

A Fox in The Library

By Charles McLean Redding

As he turned the dial on the vibrational delineator, Antony held his breath and didn't dare blink. The clockwork device whirred and clicked, springs and coils snapped against the gears, resonating lenses at precise frequencies, and holding them at microfractional distances and angles. The struts of the machine dug brutally into the stone and kept it as still as the bedrock of the city could be.

A single flickering candle's light was twisted, warped, magnified into a broad glowing beam, like a lighthouse beacon, against a plain stone wall in the basement of the long abandoned cathedral.

As the dial turned with soft clicks in Antony's delicate fingers, the light changed; varying in color yes, but also in texture. The air itself seemed to grow almost fuzzy, then sharp, then bending like a fun-house mirror, and then writhing like worms, as if alive. Layers of reality, unseen and unknown in daily life were visited, and passed through. Antony wiped a strand of red hair out of his eyes and his fingers came away dripping with sweat.

Deeper and deeper, the delineator delved, Antony's hand now barely moving. It was such a tiny, fragment of reality. An unimaginably thin slice of an incomprehensibly vast firmament, that he sought. At last, a line appeared on the wall. It joined others. Emerging, first only a whisper of a vision, and then more and more solid, a massive wooden door took shape, as if it had always been there. It vanished and Antony swore.

He backtracked and tried to recover the phantom doorway. It was there. It had been no trick of his mind... It was real. *There*. He had it. Too scared to breath, and knowing that the slightest nudge could lose the frequency again, he ever so gently removed his fingers from the dial. That was it.

It had taken four years of research, months of invention, ingenuity, a few unfortunate lies, intensive digging, a broken bone, and at least once incidence of outright theft of Academy property... but now he stood before the *Library of Candor*. The first person in two thousand years to do so. Antony James Ardent. His name would go down in history.

He knew exactly what he should do: Record the frequency, take a facsimile, perform all the tedious steps necessary to officially claim this incredible discovery. He knew exactly what he should not do. Between the two options, there was never even a contest.

Antony stepped into the light. He left no shadow upon the door. The light penetrated his corporeal matter like breeze through branches. He felt it humming; whispering through him. The young man approached the door and when he touched the illusory object, his fingers sensed the coldness of the metal; the solidity and weight. He pulled, and it didn't move. He frowned for a moment. He pushed, and it opened wide into the grand entryway of the legendary library as golden light pouyred into the grey cathedral from the ephemeral passage.

The floors within were a mosaic of marble in every color, lines of gold and platinum turning the ground into a spreading stained-glass of some inconceivable geometry. There was not a wall visible that wasn't covered in books. A corridor stretched out before Antony, without a visible end. Yet he could see breaks in the shelves implying horizontally parallel corridors on either side, and not too far off, a spiraling staircase upward and downward. The center of the aisle had wooden tables, each displaying devices, the purpose of which he, who had studied Candor's work most of his life, could not begin to fathom.

There were more books here than could exist in one world alone. Artemis Candor was said to have gathered the knowledge in this library from countless dimensions, realities, and worlds; from past, present, and future. Her technology, of which twenty lifetimes of research had only just barely understood enough for Antony to manage to turn the key to the door, gave her access to all of reality.

Upon this knowledge, she had built the world he knew into what it was, single-handedly conquering a dark age of ignorance and unending war. Yet for all of that, she was still a mortal being. And when she died with so many secrets, her work unfinished, the world had slowly and steadily declined, receding steadily from the light of her brilliance back into a new dark age. Even now, far more terrible weapons were built in preparation for a new age of violence. But not anymore.

He, Antony James Ardent, had turned that key. He had unlocked the door and now could unlock the secrets which had uplifted and saved the world once before. He glanced back at the machine. The candle had hours to burn, which gave him plenty of time. He took his first step into the Library.

For the first time in a very, very, long time, the Library's grand corridor echoed with the footsteps of a living human. The Library heard the sound, and began to follow the procedure it had been commanded to follow. First it sensed and detected, using sophisticated parameters to judge the needs and comfort levels of this lone visitor. Once it had the required information, the Library made a note. Lights began to activate as flowing gas ignited in every lamp within a mile of the human auditor. Air began to flow; furnaces were activated. Soon the temperature would be just right for this particular human. Servants began to stir in various nooks and hideaways.

There were many servants in the library. A clockwork ecology of creatures great and small, to suit every purpose the library or a scholar may need. The library checked on the custodians first; those whose job it was to return books. Simian, with dexterous limbs and prehensile tails for climbing and carrying; those with a more robust ape-like form whose job it was to use tools and make repairs to the furniture and structure; those very small rodentia whose job it was to scurry here and there to remove dust and signs of decay. Only eighty-seven percent of the custodial staff responded as ready, and so the serpentine automata, bristling with tools under each plate-segment, whose job it was to repair and maintain the rest of the staff were also activated. In a day, they would be back to one-hundred percent.

If the Library could be amused when the human jumped at his first sight of a malfunctioning cleaning-rodent being pursued by a repair-serpent, it would have. It made a note of the incident, though it could hardly be called important, so perhaps that was, in its own way, an expression of the Library's amusement.

Next receiving orders to awaken were the assistance staff. These animata whose job it was to provide assistance; equines with carts to transport books or carry a scholar from one section to another; bibliothecaries of various amusing and pleasing zoomorphic shapes to aid in locating specific volumes or information. It was, after all, quite a large library for a lone human to navigate. Normally, one such creature would be assigned to each visitor for their every need upon every visit. A comfortable and consistent research companion.

The assistance staff, however, failed to report in at all. In fact, only zero-point-zero-two percent of the staff was registered as functional. If the Library could have frowned, it would have. Repair custodians were assigned, but the Library noted with the closest it could come to dismay that in every yearly check-in, the number had remained near zero. In fact, there was only one librarian currently active over the last multiplicity of check-ins.

Per standard procedure, the Library sent a more insistent status request to that one. As had become an unfortunately routine anomaly, the Library received in turn, not a ready signal, but a request to “politely sod off”. The rebellious bibliothecary then activated itself and went out on unassigned business of its own.

The Library made a note.

“How may I be of service?” a musical voice chimed, nearly causing Antony to jump out of his skin. He had begun to accustom himself to the plethora of strange animata wandering about the library. It had been far more like a jungle than he'd imagined it would be. Between the clockwork mice and snakes, the monkeys scrambling about the upper shelves, and the carousel horses left eerily still in various corners, he'd half expected a clockwork tiger or bear to appear as a guard and demand his library card. Or possibly just eat him for trespassing. He had not expected to look down and see a fox, much less to be addressed so amicably.

The clockwork fox's ears and wire whiskers twitched, providing such a convincing illusion of life that Antony would have thought it truly sentient if it was not so clearly made of copper and bronze; if he could not, in fact, see within the body to the whirring gears and active steam pistons.

The real wonder of the thing was its eyes. Animata had been around since the dawn of the gilded age, but rarely were they made now with such workmanship and artistry. They were rarely more than simple mechanisms with animal shapes.

Eyes were often ornamental on the clockwork carriage horses that roamed every city street (which were only a little more like a real horse than a scarecrow was like a real farmer), but the way the irises opened and closed on this bantam vulpine... Antony could almost see a sense of impatience in the machine's eyes, and he had little doubt they were truly used for sensory input. Marvelous.