

## Chapter I

Among the people of the Floats caste distinctions were fast losing their old-time importance. The Anarchists and Procurers had disappeared altogether; inter-caste marriages were by no means uncommon, especially when they involved castes of approximately the same social status. Society, of course, was not falling into chaos; the Bezzlers and the Incendiaries still maintained their traditional aloofness; the Advertiser-men still could not evade a subtle but nonetheless general disesteem, and where the castes were associated with a craft or trade, they functioned with undiminished effectiveness. The Swindlers comprised the vast majority of those who fished from coracles, and though the once numerous Peculators had dwindled to a handful, they still dominated the dye works on Fay Float. Smugglers boiled varnish, Malpractors pulled teeth. Blackguards constructed the sponge-arbors in every lagoon; the Hoodwinks completely monopolized the field of hood-winking. This last relationship always excited the curiosity of the young, who would inquire, "Which first: the Hoodwinks or hood-winking?" To which the elders customarily replied: "When the Ship of Space discharged the Firsts upon these blessed floats, there were four Hoodwinks among the Two Hundred. Later, when the towers were built and the lamps established, there were hoods to wink, and it seemed only appropriate that the Hoodwinks should occupy themselves at the trade. It may well be that matters stood so

in the Outer Wildness, before the Escape. It seems likely. There were undoubtedly lamps to be flashed and hoods to be winked. Of course there is much we do not know, much concerning which the Memoria are either silent or ambiguous.”

Whether or not the Hoodwinks had been drawn to the trade by virtue of ancient use, it was now the rare Hoodwink who did not in some measure find his vocation upon the towers, either as a rigger, a lamp-tender, or as a full-fledged hoodwink.

Another caste, the Larceners, constructed the towers, which customarily stood sixty to ninety feet high at the center of the float, directly above the primary stalk of the sea-plant. There were usually four legs of woven or laminated withe, which passed through holes in the pad to join a stout stalk twenty or thirty feet below the surface. At the top of the tower was a cupola, with walls of split withe, a roof of varnished and laminated pad-skin. Yard-arms extending to either side supported lattices, each carrying nine lamps arranged in a square, together with the hoods and trip-mechanisms. Within the cupola, windows afforded a view across the water to the neighboring floats—a distance as much as the two miles between Green Lamp and Adelvine, or as little as the quarter-mile between Leumar and Populous Equity.

The Master Hoodwink sat at a panel. At his left hand were nine tap-rods, cross-coupled to lamp-hoods on the lattice to his right. Similarly the tap-rods at his right hand controlled the hoods to his left. By this means the configurations he formed and those he received, from his point of view, were of identical aspect and caused him no confusion. During the daytime the lamps were not lit and white targets served the same function. The hoodwink set his configuration with

quick strokes of right and left hands, kicked the release, which thereupon flicked the hoods, or shutters, at the respective lamps or targets. Each configuration signified a word; the mastery of a lexicon and a sometimes remarkable dexterity were the Master Hoodwink's stock in trade. All could send at speeds almost that of speech; all knew at least five thousand, and some six, seven, eight, or even nine thousand configurations. The folk of the floats could in varying degrees read the configurations, which were also employed in the keeping of the archives (against the vehement protests of the scribes), and in various other communications, public announcements and messages.\*

On Tranque Float, at the extreme east of the group, the Master Hoodwink was one Zander Rohan, a rigorous and exacting old man with a mastery of over seven thousand configurations. His first assistant, Sklar Hast, had well over five thousand configurations at his disposal; precisely how many more he had never publicized. There were two further assistants, as well as three apprentices, two riggers, a lamp-tender, and a maintenance withe-weaver, this latter a Larce-ner. Zander Rohan tended the tower from dusk until middle evening: the busy hours during which gossip, announcements,

\* The orthography had been adopted in the earliest days and was highly systematic. The cluster at the left indicated the genus of the idea, the cluster at the right denoted the specific. In such a fashion  $\begin{smallmatrix} \cdot \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \end{smallmatrix}$  at the left, signified *color*; hence:

White  $\begin{smallmatrix} \cdot \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \end{smallmatrix}$   $\cdot$   
 Black  $\begin{smallmatrix} \cdot \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \end{smallmatrix}$   $\cdot$   
 Red  $\begin{smallmatrix} \cdot \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \end{smallmatrix}$   $\cdot \cdot$   
 Pink  $\begin{smallmatrix} \cdot \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \end{smallmatrix}$   $\cdot \cdot$   
 Dark Red  $\begin{smallmatrix} \cdot \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \end{smallmatrix}$   $\cdot \cdot$

and so forth.

news, and notifications regarding King Kragen flickered up and down the fifty-mile line of the floats.

Sklar Hast winked hoods during the afternoon; then, when Zander Rohan appeared in the cupola, he looked to maintenance and supervised the apprentices. A relatively young man, Sklar Hast had achieved his status by the simplest and most uncomplicated policy imaginable: with great tenacity he strove for excellence, and sought to instill the same standards into the apprentices. He was a positive and direct man, without any great affability, knowing nothing of malice or guile and little of tact or patience. The apprentices resented his brusqueness but respected him; Zander Rohan considered him overpragmatic and deficient in reverence for his betters—which was to say, himself. Sklar Hast cared nothing one way or the other. Zander Rohan must soon retire; in due course Sklar Hast would become Master Hoodwink. He was in no hurry; on this placid, limpid, changeless world where time drifted rather than throbbed, there was little to be gained by urgency.

Sklar Hast owned a small pad of which he was the sole occupant. The pad, a heart-shaped wad of spongy tissue a hundred feet in diameter, floated at the north of the lagoon. Sklar Hast's hut was of standard construction: withe bent and lashed, then sheathed with sheets of pad-skin, the tough near-transparent membrane peeled from the bottom of the sea-plant pad. All was then coated with well-aged varnish, prepared by boiling sea-plant sap until the water was driven off and the resins amalgamated.

Other vegetation grew in the spongy tissue of the pad: shrubs, a thicket of bamboo-like rods yielding good-quality withe, epiphytes hanging from the central spike of the sea-

plant. On other pads the plants might be ordered according to aesthetic theory, but Sklar Hast had small taste in these matters, and the center of his pad was little more than an untidy copse of various stalks, fronds, tendrils and leaves, in various shades of black, green and rusty orange.

Sklar Hast knew himself for a fortunate man. There was, unfortunately, an obverse to the picture, for those qualities which had won him prestige, position, a private float, were not those calculated to ease him through the careful routines of float society. Only this afternoon he had become involved in a dispute involving a whole complex of basic float principles. Sitting now on the bench before his hut, sipping a cup of wine, Sklar Hast watched lavender dusk settle over the ocean and brooded upon the headstrong folly of Meril Rohan, daughter to Zander Rohan. A breeze ruffled the water, moved the foliage; drawing a deep breath, Sklar Hast felt his anger loosen and drain away. Meril Rohan could do as she pleased; it was folly to exercise himself—either in connection with her or Semm Voiderveg or anything else. Conditions were as they were; if no one else objected, why should he? With this, Sklar Hast smiled a faint, rather bitter, smile, knowing that he could not fully subscribe to this doctrine. . . . But the evening was far too soft and soothing for contentiousness. In due course events would right themselves, and looking away toward the horizon, Sklar Hast, in a moment of clarity, thought to see the future, as wide and lucid as the dreaming expanse of water and sky. Presently he would espouse one of the girls whom he currently tested—and forever abandon privacy, he reflected wistfully. There was no need for haste. In the case of Meril Rohan. . . . But no. She occupied his thoughts merely because of her perverse and headstrong

plans in regard to Semm Voiderveg—which did not bear thinking about.

Sklar Hast drained his cup of wine. Folly to worry, folly to fret. Life was good. In the lagoon hung arbors on which grew the succulent spongelike organisms which, when cleaned, plucked and boiled, formed the staple food of the Float folk. The lagoon teemed with edible fish, separated from the predators of the ocean by an enormous net. Much other food was available: spores from the sea-plant fruiting organ, various tendrils and bulbs, as well as the prized flesh of the gray-fish which the swindlers took from the ocean.

Sklar Hast poured himself a second cup of wine and, leaning back, looked up to where the constellations already blazed. Halfway up the southern sky hung a cluster of twenty-five bright stars, from which, so tradition asserted, his ancestors had come, fleeing the persecution of megalomaniac tyrants. Two hundred persons, of various castes, managed to disembark before the Ship of Space foundered in the ocean which spread unbroken around the world. Now, twelve generations later, the two hundred were twenty thousand, scattered along fifty miles of floating sea-plant. The castes, so jealously differentiated during the first few generations, had gradually accommodated themselves to one another and now were even intermingling. There was little to disturb the easy flow of life, nothing harsh or unpleasant—except, perhaps, King Kragen.

Sklar Hast rose, walked to the edge of the float, where only two days before King Kragen had plucked three of his arbors clean. King Kragen's appetite as well as his bulk grew by the year, and Sklar Hast wondered how large King Kragen might eventually become. Was there any limit? During his own life-

time King Kragen had grown perceptibly, and now measured perhaps sixty feet in length. Sklar Hast scowled westward across the ocean, in the direction from which King Kragen customarily appeared, moving with long strokes of his four propulsive vanes in a manner to suggest some vast, grotesquely ugly anthropoid swimming the breast-stroke. There, of course, the resemblance to man ended. King Kragen's body was tough black cartilage, a long cylinder riding a heavy rectangle, from the corners of which extended the vanes. The cylinder comprising King Kragen's main bulk opened forward in a maw fringed with four mandibles and eight palps, aft in an anus. Atop this cylinder, somewhat to the front, rose a turret from which the four eyes protruded: two peering forward, two aft. King Kragen was a terrible force for destruction, but luckily could be placated. King Kragen enjoyed copious quantities of sponges, and when his appetite was appeased, he injured no one and did no damage; indeed he kept the area clear of other marauding kragen, which either he killed or sent flapping and skipping in a panic across the ocean.

Sklar Hast returned to the bench, swung sidewise to where he could watch the winks from Tranque Tower. Zander Rohan was at the hoods; Sklar Hast well knew his touch. It was marked by a certain measured crispness, which very gradually was becoming wooden. To the casual eye Zander Rohan's style was clean and deft; his precision and flexibility were those of a Master Hoodwink. But almost insensibly his speed was falling off, his sense of time was failing; there was a brittle quality to his winking, rather than the supple rhythm of a hoodwink at the height of his powers. Zander Rohan was growing old. Sklar Hast knew that he could outwink Zander Rohan at any time, should he choose to humiliate the old

man. This, for all Sklar Hast's bluntness and lack of tact, was the last thing he wished to do. But how long would the old man persist in fulfilling his duties? Even now Zander Rohan had unreasonably delayed his retirement — from jealousy and rancor, Sklar Hast suspected.

The antipathy derived from a whole set of circumstances: Sklar Hast's uncompromising manner, his self-confidence, his professional competence; and then there was the matter of Meril, Zander Rohan's daughter. Five years before, when relations between the two men had been more easy, Rohan had extended a number of not too subtle hints that Sklar Hast might well consider Meril as a possible spouse. By every objective standpoint, the prospect should have aroused Sklar Hast's enthusiasm. Meril was of his own caste, the daughter of a guild-master; Sklar Hast's career could not help but be furthered. They were of the same generation, both Elev-enths, a matter of no formal importance but which popularly was regarded as desirable and advantageous. And finally Meril was by no means uncomely, though somewhat leggy and boy-ishly abrupt of movement. What had given Sklar Hast pause was Meril Rohan's unpredictability and perverse behavior. Like most folk of the floats she could read winks but she also had learned the cursive script of the Firsts. Sklar Hast, with eyes conditioned by the precision and elegance of the hood-wink configurations, considered the script crabbed, sinuous and cryptic; he was annoyed by its lack of uniformity, even though he recognized and was a connoisseur of the unique and individual style that distinguished each Master Hood-wink. On one occasion he had inquired Meril Rohan's motive for learning the script. "Because I want to read the Memoria," she told him. "Because I wish to become a scrivener."

Sklar Hast had no fault to find with her ambition—he was quite willing that everyone should pursue his own dream—but he was puzzled. “Why go to such effort? The Analects are given in winks. They teach us the substance of the Memoria and eliminate the absurdities.”

Meril Rohan laughed in a manner Sklar Hast found somewhat strange. “But it is exactly this which interests me! The absurdities, the contradictions, the allusions—I wonder what they all mean!”

“They mean that the Firsts were a confused and discouraged set of men and women.”

“What I want to do,” said Meril, “is to make a careful new study of the Memoria. I want to note each of the absurdities and try to understand it, try to relate it to all the other absurdities—because I can’t believe that the men who wrote the Memoria considered these passages absurdities.”

Sklar Hast gave a shrug of indifference. “Incidentally, your father suggested that you might care to be tested. If you like, you can come to my float any time after tomorrow morning—Coralie Vozelle will then be leaving.”

Meril Rohan compressed her lips in mingled amusement and vexation. “My father is trying to marry me off long before I care to be so dealt with. Thank you, I do not care to be tested. Coralie may exert herself on your behalf yet another week, for all of me. Or another month. Or a year.”

“As you wish,” said Sklar Hast. “It probably would be time wasted, since we obviously have no community of soul.”

Shortly thereafter Meril Rohan departed Tranque Float for the Scrivener’s Academy on Quatrefoil. Sklar Hast had no idea whether or not Meril had mentioned his solicitation to her father, but thereafter the relationship congealed.

In due course Meril Rohan returned to Tranque with her own copies of the Memoria. The years on Quatrefoil had changed her. She was less careless, less flamboyant, less free with her opinions, and had become almost beautiful, though she still ran to leg and a certain indefinable informality of dress and conduct. Sklar Hast twice had offered to test her. On the first occasion she gave him an absentminded negative; on the second—only a day or two before—she had informed him that Semm Voiderveg was planning to espouse her without benefit of testing.

Sklar Hast found the news incredible, disturbing, unacceptable. Semm Voiderveg, a Hooligan by caste, was Tranque Intercessor, with a prestige second only to that of Ixon Myrex, the Float Arbiter. Nevertheless Sklar Hast found a dozen reasons why Meril Rohan should not become spouse to Semm Voiderveg, and he was not at all diffident in imparting them. "He's an old man! You're hardly more than a girl! He's probably an Eighth! Maybe a Ninth."

"He's not so old. Ten years older than you, or so I should guess. Also he's a Tenth."

"Well, you're an Eleventh, and I'm an Eleventh!"

Meril Rohan looked at him, head at a sidelong tilt, and Sklar Hast suddenly became aware of matters he had never noticed before: the clear luminosity of her skin, the richness of her dark curls, the provocative quality that once had seemed boyish abruptness but now was—something else.

"Bah," muttered Sklar Hast. "You're both insane, the pair of you. He for wiving without a test, you for flinging yourself into the household of a kragen-feeder. You know his caste? He's only a Hooligan."

"What a disrespectful attitude!" she exclaimed. "Semm

Voiderveg is Intercessor!"

Sklar Hast peered frowningly at her in an attempt to learn if she were serious. There seemed to be a lightness to her voice, a suppressed levity, which he was unable to interpret. "What of it?" he asked. "When you add everything together, the kragen is only a fish. A large fish, true. Still, it seems foolish making so much ceremony over a fish."

"If he were an ordinary fish, your words would have meaning," said Meril Rohan. "King Kragen is not a fish, and he is—extraordinary."

Sklar Hast made a bitter sound. "And you're the one who went to Quatrefoil to become a scrivener! How do you think Voiderveg will take to your unorthodox ideas?"

"I don't know." Meril Rohan gave her head a frivolous toss. "My father wants me married. As spouse to the Intercessor I'll have time to work on my analysis."

"Disgusting," said Sklar Hast, and walked away. Meril Rohan gave her shoulders a shrug and went her own way.

Sklar Hast brooded on the matter during the morning and later in the day approached Zander Rohan: a man as tall as himself, with a great mop of white hair, a neat white beard, a pair of piercing gray eyes, a pinkish complexion, and a manner of constant irascible truculence. In no respect did Meril Rohan resemble her father save in the color of her eyes.

Sklar Hast, who had the least possible facility with tact or subtlety, said, "I've been speaking to Meril. She tells me you want her to espouse Voiderveg."

"Yes," said Zander Rohan. "What of it?"

"It's a poor match. You know Voiderveg: he's portly, pompous, complacent, obstinate, stupid—"

"Here, here!" exclaimed Rohan. "He's Intercessor to Tranque

Float! He does my daughter great honor by agreeing to test her!"

"Hmm." Sklar Hast raised his eyebrows. "She told me he'd waived testing."

"As to that, I can't say. If so, the honor is even greater."

Sklar Hast drew a deep breath and made a hard decision. "I'll marry her," he growled. "I'll waive testing. It would be a much better match for her."

Rohan drew back, lips parted in an unpleasant grin. "Why should I give her to an assistant hoodwink when she can have the Intercessor? Especially a man who thinks he's too good for her, to begin with!"

Sklar Hast held back his anger. "I am a Hoodwink, as is she. Do you want her attached to a Hooligan?"

"What difference does it make? He is Intercessor!"

"I'll tell you what difference it makes," said Sklar Hast. "He can't do anything except caper for the benefit of a fish. I am Assistant Master Hoodwink, not just an assistant hoodwink. You know my quality."

Zander Rohan compressed his lips, gave his head a pair of short sharp jerks. "I know your quality—and it's not all it should be. If you expect to master your craft, you had best strike the keys with more accuracy and use fewer paraphrases. When you meet a word you can't wink, let me know and I will instruct you."

Sklar Hast clamped his throat upon the words that struggled to come forth. For all his bluntness he had no lack of self-control when circumstances warranted, as they did now. Staring eye to eye with Zander Rohan, he weighed the situation. Should he choose, he might require Zander Rohan to defend his rank, and it almost seemed that Rohan were dar-

ing him to challenge: for the life of him Sklar Hast could not understand why—except on the basis of sheer personal antipathy. Such contests, once numerous, now were rare, inasmuch as consideration of dignity made resignation of status incumbent upon the loser. Sklar Hast had no real wish to drive Zander Rohan from his position, and he did not care to be driven forth himself. . . He turned his back and walked away from the Master Hoodwink, ignoring the contemptuous snort that came after him.

At the foot of the tower he stood staring bleakly and unseeingly through the foliage. A few yards away was Zander Rohan's ample three-dome cottage, where, under a pergola draped with sweet-tassel, Meril Rohan sat weaving white cloth at the loom—the spare-time occupation of every female from childhood to old-age. Sklar Hast went to stand by the low fence of woven withe which separated Rohan's plot from the public way. Meril acknowledged his presence with a faint smile and continued with her weaving.

Sklar Hast spoke with measured dignity. "I have been talking with your father. I protested the idea of your espousal to Voiderveg. I told him I would marry you myself." And he turned to look off across the lagoon. "Without testing."

"Indeed. And what did he say?"

"He said no."

Meril, making no comment, continued with her weaving.

"The situation as it stands is ridiculous," said Sklar Hast. "Typical of this outlying and backward float. You would be laughed out of countenance on Apprise or even Sumber."

"If you are unhappy here, why do you not go elsewhere?" asked Meril in a voice of gentle malice.

"I would if I could—I'd leave these insipid floats in their

entirety! I'd fly to the far worlds! If I thought they weren't all madhouses."

"Read the Memoria and find out."

"Hmf. After twelve generations all may be changed. The Memoria are a pedant's preserve. Why rake around among the ashes of the past? The scribes are of no more utility than the intercessors. On second thought you and Semm Voiderveg will make a good pair. While he invokes blessings upon King Kragen, you can compile a startling new set of Analects."

Meril halted her weaving, frowned down at her hands. "Do you know, I think I will do exactly this?" She rose to her feet, came over to the fence. "Thank you, Sklar Hast!"

Sklar Hast inspected her with suspicion. "Are you serious?"

"Certainly. Have you ever known me otherwise?"

"I've never been sure . . . How will a new set of Analects be useful? What's wrong with the old ones?"

"When sixty-one books are condensed into three, a great deal of information is left out."

"Vagueness, ambiguity, introspection: is any of it profitable?"

Meril Rohan pursed her lips. "The inconsistencies are interesting. In spite of the persecutions the Firsts suffered, all express regret at leaving the Home Worlds."

"There must have been other sane folk among the madmen," said Sklar Hast reflectively. "But what of that? Twelve generations are gone; all may be changed. We ourselves have changed, and not for the better. All we care about is comfort and ease. Appease, assuage, compromise. Do you think the Firsts would have capered and danced to an ocean-beast as is the habit of your prospective spouse?"

Meril glanced over Sklar Hast's shoulder; Sklar Hast turned to see Semm Voiderveg the Intercessor, standing by with arms clasped behind his back, head thrust forward: a man of maturity, portly, but by no means ill-favored, with regular features in a somewhat round face. His skin was clear and fresh, his eyes a dark magnetic brown.

"These are impertinent remarks to make of the Intercessor!" said Semm Voiderveg reproachfully. "No matter what you think of him as an individual, the office deserves respect!"

"What office? What do you do?"

"I intercede for the folk of Tranque Float; I secure for us all the benevolence of King Kragen."

Sklar Hast gave an offensive laugh. "I wonder always if you actually believe your own theories."

"'Theory' is an incorrect word," stated Semm Voiderveg. "'Science' or 'doxology' is preferable." He went on in a cold voice. "The facts are incontrovertible. King Kragen rules the ocean, he lends us protection; in return we gladly tender him a portion of our bounty. These are the terms of the Covenant."

The discussion was attracting attention among others of the float; already a dozen folk had halted to listen. "In all certainty we have become soft and fearful," said Sklar Hast. "The Firsts would turn away in disgust. Instead of protecting ourselves, we bribe a beast to do the job."

"Enough!" barked Semm Voiderveg in a sudden cold fury. He turned to Meril, pointed toward the cottage. "Within—that you need not hear the wild talk of this man! An Assistant Master Hoodwink! Astonishing that he has risen so high in the guild!"

With a rather vague smile Meril turned and went into the cottage. Her submission not only irked Sklar Hast, it astounded him.

With a final indignant glance of admonition Semm Void-erveg followed her within.

Sklar Hast turned away toward the lagoon and his own pad. One of the men who had halted called out. "A moment, Sklar Hast! You seriously believe that we could protect our own if King Kragen decided to depart?"

"Certainly," snapped Sklar Hast. "We could at least make the effort! The intercessors want no changes—why should they?"

"You're a trouble-maker, Sklar Hast!" called a shrill female voice from the back of the group. "I've known you since you were an infant; you never were less than perverse!"

Sklar Hast pushed through the group, walked through the gathering dusk to the lagoon, ferried himself by coracle to his pad.

He entered the hut, poured himself a cup of wine, and went out to sit on the bench. The halcyon sky and the calm water soothed him, and he was able to summon a grin of amusement for his own vehemence—until he went to look at the arbors plucked bare by King Kragen, whereupon his ill-humor returned.

He watched winks for a few moments, more conscious than ever of Zander Rohan's brittle mannerisms. As he turned away, he noticed a dark swirl in the water at the edge of the net: a black bulk surrounded by glistening cusps and festoons of starlit water. He went to the edge of his float and strained his eyes through the darkness. No question about it: a lesser kragen was probing the net which enclosed Tranque Lagoon!