

Counter-Clock World

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Place there is none; we go backward and forward, and there is no place.

— St Augustine

As he glided by the extremely small, out-of-the-way cemetery in his airborne prowler car, late at night, Officer Joseph Tinbane heard unfortunate and familiar sounds. A voice. At once he sent his prowler car up over the spiked iron poles of the badly maintained cemetery fence, descended on the far side, listened.

The voice said, muffled and faint, 'My name is Mrs Tilly M. Benton, and I want to get out. Can anybody hear me?'

Officer Tinbane flashed his light. The voice came from beneath the grass. As he had expected: Mrs Tilly M. Benton was underground.

Snapping on the microphone of his car radio Tinbane said, 'I'm at Forest Knolls Cemetery – I think it's called – and I have a 1206, here. Better send an ambulance out with a digging crew; from the sound of her voice it's urgent.'

'Chang,' the radio said in answer. 'Our digging crew will be out before morning. Can you sink a temporary emergency shaft to give her adequate air? Until our crew gets there – say nine or ten A.M.'

'I'll do the best I can,' Tinbane said, and sighed. It meant for him an all-night vigil. And the dim, feeble voice from below begging in its senile way for him to hurry. Begging on and on. Unceasingly.

This part of his job he liked least. The cries of the dead; he hated the sound, and he had heard them, the cries, so much, and so many times. Men and women, mostly old but some not so old, sometimes children. And it always took the digging crew so long to get there.

Again pressing his mike button, Officer Tinbane said, 'I'm fed up with this. I'd like to be reassigned. I'm serious; this is a formal request.'

Distantly, from beneath the ground, the impotent, ancient female voice called, 'Please, somebody; I want to get out. Can you hear me? I know somebody's up there; I can hear you talking.'

Leaning his head out the open window of his prowl car, Officer Tinbane yelled, 'We'll get you out any time now, lady. Just try to be patient.'

'What year is this?' the elderly voice called back. 'How much time has passed? Is it still 1974? I have to know; please tell me, sir.'

Tinbane said, 'It's 1998.'

'Oh dear.' Dismay. 'Well, I suppose I must get used to it.'

'I guess,' Tinbane said, 'you'll have to.' He picked a cigarette butt from the car's ashtray, lit it and pondered. Then, once again, he pressed his mike button. 'I'd like permission to contact a private vitarium.'

'Permission denied,' his radio said. 'Too late at night.'

'But,' he said, 'one might happen along anyhow. Several of the bigger ones keep their scout-ambulances heading back and forth all through the night.' He had one vitarium in particular in mind, a small one, old-fashioned. Decent in its sales methods.

'So late at night it's unlikely -'

'This man can use the business.' Tinbane picked up the vidphone receiver mounted on the car's dashboard. 'I

want to talk to a Mr Sebastian Hermes,' he told the operator. 'You find him; I'll wait. First of all try his place of business, the Flask of Hermes Vitarium; he probably has an all-night relay to his residence.' If the poor guy can currently afford it, Tinbane thought. 'Call me back as soon as you've located him.' He hung up, then, and sat smoking his cigarette.

The Flask of Hermes Vitarium consisted primarily of Sebastian Hermes himself, with the help of a meager assortment of five employees. No one got hired at the establishment and no one got fired. As far as Sebastian was concerned these people constituted his family. He had no other, being old, heavy set, and not very likable. They, another, earlier vitarium, had dug him up only ten years ago, and he still felt on him, in the dreary part of the night, the coldness of the grave. Perhaps it was that which made him sympathetic to the plight of the old-born.

The firm occupied a small, wooden, rented building which had survived World War Three and even portions of World War Four. However, he was, at this late hour, of course home in bed, asleep in the arms of Lotta, his wife. She had such attractive clinging arms, always bare, always young arms; Lotta was much younger than he: twenty-two years by the non-Hobart Phase method of reckoning, which she went by, not having died and been reborn, as he, so much older, had.

The vidphone beside his bed clanged; he reached, by reflex of his profession, to acknowledge it.

'A call from Officer Tinbane, Mr Hermes,' his answering girl said brightly.

'Yes,' he said, listening in the dark, watching the dull little gray screen.

A controlled young man's face appeared, familiar to him. 'Mr Hermes, I have a live one at a hell of a third rate place called Forest Knolls; she's crying out to be let out. Can you make it here right away, or should I begin to drill an air vent myself? I have the equipment in my car, of course.'

Sebastian said, 'I'll round up my crew and get there. Give me half an hour. Can she hold out that long?' He switched on a bedside light, groped for pen and paper, trying to recall if he had ever heard of Forest Knolls. 'The name.'

'Mrs Tilly M. Benton, she says.'

'Okay,' he said, and rang off.

Stirring beside him, Lotta said drowsily, 'A job call?'

'Yes.' He dialed the number of Bob Lindy, his engineer.

'Want me to fix you some hot sogum?' Lotta asked; she had already gotten out of bed and was stumbling, half-asleep, toward the kitchen.

'Fine,' he said. 'Thanks.' The screen glowed, and thereon formed the glum and grumpy, thin and rubbery face of his company's sole technician. 'Meet me at a place called Forest Knolls,' Sebastian said. 'As soon as you can. Will you have to go by the shop for gear, or -'

'I've got it all with me,' Lindy grumbled, irritably. 'In my own car. Chang.' He nodded, broke the connection.

Padding back from the kitchen, Lotta said, 'The sogum pipe is on. Can I come along?' She found her brush and began expertly combing her mane of heavy dark-brown hair; it hung almost to her waist, and its intense color matched that of her eyes. 'I always like to see them brought up. It's such a miracle. I think it's the most marvelous sight I've ever watched; it seems to me it fulfills what St Paul says in the Bible, about "Grave,

where is thy victory?" She waited hopefully, then, finished with her hair, searched in the bureau drawers for her blue and white ski sweater which she always wore.

'We'll see,' Sebastian said. 'If I can't get all the crew we won't be handling this one at all; we'll have to leave it to the police, or wait for morning and then hope we're first.' He dialed Dr Sign's number.

'Sign residence,' a groggy middle-aged familiar female voice said. 'Oh, Mr Hermes. Another job so soon? Can't it wait until morning?'

'We'll lose it if we wait,' Sebastian said. 'I'm sorry to get him out of bed, but we need the business.' He gave her the name of the cemetery and the name of the old-born individual.

'Here's your sogum,' Lotta said, coming from the kitchen with a ceramic container and ornamented intake tube; she now had her big ski sweater on over her pajamas.

He had only one more call to make, this one to the company's pastor, Father Jeramy Faine. Placing the call, he sat precariously on the edge of the bed, dialing with one hand, using the other to hold in place the container of sogum. 'You can come with me,' he said to Lotta. 'Having a woman along might make the old lady - I assume she's old - more comfortable.'

The vidscreen lit; elderly, dwarfish Father Faine blinked owlishly, as if surprised in the act of nocturnal debauchery. 'Yes, Sebastian,' he said, sounding, as always, fully awake; of Sebastian's five employees, Father Faine alone seemed perpetually prepared for a call. 'Do you know which denomination this old-born is?'

'The cop didn't say,' Sebastian said. As far as he himself was concerned it didn't much matter; the company's pastor sufficed for all religions, including Jewish

and Udi. Although the Uditi, in particular, did not much share this view. Anyhow, Father Faine was what they got, like it or not.

'It's settled, then?' Lotta asked. 'We're going?'

'Yes,' he said. 'We've got everyone we need.' Bob Lindy to sink the air shaft, put digging tools to work; Dr Sign to provide prompt – and vital – medical attention; Father Faine to perform the Sacrament of Miraculous Rebirth . . . and then tomorrow during business hours, Cheryl Vale to do the intricate paper work, and the company's salesman, R.C. Buckley, to take the order and set about finding a buyer.

That part – the selling end of the business – did not much appeal to him; he reflected on this as he dressed in the vast suit which he customarily wore for cold nights. R.C., however, seemed to get a bang out of it; he had a philosophy which he called 'placement location,' a dignified term for managing to pawn off an old-born individual on somebody. It was R.C.'s line that he placed the old-borns only in 'specially viable, selected environments of proven background,' but in fact he sold wherever he could – as long as the price was sufficient to guarantee him his five percent commission.

Lotta, trailing after him as he got his greatcoat from the closet, said, 'Did you ever read that part of First Corinthians in the NEB translation? I know it's getting out of date, but I've always liked it.'

'Better get finished dressing,' he said gently.

'Okay.' She nodded dutifully, trotted off to get work-pants and the high soft-leather boots which she cherished so much. 'I'm in the process of memorizing it, because after all I am your wife and it pertains so directly to the work we – I mean you – do. Listen. That's how it starts, I mean; I'm quoting. "Listen. I will unfold a mystery: we

shall not all die, but we shall be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet call.”’

‘A call,’ Sebastian said meditatively as he waited patiently for her to finish dressing, ‘that came one day in June of the year 1986.’ Much, he thought, to everyone’s surprise – except of course for Alex Hobart himself, who had predicted it, and after whom the anti-time effect had been named.

‘I’m ready,’ Lotta said proudly; she had on her boots, workpants, sweater, and, he knew, her pajamas under it all; he smiled, thinking of that: she had done it to save time, so as not to detain him.

Together, they left their conapt; they ascended by the building’s express elevator to the roof-field and their parked aircar.

‘Myself,’ he said to her as he wiped the midnight moisture from the windows of the car, ‘I prefer the old King James translation.’

‘I’ve never read that,’ she said, childish candor in her voice, as if meaning, But I’ll read it; I promise.

Sebastian said, ‘As I recall, in that translation the passage goes, “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep; we shall be changed – ” and so on. Something like that. But I remember the “behold.” I like that better than “listen.”’ He started up the motor of the aircar, and they ascended.

‘Maybe you’re right,’ Lotta said, always agreeable, always willing to look up to him – he was, after all, so much older than she – as an authority. That perpetually pleased him. And it seemed to please her, too. Seated beside her, he patted her on the knee, feeling affection; she thereupon patted him, too, as always: their love for each other passed back and forth between them, without

resistance, without difficulty; it was an effortless two-way flow.

Young, dedicated Officer Tinbane met them inside the dilapidated spiked iron-pole fence of the cemetery. 'Evening, sir,' he said to Sebastian, and saluted; for Tinbane every act done while wearing his uniform was official, not to mention impersonal. 'Your engineer got here a couple of minutes ago and he's sinking a temporary air shaft. It was lucky I passed by.' The policeman greeted Lotta, seeing her now. 'Good evening, Mrs Hermes. Sorry it's so cold; you want to sit in the squad car? The heater's on.'

'I'm fine,' Lotta said; craning her neck, she strove to catch sight of Bob Lindy at work. 'Is she still talking?' she asked Officer Tinbane.

'Chattering away,' Tinbane said; he led her and Sebastian, by means of his flashlight, toward the zone of illumination where Bob Lindy already toiled. 'First to me; now to your engineer.'

On his hands and knees, Lindy studied the gauges of the tube-boring rig; he did not look up or greet them, although he evidently was aware of their presence. For Lindy, work came first; socializing ran a late last.

'She has relatives, she claims,' Officer Tinbane said to Sebastian. 'Here; I wrote down what she's been saying; their names and addresses. In Pasadena. But she's senile; she seems confused.' He glanced around. 'Is your doctor coming for sure? I think he'll be needed; Mrs Benton said something about Bright's disease; that's evidently what she died of. So possibly he'll need to attach an artificial kidney.'

Its landing lights on, an aircar set down. Dr Sign stepped from it, wearing his plastic, heat-enclosing,

modern, stylish suit. 'So you think you've got a live one,' he said to Officer Tinbane; he knelt over the grave of Mrs Tilly Benton, cocked an ear, then called, 'Mrs Benton, can you hear me? Are you able to breathe?'

The faint, indistinct, wavering voice drifted up to them, as Lindy momentarily ceased his drilling. 'It's so stuffy, and it's dark and I'm really very much afraid; I'd like to be released to go home as soon as I can. Are you going to rescue me?'

Cupping his hands to his mouth, Dr Sign shouted back, 'We're drilling now, Mrs Benton; just hang on and don't worry; it'll only be another minute or so.' To Lindy he said, 'Didn't you bother to yell down to her?'

Lindy growled, 'I have my work. Talking's up to you guys and Father Faine.' He resumed the drilling. It was almost complete, Sebastian noted; he walked a short distance away, listening, sensing the cemetery and the dead beneath the headstones, the corruptible, as Paul had called them, who, one day, like Mrs Benton, would put on incorruption. And this mortal, he thought, must put on immortality. And then the saying that is written, he thought, will come to pass. Death is swallowed up in victory. Grave, where is thy victory? Oh death, where is thy sting? And so forth. He roamed on, using his flashlight to avoid tripping over headstones; he moved very slowly, and always hearing – but not exactly; not literally, with his ears, but rather inside him – the dim stirrings underground. Others, he thought, who one day soon will be old-born; their flesh and particles are migrating back already, finding their way to their onetime places; he sensed the eternal process, the unending complex activity of the graveyard, and it gave him a thrill of enthusiasm, and of great excitement. Nothing was more good, than this re-forming of bodies which had, as Paul put it,

corrupted away, and now, with the Hobart Phase at work, reversing the corruption.

Paul's only error, he reflected, had been to anticipate it in his own lifetime.

Those who were presently being old-born had been the last to die: final mortalities before June of 1986. But, according to Alex Hobart, the reversal of time would continue to move backwards, continually sweeping out a great span; earlier and still earlier deaths would be reversed . . . and, in two thousand years from now, Paul himself would no longer 'sleep,' as he himself had put it.

But by then – long, long before then – Sebastian Hermes and everyone else alive would have dwindled back into waiting wombs, and the mothers who possessed those wombs would have dwindled, too, and soon; assuming, of course, that Hobart was right. That the Phase was not temporary, short in duration, but rather one of the most vast of sidereal processes, occurring every few billion years.

One final aircar now sputtered to a landing; from it strode short little Father Faine, with his religious books in his briefcase. He nodded pleasantly to Officer Tinbane and said, 'Commendable, your hearing her; I hope now you won't have to stand around in the cold any longer.' He noted the presence of Lindy at work and Dr Sign waiting with his black medical bag, and of course Sebastian Hermes. 'We can take over now,' he informed Officer Tinbane. 'Thank you.'

'Good evening, Father,' Tinbane said. 'Good evening, Mr and Mrs Hermes, and you too, Doctor.' He glanced then at sour, taciturn Bob Lindy, and did not include him; turning, he walked off in the direction of his squad car. And was quickly off into the night, to patrol the rest of his beat.

Coming up to Father Faine, Sebastian said, 'You know something? I - hear another one. Somebody very near to being reborn. A matter of days; possibly even hours.' I catch a terrific, strong emanation, he said to himself. What must be a uniquely vital personality very close by.

'I've got air down to her,' Lindy declared; he ceased drilling, shut off the portable, much-depended-on rig, turned now to excavation equipment. 'Get ready, Sign.' He tapped the earphones which he had put on, the better to hear the person below. 'She's very ill, this one. Chronic and acute.' He snapped the automatic scoops on, and they at once began to toss dirt from their exhaust.

As the coffin was lifted up by Sebastian, Dr Sign and Bob Lindy, Father Faine read aloud from his prayer book, in a suitable commanding and clear voice, so as to be audible to the person within the coffin. "'The Lord rewarded me after my righteous dealing, according to the cleanness of my hands did he recompense me. Because I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not forsaken my God, as the wicked doth. For I have an eye unto all his laws, and will not cast out his commandments from me. I was also uncorrupt before him, and eschewed mine own wickedness. Therefore the Lord rewarded me after my righteous dealing, and according unto the cleanness of my hands in his eyesight. With the holy thou shalt be holy - "' On and on Father Faine read, as the work progressed. They all knew the psalm by heart, even Bob Lindy; it was their priest's favorite on these occasions, being sometimes replaced, as for example by psalm nine, but always returning.

Bob Lindy rapidly unscrewed the lid of the coffin; it was cheap synthetic pine, lightweight, and the lid came right off. Instantly Dr Sign moved forward, bent over the old lady with his stethoscope, listening, talking to her in

a low voice. Bob Lindy started up the hot fan, keeping a stream of constant heat on Mrs Tilly M. Benton; this was vital, this transfer of heat: the old-born were always terribly cold; had, in fact, an inevitable phobia about cold which, as in Sebastian's case, often lasted for years after their rebirth.

His part of the job temporarily over, Sebastian once again moved about the cemetery, among the graves, listening. Lotta this time tagged after him and insisted on talking. 'Isn't it mystical?' she said breathlessly, in her little girl's awed voice. 'I want to paint it; I wish I could get that expression they have when they first see, when the lid of the coffin is opened. That look. Not joy, not relief; no one particular thing, but a deeper and more - '

'Listen,' he said, interrupting her.

'To what?' She obligingly listened, obviously hearing nothing. Not sensing what he sensed: the enormous *presence* nearby.

Sebastian said, 'We're going to have to keep a watch on this strange little place. And I want a complete list - absolutely complete - of everyone buried here.' Sometimes, studying the inventory list, he could fathom which it was; he had a virtually psionic gift, this ability to sense in advance a forthcoming old-birth. 'Remind me,' he said to his wife, 'to call the authorities who operate this place and find out exactly who they have.' This invaluable rich storehouse of life, he thought. This onetime graveyard which has become instead a reservoir of reawakening souls.

One grave - and one alone - had an especially ornate monument placed above it; he shone his flashlight on the monument, found the name.

THOMAS PEAK

1921-1971

Sic igitur magni quoque circum
moenia mundi expugnata dabunt
labem putresque ruinas.

His Latin was not good enough for him to translate the epitaph; he could only guess. A statement about the great things of the earth, all of which fell eventually into corruption and ruin. Well, he thought, that is no longer true, that epitaph. Not about the great things with souls; them especially. I have a hunch, he said to himself, that Thomas Peak – and he evidently had been somebody, to judge by the size and stone-quality of the monument – is the person I sense to be about to return, the person we should watch for.

'Peak,' he said aloud, to Lotta.

'I've read about him,' she said. 'In a course I took on Oriental Philosophy. You know who he is – was?'

He said, 'Was he related to the Anarch by that name?'

'Udi,' Lotta said.

'That Negro cult? That's overrun the Free Negro Municipality? Run by that demagogue Raymond Roberts? The *Uditi*? This Thomas Peak buried here?'

She examined the dates, nodded. 'But it wasn't a racket, in those days, my teacher told us. There really is a Udi experience, I believe. Anyhow, so we were taught at San Jose State. Everyone merges; there's no you and no –'

'I know what Udi is,' he said testily. 'God, now that I know who he is I'm not so sure I want to help bring this one back.'

'But when the Anarch Peak comes back,' Lotta said, 'he'll resume his position as head of Udi and it'll stop being a racket.'

Behind them Bob Lindy said, 'You could probably make a fortune by *not* bringing him back to an unwilling, unawaiting world.' He explained, 'I'm now done with your job-call, here; Sign is inserting one of those hand-me-down electric kidneys and getting her on a stretcher and into his car.' He lit a cigarette butt, stood smoking and shivering and meditating. 'You think this fella Peak's about to return, Seb?'

'Yes,' he said. 'You know my intimations.' Our firm operates at a profit because of them, he meditated; they're what keep us ahead of the big outfits, make it possible in fact to get any business at all . . . anything, anyhow, above and beyond what the city police throw to us.

Lindy said somberly, 'Wait'll R.C. Buckley hears about this. He'll really go into action on this one; in fact, I suggest you call him right now. The sooner he knows, the sooner he can formulate one of those wild rizzle-drizzle promotion campaigns he concocts.' He laughed sharply. 'Our man in the graveyard,' he said.

'I'm going to plant a bug here on Peak's grave,' Sebastian said after a thoughtful pause. 'One that'll both pick up cardiac activity and will transmit a notifying coded signal to us.'

'You're that sure,' Lindy said, nervously. 'I mean, it's illegal; if the LA police find it, you know - maybe a suspension of our license to operate.' His innate Swedish caution emerged, now, and his dubiousness regarding Sebastian's psionic intimations. 'Forget it,' he said. 'You're getting as bad as Lotta.' He plomped her friendlily on the back, meaning well. 'I always say, I'm not going to let the atmosphere of these places get to me; it's a technical job having to do with exact location, adequate air supply, digging accurately so you don't saw it in half,

then raising it up, getting Dr Sign to patch its busted parts together.' To Lotta he said, 'You're too metaphysical about this, kid. Forget it.'

Lotta said, 'I'm married to a man who lay dead down below, once. When I was born, Sebastian was dead, and he remained dead until I was twelve years old.' Her voice – odd for her – was unyielding.

'So?' Lindy demanded.

'This process,' she said, 'has given me the only man in the world or on Mars or on Venus that I love or *could* love. It has been the greatest force in my life.' She put her arm around Sebastian, then, and hugged him, hugged his big bulk against her.

'Tomorrow,' Sebastian said to her, 'I want you to pay a visit to Section B of the People's Topical Library. Get all the information you can about the Anarch Thomas Peak. Most of it has probably gone into erad by now, but they may have a few terminal typescript manuscripts.'

'Was he really that important?' Bob Lindy asked.

Lotta said, 'Yes. But – ' She hesitated. 'I'm scared of the Library, Seb; I really am. You know I am. It's so – oh the hell with it. I'll go.' Her voice sank.

'There I agree with you,' Bob Lindy said. 'I don't like that place. And I've been there exactly once.'

'It's the Hobart Phase,' Sebastian said. 'The same force at work that operates here.' He turned to Lotta again. 'Avoid the Head Librarian, Mavis McGuire.' He had run into her several times in the past, and he had been repelled; she had struck him as bitchy, hostile, and mean. 'Go right to Section B,' he said.

God help Lotta, he thought, if she gets fouled up and runs into that McGuire woman. Maybe I should go . . . No, he decided; she can ask for someone else; it'll work out all right. I'll just have to take the chance.