

LBRIS

We know  
books

BY JOSIAH BANCROFT

*The Hexologists Novels*

The Hexologists

*The Books of Babel*

Senlin Ascends

Arm of the Sphinx

The Hod King

The Fall of Babel

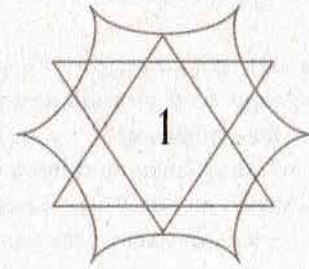
THE  
HEXOLOGISTS

A Hexologists Novel

JOSIAH  
BANCROFT



[orbitbooks.net](http://orbitbooks.net)



## THE KING IN THE CAKE

---

**T**he king wishes to be cooked alive," the royal secretary said, accepting the proffered saucer and cup and immediately setting both aside. At his back, the freshly stoked fire added a touch of theater to his announcement, though neither seemed to suit what, until recently, had been a pleasant Sunday morning.

"Does he?" Isolde Wilby gazed at the royal secretary with all the warmth of a hypnotist.

"Um, yes. He's quite insistent." The questionable impression of the royal secretary's negligible chin and cumbersome nose was considerably improved by his well-tailored suit, fastidiously combed hair, and blond mustache, waxed into upturned barbs. Those modest whiskers struck Isolde as a dubious effort to impart gravity to a youthful face. Though Mr. Horace Alman seemed a man of perfect manners, he sat with his hat capping his knee. "More precisely, the king wishes to be baked into a cake."

Looming at the tea cart like a bear over a blackberry bush, Mr. Warren Wilby quietly swapped the plate of cakes with a dish of water-cress sandwiches. "Care for a nibble, sir?"

"No. No, thank you," Mr. Alman murmured, flummoxed by the offer. The secretary watched as Mr. Wilby positioned a triangle of white bread under his copious mustache, then vanished it like a letter into a mail slot.

The Wilbies' parlor was unabashedly old-fashioned. While their neighbors pursued the bare walls, voluptuous lines, and skeletal furniture that defined contemporary tastes, the Wilbies' townhouse decor fell somewhere between a gallery of oddities and a country bed-and-breakfast. Every rug was ancient, ever doily yellow, every table surface adorned by some curio or relic. The picture frames that crowded the walls were full of adventuresome scenes of tall ships, dogsleds, and eroded pyramids. The style of their furniture was as motley as a rummage sale and similarly haggard. But as antiquated as the room's contents were, the environment was remarkably clean. Warren Wilby could abide clutter, but never filth.

Isolde recrossed her legs and bounced the topmost with a metronome's precision. She hadn't had time to comb her hair since rising, or rather, she had had the time but not the will during her morning reading hours, which the king's secretary had so brazenly interrupted, necessitating the swapping of her silk robe for breeches and a blouse. Wearing a belt and shoes seemed an absolute waste of a Sunday morning.

Isolde Wilby was often described as *imposing*, not because she possessed a looming stature or a ringing voice, but because she had a way of imposing her will upon others. Physically, she was a slight woman in the plateau of her thirties with striking, almost vulpine features. She parted her short hair on the side, though her dark curls resisted any further intervention. Her long-suffering stylist had once described her hair as resembling a porcupine with a perm, a characterization Isolde had not minded in the slightest. She was almost entirely insensible to pleasantries, especially the parentheses of polite conversation,

preferring to let the drumroll of her heels convey her hellos and her coattails say her goodbyes.

Her husband, Warren, was a big, squarish man with a tree stump of a neck and a lion's mane of receded tawny hair. He wore unfashionable tweed suits that he hoped had a softening effect on his bearing, but which in fact made him look like a garden wall. Though he was a year younger than Isolde, Warren did not look it, and had been, since adolescence, mistaken for a man laboring toward the promise of retirement. He had a mustache like a boot brush and limpid hazel eyes whose beauty was squandered on a beetled and bushy brow, an obstruction that often rendered his expressions unfathomable, leading some strangers to assume he was gruffer than he was. In fact, Warren was a man of tender conscience and emotional depth, traits that came in handy when Isolde's brusque manner necessitated a measure of diplomacy. He was considerably better groomed that morning only because he had risen early to greet the veg man, who unfailingly delivered the freshest greens and gossip in all of Berbiton at the unholy hour of six.

Seeming to wither in the silence, Mr. Alman repeated, "I said, the king wishes to be baked into a ca—"

"Intriguing," Isolde interrupted in a tone that plainly suggested it was not.

Iz did not particularly care for the nobility. She had accepted Mr. Horace Alman into her home purely because War had insisted one could not refuse a royal visitor, nor indeed, turn off the lights and pretend to be abroad.

While War had made tea, Iz had endured the secretary's boorish attempts at small talk, made worse by an unprompted confession that he was something of a fan, a Hexologist enthusiast. He followed the Wilbies' exploits as frequently documented in the *Berbiton Times*. Mr. Horace Alman was interested to know how she felt about the recent court proceedings. Iz had rejoined she was curious how he felt about his conspicuous case of piles.

The royal secretary had gone on to irk her further by asking whether her name really was "Iz Ann Always Wilby" or if it were some sort

of theatrical appellation, a stage name. Iz patiently explained that her father, the famous Professor Silas Wilby, had had many weaknesses—including an insatiable wanderlust and an allergy to obligations—but none worse than his fondness for puns, which she personally reviled as charmless linguistic coincidences that could only be conflated with humor by a gormless twit. Only the sort of vacuous cretin who went around asking people if their names were made-up could possibly enjoy the lumbering comedy that was the godless pun.

Though, in all fairness, she was not the only one to be badgered over her name. Her husband had taken the rather unusual step of adopting her last name upon the occasion of their marriage. He'd changed his name not because he was estranged from his family, but rather because he'd never liked the name Offalman.

Iz had been about to throw the royal secretary out on his inflamed fundament when War had emerged from the kitchen pushing a tea cart loaded with chattering porcelain and Mr. Horace Alman had announced that King Elbert III harbored aspirations of becoming a *gâteau*.

His gaunt cheeks blushing with the ever-expanding quiet, Mr. Alman pressed on: "His Majesty has gone so far as to crawl into a lit oven when no one was looking." The secretary paused to make room for their astonishment, giving Warren sufficient time to post another sandwich. "And while he escaped with minor burns, the experience does not appear to have dissuaded him of the ambition. He wants to be roasted on the bone."

"So, it's madness, then." Iz shook her head at War when he inquired whether she would like some of either the lemon sponge or the spice cake, an inquiry that was conducted with a delicate rounding of his plentiful brows.

"I don't believe so." Mr. Alman touched his teacup as if he might raise it, then the fire behind him snapped like a whip, and his fingers bid a fluttering retreat. "He has long moments of lucidity, almost perfect coherence. But he also suffers from fugues of profound confusion. He's been discovered in the middle of the night roaming the royal grounds without any sense of himself or his surroundings. The king's sister,

Princess Constance, has had to take the rather extreme precaution of confining him to his suite. And I must say, you both seem to be taking all of this rather in stride! I tell you the king believes he's a waste of cake batter, you stifle a yawn!"

Iz tightened the knot of her crossed arms. "I didn't realize you were looking for a performance. I could have the neighbor's children pop by if you'd like a little more shrieking."

War hurried to intervene: "Mr. Alman, please forgive us. We do not mean to appear apathetic. We are just a bit more accustomed to unusual interviews and extraordinary confessions than most. But, rest assured, we are not indifferent to horror; we are merely better acquainted."

"Indeed," Iz said with a muted smile. "How have the staff taken the king's altered state of mind?"

Appearing somewhat appeased, the secretary twisted and shaped the points of his mustache. "They're discreet, of course, but there are limits. Princess Constance knows it's a secret she cannot keep forever, devoted as she is to her brother."

"Surely, you want physicians, psychologists. We are neither," Iz said.

The secretary absorbed her comments with an expression of pinched indulgence. "We've consulted with the nation's greatest medical minds. They were all stumped, or rather, they were perfectly confident in their varying diagnoses and prescriptions, and none of them were at all capable of producing any results. His condition only worsens."

"Even so, I'm not sure what help we can be." Iz picked at a thread that protruded, wormlike, from the armrest of the sofa.

The secretary turned the brim of his hat upon his knee, ducking her gaze when he said, "There's more, Ms. Wilby. There was a letter."

"A letter?"

"In retrospect, it seems to have touched off His Majesty's malaise." The royal secretary reached into his jacket breast pocket. The stiff envelope trembled when he withdrew it. The broken wax seal was as sanguine as a wound. "It is not signed, but the sender asserts that he is the king's unrecognized son."

Warren moved to stand behind his wife's chair. He clutched the back

of it as if it were the rail of a sleigh poised atop a great hill. Iz reached back and, without looking, patted the tops of his knuckles. "I imagine the Crown receives numerous such claims. No doubt there are scores of charlatans who're foolish enough to hazard the gallows for a chance to shake down the king."

"Indeed, but there are two things that distinguish this particular instance of blackmail. First, the seal." Mr. Alman stroked the edge of the wax medallion, indicating each element as he described it: "An S emblazoned over a turret; note the five merlons, one for each of Luthland's counties. Beneath the S, a banner bearing the name Yeardley. This is the seal of Sebastian, Prince of Yeardley. This is the stamp of the king's adolescent ring."

"He identified it as such?" Iz asked.

"I did, at least initially. Of course, I like to believe I'm familiar with all the royal seals, but I admit I had to check the records on this occasion. Naturally, there is much of his correspondence that His Majesty leaves me to open and deal with, but when something like this comes through, I deliver it to him unbroken."

"The signet was no longer in the king's possession, then?"

"No, the royal record identified the ring as lost about twenty-five years ago, around the conclusion of his military service, I believe."

"That's quite a length of time to sit on such a claim." Iz reached for the letter, but the secretary pulled it back. She looked into his eyes; they glistened with uncertainty as sweat dripped from his nose like rain from a grotesque. "What is the second thing that distinguishes the letter?"

"The king's response to the correspondence was . . . pronounced. He has thus far refused to discuss his impressions of the contents with myself, his sister, or any of his advisors. He insists that it is a hoax, that we should destroy it, though Princess Constance won't hear of it. She maintains that one doesn't destroy the evidence of extortion: One saves it for the inquiry. But of course, there hasn't been an inquiry. How could there be, given the nature of the claim? To say nothing of the fact that the primary witness to the events in question is currently raving in the royal tower."

"The princess wishes for us to investigate?" she asked. Though Isolde held little affection for the gentry, she liked the princess well enough. Constance had established herself as one of very few public figures who continued to promote the study of hexegy, touting the utility of the practice, even amid the blossoming of scientific discovery and electrical convenience. Still, Isolde's vague respect for the princess was hardly sufficient to make her leap to her brother's aid.

Mr. Alman coughed—a brittle, aborted laugh. "Strictly speaking, Her Royal Highness does not know I am here. I have taken it upon myself to investigate the identity of the bastard, or rather, to engage more capable persons in that pursuit."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alman, but what I said when we first sat down still holds. I am a private citizen. I serve the public, some of whom come to me with complaints about royal overreach, the criminal exploitations of the nobility, or the courts' bungling of one case or another. I don't work for the police—not anymore. Surely you have enough resources at your disposal to forgo the interference of one unaffiliated investigator."

"I do understand your preference, ma'am." The royal secretary rucked his soft features into an authoritative scowl. "But these are extraordinary circumstances, and not without consequence. The uncertainty of rule only emboldens the antiroyalists, the populists, and our enemies overseas. You must—"

Isolde pounced like a tutor upon a mistake: "I *must* pay my taxes. I *may* help you. Show me the letter."

Mr. Alman tightened like a twisted rag. "I cannot share such sensitive information until you have agreed to assist in the case."

"There is another way to look at this, Iz," Warren said, returning to the tea cart. He poured water from a sweating pitcher into a juice glass and presented it to the dampened secretary, who readily accepted it. "You wouldn't just be working for the Crown; you would be serving the interests of the private citizen who has come forward with the claim . . . perhaps a *legitimate* one." The final phrase made Mr. Alman nearly choke upon his thimble swallow of water. "If the writer of this letter

shares the king's blood, and we were to prove it, I don't think anyone would accuse you of being too friendly with the royals."

Isolde bobbed her head in consideration, an easy rhythm that quickly broke. "But if I help to prove that he is a prince, I'd just be serving at the pleasure of a different sovereign."

"True." Warren moved to the mantel to stir the coals, not to invigorate them, but to shuffle the loose embers toward the corners of the firebox. "But if you don't intervene, our possible prince will remain a fugitive."

"You think we should take the case?"

"You know how I feel about lords and lawmen. But it seems to me Mr. Alman is right: If there's a vacuum in the palace and a scramble for the throne, there will be strife in the streets. We know who suffers when heaven squabbles—the vulnerable. Someone up on high only has to whisper the word 'unrest' and the prisons fill up, the workhouses shake out, the missions bar their doors, and the orphanages repopulate. And when the dust settles, perhaps there'll be a new face printed on the gallet bill or a fresh set of bullies on the bench, but the only thing of real consequence that will have changed is the number of bones in the potter's field. Revolution may chasten the rich, but uncertainty torments the poor."

Isolde patted the air, signaling her surrender. "All right, War. All right. You've made your point. Mr. Alman, I—"

A heavy, arrhythmic knock brought the couple's heads around. The Wilbies stared at the unremarkable paneled door as if it were aflame.

Alman snuffled a little laugh. "Do knocking guests always cause such astonishment?"

"They do when they come by my cellar," Warren said.

The door shattered, casting splinters and hinge pins into the room, making all its inhabitants cry out in alarm. It seemed a fitting greeting for the seven-foot-tall forest golem who ducked beneath the riven lintel.

Its skin, rough as bark and scabbed with lichen, bunched about fat ankles and feet that were arrayed from toe to heel by a hundred gripping roots. Its swollen arms were heavy enough to bend its broad back

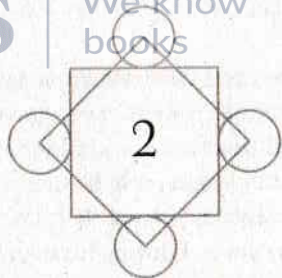
and bow its head, ribbed and featureless as a grub. The golem lurched forward, swaying and creaking upon the shore of a gold-and-amethyst rug whose patterns had been worn down by the passage of centuries.

"A mandrake," Iz said, tugging a half stick of chalk from her khaki breeches. "I've never seen one so large. But don't worry. They're quite docile. He probably just got lost during his migration. Let's try to herd him back down."

With hands raised, Warren advanced upon the mandrake, nattering pleasantly as he inched toward the heaving golem that resembled an ambling yam. "There's a sport. Thank you for keeping off my rug. It's an antique, you know. I have to be honest—it's impossible to match and hard to clean. I haven't got one of those newfangled carpet renovators. The salesman, wonderful chap, wanted three hundred and twenty gallets for it. Can you imagine? And those suck-boxes are as big as a bureau. I have no idea where I'd park such a—"

The moment War inched into range, the mandrake swatted him with a slow, unyielding stroke of its limb, catching him on the shoulder and throwing him back across the room and violently through his tea cart. Macarons and petits fours leapt into the air and rained down upon the smashed porcelain that surrounded the splayed host.

The mandrake raised the fingerless knob of one hand, identifying his quarry, then charged at the royal secretary, who sat bleating like a calf.



## THE PORTALMANTEAU

The analogy most often used to explain *magic* to the children of Berbiton was that it was like a mountain spring—a thing that burst from the earth, emerging from mysterious depths but producing a reliable flow. The cascades that leapt from magic's fountainhead were full of bounties and hazards, both of which were perfectly indifferent to the scholars and fools who frolicked along their slippery shores . . .

The truth, of course, was far less elegant and more frightening. But schoolchildren did not need to learn about the death of the Yoked God, the Great Putrefaction, and the Transmutation of Spleen. Suffice it to say, those who knew of the visceral origins of Magic's Bubbling Font generally wished they did not.

Four primary streams split from magic's ancient wellspring: wizardry, necromancy, alchemy, and hexegy.

Wizards were powerful conjurers that, among other wonders, were

## THE HEXOLOGISTS

renowned for calling lightning from the unexcited air, immolating careless apprentices, and reading themselves to a state of near blindness. Necromancers, who communed with the dead in ways that unsettled the living and departed alike, were broadly untroubled by morality and sentimentality, a quality that served them well in their efforts to breathe new life into old bones. Alchemists, emerging from a tradition of chemistry and metallurgy, bent the physical laws to their wills, which more often than not were financially inspired. Alchemists could puncture the skins of dimensions and harvest the coals from hell—a chancy though profitable business model.

Of all the brooks of magic, hexegy was but a runnel, a shallow rill that contained a multitude of practical, if not awe-inspiring, functions. The hex-caster, whose power lay in the drawing of complex rosettes, could ease ailments, improve environments, facilitate studies, and assist births.

Wizardry and necromancy, whose practitioners were once considered magic's upper crust, had since the conclusion of the Meridian War been regulated into obscurity. Wizards had been reduced to stage entertainers who pulled strings of scarves out of a variety of orifices, and necromancers had reinvented themselves as behaviorists who treated the ill-tempered pets of the aristocracy. The students of those who'd once animated armies of fallen soldiers now found themselves tasked with discouraging Miss Mittens from eating (and subsequently coughing up) the house plants.

In the boom years that followed the war, alchemy had ascended as the dominant form of magic because of its industrial applications. The lights of the nations were fired by fuel pulled from the alchemists' halos. Several of the alchemists had more money than the monarchy, which was a growing point of royal concern. But while alchemists rose to prominence, and wizards and necromancers had been all but mandated from existence, hex-casters had been allowed to continue to practice because they were benign—and increasingly irrelevant, as they were, bit by bit, being obsoleted by technological innovation. The call for practicing hexegists, which had once been considered a

craft as prestigious as lutherie, had been answered by a host of emerging gimmicks and medicaments. The financiers and bourgeois of the capital city of Berbiton increasingly looked to the pioneering efforts of engineers—who had already supplied the city with the miracles of motorized jaunts, electric lights, voxboxes, and hyaline receivers that piped news, melodramas, and music into the nation's parlors and cabs.

The only professions that still commonly employed the delineation of charmed patterns were midwives and dentists, and even they were beginning to swap out their hexes for opiates.

The essential trouble with hexery was this: The art was unforgiving and often ineffectual. A hex, whether done in the air, chalked on a headboard, or carved upon the soft earth, was as impotent as a scrawl if a circler bulged from its focus or a single cross leaned one degree this way or that. Even a perfectly traced hex could fail for any number of reasons: an intolerant environment, an unsettled practitioner, or a disinclined subject, to say nothing of interference from other wards, jinxes, and spells.

So, when Isolde Wilby drew before the charging woodland golem a knot of circles and chevrons that colored the air like a sunbeam, she was hardly surprised to see the mandrake dispel her Hex of Tranquility like a runner snapping the ribbon of a finish line.

She would've been trampled by the enchanted creature had she not thrown herself over the ottoman that supported a carefully squared stack of letters. She had been studiously ignoring them for weeks even as her husband found increasingly inconvenient locations to place her looming obligations. It was with some satisfaction that she observed the root golem kick the footstool full of correspondences, enlivening a blizzard of pages. She might've shaken the mandrake's hand if it had had one, and if it were not plowing onward toward the baying royal secretary.

To his credit, Mr. Alman appeared to be trying his best to get out of the way; to his disadvantage was the significant divot Warren had carved into the seat of the club chair over years of daily possession, which left the secretary in something of a hole.

Warren intercepted the mandrake at speed and an angle, tackling its trunk with shoulder lowered and head turned, a daring stroke that proved only slightly more effectual than tackling an oak. The woodland golem listed a little, staggered a step, then straightened again. It hammered upon Warren's back, laying him out like a bearskin. The mandrake raised the great boughs of its arms high overhead, loading a stroke that would undoubtedly ruin Mr. Wilby's organs and consequently his antique rug.

Iz closed the ring on a second hex, and the budding roots that whiskered the mandrake's bulbous hands shot outward, upward, tangling and growing, piercing the plaster of the ceiling and blowing out leaves along the way. The same Hex of Fecundity that made her droughted flowers stand up in the window box now made the mandrake's roots snake from its feet and worm into the hand-knotted rows of the antique carpet.

Seeing that the golem was stuck, at least for the moment, Iz thought to interrogate it. Though mandrakes possessed no vocal cords, they could still communicate a range of emotions to an attuned ear. Plucking another half stick of white chalk from the pocket of her breeches, she rushed forward to draw upon the golem's warted ribs, which were only accessible because its raised arms were presently entangled with the lath in the ceiling. As she formed the first figure of the Hex of Empathy, she wondered if mandrakes were ticklish, though the idle thought was quickly pressed aside by a glimpse of something strange: A colorful rope banded the golem's waist. It appeared to be some sort of belt, one that was almost entirely obscured by the creature's overgrown bark.

Clambering to his feet, Warren swayed like a man straddling a sea-thrown raft. His tumble had tussled his pomaded hair, which now stood out like a witch's broom. "Perhaps we should give our guest a little more room, Iz," he said thickly.

"Just a moment. I want to see what's got it so riled up." Isolde continued to scratch a ring of arcane figures upon the creature's ribs, even as it twisted and writhed with mounting impatience. "Hold still."

Flakes of plaster snowed down upon their shoulders, as the

mandrake's branches began to dislodge from the ceiling. It strained its mighty legs, and the dozens of roots that had drilled into the floorboards began to snap, one after another, like brittle wicker.

"That's it. I'm fetching Grandad." Warren rushed to the mantelpiece: an ornate arch crowned by an elaborate bas-relief. The carved scene depicted a many-armed leviathan overwhelming the deck of an ocean liner. With one hand, War hauled the petrified royal secretary up from his eggcup of a chair; with the other, he knocked upon three distinct spots on the mantel's right pilaster. The center tablet of the decorative frieze slid down, making the monstrous squid appear to sink into the sea. In the uncovered alcove there stood a carpetbag—unassuming, and seemingly unpacked. It had a corroded clasp and cracked leather handle. Dozens of patches colored its sides. War extracted the unhand-some bag in the same instant Iz piped a single note of surprise. The mandrake, having freed itself amid a helter-skelter of gypsum and wood, turned to embrace her. She ducked its grasp and ran toward her husband, who stood with his arm deep inside the carpetbag. Chin dimpled from the effort of his concerted rummage, Warren said, "A bit sticky today."

The woodland golem lunged, shedding its roots and canopy as it came. Though the loss robbed it of a little height, it did not appear to diminish its resolve in the least: The mandrake shambled toward the royal secretary, who cowered at Warren's hip.

"Ah, here we are!" War said, grasping something from the purse's impossible depths. With a graceful stroke, he drew forth a claymore, some six feet in length, veined with a fuller that shone like sheet lightning. "Catch, dear!" He tossed the carpetbag into the air to free both hands to better manage the blade. Iz caught the bag and sprang to one side, diving for the sofa, even as War raised the Archsword of the Cloven God and brought its blazing steel down.

The blessed blade carved the storming mandrake from neck to crotch, robbing it of momentum. In the exposed wound, Iz saw what seemed a boiling swarm of luminous mites, blue sparks that crazed between the golem's internal fibers. Cocking the sword to the right,

Warren swung again, nearly severing the creature's arm at the joint, and knocking it over into the iron cradle of the fire grate. Even as they collapsed into the blaze, the mandrake's limbs and trunk shriveled. Those diminished logs burst into embers that fled up the chimney and out into the parlor. With toes upon the hearth and head among the coals, the mandrake burned quick as straw. Even as Iz called to her husband to save some part of it, the rapid spread of the flames resisted Warren's efforts to save even a twiglet. The golem's cremation, utter and entire, was scored by the whistle and pop of boiling sap.

Squelching with his heel a cinder that had fallen onto the rug, Warren surveyed his devastated parlor with slouching resignation. He fortified himself with a deep breath and looked to his wife, who sat with the patched carpetbag in her lap and a look of consternation on her face. Still in a thoughtful daze, she opened the bag's clasp to assist Warren as he returned the long blade to its unlikely sheath. He shut the case and, repeating the sequence of probing several discreet switches embedded in the mantel, Warren returned the unnatural luggage to its cloistered shelf.

He righted the chair the royal secretary still cowered behind and invited him to resume his seat before the fire. The quaking, blinking Mr. Alman was quick to answer: "I think I'll stand."

The fire snapped like a party cracker, and the secretary gave one final squawk.

It came as some surprise to discover that mandrake wood smelled remarkably like clove.

While the golem cheered the parlor with fragrance and dancing shadows and Warren excused himself to prepare a tray of gin fizzes, Mr. Alman sat in silence—the result of shock, it seemed—while Ms. Wilby inspected the remnants of leaves and roots that littered the floor and examined what remained of her cellar door that had been so roughly blown out. Eventually, the royal secretary remarked, "I thought it would be a bit grander . . . the portalmanteau. I always pictured a leather satchel."