

The Poet Walks Along High Street

Just after two, Gabriel Singer stepped out of doors. The early afternoon sun, he was glad to see, was pleasantly warm. It shimmered watery on the oil-slicked asphalt; it vaulted from the shop-windows and duco of passing cars; and shot white-gold shafts into the crystal space around. The air, so thin, hummed with the rumble of tramlines; it buzzed with the trembling of wires; and, close by, it was filled, as ever, with the strong earthy smells of flake and roast coffee, of cloves and tanned leather, and with a myriad other smells to which he had become accustomed, smells as familiar as his own sweat or the breaths of low-bowing obsequious waiters or the staler fusty pungency of mothballs in his tiny but adequate garret above Harry Bosch's picture-framing store midway along High Street.

Apart from the presence of a handful of ravens cruising overhead, black visitors dotting the sky, as he took deep bracing breaths to fill his lungs, Gabriel Singer thought the day perfectly splendid.

For High Street, he had a special feeling. He liked it. He savoured it. He had a keen affinity with it, a distinct rapport. It was, as he had written in his notebook:

'a profusion of colours, sounds, tastes and smells, the hub of local bustle, the hub of magnetised convergence, a milling thoroughfare of shop-keepers and shoppers, businessmen and tradesmen, along which:

Humanity cascades in crashing torrents,
Streaming in clamour to the hammer of time.'

The feeling, however, was not unmixed. He had written further:

'Yet none is there in that flow with as much as a line of poetry on his lips, none aware of lyric beauty, none – how sad!, what waste! – blessed with the gift of discovery, the gift of delight in the sanctified creations of the artistic mind.'

And he had closed the passage with the lines:

'To the poet is given that gift; to him the summons – the hard god called Anonymity be defied – to rise above the ordinary and the earth-bound, the call to transform the humdrum and routine, and the dictate to imbue all these with beauty and celebration, these being – no, not merely the function – but the very duty of the highest art.'

Emerging into the street then, he remembered those lines, remembered them as he watched two beetles scurrying swiftly along a crack in the pavement, and remembered them yet again as he squinted northward and gazed south, deciding this time upon the northern route, at the end of which, where Utopia Bridge straddled Erehwon Creek, there were broader finer infinitely more lavish vistas to enjoy.

In that direction, the buildings were huddled closer together and greater diversity was to be had – the Town Hall, for instance, with its solid neo-Renaissance facade, the equally-stately Croesus Bank, and just the nearer side of them, at the corner of Quandary Street, the age-and-weather-beaten Hotel Bacchus. Beyond the bank was Munch's ultra-modern Funeral Parlours – Munch, himself, it was said, recently retired –, also the Spectral Buy-All Supermarket, the Left-and-Right-Hand Hardware Store, and, further still, a more intimate string of food-shops, shoe-stores, haberdasheries and florists, into which, from which, the locals darted – Mrs.

Rushall, Ellen Herd, Charlie Scuttle – in a ravelling, unravelling tangle of colour, chaos and briskness.

Towards this maelstrom, he made his way. From Smetana's ice-cream parlour, he saw Chrissie Chrysalis emerge, wheeling her Sammy who was happily smearing a vanilla ice-cream over his face. She was his landlord Harry Bosch's daughter and Gabriel Singer could never meet her without having his pulse miss a beat.

'Likes it, the little one, doesn't he?', he said, awkwardly.

All in white – shoes, skirt, blouse –, a perfect angel, she smiled. Her smile, too, he liked. It was so open, so happy, so pert.

'Likes anything messy,' she said with a gladdening laugh. 'Just like any dear precious lovable child.'

Gabriel felt a pressure in his throat. He was twenty-four; she was twenty-two. If only she weren't married! . . .

Again, as upon its completion, he considered giving her his latest poem and dedicating it to her, the one entitled '*An Innocent – and a Scene from Botticelli*.' But he knew he wouldn't. In practical matters – his nature be damned! – he knew he was a coward.

He was wondering what else to say when Barney Brown, the electrician Lightfoot's apprentice, drew abreast, along with young Freddie Freeling whistling as he swung his schoolbag. At his heels followed Freddie's dog, Black Roger, mangy and malnourished and blind in one eye.

They had just crossed Enigma Lane when Gabriel saw Ol' Chris 'the Prophet' being strong-armed through the Bacchus door. Off-balanced, he reeled and toppled to the pavement where, levering himself to a knee, he wiped at a graze with a grimy sleeve and appealed to a doughy woman Gabriel recognised as Mrs. Goodworks of the Holy Duty Opportunity Shop to take pity on a fellow man.

Mrs. Goodworks, evidently in a hurry, dismissed him with a rubied hand. Felicity Worth of the Citizen's Welfare Group, passing just then, gave him wide berth; arthritic Clem Goldheart prodded him with a stick; Judas Barabas of Barabas and

Sons spat 'Get out of the way;' while Benedict Gentile shoved a bird-cage in his face, the parrot within it squawking with every thrust.

All insult notwithstanding, the drunkard rose to both knees now, raised a defiant fist and began to shout:

'I am fallen! Yes I know! You see before you a fallen man! But so are you all! And there'll be hell to pay! 'Cos when they call, you'll be payin'! You'll all be payin' when they call! Lord ha' pity on yous all!'

Archie Hugo, the hunchback came close, nudged Gabriel in the ribs.

'e's at it again, that bag o' wind!', he said.

'It'll be a cleansin' we'll be headin' for when they call,' said Father Templeton of All Souls Church of Mary Magdalene, 'a purification and a salvation, yeah, not to any old dark and burnin' devil-ridden hell like that tosspot he has it.'

'Yeah!' echoed young Luke the choirboy, nestling under his arm.

Gabriel felt Chrissie Chrysalis' hand on his arm. He leapt with the electricity of her touch and felt goose-pimples creeping to his neck.

'Poor Chris, he's right, dear soul,' she said nodding, and not without sadness. 'And when they do call, Lord truly have mercy and see fit to spare us all.'

'When they call?' he was about to ask, when something about Ol' Chris made him catch his breath.

'God, how beautiful!' he couldn't help but exclaim. For, drunk though he may have been, Ol' Chris was encircled by a magnificently-gilded halo. His face, usually violaceous, glowed; his white dishevelled hair shone. Though Gabriel knew the aureole to be a trick of light, yet did it possess a palpability as real as the very pavement on which 'the Prophet' knelt. And at that moment, in one of those flashes he was ever aching for, a line, two, came to him, and outside Springer's the jeweller's, as Chrissie Chrysalis and the others went on ahead, he took from his pocket his pen and dog-eared pad, and wrote:

'Around each man a circular field,
Distancing, repelling – an impenetrable shield.'

He might have written more – the words, the phrases, the rhymes were beginning to form –, but just then a siren, something of a scream, made him look up. He saw the ravens startle in flight and dart madly in each and every direction. The siren was shrill and piercing. It rose above the jagged high-pitched squeals of the ravens, above the rumble and clatter of passing traffic, above the tittle-tattle, chit-chat, hellos, goodbyes, and above the chinwag, palaver and repartee of people meeting, chattering, parting in the street. It made him think of a dog such as he had once seen kicked in the flank by an angry exasperated postman. He couldn't determine its precise source but it did seem to arise from somewhere past Poe's Corner a couple of blocks away.

That he was not alone in having heard it was clear. Josiah Springer himself appeared suddenly in the doorway, sniffed at the air, said with unmistakable ardour 'So it's true. At last. You can tell by the burning!', and vanished hastily inside.

Perhaps there *was* a faint smell of burning. Gabriel let himself believe it, but he scarcely thought it strange. There were, after all, any number of factories nearby, some as close as in Coke and Coal and Cauldron Streets. And that sound – it was a mere siren after all, scarcely, one would have thought, a thing exceptional.

And yet what an odd effect it had on the people! All about him, everyone stopped abruptly, looked searchingly at one another, and almost joyfully, apparently finding confirmation of something expected, became again galvanised and animated, and whatever had been the direction of their separate missions but moments before, they now, in near-unison, turned northward. Some, like Mrs. Goodworks, Barabas the lawyer, and Gentile who carried his bird-cage with him were decidedly delighted and, clearly forgetting about Ol' Chris, made haste. Clem Goldheart, on the other hand, became visibly distressed. Waving his stick after them, he called out

'Wait for me, wait for me!', but, ignored, he hobbled as well as he could on his arthritic feet. Even Wally Pipes, the plumber, normally not one to hurry, pushed past the cripple and laughed, 'You'd better get a move on, old Quasimodo, or you'll be too late for your cleansin' an' deliverance from your sins!'

Witness to this peculiar transformation, Gabriel Singer was struck by a notion and took out his pen again.

'Sounds mysterious in broad daylight' – he wrote,
'When even the deaf will startle, even cats
and ravens leap in fright.'

He mused over the couplet, recognised that the lines, particularly the second, were not wholly suited to what was taking place – perhaps 'delight' might have been more apt –, but did find merit in them. They had rhyme, rhythm. As for the rest, he would work on the verse more concertedly later. Meanwhile, he preferred to continue on his stroll, while the air was pleasant, the sun warm, the day so splendidly congenial, even if, as Springer had said, the smell of burning was becoming more definite and another half-dozen ravens had gathered overhead.

He moved on, watching Mrs. Rushall, Mrs. Goodworks, Father Templeton and his choirboy Luke almost sprint ahead of him. Outside the Gluttony Den Carvery, Josiah Springer himself, hurriedly putting on his coat and hat, brushed past him.

'We've been called, Gaby!' he said, looking back at him. 'You'd better be getting on. You heard the signal! They've promised us eternal life, deliverance. It's like the coming of the messiah. But if you don't get there on time ... Lord! ...'

The watchmaker, round-shouldered and squat, pattered ahead on dwarfish legs. He was joined by his lottery partners, Schechter the butcher and the grocer Salzberger, all three, having greeted each other with obvious glee, making their way through the converging mass ahead which enclosed them

like some consuming ocean. In that mass, which was beginning to mill and bustle and kick up dust, he recognised Kleist the book-seller, Hands the physician and Scholes, Professor of Occultism and Esoterica from the nearby University of Arcadia. He also saw Beckett, Schulz and Neugroschel of the local repertory theatre. Individualists all were they – so had he always looked upon them –, yet did they, too, press through the crowd of people streaming out from every doorway, they, too, at times running, at times veering left, veering right, jostling tardier folk aside.

Eternal life, Josiah Springer had said. Deliverance. The coming of the messiah. While Father Templeton had talked of a cleansing, a purification, salvation. And yet, he himself had heard nothing, had read nothing. – But then, how could he have heard about it all, when his radio remained ever silent, when he possessed no television, when he subscribed to no newspaper? So banal were these, so mundane, with nothing in them to touch a poet's soul. And so insipid! Arid! Flat! No wonder, then, that he knew nothing of what was going on.

But what *was* going on? He wondered at the movement that had become more boisterous, but above the wonder, he was moved to smile. Watching the people scurry and scud northward in increasingly-fervent, eager, headlong flow, he was reminded of the chicken his mother had long ago slaughtered when he had lived in the country, the wretched headless fowl scuttling blind and bleeding under the house. He had always remembered that, for, being the smallest in his family, it was he who had crept under the boards to redeem the exsanguinated corpse. And as he continued to watch, the people now four, five, six abreast, he himself holding back from the crush, he remembered yet another thing, a line he had jotted in his notepad just a week before:

'We march to the future with bold sturdy tread,'

but recognised with amusement that their onward scrambling and shoving and haste would scarcely pass for marching.

Again he smiled, just as another sounding of the siren – strange, it *did* seem more of a scream – came through the air. The tempo of the movement escalated more noticeably still. Pedestrians, trams, cars, cyclists – all. Old skinflint Cashmore stumbled over the tardy Newbold child. Tessie Aintree dropped a bag of oranges and left them to roll into the gutter. Archie Hugo got his feet entangled in someone's abandoned shawl. Studs Gidley lost a shoe. He himself, Gabriel, almost collided with his landlord, Harry Bosch, who was just then emerging, sniffing at the air, from the Nether World Bookshop. Somewhere, glass was being shattered. He heard what his imagination interpreted as gunfire but what could really, surely, only have been the backfiring of a car. Tram-drivers caught in the swelling traffic sounded their horns impatiently; cyclists rang their bells. Even the ravens, now doubled in number, headed north. To his left, to his right, he heard a succession of questions:

'Will we make it on time?'

'Do you think it will take long?'

'How many of us can they purify at a time?'

'Do you really believe they can keep their promise of offering us happiness, peace and justice like they say for evermore?'

Gabriel Singer walked on. A rat darted across the pavement; a cat lumbered after it in fevered pursuit, first the one, then the other nearly causing old Flora Scarlett of Finewreath's Florists to topple in her haste. Here, he side-stepped an infant's rattle, there a dropped newspaper, here a crumpled hat, there a dust-smothered jacket. He also saw a button on the asphalt and a cigarette-lighter, someone's wallet and a pair of glasses.

He was about to ask Marcia Faithfull of the local massage parlour where everyone was heading when he was distracted by an outburst of angry shouting. It came from an open window above the fruiterer Peppercorn's store where Justus Peppercorn was beating his wife Angela who cowered before him with upraised arms. He should have guessed. Punch and Judy were yet again enacting their customary pantomime.

'Are ya 'comin' with me or do I 'ave ta drag ya like a bitch?!' Peppercorn shouted.

'But I'm clean already,' Angela countered. 'Me body, me soul. I'm clean 'n' I'm pure 'n' the Lord Hi'self He knows I don' need no cleansin'!'

'Ya heard what they said! Everyone need a cleansin'. It only takes one bein' that is uncleansed 'n' all aroun' 'im becomes impure. Like an apple gone rotten in the case. So you'd better be comin' b'fore I truly gives ya somethin' to be cleansed about!'

Justus Peppercorn struck his wife again and pulled her by an arm.

Sandy Beechall, the soil merchant, hurrying past, said, 'He'll kill her yet, he will, he will, and then she'll really be eternal . . . If they don't get to her first . . .!'

'They?' Gabriel was about to say, but Sandy Beechall had already moved ahead. Besides, the soil merchant was exaggerating. Peppercorn wouldn't kill his wife. Another minute, two, three perhaps, and like Punch and Judy every time, they would patch up their quarrel, make peace, and seal their love with an embrace and a kiss.

The scene, theatrical as it was, did, however, yield another inspiration. The wonder was that it had not occurred to him before. Outside Becker's Hot Bread Shop, closed now, like so many others, with a sign on the handle reading '*Closed until tomorrow*,' Gabriel Singer paused again.

'They cannot love that do not also hate,' – he wrote
'Nor peace can make who war do never wage.'

He saw Peppercorn again beat Angela about her head.

'You'd better be comin', you witch! For your sake, for mine! 'Cos if they come instead . . .'

Gabriel frowned. Something about the couplet troubled him. The idea was simple, but as poetry . . . There was something archaic about the lines, they needed shaping into modern cadence, moulding into art. They needed more refining, polish.

He smelled burning more distinctly now, and, looking up, actually saw the smoke. There were thick wads of it, in fact, grey coils spiralling into the turquoise blue which over mere minutes appeared to have lost its earlier luminosity. And it was not from Coke or Coal or Cauldron Sweets that the smoke arose, but from the Salus et Vitas Hospital past Poe's Corner towards which everyone, in ever-mounting, ever-excited, ever-more-crowded fervour and expectancy was heading.

At Quandary Street, however, there was a hold-up in the current. A huddle of people had gathered about, now and again one of their number – Kochan, for instance, or Priestley, or Theophanus – looking uneasily over a shoulder.

'What could they expect?', he heard someone say from within the circle.

'Turned back instead of going forward.'

'They should have known . . . Everyone was called, everyone had to go . . .'

'And it was for their sakes, too. There is no sense in missing out or trying to escape, poor fools . . .'

There must be a line or two in this, Gabriel thought.

He edged forward through the gathering. He saw glass glinting on the road. He saw an overturned stroller and a squashed ice-cream splattered across the asphalt, and, a little way into Quandary Street, where a line of graffiti '*Folly is it to doubt*' had been painted upon a wall, the distorted dismembered bloodied bodies of Chrissie Chrysalis, little Sammy, Barney Brown and young Freddie Freeling, and nearby, too, Freddie's mangy dog, Black Roger, shoved into a gutter, its blind glaucous eye open and protruding, looking like a dirty grey button about to loosen.

Already the flies had begun to buzz around them.

'Better move on, sonny,' he heard someone say in his ear. 'If they catch you dawdling . . .'

It was Alf Keymoney, the real estate agent, running as though some demon were in close pursuit.

Gabriel looked once, twice more, at Chrissie Chrysalis, but had to look away; look away from Sammy, too. He preferred

not to see in this exposed shattered form his object of divinity. It was rather to that earlier image of beauty, of perfection, he wished to hold, the saintly mother in immaculate white, all smiles and pertness and electric touch, the child, it too so saintly, playing havoc with its ice-cream.

As Alf had said – it was better to move on, wherever it was that he had to move on.

He did move on; but scarcely was he across the road than he was struck by a thought that sent a hot prickly burning flush to his cheeks.

The luck of it!, he could not help but think. The strange mysterious peculiar workings of luck! Lord! – Had he, had he, in his infatuation, kept pace with Chrissie; had he not paused to describe Ol' Chris 'the Prophet' in verse; had he, with Chrissie, Barney, Freddie at Quandary Street also sought to turn back! . . . Lord, might he, too, not now have been a mangled tangle of flesh, of bone, of hair, and victual for the flies? Lord!

He turned a page of his notebook.

'Not by the grace of God go we,' – he wrote,
'Nor by human design, however appealing,
But like dust in cyclones, tornado-tossed leaves,
On skittles of chance our very lives keeling.'

He pondered over the verse and bit a lip. He was saddened by another reflection. For, to whom, to whom might he now dedicate that latest poem, that '*An Innocent – and a Scene from Botticelli*' with his own lovely angelic galvanising Innocent gone? To whom?

A sharp thrust against his shoulder made him look up. It was Ernie Windglass, the glazier, who had struck him in his northbound haste. But it was not Ernie who captured his attention. For a moment, a tram crowded with excited impatient passengers obscured his view. While others to right and left of him rushed past, he waited for the tram, too, to pass, ready to believe, as with the aureole around Ol' Chris that what he saw was another trick of light. But he knew that this

time it wasn't so. The sun was more subdued, the sky had mellowed to a more sombre grey. No, what he had seen was real. Lazarus Godson, the manager of the Croesus Bank, *was* hanging behind the plate-glass window, his normally cheery, cherubic, chubby face so bloated and violet as to be almost beyond recognition, almost like an over-ripe plum.

'The silly fool!' Ernie Windglass, looking back, hissed with near-contempt. 'Wanted to be a hero. Tried to resist them, I swear. An' that's what he got. If only he'd taken to heart what's written there b'neath the window. Poor fool!'

Gabriel read. '*Trust - and unto you shall eternity be given.*'

'Maybe it was suicide,' he was about to say, but held back as on the uppermost step of the Town Hall he now saw the Mayor, Peter Holyoake, also hanging, he, not by the neck but by the feet from a flag-pole.

'Another hare-brained hero!', Ernie Windglass now receding further away spat back. 'He, of all people, shoulda known . . .'

The siren sounded yet again, a third time, closer now, more clearly than ever like some unnatural scream. It came, Gabriel was sure now, quite sure from the Salus et Vitus Hospital, upon which the people were all feverishly converging, while it was also from *its* chimneys, so clear was it now, that the smoke was billowing thickly, giving to the air a dully-opaque bilious light and a heat become drier, heavier and more scorching. It smelled peculiarly and vaguely as his own flesh had done when long before he had singed it over an incinerator. In the meantime, what was left of the sun could no more be seen. His eyes began to smart, his saliva thickened. At moments, he had to turn aside for breath. And yet the people themselves, those around him, seemed not to notice. Arrived there by foot, by car, by cycle, by tram, some of them joked, others laughed, still others talked of the new directions they would take when their lives would be renewed and made eternal, they talked of new business ventures, of journeys, of new occupations, as also of hobbies, enterprises and creative pursuits till then denied them by the ever-present demands of the moment in their

arduous, busy day-to-day lives. That he was more aware of the accumulated heaviness and acerbity that had come to the air, Gabriel Silver attributed to his more sensitive perceptions, to the inner sight, as it were, bequeathed to him as a poet.

The ravens overhead had doubled yet again.

Reaching the outer rim of that human swarm, Gabriel rose to his toes. No lights, he noticed, shone from the hospital windows, the clock had stopped, while a broad prominent banner flapped against the wall.

'*Cleansing Makes Free*,' he read, the blood-red lettering bold on the sooty white.

People pointed at the sign, breathed deeply, took in the air in draughts as if already breathing in freedom's freshness, and smiled – beatifically, Gabriel thought.

He reached for his pen.

'*Cleansing makes Free*,' he wrote. He bit a lip, sucked his pen, and crossed out what he had written.

'In cleaning lies salvation' – he wrote instead, and
added

'And in fire is purgation.'

He was more pleased this time by the musicality and the symmetry of the lines.

He was about to write a matching couplet when he looked up as though he might find the lines ready-formed in the air. He was momentarily taken aback by what he saw, while beside him, he heard someone else exclaim, 'Wow! Gee!' For, high up, towards the topmost end of a lamp-post near the hospital's doors, hung Angela Peppercorn. Her arms were bound to the horizontal, while her body, delicate and light though it was, sagged limply. At her feet hung the tardy Newbold child who seemed at that moment to be restfully sleeping; below that tranquil cherub was Ol' Chris 'the Prophet,' his tongue dangling loose and the blood congealed in his mouth; while at *his* feet lay Benedict Gentile's parrot, its throat slit wide and its eyes protruding as if on mushroom stalks.

'They thought they were pure and already immortal, so they refused to come,' Gabriel heard Canon Priestley say ahead of him. 'Yet is there any among us who is, who can be, truly, truly, wholly clean?'

'Yeah,' said Willet Everend who worked as clerk at the Coroner's Court, pointing at Angela. 'She thought she was too good and wouldn't listen. The young 'un, below her, he was too slow, and that one, that swiller o' spirits, he, the ol' rebel, he jus' babbled too much. So his tongue, it's been prised jus' a little loose, jus' a little loose, poor devil . . .'

Explained that way, Gabriel Singer could believe all that. But what, he wondered, could anyone have had against a parrot?

'Parrots, too, can sin,' said Canon Priestley gravely. 'I guess it's b'cause they also know to talk.'

And that was all. After the explanations offered by Willet Everend and Canon Priestley, no-one else seemed to as much as look at the corpses along the mast. They might as well have been part of the landscape a decade past. Rather did the mass of folk gathered there face the hospital doors, clinging to them, all of them pressing forward, their breaths stale as they mingled with one another.

He moved on, skirting around the perimeter of the massed chattering, laughing, bantering, gesturing, expectant, impatient assemblage.

'We're going to be scrubbed lily-white,' someone said.

'Like loveable albinos,' someone else laughed.

'Say, if we go in through here for the cleansin', where do we come out, do you think?' a third one asked.

'With the bath-water, down the drain,' a wit saw fit to reply.

There was much of that. Gabriel Singer registered their talk, but held continually to the outer, the better, as poet, to observe them. He reached a position opposite the doors at just that moment when the siren sounded again. Climbing on to the step of an evacuated tram – it had the peculiar appearance of a cattle-car –, he caught sight of the hospital interior. And

he saw the source of the siren. He had been right. The siren was, in fact, a scream, a human – and yet, in other ways, a patently inhuman – scream. It issued from a scraggy figure standing on a platform just inside the entrance. The figure was bald and nearly fleshless, its cheeks were troughed, its eyes empty mussels, and its belly and thighs as if scooped out by huge serrated trowels. It held bony hands to the hollow that was its mouth and screamed with a force so shrill, so strident, that, to Gabriel, the penetration of that cry could scarce be reconciled with its shrivelled form. Yet, its skeletal form notwithstanding, Gabriel suddenly recognised him. It was Munch – Think of it; Munch, Munch himself, Munch, of Munch's Funeral Parlours who was said to be retired – calling the people to their salvation.

Again, Gabriel reached for his pen and pad and wrote:

'There is no end to mysteries, no dearth of surprises,
People familiar assume motley guises.'

He looked up to observe the scene. Some hundred to two hundred folk entered, in homage bowing to Munch who, despite his stark appearance – indeed, in contrast to it –, eyed them smilingly and clearly benevolent. With an arc described by his arm, he motioned the people inside. And the people moved in, the people, Gabriel Singer's neighbours and acquaintances, and the waiters he had known, and the shopkeepers, the printers, seamstresses, tailors and Lord knew who else. As many as could enter, as many crowded in. Any anxiety at being delayed had clearly been needless; all had reached the hospital well in time and everyone, everyone would in his-her turn be readily accommodated.

In the foyer, during the few moments the doors remained open, Gabriel saw the arrivals begin to undress, men, women, children, who with neither shame nor bashfulness shed their clothes which a score of men in gold braid, all remarkably handsome, dignified and polite, piled neatly against a wall, alongside boxes that contained mounds and mountains of

spectacles, necklaces, dentures, watches and rings. Pregnant Gwenda Canister, he saw, had trouble undoing her bra, with which one of the men then graciously assisted her; arthritic Clem Goldheart was asked courteously to give up his stick; Mrs. Goodworks freely offered up her rubies; while Felicity Worth, clearly finding old habits hard to surmount, offered up herself.

The heat issuing from the hospital struck Gabriel more keenly. He saw the naked bodies glisten white, yellow, gold and red with a gleaming of sweat. But it was scarce to be wondered at, for, in the background, a series of open fires were brilliantly blazing. Before them stood rows of chairs on which the new arrivals were seated while a team of men, working briskly, shaved their heads and tossed their hair into the flames along with some of the clothes clearly too ragged and worn for further use. Tessie Aintree, skinflint Cashmore and Justus Peppercorn, he saw, though in their shaven state he nearly did not recognise, were given soap and towels and led away, while at the foot of the pedestal where Munch stood beaming knelt Father Templeton with his choir-boy Luke both naked and white, in rapt delight offering up a string of peeling trilling hosannas to him above them who was about to give them new and eternal life.

Then, with Munch holding up a palm to the public left waiting outside the entrance, and bidding them be patient, the doors closed.

Gabriel Singer stepped down from the tram and resumed his walk. He was within sight of Utopia Bridge. He liked its name. It corresponded with his idea of culture – erudition, curiosity, sophistication, art – towards all of which he, too, in his way, was working.

If, for a moment, he deemed it strange that the people proved so ready to disrobe to nakedness, on reflection, the fact was scarcely strange at all. They had come for cleansing, for salvation, for the promised granting of eternal life. What were all these if not, in a sense, rebirth into the world? It was, therefore, wholly logical, indeed wholly natural, that it

should be in a state naked, purified and innocent, in a condition shorn of all vestiges of the old life and healed of all ailments and delivered of all past encumbrances that they should be reborn. And to be reborn, to be made whole again, to pursue the promise of eternal life – think of it! – were not these the dreams and hankerings and aspirations of every age, the ultimate consummation of every human instinct, drive and impulse, notwithstanding the fact that there were departures from the general rule, aberrations perhaps such a Angela Peppercorn, say, or Lazarus Godson, Peter Holyoake or Ol' Chris, the Prophet?

There must be a poem in all this, he thought. He must, he would on his return give careful consideration to the theme.

He reached the centre of the bridge. He had a special fondness for the bridge, that arch of solid dependable stone spanning Erehwon Creek, in winter ever a rich swiftly-flowing river bordered by vegetation lush and verdant with a lavish fecundity of poplar and willow, eucalyptus and pine. That was how he savoured it best. But now something different rose from the creek – a smell –, a smell not altogether pleasant, a smell sulphurous and aquatic, a smell strangely faeculent, as though emanating from a leaking sewer the Council had not repaired, while he heard also sharp rapid muffled retorts and brief squeals and shrieks such as could not come from those hovering ravens alone.

He placed his arms upon the stone and looked down.

All grey, – the smoke having shut out the brighter light of the sun apart from some thin greenish-yellow shafts struggling through –, the creek and its embankments stretched a short way into the distance where it veered suddenly out of visibility. If asked, he would have had to concede that the view this time was unusual – at least, for him, unusual. For, just beneath him, in so far as he could recognise them, he saw Tessie Aintree, Cashmore and Peppercorn, along with a score, two-score of others, being ushered into a low building, on the roof of which, after the doors had been shut and secured, an

attendant, clearly earnest about his work – dedicated, one could say –, emptied a canister of crystals down a narrow chute. Barely a dozen paces away, on a makeshift dais, Barabas the solicitor and Willy Pipes were being flogged, Harry Bosch, his landlord, at whom Gabriel waved without response, was drinking turps, while the high-brow threesome, the bookseller Kleist, the physician Hands and Professor Scholes were being strung up on a gallows by other attendants who worked with an efficiency beyond the slightest reproach. Beckett, Schulz and Neugroschel were already dangling floppily, their necks at sharp angles to their trunks. At some remove, where Marcia Faithfull was copulating with another attendant while an Alsatian looked calmly on, Archie Hugo, the hunchback, and crippled Clem Goldheart were led to leaden furnaces and through narrow openings were thrown inside; pregnant Gwenda Canister, nearly too big to fit through, was next; then Studs Gidley, Benedict Gentile and Flora Scarlett, followed by the clerical trio Kochan, Priestley and Theophanos; while on a row of tables, rinsed by a hose constantly flowing, Father Templeton, his choirboy Luke, and – Gabriel saw – another trio of choristers were losing their balls. Others were having their nails torn from their thumbs; near the gallows, a number of souls were being stretched on racks; some, tied to stakes, were being macerated by clubs and hooks and whips; while others still – Springer, he recognised, and the jeweller's lottery-partners, Schechter and Salzberger – were being impaled like lambs on spits. And one thing more caught – could not help but catch – Gabriel's eye. Though smoke-permeated mist lay heavily upon them, he saw several tracks cut into the slopes of the banks that led from the hospital above to the lower reaches of the Erehwon Creek below. Along these tracks he saw, too, separate trails of people descend, all of them naked, all shaven, all, even the children, wholly mute, there along the embankment to spread out in a single file at the behest of a further clan of attendants. Behind them, the creek had a mottled-marble appearance with, here and there, thick splotches of red. The creek had obviously

dried out. Gabriel missed the shimmering reflections of its more usual flow, as also the customary darts of silver under the sun, the dancing shafts of mercury, and the glinting javelins of gold. He did not see their actual source, but again there arose from below a volley of short and rapid retorts. What he did see, however, were puffs of cotton-wool smoke among the trees, followed by the sudden flurry of ravens and accompanied by another succession of squeals, from the birds themselves, to be sure, but also he now clearly recognised, from those very souls below as, along the embankment, and in a quaintly-uniform way, the linear formation of men, women and children tumbled back, rolled and cartwheeled surprisingly nimbly down the slope and came to rest in quiet immobility, although a few did stand their ground a fraction longer before executing a final reeling pirouette. The one formation despatched, another promptly followed. Gabriel Singer no longer knew any of them. They were clearly the ones who had come from further out by car or tram or cycle. They made him think of extras on a film set and he wondered, fleetingly, whether somewhere in the mist among the trees sat a film-maker with a cameraman nearby.

What briefly struck him, too, were the expressions of what seemed surprise, pain, even agony and anguish on the faces of the many led to the gallows, the furnaces, the gas-chambers – for what else could those low-roofed buildings be? –, and to the embankments below, and with that thought became linked another: that all those who had so keenly, so expectantly run and bustled and rushed to their promised salvation had, in fact, been cleverly, expertly and excellently duped and beguiled. But, no – on further reflection, there was a more compelling argument still. If one were to be reborn, it was only natural – it was nothing if not natural – that one must first die, while if one were to be reborn purified and prepared for eternal life, then one had first to be cleansed, wholly cleansed – of sins and of sickness, as of smallness and infirmity –, even if such cleansing necessitated the infliction of what was all too glibly and superficially described as suffering by such who would

hold the means of cleansing as things evil or vile or reprehensible. Clearly, the logic was nothing if not inescapable and irrefutable.

He did not remain long on the bridge. He was disappointed that the usually clear invigorating, indeed inspiring, vistas of Erehwon Creek had been blemished. He had always been one to prefer light; he did not like the murkiness that had gathered, nor the way the smell of the creek impinged on his breath. Next time, he thought, he would take a different route.

By the time he reached the hospital on his return, its doors were shut and no-one any longer waited outside. The whole process had been remarkably efficient, a credit to Munch and his clearly superbly-organised team. The funeral director was a master of his calling, *par excellence*. For the chimneys themselves had as good as stopped billowing, and afternoon light, the more usual golden light, again began to tremble, however tentatively, in the sky. The banner reading '*Cleansing Makes Free*' had meanwhile been removed and the pavement before the doors swept perfectly clean. No-one hung now on the lamp-post outside the hospital, and as he looked south, down the length of High Street from whence he had come, even the cars, the trams and the bicycles were gone. High Street was deserted, silent and mellow under the lifting returning spreading light. Remarkable, remarkable – he thought – what could be achieved if only a man set his mind to do it. A whole city of folk – tradesmen, shopkeepers, intellectuals, clergy – a whole city in a blinking had been cleansed; and now only silence and calm remained, as if people, there, had never been.

Alone, with no-one near to nudge his shoulder or urge him on, he paused. Once again, he licked his pen.

'A man, a car, a street, a city,' – he wrote,
'Into oblivion plunged, to anonymity purged,
All engulfed, devoured, in oceans submerged.'

He walked on, passed the shops and looked for the signs he had read before: '*Back soon*', '*Out for an hour*', '*Open again tomorrow*'.

They were no longer there, nor did he see Peter Holyoake outside the Town Hall or Lazarus Godson hanging inside the Croesus Bank. Even the graffiti had been rubbed away, while, at the corner of Quandary Street, no sign was there of Chrissie Chrysalis, of Sammy or his splattered ice-cream, of Barney Brown, Freddie Freeling or his mangy dog, Black Roger.

He was crossing the narrow street when he entertained a sudden vision of the heroic.

'If only . . . if only . . . if only . . .'

If only he had had been near Quandary Street with that foursome; if only he had been with Lazarus Godson at the bank; or with Peter Holyoake, the Mayor; or with the Peppercorns in their room; or with Ol' Chris 'the Prophet' to whom the wisdom of silence he might yet have taught or whom, in some other forceful defiant way, he might, he might yet have saved.

But just as quickly, he recognised the folly of his notions. He was a poet, an artist, not a man of action. His brief was to create order from disorder, beauty from discord, truth from confusion. Not for him was it to compound violence with violence or confound common sense with derring-do. Nor was it in his power – let others do it! – through ill-judged action to alter events. What had been – if, indeed, it had truly been – had had to be. What now would be, would have to be. For this was the way of the world. And if others had been cleansed, purified, purged and, in that way, redeemed, it was because they had shown reason for it – Josiah Springer who over-charged, for instance, Salzberger who gave short weight, Barabas who tendered poor advice, and, of course, those physical liabilities, the cripples Clem Goldheart and Archie Hugo. He, Gabriel Singer was not of their kind. His was a quiet, fruitful, creative life, neither sinning, nor offending, his hands in this world perpetually clean. Those others – even Chrissie Chrysalis, even Angela Peppercorn if the truth had to be admitted – were little folk, while he, Gabriel, was the servant of art. And as its servant, he was ear-marked for finer attainments. Not for nothing had he been spared.

Buoyed by the thought, he hastened his step, almost ran. He seemed to be gliding. He passed the shops, crossed the side-streets and felt sweat gathering down the length of his spine, while his mind, suddenly so lucid, so alive, so clear, buzzed with a refrain:

'We march to the future with bold sturdy tread,
I create for the future with bold steady pen.'

Now he did run.

'We march to the future with bold sturdy tread; I create for the future with bold steady pen.'

At the door of Bosch's store, he fumbled with his key.

'We march to the future . . .'

He opened the door, entered.

'I create for the future . . .'

He made his way between the paintings, between the portraits, between the frames on the floor. He half-expected Harry Bosch to say, as always, 'Well, how's our Singer, our poet today?' He reached the stairs, scaled them in twos, in threes; he took out his notepad, he switched on the light and, wondering vaguely, fleetingly, where, with Salzberger gone, he might get tomorrow's rolls, he hastened to his desk, pulled out his chair and sat down, there to work upon his snatches of verse, there to create order out of disorder, there to forge pure art, cocooned in his still, secluded, untroubled garret above Harry Bosch's picture-framing store.