The Man Who Lived Backward

by Gelett Burgess

The idea of a man aging in reverse has been exemplified by such stories as F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Curious Case of Benjamin Button," a recent novel of the same title as this story, and a few other rare examples. Because they are so rare, we venture to say that almost any of them would be bound to show an individuality of approach. Gelett Burgess's story is no exception to this. It is decidedly different from the others we have seen, is markedly weird, and in fact can be called devilish in more ways than one.

LATE OCTOBER, it was—yes, Allhallow Eve, now I remember—that my Hungarian friend Dr. Kojer rang me up and asked me to come over to his place as soon as I possibly could.

"There is a woman here I want you to meet," he said. "But please don't ask any questions or make any definite statements or denials while she is here." And he told me he would explain later.

Dr. Kojer was much older than I; he was gruff and sarcastic; but I liked his scientific talk and sense of humor.

He liked me, I imagine, mainly because he found me a good listener.

The doctor was a specialist in pathology and did considerable consultative work, at enormous fees, but he saw few patients of his own. Most of his time was spent in private research—embryology, I believe, and biochemistry. Anyway, he kept a lot of rats and rabbits and even insects in the laboratory back of the living-rooms in his penthouse on the roof of a Park Avenue apartment building.

Kojer had become prominent a few years ago as one of the discoverers of the so-called chemical "inductor" which causes organs to change their form to that of transplanted tissues. He used to tell me that he could produce a rabbit with horns by such transformation of the cartilage of the ears. He was working too, I believe, on the rejuvenation of decayed teeth by a similar inductor process—something he needed badly himself.

Kojer was built like an oak tree—rugged trunk and thick limbs. His heavy black hair and heavy black mustache made him look something like Stalin, the peasant type; only Stalin hasn't such black teeth.

As I live near by, I was over at his place within fifteen minutes. I had to wait awhile, though, after all. I sat down in his modernistic waiting-room and picked up a magazine. . . . The office door finally opened. The Doctor ushered out an elderly, handsome, white-haired woman, followed by a Negro maid with a baby in her arms. The elderly woman had sharp, aristocratic features; and despite her old-fashioned blue gown to her ankles, she was a figure of distinction.

The Doctor perplexed me by introducing me as his assistant, and said that I might be able to help Mrs. Keaf while he was studying her case. It was like a scene in a movie where I was an actor who knew nothing of the continuity. I mumbled something, and wondered what was the matter with that baby. It had the strangest strained expression, and it gazed at me with an intensity that was disconcerting.

The old lady, however, didn't seem much interested in me. She directed the maid to wait in the foyer, and her look was agonized as she turned immediately to Dr. Kojer.

"But you will operate, Doctor, won't you? You must do something, and very soon. There's such a short time left—only a few weeks. Oh, Doctor, I beg of you! I'm desperate. I don't know what will happen if—" And she began to sob.

Dr. Kojer said: "All right, Mrs. Keaf, all right. I'll see what I can do." And he led her gently toward the door and closed it slowly behind her.

He came back to me with a queer look on his face, and stood with his hands in his pockets, nodding his head.

"How old would you say that baby was?" he asked me.

I said I didn't know much about babies. Six weeks or so, I thought.

The Doctor slowly took a pipe from his pocket, filled it, lighted it. Then he said, watching me with a quizzical look:

"That child was born in 1785—at least, that's what I'm told."

"1785!" I supposed it must be one of his jokes. "Why, that would make him—let's see—one hundred and sixty years old," I said.

The Doctor grinned and nodded. "And to make it more interesting, that baby is worth some twenty millions."

I didn't know how to take it. "You mean," I said, "that he has inherited all that money?"

"No," said Dr. Kojer, "he is said to have earned it himself, dealing in real estate." And he asked me if I had ever heard of the Wicet Realty Corporation.

I knew that the company owned almost as much land in New York as the Astor estate; and I said, still uncertain what he meant, that the child might perhaps be the great-grandson, or even great-great-grandson of the original Levi Wicet, who founded the company.

Dr. Kojer still had that enigmatical smile. "That child *is* the original Levi," he said. "I have Mrs. Keaf's word for it."

The idea was ridiculous. I laughed and said: "Then why isn't he an old man instead of a baby?"

"That's just what I'd like to know," said the Doctor. And he informed me that the Wicet Corporation had been kept in the family for over a hundred years, and was now controlled by three of Levi's great-great-grandsons, three brothers. "And that's another queer twist to the Wicet story," he added. "Levi's descendants have always named their sons anagrams of Levi."

"Anagrams?" I said, and I laughed, and said that then probably one of them must have been named *Evil.*

"That is so," said the Doctor; "only, they accent it on the last syllable, Ev*eel*. Their father's name was *Vile,* pronounced *Veelay.* Further back in the family line, I am told, were *Viel, Ivel, Eliv, Ilev,* and *Elvi.* They are certainly proud of old Levi."

"Who," I said, "you tell me is young Levi." Doctor Kojer grinned and showed his blackened teeth. I was impatient at this mystification. "It's impossible!" I said.

The Doctor chuckled and then took me into his office, the walls of which were lined with books. We had had many interesting talks there. I dropped into a red leather chair, and he sat down behind his flat-topped desk, leaned back, took off his tortoiseshell goggles and cleaned them carefully.

"A man's scientific education," he said in a professional tone, "is said to be gauged by the way he uses the word *impossible.* I have a book here with some four thousand engravings. They are illustrations of the microscopic sections of every part of the human body. The exploration of the secret corners of the earth, my dear sir, has been child's play, compared with the investigation of man's body and the operation of his organs. We have as yet hardly done more than to guess at the mysteries of anatomy, function, repair and growth. Why, chemical histology, as late as 1875 was regarded as a vague, unprofitable theorizing. Even Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes had to wait twenty-five years to have the simplest theories of antiseptic surgery accepted. The X-ray though, radium, vitamins and hormones, television and the exploded atom all show that we've only begun to understand nature, and that new discoveries will continue to amaze us. The story of this baby appears preposterous at first sight, I admit; but it may possibly open up a new field of research—who knows? You can't reject anything as incredible, nowadays."

"Well," I said, impatiently, "then let's have the fairy-tale."

"Mrs. Keaf," said the Doctor, "asserts that the baby, Levi Wicet, is living backward, so to speak, and has been for the past eighty years. Growing younger, that is, every day."

I said that, so far as I knew; there was nothing in natural science that suggested the possibility of such a regression, or devolution.

Dr. Kojer knocked the ashes out of his pipe and refilled it. "What would you say," he said between puffs, as he lit it, "if a mother were born after her daughter?" And he grinned whimsically at me.

"I'd say it was impossible," I answered.

The Doctor laughed. "There you go again, you scientific ignoramus! Well, now, consider the lowly aphides, commonly known as plant lice."

"Yes, I know," said I. "They serve as cows for the ants to milk."

He nodded. "After a first fertilization by the male," he said, "the females go on all summer producing young females, one after the other parthenogenetically, by a process like internal budding. And the young begin to produce daughters immediately, and so on and on, and so rapidly that if there is any complication which retards a mother's birth, her daughter goes right ahead and is born first. It's a fairly frequent occurrence in insect life."

It was a paradox new to me, and I laughed and said that many a woman would be glad to be younger than her daughter. Then I said: "Does all that mean that you believe that baby is one hundred and sixty years old, Dr. Kojer?"

He gazed up at the ceiling. "Mrs. Keaf brought the child here first about a year ago," he said. "It had few teeth and weighed about twenty pounds. It looked to be about fourteen months old."

I asked him if he was sure it was the same baby as the one she brought today.

"I thought then," said the Doctor, "that she was probably insane, and I really never expected to see her again, or I'd undoubtedly have taken the kid's fingerprints."

"Well," I said, "suppose, for the sake of the argument, that the child *is* actually getting younger every day. What'll happen when he's only one day old?"

"That's what's tormenting the poor lady," the Doctor said. "Levi Wicet is said to have been born Dec. 1st, 1785. And Dec. 1st, 1945, is only a few weeks off. Do you wonder that I am a bit interested? I thought that you, too, as a writer, might be interested."

"What does she want you to do?" I asked. "She spoke of an operation. Perhaps she has some idea of doing something with the pituitary gland. That's supposed to regulate growth, isn't it? Is it ever operated on?"

Dr. Kojer grunted. "Take it out, you mean, and sew it back again upside down onto the infundibulum? Though how you're going to get at it would be a problem. It's way down inside the skull, you know—not to mention operating on a month-old baby. Mrs. Keaf may have some thought of hormones—or radium, for all I know. She's been to pediatricians all over—here and abroad, and they've all laughed at her."

"And you didn't?"

"I only laugh at my own jokes," he said, with a grin. And then he told me the story Mrs. Keaf had told him.

Levi Wicet, she'd said, came to this country in the year 1800, when he was fifteen, with his parents, who were Dutch. They bought a farm on Lenox Hill, then in the country a few miles out of New York. After Levi had served in the War of 1812 as a marine on board the sloop-of-war *Hornet*, he went into business, buying real estate on the outskirts of town and

turning them into profits as New York grew northward. He married, and twenty years later took his son into partnership. They were shrewd dealers and made money hand over fist. At the age of seventy, Levi retired from the business, immensely rich. Mrs. Keaf says he traveled abroad a good deal, and it was in 1865, when he was eighty, she says, that the strange thing happened which was to make him different from any human being who had ever lived. In Vienna he fell down some stairs, and was taken to a private hospital.

Just what took place there Levi never knew. He was unconscious when he arrived, and wasn't aware of what treatment was given him during his stay. All he could remember, when he told the story to Mrs. Keaf, forty-five years later, was that a strange-looking doctor named Santa, with a hooked nose and black beard, and dressed always in black, seemed to take great interest in his case and kept coming to see him after he had left the hospital. Levi assumed that his skull had been fractured; but as he improved steadily, he made no effort to find out what had been done. He knew, though, that he felt better than he had for years.

"But who is this Mrs. Keaf?" I asked, "and how does she happen to have the baby?"

Dr. Kojer didn't know exactly what her relation was to Levi Wicet. She told him that she had first met Levi when she was thirty years old. He told her at that time that he was thirty-five; but that was, of course, his regressive age. In point of fact, he was then actually one hundred and twenty-five. Mrs. Keaf didn't see him again till he came to her fifteen years ago.

"Being then one hundred and forty-five years old," I remarked.

"But," said the Doctor, "being, regressively, a boy of fifteen and terrified as to what was happening to him. She has taken care of him ever since."

I asked the Doctor how I came into it, and what he wanted me to do.

The Doctor became more serious then, and he explained that his discoveries and the disputes about the priority of them over other claimants in the matter of the much-discussed "inductor" tissue, had aroused considerable jealousy and rancor amongst his colleagues. They had denied his theories and questioned his experiments. And so he suspected that this regressive-baby story might be a kind of hoax arranged to make a fool of him. The woman, he said, might have been hired by his professional rivals to lead his curiosity on, and told to bring a different baby the second time, and they hoped he might betray his credulity and lack of scientific insight by taking her seriously and following up the case. And so, he said, he preferred not to see Mrs. Keaf again; but the mystery was otherwise so provocative that he would like me to keep track of the child and report to him.

Well, the idea was too fascinating to refuse; and I agreed to undertake the mission; then his telephone bell rang, and he was asked to go to Hoboken on an urgent consultation, and he had to hurry right off. He said he'd give me further details about Mrs. Keaf the next day.

When I got back home that afternoon I couldn't get the darned thing out

of my mind. If the story were true—which of course it couldn't be, I thought—just when, I wondered, did Levi Wicet first discover that he was growing younger? Many men of eighty are as hale and vigorous as others at seventy, and so he mightn't have realized for ten years that he was regressing, perhaps even not for twenty years. He would then feel and appear like a man of sixty; but knowing that he was actually one hundred years old, wouldn't he be then convinced that something uncanny had happened to him? At eighty, too, he must have been either bald or gray; but as his hair came in again or darkened, he might have thought it merely an extraordinary rejuvenation without suspecting that he was living backward.

When he had got back to fifty, however, he must have been sure and he must have begun to dread the exposure of his state to his acquaintances. What could they think of him, knowing him to be one hundred and ten years old? At that venerable age men don't travel, dance, play tennis, or do any of the things he must have felt capable of doing. How could he rejoice in his new lease of life if he became notorious as a phenomenon? But how could he keep his monstrous secret? Such speculations kept me awake most of the night, and I got up determined to find out what I could for myself and as soon as possible.

When I phoned in the morning, Dr. Kojer's nurse told me that he hadn't yet returned, and she couldn't reach him as he had already left the hospital where the consultation had taken place.

I asked her then if she could give me the address of Mrs. Keaf whom I had met in the Doctor's office.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I haven't it in my file. But perhaps I can find it among the papers in the Doctor's desk and you might call me back later."

But somehow I couldn't wait. The thing had so got hold of me that in the forenoon I went downtown to the office of the Wicet Realty Corporation, and asked to see one of the partners—any one of them. After I had sent in my card, the girl returned to ask me what I wanted to see Mr. Wicet about. I told her it was concerning a Mrs. Keaf, and she returned and immediately showed me into a spacious mahogany-paneled room with heavy Oriental rugs that made it seem more like a luxurious home than an office. In the center of one wall was the portrait of a handsome white-haired gentleman in a black stock and wide stand-up collar, a costume of the 1850's. And directly under it seated at a huge glass-topped desk was Mr. Ilve Wicet, who somewhat resembled the portrait. The same high, narrow forehead and bushy eyebrows, the same tight crooked line of the mouth. His face was harder, though, and more ingrowing. Without rising he pointed with a pencil to a chair.

I said that I wished to inquire about Mrs. Keaf, who was, I understood, a relative of his.

He said: "Oh, Aunt Avelia, I suppose you mean. What about her?"

"Could you tell me where she lives?" I asked.

He pursed his lips and inspected me for a moment. "I have no idea," he said. "I haven't seen her for years." He put the tips of his fingers together. "Aunt Avelia should be about seventy, now, if indeed she is still living."

"I saw her yesterday," I said.

"What?" he exclaimed, and an expression of anxiety came into his hard, cold face. "Where did you see her, may I ask?"

When I had told him about meeting her in Dr. Kojer's office, he held up a finger. "Wait a minute, please," And he spoke into an inter-office telephone, asking that "Mr. Vlei" come immediately. Then he informed me, with a somewhat more gracious manner, that the family had been trying for some time to locate Mrs. Keaf, as it was necessary to see her on important business.

Mr. Vlei Wicet, when he came in, I found to be short, stout and evidently younger than Ilve; but he had the same tight-lipped look. He stood facing me, twiddling a card in his fingers while the two brothers questioned me. They asked about Mrs. Keaf's appearance and if she seemed ill—or, they hinted, perhaps a bit mentally unbalanced? I made vague replies, wondering at their manner which implied more than a mere interest in an elderly relative. They seemed somewhat angry, I thought, or at least disturbed. The elder brother, Ilve, still sat at his desk rubbing his chin. Finally he asked in a casual enough tone:

"Was Mrs. Keaf alone?"

I didn't like either of the men, and I suspected them of—I don't know what. But I decided to see what would come of it anyway, and so I told them that Mrs. Keaf had had a baby with her.

Ilve looked at his brother Vlei meaningly, and asked how old a child.

I said about six weeks, and they both scowled.

Vlei said something to Ilve in a low tone; and then, after thanking me for my information, he rose, indicating clearly enough that the interview was at an end.

I lingered long enough, however, to speak of the portrait over his head. I said it was evidently by a master, and asked if it was perhaps an ancestor.

Ilve glanced up at it. "Levi Wicet," he said, "my great-great-grandfather, the founder of this company."

I remarked, inanely enough, but I was watching him closely, that the handsome old gentleman must have lived a long time ago.

"Of course," said Vlei, "naturally. He died in 1885, just after his hundredth birthday."

Ilve was still standing, tapping the desk with his fingers a bit nervously. He nodded assent and they said nothing more. In the rather awkward pause I took my leave.

In the outer waiting-room a man was sitting in a chair. Something about him attracted my attention—something queer. I didn't know what it was

till I suddenly recalled what Dr. Kojer had told me about that Viennese surgeon, Dr. Santa, who was supposed to have treated Levi Wicet after his accident, back in 1865. A strange man, Levi had said, with a hooked nose and a black spade beard, and who always dressed in black. It was a mere coincidence of course; but this foreign-looking man, curiously enough, answered perfectly to that description. With his saturnine and rather sinister smile, as he sat there stiffly, he had, somehow, a peculiar magnetism as of some suppressed power. I said to myself, as I went out, that in the proper costume and make-up, I could imagine him playing the part of *Mephistopheles* in "Faust." He seemed, by the way the receptionist girl treated him, to be a messenger of some sort. She called him Elvid.

In the afternoon I phoned again to Dr. Kojer's office. His nurse told me that he hadn't yet come in, and she was a little nervous about him. She had found the address of Mrs. Keaf, though; it was out in Riverdale. She wasn't listed in the telephone directory, but probably had a private number, as she seemed to be very well off. Then the nurse added something that worried me a little:

"A Mr. Wicet," she said, "of the Wicet Realty Corporation, rang me up a little while ago, and he asked for Mrs. Keaf's address, too."

"You didn't give it to him, did you?" I asked.

She hesitated and seemed embarrassed. "Why, yes, I did," she said. "He told me Mrs. Keaf was a near relative of his. Wasn't it all right to give the address?"

Well, after all, it was really none of my affair, and I knew nothing about the man. So I said, "All right," but I decided to lose no time getting out to Riverdale to see the old lady. I was detained, however by a caller—he wanted to publish my next book—and I put the matter off till I could get a little work done on my manuscript.

The next morning when I took up my paper I was shocked to read of an automobile accident in which Dr. Kojer had been killed in Jersey City. And so it wasn't until after his funeral that I found the time to go to Riverdale.

Mrs. Keaf lived in an old yellow two-story Colonial house with columns and a wide portico back from a garden above the street. It was a dignified mansion amongst the elms that you might notice and think looked rather romantic.

I was shown by the Negro maid into a beautiful little white-and-gold reception room, and there I found the old lady, very straight, very correct and aristocratic, in lavender and lace. She was in a highly nervous state. She had heard of Dr. Kojer's death, and she said she was hoping I would come. Except for her two servants, she was alone with the baby; and she seemed to want a man's company and advice to support her in what she said was a mysterious danger she feared was imminent. And then she told me something that somewhat disturbed me also.

A man had called that forenoon, she said, to inquire about somebody

named Taylor. She was sure that it was a mere excuse to see her, or perhaps the baby.

"Perhaps I'm a bit superstitious," the old lady confessed, "but I feel that man's coming as—well, as an evil sign of some kind. You know, I didn't tell Dr. Kojer, but there's a tradition in the Wicet family that the original Levi—my baby here—was not really the son of the man he called father. That man, Phyno Wicet, lived with his wife—they had no children—in Antwerp. Well, one dark, stormy night, so the story runs, the Wicets were coming home from church in the rain when an old man stopped them on a corner by the cathedral. He had a hooked nose and a black beard, and he was all in black—a strange-looking man; and he carried a baby, wrapped up, in his arms. He went up to Frau Wicet, put the baby in her arms and said, 'Keep him till I come,' and then disappeared. Well, the couple grew fond of the child—and he was apparently only a few days old—and adopted him, giving him the name Levi. The little boy, they say, had a will of his own, when he grew larger; and when it clashed with his father's, old Phyno would call him a child of the Devil."

As I didn't want to alarm Mrs. Keaf further, I said nothing about that foreign-looking hook-nosed bearded man I had seen in the Wicets' office waiting-room—the one who had been called Elvid. I promised to come out to see her every day or so, if she wished. There was a stable on the place where she kept an ancient Pierce-Arrow, and it was there I kept my own car when I called. Her two servants lived in an upper floor of the stable.

Mrs. Keaf seemed grateful for my sympathy; Levi's birthday was rapidly approaching, and she dreaded what might happen. Her suspense was the harder to bear because although December 1st was called his birthday, the exact date was of course unknown, as he was a kind of foundling. It might be a week or so earlier or later.

It wasn't merely a terror of the supernatural, however, that was haunting the old lady. She was afraid of her nephews, Ilve, Vlei and Evil.

"For a long time," she said, "they have been fearing an exposure of the fact that Levi is still alive. They know it would make an unconscionable amount of talk. If the papers got hold of the story, you can imagine what they would do with it. It would be a sensation that might even ruin their business, and Vlei's political chances, for he is now trying for election as Senator." And Mrs. Keaf went on to tell me that back in 1885 that the Wicets had held a family conclave and discussed the anomalous position in which they were placed. Levi was then one hundred years old, but seemed only sixty, and was unmistakably growing younger all the time. And so he agreed to disappear and live abroad, and even have himself reported dead.

"I would never have anything to do with my nephews," Mrs. Keaf said; "I despise them. But after Levi came to me for protection, fifteen years ago, they must have heard of it somehow. They have written to me repeatedly, but I never answered. They have tried to see me—they have even accused me of having an illegitimate child. They have offered me money to give

Levi up to them. They offered first twenty-five thousand dollars, then one hundred thousand. I don't need to tell you, I'm sure, that nothing they could offer me would be the slightest temptation for me to part with Levi; but in any case what money I have of my own, not to speak of what he brought me, is more than sufficient for us."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes. "What they would do with the child," she said brokenly, "if they had him, I can't imagine. I don't think of it. . . . So far, I have managed to keep my whereabouts secret from them. But if Levi should die"—and here poor Mrs. Keaf almost broke down—"I don't know what investigations would be made by the authorities, or how they'd take my explanation. And all that publicity, I suppose, is what my nephews are anxious to avoid. But if I should die—oh, I don't know, I don't know what would become of—" And then she was sobbing pitifully.

The last thing I'd have wished was to become involved in a family affair like this, but the old lady's anxiety and distress impelled me to give up my work and devote most of my time to her in Riverdale. She seemed pathetically grateful at having some one to share her trouble, and was relieved somewhat in being able to talk about it. And so it was in our conversations during those sad November days that, bit by bit, I was able to patch together most of the epic of Levi Wicet's strange life, and her own brief part in it.

She must have been beautiful when she was young, for, with the shy, pathetic vanity of a woman who has lost her looks, she mentioned that she had been chosen to lead the daisy chain procession at her Vassar graduation. She was soon married to a wealthy broker, Rial Keaf, and soon made a widow. She was thirty when she took a trip abroad.

It was in Paris, at one of those gay, bustling, cosmopolitan sidewalk cafés on the Avenue des Champs Elysées that she was introduced, one June afternoon, to a handsome, spirited and clever chap known as Monsieur Salia. There must have been something in his air and glances that day more potent than the *apéritif* she sipped, for she hadn't met him many times—he followed her persistently—before she was calling him by his first name, Dirth, and she was soon head over heels in love with him, and he with her. He was at that time, so he told her, thirty-five years old. In a month they were engaged to be married. Avelia and he lived in the clouds.

And then came sudden disaster to all her hopes of happiness. One night, after a day of amorous intoxication, he confessed to her that Salia was an assumed name. He felt her deep sympathy and he longed for a confidant. He told her the story of his mysterious treatment in Vienna—then forty-five years ago—and how he had since then steadily grown younger. But it wasn't only the fact, atrocious though it was, that he was actually one hundred and twenty-five years old, that appalled her.

It was the discovery, when he had told her his real name was Levi Wicet (her maiden name was Avelia Wicet), that this charming, handsome young man she loved was her great-grandfather. Ridiculous though it may sound, the situation was to her shocking. It was sickening. He was the lover of her

dreams suddenly made horrible. Every hope for happiness she had had was blasted. She hardly dared touch his hand.

"Levi kept insisting," she told me tearfully one day, as we sat watching the baby (the very person she was talking of) "that our consanguinity was too slight to matter. He said that first cousins could marry although they had fifty per cent of the same blood, while I had only one-eighth of his. But to me," she said, "it was unnatural, it was sinful; I couldn't even think of it. We had a desperate time of it; my heart was broken—for I loved him, oh, I loved him so! I couldn't help loving him, even when I knew. But finally I broke away from him and came home. I didn't see him again for nineteen years."

I said, I remember, that apart from the blood relationship, the idea of seeing him steadily grow younger would have been unbearable. In ten years when she was forty, he would have been twenty-five. And in ten years more, when she was fifty, he would be only fifteen.

"Oh, it wasn't that," Mrs. Keaf protested. "I would have been glad to protect and comfort him, for I knew how he was suffering and would suffer, more and more. Do you realize what that child there has been through? It's bad enough to grow old, I know that well enough—to lose your looks and charm and vigor, year by year. But to know that you're growing *younger* all the time, inevitably, to feel something terrible coming, you don't know what, but certainly helplessness, dependence on others, and your mind growing childish—and then infancy—and then what? It must have been terrifying to him. Even when he came to me, when he was back to fifteen, when he was too young to realize what was happening to him, it was horrible. It is horrible even now that he is a baby. I can hardly bear to look at him. He seems to sense that something is wrong."

And then she told me more of Levi Wicet's strange history. After that family council in 1885, when he was a hundred years old, Levi went to England, he had told Avelia, where for ten years he led a gayish life in a Surrey country house he had bought. He knew that if it were known that he was a centenarian he would become unpleasantly notorious and so, apparently in his fifties, he adopted the name of Eli Busgo and avoided all his former English friends.

One day in 1890 a dissolute young man, Live Wicet, met this charming Mr. Busgo at a hunt party in a house near Betchworth. That night, after several rounds of drinks he said to a girl he was pursuing, "By Jove, think of the old beggar riding to hounds at a hundred and five! How do I know?" he snickered. "Why, he's my own great-great-grandfather, by Jove." The girl told an intimate friend, and the tale soon spread all over the country.

Levi, alarmed at the rumor, moved to Vienna where he hoped to escape notice. There he changed his name again and his family being traditionally fond of anagrams, he was there known as Count Lei Felsa. In Vienna, he afterwards told Avelia, he tried to find Dr. Santa, but as it was then some

thirty-five years since the Doctor had treated him, it wasn't surprising that his quest was fruitless.

Levi was a rich man. To avoid being traced or identified through banking offices he had converted his entire fortune into U. S. Government coupon bonds. In Vienna he must have begun fully to realize the fate that was upon him, and he sought to forget it in gayety and pleasure. The first year there, he told Avelia, he spent over two million dollars. In appearance and in temperament he was now a man in his forties, and since he was handsome, distinguished and prodigal, as time passed even his new friends began to comment on his strangely changeless appearance.

In a gambling casino, one day, where Levi often played heavily, an old Englishman, bald and feeble, tottering on a cane, said to him:

"My word, sir, aren't you Mr. Busgo? I used to know you in Dorking, remember? You bought some of my Tamworth pigs. By gad, sir, you look twenty years younger than you did then. How d'you do it?"

Levi said, coldly, "My name, sir, is Lei Felsa. I'm sorry to say I don't know you."

And that week he packed up and moved to Paris, where some ten years later he met the beautiful Avelia. . . .

After that unhappy love affair, doubly tragic for Levi who was in such dire need of a friend and confidant, he seems for several years to have plunged into the most remarkable dissipation and extravagance. He wandered all over the world seeking distraction and forgetfulness of his doom. Avelia received letters from him, she told me, from India, from South Africa and the Argentine. When the first World War broke out in 1914, he engaged as a driver in the American Ambulance Corps under the name of Eli Drauf, in the hope, he wrote Avelia, that he would be killed. He had given his age as twenty-nine, and he displayed such daring and devotion to duty, even fool-hardiness under fire that it was impossible to suspect that he was, in reality, a man of one hundred and twenty-nine. In 1920 he wrote to Avelia:

> *When I think of what may happen—will certainly happen— in the coming years it seems to me that my only course should be suicide—if, indeed, I don't perish of loneliness. Now, when I am in what should be a glorious renewal of my youth, with the ardor and energy of a man of twenty-five, with all a young man's emotions and desires and ambitions, and money for any kind of pleasure, the men all friendly and the women all fond—all is dust and ashes in my mouth. How shall I live when I get back to boyhood, to childhood, to infancy? How shall I conceal the fact that I am a monstrosity and a marvel for all to wonder at, to talk about, perhaps to jeer at?*

It was not till he had regressed to the age of fifteen, however, that he appealed to Avelia, the only one whom he could trust to keep his secret. Levi was in a sorry plight. His teeth, he found, were reversing their original development, and gradually receding into the gums. And as his first teeth

had of course gone when he was a child, he was forced to live on milk and soft foods, and found it was growing harder to speak distinctly. He had tried, he wrote her, to have dentures made to fit his little mouth, but as he appeared to be a normal adolescent, dentists had only laughed at him, patted him on the shoulder and told him to be patient till his second teeth appeared.

One day, in 1930, it was, while Avelia Keaf was living in Brookline, Mass., she answered the doorbell to find a weeping, wretched boy of fifteen asking for refuge. His memory of the past was growing faint but he still had intelligence to understand his deplorable condition. He had with him in a bag a bundle of United States bonds, some of them long past maturity.

Avelia still loved him, but it was now a kind of maternal love based on pity. From then on he lived with her and was passed off as her adopted son.

There were a few years of melancholy happiness for the two. "Until he had got back to five years old," she told me, "he was constantly asking me what was the matter with him and why he was growing smaller all the time. I had to prevent his going with other children who might have discovered that there was something queer about him and talk about him, and he had a lonely time of it."

Ilve and Vlei Wicet managed, after a while, to learn where Avelia lived and that she had little Levi with her. From that time on she led a life of anxiety and dread. "We moved from Brookline to Philadelphia," she told me, "and then to Washington, for I was always hoping that in some new city I'd be able to find some doctor who could solve the mystery of Levi's case. But my nephews always found out, somehow, after a while, where I was and I had to move again."

I asked her if there was any possibility of the Wicets going to law to get possession of the child.

"Oh, no, I think not," she said. "They would be afraid to, for then the whole story would have to come out. Anyway, neither of us can establish any legal claim to guardianship. We can't even prove his identity. He has no papers, and I doubt if his own testimony—that is, when he was still able to talk intelligently—would have been accepted as valid."

As the days passed Avelia grew more nervous and overwrought. I myself was somewhat uneasy because, one day, while driving out to Riverdale, I had passed, just before I got to Mrs. Keaf's house, an old-fashioned Ford closed coupé, one of those square-front model T's you haven't seen for years. It was coming in toward New York, and in it I had seen, or thought I had seen, driving it, a man in a black beard unpleasantly like that strange-looking man Elvid, I had seen in the waiting-room of the Wicets' office. It disturbed me so, in fact, that I took one of Mrs. Keaf's guestrooms to stay with her there for a while, greatly to her relief. I saw the baby, of course, every day, an unhappy little creature, I thought, almost always crying, and by the end of November it was evident that little Levi had grown noticeably smaller. By the 28th we found he now weighed only ten pounds.

The baby slept in a cot bed in the same room with Mrs. Keaf, who hardly left him out of her sight, and as the first of December drew near she was exhausted and miserable from her vigil. It was all I could do to keep up her spirits—in fact it was all I could do to pretend to be cheerful myself in that strain of waiting for—what?

One night Avelia and I were sitting in a little sewing-room between the room I occupied and her bedroom where little Levi was sleeping. All the afternoon the sky had been overcast with heavy dark clouds; it was what, in California, they call "earthquake weather," close and lowering; and toward nine o'clock a thunderstorm had broken over the house. Avelia sat by the window looking out gloomily through the swaying branches of the trees into the darkness and the pouring rain.

"It always reminds me of *Paradise Lost,*" she said, "the thunder and lightning and the wind. " 'The floors of heaven ring to the roar of an angel onset!' " she quoted. "Milton must have believed in the powers of darkness," she said, "or he couldn't have described so well the fall of Lucifer to the bottomless pit, to become the ruler of Hell." Then she looked at me with a queer expression, and asked me if I believed in a personal Satan.

I told her that I considered him merely as symbolic of the evil part of human nature.

"But they believed in him in the Middle Ages," she said. "Didn't they have carved gargoyles and devils and imps on all the cathedrals? They thought that the Evil One was almost as powerful as God, and tried that way to propitiate him." And then she half-laughed nervously and asked me if I thought she was losing her mind.

I reassured her as well as I could and then she told me seriously that she thought she had seen Satan himself. He was that black-bearded man who had called at the house on a pretended errand, she said. I tried to laugh it off, but she sat there shaking her head in silence.

Suddenly, she asked me if I had ever heard of the Wandering Jew.

Of course I knew the legend of Cartaphilus (Ahasuerus, she corrected me), who had reviled Jesus as he was led out to execution, and to whom the Christ had said, "Thou shalt walk the earth till my return." And Avelia said she believed the Jew was really Satan and he was still wandering on among men and creating evil.

There was an exceptionally vivid flash of lightning just then, and through the crashing reverberations of the thunder and the slashing of the rain against the windowpanes I heard her cry, hysterically:

"There's someone out there in the garden! I saw someone move under a tree when that lightning lit up the place. Someone all in black!"

It didn't seem possible that anyone would be out in such a tempest, and I tried to quiet her, but she kept gazing out waiting for every flash. I told her I'd go outside and look about to see if I could find anyone, or I'd call her chauffeur in the stable, but she seized my arm and sobbed:

"No, no, don't leave me! I'm afraid! Don't leave me!"

Suddenly she got up and went into her room. In a moment she returned.

"No, he's all right," she gasped. "Little Levi's sleeping right through all this tumult," and she seemed somewhat pacified and sat down again with me. But I saw that she was breathing with difficulty, and she held her hand to her heart.

And then again she was staring at me. I hope I shall never again have to see such terror as was in her eyes.

"What was that?" she asked faintly. "Did you hear anything? I thought I heard a noise."

Then, without waiting for my answer she rose and almost staggered into her room. Before I could follow her I heard a heavy sound, but whether it was distant thunder or caused by a fall, I couldn't tell. The next moment I found her lying on the floor in her room. I stooped over her and she stared at me with glassy eyes. She tried to speak. I thought she said something about the window, but I couldn't make out what it was, her voice was so faint, and I lifted her up and laid her on her bed beside the cot where the baby was sleeping. Then I ran downstairs and out through the pouring rain to the stable to call the maid.

When we got back to the room, Avelia Keaf was dead. The window was open. Little Levi was gone.

I looked at my watch. It was midnight. And it was now Dec. 1st, 1945. Just one hundred and sixty years since a strange bearded man in black had put into the arms of a Dutch woman in Antwerp, a newborn babe.

And despite the present tragedy and mystery of this stormy night, the question somehow came to me: Where had that strange man, so long ago, got that baby—who now had so inexplicably disappeared?