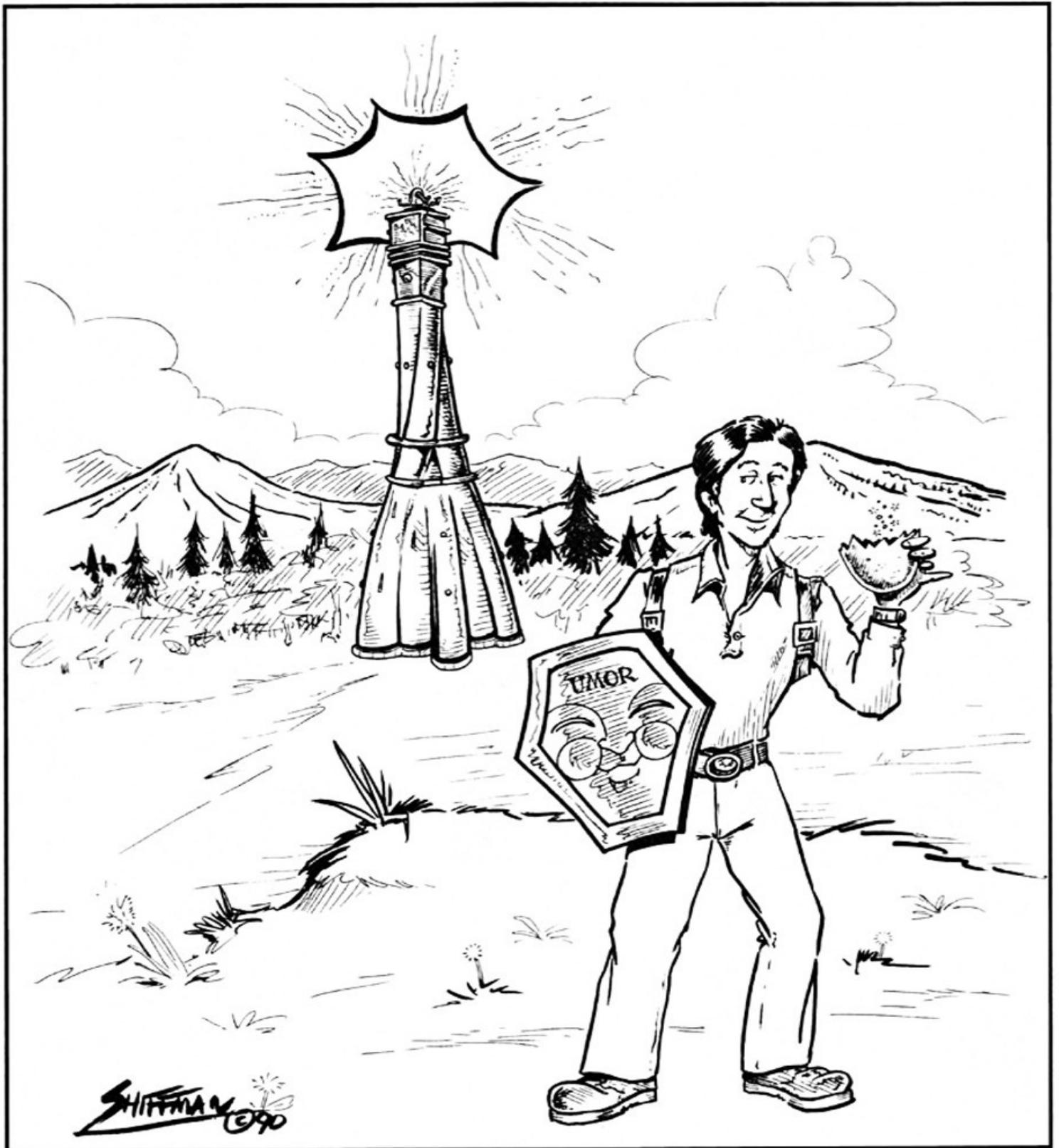


Beyond the Enchanted Duplicator... ...To the Enchanted Convention



By Walt Willis & James White

Illustrated by Stu Shiffman

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Preface

This volume is a sequel to *The Enchanted Duplicator*, written by Walt Willis and Bob Shaw, which was first published in February 1954, in an edition of 200 numbered copies. (Chuck Harris got #1.)

A Second Edition of 150 copies was published in 1962 by Ted Johnstone and Bruce Pelz, with illustrations by Eddie Jones.

Arnie Katz and rich brown published a Third Edition in 1971, with illustrations by C. Ross Chamberlain.

In 1972/3 it was serialised in *Amazing Science Fiction*, then being edited by Ted White.

In 1979 a Fifth Edition was published by Eve Harvey for Seacon, the British Worldcon, with illustrations by Carol Gregory.

In 1980 it was reprinted, with other material, in the 28th issue of Richard Bergeron's *Warhoon*.

In 1981 Gary Farber published 300 copies of a replica of the Third Edition.

The Eighth Edition was published for the 1983 Worldcon (Constellation) by Dan and Lynn Steffan, Gary Farber, Avedon Carol, and Peggy Rae Pavlat.

In 1985 Peter Trei of New York serialised an ASCII computer-readable version in his computer network fanzine, *SF-Lovers Digest*; it can still be downloaded through computers using the UNIX operating system. This version might be regarded as the Ninth Edition. In which case –

The Tenth Edition was that published in Melbourne in May 1988, by Greg Hills.

Greg however describes his edition as the Ninth, advised by no less an authority than Vince Clarke. And it must be admitted that if a computer disc version is to be regarded as an Edition, how much more so must be the stage version written by Jerry Kaufman, Gary Farber, and Shelley Dutton and performed by an equally distinguished cast at Norwescon 5 in 1982? And what about Dan Steffan's incomplete graphic novel of that era?

— WAW

Availability:

Beyond the Enchanted Duplicator... To the Enchanted Convention

This Standard First Edition is available for \$6 U.S. from Geri Sullivan, 3444 Blaisdell Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55408-4315 USA. A numbered, autographed, mimeographed Collector's Edition is available from Geri for \$15 U.S. (FYI. Chuck Harris got #1.) These two editions are also available, for £3 and £8 respectively, from A. Vincent Clarke, 16 Wendover Way, Welling, Kent DA16 2BN GREAT BRITAIN. Domestic postage is included; please contribute an extra bit for international postage if you're ordering from another country.

The Enchanted Duplicator

Warhoon 28, with the Sixth Edition of *The Enchanted Duplicator* and 550+ additional pages of Willis' fanwriting is available for \$34 U.S. from Joe Siclari, 4599 NW 5 Ave. Boca Raton, FL 33431. Price includes \$4 for postage and handling.

The Eighth Edition is available for \$3.50 U.S. from Geri Sullivan. (Price includes \$1.50 postage; see address above.)

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- Dave Langford, for creating the Magic Mimeograph of the '90s: the Magic Text File Translators.
- And, of course, Official Happy Deadwood Fred Levy Haskell.

— *GFS*

Yes, send letters of comment! They will be published in future issues of *No Goat's Toe*, which will be sent to contributors and interested parties. Mail correspondence to: Geri Sullivan, 3444 Blaisdell Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55408-4315, USA.



Chapter 1

In Which the Spirit of Fandom Appears Once Again to Jophan

From the summit of the soaring white Tower of the Enchanted Duplicator, Jophan gazed down on Trufandom and far beyond to the ring of misty mountains that protected this fairest of all lands from the dangers and discords of the Outside.

It was a vista of beauty unsurpassed, of forest glades and parkland dotted with tiny dwellings; each, like his own, a white tower in a walled garden, a miniature of the great Tower itself. The figures and voices of his many Trufan friends and the sounds of their keyboards and duplicators and printers, near and far, all seemed close in the golden haze of this enchanted land. Looking down on the peaceful scene, Jophan recalled the terrible dangers he had braved to come to this haven of warmth and friendship: the welcome he had received and, in the course of time, the recognition and honours accorded to him. And not for the first time, he wondered why he should now feel something like the same restlessness that had impelled him to leave Mundane in search of the Enchanted Duplicator.

He had found that magic machine, and had used it to produce the Perfect Fanzine; or at least a fanzine thought perfect by the people whose opinion he most respected. No one could do more: there were, he had come to realise, as many varieties of Perfect Fanzine as there were of people. Ultimate perfection was not attainable. Perhaps fortunately.

Jophan turned away from the parapet and walked across to the golden plinth, still shining so brightly that it lit up all Trufandom like a tiny yellow sun; on it rested the ancient, battered, ink-and-corrosion-stained device that was the Enchanted Duplicator. Well did he know that the machine had no real worth, and that no person in all Trufandom would willingly use such antiquated equipment. But as a symbol it was still all-powerful. For any Neo who braved the dreadful perils and even more dangerous distractions of the journey from Mundane, to reach this shining tower and grasp this rusty handle, in the faith that it could produce the Perfect Fanzine, had beyond doubt become a True Fan.

Fearfully, uncertain of the results of what he was about to do, Jophan

reached out and grasped the handle once again.

His instinct had been correct; there had been a change. The flow of power and purpose that had strengthened and sustained him was still there, but there had been a change in himself. Now he realised it would not be enough to continue producing issues of the Perfect Fanzine. He would, he knew, still feel the thrill of inspiration and the joy of creation; the inimitable mixture of love and pride with which his fanzine opened his heart to his friends. These he would never lose. But there was no longer a challenge. Strangely, he found himself contemplating with nostalgia the perilous adventures of his journey from Mundane, and the people he had met on his quest

He released his grip and closed his eyes ... until he became aware of a growing brightness on his eyelids. As he opened them, there came the sound of a fanfare of trumpets, but one that seemed distant and, for a fanfare, curiously uncertain.

Then the Spirit of Fandom again appeared before him.

“Jophan,” she said, “what is it that troubles you?”

Jophan hung his head. “There is no reason,” he said miserably, “why I should be anything but happy in this place. But I am prey to strange and disturbing thoughts. Shameful too they are, because they reflect a base ingratitude for all I have been given here. That ingratitude pains me most of all, for I cannot excuse or condone it, even to myself.”

“Jophan,” said the Spirit of Fandom, in a voice that held sympathy and understanding, “there is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, quite the reverse. What you feel is essentially the same urge that leads mankind to leave his congenial planet for the unknown perils of space. Your instincts have been correct. It is necessary for you to retrace your steps and return to Mundane.”

There was a strange fascination about the idea that Jophan could not fully understand. “For what purpose?” he asked. “Is this another quest?”

“Yes,” said the Spirit of Fandom. “But you will not be able to understand its purpose fully until you have communed with others like yourself, at a convention.”

Jophan knew about conventions of course. Fanzines, even his own, often contained reports and references to them. They had, he understood, been created by fanzines in the first place, and fanzines were necessary for their continued existence, in the sense that what is not reported cannot be said to have real existence. But it was a new thought that conventions might in some

way be necessary to him. They had always seemed to him dangerously unpredictable affairs, as uncontrollable as a fanzine composed on stencil. But now this very unpredictability began to seem attractive.

The Spirit of Fandom noticed this new eagerness. “Don’t think the journey will be easy,” she warned him. “You will face trials and temptations as dangerous as those you encountered on your journey here, though different in kind. There is important information, meagre and of questionable accuracy though some of it may be, which will aid you in –”

Suddenly the prospect of leaving Trufandom, so suddenly imminent, became alarming for Jophan. “Must I go?” he asked in an agonised voice, “I do not want to risk losing everything I have gained or have been given here. Surely this discontent will fade, and pass? I entreat you, please do not send me away, for I fear that my resolve is uncertain and that I will be numbered among those hapless Trufen who are lost never to return.”

“Your discontent will increase,” said the Spirit firmly, “rather than fade. You must make this second great journey, and risk the dangers that will threaten both your fannish mind and body, for there is no other cure. Many Trufen have indeed been lost ...”

Strangely, at that moment there was a brightening of the golden mist that surrounded the Enchanted Duplicator and its great tower. And there came from the mist the sound of trumpets, no longer muted, clear in the still air.

“But know this: there are some who have no need to return because they carry the Essence of Trufandom with them.”



Chapter 2

In Which Jophan Retraces His Steps to Mundane

In the early afternoon of the following day, Jophan paused on the first ridge of the Trufandom Mountains to look back on the enchanted land he might never see again. But the pause was brief, because he feared that if he tarried too long his resolve would weaken. So he turned his face again toward distant Mundane and the lands between. Thereafter he travelled more swiftly because his mental burden had been lightened by the finality of his decision.

His physical burden consisted of no more than a single flask for food and drink, and his old but carefully polished Shield of Umor. “Carry always your Shield of Umor,” the Spirit of Fandom had told him, “and keep it brightly burnished. Of all the arts and devices and abilities in your possession, it alone has undiminished power both here and in Mundane.”

Already he had begun to suspect that it would be easier to leave Trufandom than it had been to get there. The uphill journey had taken a surprisingly short time and even the Canyon of Criticism, which he now entered, did not seem as immense as he recalled. There was of course not one of the giant Promagrevoos to be seen. He called on his old friend Letteraxe, who still lived in his cave overlooking Trufandom, and seemed to know everybody and everything. Letteraxe told him that after these giants had been ruthlessly exterminated by their masters the Headeaters, the latter’s own ranks had been decimated as if in retribution by an even more powerful and mysterious race. Letteraxe felt there must be some connection between these two events but had never been able to identify it.

The extinction of the giants seemed to have resulted in a proliferation of their rivals, the Fanmagrevoos. Bands of these pygmies, squealing and gibbering with rage and hatred, could be seen raising their standards on high ledges where they thought themselves safe; but their missiles were easily deflected by his Shield of Umor, sometimes straight back to the thrower. Jophan noticed again, with wry amusement, that when this happened the aggressor, having no such shield of his own, was often seriously disabled.

But one thing that did surprise and worry him was the fact that he had met very few pilgrims on their way to Trufandom. There were bodies and skeletons to be seen on the floor of the canyon, obviously victims of the

demented Fanmagrevoos, and most of the few survivors on their way to Trufandom were also wounded. He wondered what would become of Trufandom if this went on.

It seemed to him that it was his duty to reduce the menace of these malevolent dwarfs. He chose a strategic ledge on the opposite side of the canyon and began to accumulate a supply of stones. His sojourn in Trufandom had so sharpened his faculties and strengthened his muscles that he was confident of his ability to dislodge the creatures from their perches.

He had accumulated several dozen missiles when a strange sight made him pause. One of the dwarfs, who seemed to have grown taller than the rest, was moving among the fallen victims on the floor of the canyon, binding up their wounds and helping them to their feet. Even as Jophan watched, he stopped by the body of a victim he had not been able to revive, and stood there weeping. Then, with an expression of resolve, he took up the victim's shield and strode off in the direction of Trufandom.

Jophan stopped collecting stones. It was obvious that the ecology of fandom was more complex than he had assumed. He climbed down from his ledge and continued his journey, lost in thought.

By sunset he had come to the end of the canyon, from where he could look down on the vast Desert of Indifference. He thought it best to spend the night at the canyon entrance before descending into the trackless desert. A draft of nourishing Egg o' Bu satisfied his hunger and did much to dispel the misgivings left by his encounter with the dwarfs. He must avoid further mistakes. Watching the shadows of the mountains lengthen on the desert, he reviewed the other advice the Spirit of Fandom had given him.

"The race of Subrs is now almost extinct," she had said, "and the Desert is a lonely and dangerous place. However, on your way to Trufandom and during your stay here you have, albeit unconsciously, developed a capacity for sustained mental effort that will enable you to make your way back to Mundane unaided. This capacity will also help you to survive in Mundane, as will the many arts and abilities you have mastered. You will, however, have to adapt to the strange rules and practices current there. Remember always that you must engage in some mundane work, however onerous or pointless it seems, for only thus can you obtain the tokens they call money to enable you to survive. Remember, the mean and primitive society of Mundane does not have the generous hospitality of Trufandom, so you will have to pay tokens for shelter and warmth. Their bizarre customs will also require you to buy

special garments for most activities, though one type would suffice for all. These and various other demarcation symbols are required because they lack our ability to recognise merit. Above all, they know not the sweet-tasting and all-sustaining Egg o' Bu, and were you to show one of your fanzines to them in the hope of garnering some, they would laugh cruelly in their ignorance and call you demented."

Marvelling at the foolishnesses of Mundane, Jophan fell into a deep sleep.



Chapter 3

In Which Jophan Meets An Old Acquaintance and a New Friend

Shortly after dawn the next day, Jophan set off down the mountain slope. It was too steep and stony on this side to use his shield as a toboggan, as he had done going down the other side, but he reached level ground by noon. The heat of the desert was oppressive, but oases were frequent, and he made good speed. He was cheered by the fact that he met several neos on their way to Trufandom: he paused each time to encourage them, warn them about the Canyon of Criticism and impress on them the importance of keeping their shields polished.

Otherwise his journey was so uneventful that he became impatient to reach the end of the desert. Each day he tried to go further, and each day the oases became more sparse. Without realising it, he overtaxed his strength. He began to see oases where none existed, and to stagger helplessly from one mirage to another. Finally, late one afternoon, he collapsed from exhaustion and heat stroke. The last thing he saw was a lone vulture circling overhead.

He awoke to find he was in a verdant oasis, in bright moonlight. His burning feet were being bathed in cool water, and a glass of lifegiving Egg o' Bu was on a little stone table by his side. When he had drained it, the glass was instantly refilled. Jophan could see only dimly the features of his benefactor, but there seemed something familiar about them. However, the first priority must be to thank him, whoever he was. But his host demurred. It was an honour to serve someone like Jophan, he said, and he hoped his guest would stay indefinitely and allow him to continue to do so. Still wondering how the stranger knew his name, Jophan fell fast asleep.

In the morning light, the stranger's invitation began to seem even more attractive. The oasis was remarkably beautiful, and so extensive as almost to merit being described as a glade. In the dappled shade, the fierce heat of the desert sun was soothed to a languorous warmth. A long cool glass of Egg o' Bu stood on the little table by his side, and was constantly refilled. This is the life, Jophan thought. He could stay here for ever.

He was awakened from a doze by a glint in the undergrowth, a reflection of the noonday sun on something metallic. It was the corner of his shield. He

had forgotten about it during his delirium, and parts had become dull and tarnished. However a sedulous rub with his sleeve made it shiny again, and he checked it with his own reflection. To his horror, it seemed to have somehow become a distorting mirror, like one in a carnival. His head looked hideously swollen, as round and foolish as a pumpkin lantern.

Shocked, he moved the shield about, looking at the trees and flowers. They seemed perfectly normal. And there was his host hastening towards him with another jug of Egg o' Bu. The truth began to dawn on Jophan. "No more of that for me," he said. "I've had too much already." His host bowed in acquiescence, set the jug carefully on the stone table, and prostrated himself before it. At last Jophan realised the full horror of his situation. It was not a table; it was an altar. "You are Sycophan," he accused, "and you're worshipping me!"

"Of course I am," said Sycophan, with some indignation. "For years I've been trying to invoke one of the BNFificent spirits, and here you are at last. You needn't try to pass yourself off as an ordinary mortal. I've heard of you and I know you're one of the Biggest Names in Trufandom."

Jophan despaired of explaining the true nature of Trufandom to someone so confused. "Look," he said, "many years ago we two met on this very spot, when it was still desert, and I was on my way to Trufandom. Well, you've worked hard and made a very nice place of it here. But you're still the same person, aren't you? Well, so am I."

It took a while to convince Sycophan, but eventually Jophan and he were talking like old friends. He promised he would try to help and encourage any further travellers to Trufandom: he might make the journey himself some day, though he was very comfortable here. He listened intently as Jophan explained his reasons for leaving Trufandom and going to Mundane. "So you're going to a Convention," he marvelled. "Look out for my half-brothers, Feudophan and his lawyer twin, Suedophan. Don't worry," he added wryly, "they're different from me in every respect." He would say no more about them.

They talked long into the night, but nevertheless Jophan was up soon after dawn, eager to proceed with his journey. Sycophan accompanied him to the edge of the huge oasis and pointed out the direction he should take. "It's easy to get lost in the desert now the Subrs have died out," he explained, "but if you keep the sun on your face you'll soon arrive at the track of the old Letterpress Railroad, and you can follow that all the way to Sercon City."



Chapter 4

In Which Jophan Reaches Mundane

It was as Sycophan had said. There were of course no rails where the railway had run, but the ruts and ridges where they had lain on the soft sandstone were still clearly visible. Jophan strode forward with confidence.

This route was evidently now well known, for he began to meet more Neofen on their way to Trufandom. They were bright-eyed and eager, but seemed reluctant to converse with him, presumably because he was coming away from Trufandom. Surely, Jophan thought, Disillusion could not still be riding about on his high horse after all those years, spreading his envy and malice? It was up to him to correct the impression he must have left.

So he spoke to the Neofen at length in encouraging fashion, explaining the nature of Trufandom, and giving much helpful advice on the dangers ahead, based on his own hard-won experience. They listened politely but in silence, until he explained that he was on his way from Trufandom to a Convention in Mundane. They seemed to understand this at once, and wished him well.

Indeed, to his astonishment, Jophan learned that many of them had actually attended Conventions themselves. Seeing his surprise, they offered practical advice on Convention matters, which he realised would be extremely helpful. As he listened, Jophan realised that there had been an abrupt and complete reversal of roles. It was now he who was the Neo. He had been woefully lacking in humility. He thanked them sincerely for their help, and they parted with expressions of goodwill.

Jophan resumed his journey much chastened. But his spirits were raised as the desert gave way in time to scrubland, and eventually to a region of fertile fields and fine houses. Here, Jophan left the line of the old railway, now increasingly hard to follow among all the new buildings, in search of the Profan mansion. He found it without much difficulty, every moment of his meeting with that generous friend and kindly advisor being still fresh in his mind. But the heavy gates were locked, the long, sleek motor car was not in the driveway and the windows returned only an empty stare. Obviously Profan was not at home.

Disappointed, Jophan continued downtown to the centre of Sercon City,

as the home of Serious Constructivism was apparently now called. At first sight it had not changed very much. It was still an area of impressive skyscrapers. But now, Jophan realised, they were real and solid. The rickety facades had gone. The great Federation Building had been torn down, to be replaced by a thriving Craft Centre, in which dozens of artists and writers created work of unique beauty and interest. The only thing that Jophan could find to remind him of his first journey through the city was in a residential area of old fashioned squares, where he found a small statue of Dedwood.

On the far side of the city, there were more improvements. All the hucksters' stalls had been cleared away, and on the site was a huge shopping mall. Further on, there was a magnificent medical centre called The HDV Kolektin Clinic, surrounded by areas of sheltered housing for convalescing patients.

The Jungle of Inexperience had become a Theme Park. Parties of tourists were taken on conducted tours twice a day, protected from the surviving Typoes, now an endangered species, by a trained corps of Guides known as Spellcheckers. A part of the Hecto Swamp had been preserved for the tourists to marvel at and photograph, the rest of the once dreaded Swamp having been filled in and built over with a bright new and soulless suburb called Newtek.

Beyond this began the foothills of the Mountains of Inertia, the frontier of Fandom. Beyond them was only the Forest, and then he would come face to face with all the problems and perils of Mundane. It was pleasant here on the borders of fandom. He climbed up a little way so that he could see the sun setting behind the Trufandom Mountains, and then slept.

Next morning Jophan again found the climb easier than he had expected, just as he had done leaving Trufandom itself, and by late afternoon he had reached the pass through the Mountains of Inertia. From here he could see both the fair land of Trufandom, nestled among its protective ring of mountains, and the plains of Mundane stretching endlessly to the horizon.

The spectacle filled Jophan with awe and trepidation. What would become of him in that vast strange land? Gazing nostalgically back towards Trufandom, he absent-mindedly wiped his shield, as was his habit when perplexed. At once he felt better, and remembered what he had been told by the Spirit of Fandom, that the power of a Shield of Umor is undiminished in Mundane. Now, regarding it with renewed respect, he noticed that in its concave inner surface the whole vista of Mundane was mirrored in miniature.

It seemed different; somehow it looked ... manageable.

Jophan set off down the mountainside, meaning to reach the Circle of Lassitude before nightfall. It took longer than he expected, and the fog, which seemed a permanent feature of this region, made the steep descent perilous. However the cave was brightly lit, just as he remembered it, and its entrance shone like a beacon in the twilight. Inside he was welcomed as warmly as before. R.G. Leth was there, seemingly not much older; some other people remembered him, and some seemed to recognise his name. It was a very pleasant evening, but Jophan was tired from his long journey and soon after midnight he curled up in a corner and went to sleep.

Next morning he was still tired, and thought how pleasant it would be to spend a few days here resting and regaining his energy. But he remembered how dangerously addictive were the attractions of the Circle of Lassitude, and went outside for a reviving breath of fresh air. A strong breeze had sprung up from the direction of Fandom, dispelling the fog. The path down the mountain was clear and inviting. Pausing only to thank the members of the Circle for their hospitality, Jophan set off again.

Soon he came to the abandoned station of the Letterpress Railroad, its tunnel through the mountains overgrown with brambles. Further on, he passed the reason for the demise of the railroad, a thriving airport advertising cheap round trips to Sercon City, with free tickets to all the rides in the Prehistoric Fandom Theme Park.

Past the airport began the Forest of Stupidity. It was even denser than Jophan remembered, and impervious to the wind that blew out of fandom, so that Jophan felt stifled and bemused, as if his brain was deprived of oxygen. The path had kept branching off, perhaps for various destinations in Mundane, and he had lost all sense of direction. He stopped and tried to sharpen his wits. On all sides the forest looked exactly the same. The cloudy sky gave no indication of the direction of the sun. But there was the sound of an aeroplane. As he watched it came into view, still climbing, made a half circle turn, and set off in a direction which, Jophan realised, must be that of Sercon City.

He set his face in the opposite direction, identified a particular tree and marched determinedly towards it. He soon became quite expert at this kind of steeplechase, and with no further trouble came to the edge of the forest. He found himself in a parking area of a large bus station. He had arrived in Mundane.



Chapter 5

In Which Jophan Begins His New Life in Mundane

Among the coaches waiting in the bus station there was one for Quotidian, the town where the Convention was to be held. But of course Jophan had no Mundane tokens for the fare. Worse, he was now very hungry. His flask of Egg o' Bu had been lost during his delirium in the desert and he had not replaced it. It was one of the peculiarities of Egg o' Bu, fandom's only currency, that it was sometimes difficult to acquire. One could not buy it, of course, but one could not even ask for it. It had to be freely given. Sycophan had been only too free with it, sickening Jophan so much that he had taken none with him for the rest of his journey. If it had not been for the hospitality of the Circle of Lassitude it was doubtful if he would have had the strength to climb the Mountains and traverse the Forest.

Obviously he must do some mundane work to get some mundane money. But what? All he had was his shield; and of course his polishing cloth, made of a light leather that also gave protection against rain. Jophan looked round the car park. There were scores of cars, many of which looked as if they had come a considerable distance. Jophan took an empty can from the dump behind the snack bar, filled it with water from a standpipe, and began methodically to clean the dirtiest windshields. While he worked he would prop his shield up carefully on the car roof, with a sheet of cardboard under it to protect the car's paint, and when he had finished he would put a note, cut from the same thin card, under the wiper. It simply said COMPLIMENTS SHIELD CLEANERS.

Soon drivers began to come out of the snack bar and marvel at their crystal-clear windshields. They would read the note and look around curiously and see the shining shield on another car. Most of them would come over; and liking Jophan's energy, cheerfulness and ready wit, would leave more money than they had intended. Much more, in fact, than Jophan would have dared to charge. So much so that soon he went back to the snack bar dump and got another can for the money.

After a few hours it seemed to Jophan that he must have enough to buy a substantial meal, and he started to count the money in the can. At that point a middle-aged man in a smart suit appeared from nowhere and watched him

until he had finished.

“I’d like to buy you out,” he said unexpectedly.

“What do you mean?” asked Jophan.

“It’s simple,” said the man, “You give me a piece of paper assigning to me all rights to the name and operation known as Shield Cleaners and I give you money.”

“How much?” asked Jophan faintly.

In reply the man produced a wad of notes. Jophan nodded, and signed a piece of paper the man wrote out.

“Will you sell your shield?” asked the man.

“Never,” said Jophan, and made for the snack bar, where he returned the tins and what was left of the cardboard. Then he had two of the most substantial meals the snack bar could provide. He had change from one of the notes the business man had given him.

It was obvious he had enough money for the bus fare to Quotidian, so he went to the Booking Office and bought a round trip ticket. Whatever befell him in Mundane, it would always be a comfort to know he had the means to go back to Trufandom. The next bus was due in about an hour. To pass the time, he strolled to the edge of the freeway and watched the traffic. It was fast and unceasing, offering no opportunity to cross the road. However he saw a notice to his left, some hundred yards away, and walked along to see what it said. It was for the guidance of drivers coming on the righthand carriageway, and it read “NEXT EXIT PROSAIC. RIGHT LANE MUST TURN RIGHT.” Looking back, Jophan now saw there was a flyover rising from the bus station area. So, he thought, this is what has happened to my little country lane, where I began my search for the Enchanted Duplicator. He went back to the bus station and walked along the flyover to where it descended on the other side of the freeway, hoping to find something familiar. But the road itself had been straightened and widened and was unrecognisable.

With mixed feelings Jophan walked back to the bus station and found the coach for Quotidian. It was already loading. The driver would not allow him to take his shield inside, but was helpful in stowing it in the baggage compartment. Having made sure the compartment door was securely fastened, Jophan took a last look round, trying to memorise everything. The Forest of Stupidity, the parking lot, the snack bar and booking office, the flyover for Prosaic. There was another bus loading at the entrance to the flyover, a couple were climbing aboard. Jophan thought he recognised his

parents.

Conflicting impulses pulled at him. Instinct told him to rush over and embrace them. Reason told him he would miss the bus and lose his shield; and it might not be them; and if it was, they wouldn't thank him for making them miss the last bus home. Underlying everything was the memory of the coolness there had been between him and his parents ever since his father had burned all his books, the ones that told about faraway places and other times.

While he was still struggling with his indecision, the engine of the other bus revved up and it surged up the exit ramp. Unhappily, Jophan took a seat and tried to put the matter from his mind so that he could get some sleep. The drone of the engine and the hypnotic flashing of the lights of opposing traffic conspired to send him into a fitful doze.



Chapter 6

In Which Jophan Finds Mundane Work

He awoke in the Quotidian Bus Terminus. It was after midnight. He stumbled out, waited for his shield, and set off at random. The immediate area was run down, but further on it began to improve, and he was drawn by the bright lights of an all-night supermarket. There was an envelope stuck by the flap to the door: on it someone had written HELP WANTED URGENTLY.

Inside he found a harassed Night Manager clutching a sheaf of invoices. Jophan explained he had just arrived in Quotidian and was looking for work, any work at all. “Can you work all night?” asked the Night Manager. Jophan said he could. He had nowhere else to go anyway, and his experience in meeting fan publishing deadlines had accustomed him to all-night sessions.

The Night Manager pointed to an aisle devoted to Easter eggs and Mother’s Day gifts. “All those shelves have to be emptied,” he explained, “and replaced by the stock in the store room. Before eight this morning, when the boss comes in. I’ll have to leave you to it. So much paperwork to do.” He disappeared into his office with the sheaf of invoices and a worried look.

Jophan made a mental estimate of the capacity of the shelves and the volume of the stock in the store room, casting them off against each other, item by item. The problem seemed simple: merely one of fitting a variety of material into a space slightly too small for it, in such a way that it appeared to the best advantage and gave the best overall impression. To an experienced fanzine editor, it was child’s play. He set to work cheerfully, wheeling a loaded trolley of old stock to the storeroom and bringing it back full of new stock. By 7:30 he had finished and went to report to the Night Manager. There was no answer to his knock, so he went in and found the unfortunate man asleep in his chair, invoices strewn on the desk and floor. Jophan woke him gently.

The Night Manager viewed the aisle blearily and with suspicion. “Where’s the rest of the stuff?” he asked. “It’s all there,” said Jophan. “Look and see.”

The Night Manager inspected the shelves and began to wake up. The stuff did seem to be all there, but the different tins and packages had been so cleverly arranged as not to appear confusedly crowded together, but rather to

complement one another. Moreover he had the feeling that a customer would know at once if what he wanted was in this aisle, and exactly where to find it. What the Night Manager was experiencing, had he but known it, was in fact a feeling of artistic unity. And what he was looking at was in fact very like the last anniversary issue of Jophan's fanzine.

"That's very good," he said weakly. "I wish you could do something like that about these damned invoices."

If there was one thing Jophan had learned in Trufandom, it was to read quickly. A glance at the papers, and his clear recollection of the goods he had just sorted, enabled him to arrange the invoices there and then into three piles. "This lot are OK and can be paid," he said, setting them out neatly on the desk. "This second lot are for goods that have not arrived yet. Sit on them. And the third is for the little pile of defective goods I left in the far corner of the store room."

There was a long pause. Then the Night Manager said, "Can you come in every night?"

Jophan gratefully agreed and set off to find a place to sleep. He found an airy room with plenty of space for books in the home of a cheerful woman in the next street, and slept most of the day.

At midnight he was back in the supermarket, pushing his silent soft-wheeled trolley happily up and down the aisles, removing date-expired stock and replacing it from fresh stores, and making subtle rearrangements he thought would help and please the customers, encouraging them to spend more money. He was, unconsciously, using the same hypersensitivity that enables a fanzine editor to judge what his readers will like enough to write appreciative letters of comment

On the Friday there was a message for him from the Supreme Being, namely the Regional Manager. He would like to see Jophan if he would kindly wait until after eight on Saturday morning. Jophan wondered if he was going to get paid off, and awaited the interview with trepidation. But it wasn't like that at all. "I have noticed," said the Supreme Being, "from the daily checkout summaries, that business is up every day this week from Tuesday onwards, one half per cent more each day than the previous one. The only change has been your appointment. I have been examining the shelves and I noticed what you have done." There was a long pause. Jophan did not fill it. The Supreme Being went on.

"I am wondering," He said, "what a person like you is doing as a shelf

filler in a supermarket. Whether you perhaps regard it as a dull and menial occupation that you will leave as soon as you can for something more interesting. Do you mind if I ask a personal question? What do you think about, wheeling your trolley up and down the aisles all night?"

Jophan decided to tell this man the truth. "I don't think of it as a dull or menial job at all," he said. "I like to imagine that my overall is the uniform of an astronaut, engaged in the provisioning of a great generation spaceship on its way to the stars. You may think that is fanciful, but what else is the world?"

There was an even longer silence, and when the Supreme Being spoke again there was a new sincerity in his voice, "I envy you, Jophan," he said. "Few people are able to retain the sense of wonder that sees the world as it really is, untarnished by the dross of familiarity. It is a rare and precious talent."

Not so rare, thought Jophan, remembering Trufandom. But the Supreme Being was speaking again. "Will you accept the job of Stock Superintendent," he said incredibly, "at three times your present salary?" Jophan could only nod and accept the proffered handshake, before being ushered from the Presence.

His first thought was that he would now be able to afford a room at the Convention hotel. For the present, the promotion made little financial difference to him. His lodgings were comfortable, and he saw no point in moving. He bought some books, and looked forward to buying more at the Convention; maybe even some artwork.

One change was that he now met more girls. The checkout girls were all bright and pretty, and the brightest and prettiest of all was the one at Express Checkout. This was no accident: that checkout had the highest proportion of male customers. The present incumbent had large dark eyes and long hair as dark as a starless night: thoughts of her body that he had seen only in imagination delighted and disturbed his sleep. And she seemed to like him. With a well paid job and a lovely girl like Miss Express Checkout at his side, the responsibilities and pressures of Mundane would be bearable, even enjoyable.

But still he held back. For one thing, the major coming event in his life was the Convention, and try as he would he somehow could not imagine Miss Express Checkout being there. Also he had noticed what she read during the slack periods at her checkout. It was always about events on this

planet that had already happened, which Jophan could not help regard ing as pointless. He knew it was unreasonable to be influenced about a girl by her choice of reading matter, but he could not help feeling it was important.

So he invited out the girls who were interested only in an evening's pleasure; his own innermost thoughts were increasingly concentrated on the great event of the first weekend in September.

His first Convention.



Chapter 7

In Which Jophan Is Pleasantly Surprised

Confused, uncertain and very excited, Jophan joined the end of the queue before the registration desk. The hotel's marbled entrance hall was crowded with fans. They all seemed to know one another, standing talking together in small groups, breaking off frequently to wave and loudly renew acquaintanceship with newer arrivals, or members of other groups scattered about the foyer. None of them waved at Jophan, for he seemed a stranger to them: but he did not feel alone because the words they were speaking, or shouting, were in a language long familiar to him.

As he neared the desk, Jophan felt a nudge from behind him. He looked round to see that a small, slim girl wearing an enormous rucksack that made her look even smaller had joined the line behind him. It was her rucksack that had touched him, as she twisted to get at one of the pockets.

"Sorry," she said, and smiled up at him. But before he could reply, the harried fan behind the registration desk said impatiently, "Welcome to Quoticon. Name and membership number?"

"I haven't joined yet," said Jophan, feeling for his wallet in the back pocket of his jeans. "How much is it?"

"It costs more to pay at the door or for daily membership," said the other. "Sorry about that." He quoted the figures.

Jophan hardly heard him, for he had realised his wallet was missing. He had paid for his room in advance at hotel reception, and the room key and his change were in his side pockets, but the wallet was gone. His face felt hot with embarrassment as he hastily counted his change. There was just enough for one day, if he didn't eat.

"I'll join for one day," he said.

"Excuse me," said the girl behind him, "is this your first convention? Do you want to come for more than one day?"

"Yes," said Jophan, and then with much greater feeling, "Oh yes."

"Dave," she said to the man behind the desk, "you have the mind of a cash register, and Ghod alone knows what base metal your heart is made of, but can't you recognise a willing potential gofer when you see one?"

The man called Dave did not take offence at the girl's insulting words: it

seemed he already knew her name because he smiled and handed her a programme envelope while she was still speaking. Then he turned back to Jophan.

“It will mean a lot of hard work,” he said warningly, “and you will probably never see a complete programme item without being called away. But you get free membership, and refreshments in the Committee Room when you collapse from malnutrition and exhaustion. You understand this arrangement is temporary until it gets the Con Committee’s approval? In the meantime print your name on this gofer’s badge, dump your stuff in your room and come back here. Have you any idea what you are letting yourself in for? But of course not, this is your first con.”

“No,” Jophan agreed, and with difficulty restrained himself from shouting out with sheer joy, “And thank you.” His first convention, and he was going to be part of it.

The girl and he moved away from the registration desk, pinning on their name badges. Jophan said awkwardly, “And thank you, too. If it hadn’t been for your suggestion –”

“So you’re Jophan,” she said suddenly. “I like your zine. You made a nice job of editing my letter of comment –”

“Les!” Jophan burst out, having noticed the name on her badge. “But you’re a *girl*.”

“I’ve been a girl,” she said gravely, “for as long as I can remember. Les is short for Lesley, the female spelling of Leslie. Most con fans have met me and know about it, but we like to watch others being surprised. Have you been stricken speechless?”

Jophan nodded and smiled foolishly down at her. Before he could find the words to express either his thanks or surprise, Les reached up impulsively and patted his cheek.

“I’ll see you around, Jophan,” she said. “This is your first con and I do hope you enjoy it. But don’t try to thank me for suggesting you as a gofer, because I may not have done you a favour.”

Les turned away and Jophan watched her walk quickly through the crowded foyer towards the elevators. So small and slender was she under that enormous rucksack, he thought suddenly, that she looked like nothing so much as a giant ambulating toadstool with a too-slender stem. There was no physical resemblance at all to the picture that came suddenly into his mind, which made him wonder why she should remind him so strongly of his

mother.

“You have,” Jophan called out after her, “Oh, you have.”



Chapter 8

In Which Jophan Enters Into the Spirit of the Convention

“This is yours,” said a voice behind him.

He turned, and tried to take in the doubly incredible sight of Letteraxe holding out his wallet.

“What –? How –” he gasped.

“I found it on the floor of the baggage room beside Reception,” explained Letteraxe. “You must have dropped it there when you left your stuff. Who was that smashing girl?”

“How did you come to be here?” asked Jophan.

“I had a long letter from Sycophan after your visit. You seem to have made quite an impression on him. He wanted to visit Trufandom, so I put him up. We decided we would both come to this convention and see how you got on. We got the plane from Sercon City. Sycophan is somewhere around. We’re looking for Les Brown. Have you met him yet? I promised to write a conreport for that marvellous fanzine of his. Who *was* that you were talking to?”

Jophan was beginning to enjoy this. “You didn’t know that Les Brown is a girl?” he enquired innocently.

“What? What?” spluttered the normally imperturbable Letteraxe. “He can’t be. Are you sure? How do you know?”

“In the first place,” said Jophan, “she looks like a girl. She looks like a girl in the second place, too. That was her I was talking to just now.”

Considering everything, Letteraxe made a remarkable recovery.

“Do you know where she went?” he asked. When Jophan shook his head he disappeared with almost supernatural alacrity.

Left to himself for the first time in that hectic half hour, Jophan felt in dire need of something. After some thought he identified it as either a shower or a lie-down in a darkened room. Possibly both. He got his stuff from the baggage store and found his room. He drew the curtains, took off his shoes and lay down on the bed.

After a few minutes he got up again and showered. His mind was possessed by a vision of the wonderful thing that was happening all round

him. Fascinating people to meet, wonderful things to see, important things to do. Things to do. He dried and dressed and went back down to Registration.

There, Dave gave him his first assignment. It was to deliver a message about a programme change to one of the three Convention Guests, a personage Jophan knew only through his writings rather than by sight.

Jophan discovered that gofering was much like working in a supermarket, except that here all the shoppers knew more about everything than he did. Not only was he unable to find the august being in his room, but during the ensuing search Jophan lost his way in the labyrinthine corridors of the hotel. In growing desperation, for he was sure that his failure to discharge such a simple task would cause the Committee to expel him with ignominy from the convention, Jophan decided to accost politely the next fan he met and endeavour to explain his difficulty.

But he was now in a part of the hotel that was deserted and silent. There was a faint sound like distant singing, but he could not tell what direction it was coming from. However, to his relief, round the next corner he found a lone fan. He was swaying from side to side of the corridor, like a passenger in a storm-tossed ship. His face was red and shining, and his words in response to Jophan's request were spoken slowly and with great care.

"Try the bar," he said. "I saw him there ten minutes ago. Go back that way to the elevator. You'll see a sign in the foyer. I shouldn't drink so much before the con starts. Is this my floor? Damnit, is it my hotel?"

Jophan read the number tag on the key that was hanging precariously from the other's jacket pocket. "Yes," he said, and pointed. "Your room is the fifth door on the right. And thank you,"

He watched until the Unsteady Fan reached his room and entered; then he made his way to the bar to deliver his message.

His next assignment was in the main hall, arranging the seating for the official opening ceremony, which was to be followed by the introduction of Guests and other notables. It was a heavy, arduous task, but one that was greatly lightened by the muscles, conversation and willing help of two fans whose badges showed them to be neither Committee nor Gofers. The last few chairs were being moved into place and the hall was beginning to fill up and he was looking forward eagerly to seeing his first official opening of a convention, when Dave suddenly appeared beside him.

"Nice work, Jophan," he said, in the voice of one who has his mind on many other things. "Sorry for taking you away from this, but I did warn you.

Take a break, get something to eat, then go to the Hall of the Hucksters. Set out a table, three chairs and name-boards according to this sketch. Then stand outside the door and do not allow anyone in until the authors arrive for the signing session. Got that?

“When it starts,” Dave went on, without waiting for a reply, “stay near the signing table and make sure the authors get anything they want.”

“Anything ...?” asked Jophan hesitantly.

“To drink,” said Dave, and was gone as quickly as he had appeared.

Jophan had not had an opportunity to read the programme book that Dave had given him, so it was a pleasant surprise to see that one of the boards for the signing table bore the name of his first friend and mentor on his journey to Trufandom: and it was Profan himself who was the first of the authors to arrive.

“Ah, Jophan,” he said kindly, “I wondered when I would see you at a con. You found your enchanted duplicator, I hear, and you must tell me of your adventures after you left my place. But not now. There’s a party in my room, Five Fifty Two, after the programme ends tonight. We can talk then. Meanwhile, mine’s a bheer.”

Jophan tried to speak, but awe and embarrassment had tied a double knot in his tongue. The other two authors had taken their places and fans were beginning to crowd around the table clutching their books for signing. Finally, he stammered, “Thank you Sir, but I would not wish to impose on your kindness. I mean, there will be Authors and Agents and Headeaters there who will be discussing matters of the utmost gravity and importance –”

“Ghod, I hope not,” said Profan, smiling, “John, here, wants a bheer too, and Frank ...” “Wants something less fattening,” said the third Author as he sat down. “Perhaps something dry, sugar-free, even non-alcoholic –”

“Don’t complicate things,” said Profan, smiling again. “You know you want a bheer.” “I know,” said Frank, “that I have absolutely no will-power. All right then, bheer.” It was not until Jophan reached the bar that he realised that in the pleasure and excitement of meeting Profan again, he had forgotten to obtain a very important piece of information. His angry self-criticism must have been audible because suddenly Dave was standing beside him. “Large, Jophan, large. With Pros it is always a large one....”



Chapter 9

In Which Jophan Goes to a Party

The party in Profan's room was well under way by the time he got there. A late-arriving huckster who spoke in a deep voice, and who greatly surprised Jophan by apologising for his tardiness in the words of a Trufan, had asked help to set up his stall and display his wares. Dave, who had long since closed the Registration Desk, joined him in helping Hucksterfan and his wife carry in and unpack what seemed like hundreds of boxes of books. The work was long and arduous but the conversation enjoyable, for Jophan learned much about the happenings at conventions in the past, and even more about the wild, scandalous or hilarious things that had taken place and the totally unexpected names of those involved. As they were putting the last books on display, Hucksterfan had thanked him for his help and remarked that they came to these cons to make money, meet old and new friends and enjoy themselves, and his wife had smiled and added, "but not necessarily in that order of importance."

A few minutes later, when they were alone outside the elevator, Dave said, "If you want to try your luck at crashing a room party, Jophan, I can give you a couple of numbers."

"Thank you," said Jophan, "but I am going to 552. Mr Profan invited me."

Dave looked at him strangely, as if in some surprise, then said, "He invited the Committee too. Let's go up before all the booze disappears."

On the way they passed Letteraxe and Les Brown, deep in conversation on a sofa in an alcove. A parade of questions marched through Jophan's mind with bewildering speed. Should he stop and tell his friends where he was going? But suppose they had not been invited to Profan's party, would their feelings be hurt? Or would they expect to come along with him anyway? And if they did, what would Profan say? Even if he was polite, would not Jophan's name henceforth be Mud? It was Jophan's first exposure to the complex laws of the room party continuum, which perforce included a hierarchic principle so foreign to his experience that he had difficulty in coping with it.

But now they had passed the alcove, and Jophan consoled himself with

the thought that Letteraxe and Les had not looked as if they would welcome an interruption. Besides, Room 552 was now approaching, and a sound was coming to meet them that was so strange as to drive out all other thoughts. It seemed to Jophan that the room was emitting a low-pitched growling sound, so constant and unwavering that it was like a sonic beacon that could be heard long before the room door came in sight.

But between them and their destination could be seen a tall, dark figure, impeccably dressed and barbered, and of forbidding visage, pacing slowly towards them.

“It’s the Night Manager,” said Dave in a low, worried voice. Then, more loudly, “Good evening. Sir, is there, ah, a little too much noise coming from Mr Profan’s room? Is it disturbing the hotel’s Mundane guests?”

The Night Manager raised one thin, black and well-groomed eyebrow and said in a condescending voice, “It is morning. Not yet. There aren’t any.”

He couldn’t be more different from the Night Manager at the Supermarket, thought Jophan. He was more like a Satanic version of the Supreme Being.

With a word of apology that was muffled by the grotesque horned and tusked mask that covered his face, a fan walked quickly between them on the way to the party. Green, long-taloned gloves hid his hands, and his shoes were likewise covered to represent enormous webbed feet. A richly decorated, ankle-length cloak of green and silver completed what was a very good likeness to Zernhuld, one of the principal characters in Profan’s latest book.

“What do you people do in real life?” said the Night Manager disdainfully, and moved on.

A wave composed of heat and many conversations washed over Jophan as the door was opened, and it seemed that the entire floor and every other flat surface in the room was covered by a thick, uneven carpet of fans. They knelt, crouched and lay; they were on the floor and beds and tables: a few were even sitting on chairs. Others stood tall and straight above them like trees, some of which were being swayed by an unseen, alcoholic wind.

Jophan stood just inside the door, trying to make sense out of the fragments of conversation that came from all directions....

But when you read a book and then forget it, you’re left with a different kind of ignorance ... My theology, briefly, is that the Universe was dictated but not signed ... He’s been a Trufan all his life and fully expects Courtney to

row him across the Styx ... I think in cosmic terms every chance I get ... Think how much quicker the West would have been won if the wagon wheels had gone round the right way ... Reality is an illusion caused by alcohol deficiency ... I ain't half bloody suave myself ... The Chinese say that if you wait long enough by the bank of the river, the bodies of the other Hugo nominees will come floating by....

It was like a river, Jophan thought, a river of conversation that had been flowing since the beginning of fandom. A torrent of talk, bearing along the wreckage of hopes, the souvenirs of happiness, memories of sadness and joy in little whirlpools of laughter and tears, and from the heights of fandom a fertile soil of ideas.

Nobody could possibly understand it all, but there was something in it for everyone.

It sounds vaguely obscene, and if there's anything I detest, it's vagueness ... It's not good, but it's obscure ... I know I look old, but I have the heart of a little boy. I keep it in a jar on my desk ... She said she had heard pros always have big ones ... I want to go to the stars in my spare time ... You couldn't hear your blood boil at their party ... His review hit the nail unerringly on the thumb ... He said Les had asked him for a conreport for his fanzine ... It's literature damnit, don't ask what it's about....

Stepping carefully, and only when a hole large enough to accommodate his feet appeared in that living and loudly-talking carpet, Jophan moved deeper into the room.



Chapter 10

In Which Jophan Survives His First Room Party

He saw Dave talking seriously to another fan, about matters which were unclear to Jophan: they seemed to be resuming a conversation interrupted a year or more earlier. Further on, he could see the Unsteady Fan he had met in the corridor, steady now that his feet were splayed out and his back propped solidly against a wall. Next to him, he saw what looked like the back of Sycophan, talking to a girl seated daintily in a washbasin. Then he saw Profan, standing by a table, the only level surface covered with bottles and glasses rather than people, smiling and waving him forward.

He was given a large smile and an even larger bheer, but the promised talk was constantly interrupted, because Profan took his duties as a host very seriously and insisted on offering hospitality and speaking to the many guests who came as well as the very few who went. Not wishing to presume on Profan's friendship, Jophan drank some of his bheer to reduce the risk of spilling it over someone on the floor and began to circulate. Possibly because of the great heat of the room, the rest of it seemed to evaporate very quickly.

It was Jophan's first experience of drinking the mildly aromatic, pale-gold liquid, although he made a great pretence to those around him that it was not, and the taste made him wonder why so many of the fans were drinking it. But he persevered and discovered very soon that while the taste was unpleasant at first, there was growing slowly within him a warm, relaxed and very pleasant sensation that was strange to him, but which reminded him a little of the similarly indescribable feeling of well-being experienced after consuming Egg o' Bu.

Jophan moved carefully about the room, among fans who smiled genially and opened up their conversations to include him, even though as often as not he was unable to make any contribution. And he discovered that the Zernhuld costume hid the identity of a fan illustrator of note, and was pleased to obtain the promise of a contribution from him for Jophan's fanzine. But there were other fans who fell silent at his approach, and some who continued talking as if he did not exist, speaking in the loud, self-important tones and unfriendly accents that marked them as being among the less intelligent natives of Sercon City. But even from them Jophan learned

much, and it seemed that the bheer had encased him in a shield of good feeling that robbed all barbed words and insults of their strength.

Eventually he returned to the drinks table, only to find that the bheer had all gone and Profan was no longer there. He looked carefully about the room, noticing as he did so that the holes in the carpet of fans had become larger and more numerous; and saw Profan sitting cross-legged on his bed talking quietly to Dave and another Committeefan. The table held only a large, half-filled punchbowl in which tiny pieces of fruit floated on the surface of a reddish liquid, like dead goldfish. Jophan filled his glass and, with new-found confidence, lowered the level expertly to avoid the risk of spillage, and looked for somewhere to sit down.

With a little guilt and much pleasure, he saw that Les Brown had found her way to the party, accompanied by Letteraxe. They seemed to be holding hands when they thought no one was looking. Nearby was the Unsteady Fan, who had slid down the wall so that he was sitting with his knees supporting his chin. Jophan found it remarkably easy to slide down the wall beside him.

“What,” enunciated the Unsteady Fan clearly, “is that stuff?”

Before Jophan’s reply could make the strangely difficult journey from brain to tongue, Les reached over to take the glass from him and raised it to her nose.

“I believe it came in an empty two-gallon kerosene can,” she said, sniffing delicately, “and judging by the smell I don’t think they washed it out first. Be careful of that stuff, Jophan, it will probably dissolve your teeth.”

“But it tastes nicer than bheer,” Jophan protested. Nevertheless, his next mouthful more closely resembled a sip than a gulp.

He listened to Les and the Unsteady Fan discussing the merits of the fan writers and artists who were candidates for awards, but found that the conversation was long past his interjection point by the time the words were formed, and so he remained silent. And then he noticed that Les was no longer with them, having joined Profan and Dave by the bed, and that the Unsteady Fan was talking very seriously to the pedestal of a washbasin.

For a moment Jophan wondered if he too was drunk, and decided that if he was, it was not due to the bheer or the stuff from the kerosene can, but to the conversation and the company.

Other conversations were going on, hanging in the air and blowing past like tangled, brightly-coloured streamers, so that often he heard only half-sentences or single words that were utterly baffling to him, or that seemed to

hint at some great philosophical truth, or to be bouncing off a great Shield of Umor. And gradually it seemed that a soft golden glow, like that which bathed the Tower of the Enchanted Duplicator, was all about him ... and suddenly Jophan was hearing and understanding every word. A great joy and contentment filled his being, and he closed his eyes the better to hug the lovely feeling closer to him.

He was awakened by hands grasping his arms and lifting him to his feet, and he saw that the room was nearly empty. Two Committeefans were clearing away the empty bottles and cans and glasses as they tried to impose a semblance of tidiness on the devastation: Profan, his shoes and spectacles removed, was sleeping soundly, indeed noisily, on top of his coverlet.

“Are you all right, Jophan?” said Letteraxe, gripping one arm. “Can you walk?”

“Yes,” Jophan replied, “twice.”

Les released her grip on his other arm, and in a voice which again reminded him of his mother she said, “Jophan, you are supposed to go to bed before you go to sleep,”

Jophan could see that this theory had some validity, and made his way without much difficulty to the elevator for his room. But he was the only passenger and at this time in the morning the elevator seemed so buoyant with energy that it carried him past his floor before he could bring it under control.

However he was only one floor up, so he decided to walk down rather than risk being hijacked by the elevator again. On the way to the stairs he heard again that distant sound of voices singing which had puzzled him before. It seemed nearer this time, and he traced it to a door near the top of the stairs. He opened it gently, and saw a penthouse lounge with a spectacular view of the lights of downtown Quotidian, and a dozen or so people singing to the accompaniment of a guitar. It was not quite the same sound he had heard before, but it could well have been part of it, and it was very pleasant. But after a while Jophan realised he was in danger of providing an unwelcome snore accompaniment and that he must leave. He stood and bowed, and brought his hands silently together in mute appreciation: the singers returned his bow with friendly smiles, and he tiptoed out.

He had a little difficulty with the key to his room, but none at all in finding the bed, nor collapsing into it even with his eyes already dosed. In his last moment of consciousness came the thought, so this is what they mean by

“falling asleep”.



Chapter 11

In Which Jophan Is Doubly Afflicted

It seemed that a strange and terrible malady, the like of which Jophan had never before experienced, had overtaken him during the night. His head throbbed as though it was being stricken continually by the brickbats of angry Magrevoos, and with every loud sound or sudden body movement or change in the position of his head, his suffering increased. In the hotel restaurant the lavish and aromatic breakfasts served to the horribly hearty people around him caused only feelings of the direst inner disquiet. He confined himself to coffee, which seemed to bring about some of the adjustments urgently necessary between him and reality.

It was fortunate that the assignments given him that morning by Dave were few and simple: they did not require any strenuous exercise of his strangely weakened body or disabled mind. For much of the morning he was able to sit among other fans whose faces mirrored the sickly pallor of his own; who also spoke in soft voices and who twitched whenever a door slammed or a chair scraped noisily on the floor. But it seemed that the healing Spirit of Fandom must have been moving quietly among them, for they were enjoying their misery together.

And by noon the malady had altogether receded. Once again clearheaded and eager for food and fannish company, Jophan resumed his full enjoyment of the convention. Dave told him he could attend any programme item he wished, provided he left word of his whereabouts in the Committee Room. There, he was several times involved in confidential discussions and activities, of a kind to which the convention membership at large were not privy. When this happened the Committeefans paid him the compliment of not continually reminding him that these matters were only for the ears of the convention organisers.

He was able to hear the beginning and the closing sentences of Profan's Guest Speech, half of a movie – the second half, fortunately – that he had long wanted to see, and most of a panel on fan publishing, which shocked and surprised him because it seemed to be constantly on the verge of descending from verbal into physical violence.

The panel consisted of four fans known to Jophan only by reputation,

and one whom he had encountered briefly the previous evening at Profan's party among the unfriendly group from Sercon City. He had not mellowed in the interim. His sole desire seemed to be to demean and personally insult each of the other panelists. He was small in stature, but appeared to be trying to make up in volume and circumference what he lacked in height. His manner was superior, his tongue acid, his language in turn coarse or smooth as silk: his verbal thrusts were well-timed, vicious and directed with deadly precision at the target's most vulnerable area. It was clear the four other fans were being outmanoeuvred and utterly demolished. When the panel broke up without coming to blows, Jophan's sigh of relief was long and heartfelt.

"That was Feudophan," said Dave, making his usual sudden appearance. "Stay away from him, Jophan. I don't know of anyone who likes him, apart from himself and possibly his twin brother, but next to the GOH he draws the biggest crowd. You won't mind missing the next item because it's the auction and you have no money. There is another job for you...."

Jophan didn't bother to mention that he did have money now, thanks to Letteraxe, but hurried to complete his task so that he could get back to the auction in time to buy something. All he had to do was to notify the participants in another panel of a substitution in their number. He knew his way about the hotel now and had no difficulties.

He was returning by way of the great carpeted marble central stairway, when he heard voices raised in anger. One of the voices was all too familiar, and indeed when he turned the corner there was the plump figure of Feudophan. The person he was shouting at turned out to be the Day Manager of the hotel, whom Jophan had met briefly in the Committee Room. Around their feet the spotless marble floor was covered with a thin layer of soil, scattered vegetation and broken porcelain.

"I was not trying to kill anyone!" Feudophan was saying. "Do you think I'm stupid? I was going to dump the soil and plant on his head, as a joke, but the pot cracked in my hand. My brother has advised me to sue your flearidden hotel for endangering the lives of guests with gimcrack ornaments, occasioning me severe emotional stress. Besides, I missed him by yards. No, I will not clean it up. The Committee can do that, for being stupid enough to allow that moron into the convention. Do you know what he wrote about me in –"

"Excuse me, sir," said Jophan respectfully to the Day Manager, as he stepped between them. "We'll clean it up."

The Day Manager turned without a word and strode for a short distance along a side passage, where he opened a door into a broom closet. Jophan took a brush, mop and bucket and returned to the staircase, the Day Manager following behind with a plastic dustpan and an air of faint distaste. Feudophan was still on the scene, regarding them coldly and trying to ignore the critical murmurs about his behaviour from his diminishing audience. He did not offer to help. Instead he stayed by Jophan's elbow as he worked and talked about his many grievances and the even greater number of fans who hated him for no reason and the reasons why he hated them.

A mundane corporate lawyer, and perhaps a Healer of the Mind, would have been needed to sift and weigh the mass of evidence that Feudophan produced. It was made up of veiled accusations, half-truths, covert character assassination, and revelations of various dark and devious conspiracies against him, all of which seemed highly subjective in nature but presumably were no less distressing for that.

Only once did he stop talking, when Jophan asked him to help move a heavy ornamental table from the wall so that he could brush away the soil behind it. Rather to Jophan's surprise, he did not demur, but co-operated with quiet efficiency. Then he resumed his tirade, though less loudly than before. Several times

Jophan told him he understood and sympathised, but that was only a half truth because he did not fully understand.

Then Feudophan left, and Jophan realised the job was nearly completed. All the debris had been cleared away, the carpet brushed clean and there were only a few smears of dirt left on the marble. As Jophan worked with his mop, admiring the way the wet marble looked so supernaturally clean, the Day Manager approached and spoke to him for the first time. His tone was apologetic.

"We have cleaning staff to do that," he said, "but I wanted that Feudophan fellow to do it. I do not like him or his stupid jokes. Two years ago he filled balloons with water and bombed people in the street from his window. The majority of the fans here are intelligent, responsible people and that sort of juvenile foolishness gives them a bad name. Or is he, perhaps, a friend of yours?"

"No," said Jophan.

"I applaud your good taste," said the Day Manager. "Let me give you a hand with that thing."

In many respects he resembled his dreaded Brother of the Night, but as he bent forward to help move the heavy table back into position, Jophan saw a thin edge of gleaming metal protruding above his rightly buttoned and resplendent waistcoat, and he realised that the Day Manager was wearing a Shield of Umor as brightly burnished as was his own.



Chapter 12

In Which Jophan Is Richly Rewarded for Enjoying Himself

Dave joined them a few minutes later to say, “Jophan, try to find Frank Roberts, and if I haven’t found him first, tell him that the Toastmaster has had to call off for urgent reasons and that the Committee have volunteered him for the job. Do you know Frank to see? Grey hair, walks with a stick.”

“Sure,” said Jophan, poised for flight, “I met him at the authors’ signing session.”

“Good,” said Dave. “There’s one other thing. This means there will be a vacancy at the top table for the Banquet tomorrow night. You can take the empty place; you’ve earned it ... and don’t worry, we don’t charge our gofers for banquet tickets.”

Jophan found Frank Roberts without difficulty, in the bar, and this time had an opportunity to tell him how much he had always admired his work. It had indeed been one of Frank’s classic stories which he had been reading in the cornfield when he was first visited by the Spirit of Fandom. Jophan was surprised to find that Frank was so pleased with his praise; he had thought that anyone so famous would have been inured to compliments. But then he remembered that in Trufandom they said that Egg o’ Bu never went off.

After the incident with Feudophan, it seemed that the calls on Jophan’s time diminished, so that he was able to see more of the programme without interruption. The Convention was going well, he was told, and he could see for himself that even the Committeefans were beginning to enjoy it. Not that everything was perfect, of course. There had been complaints about the hotel food and a mild outbreak of salmonella, half the elevators had broken down at about the same time as the public address system, and the programme would have been running even later than the erroneous version in the Programme Booklet if so many items had not had to be cancelled. But all this, he was assured, was perfectly normal. Listening to some of the stories he was told of past disasters it seemed to Jophan that calamity lay in ambush at every corner of a convention: it seemed as if an operation as complex as a convention was prey to evil forces lurking in the chaos which infests all large hotels beneath the smooth surface of their administration. Against these

cosmic forces there stood only the determination and intelligence of Convention Committees. Their role, Jophan realised, was not unlike that of the human race in its conquest of space.

That night he went to another room party, this time given by the Committee itself, and spent some time pouring bheer for others rather than drinking it himself. This way, he met a lot of people, including all the other gofers whom he had seen only as they flashed past in their separate orbits. He felt again among them the sensation of brightness and warmth that told him the Spirit of Trufandom was present, and he talked with and enjoyed the company of many other different people. Among them was Feudophan.

He had just poured him a bheer when he saw Frank Roberts coming towards them. "Do you know Frank Roberts?" he asked. "Know him?" said Feudophan, "I'm fed up hearing about him. I always say, if he's so famous, why isn't he dead?"

"Ah, Jophan," said Roberts, cordially, showing no sign of having overheard this remark. "Enjoying the party? Is it not always a relief to find that fandom is in no danger of running short of its supply of obnoxious twits? Who's your fat friend?"

Feudophan had the grace to grin at this, and surprised Jophan by talking seriously and without rancour to Frank and others on many fannish subjects: until a fanzine columnist with an aggressive manner joined them and Feudophan again became the sarcastic and unlikable character that everyone knew and loathed.

When the party ended, Jophan was sure he was drunk, but he was able without difficulty to find his way again to the Singing Penthouse, where he pleasantly unwound from the tensions of the day. Even then he was not really tired, just relaxed enough to go to bed and fall into an easeful sleep.

Next morning he woke quite early, but in spite of having had so little sleep he felt quite refreshed and there was no sign of the dreadful malady of the first morning. Indeed, he was looking forward to a substantial breakfast. Obviously, mused Jophan, there is something regenerative about Conventions. If only I could live this way all the time I might evolve into a higher life form altogether.

The last day passed like a curiously accelerating dream, as Jophan tried to meet people he had so far missed, or with whom he had had unfinished conversations. Unaccountably, the list seemed to lengthen during the day rather than shorten.

But all frustrations were forgotten when the banquet began. The banqueting tables were laden with different kinds of food, much of it edible, and the clash of cutlery on crockery almost drowned the hum of conversation. Eventually the noise was stilled as the toasts were drunk to the guests in vintage Egg o' Bu specially imported from Trufandom, the first Jophan had seen in Mundane.

Then there were votes of thanks to the Committee and the various programme organisers and participants, all wildly applauded: and, to Jophan's intense pleasure, one to the gofers that was no less warmly supported. Jophan had to remind himself he was not supposed to drink a toast to himself: it was the first time he had ever been in such a situation, or indeed even imagined it. Finally the hotel supervision and staff were thanked, and they too were warmly applauded, all past frictions forgotten ... at least until the convention reports. Singled out for special praise was the Day Manager, who stood at the back of the banqueting hall bowing gravely in acknowledgement, resplendent in formal dress, with the unexpected addition of an impeccably-styled black beanie on his head.

The party that night was as enjoyable as before, but strangely subdued. People who had to leave very early in the morning were saying goodbye now, though to Jophan's mind they had only just arrived. It was, he realised, the beginning of a long goodbye.

It continued next morning in the foyer. It seemed very right and proper that the first three fans to speak to him should also be the last. Letteraxe shook his hand warmly. Les stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek and whispered, "Thank you for bringing us together." And Dave clapped him on the back. "You did very well, Jophan," he said. "Will we see you next year?"

Jophan looked across the foyer where the same fans he had seen three days earlier were standing about in small groups or calling out to one another. But now they were leaving rather than arriving, saying farewell instead of hello, and most important of all, they were no longer strangers. There was so much he wanted to say, but the right words would not come.

"Yes," said Jophan.



Chapter 13

In Which Jophan Rejoins the Mundane World

Even with the books he had bought in the Hucksters' Room, Jophan's bag did not seem heavy, and he began the long walk to his lodgings with a light step. It was a beautiful autumn morning, calm and sunny, and the euphoria of the convention still surged through his veins. His mind was full of memories, jostling one another as candidates for preservation.

He was some distance from the hotel when he heard again the sound of distant voices singing. He stopped in shocked surprise. Of course he knew what it was. The people in the penthouse had been singing as they packed for departure, and had thrown open the windows to air the room. They had been joined by other fans waiting for transport or calling to say goodbye. He had been one of those himself. The singers changed, but the song continued, a sort of joyful lament as if in remembrance of a much loved friend. What he was hearing now must be the last chorus, as the remaining survivors of the convention rallied and sang their hearts out.

No, that was not what had surprised him. The surprising thing was that now at last he realised what was familiar about that sound. It was the same sound of happy voices singing that had been borne to him on the late summer breeze, all those years ago, when he was a boy in Prosaic, before he set off on his quest for the Enchanted Duplicator. That singing had come from Trufandom, or so he had always thought. Now, here was something very like it in the heart of Mundane. How could that be?

Obviously, there was still much he did not understand. He wished, not for the first time, that he could meet one of the legendary Elders of Fandom who could explain these mysteries to him.

Back home at his lodgings, he unpacked his new books and arranged them proudly on his shelves. There was no artwork, because he had not been able to afford it. Anyway, the landlord might not allow him to take down the present pictures. Some day he would have his own place and fill it with books and paintings. Some day he must go to another convention. How could he ever make enough money for all that?

With that thought, the convention euphoria drained away and he began to feel tired and depressed, for the first time in three days. He had just enough

energy for a simple meal of sandwiches and a glass of milk, before going to bed.

He slept the remainder of that day and all night. Next morning he awoke with the same sense of loss. But a light breakfast revived his spirits, and full of renewed energy he arrived for work before the supermarket opened; it had been closed for the holiday. He passed the time looking at the window display, trying to analyse what was wrong with it. It lacked ... wonderment, he thought. The packages just sat there, neatly arranged and sensibly displayed, but all they did was announce their presence. Passers-by would just pass by. There should be something to entice them inside, some mystery, some unanswered question, some temptation. Like a fanzine cover.

The supermarket doors were opened by the cleaners, and he went inside determined to make a success of his job of Stores Supervisor.

Seldom in the history of retailing can stores have been so sedulously supervised. He started by clearing out a disused room at the back, full of old boxes, and found an unused minicomputer, still in the carton in which it had come from Head Office. There was also a store accounting programme. The computer was the same model he used for word-processing his fanzine, and in half an hour he had the whole operation up and running.

From then on the paperwork involved by orders and invoices took up very little time, and he was able to devote himself to his customers. No detail escaped his notice. First thing in the morning he personally oiled every trolley wheel and pivot. Last thing every evening he worked out a different route for his walk home, in which he tried to assess the nature of his catchment area, and how it was changing. In between he prowled the aisles, observing how the customers behaved and eavesdropping on their conversations. Occasionally they asked him where to find some article, and he made a mental note that the shelf displays needed rearranging. There must be some arrangement so natural and right that no one would ever need to ask questions.

It also worried him that sometimes the store ran out of some kinds of merchandise before the truck arrived from the warehouse with the week's supply. Apparently the volume of goods supplied to each supermarket in the chain was based on the volume of purchases in the previous week: but it did not take account of the purchases that were not made because the supply had run out. He also noticed that the articles they ran short of were often of the more up-market variety, and associated this in his mind with the number of

newly painted front doors he had noticed in the run-down residential area near the bus station.

But of course the supermarket supplies were based on bulk purchasing and bulk delivery: obviously there could not be different supplies for different stores in the same chain.

Well, he thought; why not? He had read an article in *Mildly Surprising Stories of Superscience* pointing out that computers were superseding the era of Mass Production by one of Universal Customisation. You could specify every available detail of the car or kitchen you wanted and the computers would make it up for you. Why not the groceries the car brought to the kitchen?

He booted up the computer with the store accounting programme and called up the Directory. There was a file called Read Me, and he put it on screen. It revealed that since the manual was printed the warehouse had been automated, and any detail of the weekly bulk order could now be amended up to 30 minutes before dispatch. Moreover, special orders could be placed for foods not included in the chain's bulk purchases.

Jophan took to roaming his area more extensively every evening, noting the dishes being served in the little diners and bistros that were springing up. When he saw unfamiliar foods that looked interesting, he ordered a supply, and was glad to notice that in most cases they sold well. However, there also seemed to be a lot more customers these days.

But all this was put out of his head for a time, by an unforeseen development. In one of his expeditions he found in a side street a little secondhand bookshop whose existence he had not suspected. Some of the books in the window looked interesting, but his attention was riveted on a faded postcard taped on the glass at the side. It bore the fateful message *East Quotidian Science Fiction Association. Thursdays 8pm.*

The shop was still open. Indeed, judging from its appearance, Jophan feared that if it ever closed it might never open again. Inside was a pleasantly plump lady with a nice smile. "What day of the week is it?" asked Jophan idiotically, uttering the first words that came into his head.

"It's Thursday all right," was the understanding reply. "You'll find them at Omar's Eats, just 'round the corner."



Chapter 14

In Which Jophan Finds the Oasis of Omar

Jophan had not realised how much he had missed the company of fans. The distractions and temptations offered by Mundane had been many and various, but there was always something missing. It was almost as if the people spoke a foreign language. Communication on everyday matters had presented no problems, but humour of the subtlety to which he was accustomed met with incomprehension, and on the few occasions when people addressed themselves to matters that seemed important to Jophan, like the mysteries of space and time and the future of mankind, their views seemed embarrassingly superficial.

Omar's bistro was small, low ceiled and poorly lit. There were some Mundanes drinking noisily at the bar, but two of the four tables furthest away were occupied by fans. Jophan knew this because the tables were strewn with books and magazines, their bright covers seeming to shine in the dark with a welcome like that of a lighthouse for a lost ship.

The fans were cordial and hospitable, competing with one another for the privilege of buying him a drink. When his eyes got used to the light, he recognised two of them as fellow gofers at the convention. Some of the others were more youthful than he had expected, and used the strangely-accented speech he had learned was the language of mediafen. But their conversation was lively and wide-ranging and well informed, and they laughed a lot, and they enjoyed finding out things and eagerly sought an explanation of any allusion they didn't understand. They were fans all right.

All too soon it was ending, as fans left to catch transport home, until there was only one left: the one Jophan thought of as the Wise Old Fan. The evening had not been as good as the convention, Jophan told himself, or even a room party, but it was the closest to either he was likely to find. He did not want it to end.

"Sir," said Jophan, hoping with all his will that the answer would be in the negative, "will you have to leave soon?"

From the behaviour of the others towards him, it had been plain that the Wise Old Fan was much loved and greatly respected. His features were deeply wrinkled and his remaining wisps of hair hung about his head like a

saintly halo, but the eyes in that weathered face still shone with all the brightness of youth. The words he had spoken during the evening were few and, as now, never about himself.

“Soon,” he said, smiling and gently inclining his head in the direction of a waiter who was pointedly placing a chair on a table, “they will throw us out.”

Disappointment at what threatened to be their imminent parting made Jophan’s manner less respectful than he had intended as he said, “But I wanted to ask you something, get to know you. You’ve hardly said a word all night.”

“If you wish, Jophan,” said the Wise Old Fan as he rose stiffly to his feet, “we can talk on the way to the bus station. But at my age I find it easier, and more fun, to listen to others. I would like to listen to you.”

“You might find that easier,” said Jophan, holding out a supporting arm as they moved into the street, “but it will not be much fun ...”

The progress of the Wise Old Fan along the poorly lit street was less than rapid, so there was ample time for him to encourage Jophan to speak of himself. Jophan told of his unhappy life as a youth in Prosaic, of the dream that had taken him on his epic journey to the Tower of the Enchanted Duplicator in Trufandom, of the discontent that had eventually driven him from that gentle land, and of his adventures since. He described the pleasure and excitement of his first convention, the desolation which had followed it and which he had submerged in his work, and the loneliness he had felt in Mundane – the depth of which he had just realised. He felt like leaving all the brash insensitivity of Mundane and returning to Trufandom. Why, he had a return ticket in his pocket and could leave tonight from the very bus station they were walking towards.

It was then that the Wise Old Fan halted suddenly, and his grip on Jophan’s arm grew tighter.

“Jophan, Jophan,” he said in a gentle, chiding voice, “you are too hard on yourself. But it was ever thus of the dwellers in the lofty seclusion of Trufandom. You demand too much of yourselves, and thus of everyone else as well.

“Heed me, Jophan,” he went on, “Mundane is neither a good nor an evil place. Numbered among its people are both the good and the bad, and everything in between, the intelligent and stupid, the sympathetic, and the insensitive. You have met many of them at your place of work and know this

to be so. And from among them have arisen many of the fans, like Dave and Les and Hucksterfan, whom you met at the convention and know in your heart to be as true fans as any living by the Tower. In many respects they are truer, more dedicated and more severely tested than you, for they have lived surrounded and under constant assault by the many temptations and distractions of Mundane, and their success is measured by the number who despite such blandishments have risen to high positions in Mundane itself while remaining at all times true to their fannish ideals.”

“When I was leaving the convention,” said Jophan slowly, his voice hushed in wonderment, “I heard from the penthouse of the Grandiloquent Hotel a sound of voices singing, very like what I heard once in the far distance from Trufandom itself. That was what I was going to ask you about.”

“I think you know the answer yourself now,” said the Wise Old Fan. “Trufandom was in the penthouse of the Grandiloquent Hotel in Quotidian that day as much as it ever was in the Tower of the Enchanted Duplicator.”

“But there is no Enchanted Duplicator at the top of the Grandiloquent Hotel,” said Jophan, stupidly.

“No,” agreed the Wise Old Fan, “but your quest was for a means to produce the Perfect Fanzine. The quest of the Trufans in the Grandiloquent Hotel was for something else.”

“What?” asked Jophan.

“Why, what else but the Perfect Convention?” said the Wise Old Fan. “Oh, there’s my bus.” With a surprising turn of speed he hobbled into the path of a bus just leaving the station. It halted to let him on.

Jophan was left on the sidewalk in a maze of conjecture. He was bathed in a great light, but it was only from the headlights of the bus. And instead of the sound of golden trumpets there was only the grinding of gears as the bus accelerated past him. Nevertheless Jophan knew he had again been told something that could change his life. He felt shivers of awe and wonder like tiny, icy feet marching along his spine.

The Perfect Convention? A Convention where all your friends were? Where you met them at wonderful all-night room parties about which nobody complained? Where every item on the programme was the very best of its kind and started on time? Where every speaker and panelist spoke with wit and intelligence and knew when to stop doing it? Where all the evil forces of the hotel were completely routed by a Samurai-like Convention Committee?

Where all the lifts worked, all the time? Which the press reported fairly? Where the food was varied in its excellence and excellent in its variety, with drink to match? Where all the awards met with universal approval, even from the runners-up? Which ended with everyone more friends than ever? And which instantly became a legend? Was it possible?

It would be very difficult, Jophan thought. It would be like a sort of three-dimensional version of the Perfect Fanzine, only more difficult because it depended on the efforts of so many other people whose contributions you could not revise. But what a wonderful concept! What more could anyone want than to be part of its realisation? What aim could be more worthwhile than to give your friends three days of happiness and a lifetime of pleasant memories?



Chapter 15

In Which Jophan Is Elevated

It seemed that the East Quotidian Science Fiction Association met at 8pm only to transact official business, which usually took about two minutes, before adjourning to some eating place, usually Omar's. However some members went to the bookshop straight from work in Quotidian, to read or sell or buy or exchange books and magazines. Jophan took to doing this himself, and one of the startling things he learned from the fanzines available there was that there was a convention somewhere in Mundane nearly every weekend.

At first this information inclined him to despair, at the thought of the number of conventions he was going to miss. But then he sensibly decided that the best he could do was earn enough money to attend maybe two a year, so he plunged back into his work.

One of the things on his mind had been the impersonality of supermarkets. They were a good idea for quick one-stop shopping, which was what most people wanted, but he was quite sure there was a sizable number of people who missed the corner shop, where you could get information and advice, and perhaps local gossip. It was already the practice in Jophan's store to attach little cards to some merchandise, with information like FRESH TODAY or GREAT VALUE, and Jophan used his little dot matrix printer to extend greatly the scope of these. Sometimes it was the place of origin, for imported fruit and vegetables, or information about the length of the season in the case of local produce. Sometimes it was simply the price per kilo, where competing brands of the same product were being offered in different sizes of containers. In the case of the new foodstuffs he had introduced, he offered simple recipes.

When he was typing one of these out on his word processor, the thought came to him that there was now only one facility of the corner shop he was not providing, namely gossip. He took out the notebook on which he had jotted down the overheard remarks of customers and began adding them between two lines at the foot of his cards, like a fanzine interlineation.

Nothing seemed to happen as a result of these innovations, except that occasionally he heard giggles from the aisles, and twice he was touched when

women brought him little delicacies for his lunch, made from his recipes. However he was very much afraid he had done something wrong when he heard after about a month that the Supreme Being wanted to see him again, on the Friday morning. He had heard the story of an over-enthusiastic Supermarket Assistant Manager who was dismissed for “fraternising with the customers,” and he was even more conscious of the precarious nature of his job when on the way to the EQSFA meeting that evening he saw that the supermarket in the next street but one had closed down altogether.

Shortly after he arrived the next morning he was shown into the Presence. “I think you had better sit down, Jophan,” said the Supreme Being without preamble.

Fearing the worst, Jophan did so.

“I have some good news for you, and some bad news.” said the Supreme Being. “The good news is that the computer that rules our lives has apparently decided that the continuing dramatic increase in our profits is due to you for your ideas and to me for not getting in your way. We are both to be promoted to Headquarters in downtown Quotidian to set up a new Customer Relations Division serving all the businesses in the Group.”

Jophan was at a loss for words. “The bad news?”

“The Group’s activities extend all over Mundane,” explained the Supreme Being, “in some fifty cities. They include big companies like the Grandiloquent Hotel chain and the Routeviler Bus Company. Plus a number of small companies you probably never heard of, like Shield Cleaners. You will have to visit each local office, and this means you will be spending every week in a different city. Of course the salary will be very good, and you can arrange your own itinerary and you will have first class air travel for long journeys and your own car for shorter ones, but it will wreak havoc with your social life. However I would personally be very grateful if you would take it on.”

“Well, all right,” said Jophan.



Chapter 16

In Which Jophan Enters a New Life

On his way out, Jophan was given two large brown envelopes. One turned out to contain an advance copy of a study by the Sociology Department of the University of Quotidian, entitled *The Supermarket as Community Centre*. Apparently Jophan's supermarket had become a minor cult among the social scientists, being regarded as filling a useful role in the development of a community spirit. It seemed that various indices used by social welfare statisticians had shown a substantial improvement. The Supermarket Company was being nominated for some kind of Award.

The quotations Jophan had gathered were regarded as a new kind of folk graffiti, and extensively quoted. Jophan glanced through them ...

On a day like this, next door could be far down the street ... Her honeymoon was just a busman's holiday ... The doctor said her feet would never be any use to her again. Not as feet... One morning he told me that the best thing about having a hardboiled cigarette for breakfast was that it gave you time to smoke an egg ... What's the good of speaking French if everyone knows what you're saying? ... I think the price of those diapers is absorbitant ... People laugh at the funniest things ... I dreamed I was sick in my Maidenform bra. Twice ... I never knew my husband was a drunkard until one night he came home sober ... People shouldn't have to visit people at Christmas. People should visit them ... I tried to like him, but the moment he took off his shoes I could smell defeat ... I believe it's unlucky to be superstitious ... Money may not be everything in life but it's nice to run barefoot through ... She'll always have her back to fall back on.

Jophan shook his head and put the study aside to be read more carefully later. He opened the other envelope.

This turned out to contain a voucher for his company car, and a number of catalogues showing the models he could choose from. He went along to the garage and picked out a rather sporty hatchback, which he thought projected a go-ahead image of the group and had enough space to carry a complete mailing of a fanzine.

The first trip he made was to take the Wise Old Fan for a drive in the country. They went first to the bus station where Jophan had left and re-

entered Mundane, and he showed his guest the beginning of the path through the Forest of Stupidity. When they got back to the car Jophan noticed that the windshield had been cleaned already, although it had not been very dirty. Feeling hoist by his own petard, he made a mental note to advise Shield Cleaners that such excess of zeal was likely to be counter-productive.

Then they took the flyover to the Prosaic mad. The journey, which Jophan remembered as being so long, seemed to take no time at all. His parents were very pleased to see him, and to hear about his new job, and his father seemed very impressed with his car. He and the Wise Old Fan got on like a house on fire, and as they talked Jophan could see his father kept glancing at Jophan and back to the car. His mother served up a simple but appetising meal, and afterwards his father took him aside.

“All this is from reading those books I burned?” he said.

“Well, most of them were trash, like you said,” said Jophan. “It’s just that they made me think.”

“Well, I’m sorry anyway,” said his father.

“It’s all right,” said Jophan. “Everything worked out.”

They parted on good terms, but driving back to Quotidian in the dusk Jophan thought that the Wise Old Fan dozing beside him was in some ways more of a father to him. He realised there was much he wanted to say to the gentle old man, and more that he wanted to know about him, but he hardly knew how to start.

When he saw that the lights of Quotidian had awakened his passenger, Jophan said quickly, “I still don’t know much about you, sir. Have you ever produced a fanzine?”

“Not for a long time,” the Wise Old Fan replied in a serious voice. “I ceased publishing when they invented papyrus, having always considered fanzines chiselled on stone to be much more up-market. Fewer typos, for one thing.”

Jophan laughed quietly, because the other had a habit of saying very funny things in a tone of the utmost gravity.

“I would like ... Will I ever see you again?” Jophan stammered, as the car drew up at the Wise Old Fan’s cottage in a leafy suburb. “At a convention maybe? If you still go to conventions, that is.”

“I will be going to one convention,” said the Wise Old Fan, and this time his voice sounded very serious as he took Jophan’s hand in a grip so gentle that it could scarcely be felt, “and I hope, no, I expect to see you

there.”

And suddenly the Wise Old Fan was gone, into a strange mist that seemed to be only in Jophan’s eyes.



Chapter 17

In Which Jophan Begins his Travels

On the following week Jophan began his new way of life, and found it not uncongenial. Every Monday afternoon he would check into the Grandiloquent Hotel in a different city, under an assumed name. During the week, he would assess the merits of the hotel's various services. Between mealtimes he would check on any other Group businesses in the area, including the local branches of the supermarket chain. He noted with interest the extent to which his ideas had been adopted.

His expense account entitled him to make test purchases, by means of which he laid in a store of food and drink for the weekend. In fine weather he took trips by Routeviler bus to various places of interest in the local countryside, stopping off at each depot to check the services and write up his notes. Among his tests of the services provided, he would follow up a suggestion from the Wise Old Fan. He would put in a baggage tracing request, the baggage check numbers he quoted being ones known to fandom as those of the lost baggage of two fannish pilgrims of antiquity. Both cases were reputed to contain fabulous treasures and the search for them, which had at one time united all fandom, had never been quite abandoned.

On the Friday evening he would begin to relax from his arduous toil, not too exhausted to enjoy the convention during the weekend. On Monday morning he would leave by car or plane for another convention city.

After a few months he had a diffident enquiry from the Accounts Audit Department at Group Headquarters. They had been unable to detect the pattern behind his travelling schedule, and wondered if he would like them to plan a more orderly and economical progression from region to region which would save him time and the firm money. In his reply Jophan thanked them for their offer, but explained that if his presence in a region became known, or his future movements became predictable, people would put on a show for him and the whole purpose of his operation would be vitiated. He had accordingly devised a method of random selection of cities to visit, the principle of which he was unable for security reasons to divulge. He enclosed with his memorandum a print-out from the little lap-top computer the firm had issued him with, through which he had accessed the Group's main

accounts database. The printout showed that the profits estimated to have been so far generated by Jophan's operation would be sufficient to pay his salary and expenses for the next 17 years, 4 months, three days and 6.5 hours, approximately. He did not hear from the Audit Department again.

Jophan never had any difficulty finding a city with a convention, but some of the conventions were not quite what he expected. There was one where all the people wore the same type of eccentric clothing, neither uniform nor fancy dress; there was one where people wore elaborate costumes all the time, even on the street, without any sign of embarrassment; and even one where many of the attendees went about with artificially deformed features. In these conventions he found to his astonishment that the Honoured Guests were not authors or fens at all, but mere actors. On one occasion, a pseudoguest of this kind treated the Committeefans and everyone else with a discourtesy so extreme that it reminded Jophan of Feudophan's response to a particularly opinionated columnist: but other actor guests seemed genuinely friendly, throwing themselves with enthusiasm into every aspect of the convention and working as hard as any gofer.

The conventions were well organised, with forethought and consideration. The hotels were well chosen and the programmes efficiently arranged, and as interesting as could be expected. The parties in the rooms and corridors and the joyful meetings on stairs and in elevators were just like those Jophan remembered from Quoticon; and the fans, once he had learned and understood the words and ideas peculiar to their beliefs, were as bright and friendly as those he had met then. To his pleasure, he found that there were even some who seemed keenly interested in his diffident explanation about the Enchanted Duplicator and Trufandom. And, much to his surprise, Jophan enjoyed all three types of convention very much.



Chapter 18

In Which Jophan Meets Old Friends

Several conventions and many thousands of miles later, Jophan presented himself once again at a Registration Desk manned by Dave. Les was there too, this time assisting him. She smiled the happiest smile he had ever seen and handed him his programme pack before he could speak. She also offered him a delicatessen carton containing slices of sausage and pieces of deep-fried chicken.

As he hesitated there was a familiar voice behind him. "That's all there is, I'm afraid. I married her for batter or for wurst."

"Letteraxe!" exclaimed Jophan in delight. "I recognised you from the awful pun. You mean you two are married?"

"Well, I should hope so," said Les, "as well as we could be with you not there."

"I am sorry, I never knew about it, I've been travelling so much."

When he had finished congratulating them and Letteraxe had stopped grinning like someone who had won all the highest fan awards at the same time, his three friends looked with mock subservience at the airline labels on Jophan's bag. "I can see you're still short of money," said Dave, "I expect you want your gofer's job back."

"Not this time," said Jophan, shaking his head. "But if there's anything I can do to help out...."

"Oh, Jophan," said Les in tones of mock anger, "will you never learn? Now he'll work you half to death and you won't even get a free banquet ticket!"

They all laughed and Jophan moved across the crowded foyer towards the elevators, but very slowly because he kept meeting fans he knew from earlier conventions, and this one was already swallowing him like a great, warm and wonderful amoeba.

He met two young fans from the East Quotidian SFA, attending their first convention and looking self-conscious and alone in their special T-shirts and badges. Jophan greeted them with pleasure and asked after the Wise Old Fan; then he introduced them to others of their kind and mentioned a couple of room numbers to them.

He met Profan, kindly as ever, who said that at this convention he was not a poor overworked Guest Author but was responsible only for enjoying himself, and they went to the bar and drank bheer together and swapped room numbers, and had their long and long-delayed talk. He told Profan all about his journey to Mundane and his job at the supermarket and how the Wise Old Fan had explained to him about the Perfect Convention and how he was now devoting his life to the search for it.

“Well, if anyone can find the Perfect Convention, Jophan, it would be you,” said Profan. “Because it wouldn’t be perfect if you weren’t there.”

Jophan looked askance at him, but he seemed perfectly serious. Embarrassed by the extravagant nature of the compliment, he changed the subject.

“You would know something I wondered about,” he said. “Did the Wise Old Fan ever publish a fanzine?”

“Come now,” said Profan, “you must have heard of *Nirvana*.”

Of course Jophan had heard of *Nirvana*. Who hadn’t? But he had always thought it was a paradigm, a name for the perfect fanzine of the imagination. No one had ever told him it was real. According to legend it was the first fanzine produced on the Enchanted Duplicator, when the machine was new. Jophan was so overcome with awe at the thought that he had actually spoken to the editor of *Nirvana* that he fell silent

Into the lull in the conversation the Unsteady Fan projected himself, staggering up to their table and collapsing on a chair.

“He is presently in the bar,” he articulated, with the utmost clarity.

“Who is?” asked Jophan.

“Me,” said the Unsteady Fan.

“You’re right,” said Profan less distinctly, and laughed. “Sit down, friend, and tell me how brilliant I am. But first I’ll buy us all another bheer.”

Presumably other things happened that evening, but Jophan never did remember them.

However he must have found his room because he awoke there the next morning, in good time for the Official Opening ceremony. This time he did not miss any programme item he wanted to see, and most of the rest of the time he spent in the Fan Room.

Only once did Dave ask him, in words that were more hesitant than was usual for him, if he would do the Committee a special favour. The job would not cause Jophan to miss a programme item, merely ask him to sit on a panel

rather than in the audience.

“This time we would like to have a Moderator on the Fanzine Editors’ Panel,” Dave went on, “to keep things more under control. You seem to be the only one who can talk to Feudophan without immediately starting an uncivil war. Please, will you do it?”

Jophan did it to the best of his ability, and while the verbal pyrotechnics of Feudophan were spectacular and continuous, there was no violence. He was much relieved, and thought he must unconsciously have learned something from the other convention programmes he had attended, particularly the one with the unpleasant actor.

When it was safely over, and he was moving towards the bar in the wake of the other panelists, who were still trading insults with Feudophan but laughing between times, Jophan was surprised to discover that the Day Manager was walking towards him.

“You know, Jophan, that is one very funny, and very unhappy, fan,” he said, nodding in the direction of Feudophan. “Did you know he was carrying a concealed weapon? I confiscated it before he went in, naturally. It was a loaded water pistol ...” He patted the side pocket of his immaculately tailored jacket where a dark, damp stain was visibly growing in size. “... and the bloody thing is leaking. When I told him that you were moderating your first fan panel and were nervous enough without him squirting at people, he didn’t make too much fuss about giving it up. I am well used to people calling me interfering, and accusing me of being born out of wedlock, but for him such language is mild in the extreme. Do you think he is mellowing with age?”

“I do,” said Jophan, “and thank you.”

And so the convention rolled on like a snowball, gathering memories of drama and laughter, tension and relief, as conventions do, and as always Jophan tried to be everywhere because he did not want to miss even the smallest part of it, and all too soon it was over. He had checked out and was saying goodbye to the few fans remaining when Dave took him aside, to where Les and Letteraxe were standing.

“We, ah, wanted to ask you something,” said Dave. “Will you be coming next year?”

“That’s a silly question,” said Les before Jophan could reply. “Of course he’s coming. Get on with it, Dave.” Jophan grinned, and Dave floundered on.

“Well, ah,” he said, “what I wanted to say was, well, would you come next time as the Official Fan Guest? The Committee have discussed it at

length and there is an overwhelming majority who think you will make a fine
_”

“But wait,” Jophan protested, feeling his face grow warm with pleasure and red with embarrassment. “I would be delighted of course, and honoured. But there are fans much more deserving than me, you know who they are as well as I do. What does your minority say?”

“Forget the minority,” said Les, smiling as she reached up to pat his cheek. “You are the minority, all of it. Congratulations.”



Chapter 19

In Which Jophan Continues His Search for the Perfect Convention ...

Many times Jophan was invited to be Fan Guest at subsequent conventions, but he always tried to avoid such prominence when he could do so without giving offence. He preferred to fade into the background, experiencing and enjoying the convention as if he were a neofan again. His success at this was not complete, because even when people seemed to have forgotten his name they all knew and welcomed him.

Sometimes Jophan had nothing to do but wander around enjoying the company and the fannish atmosphere that now sustained his life, but he was always ready and eager to provide whatever was asked of him. Whether it was something as simple as a piece of string; a thumbtack to secure an unstable exhibit in the Art Room; or someone qualified to fill a sudden vacancy on a fan panel, when he would invariably astound and delight his fellow-panelists and the audience with the depth and detail of his knowledge of convention history, he would provide exactly what was needed.

At all times his enthusiasm was intense, but never brash. His conversation was widely known to be intelligent and wide-ranging, in turn serious and wildly funny, always stimulating and never malicious. Despite the number of questionable characters he met and the number of scandals he heard, there was no cynicism or sarcasm in him. He could be extremely witty, but there was a warmth in him that sustained an even rarer and greater quality, that of being able to make others feel witty.

There was never any need to ask Jophan if he was enjoying a particular convention because it was plain that he enjoyed them all, and so did any fans who happened to be in his company. No convention was perfect, but they were all enjoyable in their different ways. And in each of them Jophan looked for and found an element of perfection, be it something so small as the coffee at breakfast or the balance of a panel. It seemed to him that through the years the proportion of perfection was gradually increasing, and this sustained his hope that one day he would find the convention that was wholly perfect.

But there were moments of sadness, too. His old friend, the kindly Profan, grew old and weak and ceased attending conventions. And no matter

how carefully he watched for him, there was never any sign of the Wise Old Fan: it no longer seemed possible that Jophan would ever see him again.

Many others dropped away for reasons not involving age or health: Dave had become Personnel Director of a large corporation, and travelled the world looking after his 50,000 gofers, his orbit seldom intersecting that of Jophan. Les and Letteraxe ceased attending conventions to bring up a family. Jophan kept looking out for them, and once he ran up to a girl he took for Les and hugged her, only to find it was her daughter ... just as pretty and, fortunately, just as understanding.

This experience made Jophan realise he could not really be young any more. Not old, of course, he never felt old, he thought he did not even look old, it was just that in chronological terms he was not as young as he used to be.

But at each convention the faces of the fans and fanguests, the authors and editors, grew older and more tired until they eventually disappeared from the convention scene, to be replaced by other faces as fresh and eager as his own. Sometimes it seemed that what was happening was that Jophan stayed where he was but every few days the hotel surroundings changed without warning, as did the Honoured Guests and the shape and design of the convention logo and badges.

At one convention there was a nostalgic programme item on conventions of the past, in which Jophan appeared in several photographs, though his name was not among the captions. There was a cracked black and white photograph that had been taken outside the hotel at Loncon '57, showing him wearing the long tight jacket and drainpipe trousers of the time. Another showed him sporting long hair and a psychedelic shirt at the Brighton Worldcon in '79, and another wearing a sweatshirt with the emblem, in Cyrillic script, of the second Moscow Worldcon. Although the audience was composed of fans, people who by their very nature possessed minds capable of making an intuitive leap, they did not recognise him.

He began to cut down on the amount of travelling he did. Every year the number of conventions increased, so it was no longer necessary to travel so far. Also, it was no longer so important that his visits to each city be unexpected. All the local managers had by now enthusiastically adopted his approach, so that his role was now one of counsellor and friend, rather than inspector. He had felt bound to explain this development to Headquarters, but they had accepted it with equanimity. Obviously, they were afraid that any

change would disturb the profitable situation Jophan had established. Besides, his new type of itinerary involved less expense on air travel.

Jophan now spent much of his time driving. In the week before each convention, after his routine visits to the various local offices, he would drive into the countryside to visit some old friend, and to offer a ride to the convention. In this way he sometimes brought to a convention a hermit-like Trufan who had never been to one before, and whose appearance was invariably greeted with astonishment and delight.

As his job became less demanding, it seemed to become less real than the world of conventions. It was being performed on mental auto-pilot, while the thoughts of the real Jophan concentrated on last week's convention, or the next. Becoming conscious of the dangers of falling asleep on his long journeys down the monotonous turnpikes, Jophan installed the latest model hi-fi system in his car and took to playing the tape cassettes he had of past convention programsme.



Chapter 20

... And Finds It

And so it came to pass that one evening Jophan awoke from memories of past conventions to find that he had forgotten the particulars of the one for which he was bound. However he had no difficulty in finding the city's Grandiloquent Hotel. This was invariably where a convention was held if there was one anywhere in the area, the hotel chain having acquired as a result of Jophan's advice an unrivalled expertise in the convention field.

In this case the hotel turned out to be ideally situated, with a magnificent view of the river and the lake, and it was surrounded by a fascinating variety of small restaurants. There was something familiar about the foyer, which made him feel immediately at home. Reception could not have been more welcoming and efficient; his room seemed ideal for parties, and was convenient for the elevators.

It seemed no time at all until he was back in the foyer. There, on the sofa opposite reception, was one of the most welcome sights he could have imagined. It was the unmistakable figure of Profan himself, looking as he had been when Jophan had first met him. With a glad cry Jophan hurried over to greet him, and they fell into a conversation that felt as if it had never been interrupted, largely about old times and old friends. Jophan noticed among the fans arriving a smiling Feudophan, and the even more happily smiling Unsteady Fan talking to the Day Manager from Quoticon who, incredibly, was wearing slacks and a sweatshirt.

"Any sign of Les and Letteraxe?" asked Jophan.

"Not yet," said Profan, "but they are expected. Everyone is coming."

Jophan wondered what Les would look like now, and could not refrain from commenting on Profan's own youthful appearance.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," said Profan, pointing towards the elevators. Coming in their direction with a sprightly step was the Wise Old Fan. It seemed that his hair had started to grow again, and had in so doing drawn out the wrinkles from his face. The gentle smile and the inclination of the head were the same as they had always been, but the grip on Jophan's hand was firm and strong. In his other hand he was carrying a large manila envelope.

Sitting down beside them he opened the envelope, produced two copies of a fanzine and handed one to each of them.

“Could I interest either of you two gentlemen in a copy of the latest *Nirvana*?” he enquired.

Profan took up his copy and leafed through it. Then he held one page between finger and thumb and rubbed it reflectively. “Good papyrus,” he grinned.

Jophan smiled in recognition of this allusion to a famous comment of the past, on a fanzine that had taken a year of the editors’ lives. It reminded him of something else. He turned back to the Wise Old Fan. “Do you remember that baggage you suggested I look out for, the treasure that belonged to those old time fans? I have looked for it in every Routeviler bus depot in Mundane and I’m afraid it really is lost for ever.”

“No it isn’t,” said the Wise Old Fan. “Not ten minutes ago I saw Himself pick it up at reception. Yes, that’s right, Jophan. They are here, too.”

“But... Please,” said Jophan helplessly, “something very strange is happening to me. I don’t understand it. Can you –”

He broke off as the Wise Old Fan raised his hand gently for silence. In the sudden hush, Jophan could hear that the Penthouse Singers had started. But this time there was apparently some sort of trumpet counterpoint to their melody. The combination was, Jophan abruptly realised, exactly the same sound he had heard a lifetime ago as a boy in Prosaic.

And suddenly there was a golden light all about them and Jophan knew that the Spirit of Fandom was here.

The well-remembered voice seemed to sound not just in his ears but in his very bones, so that he shivered for a moment in awe and wonder.

“Jophan,” said the Spirit of Fandom. “You have done well. Not only did you find the secret of the Perfect Fanzine, you have now found your Perfect Convention. This is the Ultimate Convention. It comprises all the perfect elements of every convention there has ever been, or ever will be; all your friends are here, and all the people you have ever hoped to meet; you will be able to continue all your interrupted conversations and see every programme item you missed; here you will have all the happiness you have ever experienced, or wished for. Whether these things have seemed possible in the Mundane world or not, they are here. For with the power of love and imagination, everything is possible in this, the Enchanted Convention.”

Once again the trumpets pealed out in joyful triumph, as the Spirit of

Fandom spoke her final words. “Enjoy your convention, Jophan. It will last forever.”

And Jophan knew that it was so....



The End

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