

BALLANTINE  
**Star**

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Editor FREDERIK POHL • Art director RICHARD POWERS

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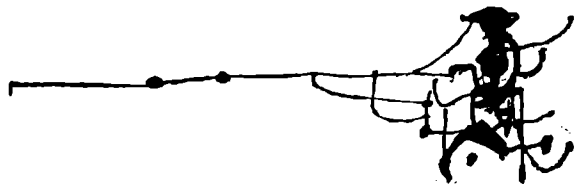
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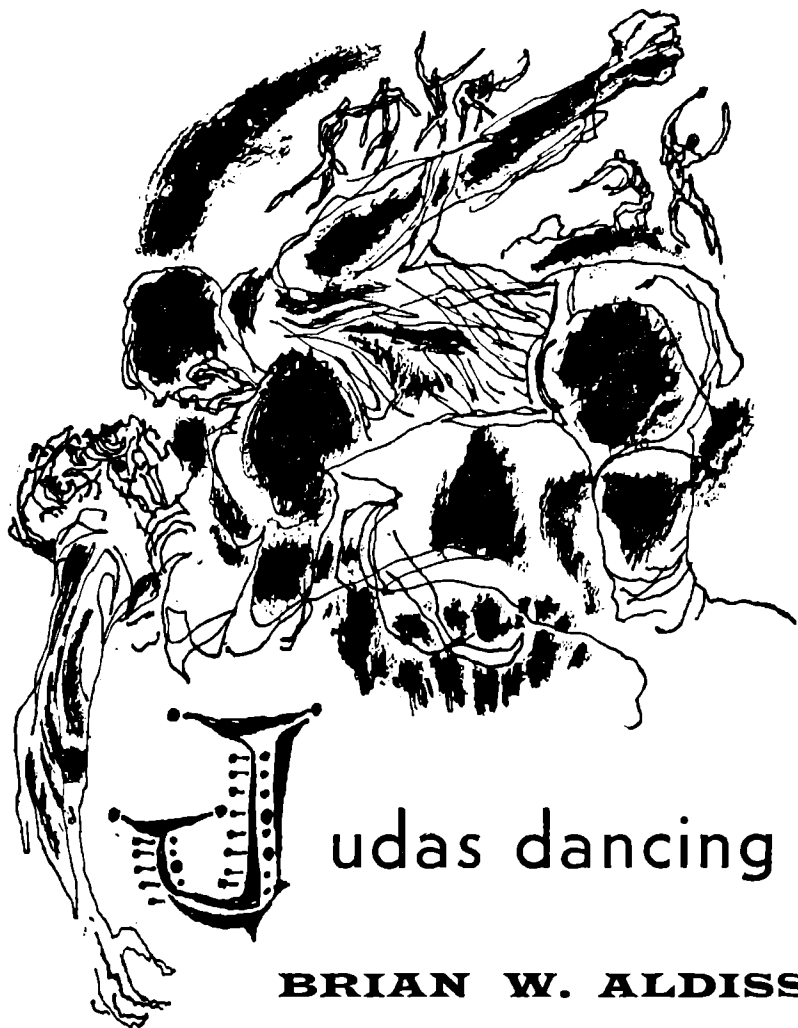
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## udas dancing

**BRIAN W. ALDISS**

**I**T WAS not a fair trial. You understand I was not inclined to listen properly, but it was not a fair trial. It had a mistrustful and fur-

tive haste about it. Judge, counsel and jury all took care to be as brief and explicit as possible. I said nothing, but I knew why: everyone wanted

to get back to the dances.

So it was not very long before the judge stood up and pronounced sentence:

"Alexander Abel Crowe, this court finds you guilty of murdering Parowen Scryban for the second time."

I could have laughed out loud. I nearly did.

He went on: "You are therefore condemned to suffer death by strangulation for the second time, which sentence will be carried out within the next week."

Round the court ran a murmur of excitement.

In a way, even I felt satisfied. It had been an unusual case: few are the people who care to risk facing death a second time; the first time you die makes the prospect worse, not better. For just a minute, the court was still, then it cleared with almost indecent haste. In a little while, only I was left there.

I, Alex Abel Crowe—or approximately he—came carefully down out of the prisoner's box and limped the length of the dusty room to the door. As I went, I looked at my hands. They weren't trembling.

Nobody bothered to keep a check on me. They knew they could pick me up whenever they were ready to execute

sentence. I was unmistakable, and I had nowhere to go. I was the man with the club foot who could not dance; nobody could mistake me for anyone else. Only I could do that.

Outside in the dark sunlight, that wonderful woman stood waiting for me with her husband, waiting on the court steps. The sight of her began to bring back life and hurt to my veins. I raised my hand to her as my custom was.

"We've come to take you home, Alex," Husband said, stepping towards me.

"I haven't got a home," I said, addressing her.

"I meant *our* home," he informed me.

"Elucidation accepted," I said. "Take me away, take me away, take me away, Charlemagne. And let me sleep."

"You need a sleep after all you have been through," he said. Why, he sounded nearly sympathetic.

Sometimes I called him Charlemagne, sometimes just Charley. Or Cheeps, or Jags, or Jagers, or anything, as the mood took me. He seemed to forgive me. Perhaps he even liked it—I don't know. Personal magnetism takes you a long way; it has taken me so far I don't even have to remember names.

**T**HEY stopped a passing taxi and we all climbed in. It was a tumbril, they tell me. You know, French? Circa seventeen-eighty something. Husband sat one side, Wife the other, each holding one of my arms, as if they thought I should get violent. I let them do it, although the idea amused me.

"Hallo, friends!" I said ironically. Sometimes I called them "parents," or "disciples," or sometimes "patients." Anything.

The wonderful woman was crying slightly.

"Look at her!" I said to Husband. "She's lovely when she cries, that I swear. I could have married her, you know, if I had not been dedicated. Tell him, you wonderful creature, tell him how I turned you down!"

Through her sobbing, she said, "Alex said he had more important things to do than sex."

"So you've got to thank me for Perdita!" I told him. "It was a big sacrifice, but I'm happy to see you happy." Often now I called her Perdita. It seemed to fit her. He laughed at what I had said, and then we were all laughing. Yes, it was good to be alive; I knew I made them feel good to be alive. They were loyal. I had

to give them something—I had no gold and silver.

The tumbril stopped outside Charley's place—the husband residence, I'd better say. Oh, the things I've called that place! Someone should have recorded them all. It was one of those inverted beehive houses: just room for a door and an elevator on the ground floor, but the fifth floor could hold a ballroom. Topply, topply. Up we went to the fifth. There was no sixth floor; had there been, I should have gone up there, the way I felt. I asked for it anyhow, just to see the wonderful woman brighten up. She liked me to joke, even when I wasn't in a joking mood. I could tell she still loved me so much it hurt her.

"Now for a miracle, ye pampered jades," I said, stepping forth, clumping into the living room.

I seized an empty vase from a low shelf and spat into it. Ah, the old cunning was still there! It filled at once with wine, sweet and bloody-looking. I sipped and found it good.

"Go on and taste it, Perdy!" I told her.

Wonderful w. turned her head sadly away. She would not touch that vase. I could have eaten every single strand

of hair on her head, but she seemed unable to see the wine. I really believe she could not see that wine.

"Please don't go through all that again, Alex," she implored me wearily. Little faith, you see—the old, old story. (Remind me to tell you a new one I heard the other day.) I put my behind on one chair and my bad foot on another and sulked.

They came and stood by me . . . not too close.

"Come nearer," I coaxed, looking up under my eyebrows and pretending to growl at them. "I won't hurt you. I only murder Parowen Scryban, remember?"

"We've got to talk to you about that," Husband said desperately. I thought he looked as if he had aged.

"I think you look as if you have aged, Perdita," I said. Often I called him Perdita, too; why, man, they sometimes looked so worried you couldn't tell them apart.

"I cannot live forever, Alex," he replied. "Now try and concentrate about this killing, will you?"

I waved a hand and tried to belch. At times I can belch like a sinking ship.

"We do all we can to help you, Alex," he said. I heard him although my eyes were

shut; can you do that? "But we can only keep you out of trouble if you co-operate. It's the dancing that does it; nothing else betrays you like dancing. You've got to promise you'll stay away from it. In fact, we want you to promise that you'll let us restrain you. To keep you away from the dancing. Something about that dancing. . . ."

He was going on and on, and I could still hear him. But other things were happening. That word "dancing" got in the way of all his other words. It started a sort of flutter under my eyelids. I crept my hand out and took the wonderful woman's hand, so soft and lovely, and listened to that word "dancing" dancing. It brought its own rhythm, bouncing about like an eyeball inside my head. The rhythm grew louder. He was shouting.

I sat up suddenly, opening my eyes.

W. woman was on the floor, very pale.

"You squeezed too hard, boy," she whispered.

I COULD see that her little hand was the only red thing she had.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really wonder you two don't throw me out for good!" I

couldn't help it, I just started laughing. I like laughing. I can laugh even when nothing's funny. Even when I saw their faces, I still kept laughing like mad.

"Stop it!" Husband said. For a moment he looked as if he would have hit me. But I was laughing so much I did not recognize him. It must have done them good to see me enjoying myself; they both needed a fillip, I could tell.

"If you stop laughing, I'll take you down to the club," he said, glibly bribing.

I stopped. I always know when to stop. With all humility, that is a great natural gift.

"The club's the place for me," I said. "I've already got a club foot—I'm half way there!"

I stood up.

"Lead on, my loyal supporters, my liege lords," I ordered.

"You and I will go alone, Alex," Husband said. "The wonderful woman will stay here. She really ought to go to bed."

"What's in it for her?" I joked. Then I followed him to the elevator. He knows I don't like staying in any one place for long.

When I got to the club, I knew, I would want to be somewhere else. That's the

worst of having a mission: it makes you terribly restless. Sometimes I am so restless I could die. Ordinary people just don't know what the word means. I could have married her if I had been ordinary. They call it destiny.

But the club was good.

We walked there. I limped there. I made sure I limped badly.

The club had a timescreen. That, I must admit, was my only interest in the club. I don't care for women. Or men. Not living women or men. I only enjoy them when they are back in time.

This night—I nearly said "this particular night," but there was nothing particularly particular about it—the timescreen had only been tuned roughly three centuries back into the past. At least, I guessed it was twenty-first century stuff by the women's dresses and a shot of a power station. A large crowd of people were looking in as Perdita Caesar and I entered, so I started to pretend he had never seen one of the wall screens before.

"The tele-eyes which are projected back over history consume a fabulous amount of power every second," I told him loudly, in a voice which suggested I had swal-

lowed a poker. "It makes them very expensive. It means private citizens cannot afford screens and tele-eyes, just as once they could not afford their own private cinemas. This club is fortunately very rich. Its members sleep in gold leaf at nights."

Several people were glancing round at me already. Caesar was shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

"The tele-eyes cannot get a picture further than twenty-seven centuries back," I told him, "owing to the limitations of science. Science, as you know, is a system for taking away with one hand while giving with the other."

He could not answer cleverly. I went on: "It has also proved impossible, due to the aforesaid limitations, to send human beings further back in time than one week. And that costs so much that only governments can do it. As you may have heard, nothing can be sent ahead into time—there's no future in it!"

I had to laugh at that. It was funny, and quite spontaneous.

Many people were calling out to me, and Caesar Borgia was dragging at my arm, trying to make me be quiet.

"I wouldn't spoil anyone's fun!" I shouted. "You lot get

on with your watching; I'll get on with my speech."

But I did not want to talk to a lot of feather-bedders like them. So I sat down without saying another word, Boy Borgia collapsing beside me with a sigh of relief. Suddenly I felt very, very sad. Life just is not what it was; once on a time, I could have married this husband's wife.

"Physically, you can go back one week," I whispered, "optically, twenty-seven centuries. It's very sad."

It was very sad. The people on the screen were also sad. They lived in the Entertainment Era, and appeared to be getting little pleasure from it. I tried to weep for them but failed, because at the moment they seemed just animated history. I saw them as period pieces, stuck there a couple of generations before reading and writing had died out altogether and the fetters of literacy fell forever from the world. Little any of them cared for the patterns of history.

"I've had an idea I want to tell you about, Cheezer," I said. It was a good idea.

"Can't it wait?" he asked. "I'd like to see this scan. It's all about the European Alliance."

"I must tell you before I forget."

"Come on," he said resignedly, getting up.

"You are too loyal to me," I complained. "You spoil me. I'll speak to St. Peter about it."

**A**S MEEK as you like, I followed him into an ante-room. He drew himself a drink from an automatic man in one corner. He was trembling. I did not tremble, although at the back of my mind lurked many things to tremble about.

"Go on then, say whatever in hell you want to say," he told me, shading his eyes with his hand. I have seen him use that trick before; he did it after I killed Parowen Scryban the first time, I remember. There's nothing wrong with my memory, except in patches.

"I had this idea," I said, trying to recall it. "This idea—oh, yes. History. I got the idea looking at those twenty-first century people. Mythology is the key to everything, isn't it? I mean, a man builds his life on a set of myths, doesn't he? Well, in our world, the so-called Western world, those accepted myths were religious until about mid-nineteenth century. By

then, a majority of Europeans were literate, or within reach of it, and for a couple of centuries the myths became literary ones: tragedy was no longer the difference between grace and nature but between art and reality."

Julius had dropped his hand. He was interested. I could see he wondered what was coming next. I hardly knew myself.

"Then mechanical aids—television, computers, scanners of every type—abolished literacy," I said. "Into the vacuum came the timescreens. Our mythologies are now historical: tragedy has become simply a failure to see the future."

I beamed at him and bowed, not letting him know I was beyond tragedy. He just sat there. He said nothing. Sometimes such terrible boredom descends on me that I can hardly fight against it.

"Is my reasoning sound?" I asked. (Two women looked into the room, saw me, and left again hurriedly. They must have sensed I did not want them, otherwise they would have come to me; I am young and handsome—I am not thirty-three yet.)

"You could always reason well," Marcus Aurelius Marconi said, "but it just never



leads anywhere. God, I'm so tired."

"This bit of reasoning leads somewhere. I beg you to believe it, Holy Roman," I said, flopping on my knees before him. "It's the state philosophy I've really been telling you about. That's why although they keep the death penalty for serious crimes—like murdering a bastard called Parowen Scryban—they go back in time the next day and call off the execution. They believe you should die for your crime, you see? But more deeply they believe every man should face his true future. They've—we've all seen too many premature deaths on the timescreens. Romans, Normans, Celts, Goths, English, Israelis. Every race. Individuals—all dying too soon, failing to fulfill——"

Oh, I admit it, I was crying on his knees by then, although bravely disguising it by barking like a dog: a Great Dane. Hamlet. Not in our stars but in our selves. (I've watched W. S. write that bit.)

I was crying at last to think the police would come without fail within the next week to snuff me out, and then resurrect me again, according to my sentence. I was remembering what it was like last

time. They took so long about it.

They took so long. Though I struggled, I could not move; those police know how to hold a man. My windpipe was blocked, as sentence of court demanded.

And then, it seemed, the boxes sailed in. Starting with small ones, they grew bigger. They were black boxes, all of them. Faster they came, and faster, inside me and out. I'm telling you how it felt, my God! And they blocked the whole, whole universe, black on red. With my lungs really crammed tight with boxes, out of the world I went. Dead!

Into limbo I went.

I don't say nothing happened, but I could not grasp what was happening there, and I was unable to participate. Then I was alive again.

It was abruptly the day before the strangulation once more, and the government agent had come back in time and rescued me, so that from one point of view I was not strangled. *But* I still remembered it happening, and the boxes, and limbo. Don't talk to me about paradoxes. The government expended several billion megavolts sending that man back for me, and those megavolts account for all

paradoxes. I was dead and then alive again.

Now I had to undergo it all once more. No wonder there was little crime nowadays: the threat of that horrible experience held many a likely criminal back. But I *had* to kill Parowen Scryban; just so long as they went back and resurrected him after I had finished with him, I had to go and do it again. Call it a moral obligation. No one understands. It is as if I were living in a world of my own.

"Get up, get up! You're biting my ankles."

Where had I heard that voice before? At last I could no longer ignore it. Whenever I try to think, voices interrupt. I stopped chewing whatever I was chewing, unblocked my eyes and sat up. This was just a room; I had been in rooms before. A man was standing over me; I did not recognize him. He was just a man.

"You look as if you have aged," I told him.

"I can't live forever, thank God," he said. "Now get up and let's get you home. You're going to bed."

"What home?" I asked. "What bed? Who in the gentle name of anyone may you be?"

He looked sick.

"Just call me Adam," he said sickly.

I recognized him then and went with him. We had been in some sort of a club; he never told me why. I still don't know why we went to that club.

THE house he took me to was shaped like a beehive upside-down, and I walked there like a drunk. A club-footed drunk.

This wonderful stranger took me up in an elevator to a soft bed. He undressed me and put me in that soft bed as gently as if I had been his son. I am really impressed by the kindness strangers show me; personal magnetism, I suppose.

For as long as I could after he had left me, I lay in the bed in the inverted beehive. Then the darkness grew thick and sticky, and I could imagine all the fat, furry bodies, chitinously winged, of the bees on the ceiling. A minute more and I should fall head first into them. Stubbornly, I fought to sweat it out, but a man can only stand so much.

On hands and knees I crawled out of bed and out of the room. Quickly, softly, I clicked the door shut behind me: not a bee escaped.

People were talking in a

lighted room along the corridor. I crawled to the doorway, looking and listening. The wonderful stranger talked to the wonderful woman; she was in night attire (pronounced "nigh ta-ta") with a hand bandaged.

She was saying: "You will have to see the authorities in the morning and petition them."

He was saying: "It'll do no good. I can't get the law changed. You know that. It's hopeless."

I merely listened.

Sinking onto the bed, he buried his face in his hands, finally looking up to say, "The law insists on personal responsibility. We've got to take care of Alex. It's a reflection of the time we live in; owing to the timescreens we've got—whether we like it or not—historical perspectives. We can see that the whole folly of the past was due to failures in individual liability. Our laws are naturally framed to correct that, which they do—it just happens to be tough on us."

He sighed and said, "The sad thing is, even Alex realizes that. He talked quite sensibly to me at the club about not evading the future."

"It hurts me most when he

talks sensibly," the wonderful double-you said. "It makes you realize he is still capable of suffering."

He took her bandaged hand, almost as if they had a pain they hoped to alleviate by sharing it between them.

"I'll go and see the authorities in the morning," he promised, "and ask them to let the execution be final—no reprieve afterwards."

Even that did not seem to satisfy her.

Perhaps, like me, she could not tell what either of them were talking about. She shook her head miserably from side to side.

"If only it hadn't been for his club foot," she said. "If only it hadn't been for that, he could have danced the sickness out of himself."

Her face was growing more and more screwed up.

It was enough. More.

"Laugh and grow fat," I suggested. I croaked because my throat was dry. My glands are always like bullets. It reminded me of a frog, so I hopped spontaneously into the room. They did not move; I sat on the bed with them.

"All together again," I said.

They did not move.

"Go back to bed, Alex," she of the wonderfulness said in a low voice.

They were looking at me; goodness knows what they wanted me to say or do. I stayed where I was. A little green clock on a green shelf said nine o'clock.

"Oh, holy heavens!" the double-you said. "What does the future hold!"

"Double chins for you, double-yous for me," I joked. That green clock said a minute past nine. I felt as if its little hand were slowly, slowly disembowelling me.

If I waited long enough, I knew I should think of something. They talked to me while I thought and waited; what good they imagined they were doing is beyond me, but I would not harm them. They mean well. They're the best people in the world. That doesn't mean to say I have to listen to them.

The thought about the clock arrived. Divine revelation.

"The dancing will be on now," I said, standing up like a jackknife.

"No!" Husband said.

"No!" Perdita said.

"You look as if you have aged," I told them. That is my favorite line in all speech.

**I** RAN out of the room, slamming the door behind me, ran step-club-step-club down the passage and hurled

myself into the elevator. With infinitesimal delay, I chose the right button and sank to ground level. There, I wedged the lattice door open with a chair; that put the elevator out of action.

People in the street took no notice of me. The fools just did not realize who I was. Nobody spoke to me as I hurried along, so of course I replied in kind.

Thus I came to the dance area.

Every community has its dance area. Think of all that drama, gladiatorial contests, reading, and sport have ever meant in the past; now they are all merged into dance, inevitably, for only by dance—our kind of dance—can history be interpreted. And interpretation of history is our being, because through the timescreens we see that history is life. It lives round us, so we dance it. Unless we have club feet.

Many dances were in progress among the thirty permanent sets. The sets were only casually separated from each other, so that spectators or dancers, going from one to another, might get the sense of everything happening at once, which is the sense the timescreens give you.

That is what I savagely

love about history. It is not past: it is always going on. Cleopatra lies forever in the sweaty arms of Anthony, Socrates continually gulps his hemlock down. You just have to be watching the right screen or the right dance.

Most of the dancers were amateurs—although the term means little where everyone dances out their roles whenever possible. I stood among a crowd, watching. The bright movements have a dizzying effect; they excite me. To one side of me, Marco Polo sweeps exultantly through Cathay to Kubla Khan. Ahead, four children who represent the satellites of Jupiter, glide out to meet the sombre figure of Galileo Galilei. To the other side, the Persian poet Firdausi leaves for exile in Bagdad. Further still, I catch a glimpse of Heyerdahl turning towards the tide.

And if I cross my eyes, raft, telescope, pagoda, palm all mingle. That is meaning! If I could only dance it!

I cannot stay still. Here is my restlessness again, my only companion. I move, eyes unfocused. I pass round the sets or across them, mingling stiff-legged among the dancers. Something compels me, something I cannot remem-

ber. Now I cannot even remember who I am. I've gone beyond mere identity.

Everywhere the dancing is faster, matching my heart. I would not harm anyone, except one person who harmed me eternally. It is he I must find. Why do they dance so fast? The movements drive me like whips.

Now I run into a mirror. It stands on a crowded set. I fight with the creature imprisoned in it, thinking it real. Then I understand that it is only a mirror. Shaking my head, I clear the blood from behind my eyes and regard myself. Yes, that is unmistakably me. And I remember who I am meant to be.

I first found who I was meant to be as a child, when I saw one of the greatest dramas of all. There it was, captured by the timescreens! The soldiers and centurions came and a bragging multitude. The sky grew dark as they banged three crosses into the ground. And when I saw the Man they nailed upon the central cross, I knew I had His face.

Here it is now, that same sublime face, looking at me in pity and pain out of the glass. Nobody believes me; I no longer tell them who I think I am. But one thing I know I

have to do. I have to do *it*.

So now I run again clump-trot-clump-trot, knowing just what to look for. All these great sets, pillars and panels of concrete and plastic, I run round them all, looking.

And here it is. Professionals dance out this drama, my drama, so difficult and intricate and sad. Pilate in dove gray, Mary Magdalene moves in green. Hosts of dancers fringe them, representing the crowd who did not care. I care! My eyes burn among them, seeking. Then I have the man I want.

He is just leaving the set, to rest out of sight until the cue for his last dance. I follow him, keeping behind cover like a crab in a thicket.

Yes! He looks just like me! He is my living image, and consequently bears That face. Yet it is now overlaid with make-up, pink and solid, so that when he comes out of the bright lights he looks like a corpse.

I am near enough to see the thick muck on his skin, with its runnels and wrinkles caused by sweat and movement. Underneath it all, the true face is clear enough to me, although the make-up plastered on it represents Judas.

To have That face and to

play Judas! It is the most terrible of all wickedness. But this is Parowen Scryban, whom I have twice murdered for this very blasphemy. It is some consolation to know that although the government slipped back in time and saved him afterwards, he must still remember those good deaths. Now I must kill him again.

As he turns into a rest room, I have him. Ah, my fingers slip into that slippery pink stuff, but underneath the skin is firm. He is small, slender, tired with the strain of dancing. He falls forward with me on his back.

I kill him now, although in a few hours they will come back and rescue him and it will all not have happened. Never mind the shouting: squeeze. Squeeze, dear God!

**W**HEN blows fall on my head from behind, it makes no difference. Scryban should be dead by now, the traitor. I roll off him and let many hands tie me into a strait jacket.

Many lights are in my eyes. Many voices are talking. I just lie there, thinking I recognize two of the voices, one a man's, one a woman's.

The man says, "Yes, Inspector, I *know* that under

law parents are responsible for their own children. We look after Alex as far as we can, but he's mad. He's a throwback! I—God, Inspector, I *hate* the creature."

"You mustn't say that!" the woman cries. "Whatever he does, he's our son."

They sound too shrill to be true. I cannot think what they make such a fuss about. So I open my eyes and look at them. She is a wonderful woman but I recognize neither her nor the man; they just do not interest me. Scryban I do recognize.

He is standing rubbing his throat. He looks a real mess with his two faces all mixed in together like a Picasso. Because he is breathing, I know they have come back and saved him again. No matter: he will remember.

The man they call Inspector (and who, I ask, would want a name like that?) goes over to speak to Scryban.

"Your father tells me you are actually this madman's brother," he says to Scryban. Judas hangs his head, though he continues to massage his neck.

"Yes," he says. He is as quiet as the woman was shrill; strange how folks vary. "Alex and I are twin brothers. I

changed my name years ago—the publicity, you know . . . harmful to my professional career. . . ."

How terribly tired and bored I feel.

Who is whose brother, I ask myself, who mothers whom? I'm lucky: I own no relations. These people look sad company. The saddest in the universe.

"I think you all look as if you have aged!" I shout suddenly.

That makes the Inspector come and stand over me, which I dislike. He has knees halfway up his legs. I manage to resemble one of the tritons on one of Benvenuto Cellini's salt cellars, and so he turns away at last to speak to Husband.

"All right," he says. "I can see this is just one of those things nobody can be responsible for. I'll arrange for the reprieve to be countermanded. This time, when the devil is dead he stays dead."

Husband embraces Scryban. Wonderful woman begins to cry. Traitors all! I start to laugh, making it so harsh and loud and horrible it frightens even me.

What none of them understand is this: on the third time I shall rise again. And, oh, to dance!