

Clark Ashton Smith
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BERSERKER

BOOKS



A COPY OF BURNS

Andrew McGregor and his nephew, John Malcolm, were precisely alike, except for one particular. Both were unmistakably Scottish, to an extent that was almost caricatural; both were lean-faced and close-lipped, and rosy of figure; both were thrifty to the point of penuriousness; and both loved with a dour love the rugged soil of their neighboring hillside ranches in El Dorado. The difference lay in this, that McGregor, a native of Ayrshire, was fantastically enamored of the poetry of Burns, whom he quoted on all possible occasions, regardless of whether or not the verse was appropriate. But young Malcolm, who was Californian by birth, had a secret disdain for anything in rhyme or meter, and looked upon his uncle's literary enthusiasm as an odd weakness in a nature otherwise sound and admirable. This opinion, however, he had always been careful to conceal from the old man; though his reasons for concealing it were not altogether those of respect for an elder and affection for a relative.

McGregor was not close upon eighty; and a lifetime of rigorous toil had bowed his back and consumed his vitality. In the space of a few months, his health had broken, and he was now quite feeble. It was generally thought that he would leave his well-kept orchard, as well as a tidy deposit in the Placerville bank, to John Malcolm, the son of his sister Elizabeth, rather than to his own sons, George and Joseph, who had tired of country labor years before and were now prospering after their own fashion in Sacramento. Young Malcolm, certainly, was deserving; and the ranch left him by his parents was of poorer soil than McGregor's, and had never yielded more than a scant living, despite the industry of its owners.

One day, McGregor sent for his nephew. The young man found the elder sitting in an arm-chair before the fire-place, pitifully weak; and his fingers trembled helplessly as they turned the worn pages of the copy of Burns he was holding. His voice was a thin, rasping whisper.

"My time is about come, John," he said, "but I want to gie yea gift with my own hand before I jany. Take this copy of Burns. I recommend that ye peruse it diligent-like."

Malcolm, a little surprised, accepted the gift with proper thanks and with all due expressions of solicitude regarding his uncle's health. He took the volume home, placed it on a shelf which contained an almanac, a Bible, and two mail-order catalogues; and forgot all about it henceforward.

A week later, Andrew McGregor died. After he had been interred in the [^]Placerville[^] [Georgetown] cemetery, a search was made for his will. It was never found; and in due course of time, his sons laid claim to the property. Afterwards, they sold the ranch, not caring to keep it themselves.

John Malcolm swallowed his disappointment in a dour silence, and went on plowing his rocky slope of grape-vines and pear-trees. He saved a little money, purchased a little more property, and eventually found himself in a position of tolerable comfort, which however could be maintained only at the cost of incessant work. He married; and one daughter was born to him. He named her after his aunt Elizabeth, of whom he had been fond. Twenty years later, the long hours of back-breaking toil, plus an addiction to El Dorado moonshine, had finally done their work. Prematurely worn out at fifty, John Malcolm lay dying. Double pneumonia had set in; and the doctor made no pretense of hopefulness.

Malcolm's wife and daughter sat at his bedside. Usually a silent man, delirium had now loosened his tongue, and he babbled for hours at a time. Mostly, he talked of the money and property he had once hoped to inherit from Andrew McGregor; and regret for its loss was mingled with reproaches toward his uncle. The lost will had been forgotten by everyone else long ago; and no one had dreamt that he had cared so much, or borne the matter so much in mind all these years.

His wife and daughter were shocked by his babbling. In an effort to preoccupy her mind, the gift Elizabeth took from the shelf the copy of Burns which McGregor had once presented to his nephew, and began to

turn the sheets. She read a poem here and a stanza there; and with a mechanical feverishness her fingers contrived to flick the pages. Suddenly she came upon a thin sheet of writing-paper, which had been cut to the exact size of the book and had been pasted in so unobtrusively that no one could have detected its presence without opening the volume at the right place. On this sheet, in faded ink, was written the last will and testament of Andrew McGregor, in which he had left all his property to John Malcolm.

Silently the girl showed the will to her mother. As the two bent over the yellowed sheet, the dying man ceased to babble.

"What's that?" he said, peering toward the woman. Evidently, he was now aware of his surroundings, and had become rational again. Elizabeth went over to the bed and told him how she had found the will. He made no comment whatever, but his face went ashen and lifeless, with a look of bleak despair. He did not speak again. He died within thirty minutes. It is probable that his death was hastened several hours by the shock.

A GOOD EMBALMER

I

Jonas Turple and Caleb Udley, joint owners of the sole undertaking establishment in Johnsville, were continuing an immemorial dispute.

"You couldn't embalm a salted herring," said Turple, with the air of jocose and rubicund contempt which he usually adopted in referring to his partner's technical abilities and methods. "Look at the job you did on old Aaron Webley, five years ago, when I was away ^at the embalmers' convention^ [on my honeymoon]. Of course no one would have been the wiser if the family hadn't decided to transfer him to their home lot in ^Georgetown, ten months after^ [Johnstown]. The condition of the corpse wasn't much of an advertisement for us. I believe in doing a thorough job, one that will endure and stand up under all vicissitudes. And I tell you, there's nothing like corrosive sublimate, and plenty of it. You can have your Peruvian bark, your camphor and cinnamon and other aromatics, and your sulphate of zinc; but all this stuff is mere trimming if you ask me."

Turple, a large, florid, middle-aged bachelor, who looked more like a restaurant owner than a mortician, terminated his remarks with a resonant sniff and eyed his confrere with semi-jovial belligerence.

"Sulphate of zinc is good enough for me," maintained Caleb Udley, with much acerbity. He was a thin, meager, deacon-like person, alternately bullied by his wife and his business partner. He was, however, more recalcitrant toward the latter than toward the former, and rarely made an attempt to uphold his own views.

"Well, you'll never shoot any of it into me," said Turple. "You'd make a mess of it anyway. I'd certainly hate to be at your mercy and have you try to

embalm me, if I were dead."

"Even at that, there are times when I wouldn't mind having the chance," returned Udley, with a tart malice.

"The hell you say. Look here, Caleb, if I should die before you do, and you start your blundering operations on me, I'll simple rise up from the dead."

"But the dead don't rise," said Udley, who was not only something of a Sadducean, but was also rather literal-minded.

II

It is not the function of this story to record in detail, or even in rough outline, the lives of two country undertakers.

For many years after the discussion related above, Turple and Udley pursued the somewhat funereal tenor of their ways. In the face of their perennial disputation, half-humorous, half-contemptuous on one side and wholly acrimonious on the other, it would have been difficult to determine the exact degree of brotherly love which existed between them. Turple continued to deride his confrere's professional capacities and opinions; and Udley never failed to resent the derision. With slight variations, their quotidian quarrel was repeated a thousand times.

The situation was modified only by the admission of a third and younger partner, one Thomas Agdale, into the firm. Agdale, who was comparatively inexperienced, and was also mild-tempered, became the butt of both his seniors; and, in especial, of Udley, who thus succeeded in transferring to another victim some of the scorn and contumely which he himself endured at the hands of Turple.

Even undertakers, however, are not exempt from the common laws of mortality. Turple, who had long shown an apoplectic tendency, but

nevertheless had not expected a so sudden and early demise, was found dead one morning in the local hotel-room which he had occupied for more than twenty years. His partners, as was natural, were deeply shocked and surprised by the news; but, since he had omitted to leave any instructions to the contrary, they proceeded to take charge of his body with all due expedition.

The feelings of Udley, when Turple's corpse was laid out before him on the embalming-table, were somewhat peculiar and difficult to analyze. How much of real regret or sorrow they included, I am not prepared to say: but, undeniably, there was a more or less furtive undercurrent of actual triumphancy, of self-vindication if not of vindictiveness. After all of Turple's manifold and life-long aspersions on his capabilities as an embalmer, Udley was now in a position to render the last services to his vilifier. It would not be proper to say that he rejoiced in this situation; but certainly his emotions were those of a wronged man who beholds the final balancing of the scales of justice.

Agdale was present, but Udley had resolved that he himself would perform everything necessary and would utilize the services of Agdale only in the mere lifting of the corpse into the grimly sumptuous casket that had been prepared for it.

The March afternoon was murky and foggy; and the lights had been turned on in the rear room of the undertaking parlor, where Udley and Agdale were about to begin their gruesome task. They gave a semi-nocturnal touch to the macabre scene.

"So I couldn't embalm a salted codfish, hey?" thought Udley to himself, remembering his partner's habitual jest with the sour resentment of one who is wholly without humor. "Well, we'll see about that."

He approached the puffy and somewhat abdominous corpse, and was about to begin the preliminary incisions. These, however, were not made—at least not by Caleb Udley. For, even as he stooped above it, the cadaver

stirred, its eyelids fluttered and opened, and that which had been the earthly shell of Jonas Turple sat up suddenly and heavily on the cold slab.

Udley leapt back. His lean frame exuded from head to foot an icy, instantaneous perspiration, and terror had deprived him of the power of thought and reason. Something seemed to have gone wrong with his heart, also; and he felt an awful choking sensation between the intolerably suspended beat. Agdale, who had a superstitious vein, had given one look at the animated corpse and was fleeing from the shop by the back door.

"What did I tell you, Caleb?" Udley was aware that the cadaver had spoken. Its voice seemed to issue from a deep vault, and was hideously muffled, as if it had made its way through some intervening medium of a viscous or semi-liquescient nature. It was not the familiar voice of the living Turple: but one could readily have imagined it as issuing from the lips of Lazarus after his resurrection.

If any further remarks or observations were made by the corpse, they were not heard by Udley. His heart, at the sound of that unnatural voice, had refused to continue its disordered throbbing, and he had fallen dead on the floor.

III

It was two hours later when Agdale mastered his terrors sufficiently to admit of returning. In the meanwhile, he had confided to several of the townspeople, including the doctor who had signed Turple's death-certificate, the unbelievable circumstances which had occasioned his hasty departure. It was a resolute and valiant committee of investigation which finally entered the undertakers' parlors.

The situation which revealed itself here was more mysterious and more remarkable than even the superstitious Agdale had expected. The corpse of Turple was lying decorously in the very same place and position in which it

had been laid out by Udley and Agdale; and there was not the faintest hint of life or supernatural re-animation. Dr. Martin needed no more than a glance to re-confirm his original opinion, that the deceased was properly and lawfully dead.

For a few moments, no one noticed Udley. He had been alive when Agdale fled; and the latter not unnaturally surmised that Udley had followed suit. Somehow, no one had given him much thought.

It was Agdale who made the singular discovery that the new casket which had been provided for Turple's reception was now occupied—and that the occupant was Caleb Udley! But it remained for Dr. Martin, in his official capacity as coroner, to make a discovery that was even more singular, if possible. The corpse of Udley had been fully and efficiently embalmed; and the chief agent employed was corrosive sublimate. The body of Turple, however, was still in need of this service.

A NIGHT IN MALNÉANT

My sojourn in the city of Malnéant occurred during a period of my life no less dim and dubious than that city itself and the misty regions lying there about. I have no precise recollection of its locality, nor can I remember exactly when and how I came to visit it. But I had heard vaguely that such a place was situated along my route; and when I came to the fog-enfolded river that flows beside its walls, and heard beyond the river the mortuary tolling of many bells, I surmised that I was approaching Malnéant.

On reaching the gray, colossal bridge that crosses the river, I could have continued at will on other roads leading to remoter cities: but it seemed to me that I might as well enter Malnéant as any other place. And so it was that I set foot on the bridge of shadowy arches, under which the black waters flowed in stealthy division and were joined again in a silence as of Styx and Acheron.

That period of my life, I have said, was dim and dubious: all the more so, mayhap, because of my need for forgetfulness, my persistent and at times partially rewarded search for oblivion. And that which I needed to forget above all was the death of the lady Mariel, and the fact that I myself had slain her as surely as if I had done the deed with my own hand. For she had loved me with an affection deeper and purer and more stable than mine; and my changeable temper, my fits of cruel indifference or ferocious irritability, had broken her gentle heart. So it was that she had sought the anodyne of a lethal poison; and after she was laid to rest in the somber vaults of her ancestors, I had become a wanderer, followed and forever tortured by a belated remorse. For months, or years, I am uncertain which, I roamed from old-world city to city, heeding little where I went if only wine and the other agents of oblivion were available... And thus I came, some while in my indefinite journeying, to the dim environs of Malnéant.

The sun (if ever there was a sun above this region) had been lost for I knew not how long in a sky of leaden vapors; the day was drear and sullen at best. But now, by the thickening of the shadows and the mist, I felt that evening must be near; and the bells I had heard, however heavy and sepulchral their

tolling, gave at least the assurance of prospective shelter for the night. So I crossed the long bridge and entered the grimly yawning gate with a quickening of my footsteps even if with no alacrity of spirit.

The dusk had gathered behind the gray walls, but there were few lights in the city. Few people were abroad, and these went upon their way with a sort of solemn haste, as if on some funereal errand that would admit of no delay. The streets were narrow, the houses high, with overhanging balconies and heavily curtained or shuttered windows. All was very silent, except for the bells, which tolled recurrently, sometimes faint and far off, and sometimes with a loud and startling clangor that seemed to come almost from overhead.

As I plunged among the shadowy mansions, along the streets from which a visible twilight issued to envelop me, it seemed that I was going farther and farther away from my memories at every step. For this reason I did not at once inquire my way to a tavern but was content to lose myself more and more in the gray labyrinth of buildings, which grew vaguer and vaguer amid the ever-mounting darkness and fog, as if they were about to dissolve in oblivion.

I think that my soul would have been almost at peace with itself, if it had not been for the reiterant ringing of the bells, which were like all bells that toll for the repose of the dead, and therefore set me to remembering those that had rung for Mariel. But whenever they ceased, my thoughts would drift back with an indolent ease, a recovered security, to the all-surrounding vagueness...

I had no idea how far I had gone in Malnéant, nor how long I had roamed among those houses that hardly seemed as if they could be peopled by any but the sleeping or the dead. At last, however, I became aware that I was very tired, and bethought me of food and wine and a lodging for the night. But nowhere in my wanderings had I noticed the sign-board of an inn; so I resolved to ask the next passer-by for the desired direction.

As I have said before, there were few people abroad. Now, when I made up my mind to address one of them, it appeared that there was no one at all; and I walked onward through street after street in my futile search for a living face.

At length I met two women, clothed in gray that was cold and dim as the folds of the fog, and veiled withal, who were hurrying along with the same funereal intentness I had perceived in all other denizens of that city. I made bold to accost them, asking if they could direct me to an inn.

Scarcely pausing or even turning their heads, they answered: 'We cannot tell you. We are shroud-weavers, and we have been busy making a shroud for the lady Mariel.'

Now, at that name, which of all names in the world was the one I should least have expected or cared to hear, an unspeakable chill invaded my heart, and a dreadful dismay smote me like the breath of the tomb. It was indeed strange that in this dim city, so far in time and space from all I had fled to escape, a woman should have recently died who was also named Mariel. The coincidence appeared so sinister, that an odd fear of the streets through which I had wandered was born suddenly in my soul. The name had evoked, with a more irrevocable fatality than the tolling of the bells, all that I had vainly wished to forget; and my memories were like living coals in my heart.

As I went onward, with paces that had become more hurried, more feverish than those of the people of Malnéant, I met two men, who were likewise dressed from head to foot in gray; and I asked of them the same question I had asked of the shroud-weavers.

'We cannot tell you,' they replied. 'We are coffin-makers, and we have been busy making a coffin for the lady Mariel.'

As they spoke, and hastened on, the bells rang out again, this time very near at hand, with a more dismal and sepulchral menace in their leaden tolling. And everything about me, the tall and misty houses, the dark, indefinite streets, the rare and wraith-like figures, became as if part of the obscure

confusion and fear and bafflement of a nightmare. Moment by moment, the coincidence on which I had stumbled appeared all too bizarre for belief, and I was troubled now by the monstrous and absurd idea that the Mariel I knew had only just died, and that this fantastic city was in some unsurmountable manner connected with her death. But this, of course, my reason rejected summarily, and I kept repeating to myself: 'The Mariel of whom they speak is another Marel.' And it irritated me beyond all measure that a thought so enormous and ludicrous should return when my logic had dismissed it.

I met no more people of whom to inquire my way. But at length, as I fought with my shadowy perplexity and my burning memories, I found that I had paused beneath the weather-beaten sign of an inn, on which the lettering had been half effaced by time and the brown lichens. The building was obviously very old, like all the houses in Malnéant; its upper stories were lost in the swirling fog, except for a few furtive lights that glowed obscurely down; and a vague and musty odor of antiquity came forth to greet me as I mounted the steps and tried to open the ponderous door. But the door had been locked or bolted; so I began to pound upon it with my fists to attract the attention of those within.

After much delay, the door was opened slowly and grudgingly, and a cadaverous-looking individual peered forth, frowning with portentous gravity as he saw me.

'What do you desire?' he queried, in tones that were both brusque and solemn.

'A room for the night, and wine,' I requested.

'We cannot accommodate you. All the rooms are occupied by people who have come to attend the obsequies of the lady Mariel; and all the wine in the house has been requisitioned for their use. You will have to go elsewhere.'

He closed the door quickly upon me with the last words. I turned to resume my wanderings, and all that had troubled me before was now intensified a hundredfold. The gray mists and the grayer houses were full of the menace of memory: they were like traitorous tombs from which the cadavers of dead hours poured forth to assail me with envenomed fangs and talons. I

cursed the hour when I had entered Malnéant, for it seemed to me now that in so doing I had merely completed a funereal, sinister circle through time, and had returned to the day of Mariel's death. And certainly, all my recollections of Mariel, of her final agony and her entombment, had assumed the frightful vitality of present things. But my reason still maintained, of course, that the Mariel who lay dead somewhere in Malnéant, and for whom all these obsequial preparations were being made, was not the lady whom I had loved, but another.

After threading streets that were even darker and narrower than those before traversed, I found a second inn, bearing a similar weather-beaten sign, and in all other respects very much like the first. The door was barred, and I knocked thereon with trepidation and was in no manner surprised when a second individual with a cadaverous face informed me in tones of sepulchral solemnity:

'We cannot accommodate you. All the rooms have been taken by musicians and mourners who will serve at the obsequies of the lady Mariel; and all the wine has been reserved for their use.'

Now I began to dread the city about me with a manifold fear: for apparently the whole business of the people in Malnéant consisted of preparations for the funeral of this lady Mariel. And it began to be obvious that I must walk the streets of the city all night because of these same preparations. All at once, an overwhelming weariness was mingled with my nightmare terror and perplexity.

I had not long continued my peregrinations, after leaving the second inn, when the bells were tolled once more. For the first time, I found it possible to identify their source: they were in the spires of a great cathedral which loomed immediately before me through the fog. Some people were entering the cathedral, and a curiosity, which I knew to be both morbid and perilous, prompted me to follow them. Here, I somehow felt, I should be able to learn more regarding the mystery that tormented me.

All was dim within, and the light of many tapers scarcely served to illumine the vast nave and altar. Masses were being said by priests in black whose faces I could not see distinctly; and to me, their chanting was like words in a dream; and I could hear nothing, and nothing was plainly visible in all the place, except a bier of opulent fabrics on which there lay a motionless form in white. Flowers of many hues had been strewn upon the bier, and their fragrance filled the air with a drowsy languor, with an anodyne that seemed to drug my heart and brain. Such flowers had been cast on the bier of Mariel; and even thus, at her funeral, I had been overcome by a momentary dulling of the senses because of their perfume.

Dimly I became aware that someone was at my elbow. With eyes still intent on the bier, I asked:

'Who is it that lies yonder, for whom these masses are being said and these bells are rung?' And a slow, sepulchral voice replied:

'It is the lady Mariel, who died yesterday and who will be interred tomorrow in the vaults of her ancestors. If you wish, you may go forward and gaze upon her.'

So I went down the cathedral aisle, even to the side of the bier, whose opulent fabrics trailed on the cold flags. And the face of her who lay thereon, with a tranquil smile upon the lips, and tender shadows upon the shut eyelids, was the face of the Mariel I had loved and of none other. The tides of time were frozen in their flowing; and all that was or had been or could be, all of the world that existed aside from her, became as fading shadows; and even as once before (was it eons or instants ago?) my soul was locked in the marble hell of its supreme grief and regret. I could not move, I could not cry out nor even weep, for my very tears were turned to ice. And now I knew with a terrible certitude that this one event, the death of the lady Mariel, had drawn apart from all other happenings, had broken away from the sequence of time and had found for itself a setting of appropriate gloom and solemnity; or perhaps had even built around itself the whole enormous maze of that spectral city, in which to abide my destined return among the mists of a deceptive oblivion.

At length, with an awful effort of will, I turned my eyes away; and leaving the cathedral with steps that were both hurried and leaden, I sought to find an egress from the dismal labyrinth of Malnéant to the gate by which I had entered. But this was by no means easy, and I must have roamed for hours in alleys blind and stifling as tombs, and along the tortuous, self-reverting thoroughfares, ere I came to a familiar street and was able henceforward to direct my paces with something of surety. And a dull and sunless daylight was dawning behind the mists when I crossed the bridge and came again to the road that would lead me away from that fatal city.

Since then, I have wandered long and in many places. But never again have I cared to revisit those old-world realms of fog and mist, for fear that I should come once more to Malnéant, and find that its people are still busied with their preparations for the obsequies of the lady Mariel.

A PLATONIC ENTANGLEMENT

They were sitting a fairly proper distance apart, on their favorite moss-grown boulder, at the end of the leaf-strewn autumn trail they had taken so often.

"Do you know that people are talking about us?" Her voice was hardly more than a whisper, falling on a mournful cadence almost un audible, and he moved nearer, to catch the faint silver of its tones . As always, he found something vaguely pleasurable in the nearness of the plump olive neck under its coil of unbobbed hair, and the tender oval cheek that was exquisitely innocent of rouge.

"We have been seen together too often," she continued, with trouble and sadness in the droop of her eyelids, in the fall of her voice. "This town is full of cats, like all villages, and they are all the more willing to tear me in shreds because I am living apart from my husband. I am sorry, Geoffry... because our friendship has meant so much to me."

"It has meant much to me, too, Anita," he responded. He felt disturbed and even a little conscience-stricken. It had been very pleasant, in his loneliness, to call upon her with increasing frequency throughout the summer, and to take these little walks in the autumn woods, now that the air was cooling and the leaves were aflame with saffron and crimson. It had all been so harmless and platonic, he assured himself — the natural drifting together of two lonely people with certain tastes in common. But assuredly he was not in love with her nor she with him: his attitude toward her had always been rather shy and respectful, and it was she who had somehow increased the familiarity of their friendship by subtle and imperceptible degrees. Indeed, had she not urged him, he would never have had the boldness to call her by her first name. She was a little the older and much the maturer of the two.

"Those horrid tattle-cats!" she went on, raising her voice in a silver burst of indignation. "If they would only be content to do their ripping and rending

and clawing behind my back! But some of them must always come and tell me about it — 'My dear, I think you ought to know what people are saying!'" She made an exquisite little moue of disgust. He reflected, not for the first time, that her mouth was eminently kissable; but, being a somewhat shy and modest young man, and not at all in love with her, he put the thought away as speedily as he could.

"What will your husband do if he hears the gossip?" he queried cautiously.

"Oh, George wouldn't care." Her tone was reckless, with an undertone of contempt. "As long as I leave him alone, he will leave me alone. . . . He wouldn't have the decency to give me a divorce; but, on the other hand, he is too indifferent to make trouble. George doesn't matter, one way or the other: what I hate and dread is this dirty small-town gossip; I feel as if unclean hands were pawing me all the time."

Shuddering a little, she pressed against him, ever so gently . Her mournful eyelids fluttered, and she gave him a brief and almost furtive glance, in which he could read nothing but sadness. She lowered her eyes hastily, as tears crept out and hung on the thick lashes.

"Oh! it is hateful hateful!" There was a melodious break in her voice. "I don't know what to do But I can't give up seeing you, Geoffrey; and you don't want to give me up, do you?"

"Of course not," he hastened to reassure her. "But I can't see what all the excitement is about. We are good friends, of course, but — " He broke off, for she was sobbing openly, seeming not to hear him. Somehow — he never quite knew how it all happened — her head fell on his shoulder, and her white arms, clinging forlornly and tenaciously, were about his neck. Slightly terrified, in a turmoil of sensations that were by no means unpleasant, he returned the embrace and kissed her. It seemed to be the thing to do.

Afterwards, as she rearranged the coil of her disordered hair, she murmured:

"I have always loved you, Geoffry It simply had to happen, I suppose
Do you love me?"

"Of course I love you." He put the correct period to his reply with another
kiss. After all, what else could he say or do?

A RENDEZVOUS IN AVEROIGNE

Gerard de l'Automne was meditating the rimes of a new ballade in honor of Fleurette, as he followed the leaf-arrased pathway toward Vyones through the woodland of Averoigne. Since he was on his way to meet Fleurette, who had promised to keep a rendezvous among the oaks and beeches like any peasant girl, Gerard himself made better progress than the ballade. His love was at that stage which, even for a professional troubadour, is more productive of distraction than inspiration; and he was recurrently absorbed in a meditation upon other than merely verbal felicities.

The grass and trees had assumed the fresh enamel of a mediaeval May; the turf was figured with little blossoms of azure and white and yellow, like an ornate broidery; and there was a pebbly stream that murmured beside the way, as if the voices of undines were parleying deliciously beneath its waters. The sun-lulled air was laden with a wafture of youth and romance; and the longing that welled from the heart of Gerard seemed to mingle mystically with the balsams of the wood.

Gerard was a trouvère whose scant years and many wanderings had brought him a certain renown. After the fashion of his kind he had roamed from court to court, from chateau to chateau; and he was now the guest of the Comte de la Frênaie, whose high castle held dominion over half the surrounding forest. Visiting one day that quaint cathedral town, Vyones, which lies so near to the ancient wood of Averoigne, Gerard had seen Fleurette, the daughter of a well-to-do mercer named Guillaume Cochin; and had become more sincerely enamored of her blonde piquancy than was to be expected from one who had been so frequently susceptible in such matters. He had managed to make his feelings known to her; and, after a month of billets-doux, ballades, and stolen interviews contrived by the help of a complaisant waiting-woman, she had made this woodland tryst with him in the absence of her father from Vyones. Accompanied by her maid and a man-servant, she was to leave the town early that afternoon and meet Gerard under a certain beech-tree of enormous age and size. The servants

would then withdraw discreetly; and the lovers, to all intents and purposes, would be alone. It was not likely that they would be seen or interrupted; for the gnarled and immemorial wood possessed an ill repute among the peasantry. Somewhere in this wood there was the ruinous and haunted Chateau des Faussesflammes; and, also, there was a double tomb, within which the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and his chatelaine, who were notorious for sorcery in their time, had lain unconsecrated for more than two hundred years. Of these, and their phantoms, there were grisly tales; and there were stories of loup-garous and goblins, of fays and devils and vampires that infested Averoine. But to these tales Gerard had given little heed, considering it improbable that such creatures would fare abroad in open daylight. The madcap Fleurette had professed herself unafraid also; but it had been necessary to promise the servants a substantial pourboire, since they shared fully the local superstitions.

Gerard had wholly forgotten the legendry of Averoine, as he hastened along the sun-flecked path. He was nearing the appointed beech-tree, which a turn of the path would soon reveal; and his pulses quickened and became tremulous, as he wondered if Fleurette had already reached the trysting-place. He abandoned all effort to continue his ballade, which, in the three miles he had walked from La Frenaie, had not progressed beyond the middle of a tentative first stanza.

His thoughts were such as would befit an ardent and impatient lover. They were now interrupted by a shrill scream that rose to an unendurable pitch of fear and horror, issuing from the green stillness of the pines beside the way. Startled, he peered at the thick branches; and as the scream fell back to silence, he heard the sound of dull and hurrying footfalls, and a scuffling as of several bodies. Again the scream arose. It was plainly the voice of a woman in some distressful peril. Loosening his dagger in its sheath, and clutching more firmly a long hornbeam staff which he had brought with him as a protection against the vipers which were said to lurk in Averoine, he plunged without hesitation or premeditation among the low-hanging boughs from which the voice had seemed to emerge.

In a small open space beyond the trees, he saw a woman who was struggling with three ruffians of exceptionally brutal and evil aspect. Even in the haste and vehemence of the moment, Gerard realized that he had never before seen such men or such a woman. The woman was clad in a gown of emerald green that matched her eyes; in her face was the pallor of dead things, together with a faery beauty; and her lips were dyed as with the scarlet of newly flowing blood. The men were dark as Moors, and their eyes were red slits of flame beneath oblique brows with animal-like bristles. There was something very peculiar in the shape of their feet; but Gerard did not realize the exact nature of the peculiarity till long afterwards. Then he remembered that all of them were seemingly club-footed, though they were able to move with surpassing agility. Somehow, he could never recall what sort of clothing they had worn.

The woman turned a beseeching gaze upon Gerard as he sprang forth from amid the boughs. The men, however, did not seem to heed his coming; though one of them caught in a hairy clutch the hands which the woman sought to reach toward her rescuer.

Lifting his staff, Gerard rushed upon the ruffians. He struck a tremendous blow at the head of the nearest one a blow that should have levelled the fellow to earth. But the staff came down on unresisting air, and Gerard staggered and almost fell headlong in trying to recover his equilibrium. Dazed and uncomprehending, he saw that the knot of struggling figures had vanished utterly. At least, the three men had vanished; but from the middle branches of a tall pine beyond the open space, the death-white features of the woman smiled upon him for a moment with faint, inscrutable guile ere they melted among the needles.

Gerard understood now; and he shivered as he crossed himself. He had been deluded by phantoms or demons, doubtless for no good purpose; he had been the gull of a questionable enchantment. Plainly there was something after all in the legends he had heard, in the ill-renown of the forest of Averroigne.

He retraced his way toward the path he had been following. But when he thought to reach again the spot from which he had heard that shrill unearthly scream, he saw that there was no longer a path; nor, indeed, any feature of the forest which he could remember or recognize. The foliage about him no longer displayed a brilliant verdure; it was sad and funereal, and the trees themselves were either cypress-like, or were already sere with autumn or decay. In lieu of the purling brook there lay before him a tarn of waters that were dark and dull as clotting blood, and which gave back no reflection of the brown autumnal sedges that trailed therein like the hair of suicides, and the skeletons of rotting osiers that writhed above them.

Now, beyond all question, Gerard knew that he was the victim of an evil enchantment. In answering that beguileful cry for succor, he had exposed himself to the spell, had been lured within the circle of its power. He could not know what forces of wizardry or demonry had willed to draw him thus; but he knew that his situation was fraught with supernatural menace. He gripped the hornbeam staff more tightly in his hand, and prayed to all the saints he could remember, as he peered about for some tangible bodily presence of ill.

The scene was utterly desolate and lifeless, like a place where cadavers might keep their tryst with demons. Nothing stirred, not even a dead leaf; and there was no whisper of dry grass or foliage, no song of birds nor murmuring of bees, no sigh nor chuckle of water. The corpse-grey heavens above seemed never to have held a sun; and the chill, unchanging light was without source or destination, without beams or shadows.

Gerard surveyed his environment with a cautious eye; and the more he looked the less he liked it: for some new and disagreeable detail was manifest at every glance. There were moving lights in the wood that vanished if he eyed them intently; there were drowned faces in the tarn that came and went like livid bubbles before he could discern their features. And, peering across the lake, he wondered why he had not seen the many-turreted castle of hoary stone whose nearer walls were based in the dead waters. It was so grey and still and vasty, that it seemed to have stood for incomputable ages between the stagnant tarn and the equally stagnant

heavens. It was ancients than the world, it was older than the light: it was coeval with fear and darkness; and a horror dwelt upon it and crept unseen but palpable along its bastions.

There was no sign of life about the castle; and no banners flew above its turrets or its donjon. But Gerard knew, as surely as if a voice had spoken aloud to warn him, that here was the fountainhead of the sorcery by which he had been beguiled. A growing panic whispered in his brain, he seemed to hear the rustle of malignant plumes, the mutter of demonian threats and plottings. He turned, and fled among the funereal trees.

Amid his dismay and wilderment, even as he fled, he thought of Fleurette and wondered if she were awaiting him at their place of rendezvous, or if she and her companions had also been enticed and led astray in a realm of damnable unrealities. He renewed his prayers, and implored the saints for her safety as well as his own.

The forest through which he ran was a maze of bafflement and eeriness. There were no landmarks, there were no tracks of animals or men; and the swart cypresses and sere autumnal trees grew thicker and thicker as if some malevolent will were marshalling them against his progress. The boughs were like implacable arms that strove to retard him; he could have sworn that he felt them twine about him with the strength and suppleness of living things. He fought them, insanely, desperately, and seemed to hear a crackling of infernal laughter in their twigs as he fought. At last, with a sob of relief, he broke through into a sort of trail. Along this trail, in the mad hope of eventual escape, he ran like one whom a fiend pursues; and after a short interval he came again to the shores of the tarn, above whose motionless waters the high and hoary turrets of that time-forgotten castle were still dominant. Again he turned and fled; and once more, after similar wanderings and like struggles, he came back to the inevitable tarn.

With a leaden sinking of his heart, as into some ultimate slough of despair and terror, he resigned himself and made no further effort to escape. His very will was benumbed, was crushed down as by the incumbence of a superior volition that would no longer permit his puny recalcitrance. He

was unable to resist when a strong and hateful compulsion drew his footsteps along the margin of the tarn toward the looming castle.

When he came nearer, he saw that the edifice was surrounded by a moat whose waters were stagnant as those of the lake, and were mantled with the iridescent scum of corruption. The drawbridge was down and the gates were open, as if to receive an expected guest. But still there was no sign of human occupancy; and the walls of the great grey building were silent as those of a sepulcher. And more tomb-like even than the rest was the square and over-towering bulk of the mighty donjon.

Impelled by the same power that had drawn him along the lakeshore, Gerard crossed the drawbridge and passed beneath the frowning barbican into a vacant courtyard. Barred windows looked blankly down; and at the opposite end of the court a door stood mysteriously open, revealing a dark hall. As he approached the doorway, he saw that a man was standing on the threshold; though a moment previous he could have sworn that it was untenanted by any visible form.

Gerard had retained his hornbeam staff; and though his reason told him that such a weapon was futile against any supernatural foe, some obscure instinct prompted him to clasp it valiantly as he neared the waiting figure on the sill.

The man was inordinately tall and cadaverous, and was dressed in black garments of a superannate mode. His lips were strangely red, amid his bluish beard and the mortuary whiteness of his face. They were like the lips of the woman who, with her assailants, had disappeared in a manner so dubious when Gerard had approached them. His eyes were pale and luminous as marsh-lights; and Gerard shuddered at his gaze and at the cold, ironic smile of his scarlet lips, that seemed to reserve a world of secrets all too dreadful and hideous to be disclosed.

"I am the Sieur du Malinbois," the man announced. His tones were both unctuous and hollow, and served to increase the repugnance felt by the young troubadour. And when his lips parted, Gerard had a glimpse of teeth

that were unnaturally small and were pointed like the fangs of some fierce animal.

"Fortune has willed that you should become my guest," the man went on. "The hospitality which I can proffer you is rough and inadequate, and it may be that you will find my abode a trifle dismal. But at least I can assure you of a welcome no less ready than sincere."

"I thank you for your kind offer," said Gerard. "But I have an appointment with a friend; and I seem in some unaccountable manner to have lost my way. I should be profoundly grateful if you would direct me toward Vyones. There should be a path not far from here; and I have been so stupid as to stray from it."

The words rang empty and hopeless in his own ears even as he uttered them; and the name that his strange host had given the Sieur du Malinbois was haunting his mind like the funereal accents of a knell; though he could not recall at that moment the macabre and spectral ideas which the name tended to evoke,

"Unfortunately, there are no paths from my chateau to Vyones," the stranger replied. "As for your rendezvous, it will be kept in another manner, at another place, than the one appointed. I must therefore insist that you accept my hospitality. Enter, I pray; but leave your hornbeam staff at the door. You will have no need of it any longer."

Gerard thought that he made a moue of distaste and aversion with his over-red lips as he spoke the last sentences; and that his eyes lingered on the staff with an obscure apprehensiveness. And the strange emphasis of his words and demeanor served to awaken other phantasmal and macabre thoughts in Gerard's brain; though he could not formulate them fully till afterwards. And somehow he was prompted to retain the weapon, no matter how useless it might be against an enemy of spectral or diabolic nature. So he said:

"I must crave your indulgence if I retain the staff. I have made a vow to carry it with me, in my right hand or never beyond arm's reach, till I have

slain two vipers."

"That is a queer vow," rejoined his host. "However, bring it with you if you like. It is of no matter to me if you choose to encumber yourself with a wooden stick,"

He turned abruptly, motioning Gerard to follow him. The troubadour obeyed unwillingly, with one rearward glance at the vacant heavens and the empty courtyard. He saw with no great surprise that a sudden and furtive darkness had closed in upon the chateau without moon or star, as if it had been merely waiting for him to enter before it descended. It was thick as the folds of a serecloth, it was airless and stifling like the gloom of a sepulcher that has been sealed for ages; and Gerard was aware of a veritable oppression, a corporeal and psychic difficulty in breathing, as he crossed the threshold.

He saw that cressets were now burning in the dim hall to which his host had admitted him; though he had not perceived the time and agency of their lighting. The illumination they afforded was singularly vague and indistinct, and the thronging shadows of the hall were unexplainably numerous, and moved with a mysterious disquiet; though the flames themselves were still as tapers that burn for the dead in a windless vault.

At the end of the passage, the Sieur du Malinbois flung open a heavy door of dark and somber wood. Beyond, in what was plainly the eating-room of the chateau, several people were seated about a long table by the light of cressets no less dreary and dismal than those in the hall. In the strange, uncertain glow, their faces were touched with a gloomy dubiety, with a lurid distortion; and it seemed to Gerard that shadows hardly distinguishable from the figures were gathered around the board. But nevertheless he recognized the woman in emerald green who had vanished in so doubtful a fashion amid the pines when Gerard answered her call for succor. At one side, looking very pale and forlorn and frightened, was Fleurette Cochin. At the lower end reserved for retainers and inferiors, there sat the maid and the man-servant who had accompanied Fleurette to her rendezvous with Gerard.

The Sieur du Malinbois turned to the troubadour with a smile of sardonic amusement.

"I believe you have already met everyone assembled," he observed. "But you have not yet been formally presented to my wife, Agathe, who is presiding over the board. Agathe, I bring to you Gerard de l'Automne, a young troubadour of much note and merit."

The woman nodded slightly, without speaking, and pointed to a chair opposite Fleurette. Gerard seated himself, and the Sieur du Malinbois assumed according to feudal custom a place at the head of the table beside his wife.

Now, for the first time, Gerard noticed that there were servitors who came and went in the room, setting upon the table various wines and viands. The servitors were preternaturally swift and noiseless, and somehow it was very difficult to be sure of their precise features or their costumes. They seemed to walk in an adumbration of sinister insoluble twilight. But the troubadour was disturbed by a feeling that they resembled the swart demoniac ruffians who had disappeared together with the woman in green when he approached them.

The meal that ensued was a weird and funereal affair. A sense of insuperable constraint, of smothering horror and hideous oppression, was upon Gerard; and though he wanted to ask Fleurette a hundred questions, and also demand an explanation of sundry matters from his host and hostess, he was totally unable to frame the words or to utter them. He could only look at Fleurette, and read in her eyes a duplication of his own helpless bewilderment and nightmare thralldom. Nothing was said by the Sieur du Malinbois and his lady, who were exchanging glances of a secret and baleful intelligence all through the meal; and Fleurette's maid and manservant were obviously paralyzed by terror, like birds beneath the hypnotic gaze of deadly serpents.

The foods were rich and of strange savor; and the wines were fabulously old, and seemed to retain in their topaz or violet depths the unextinguished

fire of buried centuries. But Gerard and Fleurette could barely touch them; and they saw that the *Sieur du Malinbois* and his lady did not eat or drink at all. The gloom of the chamber deepened; the servitors became more furtive and spectral in their movements; the stifling air was laden with unformulable menace, was constrained by the spell of a black and lethal necromancy. Above the aromas of the rare foods, the bouquets of the antique wines, there crept forth the choking mustiness of hidden vaults and embalmed centurial corruption, together with the ghostly spice of a strange perfume that seemed to emanate from the person of the *chatelaine*. And now Gerard was remembering many tales from the legendry of *Averoigne*, which he had heard and disregarded; was recalling the story of a *Sieur du Malinbois* and his lady, the last of the name and the most evil, who had been buried somewhere in this forest hundreds of years ago; and whose tomb was shunned by the peasantry, since they were said to continue their sorceries even in death. He wondered what influence had bedrugged his memory, that he had not recalled it wholly when he had first heard the name. And he was remembering other things and other stories, all of which confirmed his instinctive belief regarding the nature of the people into whose hands he had fallen. Also, he recalled a folklore superstition concerning the use to which a wooden stake can be put; and realized why the *Sieur du Malinbois* had shown a peculiar interest in the hornbeam staff. Gerard had laid the staff beside his chair when he sat down; and he was reassured to find that it had not vanished. Very quietly and unobtrusively, he placed his foot upon it.

The uncanny meal came to an end; and the host and his *chatelaine* arose.

"I shall now conduct you to your rooms," said the *Sieur du Malinbois*, including all of his guests in a dark, inscrutable glance.

"Each of you can have a separate chamber, if you so desire; or *Fleurette Cochin* and her maid *Angelique* can remain together; and the man-servant *Raoul* can sleep in the same room with *Messire Gerard*."

A preference for the latter procedure was voiced by *Fleurette* and the *troubadour*. The thought of unaccompanied solitude in that castle of

timeless midnight and nameless mystery was abhorrent to an insupportable degree.

The four were now led to their respective chambers, on opposite sides of a hall whose length was but indeterminately revealed by the dismal lights. Fleurette and Gerard bade each other a dismayed and reluctant good-night beneath the constraining eye of their host. Their rendezvous was hardly the one which they had thought to keep; and both were overwhelmed by the supernatural situation amid whose dubious horrors and ineluctable sorceries they had somehow become involved. And no sooner had Gerard left Fleurette than he began to curse himself for a poltroon because he had not refused to part from her side; and he marvelled at the spell of drug-like involition that had bedrowsed all his faculties. It seemed that his will was not his own, but had been thrust down and throttled by an alien power.

The room assigned to Gerard and Raoul was furnished with a couch, and a great bed whose curtains were of antique fashion and fabric. It was lighted with tapers that had a funereal suggestion in their form, and which burned dully in an air that was stagnant with the mustiness of dead years.

"May you sleep soundly," said the *Sieur du Malinbois*. The smile that accompanied and followed the words was no less unpleasant than the oily and sepulchral tone in which they were uttered. The troubadour and the servant were conscious of profound relief when he went out and closed the leaden-clanging door. And their relief was hardly diminished even when they heard the click of a key in the lock.

Gerard was now inspecting the room; and he went to the one window, through whose small and deep-set panes he could see only the pressing darkness of a night that was veritably solid, as if the whole place were buried beneath the earth and were closed in by clinging mould. Then, with an access of unsmothered rage at his separation from Fleurette, he ran to the door and hurled himself against it, he beat upon it with his clenched fists, but in vain. Realizing his folly, and desisting at last, he turned to Raoul.

"Well, Raoul," he said, "what do you think of all this?" Raoul crossed himself before he answered; and his face had assumed the vizard of a mortal fear.

"I think, Messire," he finally replied, "that we have all been decoyed by a malefic sorcery; and that you, myself, the demoiselle Fleurette, and the maid Angelique, are all in deadly peril of both soul and body."

"That, also, is my thought," said Gerard. "And I believe it would be well that you and I should sleep only by turns; and that he who keeps vigil should retain in his hands my hornbeam staff, whose end I shall now sharpen with my dagger. I am sure that you know the manner in which it should be employed if there are any intruders; for if such should come, there would be no doubt as to their character and their intentions. We are in a castle which has no legitimate existence, as the guests of people who have been dead, or supposedly dead, for more than two hundred years. And such people, when they stir abroad, are prone to habits which I need not specify."

"Yes, Messire," Raoul shuddered; but he watched the sharpening of the staff with considerable interest. Gerard whittled the hard wood to a lance-like point, and hid the shavings carefully. He even carved the outline of a little cross near the middle of the staff, thinking that this might increase its efficacy or save it from molestation. Then, with the staff in his hand, he sat down upon the bed, where he could survey the litten room from between the curtains.

"You can sleep first, Raoul." He indicated the couch, which was near the door.

The two conversed in a fitful manner for some minutes. After hearing Raoul's tale of how Fleurette, Angelique, and himself had been led astray by the sobbing of a woman amid the pines, and had been unable to retrace their way, the troubadour changed the theme. And henceforth he spoke idly and of matters remote from his real preoccupations, to fight down his torturing concern for the safety of Fleurette. Suddenly he became aware that Raoul had ceased to reply; and saw that the servant had fallen asleep on

the couch. At the same time an irresistible drowsiness surged upon Gerard himself in spite of all his volition, in spite of the eldritch terrors and forebodings that still murmured in his brain. He heard through his growing hebetude a whisper as of shadowy wings in the castle halls; he caught the sibilation of ominous voices, like those of familiars that respond to the summoning of wizards; and he seemed to hear, even in the vaults and towers and remote chambers, the tread of feet that were hurrying on malign and secret errands. But oblivion was around him like the meshes of a sable net; and it closed in relentlessly upon his troubled mind, and drowned the alarms of his agitated senses.

When Gerard awoke at length, the tapers had burned to their sockets; and a sad and sunless daylight was filtering through the window. The staff was still in his hand; and though his senses were still dull with the strange slumber that had drugged them, he felt that he was unharmed. But peering between the curtains, he saw that Raoul was lying mortally pale and lifeless on the couch, with the air and look of an exhausted moribund.

He crossed the room, and stooped above the servant. There was a small red wound on Raoul's neck; and his pulses were slow and feeble, like those of one who has lost a great amount of blood. His very appearance was withered and vein-drawn. And a phantom spice arose from the couch a lingering wraith of the perfume worn by the chatelaine Agathe.

Gerard succeeded at last in arousing the man; but Raoul was very weak and drowsy. He could remember nothing of what had happened during the night; and his horror was pitiful to behold when he realized the truth.

"It will be your turn next, Messire," he cried. "These vampires mean to hold us here amid their unhallowed necromancies till they have drained us of our last drop of blood. Their spells are like mandragora or the sleepy sirups of Cathay; and no man can keep awake in their despite."

Gerard was trying the door; and somewhat to his surprise he found it unlocked. The departing vampire had been careless, in the lethargy of her repletion. The castle was very still; and it seemed to Gerard that the

animating spirit of evil was now quiescent; that the shadowy wings of horror and malignity, the feet that had sped on baleful errands, the summoning sorcerers, the responding familiars, were all lulled in a temporary slumber.

He opened the door, he tiptoed along the deserted hall, and knocked at the portal of the chamber allotted to Fleurette and her maid. Fleurette, fully dressed, answered his knock immediately; and he caught her in his arms without a word, searching her wan face with a tender anxiety. Over her shoulder he could see the maid Angelique, who was sitting listlessly on the bed with a mark on her white neck similar to the wound that had been suffered by Raoul. He knew, even before Fleurette began to speak, that the nocturnal experiences of the demoiselle and her maid had been identical with those of himself and the man-servant.

While he tried to comfort Fleurette and reassure her, his thoughts were now busy with a rather curious problem. No one was abroad in the castle; and it was more than probable that the *Sieur du Malinbois* and his lady were both asleep after the nocturnal feast which they had undoubtedly enjoyed. Gerard pictured to himself the place and the fashion of their slumber; and he grew even more reflective as certain possibilities occurred to him.

"Be of good cheer, sweetheart," he said to Fleurette. "It is in my mind that we may soon escape from this abominable mesh of enchantments. But I must leave you for a little and speak again with Raoul, whose help I shall require in a certain matter."

He went back to his own chamber. The man-servant was sitting on the couch and was crossing himself feebly and muttering prayers with a faint, hollow voice.

"Raoul," said the troubadour a little sternly, "you must gather all your strength and come with me. Amid the gloomy walls that surround us, the somber ancient halls, the high towers and the heavy bastions, there is but one thing that veritably exists; and all the rest is a fabric of illusion. We must find the reality whereof I speak, and deal with it like true and valiant

Christians. Come, we will now search the castle ere the lord and chatelaine shall awaken from their vampire lethargy."

He led the way along the devious corridors with a swiftness that betokened much forethought. He had reconstructed in his mind the hoary pile of battlements and turrets as he had seen them on the previous day; and he felt that the great donjon, being the center and stronghold of the edifice, might well be the place which he sought. With the sharpened staff in his hand, with Raoul lagging bloodlessly at his heels, he passed the doors of many secret rooms, the many windows that gave on the blindness of an inner court, and came at last to the lower story of the donjon-keep.

It was a large, bare room, entirely built of stone, and illumined only by narrow slits high up in the wall, that had been designed for the use of archers. The place was very dim; but Gerard could see the glimmering outlines of an object not ordinarily to be looked for in such a situation, that arose from the middle of the floor. It was a tomb of marble; and stepping nearer, he saw that it was strangely weather-worn and was blotched by lichens of grey and yellow, such as flourish only within access of the sun. The slab that covered it was doubly broad and massive, and would require the full strength of two men to lift.

Raoul was staring stupidly at the tomb. "What now, Messire?" he queried.

"You and I, Raoul, are about to intrude upon the bedchamber of our host and hostess."

At his direction, Raoul seized one end of the slab; and he himself took the other. With a mighty effort that strained their bones and sinews to the cracking-point, they sought to remove it; but the slab hardly stirred. At length, by grasping the same end in unison, they were able to tilt the slab; and it slid away and dropped to the floor with a thunderous crash. Within, there were two open coffins, one of which contained the Sieur Hugh du Malinbois and the other his lady Agathe. Both of them appeared to be slumbering peacefully as infants; a look of tranquil evil, of pacified

malignity, was imprinted upon their features; and their lips were dyed with a fresher scarlet than before.

Without hesitation or delay, Gerard plunged the lance-like end of his staff into the bosom of the Sieur du Malinbois. The body crumbled as if it were wrought of ashes kneaded and painted to human semblance; and a slight odor as of age-old corruption arose to the nostrils of Gerard. Then the troubadour pierced in like manner the bosom of the chatelaine. And simultaneously with her dissolution, the walls and floor of the donjon seemed to dissolve like a sullen vapor, they rolled away on every side with a shock as of unheard thunder. With a sense of weird vertigo and confusion Gerard and Raoul saw that the whole chateau had vanished like the towers and battlements of a bygone storm; that the dead lake and its rotting shores no longer offered their malefical illusions to the eye. They were standing in a forest glade, in the full unshadowed light of the afternoon sun; and all that remained of the dismal castle was the lichen-mantled tomb that stood open beside them. Fleurette and her maid were a little distance away; and Gerard ran to the mercer's daughter and took her in his arms. She was dazed with wonderment, like one who emerges from the night-long labyrinth of an evil dream, and finds that all is well.

"I think, sweetheart," said Gerard, "that our next rendezvous will not be interrupted by the Sieur du Malinbois and his chatelaine."

But Fleurette was still bemused with wonder, and could only respond to his words with a kiss.

A STAR-CHANGE

It was on Spanish Mountain, where he had climbed from Donner to escape the society of his fellow-campers, that Lemuel Sarkis first met the people of the planet Mlok.

Since he was far from being an expert mountaineer, he had not cared to assail the crowning peaks of the long, somber ridge, but had contented himself with the lower, more accessible eastern terminus. From this, he could look down on the waters of Frog Lake, lying dark and still at the bottom of a bare declivity.

Among volcanic-looking boulders, well out of the wind that swept the upper ridge, he seated himself in morose contemplation while the mountain shadows lengthened, shaken out like lazy wings, and a pale light crept eastward on the waters of black opal below. The vastness of the solitude, its grim and craggy grandeur, began to have a soothing effect upon Sarkis; and the human trivialities and banalities that had driven him to flight assumed their proper insignificance in the mighty perspectives on which he peered.

He had seen no one, not even a shepherd or fisherman, in his climb through the forested ravines and up the sun-flower-covered slopes. He was startled as well as annoyed when a pebble loosened as if by some unheard foot fall clattered past him and went over the precipice. Someone else had climbed the mountain; and his misanthropic aversion rose in a gall-like bitterness as he turned to survey the intruder.

Instead of the tourist or mountaineer he had expected, he saw two beings who bore not even the remotest appearance to humanity, and, moreover, were obviously unrelated to any species of earth-life. Not only for that first startled moment, but during the entire episode that followed, Sarkis wondered if he had fallen asleep and had been visited by some preposterous dream.

Each of the beings was about four feet high, with a somewhat doubtful division into head and body. Their formation was incredibly flat and two-dimensional; and they seemed to float rather than stand, as if swimming through the air. The upper division, which one accustomed to earthly physical structures would have taken for the head, was much larger than the lower, and more rotund. It resembled the featureless disk of a moonfish, and was fringed with numberless interbranching tendrils or feelers like a floral arabesque.

The lower division suggested a Chinese kite. It was marked with unknown goblin features, some of which may have been eyes, of a peculiarly elongated and oblique sort. It ended in three broad, streamer-like members, subdividing into webby tassels, that trailed on the ground but seemed wholly inadequate for the purpose of legs.

The coloration of these beings baffled Sarkis. He received alternate impressions of opal-shot blackness, elusive greyness and blood-bright violet.

Impossible, beyond belief, they hung before him among the rocks, swaying forward with a dreamy slowness, as if attached to the ground by their tasseled streamers. Their fringes of woven tendrils seemed to float toward him, quivering with restless life, and certain of their eye-like features gradually brightened and drew his gaze with the hypnotic gleaming of crystals.

The feeling of divorce from reality increased upon him; for now he seemed to hear a low, insistent humming, to which he could assign no definite source. It corresponded vaguely with the slow vibration of the fringes in its beat and cadence. He heard it all around him in the air, like a mesh of sound; and yet somehow it was inside his own brain, as if the unused cells were thrilling with a telepathic murmur from worlds unknown to man.

The humming grew louder, it took an a partial coherence and articulation, as if certain sounds were repeated over and over in a long-drawn sequence. Still more articulate it grew, seeming to form a prolonged vocable.

Startlingly it dawned upon him that the vocable was intended for the English phrase, "Come with us," and he realized that the beings were trying earnestly to convey an invitation by means of unearthly vocal organs.

Like one who has been mesmerized, without fear or wonder, he gave himself up to the impressions that besieged his senses. On the flat, vacant, moonfish disks, very gradually, dim, intricate lines and masses limned themselves, growing brighter and more distinct till they began to suggest an actual picture.

Sarkis could comprehend little enough of what he saw; but he received an idea of immense distance and alien, distorted perspective. In a glare of exotic light, a sea-like flood of intense color, strange-angled machineries towered, and structures that might have been either buildings or vegetable growths, receded on a ground of baffling dimension and doubtful inclination. Through this baroque scenery, there floated forms that bore a slight and incoherent resemblance to the beings who confronted him: a resemblance like the broken hint of natural shapes maintained in the utmost perversions of cubism. Together with these forms, as if convoyed by them, there moved another figure having an equally remote and dubious likeness to a human being.

Somehow, Sarkis divined that this latter figure was intended for himself. The scene was a picture of some foreign world or dimension which these fantastic creatures invited him to visit! Alike in all its details the tableau was duplicated on the disks.

With curious lucidity and coolness, he pondered the invitation. Should he accept it? And if he did accept, what would happen? Of course, it was all a dream—and dreams were tricky things, with a habit of vanishing if one tried consciously to fathom their elusive vistas. But—supposing it were not a dream? From what world, then, had these beings emerged, and by what mode of transit were they enabled to visit the earth? Surely they could not have come from any planet of the solar system: their utter strangeness seemed to argue that they were children of another galaxy, or at least of another sun than ours.

The beings appeared to perceive his hesitation. The pictures on their bodies faded, and were slowly replaced by others, as if they sought to woo him with the varied sceneries of their native world. At the same time, the humming noise resumed ; and after awhile, the equivocal monotone began to suggest familiar words, most of which continued to elude Sarkis. He seemed to make out an eerie prolongation of "offer" and "escape," as if these vocables were uttered by some enormous, droning insect.

Then, through the strange hypnotic sound, he heard the crisp laughter of a girl and the gay chattering of human voices. Plainly several people had climbed the mountain and were coming toward him along the slope, though he could not see them as yet.

The dreamy charm was broken, and he felt a shock of actual fear as well as deep startlement when he saw that the unknown visitors were still before him. Those intruding human voices had convinced him that the happening was no dream. He felt the involuntary recoil of the earth-born mind from things that are monstrous and inexplicable.

The voices drew nearer behind the rocks, and he thought that he recognized the tones of one or more of his fellow-campers. Then, as he continued to face the apparitions, he discerned above their grotesquely floating forms the sudden flash of sourceless coppery metals that barred the air, hanging aloft like some mechanical mirage. A maze of slanted rods and curving reticulations seemed to hover and descend about the two beings. An instant later, it was gone, and the visitants had also disappeared!

Sarkis hardly saw the approach of a woman and two men, all membes of the party he had wished to avoid. To a bewilderment like that of some rudely awakened sleeper, was added the eerie consternation of one who thinks that he has met the supernatural.

A week later, Sarkis had returned to his lodgings in San Francisco and had resumed the tedious commercial art which formed his on reliable source of livelihood. This uncongenial work had involved the ruthless smothering of higher ambitions. He had wanted to paint imaginative pictures, had dreamt

of fixing in opulent color a fantasy such as Beardsley had caught in ornate line. But such pictures, it seemed, were in small request.

The happening on Spanish Mountain had stirred his imagination profoundly, though he was still doubtful of its actuality. He gave himself to endless speculation, and often he cursed the untimely interruption that had caused the visitants to vanish.

It seemed to him that the beings (if they were not mere hallucinatory images) had appeared in answer to his own vague and undirected longings for the supermundane. Like envoys from a foreign universe, they had sought him out, had favored him with their invitation. Their attempt at verbal communication argued a knowledge of English; and it was plain that they could come and go at will, no doubt by means of some occult mechanism.

What did they want with him? he wondered. What would have been his fate if he had accompanied them?

His pictorial bent for the fantastic was deeply stimulated; and more than once, after his daily stint of advertising art was done, he tried to paint the visitants from memory. This he found peculiarly difficult: the images with which he sought to deal were without analogy; and their very hues and proportions baffled his recollection. It was as if an alien spectrum, a trans-Euclidean geometry, had somehow been involved.

One eve, he stood glowering with dissatisfaction before his easel. The picture, he thought, was a silly smudge of over-painted colors which utterly failed to convey the true outlandishness of its theme.

There was no sound or other warning, nothing that could consciously attract his attention. But turning abruptly, he saw behind him the two beings he had met on Spanish Mountain. They swayed slowly in the lamplight between the cluttered table and a somewhat shabby divan, trailing their tasseled members on an old rug whose fading floral designs were splashed with fresh paint.

With the loaded brush in his fingers, Sarkis could only stand and stare, held in the same hypnotic thrall that had swept him beyond fear or wonder on the mountain. Once more he beheld the gradual, somnolent waving or the arabesque feelers; again he heard the dreamy monotonous hum that resolved itself into longdrawn vocables, inviting him to go with the visitants. Again, on the moonfish disks, were depicted scenes that would have been the despair of a futurist.

Almost without emotion or thought of any kind, Sarkis gave an audible consent. He hardly knew that he had spoken.

Slowly, as it had begun, the waving motion of the feelers ceased. The consonant humming died, the pictures faded. Then, as before, there came the coppery flash of air-suspended machinery. Broad, oblique rods and concave meshes hovered between ceiling and floor, descended about the alien entities—and about Sarkis himself. Dimly, between the glowing bars, he described the familiar furnishings of his room.

An instant more, and the room vanished like a film of shadow wiped away in light. There was no sense of movement or of transit; but it seemed that a foreign sky had opened above, pouring down a deluge of crimson. Redness streamed upon him, it filled his eyes with a fury as of boiling blood, it dripped over him in sullen or burning cascades.

By degrees, he began to distinguish outlines and masses. The bars and meshes were still around him, his strange companions were still beside him. They were weirdly altered now, and they swam in the crimson flood like the goblin fish of some infernal sea. Involuntarily, Sarkis shrank away from them: they were terrifying, monstrous.

He saw now that he was standing on a curiously tessellated floor that curved upward on all sides like the bottom of a huge saucer. High, outward-sloping walls, windowless and roofless, towered all about. The mechanism that surrounded him was also topless, and he perceived that it was changing. Very slowly, like dying flames, the rods and meshes sank and disappeared in a circle of small sockets that were part of the floor.

A deep vermilion heaven domed the tower, pouring down the thick, heavy light. The material of which the building was composed, whether stone, metal or some unheard-of element, flowed with lusters of liquid ruby and dissolving cinnabar.

Sarkis became aware that the air he breathed, though well-supplied with oxygen, was uncomfortably thick and seemed to choke his lungs. Also, when he tried to move, he found his weight enormously increased, as if by the gravitation of a gigantic planet.

Where he was or how he had gotten there, he could not imagine. He had nursed an artistic longing for the weird, the otherworldly; but he had never dreamed of this utter and delirious alienation from known things. Moreover, he had not foreseen the shock to human nerves that would ensue an actual transition into another sphere. His sensations of physical discomfort were soon supplemented by a sort of optic torture: the light troubled him, it stimulated his senses cruelly, and yet it stifled and oppressed him at the same time,

A multitude of beings similar to his companions began to enter the topless tower, floating gradually down from the sky or swimming in through low doors. They crowded about him, and he found himself moving toward one of the exits, with their feelers and streamers tugging gently at his limbs. He felt an unreasoning terror at their touch, like a child in the grip of nightmare shadows. Their loud humming awoke in his brain the thought of some hostile horde of abominably droning insects.

Passing through the doorway, he entered a sea of light in which he was unable to discern clearly the features of the landscape. Almost vertically overhead, he saw the blinding blot of a vast sun, The throng of goblin people, increasing momentarily, bore him down a grassless, barren slope whose bottom was lost in the inundating crimson.

More and more, he felt an inexpressible malaise, a frightful mixture of confusion, irritation and depression to which all his senses contributed. He tried to recall the circumstances of his departure from earth, tried to assure

himself that there was some natural explanation of all that had happened. The beings whose invitations he had accepted were, he told himself, friendly and well-meaning, and he would suffer no harm, But such thoughts were powerless to calm his agitated nerves, now subject to the assault of innumerable vibratory forces which the human system had never been meant to sustain.

The torture deepened. His journey down the slope, rendered doubly slow by the dragging gravitational pull and the leisurely drifting of his fantastic entourage, who seemed to obey another and more decelerated tempo of time than man, was literally a descent into hell. Every impression became a source of pain and terror, and he found a lurking menace of evil in all that surrounded him.

At the bottom of the slope, a second roofless bowl-shaped tower loomed from the murk, on the shore of a stagnant sea. To him, at that moment, it was like a shrine of alien diabolism, hateful and menacing and he wanted to scream aloud with a nameless horror when the goblin creatures bore him toward it and urged him through its portals.

The interior of this tower yawning to the red sky, was lined with countless outlandish carvings from floor to top. In the center of the floor, there stood a curious couch, made from a pile of mattress-thick fabrics.

Eyeing the couch with nervous dubiety, Sarkis became aware that the throng had melted away, as if its curiosity were appeased. A mere half-dozen of the beings remained; and since all were equally monstrous, he could not be sure if his original companions were among them.

They gathered around him with their hateful droning, pulling him toward the couch He resisted, but the tasseled streamers were unbelievably strong, and they tightened about him, clammy repulsive as the tentacles of octopi. The couch was innocent enough, and no doubt the creatures were merely offering him a hospitality which, in their own way, they had tried to accommodate to human needs. But Sarkis felt the terror of a fever patient, whose doctors and attendants seem like hellish torturers.

His last remnant of control gave way, and he shrieked and fought wildly. His own voice assumed an uncanny volume in the thick air, returning upon him deafeningly, surrounding him with ventriloquistic clamors; and he seemed to lift a mountainous load as he struggled.

Very gently but firmly, the creatures laid him on the couch. Fearing he knew not what, he still tried to resist them. Two of the beings proceeded to join their streamers across his recumbent body, interlacing the divided ends like fingers; and two others arranged their members in like fashion across his legs. Floating just above the floor, they held him securely to the couch, like doctors who have tied down a delirious patient.

Lying helpless, he saw the remaining two swim skyward and vanish beyond the tower's rim. After awhile he ceased his futile struggling; but his attendants still held him bound with their flat, clammy streamers.

Sarkis lived in an aching torment, whose duration was not to be measured by earthly time. The red sky appeared to descend upon him, heavier and closer; and the enigmatic details of the sculptures on the tower walls perturbed him with sly suggestions of alien foulness and fear. He saw Satanic faces that leered or frowned obscenely, and faceless gargoyle things that seemed to palpitate with malignant life in the Crimson.

The sky took on an awful, ardent glowing. With intolerable slowness the huge sun, rising to its meridian, filled with its orb the cup that was formed by the tower's rim. The intricate carvings ran with redouble light, the stellar monsters and gargoyles dripped a venomous ruby that maddened the staring eyes of Sarkis, till he closed his lids against it, and still saw in his branded brain the corrosive, inexorably irritant color. Finally a great blackness came upon him: a sluggish and leaden Lethe, through which he sank interminably, still pursued by floating blots of acrid crimson, before losing himself.

He awoke in a sort of stupefaction, drugged and exhausted, as if his nerves had been burnt out by that cruel debauch of red. With nightmare effort, he opened his eyes to a heaven of funereal violet. The red sun had been

succeeded by a purple binary of equal magnitude, whose orb was now intersecting the topless tower with a mournfully glaring crescent.

Sarkis could not collect his shattered thoughts; but a shapeless fear, an awareness of something irremediably wrong and baleful, rose in his mind. He was still held by the streamers of his four attendants; and moving his head, he saw that several others were floating patiently beside the couch. With their adroit members, more supple and capacious than hands, they bore a multitude of strange articles.

Seeing that he had awakened, they swam toward him, proffering certain smooth, elongated, fruit-like objects. One of them held to his lips a shallow bowl filled with a semi-viscid liquor, which he was plainly expected to drink.

Utterly astray and unstrung, Sarkis shrank in renewed terror from these beings. Bathed in that lugubrious violet, their outré forms were cadaverous as dead things from another star. An infinite melancholia poured from the purple sun, cascaded from the sloping walls, jetted from the monstrous carvings. The humming of his attendants, who doubtless sought to reassure him, was heavy with a dirge-like horror. Refusing the offered food and drink, he closed his eyes and lay inert beneath the dismal madness that had fallen upon him.

All that followed was as if part of this madness, and not to be separated from its teeming phantasms. Sarkis was lifted from the couch by his attendants, who formed a sort of cradle with their streamers, in which they carried him from the tower and along some endless road. At intervals he opened his eyes to ghastly-looking plants that swam and swayed in the violet air like sea-weed in an ocean-stream.

Presently he knew that his bearers were descending a steep incline, as if to some deeper circle of this dolorous inferno. Walls that might have been those of a slanted catacomb, lit with a bluish, deathly lambence, stifled him with their closeness.

At length he found himself in a great chamber, whose furnishings, to his distraught eyes, bore the aspect of frightful instruments of torture. Sarkis' alarm was increased when the flat-bodied people stretched him on a slightly hollowed slab of pale mineral whose fittings of machinery at sides and ends were reminiscent of some medieval rack.

A stony fear weighed down his faculties, arrested his breathing; and he did not resist. One of his torturers was floating above him in the hell-blue light, while the others swam in a sort of ring about the slab. The floating creature laid the fringy tips of its middle streamer on his mouth and nostrils, and he felt an odd shock from the contact.

An icy coldness flowed across his face, into his brow and head, into his neck, his arms, his body. It seemed that a strange, benumbing force had been exerted by the creature; the flowing coldness was followed by a loss of all sensation, and a singular detachment from the terror and malaise that had tormented him. Without alarm or speculation, he considered the beings about him, who were now removing his garments and applying to his body the sinister little disks and needle-studded plates that formed part of the slab's mechanical equipment.

It was all meaningless to him; and in some fashion that he did not even try to understand, the whole scene took on an ever-growing dimness and remoteness, as if he were floating away from it—and from himself—into another dimension.

His return to awareness was like a new birth. Strangeness there was, such as an infant would find in its surroundings; but fear and pain were wholly gone. He found nothing monstrous or unnatural or menacing in the world that was now revealed to his senses.

Later, when he had learned to communicate easily with the people of Mlok, they told him of the singular and radical operations which they had deemed it necessary to perform upon him: operations involving his nerves and sense-organs, so as to alleviate, by changing all his impressions and even certain subconscious functions, the torment he had suffered from the images

and vibratory rays of a world in which the human senses were not prepared to function properly.

At first they had not understood his sufferings, since they themselves, being far more adaptive than men, endured little discomfort in passing from one world to another. But, having diagnosed his condition, they had hastened to palliate it through the resources of a super-human Science.

Just what had been done to him, Sarkis could never wholly grasp; but the results of the operations, admitted him to an entire new range of perceptions. His other-world hosts had wished to make him hear, see, feel and perceive in much the same manner as themselves.

Perhaps the profoundest change was in his visual images. He saw new colors of supernal softness and beauty. The red daylight, which had almost maddened him, was now a clear and nameless hue which he somehow associated with emerald green. The light of the violet binary no longer depressed him, and its color was remotely allied to pale amber.

His ideas of form had undergone a corresponding alteration. The bodies and members of the alien people, which he had thought almost two dimensional, and which had terrified him with their goblin grotesquery, presented many subtle planes and curves, together with a depth that argued the addition of at least one totally new dimension. The whole effect was esthetically pleasing, with a fundamental symmetry such as he had previously discerned in well-shaped human bodies. The vegetation, scenery and architecture no longer impressed him abnormal or monstrous.

His sense of time had now become synchronized with the slow tempo of the heavy planet, and the speech and movement of the people had lost that former sense of undue prolongation. The thick air, the weighty gravitation, had also ceased to discomfit him.

Moreover, he had acquired several new senses. One of these can best be described as a combination of hearing and touch: many sound images, especially those of high pitch, were perceived by his tactical nerves as a

gently varied tapping. Another sense was that of audible color: certain hues were always accompanied by an overtone of sound, often highly musical.

His intercourse with the people of Mlok was carried on through non-verbal mediums. After the operations, they could impress telepathic words and images upon his mind. Their other modes of communication which involved for them less expenditure of energy than pure telepathy, were mastered more gradually by Sarkis. The reflex of thought-pictures, thrown on their bodies as on a screen, became intelligible to him; and the sound-vibration of their arabesque feelers, which served them in lieu of vocal cords, was now fully articulate, with its higher notes perceivable as a graduated tactile pressure.

He learned that his hosts, who called themselves the Mloki after their planet, were an old and highly developed race for whom the marvels of scientific masterdom had become secondary to the delights of pure perception and reflection. Mlok, they told him, was the third planet of a binary solar system in a galaxy so remote, astronomically speaking, that its light had never reached the earth.

The manner in which they had visited the earth and had taken Sarkis to their own world was indeed strange, and involved the use of an arcanic force, which, by projecting itself through the fifth dimension could exist simultaneously in opposite corners of the universe. The apparatus of coppery-looking bars and meshes which had descended upon Sarkis was composed of this force. How it was controlled and manipulated, he never quite understood, apart from the fact that it was closely obedient to a certain nervous power possessed by the Mlok. They had often visited the earth, as well as many other alien planets, through curiosity. In spite of their divergent sense-development, they had acquired a surprising knowledge of terrene conditions. Two of them, whose names were Nlaa and Nluu, had found Sarkis on Spanish Mountain, and had perceived telepathically his dissatisfaction with mundane life. Being sympathetic in their way, and also curious concerning the result of such an experiment, they had invited him to accompany them in their return to Mlok.

The real events of Sarkis' life among the Mloki were his new and wonderful sensations. The outward happenings were all very simple, for the existence of this people, apart from their excursions to remote worlds, was almost wholly contemplative.

For his food and drink, they supplied him with many fruits and vegetable juices. The Mloki themselves drew their nourishment directly from the air and light; and their topless towers were designed to collect and focus all the solar rays, the absorption of which was to them a rare, epicurean pleasure. To a limited extent, the alteration of Sarkis' nerves had given him a similar faculty; but he still depended mainly on grosser foods.

One very remarkable feature of the sensory change in Sarkis was the vagueness which attended his impressions of his own body. He seemed to possess a dream-like immateriality, and to drift rather than walk in his movement from place to place.

He spent much of his time in converse with certain of the Mlok especially Nlaa and Nluu, who took a tutelary interest in their protégé, and never wearied of imparting to him their immensely recondite and various knowledge. He acquired undreamt-of conceptions regarding time, space, life, matter and energy, and was also instructed in novel esthetics and in highly complicated arts which made painting appear a silly and barbarous pastime.

How long he remained in Mlok, he never knew. His instructors, a long-lived people to whom centuries were no more than years, gave little importance to the formal measurement of time. But many of the long, double days and brief, irregular nights had gone by, before a homesickness for the lost earth began to torment him. Amid all the beguilements and novelties of his existence, beneath his altered senses, a nostalgia rose in his brain, which was still, at bottom, the brain of an earthman.

The feeling came upon him by degrees. His memories of the world he had formerly detested and from which he had longed to escape, took on a haunting charm and poignancy, and were touched with an enchantment such

as belongs to early childhood. He recoiled from the sensory opulence of the world about him, and yearned for the simple scenes and faces of the human sphere.

The Mloki, well aware of the growth of this feeling, tried to distract him with new impressions and took him on a tour of their planet. In this tour, they employed a vessel which swam through the thick air like a submarine in some tellurian ocean. Nlaa and Nluu accompanied the earthman, solicitous, and eager to point out the marvels of each latitude.

The effect however, was merely to aggravate Sarkis' nostalgia. Peering down on the domeless Karnaks and Babylons of this ultra-cosmic world he thought of the earth-cities with a craving which, in view of his former aversion for the works of man, he would never have believed possible. Drifting among prodigious mountains, where mundane peaks would have been lost like boulders, he recalled the Sierras with a sick yearning that moved him almost to tears.

After rounding the equator of Mlok, and visiting the iceless poles, the expedition returned to its starting-point, which lay in the tropic realms Sarkis, now desperately ill and languishing, implored Nlaa and Nluu to send him back by means of the occult force-projector to his own world. They tried to dissuade him, saying that his homesickness was merely a brain-wrought illusion that would wear off in time.

In order to relieve him permanently and speedily from his suffering, they proposed a certain treatment of his brain-cells. By the injection of a rare vegetable serum, they could alter his very memories and mental reactions. These, as well as his sense-impressions, would then approximate those of the Mloki.

Sarkis, though he shrank in a way from the proposed mental transformation, which would have removed him utterly and forever beyond humanity, might well have consented. But certain untoward happenings, wholly unforeseen, were to bring about another eventuation than this.

The planetary system to which Mlok belonged was on the very extreme of its native island universe. In the short intersolar nights, this universe could be seen as a nebulous star-cloud, filling half of the heavens; but the other half was dark and rayless as the Coal Sack familiar to terrene astronomers. It seemed that there were no living stars in the sable gulf, unless at a distance that had not yet permitted their rays to reach the observatories of Mlok.

Nevertheless, there came from this void the first invasion that had ever threatened the security of the two-sunned planet. The first warning of this invasion was a dark cloud—a thing hitherto unknown in Mlokk, whose humid element was constant in the thick seas and heavy air, without evaporation or precipitation. The cloud, which had the form of a trapezium, drew down and widened rapidly above the southern zones, doming the sky with intense ebon. It broke on the lands beneath in a rain of black, liquid globules, which acted like a mordant chemical. Flesh, stone, soil, vegetation, everything that was touched by the rain, dissolved instantly, forming tarry pools and rills that soon merged in an ever-spreading sea.

The news of this catastrophe became known immediately all over the planet. The corrosive sea was watched from air-vessels, and every effort was made to curb its inroads. Dykes of atomic energy were built to enclose it; and belts of elemental fire were centered upon the pollution, to burn it away. But all such measures were in vain: the sea like a liquid cancer, ate steadily into the huge planet.

Some of the black fluid was obtained by Mloki who sacrificed their own lives in submitting it to analysis. Even as the element began its ravages upon their bodies, they announced their findings as to its nature. The globules that had fallen from space, they thought, were protoplasmic organisms of an unknown type, which had the power of liquefying all other forms of matter in what was seemingly an illimitable process of assimilation. This process had formed the eroding sea.

Another rain of globules was soon reported, this time in the northern hemisphere. A third precipitation, following swiftly, made certain then

eventual doom of Mlok. The people could only flee from the dissolving littorals of the three oceans, which were widening in ravenous circles and would sooner or later unite and surround the planet. It became known, also, that the other worlds of the system, which were not peopled by intelligent beings, had been attacked by the lethal organisms,

The Mloki, a philosophic race, long given to equable meditation on cosmic change and death, were resigned to the coining annihilation. Though they could have fled to alien worlds by means of their space projectors, they preferred to perish with their planet.

Nlaa and Nluu, however, as well as their fellows in general, now became anxious for the return of Lemuel Sarkis to his own sphere. It was not just or proper, they argued, that he should share the doom of an ultra-terrene people. They had promptly abandoned the idea of subjecting him to further medical treatment, and could only urge his immediate departure.

In a state of oddly bewildered emotions, he was taken by Nlaa and Nluu to the tower through which he had entered Mlok. From the hill on which this tower stood, he could discern the black arc of the encroaching sea of dissolution on the far horizon.

Enjoined by his preceptors, he took his place amid the circle of floor-sockets that formed the generators of the transporting mechanism. With much regret and sadness, he said farewell to Nlaa and Nluu, after vainly pressing them to accompany him.

Since, as they told him, they could determine by means of their thought-images the very spot in which he was to land, he had expressed a desire to return to Earth via his studio in San Francisco. Moreover, since travel in time was no less feasible than space-transit, his mundane reappearance would occur on the morning that had followed his departure.

Slowly, and having now a different form and hue for his altered eyes, the bars and meshes sprang from the tower floor and surrounded Sarkis. All at once the air darkened strangely. He turned again toward Nlaa and Nluu for a

parting glimpse—and found that they, as well as the tower, had vanished. The transition had already taken place!

The pseudo-metallic rods and meshes began to dissolve about him and he looked for the familiar outlines and furnishings of his studio. A puzzlement assailed him, and then a hideously growing doubt. Surely Nlaa and Nluu had made a mistake, or else the projecting power had failed to return him to his chosen bourn. Seemingly he had been landed in a totally unknown sphere or dimension.

Around him, in a sullen light, he saw the looming of dark, chaotic masses, whose very contours were touched with nightmare menace. Surely this place was not his studio room—these crazily angled cliffs that closed him in were not walls, but the sides of some infernal pit! The dome above, with its dolorously distorted planes, pouring down a hellish glare, was not the skylighted roof that he recalled. The bulging horrors that rose before him along the bottom of the pit, with obscene forms and corrupt hues, were surely not his easel, table and chairs.

He took a single step, and was alarmed by the horrible lightness which he felt. As if by some miscalculation of distance, the step carried him against one of the looming objects, and he ran his hands over it, finding that the thing, whatever it might be, was clammily repulsive to the touch as well as repugnant to sight. Something about it, however, on close inspection, was remotely familiar. The thing was like an over-swollen, geometric travesty of an armchair!

Sarkis felt a nervous perturbation, a vague and all-surrounding terror comparable to that of his first impressions in Mlok. He realized that Nlaa and Nluu had kept their word, and had returned him to his studio; but the realization merely increased his bewilderment. Because of the profound sensory changes to which he had been subjected by the Mlok his perceptions of form, light, color and perspective were no longer those of an earthman. Therefore the well-remembered room and its furnishings were wholly monstrous to him. Somehow, in his nostalgia, and the haste and

flurry of his departure, he had failed to foresee the inevitability of this change of aspect in all earthly things.

A hideous vertigo swept upon him with the full understanding of his predicament. He was, virtually, in the position of a madman who knows well his own madness, but is utterly without power to control it. Whether or not his new mode of cognition was closer to ultimate reality than the former human mode, he could not know. It mattered little, in the overwhelming sense of estrangement, amid which he sought desperately to recover the least hint or vestige of the world that he remembered,

With the doubtful groping of one who seeks an exit from some formidable maze, he searched for the door, which he had left unlocked on the evening when he accepted the invitation of Nlaa and Nluu. His very sense of direction, he found, had become inverted; the relative nearness and proportion of objects baffled him; but at last, after many stumblings and collisions with the misshapen furniture, he found an insanely faceted projection amid the perverted planes of the wall. This, he somehow determined, was the door-knob.

After repeated effort he opened the door, which seemed to be of unnatural thickness, with convex distortions. Beyond, he saw a yawning cavern with lugubrious arches, which he knew to be the hall of the apartment house in which he lived.

His progress along the hall and down the two flights of stairs to the street-level was like a pilgrimage in some ever-deepening nightmare. The time was early morning, and he met no one. But apart from the maddening visual distortion of everything about him, he was assailed, as he went on, by a multitude of other sense-impressions that confirmed and increased his neural torture.

He heard the noises of the awakening city, set to an alien tempo of delirious speed and fury: a hurtling of cruel clangors, whose higher notes beat upon him like a pounding of hammers, a volleying of pebbles. The ceaseless

impingement stunned him more and more; it seemed that the thronging strokes would batter in his very brain.

He emerged at length on what he knew to be the city street: a broad avenue that ran toward the ferry building. The early traffic had begun and to Sarkis, the passing cars and pedestrians seemed to whirl with lightning speed, like the souls of the damned in some nether chasm of an insane hell. For him, the morning sunlight was a lurid, baleful gloom that flowed in forked rays from a demonian Eye that brooded above the chasm.

The buildings, with pestilent hues and outlines, were full of the terror of delirium, the abomination of ill dreams. The people were ghastly creatures whose headlong movement barely permitted him to form a clear impression of their bulging eyes, their bloated faces and bodies. They terrified him, even as the people of Mlok beneath the maddening vermilion sun.

The air was thin and bodiless to him, and he suffered a peculiar discomfort from the lessened pressure and gravity, which now added to his feeling of hopeless alienation. He seemed to move like a wildered phantom through the dismal Hades to which he had been committed.

He heard the voices of the monsters who went flying past: voices that partook of the same giddy acceleration as their movements, so that the words were indistinguishable. It was like the sound of some vocal record, played too fast on a phonograph.

Sarkis groped his way along the pavement, searching for some familiar landmark in the alien-angled masses of the buildings. Sometimes he thought that he was about to discover a remembered hotel or shop-front—and then, a moment later, the broken similitude was lost in a mad bizarrerie.

He came to an open space, which he had known as a small park, with well-kept trees and shrubbery amid the greening grass. He had been fond of the place, and its memory had often haunted him in his cosmic homesickness. Now, stumbling upon it in that city of delirium, he sought vainly to retrieve the longed-for charm and loveliness.

The trees and shrubs were like towering fungi, loathsome, unclean, and the grass was a vermin-grey foulness from which he turned in sick revulsion.

Astray in that labyrinth of fear, and virtually out of his senses, he fled at random, and tried to cross an arterial where cars were hurtling by at the apparent speed of projectiles. Here, with no warning that his eyes or ears could perceive, something struck him down like a sudden bolt, and he slid into merciful oblivion.

He awoke an hour later in the hospital to which he had been taken. The injuries which he had sustained, from being knocked down by the slowly driven car before which he had thrust himself as if deaf and blind, were not serious, but his general condition puzzled the doctors.

When, with reviving consciousness, he began to scream horribly, and to shrink away as if in mortal terror from his attendants, they were inclined to diagnose the case as delirium tremens. His nerves were obviously in a bad way; though, curiously enough, the doctors failed to detect the presence of alcohol or any known drug to support their diagnosis.

Sarkis failed to respond to the powerful sedatives which they administered. His sufferings, which seemed to take the form of terrific hallucinations, were prolonged and progressive. One of the internes noted a queer deformation of his eyeballs; and there was much speculation regarding the singular long-drawn slowness of His screams and writhings. However, though baffling, his case was readily enough dismissed by the doctors when, a week later, he persisted in dying. It was merely one more of those unsolved enigmas that sometimes occur even in the best-regulated of professions.

A VINTAGE FROM ATLANTIS

I thank you, friend, but I am no drinker of wine, not even if it be the rarest Canary or the oldest Amontillado. Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging . . . and more than others, I have reason to know the truth that was writ by Solomon the Jewish king. Give ear, if ye will, and I shall tell you a story such as would halt the half-drained cup on the lips of the hardiest bibber.

We were seven-and-thirty buccaneers, who raked the Spanish Main under Barnaby Dwale, he that was called Red Barnaby for the spilling of blood that attended him everywhere. Our ship, the Black Falcon, could outfly and outstrike all other craft that flew the Jolly Roger. Full often, Captain Dwale was wont to seek a remote isle on the eastward verge of the West Indies, and lighten the vessel of its weight of ingots and doubloons.

The isle was far from the common course of maritime traffic, and was not known to maps or other mariners; so it suited our purpose well. It was a place of palms and sand and cuffs, with a small harbor sheltered by the curving outstretched arms of rugged reefs, on which the dark ocean climbed and gnashed its fangs of white foam without troubling the tranquil waters beyond. I know not how many times we had visited the isle; but the soil beneath many a coco tree was heavy with our hidden trove. There we had stored the loot of bullion-laden ships, the massy plate and jewels of cathedral towns.

Even as to all mortal things, an ending came at last to our visits. We had gathered a goodly cargo, but might have stayed longer on the open main where the Spaniards passed, if a tempest had not impended. We were near the secret isle, as it chanced, when the skies began to blacken; and wallowing heavily in the rising seas we fled to our placid harbor, reaching it by night-fall. Before dawn the hurricane had blown by; and the sun came up in cloudless amber and blue. We proceeded with the landing and burying of our chests of coin and gems and ingots, which was a task of some length;

and afterward we refilled our water-casks at a cool sweet spring that ran from beneath the palmy hill not far inland.

It was now midafternoon. Captain Dwale was planning to weigh anchor shortly and follow the westering sun toward the Caribbees. There were nine of us, loading the last barrels into the boats, with Red Barnaby looking on and cursing us for being slower than mud-turtles; and we were bending knee-deep in the tepid, lazy water, when suddenly the captain ceased to swear, and we saw that he was no longer watching us. He had turned his back and was stooping over a strange object that must have drifted in with the tide, after the storm: a huge and barnacle-laden thing that lay on the sand, half in and half out of the shoaling water. Somehow, none of us had perceived it hereto-fore.

Red Barnaby was not silent long.

"Come here, ye chancre-eaten coistrels," he called to us. We obeyed willingly enough, and gathered around the beached object, which our captain was examining with much perplexity. We too were greatly bewildered when we saw the thing more closely; and none of us could name it offhand or with certainty.

The object had the form of a great jar, with a tapering neck and a deep, round, abdomens body. It was wholly encrusted with shells and corals that had gathered upon it as if through many ages in the ocean deeps, and was festooned with weeds and sea-flowers such as we had never before beheld; so that we could not determine the substance of which it was made.

At the order of Captain Dwale, we rolled it out of the water and beyond reach of the tide, into the shade of nearby palms; though it required the efforts of four men to move the unwieldy thing, which was strangely ponderous. We found that it would stand easily on end, with its top reaching almost to the shoulders of a tall man. While we were handling the great jar, we heard a swishing noise from within, as if it were filled with some sort of liquor.

Our captain, as it chanced, was a learned man.

"By the communion cup of Satan!" he swore. "If this thing is not an antique wine-jar, then I am a Bed-lamite. Such vessels-though mayhap they were not so huge-were employed by the Romans to store the goodly vintages of Falernus and Cecuba. Indeed, there is today a Spanish wine-that of Valdepenas - which is kept in earthen jars. But this, if I mistake not, is neither from Spain nor olden Rome. It is ancient enough, by its look, to have come from that long-sunken isle, the Atlantis whereof Plato speaks. Truly, there should be a rare vintage within, a wine that was mellowed in the youth of the world, before the founding of Rome and Athens; and which, perchance, has gathered fire and strength with the centuries. Ho! my rascal sea-bullies! We sail not from this harbor till the jar is broached. And if the liquor within be sound and potable, we shall make holiday this evening on the sands."

"Belike, 'tis a funeral urn, full of plaguey cinders and ashes," said the mate, Roger Aglone, who had a gloomy turn of thought.

Red Barnaby had drawn his cutlas and was busily prying away the crust of barnacles and quaint fantastic coral-growths from the top of the jar. Layer on layer of them he removed, and swore mightily at this increment of forgotten years. At last a great stopper of earthen-ware, sealed with a clear wax that had grown harder than amber, was revealed by his prying. The stopper was graven with queer letters of an unknown language, plainly to be seen; but the wax refused the cutlas—point. So, losing all patience, the captain seized a mighty fragment of stone, which a lesser man could scarce have lifted, and broke therewith the neck of the jar.

Now even in those days, I, Stephen Magbane, the one Puritan amid that Christless crew, was no bibber of wine or spirituous liquors, but a staunch Rechabite on all occasions. Therefore I held back-, feeling little concern other than that of reprobation, while the others pressed about the jar and sniffed greedily at the con-tents. But, almost immediately with its opening, my nostrils were assailed by an odor of heathen spices, heavy and strange; and the very inhalation thereof caused me to feel a sort of giddiness, so that

I thought it well to retreat still further. But the others were eager as midges around a fermenting-vat in autumn.

"'Sblood! 'Tis a royal vintage!" roared the captain, after he had dipped a forefinger in the jar and sucked the purple drops that dripped from it. "Avast, ye slumgullions! Stow the water-casks on board, and summon all hands ashore, leaving only a watch there to ward the vessel. We'll have a gala night before we sack any more Spaniards."

We obeyed his order; and there was much rejoicing amid the crew of the Black Falcon at the news of our find and the postponement of the voyage. Three men, grumbling sorely at their absence from the revels, were left on board; though, in that tranquil harbor, such vigilance was virtually needless. We others returned to the shore, bringing a supply of pannikins in which to serve the wine, and provisions for a feast. Then we gathered pieces of drift with which to build a great fire, and caught several huge tortoises along the sands, and unearthed their hidden eggs, so that we might have an abundance and variety of victuals.

In these preparations I took part with no special ardor. Knowing my habit of abstention, and being of a somewhat malicious and tormenting humor, Captain Dwale had expressly commanded my presence at the feast. However, I anticipated nothing more than a little ribaldry at my expense, as was customary at such times; and being partial to fresh tortoise-meat, I was not wholly unresigned to my lot as a witness of the Babylonian inebrieties of the others.

At nightfall, the feasting and drinking began; and the fire of driftwood, with eery witch-colors of blue and green and white amid the flame, leapt high in the dusk while the sunset died to a handful of red embers far on purpling seas.

It was a strange wine that the crew and captain swilled from their pannikins. I saw that the stuff was thick and dark, as if it had been mingled with blood; and the air was filled with the reek of those pagan spices, hot and rich and unholy, that might have poured from a broken tomb of antique emperors.

And stranger still was the intoxication of that wine; for those who drank it became still and thoughtful and sullen; and there was no singing of lewd songs, no playing of apish antics.

Red Barnaby had been drinking longer than the others, having begun to sample the vintage while the crew were making ready for their revel. To our wonderment, he ceased to swear at us after the first cupful, and no longer ordered us about or paid us any heed, but sat peering into the sunset with eyes that held the dazzlement of unknown dreams. And one by one, as they began to drink, the others were likewise affected, so that I marvelled much at the unwonted power of the wine. I had never before beheld an intoxication of such nature; for they spoke not nor ate, and moved only to refill their cups from the mighty jar.

The night had grown dark as indigo beyond the flickering fire, and there was no moon; and the firelight blinded the stars. But one by one, after an interval, the drinkers rose from their places and stood staring into the darkness toward the sea. Unquietly they stood, and strained forward, peering intently as men who behold some marvelous thing; and queerly they muttered to one another, with unintelligible words. I knew not why they stared and muttered thus, unless it were because of some madness that had come upon them from the wine; for naught was visible in the dark, and I heard nothing, save the low murmur of wavelets lapping on the sand.

Louder grew the muttering; and some raised their bands and pointed seaward, babbling wildly as if in delirium. Noting their demeanor, and doubtful as to what further turn their madness might take, I bethought me to withdraw along the shore. But when I began to move away, those who were nearest me appeared to waken from their dream, and restrained me with rough hands. Then, with drunken, gibbering words, of which I could make no sense, they held me helpless while one of their number forced me to drink from a pannikin filled with the purple wine.

I fought against them, doubly unwilling to quaff that nameless vintage, and much of it was spilled. The stuff was sweet as liquid honey to the taste, but burned like hell-fire in my throat. I turned giddy; and a sort of dark

confusion possessed my senses by degrees; and I seemed to hear and see and feel as in the, mounting fever of calenture.

The air about me seemed to brighten, with a redness of ghostly blood that was everywhere; a light that came not from the fire nor from the nocturnal heavens. I be-held the faces and forms of the drinkers, standing with-out shadow, as if mantled with a rosy phosphorescence. And beyond them, where they stared in troubled and restless wonder, the darkness was illumed with the strange light.

Mad and unholy was the vision that I saw: for the harbor waves no longer lapped on the sand, and the sea had wholly vanished. The Black Falcon was gone, and where the reefs had been, great marble walls ascended, flushed as if with the ruby of lost sunsets. Above them were haughty domes of heathen temples, and spires of pagan palaces; and beneath were mighty streets and causeys where people passed in a never—ending throng. I thought that I gazed upon some immemorial city, such as had flourished in Earth's prime; and I saw the trees of its terraced gardens, fairer than the palms of Eden. Listening, I heard the sound of dulcimers that were sweet as the moaning of women; and the cry of horns that told forgotten glorious things; and the wild sweet singing of people who passed to some hidden, sacred festival within the walls.

I saw that the light poured upward from the city, and was born of its streets and buildings. It blinded the heavens above; and the horizon beyond was lost in a shining mist. One building there was, a high fane above the rest, from which the light streamed in a muddier flood; and from its open portals music came, sorcerous and beguiling as the far voices of bygone years. And the revellers passed gayly into its portals, but none came forth. The weird music seemed to call me and entice me; and I longed to tread the streets of the alien city, and a deep desire was upon me to mingle with its people and pass into the glowing fane.

Verily I knew why the drinkers had stared at the darkness and had muttered among themselves in wonder. I knew that they also longed to descend into the city. And I saw that a great causey, built of marble and gleaming with

the red luster, ran downward from their very feet over meadows of unknown blossoms to the foremost buildings.

Then, as I watched and listened, the singing grew sweeter, the music stranger, and the rosy luster brightened. Then, with no backward glance, no word or gesture of injunction to his men, Captain Dwale went slowly forward, treading the marble causeway like a dreamer who walks in his dream. And after him, one by one, Roger Aglone and the crew followed in the same manner, going toward the city.

Haply I too should have followed, drawn by the witching music. For truly it seemed that I had trod the ways of that city in former time, and had known the things whereof the music told and the voices sang. Well did I remember why the people passed eternally into the fane, and why they came not forth; and there, it seemed, I should meet familiar and beloved faces, and take part in mysteries recalled from the foundered years.

All this, which the wine had remembered through its sleep in the ocean depths, was mine to behold and conceive for a moment. And well it was that I had drunk less of that evil and pagan vintage than the others, and was less besotted than they with its luring vision. For, even as Captain Dwale and his crew went toward the city, it appeared to me that the rosy glow began to fade a little. The walls took on a wavering thinness, and the domes grew insubstantial. The rose departed, the light was pale as a phosphor of the tomb; and the people went to and fro like phantoms, with a thin crying of ghostly horns and a ghostly singing. Dimly above the sunken causeway the harbor waves returned; and Red Barnaby and his men walked down beneath them. Slowly the waters darkened above the fading spires and walls; and the midnight blackened upon the sea; and the city was lost like the vanished bubbles of wine.

A terror came upon me, knowing the fate of those others. I fled swiftly, stumbling in darkness toward the palmy hill that crowned the isle. No vestige remained of the rosy fight; and the sky was filled with returning stars. And looking oceanward as I climbed the hill, I saw a lantern that burned on the Black Falcon in the harbor, and discerned the embers of our

fire that smoldered on the sands. Then, praying with a fearful fervor, I waited for dawn.

A VOYAGE TO SFANOMOË

There are many marvellous tales, untold, unwritten, never to be recorded or remembered, lost beyond all divining and all imagining, that sleep in the double silence of far-recessive time and space. The chronicles of Saturn, the archives of the moon in its prime, the legends of Antillia and Moaria—these are full of an unsurmised or forgotten wonder. And strange are the multitudinous tales withheld by the light-years of Polaris and the Galaxy. But none is stranger, none more marvellous, than the tale of Hotar and Evidon and their voyage to the planet Sfanomoë, from the last isle of foundering Atlantis. Harken, for I alone shall tell the story, who came in a dream to the changeless center where the past and future are always contemporary with the present; and saw the veritable happening thereof; and, waking, gave it words:

Hotar and Evidon were brothers in science as well as by consanguinity. They were the last representatives of a long line of illustrious inventors and investigators, all of whom had contributed more or less to the knowledge, wisdom, and scientific resources of a lofty civilization matured through cycles. One by one they and their fellow-savants had learned the arcanic secrets of geology, of chemistry, of biology, of astronomy; they had subverted the elements, had constrained the sea, the sun, the air, and the force of gravitation, compelling them to serve the uses of man; and lastly they had found a way to release the typhonic power of the atom, to destroy, transmute, and reconstruct the molecules of matter at will.

However, by that irony which attends all the triumphs and achievements of man, the progress of this mastering of natural law was coincidental with the profound geologic changes and upheavals which caused the gradual sinking of Atlantis. Age by age, aeon by aeon, the process had gone on: huge peninsulas, whole sea-boards, high mountain-ranges, citted plains and plateaus, all went down in turn beneath the diluvial waves. With the advance of science, the time and location of future cataclysms was more accurately predictable; but nothing could be done to avert them.

In the days of Hotar and Evidon, all that remained of the former continent was a large isle, called Poseidonis. It was well known that this isle, with its opulent sea-ports, its aeon-surviving monuments of art and architecture, its fertile inland valleys, and mountains lifting their spires of snow above semi-tropic jungles, was destined to go down ere the sons and daughters of the present generation had grown to maturity.

Like many others of their family, Hotar and Evidon had devoted long years of research to the obscure telluric laws governing the imminent catastrophe; and had sought to devise a means of prevention, or, at least, of retardation. But the seismic forces involved were too deeply seated and too widespread in their operation to be controllable in any manner or degree. No magnetic mechanism, no zone of repressive force, was powerful enough to affect them. When the two brothers were nearing middle-age, they realized the ultimate futility of their endeavors; and though the peoples of Poseidonis continued to regard them as possible saviors, whose knowledge and resource were well-nigh superhuman, they had secretly abandoned all effort to salvage the doomed isle, and had retired from sea-gazing Lephara, the immemorial home of their family, to a private observatory and laboratory far up in the mountains of the interior.

Here, with the hereditary wealth at their command, the brothers surrounded themselves not only with all the known instruments and materials of scientific endeavor, but also with a certain degree of personal luxury. They were secluded from the world by a hundred scarps and precipices and by many leagues of little-trodden jungle; and they deemed this seclusion advisable for the labors which they now proposed to themselves, and whose real nature they had not divulged to anyone.

Hotar and Evidon had gone beyond all others of their time in the study of astronomy. The true character and relationship of the world, the sun, the moon, the planetary system, and the stellar universe, had long been known in Atlantis. But the brothers had speculated more boldly, had calculated more profoundly and more closely, than anyone else. In the powerful magnifying mirrors of their observatory, they had given special attention to the neighboring planets; had formed an accurate idea of their distance from

the earth; had estimated their relative size; and had conceived the notion that several, or perhaps all, might well be inhabited by creatures similar to man; or, if not inhabited, were potentially capable of supporting human life.

Venus, which the Atlanteans knew by the name of Sfanomoë, was the planet which drew their curiosity and their conjecture more than any other. Because of its position, they surmised that it might readily resemble the earth in climatic conditions and in all the prerequisites of biological development. And the hidden labor to which they were now devoting their energies was nothing less than the invention of a vehicle by which it would be possible to leave the ocean-threatened isle and voyage to Sfanomoë.

Day by day the brothers toiled to perfect their invention; and night by night, through the ranging seasons, they peered at the lustrous orb of their speculations as it hung in the emerald evening of Poseidonis, or above the violet-shrouded heights that would soon take the saffron footprints of the dawn. And ever they gave themselves to bolder imaginings, to stranger and more perilous projects.

The vehicle they were building was designed with complete foreknowledge of all the problems to be faced, of all the difficulties to be overcome. Various types of air-vessels had been used in Atlantis for epochs; but they knew that none of these would be suitable for their purpose even in a modified form. The vehicle they finally devised, after much planning and long discussion, was a perfect sphere, like a miniature moon; since, as they argued, all bodies travelling through etheric space were of this shape. It was made with double walls of a metallic alloy whose secret they themselves had discovered—an alloy that was both light and tough beyond any substance classified by chemistry or mineralogy. There were a dozen small round windows lined with an unbreakable glass, and a door of the same alloy as the walls, that could be shut with hermetic tightness. The explosion of atoms in sealed cylinders was to furnish the propulsive and levitative power and would also serve to heat the sphere's interior against the absolute cold of space. Solidified air was to be carried in electrum containers and vaporized at the rate which would maintain a respirable atmosphere. And foreseeing that the gravitational influence of the Earth would lessen and

cease as they went further and further away from it, they had established in the floor of the sphere a magnetic zone that would simulate the effect of gravity and thus obviate any bodily danger or discomfort to which they might otherwise be liable.

These labors were carried on with no other assistance than that of a few slaves, members of an aboriginal race of Atlantis, who had no conception of the purpose for which the vessel was being built; and who, to ensure their complete discretion, were deaf-mutes. There were no interruptions from visitors, for it was tacitly assumed throughout the isle that Hotar and Evidon were engaged in seismologic researches that required a concentration both profound and prolonged.

At length, after years of toil, of vacillation, doubt, anxiety, the sphere was completed. Shining like an immense bubble of silver, it stood on a westward-facing terrace of the laboratory, from which the planet Sfanomöë was now visible at eventide beyond the purpling sea of the jungle. All was in readiness: the vessel was amply provisioned for a journey of many lustrums and decades, and was furnished with an abundant supply of books, with implements of art and science, with all things necessary for the comfort and convenience of the voyagers.

Hotar and Evidon were now men of middle years, in the hale maturity of all their powers and faculties. They were the highest type of the Atlantean race, with fair complexions and lofty stature, with the features of a lineage both aristocratic and intellectual. Knowing the nearness of the final cataclysm, they had never married, they had not even formed any close ties; but had given themselves to science with a monastic devotion. They mourned the inevitable passing of their civilization, with all its epoch-garnered lore, its material and artistic wealth, its consummate refinement. But they had learned the universality of the laws whose operation was plunging Atlantis beneath the wave—the laws of change, of increase and decay; and they had schooled themselves to a philosophic resignation—a resignation which, mayhap, was not untempered by a foresight of the singular glory and novel, unique experiences that would be entailed by their flight upon hitherto-untravelled space.

Their emotions, therefore, were a mingling of altruistic regret and personal expectancy, when, on the evening chosen for their departure, they dismissed their wondering slaves with a writ of manumission, and entered the orb-shaped vessel. And Sfanomoë brightened before them with a pulsing luster, and Poseidonis darkened below, as they began their voyage into the sea-green heavens of the west.

The great vessel rose with a buoyant ease beneath their guidance; till soon they saw the lights of Susran the capital and its galley-crowded port Lephara, where nightly revels were held and the very fountains ran with wine that people might forget awhile the predicted doom. But so high in the air had the vessel climbed that Hotar and Evidon could hear no faintest murmur of the loud lyres and strident merrymaking in the cities beneath. And they went onward and upward, till the world was a dark blur and the skies were aflame with stars that their optic mirrors had never revealed. And anon the black planet below was rimmed with a growing crescent of fire, and they soared from its shadow to unsettling daylight. But the heavens were no longer a familiar blue, but had taken on the lucid ebon of ether; and no star nor world, not even the littlest, was dimmed by the rivalship of the sun. And brighter than all was Sfanomoë, where it hung with unvacillating lambence in the void.

Mile by stellar mile the earth was left behind; and Hotar and Evidon, peering ahead to the goal of their dreams, had almost forgotten it. Then, gazing back, they saw it was no longer below but above them, like a vaster moon. And studying its oceans and isles and continents, they named them over one by one from their maps as the globe revolved; but vainly they sought for Poseidonis, amid an unbroken glittering waste of sea. And the brothers were conscious of that regret and sorrow which is the just due of all vanished beauty, of all sunken splendor. And they mused awhile on the glory that had been Atlantis, and recalled to memory her obelisks and domes and mountains, her palms with high and haughty crests, and the fire-tall plumes of her warriors, that would lift no longer to the sun.

Their life in the orb-like vessel was one of ease and tranquillity, and differed little from that to which they were accustomed. They pursued their

wonted studies, they went on with experiments they had planned or begun in past days, they read to each other the classic literature of Atlantis, they argued and discussed a million problems of philosophy or science. And time itself was scarcely heeded by Hotar and Evidon; and the weeks and months of their journey became years, and the years were added into lustrums, and the lustrums into decades. Nor were they sensible of the change in themselves and in each other, as the years began to weave a web of wrinkles in their faces, to tint their brows with the yellow ivory of age and to thread their sable beards with ermine. There were too many things to be solved or debated, too many speculations and surmises to be ventured, for such trivial details as these to usurp their attention.

Sfanomoë grew larger and larger as the half-oblivious years went by; till anon it rolled beneath them with strange markings of untravelled continents and seas unsailed by man. And now the discourse of Hotar and Evidon was wholly concerning the world in which they would so soon arrive, and the peoples, animals, and plants which they might expect to find. They felt in their ageless hearts the thrill of an anticipation without parallel, as they steered their vessel toward the ever-widening orb that swam below them. Soon they hung above its surface, in a cloud-laden atmosphere of tropic warmth; but though they were childishly eager to set foot on the new planet, they sagely decided to continue their journey on a horizontal level till they could study its topography with some measure of care and precision.

To their surprise, they found nothing in the bright expanse below that in any manner suggested the work of men or living beings. They had looked for towering cities of exotic aerial architecture, for broad thoroughfares and canals and geometrically measured areas of agricultural fields. Instead, there was only a primordial landscape of mountains, marshes, forests, oceans, rivers, and lakes.

At length they made up their minds to descend. Though they were old, old men, with five-foot ermine beards, they brought the moon-shaped vessel down with all the skill of which they had been capable in their prime; and opening the door that had been sealed for decades, they emerged in turn—Hotar preceding Evidon, since he was a little the elder.

Their first impressions were of a torrid heat, of dazzling color and overwhelming perfume. There seemed to be a million odors in the heavy, strange, unstirring air—odors that were almost visible in the form of wreathing vapors—perfumes that were like elixirs and opiates, that conferred at the same time a blissful drowsiness and a divine exhilaration. Then they saw that there were flowers everywhere—that they had descended in a wilderness of blossoms. They were all of unearthly form, of supermundane size and beauty and variety, with scrolls and volutes of petals many-hued, that seemed to curl and twist with a more than vegetable animation or sentiency. They grew from a ground that their overlapping stems and calyxes had utterly concealed; they hung from the boles and fronds of palm-like trees they had mantled beyond recognition; they thronged the water of still pools; they poised on the jungle-tops like living creatures winged for flight to the perfume-drunken heavens. And even as the brothers watched, the flowers grew and faded with a thaumaturgic swiftness, they fell and replaced each other as if by some legerdemain of natural law.

Hotar and Evidon were delighted, they called out to each other like children, they pointed at each new floral marvel that was more exquisite and curious than the rest; and they wondered at the speed of their miraculous growth and decay. And they laughed at the unexampled bizarrerie of the sight, when they perceived certain animals new to zoology, who were trotting about on more than the usual number of legs, with orchidaceous blossoms springing from their rumps.

They forgot their long voyage through space, they forgot there had ever been a planet called the earth and an isle named Poseidonis, they forgot their lore and their wisdom, as they roamed through the bowers of Sfanomoë. The exotic air and its odors mounted to their heads like a mighty wine; and the clouds of golden and snowy pollen which fell upon them from the arching arbors were potent as some fantastic drugs. It pleased them that their white beards and violet tunics should be powdered with this pollen and with the floating spores of plants that were alien to all terrene botany.

Suddenly, Hotar cried out with a new wonder, and laughed with a more boisterous mirth than before. He had seen that an oddly folded leaf was starting from the back of his shrunken right hand. The leaf unfurled as it grew, it disclosed a flower-bud; and lo! the bud opened and became a triple-chaliced blossom of unearthly hues, adding a rich perfume to the swooning air. Then, on his left hand, another blossom appeared in like manner; and then leaves and petals were burgeoning from his wrinkled face and brow, were growing in successive tiers from his limbs and body, were mingling their hair-like tendrils and tongue-shaped pistils with his beard. He felt no pain, only an infantile surprise and bewilderment as he watched them.

Now from the hands and limbs of Evidon, the blossoms also began to spring. And soon the two old men had ceased to wear a human semblance, and were hardly to be distinguished from the garland-laden trees about them. And they died with no agony, as if they were already part of the teeming floral life of Sfanomoë, with such perceptions and sensations as were appropriate to their new mode of existence. And before long their metamorphosis was complete, and every fiber of their bodies had undergone a dissolution into flowers. And the vessel in which they had made their voyage was embowered from sight in an ever-climbing mass of plants and blossoms.

Such was the fate of Hotar and Evidon, the last of the Atlanteans, and the first (if not also the last) of human visitors to Sfanomoë.

"A Voyage To Sfanomoë" by Clark Ashton Smith. Transcribed by James Russell from *A Rendezvous in Averogne* (Arkham House, 1988), pp.112-119.

AN ADVENTURE IN FUTURITY

A survivor from the lost continents of Mu or Atlantis, appearing on our modern streets, would have seemed no stranger, no more different from others, than the man who called himself Conrad Elkins. And yet I have always found it difficult to define, even in my own thoughts, the many elements which served to constitute this strangeness.

It would seem (since we think mainly in words and are often dependent upon them for the clarification of our ideas) that the adjectives which would fitly describe Elkins were as yet non-existent in our vocabulary; that they could be found only in some unimaginably subtle, complex and refined language, such as might be developed through long cycles of elaborating culture and civilization on an older and riper planet than ours.

Even at first sight I was greatly struck — not to say startled — by the man's personality. Perhaps the thing which arrested me more than all else was the impossibility of assigning him to any known ethnic stock. It is my theory that no human being is so individual that he does not possess obvious earmarks which place him immediately among the tribes of mankind; and I am prone to pride myself on a sedulously cultivated gift for analyzing off-hand the nationality and racial affiliations of any given person.

But Elkins baffled me: his extreme pallor, his fine hair and clear-cut lineaments were, in a general sense, indicative of Caucasian origin; yet I could not find the distinguishing features of any American, European or Asiatic branch of the white race. Also, I could not have told his age: he seemed young, when one considered the smoothness of his face; and yet there was a hint of something incalculably old in his expression.

His garb was modish and well-tailored, with nothing in the least unusual or eccentric. In this, as in all other things, he gave always the subtle impression of desiring to avoid notice. He was a little under medium height and of strangely delicate build; and his features, considered by themselves, were almost effeminate, apart from the great brow of uncorrugated ivory, which resembled the one that we see in the portraits of Edgar Allan Poe.

The small, intricately convoluted ears, the short, deeply curved lips, and the queer exotic molding of the sensitive nostrils all seemed to bespeak the possession of more highly developed senses than are normal to mankind. His eyes were very large and luminous, of an indescribable purplish color, and did not flinch, as I had occasion to observe, before the most intense light. His hands too were quite remarkable: in their extreme fineness, flexibility and vigor, they were the hands of a super-surgeon or a super-artist.

The man's habitual expression was wholly enigmatic. No one could have read his mind, and this not from any lack of mobility or expressiveness in the lineaments themselves, but rather, I felt sure, from the unknown character of his ideas and motivations. About him there was an aura of remote, recondite knowledge, of profound wisdom and aesthetic refinement. Assuredly he was a mystery from all angles; and any one who has gone into chemistry as I have is almost inevitably a lover of mysteries. I made up my mind to learn all that I could concerning him,

I had seen Elkins a number of times, on the streets and in libraries and museums, before the beginning of our actual acquaintance. Indeed, the frequency of our meetings in the multitudinous babel of New York was so phenomenal that I soon decided that he must have lodgings near mine and was perhaps engaged in similar studies. I made inquiries regarding him from librarians and curators, but learned nothing more than his name and the fact that he had been reading the works of Havelock Ellis and other modern authorities on sex, as well as many books in biology, chemistry and physics.

The motives which prompted his visits to the Natural History and other museums were seemingly of a general nature. But evidently he was seeking to familiarize himself with certain branches of modern science as well as archaeology. Being myself a student of chemistry, who had given nearly a decade of collegiate and post-graduate effort to the subject, and also several years of independent work and experimentation in my laboratory on Washington Square, my curiosity was touched with fraternal interest when I learned of Elkins' studies.

Others than myself, I found, had been struck by the man's appearance; but no one really knew anything about him. He was extremely taciturn, volunteering no information whatever regarding himself, though impeccably polite in all his dealings with others. Apparently he desired to avoid making friends or acquaintances — a far-from-difficult procedure in any large city. Yet oddly enough I did not find it hard to know him — which, as I later learned, was due to the fact that Elkins had somehow conceived an interest in me and also was well aware of my interest.

I came upon him one May afternoon as he was standing in the Natural History Museum before a case of artifacts from the Mounds of the Mississippi Valley. To all appearance he was deeply absorbed. I had made up my mind to address him on some pretext or another, when suddenly he forestalled me.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he said in a grave, finely modulated voice, "how many civilizations have been irretrievably lost, how many have been buried by deluge, glacial action and geological cataclysm, and also by profound social upheavals with their subsequent reversions to savagery?"

"And do you ever think that present-day New York will some time be as fragmentary and fabulous as Troy or Zimbabwe? That archaeologists may delve in its ruins, beneath the sevenfold increment of later cities, and find a few rusting mechanisms of disputed use, and potteries of doubtful date, and inscriptions which no one can decipher?"

"I assure you, this is not only probable but certain. The very history of America, in some future epoch, will become more or less legendary; and it would surprise you to know the theories and beliefs regarding the current civilization which will some day be prevalent."

"You speak as if you had some inside information on the subject," I replied half-jestingly.

Elkins gave me a quick, inscrutable glance.

"I am interested in all such things," he said. "And by the same token, Mr. Pastor, I believe you are something of a speculative thinker yourself, along different lines. I have read your little thesis on the cosmic rays. Your idea, that these rays might become a source of illimitable power through concentration, appeals to me. I can safely say that the idea is quite ultra-modern."

I was surprised that he knew my name; but obviously he had made inquiries similar to mine. Also, of course, I was pleased by his familiarity with a treatise that was generally looked upon as being rather advanced, not to say fantastic, in its theories.

The ice being thus broken, the growth of our acquaintance was rapid. Elkins came to my rooms and laboratory many times; and I in turn was admitted to his own modest lodgings, which as I had surmised were only a few blocks away from mine on the same street.

A score of meetings, and the development of a quasi-friendship, left me as fundamentally ignorant concerning Elkins as I had been at first. I do not know why he liked me — perhaps it was the universal human need of a friend, inescapable at all times and in all places. But somehow the half-affectionate air which he soon adopted toward me did not make it any easier to ask the personal questions that seethed within me.

The more I came to know him, the more I was overcome by a sense of impossible seniority on his part — by the feeling that he must be older, and intellectually more evolved than myself, in a fashion that could not be measured by tabulated or classified knowledge. Strangely — since such a feeling has been unique in my experience — I was almost like a child before him, and grew to regard him with something of the awe which a child conceives toward an elder who is seemingly omniscient. Nor was the awe conditioned at first by anything which he actually said or did.

The furnishings of his rooms were as noncommittal as the man himself. There was nothing to seize upon as indicating his nationality and antecedents. However, I saw at once that he was a linguist, for there were

books in at least four modern languages. One, which he told me he had just been reading, was a recent and voluminous German work on the physiology of sex.

"Are you really much interested in that stuff?" I ventured to ask. "There is, it seems to me, overmuch discussion and all too little knowledge regarding such matters."

"I agree with you," he rejoined. "One hears of special knowledge, but it fails to materialize on investigation. I thought that I had an object in studying this branch of twentieth century science; but now I doubt greatly if there is anything of value to be learned."

I was struck by the tone of intellectual impersonality which he maintained in all our discussions, no matter what the subject. His range of information was obviously vast, and he gave the impression of boundless reserves, though there were certain avenues of science, generally looked upon as important in our day, to which he seemed to have given only a somewhat cursory and negligent attention.

I gathered that he did not think much of current medicine and surgery; and he startled me more than once by pronouncements on electricity and astronomy that were widely at variance with accepted ideas. Somehow, at most times he made me feel that he was discreetly curbing the full expression of his thoughts. He spoke of Einstein with respect and seemed to regard him as the one real thinker of the age, mentioning more than once with great approval his theories concerning time and space.

Elkins showed a tactful interest in my own chemical researches; but somehow I felt that he looked upon them as being rather elementary. Once in an unguarded manner, he spoke of the transmutation of metals as if it were already an accomplished everyday fact; explaining the reference, when I questioned him, as a rhetorical flight of imagination in which he had lost himself for the moment.

The late spring and early summer passed, and the mystery which had drawn me to Elkins was still unsolved. I did indeed learn from a casual remark that

he was a native of North America — which failed to render his ethnic distinction any the less baffling. I decided that he must represent a reversion to some type whose lineaments have not been preserved in history, or must be one of those rare individuals who anticipate in themselves a whole era of the future evolution of the race. I will not deny that the truth occurred to me more than once; but how was I to know that the truth was a thing so utterly improbable?

Much as I had grown to admire and even revere him, Elkins was to me the most incomprehensible and alien being on earth; and I sensed in him a thousand differences of thought and emotion, and a world of unfamiliar knowledge which for some reason he was trying to withhold from my apprehension.

One day, toward the end of the summer, he said to me:

"I must leave New York before long, Hugh."

I was startled, since hitherto he had made no reference to leaving or to the duration of his stay.

"You are returning home, perhaps? I hope it will at least be possible for us to keep in touch with each other."

He gave me a long, unreadable glance.

"Yes, I am going home. But, odd as it may seem to you, there will be no possibility of future communication between us. We part for all time — unless you should care to accompany me."

My curiosity seethed anew at his cryptic words. Yet somehow I was still unable to ask the questions that arose to my lips.

"If you mean that as an invitation," I said, "I shall be glad to accept and pay you a visit sometime."

"Yes, it is an invitation," he rejoined gravely. "But before accepting, would you not prefer to know where you are going? Perhaps, when you hear the truth, you will not care to accept. And perhaps you will not even believe me.

For once, my inquisitiveness was stronger than my respect.

"Do you live on Mars or Saturn, then?" He smiled. "No, I am a denizen of the Earth; though it may surprise you, in the present infantile condition of astronautics, to learn that I have made more than one voyage to Mars. I realize your natural curiosity concerning me; and an explanation is now necessary. If, when you have learned the truth, you still care to accompany me as my guest, I shall be overjoyed to take you with me and to offer you my hospitality for as long as you wish to remain."

He paused a moment. "The mystery that has troubled you will be fully explained when I tell you that I am not a man of your own era, but have come from a period far in the future — or what is known to you as the future. According to your notation, my proper time is about 15,000 A. D. My real name is Kronous Alkon — I have assumed the vaguely analogous one of Conrad Elkins, as well as the speech and garb of your time, for reasons which will be fairly obvious.

"At present I shall give you only a brief summary of the causes which prompted my visit to the twentieth century. It would require a long discourse to even offer you an adequate sketch of our social anatomy and problems; and I speak merely of one aspect.

"Humanity in our age is menaced with gradual extinction through an increasing overpreponderance of male children; and a method of sex-control, which would restore in some degree the balance of nature, is urgently desired.

"Your age, the first great mechanistic era, is a well-nigh mythical period to us, and less known even than certain earlier periods, because of the all-engulfing savagery to which man reverted at its end. There ensued long dark ages, through which only the most fragmentary records survived,

along with a legendry of vast, uncouth machines which the superstition of peoples identified with avenging demons. Perhaps they were not without reason, since the abuse of machinery was one of the main causes of your débâcle.

"Also, there remained a widespread popular belief, accepted even now by many of our scientists, that the people of the twentieth century could determine at will the sex of their offspring; and that the secret of this determination was lost in the ensuing barbarism, along with certain minor secrets of chemistry and metallurgy which no later civilization has ever re-discovered.

"The former belief has no doubt arisen because the sexes are well known to have been numerically equal in your time; and because they have not been equal since. For many thousands of years after the rebuilding of an enlightened civilization on the ruins of yours, girl-children predominated; and the whole world became a matriarchy.

"The period known as the Amazonian wars, which were the most sanguinary and merciless wars in history, put an end to the matriarchy by wiping out all but a few hundred thousand of the human race. These reverted to the most primitive conditions: there were more dark ages, and then, slowly, the evolution of our present cycle of renewed culture, in which the male predominates both numerically and intellectually. But our difficulties were not over.

"It was to recover the fabled secret of sex-determination that I came back through the ages, and have lived among you for a full year of twentieth century time. It has been a fascinating experience, and I have learned many things regarding the antique world which are altogether unknown and unverifiable to my fellows.

"Your crude, cumbrous machines and buildings are not unimpressive in their way; and your science is not without a few inklings of our later discoveries. But obviously you know even less regarding the mysterious laws of biology and sex than we do; your supposed method of

determination is truly fabulous, and I have no reason for tarrying any longer in an alien epoch.

"Now to become personal. Hugh, you are the only friend I have cared to make in the epoch. Your mind is in some respects beyond the age; and though everything will seem different to you in our time, and much will be incomprehensible, I am sure you will find a surpassing interest in the world of 15,000 A. D. I shall of course provide you with a safe means of return to your own era whenever you wish. Will you go with me, Hugh ?"

I could not reply for a moment. I was awed, astonished, bewildered even to stupefaction by the remarkable things that my friend had just told me. His statements were no less than miraculous — yet somehow they were not incredible. I did not doubt his veracity for an instant. After all, it was the only logical explanation of everything that puzzled me in Conrad Elkins.

"Of course I'll go with you," I cried, overcome and dazzled by the strange opportunity which he offered me.

There were a hundred obvious questions that I wanted to ask Elkins. Anticipating certain of these, he said:

"The machine in which I traveled through time is a vessel commonly used among us for space-travel. I will explain to you later the modification of the original mechanism which rendered possible a journey in that fourth-dimensional space known as time. I have reason to believe that the invention is wholly unique and has never been duplicated.

"I had nurtured for many years my project for visiting your period; and in preparation for this, I made a prolonged study of all available historic data bearing thereon, as well as the archaeological and literary remains of antique America. As I have said, the remains are fragmentary; but the language, being the root-stock of our own tongue, is fairly well-known to our scholars.

"I took pains to master it as far as possible; though I have since found that some of our pronunciations and definitions are erroneous; also, that the

vocabulary is much ampler than we had supposed.

"I studied likewise the costumes of your period, of which a few plates are still extant, and made for myself habiliments which would enable me to pass unnoticed upon my arrival."

Elkins paused, and went to his clothes-closet. He opened it and brought out a suit of some soft brown fabric. It was not badly tailored, though the cut was unfamiliar. Later, I found that the actual plate from which it had been designed belonged to the year 1940, ten years in advance of our own date.

Elkins went on. "My departure was carefully planned, and I am supposed to have gone on a voyage to the asteroids, several of which, notably Pallas, Vesta and Ceres, have been colonized by human beings for hundreds of years past.

"I made the actual time-journey in a state of unconsciousness. This, as you will soon learn, was inevitable because of the temporary abstraction from everything that creates or contributes to what we know as consciousness. I was prepared for it, and had made all the necessary calculations and adjustments beforehand, and had carefully synchronized the movement of the vessel in the time-dimension with the movement of the earth and the solar system in space. Geographically speaking, I would not move an inch during the entire trip.

"Rising to an elevation of thirty thousand feet above the earth, I started the time-mechanism. There was a period of absolute oblivion (a second or a million years would have seemed the same) and then, with the ceasing of the time-flight, I recovered my senses. Knowing that I was now in the twentieth century, if my calculations were correct, and not choosing to advertise my strangeness, I sought for a place where I could land quietly and without detection.

"The place which I selected after much circumnavigation and study was an inaccessible cliff in the Catskill Mountains, far from any settlement. There I descended at night and left my machine, whose presence was undetectable

either from below or above. I finished my descent of the cliff by the use of an anti-gravitational device, and made my way from the wilderness.

"The next day I was in New York, where, for the most part, I have remained ever since and have carried on unobtrusively my studies of your civilization. For monetary needs, I had brought with me some disinterred coins of your period, and also a few small ingots of chemically wrought gold."

He showed me one of the coins — a silver dollar that was stained almost beyond recognition, like an ancient obolus, by the oxidation of untold centuries. Then he brought out another garment from the clothes-closet — a short flaring tunic of dull red with a long graceful mantle that could be detached at will, since it was fastened to the shoulders by two clasps of carven silver. The fabric, as well as the garment itself, was strange to me. Kronous also brought out a pair of sandals, vaguely resembling those of the ancients, though they were not made of leather but of some stiff, indestructible cloth.

"This," he said, "is the raiment in which I left Akameria, the America of 15,000 A. D. I will have a similar tunic made for you by some costume-tailor here in New York — and also sandals, though I suppose the sandals will have to be made of leather, since the material used in these is a chemical product of my own time. I am planning to leave the day after tomorrow, and I hope that will not be too soon for you.

"Indeed it won't," I replied. "I haven't many preparations to make — there's nothing to do but lock up the laboratory and phone a few friends that I am leaving for a world-tour of indefinite length. I don't imagine there'll be any search-parties."

Two days later, with an hour of daylight still before us, Elkins and I had reached the base of the unsurmountable cliff on which the time-machine was hidden. The last four hours of our journey had been on foot. We were in the wildest section of the Catskills; and staring up at the terrible

mountain-wall, I felt an increased awe of my strange companion, who seemed to have no doubt whatever of his ability to scale it.

He opened a small satchel, whose contents he had not hitherto revealed to me, and took out the anti-gravitational device of which he had spoken. The thing was a hollow disk of some dull, unidentifiable metal, with chains of an equally ambiguous material which secured it to the body. Elkins showed me the simple operation of the mechanism which, he said, was electronic in its nature. Then he strapped it to his chest, set the apparatus running, and rose slowly in air till he reached the top of the precipice. There he disappeared from view; but a few moments later, the metal disk was lowered at the end of a long cord for my use in surmounting the cliff.

Following directions, I proceeded to adjust the mechanism and start it going. The feeling of utter weightlessness as I floated upward was a most unique experience. It was as if I were a feather wafted on an imperceptible air-current. Being unused to the apparatus, I did not understand the finer technique of movement beneath its influence; and when I came to the cliff-edge I would have continued to drift skyward if my companion had not reached out and stopped me.

I found myself standing beside him on a broad ledge overhung by another cliff which rose immediately above it. Certainly Elkins could not have chosen a safer hiding-place for this time-machine.

The vessel itself, whose door he now proceeded to unlock, was a long, spindle-shaped affair, evidently designed for swift movement in air or ether. It could not have carried more than three people. Inside, it was lined with lockers and machinery, and three great slings or cradles in which the driver and passengers were immovably suspended. This of course, was requisite during the loss of gravity and normal weight in ether-flight. Elkins said that he had found it equally convenient to strap himself into one of the slings during his voyage in time.

Both of us were still dressed in twentieth century attire. Elkins now donned the tunic and sandals of his own age, which he had brought along in the

satchel together with the duplicates that had been made for me by a somewhat mystified costumer. These Elkins directed me to put on. I obeyed, feeling like a masquerader in the odd garb.

"That is the last of Conrad Elkins," said my companion, pointing to his discarded suit. "Henceforth you must call me Kronous Alkon. Your name will seem pretty outlandish among us; so I think I will introduce you as Huno Paskon, a young colonial born on Pallas."

Kronous Alkon now busied himself with the machinery of the vessel. This, to my untrained eye, was awesomely intricate. He adjusted a series of movable rods that were set in a notched board, and seemed to be winding up a clock-like apparatus with a numbered dial and three hands. There were hundreds — perhaps thousands — of figures on the dial.

"That," he said, "is to control within precise limits the extent of our forward movement in the time-dimension. We are all set for the proper year, month and day."

He now fastened me, and then himself, in the complicated slings, and turned to a small key-board with many knobs and levers, which seemed to be distinct from the rest of the machinery.

"These," he said, "are the controls for atmosphere and ether-flight. Before turning on the time-power, I shall rise to a higher altitude and fly south for about fifty miles."

He turned one of the knobs. There was a low, drumming sound; but I would not have been conscious of any movement, if a sudden sunset glow through the vessel's ports had not shown that we were rising above the level of the cliffs.

After a few minutes, Kronous Alkon moved one of the levers; and the drumming ceased. "The power of space-flight," he said, "is provided by atomic disintegration. Now, for the time-flight, I shall make use of a very different kind of power — a strange, complex energy derived from the

repercussion of cosmic rays, which will transport us into what, for lack of a better name, is called the fourth dimension.

"Properly speaking, we will be outside of space, and, from a mundane view-point, will be non-existent. I assure you however that there is no danger. When the time-power shuts off automatically in 15,000 A.D., you and I will awaken as if from a deep sleep. The sensation of dropping off may prove rather terrific, but no more so than the taking of certain anaesthetics. Simply let yourself go and realize that there is nothing to fear."

He seized a large rod and gave it a powerful jerk. I felt as if I had received an electric shock that was tearing all my tissues apart and disintegrating me into my ultimate cells and molecules. In spite of the reassurance of Kronous Alkon, I was overwhelmed by an unspeakably confusing terror. I had the sensation of being divided into a million selves, all of which were whirling madly downward in the maelstrom of a darkening gulf. They seemed to go out one by one like sparks as they reached a certain level; till soon all were gone, and there was nothing anywhere but darkness and unconsciousness. . .

I came to myself in a manner which was like the direct reversal of my descent into oblivion. First, there was that sense of remote and spark-like entities, which increased to a multitude, all of them drifting upward in cosmic gloom from an ultimate nadir; and then the gradual merging of these entities into one, as the interior of the time-machine resumed coherent outline around me. Then I saw before me the figure of Kronous Alkon, who had twisted about in his sling, and was smiling as he met my gaze. It seemed to me that I had slept for a long, long time.

My companion pressed a knob, and I had the feeling of one who descends in an elevator. It was not necessary for Kronous Alkon to tell me that we were sinking earthward. In less than a minute, trees and buildings were visible through the ports, and there was a slight jar as we landed.

"Now," said Kronous, "we are on my country estate near Djarma, the present capital of Akameria. Djarma is built on the ruins of the city of New

York, but is hundreds of miles inland, since there have been extensive geologic changes during the past 13,000 years. You will find that the climate is different too, for it is now sub-tropical. Weather conditions are pretty much under human control, and we have even reduced by artificial means the permanent areas of ice and snow at the poles."

He had unstrapped himself and was performing the same service for me. Then he opened the door of the vessel and motioned me to precede him. I was met by wafts of warm, perfume-laden air as I stepped out on a stone platform adjoining a sort of aerodrome — a great, shining edifice in which were housed various air-craft of unfamiliar types.

Not far away was another building, marked by a light, graceful architecture, with many tiers of open galleries, and high, fantastic, Eiffel-like towers. There were extensive gardens around this building; and broad fields of vegetables that I did not recognize ran away on each side of the distance. Somewhat apart, there stood a group of long, one-storied houses.

"My home," said Kronous. "I trust that everything is well. I left the estate in charge of my two cousins, Altus and Oron. Also, there is Trogh the Martian overseer, and a barracoon of Venusian slaves, who do all the agricultural labor. All our necessary menial and industrial tasks are performed by such slaves, who have been imported to earth for many generations, and are now becoming a problem in themselves. I hope there has not been any trouble during my absence."

I noticed that Kronous had taken from an inner pocket of his tunic a small rod, vaguely resembling a flash-light and having a ball of red glass or crystal at one end. This he was carrying in his hand.

"An electronic projector," he explained. "The current paralyzes, but does not kill, at any distance up to fifty yards. Sometimes we have to use such weapons when the slaves are recalcitrant. The Venusians are a low, vicious type and require careful handling.

We started toward the house, whose lower stories were half-concealed by tall trees and massed shrubbery. No sign of life was manifest, as we

followed a winding path among fountains of colored marble, and palms and rhododendrons, and baroque, unearthly-looking plants and flowers that would have baffled a present-day botanist. Kronous told me that some of these latter were importations from Venus. The hot, humid air was saturated with odors which I found oppressive, but which Kronous appeared to inhale with delight.

Rounding a sharp turn in the path, we came to an open lawn immediately in front of the house. Here an unexpected and terrific scene revealed itself. Two men, attired like Kronous, and a huge, barrel-chested, spindle-legged being with an ugly head like that of a hydrocephalous frog, were fronting a horde of bestial creatures who would have made the Neanderthal man look like an example of classic beauty in comparison.

There must have been a score of these beings, many of whom were armed with clubs and stones, which they were hurling at the three who opposed them. Their brown-black bodies were clothed only with patches and tufts of coarse, purple hair; and perhaps half of their number were adorned with thick, bifurcated tails. These I learned later, were the females — the males, for some obscure evolutionary reason, being undistinguished in this respect.

"The slaves!" cried Kronous, as he ran forward with his projector leveled. Following him, I saw the fall of one of the two men beneath the impact of a large stone. A dozen of the slaves were lying senseless on the lawn; and I could see that the persons they were attacking were armed with projectors.

Our approach had not been noticed; and Kronous made deadly use of his weapon at close range, stretching slave after slave on the ground. Turning, and apparently recognizing their master, the remainder began to disperse sullenly. Their rout was completed by the heavy-chested giant, who hurled after them with his catapult-like arms much of the ammunition which they had dropped on beholding Kronous.

"I fear that Altus is badly hurt," said Kronous as we joined the little group on the lawn. The other man, whom Kronous now introduced to me as his cousin Oron, was stooping over the fallen figure and examining a hidden

wound from which blood was streaming heavily amid the fine black hair. Oron, who acknowledged the introduction with a courteous nod, had himself been cut and bruised by several missiles.

The introduction had been made in English. Kronous and Oron now began to talk in a language that I could not understand. Apparently some explanation was being made regarding myself, for Oron gave me a quick, curious glance. The giant had ceased hurling stones and clubs after the departing Venusians, and now came to join us.

"That is Trogh, the Martian overseer," said Kronous to me. "Like all of his race he is extremely intelligent. They are an old people with an immemorial civilization that has followed a different trend from ours but is not therefore necessarily inferior; and we of earth have learned much from them, though they are highly reserved and secretive."

The reddish-yellow body of the Martian was attired only in a black loin-cloth. His squat, toad-like features, under the high, bulging, knobby head, were impossible to read; and I was chilled by the sense of an unbridgeable evolutionary gulf as I looked into his icy green eyes.

Culture, wisdom, power, were manifest behind his gaze, but in forms that no human being was properly fitted to understand. He spoke in a harsh, guttural voice, evidently using human language, though the words were difficult to recognize as being in any way related to those employed by Kronous and Oron, because of an odd prolongation of the vowels and consonants.

Carrying among us the still unconscious form of Altus, Oron, Kronous, Trogh and myself entered the portico of the nearby house. Both the architecture and the material of this building were the most beautiful I had ever seen. Much use was made of arabesque arches and light decorative pillars. The material, which resembled a very translucent onyx, was, as Kronous told me, in reality a synthetic substance prepared by atomic transmutation.

Within, there were many couches covered with unknown opulent fabrics of superb design. The rooms were large, with lofty, vaulted ceilings; and in many cases were divided only by rows of pillars, or by tapestries. The furniture was of much beauty, with light, curving lines that conformed to the architecture; and some of it was made from gem-like materials and gorgeous metals that I could not name. There were scores of paintings and statues, mainly of the most bizarre and fantastic nature, and testifying to supreme technical skill. I learned that some of the paintings were first-hand depictions of scenes on alien planets.

We laid Altus on a couch. The man was indeed severely injured, and his breathing was slow and faint. In all likelihood he had suffered some degree of brain-concussion.

Kronous brought out a bulb-shaped mechanism ending in a hollow cone, which, he explained to me, was the generator of a force known as osc — a super-electric energy used in the treatment of wounds as well as of illness in general. It was of sovereign power in restoring the normal processes of health, no matter what the cause of derangement might be.

When the generator was set in action by Kronous, I saw the emission of a green light from the hollow end, falling on the head of the wounded man. The pulse of Altus became stronger and he stirred a little, but did not awaken as yet. When Kronous turned off the green ray after a few minutes, he asked me to examine the wound; and I found that it was already beginning to heal.

"Altus will be perfectly well in two or three days," said Kronous.

"The real problem," he went on, "is the Venusians — and not only for me but for everyone else. It was a dreadful mistake to bring them to earth in the beginning; they are not only ferocious and intractable, but they breed with the most appalling fecundity, in opposition to the dwindling numbers of the human race. Already they outnumber us five to one; and in spite of our superior knowledge and weapons, I believe that they constitute our worst menace. All that they require is a little organization"

Evening had now fallen. Trogh had retired to his own quarters, presided over by his Martian wife, at some distance from the house. A meal consisting mainly of delicious fruit and vegetables, most of which were new to me, was served by Oron. I learned that one of the vegetables was a species of truffle imported from Venus. After we had eaten, a strong, delicately flavored liqueur, made from a fruit that vaguely resembled both the peach and the pineapple, was brought out in deep, slender glasses of crystal.

Kronous now spoke at some length. He told me that he had already confided the truth concerning his time-voyage and myself to Oron. "The reason I did not want my trip to be known," he said, "is because of the mechanical principle involved, which might be stolen or duplicated by some other inventor. And I am dubious of its value to mankind in general.

"We of the present era have learned not to abuse mechanical devices in the gross manner of earlier generations; but even so, it is not well that man should know too much. We have conquered space, and the conquest has entailed new perils. On the whole, I think it would be better if the conquest of time should remain an isolated exploit. I can trust Oron, and also Altus, to keep the secret."

He went on to speak of various things which he felt that it was necessary for me to know. "You will find," he soliloquized, "that our world is motivated by desires and ambitions very different from those which are most prevalent in your own. The mere struggle for existence, for wealth and power, is almost alien to our comprehension. Crime is extremely rare among us, and we have few problems of administration or government. When such occur, they are submitted to the arbitration of a board of scientists.

"We have infinite leisure; and our aspirations are toward the conquest of remote knowledge, the creation of rare art-forms, and the enjoyment of varied intellectual and aesthetic sensations, aided by the long life-span, averaging three or four hundred years, which our mastery of disease has made possible. (I myself am 150 years old, as it may surprise you to learn.)

"I am not sure, however, that this mode of life has been wholly to our advantage. Perhaps through the very lack of struggle, of hardship, of difficulty, we are becoming effete and effeminate. But I think we will be put to a severe test before long.

"Coming as you have from a commercial age," he went on, "it will no doubt interest you to be told that half of our own commerce is interplanetary. There are whole fleets of ether-craft that ply between the earth, Mars, Venus, the moon and the asteroids. However, we are on the whole not a commercial people. Apart from those of us who have chosen to live in cities, the remainder are mostly the owners of large plantations where everything necessary is produced or manufactured by slave-labor. It is, of course, only our dwindling numbers that have made this system possible.

"We possess the power, if we so desire, of manufacturing everything through a mode of chemical synthesis. However, we find that natural food-stuffs are preferable to the synthetic kind; and we make less use of our knowledge in this regard than you might suppose. Perhaps the chief use of our mastery of atomic conversion is in the making of fabrics and building-materials.

"There is much more that I might tell you; but you will see and learn for yourself. Tomorrow morning, Oron and myself will begin to instruct you in our language."

Thus began several quiet weeks of life on Kronous' estate. I made rapid progress in the language, which bore about the same relation to English that English bears to Latin. I was given access to a fine and extensive library filled with the latest scientific works, with fiction and poetry of the latter-day world, and also a few rare items dating from periods which, though long subsequent to our own time, were nevertheless buried in the dust of antiquity. On several occasions Kronous took me through his laboratory, in which he could perform the most incredible marvels of atomic transformation, and feats of microscopic analysis that revealed a whole world in the electron. I realized that the science of our time was child's-play compared with that of the era into which I had been transported.

One day Kronous showed me a cabinet full of objects that had been recovered from the ruins of New York and other antique cities. Among them were porcelain dinner-plates, Masonic emblems, pearl necklaces, China door-knobs, twenty dollar gold-pieces, and spark-plugs. The sight of them, and the realization of their extreme age, combined with their homely familiarity, aroused in me the most violent nostalgia — an intolerably desperate homesickness for my own period. This feeling lasted for days; and Kronous did not show me any more ancient relics.

Altus had recovered fully from his wound; and I heard of no more insubordination from the slaves of Kronous. However, I could not forget the terrible scene which had formed my initiation into life on the estate. I saw many times the savage-looking Venusians, who went about their agricultural labors with a sullen air of mindless brooding; and I was told much concerning them.

Their ancestors were inhabitants of the deep and noisomely luxuriant jungles of Venus, where they lived under the most primitive conditions, in perpetual conflict with terrible animals and insects, and also with each other. They were cannibalistic by nature, and their habits in this respect had proven hard to curb. Every now and then on the plantation one of their number would disappear surreptitiously.

The slave-trade had flourished for several centuries, but had languished of late years, since those brought to earth had now multiplied in excess of the required quota. The original Venusian slaves were mostly, though not all, the captives of tribal raids and wars; and they had been purchased very cheaply by terrestrial traders in exchange for alcoholic liquors and edged weapons.

However, the Venusians had been willing to sell even members of their own tribes. Apparently there was little attachment or loyalty among them; and their instincts were those of wolves and tigers.

The Martians had come to earth mainly as traders; though their services were sometimes procurable for such positions as the one held by Trogh.

They were taciturn and aloof; but they had permitted certain of their chemical and astronomical discoveries to be utilized by human beings.

They were a philosophical race, much given to dreaming, and were universally addicted to the use of a strange drug, known as gnultan, the juice of a Martian weed. This drug was more powerful than opium or hashish, and gave rise to even wilder visions, but its effects were physically harmless. Its use had spread among human beings, till a law was passed forbidding its importation. It was still smuggled both by Martians and Terrestrials, in spite of all the efforts made to stop it; and addiction to the drug was still fairly common among humanity.

By means of radio and television, both of which were now employed in vastly simplified and improved forms, Kronous and his cousins were in hourly touch with the whole world of their time, and even with the earth-stations on Mars, Venus, the moon and the larger asteroids. I was privileged to see in their televisions many scenes that would have appeared like the maddest visions of delirium back in 1930.

We were posted on all the news of the world; and with my growing mastery of the language, I soon came to the point where I no longer required the interpretation of Kronous to understand the announcements. Much of this news was not reassuring, but served to confirm the prophetic fears that had been voiced by my host.

There were daily outbreaks on the part of Venusian slaves all over the planet; and in many cases much damage was inflicted before they could be subdued. Also, these outbreaks were beginning to display a mysterious concertion and a degree of mentality of which the Venusians had not hitherto been believed capable.

Acts of sabotage, as well as personal assaults, were increasingly common; and the sabotage in particular often showed a rational intelligence. Even at this early date, there were those who suspected that the Venusians were being aided and incited by the Martians; but there was no tangible proof of such abetting at the time.

One day, from Djarma, there came the news of that bizarre minerals plague known as the Black Rot. One by one the buildings in the suburbs of Djarma were being attacked by this novel disease, which caused their synthetic stone and metal to dissolve inch by inch in a fine black powder. The Rot was the work of a micro-organism which must some how have been introduced from Venus, where its ravages had been noted in certain mountain-ranges. Its appearance on earth was a mystery, but had all the air of another act of sabotage. It was capable of devouring half the elements known to chemistry; and off-hand, nothing could be discovered to arrest its progress, though all the Akameriaian chemists were at work on the problem.

Kronous and I watched in the televisor the working of the Black Rot. Somehow, it was inexpressibly terrifying to see the slowly spreading area of silent and utter devastation, the crumbled or half-eaten buildings from which the occupants had fled. The thing had started on the outskirts of Djarma, and was steadily devouring the city in an ever-broadening arc.

All the best-known scientists of Akameria were summoned in conclave at Djarma to study the Rot and devise if possible a means of retardation. Kronous, who was a renowned chemist and microscopist, was among those called upon. He offered to take me with him, and of course I accepted with the utmost eagerness.

The trip was a matter of no more than forty miles, and we made it in a light air-vessel belonging to Kronous — a sort of monoplane run by atomic power.

Though I had already familiarized myself with many of the scenes of Djarma by television, the city was a source of absorbing fascination to me. It was far smaller than New York and was widely spaced, with many gardens and exuberant semi-tropical parks meandering through its whole extent. The architecture was nearly all of the same open, aerial type that I had seen in Kronous' home. The streets were broad and spacious and there were comparatively few large buildings. The whole effect was one of supreme grace and beauty.

The streets were not overcrowded with people, and no one ever seemed to be in a hurry. It was strange to see the grotesque Martians and bestial Venusians mingling everywhere with humans of the same type as Kronous. The stature and build of Kronous were above the average and it was rare to see a man who was taller than five feet six inches. I, of course, with my five feet eleven, was very conspicuous and attracted much attention.

The conclave of savants was being held in a large edifice, built expressly for such meetings, at the heart of Djarma. Entering, we found that about two hundred men, some of whom were extremely old and venerable, had already gathered in the council chamber. Much general discussion was going on; and those who had ideas to suggest were listened to in respectful silence. Kronous and I took seats amid the gathering. So intent were all these men on the problem to be solved, that few of them even vouchsafed me a curious glance.

Peering at the faces about me, I was awed by an impression of supreme intellectuality and wisdom — the garnered lore of incalculable ages. Also, on many of these countenances I perceived the marks of a world-old ennui, and the stamp of a vague sterility, an incipient decadence.

For some time, Kronous and I listened to the discussion that was in progress. Pondering the various data brought forward, I was struck by the fact that all the elements assailed by the Black Rot belonged at the opposite end of the scale from radium in regard to their atomic activity and explosiveness.

Sotto voce, I commented on this to Kronous. "Is it not possible," I suggested, "that radium might be of some use in combatting the plague? I believe you have told me that radium, like any other element, is easily manufacturable nowadays."

"That is a striking inspiration," said Kronous thoughtfully. "And it might be worth trying. With our chemical mastery we can make all the radium we need at will in our laboratories. With your permission I am going to broach the idea."

He arose and spoke briefly amid the attentive silence of the assembly. "Credit for the idea," he announced as he ended, "must be given to Huno Paskon, a young colonial from Pallas, whom I have brought to earth as my guest."

I felt myself abashed by the grave, unanimous gaze of these erudite and revered savants, who all eyed me in a manner that I could not fathom. Somehow, it seemed unthinkable presumptuous to have made any suggestion in their presence.

However, there appeared to me much serious debate going on — a widespread discussion in which the proposed use of radium was manifestly meeting with great favor. At last a venerable savant named Argo Kan, who was spokesman of the assembly, rose and said:

"I vote for an immediate trial of the method suggested by Kronous Alkon and Huno Paskon."

Others, one by one, stood up and cast similar verbal votes, till the motion had been approved by nearly everyone present.

The meeting then dispersed, and I learned from Kronous that work was being immediately begun in local laboratories for the preparation of radium on a large scale and its utilization in the most effective form.

In less than an hour, several chemists were ready to visit the area of destruction with portable machines in which radium was disintegrated and used as a fine spray. It was magical in arresting the Black Rot which had been eating its way continuously into the city, creeping from house to house along the crumbling pavements. The whole affected area, which now covered several square miles, was soon surrounded by a cordon of men equipped with the radium-machines; and, to the vast relief of the people of Djarma and Akameria, the plague was pronounced under control.

During our stay in Djarma, Kronous and I were guests in a fine building set apart for the use of visiting scientists. I was amazed at the sybaritic luxury developed by this people — a luxury which, though illimitably and

unimaginably resourceful, was at no time in excess of the bounds of good taste.

There were baths that would have been the envy of a Roman emperor, and beds that would have reduced Cleopatra to beggary. We were lulled by rich, aerial music from no visible source, and were served with food and with all other necessities as if by intangible hands, at the mere verbal expression of a wish.

Of course, there was a mechanical secret to such wonders; but the secret was cleverly hidden, and the means never obtruded itself. Humbly I realized how far ahead of ourselves were these men of 15,000 A.D., with their quiet and consummate mastery of natural laws — a mastery which none of them seemed to regard as being of any great value or importance.

I was somewhat embarrassed by the honor paid to myself as the originator of a means of retarding the Black Rot, and could only feel that my inspiration had been merely a fortunate accident. Compliments, both written and verbal, were showered upon me by scientific dignitaries; and it was only through the intercession of Kronous, who explained my aversion to publicity, that I was able to avoid numerous invitations.

Finding that he had certain business to transact, Kronous was not ready to return to his estate for several days. Since he could not devote all of his time to me, I formed the habit of going for long walks on the streets of Djarma and through its environs.

Walking slowly amid the changing scenes of a metropolis has always been a source of unending fascination for me. And of course, in this unfamiliar city of the future, where all was new and different, the lure of such wanderings was more than doubled. And the sensations of knowing that I trod above the ruins of New York, separated from my own period by 13,000 years with their inconceivable historic and telluric vicissitudes, was about the weirdest feeling that I had ever experienced.

It was a strange spectacle through which I sauntered. Vehicles were used, of a light, noiseless, gliding type without visible means of propulsion; and

there were many air-vessels which flew deftly and silently overhead and discharged their passengers on the roofs or balconies of the high buildings. And the landing or departure of great, shinning ether-ships was an hourly occurrence. However, it was the throng of foot-passengers which engaged my attention most.

Both sexes and all ages were attired in gaily colored costumes. I was impressed by the practical absence of noise, tumult and hurry; all was orderly, tranquil, unconfused. From the scarcity of women in the crowd, I realized how true were the racial fears expressed by Kronous. The women whom I saw were seldom beautiful or attractive according to 20th Century standards; in fact, there was something almost lifeless and mechanical about them, almost sexless.

It was as if the sex had long reached the limit of its evolutionary development and was now in a state of stagnation or virtual retrogression. Such, I learned from Kronous, was indeed the case. But these women, because of their rarity and their value to the race were shielded and protected with great care. Polyandry was prevalent; and romantic love, or even strong passion, were unknown things in this latter-day world.

A horrible homesickness came over me at times as I roamed amid this alien throng and peered into shop-windows where outlandish food-stuffs and curiously wrought fabrics from foreign planets were often displayed. And the feeling would increase whenever I approached the Martian quarter, where dwelt a considerable colony of these mysterious outsiders.

Some of them had transported their own many-angled and asymmetrical architecture to earth. Their houses defied the rules of geometry — one might almost say those of gravity; and the streets about them were full of exotic odors, among which the stupefying reek of the drug gnultan was predominant. The place allured me, even though it disturbed me; and I strolled often through the tortuous alleys, beyond which I would reach the open country and wander among luxuriant fields and palmy woods that were no less baffling and unfamiliar than the scenes of the City.

One afternoon I started out later than usual. As I passed through the city, I noticed that there were few Venusians in the throng and overheard rumours of fresh revolts. However, I paid little attention to these at the time.

Twilight had overtaken me when I turned back from the open country toward the Martian quarter. The sylvan wilderness, in which I had never met many people, was quieter than usual. I was following a narrow path bordered with thick shrubbery and palmettoes; and I began to hurry with a vague apprehensiveness, remembering the rumors I had heard. Heretofore I had been unafraid; but now in the thickening twilight I was aware of some indefinible menace; and I remembered that I had foolishly forgotten to arm myself with the electronic projector which Kronous had given me to carry in my wanderings.

I had not seen anyone in the neighborhood. But now, as I went along, I scrutinized the deepening shadows of the shrubbery on each side of the path. Suddenly I heard a sound behind me that was like the scuffling of heavy naked feet; and turning saw that seven or eight Venusians, several of them armed with clubs, were closing in upon me. They must have been crouching amid the leafage as I passed.

Their eyes gleamed like those of ravenous wolves in the twilight; and they uttered low, snarling, animal noises as they hurled themselves upon me. I avoided the viciously swinging weapons of the foremost and laid him out with a neat upper-cut; but the others were at me in a moment, using indiscriminately their clubs and dirty talons. I was aware of claws that tore my clothing and slashed my flesh; and then something descended upon my head with a dull crash, and I went down through reeling flame and whirling darkness to utter insensibility.

When I came to myself I was conscious at first only of my pain-racked head and limbs. The crown of my head was throbbing violently from the blow I had received. Then I heard a mutter of thick unhuman voices, and opening my eyes, beheld the flame-lit faces and bodies of a score of Venusians who were dancing around a great fire. I was lying on my back; and it required only a tentative effort at movement to tell me that my hands and feet were

bound. Another man, similarly bound and perhaps dead or dying, was stretched on the ground beside me.

I lay still, deeming it inadvisable to let the Venusians know that I had recovered consciousness, and watched the lurid scene. It was something out of Dante's *Inferno*, with the red reflection that ran bloodily on the uncouth, hairy limbs and hideous, demoniacal features of the interplanetary slaves. Their movements, though they had a semblance of some rude, horrible rhythm, were nearer to the capering of animals than they were to the dancing of even the lowest terrestrial savages; and I could not help but wonder that such beings had mastered the art of lighting a fire.

The use of fire, I was told, had been unknown to them in their own world till the advent of men. I remembered hearing also that they sometimes employed it nowadays in their cannibalistic revels, having acquired a taste for cooked meat. Likewise it was rumored of late that they were not averse to human flesh and that more than one unfortunate had fallen a victim to their practices.

Such reflections were not conducive to my peace of mind. Also, I was oddly disturbed by a large sheet of metal grating, lying near the fire and having a grotesque resemblance to a giant gridiron, which was visible at intervals between the whirling figures. At second glance I recognized it as a sort of perforated tray which was used in the dehydration of various fruits. It was about eight feet in length by four in width.

Suddenly I heard a whisper from the man beside me, whom I had supposed unconscious.

"They are waiting for the fire to die down," he said, almost inaudibly. "Then they will broil us alive over the coals on that sheet of metal."

I shuddered, though the information was far from novel or unexpected.

"How did they get you?" I enquired, in a tone as low as that of my interlocutor.

"I am, or was, the owner of these slaves," he answered. "They caught me unaware this time; but I believe, or hope, that my family has escaped. I made the mistake of thinking the slaves were thoroughly cowed from punishments that I inflicted not long ago. I gather that there has been a concerted revolt this afternoon, from what the savages themselves (whose speech I understand) have let drop. They are not so unintelligent as most people believe them to be; and I have a theory that the terrestrial climate has served to stimulate their mentality.

"They possess secret means of communication among themselves over the most unbelievable distances that are no less efficient than radio. I have long suspected, too, that they have a tacit understanding with the Martians, who are covertly abetting them. The micro-organism that caused the Black Rot was no doubt smuggled from Venus by the Martians in their ether-vessels; and there is no telling what sort of plague they will loose next. There are some queer and frightful things on those alien planets — things that are deadly to terrestrials though harmless enough to the natives. I fear that the end of human supremacy is near at hand."

We conversed in this fashion for some time; and I learned that the name of my fellow-captive was Jos Talar. In spite of our dire and seemingly hopeless predicament, he showed no evidence of fear; and the abstract, philosophical manner in which he viewed and discussed the situation was truly remarkable. But this, as I had occasion to observe, was characteristic of the temper of mankind in that era.

A full half hour must have passed, as we lay there bound and helpless. Then we saw that the huge fire was beginning to die down, revealing a vast bed of glowing coals. The light grew dimmer on the antic figures around it and the beast-like faces of the Venusians were more loathsome than ever in the lowering gloom.

The dancing ceased, as if at an unspoken signal; and several of the dancers left the circle and came to where Jos Talar and myself were lying. We could see the gloating of their obscene eyes and the slavering of their greedy

mouths, as they dug their filthy talons into our flesh and dragged us roughly toward the fire.

In the meanwhile others had stretched the huge metal tray upon the bed of coals. All of them were eyeing us with a hyena-like avidity that made me shiver with sickness and repulsion.

I will not pretend that I was able to regard with any degree of complacency the prospect of becoming in the near future a Venusian *pièce de résistance*. But I nerved myself to the inevitable, reflecting that the agony would soon be over. Even if they did not knock us on the head beforehand, there would be a swift though terrible death on the bed of coals.

Our captors had now seized us by our feet and shoulders, as if they were about to fling us upon the improvised gridiron. There was an awful moment of suspense; and I wondered why the Venusians did not complete the expected action. Then I heard from their lips a low snarling, with an unmistakable note of alarm, and saw that all of them were watching the starlit heavens. They must have possessed keener senses than those of humanity, for at first I could neither see nor hear anything to justify their attention. Then, far-off among the stars, I perceived a moving light such as was carried by the Akamerian air-vessels.

At first I did not connect the light with any idea of possible rescue; and I wondered at the perturbation of the slaves. Then I realized that the light was flying very low and was descending straight toward the fire. It drew near with meteoric rapidity, till Jos Talar and myself and the cowering savages were illuminated by the full beams of the bluish searchlight. The vessel itself, like all of its kind, was almost noiseless; and it slid to earth and landed with preternatural speed and dexterity, within twenty paces of the fire.

Several men emerged from its dim bulk and ran toward us. The slaves had loosened their hold on Jos Talar and myself; and growling ferociously, they crouched as if ready to leap upon the advancing figures.

The men were all armed with tubular objects, which I supposed were the usual electronic projectors. They levelled them at the Venusians; and thin rays of flame, like those from acetylene torches, issued from them and stabbed across the gloom. Several of the savages screamed with agony and fell writhing to the ground.

One of them dropped among the coals and howled for a few instants like a demon who has been taken in some pitfall prepared for the damned. The others began to run but were followed by long slender beams that searched them out in their flight, dropping several more. Soon the survivors had disappeared from view in the darkness, and the fallen had ceased to writhe.

As our rescuers approached, and the glow of the dying fire illumed their faces, I saw that the foremost was Kronous Alkon. Some of the others I recognized as scientists whom I had met in Djarma.

Kronous Alkon knelt beside me and severed my bonds with a sharp knife, while someone else performed a like service for Jos Talar.

"Are you hurt ?" asked Kronous.

"Not severely," I replied. "But you certainly came just in the proverbial nick of time. A moment more, and they would have thrown us upon the fire. Your coming is a miracle — I cannot imagine how it happened." "That is easily explained," said Kronous as he helped me to my feet "When you did not return this evening, I became alarmed; and knowing the usual directions of your wanderings I studied this part of the environs of Djarma very closely with a nocturnal televiser, which renders plainly visible the details of the darkest landscape.

"I soon located the Venusians and their fire and recognized one of the bound figures as being yourself. After that, it required only a few minutes for me to collect several companions, arm them, charter an air-vessel, and seek the spot indicated by the televiser. I am more than thankful that we arrived in time.

"There has been," he went on, "a world-wide revolt of the slave during the past few hours. Two of the continents, Asia and Australia, are already in their hands; and a desperate struggle is going on throughout Akameria. We are no longer using the electronic projectors, which merely stun. The weapons we used tonight are heat-ray generators, which kill. But come — we must return to Djarma. I will tell you more afterwards."

Our flight to Djarma was uneventful; and Kronous and I were landed by our companions on the roof of the building in which we had been housed. Here we said good-bye to Jos Talar, who went on with the rescuing scientists to find certain relatives and to learn if possible the fate of his family.

Kronous and I descended to our rooms, where we found Altus, who had just arrived from the estate. He told us that Oron had been killed in a terrific combat with the slaves that afternoon. Trogh had mysteriously disappeared; and Altus himself had been compelled to flee in one of the air-vessels belonging to Kronous. A truly horrible state of affairs.

My bruised head and lacerated body required attention, and Kronous gave an application of the green ray, which marvelously relieved all my pain and soreness. Altus, miraculously, had escaped injury this time in his hand-to-hand fighting with the slaves.

We sat for hours while Kronous told us the events of the day and while fresh reports continued to arrive. The world-situation had indeed become serious; and apart from the universal revolt of the slaves, many new and unlooked-for perils had disclosed themselves.

In the actual conflict the Venusians had suffered more heavily than the Terrestrials, and thousands of them had been slain and others compelled to flee before the superior weapons of mankind. But to counterbalance this, a number of new and baffling plagues had been loosed by the savages, who, it was now universally felt, were being assisted in this regard by the Martians. In the western part of Akameria great clouds of a vicious and deadly Martian insect had appeared — an insect which multiplied with the most damnable rapidity.

In other sections gases had been freed in the air that were harmless to both Venusians and Martians but deleterious to human beings. Vegetable moulds from Venus, which fed like malignant parasites on all terrene plant-forms, had also been introduced in a hundred places; and no one knew what else the morrow would reveal in the way of extra-planetary pests and dangers. I thought of the prophecy of Jos Talar.

"At this rate," said Kronous, "the world will soon be rendered uninhabitable for man. With our heat-rays and other weapons we might wipe out the revolutionists in time; but the plagues they have brought in are a different problem."

There was little sleep for any of us that night. We rose at early dawn, to learn the appalling news that the whole of Europe was now subject to the interplanetary slaves. The bacteria of a score of awful Martian and Venusian diseases, to which the outsiders had developed more or less immunity, were decimating the human population, and those who survived were unable to cope with their conquerors. Similar diseases were appearing in Akameria; and all the other plagues were spreading with malign celerity.

"We must go to my estate immediately and retrieve the time machine, which I left in the aerodrome," said Kronous to me. "You can then return to your own age — it is not fair to ask you to stay longer in a world that is nearing ultimate ruin and chaos. We, the last remnants of mankind, will fight it out as best we can; but the war is not yours."

I protested that I had no desire to leave him; that I would remain to the end; and also that I had implicit faith in the power of humanity to overcome its extra-terrestrial foes.

Kronous smiled, a little sadly. "Nevertheless," he persisted, "we must recover the time-machine. Thus your means of escape will be assured, no matter what happens. Will you go with me? I intend to make the trip this very forenoon."

Of course, I could not object to this; and I was eager to accompany him. Apart from any use which I myself might make of it, the time-machine was

too rare and valuable a thing to be left at the mercy of Venusian vandals, who might well destroy it in their campaign of nation-wide sabotage.

Kronous, Altus and myself made the brief trip in the same light air-vessel that had been used for the journey to Djarma. The fertile, luxuriant countryside with fronded woods and tall, airy spires of embowered mansions above which we had flown less than a week before was now patched and blotched with devastation. Many of the houses had been gutted by fire; and the ravages of the vegetable mould from Venus had blighted many fields and forests, whose grass and foliage rotted beneath it to a nauseous grey slime.

Approaching the estate of Kronous, we saw that we should arrive none too soon. The Venusians had fired the house, and even their own quarters, and columns of smoke were arising from the doomed edifices. A dozen slaves were nearing the aerodrome with the obvious intention of trying to set it on fire, or of destroying or damaging the vessels which it contained.

The features of Kronous were deadly pale with anger. He said nothing as he steered the atomic monoplane directly toward the slaves, who had now seen us and were running headlong in a futile effort to escape. Several of them had been carrying lighted torches, which they now dropped. We swooped upon them, flying only a few feet above the ground in the open space that surrounded the aerodrome.

Two of the slaves were caught and mangled by the sharp prow of the flier; and Altus and myself, using heat-ray projectors, accounted for five more as we passed them. Only three remained; and wheeling the vessels around in a sharp curve, and steering with one hand, Kronous himself dispatched them with his heat-ray.

We landed near the entrance of the aerodrome. Kronous went in; and a minute later, the time-vessel flew gently forth and settled on the platform. Kronous opened the door and called to me.

"You and I, Hugh, will return to Djarma in the time-ship; and Altus will take charge of the monoplane."

No more of the Venusians were in sight; though we saw enough of their handiwork as we circled above the plantation before starting for Djarma. Kronous sighed at the ruin that had been wrought, but otherwise gave no evidence of emotion, and maintained a stoical silence.

Half an hour later we were back in our apartments at Djarma; and the time-machine was securely housed in an aerodrome nearby. Since it had all the appearance of a small interplanetary flier, no one but ourselves ever dreamt of its real nature and use.

Every hour brought fresh news of the national damage inflicted by the planetary aliens and their plagues. The Martians had now declared open hostility. Their first movement had been to destroy all the human embassies and trading-stations on Mars and to seize a vast amount of ether-shipping; but before these overt actions were generally known, they had also assumed the offensive everywhere on earth.

They possessed a frightful weapon, the zero-ray, which could penetrate animal tissue in an instant with fatal frost-bite. This weapon had been kept a secret; its invention and mode of operation were obscure to human scientists; and it was no less lethal and effective than the heat-ray. A battle was now going on in the Martian quarter of Djarma; and the Martians were holding their own.

Air-vessels had tried dropping explosives on the quarter; but this was found to be more dangerous to humanity than to the Martians; for the latter were using some sort of unknown ray which detonated the explosives in mid-air, or even while they were still on board the air-vessels.

I was forced to marvel at the equanimity shown by the people of Akameria in the face of all these dire problems and dangers. Everywhere, scientists were coolly endeavoring to combat the new pests and were seeking to devise more efficacious weapons for use against the outsiders. No fear or alarm was exhibited by anyone. Probably the secret of this calm, imperturbable attitude lay in the lofty mental evolution and philosophic

detachment that had been universally attained by the human race through the past ages.

Knowing how insecure and impermanent was their tenure of existence among the inimical forces of the cosmos, men were prepared to meet their doom with resignation and dignity. Also, the race had grown old; and many, perhaps, were tired of the quotidian sameness of life and were ready to welcome anything, no matter how hazardous, in the nature of change.

Djarma was now full of refugees from the outlying plantations; and more were arriving hourly. But, gazing on the calm, unhurried throng, no one could have guessed the parlousness of the general situation. There was no evidence of strife or peril or apprehension; and even the war in the Martian quarter was conducted silently, since the weapons employed were all noiseless. Some of the Martian buildings, however had been fired by heat-rays; and a pall of black smoke was rising and mushrooming above the ruddy flames.

Djarma had suffered less, so far, than most of the other Akameriaian centers. The whole country was in disorder, and all communication was becoming seriously deranged. However, a few hours after the return of Kronous, Altus, and myself, there came from southern Akameria the warning of a new and more lethal plague than any which hitherto appeared.

A tiny venusian micro-organism, a sort of aerial algae, which spread and increased with phenomenal celerity, had been turned loose and was rendering the air unbreathable for human beings over a vast and ever growing area. It was harmless to the Venusians themselves, for the thick, vaporous air of their native jungles was full of it; and though it was deleterious to the Martians, the latter had prepared themselves beforehand and were all equipped with respiratory masks and atmospheric alters.

But men were dying of slow asphyxiation, marked by the most painful pneumonic symptoms, wherever overtaken by the strange pest. It was visible in the air, which displayed a saffron color when invaded by the organism. For this reason, it soon became known as the Yellow Death.

Beyond the manufacture and distribution of air-masks on a large scale, nothing could be done by savants to combat the new plague. The saffron cloud was rolling northward hour by hour — a noiseless and irresistible doom; and the situation was indeed desperate. A conclave of scientists was called; and it was soon decided that humanity must evacuate the regions menaced by the deadly aerial scourge. The only resource was for men to retreat toward the Arctic circle and entrench themselves in dominions where the organism could not penetrate, since it thrived only in warm, tropical air.

"This," said Kronous to me, sorrowfully, "is a preparatory step toward our final abandonment of the earth. The planetary aliens have conquered, as I knew they would. The cycle of human domination has completed itself; and the future belongs to the Venusians and Martians. I venture to predict, however, that the Martians will soon enslave the Venusians and rule them with a far stricter hand than we humans."

He went on. "Hugh, the hour of our parting will soon arrive. You could leave us at any rate, as you know; but perhaps you will wish to see the drama to its end."

I pressed his hand but could say nothing. There was a tragic pathos in the swift doom which threatened the final remnant of the race. Remote and alien as these people were in many of their customs and ideas and feelings, they were still human. I admired their stoical courage in the face of irretrievable disaster; and for Kronous himself, after our long association and mutual vicissitudes, I had conceived a real affection.

All of Djarma was now astir with preparations for the northward flight. Every air-vessel or space-craft available was mustered for use; and more were being built with miraculous expedition. There were great air-liners and freighters in which personal belongings, food-supplies and laboratory equipment were transported; and the skies were thronged with their departure and their return for new cargoes. Perfect order and organization prevailed, and there was no trace of hurry or confusion anywhere.

Kronous, Altus and myself were among the last to leave. An immense bank of smoke was looming above the Martian quarter, and the weird, hydrocephalous inhabitants were being driven forth by the flames and were invading the deserted streets of the human section when we rose above the city in the time-vessel and steered northward. Far to the south, we could see a saffron cloud that had covered the horizon — the micro-organic plague that was smothering the whole of Akameria.

Beneath the guidance of Kronous, our vessel rose to a lofty elevation where more than the ordinary atmospheric speed was possible. Flying at seven hundred miles per hour, we soon neared the realms of perpetual winter and saw the sheeted ice of the polar regions glittering far below us.

Here humanity had already entrenched itself; and whole cities were being reared as if by magic amid the eternal wastes of snow. Laboratories and foundries were erected, where synthetic foods and fabrics and metals were prepared in immense quantities. The polar domains, however, were too inhospitable, and the climate too rigorous for a warmth-loving race, to form more than a way-station in the flight of humanity.

It was decided that the larger asteroids, which had long been successfully colonized by man, would form the most suitable cosmic refuge. A great fleet of space-vessels was soon assembled in readiness for departure; more were built amid the ice and snow; and each day was marked by the arrival of ships from mid-ether, plying among the planets, which had been warned by radio of existing terrestrial conditions and had come to assist in the universal Hegira.

In those days, before the ultimate farewell, I came to know Kronous better than at any previous time. His altruism and imperturbable fortitude aroused my deepest admiration. Of course he had cast in his lot with the people of his own era, and official posts on one of the ether-liners had already been assigned to Altus and himself. Those who displayed any interest in the matter were informed by Kronous that I, Huno Paskon, intended to return alone in a small ether-vessel to Pallas my supposedly natal asteroid. Even between ourselves, we seldom mentioned the real nature of my journey.

Kronous gave me careful instruction regarding the mechanism, both spatial and chronological, of the time-machine; but to avoid any error, he himself arranged all the controls in preparation for my flight through backward time. All that I would have to do was to turn on the power of the cosmic rays; and the machine would land me in 1930. Then after it landed, an automatic device would shoot it back to his own day.

The day of departure came, when vessels were ready for the inter-cosmic transportation of the world's remaining people. It was an awful and solemn moment. Ship by ship and fleet by fleet, from the ice-founded platforms on which they had been resting, the long bulks of glittering metal upon the Aurora Borealis and disappeared in the chill, dreadful gulfs of outer space. The ship to which Kronous had been assigned was one of the last to leave; and he and I stood for a long while beside the time-vessel and watched the soaring of those skyward flocks Altus had already said a farewell to me and had gone aboard the great ether-liner.

For me, the hour was full of infinite sorrow and a strange excitement, in the realization that man was abandoning his immemorial home and would henceforward be an exile among the worlds. But the face of Kronous was a marble mask; and I could not surmise his thoughts and feelings.

At last he turned to me and smiled with an odd wistfulness. "It is time for me to go — and time for you also," he said. "Good by, Hugh — we shall not meet again. Remember me sometimes, and remember the final fate of the human race, when you are back in your own epoch."

He pressed my hand briefly and then climbed aboard the spaceliner; and he and Altus waved to me through the thick crystal of a sealed port as the huge vessel rose in air for its flight upon the interplanetary void. Sadly, regretting almost that I had not insisted upon accompanying them, I locked myself in the time-vessel and pulled the lever which would begin my own flight across the ages.

AN OFFERING TO THE MOON

"I believe," announced Morley, "that the roofless temples of Mu were not all devoted to solar worship, but that many of them were consecrated to the moon. And I am sure that the one we have now discovered proves my point. These hieroglyphics are lunar symbols beyond a doubt."

Thorway, his fellow-archaeologist, looked at Morley with a surprise not altogether due to the boldly authoritative pronouncement. He was struck anew by the singularity of Morley's tones and expression. The dreamy, beardless, olive features, that seemed to repeat some aboriginal Aryan type, were transfigured by a look of ecstatic absorption. Thorway himself was not incapable of enthusiasm when the occasion seemed to warrant it; but this well-nigh religious ardor was beyond his comprehension. He wondered (not for the only time) if his companion's mentality were not a trifle... eccentric.

However, he mumbled a rejoinder that was deferential even though non-committal. Morley had not only financed the expedition, but had been paying a liberal stipend to Thorway for more than two years. So Thorway could afford to be respectful, even though he was a little tired of his employer's odd and unauthorized notions, and the interminable series of sojourns they had made on Melagesian isles. From the monstrous and primordial stone images of Easter Island to the truncated pyramidal columns of the Ladrões, they had visited all the far-strewn remains which are held to prove the former existence of a great continent in the mid-Pacific. Now, on one of the lesser Marquesas, hitherto unexplored, they had located the massive walls of a large temple-like edifice. As usual, it had been difficult to find, for such places were universally feared and shunned by the natives, who believed them haunted by the immemorial dead, and could not be hired to visit them or even to reveal their whereabouts. It was Morley who had stumbled upon the place, almost as if he were led by a subconscious instinct.

Truly, they had made a significant discovery, as even Thorway was compelled to admit. Except for a few of the colossal topmost stones, which had fallen or splintered away, the walls were in well-nigh perfect preservation. The place was surrounded by a tangle of palms and jackfruit and various tropical shrubs; but somehow none of them had taken root within the walls. Portions of a paved floor were still extant, amid centurial heaps of rubble. In the center was a huge, square block, rising four feet above the ground-level, which might well have served as an altar. It was carved with rude symbols which appeared to represent the moon in all its digits, and was curiously grooved across the top from the middle to one side with a trough that became deeper toward the edge. Like all other buildings of the sort, it was plain that the temple had never supported a roof.

"Yes, the symbols are undoubtedly lunar," admitted Thorway.

"Also," Morley went on, "I believe that rites of human sacrifice were performed in these temples. Oblations of blood were poured not only to the sun but to the moon."

"The idea is maintainable, of course," rejoined Thorway. "Human sacrifice was pretty widespread at a certain stage of evolution. It may well have been practiced by the people who built this edifice."

Morley did not perceive the dryness and formality of his confrere's assent. He was preoccupied with feelings and ideas, some of which could hardly have been the natural result of his investigations. Even as in visiting many others of the ancient remains, he had been troubled by a nervous agitation which was a compound of irresoluble awe and terror, of nameless, eager fascination and expectancy. Here, among these mighty walls, the feeling became stronger than it had been anywhere else; and it mounted to a pitch that was veritably distracting, and akin to the disturbed awareness that ushers in the illusions of delirium.

His idea, that the temple was a place of lunar worship, had seized him almost with the authority of an actual recollection, rather than a closely reasoned inference. Also, he was troubled by sensory impressions that

bordered upon the hallucinative. Though the day was tropically warm, he was conscious of a strange chill that emanated from the walls — a chill as of bygone cycles; and it seemed to him that the narrow shadows wrought by a meridian sun were peopled with unseen faces. More than once, he was 'prompted to rub his eyes, for ghostly films of color, like flashes of yellow and purple garments, came and went in the most infinitesimal fraction of time. Though the air was utterly still, he had the sense of perpetual movement all around him, of the passing to and fro of intangible throngs. It was many thousand years, in all likelihood, since human feet had trodden these pavements; but Morley could have cried aloud with the imminence of the longdead ages. It appeared to him, in a brief glimpse, that his whole life, as well as his journeyings and explorations in the South Seas, had been but a devious return to some earlier state of being; and that the resumption of this state was now at hand. All this, however, continued to perplex him mightily: it was as if he had suffered the intrusion of an alien entity.

He heard himself speaking to Thorway, and the words were unfamiliar and remote, as if they had issued from the lips of another.

"They were a joyous and a child-like race, those people of Mu," he was saying; "but not altogether joyous, not wholly child-like. There was a dark side... and a dark worship — the cult of death and night, personified by the moon, whose white, implacable, frozen lips were appeased only by the warm blood that flowed upon her altars. They caught the blood in goblets as it ran from the stone grooves... they raised it aloft... and the goblets were swiftly drained in mid-air by the remote goddess, as if the sacrifice had proven acceptable."

"But how do you know all this?" Thorway was quite amazed, no less by his companion's air than by the actual words. Morley, he thought, was less like a modern, every-day American than ever. He remembered, inconsequently, how all the natives of the various island groups had taken to Morley with an odd friendliness, without the reserve and suspicion often accorded to other white men. They had even warned Morley against the guardian spirits of the ruins — and they did not always trouble to warn others. It was almost as if

they regarded him as being in some manner akin to themselves. Thorway wondered... though he was essentially unimaginative.

"I tell you, I know," Morley said, as he walked up and down beside the altar. "I have seen..." his voice trailed off in a frozen whisper, and he seemed to stiffen in every limb, and stood still as with some momentary catalepsy. His face grew deadly pale, his eyes were set and staring. Then, from between rigid lips; he uttered the strange words, "Rhalu muvasa than," in a monotonous, hieratic tone, like a sort of invocation.

Morley could not have told what it was that he felt and saw in that moment. He was no longer his known and wonted self; and the man beside him was an unheeded stranger. But he could remember nothing afterwards — not even the odd vocals he had uttered whatever his mental experience may have been, it was like a dream that fades instantly when one awakens. The moment passed, the extreme rigidity left his limbs and features, and he resumed his interrupted pacing.

His confrere was staring at him in astonishment, not unmingled with solicitude.

"Are you ill? The sun is pretty hot today. And one should be careful. Perhaps we had best return to the schooner. "

Morley gave a mechanical assent and followed Thorway from the ruins towards the seashore, where the schooner they had used in their voyaging was anchored in a little harbor less than a mile distant. His mind was full of confusion and darkness. He no longer felt the queer emotions that had seized him beside the altar, nor could he recall them otherwise than dimly. All the while he was trying to recollect something which lay just below the rim of memory; something very momentous, which he had forgotten long, long ago.

Lying in a cane couch beneath an awning on the schooner's deck, Morley drifted back to his normal plane of consciousness. He was not unwilling to accept Thorway's suggestion, that he had suffered a touch of sun among the ruins. His ghostly sensations, the delirium-like approach to a state of

awareness which had no relation to his daily life, were now unlikely and unreal, In an effort to dismiss them altogether, he went over in his mind the whole of the investigative tour he had undertaken, and the events of the years preceding it.

He remembered his youthful luctations against poverty, his desire for that wealth and leisure which alone makes possible the pursuit of every chimera; and his slow but accelerative progress when once he had acquired a modicum of capital and had gone into business for himself as an importer of Oriental rugs. Then he recalled the chance inception of his archaeological enthusiasm — the reading of an illustrated article which described the ancient remains on Easter Island. The insoluble strangeness of these little-known relics had thrilled him profoundly, though he knew not why; and, he had resolved to visit them some day. The theory of a lost continent in the Pacific appealed to him with an almost intimate lure and imaginative charm; it became his own particular chimera, though he could not have traced to their psychal origin the feelings behind his interest. He read everything procurable on the subject; and as soon as his leisure permitted, he made a trip to Easter Island. A year later, he was able to leave his business indefinitely in the hands of an efficient manager. He hired Thorway, a professional archaeologist with much experience in Italy and Asia Minor, to accompany him; and purchasing an old schooner, manned by a Swedish crew and captain, he had set out on his long, devious voyage among the islands.

Going over all this in his thoughts, Morley decided that it was now time to return home. He had learned all that was verifiable regarding the mysterious ruins. The study had fascinated him as nothing else in his life had ever done; but for some reason his health was beginning to suffer. Perhaps he had thrown himself too assiduously into his labors; the ruins had absorbed him too deeply. He must get away from them, must not risk a renewal of the queer, delusory sensations he had experienced. He recalled the superstitions of the natives, and wondered if there were something in them after all; if unwholesome influences were attached to those primeval stones. Did ghosts return or linger from a world that had been buried beneath the waves for

unknown ages? Damn it, he had almost felt at times as if he were some sort of revenant himself.

He called to Thorway, who was standing beside the rail in conversation with one of the Norse sailors.

"I think we have done enough for one voyage, Thorway," he said. "We will lift anchor in the morning and return to San Francisco."

Thorway made little effort to conceal his relief. He did not consider the Polynesian isles a very fruitful field for research: the ruins were too old and fragmentary, the period to which they belonged was too conjectural, and did not deeply engage his interest.

"I agree," he rejoined. "Also, if you will pardon me for saying it, I don't think the South Sea climate is one of ideal salubriousness. I've noticed occasionally indispositions on your part for some time past."

Morley nodded in a weary acquiescence. It would have been impossible to tell Thorway his actual thoughts and emotions. The man was abysmally unimaginative.

He only hoped that Thorway did not think him a little mad — though, after all, it was quite immaterial.

The day wore on; and the swift, purpureal darkness of eventide was curtailed by the rising of a full moon which inundated sea and land with warm, ethereal quicksilver. At dinner, Morley was lost in a taciturn abstraction; and Thorway was discreetly voluble, but made no reference to the late archaeological find. Svensen, the captain, who ate with them, maintained a monosyllabic reticence, even when he was told of the proposed return to San Francisco. After eating, Morley excused himself and went back to the cane couch. Somewhat to his relief, he was not joined by Thorway.

Moonlight had always aroused in Morley a vague but profound emotion. Even as the ruins had done, it stirred among the shadows of his mind a

million ghostly intimations; and the thrill he felt was at times not unalloyed with a cryptic awe and trepidation, akin, perhaps, to the primal fear of darkness itself.

Now, as he gazed at the tropic plenilune, he conceived the sudden and obsessing idea that the orb was somehow larger, and its light more brilliant than usual; even as they might have been in ages when the moon and earth were much younger. Then he was possessed by a troublous doubt, by an inenarrable sense of dislocation, and a dream-like vagueness which attached itself to the world about him. A wave of terror surged upon him, and he felt that he was slipping irretrievably away from all familiar things. Then the terror ebbed; far that which he had lost was far off and incredible; and a world of circumstances long-forgot was assuming or resuming, the tinge of familiarity.

What, he wondered, was he doing on this queer ship? It was the night of the sacrifice to Rhalu, the selenic goddess; and he, Matla, was to play an essential part in the ceremony. He must reach the temple ere the moon had mounted to her zenith above the star-stone. And it now lacked only an hour of the appointed time.

He rose and peered about with questioning eyes. The deck was deserted, for it was unnecessary to keep watch in that tranquil harbor. Svensen and the mate were doubtless drinking themselves to sleep as usual; the sailors were playing their eternal whist and pedro; and Thorway was in his cabin, probably writing a no-lesseternal monograph on Etruscan tombs. It was only in the most remote and exiguous manner that Morley recollected their existence.

Somehow, he managed to recall that there was a boat which he and Thorway had used in their visits to the isle; and that this boat was moored to the schooner's side. With a tread as lithe and supple as that of a native, he was over the rail and was rowing silently shoreward. A, hundred yards, or little more, and then he stood on the moon-washed sand.

Now he was climbing the palm-clustered hill above the shore, and was heading toward the temple. The air was suffused with a primal, brooding warmth, with the scent, of colossal flowers and ferns not known to modern botanists. He could see them towering beside his way with their thick, archaic fronds and petals, though such things have not lifted to the moon for aeons. And mounting the crest of the hill, which had dominated the little isle and had looked down to the sea on two sides, he saw in the mellow light the far, unbounded reaches of a softly rolling plain, and sealess horizons everywhere, that glowed with the golden fires of cities. And he knew the names of these cities, and recalled the opulent life of Mu, whose prosperity had of late years been menaced by Atlantean earthquakes and volcanic upheavals. These, it was believed, were owing to the wrath of Rhalu, the goddess who controlled the planetary forces; and human blood was being poured in all her fanes to placate the mysterious deity.

Morley (or Matla) could have remembered a million things; he could have called to mind the simple but strange events of his entire pre-existence in Mu, and the lore and history of the far-flung continent. But there was little room in his consciousness for anything but the destined drama of the night. Long ago (how long he was not sure) he had been chosen among his people for an awful honor; but his heart had failed him ere the time ordained, and he had fled. Tonight, however, he would not flee. A solemn religious rapture, not untinged with fear, guided his steps toward the temple of the goddess.

As he went on, he noticed his raiment, and was puzzled. Why was he wearing these ugly and unseemly garments? He began to remove them and to cast them aside one by one. Nakedness was ordained by sacerdotal law for the role he was to play.

He heard the soft-vowelled murmur of voices about him, and saw the multi-colored robes or gleaming amber flesh of forms that flitted among the archaic plants. The priests and worshippers were also on their way to the temple.

His excitement rose, it became more mystical and more rhapsodic as he neared his destination. His being was flooded by the superstitious awe of ancient man, by the dreadful reverence due to the unknown powers of nature. He peered with a solemn trepidation at the moon as it rose higher in the heavens, and saw in its rounded orb the features of a divinity both benign and malevolent.

Now he beheld the temple, looming whitely above the tops of titan fronds. The walls were no longer ruinous, their fallen blocks were wholly restored. His visit to the place with Thorway was dim as a fever fantasy; but other visits during his life as Matla, and ceremonials of the priests of Rhalu which he had once beheld, were clear and immediate in his memory. He knew the faces he would see, and the ritual wherein he would participate. He thought mostly in pictures; but the words of a strange vocabulary were ready for his recollection; and phrases drifted through his mind with unconscious ease; phrases that would have seemed unintelligible gibberish an hour before.

Matla was aware of the concentrated gaze of several hundred eyes as he entered the great, roofless fane. The place was thronged with people, whose round features were of a pre-Aryan type; and many of the faces were familiar to him. But at that moment all of them were parcel of a mystic horror, and were awesome and obscure as the night. Nothing was clear before him, save an opening in the throng, which led to the altar-stone around which the priests of Rhalu were gathered, and wherein Rhalu herself looked down in relentless, icy splendor from an almost vertical elevation.

He went forward with firm steps. The priests, who were clad in lunar purple and yellow, received him in an impassive silence. Counting them, he found that there were only six instead of the usual seven. One there was among them who carried a large, shallow goblet of silver; but the seventh, whose hand would lift the long and curving knife of some copperish metal, had not yet arrived.

Thorway had found it curiously hard to apply himself to the half-written monograph on Etruscan tombs. An obscure and exasperating restlessness finally impelled him to abandon his wooing of the reluctant muse of

archaeology. In a state of steadily mounting irritation, wishing that the bothersome and unprofitable voyage were over, he went on deck.

The moonlight dazzled him with its preternatural brilliance, and he did not perceive for a few moments that the cane couch was empty. When he saw that Morley was gone, he experienced a peculiar mixture of alarm and irritation. He felt sure that Morley had not returned to his cabin. Stepping to the schooner's shoreward side, he noted with little surprise the absence of the moored boat. Morley must have gone ashore for a moonlight visit to the ruined temple; and Thorway frowned heavily at this new presumptive evidence of his employer's eccentricity and aberration. An unwonted responsibility; deep and solemn, stirred him. He seemed to hear an inward injunction, a half-familiar voice, bidding him to take care of Morley. This unhealthy and exorbitant interest in a more than problematic past should be discouraged or at least supervised.

Very quickly, he made up his mind as to what he should do. Going below, he called two of the Swedish sailors from their game of pedro and had them row him ashore in the ship's dinghy. As they neared the beach the boat used by Morley was plainly visible in the plummy shadow of a clump of seaward-leaning palms.

Thorway, without offering any explanation of his purpose in going ashore, told the sailors to return to the ship. Then, following the well-worn trail toward the temple, he mounted the island-slope.

Step by step, as he went on, he became aware of a strange difference in the vegetation. What were these monstrous ferns and prinordial-looking flowers about him? Surely it was some weird trick of the moonlight, distorting the familiar palms and shrubs. He had seen nothing of the sort in his daytime visits, and such forms were impossible, anyway. Then, by degrees, he was beset with terrible doubt and bewilderment. There came to him the ineffably horrifying sensation of passing beyond his proper self, beyond all that he knew as legitimate and verifiable. Fantastic, unspeakable thoughts, alien, abnormal impulses, thronged upon him from the sorcerous glare of the effulgent moon. He shuddered at repellent but insistent memories that were

not his own, at the ghastly compulsion of an unbelievable command. What on earth was possessing him? Was he going mad like Morley? The moon-bright isle was like some bottomless abyss of nightmare fantasy, into which he sank with nightmare terror.

He sought to recover his hard, materialistic sanity, his belief in the safe literality of things. Then, suddenly and without surprise, he was no longer Thorway.

He knew the real purpose for which he had come ashore — the solemn rite in which he was to play an awful but necessary part. The ordained hour was near -- the worshippers, the sacrifice and the six fellow-priests awaited his coming in the immemorial fane of Rhalu.

Unassisted by any of the priests, Matla had stretched himself on the cold altar. How long he lay there, waiting, he could not tell. But at last, by the rustling stir and murmur of the throng, he knew that the seventh priest had arrived.

All fear had left him, as if he were already beyond the pain and suffering of earth. But he knew with a precision well-nigh real as physical sight and sensation the use which would be made of the copperish knife and the silver goblet.

He lay gazing at the wan heavens, and saw dimly, with far-focused eyes, the leaning face of the seventh priest. The face was doubly familiar... but he had forgotten something. He did not try to remember. Already it seemed to him that the white moon was drawing nearer, was stooping from her celestial station to quaff the awaited sacrifice. Her light blinded him with unearthly fulgor; but he saw dimly the flash of the falling knife ere it entered his heart. There was an instant of tearing pain that plunged on and on through his body, as if its tissues were a deep abyss. Then a sudden darkness took the heavens and blotted out the face of Rhalu; and all things, even pain, were erased for Matla by the black mist of an eternal nothing.

In the morning, Svensen and his sailors waited very patiently for the return of Morley and Thorway from the island. When afternoon came and the two

were still absent, Svensen decided that it was time to investigate.

He had received orders to lift anchor for San Francisco that day; but he could not very well depart without Thorway and Morley.

With one of the crew, he rowed ashore and climbed the hill to the ruins. The roofless temple was empty, save for the plants that had taken root in the crevices of its pavement. Svensen and the sailor, looking about for the archaeologists, were horrified from their stolidity by the stains of newly dried blood that lined the great groove in the altar-block to its edge.

They summoned the remainder of the crew. A daylong search of the little island, however, was without result. The natives knew nothing of the whereabouts of Morley and Thorway, and were queerly reticent even in avowing their ignorance. There was no place where the two men could have hidden themselves, granting that they had any reason for a procedure so peculiar. Svensen and his men gave it up. If they had been imaginative, it might have seemed to them that the archaeologists had vanished bodily into the past.

CHECKMATE

"I'm afraid he has found your letters to me, Leonard."

"He? Who is he?"

"My husband, of course, stupid!"

"The devil! That's awkward, if true. What makes you think your husband has found them?"

"The letters are missing—and who else could have taken them? You remember where I kept them — under that pile of lingerie in my middle bureau drawer? Well, the whole packet is gone. Also, Jim has changed toward me the last few days. He's so grouchy all the time. And he has a kind of sly look, too, as if he knew something and were watching me."

"What do you think he'll do about it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. But it makes me very uncomfortable. The present question is, what are we going to do? Have you anything to suggest?"

Ethel Drew and her lover, Leonard Alton, stared at each other in mutual alarm. Also, their consternation was touched with more than a hint of critical appraisal. In the light of the danger that menaced their affair, Ethel wondered if Leonard were quite the ideal gallant she had imagined him to be. And Leonard wondered for the first time if Ethel's blonde deliciousness were not becoming slightly over-mature. However, they had had a lot of pleasant times together; and neither of them relished the idea of an interruption to those good times. Then, there were other considerations. Ethel was indifferent to her husband; but there were reasons why she did not care to lose him. He was a convenient wage-earner and provider of luxuries even if not of romantic thrills. And Leonard, on his part, was hardly intrigued by the vision of a divorce suit in which he would find

himself playing the expensive role of co-respondent. Also, he might have to marry Ethel... and support her.

"Supposing he decides to divorce me?" Ethel, with feminine frankness, was the first to voice the thought.

"We can't have anything of that sort."

"Jim might do it. Certainly he could, with your letters for evidence." Leonard recalled certain passages of the perfervid phraseology which he had used in writing to Ethel. Also, the many direct references to episodes of their passion. What an indiscreet idiot he had been!

"I'll say he could," he rejoined ruefully.

"Well, haven't you anything to suggest?" The tone was perceptibly tart.

"If he has the letters, he must have put them away somewhere. Have you looked for them?"

"Of course I have. I went through Jim's bed-room and clothes-closet as soon as I found they were missing. Then, I searched his den. But the letters aren't in the house. It was useless to look he wouldn't leave them around like that."

"Have you searched his office? Bet you he's got them pigeon-holed in his desk."

"I haven't looked there yet — no chance to do it so far. But I thought of it. I'll try to get hold of the office-key as soon as I can. Jim may go out of town for a day or two before long, on some business deal."

"You've got to find the letters, Ethel."

"That's evident. You wouldn't be much good at finding them. Of course, it's up to me."

"But I'll come with you, if you like."

"Oh, all right. I'll ring you up when I get the key."

"Bet you anything he's got the letters filed away in his desk."

"Maybe — if he hasn't filed them with a lawyer."

Ethel Drew and her husband were at breakfast the next morning. Jim had been gulping his coffee and oatmeal in sulky silence. And Ethel was pretending a blithe unconsciousness of his manner and its implications. Jim did not speak till he arose from the table. Then:

"I'm going out of town to-day. Have to see the Chalmers Co.—also, Reed Bros. I won't be back till late tomorrow night... And I'd advise you to behave while I'm gone."

It was the first direct verbal insinuation which Jim had made.

"What do you mean?" Ethel's tone was crisp and cool.

"Just what I say. You'd better be good... if you want me to go on paying for your lingerie and breakfast bacon."

"I don't understand you. And your remarks are rather insulting."

"The hell they are."

"I think you might explain your insults."

"Is it necessary? You certainly have your nerve, Ethel. I know all about you and your little play-mate."

"Are you crazy, Jim? I don't know what you are driving at."

Jim glowered at Ethel as he drew on his overcoat.

"Oh, yes you do. Take it from me, you can't get away with this Leonard Alton business. No lounge-lizard is going to make a monkey of me. He'll

have the job of supporting you, if there's any more of that stuff And you'll like that, won't you, hey? He'll certainly make a grand provider, with his peanut income."

"Jim, you are ridiculous."

"A great little bluffer, aren't you? Well, I know all about it ...Red-hot letters to a red-hot mama!" He fairly sneered the last words. "Bye-bye. And don't forget what I told you."

He was gone before Ethel could think of another rejoinder.

"Well, that's that," she thought, biting her lip. "I've simply got to get Leonard's letters back and destroy them. They're the only evidence. Jim can be nasty, of course — but he couldn't really prove anything without them."

Five minutes later, she was ransacking Jim's room, hoping desperately that he had not taken his key-ring with him. Where would it be? It was not on the bureau, where he often left it. But sometimes he left it in his pocket. She remembered that he had been wearing a suit of brown and black checks that morning, instead of the blue serge suit he usually wore in the office.

She opened the clothes-closet. The blue serge was hanging next to the door. And thank heaven, the key-ring was in one of the coat-pockets. She knew the office-key by sight. There it was, between the door-key

of their bungalow and the key of an old trunk. She called Leonard on the phone.

"Jim is out of town until late to-morrow. And I have the key. Will you help me to do a little burglarizing?"

"Any time, darling."

"Not till tonight, of course. The stenographer might be there during the day. You can take me to dinner, if you want to, and we'll visit the office afterwards."

"That's a good plan. Nothing like combining pleasure with business. Shall I call for you at the house about six-thirty?"

"That will be fine, Leonard. But you needn't be so flippant. Supposing we don't recover the letters?"

Ethel and Leonard were very gay that evening; and neither spoke of the missing letters, as they sat in an alcove of a fashionable restaurant. There was a tenseness beneath their gaiety, however; and they were repeating to themselves over and over the same unanswered query with which their phone conversation had ended. The tenseness grew. With a tacit agreement, they did not linger over their dessert.

A short drive in Leonard's car, and then they entered a downtown building. They boldly took the elevator to the third story. Before them, in a long, deserted hall, was the lettered glass of an office door, with the words: JAMES DREW, Fire Insurance. Ethel took the key-ring from her vanity bag and unlocked the door.

She turned on the light and began to examine her husband's desk. It was strewn with unsorted papers; and none of the drawers had been locked. She pulled them out one by one and went through them systematically. Nothing of interest in the first two — only business documents. But what were these letters in the third drawer, lying beneath some legal papers?

The letters were not those for which she was looking. But nevertheless, what were they doing in her husband's desk? They were addressed to Jim; and the writing and stationery were feminine. Indeed, they fairly reeked of femininity: the mauve paper had been perfumed with sandalwood. Ethel did not recognize the writing; but her natural curiosity was not lessened by this fact.

She opened one of them and began to read it. The letter began: "Darling Piggy," and was full of endearments and amorous allusions, couched in the diction of a demimonde. It was signed, "Your red-hot tootsie-wootsie, Flora," with a row of crosses before and after the name.

Ethel's cheeks and eyes were burning as she turned to Leonard. She was shocked and amazed — also indignant. She would not have believed Jim capable of this sort of thing. Who was this low woman with whom he had gotten himself involved?

"Have you found something?" asked Leonard.

"I've found plenty." She gave him the letter with no further comment and proceeded to open and read the next.

"Why, the old devil!" exclaimed Leonard, when he had caught the purport of the epistle. "This is rich." He ended with a chuckle.

"Do you think it so funny?" Ethel asked stiffly.

"Well, I'll be — " Leonard wisely checked himself, reflecting that no man could foresee a woman's emotional reactions.

Ethel gave him the second letter and opened the third. There were nearly two dozen in the pile. She and Leonard read them all. Most of them were damnatory proof of a vulgar liaison. Many referred to secret meetings, even to nights that had been spent together in hotels by Jim and the writer, under assumed names. One of them enclosed a snapshot, showing Jim with his arm around a plump and luscious brunette in a one-piece bathing suit of extreme brevity. The snap-shot commemorated one of their outings. The woman's full name, Flora Jennings, was signed to one of her letters — comparatively formal note which evidently dated from the beginning of the acquaintance.

"I'll divorce him!" cried Ethel when she had finished the last letter.

"But how about my letters? We haven't found them yet."

Ethel did not reply. She was re-reading one of the mauve-tinted epistles. Then, as she stuffed the whole packet into her vanity bag, she said:

"I'm going to take those letters with me — even if I haven't found yours."

"A fair exchange is no robbery," chuckled Leonard.

Jim had returned from his business trip. He and Ethel were at the breakfast table again. "Did you do what I told you?" he asked gruffly, after a period of sullen pre-occupation with his food.

"What was that, Jim?" Ethel's tone was very sweet and guileless.

"What I told you about that d—n lounge-lizard," he snapped.

"And who is the lounge-lizard, pray?"

"Don't try any more bluff with me ... I told you to watch your step with Leonard Alton."

"Oh, I remember now. You said some silly things about LeonardWhich reminds me that the dear boy took me out to dinner, night before last."

"What?" Jim was almost apoplectic with rage. "Say, do you think you can go on getting away with murder? I found a bunch of billets-doux from this Leonard person in your bureau the other day. They certainly told me all I needed to know — they ought to have been written on asbestos instead of paper. Do you think I'm going to stand for any more of this? I've got those letters in a safety deposit box at the bank. But I'll deposit 'em with a lawyer, if there's any more funny business."

"Why, what an odd coincidence," laughed Ethel. "I put some letters in a box at the bank, myself, only yesterday."

"You did? What letters?" Jim was plainly puzzled.

"Oh, some letters on mauve paper, scented with sandalwood. They were written to you, Jim, by someone named Flora Jennings ... So, I think you'd better not say anything more about Leonard."

DOUBLE COSMOS

It is for the reader to decide how much importance can be attached to the manuscript left by Bernard Meecham. Doubtless few will consider it anything more than a record of delirium induced by the strange drug that Meecham had compounded. Even from this standpoint the record possesses a certain medical interest: for it throws a startling light on the possibilities of human sensation. And if one accepts Meecham's experiences at his own valuation, it will be seen that the veil of a new and heretofore unsuspected world has been lifted.

Meecham, a brilliant young chemist, had made from the beginning a special study of narcotic drugs. He had been freed by an ample inheritance from the necessity of commercializing his knowledge and his talents, and was thus able to give his whole time to the specialty which absorbed him so deeply. A recluse, he was incommunicative regarding the aim of his researches; and the revolutionary theory he had conceived was not known to his colleagues. This theory, as well as the outcome of his experiments, he confided only to the manuscript written and dated shortly before his unexplained disappearance. The manuscript was found lying on his laboratory desk. It is now published in accord with a brief, unaddressed note of instructions also left behind by Meecham.

The Manuscript

Even in my childhood, I began to suspect that the world about us was perhaps only the curtain of hidden things. The suspicion was born following my recovery from an attack of scarlet fever attended by intervals of delirium. In that delirium, recalled dimly afterwards, I had seemed to live in a monstrous world peopled by strange misshapen beings whose actions were fraught with terror and menace; or, when not menacing, were wholly cryptic and unearthly. This realm of shadow had seemed no less real than the world perceived by my normal senses; and during my convalescence I

believed that it still existed somewhere beyond the corners of the familiar room; and I feared that its horrible specters might reappear at any moment.

My nightly dreams, which were often very strange and vivid, also served to confirm my intuition of other spheres and secret aspects of the known world. Each night it seemed to me that I stepped across the border of an actual land lying conterminous with the lands of day, but accessible only in sleep.

Such beliefs, whether pure fantasy, or fantasy mingled with an obscure truth, are no doubt more or less common to imaginative children.

However, as my faculties matured, I did not wholly dismiss them but was led into speculations concerning the enigmas of human perception and the workings of the sense-mechanism. It soon occurred to me that the five classified senses were very poor and doubtful channels for the cognition of reality; in fact, that their testimony regarding the nature of our surroundings might well be partially or wholly erroneous. The fact that all so-called sane and normal people, possessed of sight, hearing and the other senses, agreed substantially in their impressions of outward phenomena, might prove only the existence of common flaws or limitations in the sensory apparatus of the species. The thing called reality, perhaps, was merely a communal hallucination; and certainly, as science itself had tended to prove, man could lay claim to no finality of perception. The imagery discerned by the human eye was not that beheld by the multi-faceted eye of an insect; the colors that man saw were not perceived by the bird. Where, then, was actuality?

Inevitably, following this line of thought, I became interested in the effect of drugs, especially those narcotics which modify sensation so profoundly and in such varied and fantastic ways. I read with absorption such books as De Quincey's *Opium Eater*, *The Artificial Paradises* of Charles Baudelaire, and the almost forgotten *Hashish-Eater* of Fitzhugh Ludlow. This literary interest soon led me to study the chemistry of narcotics as well as their physiological action. Herein, I felt, were profound mysteries and a clue to secrets which none had yet unraveled.

Thus began the ten years of research and experiment which have left me a nerve-shaken wreck at twenty-nine. The earlier stages I must summarize briefly, for little enough time remains in which to record that inconceivably awesome discovery on which I stumbled in the end.

My laboratory was equipped with the finest and subtlest apparatus, and I procured for analysis all narcotic drugs familiar to modern chemistry, together with certain others found by explorers in remote savage regions. Opium and all its derivatives, the extract of hashish and the dried plant itself—mescal, atropine, peyote, kava—these and numerous others were the subjects of my experimentation. From the very first I had conceived an inkling of a strange and seemingly unauthorized theory; and to prove the theory it was necessary to study the effect of drugs on my own sensory system. Also, I was compelled to invent an incredibly delicate photo-electric device, a graph for the tracing and registration of obscure neural impulses.

My theory was, that the visions, the so-called hallucinations induced by drugs, were not due to a mere derangement of the sensory nerves, but sprang from the excitation of some new and undeveloped sense. This sense, though more complex and esoteric than the others, was akin to sight; and I suspected that its organ was one of the glands, probably the pineal. I did not disregard the function of growth-regulation assigned to the pineal gland by endocrinologists, but merely surmised a secondary function wholly latent under the conditions of everyday life.

Under the terrific stimulus of drugs, this third eye was partially awakened, affording distorted, broken glimpses of that larger reality which the outward senses failed to mirror. Through it, perhaps, one could behold dimensions higher than the three to which our perceptions were limited. Small reliance, however, could be placed on the testimony of the organ; for I felt sure that no known drug was powerful enough to rouse it into full consciousness. It was like the untaught eye of a newborn babe, which beholds its surroundings without any true perception of the form, distance, perspective and relationship of objects. Thus the mad variety, the wavering, ever-shifting fantasy, of narcotic visions; thus their alternations and minglings of

horror, splendor, grotesquery, obscurity. Yet through them infinite vistas of untold realms were shadowed darkly upon the mind of man.

I shall say only that I succeeded in demonstrating, through the graphic device that I had invented, the direct influence of narcotics on the pineal gland, and the temporary activating of that gland as a sort of optic organ. The reactions recorded by this instrument while I was enduring the effect of hashish were unusually strong, and markedly similar to those which the graph had detected in the human eye during the reception of sight-images. Thus was confirmed my thesis of an objective world behind the teeming phantasmagoria evoked by drugs.

It remained now to invent or compound a drug sufficiently potent to stimulate the new eye into full and mature awareness of this hidden world. I shall not record here the details of my many trials and failures with complicated mixtures of strange alkaloids. Nor shall I record the elements of the composite super-drug through which I attained eventual success at the cost of a fatally shattered nervous system - or perhaps something worse. I do not wish others to pay the price that I have paid.

My first sensations under the new drug were similar to those induced by a strong dose of Cannabis indica. There was the same protraction of the time-sense, by which mere minutes were stretched out into ages; and the same spatial expansion, by which my laboratory walls appeared to recede to an immense distance, and my own body, as well as the familiar objects about me, extended themselves to prodigious height and length. The legs of my chair were tall as the famed sequoias. My hand and arm, reaching up to make sure that the graph was correctly adjusted on my forehead over the pineal gland, seemed to scale a gulf like that of some profound canyon. A carboy loomed like a giant monument.

All this was familiar to me, and I felt somewhat disappointed. Was the new compound a failure, like the others?

I closed my eyes, as I had often done before, to shut out any ordinary sight-impressions that might obscure the vision of the third optic. Certain details

disappeared and others were added but the imagery on which I peered remained fundamentally the same. Then, gradually, there was a change, and the scene before me divided itself into what I can only describe as two different planes or levels, distinct from each other as water and land.

The first plane was composed of my immediate surroundings, the laboratory and its fixtures, which had now become transparent as if permeated by some sort of radio-active light. My own body shared in this transparency, but, together with all the objects around me, retained clearly separate outlines.

Beyond this immediate plane was the second, in which everything seemed to possess a comparative solidity and opaqueness. I gazed on a medley of strange-angled forms that might have materialized from a geometrician's nightmare. These forms were immense, complicated, mysterious. Then, slowly, I perceived that they were an apparent extension of the forms in my own plane, thus accounting for my original impression that everything about me had stretched itself out to inordinate length and distance.

It is hard to describe exactly what I saw, since my vision doubtless included an extra dimension. My limbs and body, my chair, the tables, shelves, bottles and littered chemical apparatus, all seemed to protract themselves at incredibly oblique angles into the medley of super-Euclidean shapes that crowded the new world. My eyes, like those of an infant learning to see, gradually began to distinguish detail and establish proportion and perspective where all had seemed meaninglessly blurred and chaotic at first glance.

My attention centered itself on a figure that seemed to correspond to my own. This figure, seated on a vaguely chair-like structure, was of colossal size. It presented a hundred strange facets, convexities, concavities. However, I made out the various parts equivalent to human head, torso, arms and legs. The figure appeared to sit facing me, for there was a multi-angled suggestion of eyes, mouth and other features in the immensely proportioned head.

Was this, I wondered, a living entity like myself? If so, what was my relationship to this being in a world never before penetrated by human vision? [Had the super-drug revealed to me the doppelganger of my own self, in a fourth dimension?]

At length a very simple experiment occurred to another, there was the same apparent reversal that a reflection would present.

Now I rose to my feet and began to walk around the laboratory, tottering a little at first from that loss of control I have mentioned. The other-dimensional figure also rose and walked, with the same shaky and uncertain steps. I picked up a beaker. The entity took in his hand a baroquely shaped vessel and raised it aloft. From sheer weakness, the beaker slipped from my fingers, crashing into many fragments. The vessel held by the being dropped at the same moment, and its shards littered that otherworld floor.

It seemed that every movement I made was duplicated in perfect synchronism by this amazing alter ego.

An obvious but startling question now occurred to me. I went over to the table and took up the graduated bottle in which I kept my supply of the new drug. I measured out a fifth of the amount I had already taken, feeling that it would be reasonably safe to add this much to the dose. Dissolving the powder in a little water, I swallowed it.

Using vessels of more complex geometric form, the being in that other laboratory reproduced my every motion.

Was he too an experimenter, seeking to pierce the manifold veils of the cosmos? Did he see me, I wondered? Was he experiencing a revelation similar in kind to the one I experienced? Was he performing the acts that I performed, to test the correspondence that existed between us? Did all the objects, entities, causes and effects of his world possess their counterparts in mine?

Perhaps, I thought, the relation between the worlds was one of cause and effect. But if so, which world was primary, which secondary? Did my

actions determine those of that alien self? Or did his determine mine?

I felt that my new visual sense was being sharpened by the small additional dose of the drug I had taken. The details of the strange dimension grew clearer, more distinct. Hitherto it had all been colorless, like the grey tones of a photograph. Now I began to distinguish hues that were quite indescribable, since they did not belong to the known spectrum.

Feeling a little light-headed, I went over and stretched myself on a couch that I had placed in the laboratory for use during my experiments. Synchronously, the being in that other laboratory reclined on a vast, many-cubed object that corresponded to the couch in mine.

We lay facing each other, motionless. At length the vision blurred, becoming once more chaotic and distorted. Finally it faded, leaving only the familiar details of the room about me.

During my next experiment, I risked going out on the street while the drug's influence was at its height. Step by step, as I went, the vision changed with the shifting scene about me; and step by step I was accompanied in the vision by that being whom I had grown to regard as an other-cosmic self.

It was a double city that I beheld — the city of our own world, traversed by autos, by street-cars, by throngs of pedestrians — and a city of that alien plane, with vehicles, people, buildings, all corresponding to ours in movement or position, but vaster and more complex in their geometric forms.

Absorbed in that astounding revelation, I forgot the danger to which I was exposed. An auto, driven slowly, struck me with its fender as I stepped from the sidewalk at a crossing. As I fell, I saw that my visioned companion had been struck by one of the vehicles in his city, and was also falling.

I had sustained no injuries apart from a few slight bruises. Passersby helped me to my feet, while, in that other city, pedestrians performed the same service for my strange double.

I repeated the experiment under varying conditions, in city and country. Always I saw my ultra-dimensional double, in an equivalent situation, duplicating my actions. It seemed that there was no person, animal, plant, machine, building, landscape, in our world which did not have its counterpart in the other. All happenings occurred coincidentally in the two spheres.

Then came the astounding change. I had deferred taking the drug for some days, realizing that my health had suffered too heavily from its use and that death might soon follow if I persisted in further experiments. During that time I had experienced some strange mental states, which I could not recall clearly afterwards. Also, there had been several odd lapses of consciousness, lasting for several hours, which were always preceded by mental confusion and a preoccupation with thoughts remote from my usual trend. In particular, there would come to me the thought of an absolute vacuum, between the worlds, apart from time and place. Through superior, godlike will-power, it seemed to me, a being might enter this vacuum and thus insulate himself from the cosmic laws that would otherwise control his destiny. Such insulation seemed desirable to me, and I would find myself willing it intently just as consciousness deserted me. Thus alone could I divorce my actions from those of the otherworld being, and escape the doom which menaced us both through repeated use of the powerful compound drug.

Feeling still too weak and ill to go out, I made the next experiment with the drug in my laboratory, lying on the couch. The drug acted as usual, the vision clarifying itself till I saw once more the vessels and furniture of that alien laboratory beyond my own. But, to my amazement, the vast, many-cubed couch, on which I had thought to see a reclining figure, was vacant! I looked everywhere about the place, but in vain, for the companion of my visions.

Then, for the first time in my use of the super-drug, I experienced the sensation of hearing. A voice began to speak, low, toneless, coming from no direction — and yet from all directions. Sometimes I thought it spoke in my own brain, rather than from any point in space. It said:

"Can you hear me? I am Abernarda Chameechamach, your twin in the four-dimensional cosmos you have visioned."

"Yes, I can hear you," I replied. "Where are you?" Whether I spoke aloud, or merely thought the words, I am not sure.

"I have isolated myself in the vacuum of super-space," was the answer. "It is the only way in which I can break the rapport between our existences — which must be broken if I am to escape the death that threatens you. In this vacuum, all laws and all forces are inoperative, except those of thought and will. I can will myself into the vacuum and out of it again. My thoughts can pass to your world and become audible to you in your present state under the influence of the drug."

"But how can you do these things independently of me?" I asked.

"Because my will and my brain are superior to yours, though otherwise identical with them. Our worlds are twin, as you have realized; but mine, which has one more dimension than yours, is the primary one, the world of causes. Yours is the secondary world of effects. It was I who invented the super-drug, in my efforts to stimulate a new sense that would reveal cosmic reality. Your invention of it was the result of mine, just as your existence is the result of my existence. I alone of the people in this world, through the drug, have learned that there is a secondary sphere; and you alone, in yours, have visioned the primary sphere. My knowledge, through a law of the higher dimension, enables me to act now upon the secondary world through thought alone. Insulating myself in this vacuum, I have willed that you should perform actions from whose necessity I myself am exempt. Several times the only result was a loss of consciousness on your part, corresponding to my stay in the vacuum. But now I have triumphed. You have taken the drug, while I stand aloof between the worlds, invisible, and apart from the chain of cause and effect."

"Since you have not used the drug," I asked, "how is it that you are conscious of me? Can you see me?"

"No, I cannot see you. But I am aware of you through a sense not dependent upon the drug: a sense that my very knowledge of your existence enables me to use. It is part of my superior mind power. I do not intend to use the drug again; but I wish that you shall continue to use it."

"Why?" I queried.

"Because you will soon die from the effects of such use. I, abstaining, will escape death. Such a thing, I believe, has never before happened in the history of the double cosmos. Death, in your world, like birth and everything else, has always been the concomitant of a like happening in mine. What the outcome will be, I am not quite sure. But, by breaking the nexus between us, and outliving you, it may be that I shall never die."

"But is my death possible without yours?" I questioned.

"I think that it is. It will result from the continuation of actions that would also cause my death, if I did not choose to interrupt them in myself. When your death approaches, I shall enter the vacuum again, where no cosmic cause or consequence can follow me. Thus I shall be doubly safe."

For several hours past, I have been writing this account at my laboratory desk. Whatever happens to me — whether death or something stranger than death — a record of my incredible experiences will at least remain when I am gone.

Since my conversation with the being who calls himself Abernarda Chameechamach, I have tried to abstain wholly from the super-drug and have several times delayed yielding to the impulse that makes me continue its use. I find myself wishing, willing intensely that Abernarda Chameechamach should take the drug while I refrain, and should perish in my stead.

During my few recent experiments with the drug, I have seen only the empty laboratory of my trans-dimensional twin. Apparently, on each occasion, that being has absented himself in super-space. He has not spoken to me again.

However, I have a strange feeling that I am closer to him than at any time during our mutual visions or our one conversation. My physical enfeeblement has progressed pace by pace with a remarkable strengthening and enlargement of my mental faculties. It seems, indescribably, that another dimension has been added to my mind. I feel myself the possessor of senses beyond the normal five and the one activated by the drug. I believe that the powers of Abernarda Chameechamach, though directed against me, have to some extent passed into me through a cosmic law that not even he is able to abrogate from his station beyond time and place. There is a balance that must right itself, even though temporarily disturbed by the unknown forces of a four-dimensioned mind.

His very volition had transferred itself to me, and has turned back against him, though I am subject to him in ways already indicated. I am possessed by the image of the cosmic vacuum in which he isolates himself. More and more I feel in myself the desire, the will and the power to project myself bodily into the vacuum, and thus escape the chain of consequences that began with the discovery of the super-drug. What, I wonder, will happen if I should escape in this manner before the drug kills me? What will happen to me, and to Abernarda Chameechamach, if we should meet face to face in that void between the worlds of our double cosmos?

Will the meeting mean annihilation for us both? Will we survive as two entities — or a single entity? I can only wait and conjecture. Does that other also doubt and wonder while he waits? Are there two of us — or is there only one?

FAKHREDDIN

Fakhreddin, Grand Vizier to Abdallah Harun Al-Raschid, seventh Caliph of the race of the Abassids, was a tall, handsome man, well versed in all the known sciences. He was well-beloved of his master, but in his secret heart, cherished that malignant monster, Jealousy. Yes, he was envious of the Caliph's great wealth and position. He was a cousin of Harun Al-Raschid.

Being of a secretive disposition, however, he had kept his envy strictly to himself, except on certain occasions when it had broken out in great fury.

A certain rich merchant of whom Fakreddin was purchasing a turban, extolled to him the praises of the Caliph.

"Our good Prince, Harun Al-Raschid," he said, in a sonorous voice which was meant to be impressive and was not, "is superior to all princes of this earth, living or dead, with the exception of Mahomet. He is wiser, kinder, wealthier, and more holy than any living ruler. He is richer than any of the emperors of Cathay, wiser than the wise men of China, and more holy than any of his predecessors, except the prophet himself."

"Perfidious liar! Dolt! Thou knowest not what thou sayest," cried Fahreddin, siezing the unlucky merchant by the throat and throwing him to the ground. Drawing his poignard he would have stabbed him (the merchant) dead, had not some people who had been standing nearby, interfered. They held back the furious Vizier, while the merchant, his face livid, staggered to his feet.

"Is it meet for the Grand Vizier of the Caliph to thus abuse his master?" he asked, still gasping for breath.

"I did not abuse the Caliph," said Fakhreddin, "I merely called you a liar and a dolt, and told you that you knew not what you said."

"You did, I'll admit that," said the merchant. "But all the same you meant that the qualities which I ascribed to the Caliph were not his. Everyone knows, who knows anything, that what I spoke was the truth."

"I'll say one thing for the Caliph," sneered Fakhreddin, "he's much better than Mahomet ever was!"

At this sacreligious utterance, coming from the lips of so illustrious a person as the Grand Vizier of the Vice-regent of God, the people who had collected in the bazaar drew back in horror and astonishment.

Finding that his captors had relinquished their hold upon him in their amazement, Fakhreddin drew his poignard and with a swift movement, stabbed the unhappy merchant to the heart.

The merchant fell without a sound, and the Grand Vizier made his escape during the confusion that followed. He reached the palace out of breath and immediately retired to his room.

Luckily for Fakhreddin, the Caliph was absent from Bagdad at the time and on his return, heard nothing of what had happened. Had it been otherwise than this the Vizier would assuredly have lost his head. But this, rest assured, was not the only occasion in which the malignant Fakhreddin displayed his hatred for the Caliph. It is not my purpose to weary the reader with an account of all that the Vizier did. I do not applaud his actions, for Harun Al-Raschid was the best of all the Caliphs, from Mahomet to the present Sultan of Turkey, who, tho he asserts himself to be viceregent of Allah, is not regarded in that light by the Arabians, and other Mohammedan peoples outside his own dominions.

It is sufficient for my purpose to recite one more of the Vizier's acts of jealousy, if by doing so I give the reader a better comprehension of his (Fakhreddin's) feelings towards the Caliph. This I hope I shall do, but the final issue is left to the good judgment of the reader.

It happened, that one night, the Caliph, who made it his custom to pass thru the city every night to see that all was well, was taken sick with a slight

illness, brought on by needless exposure. Fakhreddin, who always accompanied him on these nightly rambles, had this time to go alone.

The task was not at all to his taste, he having been wearied by a long day of hard and incessant work. The divan had been assembled several times and some hard thinking had been done.

The last of these councils had been assembled for the purpose of judging the Caliph's illness and what should be done about it. As no opinion was arrived at, the divan was broken up, and the Grand Vizier and the lesser viziers retired, much vexed by the gloomy disposition of the Caliph, who had ever been bright and happy.

And now, to return to Fakhreddin's journey. About ten o'clock that night he sallied forth from the palace disguised as a common eunuch. After traversing the city from end to end he hastened homeward, spurred on by the thought of a warm supper.

He passed by a large house thru the windows of which a light could be seen burning. This was strange, it seemed to the Vizier, so he ventured nearer for the purpose of making closer observations.

He walked noiselessly up to the door and listened. From within came the sound of music and singing, the latter decidedly feminine voices. The Vizier, curious to know the reason of this, stopped to think for a moment. As he was perfectly aware that the Caliph had forbidden entertainments later than ten at night, this particular one needed some investigation.

The Vizier knocked loudly upon the door, first making sure that his scimitar was ready for use. As he knew not what might happen as a result of his intrusion, he determined to be ready to meet all emergencies. The first result was that the music and singing immediately stopped, and that the light was blown out. The second was that no one came to admit him. Both were highly suspicious, inasmuch as they admitted that something was happening within, which the participants did not think it best to reveal to people whose intention they did not know.

Finding that the inmates entertained no intention of admitting him, Fakhreddin bestowed upon the door a heavy kick. The door was equally as heavy and was barred into the bargain. It was of mahogany, and evidently very thick.

Fakhreddin, who was a strong man, put his shoulder to the offending door. It cracked slightly. Fakhreddin pushed again, this time with all his strength. The obstacle collapsed with a crash, the Grand Vizier collapsing with it. He was on his feet in a moment, and with his sword in his hand he rushed into the room.

Aforesaid house was as dark and as still as the tomb. As a consequence, Fakhreddin collided with a wall. His scimitar was broken during the operation. The Grand Vizier got up, cursing heartily. He cursed all the inmates, their personal property, going much into detail, then fathers, mothers, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews, sons and daughters, wives, slaves, and concubines, and all their ancestors back to Adam. This occupied him at least five minutes and was done in a whole-hearted manner, intended to convince those who heard of the speaker's veracity and sincerity. And very undoubtedly those who heard were fully convinced. Fakhreddin was an adept in the art of cursing, and the aforesaid performance fully sustained his reputation. When Fakhreddin was finished he began to grope around for the door. He found it. The he tried to open it. But the door would not open. Fakhreddin cursed again. This time he did it a little more thoroughly. Then he applied his shoulder to the obstacle. It collapsed instantly and the unlucky Vizier executed a double somersault, coming down on his back. At the same moment he heard the sound of laughing nearby. He sought to rise and find the laugher, but he sought in vain. Then someone precipitated himself upon Fakhreddin from out of the darkness. Fakhreddin sat down very suddenly and the next moment was neatly trussed.

Someone lighted a lamp. The Vizier's captor suffered him to sit up. Fakhreddin blinked a little and then looked at the man who had captured him.

This person was to all intents a rich merchant. He was well dressed, and his garments were of expensive silks. He might have been forty years of age. His face wore a young expression, and his beard was of a rich black color. He had long hair, and a fierce looking mustache, about six inches in length. His great height exceeded that of Fakhreddin and he was correspondingly broad. Besides him there were two youths, who in their appearance the Vizier took to be the sons of the man. It was one of them who had lighted the lamp.

He approached and held it over Fakhreddin, so that his father might examine that person more closely.

"What do you mean by breaking into our house like this?" he asked angrily. "I see that you are one of the Caliph's eunuchs."

"I am the Grand Vizier, Fakhreddin," replied that person. "Know you not that the Caliph has forbidden any entertainments to be held after ten at night!"

"I beg your pardon," said the merchant, cutting Fakhreddin's bonds, "I did not recognize you. If I had known that the Caliph had forbidden

entertainments after a certain time I would not have held one. You must present my humble apologies to Harun Al-Raschid, whose equal for beneficence and generosity has never been known."

These last words, spoken in a loud voice, aroused the slumbering jealousy of the Vizier. With a quick movement, he drew his dagger and stabbed the merchant to the heart.

The two sons, with loud cries drew their sword and rushed upon Fakhreddin. The Vizier parried their furious blows and after a little while disposed of both of them. Hearing voices, he then rushed from the house and continued his homeward journey. Of course he did not relate this story to the Caliph, but was forced to devise a falsehood to account for the loss of his scimitar. The scimitar had been given to Fakhreddin by the Caliph and the hilt was encrusted with diamonds. The Vizier's story was that it had

been stolen while he was passing through a dark street. The broken scimitar was discovered the next morning by the wife of the man who had been cruelly murdered. Recognizing it she took the hilt to the palace, and accused Fakhreddin of the murder.

"You are mad," said Fakhreddin. It was stolen from me last night, long before the time of the deed. If you can find the thief, you will find him who killed your husband and sons. Besides, what reason could I have for murdering them?" The woman acknowledged that there was none and went home perfectly well satisfied with this explanation.

A search was made for the thief, but he of course, not existing, was not found.

GENIUS LOCI

'It is a very strange place,' said Amberville, 'but I scarcely know how to convey the impression it made upon me. It will all sound so simple and ordinary. There is nothing but a sedgy meadow, surrounded on three sides by slopes of yellow pine. A dreary little stream flows in from the open end, to lose itself in a cul-de-sac of cat-tails and boggy ground. The stream, running slowly and more slowly, forms a stagnant pool of some extent from which several sickly-looking alders seem to fling themselves backwards, as if unwilling to approach it. A dead willow leans above the pool, tangling its wan, skeleton-like reflection with the green scum that mottles the water. There are no blackbirds, no kildees, no dragon-flies even, such as one usually finds in a place of that sort. It is all silent and desolate. The spot is evil — it is unholy in a way that I simply can't describe. I was compelled to make a drawing of it, almost against my will, since anything so outré is hardly in my line. In fact, I made two drawings. I'll show them to you, if you like.'

Since I had a high opinion of Amberville's artistic abilities and had long considered him one of the foremost landscape painters of his generation, I was naturally eager to see the drawings. He, however, did not even pause to await my avowal of interest, but began at once to open his portfolio. His facial expression, the very movements of his hands, were somehow eloquent of a strange mixture of compulsion and repugnance as he brought out and displayed the two water-colour sketches he had mentioned.

I could not recognize the scene depicted from either of them. Plainly it was one that I had missed in my desultory rambling about the foot-hill environs of the tiny hamlet of Bowman, where, two years before, I had purchased an uncultivated ranch and had retired for the privacy so essential to prolonged literary effort. Francis Amberville, in the one fortnight of his visit, through his flair for the pictorial potentialities of landscape, had doubtless grown more familiar with the neighbourhood than I. It had been his habit to roam about in the forenoon, armed with sketching-materials; and in this way he

had already found the theme of more than one lovely painting. The arrangement was mutually convenient, since I, in his absence was wont to apply myself assiduously to an antique Remington typewriter.

I examined the drawings attentively. Both, though of hurried execution, were highly meritorious, and showed the characteristic grace and vigour of Amberville's style. And yet, even at first glance, I found a quality that was more alien to the spirit of his work. The elements of the scene were those he had described. In one picture, the pool was half hidden by a fringe of mace-weeds, and the dead willow was leaning across it at a prone, despondent angle, as if mysteriously arrested in its fall towards the stagnant waters. Beyond, the alders seemed to strain away from the pool, exposing their knotted roots as if in eternal effort. In the other drawing, the pool formed the main portion of the foreground, with the skeleton tree looming drearily at one side. At the water's farther end, the cat-tails seemed to wave and whisper among themselves in a dying wind; and the steeply barring slope of pine at the meadow's terminus was indicated as a wall of gloomy green that closed in the picture, leaving only a pale of autumnal sky at the top.

All this, as the painter had said, was ordinary enough. But I was impressed immediately by a profound horror that lurked in these simple elements and was expressed by them as if by the balefully contorted features of some demoniac face. In both drawings, this sinister character was equally evident, as if the same face had been shown in profile and front view. I could not trace the separate details that composed the impressions; but ever, as I looked, the abomination of a strange evil, a spirit of despair, malignity, desolation, leered from the drawing more openly and hatefully. The spot seemed to wear a macabre and Satanic grimace. One felt that it might speak aloud, might utter the imprecations of some gigantic devil, or the raucous derision of a thousand birds of ill omen. The evil conveyed was something wholly outside of humanity — more ancient than man. Somehow -- fantastic as this will seem — the meadow had the air of a vampire, grown old and hideous with unutterable infamies. Subtly, indefinitely, it thirsted for other things than the sluggish trickle of water by which it was fed.

'Where is the place?' I asked, after a minute or two of silent inspection. It was incredible that anything of the sort could really exist — and equally incredible that a nature so robust as Amberville should have been sensitive to its quality.

'It's in the bottom of that abandoned ranch, a mile or less down the little road towards Bear River,' he replied. 'You must know it. There's a small orchard about the house, on the upper hillside; but the lower portion, ending in that meadow, is all wild land.'

I began to visualize the vicinity in question. 'Guess it must be the old Chapman place,' I decided, 'No other ranch along that road would answer your specifications.'

'Well, whoever it belongs to, that meadow is the most horrible spot. I have ever encountered. I've known other landscapes that had something wrong with them, but never anything like this.'

'Maybe it's haunted,' I said, half in jest. 'From your description, it must be the very meadow where old Chapman was found dead one morning by his youngest daughter. It happened a few months after I moved here. He was supposed to have died of heart failure. His body was quite cold, and he had probably been lying there all night, since the family had missed him at supertime. I don't remember him very clearly, but I remember that he had a reputation for eccentricity. For some time before his death, people thought he was going mad. I forget the details, Anyway, his wife and children left, not long after he died, and no one has occupied the house or cultivated the orchard since. It was a commonplace rural tragedy.'

'I'm not much of a believer in spooks,' observed Amberville, who seemed to have taken my suggestion of haunting in a literal sense. 'Whatever the influence is, it's hardly of human origin. Come to think of it, though, I received a very silly impressiom once or twice --' the idea that some one was watching me while I, did those drawings. Queer — I had almost forgotten that, till you brought up the possibility of haunting. I seemed to see him out of the tail of my eye, just beyond the radius that I was putting

into the picture: a dilapidated old scoundrel with dirty grey whiskers, and an evil scowl. It's odd, too, that I should have gotten such a definite conception of him, without ever seeing him squarely. I thought it was a tramp who had strayed into the meadow bottom. But when I turned to give him a level glance, he simply wasn't there. It was as if he melted into the miry ground, the cat-tails, the sedges.'

'That isn't a bad description of Chapman,' I said. 'I remember his whiskers — they were almost white, except for the tobacco juice. A battered antique, if there ever was one — and very unamiable, too. He had a poisonous glance towards the end, which no doubt helped along the legend of his insanity. Some of the tales about him come back to me now. People said that he neglected the care of his orchard more and more. Visitors used to find him in that lower meadow, standing idly about and staring vacantly at the trees and water. Probably that was one reason they thought he was losing his mind. But I'm sure I never heard that there was anything unusual or queer about the meadow, either at the time of Chapman's death, or since. It's a lonely spot, and I don't imagine that any one ever goes there now.'

'I stumbled on it quite by accident,' said Amberville. 'The place isn't visible from the road, on account of the thick pines... But there's another odd thing. I went out this morning with a strong and clear intuition that I might find something of uncommon interest. I made a bee-line for the meadow, so to speak; and I'll have to admit that the intuition justified itself. The place repels me - but it fascinates me, too. I've simply got to solve the mystery, if it has a solution,' he added, with a slightly defensive air. 'I'm going back early tomorrow, with my oils, to start a real painting of it.'

I was surprised, knowing that predilection of Amberville for scenic brilliance and gaiety which had caused him to be likened to Sorolla. 'The painting will be a novelty for you,' I commented. 'I'll have to come and take a look at the place myself, before long. It should really be more in my line than yours. There ought to be a weird story in it somewhere, if it lives up to your drawings and description.'

Several days passed. I was deeply preoccupied, at the time with the toilsome and intricate problems offered by the concluding chapters of a new novel; and I put off my proposed visit to the meadow discovered by Amberville. My friend, on his part, was evidently engrossed by his new theme. He sallied forth each morning with his easel and oil-colours, and returned later each day, forgetful of the luncheon-hour that had formerly brought him back from such expeditions. On the third day, he did not reappear till sunset. Contrary to his custom, he did not show me what he had done, and his answers to my queries regarding the progress of the picture were somewhat vague and evasive. For some reason, he was unwilling to talk about it. Also, he was apparently loath to discuss the meadow itself, and in answer to direct questions, merely reiterated in an absent and perfunctory manner the account he had given me following his discovery of the place. In some mysterious way that I could not define, his attitude seemed to have changed.

There were other changes, too. He seemed to have lost his usual bitterness. Often I caught him frowning intently, and surprised the lurking of some equivocal shadow in his frank eyes

There was a moodiness, a morbidity, which, as far as our five years' friendship enabled me to observe, was a new aspect of his temperament. Perhaps, if I had not been so preoccupied with my own difficulties, I might have wondered more as to the causation of his gloom, which I attributed readily enough at first to some technical dilemma that was baffling him. He was less and less the Amberville that I knew; and on the fourth day, when he came back at twilight, I perceived an actual surliness that was quite foreign to his nature.

'What's wrong?' I ventured to inquire. 'Have you struck a snag? Or is old Chapman's meadow getting on your nerves with its ghostly influences?'

He seemed, for once, to make an effort to throw off his gloom, his taciturnity and ill humour.

'It's the infernal mystery of the thing,' he declared, 'I've simply got to solve it, in one way or another. The place has an entity of its own — an indwelling personality. It's there, like the soul in a human body, but I can't pin it down or touch it. You know that I'm not superstitious — but, on the other hand, I'm not a bigoted materialist, either; and I've run across some odd phenomena in my time. That meadow, perhaps, is inhabited by what the ancients called a Genius Loci. More than once, before this, I have suspected that such things might exist — might reside, inherent, in some particular spot. But this is the first time that I've had reason to suspect anything of an actively malignant or inimical nature. The other influences, whose presence I have felt, were benign in some large, vague, impersonal way — or were else wholly indifferent to human welfare — perhaps oblivious of human existence. This thing, however, is hatefully aware and watchful: I feel that the meadow itself — or the force embodied in the meadow - is scrutinizing me all the time. The place has the air of a thirsty vampire, waiting to drink me in somehow, if it can. It is a cul-de-sac of everything evil, in which an unwary soul might well be caught and absorbed. But I tell you, Murray, I can't keep away from it.'

'It looks as if the place were getting you,' I said, thoroughly astonished by his extraordinary declaration, and by the air of fearful and morbid conviction with which he uttered it.

Apparently he had not heard me, for he made no reply to my observation. 'There's another angle,' he went on, with a feverish intensity in his voice. 'You remember my impression of an old man lurking in the background and watching me, on my first visit. Well, I have seen him again, many times, out of the corner of my eye; and during the last two days, he has appeared more directly, though in a queer, partial way. Sometimes, when I am studying the dead willow very intently, I see his scowling filthy-bearded face as a part of the hole. Then, again, it will float among the leafless twigs, as if it had been caught there. Sometimes a knotty hand, a tattered coat-sleeve, will emerge through the mantling in the pool, as if a drowned body were rising to the surface. Then, a moment later — or simultaneously — there will be something of him among the alders or the cat-tails. These apparitions are always brief, and when I try to scrutinize them closely, they melt like films of

vapour into the surrounding scene. But the old scoundrel, whoever or whatever he may be, is a sort of fixture. He is no less vile than everything else about the place, though I feel that he isn't the main element of the vileness.'

'Good Lord!' I exclaimed. 'You certainly have been seeing things. If you don't mind, I'll come down and join you for a while, tomorrow afternoon. The mystery begins to inveigle me.'

'Of course I don't mind, Come ahead.' His manner, all at once, for no tangible reason, had resumed the unnatural taciturnity of the past four days. He gave me a furtive look that was sullen and almost unfriendly. It was as if an obscure barrier, temporarily laid aside, had again risen between us. The shadows of his strange mood returned upon him visibly; and my efforts to continue the conversation were rewarded only by half-surlly, half-absent monosyllables. Feeling an aroused concern, rather than any offence, I began to note, for the first time, the unwonted pallor of his face, and the bright, febrile lustre of his eyes, He looked vaguely unwell, I thought, as if something of his exuberant vitality had gone out of him, and had left in its place an alien energy of doubtful and less healthy nature. Tacitly, I gave up any attempt to bring him back from the secretive twilight into which he had withdrawn. For the rest of the evening, I pretended to read a novel, while Amberville maintained his singular abstraction. Somewhat inconclusively, I puzzled over the matter till bedtime. I made up my mind, however, that I would visit Chapman's meadow. I did not believe in the supernatural, but it seemed apparent that the place was exerting a deleterious influence upon Amberville.

The next morning, when I arose, my Chinese servant informed me that the painter had already breakfasted and had gone out with his easel and colours. This further proof of his obsession troubled me; but I applied myself rigorously to a forenoon of writing.

Immediately after luncheon, I drove down the highway, followed the narrow dirt road that branched off towards Bear River, and left my car on the pine-thick hill above the old Chapman place. Though I had never visited

the meadow, I had a pretty clear idea of its location. Disregarding the grassy, half-obliterated road into the upper portion of the property, I struck down through the woods into the little blind valley, seeing more than once, on the opposite slope, the dying orchard of pear and apple trees, and the tumbledown shanty that had belonged to the Chapmans.

It was a warm October day; and the serene solitude of the forest, the autumnal softness of light and air, made the idea of anything malign or sinister seem impossible. When I came to the meadow-bottom, I was ready to laugh at Amberville's notions; and the place itself, at first sight, merely impressed me as being rather dreary and dismal. The features of the scene were those that he had described so clearly, but I could not find the open evil that had leered from the pool, the willow, the alders and the cat-tails in his drawings.

Amberville, with his back towards me, was seated on a folding stool before his easel, which he had placed among the plots of dark green wire-grass in the open ground above the pool. He did not seem to be working, however, but was staring intently at the scene beyond him, while a loaded brush drooped idly in his fingers. The sedges deadened my footsteps, and he did not hear me as I drew near.

With much curiosity, I peered over his shoulder at the large canvas on which he had been engaged. As far as I could tell, the picture had already been carried to a consummate degree of technical perfection. It was an almost photographic rendering of the scummy water, the whitish skeleton of the leaning willow, the unhealthy, half-disrooted alders, and the cluster of nodding mace-reeds. But in it I found the macabre and demoniac spirit of the sketches: the meadow seemed to wait and watch like an evilly distorted face. It was a deadfall of malignity and despair, lying from the autumn world around it; a plague-spot of nature, forever accursed and alone.

Again I looked at the landscape itself — and saw that the spot was indeed as Amberville had depicted it. It wore the grimace of a mad vampire, hateful and alert! At the same time, I became disagreeably conscious of the unnatural silence. There were no birds, no insects, as the painter had said;

and it seemed that only spent and dying winds could ever enter that depressed valley- bottom. The thin stream that lost itself in the boggy ground was like a soul that went down to perdition. It was part of the mystery, too; for I could not remember any stream on the lower side of the barring hill that would indicate a subterranean outlet.

Amberville's intentness, and the very posture of his head and shoulders, were like those of a man who has been mesmerized. I was about to make my presence known to him; but at that instant there came to me the apperception that we were not alone in the meadow. Just beyond the focus of my vision, a figure seemed to stand in a furtive attitude, as if watching us both. I whirled about and there was no one. Then I heard a startled cry from Amberville and turned to find him staring at me. His features wore a look of terror and surprise, which had not wholly erased a hypnotic absorption.

'My God!' he said, 'I thought you were the old man!'

I can not be sure whether anything more was said by either of us. I have, however, the impression of a blank silence. After his single exclamation of surprise, Amberville seemed to retreat into an impenetrable abstraction, as if he were no longer conscious of my presence; as if, having identified me, he had forgotten me at once. On my part, I felt a weird and overpowering constraint. That infamous, eerie scene depressed me beyond measure. It seemed that the boggy bottom was trying to drag me down in some intangible way. The boughs of the sick alders beckoned. The pool, over which the bony willow presided like an arboreal death, was wooing me foully with its stagnant waters.

Moreover, apart from the ominous atmosphere of the scene itself, I was painfully aware of a further change in Amberville — a change that was an actual alienation, His recent mood, whatever it was, had strengthened upon him enormously: he had gone deeper into its morbid twilight, and was lost to the blithe and sanguine personality I had known. It was as if an incipient madness had seized him; and the possibility of this terrified me.

In a slow, somnambulistic manner, without giving me a second glance, he began to work at his painting, and I watched him for a while, hardly knowing what to do or say. For long intervals he would stay and peer with dreamy intentness at some feature of the landscape. I conceived the bizarre idea of a growing kinship, a mysterious rapport between Amberville and the meadow. In some intangible way, it seemed as if the place had taken something from his very soul — and had given something of itself in exchange. He wore the air of one who participates in some unholy secret, who has become the acolyte of an unhuman knowledge. In a flash of horrible definitude, I saw the place as an actual vampire, and Amberville as its willing victim.

How long I remained there, I can not say. Finally I stepped over to him and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

'You're working too hard,' I said. 'Take my advice, and lay off for a day or two.'

He turned to me with the dazed look of one who is lost in some narcotic dream. This, very slowly, gave place to a sullen, evil anger.

'Oh, go to hell!' he snarled. 'Can't you see that I'm busy?'

I left him then, for there seemed nothing else to do under the circumstances. The mad and spectral nature of the whole affair was enough to make me doubt my own reason. My impressions of the meadow — and of Amberville — were tainted with an insidious horror such as I had ever before felt in any moment of waking life and normal consciousness.

At the bottom of the slope of yellow pine, I turned back with repugnant curiosity for a parting glance. The painter had not moved, he was still confronting the malignant scene like a charmed bird that faces a lethal serpent. Whether or not the impression was a double optic image, I have never been sure: but at that instant I seemed to discern a faint, unholy aura, neither light nor mist, that flowed and wavered about the meadow, preserving the outlines of the willow, the alders, the weeds, the pool. Stealthily it appeared to lengthen, reaching towards Amberville like ghostly

arms. The whole image was extremely tenuous, and may well have been an illusion; but it sent me shuddering into the shelter of the tall, benignant pines.

The remainder of that day, and, the evening that followed, were tinged with the shadowy horror I had found in Chapman's meadow. I believe that I spent most of the time in arguing vainly with myself, in trying to convince the rational part of my mind that all I had seen and felt was utterly preposterous. I could arrive at no conclusion, other than a conviction that Amberville's mental health was endangered by the damnable thing, whatever it was, that inhered in the meadow. The malign personality of the place, the impalpable terror, mystery and lure, were like webs that had been woven upon my brain, and which I could not dissipate by any amount of conscious effort.

I made two resolves, however: one was, that I should write immediately to Amberville's fiancé, Miss Avis Olcott, and invite her to visit me as a fellow-guest of the artist during the remainder of his stay at Bowman. Her influence, I thought, might help to counteract whatever was affecting him so perniciously. Since I knew her fairly well, the invitation would not seem out of the way. I decided to say nothing about it to Amberville: the element of surprise, I hoped, would be especially beneficial.

My second resolve was, that I should not again visit the meadow myself, if I could avoid it. Indirectly — for I knew the folly of trying to combat a mental obsession openly — I should also try to discourage the painter's interest in the place, and divert his attention to other themes. Trips and entertainments, too, could be devised, at the minor cost of delaying my own work.

The smoky autumn twilight overtook me in such meditations as these; but Amberville did not return. Horrible premonitions, without coherent shape or name, began to torment me as I waited for him. The night darkened; and dinner grew cold on the table. At last, about nine o'clock, when I was nerving myself to go out and hunt for him, he came in hurriedly. He was

pale, dishevelled, out of breath; and his eyes held a painful glare, as if everything had frightened him beyond endurance.

He did not apologize for his lateness; nor did he refer to my own visit to the meadow-bottom. Apparently he had forgotten the whole episode — had forgotten his rudeness to me.

'I'm through!' he cried. 'I'll never go back again — never take another chance. That place is more hellish at night than in the daytime. I can't tell you what I've seen and felt — I must forget it, if I can. There's an emanation - something that comes out openly in the absence of the sun, but is latent by day. It lures me, it tempted me to remain this evening — and it nearly got me... God! I didn't believe that such things were possible — that abhorrent compound of--' He broke off, and did not finish the sentence. His eyes dilated, as if with the memory of something too awful to be described. At that moment, I recalled the poisonously haunted eyes of old Chapman whom I had sometimes met about the hamlet. He had not interested me particularly, since I had deemed him a common type of rural character, with a tendency to some obscure and unpleasant aberration. Now, when I saw the same look in the eyes of a sensitive artist, I began to wonder, with a shivering speculation, whether Chapman too had been aware of the weird evil that dwelt in his meadow. Perhaps, in some way that was beyond human comprehension, he had been its victim. ... He had died there; and his death had not seemed at all mysterious. But perhaps, in the light of all that Amberville and I had perceived, there was more in the matter than any one had suspected.

'Tell me what you saw,' I ventured to suggest. At the question, a veil seemed to fall between us, impalpable but terrific. He shook his head morosely and made no reply. The human terror, which perhaps had driven him back towards his normal self, and had made him almost communicative for the nonce, fell away from Amberville. A shadow that was darker than fear, an impenetrable alien umbrage, again submerged him. I felt a sudden chill, of the spirit rather than the flesh; and once more there came to me the outré thought of his growing kinship with the ghoulissh meadow. Beside me, in

the lamplit room, behind the mask of his humanity, a thing that was not wholly human seemed to sit and wait.

Of the nightmarish days that followed, I shall offer only a summary. It would be impossible to convey the eventless, fantasmal horror in which we dwelt and moved.

I wrote immediately to Miss Olcott, pressing her to pay me a visit during Amberville's stay, and, in order to insure acceptance, I hinted obscurely at my concern for his health and my need of her coadjutation. In the meanwhile, waiting her answer, I tried to divert the artist by suggesting trips to sundry points of scenic interest in the neighbourhood. These suggestions he declined, with an aloof curtness, an air that was stony and cryptic rather than deliberately rude. Virtually, he ignored my existence, and made it more than plain that he wished me to have him to his own devices. This, in despair, I finally decided to do, pending the arrival of Miss Olcott. He went out early each morning, as usual, with his paints and easel, and returned about sunset or a little later. He did not tell me where he had been; and I refrained from asking.

Miss Olcott came on the third day following my letter, in the afternoon. She was young, lissome, ultra-feminine, and was altogether devoted to Amberville. In fact, I think she was a little in awe of him. I told her as much as I dared, and warned her of the morbid change in her fiancé, which I attributed to nervousness and overwork. I simply could not bring myself to mention Chapman's meadow and its baleful influence: the whole thing was too unbelievable, too fantasmagoric, to be offered as an explanation to a modern girl. When I saw the somewhat helpless alarm and bewilderment with which she listened to my story, I began to wish that she were of a more wilful and determined type, and were less submissive towards Amberville than I surmised her to be. A stronger woman might have saved him; but even then I began to doubt whether Avis could do anything to combat the imponderable evil that was engulfing him.

A heavy crescent moon was hanging like a blood-dipped horn in the twilight, when he returned. To my immense relief, the presence of Avis

appeared to have a highly salutary effect. The very moment that he saw her, Amberville came out of the singular eclipse that had claimed him, as I feared, beyond redemption, and was almost his former affable self, Perhaps it was all make-believe, for an ulterior purpose; but this, at the time, I could not suspect. I began to congratulate myself on having applied a sovereign remedy. The girl, on her part, was plainly relieved; though I saw her eyeing him in a slightly hurt and puzzled way, when he sometimes fell for a short interval into moody abstraction, as if he had temporarily forgotten her. On the whole, however, there was a transformation that appeared no less than magical, in view of his recent gloom and remoteness. After a decent interim, I left the pair together, and retired.

I rose very late the next morning, having overslept. Avis and Amberville I learned, had gone out together, carrying a lunch which my Chinese cook had provided. Plainly he was taking her along on one of his artistic expeditions; and I augured well for his recovery from this. Somehow, it never occurred to me that he had taken her to Chapman's meadow. The tenuous, malignant shadow of the whole affair had begun to lift from my mind; I rejoiced in a lightened sense of responsibility; and, for the first time in a week, was able to concentrate clearly on the ending of my novel.

The two returned at dusk, and I saw immediately that I had been mistaken on more points than one. Amberville had again retired into a sinister, saturnine reserve. The girl, beside his looming height and massive shoulders, looked very small, forlorn and pitifully bewildered and frightened. It was as if she had encountered something altogether beyond her comprehension something with which she was humanly powerless to cope.

Very little was said by either of them. They did not tell me where they had been; but, for that matter, it was unnecessary to inquire. Amberville's taciturnity, as usual, seemed due to an absorption in some dark mood or sullen reverie. But Avis gave me the impression of a dual constraint — as if, apart from some enthralling terror, she had been forbidden to speak of the day's events and experiences. I knew that they had gone to that accursed meadow; but I was far from sure whether Avis had been personally

conscious of the weird and baneful entity of the place, or had merely been frightened by the unwholesome change in her lover beneath its influence. In either case, it was obvious that she was wholly subservient to him, I began to damn myself for a fool in having invited her to Bowman — though the true bitterness of my regret was still to come.

A week went by, with the same daily excursions of the painter and his fiancé — the same baffling, sinister estrangement and secrecy in Amberville — the same terror, helplessness, constraint and submissiveness in the girl. How it would all end, I could not imagine; but I feared, from the ominous alteration of his character, that Amberville was heading for some form of mental alienation, if nothing worse. My offers of entertainment and scenic journeys were rejected by the pair; and several blunt efforts to question Avis were met by a wall of almost hostile evasion which convinced me that Amberville had enjoined her to secrecy — and had perhaps, in some sleightful manner, misrepresented my own attitude towards him.

'You don't understand him,' she said, repeatedly. 'He is very temperamental.'

The whole affair was a maddening mystery, but it seemed more and more that the girl herself was being drawn, either directly or indirectly, into the same fantasmal web that had enmeshed the artist.

I surmised that Amberville had done several new pictures of the meadow; but he did not show them to me, nor even mention them. My own impressions of the place, as time went on, assumed an unaccountable vividness that was almost hallucinatory. The incredible idea of some inherent force or personality, malevolent and even vampirish, became an unavowed conviction against my will. The place haunted me like a fantasm, horrible but seductive. I felt an impelling morbid curiosity, an unwholesome desire to visit it again, and fathom, if possible, its enigma. Often I thought of Amberville's notion about a Genius Loci that dwelt in the meadow, and the hints of a human apparition that was somehow associated with the spot. Also, I wondered what it was that the artist had seen on the one occasion when he had lingered in the meadow after nightfall, and had returned to my

house in driven terror. It seemed that he had not ventured to repeat the experiment, in spite of his obvious subjection to the unknown lure.

The end came, abruptly and without premonition. Business had taken me to the county seat, one afternoon, and I did not return till late in the evening. A full moon was high above the pine-dark hills. I expected to find Avis and the painter in my drawing-room; but they were not there. Li Sing, my factotum, told me that they had returned at dinnertime. An hour later, Amberville had gone out quietly while the girl was in her room. Coming down a few minutes later, Avis had shown excessive perturbation when she found him absent, and had also left the house, as if to follow him, without telling Li Sing where she was going or when she might return. All this had occurred three hours previously; and neither of the pair had yet reappeared.

A black and subtly chilling intuition of evil seized me as I listened to Li Sing's account. All too well I surmised that Amberville had yielded to the temptation of a second nocturnal visit to that unholy meadow. An occult attraction, somehow, had overcome the horror of his first experience, whatever it had been. Avis, knowing where he was, and perhaps fearful of his sanity — or safety — had gone out to find him. More and more, I felt an imperative conviction of some peril that threatened them both -- some hideous and innumerable thing to whose power, perhaps, they had already yielded.

Whatever my previous folly and remissness in the matter, I did not delay now. A few minutes of driving at precipitate speed through the mellow moonlight brought me to the piny edge of the Chapman property. There, as on my former visit, I left the car, and plunged headlong through the shadowy forest, Far down, in the hollow, as I went, I heard a single scream, shrill with terror, and abruptly terminated. I felt sure that the voice was that of Avis; but I did not hear it again.

Running desperately, I emerged in the meadow-bottom, Neither Avis nor Amberville was in sight; and it seemed to me, in my hasty scrutiny, that the place was full of mysteriously coiling and moving vapours that permitted only a partial view of the dead willow and the other vegetation. I ran on

towards the scummy pool, and nearing it, was arrested by a sudden and twofold horror.

Avis and Amberville were floating together in the shallow pool, with their bodies half hidden by the mantling masses of algae. The girl was clasped tightly in the painter's arms, as if he had carried her with him, against her will, to that noisome death. Her face was covered by the evil, greenish scum; and I could not see the face of Amberville, which was averted against her shoulder. It seemed that there had been a struggle; but both were quiet now, and had yielded supinely to their doom.

It was not this spectacle alone, however, that drove me in mad and shuddering flight from the meadow, without making even the most tentative attempt to retrieve the drowned bodies. The true horror lay in the thing, which, from a little distance, I had taken for the coils of a slowly moving and rising mist. It was not vapour, nor anything else that could conceivably exist — that malign, luminous, pallid emanation that enfolded the entire scene before me like a restless and hungrily wavering extension of its outlines — a phantom projection of the pale and deathlike willow, the dying alders, the reeds, the stagnant pool and its suicidal victims. The landscape was visible through it, as through a film; but it seemed to curdle and thicken gradually in places, with some unholy, terrifying activity. Out of these curdlings, as if disgorged by the ambient exhalation, I saw the emergence of three human faces that partook of the same nebulous matter, neither mist nor plasma. One of these faces seemed to detach itself from the bole of the ghostly willow; the second and third swirled upwards from the seething of the phantom pool, with their bodies trailing formlessly among the tenuous boughs. The faces were those of old Chapman, of Francis Amberville, and Avis Olcott.

Behind this eerie, wraith-like projection of itself, the actual landscape leered with the same infernal and vampirish air which it had worn by day. But it seemed now that the place was no longer still — that it seethed with a malignant secret life — that it reached out towards me with its scummy waters, with the bony fingers of its trees, with the spectral faces it had spewed forth from its lethal deadfall.

Even terror was frozen within me for a moment. I stood watching, while the pale, unhallowed exhalation rose higher above the meadow. The three human faces, through a further agitation of the curdling mass, began to approach each other. Slowly, inexpressibly, they merged in one, becoming an androgynous face, neither young nor old, that melted finally into the lengthening phantom boughs of the willow — the hands of the arboreal death, that were reaching out to enfold me. Then, unable to bear the spectacle any longer, I started to run.

There is little more that need be told, for nothing that I could add to this narrative would lessen the abomiabile mystery of it all in any degree. The meadow — or the thing that dwells in the meadow — has already claimed three victims... and I sometimes wonder if it will have a fourth. I alone, it would seem, among the living, have guessed the secret of Chapman's death, and the death of Avis and Amberville; and no one else, apparently, has felt the malign genius of the meadow. I have not returned there, since the morning when the bodies of the artist and his fiancée were removed from the pool... nor have I summoned up the resolution to destroy or otherwise dispose of the four oil paintings and two watercolor-drawings of the spot that were made by Amberville. Perhaps... in spite of all that deters me... I shall visit it again.

MAROONED IN ANDROMEDA

"I'm going to put you fellows off on the first world of the first planetary system we come to."

The icy deliberation of Captain Volmar's tones was more terrible than any show of anger would have been. His eyes were chill and sharp as the sapphire lights in snow; and there was a fanatic rigor in the tightening of his lips after the curtly spoken words.

The three mutineers looked sullenly at each other and at the captain, but said nothing. The leveled automatics of Volmar and the three other members of the space-flier's crew made all appeal or argument seem absurd. They knew that there could be no relenting on the part of that thin, austere mariner of the interstellar gulfs, who had dreamt of circumnavigating space and thus becoming the Magellan of the constellations.

For five years he had driven the great vessel further and further away from the earth and the solar system, which had long ago dwindled into points of telescopic light — for five years he had hurled it onward at more than the speed of cosmic rays, through the shoreless, bottomless night, among the shifting stars and nebulae. The configuration of the skies had changed beyond all recognition; the Signs were no longer those that are known to terrestrial astronomers; far-off stars had leapt into blazing suns and had faded back to stars; and there had been a flying glimpse of stranger planets. And year by year the cold terror of the endless deeps, the vertiginous horror of untold infinitude, had crept like a slow paralysis upon the souls of the three men; and a nostalgia for the distant earth had swept them with unutterable sickness; till they could bear it no longer, and had made their hasty, ill-planned attempt to secure control of the vessel and turn it homeward.

There had been a brief, desperate struggle. Forewarned by a subtle instinct, Volmar had suspected them and had been in readiness; and he and the men loyal to him had armed themselves furtively in preparation, while the others had made their attack bare-handed, man to man. All of the mutineers were wounded, though not seriously, before they could be subdued; and blood dripped from their wounds on the floor of the flier, as they stood before Volmar.

Albert Adams, Chester Deming and James Roverton were the names of the mutineers. Adams and Deming were quite young, and Roverton was now verging upon early middle-age. Their very presence in Volmar's crew was proof of intellectual ability and prime physical fitness, for all had been subjected to examinations of the most rigorous and prolonged order. A high knowledge of mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and other branches of science had been required, as well as a mastery of mechanics; and perfect sight, hearing, equilibrium and a flawless constitution were likewise requisite. Also, it goes without saying that they belonged to a most active, adventurous type: for no ordinary men would even have volunteered for such a project as Volmar's. Innumerable voyages had already been made to the moon and the nearer planets; but, previous to this, aside from the one trip made to Alpha Centauri by the Allen Farquhar expedition, no one had dared the outer deep and the constellations.

Volmar and the three who had remained faithful to him were all of the same breed: men of religious, well-nigh inhuman devotion to an idea, scientists to whom nothing mattered apart from science, who were capable of martyring themselves and others if by so doing they could prove a theory or make a discovery. And in Volmar himself there was a spirit of mad adventure, a desire to tread where no man had been before; the cold flame of an imperial lust for unexplored immensity. The mutineers were more human; and the years of bleak confinement in the space-flier, among the terrific pits of infinity, remote from all that is life to normal beings, had broken down their morale in the end. Few, perhaps, could have endured it as long as they.

"Another thing," the chill voice of Volmar went on: "I shall put you off without weapons, provisions or oxygen-tanks. You will have to shift for yourselves — and of course, the chances are that the atmosphere, if there is any, will prove unfit for human respiration. Jasper will now proceed to truss you up, so that there won't be any more foolishness."

Alton Jasper, a well-known astronomer, who was first mate of the flier, stepped forward and bound the hands of the mutineers behind them with rope. Then they were locked in a lower apartment of the vessel, above the manhole that gave entrance and egress. This apartment was insulated from all the rest; and the manhole could be opened from the higher rooms by means of an electrical device. There the mutineers lay in absolute darkness, except when someone entered with a meager allotment of food and drink.

Aeons seemed to pass, and the three men abandoned all efforts to keep a reckoning of time. They spoke little, for there was nothing to speak of but failure and despair and the dreadful unknown fate ahead of them. Sometimes one of them, particularly Roverton, would gallantly try to crack a jest; but the laughter that answered the jest was the last flare of a courage tried almost beyond human endurance.

One day, they heard the voice of Volmar addressing them through the speaking-tube. It was far-off and high and thin, like a voice from some sidereal altitude.

"We are now approaching Delta Andromedae," the voice announced. "It has a planetary system, for two worlds have already been sighted. We shall make a landing, and put you off on the nearest one, in about two hours."

The mutineers felt a sense of comparative relief. Anything, even sudden death from the inhalation of some irrespirable atmosphere, would be better than the long confinement. Stoically, like condemned criminals, they prepared themselves for the fatal plunge into the unknown.

The black minutes ebbed away, and then the electric lights were turned on. The door opened, and Jasper came in. He removed the bonds of the three

men in silence; then he retired, and the door was locked upon them for the last time.

They were aware, somehow, that the flier had slackened its speed. They tried to stand up, with their stiffened limbs, and found it hard to maintain their equilibrium, for they had long been habituated to a rate of movement far beyond that of any cosmic body. Then they were aware that the vessel had stopped: there was a sudden jolt that flung them against the wall, and a cessation of the engines' eternal drone. The silence was very strange, for the throbbing of the great electromagnetic motors had long been as familiar to them as the beating of their own blood.

The manhole opened with a harsh, metallic screech, and there was a faint glimmering of bluish-green light from without. Then there came a gust of acrid air, and a waft of indescribable smells that were unlike anything on earth. The mutineers heard the voice of Volmar once more:

"Out with you — and make it quick. I've no more time to waste on rubbish."

Holding his breath, Roverton approached the manhole, crawled through, and climbed down the steel ladder that ran along the outer side of the flier. The others followed him in turn. They could see little, for apparently it was night in the new world on which they were being landed. They seemed to hang over an indefinite abyss with no bottom, but on reaching the end of the ladder, they found solid earth beneath their feet. The air, though sharp and unpleasant to the nostrils, was apparently breathable. They took a few careful steps, keeping close together, on a surface that was smooth and level to their tread. While they were trying to adjust their senses to the dim surrounding, they saw the vague bulk of the flier begin to move, and then heard the prodigious roar of its ascent to the skies.

"Marooned!" said Roverton, with a short laugh. "Well, there's one safe bet — we're the first mutineers who have ever been put off in Andromeda. I vote that we make the most of the experience. The air hasn't killed us yet, so evidently it contains a proportion of hydrogen and oxygen not too dissimilar

from that of the earth's atmosphere. And, with such air, there is a good chance of finding plant-life, or even animal-life, of types that will afford edible substances."

The three men peered about, straining their eyes in an effort to penetrate the blue-green darkness. None of them was unimaginative; and they felt the thrill of an eeriness beyond all parallel, an overpowering strangeness that preyed upon their nerves with a million intimations of unrevealed and formless things never before conceived by man. Their situation was unthinkably desolate; but behind the desolation there seemed to lurk the multitudinous and multiform teeming of unearthly life. However, they could see nothing tangible, except some vague unmoving masses that resembled large boulders. The air was a little chill, and its acrid character became more noticeable, in unison with a peculiar darkness.

The skies above were faint and vaporous, with a few stars glowing dully in their depths. Some of the stars were momentarily obscured then disclosed, as if there were some movement or change in the occluding medium. Everywhere there was the sense of abysmal and immeasurable distance; and the mutineers were conscious of an odd, terrific vertigo, as if the horizontal spaces on all sides might draw them in like some unfathomable gulf.

Roverton stepped forward toward one of the boulder-like masses, taking careful note of the gravitational pull exerted by the ground. He was not quite sure, but thought that he experienced a sense of weight, of difficulty in locomotion, slightly beyond that which is felt on our earth

"I think this world is a little larger or heavier than our own," he announced. The others followed him, and were aware of like sensations. They stopped uncertainly, wondering what was to be done next.

"I suppose the sun will rise some time," observed Deming. "Delta Andromedae is a sizable affair, and seemingly the warmth it affords is comparable to that of our sun. Doubtless it will yield a similar illumination. In the meanwhile we might as well sit down and wait, if this is a bona fide boulder."

He seated himself on the dark mass, which was almost circular in form and was perhaps eight feet in diameter by three in height, with a gently rounded top. The others followed suit. The object seemed to be covered with a sort of thick, shaggy, resilient moss.

"This is luxury," exclaimed Roverton. "I'd like to take a nap." Neither he nor any of the others, however, was in any state to permit of slumber. All were ungovernably excited by the novelty of their position, and were aware of a terrible disquietude, a wild nervousness due to the shock of being plunged among alien atmospheric and geologic forces, the magnetic emanations of a soil untrod by human foot. Of this soil itself they could determine nothing, except that it was moist and was apparently devoid of grass or plant-forms.

They waited. The darkness was like the slow oozing of a cold, glaucous eternity. The mutineers carried watches, which perforce had run down during their period of incarceration. They wound and set these watches going, and struck a match occasionally to note the passage of time — a proceeding which struck them all with its absurdity, since there was no means of knowing whether or not the twenty-four hours of the terrestrial day would correspond in any manner to the diurnal period of this new world.

Hours dragged on. They talked with sporadic and feverish loquacity in an effort to fight down the nervousness of which all were uncontrollably conscious. Strong and mature men though they were, they felt at times like children alone in the dark, with a horde of monstrous unknown terrors pressing about them. When silence fell, the unformulable weirdness and horror of the envioning gloom seemed to draw closer; and they dared not be still for very long. The hush of the dim heavens and the dimmer ground was oppressive with unimaginable menace. Once, they heard a far-off sound, like the whirring and jarring of a rusty crank. It soon ceased, and was not repeated; but at long intervals there were sharp, tiny stridulations, like those of insects, which appeared to come from the nearer distance. They were so high and harsh that the teeth of the three men were actually set on edge by them.

Suddenly, they all perceived that the darkness was beginning to lighten. A chill glimmering crept along the ground, and the boulder-like masses defined themselves more clearly. The light was very peculiar, for it appeared to emanate from the soil and to tremble upward in visible waves like those of heat. It was faintly iridescent, like the nimbus of a cloudy moon; and, gathering strength, it soon became comparable to earthly moonlight in its illuminative power. Beneath it, the soil displayed a greenish-grey color and a consistency resembling half-dried clay. The sides of the boulder-forms were plainly lit, through their tops remained in shadow. The moss-like substance covering them was of a purple hue, and was very long and coarse and hairy.

The mutineers were greatly puzzled by the light. "Is it some sort of radioactivity?" queried Roverton. "Is it phosphorescence? Is it due to some luminous micro-organism — a kind of noctiluca?"

He stooped down and peered closely at the trembling waves of iridescence. He gave an exclamation. The light, as it rose, seemed to be full of infinitesimal motes, which hovered about a foot from the ground at their highest flight. They poured unceasingly to this level in teeming millions.

"Animaculæ of some unknown kind," decided Roverton. "Evidently their bodies are highly luminescent—one could almost read a book by this light." He took out his watch and found that the figures were clearly distinguishable.

After awhile the weird luminosity began to subside, and ebbed along the soil as it had come. The re-established darkness, however, was not of long duration. Soon the landscape declared its outlines again; and this time the illumination came in a normal manner, like the twilight of a misty dawn. A plain with barely perceptible undulations, and having scores of the boulder-forms scattered about it, was now visible for some distance, till it was lost among the streamers of curling vapor that rose all about. A sluggish, leaden-colored stream ran through the plain, about two hundred feet from where Roverton and his fellows were sitting, and vanished in the mist. Soon the vapors, hueless at first, were tinged with deepening colors — pink and

saffron and heliotrope and purple — as if an aurora were rising behind them. There was a brightening in the center of this prismatic display; and it was surmised that the solar body, Delta Andromedae, had now ascended above the horizon. The air grew rapidly warmer. Seeing the nearby stream, the men all realized that they were excessively thirsty. Of course, the water might not be drinkable; but they decided to chance it. The fluid was peculiarly thick, milky and opaque. The taste was a trifle brackish; but nevertheless, it allayed their thirst; and they felt no immediate ill-effects.

"Now for breakfast, if we can find it," said Roverton. "We lack nothing but food-stuffs, utensils and fuel."

"I can't see that we'll find any by staying where we are," observed Adams. "Of all the desolate holes! Let's go." A discussion arose as to which direction they should take. They all sat down again on one of the mossy purple masses, to decide the momentous problem. The landscape was equally barren and dreary on all sides; but at last they agreed to follow the flowing of the leaden stream, which ran toward the auroral display. They were about to rise, when the boulder-form on which they were sitting seemed to heave upward suddenly. Adams found himself sprawling on the ground, but the other two were quick enough to save themselves from a like fate. Startled, they leapt away; and turning back, they saw that the great mass had opened, as if cloven through the center, revealing an immense hollow lined with a whitish material that resembled the interior of an animal's stomach. The material trembled incessantly, and a glutinous liquid welled from within it, like saliva or digestive fluid.

"Heavens!" ejaculated Roverton. "Who ever dreamt of anything like that? Is it plant, animal, or both?"

He approached the mass, which gave no sign of movement apart from the trembling. Apparently it was rooted, or deeply embedded in the ground. As he drew near, the production of the glutinous liquid became more copious.

A sharp stridulation, similar to the noises heard during the night, was now audible. Turning, the mutineers saw a most singular creature flying toward

them. It was large as a Chinese teal, but presented the general appearance of an insect rather than a bird. It had four large, pointed, membranous wings, a fat grub-like body marked off into segments, a thin head with two black periscope-like attachments rising above it, a dozen long intricate antennae, and a greenish-yellow beak shaped like that of a parrot. The body and head were a loathsome verminous gray. The thing flew past Roverton and lit on the substance he had been inspecting. Crouching down on four short, rudimentary legs, it started to sip the fluid with its beak, trailing its wings as it did so. The fluid welled as if in waves, and the wings and body of the creature were soon glistening with slime. Presently it ceased to sip, its head sank in the fluid, it struggled feebly to free itself, and then lay still.

"Ugh!" said Deming. "So that's the idea. A sort of Andromedan pitcher-plant or fly-trap. If the flies are all like that we'll need tennis-rackets for swatters."

As he spoke, three more of the insect creatures flew past, and began to repeat the actions and the fate of their predecessor. No sooner were they securely imprisoned, when the shaggy mass proceeded to close itself till the white lining was no longer discernible. The cleavage where it had opened could barely be detected; and once more the thing presented the appearance of a mossy boulder. Looking about, the mutineers saw that others of the purple masses had opened and were awaiting their victims.

"Those things could easily devour a man," meditated Roverton. "I'd hate to be caught in one of them. Let's get out of this if there is a way out."

He led the way along the sluggish stream. As they went, they saw many more of the gigantic flying insects, which paid no apparent attention to them. After they had gone a few hundred yards, Roverton almost trod on a black creature shaped like an enormous blindworm, which was crawling away from the stream. It was three feet long. Its movements were extremely torpid, and the men passed it with a shudder of repulsion, for the thing was more loathsome than either a snake or a worm

"What's that?" Roverton had stopped, and was listening. The others also paused and listened intently. They all heard the sound of dull, muffled blows, at an indeterminate distance in the fog. The sound was quite rhythmic in its repetition, but ceased at intervals. When it stopped, there was a sharp, shrill, multitudinous cheeping.

"Shall we go on ?" Roverton had lowered his voice cautiously. "We're without weapons; and hell knows what we'll get into. We may find intelligent beings; but there's no means of knowing beforehand whether or not they will prove hostile."

Before his companions could answer, the fog parted and revealed a singular spectacle. No more than a hundred yards down the stream, a dozen pygmy-like beings, about two feet in height, were gathered around one of the purple masses. With instruments whose general form suggested knives and axes, they were cutting away the moss-like integument from the mass and hewing great slabs of the white fleshy material within. Even at that distance, it could be seen that the mass was quivering convulsively, as if it felt their blows.

Suddenly the hewing was suspended. Once more the cheeping sound arose. The pygmies all turned and seemed to be gazing toward Roverton and his companions. Then the sound changed and took on a high, chirping note, like a summons. As if in answer, three monstrous creatures appeared from the fog. Each of them was twenty feet in length, they were like fat lizards in their general form and had an indefinite number of very short legs on which they crawled or waddled with amazing swiftness. Each of them had four saddles of a fantastic type arranged at intervals along its back. They crouched down, as if at a word of command, and all the pygmies swung themselves with incredible celerity into the saddles. Then, to an accompaniment of shrill pitterings, the unearthly cavalcade advanced upon the travelers. There was no time to even think of fleeing. The speed of the lizard-creatures was far beyond that of the fleetest runner: in a few instants they loomed upon the three men, surrounding them and hemming them in with their mammoth length. The creatures were both grotesque and terrible, with their squat, toadlike heads and their puffed bodies mottled in sinister

designs with dull blues and rusty blacks and clayish yellows. Each of them had a single bulging eye that glowed with a ruddy phosphorescence in the middle of its face. Their ears, or what appeared to be such, drooped along their jowls in wrinkled folds and hung down like wattles.

Their riders, seen close at hand, were equally bizarre and hideous. Their heads were large and globular, they were cyclops-eyed, but possessed two mouths, one on each side of an appendage like the trunk of an elephant, which depended almost to their feet. Their arms and legs were of the normal number, but seemed to be very supple and boneless, or else had a bone-structure radically different from that of earth-vertebrates. Their hands were four-fingered and were webbed with translucent membranes. Their feet were also webbed, and terminated in long, curving claws. They were altogether naked; were seemingly hairless; and their skin displayed a leaden pallor. The weapons they carried were made of some purplish metal, colored like permanganate of potash. Some were halberds with short handles; and others were crescent-shaped knives weighted at the top of the blade with heavy knobs.

"God !" cried Roverton. "If we only had elephant-guns and automatics !"

The pygmies had stopped their mounts and were gibbering excitedly as they stared with their round orbs at the earth-beings. The sounds they made were scarcely to be duplicated by human vocal chords.

"Mlah! mlah! knurhp! anhkla! hka! lkai! rhpai! " they chattered to each other.

"I guess we're as much of a novelty to them as they are to us," observed Adams.

The pygmies seemed to have arrived at a definite decision. They waved their weapons and chirped, and their lizard-steeds swung round in a semi-circle till all were in a position upstream from the mutineers. They advanced, and the pygmies pointed onward with their weighted knives and halberds as if enjoining the men to precede them. There was nothing to do but obey, for the lizard-creatures opened yawning mouths that were fanged

like caverns of stalactites and stalagmites, when they drew near. Roverton and his fellows were forced to proceed at a marathon-like pace in order to keep ahead of them.

"They're herding us like cattle !" Roverton cried.

When they came abreast of the purple-covered mass which the pygmies had been hewing into slabs, a halt was made and the slabs were loaded into large panniers which were then attached to the backs of the monsters by means of a curious harness that looked as if it were wrought of animal intestines. The men were herded in the center of the cavalcade while this work was going on. There was no possible escape; and they resigned themselves with as much scientific calm as they could muster.

After the loading had been accomplished, the pygmies resumed their advance along the stream, driving their captives before them. The fog had now begun to lift and disappear, and a dim yellow solar orb, slightly larger than our sun, became discernible low in the heavens above a remote horizon of serrate peaks. The river turned abruptly after a mile or so and wound away through the desolate plain toward a large lake or sea that filled the further distance with a semi-hue of dull purple. Here the cavalcade left the stream, marshaling its prisoners towards the far-off mountains.

The landscape grew barer and even more desert-like in its character as Roverton and his companions stumbled onward before the gaping maws of the monsters. There were no more of the insect-devouring shaggy masses, nor even insects themselves nor any other forms of life. The plain was like a vast level of dried primordial ooze, or the bed of some vanished ocean.

Hunger and weariness assailed the men. They were driven ever onward at a merciless, unremitting pace, till they panted for breath and their muscles grew leaden with fatigue. Hours seemed to pass; but the dim sun rose no higher above the horizon. It swung in a low arc, like the sun of sub-polar lands. The mountains drew no nearer, but receded on the vast vague skies.

The plain began to reveal details hitherto unnoticed. Low hills sprang up, the undulations deepened. Bare ravines of dark, sullen, semi-basaltic stone

intersected it at intervals. Still there were no signs of life, no plants, no trees, no habitations. The mutineers wondered wearily where they were being taken, and when they would reach the destination sought by their captors. They could not imagine what it would be like.

Now they were driven along a ravine in which ran a rapid stream. The ravine grew deeper; and sheer cliffs, increasing in height to a hundred feet or more, hemmed it in on each side. Rounding a sharp turn, the men saw before them a broad space of level shore, and above the shore a cliff that was lined with several rows of cavern-mouths and little steps cut in the stone. Dozens of pygmies, of the same type as their captors, were gathered before the entrances of the lower caves. An animated chattering arose among them at sight of the cavalcade and its prisoners.

"Troglodytes," exclaimed Roverton, feeling in spite of his fatigue the keen interest of a man of science. He and his companions were immediately surrounded by the pygmies, some of whom, on closer inspection, appeared to be of a different sex from the ones they had first encountered. There were also a few infants, the smallest of which were little larger than guinea-pigs.

The members of the cavalcade dismounted and proceeded to unload the panniers with the assistance of the others. The slabs of fleshy white substance were piled on the ground beside several large flat mortars of stone. When the unloading was completed, the pygmies laid some of the slabs in these mortars and began pounding them with heavy pestles. They made signs to the men, enjoining them to do likewise.

"I suppose the stuff is used for food," surmised Adams. "Maybe it's the staff of life among these creatures." He and the others selected pestles and started to pound one of the slabs. The material was easily reduced to a fine, creamy paste. It gave off a pungent odor that was far from unpleasant; and in spite of certain highly repulsive memories the three men became conscious that they were extremely hungry.

When all the mortars were full of paste, the pygmies began to devour it without any further formality, using not only their webbed hands but their

prehensile trunks to convey the stuff to their double mouths. They motioned to the men that they also should eat.

The paste had a saline flavor and vaguely resembled a mixture of sea-fish with some nutritious root-vegetable. It was quite palatable on the whole; and it served to allay the pangs of hunger in a fairly satisfactory manner. At the end of the meal a sort of fermented beverage, yellow-green in color, was brought out in shallow vessels of earthen-ware. The taste was disagreeable and very acrid; but all fatigue disappeared after a few sips; and the mutineers were able to survey their situation with new hopefulness and courage.

Several hours were now spent in pounding up the remainder of the slabs. The paste was stored in broad-mouthed urns and these urns were carried into the lower caves. Roverton and his comrades were signed to assist in this work. The caves were too low to permit their standing upright and were very dark and shadowy, with many ramifications of irregular size. The furnishings were quite primitive, as was to be expected; though there was a welcome degree of cleanliness. They were full of a smoke-like smell, and in one of them a little fire was burning. The fuel resembled some sort of peat. There were tiny couches covered with furless skins, probably those of creatures similar to the lizard-things.

The low sun had gone down behind the cliffs when the last urn was carried into the caverns. A cold green twilight gathered along the streams, thickened by the rising wispy vapors. The lizard-monsters were led away to a cave larger than the rest, lying at some distance apart. Obviously it served as a stable. Then the pygmies retired by twos and threes to their caverns, after indicating a grotto which the men were to occupy. Four pygmies, armed with their queer halberds and heavily weighted knives, remained on guard in front of the entrance.

Darkness flowed into the grotto like a rising sea of stealthy silent ripples. With its coming, an odd lethargy overpowered the men — a reaction from all the stress and strain and hardship they had endured, from the tax of all the new, unearthly impressions their nerves had sustained. They stretched

out on the stone floor, using the little couches along the wall for pillows. In a few minutes they were asleep.

They awoke with the sound of myriad cheepings and chatterings outside their cavern in the pale mistiness of dawn.

"Sounds like a caucus," surmised Roverton as he crawled toward the entrance. Peering out, he saw that more than a hundred pygmies, half of whom must have come from some other community, were collected on the stream-bank and were seemingly engaged in an earnest debate. All of them kept looking with their round orbs toward the cave occupied by the mutineers. Their words, expressions, gestures, were so remote from anything familiar to humanity, that it was impossible to guess the trend or import of their debate, or to know whether the decision at which they were arriving was friendly or inimical.

"They give me the creeps," said Deming. "We don't know whether they're going to eat us or elect us for their tribal deities."

Apparently at a word of command, the guards approached the cavern-mouth and motioned the men to come forth. They obeyed. Platters full of the white paste and cups of a sweetish ebon-black beverage were set before them; and while they ate and drank, the whole assemblage looked on in silence. Somehow, there seemed to be a change in the attitude of the pygmies; but the nature of the change, or what it might portend, was beyond surmise. The whole proceeding was extremely mysterious and had almost the air of some sinister sacrament. The black beverage must have been mildly narcotic, for the men began to feel as if they were drugged. There was a slight deadening of all their senses, though their brain-centers remained alert.

"I don't like this," murmured Roverton. He and the others felt a growing disquietude, for which they could assign no determinate reason. They were not re-assured when the three lizard-monsters, followed by two more of a similar type, re-appeared along the stream-bank. All were mounted by armed pygmies who, when they approached, made signs that the men

should precede them along their line of march. The mutineers started downstream, with the mounted guards and the whole assemblage following them.

Soon the bank grew narrower and the walls above more precipitous. The foothold narrowed to a yard-wide path, beside which the waters rushed with sullen vehemence in a series of torrential rapids teathed with yellow foam. Passing a turn in the wall, the men saw that the bank ended in a large cavern-mouth. Beyond, the cliffs rose perpendicularly from the torrent.

The three hesitated as they neared the cavern. What fate was before them they could not conjecture; but their sense of alarm and disquietude increased. They looked back and saw that the foremost lizard-thing was close upon them, yawning more horribly than the black cave in front. They thought of leaping into the stream; but the headlong torrent was full of sharp rocks; and a roaring from beyond the cliff betokened the nearness of a waterfall. The walls above the path were impossible to climb; so they entered the cavern.

The place was quite roomy in distinction to the caves inhabited by the pygmies, and the men were not forced to stoop at any time. But, blinded with the daylight they had left, they stumbled over stones and against the winding walls as they groped in utter darkness. A gust of chill and noisome air came forth like a subterranean wind from the heart of the cavern; and one of the monsters was breathing at their heels. They could see nothing, could be sure of nothing; but perforce they must go on, not knowing if the next step would plunge them into some terrific pit or bottomless gulf. A sense of uncanny menace, of weird unhuman horror, increased upon them momentarily.

"This place is dark as the coal-cellars of Hades," jested Roverton. The others laughed bravely, though their nerves were on edge with sinister expectation and uncertainty.

The draft of dank, mephitic air grew stronger. The smell of stagnant, sunless waters, lying at some unfathomable depth, mingled in the men's nostrils with a nauseating reek as of bat-haunted catacombs or foul animal-dens.

"Phooey !" grumbled Deming. "This is worse than Gorgonzola and fox-guts all in one."

The floor of the cavern began to slope downward. Step by step the descent steepened like some infernal chute, till the mutineers could hardly keep their footing in the dark.

Remote and faint, like a little patch of phosphorescence, a light dawned in the depths below. The walls of the cavern, dolorously ribbed and arched, were now distinguishable. The light strengthened as the men went on; and soon it was all about them, pouring in pale-blue rays from an undiscerned subterranean source.

The incline ended abruptly, and they came out in a vast chamber full of the queer radiance, which appeared to emanate from roof and walls like some kind of radioactivity. They were on a broad semi-circular shelf; and, crossing the shelf, they found that it terminated sharply and fell sheer down for perhaps fifty feet to a great pool in the center of the chamber. There were ledges on the opposite side of the cavern at the same level as the one on which they stood; and there were smaller caves that ramified from these ledges. But apparently none of the caves was attainable from the ledge where the incline had ended. Between, were perpendicular walls that could afford no moment's foothold anywhere.

The three men stood on the brink above the pool and looked about hem. They could hear the shuffling of the first lizard-monster on the incline and could see the baleful glaring of its single eye as it came forward.

"This looks like the last page of the last chapter." Roverton was now leering down at the pool. The others followed his gaze. The waters were dusky, stirless, dull, ungleaming, beneath the bluish glow from the cavern-sides. They were like something that had been asleep or dead for thousands of years; and the stench that arose from them suggested ages of slow putrefaction.

"Good Lord ! What is that ?" Roverton had noticed a change in the waters, an odd glimmer that came from beneath their surface as if a drowned moon

were rising within them. Then the dead calm of the pool was broken with a million spreading ripples, and a vast head, dripping with loathsome luminescence, upreared from the waters. The thing was seven or eight feet wide, it was hideously round and formless and seemed to consist mainly of gaping mouths and glaring eyes all strewn together in a mad chaos of malignity and horror. There were at least five mouths, each of them large enough to devour a man at one swallow. They were fangless, and elastically distensible. Scattered among them, the eyes burned like satanic embers.

One of the lizard-monsters had crawled forth on the shelf. Scores of the pygmies were crowding beside and behind it, and some of them now advanced till they were abreast of the men. They stared down at the fearsome thing in the pool and made uncouth gestures and genuflections with heads, hands and long prehensile trunks, as if they were invoking or worshipping it. Their shrill voices rose in a rhythmically wavering chant.

The men were almost stupefied with horror. The creature in the gulf was beyond anything in earthly legend or nightmare. And the rites of the obeisance offered by the pygmies was unbelievably revolting.

"The thing is their god," Roverton cried. "Probably they are going to sacrifice us to it."

The ledge was not thronged with pygmies; and the lizard-monster had pushed forward till the three men had no more than standing room on the brink of the gulf, in a crescent-like arc formed by its body.

The ceremony performed by the pygmies came to an end, their genuflections and chantings ceased, and all turned their eyes in a simultaneous unwinking stare on the mutineers. The four who were mounted upon the lizard-creature gave vent in unison to a single word of command.

"Ptrahsai! " The monster opened its maw and pushed forward with its squat jowl. Its horrible teeth were like a moving porticullis. Its breath was like a fetid wind. There was no time for terror, and no chance to resist: the men tottered and slipped on the narrowing verge, and toppled simultaneously

into space. In his fall Roverton clutched automatically at the nearest of the pygmies, caught the creature by its trunk, and bore it along as he hurtled through the air. He and his companions plunged with a huge splash into the pool and sank far below the surface. With a concerted presence of mind they all came up as close to the cavern-wall as they could and began to look for possible foot-holds. Roverton had not lost his grip on the pygmy. The creature howled ferociously when its head came above the water, and tried to claw him with its long toenails.

The precipice was bare and sheer from the water's edge, with no visible break anywhere. The men swam desperately along it, searching for an aperture or a ledge. The thing of mouths and eyes had begun to move toward them, and they felt sick with terror and repulsion at the sight of its slow, phosphorescent gliding. There was a damnable deliberation, a dreadful leisureliness in its motion, as if it knew that there was no way in which its victims could evade the elastic yawning of those five abominable mouths. It approached, till the cavern-wall beside the swimmers grew brighter with the foul effulgence of its looming head. They could see beneath and behind the head the distorting glowing of a long, formless body submerged in the black abysses of the pool.

Roverton was nearest to the monster when it came abreast. Its malignant bulging eyes were all bent upon him and its foremost mouth opened more widely and slavered with an execrable slime. Now it loomed athwart him, and he could feel the unutterable corruption of its breath. He was driven against the cavern-wall; and, managing to steady himself for a moment, he pushed the pygmy toward the approaching mouth. The pygmy yelled and struggled in a frenzy of fear till the awful slobbering lips had closed upon it. The monster paused as if its appetite and curiosity were appeased for the nonce; and the three men took advantage of this to continue their exploration of the wall.

Suddenly they perceived a low aperture in the smooth cliff, into which the waters flowed with a gentle rippling. The aperture was narrow and its roof was not more than a foot above the surface. It might or might not afford an

escape from the pool; but no other possible exit could be detected. Without hesitation Adams swam into the opening and the others followed him.

The water was still deep beneath them and they did not touch bottom anywhere. The walls of the little cavern were luminous at first; but the luminosity soon ceased and left them in absolute darkness. As they swam onward, they could no longer judge the extent of the air-space above them. At no time, however, were they compelled to dive beneath the surface; and they soon found that the cave was now wide enough to permit their moving side by side. They perceived also that they were caught in the flow of an ever-strengthening current which carried them on with considerable velocity. Since there was no sign of pursuit from the monster in the pool, the men began to feel a faint quickening of hope. Of course the stream might carry them to the very bowels of this terrific transstellar world, or might plunge at any moment into some dreadful gulf; or the roof might close in and crush them down beneath the noisome strangling waters. But at any rate they felt that there was a chance of ultimate emergence; and anything almost would be better than the proximity of the luminescent monster with mephitic breath and myriad eyes and mouths. Probably the cave in which they now swam was far too narrow to permit the entrance of its loathly bulk.

How long the three men floated in the swiftening current, it was impossible for them to know. As far as they could tell, there was no change in their situation; nor could they estimate how far they had gone in this underground world. The darkness weighed upon them, seemingly no less opaque and heavy than the water itself and the cavern-walls. They resigned themselves to the obscure progression of the stream, saving their strength as much as possible for any future emergency that might arise.

At length, when it seemed that they were irretrievably lost in the solid abysmal murk, when their eyes had forgotten the very memory of sight, the darkness before them was pierced by a pinpoint of light. The light increased by slow, uncertain degrees, but for awhile they were doubtful as to its nature, not knowing whether they were approaching another vault of phosphorescence, or the actual outer daylight. However, they were thankful

for its dim glimmering. The stream had become still swifter and rougher, with boulder-cloven rapids in which their descent was impetuous and dangerous. More than once the men were almost thrown against the dark and jagged masses that towered about them.

All at once the current slackened and the seething rapids died in a broad pool above which the arching of the lofty cavern-dome was now discernible. The light poured in a stream of pale radiance across this pool from what was evidently the cavern's mouth; and beyond the mouth a large sheet of sun-white water stretched away and was lost in the luminous distance.

All three men were suddenly conscious of a crushing, dragging fatigue — an overwhelming reaction from all the peril and hardship they had undergone. But the prospect of emergence from this underworld of mysterious horror prompted them to summon their remaining strength with sodden limbs, they swam toward the cavern-mouth and floated through its black arch into the silvery dazzle of a great lake. The lake was probably the same body of water they had seen from afar on the previous day. Its aspect was ineffably weird and desolate. High cliffs with many buttresses and chimneys overhung the cavern from which they had emerged, and ran away on either side in gradually descending lines till they ceased in long flats of ooze and sand. There was no trace of vegetation anywhere — nothing but the wart stone of the cliffs, and the gray mud of the marshes, and the wan, dead waters. And at first the men thought that there was no life of any kind. They swam along the cliff, looking for a place to land. The levels of ooze and sand were seemingly miles away; and their progress in the sluggish lake was excruciatingly slow and tedious. They felt as if the strange, lifeless waters had soaked them to the bone; and a deadly inertia dragged them down and drugged their very senses till everything became blurred in a monotone of faintness. They were all too exhausted to speak or even think. Dimly, despairingly, they plowed on toward the receding goal of the far-off shore. Somehow, they were aware that a shadow had fallen upon them, breaking the diffused glare of the foggy sun. They were too weary to look up, or even speculate as to the origin of the shadow. Then they heard a harsh, jarring cry and a beating as of stiff, enormous wings, and something

swooped down and hovered above them. Turning their heads in the water, the three men saw an incredible sight. The thing that shadowed them was a mammoth bird-like creature with ribbed and leathern wings that were at least fifty feet from tip to tip. It suggested that prehistoric flying monster, the pterodactyl; and also it suggested a pelican, for beneath its seven-foot beak there hung a prodigious pouch. Scarcely crediting their eyes, the swimmers stared at the hovering apparition. It glowered upon them with malevolent orbs of fire big as dinner-plates; and then, with horrible swiftness, it descended. Adams, who was nearest, felt the huge beak close upon him and lift him from the water; and before he could realize what was happening he found himself in the interior of the pouch. Deming was seized and deposited beside him a moment later; and Roverton, who had instinctively dived beneath the surface, was retrieved and drawn out by the questing beak as if he had been a flounder, and joined the other two.

Utterly stunned, they groped about in the noisome darkness of the pouch and were thrown prostrate in a heap as they felt the monster rise and soar heavenward. There were eel-like things that squirmed beneath them; and they breathed a medley of suffocating stench. They could see nothing; but the gloom in which they lay was not absolute blackness, for the walls of the pouch were sufficiently permeable by light to create a blood-like dusk. The men could hear the loud beating of the leathern wings, could feel the rhythmic throb of their vibration; and while they were trying to habituate themselves to the unique situation they had the sense of being borne onward in vertiginous flight at a great altitude. Roverton was the first to speak.

"Of all the ineffable predicaments! Even a fiction-writer wouldn't dare to imagine this, I suppose the creature has a nest somewhere and it's carrying us home to provide food for its young or its mate."

"Or," suggested Adams, "having caught a supply of live meat, it's going off somewhere to secure its vitamins."

A faint laughter greeted the jest.

"Well," put in Deming, "we're getting a free ride, anyhow — for once we're not having to walk, run or swim."

Time passed in a doubtful, confused way. The beating of the wings had died to a swish of rushing air as about the unflapping level of flight of some giant vulture or bird of prey. Still there was the sense of prodigious speed, of horizon on horizon left behind, of plains and waters and mountains slipping away beneath in a swift recession.

The men grew sick and dizzy with the noxious air of their prison; they fell into periods of semi-consciousness from which they revived with a start. In the novel horror of their position, they almost lost the feeling of identity. It was as if they were part of some monstrous dream or hallucination.

After an undetermined lapse of time, they felt a slackening of the headlong flight and then heard once more the thunderous flap of those huge wings as the bird sank groundward. It seemed to descend from an alp-surpassing height, with tremendous velocity.

Now the descent was arrested with abrupt ease, like the stopping of an elevator. A sudden glimmering of light in the interior of the pouch, and Roverton and his companions were aware that the creature had opened its bill as if to seize something. Then, with a raucous, deafening cry, it began to thrash about as in some stupendous convulsion, and the men were thrown violently from side to side in the tossing pouch. It was impossible to imagine what had happened — the whole occurrence was supremely mysterious and terrifying. Adams and Deming were knocked almost senseless by the shaking they received; and Roverton alone was able to retain anything like full cognizance. He realized that the bird was engaged in some sort of struggle or combat. After a brief interval its heavings became less tumultuous and powerful; and at last, with one hoarse, diabolic shriek, it appeared to collapse and lay still except for an occasional shuddering that shook body and neck and was communicated to the pouch. These shudderings diminished in force and frequency. The bird was now lying on its side, and the light entered the pouch directly through its wide-open beak.

Making sure that his companions had recovered their senses, Roverton crawled toward the light. The others followed in turn. Wriggling out through the slimy mouth, from which a frothy blood-like fluid was dripping, Roverton stood up dizzily and looked around.

The scene upon which he had emerged was wilder and madder than the grotesqueries of fever-delirium. For an instant he thought that the things about him were products of hallucination, were born of his overwrought nerves and brain. The flying monster was stretched on the ground and was wrapped from head to tail in the coils of something which Roverton could only designate to himself as a vegetable anaconda. The coils were pale-green with irregular brown and purplish mottlings and were manifestly hundreds of feet in length. They terminated in three heads covered with mouths like the suckers of an octopus. The coils had encircled the bird many times, and were evidently possessed of enormous constrictive power, for they had tightened upon their prey so that the body bulged between them in loathsome knots and protuberances. They were visibly rooted in a black, viscid-looking soil, and were swollen at their base like the bole of some ancient tree. The three heads had applied themselves to the back of their prostrate victim and were obviously drawing sustenance from it with their myriad suckers.

All around, in the veering vapors that rose from the ground like steam, there loomed the tossing tops and writhing trunks, branches and feelers of a medley of half-ophidian or half-animal plant-forms. They varied in size from vines that were no larger than coral snakes, to amorphous bulks with a hundred squirming tentacles, huge as the kraken of mythology. They were no less diverse than the plant-forms of a terrestrial jungle, and all of them were hideously alive. Many were devoid of anything that suggested leaves; but others had fingerlike fronds or a sort of foliage that resembled a network of hairy ropes, and which undoubtedly served the same purpose as a spider web, for in some of these nets queer, uncouth insects and birds had been caught. Others of the trees bore tumescent oval or globular fruits, and fleshy-looking flowers that could close like mouths upon their prey. Overhead, through the steaming vapors, a hot, swollen sun flamed down from an almost vertical altitude. Roverton realized that the bird-monster,

flying at many hundreds of miles an hour, must have carried himself and his companions to a sub-tropic zone of the world in which they were marooned.

Adams and Deming had now crawled out and were standing beside Roverton. For once none of the three could utter a word, in the profound stupefaction with which they surveyed their surroundings. Instinctively they all looked for an avenue of escape in the rows of vegetable monstrosities that hemmed them in on all sides. But there was no break anywhere — only a writhing infinity of things that were plainly poisonous, maleficent and inimical. And somehow they all felt that these plant-entities were conscious of their presence, were observing them closely, and, in some manner not cognizable by human senses, were even discussing or debating them.

Adams ventured to take a step forward. Instantly a long tentacle shot out from the nearest of the kraken-like forms and encircled him. Struggling and screaming, he was drawn toward the great dark lumpish mass from which the tentacles emanated. There was an open cuplike mouth of vermilion, fully a yard wide, in the center of this mass; and before his companions could even move, Adams was thrust into the mouth which forthwith closed upon him like the mouth of a tightened sack, Roverton and Deming were petrified with horror. Before they could even think of stirring from where they stood, two more of the tentacles shot out and gripped each of them about the waist. The grip was firm as an iron rope; and both were conscious of a sort of electric shock at the contact — a shock which served to stun them still further. Almost fainting, they were held erect by the horrible coils.

Nothing more happened for a brief interval. The incomprehensible strangeness of their position, the manifold fatigues and ordeals of the day, together with the shock of those coils, had dazed the two men so that they could hardly grasp the fate of their companion and their own imminent doom.

Everything became unreal, misty, dream-like. Then, through the vagueness that enveloped their senses, they saw that the dark mass at the core of the tentacles was beginning to move and heave. Soon the heavings turned to

convulsions that became more and more violent. Roverton and Deming fell to the ground as the coils loosened their hold, and saw the lashing of a score of tentacles in the air above, tossing from side to side about the agitated central mass. Then, from this mass, the body of Adams was ejected, to fall beside Roverton and Deming. Obviously human flesh had not agreed with the digestion of the Andromedan plant-monster. The mass continued to heave and palpitate, and its myriad arms waved through the air as if in agony.

The two men dared not look at the body of their erstwhile comrade. Sick, and utterly spent with weariness and horror, they lay prostrate on the ground. After awhile they felt the tentacles encircle them once more; but they were not drawn toward the central mouth but were lifted and dragged away toward the tangle of unearthly forms behind the vegetable kraken. Here they were caught by the supple serpentine limbs of other living plants and were drawn onward through the jungle.

They were dimly aware of multiform mouths that gaped or puckered in the air beside them, they felt the antennae-like tendrils that swayed and groped, they saw the poisoning branches armed with dart-like thorns, they saw the crimson ell-wide blossoms with cloven tongues from which a venomous honey dripped. And all around they heard the moan or shriek or hiss of animals snared by the demoniacal growths, and saw the yawning mouths that devoured their victims bodily, or the suckers that fastened upon them like the lips of vampires. But among these terrors and horrors of a transstellar flora the two men passed unharmed, untouched, and were drawn from coil to lethal coil, from net to fatal net, through the unimaginable woods. It was as if all these carnivorous and deadly things had been warned of their inedible nature, and were thrusting them away.

At length the light grew stronger and the men perceived that they were approaching the jungle's edge. The last of the plant-krakens gave them a vehement fling with its great arms, and the steaming soil of a flat, treeless plain hovered and reeled before them as they fell unconscious in the open sunlight.

Roverton was the first to recover his senses. Feeling very weak and dizzy, with blurred thoughts and vision, he tried to sit up, and fell back helplessly. Then as his eyes and brain began to clear, a little strength returned to him, and a second effort was more successful. His first thought was of his comrade, for whom he now looked. Deming still lay where he had fallen, in a prone and sprawling posture.

Several hours must have elapsed, for the sun was now hanging above the edge of the plain, and the tall, columnar vapors were tinted as with the flames of an aurora. The very soil itself, wet and glistening, had taken on a reflection of prismatic hues. Turning, Roverton saw behind him at a little distance the fearsome jungle from which he and Deming had been so summarily ejected by the sarcophagous trees and plants. The jungle was comparatively quiescent now; but its branches and boles were still swaying slightly; and a low, sibilant sound arose from among them like the hissing of an army of serpents.

Roverton managed to stand up. He tottered like a fever-patient, and could scarcely keep from falling. His mouth was parched and fiery with an all-consuming thirst; and his head throbbed like a beaten drum. Seeing a pool of water not far away, he started toward it, but was forced to finish his journey on hands and knees. He drank, and felt amazingly refreshed by the dark, bitterish fluid. Filling his cap (which he had somehow managed to retain through all the vicissitudes of the past two days) with the water, he went back to his companion, walking erect this time, and sprinkled some of the fluid on Deming's face. Deming stirred, and opened his eyes. In a brief while he was able to drink the remainder of the contents of the cap, and then succeeded in standing up and taking a few steps.

"Well, what's the next number on the program?" he queried. His voice was cracked and feeble, but indomitably gallant.

"Damned if I know," shrugged Roverton. "But I move that we get as far as possible from that beastly jungle." Neither he nor Deming could bear to think of Adams' fate or the abominable things they had seen and heard and felt. The whole experience was unendurable to human nerves, and revulsion

sickened the two men as the memory of it arose on the threshold of their brains. Resolutely they turned their backs to the carnivorous forest, and staggered away toward the dim and fuming horizon with its banners of rainbow splendor.

The landscape through which they now wandered was like the bottom of a newly dried ocean. It was one vast level of reeking clay, of a peculiar consistency, which yielded a little like rubber or some resilient fabric beneath their feet, without breaking through. The sensation afforded by treading upon it was uncanny and disconcerting. At every step they fully expected to sink down in some bog or quicksand. They realized why they had not suffered any contusions or broken bones when the living trees had hurled them forth with such irresistible violence.

There were many pools of water in the plain; and once the men were compelled to deviate from their course by a narrow, winding lake. The aspect of the resilient ooze was indelectably monotonous and was unrelieved by any vegetable growth or outcropping of mineral. But somehow it was not dead, but conveyed a sense of somnolent vitality, as if it possessed a dark, secret life of its own.

The vapors parted in the oblique rays of the sun. Not far ahead, Roverton and Deming now perceived a low table-like elevation. Even at first sight, it suggested an island; and as the men neared it the characteristics it revealed were indicative that it really had been such, and that the plain around it had been the bed of a shallow sea at no very ancient date. There were wave-marks in the soil about the base; and, in contradistinction to the utter barrenness of the plain, there were boulders and tree-forms on its long undulating sides; and several ruinous walls and monoliths of an unearthly architecture were visible on the broad, flat summit.

"Now for some Andromedan archaeology," Roverton commented, pointing to the ruins.

"Not to mention some more botany," added Deming.

Both of them peered with considerable caution and trepidation at the foremost trees and plants. These were similar in type to the monstrosities of the jungle; but they were more sparse and scattered; and somehow there was a difference. When Deming and Roverton approached them the nature of the difference became manifest. The ophidian branches dropped and trailed on the ground, and were strangely still and unmoving. Seen closer at hand, they were withered and mummified. It was evident to these scientists that the trees had long been dead.

Not without repulsion, Roverton broke off the end of one of the hanging tentacles. It snapped easily; and he found that he could crumble it into fine powder between his fingers. Realizing that there was nothing to be feared, he and Deming began to climb the slope toward the fantastic ruins.

The soil of the hill, a sort of grey and purple marl, was firm beneath their feet. They reached the summit as the sinking sun began to disappear behind a far-off line of cliffs that rose like the core of a continent from the plain.

Circled about with rows of the dead plant-monsters, there stood in the center of the summit the strange ruins that Roverton and Deming had descried from below. They gleamed in the light with a dull luster, and appeared to be made of some foreign stone that was heavily impregnated with metal. They were apparently the remnants of several immense buildings, and bore the marks of some awful cataclysm that had carried away their super-structures and even much of the floor-work and foundations. One of the walls retained a doorway that was oddly high and narrow and was wider at top than at bottom. Also, there were some queer windows close to the ground. The men wondered at the physical characteristics of the race that had reared such edifices. From a human standpoint everything about the ruins was architecturally abnormal.

Roverton approached one of the monoliths. It was square in shape, was forty feet high by seven in diameter, and had manifestly been taller at one time, for the top was riven and jagged where it had been broken off abruptly. It was wrought of the same material as the walls. A series of bas-reliefs, intermingled with columns of hieroglyphic letter-forms, had been

carved about the base. The bas-reliefs depicted beings of a curious type, with long thin trunks terminating at each end in a multitude of many-jointed limbs. The heads of these creatures, or what appeared to be such, were at the nether extremity of the trunks, and had two mouths that were set above a double row of eyes. Ear-like appendages drooped from the chins. The lower limbs ended in bird-like claws and the upper in broad, umbrella-shaped webs whose use was beyond conjecture. Roverton exclaimed with amazement as he called Deming's attention to these figures. Whether such beings represented an extinct race, or whether their prototypes were still to be found in this outré world, was of course an irresolvable problem. But the men felt that this mystery too would soon be solved. It would be solved whether they liked it or not.

The men were too worn out with their herculean ordeals to devote much time and energy to speculation of this order. They found a sheltered place in the angle of one of the walls, and sat down. Perforce they had eaten nothing since the food provided by the pygmies at early dawn; and seemingly there was no immediate prospect of finding any. They were desperate and there seemed no hope to lighten the depression that closed in about these doomed men.

The sun had gone down, leaving an erubescence twilight that stained the soil, the ruins and the dead trees as with a deepening tide of blood. A preternatural silence prevailed — a silence fraught with the sense of foreign mystery, the burden of ultramundane antiquity that clung to those strange ruins. The men lay down and began to doze.

They awoke simultaneously, without knowing for a brief moment what it was that had aroused them. The twilight had turned to a rich violet, though the walls and trees were still clearly distinguishable. Somewhere in this twilight, there was a shrill, strident humming that grew louder momentarily.

All at once the humming was near at hand, in midair. It soared to a deafening clamor. Roverton and Deming saw that a swarm of giant insects with curving five-inch bills were hovering about them as if uncertain whether or not to attack. There seemed to be hundreds of these formidable-

looking creatures. One of them, bolder than the others darted forward and stung Deming on the back of his left hand till its beak almost protruded from his palm. He cried out with the pain, and truck the insect with his other fist. It squashed beneath the blow and fell to the ground, emitting a nauseous stench.

Roverton sprang to his feet and broke off a bough from one of the trees. This he waved at the swarm, which retreated a little but did not disperse. An idea came to him, and he thrust the bough into Deming's hand, saying:

"If you can keep them off, I'll try to build a fire"

While Deming waved his ineffectual weapon at the hesitating army Roverton broke off more of the dead, tentacle-like boughs, piled them, and crushed others into a heap of fine dust with his heel. Then, in the twilight, he found two small fragments of the metallic stone from which the buildings had been wrought; and striking the fragments together, he obtained a spark which fell into the dust-pile and ignited it. The stuff was highly combustible, for in less than a minute the heap of boughs was burning brightly. Terrified by the blaze, the insects fell back; and their stridulation soon diminished and sank away in the distance.

Deming's hand was now painfully swollen and throbbing from the sting he had received.

"Those brutes would have finished us if they had been nervy enough to attack in force," he observed.

Roverton piled more fuel on the fire, in case the swarm should return.

"What a world !" he ejaculated. "I wish Volmar were here, confound him!"

As he spoke, there was a far-off droning in the crepuscular sky. For a moment, the men thought that the insect swarm was coming back to assail them again. Then the droning deepened to a great roar. The roar was somehow familiar, though neither could determine at first the memory

which it tended to evoke. Then, where stars were beginning to pierce the vague heavens, they saw the indistinct bulk that descended toward them.

"My God! Is that the space-flier?" cried Deming.

With a final roaring and screeching of its propellers, the bulk came to rest within fifty feet of the fire. The light flickered on its metal sides and revealed the well-known ladder down which the three mutineers had climbed in an alien darkness.

A figure descended the ladder and came toward the fire, it was Captain Volmar. His face was drawn and livid in the firelight, and looked older than the two men remembered it. He greeted them stiffly, with an odd trace of embarrassment in his manner,

"I'm certainly glad to have located you," he announced, without waiting for Roverton or Deming to return too his salutation. "I've been flying around this damn planet all day, hoping there was one chance in a trillion of finding you again. I didn't take any bearings when I put you off in the night, so of course I had no idea where to look. I was about to give it up, when I saw the fire and decided to investigate."

"If you'll come back with me," he continued, "we'll let bygones be bygones. I'm short-handed now, and am going to give up the trip and start back for the solar system. We began to develop engine-trouble not long after we put you off; and two of the men were electrocuted by a short-circuit before the trouble was remedied. Their bodies are floating somewhere in mid-ether now — I gave them a space-burial. Then Jasper fell ill, and I've been running the flier single-handed for the past twenty-four hours. I'm sorry I was so hasty with you — I certainly put you off on an impossible sort of world. I've been all over it today, and there's nothing anywhere but seas, deserts, marshes, mud-flats, jungles of crazy-looking vegetation, a lot of equally desolate ruins, and no life except overgrown insects, reptiles, and a few cliff-dwelling pygmies in the sub-polar regions. It's a wonder that even two of you have managed to survive. Come on — you can tell me your story when we're aboard the flier."

Roverton and Deming followed him as he turned and re-ascended the ladder. The manhole closed behind them with a clang that was more grateful to their ears than music. A minute more, and the flier was climbing the heavens along the crepuscular curve of the planet, till it soared into the daylight of Delta Andromedae. Then it rushed on through the sidereal gulfs, till the great sun became a star and began to resume its wonted place in an ever-receding constellation.

MASTER OF THE ASTEROID

Man's conquest of the interplanetary gulfs has been fraught with many tragedies. Vessel after vessel, like venturesome motes, disappeared in the infinite — and had not returned. Inevitably, for the most part, the lost explorers have left no record of their fate. Their ships have flared as unknown meteors through the atmosphere of the further planets, to fall like shapeless metal cinders on a never-visited terrain; or have become the dead, frozen satellites of other worlds or moons. A few, perhaps, among the unreturning fliers, have succeeded in landing somewhere, and their crews have perished immediately, or survived for a little while amid the inconceivably hostile environment of a cosmos not designed for men.

In later years, with the progress of exploration, more than one of the early derelicts has been descried, following a solitary orbit; and the wrecks of others have been found on ultraterrene shores. Occasionally — not often — it has been possible to reconstruct the details of the lone, remote disaster. Sometimes, in a fused and twisted hull, a log or record has been preserved intact. Among others, there is the case of the Selenite, the first known rocket ship to dare the zone of the asteroids.

At the time of its disappearance, fifty years ago, in 1980, a dozen voyages had been made to Mars, and a rocket base had been established in Syrtis Major, with a small permanent colony of terrestrials, all of whom were trained scientists as well as men of uncommon hardihood and physical stamina.

The effects of the Martian climate, and the utter alienation from familiar conditions, as might have been expected, were extremely trying and even disastrous. There was an unremitting struggle with deadly or pestiferous bacteria new to science, a perpetual assailment by dangerous radiations of soil, and air and sun. The lessened gravity played its part also, in contributing to curious and profound disturbances of metabolism.

The worst effects were nervous and mental. Queer, irrational animosities, manias or phobias never classified by alienists, began to develop among the personnel at the rocket base.

Violent quarrels broke out between men who were normally controlled and urbane. The party, numbering fifteen in all, soon divided into several cliques, one against the others; and this morbid antagonism led at times to actual fighting and even bloodshed.

One of the cliques consisted of three men, Roger Colt, Phil Gershom and Edmond Beverly. These three, through banding together in a curious fashion, became intolerably antisocial toward all the others. It would seem that they must have gone close to the borderline of insanity, and were subject to actual delusions. At any rate, they conceived the idea that Mars, with its fifteen Earthmen, was entirely too crowded. Voicing this idea in a most offensive and belligerent manner, they also began to hint their intention of faring even further afield in space.

Their hints were not taken seriously by the others, since a crew of three was insufficient for the proper manning of even the lightest rocket vessel used at that time. Colt, Gershom and Beverly had no difficulty at all in stealing the Selenite, the smaller of the two ships then reposing at the Syrtis Major base. Their fellow-colonists were aroused one night by the cannon-like roar of the discharging tubes, and emerged from their huts of sheet-iron in time to see the vessel departing in a fiery streak toward Jupiter.

No attempt was made to follow it; but the incident helped to sober the remaining twelve and to calm their unnatural animosities. It was believed, from certain remarks that the malcontents had let drop, that their particular objective was Ganymede or Europa, both of which were thought to possess an atmosphere suitable for human respiration.

It seemed very doubtful, however, that they could pass the perilous belt of the asteroids. Apart from the difficulty of steering a course amid these innumerable far-strewn bodies, the Selenite was not fueled or provisioned for a voyage of such length. Gershom, Colt and Beverly, in their mad haste

to quit the company of the others, had forgotten to calculate the actual necessities of their proposed voyage, and had wholly overlooked its dangers.

After that departing flash on the Martian skies, the Selenite was not seen again; and its fate remained a mystery for thirty years. Then, on tiny, remote Phocea, its dented wreck was found by the Holdane expedition to the asteroids.

Phocea, at the time of the expedition's visit, was in aphelion. Like others of the planetoids, it was discovered to possess a rare atmosphere, too thin for human breathing. Both hemispheres were covered with thin snow; and lying amid this snow, the Selenite was sighted by the explorers as they circled about the little world.

Much interest prevailed, for the shape of the partially bare mound was plainly recognizable and not to be confused with the surrounding rocks. Holdane ordered a landing, and several men in space suits proceeded to examine the wreck. They soon identified it as the long-missing Selenite.

Peering in through one of the thick, unbreakable neocrystal ports, they met the eyeless gaze of a human skeleton, which had fallen forward against the slanting, overhanging wall. It seemed to grin a sardonic welcome. The vessel's hull was partly buried in the stony soil, and had been crumpled and even slightly fused, though not broken, by its plunge. The manhole lid was so thoroughly jammed and soldered that it was impossible to effect an entrance without the use of a cutting-torch.

Enormous, withered, cryptogamous plants with the habit of vines, that crumbled at a touch, were clinging to the hull and the adjacent rocks. In the light snow beneath the skeleton-guarded port, a number of sharded bodies were lying, which proved to be those of tall insect forms, like giant phasmidae.

From the posture and arrangement of their lank, pipy members, longer than those of a man, it seemed that they had walked erect. They were unimaginably grotesque, and their composition, due to the almost non-

existent gravity, was fantastically porous and unsubstantial. Many other bodies, of a similar type, were afterwards found on other portions of the planetoid, but no living thing was discovered. All life, it was plain, had perished in the trans-arctic winter of Phocea's aphelion.

When the Selenite had been entered, the party learned from a sort of log or notebook found on the floor, that the skeleton was all that remained of Edmond Beverly. There was no trace of his two companions; but the log, on examination, proved to contain a record of their fate as well as the subsequent adventures of Beverly almost to the very moment of his own death from a doubtful, unexplained cause.

The tale was a strange and tragic one. Beverly, it would seem, had written it day by day, after the departure from Syrtis Major, in an effort to retain a semblance of morale and mental coherence amid the black alienation and disorientation of infinitude. I transcribe it herewith, omitting only the earlier passages, which were full of unimportant details and personal animadversions. The first entries were all dated, and Beverly had made an heroic attempt to measure and mark off the seasonless night of the void in terms of earthly time. But after the disastrous landing on Phocea, he had abandoned this; and the actual length of time covered by his entries can only be conjectured.--

* * *

Sept. 10th. Mars is only a pale-red star through our rear ports; and according to my calculations we will soon approach the orbit of the nearest asteroids. Jupiter and its system of moons are seemingly as far off as ever, like beacons on the unattainable shore of immensity. More even than at first, I feel that dreadful suffocation illusion, which accompanies ether-travel, of being perfectly stationary in a static void.

Gershom, however, complains of a disturbance of equilibrium, with much vertigo and a frequent sense of falling, as if the vessel were sinking beneath him through bottomless space at a headlong speed. The causation of such symptoms is rather obscure, since the artificial gravity regulators are in

good working order. Colt and I have not suffered from any similar disturbance. It seems to me that the sense of falling would be almost a relief from this illusion of nightmare immobility; but Gershom appears to be greatly distressed by it, and says that his hallucination is growing stronger, with fewer and briefer intervals of normalcy. He fears that it will become continuous.

* * *

Sept. 11th. Colt has made an estimate of our fuel and provisions and thinks that with careful husbandry we will be able to reach Europa. I have been checking up on his calculations, and find that he is altogether too sanguine. According to my estimate, the fuel will give out while we are still midway in the belt of the asteroids; though the food, water and compressed air would possibly take us most of the way to Europa.

This discovery I must conceal from the others. It is too late to turn back. I wonder if we have all been mad, to start out on this errant voyage into cosmical immensity with no real preparation or thought of consequences. Colt, it would seem, has lost the power of mathematical calculation: his figures are full of the most egregious errors.

Gershom has been unable to sleep, and is not even fit to take his turn at the watch. The hallucination of falling obsesses him perpetually, and he cries out in terror, thinking that the vessel is about to crash on some dark, unknown planet to which it is being drawn by an irresistible gravitation. Eating, drinking and locomotion are very difficult for him, and he complains that he cannot even draw a full breath — that the air is snatched away from him in his precipitate descent. His condition is indeed painful and pitiable.

* * *

Sept. 12th. Gershom is worse — bromide of potassium and even a heavy dose of morphine from the Selenite's medicine lockers, have not relieved him or enabled him to sleep. He has the look of a drowning man and seems to be on the point of strangulation. It is hard for him to speak.

Colt has become very morose and sullen, and snarls at me when I address him. I think that Gershom's plight has preyed sorely upon his nerves — as it has on mine. But my burden is heavier than Colt's: for I know the inevitable doom of our insane and ill-starred expedition. Sometimes I wish it were all over.... The hells of the human mind are vaster than space, darker than the night between the worlds...and all three of us have spent several eternities in hell. Our attempt to flee has only plunged us into a black and shoreless limbo, through which we are fated to carry still our own private perdition.

I, too, like Gershom, have been unable to sleep. But, unlike him, I am tormented by the illusion of eternal immobility. In spite of the daily calculations that assure me of our progress through the gulf, I cannot convince myself that we have moved at all. It seems to me that we hang suspended like Mohammed's coffin, remote from earth and equally remote from the stars, in an incommensurable vastness without bourn or direction. I cannot describe the awfulness of the feeling.

* * *

Sept. 13th. During my watch, Colt opened the medicine locker and managed to shoot himself full of morphine. When his turn came, he was in a stupor and I could do nothing to rouse him. Gershom had gotten steadily worse and seemed to be enduring a thousand deaths so there was nothing for me to do but keep on with the watch as long as I could. I locked the controls, anyway, so that the vessel would continue its course without human guidance if I should fall asleep.

I don't know how long I kept awake — nor how long I slept. I was aroused by a queer hissing whose nature and cause I could not identify at first. I looked around and saw that Colt was in his hammock, still lying in a drug-induced sopor. Then I saw that Gershom was gone, and began to realize that the hissing came from the air-lock. The inner door of the lock was closed securely — but evidently someone had opened the outer manhole, and the sound was being made by the escaping air. It grew fainter and ceased as I listened.

I knew then what had happened — Gershom, unable to endure his strange hallucination any longer, had actually flung himself into space from the Selenite! Going to the rear ports, I saw his body, with a pale, slightly bloated face and open, bulging eyes. It was following us like a satellite, keeping an even distance of ten or twelve feet from the lee of the vessel's stern. I could have gone out in a space suit to retrieve the body; but I felt sure that Gershom was already dead, and the effort seemed more than useless. Since there was no leakage of air from the interior, I did not even try to close the manhole.

I hope and pray that Gershom is at peace. He will float forever in cosmic space — and in that further void where the torment of human consciousness can never follow.

* * *

Sept. 15th. We have kept our course somehow, though Colt is too demoralized and drug-sodden to be of much assistance. I pity him when the limited supply of morphine gives out.

Gershom's body is still following us, held by the slight power of the vessel's gravitational attraction. It seems to terrify Colt in his more lucid moments; and he complains that we are being haunted by the dead man. It's bad enough for me, too, and I wonder how much my nerves and mind will stand. Sometimes I think that I am beginning to develop the delusion that tortured Gershom and drove him to his death. An awful dizziness assails me, and I fear that I shall start to fall. But somehow I regain my equilibrium.

* * *

Sept. 16th. Colt used up all the morphine, and began to show signs of intense depression and uncontrollable nervousness. His fear of the satellite corpse appeared to grow upon him like an obsession; and I could do nothing to reassure him. His terror was deepened by an eerie, superstitious belief.

"I tell you, I hear Gershom calling us," he cried. "He wants company, out there in the black, frozen emptiness; and he won't leave the vessel till one of us goes out to join him. You've got to go, Beverly — it's either you or me — otherwise he'll follow the Selenite forever."

I tried to reason with him, but in vain. He turned upon me in a sudden shift of maniacal rage.

"Damn you, I'll throw you out, if you won't go any other way!" he shrieked.

Clawing and mouthing like a mad beast, he leaped toward me where I sat before the Selenite's control-board. I was almost overborne by his onset, for he fought with a wild and frantic strength. I don't like to write down all that happened, for the mere recollection makes me sick. Finally he got me by the throat, with a sharp-nailed clutch that I could not loosen and began to choke me to death. In self-defense, I had to shoot him with an automatic which I carried in my pocket. Reeling dizzily, gasping for breath, I found myself staring down at his prostrate body, from which a crimson puddle was widening on the floor.

Somehow, I managed to put on a space suit. Dragging Colt by the ankles, I got him to the inner door of the air-lock. When I opened the door, the escaping air hurled me toward the open manhole together with the corpse; and it was hard to regain my footing and avoid being carried through into space. Colt's body, turning traversely in its movement, was jammed across the manhole; and I had to thrust it out with my hands. Then I closed the lid after it. When I returned to the ship's interior, I saw it floating, pale and bloated, beside the corpse of Gershom.

* * *

Sept. 17th. I am alone — and yet most horribly I am pursued and companioned by the dead men. I have sought to concentrate my faculties on the hopeless problem of survival, on the exigencies of space navigation; but it is all useless. Ever I am aware of those stiff and swollen bodies, swimming in the awful silence of the void, with the white, airless sun like a leprosy of light on their upturned faces.

I try to keep my eyes on the control-board — on the astronomic charts — on the log I am writing — on the stars toward which I am travelling. But a frightful and irresistible magnetism makes me turn at intervals, and mechanically, helplessly, to the rearward ports. There are no words for what I feel and think — and words are as lost things along with the worlds I have left so far behind. I sink in a chaos of vertiginous horror, beyond all possibility of return.

* * *

Sept. 18th. I am entering the zone of the asteroids — those desert rocks, fragmentary and amorphous, that whirl in far-scattered array between Mars and Jupiter. Today the Selenite passed very close to one of them — a small body like a broken-off mountain, which heaved suddenly from the gulf with knife-sharp pinnacles and black gullies that seemed to cleave to its very heart.

The Selenite would have crashed full upon it in a few instants, if I had not reversed the power and steered in an abrupt diagonal to the right. As it was, I passed near enough for the bodies of Colt and Gershom to be caught by the gravitational pull of the planetoid; and when I looked back at the receding rock, after the vessel was out of danger, they had disappeared from sight. Finally I located them with the telescopic reflector, and saw that they were revolving in space, like infinitesimal moons, about that awful, naked asteroid. Perhaps they will float thus forever, or will drift gradually down in lessening circles, to find a tomb in one of those bleak, bottomless ravines.

* * *

Sept. 16th I have passed several more of the asteroids — irregular fragments, little larger than meteoric stones; and all my skill of spacemanship has been taxed severely to avert collision. Because of the need for unrelaxing vigilance, I have been compelled to keep awake at all times. But sooner or later, sleep will overpower me, and the Selenite will crash to destruction.

After all, it matters little: the end is inevitable, and must come soon enough in any case. The store of concentrated food, the tanks of compressed oxygen, might keep me alive for many months, since there is no one but myself to consume them. But the fuel is almost gone, as I know from my former calculations. At any moment, the propulsion may cease. Then the vessel will drift idly and helplessly in this cosmic limbo, and be drawn to its doom on some asteroidal reef.

* * *

Sep. 21st(?). Everything I have expected has happened, and yet by some miracle of chance — or mischance — I am still alive.

The fuel gave out yesterday (at least I think it was yesterday). But I was too close to the nadir of physical and mental exhaustion to realize clearly that the rocket-explosions had ceased. I was dead for want of sleep, and had gotten into a state beyond hope or despair. Dimly I remember setting the vessel's controls through automatic force of habit; and then I lashed myself in my hammock and fell asleep instantly.

I have no means of guessing how long I slept. Vaguely, in the gulf beyond dreams, I heard a crash as of far-off thunder, and felt a violent vibration that jarred me into dull wakefulness. A sensation of unnatural, sweltering heat began to oppress me as I struggled toward consciousness; but when I had opened my heavy eyes, I was unable to determine for some little time what had really happened.

Twisting my head so that I could peer out through one of the ports, I was startled to see, on a purple-black sky, an icy, glittering horizon of saw-edged rocks.

For an instant, I thought that the vessel was about to strike on some looming planetoid. Then, overwhelmingly, I realized that the crash had already occurred — that I had been awakened from my coma-like slumber by the falling of the Selenite upon one of those cosmic islets.

I was wide-awake now, and I hastened to unlash myself from the hammock. I found that the floor was pitched sharply, as if the vessel had landed on a slope or had buried its nose in the alien terrain. Feeling a queer, disconcerting lightness, and barely able to re-establish my feet on the floor, I gradually made my way to the nearest port. It was plain that the artificial gravity-system of the flier had been thrown out of commission by the crash, and that I was now subject only to the feeble gravitation of the asteroid. It seemed to me that I was light and incorporeal as a cloud — that I was no more than the airy specter of my former self.

The floor and walls were strangely hot; and it came to me that the heating must have been caused by the passage of the Selenite through some sort of atmosphere. The asteroid, then, was not wholly airless, as such bodies are commonly supposed to be; and probably it was one of the larger fragments with a diameter of many miles — perhaps hundreds. But even this realization failed to prepare me for the weird and surprising scene upon which I gazed through the port.

The horizon of serrate peaks, like a miniature mountain-range, lay at a distance of several hundred yards. Above it, the small, intensely brilliant sun, like a fiery moon in its magnitude, was sinking with visible rapidity in the dark sky that revealed the major stars and planets.

The Selenite had plunged into a shallow valley, and had half-buried its prow and bottom in a soil that was formed by decomposing rock, mainly basaltic. All about were fretted ridges, guttering pillars and pinnacles; and over these, amazingly, there clambered frail, pipy, leafless vines with broad, yellow-green tendrils flat and thin as paper. Insubstantial-looking lichens, taller than a man, and having the form of flat antlers, grew in single rows and thickets along the valley.

Between the thickets, I saw the approach of certain living creatures who rose from behind the middle rocks with the suddenness and lightness of leaping insects. They seemed to skim the ground with long, flying steps that were both easy and abrupt.

There were five of these beings, who, no doubt, had been attracted by the fall of the Selenite from space and were coming to inspect it. In a few moments, they neared the vessel and paused before it with the same effortless ease that had marked all their movements.

What they really were, I do not know; but for want of other analogies, I must liken them to insects. Standing perfectly erect, they towered seven feet in air. Their eyes, like faceted opals, at the end of curving protractile stalks, rose level with the port. Their unbelievably thin limbs, their stem-like bodies, comparable to those of the phasmidae, or "walking-sticks", were covered with gray-green shards. Their heads, triangular in shape, were flanked with immense, perforated membranes, and were fitted with mandibular mouths that seemed to grin eternally.

I think that they saw me with those weird, inexpressive eyes; for they drew nearer, pressing against the very port, till I could have touched them with my hand if the port had been open. Perhaps they too were surprised: for the thin eye-stalks seemed to lengthen as they stared and there was a queer waving of their sharded arms, a quivering of their horny mouths, as if they were holding converse with each other. After a while they went away, vanishing swiftly beyond the near horizon.

Since then, I have examined the Selenite as fully as possible, to ascertain the extent of the damage. I think that the outer hull has been crumpled or even fused in places: for when I approached the manhole, clad in a space suit, with the idea of emerging, I found that I could not open the lid. My exit from the flier has been rendered impossible, since I have no tools with which to cut the heavy metal or shatter the tough, neo-crystal ports. I am sealed in the Selenite as in a prison; and the prison, in due time, must also become my tomb.

Later. I shall no longer try to date this record. It is impossible under the circumstances, to retain even an approximate sense of earthly time. The chronometers have ceased running, and their machinery has been hopelessly jarred by the vessel's fall. The diurnal periods of this planetoid are, it would seem, no more than an hour or two in duration; and the nights

are equally short. Darkness swept upon the landscape like a black wing after I had finished writing my last entry; and since then, so many of these ephemeral days and nights have shuffled by, that I have now ceased to count them. My very sense of duration is becoming oddly confused. Now that I have grown somewhat used to my situation, the brief days drag with immeasurable tedium.

The beings whom I call the walking-sticks have returned to the vessel, coming daily, and bringing scores and hundreds of others. It would seem that they correspond in some measure to humanity, being the dominant life-form of this little world. In most ways, they are incomprehensibly alien; but certain of their actions bear a remote kinship to those of men, and suggest similar impulses and instincts.

Evidently they are curious. They crowd around the Selenite in great numbers, inspecting it with their stalk-borne eyes, touching the hull and ports with their attenuated members. I believe they are trying to establish some sort of communication with me. I cannot be sure that they emit vocal sounds, since the hull of the flier is soundproof; but I am sure that the stiff, semaphoric gestures which they repeat in a certain order before the port as soon as they catch sight of me, are fraught with conscious and definite meaning.

Also, I surmise an actual veneration in their attitude, such as would be accorded by savages to some mysterious visitant from the heavens. Each day, when they gather before the ship, they bring curious spongy fruits and porous vegetable forms which they leave like a sacrificial offering on the ground. By their gestures, they seem to implore me to accept these offerings.

Oddly enough, the fruits and vegetables always disappear during the night. They are eaten by large, luminous, flying creatures with filmy wings, that seem to be wholly nocturnal in their habits. Doubtless, however, the walking-sticks believe that I, the strange ultra-stellar god, have accepted the sacrifice.

It is all strange, unreal, immaterial. The loss of normal gravity makes me feel like a phantom; and I seem to live in a phantom world. My thoughts, my memories, my despair — all are no more than mists that waver on the verge of oblivion.... And yet, by some fantastic irony, I am worshipped as a god!

* * *

Innumerable days have gone by since I made the last entry in this log. The seasons of the asteroid have changed: the days have grown briefer, the nights longer; and a bleak wintriness pervades the valley. The frail, flat vines are withering on the rocks, and the tall lichen-thickets have assumed funereal autumn hues of madder and mauve. The sun revolves in a low arc above the sawtoothed horizon, and its orb is small and pale as if it were receding into the black gulf among the stars.

The people of the asteroid appear less often, they seem fewer in number, and their sacrificial gifts are rare and scant. No longer do they bring sponge-like fruits, but only pale and porous fungi that seem to have been gathered in caverns.

They move slowly, as if the winter cold were beginning to numb them. Yesterday, three of them fell, after depositing their gifts, and lay still before the flier. They have not moved, and I feel sure that they are dead. The luminous night-flying creatures have ceased to come, and the sacrifices remain undisturbed beside their bearers.

* * *

The awfulness of my fate has closed upon me today. No more of the walking-sticks have appeared. I think that they have all died — the ephemerae of this tiny world that is bearing me with it into the Arctic limbo of the solar system. Doubtless their lifetime corresponds only to its summer — to its perihelion.

Thin clouds have gathered in the dark air, and snow is falling like fine powder. I feel an unspeakable desolation — a dreariness that I cannot write.

The heating-apparatus of the Selenite is still in good working-order; so the cold cannot reach me. But the black frost of space has fallen upon my spirit. Strange — I did not feel so utterly bereft and alone while the insect people came daily. Now that they come no more, I seem to have been overtaken by the ultimate horror of solitude, by the chill terror of an alienation beyond life. I can write no longer, for my brain and my heart fail me.

* * *

Still, it would seem, I live after an eternity of darkness and madness in the flier, of death and winter in the world outside. During that time, I have not written in the log; and I know not what obscure impulse prompts me to resume a practice so irrational and futile.

I think it is the sun, passing in a higher and longer arc above the dead landscape, that has called me back from the utterness of despair. The snow has melted from the rocks, forming little rills and pools of water; and strange plant-buds are protruding from the sandy soil. They lift and swell visibly as I watch them. I am beyond hope, beyond life, in a weird vacuum; but I see these beings as a condemned captive sees the stirring of spring from his cell. They rouse in me an emotion whose very name I had forgotten.

My food-supply is getting low, and the reserve of compressed air is even lower. I am afraid to calculate how much longer it will last. I have tried to break the neo-crystal ports with a large monkey-wrench for hammer; but the blows, owing partly to my own weightlessness, are futile as the tapping of a feather. Anyway, in all likelihood, the outside air would be too thin for human respiration.

The walking-stick people have reappeared before the flier. I feel sure, from their lesser height, their brighter coloring, and the immature development of certain members, that they all represent a new generation. None of my former visitors have survived the winter; but somehow the new ones seem to regard the Selenite and me with the same curiosity and reverence that were shown by their elders. They, too, have begun to bring gifts of

unsubstantial-looking fruit; and they strew filmy blossoms below the port. I wonder how they propagate themselves, and how knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another....

* * *

The flat, lichenous vines are mounting on the rocks, are clambering over the hull of the Selenite. The young walking-sticks gather daily to worship — they make those enigmatic signs which I have never understood, and they move in swift gyrations about the vessel, as in the measures of a hieratic dance. I, the lost and doomed, have been the god of two generations. Perhaps they will still worship me when I am dead. I think the air is almost gone — I am more light-headed than usual today, and there is a queer constriction in my throat and chest....

* * *

Perhaps I am a little delirious, and have begun to imagine things; but I have just perceived an odd phenomenon, hitherto unnoted. I don't know what it is. A thin, columnar mist, moving and writhing like a serpent, with opal colors that change momentarily, has disappeared among the rocks and is approaching the vessel. It seems like a live thing — like a vaporous entity; and somehow, it is poisonous and inimical. It glides forward, rearing above the throng of phasmidae, who have all prostrated themselves as if in fear. I see it more clearly now: it is half-transparent, with a web of gray threads among its changing colors; and it is putting forth a long, wavering tentacle.

It is some rare life-form, unknown to earthly science; and I cannot even surmise its nature and attributes. Perhaps it is the only one of its kind on the asteroid. No doubt it has just discovered the presence of the Selenite, and has been drawn by curiosity, like the walking-stick people.

The tentacle has touched the hull — it has reached the port behind which I stand, penciling these words. The gray threads in the tentacle glow as if with sudden fire. My God — it is coming through the neo-crystal lens

MONSTERS IN THE NIGHT

The change occurred before he could divest himself of more than his coat and scarf. He had only to step out of the shoes, to shed the socks with two backward kicks, and shuffle off the trousers from his lean hind-legs and belly. But he was still deep-chested after the change, and his shirt was harder to loosen. His hackles rose with rage as he slewed his head around and tore it away with hasty fangs in a flurry of fallen buttons and rags. Tossing off the last irksome ribbons, he regretted his haste. Always heretofore he had been careful in regard to small details. The shirt was monogrammed. He must remember to collect all the tatters later. He could stuff them in his pockets, and wear the coat buttoned closely on his way home, when he had changed back.

Hunger snarled within him, mounting from belly to throat, from throat to mouth. It seemed that he had not eaten for a month-for a month of months. Raw butcher's meat was never fresh enough: it had known the coldness of death and refrigeration, and had lost all vital essence. Long ago there had been other meals, warm, and sauced with still spurting blood. But now the thin memory merely served to exasperate his ravening.

Chaos raced within his brain. Inconsequently, for an instant, he recalled the first warning of his malady, preceding even the distaste for cooked meat: the aversion, the allergy, to silver forks and spoons. It had soon extended to other objects of the same metal. He had cringed even from the touch of coinage, had been forced to use paper and to refuse change. Steel, too, was a substance unfriendly to beings like him; and the time came when he could abide it little more than silver.

What made him think of such matters now, setting his teeth on edge with repugnance, choking him with something worse than nausea?

The hunger returned, demanding swift appeasement. With clumsy pads he pushed his discarded raiment under the shrubbery, hiding it from the heavy-

jowled moon. It was the moon that drew the tides of madness in his blood, and compelled the metamorphosis. But it must not betray to any chance passerby the garments he would need later, when he returned to human semblance after the night's hunting.

The night was warm and windless, and the woodland seemed to hold its breath. There were, he knew, other monsters abroad in that year of the Twenty-first Century. The vampire still survived, subtler and deadlier, protected by man's incredulity. And he himself was not the only lycanthrope: his brothers and sisters ranged unchallenged, preferring the darker urban jungles, while he, being country-bred, still kept the ancient ways. Moreover, there were monsters unknown as yet to myth and superstition. But these too were mostly haunters of cities. He had no wish to meet any of them. And of such meeting, surely, there was small likelihood.

He followed a crooked lane, reconnoitered previously. It was too narrow for cars and it soon became a mere path. At the path's forking he ensconced himself in the shadow of a broad, mistletoe-blotted oak. The path was used by certain late pedestrians who lived even farther out from town. One of them might come along at any moment.

Whimpering a little, with the hunger of a starved hound, he waited. He was a monster that nature had made, ready to obey nature's first commandment: Thou shalt kill and eat. He was a thing of terror... a fable whispered around prehistoric cavern-fires... a miscegenation allied by later myth to the powers of hell and sorcery. But in no sense was he akin to those monsters beyond nature, the spawn of a new and blacker magic, who killed without hunger and without malevolence.

He had only minutes to wait, before his tensing ears caught the far-off vibration of footsteps. The steps came rapidly nearer, seeming to tell him much as they came. They were firm and resilient, tireless and rhythmic, telling of youth or of full maturity untouched by age. They told, surely, of a worthwhile prey; or prime lean meat and vital, abundant blood.

There was a slight froth on the lips of the one who waited. He had ceased to whimper. He crouched closer to the ground for the anticipated leap.

The path ahead was heavily shadowed. Dimly, moving fast, the walker appeared in the shadows. He seemed to be all that the watcher had surmised from the sound of his footsteps. He was tall and well-shouldered, swinging with a lithe sureness, a precision of powerful tendon and muscle. His head was a faceless blur in the gloom. He was hatless, clad in dark coat and trousers such as anyone might wear. His steps rang with the assurance of one who has nothing to fear, and has never dreamt of the crouching creatures of darkness.

Now he was almost abreast of the watcher's covert. The watcher could wait no longer but sprang from his ambush of shadow, towering high upon the stranger as his hind-paws left the ground. His rush was irresistible, as always. The stranger toppled backward, sprawling and helpless, as others had done, and the assailant bent to the bare throat that gleamed more enticingly than that of a siren.

It was a strategy that had never failed... til now...

The shock, the consternation, had hurled him away from that prostrate figure and had forced him back upon teetering haunches. It was the shock, perhaps, that had caused him to change again, swiftly, resuming human shape before his hour. As the change began, he spat out several broken lupine fangs; and then he was spitting human teeth.

The stranger rose to his feet, seemingly unshaken and undismayed. He came forward in a rift of revealing moonlight, stooping to a half-crouch, and flexing his beryllium-steel fingers enameled with flesh-pink.

"Who-what-are you?" quavered the werewolf.

The stranger did not bother to answer as he advanced, every synapse of the computing brain transmitting the conditioned message, translated into simplest binary terms, "Dangerous. Not human. Kill!"

MORTHYLLA

In Umbri, City of the Delta, the lights blazed with a garish brilliance after the setting of that sun which was now a coal-red decadent star, grown old beyond chronicle, beyond legend. Most brilliant, most garish of all were the lights that illumed the house of the ageing poet Famurza, whose Anacreontic songs had brought him the riches that he disbursed in orgies for his friends and sycophants. Here, in porticoes, halls and chambers the cressets were thick as stars in a cloudless fault. It seemed that Famurza wished to dissipate all shadows, except those in arrased alcoves set apart for the fitful amours of his guests.

For the kindling of such amours there were wines, cordials, aphrodisiacs. There were meats and fruits that swelled the flaccid pulses. There were strange exotic drugs that amused and prolonged pleasure. There were curious statuettes in half-veiled niches; and wall panels painted with bestial loves, or loves human or superhuman. There were hired singers of all sexes, who sang ditties diversely erotic; and dancers whose contortions were calculated to restore the outworn sense when all else had failed.

But to all such incitants Valzain, pupil of Famurza, and renowned both as poet and voluptuary, was insensible.

With indifference turning toward disgust, a half-emptied cup in his hand, he watched from a corner the gala throng that eddied past him, and averted his eyes involuntarily from certain couples who were too shameless or drunken to seek the shadows of privacy for their dalliance. A sudden satiety had claimed him. He felt himself strangely withdrawn from the morass of wine and flesh into which, not long before, he had still plunged with delight. He seemed as one who stands on an alien shore, beyond waters of deepening separation.

"What ails you, Valzain? Has a vampire sucked your blood?" It was Famurza, flushed, gray-haired, slightly corpulent, who stood at his elbow.

Laying an affectionate hand on Valzain's shoulder, he hoisted aloft with the other that fescenninely graven quart goblet from which he was wont to drink onIy wine, eschewing the drugged and violent liquors often preferred by the sybarites of Umbri

"Is it billiousness? Or unrequited love? We have cures here for both. You have only to name your medicine"

"There is no medicine for what ails me," countered Valzain. "As for love, I have ceased to care whether it be requited or unrequited. I can taste only the dregs in every cup. And tedium lurks at the middle of all kisses"

"Truly, yours is a melancholy case." There was concern in Famurza's voice. "I have been reading some of your late verses. You write only of tombs and yew trees, of maggots and phantoms and disembodied love. Such stuff gives me the colic, I need at least a half-gallon of honest vine juice after each poem."

"Though I did not know it till lately," admitted Valzain, "there is in me a curiosity toward the unseen, a longing for things beyond the material world."

Famurza shook his head commiserately. "Though I have attained to more than twice your years, I am still content with what I see and hear and touch. Good juicy meat, women, wine, the songs of full-throated singers, are enough for me."

"In the drums of slumber," mused Valzain. "I have clasped succubi who were more than flesh, have known delights too keen for the waking body to sustain. Do such dreams have any source, outside the earthborn brain itself? I would give much to find that source, if it exists. In the meanwhile there is nothing for me but despair."

"So young — and yet so exhausted! Well, if you're tired of women, and want phantoms instead, I might venture a suggestion. Do you know the old necropolis, lying midway between Umbri and Psiom — a matter of perhaps three miles from here? The goatherds say that a lamia haunts it — the spirit

of the princess Morthylla, who died several centuries ago and was interred in a mausoleum that still stands, overtowering the lesser tombs. Why not go forth tonight and visit the necropolis? It should suit your mood better than my house. And perhaps Morthylla will appear to you. But don't blame me if you don't return at all. After all those years the lamia is still avid for human lovers; and she might well take a fancy to you."

"Of course, I know the place," said Valzain... "But I think you are jesting."

Famurza shrugged his shoulders and moved on amid the revelers. A laughing dancer, blonde-limbed and lissom, came up to Valzain and threw a noose of plaited flowers about his neck, claiming him as her captive. He broke the noose gently, and gave the girl a tepid kiss that caused her to make wry faces. Unobtrusively but quickly, before others of the merry-makers could try to entice him, he left the house of Famurza.

Without impulses, other than that of an urgent desire for solitude, he turned his steps toward the suburbs, avoiding the neighborhood of taverns and lupanars, where the populace thronged. Music, laughter, snatches of songs, followed him from lighted mansions where symposia were held nightly by the city's richer denizens. But he met few roisters on the streets: it was too late for the gathering, too early for the dispersal, of guests at such symposia.

Now the lights thinned out, with ever-widening intervals between, and the streets grew shadowy with that ancient night which pressed about Umbri, and would wholly quench its defiant galaxies of lamp-bright window with the darkening of Zothique's senescent sun. Of such things, and of death's encircling mystery, were the musings of Valzain as he plunged into the outer darkness that he found grateful to his glare-wearied eyes.

Grateful too was the silence of the field-bordered road that he pursued for awhile without realizing its direction. Then, at some landmark familiar despite the gloom, it came to him that the road was the one which ran from Umbri to Psiom, that sister city of the Delta; the road beside whose middle meanderings was situated the long-disused necropolis to which Famurza had ironically directed him.

Truly, he thought, the earthly-minded Famurza had somehow plumbed the need that lay at the bottom of his disenchantment with all sensory pleasures. It would be good to visit, to sojourn for an hour or so, in that city whose people had long passed beyond the lusts of mortality, beyond satiety and disillusion.

A moon, swelling from the crescent toward the half, arose behind him as he reached the foot of the lowmounded hill on which the cemetery lay. He left the paved road, and began to ascend the slope, half-covered with stunted gorse, at whose summit the glimmering marbles were discernible. It was without path, other than the broken trails made by goats and their herders. Dim, lengthened and attenuate, his shadow went before him, like a ghostly guide. In his fantasy it seemed to him that he climbed the gently sloping bosom of a giantess, studded afar with pale gems that were tombstones and mausoleums. He caught himself wondering, amid this poetic whimsy, whether the giantess was dead, or merely slept.

Gaining the flat expansive ground of the summit, where dwarfish dying yews disputed with leafless briars the intervals of slabs blotched with lichen, he recalled the tale that Famurza had mentioned, anent the lamia who was said to haunt the necropolis. Famurza, he knew well, was no believer in such legendry, and had meant only to mock his funereal mood. Yet, as a poet will, he began to play with the fancy of some presence, immortal, lovely and evil, that dwelt amid the antique marbles and would respond to the evocation of one who, without positive belief, had longed vainly for visions from beyond mortality.

Through headstone aisles of moon-touched solitude, he came to a lofty mausoleum, still standing with few signs of ruin at the cemetery's center. Beneath it, he had been told, were extensive vaults housing the mummies of an extinct royal family that had ruled over the twin cities Umbri and Psiom in former centuries. The princess Morthylla had belonged to this family.

To his startlement a woman, or what appeared to be such, was sitting on a fallen shaft beside the mausoleum. He could not see her distinctly; the tomb's shadow still enveloped her from the shoulders downward. The face

alone, glimmering wanly, was lifted to the rising moon Its profile was such as he had seen on antique coins.

"Who are you?" he asked, with a curiosity that over powered his courtesy.

"I am the lamia Morthylla," she replied, in a voice that left behind it a faint and elusive vibration like that of some briefly sounded harp. "Beware me — for my kisses are forbidden to those who would remain numbered among the living."

Valzain was startled by this answer that echoed his fantasies. Yet reason told him that the apparition was no spirit of the tombs but a living woman who knew the legend of Morthylla and wished to amuse herself by teasing him. And yet what woman would venture alone and at night to a place so desolate and eerie?

Most credibly, she was a wanton who had come out to keep a rendezvous amid the tombs. There were, he knew, certain perverse debauchees who required sepulchral surroundings and furnishings for the titillation of their desires.

"Perhaps you are waiting for some one," he suggested. "I do not wish to intrude, if such is the case."

"I wait only for him who is destined to come. And I have waited long, having had no lover for two hundred years. Remain, if you wish: there is no one to fear but me."

Despite the rational surmises he had formed, there crept along Valzain's spine the thrill of one who, without fully believing, suspects the presence of a thing beyond nature... Yet surely it was all a game — a game that he too could play for the beguilement of his ennui.

"I came here hoping to meet you," he declared.. "I am weary of mortal women, tired of every pleasure — tired even of poetry."

"I, too, am bored," she said, simply.

The moon had climbed higher, shining on the dress of antique mode that the woman wore. It was cut closely at waist and hips and bosom, with voluminous downward folds. Valzain had seen such costumes only in old drawings. The princess Morthylla, dead for three centuries, might well have worn a similar dress.

Whoever she might be, he thought, the woman was strangely beautiful, with a touch of quaintness in the heavily coiled hair whose color he could not decide in the moonlight. There was a sweetness about her mouth, a shadow of fatigue. or sadness beneath her eyes. At the right corner of her lips he discerned a small mole.

Valzain's meeting with the self-named Morthylla was repeated nightly while the moon swelled like the rounding breast of a titaness and fell away once more to hollowness and senescence. Always she awaited him by the same mausoleum which, she declared, was her dwelling place. And always she dismissed him when the east turned ashen with dawn, saying that she was a creature of the night.

Skeptical at first, he thought of her as a person with macabre leanings and fantasies akin to his own, with whom he was carrying on a flirtation of singular charm. Yet about her he could find no hint of the worldliness that he suspected: no seeming knowledge of present things, but a weird familiarity with the past and the lamia's legend. More and more she seemed a nocturnal being, intimate only with shadow and solitude.

Her eyes, her lips, appeared to withhold secrets forgot- ten and forbidden. In her vague, ambiguous answers to his questions, he read meanings that thrilled him with hope and fear.

"I have dreamed of life," she told him cryptically. "And I have dreamed also of death. Now, perhaps there is another dream — into which you have entered."

"I, too, would dream," said Valzain.

Night after night his disgust and weariness sloughed away from him, in a fascination fed by the spectral milieu, the enviroing silence of the dead, his withdrawal and separation from the carnal, garish city. By degrees, by alternations of unbelief and belief, he came to accept her as the actual lamia. The hunger that he sensed in her, could be only the lamia's hunger; her beauty that of a being no longer human. It was like a dreamer's acceptance of things fantastic elsewhere than in sleep.

Together with his belief, there grew his love for her. The desires he had thought dead revived within him, wilder, more importunate.

She seemed to love him in return. Yet she betrayed no sign of the lamia's legendary nature, eluding his embrace, refusing him the kisses for which he begged.

"Sometime, perhaps," she conceded. "But first you must know me for what I am, must love me without illusion."

"Kill me with your lips, devour me as you are said to have devoured other lovers," beseeched Valzain.

"Can you not wait?" her smile was sweet — and tantalizing. "I do not wish your death so soon, for I love you too well. Is it not sweet to keep your tryst among the sepulchres? Have I not beguiled you from your boredom? Must you end it all?"

The next night he besought her again, imploring with all his ardor and eloquence the denied consummation.

She mocked him: "Perhaps I am merely a bodiless phantom, a spirit without substance. Perhaps you have dreamed me. Would you risk an awakening from the dream?"

Valzain stepped toward her, stretching out his arms in a passionate gesture. She drew back, saying:

"What if I should turn to ashes and moonlight at your touch? You would regret then your rash insistence."

"You are the immortal lamia," avowed Valzain. "My senses tell me that you are no phantom, no disembodied spirit. But for me you have turned all else to shadow."

"Yes, I am real enough in my fashion," she granted, laughing softly. Then suddenly she leaned toward him and her lips touched his throat. He felt their moist warmth a moment — and felt the sharp sting of her teeth that barely pierced his skin, withdrawing instantly. Before he could clasp her she eluded him again.

"It is the only kiss permitted to us at present," she cried, and fled swiftly with soundless footfalls among the gleams and shadows of the sepulchres.

On the following afternoon a matter of urgent and unwelcome business called Valzain to the neighboring city of Psiom: a brief journey, but one that he seldom took.

He passed the ancient necropolis, longing for that nocturnal hour when he could hasten once more to a meeting with Morthylla. Her poignant kiss, which had drawn a few drops of blood, had left him greatly fevered and distraught. He, like that place of tombs, was haunted; and the haunting went with him into Psiom.

He had finished his business, the borrowing of a sum of money from a usurer. Standing at the usurer's door, with that slightly obnoxious but necessary person beside him, he saw a woman passing on the street.

Her features, though not her dress, were those of Morthylla; and there was even the same tiny mole at one corner of her mouth. No phantom of the cemetery could have startled or dismayed him more profoundly.

"Who is that woman? he asked the moneylender. "Do you know her?"

"Her name is Beldith. She is well-known in Psiom, being rich in her own right and having had numerous lovers. I've had a little business with her, though she owes me nothing at present. Should you care to meet her? I can easily introduce you."

"Yes, I should like to meet her," agreed Valzain. "She looks strangely like someone that I knew a long time ago."

The usurer peered slyly at the poet. "She might not make too easy a conquest. It is said of late that she has withdrawn herself from the pleasures of the city. Some have seen her going out at night toward the old necropolis, or returning from it in the early dawn. Strange tastes, I'd say, for one who is little more than a harlot. But perhaps she goes out to meet some eccentric lover."

"Direct me to her house," Valzain requested. "I shall not need you to introduce me."

"As you like." The moneylender shrugged, looking a little disappointed. "It's not far, anyway."

Valzain found the house quickly. The woman Beldith was alone. She met him with a wistful and troubled smile that left no doubt of her identity.

"I perceive that you have learned the truth," she said "I had meant to tell you soon, for the deception could not have gone on much longer. Will you not forgive me?"

"I forgive you," returned Valzain sadly. "But why did you deceive me?"

"Because you desired it. A woman tries to please the man whom she loves; and in all love there is more or less deception."

"Like you, Valzain, I had grown tired of pleasure. And I sought the solitude of the necropolis, so remote from carnal things. You too came, seeking solitude and peace -- or some unearthly specter. I recognized you at once. And I had read your poems. Knowing Morthylla's legend, I sought to play a

game with you. Playing it, I grew to love you... Valzain, you loved me as the lamia. Can you not now love me for myself?"

"It cannot be," averred the poet. "I fear to repeat the disappointment I have found in other women. Yet at least I am grateful for the hours you gave me. They were the best I have known — even though I have loved something that did not, and could not, exist. Farewell, Morthylla. Farewell, Beldith."

When he had gone, Beldith stretched herself face downward among the cushions of her couch. She wept a little; and the tears made a dampness that quickly dried. Later she arose briskly enough and went about her household business.

'After a time she returned to the loves and revelries of Psiom. Perhaps, in the end, she found such peace as may be given to those who have grown too old for pleasure.

But for Valzain there was no peace, no balm for this last and most bitter of disillusionments. Nor could he return to the carnalities of his former life. So it was that he finally slew himself, stabbing his throat to its deepest vein with a keen knife in the same spot which the false lamia's teeth had bitten, drawing a little blood.

After his death, he forgot that he had died; forgot the immediate past with all its happenings and circumstances.

Following his talk with Famurza, he had gone forth from Famurza's house and from the city of Umbri and had taken the road that passed the abandoned cemetery. Seized by an impulse to visit it, he had climbed the slope toward the marbles under a swelling moon that rose behind him.

Gaining the flat expansive ground of the summit, where dwarfish dying yews disputed with leafless briars the intervals of slabs blotched with lichen, he recalled the tale that Famurza had mentioned, anent the lamia who was said to haunt the necropolis. Famurza, he knew well, was no believer in such legendry, and had meant only to mock his funereal mood. Yet, as a poet will, he began to play with the fancy of some presence,

immortal, lovely and evil, that dwelt amid the antique marbles and would respond to the evocation of one who, without positive belief, had longed vainly for visions from beyond mortality.

Through headstone aisles of moon-touched solitude, he came to a lofty mausoleum, still standing with few signs of ruin at the cemetery's center. Beneath it, he had been told, were extensive vaults housing the mummies of an extinct royal family that had ruled over the twin cities Umbri and Psiom in former centuries. The princess Morthylla had belonged to this family.

To his startlement a woman, or what appeared to be such, was sitting on a fallen shaft beside the mausoleum. He could not see her distinctly; the tomb's shadow still enveloped her from the shoulders downward. The face alone, glimmering wanly, was lifted to the rising moon. Its profile was such as he had seen on antique coins.

"Who are you?" he asked, with a curiosity that overpowered his courtesy.

"I am the lamia Morthylla," she replied.

MOTHER OF TOADS

"Why must you always hurry away, my little one?"

The voice of Mere Antoinette, the witch, was an amorous croaking. She ogled Pierre, the apothecary's young apprentice, with eyes full-orbed and unblinking as those of a toad. The folds beneath her chin swelled like the throat of some great batrachian. Her huge breasts, pale as frog-bellies, bulged from her torn gown as she leaned toward him.

He gave no answer; and she came closer, till he saw in the hollow of those breasts a moisture glistening like the dew of marshes... like the slime of some amphibian... a moisture that seemed always to linger there.

Her voice, raucously coaxing, persisted. "Stay awhile tonight, my pretty orphan. No one will miss you in the village. And your master will not mind." She pressed against him with shuddering folds of fat. With her short flat fingers, which gave almost the appearance of being webbed, she seized his hand and drew it to her bosom.

Pierre wrenched the hand away and drew back discreetly. Repelled, rather than abashed, he averted his eyes. The witch was more than twice his age, and her charms were too uncouth and unsavory to tempt him for an instant. Also, her repute was such as to have nullified the attractions of a younger and fairer sorceress. Her witchcraft had made her feared among the peasantry of that remote province, where belief in spells and philters was still common. The people of Averoine called her La Mere des Crapauds, Mother of Toads, a name given for more than one reason. Toads swarmed innumerable about her hut; they were said to be her familiars, and dark tales were told concerning their relationship to the sorceress, and the duties they performed at her bidding. Such tales were all the more readily believed because of those batrachian features that had always been remarked in her aspect.

The youth disliked her, even as he disliked the sluggish, abnormally large toads on which he had sometimes trodden in the dusk, upon the path between her hut and the village of Les Hiboux. He could hear some of these creatures croaking now; and it seemed, weirdly, that they uttered half-articulate echoes of the witch's words.

It would be dark soon, he reflected. The path along the marshes was not pleasant by night, and he felt doubly anxious to depart. Still without replying to Mere Antionette's invitation, he reached for the black triangular vial she had set before him on her greasy table. The vial contained a philter of curious potency which his master, Alain le Dindon, had sent him to procure. Le Dindon, the village apothecary, was wont to deal surreptitiously in certain dubious medicaments supplied by the witch; and Pierre had often gone on such errands to her osier-hidden hut.

The old apothecary, whose humor was rough and ribald, had sometimes rallied Pierre concerning Mere Antoinette's preference for him. "Some night, my lad, you will remain with her," he had said. "Be careful, or the big toad will crush you." Remembering this gibe, the boy flushed angrily as he turned to go.

"Stay," insisted Mere Antoinette. "The fog is cold on the marshes; and it thickens apace. I knew that you were coming, and I have mulled for you a goodly measure of the red wine of Ximes."

She removed the lid from an earthen pitcher and poured its steaming contents into a large cup. The purplish-red wine creamed delectably, and an odor of hot, delicious spices filled the hut, overpowering the less agreeable odors from the simmering cauldron, the half-dried newts, vipers, bat-wings and evil, nauseous herbs hanging on the walls, and the reek of the black candles of pitch and corpse-tallow that burned always, by noon or night, in that murky interior.

"I'll drink it," said Pierre, a little grudgingly. "That is, if it contains nothing of your own concoction."

"'Tis naught but sound wine, four seasons old, with spices of Arabia," the sorceress croaked ingratiatingly. "'Twill warm your stomach... and..." She added something inaudible as Pierre accepted the cup.

Before drinking, he inhaled the fumes of the beverage with some caution but was reassured by its pleasant smell. Surely it was innocent of any drug, any philter brewed by the witch: for, to his knowledge, her preparations were all evil-smelling.

Still, as if warned by some premonition, he hesitated. Then he remembered that the sunset air was indeed chill; that mists had gathered furtively behind him as he came to Mere Antoinette's dwelling. The wine would fortify him for the dismal return walk to Les Hiboux. He quaffed it quickly and set down the cup. "Truly, it is good wine," he declared. "But I must go now."

Even as he spoke, he felt in his stomach and veins the spreading warmth of the alcohol, of the spices... of something more ardent than these. It seemed that his voice was unreal and strange, falling as if from a height above him. the warmth grew, mounting within him like a golden flame fed by magic oils. His blood, a seething torrent, poured tumultuously and more tumultuously through his members.

There was a deep soft thundering in his ears, a rosy dazzlement in his eyes. Somehow the hut appeared to expand, to change luminously about him. He hardly recognized its squalid furnishings, its litter of baleful oddments, on which a torrid splendor was shed by the black candles, tipped with ruddy fire, that towered and swelled gigantically into the softgloom His blood burned as with the throbbing flame of the candles.

It came to him, for an instant, that all this was a questionable enchantment, a glamor wrought by the witch's wine. Fear was upon him and he wished to flee. Then, close beside him, he saw Mere Antoinette.

Briefly he marvelled at the change that had befallen her. Then fear and wonder were alike forgotten, together with his old repulsion. He knew why the magic warmth mounted ever higher and hotter within him; why his flesh glowed like the ruddy tapers.

The soiled skirt she had worn lay at her feet, and she stood naked as Lilith, the first witch. The lumpish limbs and body had grown voluptuous; the pale, thick-lipped mouth enticed him with a promise of ampler kisses than other mouths could yield. The pits of her short round arms, the concave of her ponderously drooping breasts, the heavy creases and swollen rondures of flanks and thighs, all were fraught with luxurious allurements.

"Do you like me now, my little one?" she questioned.

This time he did not draw away but met her with hot, questing hands when she pressed heavily against him. Her limbs were cool and moist; her breasts yielded like the turf-mounds above a bog. Her body was white and wholly hairless; but here and there he found curious roughnesses... like those on the skin of a toad... that somehow sharpened his desire instead of repelling it.

She was so huge that his fingers barely joined behind her, His two hands, together, were equal only to the cupping of a single breast. But the wine had filled his blood with a philiterous ardor.

She led him to her couch beside the hearth where a great cauldron boiled mysteriously, sending up its fumes in strange-twining coils that suggested vague and obscene figures. The couch was rude and bare. But the flesh of the sorceress was like deep, luxurious cushions...

PIERRE AWOKE in the ashy dawn, when the tall black tapers had dwindled down and had melted limply in their sockets. Sick and confused, he sought vainly to remember where he was or what he had done. Then, turning a little, he saw beside him on the couch a thing that was like some impossible monster of ill dreams; a toadlike form, large as a fat woman. Its limbs were somehow like a woman's arms and legs. Its pale, warty body pressed and bulged against him, and he felt the rounded softness of something that resembled a breast.

Nausea rose within him as memory of that delirious night returned; Most foully he had been beguiled by the witch, and had succumbed to her evil enchantments.

It seemed that an incubus smothered him, weighing upon all his limbs and body. He shut his eyes, that he might no longer behold the loathsome thing that was Mere Antoinette in her true semblance. Slowly, with prodigious effort, he drew himself away from the crushing nightmare shape. It did not stir or appear to waken; and he slid quickly from the couch.

Again, compelled by a noisome fascination, he peered at the thing on the couch — and saw only the gross form of Mere Antoinette. Perhaps his impression of a great toad beside him had been but an illusion, a half-dream that lingered after slumber. He lost something of his nightmarish horror; but his gorge still rose in a sick disgust, remembering the lewdness to which he had yielded.

Fearing that the witch might awaken at any moment and seek to detain him, he stole noiselessly from the hut. It was broad daylight, but a cold, hueless mist lay everywhere, shrouding the reedy marshes, and hanging like a ghostly curtain on the path he must follow to Les Hiboux. Moving and seething always, the mist seemed to reach toward him with intercepting fingers as he started homeward. He shivered at its touch, he bowed his head and drew his cloak closer around him.

Thicker and thicker the mist swirled, coiling, writhing endlessly, as if to bar Pierre's progress. He could discern the twisting, narrow path for only a few paces in advance. It was hard to find the familiar landmarks, hard to recognize the osiers and willows that loomed suddenly before him like gray phantoms and faded again into the white nothingness as he went onward. Never had he seen such fog: it was like the blinding, stifling fumes of a thousand witch-stirred cauldrons.

Though he was not altogether sure of his surroundings, Pierre thought that he had covered half the distance to the village. Then, all at once, he began to meet the toads. They were hidden by the mist till he came close upon them. Misshapen, unnaturally big and bloated, they squatted in his way on the little footpath or hopped sluggishly before him from the pallid gloom on either hand.

Several struck against his feet with a horrible and heavy flopping. He stepped unaware upon one of them, and slipped in the squashy noisomeness it had made, barely saving himself from a headlong fall on the bog's rim. Black, miry water gloomed close beside him as he staggered there.

Turning to regain his path, he crushed others of the toads to an abhorrent pulp under his feet. The marshy soil was alive with them. They flopped against him from the mist, striking his legs, his bosom, his very face with their clammy bodies. They rose up by scores like a devil-driven legion. It seemed that there was a malignance, an evil purpose in their movements, in the buffeting of their violent impact. He could make no progress on the swarming path, but lurched to and fro, slipping blindly, and shielding his face with lifted hands. He felt an eery consternation, an eldrich horror. It was as if the nightmare of his awakening in the witch's hut had somehow returned upon him.

The toads came always from the direction of Les Hiboux, as if to drive him back toward Mere Antoinette's dwelling. They bounded against him like a monstrous hail, like missiles flung by unseen demons. The ground was covered by them, the air was filled with their hurtling bodies. Once, he nearly went down beneath them.

Their number seemed to increase, they pelted him in a noxious storm. He gave way before them, his courage broke, and he started to run at random, without knowing that he had left the safe path. Losing all thought of direction, in his frantic desire to escape from those impossible myriads, he plunged on amid the dim reeds and sedges, over ground that quivered gelatinously beneath him. Always at his heels he heard the soft, heavy flopping of the toads; and sometimes they rose up like a sudden wall to bar his way and turn him aside. More than once, they drove him back from the verge of hidden quagmires into which he would otherwise have galled. It was as if they were herding him deliberately and concertedly to a destined goal.

Now, like the lifting of a dense curtain, the mist rolled away, and Pierre saw before him in a golden dazzle of morning sunshine the green, thick-growing

osiers that surrounded Mere Antoinette's hut. The toads had all disappeared, though he could have sworn that hundreds of them were hopping close about him an instant previously. With a feeling of helpless fright and panic, he knew that he was still within the witch's toils; that the toads were indeed her familiars, as so many people believed them to be. They had prevented his escape, and had brought him back to the foul creature... whether woman, batrachian, or both... who was known as The Mother of Toads.

Pierre's sensations were those of one who sinks momentarily deeper into some black and bottomless quicksand. He saw the witch emerge from the hut and come toward him. Her thick fingers, with pale folds of skin between them like the beginnings of a web, were stretched and flattened on the steaming cup that she carried. A sudden gust of wind arose as if from nowhere, lifting the scanty skirts of Mere Antoinette about her fat thighs, and bearing to Pierre's nostrils the hot, familiar spices of the drugged wine.

"Why did you leave so hastily, my little one~" There was an amorous wheedling in the very tone of the witch's question. "I should not have let you go without another cup of the good red wine, mulled and spiced for the warming of your stomach... See, I have prepared it for you... knowing that you would return."

She came very close to him as she spoke, leering and sidling, and held the cup toward his lips. Pierre grew dizzy with the strange fumes and turned his head away. It seemed that a paralyzing spell had seized his muscles, for the simple movement required an immense effort.

His mind, however, was still clear, and the sick revulsion of that nightmare dawn returned upon him. He saw again the great toad that had lain at his side when he awakened.

"I will not drink your wine," he said firmly. "You are a foul witch, and I loathe you. Let me go.

"Why do you loathe me?" croaked Mere Antoinette. "You loved me yesternight. I can give you all that other women give ... and more."

"You are not a woman," said Pierre. "You are a big toad. I saw you in your true shape this morning. I'd rather drown in the marsh-waters than sleep with you again."

An indescribable change came upon the sorceress before Pierre had finished speaking. The leer slid from her thick and pallid features, leaving them blankly inhuman for an instant. Then her eyes bulged and goggled horribly, and her whole body appeared to swell as if inflated with venom.

"Go, then!" she spat with a guttural virulence. "But you will soon wish that you had stayed..."

The queer paralysis had lifted from Pierre's muscles. It was as if the injunction of the angry witch had served to revoke an insidious, half-woven spell. With no parting glance or word, Pierre turned from her and fled with long, hasty steps, almost running, on the path to Les Hiboux.

He had gone little more than a hundred paces when the fog began to return. It coiled shoreward in vast volumes from the marshes, it poured like smoke from the very ground at his feet. Almost instantly, the sun dimmed to a wan silver disk and disappeared. The blue heavens were lost in the pale and seething voidness overhead. The path before Pierre was blotted out till he seemed to walk on the sheer rim of a white abyss, that moved with him as he went.

Like the clammy arms of specters, with death-chill fingers that clutched and caressed, the weird mists drew closer still about Pierre. They thickened in his nostrils and throat, they dripped in a heavy dew from his garments. They choked him with the fetor of rank waters and putrescent ooze ... and a stench as of liquefying corpses that had risen somewhere to the surface amid the fen.

Then, from the blank whiteness, the toads assailed Pierre in a surging, solid wave that towered above his head and swept him from the dim path with the force of falling seas as it descended. He went down, splashing and floundering, into water that swarmed with the numberless batrachians. Thick slime was in his mouth and nose as he struggled to regain his footing.

The water, however, was only knee-deep, and the bottom, though slippery and oozy, supported him with little yielding when he stood erect.

He discerned indistinctly through the mist the nearby margin from which he had fallen. But his steps were weirdly and horribly hampered by the toad-seething waters when he strove to reach it. Inch by inch, with a hopeless panic deepening upon him, he fought toward the solid shore. The toads leaped and tumbled about him with a dizzying eddylike motion. They swirled like a viscid undertow around his feet and shins. They swept and swelled in great loathsome undulations against his retarded knees.

However, he made slow and painful progress, till his outstretched fingers could almost grasp the wiry sedges that trailed from the low bank then, from that mist-bound shore, there fell and broke upon him a second deluge of those demoniac toads; and Pierre was borne helplessly backward into the filthy waters.

Held down by the piling and crawling masses, and drowning in nauseous darkness at the thick-oozed bottom, he clawed feebly at his assailants. For a moment, ere oblivion came, his fingers found among them the outlines of a monstrous form that was somehow toadlike... but large and heavy as a fat woman. At the last, it seemed to him that two enormous breasts were crushed closely down upon his face.

MURDER IN THE FOURTH DIMENSION

The following pages are from a note-book that was discovered lying at the foot of an oak tree beside the Lincoln Highway, between Bowman and Auburn. They would have been dismissed immediately as the work of a disordered mind, if it had not been for the unaccountable disappearance, eight days before, of James Buckingham and Edgar Halpin. Experts testified that the hand-writing was undoubtedly that of Buckingham. A silver dollar, find a handkerchief marked with Buckingham's initials, were also round not far from the note-book.

* * *

Not everyone, perhaps, will believe that my ten years' hatred for Edgar Halpin was the impelling force that drove me to the perfecting of a most unique invention. Only those who have detested and loathed another man with the black fervor of the feeling I had conceived, will understand the patience with which I sought to devise a revenge that should be safe and adequate at the same time. The wrong he had done me was one that must be expiated sooner or later; and nothing short of his death would be sufficient. However, I did not care to hang, not even for a crime that I could regard as nothing more than the mere execution of justice; and, as a lawyer, I knew how difficult, how practically impossible, was the commission of a murder that would leave no betraying evidence. Therefore, I puzzled long and fruitlessly as to the manner in which Halpin should die, before my inspiration came to me.

I had reason enough to hate Edgar Halpin. We had been bosom friends all through our school days and through the first years of our professional life as law-partners. But when Halpin married the one woman I had ever loved with complete devotion, all friendship ceased on my side and was replaced by an ice-like barrier of inexorable enmity. Even the death of Alice, five years after the marriage, made no difference, for I could not forgive the happiness of which I had been deprived-the happiness they had shared

during those years, like the thieves they were. I felt that she would have cared for me if it had not been for Halpin—indeed, she and I had been almost engaged before the beginning of his rivalry.

It must not be supposed, however, that I was indiscreet enough to betray my feelings at any time. Halpin was my daily associate in the Auburn law-firm to which we belonged; and I continued to be a most welcome and frequent guest at his home. I doubt if he ever knew that I had cared greatly for Alice: I am secretive and undemonstrative by temperament; and also, I am proud. No one, except Alice herself, ever surmised my suffering; and even she knew nothing of my resentment. Halpin himself trusted me; and nurturing as I did the idea of retaliation at some future time, I took care that he should continue to trust me. I made myself necessary to him in all ways, I helped him when my heart was a cauldron of seething poisons, I spoke words of brotherly affection and clapped him on the back when I would rather have driven a dagger through him. I knew all the tortures and all the nausea of a hypocrite. And day after day, year after year, I made my varying plans for an ultimate revenge.

Apart from my legal studies and duties, during those ten years, I apprised myself of everything available that dealt with the methods of murder. Crimes of passion allured me with a fateful interest, and I read untiringly the records, of particular cases. I made a study of weapons and poisons; and as I studied them, I pictured to myself the death of Halpin in every conceivable way. I imagined the deed as being done at all hours of the day and night, in a multitude of places. The only flaw in these dreams was my inability to think of any spot that would assure perfect safety from subsequent detection.

It was my bent toward scientific speculation and experiment that finally gave me the clue I sought. I had long been familiar with the theory that other worlds or dimensions may co-exist in the same space with ours by reason of a different molecular structure and vibrational rate, rendering them intangible for us. One day, when I was indulging in a murderous fantasy, in which for the thousandth time I imagined myself throttling Halpin with my bare hands, it occurred to me that some unseen dimension,

if one could only penetrate it, would be the ideal place for the commission of a homicide. All circumstantial evidence, as well as the corpse itself, would be lacking—in other words, one would have a perfect absence of what is known as the *corpus delicti*. The problem of how to obtain entrance to this dimension was of course an unsolved one; but I did not feel that it would necessarily prove insoluble. I set myself immediately to a consideration of the difficulties to be overcome, and the possible ways and means.

There are reasons why I do not care to set forth in this narrative the details of the various experiments to which I was drawn during the next three years. The theory that underlay my tests and researches was a very simple one; but the processes involved were highly intricate. In brief, the premise from which I worked was, that the vibratory rate of objects in the fourth dimension could be artificially established by means of some mechanism, and that things or persons exposed to the influence of the vibration could be transported thereby to this alien realm.

For a long time, all my experiments were condemned to failure, because I was groping among mysterious powers and recondite laws whose motive-principle I had not wholly grasped. I will not even hint at the basic nature of the device which brought about my ultimate success, for I do not want others to follow where I have gone and find themselves in the same dismal predicament. I will say, however, that the desired vibration was attained by condensing ultra-violet rays in a refractive apparatus made of certain very sensitive materials which I will not name.

The resultant power was stored in a kind of battery, and could be emitted from a vibratory disk suspended above an ordinary office chair, exposing everything beneath the disk to the influence of the new vibration. The range of the influence could be closely regulated by means of an insulating attachment. By the use of the apparatus, I finally succeeded in precipitating various articles into the fourth dimension: a dinner-plate, a bust of Dante, a Bible, a French novel and a house-cat, all disappeared from sight and touch in a few instants when the ultra-violet power was turned upon them. I knew that henceforth they were functioning as atomic entities in a world where all

things had the same vibratory rate that had been artificially induced by means of my mechanism.

Before venturing into the invisible domain myself, it was of course necessary to have some way of returning. I invented a second battery and a second vibratory disk, through which, by the use of certain infra-red rays, the vibrations of our own world could be established. By turning the force from the disk on the very same spot where the dinner-plate and the other articles had disappeared, I succeeded in recovering all of them. All were absolutely unchanged; and though several months had gone by, the cat had not suffered in any way from its fourth-dimensional incarceration. The infra-red device was portable; and I meant to take it with me on my visit to the new realm in company with Edgar Halpin. I-but not Halpin-would return anon to resume the threads of mundane existence.

My experiments had all been carried on with utter secrecy. To mask their real nature, as well as to provide myself with the needful privacy, I had built a small laboratory in the woods of an uncultivated ranch that I owned, lying midway between Auburn and Bowman. Here I retired at varying intervals when I had the requisite leisure, ostensibly to conduct some chemical experiments of an educative but far from unusual type. I never admitted anyone to the laboratory; and no great amount of curiosity was evinced by friends and acquaintances regarding its contents or the tests I was carrying on. Never did I breathe a syllable to anyone that could indicate the true goal of my researches.

I shall never forget the jubilation I felt when the infra-red device had proven its practicality by retrieving the plate, the bust, the two volumes and the cat. I was so eager for the consummation of my long-delayed revenge, that I did not even consider a preliminary personal trip into the fourth dimension. I had determined that Edgar Halpin must precede me when I went. I did not feel, however, that it would be wise to tell him anything concerning the real nature of my device, or the proposed excursion.

Halpin, at this time, was suffering from recurrent attacks of terrific neuralgia. One day, when he had complained more than usual, I told him

under the seal of confidence that I had been working on a vibratory invention for the relief of such maladies and had finally perfected it.

"I'll take you out to the laboratory to-night, and you can try it," I said. "It will fix you up in a jiffy: all you'll have to do will be to sit in a chair and let me turn on the current. But don't say any thing to anybody."

"Thanks, old man," he rejoined. "I'll certainly be grateful if you can do anything to stop this damnable pain. It feels like electric drills boring through my head all the time."

I had chosen my time well, for all things were favorable to the maintenance of the secrecy I desired. Halpin lived on the outskirts of the town; and he was alone for the nonce, his housekeeper having gone away on a brief visit to some sick relative. The night was murky and foggy; and I drove to Halpin's house and stopped for him shortly after the dinner hour, when few people were abroad. I do not think anyone saw us when we left the town. I followed a rough and little-used by-road for most of the way to my laboratory, saying that I did not care to meet other cars in the thick fog, if I could avoid it. We passed no one, and I felt that this was a good omen and that everything had combined to further my plan.

Halpin uttered an exclamation of surprise when I turned on the lights in my laboratory.

"I didn't dream you had so much stuff here," he remarked, peering about with respectful curiosity at the long array of unsuccessful appliances which I had thrown aside in the course of my labors.

I pointed to the chair above which the ultra-violet vibrator was suspended.

"Take a seat, Ed," I enjoined him. "We'll soon cure everything that ails you.

"Sure you aren't going to electrocute me?" he joked, as he obeyed my direction.

A thrill of fierce triumph ran through me like the stimulation of some rare elixir, when he had seated himself. Everything was in my power now, and the moment of recompense for my ten years' humiliation and suffering was at hand. Halpin was so unsuspecting: the thought of any danger to himself, of any treachery on my part, would have been fantastically incredible to him. Putting my hand beneath my coat, I caressed the hilt of the hunting-knife that I carried.

"All set?" I asked him.

"Sure, Mike. Go ahead and shoot."

I had found the exact range that would involve all of Halpin's body without affecting the chair itself. Fixing my gaze upon him, I pressed the little knob that turned on the current of vibratory rays. The result was practically instantaneous, for he seemed to melt like a puff of thinning smoke. I could still see his outlines for a moment, and the look of a fantasmal astonishment on his face. And then he was gone-utterly gone.

Perhaps it will be a source of wonderment that, having annihilated Halpin as far as all earthly existence was concerned, I was not content merely to leave him in the unseen, intangible plane to which he had been transposed. Would that I had been content to do so. But the wrong I had suffered was hot and cankerous within me, and I could not bear to think that he still lived, in any form or upon any plane. Nothing but absolute death would suffice to assuage my resentment; and the death must be inflicted by my own hand. It now remained to follow Halpin into that realm which no man had ever visited before, and of whose geographical conditions and characteristics I had formed no idea whatever. I felt sure, however, that I could enter it and return safely, after disposing of my victim. The return of the cat left no apparent room for doubt on that score.

I turned out the lights; and seating myself in the chair with the portable infra-red vibrator in my arms, I switched on the ultra-violet power. The sensation I felt was that of one who falls with nightmare velocity into a great gulf. My ears were deaf with the intolerable thunder of my descent, a

frightful sickness overcame me, and I was near to losing all consciousness for a moment, in the black vortex of roaring space and force that seemed to draw me nadir-ward through the ultimate pits.

Then the speed of my fall was gradually retarded, and I came gently down to something that was solid beneath my feet. There was a dim glimmering of light that grew stronger as my eyes accustomed themselves to it, and by this light I saw Halpin standing a few feet away. Behind him were dark, amorphous rocks and the vague outlines of a desolate landscape of low mounds and primordial treeless flats. Even though I had hardly known what to expect, I was somewhat surprised by the character of the environment in which I found myself. At a guess, I would have said that the fourth dimension would be something more colourous and complex and varied—a land of multifold hues and many-angled forms. However, in its drear and primitive desolation, the place was truly ideal for the commission of the act I had intended.

Halpin came toward me in the doubtful light. There was a dazed and almost idiotic look on his face, and he stuttered a little as he tried to speak.

"W-What h-happened?" he articulated at last.

"Never mind what happened. It isn't a circumstance to what's going to happen now.

I laid the portable vibrator aside on the ground as I spoke.

The dazed look was still on Halpin's face when I drew the hunting-knife and stabbed him through the body with one clean thrust. In that thrust, all the stifled hatred, all the cankering resentment of ten insufferable years was finally vindicated. He fell in a twisted heap, twitched a little, and lay still. The blood oozed very slowly from his side and formed a puddle. I remember wondering at its slowness, even then, for the oozing seemed to go on through hours and days.

Somehow, as I stood there, I was obsessed by a feeling of utter unreality. No doubt the long strain I had been under, the daily stress of indurate

emotions and decade-deferred hopes, had left me unable to realize the final consummation of my desire when it came. The whole thing seemed no more than one of the homicidal day-dreams in which I had imagined myself stabbing Halpin to the heart and seeing his hateful body lie before me.

At length, I decided that it was time to effect my return; for surely nothing could be gained by lingering any longer beside Halpin's corpse amid the unutterable dreariness of the fourth-dimensional landscape. I erected the vibrator in a position where its rays could be turned upon myself, and pressed the switch.

I was aware of a sudden vertigo, and felt that I was about to begin another descent into fathomless vortical gulfs. But, though the vertigo persisted, nothing happened, and I found that I was still standing beside the corpse, in the same dismal milieu.

Dumbfoundment and growing consternation crept over me. Apparently, for some unknown reason, the vibrator would not work in the way I had so confidently expected. Perhaps, in these new surroundings, there was some barrier to the full development of the infra-red power. I do not know; but at any rate, there I was, in a truly singular and far from agreeable predicament.

I do not know how long I fooled in a mounting frenzy with the mechanism of the vibrator, in the hope that something had temporarily gone wrong and could be remedied, if the difficulty were only found. However, all my tinkerings were of no avail: the machine was in perfect working-order, but the required force was wanting. I tried the experiment of exposing small articles to the influence of the rays. A silver coin and a handkerchief dissolved and disappeared very slowly, and I felt that they must have regained the levels of mundane existence. But evidently the vibrational force was not strong enough to transport a human being.

Finally I gave it up and threw the vibrator to the ground. In the surge of a violent despair that came upon me, I felt the need of muscular action, of prolonged movement; and I started off at once to explore the weird realm in which I had involuntarily imprisoned myself.

It was an unearthly land—a land such as might have existed before the creation of life. There were undulating blanks of desolation beneath the uniform grey of a heaven without moon or sun or stars or clouds, from which an uncertain and diffused glimmering was cast upon the world beneath. There were no shadows, for the light seemed to emanate from all directions. The soil was a grey dust in places and a grey viscosity of slime in others; and the mounds I have already mentioned were like the backs of prehistoric monsters heaving from the primal ooze. There were no signs of insect or animal life, there were no trees, no herbs, and not even a blade of grass, a patch of moss or lichen, or a trace of algae. Many rocks were strewn chaotically through the desolation; and their forms were such as an idiotic demon might have devised in apeing the handiwork of God. The light was so dim that all things were lost at a little distance; and I could not tell whether the horizon was near or far.

It seems to me that I must have wandered on for several hours, maintaining as direct a course of progression as I could. I had a compass—a thing that I always carry with me; but it refused to function, and I was driven to conclude that there were no magnetic poles in this new world.

Suddenly, as I rounded a pile of the vast amorphous boulders, I came to a human body that lay huddled on the ground, and say incredulously that it was Halpin. The blood still oozed from the fabric of his coat, and the pool it had formed was no larger than when I had begun my journey.

I felt sure that I had not wandered in a circle, as people are said to do amid unfamiliar surroundings. How, then, could I have returned to the scene of my crime? The problem nearly drove me mad as I pondered it; and I set off with frantic vigor in an opposite direction from the one I had first taken.

For all intents and purposes, the scene through which I now passed was identical with the one that lay on the other side of Halpin's corpse. It was hard to believe that the low mounds, the drear levels of dust and ooze and the monstrous boulders, were not the same as those among which I had made my former way. As I went, I took out my watch with the idea of timing my progress; but the hands had stopped at the very moment when I

had taken my plunge into unknown space from the laboratory; and though I wound it carefully, it refused to run.

After walking an enormous distance, during which, to my surprise, I felt no fatigue whatever, I came once more to the body I had sought to leave. I think that I went really mad then, for a little while.

Now, after a duration of time-or eternity-which I have no means of computing, I am writing this pencilled account on the leaves of my note-book. I am writing it beside the corpse of Edgar Halpin, from which I have been unable to flee; for a score of excursions into the dim realms on all sides have ended by bringing me back to it after a certain interval. The corpse is still fresh and the blood has not dried. Apparently, the thing we know as time is well-nigh non-existent in this world, or at any rate is seriously disordered in its action; and most of the normal concomitants of time are likewise absent; and space itself has the property of returning always to the same point. The voluntary movements I have performed might be considered as a sort of time-sequence; but in regard to involuntary things there is little or no time-movement. I experience neither physical weariness or hunger; but the horror of my situation is not to be conveyed in human language; and hell itself can hardly have devised a name for it.

When I have finished writing this narration, I shall precipitate the note-book into the levels of mundane life by means of the infra-red vibrator. Some obscure need of confessing my crime and telling my predicament to others has led me to an act of which I should never have believed myself capable, for I am the most uncommunicative of men by nature. Apart from the satisfying of this need, the composition of my narrative is something to do, it is a temporary reprieve from the desperate madness that will surge upon me soon, and the grey eternal horror of the limbo to which I have doomed myself beside the undecaying body of my victim.

NECROMANCY IN NAAT

Dead longing, sundered evermore from pain: How dim and sweet the shadow-hearted love, The happiness that perished lovers prove In Naat, far beyond the sable main.

Song of the Galley-Slaves.

Yadar, prince of a nomad people in the half-desert region known as Zyra, had followed throughout many kingdoms a clue that was often more elusive than broken gossamer. For thirteen moons he had sought Dalili, his betrothed, whom the slave traders of Sha-Rag, swift and cunning as desert falcons, had reft from the tribal encampment with nine other maidens while Yadar and his men were hunting the black gazelles of Zyra. Fierce was the grief of Yadar, and fiercer still his wrath, when he came back at eve to the ravaged tents. He had sworn then a great oath to find Dalili, whether in a slave-mart or brothel or harem, whether dead or living, whether tomorrow or after the lapse of gray years.

Disguised as a rug merchant, with four of his men in like attire, and guided only by the gossip of bazaars, he had gone from capital to capital of the continent Zothique. One by one his followers had died of strange fevers or the hardships of the route. After much random wandering and pursuit of vain rumors, he had come alone to Oroth, a western seaport of the land of Xylac.

There he heard a rumor that might concern Dalili; for the people of Oroth were still gossiping about the departure of a rich galley bearing a lovely outland girl, answering to her description, who had been bought by the emperor of Xylac and sent to the ruler of the far southern kingdom of Yoros as a gift concluding a treaty between these realms.

Yadar, now hopeful of finding his beloved, took passage on a ship that was about to sail for Yoros. The ship was a small merchant galley, laden with

grain and wine, that was wont to coast up and down, hugging closely the winding western shores of Zothique and venturing never beyond eyesight of land. On a clear blue summer day it departed from Oroth with all auguries for a safe and tranquil voyage. But on the third morn after leaving port, a tremendous wind blew suddenly from the low-lying shore they were then skirting; and with it, blotting the heavens and sea, there came a blackness as of night thickened with clouds; and the vessel was swept far out, going blindly with the blind tempest.

After two days the wind fell from its ravening fury and was soon no more than a vague whisper; and the skies cleared, leaving a bright azure vault from horizon to horizon. But nowhere was there any land visible, only a waste of waters that still roared and tossed turbulently without wind, pouring ever westward in a tide too swift and strong for the galley to stem. And the galley was borne on irresistibly by that strange current, even as by the hurricane.

Yadar, who was the sole passenger, marveled much at this thing; and he was struck by the pale terror on the faces of the captain and crew. And, looking again at the sea, he remarked a singular darkening of its waters, which assumed from moment to moment a hue as of old blood commingled with more and more of blackness: though above it the sun shone untarnished. So he made inquiry of the captain, a graybeard from Yoros, named Agor, who had sailed the ocean for forty summers; and the captain answered:

"This I had apprehended when the storm bore us westward: for we have fallen into the grip of that terrible ocean-stream which mariners call the Black River. Evermore the stream surges and swiftens toward the place of the sun's outermost setting, till it pours at last from the world's rim. Between us now and that final verge there is no land saving the evil land of Naat, which is called also the Isle of Necromancers. I know not which were the worse fate, to be wrecked on that infamous isle or hurled into space with the waters falling from earth's edge. From either place there is no return for living men such as we. And from the Isle of Naat none go forth except the ill sorcerers who people it, and the dead who are raised up and controlled by their sorcery. In magical ships that breast the Black River, the sorcerers sail

at will to other strands; and beneath their necromancy. to fulfill their wicked errands, the dead men swim without pause for many nights and days whither-so-ever the masters may send them.'

Yadar, who knew little of sorcerers and necromancy, was somewhat incredulous concerning these matters. But he saw that the blackening waters streamed always more wildly and torrentially towards the skyline; and verily there was small hope that the galley could regain its southward course. And he was troubled chiefly by the thought that he should never reach the kingdom of Yoros, where he had dreamt to find Dalili.

All that day the vessel was borne on by the dark seas racing weirdly beneath an airless and immaculate heaven. It followed the orange sunset into a night filled with large, unquivering stars; and at length it was overtaken by the flying amber morn. But still there was no abating of the waters; and neither land nor cloud was discernible in the vastness about the galley.

Yadar held little converse with Agor and the crew, after questioning them as to the reason of the ocean's blackness, which was a thing that no man understood. Despair was upon him; but, standing at the bulwark, he watched the sky and wave with an alertness born of his nomad life. Toward afternoon he descried far off a strange vessel with funereal purple sails, that drove steadily on an eastering course against the mighty current. He called Agor's attention to the vessel; and Agor, with a muttering of sailors' oaths, told him that it was a ship belonging to the necromancers of Naat.

Soon the purple sails were lost to vision; but a little later, Yadar perceived certain objects resembling human heads, that passed in the high-billowing water to the galley's leeward. Deeming that no mortal living men could swim thus, and remembering that which Agor had said concerning the dead swimmers who went forth from Naat, Yadar was aware of such trepidation as a brave man may feel in the presence of things beyond nature. And he did not speak of the matter; and seemingly the head-like objects were not noticed by his companions.

Still the galley drove on, its oarsmen sitting idle at the oars, and the captain standing listless beside the untended helm.

Toward night, as the sun declined above that tumultuous ebon ocean, it seemed that a great bank of thunder-cloud arose from the west, long and low-lying at first, but surging rapidly skyward with the mountainous domes. Ever higher it loomed, revealing the menace as of piled cliffs and somber, awful sea-capes; but its form changed not in the fashion of clouds; and Yadar knew it at last for an island bulking far aloft in the long-rayed sunset. From it a shadow was thrown for leagues, darkening still more the sable waters, as if with the fall of untimely night; and in the shadow the foam-crests flashing upon hidden reefs were white as the bared teeth of death. And Yadar needed not the shrill frightened cries of his companions to tell him that this was the terrible Isle of Naat.

Direly the current swiftened, raging, as it raced onward for battle with the rock-fanged shore; and the voices of the mariners, praying loudly to their gods, were drowned by its clamor. Yadar, standing in the prow, gave only a silent prayer to the dim, fatal deity of his tribe; and his eyes searched the towering isle like those of a sea-flown hawk, seeing the bare horrific crags, and the spaces of dark forest creeping seaward between the crags, and the white mounting of monstrous breakers on a shadowy strand.

Shrouded, and ominous of bale was the island's aspect. and the heart of Yadar sank like a plummet in unsunned seas. As the galley hove nearer to land, he thought that he beheld people moving darkly, visible in the lapsing of surges on a low beach, and then hidded once more by foam and spindrift. Ere he saw them a second time, the galley was hurled with thunderous crashing and grinding on a reef buried beneath the torrent waters. The forepart of its prow and bottom were broken in, and being lifted from the reef by a second comber, it filled instantly and sank. Of those who had sailed from Oroth, Yadar alone leapt free ere its foundering; but, since he was little skilled as a swimmer, he was drawn under quickly and was like to have drowned in the maelstroms of that evil sea.

His senses left him, and in his brain, like a lost sun returned from yesteryear, he beheld the face of Dalili; and with Dalili, in a bright fantasmagoria, there came the happy days that had been ere his bereavement. The visions passed, and he awoke struggling, with the bitterness of the sea in his mouth, and its loudness in his ears, and its rushing darkness all about him. And, as his senses quickened, he became aware of a form that swam close behind him, and arms that supported him amid the water.

He lifted his head and saw dimly the pale neck and half-averted face of his rescuer, and the long black hair that floated from wave to wave. Touching the body at his side, he knew it for that of a woman. Mazed and wildered though he was by the sea's buffeting, a sense of something familiar stirred within him, and he thought that he had known somewhere, at some former time, a woman with like hair and similar curving of cheek. And, trying to remember, he touched the woman again, and felt in his fingers a strange coldness from her naked body.

Miraculous was the woman's strength and skill, for she rode easily the dreadful mounting and falling of the surges. Yadar, floating as in a cradle upon her arm, beheld the nearing shore from the billows' summits; and hardly it seemed that any swimmer, however able, could win alive through the wildness of that surf. Dizzily; at the last, they were hurled upward, as if the surf would fling them against the highest crag; but, as if checked by some enchantment, the wave fell with a slow, lazy undulation; and Yadar and his rescuer, released by its ebbing, lay unhurt on a shelvy beach.

Uttering no word, nor turning to look at Yadar, the woman rose to her feet; and, beckoning him to follow, she moved away in the deathly blue dusk that had fallen upon Naat. Yadar, arising and following the woman, heard a strange and eery chanting of voices above the sea's tumult, and saw a fire that burned weirdly, with the colors of driftwood, at some distance before him in the dusk. Straightly, toward the fire and the voices, the woman walked. And Yadar, with eyes grown used to that doubtful twilight, saw that the fire blazed in the mouth of a low-sunken cleft between crags that

overloomed the beach; and behind the fire, like tall, evilly posturing shadows, there stood the dark-clad figures of those who chanted.

Now memory returned to him of that which the galley's captain had said regarding the necromancers of Naat and their practises. The very sound of that chanting, albeit in an unknown tongue, seemed to suspend the heartward flowing of his veins, and to set the tomb's chillness in his marrow. And though he was little learned in such matters, the thought came to him that the words uttered were of sorcerous import and power.

Going forward, the woman bowed low before the chanters, like a slave. The men, who were three in number, continued their incantation without pausing. Gaunt as starved herons they were, and great of stature, with a common likeness; and their sunk eyes were visible only by red sparks reflected within them from the blaze. And their eyes, as they chanted, seemed to glare afar on the darkling sea and on things hidden by dusk and distance. And Yadar, coming before them, was aware of swift horror and repugnance that made his gorge rise as if he had encountered, in a place given to death, the powerful evil ripeness of corruption.

High leaped the fire, with a writhing of tongues like blue and green serpents coiling amid serpents of yellow. And the light flickered brightly on the face and breasts of that woman who had saved Yadar from the Black River; and he, beholding her closely, knew why she had stirred within him a dim remembrance: for she was none other than his lost love, Dalili!

Forgetting the presence of the dark chanters, he sprang forward to clasp his beloved, crying out her name in an agony of rapture. But she answered him not, and responded to his embrace only with a faint trembling. And Yadar, sorely perplexed and dismayed, was aware of the deathly coldness that crept into his fingers and smote through his very raiment from her flesh. Mortally pale and languid were the lips that he kissed, and it seemed that no breath emerged between them, nor was there any rising and falling of the wan bosom against his. In the wide, beautiful eyes that she turned to him, he found only a drowsy voidness, and such recognition as a sleeper gives when but half awakened, relapsing quickly into slumber thereafter.

'Art thou indeed Dalili?' he said. And she answered somnolently, in a toneless, indistinct voice: 'I am Dalili.'

To Yadar, baffled by mystery, forlorn and aching, it was as if she had spoken from a land farther away than all the weary leagues of his search for her. Fearing to understand the change that had come upon her, he said tenderly:

'Surely thou knowest me, for I am thy lover, the Prince Yadar, who has sought thee through half the kingdoms of earth, and has sailed afar for thy sake on the unshored sea.

And she replied like one bemused by some heavy drug, as if echoing his words without true comprehension: 'Surely I know thee.' And to Yadar there was no comfort in her reply; and his concernment was not allayed by the parrotings with which she answered all his other loving speeches and queries.

He knew not that the three chanters had ceased their incantation; and, verily, he had forgotten their presence. But as he stood holding the girl closely, the men came toward him, and one of them clutched his arm. And the man hailed him by name and addressed him, though somewhat uncouthly, in a language spoken throughout many parts of Zothique, saying: 'We bid thee welcome to the Isle of Naat.'

Yadar, feeling a dread suspicion, interrogated the man fiercely: 'What manner of beings are ye? And why is Dalili here? And what have ye done to her?'

'I am Vacharn, a necromancer,' the man replied, 'and these others with me are my sons, Vokal and Uldulla, who are also necromancers. We dwell in a house behind the crags, and are attended by the drowned people that our sorcery has called up from the sea. Among our servants is this girl, Dalili, together with the crew of that ship in which she sailed from Oroth. Like the vessel in which thou camest later, the ship was blown far asea and was taken by the Black River and wrecked finally on the reefs of Naat. My sons

and I, chanting that powerful formula which requires no use of circle or pentacle, summoned ashore the drowned company: even as we have now summoned the crew of that other vessel, from which thou alone wert saved alive by the dead swimmer, at our command.'

Vacharn ended, and stood peering into the dusk intently; and Yadar heard behind him a noise of slow footsteps coming upward across the shingle from the surf. Turning, he saw emerge from the livid twilight the old captain of that galley in which he had voyaged to Naat; and behind the captain were the sailors and oarsmen. With the paces of sleep-walkers they approached the firelight, the sea-water dripping heavily from their raiment and hair, and drooling from their mouths. Some were sorely bruised, and others came stumbling or dragging with limbs broken by the rocks on which the sea had flung them; and on their faces was the look of men who had suffered the doom of drowning.

Stiffly, like automatons, they made obeisance to Vacharn and his sons, acknowledging thus their thralldom to those who had called them from deep death. In their glassily staring eyes there was no recognition of Yadar, no awareness of outward things; and they spoke only in dull, rote-like recognition of certain obscure words addressed to them by the necromancers.

To Yadar, it was as if he too stood and moved like the living dead in a dark, hollow, half-conscious dream. Walkby the enchanters through a dim ravine that wound secretly toward the uplands of Naat. In his heart there was small joy at the finding of Dalili; and his love was companioned with a sick despair.

Vacharn lit the way with a brand of driftwood plucked from the fire. Anon a bloated moon rose red as with saniesmingled blood, over the wild, racing sea; and before its orb had cleared to a deathlike paleness, they emerged from the gorge on a stony fell where stood the house of the three necromancers.

The house was built of dark granite, with long low wings that crouched amid the foliage of close-grown cypresses. Behind it a cliff beetled; and above the cliff were somber slopes and ridges piled in the moonlight rising afar toward the mountainous center of Naat.

It seemed that the mansion was a place pre-empted by death: for no lights burned in its portals and windows; and a silence came from it to meet the stillness of the wan heavens. But, when the sorcerers neared the threshold, a word was spoken by Vachara, echoing distantly in the inner halls; and as if in answer, lamps glowed suddenly everywhere, filling the house with their monstrous yellow eyes; and people appeared instantly within the portals like bowing shadows. But the faces of these beings were blanched by the tomb's pallor, and some were mottled with green decay, or marked by the tortuous gnawing of maggots...

In a great hall of the house, Yadar was bidden to seat himself at a table where Vacharn and Vokal and Uldulla commonly sat alone during their meals. The table stood on a dais of gigantic flagstones; and below, in the main hall, the dead were gathered about other tables, numbering nearly two score; and among them sat the girl Dalili, look never toward Yadar. He would have joined her, unwilling to be parted from her side: but a deep languor was upon him, as if an unspoken spell had enthralled his limbs and he could no longer move of his own volition.

Dully he sat with his grim, taciturn hosts who, dwelling always with the silent dead, had assumed no little part of their manner. And he saw more clearly than before the common likeness of the three: for all, it seemed, were as brothers of one birth rather than parent and sons; and all were like ageless things, being neither old nor young in the fashion of ordinary men. And more and more was he aware of that weird evil which emanated from the three, powerful and abhorrent as an exhalation of hidden death.

In the thralldom that weighed upon him, he scarcely marveled at the serving of that strange supper: though meats were brought in by no palpable agency, and wines poured out as if by the air itself; and the passing of the bearers to

and fro was betrayed only by a rustle of doubtful footsteps, and a light chillness that came and went.

Mutely, with stiff gestures and movements, the dead began to eat at their tables. But the necromancers refrained from the victuals before them, in an attitude of waiting; and Vacharn said to the nomad: 'There are others who will sup with us tonight.' And Yadar then perceived that a vacant chair had been set beside the chair of Vacharn.

Anon, from an inner doorway, there entered with hasty strides a man of great thews and stature, naked, and brown almost to blackness. Savage of aspect was the man, and his eyes were dilated as with rage or terror, and his thick purple lips were flecked with foam. And behind him, lifting in menace their heavy, rusted scimitars, there came two of the dead seamen, like guards who attend a prisoner.

'This man is a cannibal,' said Vacharn. 'Our servants have captured him in the forest beyond the mountains, which is peopled by such savages.' He added: 'Only the strong and courageous are summoned living to this mansion... Not idly, O Prince Yadar, wert thou chosen for such honor. Observe closely all that follows.'

The savage had paused within the threshold, as if fearing the hall's occupants more than the weapons of his guards. One of the liches slashed his left shoulder with the rusty blade, and blood rilled from a deep wound as the cannibal came forward beneath that prompting. Convulsively he trembled, like a frightened animal, looking wildly to either side for an avenue of escape; and only after a second prompting did he mount the dais and approach the necromancers' table. But, after certain hollow-sounding words had been uttered by Vacharn, the man seated himself, still trembling, in the chair beside the master, opposite to Yadar. And behind him, with high-raised weapons, there stationed themselves the ghastly guards, whose features were those of men a fortnight dead.

'There is still another guest,' said Vacharn. 'He will come later; and we need not wait for him.'

Without further ceremony he began to eat, and Yadar, though with little appetite, followed suit. Hardly did the prince perceive the savor of those viands with which his plate was piled; nor could he have sworn whether the vintages he drunk were sour or dulcet. His thoughts were divided between Dalili and the strangeness and horror about him.

As he ate and drank, his senses were sharpened weirdly, and he grew aware of eldritch shadows moving between the lamps, and heard the chill sibilance of whispers that checked his very blood. And there came to him, from the peopled hall, every odor that is exhaled by mortality between the recentness of death and the end of corruption. Vacharn and his sons addressed themselves to the meal with the unconcern of those long used to such surroundings. But the cannibal, whose fear was still palpable, refused to touch the food before him. Blood, in two heavy rills, ran unceasingly down his bosom from his wounded shoulders, and dripped audibly on the stone flags.

Finally, at the urging of Vacharn, who spoke in the cannibal's own tongue, he was persuaded to drink from a cup of wine. This wine was not the same that had been served to the rest of the company, being of a violet color, dark as the nightshade's blossom, while the other wine was a poppy red. Hardly had the man tasted it when he sank back in his chair with the appearance of one smitten helpless by palsy. The cup, rilling the remnant of its contents, was still clutched in his rigid fingers; there was no movement, no trembling of his limbs; and his eyes were wide open and staring as if consciousness still remained within him.

A dire suspicion sprang up in Yadar, and no longer could he eat the food and drink the wine of the necromancers. And he was puzzled by the actions of his hosts who, abstaining likewise, turned in the chairs and peered steadily at a portion of the door behind Vacharn, between the table and the hall's inner end. Yadar, rising a little in his seat, looked down across the table, and perceived a small hole in one of the flagstones. The hole was such as might be inhabited by a small animal: but Yadar could not surmise the nature of a beast that burrowed in solid granite.

In a loud clear voice, Vacharn spoke the single word, 'Esrit,' as if calling the name of one that he wished to summon. Not long thereafter, two little sparks of fire appeared in the darkness of the hole, and from it sprang a creature having somewhat the size and form of a weasel, but even longer and thinner. The creature's fur was a rusted black, and its paws were like tiny hairless hands; and its beaded eyes of flaming yellow seemed to hold the malign wisdom and malevolence of a demon. Swiftly, with writhing movements that gave it the air of a furred serpent, it ran forward beneath the chair occupied by the cannibal, and began to drink greedily the pool of blood that had dripped down on the floor from his wounds.

Then, while horror fastened upon the heart of Yadar, it leapt to the cannibal's knees, and thence to his left shoulder, where the deepest wound had been inflicted. There the thing applied itself to the still bleeding cut from which it sucked in the fashion of a weasel; the blood ceased to flow down on the man's body. And the man stirred not in his chair; but his eyes still widened, slowly, with a horrible glaring, till the ball were isled in livid white; and his lips fell slackly apart, showing teeth that were strong and pointed, as those of a shark.

The necromancers had resumed their eating, with eyes attentive on the small bloodthirsty monster; and it came to Yadar that this was the other guest expected by Vacharn. Whether the thing was an actual weasel, or a sorcerer's familiar, he did not know; but anger followed upon his horror before the plight of the cannibal; and drawing a sword he had carried through all his travels, he sprang to his feet and would have tried to kill the monster. But Vacharn described in the air a peculiar sign with his forefinger; and the prince's arm was suspended in mid-stroke, and his fingers became weak as those of a babe, and the sword fell from his hand, ringing loudly on the dais. Thereafter, as if by the unspoken will of Vacharn, he was constrained to seat himself again at the table.

Insatiable, it seemed, was the thirst of the weasel-like creature: for, after many minutes had gone by, it continued to suck the blood of the savage. From moment to moment the man's mighty thews became strangely shrunken, and the bones and taut sinews showed starkly beneath wrinkling

folds of skin. His face was like the chapless face of death, his limbs were lean as those of an old mummy: but the thing that batted upon him had increased in size only so much as a stoat increases by sucking the blood of some farmyard fowl.

By this token, Yadar knew that the thing was indeed a demon and was no doubt, the familiar of Vacharn. Entranced with terror, he sat regarding it, till the creature dropped from the dry bones and skin of the cannibal, and ran with an evil writhing and slithering to its hole in the flagstone.

Weird was the life that now began for Yadar in the house of the necromancers. Upon him there rested always the malign thralldom that had over-powered him during that first supper; and he moved one who could not wholly awake from some benumbing dream. It seemed that his volition was in some way controlled by those masters of the living dead. But, more than this, he was held by the old enchantment of his love for Dalili: though the love had now turned to a spell of despair.

Something he learned of the necromancers and their mode of existence: though Vacharn spoke seldom except with grim ironies; and the sons of Vacharn were taciturn as the dead. He learned that the weasel-like familiar, whose name was Esrit, had undertaken to serve Vacharn for a given term, receiving in guerdon, at the full of each moon, the blood of a living man chosen for redoubtable strength and valor. And it was clear to Yadar that, in default of some miracle, or sorcery beyond that of the necromancers, his days of life were limited by the moon's period. For, other than himself and the masters, there was no person in all that mansion who had not already passed through the bitter gates of death...

Lonely was the house, standing far apart from all neighbors. Other necromancers dwelt on the shores of Naat; but betwixt these and the hosts of Yadar there was little intercourse. And beyond the wild mountains that divided the isle, there dwelt only certain tribes of anthropophagi, who warred with each other in the black woods of pine and cypress.

The dead were housed in deep catacomb-like caves behind the mansion, lying all night in stone coffins, and coming forth in daily resurrection to do the tasks ordained by the masters. Some tilled the rocky gardens on a slope sheltered from sea-wind; others tended the sable goats and cattle; and still others were sent out as divers for pearls in the sea that ravened prodigiously, not to be dared by living swimmers, on the bleak atolls and headlands horned with granite. Of such pearls, Vacharn had amassed a mighty store through years exceeding the common span of life. And sometimes, in a ship that sailed contrary to the Black River, he or one of his sons would voyage to Zothique with certain of the dead for crew, and would trade the pearls for such things as their magic was unable to raise up in Naat.

Strange it was to Yadar, to see the companions of his voyage passing to and fro with the other liches, greeting him only in mindless echo of his own salutations, And bitter it was, yet never without a dim sorrowful sweetness, to behold Dalili and speak with her, trying vainly to revive the lost ardent love in a heart that had gone fathom-deep into oblivion and had not returned therefrom. And always, with a desolate yearning, he seemed to grope toward her across a gulf more terrible than the stemless tide that poured for ever about the Isle of the Necromancers.

Dalili, who had swum from childhood in the sunken lakes of Zyra, was among those enforced to dive for pearls. Often Yadar would accompany her to the shore and await her return from the mad surges; and at whiles he was tempted to fling himself after her and find, if such were possible, the peace of very death. This he would surely have doae: but amid the eery wilderments of his plight, and the gray webs of sorcery woven about it, it seemed that his old strength and resolution were wholly lacking.

One day, toward sunset-time, as the month drew to its end, Vokal and Uldulla approached the prince where he stood waiting on a rock-walled beach while Dalili dived far out in the torrent waters. Speaking no word, they beckoned to him with furtive signs; and Yadar, vaguely curious as to their intent, suffered them to lead him from the beach and by perilous paths that wound from crag to crag above the curving sea-shore. Ere the fall of

darkness, they came to a small landlocked harbor whose existence had been heretofore unsuspected by the nomad. In that placid bay, beneath the deep umbrage of the isle, there rode a galley with somber purple sails, resembling the ship that Yadar had discerned moving steadily toward Zothique against the full tide of the Black River.

Yadar was much bewildered, nor could he divine why they had brought him to the hidden harbor, nor the import of their gestures as they pointed out the strange vessel. Then, in a hushed and covert whisper, as if fearing to be overheard in that remote place, Vokal said to him:

'If thou wilt aid my brother and me in the execution of a certain plan, thou shalt have the use of yonder galley in quitting Naat. And with thee, if such be thy desire, thou shalt take the girl Dalili, together with certain of the dead mariners for oarsmen. Favored by the powerful gales which our enchantments will evoke for thee, thou shalt sail against the Black River and return to Zothique... But if thou helpst us not, then shall the weasel Esrit suck thy blood, till the last member of thy body has been emptied thereof; and Dalili shall remain as the bond-slave of Vacharn, toiling for his avarice by day in the dark waters ... and perchance serving his lust by night.'

At the promise of Vokal, Yadar felt something of hope and manhood revive within him, and it seemed that the baleful sorcery of Vacharn was lifted from his mind; and an indignation against Vacharn was awakened by Vokal's hintings. And he said quickly: 'I will aid thee in thy plan, whatever it may be, if such aid is within my power to give.'

Then, with many fearful glances about and behind him, Uldulla took up the furtive whispering.

'It is our thought that Vacharn has lived beyond the allotted term, and has imposed his authority upon us too long. We, his sons, grow old: and we deem it no more than rightful that we should inherit the stored treasures and the magical supremacy of our father ere age has debarred us from their enjoyment. Therefore we seek thy help in the slaying of Vacharn.'

It came to Yadar, after brief reflection, that the killing of the necromancer should be held in all ways a righteous deed, and one to which he could lend himself without demeaning his valor or his manhood. So he said without demur: 'I will help thee in this thing.'

Seeming greatly emboldened by Yadar's consent, Vokal spoke again in his turn, saying: 'This thing must be accomplished ere tomorrow's eve, which will bring a full-rounded moon from the Black River upon Naat, and will call the weasel-demon Esrit from his burrow. And tomorrow's forenoon is the only time when we can take Vacharn unaware in his chamber. During those hours, as is his wont, he will peer entranced on a magic mirror that yields visions of the outer sea, and the ships sailing over the sea, and the lands lying beyond. And we must slay him before the mirror, striking swiftly and surely ere he awakens from his trance.'

At the hour set for the deed. Vokal and Uldulla came to Yadar where he stood awaiting them in the outer hall. Each of the brothers bore in his right hand a long and coldly glittering scimitar; and Vokal also carried in his left a like weapon, which he offered to the prince, explaining that these scimitars had been tempered to a muttering of lethal runes, and inscribed afterward with unspeakable deathspells. Yadar, preferring his own sword, declined the wizard weapon; and, delaying no more, the three went hastily and with all possible stealth toward Vacharn's chamber.

The house was empty, for the dead had all gone forth to their labors; nor was there any whisper or shadow of those invisible beings, whether sprites of the air or mere phantoms, that waited upon Vacharn and served him in sundry ways. Silently the three came to the portals of the chamber, where entrance was barred only by a black arras wrought with the signs of night in silver, and bordered with a repetition of the five names of the archfiend Thasaïdon in scarlet thread. The brothers paused, as if fearing to lift the arras; but Yadar, unhesitating, held it aside and passed into the chamber; and the twain followed him quickly as if for shame of their poltroonery.

The room was large, high-vaulted, and lit by a dim window looking forth between unpruned cypresses toward the black sea, No flames arose from

the myriad lamps to assist that baffled daylight; and shadows brimmed the place like a spectral fluid, through which the vessels of wizardry, the great censers and alembics and braziers, seemed to quiver like animate things. A little past the room's center, his back to the doorway, Vacharn sat on an ebon trivet before the mirror of clairvoyance, which was wrought from electrum in the form of a huge delta; and was held obliquely aloft by a serpentine copper arm. The mirror flamed brightly in the shadow, as if lit by some splendor of unknown source; and the intruders were dazzled by glimpsing of its radiance as they went forward.

It seemed that Vacharn had indeed been overcome by the wonted trance, for he peered rigidly into the mirror, immobile as a seated mummy. The brothers held back, while Yadar, thinking them close behind him, stole toward the necromancer with lifted blade. As he drew nearer, he perceived that Vacharn held a great scimitar across his knees; and, deeming that the sorcerer was perhaps forewarned, Yadar ran quickly up behind him and aimed a powerful stroke at his neck. But, even while he aimed, his eyes were blinded by the strange brightness of the mirror, as though a sun had blazed into them from its depth across the shoulder of Vacharn; and the blade swerved and bit slantingly into the collar-bone, so that the necromancer, though sorely wounded, was saved from decapitation.

Now it seemed likely that Vacharn had foreknown the attempt to slay him, and had thought to do battle with his assailers when they came. But, sitting at the mirror in pretended trance, he had no doubt been overpowered against his will by the weird brilliance, and had fallen into a mantic slumber.

Fierce and swift as a wounded tiger, he leapt from the trivet, swinging his scimitar aloft as he turned upon Yadar. The prince, still blinded, could neither strike again nor avoid the stroke of Vacharn; and the scimitar clove deeply into his right shoulder, and he fell mortally wounded and lay with his head upheld a little against the base of the snakish copper arm that supported the mirror.

Lying there, with his life ebbing slowly, he beheld how Vokal sprang forward as with the desperation of one who sees imminent death, and

hewed mightily into the neck of Vacharn. The head, almost sundered from the body, toppled and hung by a strip of flesh and skin: yet Vacharn, reeling, did not fall or die at once, as any mortal man should have done: but, still animated by the wizard power within him, he ran about the chamber, striking great blows at the parricides. Blood gushed from his neck like a fountain as he ran; and his head swung to and fro like a monstrous pendulum on his breast. And all his blows went wild because he could no longer see to direct them, and his sons avoided him agilely, hewing into him oftentimes as he went past. And sometimes he stumbled over the fallen Yadar, or struck the mirror of electrum with his sword, making it ring like a deep bell. And sometimes the battle passed beyond sight of the dying prince, toward the window that looked seaward; and he heard the strange crashings, as if some of the magic furniture were shattered by the strokes of the warlock; and there were loud breathings from the sons of Vacharn, and the dull sound of blows that went home as they still pursued their father. And anon the fight returned before Yadar, and he watched it with dimming eyes.

Dire beyond telling was that combat, and Vokal and Uldulla panted like spent runners ere the end. But, after a while, the power seemed to fail in Vacharn with the draining of his life-blood. He staggered from side to side as he ran and his paces halted, and his blows became enfeebled. His raiment hung upon him in blood-soaked rags from the slashings of his sons, and certain of his members were half sundered, and his whole body was hacked and overscored like an executioner's block. At last, with a dexterous blow, Vokal severed the thin strip by which the head still depended; and the head dropped and rolled with many reboundings about the floor.

Then, with a wild tottering, as if still fain to stand erect, the body of Vacharn toppled down and lay thrashing like a great, headless fowl, heaving itself up and dropping back again, incessantly. Never, with all its rearings, did the body quite regain its feet: but the scimitar was still held firmly in the right hand, and the corpse laid blindly about it, striking from the floor with sidelong slashes, or slicing down as it rose half-way to a standing posture. And the head still rolled, unresting, about the chamber, and maledictions came from its mouth in a pipy voice no louder than that of a child.

At this, Yadar saw that Vokal and Uldulla drew back, as if somewhat aghast; and they turned toward the door, manifestly intending to quite the room. But before Vokal, going first had lifted the portal-arras, there slithered beneath its folds the long, black, snakish body of the weaselfamiliar, Esrit. And the familiar launched itself in air, reaching at one bound the throat of Vokal; and it clung there with teeth fastened to his flesh, sucking his blood steadily, while he staggered about the room and strove in vain to tear it away with maddened fingers.

Uldulla, it seemed, would have made some attempt to kill the creature, for he cried out, adjuring Vokal to stand firm, and raised his sword as if waiting for a chance to strike at Esrit. But Vokal seemed to hear him not, or was too frenzied to obey his adjuration. And at that instant the head of Vachara, in its rolling, bounded against Uldulla's feet; and the head, snarling ferociously, caught the hem of his robe with its teeth and hung there as he sprang back in panic fright. And though he sliced wildly at the head with his scimitar, the teeth refused to relinquish their hold. So he dropped his garment, and leaving it there with the still pendant head of his father, he fled naked from the room. And even as Uldulla fled, the life departed from Yadar, and he saw and heard no more...

Dimly, from the depths of oblivion, Yadar beheld the flaring of remote lights, and heard the chanting of a far voice. It seemed that he swam upward from black seas toward the voice and the lights, and he saw as if through a thin, watery film the face of Uldulla standing above him, and the fuming of strange vessels in the chamber of Vacharn. And it seemed that Uldulla said to him: 'Arise from death, and be obedient in all things to me the master.'

So, in answer to the unholy rites and incantations of necromancy, Yadar arose to such life as was possible for a resurrected lich. And he walked again, with the black gore of his wound in a great clot on his shoulder and breast, and made reply to Uldulla in the fashion of the living dead. Vaguely, and as matters of no import, he remembered something of his death and the circumstances preceding it; and vainly, with filmed eyes, in the wrecked chamber, he looked for the sundered head and body of Vacharn, and for Vokal and the weasel-demon.

Then it seemed that Uldulla said to him: "Follow me," and he went forth with the necromancer into the light of the red, swollen moon that had soared from the Black River upon Naat. There, on the fell before the house, was a vast heap of ashes where coals glowed and glared like living eyes. Uldulla stood in contemplation before the heap; and Yadar stood beside him, knowing not that he gazed on the burnt-out pyre of Vacharn and Vokal, which the dead slaves had built and fired at Uldulla's direction.

Then, with shrill, eery wailings, a wind came suddenly from the sea, and lifting all the ashes and sparks in a great, swirling cloud, it swept them upon Yadar and the necromancer. The twain could hardly stand against that wind, and their hair and beards and garments were filled with the leavings of the pyre, and both were blinded thereby. Then the wind went up, sweeping the cloud of ashes over the mansion and into its doorways and windows; and through all its apartments. And for many days thereafter, little swirls of ash rose up under the feet of those who passed along the halls; and though there was a daily plying of besoms by the dead at Uldulla's injunction, it seemed that the place was never again wholly clean of those ashes...

Regarding Uldulla, there remains little enough to be told: for his lordship over the dead was a brief thing. Abiding always alone, except for those liches who attended him, he became possessed by a weird melancholy that turned quickly toward madness. No longer could he conceive the aims and objects of life; and the languor of death rose up around him like a black, stealthy sea, full of soft murmurs and shadow-like arms that were fain to draw him downward. Soon he came to envy the dead, and to deem their lot desirable above any other. So carrying that scimitar he had used at the slaying of Vacharn, he went into his father's chamber, which he had not entered since the raising up of Prince Yadar. There, beside the sun-bright mirror of divinations, he disembowled himself, and fell amid the dust and the cobwebs that had gathered heavily over all. And, since there was no other necromancer to bring him back even to a semblance of life, he lay rotting and undisturbed for ever after.

But in the gardens of Vacharn the dead people still labored, heedless of Uldulla's passing; and they still kept the goats and cattle, and dived for pearls in the dark, torrent And Yadar, being with Dalili in that state now common to them both, was drawn to her with a ghostly yearning; and he felt a ghostly comfort in her nearness. The quick despair that had racked him aforetime, and the long torments of desire and separation, were as things faced and forgot; and he shared with Dalili a shadowy love and a dim contentment.

NEMESIS OF THE UNFINISHED

The authentic talent of Francis La Porte, fiction-writer, was allied with an industry no less than prodigious. Unfortunately, he was self-critical to an excessive degree. Dissatisfaction, morbid and meticulous, kept him from finishing more than one manuscript out of a dozen. Though editors importuned him for stories and bought readily the few that he submitted, Francis could seldom outdistance the wolf by a full running jump.

He had left hundreds of stories in various stages of incompleteness, clipped together with the double or triple carbons that he was always careful to make. Many ran to the size of novelettes or novels; some existed only as a few beginning paragraphs. Often he had written several variant versions, carried to more or less length. There were also countless synopses of tales attempted or unbegun.

They crammed the drawers of his desk to overflowing, they bulged and towered in insecure piles from the boxes that were stacked along the walls of his study. These voluminous abortions were the labor of a lifetime.

Most of them were eldritch tales of horror and death, of wizardry and diabolism. Their pages teemed with specters and cadavers, with ghouls and loup-garous and poltergeists.

Often they haunted La Porte like a bad conscience. Sometimes they seemed to talk to him and reproach him with ghostly whispers in the dark hours before dawn. He would fall asleep vowing to complete one or more of them without further procrastination.

In spite of such resolutions, the dust still thickened on the piled reams. A new day would always bring Francis an idea for a new plot. Occasionally he would complete one of his shorter and simpler tales, and would receive in due time a small check from *Outlandish Stories* or *Eerie Narratives*. Then he would indulge in one of his rare debauches of food and wine, and his

brain would fume with wild inspirations that he was seldom able to recall afterwards.

Though he did not suspect, La Porte was in the position of a necromancer who has called up spirits from the deep without knowing how to control or dismiss them.

He had fallen asleep one night after absorbing nearly a half-gallon of cheap claret, bought from the proceeds of a recent sale. His slumber was heavy but brief. It seemed that a vague commotion, in which he distinguished articulate voices, had awakened him. Puzzled, and still confused by his potations, he listened intently for some moments but the noises had ceased. Then suddenly there was a sound like the light rustling of paper. Then a louder noise as if great masses of paper were sliding and shifting. Then conversation, as if a crowd of people were talking all at once. It was an unintelligible babel, and he could determine nothing except that the noises came from the direction of his workroom.

La Porte's spine began to tingle as he sat up in bed. The sounds were eerie and mysterious as anything that he had ever imagined in his tales of nocturnal terror. It seemed now that he was overhearing some bizarre and sinister dialogue, in which voices of unhuman timbre replied to others that were apparently human. Once or twice he caught his own name uttered in strange gibbering tones, somehow fraught with the sense of inimical conspiracy.

La Porte sprang out of bed. Lighting an oil-lamp and going into his study, he peered into every corner but saw only the stacks of overpiled manuscripts. Apparently the piles were undisturbed but he seemed to see them through a thick haze. At the same time he began to choke and cough. Going closer to inspect the manuscripts, he perceived that the accumulated dust of months and years had been shaken from their massed reams.

He searched the room repeatedly but found no further sign of invasion either human or supernatural. Perhaps some sudden gust had performed the mysterious office of dusting the paper piles. But the windows were all

closed, and the night outside was windless. He returned to bed: but sleep refused to visit him again.

There was no repetition of the rustlings and voices that had seemed to awaken him. He began to wonder if he had been the victim of some distempered dream inspired by the evening's wine. Finally he convinced himself that this was the only credible explanation.

The next morning, moved by an unwonted impulse, La Porte selected a manuscript at random from the heaps of unfinished material. It was entitled *Incomplete Sorceries*, and dealt with a man who had achieved partial power over demons and elementals, but was still seeking certain lost formulae that were requisite to full masterdom. La Porte had abandoned the tale through indecision regarding the alternate solutions of the sorcerer's problem suggested by his all too fertile fancy. He sat down at the typewriter, determined that he would finish the story to his satisfaction.

End of the common beginning; at this point the two stories diverge. The conclusion of Version I commences, followed by that of Version II.

For once, he did not hesitate over variant wordings or divergencies of plot-development. It all seemed miraculously clear to him, and he wrote steadily through the forenoon and afternoon and evening. At midnight he ended the last paragraph, in which, after many perils and tribulations, the sorcerer stood triumphant amid his infrangible circles, compelling the dread kings of the four infernal quarters to serve his least whim.

La Porte felt that he had seldom written so well. The story should bring him a substantial check, as well as the acclaim of his many faithful but impatient admirers. He would send it out in the morning mail after a few possible retouchings. A new title was manifestly required by the denouement: he would think of one easily after a night's sleep.

He had almost forgotten the queer dream that had followed his recent bacchanal. Again he slept deeply, but not too soundly. At intervals some portion of his brain, emerging numbly from oblivion, seemed to hear the recurrent clatter of his old Remington in the next room. Drugged with

fatigue, he did not awaken fully to the strangeness of the sound under such circumstances but accepted it without question as one accepts the unexplained vagaries of dreamland.

After his meager breakfast La Porte began to reread *Incomplete Sorceries*, with his pencil poised for errors of typing or minor revisions. He found nothing to change in the first few pages, written months before, and hastened over their familiar incidents to the point at which he had begun his continuation of the sorcerer's vicissitudes. Here he paused in astonishment, for he could not remember writing a single sentence of the freshly typed paragraphs! The astonishment became stupefaction as he went on: the plot, the incidents, the whole trend of development, were alien to what he had conceived and set down.

It was as if some demon-guided hand had reversed and perverted the story. Pandemonium, and the lords of Pandemonium, prevailed throughout. The sorcerer, with all his formulae, was a mere pawn moved hither and thither at their will, in a monstrous game for supremacy over souls and planets and galaxies. The very style was foreign to La Porte's usual manner: it was studded with strange archaisms and neologisms; it burned with phrases like hellish gems; it blazed and vaped with images that were like censers of evil before Satanic altars.

More than once, La Porte wanted to drop the horribly transfigured tale. But a baleful fascination, mingling with his dumbfoundment and incredulity, held him to the end where the hapless necromancer was crushed into pulp beneath the ponderous grimoires he had collected in his lifelong search for mastery. It was only then that La Porte could lay down the manuscript. His fingers trembled as if they had touched the coils of some deadly serpent.

Tormenting his brain for some tenable explanation, he recalled the dreamlike clattering of the Remington that he had seemed to hear in slumber. Was it possible that he had risen from his bed and had rewritten the story in a somnambulistic state? Was it the work of some spectral or demoniac hand? Unmistakably the typing had been done on his own

machine: several slightly blurred letters and punctuation-marks occurred throughout the entire manuscript.

The mystery disturbed him beyond measure. He had never found in himself the least tendency to sleepwalking or to trance states of any kind. Though the supernatural was, so to speak, his literary stock-in-trade, his reason refused to accept the ideas of an extrahuman agency.

Unable to resolve the problem, La Porte tried to busy himself with the beginning of a new tale. But concentration was impossible, since he could not dismiss the unanswered riddle from his thoughts for a moment.

Abandoning all further effort to work, he left the house with hurried steps, as if driven by the spurs of an incubus.

It was many hours later that La Porte wandered homeward rather unsteadily by the rays of a cloud-strangled moon. Forgetting his usual economy, he had consumed numberless brandies at a village bar. He did not care for the people who frequented such places; but somehow he had been reluctant to leave. Never before had he been loathe to face the solitude of his cabin, peopled only with books and manuscripts, with unwritten and half-written fantasies.

Still dimly troubled by the mystery that had driven him forth, he fell across the unmade bed without undressing or even lighting a lamp, and slid into drunken slumber.

Wild dreams came to visit him anon. Weird voices shrieked and muttered in his ears, indistinct but nightmarish figures milled around him like the dancers of some demonian Sabbat. Amid the voices that seemed to conspire against his peace and safety, he heard the incessant click and rattle of a typewriter. There was a clacking as of drawers opened and shut without cessation, a multitudinous rustling as of paper slithering from place to place in unaccountable sibilant movement.

La Porte awoke from endless repetitions of this dream—to find that the noises still continued. Again, as on a former occasion, he sprang from bed,

lit his lamp, and entered the workroom from which the sounds and voices appeared to come.

Still dazed with sleep and inebriation, his eyes beheld a vast chamber whose roof and walls receded beyond the illumination of the lamp he carried in shaking fingers. Amid this chamber his manuscripts rose in massive piles, multiplied and magnified as if by the black sorcery of hashish. They seemed to loom above him with topless tiers, lost in the reaches of some Avernian vault.

On the desk of the room's center his Remington, operated as if by some unseen entity, ran and clattered with infernal speed. Black lines appeared momentarily on the sheet that emerged rapidly from the roller.

The floor was covered with other sheets, lying singly or in heaps, that slid and rustled about the chamber in mysterious perpetual agitation. The air was filled with the eerie gibberings and whispers that had haunted La Porte's dreams and awakened him. They came, it seemed, from nowhere and everywhere—from the scattered pages on the floor, from the typewriter desk, from the tiered boxes and reams that beetled into nightmare vastness, and from the apparent vacancy of space itself.

La Porte felt on his face the breathing of terrible powers, of eldritch and forbidden things, as he stood in hesitant stupor on the threshold. A wind sprang up, he knew not whence, winding and wreathing about him in icy serpentine volumes. He thought that the room grew vaster, that the floor heaved and tilted at strange impossible angles, that the towers and battlements of swollen manuscripts leaned toward him in perilous inclination.

The weird wind strengthened and swiftened, sweeping up the numberless loose sheets in a wild storm, and extinguishing the lamp that he held in his nerveless hand. Darkness fell—a darkness of vertigo and delirium, into which La Porte was hurled resistlessly, falling through endless gulfs, battling with countless evil things that swooped upon him from all directions, and heating a thunder as of loosened avalanches

Neighbors, noticing the absence of smoke from La Porte's chimney, and missing him on the road to the village, became sufficiently alarmed to investigate after the third day. Opening the unlocked outer door, they saw the littered paper, mingled with fragments of a shattered kerosene lamp, that overflowed the threshold of his workroom.

Ream upon ream of paper almost filled the room itself: a mountain of heaped and disheveled manuscripts covering the one chair and desk and typewriter with its high-piled summit. They found Francis La Porte lying in a convulsed posture beneath the pile. In his rigid hands, up-thrust protectively before his face, were clutched the sheets of several thick manuscripts, torn and ripped asunder as if in some violent struggle. Other sheets, torn to confetti-like pieces, strewed his upturned body. Still others were locked in a tetanic rigor between his bared teeth.

PHOENIX

Rodis and Hilar had climbed from their natal caverns to the top chamber of the high observatory tower. Pressed close together, for warmth as well as love, they stood at an eastern window looking forth on hills and valleys dim with perennial starlight. They had come up to watch the rising of the sun: that sun which they had never seen except as an orb of blackness, occluding the zodiacal stars in its course from horizon to horizon.

Thus their ancestors had seen it for millenniums. By some freak of cosmic law, unforeseen, and inexplicable to astronomers and physicists, the sun's cooling had been comparatively sudden, and the earth had not suffered the long-drawn complete desiccation of such planets as Mercury and Mars. Rivers, lakes, seas, had frozen solid; and the air itself had congealed, all in a term of years historic rather than geologic. Millions of the earth's inhabitants had perished, trapped by the glacial ice, the centigrade cold. The rest, armed with all the resources of science, had found time to entrench themselves against the cosmic night in a world of ramified caverns, dug by atomic excavators far below the surface.

Here, by the light of artificial orbs, and the heat drawn from the planet's still-molten depths, life went on much as it had done in the outer world. Trees, fruits, grasses, grains, vegetables, were grown in isotope-stimulated soil or hydroponic gardens, affording food, renewing a breathable atmosphere. Domestic animals were kept; and birds flew; and insects crawled or fluttered. The rays considered necessary for life and health were afforded by the sunbright lamps that shone eternally in all the caverns.

Little of the old science was lost; but, on the other hand, there was now little advance. Existence had become the conserving of a fire menaced by inexorable night. Generation by generation a mysterious sterility had lessened the numbers of the race from millions to a few thousands. As time went on, a similar sterility began to affect animals; and even plants no

longer flourished with their first abundance. No biologist could determine the cause with certainty.

Perhaps man, as well as other terrestrial life-forms, was past his crime, and had begun to undergo collectively the inevitable senility that comes to the individual. Or perhaps, having been a surface-dweller throughout most of his evolution, he was inadaptably to the cribbed and prisoned life, the caverned light and air; and was dying slowly from the deprivation of things he had almost forgotten.

Indeed, the world that had once flourished beneath a living sun was little more than a legend now, a tradition preserved by art and literature and history. Its heeding Babelian cities, its fecund hills and plains, were swathed impenetrably in snow and ice and solidified air. No living man and gazed upon it, except from the night-bound towers maintained as observatories.

Still, however, the dreams of men were often lit by primordial memories, in which the sun shone on rippling waters and waving trees and grass. And their waking hours were sometimes touched by an undying nostalgia for the lost earth. . . .

Alarmed by the prospect of racial extinction, the most able and brilliant savants had conceived a project that was seemingly no less desperate than fantastic. The plan, if executed, might lead to failure or even the planet's destruction. But all the necessary steps had now been taken toward its launching.

It was of this plan that Rodis and Hilar spoke, standing clasped in each other's arms, as they waited for the rising of the dead sun.

"And you must go?" said Rodis, with averted eyes and voice that quavered a little.

"Of course. It is a duty and an honor. I am regarded as the foremost of the younger atomicists. The actual placing and timing of the bombs will devolve largely upon me."

"But—are you sure of success? There are so many risks, Hilar." The girl shuddered, clasping her lover with convulsive tightness.

"We are not sure of anything," Hilar admitted. "But, granting that our calculations are correct, the multiple charges of fissionable materials including more than half the solar elements, should start chain-reactions that will restore the sun to its former incandescence. Of course, the explosion may be too sudden and too violent, involving the nearer planets in the formation of a nova. But we do not believe that this will happen — since an explosion of such magnitude would require instant disruption of all the sun's elements. Such disruption should not occur without a starter for each separate atomic structure. Science has never been able to break down all the known elements. If it had been, the earth itself would undoubtedly have suffered destruction in the old atomic wars."

Hilar paused, and his eyes dilated, kindling with a visionary fire.

"How glorious," he went on, "to use for a purpose of cosmic renovation the deadly projectiles designed by our forefathers only to blast and destroy. Stored in sealed caverns, they have not been used since man abandoned the earth's surface so many millenniums ago. Nor have the old spaceships been used either. . . . An interstellar drive was never perfected; and our voyagings were always limited to the other worlds of our own system—none of which was inhabited, or inhabitable. Since the sun's cooling and darkening, there has been no object in visiting any of them. But the ships too were stored away. And the newest and speediest one, powered with anti-gravity magnets, has been made ready for our voyage to the sun."

Rodis listened silently, with an awe that seemed to have subdued her misgivings, while Hilar continued to speak of the tremendous project upon which he, with six other chosen technicians, was about to embark. In the meanwhile, the black sun rose slowly into heavens thronged with the cold ironic blazing of innumerable stars, among which no planet shone. It blotted out the sting of the Scorpion, poised at that hour above the eastern hills. It was smaller but nearer than the igneous orb of history and legend. In its center, like a Cyclopean eye, there burned a single spot of dusky red fire,

believed to mark the eruption of some immense volcano amid the measureless and cinder-blackened landscape.

To one standing in the ice-bound valley below the observatory, it would have seemed that the tower's litten window was a yellow eye that stared back from the dead earth to that crimson eye of the dead sun.

"Soon," said Hilar, "you will climb to this chamber—and see the morning that none has seen for a century of centuries. The thick ice will thaw from the peaks and valleys, running in streams to remolten lakes and oceans. The liquefied air will rise in clouds and vapors, touched with the spectrum-tinted splendor of the light. Again, across earth, will blow the winds of the four quarters; and grass and flowers will grow, and trees burgeon from tiny saplings. And man, the dweller in closed caves and abysses, will return to his proper heritage."

"How wonderful it all sounds," murmured Rodis. "But . . . you will come back to me?"

"I will come back to you . . . in the sunlight," said Hilar. The space-vessel Phosphor lay in a huge cavern beneath that region which had once been known as the Atlas Mountains. The cavern's mile-thick roof had been partly blasted away by atomic disintegrators. A great circular shaft slanted upward to the surface, forming a mouth in the mountain-side through which the stars of the Zodiac were visible. The prow of the Phosphor pointed at the stars.

All was now ready for its launching. A score of dignitaries and savants, looking like strange ungainly monsters in suits and helmets worn against the spatial cold that had invaded the cavern, were present for the occasion. Hilar and his six companions had already gone aboard the Phosphor and had closed its air-locks.

Inscrutable and silent behind their metalloid helmets, the watchers waited. There was no ceremony, no speaking or waving of farewells; nothing to indicate that a world's destiny impended on the mission of the vessel.

Like mouths of fire-belching dragons the stern-rockets flared, and the Phosphor, like a wingless bird, soared upward through the great shaft and vanished. Hilar, gazing through a rear port, saw for a few moments the lamp-bright window of that tower in which he had stood so recently with Rodis. The window was a golden spark that swirled downward in abysses of devouring night—and was extinguished. Behind it, he knew, his beloved stood watching the Phosphor's departure. It was a symbol, he mused . . . a symbol of life, of memory . . . of the suns themselves . . . of all things that flash briefly and fall into oblivion.

But such thoughts, he felt, should be dismissed. They were unworthy of one whom his fellows had appointed as a light-bringer, a Prometheus who should rekindle the dead sun and re-lumine the dark world. There were no days, only hours of eternal starlight, to measure the time in which they sped outward through the void. The rockets, used for initial propulsion, no longer flamed astern; and the vessel flew in darkness, except for the gleaming Argus eyes of its ports, drawn now by the mighty gravitational drag of the blind sun. Test-flights had been considered unnecessary for the Phosphor. All its machinery was in perfect condition; and the mechanics involved were simple and easily mastered. None of its crew had ever been in extraterrestrial space before; but all were well-trained in astronomy, mathematics, and the various techniques essential to a voyage between worlds. There were two navigators; one rocket-engineer; and two engineers who would operate the powerful generators, charged with a negative magnetism reverse to that of gravity, with which they hoped to approach, circumnavigate, and eventually depart in safety from an orb enormously heavier than the system's nine planets merged into one. Hilar and his assistant, Han Joas, completed the personnel. Their sole task was the timing, landing, and distribution of the bombs.

All were descendants of a mixed race with Latin, Semitic, Hamitic, and negroid ancestry: a race that had dwelt, before the sun's cooling, in countries south of the Mediterranean, where the former deserts had been rendered fertile by a vast irrigation-system of lakes and canals.

This mixture, after so many centuries of cavern life, had produced a characteristically slender, well-knit type, of short or medium stature and pale olive complexion. The features were often of negroid softness, the general physique was marked by a delicacy verging upon decadence.

To an extent surprising, in view of the vast intermediate eras of historic and geographic change, this people had preserved many preatomic traditions and even something of the old classic Mediterranean cultures. Their language bore distinct traces of Latin, Greek, Spanish and Arabic.

Remnants of other peoples, those of sub-equatorial Asia and America, had survived the universal glaciation by burrowing underground. Radio communication had been maintained with these peoples till within fairly recent times, and had then ceased. It was believed that they had died out, or had retrograded into savagery, losing the civilization to which they had once attained.

Hour after hour, intervalled only by sleep and eating, the Phosphor sped onward through the black unvarying void. To Hilar, it seemed at times that they flew merely through a darker and vaster cavern whose remote walls were spangled by the stars as if by radiant orbs. He had thought to feel the overwhelming vertigo of unbottomed and undirectioned space. Instead, there was a weird sense of circumscription by the ambient night and emptiness, together with a sense of cyclic repetition, as if all that was happening had happened many times before and must recur often through endless future kalpas.

Had he and his companions gone forth in former cycles to the relighting of former perished suns? Would they go forth again, to rekindle suns that would flame and die in some posterior universe? Had there always been, would there always be, a Rodis who awaited his return? Of these thoughts he spoke only to Han Joas, who shared something of his innate mysticism and his trend toward cosmic speculation. But mostly the two talked of the mysteries of the atom and its typhonic powers, and discussed the problems with which they would shortly be confronted.

The ship carried several hundred disruption bombs, many of untried potency: the unused heritage of ancient wars that had left chasm scars and lethal radioactive areas, some a thousand miles or more in extent, for the planetary glaciers to cover. There were bombs of iron, calcium, sodium, helium, hydrogen, sulphur, potassium, magnesium, copper, chromium, strontium, barium, zinc: elements that had all been anciently revealed in the solar spectrum. Even at the apex of their madness, the warring nations had wisely refrained from employing more than a few such bombs at any one time. Chain-reactions had sometimes been started; but, fortunately, had died out. Hilar and Han Joas hoped to distribute the bombs at intervals over the sun's entire circumference; preferably in large deposits of the same elements as those of which they were composed. The vessel was equipped with radar apparatus by which the various elements could be detected and located. The bombs would be timed to explode with as much simultaneity as possible. If all went well, the Phosphor would have fulfilled its mission and traveled most of the return distance to earth before the explosions occurred.

It had been conjectured that the sun's interior was composed of still- molten magma, covered by a relatively thin crust: a seething flux of matter that manifested itself in volcanic activities. Only one of the volcanoes was visible from earth to the naked eye; but numerous others had been revealed to telescopic study. Now, as the Phosphor drew near to its destination, the others flamed out on the huge, slowly rotating orb that had darkened a fourth of the ecliptic and had blotted Libra, Scorpio and Sagittarius wholly from view.

For a long time it had seemed to hang above the voyagers. Now, suddenly, as if through some prodigious legerdemain, it lay beneath them: a monstrous, ever-broadening disk of ebon, eyed with fiery craters, veined and spotted and blotched with unknown pallid radioactives. It was like the buckler of some macrosomic giant of the night, who had entrenched himself in the abyss lying between the worlds.

The Phosphor plunged toward it like a steel splinter drawn by some tremendous lodestone.

Each member of the crew had been trained before-hand for the part he was to play; and everything had been timed with the utmost precision. Sybal and Samac, the engineers of the anti-gravity magnets, began to manipulate the switches that would build up resistance to the solar drag. The generators, bulking to the height of three men, with induction-coils that suggested some colossal Laocoon, could draw from cosmic space a negative force capable of counteracting many earth-gravities. In past ages they had defied easily the pull of Jupiter; and the ship had even coasted as near to the blazing sun as its insulation and refrigeration systems would safely permit. Therefore it seemed reasonable to expect that the voyagers could accomplish their purpose of approaching closely to the darkened globe, of circling it, and pulling away when the disruption-charges had all been planted.

A dull, subsonic vibration, felt rather than heard, began to emanate from the magnets. It shook the vessel, ached in the voyagers' tissues. Intently, with anxiety unbetrayed by their impassive features, they watched the slow, gradual building-up of power shown by gauge-dials on which giant needles crept like horologic hands, registering the reversed gravities one after one, till a drag equivalent to that of fifteen Earths had been neutralized. The clamp of the solar gravitation, drawing them on with projectile-like velocity, crushing them to their seats with relentless increase of weight, was loosened. The needles crept on . . . more slowly now . . . to sixteen . . . to seventeen . . . and stopped. The Phosphor's fall had been retarded but not arrested. And the switches stood at their last notch.

Sybal spoke, in answer to the unuttered questions of his companions. "Something is wrong. Perhaps there has been some unforeseen deterioration of the coils, in whose composition strange and complex alloy were used. Some of the elements may have been unstable—or have developed instability through age. Or perhaps there is some interfering force, born of the sun's decay. At any rate, it is impossible to build more power toward the twenty-seven antigravities we will require close to the solar surface."

Samac added: "The decelerative jets will increase our resistance to nineteen anti-gravities. It will still be far from enough, even at our present distance."

"How much time have we ?" inquired Hilar, turning to the navigators, Calaf and Caramod.

The two conferred and calculated.

"By using the decelerative jets, it will be two hours before we reach the sun," announced Calaf finally.

As if his announcement had been an order, Eibano, the jet-engineer, promptly jerked the levers that fired to full power the reversing rockets banked in the Phosphor's nose and sides. There was a slight further deceleration of their descent, a further lightening of the grievous weight that oppressed them. But the Phosphor still plunged irreversibly sun-ward.

Hilar and Han Joas exchanged a glance of understanding and agreement. They rose stiffly from their seats, and moved heavily toward the magazine, occupying fully half the ship's interior, in which the hundreds of disruption-bombs were racked. It was unnecessary to announce their purpose; and no one spoke either in approval or demur.

Hilar opened the magazine's door; and he and Han Joas paused on the threshold, looking back. They saw for the last time the faces of their fellow-voyagers, expressing no other emotion than resignation, vignetted, as it were, on the verge of destruction. Then they entered the magazine, closing its door behind them.

They set to work methodically, moving back to back along a narrow aisle between the racks in which the immense ovoid bombs were piled in strict order according to their respective elements. Because of various coördinated dials and switches involved, it was a matter of minutes to prepare a single bomb for the explosion. Therefore Hilar and Han Joas, in the time at their disposal, could do no more than set the timing and detonating mechanism of one bomb of each element. A great chronometer, ticking at the magazine's farther end, enabled them to accomplish this task with precision. The bombs were thus timed to explode simultaneously, detonating the others through chain-reaction, at the moment when the Phosphor should touch the sun's surface.

The solar pull, strengthening as the Phosphor fell to its doom, had now made their movements slow and difficult. It would, they feared, immobilize them before they could finish preparing a second series of bombs for detonation. Laboriously, beneath the burden of a weight already trebled, they made their way to seats that faced a reflector in which the external cosmos was imaged.

It was an awesome and stupendous scene on which they gazed. The sun's globe had broadened vastly, filling the nether heavens. Half-seen, a dim unhorizoned landscape, fitfully lit by the crimson far-sundered flares of volcanoes, by bluish zones and patches of strange radio-active minerals, it deepened beneath them abysmally disclosing mountains that would have made the Himalayas seem like hillocks, revealing chasms that might have engulfed asteroids and planets.

At the center of this Cyclopean landscape burned the great volcano that had been called Hephaestus by astronomers. It was the same volcano watched by Hilar and Rodis from the observatory window. Tongues of flame a hundred miles in length arose and licked skyward from a crater that seemed the mouth of some ultramundane hell.

Hilar and Han Joas no longer heard the chronometer's portentous ticking, and had no eyes for the watching of its ominous hands. Such watching was needless now: there was nothing more to be done, and nothing before them but eternity. They measured their descent by the broadening of the dim solar plain, the leaping into salience of new mountains, the deepening of new chasms and gulfs in the globe that had now lost all semblance of a sphere.

It was plain now that the Phosphor would fall directly into the flaming and yawning crater of Hephaestus. Faster and faster it plunged, heavier grew the piled chains of gravity that giants could not have lifted. . .

At the very last, the reflector of which Hilar and Han Joas peered was filled entirely by the tongued volcanic fires that enveloped the Phosphor.

Then, without eyes to see or ears to apprehend, they were part of the pyre from which the sun, like a Phoenix, was reborn.

Rodis, climbing to the tower, after a period of fitful sleep and troublous dreams, saw from its window the rising of the rekindled orb.

It dazzled her, though its glory was half-dimmed by rainbow-colored mists that fumed from the icy mountain-tops. It was a sight filled with marvel and with portent. Thin rills of downward-threading water had already begun to fret the glacial armor on slopes and scarps; and later they would swell to cataracts, laying bare the buried soil and stone. Vapors, that seemed to flow and fluctuate on renascent winds, swam sun-ward from lakes of congealed air at the valley's bottom. It was a visible resumption of the elemental life and activity so long suspended in hibernal night. Even through the tower's insulating walls, Rodis felt the solar warmth that later would awaken the seeds and spores of plants that had lain dormant for cycles.

Her heart was stirred to wonder by the spectacle. But beneath the wonder was a great numbness and a sadness like unmelting ice. Hilar, she knew, would never return to her—except as a ray of the light, a spark of the vital heat, that he had helped to relumine. For the nonce, there was irony rather than comfort in the memory of his promise: "I will come back to you—in the sunlight."

PRINCE ALCOREZ AND THE MAGICIAN

The following is translated from an old manuscript of the time of Limour the lame. The author's identity is unknown.

Takoob Khan, the Sultan of Balkh, had but one son named Alcorez. This son, of a fierce disposition by nature, was not improved by the luxury and power surrounding him. He became cruel, licentious, and overbearing, and made himself universally unpopular. In this he was exactly the opposite of his father, who was a wise and just Sultan, and who had endeared himself to the people. In contrast with him, the faults of his sons were doubly accentuated.

Prince Alcorez spent his days in sports and pleasure and his nights in reprehensible dissipation. He soon became noted for his love of wine, and for the number of his concubines. His father's remonstrances were of no avail. In spite of all that was said he continued in his course.

At this time there came to Balkh from Hindustan a noted magician, Amaro by name. He was skilled in the art of foretelling the future, and his fame throughout the land soon became great. To this dark-skinned man of an alien race and religion came all afflicted with trouble, or who sought to tear aside the veil of coming events. His patrons were of all ranks and station in life, for trouble is the lot of all, and curiosity a universal attribute.

Prince Alcorez, actuated by the common impulse, entered the presence of the magician. Amaro, a small man with gleaming eyes, and clad in flowing robes, arose from the cushions whereon he had sat wrapt in meditation, and saluted his royal visitor.

"O Prince," he said, "Comest thou to thy humble servant that he may read for thee the hidden and inscrutable decrees of fate?"

"Aye," said Alcorez.

"In so far as lies my ability I will serve thee," replied the Hindoo. He motioned his visitor to be seated, and then proceeded with his preparations.

As if at a word of command the room became darkened. Amaro took various perfumed woods and cast them into a brazier of heated coals. A thick black smoke arose, and standing in this, his figure seemingly grown taller and more impressive, and half-veiled in the curling vapor, the magician recited incantations in some strange and unknown tongue.

Alcorez sat spell bound, and saw the smoke form itself into various fantastic shapes. The room seemed to widen out indefinitely, and with it

the black vapor. Soon the fantastic shapes became the semblance of human forms in which Alcorez beheld himself and many whom he knew.

They were in the throne room of the royal palace. Alcorez, seated on the throne of Sultans, was crowned ruler of Balkh, and his courtiers did him homage. For many minutes the scene was maintained, and then the shapes seemed to dissolve once more into black smoke.

The magician stood at Alcorez's side. "Thou hast beheld," said he, "the shadow of a coming event. That which thou hast seen shall in time come to pass. And now thou shalt look upon another scene."

Again the magician stood in the whirling smoke and chanted incantations in a strange and unknown tongue. And again the room seemed to widen out, and the vapor to form itself into a familiar scene and human shapes.

Alcorez beheld the Hall of Audience, in which the Sultans of Balkh dispensed justice to their subjects. And he, himself, sat on the throne. Before him came many stating grievances and demanding justice. And Alcorez gave his decisions.

Then Amaro, the Hindoo magician, entered. Straight he came to the royal throne, and presented his petition. The Sultan was about to make some reply, when the Hindoo drew a knife from his bosom, and stabbed him.

At the same moment, he who sat watching this spell-bound, gave a cry of horror and fell dead, stabbed to the heart by Amaro.

PRINCE ALCOUZ AND THE MAGICIAN

Alcouz Khan was the only son of Yakoob Ullah, Sultan of Balkh. Unruly and vicious by nature, he was anything but improved by the luxury and power of his position. He grew up overbearing, cruel, and dissolute, and with mature years his faults and vices only became more pronounced. He was exactly the opposite of his father, who was a wise and just ruler and had endeared himself to the people.

The prince spent his time in reprehensible sports and dissipation and kept evil companions. His father often remonstrated with him, but without effect. He sighed when he thought of the day not far distant, for he was growing old, when Alcouz would come to the throne. The prince's succession, indeed, was universally dreaded, for well the people knew what manner of Sultan the cruel, dissipated youth would make.

There came to Balkh from Hindustan a noted magician, by name Amaroo. He soon became famous for his skill in foretelling the future. His patrons were many and of all stations in life, for the desire to tear aside the veil of the future is universal.

Alcouz, actuated by the common impulse, visited him. The magician, a small man with fiery, gleaming eyes, who wore flowing robes, arose from the couch whereon he had been sitting wrapped in meditation, and salaamed low.

"I have come to thee," said Alcouz, "that thou mayest read for me the hidden and inscrutable decrees of fate."

"In so far as lies my ability, I will serve thee," replied the Hindu. He motioned his visitor to be seated and proceeded with his preparations. He spoke a few words in a tongue Alcouz could not understand and the room became darkened except for the dim, flickering light of a brazier of burning coals. Into this Amaroo cast various perfumed woods, which he had at

hand. A thick black smoke arose, and standing in it, his figure half-hidden and seemingly grown taller and more impressive, he recited incantations in the strange and unknown tongue.

The room lightened and seemed to widen out indefinitely, with it the black vapor. Alcouz could no longer see the walls and the room seemed some vast cavern shut in at a distance by darkness. The smoke formed itself into curling, fantastic shapes which took on rapidly the semblance of human beings. At the same time the walls of the darkness contracted till they limited a space as large as the Sultan's throne room. More smoke arose from the brazier and grew to long rows of pillars and to a dais and a throne. A shadowy figure sat upon the throne before which the other figures assembled and knelt. They rapidly became clearer and more distinct, and Alcouz recognized them.

The place was the royal throne room, and the seated figure was himself. The others were officers of the court and his personal friends. A crown was placed on Alcouz's head and his courtiers knelt down in homage. The scene was maintained awhile and then the shapes re-dissolved into black vapor.

Amaroo stood at the prince's side. "What thou hast beheld will in time come to pass," he said. "Now thou shalt look upon another event."

Again he stood in the whirling smoke and chanted incantations, and again the vapor grew to pillars and a throne occupied by the solitary figure of Alcouz. He was sitting with unseeing eyes, absorbed in meditation. A slave and seemed to speak to him, then withdrew.

Then came a figure which Alcouz recognized as that of Amaroo, the Hindu magician. He knelt before the throne and seemed to present some petition. The seated shape was apparently about to reply, when the Hindu, springing suddenly to his feet, drew a long knife from his bosom and stabbed him.

Almost at the same instant, Alcouz, who was watching horror-stricken, gave a wild cry and fell dead, stabbed to the heart by the magician, who had crept up behind him unobserved.

PUTHUUM

Let the grape yield for us its purple flame, And rosy love put off its

maidenhood: By blackening moons, in lands without a name, We slew the Incubus

and all his brood. -- Song of King Hoaraph's Bowmen

Zobal the archer and Cushara the pikebearer had poured many a libation to their friendship in the sanguine liquors of Yoros and the blood of the kingdom's enemies. In that long and lusty amity, broken only by such passing quarrels as concerned the division of a wine-skin or the apportioning of a wench, they had served amid the soldiery of King Hoaraph for a strenuous decade. Savage warfare and wild, fantastic hazard had been their lot. The renown of their valor had drawn upon them, ultimately, the honor of Hoaraph's attention, and he had assigned them for duty among the picked warriors that guarded his palace in Faraad. And sometimes the twain were sent together on such missions as required no common hardihood and no disputable fealty to the king.

Now, in company with the eunuch Simban, chief purveyor to Hoaraph's well-replenished harem, Zobal and Cushara had gone on a tedious journey through the tract known as Izdrel, which clove the western part of Yoros asunder with its rusty-colored wedge of desolation. The king had sent them to learn if haply there abode any verity in certain travelers' tales, which concerned a young maiden of celestial beauty who had been seen among the pastoral peoples beyond Izdrel. Simban bore at his girdle a bag of gold coins with which, if the girl's pulchritude should be in any wise commensurate with the renown thereof, he was empowered to bargain for her purchase. The king had deemed that Zobal and Cushara should form an escort equal to all contingencies: for Izdrel was a land reputedly free of robbers, or, indeed, of any human inhabitants. Men said, however, that malign goblins, tall as giants and humped like camels, had oftentimes beset

the wayfarers through Izdrel, that fair but ill-meaning lamiae had lured them to an eldritch death. Simban, quaking corpulently in his saddle, rode with small willingness on that outward journey; but the archer and the pike bearer, full of wholesome skepticism, divided their bawdy jests between the timid eunuch and the elusive demons.

Without other mishap than the rupturing of a wine-skin from the force of the new vintage it contained, they came to the verdurous pasture-lands beyond that dreary desert. Here, in low valleys that held the middle meanderings of the river Vos, cattle and dromedaries were kept by a tribe of herders who sent biannual tribute to Hoaraph from their teeming droves. Simban and his companions found the girl, who dwelt with her grandmother in a village beside the Vos; and even the eunuch acknowledged that their journey was well rewarded.

Cushara and Zobal, on their part, were instantly smitten by the charms of the maiden, whose name was Rubalsa. She was slender and of queenly height, and her skin was pale as the petals of white poppies; and the undulant blackness of her heavy hair was full of sullen copper gleamings beneath the sun. While Simban haggled shrilly with the cronelike grandmother, the warriors eyed Rubalsa with circumspect ardor and addressed to her such gallantries as they deemed discreet within hearing of the eunuch.

At last the bargain was driven and the price paid, to the sore depletion of Simban's moneybag. Simban was now eager to return to Faraad with his prize, and he seemed to have forgotten his fear of the haunted desert. Zobal and Cushara were routed from their dreams by the impatient eunuch before dawn; and the three departed with the still drowsy Rubalsa ere the village could awaken about them.

Noon, with its sun of candent copper in a blackish-blue zenith, found them far amid the rusty sands and iron-toothed ridges of Izdrel. The route they followed was little more than a footpath: for, though Izdrel was but thirty miles in width at that point, few travelers would dare those fiend-infested leagues; and most preferred an immensely circuitous road, used by the

herders, that ran to the southward of that evil desolation, following the Vos nearly to its debouchment in the Indaskian Sea.

Cushara, splendid in his plate-armor of bronze, on a huge piebald mare with a cataphract of leather scaled with copper, led the cavalcade. Rubalsa, who wore the red homespun of the herders' women, followed on a black gelding with silk and silver harness, which Hoaraph had sent for her use. Close behind her came the watchful eunuch, gorgeous in particolored sendal, and mounted ponderously, with swollen saddlebags all about him, on the gray ass of uncertain age which, through his fear of horses and camels, he insisted on riding at all times. In his hand he held the leading-rope of another ass which was nearly crushed to the ground by the wine-skins, water-jugs and other provisions. Zobal guarded the rear, with unslung bow, slim and wiry in his suiting of light chain mail, on a nervous stallion that chafed incessantly at the rein. At his back he bore a quiver filled with arrows which the court sorcerer, Amdok, had prepared with singular spells and dippings in doubtful fluids, for his possible use against demons. Zobal had accepted the arrows courteously but had satisfied himself later that their iron barbs were in no wise impaired by Amdok's treatment. A similarly ensorceled pike had been offered by Amdok to Cushara, who had refused it bluffly, saying that his own well-tried weapon was equal to the spitting of any number of devils.

Because of Simban and the two asses, the party could make little speed. However, they hoped to cross the wilder and more desolate portion of Izdrel ere night. Simban, though he still eyed the dismal waste dubiously, was plainly more concerned with his precious charge than with the imagined imps and lamiae. And Cushara and Zobal, both rapt in amorous reveries that centered about the luscious Rubalsa, gave only a perfunctory attention to their surroundings.

The girl had ridden all morning in demure silence. Now, suddenly, she cried out in a voice whose sweetness was made shrill by alarm. The others reined their mounts, and Simban babbled questions. To these Rubalsa replied by pointing toward the southern horizon, where, as her companions now saw, a peculiar pitch-black darkness had covered a great portion of the sky and

hills, obliterating them wholly. This darkness, which seemed due neither to cloud nor sandstorm, extended itself in a crescent on either hand, and came swiftly toward the travelers. In the course of a minute or less, it had blotted the pathway before and behind them like a black mist; and the two arcs of shadow, racing northward, had flowed together, immuring the party in a circle. The darkness then became stationary, its walls no more than a hundred feet away on every side. Sheer, impenetrable, it surrounded the wayfarers, leaving above them a clear space from which the sun still glared down, remote and small and discolored, as if seen from the bottom of a deep pit.

"Ai! ai! ai!" howled Simban, cowering amid his saddlebags. "I knew well that some devilry would overtake us."

At the same moment the two asses began to bray loudly, and the horses, with a frantic neighing and squealing, trembled beneath their riders. Only with much cruel spurring could Zobal force his stallion forward beside Cushara's mare.

"Mayhap it is only some pestilential mist," said Cushara.

"Never have I seen such mist," replied Zobal doubtfully. "And there are no vapors to be met with in Izdrel. Methinks it is like the smoke of the seven hells that men fable beneath Zothique."

"Shall we ride forward?" said Cushara. "I would learn whether or not a pike can penetrate that darkness."

Calling out some words of reassurance to Rubalsa, the twain sought to spur their mounts toward the murky wall. But, after a few swerving paces, the mare and the stallion balked wildly, sweating and snorting, and would go no farther. Cushara and Zobal dismounted and continued their advance on foot.

Not knowing the source or nature of the phenomenon with which they had to deal, the two approached it warily. Zobal nocked an arrow to his string, and Cushara held the great bronze-headed pike before him as if charging an embattled foe. Both were more and more puzzled by the murkiness, which

did not recede before them in the fashion of fog, but maintained its opacity when they were close upon it.

Cushara was about to thrust his weapon into the wall. Then, without the least prelude, there arose in the darkness, seemingly just before him, a horrible, multitudinous clamor as of drums, trumpets, cymbals, jangling armor, jarring voices, and mailed feet that tramped to and fro on the stony ground with a mighty clangor. As Cushara and Zobel drew back in amazement, the clamor swelled and spread, till it filled with a babel of warlike noises the whole circle of mysterious night that hemmed in the travelers.

"Verily, we are sore beset," shouted Cushara to his comrade as they went back to their horses. "It would seem that some king of the north has sent his myrmidons into Yoros."

"Yea," said Zobel... "But it is strange that we saw them not ere the darkness came. And the darkness, surely, is no natural thing."

Before Cushara could make any rejoinder, the martial clashings and shoutings ceased abruptly. All about it seemed that there was a rattling of innumerable sistras, a hissing of countless huge serpents, a raucous hooting of ill-omened birds that had foregathered by thousands. To these indescribably hideous sounds, the horses now added a continual screaming, and the asses a more frenzied braying, above which the outcries of Rubalsa and Simban were scarce audible.

Cushara and Zobel sought vainly to pacify their mounts and comfort the madly frightened girl. It was plain that no army of mortal men had beleaguered them: for the noises still changed from instant to instant, and they heard a most evil howling, and a roaring as of hellborn beasts that deafened them with its volume.

Naught, however, was visible in the gloom, whose circle now began to move swiftly, without widening or contracting. To maintain their position in its center, the warriors and their charges were compelled to leave the path and to flee northwardly amid the harsh ridges and hollows. All around them

the baleful noises continued, keeping, as it seemed, the same interval of distance.

The sun, slanting westward, no longer shone into that eerily moving pit, and a deep twilight enveloped the wanderers. Zobal and Cushara rode as closely beside Rubalsa as the rough ground permitted, straining their eyes constantly for any visible sign of the cohorts that seemed to encompass them. Both were filled with the darkest misgivings, for it had become all too manifest that supernatural powers were driving them astray in the untracked desert.

Moment by moment the gross darkness seemed to close in; and there was a palpable eddying and seething as of monstrous forms behind its curtain. The horses stumbled over boulders and outcroppings of ore-sharp stone, and the grievously burdened asses were compelled to put forth an unheard-of speed to keep pace with the ever-shifting circle that menaced them with its horrid clamor. Rubalsa had ceased her outcries, as if overcome by exhaustion or resignation to the horror of her plight; and the shrill screeches of the eunuch had subsided into fearful wheezing and gasping.

Ever and anon, it seemed that great fiery eyes glared out of the gloom, floating close to earth or moving aloft at a gigantic height. Zobal began to shoot his enchanted arrows at these appearance, and the speeding of each bolt was hailed by an appalling outburst of Satanic laughters and ululations.

In such wise they went on, losing all measure of time and sense of orientation. The animals were galled and footsore. Simban was nigh dead from fright and fatigue; Rubalsa drooped in her saddle; and the warriors, awed and baffled by the predicament in which their weapons appeared useless, began to flag with a dull weariness.

"Never again shall I doubt the legendry of Izdrel," said Cushara gloomily.

"It is in my mind that we have not long either to doubt or believe," rejoined Zobal.

To add to their distress, the terrain grew rougher and steeper, and they climbed acclivitous hillsides and went down endlessly into drear valleys. Anon they came to a flat, open, pebbly space. There, all at once, it seemed that the pandemonium of evil noises drew back on every hand, receding and fading into faint, dubious whispers that died at a vast remove. Simultaneously, the circling night thinned out, and a few stars shone in the welkin, and the sharp-spined hills of the desert loomed starkly against a vermilion afterglow. The travelers paused and peered wonderingly at one another in a gloom that was no more than that of natural twilight.

"What new devilry is this?" asked Cushara, hardly daring to believe that the hellish leaguers had vanished.

"I know not," said the archer, who was staring into the dusk." "But here, mayhap, is one of the devils."

The others now saw that a muffled figure was approaching them, bearing a lit lantern made of some kind of translucent horn. At some distance behind the figure, lights appeared suddenly in a square dark mass which none of the party had discerned before. This mass was evidently a large building with many windows.

The figure, drawing near, was revealed by the dim yellowish lantern as a black man of immense girth and tallness, garbed in a voluminous robe of saffron such as was worn by certain monkish orders, and crowned with the two-horned purple hat of an abbot. He was indeed a singular and unlooked-for apparition: for if any monasteries existed amid the barren reaches of Izdrel, they were hidden and unknown to the world. Zobal, however, searching his memory, recalled a vague tradition he had once heard concerning a chapter of negro monks that had flourished in Yoros many centuries ago. The chapter had long been extinct, and the very site of its monastery was forgotten. Nowadays there were few blacks anywhere in the kingdom, other than those who did duty as eunuchs guarding the seraglios of nobles and rich merchants

The animals began to display a certain uneasiness at the stranger's approach.

"Who art thou?" challenged Cushara, his fingers tightening on the haft of his weapon.

The black man grinned capaciously, showing rows of discolored teeth whose incisors were like those of a wild dog. His enormous unctuous jowls were creased by the grin into folds of amazing number and volume; and his eyes, deeply slanted and close together, seemed to wink perpetually in pouches that shook like ebon jellies. His nostrils flared prodigiously; his purple, rubbery lips drooled and quivered, and he licked them with a fat, red, salacious tongue before replying to Cushara's question.

"I am Ujuk, abbot of the monastery of Puthuum," he said, in a thick voice of such extraordinary volume that it appeared almost to issue from the earth under his feet. "Methinks the night has overtaken you far from the route of travelers. I bid you welcome to our hospitality."

"Aye, the night took us betimes," Cushara returned dryly. Neither he nor Zobal was reassured by the look of lust in the abbot's obscenely twinkling eyes as he peered at Rubalsa. Moreover, they had now noted the excessive and disagreeable length of the dark nails on his huge hands and bare, splayed feet: nails that were curving, three-inch talons, sharp as those of some beast or bird of prey.

It seemed, however, that Rubalsa and Simban were less abhorrently impressed, or had not noticed these details: for both made haste to acknowledge the abbot's proffer of hospitality and to urge acceptance upon the visibly reluctant warriors. To this urging, Zobal and Cushara yielded, both inwardly resolving to keep a close watch on all the actions and movements of the abbot of Puthuum.

Ujuk, holding the horn lantern aloft, conducted the travelers to that massive building whose lights they had discerned at no great distance. A ponderous gate of dark wood swung open silently at their approach, and they entered a spacious courtyard cobbled with worn, greasy-looking stones, and dimly

illuminated by torches in rusty iron sockets. Several monks appeared with startling suddenness before the travelers, who had thought the courtyard vacant at first glance. They were all of unusual bulk and stature, and their features possessed an extraordinary likeness to those of Ujuk, from whom, indeed, they could hardly have been distinguished save by the yellow cowls which they wore in lieu of the abbot's horned purple hat. The similarity extended even to their curved and talon-like nails of inordinate length. Their movements were fantasmally furtive and silent. Without speaking, they took charge of the horses and asses. Cushara and Zobal relinquished their mounts to the care of these doubtful hostlers with a reluctance which, apparently, was not shared by Rubalsa or the eunuch.

The monks also signified a willingness to relieve Cushara of his heavy pike and Zobal of his ironwood bow and half-emptied quiver of ensorceled arrows. But at this the warriors balked, refusing to let the weapons pass from their possession.

Ujuk led them to an inner portal which gave admission to the refectory. It was a large, low room, lit by brazen lamps of antique workmanship, such as ghouls might have recovered from a desert-sunken tomb. The abbot, with ogre-like grinnings, besought his guests to take their place at a long massive table of ebony with chairs and benches of the same material.

When they had seated themselves, Ujuk sat down at the table's head. Immediately, four monks came in, bearing platters piled with spicily smoking viands, and deep earthen flagons full of a dark amber-brown liquor. And these monks, like those encountered in the courtyard, were gross ebon-black simulacra of their abbot, resembling him precisely in every feature and member. Zobal and Cushara were chary of tasting the liquor, which, for its odor, appeared to be an exceptionally potent kind of ale: for their doubts concerning Ujuk and his monastery grew graver every moment. Also, in spite of their hunger, they refrained from the food set before them, which consisted mainly of baked meats that neither could identify. Simban and Rubalsa, however, addressed themselves promptly to the meal with appetites sharpened by long fasting and the weird fatigues of the day.

The warriors observed that neither food nor drink had been placed before Ujuk, and they conjectured that he had already dined. To their growing disgust and anger, he sat lolling obesely, with lustful eyes upon Rubalsa in a stare broken only by the nictitations that accompanied his perpetual grinning. This stare soon began to abash the girl, and then to alarm and frighten her. She ceased eating; and Simban, who had been deeply preoccupied till then with his supper, was plainly perturbed when he saw the flagging of her appetite. He seemed for the first time to notice the abbot's unmonastic leering, and showed his disapproval by sundry horrible grimaces. He also remarked pointedly, in a loud, piercing voice, that the girl was destined for the harem of King Hoaraph. But at this, Ujuk merely chuckled, as if Simban had uttered some exquisitely humorous jest.

Zobal and Cushara were hard put to repress their wrath, and both itched hotly for the fleshing of their weapons in the abbot's gross bulk. He, however, seemed to have taken Simban's hint, for he shifted his gaze from the girl. Instead, he began to eye the warriors with a curious and loathsome avidity, which they found little less insupportable than his ogling of Rubalsa. The well-nourished eunuch also came in for his share of Ujuk's regard which seemed to have in it the hunger of a hyena gloating over his prospective prey.

Simban, obviously ill at ease, and somewhat frightened, now tried to carry on a conversation with the abbot, volunteering much information as to himself, his companions, and the adventures which had brought them to Puthuum. Ujuk seemed little surprised by this information; and Zobal and Cushara, who took no part in the conversation, became surer than ever that he was no true abbot.

"How far have we gone astray from the route to Faraad?" asked Simban.

"I do not consider that you have gone astray," rumbled Ujuk in his subterranean voice, "for your coming to Puthuum is most timely. We have few guests here, and we are loth to part with those who honor our hospitality."

"King Hoaraph will be impatient for our return with the girl," Simban quavered. "We must depart early tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is another matter," said Ujuk, in a tone half unctuous, half sinister. "Perhaps, by then, you will have forgotten this deplorable haste."

Little was said during the rest of the meal; and, indeed, little was drunk or eaten; for even Simban seemed to have lost his normally voracious appetite. Ujuk, still grinning as if at some uproarious jest known only to himself, was apparently not concerned with the urging of food upon his guests.

Certain of the monks came and went unbidden, removing the laden dishes, and as they departed, Zobal and Cushara perceived a strange thing: for no shadows were cast by the monks on the lamplit floor beside the moving adumbrations of the vessels they carried! From Ujuk, however, a heavy, misshapen umbrage fell and lay like a prone incubus beside his chair.

"Methinks we have come to a hatching place of demons," whispered Zobal to Cushara. "We have fought many men, thou and I, but never such as wanted wholesome shadows."

"Aye," muttered the pike-bearer. "But I like this abbot even less than his monks: though he alone is the caster of a shade."

Ujuk now rose from his seat, saying: "I trow that ye are all weary and would sleep betimes."

Rubalsa and Simban, who had both drunk a certain amount of the powerful ale of Puthuum, nodded a drowsy assent. Zobal and Cushara, noting their premature sleepiness, were glad they had declined the liquor.

The abbot led his guests along a corridor whose gloom was but little relieved by the flaring of torches in a strong draft that blew stealthily from an undetermined source, causing a rout of wild shadows to flitter beside the passers. On either hand there were cells with portals shut only by hangings of a coarse hempen fabric. The monks had all vanished, the cells were

seemingly dark, and an air of age-old desolation pervaded the monastery, together with a smell as of moldering bones piled in some secret catacomb.

Midway in the hall, Ujuk paused and held aside the arras of a doorway that differed in no wise from the rest. Within, a lamp burned, depending from an archaic chain of curiously linked and fretted metal. The room was bare but spacious, and a bed of ebony with opulent quiltings of an olden fashion stood by the farther wall under an open window. This chamber, the abbot indicated, was for the occupancy of Rubalsa; and he then offered to show the men and the eunuch their respective quarters.

Simban, seeming to wake all at once from his drowsiness, protested at the idea of being separated in such wise from his charge. As if Ujuk had been prepared for this, and had given orders accordingly, a monk appeared forthwith, bringing quilts which he laid on the flagged floor within the portals of Rubalsa's room. Simban stretched himself promptly on the improvised bed, and the warriors withdrew with Ujuk.

"Come," said the abbot, his wolfish teeth gleaming in the torchlight. "Ye will sleep soundly in the beds I have prepared."

Zobal and Cushara, however, had now assumed the position of guardsmen outside the doorway of Rubalsa's chamber. They told Ujuk curtly that they were responsible to King Hoaraph for the girl's safety and must watch over her at all times.

"I wish ye a pleasant vigil," said Ujuk, with a cachinnation like the laughter of hyenas in some underground tomb.

With his departure, it seemed that the black slumber of a dead antiquity settled upon all the building. Rubalsa and Simban, apparently, slept without stirring, for there was no sound from behind the hempen arras. The warriors spoke only in whispers, lest they should arouse the girl. Their weapons held ready for instant use, they watched the shadowy hall with a jealous vigilance: for they did not trust the quietude about them, being well assured that a host of foul cacodemons couched somewhere behind it, biding the time of assault.

Howbeit, nothing occurred to reconfirm them in such apprehensions. The draft that breathed furtively along the hall seemed to tell only of age-forgotten death and cyclic solitude. The two began to perceive signs of dilapidation in walls and floor that had heretofore escaped their notice. Eery, fantastical thoughts came to them with insidious persuasion: it seemed that the building was a ruin that had lain uninhabited for a thousand years; that the black abbot Ujuk and his shadowless monks were mere imaginations, things that had never been; that the moving circle of darkness, the pandemonian voices, that had herded them toward Puthuum, were no more than a daymare whose memory was now fading in the fashion of dreams.

Thirst and hunger troubled them, for they had not eaten since early morn, and had snatched only a few hasty drafts of wine or water during the day. Both, however, began to feel the oncreeping of a sleepy hebetude which, under the circumstances, was most undesirable. They nodded, started and awoke recurrently to their peril. But still, like a siren voice in poppy-dreams, the silence seemed to tell them that all danger was a bygone thing, an illusion that belonged to yesterday.

Several hours passed, and the hall lightened with the rising of a late moon that shone through a window at its eastern end. Zobal, less bedrowsed than Cushara, was awakened to full awareness by a sudden commotion among the animals in the courtyard without. There were neighings that rose to a frenzied pitch, as if something had frightened the horses; and to these the asses began to add their heavy braying, till Cushara was also aroused.

"Make sure that thou drowsest not again," Zobal admonished the pike-bearer. "I shall go forth and inquire as to the cause of this tumult."

"Tis a good thought," commended Cushara. "And while thou art gone, see to it that none has molested our provisions. And bring back with thee some apricots and cakes of sesame and a skin of ruby-red wine."

The monastery itself remained silent as Zobal went down the hall, his buskins of link-covered leather ringing faintly. At the hall's end an outer

door stood open, and he passed through it into the courtyard. Even as he, emerged, the animals ceased their clamor. He could see but dimly, for all the torches in the courtyard, save one, had burnt out or been extinguished; and the low gibbous moon had not yet climbed the wall. Nothing, to all appearance, was amiss: the two asses were standing quietly beside the mountainous piles of provisions and saddlebags they had borne; the horses seemed to drowse amicably in a group. Zobal decided that perhaps there had been some temporary bickering between his stallion and Cushara's mare.

He went forward to make sure that there was no other cause of disturbance. Afterward he turned to the wineskins, intending to refresh himself before rejoining Cushara with a supply of drinkables and comestibles. Hardly had he washed the dust of Izdrel from his throat with a long draft, when he heard an eery, dry whispering whose source and distance he could not at once determine. Sometimes it seemed at his very ear, and then it ebbed away as if sinking into profound subterranean vaults. But the sound, though variable in this manner, never ceased entirely; and it seemed to shape itself into words that the listener almost understood: words that were fraught with the hopeless sorrow of a dead man who had sinned long ago, and had repented his sin through black sepulchral ages.

As he harkened to the sere anguish of that sound, the hair bristled on the archer's neck, and he knew such fear as he had never known in the thick of battle. And yet, at the same time, he was aware of deeper pity than the pain of dying comrades had ever aroused in his heart. And it seemed that the voice implored him for commiseration and succor, laying upon him a weird compulsion that he dared not disobey. He could not wholly comprehend the things that the whisperer besought him to do: but somehow he must ease that desolate anguish.

Still the whispering rose and fell; and Zobal forgot that he had left Cushara to a lone vigil beset with hellish dangers; forgot that the voice itself might well be only a device of demons to lure him astray. He began to search the courtyard, his keen ears alert for the source of the sound; and, after some dubitation, he decided that it issued from the ground in a corner opposite

the gateway. Here, amid the cobbling, in the wall's angle, he found a large slab of syenite with a rusty metal ring in its center. He was quickly confirmed in his decision: for the whispering became louder and more articulate, and he thought that it said to him: "Lift the slab."

The archer grasped the rusty ring with both hands, and putting forth all his strength, he succeeded in tilting back the stone, albeit not without such exertion as made him feel that his very spine would crack. A dark opening was exposed, and from it surged a charnel stench so overpowering that Zobal turned his face away and was like to have vomited. But the whisper came with a sharp, woeful beseeching, out of the darkness below; and it said to him: "Descend."

Zobal wrenched from its socket the one torch that still burned in the courtyard. By its lurid flaring he saw a flight of worn steps that went down into the reeking sepulchral gloom; and resolutely he descended the steps, finding himself at their bottom in a hewn vault with deep shelves of stone on either hand. The shelves, running away into darkness, were piled with human bones and mummified bodies; and plainly the place was the catacomb of the monastery.

The whispering had ceased, and Zobal peered about in bewilderment not unmingled with horror.

"I am here," resumed the dry, susurrous voice, issuing from amid the heaps of mortal remnants on the shelf close beside him. Startled, and feeling again that cringing of the hairs on his neck, Zobal held his torch to the low shelf as he looked for the speaker. In a narrow niche between stacks of disarticulated bones, he beheld a half-decayed corpse about whose long, attenuate limbs and hollow body there hung a few rotten shreds of yellow cloth. These, he thought, were the remnants of a robe such as was worn by the monks of Puthuum. Then, thrusting his torch into the niche, he discerned the lean, mummy-like head, on which moldered a thing that had once been the horned hat of an abbot. The corpse was black as ebony, and plainly it was that of a great negro. It bore an aspect of incredible age, as if

it had lain there for centuries: but from it came the odor of newly ripe corruption that had sickened Zobal when he lifted the slab of syenite.

As he stood staring down, it seemed to Zobal that the cadaver stirred a little, as if fain to rise from its recumbent posture; and he saw a gleaming as of eyeballs in the deepshadowed sockets; and the dolorously curling lips were retracted still farther; and from between the bared teeth there issued that awful whispering which had drawn him into the catacomb.

"Listen closely," said the whispering. "There is much for me to tell thee, and much for thee to do when the telling is done.

"I am Uldor, the abbot of Puthuum. More than a thousand years ago I came with my monks to Yoros from Ilcar, the black empire of the north. The emperor of Ilcar had driven us forth, for our cult of celibacy, our worship of the maiden goddess Ojhal, were hateful to him. Here amid the desert of Izdrel we built our monastery and dwelt unmolested.

"We were many in number at first; but the years went by, and one by one the Brothers were laid in the catacomb we had delved for our resting place. They died with none to replace them. I alone survived in the end: for I had won such sanctity as ensures longevous days, and had also become a master of the arts of sorcery. Time was a demon that I held at bay, like one who stands in a charmed circle. My powers were still hale and unimpaired; and I lived on as an anchorite in the monastery.

"At first the solitude was far from irksome to me, and I was wholly absorbed in my study of the arcana of nature. But after a time it seemed that such things no longer satisfied. I grew aware of my loneliness, and was much beset by the demons of the waste, who had troubled me little heretofore. Succubi, fair but baneful, lamiae with the round soft bodies of women, came to tempt me in the drear vigils of the night.

"I resisted... But there was one she-devil, more cunning than the others, who crept into my cell in the semblance of a girl I had loved long ago, ere yet I had taken the vow of Ojhal. To her I succumbed; and of the unholy

union was born the half-human fiend, Ujuk, who has since called himself the abbot of Puthuum.

"After that sin, I wished to die... And the wish was manifoldly strengthened when I beheld the progeny of the sin. Too greatly, however, had I offended Ojhal; and a frightful penance was decreed for me. I lived... and daily I was plagued and persecuted by the monster, Ujuk, who grew lustily in the manner of such offspring. But when Ujuk had gained his full stature, there came upon me such weakness and decrepitude as made me hopeful of death. Scarce could I stir in my impotence, and Ujuk, taking advantage of this, bore me in his horrid arms to the catacomb and laid me among the dead. Here I have remained ever since, dying and rotting eternally — and yet eternally alive. For almost a millennium I have suffered unsleepingly the dire anguish of repentance that brings no expiation."

"Through the powers of saintly and sorcerous vision that never left me, I was doomed to watch the foul deeds, the hell-dark iniquities of Ujuk. Wearing the guise of an abbot, endowed with strange infernal powers together with a kind of immortality, he has presided over Puthuum through the centuries. His enchantments have kept the monastery hidden... save from those that he wishes to draw within reach of his ghoulish hunger, his incubus-like desires. Men he devours; and women are made to serve his lust... And still I am condemned to see his turpitudes; and the seeing is my most grievous punishment."

The whisper sank away; and Zobal, who had listened in eldritch awe, as one who hears the speech of a dead man, was doubtful for a moment that Uldor still lived. Then the sere voice went on:

"Archer, I crave a boon from thee; and I offer in return a thing that will aid thee against Ujuk. In thy quiver thou bearest charmed arrows: and the wizardry of him that wrought them was good. Such arrows can slay the else-immortal powers of evil. They can slay Ujuk — and even such evil as endures in me and forbids me to die. Archer, grant me an arrow through the heart: and if that suffice not, an arrow through the right eye, and one through the left. And leave the arrows in their mark, for I deem that thou

canst well spare so many. One alone is needed for Ujuk. As to the monks thou hast seen, I will tell thee a secret. They are twelve in number, but..."

Zobal would scarcely have believed the thing that Uldor now unfolded, if the events of the day had not left him beyond all incredulity. The abbot continued:

"When I am wholly dead, take thou the talisman which depends about my neck. The talisman is a touchstone that will dissolve such ill enchantments as have a material seeming, if applied thereto with the hand."

For the first time, Zobal perceived the talisman, which was an oval of plain gray stone lying upon Uldor's withered bosom on a chain of black silver.

"Make haste, O archer," the whispering implored.

Zobal had socketed his torch in the pile of moldering bones beside Uldor. With a sense of mingled compulsion and reluctance, he drew an arrow from his quiver, notched it, and aimed unflinchingly down at Uldor's heart. The shaft went straightly and deeply into its mark; and Zobal waited. But anon from the retracted lips of the black abbot there issued a faint murmuring: "Archer, another arrow!"

Again the bow was drawn, and a shaft sped unerringly into the hollow orbit of Uldor's right eye. And again, after an interval, there came the almost inaudible pleading: "Archer, still another shaft."

Once more the bow of ironwood sang in the silent vault, and an arrow stood in the left eye of Uldor, quivering with the force of its propulsion. This time there was no whisper from the rotting lips: but Zobal heard a curious rustling, and a sigh as of lapsing sand. Beneath his gaze the black limbs and body crumbled swiftly, the face and head fell in, and the three arrows sagged awry, since there was naught now but a pile of dust and parting bones to hold them embedded.

Leaving the arrows as Uldor had enjoined him to do, Zobal groped for the gray talisman that was now buried amid those fallen relics. Finding it, he

hung it carefully at his belt beside the long straight sword which he carried. Perhaps, he reflected, the thing might have its use ere the night was over.

Quickly he turned away and climbed the steps to the courtyard. A saffron-yellow and lopsided moon was soaring above the wall, and he knew by this that he had been absent overlong from his vigil with Cushara. All, however, seemed tranquil: the drowsing animals had not stirred; and the monastery was dark and soundless. Seizing a full wine-skin and a bag containing such edibles as Cushara had asked him to bring, Zobal hurried back to the open hall.

Even as he passed into the building, the arras-like silence before him was burst asunder by a frightful hubbub. He distinguished amid the clamor the screaming of Rubalsa, the screeching of Simban, and the furious roaring of Cushara: but above these, as if to drown them all, an obscene laughter mounted continually, like the welling forth of dark subterrene waters thick and foul with the fats of corruption.

Zobal dropped the wine-skin and the sack of comestibles and raced forward, unslinging his bow as he went. The outcries of his companions continued, but he heard them faintly now above the damnable incubus-like laughter that swelled as if to fill the whole monastery. As he neared the space before Rubalsa's chamber, he saw Cushara beating with the haft of his pike at a blank wall in which there was no longer a hempen-curtained doorway. Behind the wall the screeching of Simban ceased in a gurgling moan like that of some butchered steer; but the girl's terror-sharpened cries still mounted through the smothering cachinnation.

"This wall was wrought by demons," raged the pike bearer as he smote vainly at the smooth masonry. "I kept a faithful watch — but they built it behind me in a silence as of the dead. And a fouler work is being done in that chamber."

"Master thy frenzy," said Zobal, as he strove to regain the command of his own faculties amid the madness that threatened to overwhelm him. At that instant he recalled the oval gray touchstone of Uldor, which hung at his

baldric from its black silver chain; and it came to him that the closed wall was perhaps an unreal enchantment against which the talisman might serve even as Uldor had said.

Quickly he took the touchstone in his fingers and held it to the blank surface where the doorway had been. Cushara looked on with an air of stupefaction, as if deeming the archer demented. But even as the talisman clicked faintly against it, the wall seemed to dissolve, leaving only a rude arras that fell away in tatters as if it too had been no more than a sorcerous illusion. The strange disintegration continued to spread, the whole partition melted away to a few worn blocks, and the gibbous moon shone in as the abbey of Puthuum crumbled silently to a gapped and roofless ruin!

All this had occurred in a few moments; but the warriors found no room for wonder. By the livid light of the moon, which peered down like the face of a worm-gnawed cadaver, they looked upon a scene so hideous that it caused them to forget all else. Before them, on a cracked floor from whose interstices grew desert grasses, the eunuch Simban lay sprawled in death. His raiment was torn to streamers, and blood bubbled darkly from his mangled throat. Even the leather pouches which he bore at his girdle had been ripped open, and gold coins, vials of medicine and other oddments were scattered around him.

Beyond, by the half-crumbled outer wall, Rubalsa lay in a litter of rotted cloth and woodwork which had been the gorgeously quilted ebon bed. She was trying to fend off with her lifted hands the enormously swollen shape that hung horizontally above her, as if levitated by the floating wing-like folds of its saffron robe. This shape the warriors recognized as the abbot Ujuk.

The overwelling laughter of the black incubus had ceased, and he turned upon the intruders a face contorted by diabolic lust and fury. His teeth clashed audibly, his eyes glowed in their pouches like beads of red-hot metal, as he withdrew from his position over the girl and loomed monstrously erect before her amid the ruins of the chamber.

Cushara rushed forward with leveled pike ere Zobal could fit one of his arrows to the string. But even as the pike-bearer crossed the sill, it seemed that the foully bloated form of Ujuk multiplied itself in a dozen yellow-garmented shapes that surged to meet Cushara's onset. Appearing as if by some hellish legerdemain, the monks of Puthuum had mustered to assist their abbot.

Zobal cried out in warning, but the shapes were all about Cushara, dodging the thrusts of his weapon and clawing ferociously at his plate-armor with their terrific three-inch talons. Valiantly he fought them, only to go down after a little and disappear from sight as if whelmed by a pack of ravening hyenas.

Remembering the scarce credible thing that Uldor had told him, Zobal wasted no arrows upon the monks. His bow ready, he waited for full sight of Ujuk beyond the seething rout that mangled malignantly back and forth above the fallen pike-bearer. In an eddying of the pack he aimed swiftly at the looming incubus, who seemed wholly intent on that fiendish struggle, as if directing it in some wise without spoken word or ponderable gesture. Straight and true the arrow sped with an exultant singing; and good was the sorcery of Amdok, who had wrought it: for Ujuk reeled and went down, his horrid fingers tearing vainly at the shaft that was driven nigh to its fledging of eagle-quills in his body.

Now a strange thing occurred: for, as the incubus fell and writhed to and fro in his dying, the twelve monks all dropped away from Cushara, tossing convulsively on the floor as if they were but shaken shadows of the thing that died. It seemed to Zobal that their forms grew dim and diaphanous, and he saw the cracks in the flagstones beyond them; and their writhings lessened with those of Ujuk; and when Ujuk lay still at last, the faint outlines of the figures vanished as if erased from earth and air. Naught remained but the noisome bulk of that fiend who had been the progeny of the abbot Uldor and the lamia. And the bulk shrank visibly from instant to instant beneath its sagging garments, and a smell of ripe corruption arose, as if all that was human in the hellish thing were rotting swiftly away.

Cushara had scrambled to his feet and was peering about in a stunned fashion. His heavy armor had saved him from the talons of his assailants; but the armor itself was scored from greaves to helmet with innumerable scratches.

"Whither have the monks gone?" he inquired. "They were all about me an instant ago, like so many wild dogs worrying a fallen aurochs."

"The monks were but emanations of Ujuk," said Zobal. "They were mere fantasm, multiple eidola, that he sent forth and withdrew into himself at will; and they had no real existence apart from him. With Ujuk's death they had become less than shadows."

"Verily, such things are prodigious," opined the pikebearer.

The warriors now turned their attention to Rubalsa, who had struggled to a sitting posture amid the downfallen wreckage of her bed. The tatters of rotten quilting which she clutched about her with shamefast fingers at their approach, served but little to conceal her well-rounded ivory nakedness. She wore an air of mingled fright and confusion, like a sleeper who has just awakened from some atrocious nightmare.

"Had the incubus harmed thee?" inquired Zobal anxiously. He was reassured by her faint, bewildered negative. Dropping his eyes before the piteous disarray of her girlish beauty, he felt in his heart a deeper enamorment than before, a passion touched with such tenderness as he had never known in the hot, brief loves of his hazard-haunted days. Eyeing Cushara covertly, he knew with dismay that this emotion was shared to the fullest by his comrade.

The warriors now withdrew to a little distance and turned their backs decorously while Rubalsa dressed.

"I deem," said Zobal in a low voice beyond overhearing of the girl, "that thou and I tonight have met and conquered such perils as were not contracted for in our service to Hoaraph. And I deem that we are of one mind concerning the maiden, and love her too dearly now to deliver her to

the captious lust of a sated king. Therefore we cannot return to Faraad. If it please thee, we shall draw lots for the girl; and the loser will attend the winner as a true comrade till such time as we have made our way from Izdrel, and have crossed the border of some land lying beyond Hoaraph's rule."

To this Cushara agreed. When Rubalsa had finished her dressing, the two began to look about them for such objects as might serve in the proposed sortilege. Cushara would have tossed one of the gold coins, stamped with Hoaraph's image, which had rolled from Simban's torn moneybag. But Zobel shook his head at the suggestion, having espied certain items which he thought even more exquisitely appropriate than the coin. These objects were the talons of the incubus, whose corpse had now dwindled in size and was horribly decayed, with a hideous wrinkling of the whole head and an actual shortening of the members. In this process, the claws of hands and feet had all dropped away and were lying loose on the pavement. Removing his helmet, Zobel stooped down and placed with it the five hellish-looking talons of the right hand, among which that of the index finger was the longest.

He shook the helmet vigorously, as one shakes a dicebox, and there was a sharp clattering from the claws. Then, he held the helmet out to Cushara, saying: "He who draws the forefinger talon shall take the girl."

Cushara put in his hand and withdrew it quickly, holding aloft the heavy thumbnail, which was shortest of all. Zobel drew the nail of the middle finger; and Cushara, at his second trial, brought forth the little finger's claw. Then, to the deep chagrin of the pike-bearer, Zobel produced the dearly coveted index talon.

Rubalsa, who had been watching this singular procedure with open curiosity, now said to the warriors:

"What are ye doing?"

Zobel started to explain, but before he had finished, the girl cried out indignantly: "Neither of ye has consulted my preference in this matter."

Then, pouting prettily, she turned away from the disconcerted archer and flung her arms about the neck of Cushara.

QUEST OF THE GAZOLBA

The crown of the kings of Ustaim was fashioned from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. Its circlet was of gold mined from a huge meteor that fell in the isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of earth. It was set with thirteen jewels, unmatched even in fable, that starred the circlet with strange, unquiet fires and lusters dreadful as the eyes of the basilisk.

More wonderful than all else, however, was the stuffed gazolba-bird that topped the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws just above the wearer's brow, and towering with splendid plumage of green, violet and vermilion. Its beak was like polished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in silver sockets. Seven lacy blood-red quills arose from its black-dappled head; and a white tail fell down in a spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle.

The bird was the last of its kind, according to the sailors who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim; and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran, the son of Karpoom, was the crown's ninth wearer. He had worn it superbly for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamanders' eggs. On all public occasions it had graced the brow of the young king, conferring upon him a great majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the sad increase of an early baldness.

In the late autumn of the third year of his reign, Euvoran rose from a breakfast including twelve courses and twelve wines. As was his custom, he

went immediately to the hall of justice, whose windows looked out across the city of Aramoam toward the orient seas.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most tangled skeins of law and crime, and to mete swift punishment to all malefactors. Beside his throne's right arm there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head. Often with this mace, the bones of heinous offenders were broken, or their brains were spilt in the king's presence on a floor strewn with black sand. At the throne's left arm a torturer busied himself with the screws and pullies of certain fearful instruments, testing them repeatedly.

On that morning the city constables brought before Euvoran only a few petty thieves and vagrants. There were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace or the use of boot and rack. The king, who had looked forward to a pleasant session, was disappointed.

"Away with these mackerel!" he roared, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to nod and bow. "They pollute my presence. Give each one a hundred strokes of the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels."

Before the court-officers could obey him, two belated constables entered the hall of justice, haling between them a most peculiar individual with the long-handled, many-pointed hooks used in Aramoam for the apprehending of suspected criminals. Though the hooks were seemingly embedded in his flesh as well as in his filthy rags, the prisoner bounded continually aloft like a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow him in these lively and undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of acrobats.

With one last flying leap in which the officers were drawn through the air like the tails of a kite, the queer personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement and was not prepossessed by the extreme suppleness with which he bowed to the floor, causing his captors,

who had not yet recovered their equilibrium, to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

"Ha! what have we now?" said the king in an ominous voice.

"Sire, 'tis another vagabond," replied the breathless officers. "He would have passed through Aramoam in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the height of his saltations, if we had not arrested him."

"Such behavior is highly suspicious," growled Euvoran. "Prisoner, declare your name, your birth and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which beyond doubt you are guilty."

The captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to include Euvoran, the mace-bearer, and the torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. His nose, ears and other features possessed unnatural mobility, and he grimaced continually, making his unclean beard toss and curl like sea-weed on a whirlpool. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree.

"I'm a necromancer," he replied in, a tone that set Euvoran's teeth on edge like the grating of metal upon glass. "I was born in that realm where the dawn and the sunset meet, and the moon is equal in brightness to the sun."

"Ha! a necromancer," snorted the king. "Do you not know that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? We shall find means to dissuade you from such infamous practises."

At a sign from Euvoran the officers drew the captive toward the instruments of torture. To their surprise he allowed himself to be chained supinely on an iron rack. The torturer began to work the levers and the rack lengthened little by little with a surly grinding, till it seemed that the prisoner's joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; yet he appeared to feel no discomfort. To the stupefaction of all present, it soon became plain that his arms, legs and body were more extensible than the rack itself: for the frame was now drawn to its limit.

All were silent, viewing a thing so monstrous. Euvoran rose from his throne and went over to the rack, as if doubting his own eyes. The prisoner said to him:

"You would do well to release me, O King Euvoran."

"Say you so?" the king cried out in a rage. "We have other ways of dealing with felons in Ustaim."

He made a sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, raising his leaden-headed mace.

"On your own head be it," said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the rack, breaking the bonds that held him as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a dreadful height which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger at the king's crown. Simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night.

As if in answer to that word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran's head, and the king felt that his head was strangely lightened and bare. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all others present, saw above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been killed more than two hundred years before by seafaring men in a remote island. The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread for flight, and it carried still in its claws the jeweled circlet of the crown.

Balancing, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in awe and consternation. Then, with a great whirring, its white tail outspread like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the open palace-portals and passed eastward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it the necromancer followed with goatish leaping, and no man tried to deter him. Those who saw him swore that he went north along the ocean strand, while the bird flew seaward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. The necromancer was seen no more in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had

passed over them in mid-ocean, still flying toward the uncharted coasts of dawn. And they said that the gold crown, with its thirteen unmatched gems, was still carried by the bird.

King Euvoran, so weirdly bereft, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants, was as one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. It seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem of his fathers. Moreover the thing was against nature, annulling all laws: since never before, in history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity. Donning a voluminous turban of purple silk, Euvoran held council with his ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than Euvoran, since neither the bird nor the circlet could be replaced. In the meanwhile this irreparable misfortune was rumored throughout Ustaim. The land became filled with doubt and confusion, and some of the people murmured against Euvoran, saying that no man could be their rightful ruler without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in any national crisis, Euvoran went to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, the chief deity of Ustaim. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet as was ordained by priestly law, he entered the dim adytum. Here the image of Geol, pot-bellied, and made of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and seemed to watch the motes in a beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. Dropping prone in the dust that had gathered about the idol through ages, the king gave homage and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. Presently a voice issued from the god's navel, like a subterranean rumbling:

"Go forth, and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie below the orient sun. There, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty. And there, with thy own hand, thou shalt slay the bird."

Euvoran felt greatly comforted, since the utterances of the god were thought infallible. It seemed that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim with its avian superstructure

Returning to the palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest galleys of war which lay at anchor in the tranquil harbor, and ordered them to prepare immediately for a long voyage.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship which was a towering trireme with oars of beef-wood and stout sails dyed in saffron and scarlet. A long banner flamed at the masthead, bearing the gazolba-bird in its natural colors on a field of cobalt. The rowers and sailors were giant Negroes, and the soldiers who manned the vessel were fierce mercenaries from desert kingdoms. Going aboard, the king took with him certain of his concubines, his jesters and musicians, as well as an ample stock of rare foods and liquors, so that he should lack for nothing.

Also, mindful of the prophecy of Geol, he armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with hawk-feathered arrows. And he carried a sling of lion-skin and a blow-gun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

It seemed that the gods favored the voyage. A wind blew strongly from the west, and the fleet, numbering fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the risen sun. The farewell shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and Aramoam's marble houses on its palmy hills were lost in a floundering bank of azure.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his custom. Reclining beneath a canopy on the poop of the trireme, he swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace vaults, storing the warmth of long sunken suns. He laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, and his women diverted him with harlotries older than Rome or Atlantis. But always he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons with which he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba.

Auspicious winds blew steadily, and the fleet sped onward with the great black oarsmen singing and the gorgeous sails flapping loudly. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coast of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred miles in Loithe, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba-bird. There were rumors that the bird had passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer named Iffibos had captured it with his spells and had shut it in a cage. Hearing this the king landed in Loithe and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to visit Iffibos, who lived in a mountain valley at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey. Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, who failed to respect royalty and were always insinuating themselves under his turban. When, after much delay in the deep jungles, they came to the crag-perched house of Iffibos, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to that region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. The king returned to Loithe, declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. In Loithe the king tarried no longer than was necessary for the laying aboard of fifty jars of that fine cocoanut arrack in which Sotar excels all other orient lands.

Then the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar and came after thirty days to the seldom-visited isle of Tosk, whose people are more akin to monkeys than to men. Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba and received only an apish chattering in reply. He ordered his men-at-arms to catch some of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. Then [the] men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day without catching even one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying two of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him.

Beyond Tosk, which was the usual limit of voyaging from Ustaim the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story. But nowhere could the voyagers find a single feather such as had formed the gazolba's plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

However, the king saw many flocks of unknown, bright-winged fowl that went over his galleys, passing between the unmapped islets. Landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyre-birds and boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoos with his blowgun.

The voyagers drove into mornings crossed by gilded lories, and noontides where rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands. The stars changed above them, and under the alien Signs they heard the melancholy cry of swans that flew southward, fleeing the winter of undiscovered realms and seeking the summer in trackless worlds.

They held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the tail plumes of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them. They spoke with people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was studded as if with pin-feathers.

At noon, early in the fourth month of the voyage, a new and unheard of shore ascended from the deep. It curved for many miles, with sheltered harbors and crags and low-lying wooded valleys. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran saw that stone towers rose on some of the highest crags. But in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass.

Entering the haven, the voyagers descried no sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds. They ranged in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wing-spread than eagle or condor. They circled over the ships in coveys and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary. King Euvoran thought that here was a likely haunt in which to track down the gazolba. Arming himself for the chase, he went ashore with several of his men in a small boat.

The birds, even the largest, were plainly timid and inoffensive. When Euvoran landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and flew inland or sought the rocks that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and the king was somewhat annoyed, since he did not wish to leave without bringing down a trophy of his skill. He thought the birds' behavior curious on account of the solitude; for there were no paths except those made by forest animals. The woods were wild, the meadows untilled; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods and came to a steep slope, covered with bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower. At the slope's bottom Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. He trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry.

He was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of his men cried out in alarm. Turning his head as he stooped, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet discerned, that came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him, making a loud roar with their drumming wings, and beating him instantly to the ground.

Then, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the great birds fastened its claws in the cape of the king's mantle and carried him away toward the tower on the crag as easily as a falcon carrying a young hare. The king had dropped his longbow under the birds' onset, and the blow-gun had been shaken loose from his girdle, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. No weapon remained to him, except a small needle-sharp dagger, and this he could not use to any purpose in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with the wings of his captor flapping thunderously above him, and a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if in derision. A sickness came upon him because of the height

to which he had been carried, and giddily he saw the tower walls sink past him with windows wide as doorways. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face, while the floor seemed to pitch beneath him like a vessel's deck in storm. Recovering somewhat from his vertigo, Euvoran raised himself to a sitting position. Before him, on a sort of dais between posts of black jasper, was a monstrous perch of gold and ivory. Upon it sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran disdainfully, as an emperor might eye some gutter-snipe that his palace guards have haled before him.

The bird's plumage was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a pickax of pale bronze darkening greenly toward the point. He clutched the perch with talons longer than the armored fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with amber and turquoise quills like a many-pointed crown. About his long, unfeathered neck, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads and the heads of various feral beasts, such as the weasel, the stoat, the wildcat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no bigger than ground nuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl. His alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other great birds were sitting about the chamber on lower and less costly perches, like peers of the realm in their sovereign's presence.

Now to his confoundment the huge Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech, with a harsh but majestic voice:

"Too boldly thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornava, isle that is sacred to the birds; and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For I am the monarch of all birds that fly, walk, wade or swim, and I hold my capital in Ornava. Justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught to say in thy defense, I will give thee hearing now. I do not wish that even the vilest vermin should accuse me of inequity.

Blustering, though afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer:

"I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me with the crown through the spell of a lawless necromancer. I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow down to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species."

The ruler of the birds, seeming amazed and indignant, questioned Euvoran sharply concerning the gazolba. Learning that this bird had been killed by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the sole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried angrily:

"This helpeth not thy case but showeth thee guilty of a two-fold crime and a thing wholly against nature. In my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but it is not allowable that men should do thus to birds. In retribution I shall commit thee presently to my taxidermists. Truly, a stuffed king will enhance my collection."

Snapping his great beak, the bird-monarch turned to Euvoran's guards:

"Away with this vermin. Shut it in the man-cage and keep a strict watch."

Euvoran, urged by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sloping ladder with rungs of teak that led to a room above in the tower's top. In the center of this room stood a bamboo cage capacious enough for six men. The birds drove Euvoran into the cage and bolted its door upon him with their claws. One of them remained beside the cage, eyeing him vigilantly through the bars; and the other flew out through a window and did not return.

The king sat down on a litter of straw, which was all that the cage provided for his comfort. Despair lay heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. The things that had happened to him were monstrous beyond imagining. It was monstrous that a bird should

Speak with human speech, should dwell in royal state with servitors to do his will and the pomp and power of a king.

And monstrous above all was the doom that the bird-monarch had decreed for Euvoran.

After a while, as he pondered dismally, water and raw grain were set before him in earthen vessels by fowls that came and departed in silence. Still later, as the day drew toward sunset, he heard men shouting and birds shrieking below the tower; and together with these noises came clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. Euvoran knew that his men were assailing the place in an effort to rescue him. The noises mounted, and there were cries of people wounded and a shrilling of harpies in battle. But presently the clamor ebbed away, the shoutings grew faint, and Euvoran knew that his men had failed to take the tower.

Hopeless, he sat with bowed head while the sun went down, gilding the bars of his cage through a western window. Soon after sunset a night guard came in to relieve the day-flying fowl who watched the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes. He stood taller than Euvoran, and was formed and feathered like a great burly owl. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, burning upon him more vigilantly and balefully as the dusk deepened.

The moon rose, a little past the full, and poured its spectral quicksilver into the room. It paled the eyes of the bird, so that they seemed less watchful and formidable. Euvoran took heart and conceived a desperate scheme.

His avian captors, thinking all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the small needle-tipped dagger. He gripped the hilt stealthily under his mantle and pretended a sudden illness, groaning and tossing and throwing himself convulsively against the bars. The nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owl-like head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, feigning a more violent convulsion, drew his dagger from its sheath and struck quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

The thrust went home, piercing the deepest vein. The bird's squawking was choked by his own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so, that Euvoran feared that the tower's occupants would be wakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were groundless, for nothing stirred in the chambers below; and soon the flappings ceased and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers.

The king shot back the bolts of the latticed bamboo door with little difficulty. Going to the head of the teakwood ladder, he peered down into the room beneath, and saw that the bird-king slept in the moonlight on his gold and ivory perch, with his terrible pickaxe [sic] beak under his wing. Euvoran feared to descend, lest the ruler should awake and see him. Also, it occurred to him that the tower's lower stories might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had killed.

His despair returned, but being of a crafty bent, Euvoran conceived another scheme. With much labor, using the dagger, he skinned the slain nyctalops and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then he wrapped himself in the skin with the head of the night-bird rearing above his own head, and eyeholes in its burly throat through which he could look out amid the feathers. The skin fitted him well enough because of his pigeon-breast and pot-belly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the bird's thick-feathered legs as he walked.

He descended the ladder, treading cautiously and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. The ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In this room there were many huge birds asleep on perches, and the king could hardly breathe for terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him.

He went down to a third room, and was startled to find within it the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clothed like merchants, and others nude and painted with bright ores like savages. A deathly stillness was upon them all. Remembering that which the bird ruler had told him, Euvoran divined that they were persons who had been captured like himself and had been slain by the birds and preserved through avian taxidermy. Trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of bird-kind.

The room below this was the tower's ground story, and its windows and portals were guarded by several gigantic night-fowl similar to the one whose skin Euvoran wore. They eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs and greeted him with the soft whoo-whooping of owls. Euvoran's knees knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but imitating the sound in reply, he passed unmolested among the guards.

Reaching an open portal, he saw the moonlit rock of the crag below him. Still mindful of the birds that watched him, he hopped down from the door-sill like a fowl and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge, till he reached the slope at whose bottom he had killed the little owl. Here the descent became easier, and he soon came to the woods around the harbor.

Before he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows around him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows. He roared out in anger and dropped the mantling bird-skin. The arrows ceased, and Euvoran was greeted by a great shouting from his own men, who were returning to assail the tower by night. Learning this, he soon forgave the jeopardy in which they had placed him.

Boarding his flagship, he ordered his captains to set sail immediately. Knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was apprehensive of pursuit; and he thought it well to place a wide interval of sea between Ornava and his vessels before dawn, when his escape would be discovered. The galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a southern promontory, they went due east below the moon.

Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, ate abundantly to make up for his fasting in the man-cage. And he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and a jarful of the potent pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

Halfway between midnight and morning, when the isle of Ornava had fallen far behind, the steersmen saw a wall of ebon cloud that rushed swiftly upward across the westering moon. Higher it climbed, spreading and toppling, till the storm overtook Euvoran's fleet and drove it on through weltering, unstarred chaos. The ships were borne far apart in the gloom; and at daybreak the king's trireme was alone in a headlong tumult of waves and clouds. The mast was shattered, the oars were lost or broken; and the vessel was a toy for the tempest.

For three days and nights, without glimmer of sun or star through the boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract pouring relentlessly toward the world's verge. Early on the fourth day the clouds began to break a little; but the wind still blew like a hurricane from hell.

Then, looming darkly through spray and vapor, a strange land arose with beetling rocks and precipices. Though the broken oars had now been replaced, the helmsman and rowers were powerless to turn the doomed ship from its course. With a mighty crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, it struck on a low, foam-hidden reef. Its lower decks were flooded quickly, and the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Euvoran lashed himself with ropes to an empty wine-barrel and cast himself from the sloping deck. Those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard, leaped after him into that raging sea. Many clung to broken spars or casks or planks. But some were drawn under in the seething maelstroms, and others were beaten to death on the jagged rocks. And of all the ship's company, the king alone was cast ashore with life unquenched within him.

Half-drowned and senseless, Euvoran lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence and the billows came in with falling crests. The clouds went over in pearly fleeces; and the sun, climbing above the rocks, shone down upon Euvoran. He, still dazed from the sea's buffeting, heard dimly and as if in dream the shrilling of some unknown bird. Opening his eyes, he saw between himself and the sun, poising on spread wings, that varicolored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice harsh and shrill as that of the peacock, the bird hung above him for a moment and then flew inland through a rift amid the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys, the king unbound himself in haste from the barrel; and rising giddily, he followed the bird. It seemed to him that the fulfillment of the oracle of Geol was now at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

Beyond the cleft in the crags, he found a sequestered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and exotic trees, and fragrant shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded eyes, there darted great numbers fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba. Among them, he could not distinguish the one he had followed, supposing it the avian superstructure of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was beyond his comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed bird unique throughout the world. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the sailors who had slain the bird in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of all its kind.

Wrath and confusion filled him. But Euvoran knew that a single bird from the flock would still stand as the emblem of his royalty in Ustaim and would justify his quest among the far orient isles. With a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. But always, as he chased them, the birds flew before him from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking and a flurry of splendid plumes. And at length, by his own good aim or a chance cast, the king brought down a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered, uncouth garments, armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with wiry grass. The man wore for headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvoran, shouting indistinctly through his tangled beard. The king, surprised and furious, cried loudly:

"Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold thee to accounting for these deeds."

Eyeing Euvoran, the man laughed long and derisively as if he found much to amuse him in the king's aspect. Indeed, Euvoran presented a spectacle far from kingly: for his garments were much bedraggled and were stiff and stained with drying seawater; and his turban had been snatched away by the waves, baring his baldness. When the man had done laughing, he said:

"Truly, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. Nine years ago I was shipwrecked on this isle. I am Naz Obbamar, a sea captain from the far southwestern land called Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship's company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes and has no people except the birds.

"As for your questions, they are readily answered. I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of hunger, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because the sea stole my tarboosh when it flung me upon this strand. I know nothing of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless. You and I are alone, and I am the stronger of the two and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran. Since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl."

The wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for want of oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in Geol's oracle. He knew that the wreckage of his fleet was scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor administer the dooms of law in the justice hall, nor wear the gazolba-crown amid the plaudits of his people. Being not wholly bereft of reason, he bowed to his destiny, saying:

"Naz Obbamar, there is sense in what you have said. Therefore lead on."

Laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and Naz Obbamar followed a trail into the isle's interior. Here, in a rocky hill, Naz Obbamar had chosen a roomy cave for his abode. The captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs and showed the king how to pluck his fowl and broil it over the fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor-wood.

Euvoran, who was famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. After they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing wine he had made from certain berries. He and Euvoran drank from the jar by turns and told each other the tale of their adventures and forgot a while their desolate fate.

After that they shared the isle of gazolbas, hunting and eating the birds as their hunger decreed. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they killed some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps, in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvoran made himself a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolbas, even as Naz Obbamar had done.

SADASTOR

Listen, for this is the tale that was told to a fair lamia by the demon Charnadis as they sat together on the top of Mophi, above the sources of the Nile, in those years when the sphinx was young. Now the lamia was vexed, for her beauty was grown an evil legend in both Thebais and Elephantine; so that men were become fearful of her lips and cautious of her embrace, and she had no lover for almost a fortnight. She lashed her serpentine tail on the ground, and moaned softly, and wept those mythical tears which a serpent weeps. And the demon told this tale for her comforting:

Long, long ago, in the red cycles of my youth (said Charnadis), I was like all young demons, and was prone to use the agility of my wings in fantastic flights; to hover and poise like a gier-eagle above Tartarus and the pits of Python; or to lift the broad blackness of my vans on the orbit of stars. I have followed the moon from evening twilight to morning twilight; and I have gazed on the secrets of that Medusean face which she averts eternally from the earth. I have read through filming ice the ithyphallic runes on columns yet extant in her deserts; and I know the hieroglyphs which solve forgotten riddles, or hint eonian histories, on the walls of her cities taken by ineluctable snow. I have flown through the triple ring of Saturn, and have mated with lovely basilisks, on isles towering league-high from stupendous oceans where each wave is like the rise and fall of Himalayas. I have dared the clouds of Jupiter, and the black and freezing abysses of Neptune, which are crowned with eternal starlight; and I have sailed beyond to incommensurable suns, compared with which the sun that thou knowest is a corpse-candle in a stinted vault. There, in tremendous planets, I have furled my flight on the terraced mountains, large as fallen asteroids, where, with a thousand names and a thousand images, undreamt-of Evil is served and worshipt in unsurmisable ways. Or, perched in the flesh-colored lips of columnar blossoms, whose perfume was an ecstasy of incommunicable dreams, I have mocked the wiving monsters, and have lured their females , that sang and fawned at the base of my hiding-place.

Now, in my indefatigable questing among the remoter galaxies, I came one day to that forgotten and dying planet which in the language of its unrecorded peoples was called Sadastor. Immense and drear and gray beneath a waning sun, far-fissured with enormous chasms, and covered from pole to pole with the never-ebbing tides of the desert sand, it hung in space without moon or satellite, an abomination and a token of doom to fairer and younger worlds. Checking the speed of my interstellar flight, I followed its equator with a poised and level wing, above the peaks of cyclopean volcanoes, and bare, terrific ridges of elder hills, and deserts pale with the ghastliness of salt, that were manifestly the beds of former oceans.

In the very center of one of these ocean-beds, beyond sight of the mountains that formed its primeval shoreline, and leagues below their level, I found a vast and winding valley that plunged even deeper into the abysses of this dreadful world. It was walled with perpendicular cliffs and buttresses and pinnacles of a rusty-red stone, that were fretted into a million bizarrely sinister forms by the sinking of the olden seas. I flew slowly among these cliffs as they wound ever downward in tortuous spirals for mile on mile of utter and irredeemable desolation, and the light grew dimmer above me as ledge on ledge and battlement on battlement of that strange red stone upreared themselves between my wings and the heavens. Here, when I rounded a sudden turn of the precipice, in the profoundest depth where the rays of the sun fell only for a brief while at noon, and the rocks were purple with everlasting shadow, I found a pool of dark-green water - the last remnant of the former ocean, ebbing still amid steep, insuperable walls. And from this pool there cried a voice, in accents that were subtly sweet as mortal wine of the mandragora, and faint as the murmuring of shells. And the voice said:

"Pause and remain, I pray, and tell me who thou art, who comest thus to the accursed solitude wherein I die."

Then, pausing on the brink of the pool, I peered into its gulf of shadow, and saw the pallid glimmering of a female form that upreared itself from the waters. And the form was that of a siren, with hair the color of ocean-kelp, and beryl eyes, and a dolphin-shaped tail. And I said to her:

"I am the demon Charnadis. But who art thou, who lingerest thus in this ultimate pit of abomination, in the depth of a dying world?"

She answered: "I am a siren, and my name is Lyspial. Of the seas wherein I saw and sported at leisure many centuries ago, and whose gallant mariners I drew to to an enchanted death on the shores of my disastrous isle, there remains only this fallen pool. Alas! For the pool dwindles daily, and when it is wholly gone I too must perish."

She began to weep, and her briny tears fell down and were added to the briny waters.

Fain would I have comforted her, and I said:

"Weep not, for I will lift thee upon my wings and bear thee to some newer world, where the sky-blue waters of abounding seas are shattered to intricate webs of wannest foam, on low shores that are green and aureate with pristine spring. There, perchance for eons, thou shalt have thine abode, and galleys with painted oars and great barges purple-sailed shall be drawn upon thy rocks in the red light of sunsets domed with storm, and shall mingle the crash of their figured prows with the sweet sorcery of thy mortal singing."

But still she wept, and would not be comforted, crying:

"Thou art kind, but this would avail me not, for I was born of the waters of this world, and with its waters I must die. Alas! my lovely seas, that ran in unbroken sapphire from shores of perennial blossoms to shores of everlasting snow! Alas! the sea-winds, with their mingled perfumes of brine and weed, and scents of ocean flowers and flowers of the land, and far-blown exotic balsams! Alas! the quinquiremes of cycle-ended wars, and the heavy-laden argosies with sails and cordage of byssus, that plied between barbaric isles with their cargoes of topaz or garnet-coloured wines and jade and ivory idols, in the antique summers that now are less than legend! Alas! the dead captains, the beautiful dead sailors that were borne by the ebbing tide to my couches of amber seaweed, in my caverns underneath a cedared

promontory! Alas! the kisses that I laid on their cold and hueless lips, on their sealed marmorean eyelids!"

And sorrow and pity seized me at her words, for I knew that she spoke the lamentable truth, that her doom was in the lessening of the bitter waters. So, after many proffered condolences, no less vague than vain, I bade her a melancholy farewell and flew heavily away between the spiral cliffs where I had come, and clomb the somber skies till the world Sadastor was only a darkling mote far down in space. But the tragic shadow of the siren's fate, and her sorrow, lay grievously upon me for hours, and only in the kisses of a beautiful fierce vampire, in a far-off and young and exuberant world, was I able to forget it. And I tell the now the tale thereof, that haply thou mayest be consoled by the contemplation of a plight that was infinitely more dolorous and irremediable than thine own.

SCHIZOID CREATOR

In the private laboratory which his practice as a psychiatrist had enabled him to build, equip and maintain, Dr. Carlos Moreno had completed certain preparations that were hardly in accord with the teachings of modern science. For these preparations he had drawn instruction from old grimoires, bequeathed by ancestors who had incurred the fatherly wrath of the Spanish Inquisition. According to a rather scurrilous family legend, other ancestors had been numbered among the Inquisitors.

At the end of the long room he had cleared the cluttered floor of its equipment, leaving only an immense globe of crystal glass that suggested an aquarium. About the globe he had traced with a consecrated knife, the sorcerers' arthame, a circle inscribed with pentagrams and the various Hebrew names of the Deity. Also, at a distance of several feet, a smaller circle, similarly inscribed.

Wearing a seamless and sleeveless robe of black, he stood now within the smaller, protective circle. Upon his breast and forehead was bound the Double Triangle, wrought perfectly from several metals. A silver lamp, engraved with the same sign, afforded the sole light, shining on a stand beside him. Aloes, camphor and stroax burned in censers set about him on the floor. In his right hand he held the arthame; in his left, a hazel staff with a core of magnetized iron.

Like Dr. Faustus, Moreno designed an evocation of the Devil. But not, however, for the same purpose that had inspired Faustus.

Pondering long and gravely on the painful mysteries of the cosmos, the discrepancy of good and evil, Moreno had at last conceived an explanation that was startlingly simple.

There could, he reasoned, be only one Creator, God, who was or had been primarily benignant. Yet all the evidence pointed to the co-existence of an

evil creative principle, a Satan. God, then, must be a split or dual personality, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, manifesting sometimes as the Devil.

This duality, Moreno argued, must be a form of what is commonly called schizophrenia. He had a profound belief in the efficacy of shock treatment for such disorders. If God, in his aspect as the Devil, could be suitably confined and subjected to treatment, a cure might result. The confused problems of the universe would then resolve themselves under a sane and no longer semi-diabolic Deity.

The glass globe, specially constructed at great expense, contained at one side electrical apparatus of Moreno's own devising. The machine, far more complex than the portable apparatus used in electric shock treatment, could release a voltage powerful enough to electrocute simultaneously all the inmates of a state prison. Moreno considered that no lesser force could effect the shock necessary for the cure of a supernatural personage.

He had memorized an ancient spell for the calling up of the Devil and his confinement within a bottle. The globe would do admirably for the aforesaid bottle.

The spell was a bastard mixture of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Its exact meaning seemed doubtful. It was filled with such terms as Eloha, Tetragrammaton, Kis Elijon, Elohim, Saday and Zevaoth, the names of God. The word Bifrons recurred several times. This was no doubt one of the Devil's numerous names. But there could be only one Devil.

Moreno disregarded as childish those old demonologies that peopled Hell with a multitude of evil spirits, having each his own name, rank and office. All, then, was in readiness. In a firm, sonorous voice which might have been that of a priest chanting the Mass, he began to recite the incantation. When the summons came Bifrons was busily engaged in amorous dalliance with the she-imp Foti. Like Janus, he was two-faced; and he possessed multiple members. Since Foti herself was somewhat peculiarly formed, their love-making was quite complicated.

Bifrons began to withdraw his members from about the she-imp, 'Some damned sorcerer has gotten hold of that ancient spell containing my name. It's the first time in two hundred years. But I'll have to go.'

'Hurry back,' enjoined Foti, pouting with her four lips, two of which were located in her abdomen.

'If you don't you may find me otherwise occupied.' The air sizzled behind Bifrons in his exit from the infernal regions.

Dr. Moreno felt surprised and even appalled when he saw the being that his incantation had called up in the globe. He had scarcely known what to expect, and had paid little attention to old pictures and descriptions of the Devil, seeing in them only the dementia of mediaeval superstition. But the teratology of this creature seemed incredible. The two faces of Bifrons bloated alternately against the globe's interior; and his arms, legs, body and numerous other parts squirmed and flattened themselves convulsively in a furious effort to escape. But through the thickness of the glass, or the power of the surrounding circle, Bifrons was bottled up as helplessly as any djinn imprisoned by Solomon. He resigned himself presently and began to relax, floating awhile in mid-air, and finally seating himself on Moreno's electrical machine. As if feeling more at home, he looped some of his parts around the various pairs of forceps, ending in electrodes, that projected from a huge and intricate device.

'What the devil do you want?' he bellowed. The glass muffled his voice, which was still sufficiently audible. His tones bespoke anger and resentment.

'I want the Devil,' said Moreno. 'And I presume that you are he.'

'The Devil?' queried Bifrons. 'It's true that I'm a devil. But I'm not the Old Man himself. There are many thousands of us, as you should know if you've read the demonologists. I'm no infernal prince but merely a subordinate, though with special powers of my own. Again, what do you want? Money? Women? A Senatorship? The Presidency of your cock-eyed republic? Name it, and I'll grant the wish. I'm in a hellish hurry to get out of here.'

'You can't fool me. I know that you are the Devil - the only one in the universe. And I don't want any of your gifts. All I want is to cure you.'

Bifrons was startled. 'Cure me? Of what? Say, what kind of a sorcerer are you anyway?'

'I'm not a sorcerer but a psychiatrist. My name is Dr. Moreno. My hope and intention is to cure you of being the Devil.'

This madhouse doctor must be crazy himself, thought Bifrons. He cogitated. The trend of his cogitations was betrayed only by a sardonic one-sided twist of his left-hand mouth.

'All right, I'm the Devil,' he agreed finally. 'But let's get this over with. What do you mean to do with me?'

'Subject you to shock treatment,' announced the doctor. 'A very special high-voltage treatment. It should be the best thing for schizophrenia like yours.'

'Schizo-what?' roared Bifrons. 'Do you think I'm a lunatic?'

'Let me explain. I am using the term schizophrenia in its literal sense, meaning split personality - not as commonly applied to several types of psychic disintegration or regression. I think that you are really a sick Deity. Your illness consists in being Satan part of the time. A genuine case of dual and alternating egos. The Satanic self dominates at present, otherwise I shouldn't have been able to call you up. But we'll soon remedy all that.'

The demon thought it well to conceal his consternation. He must get back to Hell as soon as possible and make a report. Satan, he felt, would be interested in Dr. Moreno.

'Get on with your treatment,' he enjoined. 'What is it, anyway?'

'Electricity.'

Bifrons assumed an expression of double-faced dismay. 'That's a highly dangerous and destructive force. Do you wish to annihilate me?'

'The result should be different in your case,' said the doctor in his most soothing professional voice. 'Are you ready?'

Bifrons gave a bicephalic nod. Moreno stepped cautiously from the circle and went over to a panel of switches and levers set in the laboratory wall. Watching the demon closely, he began to manipulate one of the levers.

The numerous forceps of the machine, on which Bifrons had so conveniently seated himself, closed themselves on various parts of his anatomy, applying their electrodes to his skin. A pair, hitherto concealed, sprang forth and seized his temples tightly. Moreno grasped a switch firmly and turned on the full voltage. Then, still cautious, he returned to the protective circle.

A shower of sparks and short blue bolts issued from the machine within the globe. In spite of the many forceps that had tightened upon him, Bifrons writhed and tossed like a harpooned octopus. Smoke seemed to pour from his head, body and members, muffling the apparatus that held him captive. Soon a dark-brown cloud, seething and swelling, had filled the globe's interior, concealing everything from view. The cloud was something that Bifrons could emit at will, like the fluid of a cuttle-fish.

As a matter of fact, since his nature was itself electrical, he had absorbed the terrific voltage with merely a mild discomfort. The dark cloud was a necessary screen for the tactics that he now intended to use.

Perhaps, Moreno thought, the treatment had been sufficiently prolonged. He could repeat it if necessary. Emerging once more from his magic shelter, he turned off the switch and reversed the lever that had served to manipulate the forceps. Once again he went back to the circle.

After an interval of silence there issued from the clouded globe a voice which had no resemblance to that of Bifrons. It was both thunderous and

mellow. To Moreno's inexperienced ear, it sounded like the Voice that spoke to Moses on the mountain.

'I am cured,' it announced. 'You have restored Me to My Divinity, O wise and beneficent doctor. Pronounce the formula of release and let Me go. Hell is henceforth abolished, together with all evil, sin and disease. The Devil is dead. God alone exists. And God is good.'

Moreno was enraptured, believing that he had realized so quickly his fondest professional hope. Scarcely knowing what he did, he uttered the formula that served to release an imprisoned spirit.

Afterwards he asked, 'Now will You reveal Yourself to me? I would behold You in all Your glory.'

'It cannot be,' the Voice thundered. 'My glory would blast your eyes forever. Therefore the cloud with which I have surrounded myself.'

A moment later the globe burst asunder in flying fragments, like some gigantic bottle of new champagne. The released cloud, billowing vastly and voluminously, seemed to overspread the whole laboratory in an instant. Bifrons, raging behind it but still invisible, proceeded to wreck all of Moreno's equipment like a dozen baboons gone berserk. Tray-laden tables were overturned and smashed into splinters, shelves were pulled down with a crashing of countless vials and carboys. Coiled tubings were twisted and bent and ripped apart, heavily insulated wires snapped like twine. The old volumes of magic, piled in a corner sprang into flame and burned to ashes in a few seconds. A violent wind, coming as if from nowhere, took up the ashes and scattered them throughout the room.

Moreno, protected by the circle, alone escaped the demon's wrath. He crouched at the circle's center, cowering and gibbering, while the cloud passed away through windows from which every pane had been broken.

Several of his colleagues, coming to consult him that evening, found him still crouching on the wreckage-littered floor. He did not seem to recognize

them and had obviously become deranged. His mouthings appeared to indicate a sort of theological mania.

The colleagues held an impromptu consultation of their own. As a result, Moreno was removed gently but forcibly to the same type of institution as that to which he had committed so many of his patients. His friends and fellow-psychiatrists deplored the interruption, perhaps the ending, of an illustrious career.

The wrecking of the laboratory remained a mystery. Had there been an explosion caused by one of Moreno's experiments? Had the doctor himself destroyed his equipment in a state of violent mania? Or - should the occurrence be classified as an act of God?

Fuming at the interruption of his tryst with Foti, Bifrons nevertheless thought it incumbent upon himself to report at once to Satan when he returned to the nether realms.

He found that Master of that picturesque region occupied in caressing a half-flayed girl. The flaying had been done to render the caresses more intimate and more exquisitely agonizing.

Satan listened gravely to the demon's account of Dr. Moreno. His tapering artistic fingers, with long-pointed nails of polished jet, ceased their occupation; and a furrow appeared like a black triangle between his luminous marble brows.

'This is all very interesting - and rather unfortunate,' he said. 'However, you have acted with admirable aplomb and presence of mind. The situation should be well under control as long as Moreno remains in the madhouse where you and his colleagues have landed him.'

He paused, and his fingers resumed in an absent-minded fashion their gentle raking of his victim's lumbar regions.

'Of course, as you understand, Moreno was quite mad from the start. But lunatics with a speculative bent can sometimes stumble overly close to

certain guarded cosmic secrets and there are spells which even I must answer and obey - not to mention the Unspeakable Name, the Shem-hamphorash, which coerces and compels Jehovah. After he recovers from his present state of shock, Moreno might be adjudged sane - and released to continue his researches and experiments.'

'Such an eventuation must be forestalled permanently. My good Bifrons, you must return immediately to earth and watch over him. I have full trust in your abilities, and I confer upon you plenipotentiary powers. All I ask is, that you keep this doctor well bedeviled and legally insane until the hour of his death.'

When Bifrons departed, Satan summoned his chief lieutenants before him in the halls of Pandemonium.

'I am going away for a while,' he told them. 'There are certain obligations of a pressing nature that call me - and I must not neglect them too long. In my absence, I consign the management of Hell to your competent hands.'

Bowing reversely, Gorson, Goap, Zimimar and Amaimon, lords of the four quarters, went out one after one, leaving their prince alone. When they had gone, he descended from his globed throne and passed through many corridors and by upward-winding stairs to the small postern door of Hell.

The door swung open without touch of any visible hand. A long white robe seemed to weave itself swiftly from the air about Satan's form. His infernal attributes withered and dropped away. And the long white beard of the Elohim sprouted and flowed down over his bosom as he stepped across the sill into Heaven.

SEEDLING OF MARS

It was in the fall of 1947, three days prior to the annual football game between Stanford and the University of California, that the strange visitor from outer space landed in the middle of the huge stadium at Berkeley where the game was to be held.

Descending with peculiar deliberation, it was seen and pointed out by multitudes of people in the towns that border on San Francisco Bay, in Berkeley, Oakland, Alameda, and San Francisco itself. Gleaming with a fiery, copperish-golden light, it floated down from the cloudless autumn azure, dropping in a sort of slow spiral above the stadium. It was utterly unlike any known type of aircraft, and was nearly a hundred feet in length.

The general shape was ovoid, and also more or less angular, with a surface divided into scores of variant planes, and with many diamond ports of purplish material different from that of which the body was constructed. Even at first glance, it suggested the inventive genius and workmanship of some alien world, of a people whose ideas of mechanical symmetry have been conditioned by evolutionary necessities and sense-faculties divergent from ours.

However, when the queer vessel had come to rest in the amphitheater, many conflicting theories regarding its origin and the purpose of its descent were promulgated in the Bay cities. There were those who feared the invasion of some foreign foe, and who thought that the odd ship was the harbinger of a long-plotted attack from the Russian and Chinese Soviets, or even from Germany, whose intentions were still suspected. And many of those who postulated an ultra-planetary origin were also apprehensive, deeming that the visitant was perhaps hostile, and might mark the beginning of some terrible incursion from outer worlds.

In the meanwhile, utterly silent and immobile and without sign of life or occupancy, the vessel reposed in the stadium, where staring crowds began to gather about it. These crowds, however, were soon dispersed by order of the civic authorities, since the nature and intentions of the stranger were

alike doubtful and undeclared. The stadium was closed to the public; and, in case of inimical manifestations, machine-guns were mounted on the higher seats with a company of Marines in attendance, and bombing-planes hovered in readiness to drop their lethal freight on the shining, coppery bulk.

The intense interest was felt by the whole scientific fraternity, and a large group of professors, of chemists, metallurgists, astronomers, astrophysicists and biologists was organized to visit and examine the unknown object. When, on the afternoon following its landing, the local observatories issued a bulletin saying that the vessel had been sighted approaching the earth from translunar space on the previous night, the fact of its nonterrestrial genesis became established beyond dispute in the eyes of most; and controversy reigned as to whether it had come from Venus, Mars, Mercury, or one of the superior planets; or whether, perhaps, it was a wanderer from another solar system than our own.

But of course the nearer planets were favored in this dispute by the majority, especially Mars; for, as nearly as those who had watched it could determine, the line of the vessel's approach would have formed a trajectory with the red planet.

All that day, while argument seethed, while extras with luridly speculative and fantastic headlines were issued by the local papers as well as by the press of the whole civilized world; while public sentiment was divided between apprehension and curiosity, and the guarding Marines and aviators continued to watch for signs of possible hostility, the unidentified vessel maintained its initial stillness and silence.

Telescopes and glasses were trained upon it from the hills above the stadium; but even these disclosed little regarding its character. Those who studied it saw that the numerous ports were made of a vitreous material, more or less transparent; but nothing stirred behind them; and the glimpses of queer machinery which they afforded in the ship's interior were meaningless to the watchers. One port, larger than the rest, was believed to be a sort of door or man-hole; but no one came to open it; and behind it was

a weird array of motionless rods and coils and pistons, which debarred the vision from further view.

Doubtless, it was thought, the occupants were no less cautious of their alien milieu than the people of the Bay region were suspicious of the vessel. Perhaps they feared to reveal themselves to human eyes; perhaps they were doubtful of the terrene atmosphere and its effect upon themselves; or perhaps they were merely lying in wait and planning some devilish outburst with unconceived weapons or engineerings of destruction.

Apart from the fears felt by some, and the wonderment and speculation of others, a third division of public sentiment soon began to crystallize. In collegiate circles and among sport-lovers, the feeling was that the strange vessel had taken an unwarrantable liberty in pre-empting the stadium, especially at a time so near to the forthcoming athletic event. A petition for its removal was circulated, and presented to the city authorities. The great metallic hull, it was felt, no matter whence it had come or why, should not be allowed to interfere with anything so sacrosanct and of such prime importance as a football game.

However, in spite of the turmoil it had created, the vessel refused to move by so much as the fraction of an inch. Many began to surmise that the occupants had been overcome by the conditions of their transit through space; or perhaps they had died, unable to endure the gravity and atmospheric pressure of the earth.

It was decided to leave the vessel unapproached until morning of the next day, when the committee of investigation would visit it. During that afternoon and night, scientists from many states were speeding toward California by airplane and rocketship, to be on hand in time for this event.

It was felt advisable to limit the number of this committee. Among the fortunate savants who had been selected, was John Gaillard, assistant astronomer at the Mt. Wilson observatory. Gaillard represented the more radical and freely speculative trend of scientific thought, and had become well known for his theories concerning the inhabitability of the inferior

planets, particularly Mars and Venus. He had long championed the idea of intelligent and highly organized life on these worlds, and had even published more than one treatise dealing with the subject, in which he had elaborated his theories with much specific detail. His excitement at the news of the strange vessel was intense. He was one of those who had sighted the gleaming and unclassifiable speck far out in space, beyond the orbit of the moon, in the late hours of the previous night; and he had felt even then a premonition of its true character. Others of the party were free and open-minded in their attitude; but no one was more deeply and vitally interested than Gaillard.

Godfrey Stilton, professor of astronomy at the University of California, also on the committee, might have been chosen as the very antithesis of Gaillard in his views and tendencies. Narrow, dogmatic, skeptical of all that could not be proved by line and rule, scornful of all that lay beyond the bourn of a strait empiricism, he was loath to admit the ultra-terrene origin of the vessel, or even the possibility of organic life on any other world than the earth. Several of his confreres belonged to the same intellectual type.

Apart from these two men and their fellow-scientists, the party included three newspaper reporters, as well as the local chief of police, William Polson, and the Mayor of Berkeley, James Gresham, since it was felt that the forces of government should be represented. The entire committee comprised forty men; and a number of expert machinists, equipped with acetylene torches and cutting tools, were held in reserve outside the stadium, in case it should be found necessary to open the vessel by force.

At nine a.m. the investigators entered the stadium and approached the glittering multi-angled object. Many were conscious of the thrill that attends some unforeknowable danger; but more were animated by the keenest curiosity and by feelings of extreme wonderment. Gaillard, in especial, felt himself in the presence of ultramundane mystery and marvelled as he neared the coppery-golden bulk: his feeling amounted almost to an actual vertigo, such as would be experienced by one who gazes athwart unfathomable gulfs upon the arcanic secrets and the wit-transcending wonders of a foreign sphere. It seemed to him that he stood upon the verge

between the determinate and the incommensurable, betwixt the finite and the infinite.

Others of the group, in lesser degree, were possessed by similar emotions. And even the hard-headed, unimaginative Stilton was disturbed by a queer uneasiness; which, being minded as he was, he assigned to the weather—or a "touch of liver."

The strange ship reposed in utter stillness, as before. The fears of those who half-expected some deadly ambush were allayed as they drew near; and the hopes of those who looked for a more amicable manifestation of living occupancy were ungratified. The party gathered before the main port, which, like all the others, was made in the form of a great diamond. It was several feet above their heads, in a vertical angle or plane of the hull; and they stood staring through its mauve transparency on the unknown, intricate mechanisms beyond, that were colored as if by the rich panes of some cathedral window.

All were in doubt as to what should be done; for it seemed evident that the occupants of the vessel, if alive and conscious, were in no hurry to reveal themselves to human scrutiny. The delegation resolved to wait a few minutes before calling on the services of the assembled mechanics and their acetylene torches; and while waiting they walked about and inspected the metal of the walls, which seemed to be an alloy of copper and red gold; tempered to a preternatural hardness by some process unfamiliar to telluric metallurgy. There was no sign of jointure in the myriad planes and facets; and the whole enormous shell, apart from its lucid ports, might well have been wrought from a single sheet of the rich alloy.

Gaillard stood peering upward at the main port, while his companions sauntered about the vessel talking and debating among themselves. Somehow, he felt an intuition that something strange and miraculous was about to happen; and when the great port began to open slowly, without visible agency, dividing into two valves that slid away at the sides, the thrill which he experienced was not altogether one of surprise. Nor was he surprised when a sort of metal escalator, consisting of narrow stairs that

were little more than rungs, descended step by step from the opening and came down to the ground at his very feet.

The port had opened and the escalator had unfolded in silence, with no faintest creak or clang; but others beside Gaillard had perceived the occurrence, and all hastened in great excitement and gathered before the steps.

Contrary to their not unnatural expectations, no one emerged from the vessel; and they could see little more of the interior than had been visible through the shut valves. They looked for some exotic ambassador from Mars, some gorgeous and bizarre plenipotentiary from Venus to descend the queer steps; and the silence and solitude and mechanical adroitness of it all were uncanny. It seemed that the great ship was a living entity, and possessed a brain and nerves of its own, hidden in the metal-sheathed interior.

The open portal and stairs offered an obvious invitation; and after some hesitancy, the scientists made up their minds to enter. Some were still fearful of a trap; and five of the forty men warily decided to remain without; but all the others were more power-fully drawn by curiosity and investigative ardor; and one by one they climbed the stairs and filed into the vessel.

They found the interior even more provocative of wonder than the outer walls had been. It was quite roomy and was divided into several compartments of ample size, two of which, at the vessel's center, were lined with low couches covered by soft, lustrous, piliated fabrics of opalescent grey. The others, as well as the ante-chamber behind the entrance, were filled with machinery whose motive force and method of operation were alike obscure to the most expert among the investigators.

Rare metals and odd alloys, some of them difficult to classify, had been used in the construction of this machinery. Near the entrance there was a sort of tripod table or instrument-board whose queer rows of levers and buttons were no less mysterious than the ciphers of some telic cryptogram.

The entire ship was seemingly deserted, with no trace of human or extra-planetary life.

Wandering through the apartments and marvelling at the unsolved mechanical enigmas which surrounded them, the delegation-members were not aware that the broad valves of the main port had closed behind them with the same stealthiness and silence that had marked their opening. Nor did they hear the warning shouts of the five men who had remained outside.

Their first intimation of anything untoward came from a sudden lurching and lifting of the vessel. Startled, they looked at the window-like ports, and saw through the violet, vitreous panes the whirling and falling away of those innumerable rows of seats which ringed the immense stadium. The alien space-ship, with no visible hand to control it, was rising rapidly in air with a sort of spiral movement. It was bearing away to some unknown world the entire delegation of hardy scientists that had boarded it, together with the Berkeley Mayor and Chief of Police and the three privileged reporters who had thought to obtain an ultrasensational "scoop" for their respective journals!

The situation was wholly without precedent, and was more than astounding; and the reactions of the various men, though quite divergent in some ways, were all marked by amazement and Consternation. Many were too stunned and confounded to realize all the implications or possibilities, others were frankly terrified; and others still were indignant.

"This is an outrage!" thundered Stilton, as soon as he had recovered a little from his primary surprise. There were similar exclamations from others of the same temperament as he, all of whom felt emphatically that something should be done about the situation, and that someone (who, unfortunately, they could not locate or identify) should be made to suffer for such unparalleled audacity.

Gaillard, though he shared in the general amazement, was thrilled to the bottom of his heart by a sense of unearthly and prodigious adventure, by a premonition of interplanetary enterprise. He felt a mystic certainty that he

and the others had embarked on a voyage to some world untrodden heretofore by man; that the Strange vessel had descended to earth and had opened its port to invite them for this very purpose; that an esoteric and remote power was guiding its every movement and was drawing it to an appointed destination. Vast, inchoate images of unbounded space and splendor and interstellar strangeness filled his mind, and unforelimnable pictures rose to dazzle his vision from an ultratelluric bourn.

In some incomprehensible way, he knew that his life-long desire to penetrate the mysteries of distant spheres would soon be gratified; and he (if not his companions) was resigned from the very first to that bizarre abduction and captivity in the soaring space flier.

Discussing their position with much volubility and vociferousness, the assembled savants rushed to the various ports and stared down at the world they were leaving. In a mere fraction of time, they had risen to a cloud-like altitude. The whole region about San Francisco Bay, as well as the verges of the Pacific ocean, lay stretched below them like an immense relief map; and they could already see the curvature of the horizon, which seemed to reel and dip as they went upward.

It was an awesome and magnificent prospect; but the growing acceleration of the vessel, which had now gained a speed more than equal to that of the rocket-ships which were used at that time for circling the globe in the stratosphere, soon compelled them to relinquish their standing position and seek the refuge of the convenient couches. Conversation also was abandoned, for everyone began to experience an almost intolerable constriction and oppression, which held their bodies as if with clamps of unyielding metal.

However, when they had all laid themselves on the piliated couches, they felt a mysterious relief, whose source they could not ascertain. It seemed that a force emanated from those couches, which alleviated in some way the leaden stress of increased gravity due to the acceleration, and made it possible for the men to endure the terrific speed with which the space-flier was leaving the earth's atmosphere and gravitational zone.

Presently they found themselves able to stand up and walk around once more. Their sensations, on the whole, were almost normal; though, in contra-distinction to the initial crushing weight, there was now an odd lightness which compelled them to shorten their steps to avoid colliding with the walls and machinery. Their weight was less than it would have been on earth, but the loss was not enough to produce discomfort or sickness, and was accompanied by a sort of exhilaration.

They perceived that they were breathing a thin, rarefied and bracing air, not dissimilar to that of terrene mountain-tops, though permeated by one or two unfamiliar elements that gave it a touch of nitric sharpness. This air tended to increase the exhilaration and to quicken their respiration and pulses a little.

"This is damnable!" spluttered the indignant Stilton, as soon as he found that the powers of locomotion and breathing were reasonably subject to control. "It is contrary to all law, decency and order. The U. S. Government should do something about it immediately."

"I fear" observed Gaillard, "That we are now beyond the jurisdiction of the U. S., as well as that of all other mundane governments. No plane or rocket-ship could reach the air-strata through which we are passing; and we will penetrate the interstellar ether in a moment or so. Presumably this vessel is returning to the world from which it came; and we are going with it."

"Absurd! preposterous! outrageous!" Stilton's voice was a roar, slightly subdued and attenuated by the fine atmospheric medium. "I've always maintained that space-travel was utterly chimerical. Even earth-scientists haven't been able to invent a space-ship; and it is ridiculous to assume that highly intelligent life, capable of such invention, could exist on other planets."

"How, then," queried Gaillard, "do you account for our situation?"

"The vessel is of human origin, of course. It must be a new and ultra-powerful type of rocket-ship, devised by the Soviets. and under automatic

or radio control, which will probably land us in Siberia after travelling in the highest layers of the stratosphere."

Gaillard, smiling with gentle irony, felt that he could safely abandon the argument. Leaving Stilton to stare wrathfully through a port at the receding bulk of the world, on which the whole of North America, together with Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands, had begun to declare their coastal outlines, he joined others of the party in a renewed investigation of the ship.

Some still maintained that living beings must be hidden on board; but a close search of every apartment, corner and cranny resulted as before. Abandoning this objective, the men began to re-examine the machinery, whose motive-power and method of operation they were still unable to fathom. Utterly perplexed and mystified, they watched the instrument-board, on which certain of the keys would move occasionally, as if shifted by an unseen hand. These changes of alignment were always followed by some change in the vessel's speed, or by a slight alteration of its course, possibly to avoid collision with meteoric fragments.

Though nothing definite could be learned about the propelling mechanism, certain negative facts were soon established. The method of propulsion was plainly non-explosive, for there were no roaring and flaming discharge of rockets. All was silent, gliding, and vibrationless, with nothing to betoken mechanical activity, other than the shifting of the keys and the glowing of certain intricate coils and pistons with a strange blue light. This light, cold as the scintillation of Arctic ice, was not electric in its nature, but suggested rather some unknown form of radio-activity.

After awhile, Stilton joined those who were grouped about the instrument-board. Still muttering his resentment of the unlawful and unscientific indignity to which he had been subjected, he watched the keys for a minute or so, and then, seizing one of them with his fingers, he tried to experiment, with the idea of gaining control of the vessel's movements.

To his amazement and that of his confreres, the key was immovable. Stilton strained till the blue veins stood out on his hand and sweat poured in rills

from his baldish brow. Then, one by one, he tried others of the keys, tugging desperately, but always with the same result. Evidently the board was locked against other control than that of the unknown pilot.

Still persisting in his endeavor, Stilton came to a key of large size and different shape from the rest. Touching it, he screamed in agony, and withdrew his fingers from the strange object with some difficulty. The key was cold, as if it had been steeped in the absolute zero of space. It had actually seemed to sear his fingers with its extreme iciness. After that, he desisted, and made no further effort to interfere with the workings of the vessel.

Gaillard, after watching this interlude, had wandered back to one of the main apartments. Peering out once more from his set on a couch of supernal softness and resilience, he beheld a breathtaking spectacle. The whole world, a great, glowing, many-tinted globe, was swimming abreast of the flier in the black and starlined gulf. The awfulness of the undirectioned deeps, the unthinkable isolation of infinitude rushed upon him, and he felt sick and giddy for a few instants with the shock of realization, and was swept by an overwhelming panic, limitless and without name.

Then, strangely, the terror passed, in a dawning exultation at the prospect of the novel voyage through unsounded heavens and toward untrodden shores. Oblivious of danger, forgetful of the dread alienation from man's accustomed environment, he gave himself up to magical conviction of marvellous adventure and unique destiny to come.

Others, however, were less capable of orientating themselves to these bizarre and terrific circumstances. Pale and horror-stricken, with a sense of irredeemable loss, of all-encompassing peril and giddy confusion, they watched the receding earth from whose comfortable purlieu they had been removed so inexplicably and with such awful suddenness.

Many were speechless with fear, as they realized more clearly their impotence in the grip of an all-powerful and incognizable force.

Some chattered loudly and incoherently, in an effort to conceal their perturbation. The three reporters lamented their inability to communicate with the journals they represented. James Gresham, the Mayor, and William Polson, the Chief of Police, were non-plussed and altogether at a loss as to what to do or think, in circumstances that seemed to nullify completely their wonted civic importance. And the scientists, as might have been expected, were divided into two main camps. The more radical and adventurous were more or less prone to welcome whatever might be in store for the sake of new knowledge; while the others accepted their fate with varying degrees of reluctance, of protest and apprehension.

Several hours went by; and the moon, a ball of dazzling desolation in the great abyss, had been left behind with the waning earth. The flier was speeding along through the cosmic vastness, in a universe whose grandeur was a revelation even to the astronomers, familiar as they were with the magnitudes and multitudes of suns, nebulae and galaxies. The thirty-five men were being estranged from their natal planet and hurled across unthinkable immensity at a speed far beyond that of any solar body or satellite. It was hard to estimate the precise velocity; but some idea of it could be gained from the rapidity with which the sun and the nearer planets, Mars, Mercury and Venus, changed their relative positions. They seemed almost to fly athwart the heavens like so many jugglers' balls.

It was plain that some sort of artificial gravity prevailed in the ship; for the weightlessness that would otherwise have been inevitable in outer space was not experienced at any time. Also, the scientists found that they were being supplied with air from certain oddly-shapen tanks. Evidently, too, there was some kind of hidden heating-system or mode of insulation against the interspatial zero; for the temperature of the vessel's interior remained constant, at about 65° or 70°.

Looking at their watches, some of the party found that it was now noon by terrestrial time; though even the most unimaginative were impressed by the absurdity of the twenty-four hour division of day and night amid the eternal sunlight of the void.

Many began to feel hungry and thirsty, and to voice their appetite aloud. Not long after, as if in response, like the service given by a good table d'hôte, or restaurant, certain panels in the inner metal wall, hitherto unnoticed by the savants, opened noiselessly before their eyes and revealed a series of long buffets, on which were curious wide-mouthed ewers containing water and deep, tureen-like plates filled to the rim with unknown food-stuffs.

Too astonished to comment at much length on this new miracle, the delegation-members proceeded to sample the viands and beverage thus offered. Stilton, still morosely indignant, refused to taste them but was alone in his abstention.

The water was quite drinkable, though slightly alkaline, as if it had come from desert wells; and the food, a sort of reddish paste, concerning whose nature and composition the chemists were doubtful, served to appease the pangs of hunger even if it was not especially seductive to the palate.

After the earth-men had partaken of this reflection, the panels closed as silently and unobtrusively as they had opened. The vessel plunged on through space, hour after hour, till it became obvious to Gaillard and his fellow-astronomers that it was either heading directly for the planet Mars or would pass very close to Mars on its way to some further orb.

The red world, with its familiar markings, which they had watched so often through observatory telescopes, and over whose character and causation they had long puzzled, began to loom before them and swelled upon the heavens with thaumaturgic swiftness. They then perceived a signal deceleration in the speed of the flier, which continued straight on toward the coppery planet, as if its goal were concealed amid the labyrinth of obscure and singular mottlings; and it became impossible to doubt any longer that Mars was their destination.

Gaillard, and those who were more or less akin to him in their interests and proclivities, were stirred by an awesome and sublime expectancy as the vessel neared the alien world. Then it began to float gently down above an

exotic landscape in which the well-known "seas" and "canals", enormous with their closeness, could plainly be recognized.

Soon they approached the surface of the ruddy planet, spiraling though its cloudless and mistless atmosphere, while the deceleration slowed to a speed that was little more than that of a falling parachute. Mars surrounded them with its strait, monotonous horizons, nearer than those of earth, and displaying neither mountains nor any salient elevation of hills or hummocks; and soon they hung above it at an altitude of a half-mile or less. Here the vessel seemed to halt and poise, without descending further.

Below them now they saw a desert of low-ridge and yellowish-red sand, intersected by one of the so-called "canals", which ran sinuously away on either side to disappear beyond the horizon.

The scientists studied this terrain in ever-growing amazement and excitement, as the true nature of the veining "canal" was forced upon their perception. It was not water, as many had heretofore presumed, but a mass of pale-green vegetation, of vast and serrate leaves or fronds, all of which seemed to emanate from a single crawling flesh-colored stalk, several hundred feet in diameter and with swollen nodular joints at half-mile intervals! Aside from this anomalous and super-gigantic vine, there was no trace of life, either animal or vegetable, in the whole landscape; and the extent of the crawling stalk, which netted the entire visible terrain but seemed by its form and characteristics to be the mere tendril of some vaster growth, was a thing to stagger the preconceptions of mundane botany.

Many of the scientists were almost stupefied with astonishment as they gazed down from the violet ports on this titanic creeper. More than ever, the journalists mourned the staggering headlines with which they would be unable, under existing circumstances, to endow their respective dailies. Gresham and Poison felt that there was something vaguely illegal about the existence of anything so monstrous in the way of a plant-form; and the scientific disapproval felt by Stilton and his academically minded confreres was most pronounced.

"Outrageous! unheard-of! ludicrous!" muttered Stilton. "This thing defies the most elementary laws of botany. There is no conceivable precedent for it."

Gaillard, who stood beside him, was so wrapt in his contemplation of the novel growth, that he scarcely heard Stilton's comment. The conviction of vast and sublime adventure which had grown upon him ever since the beginning of that bizarre, stupendous voyage, was now confirmed by a clear daylight certitude. He could give no definite form or coherence to the feeling that possessed him; but he was overwhelmed by the intimation of present marvel and future miracle, and the intuition of strange, tremendous revelations to come.

Few of the party cared to speak, or would have been capable of speech. All that had happened to them during the past few hours, and all on which they now gazed, was so far beyond the scope of human action and cognition, that the normal exercise of their faculties was more or less inhibited by the struggle for adjustment to these unique conditions.

After they had watched the gargantuan vine for a minute or two, the savants became aware that the vessel was moving again, this time in a lateral direction. Flying very slowly and deliberately, it followed the course of the creeper toward what seemed to be the west of Mars, above which a small and pallid sun was descending through the dingy, burnt-out sky and casting a thin, chilly light athwart the desolate land.

The men were overpoweringly conscious of an intelligent determination behind all that was occurring; and the sense of this remote, unknowable supervision and control was stronger in Gaillard even than in the others. No one could doubt that every movement of the vessel was timed and predestined; and Gaillard felt that the slowness with which it followed the progress of the great stalk was calculated to give the scientific delegation ample opportunity for the study of their new environment; and, in particular, for observation of the growth itself.

In vain, however, did they watch their shifting milieu for aught that could denote the presence of organic forms of a human, nonhuman or preter-human type, such as might imaginably exist on Mars. Of course, only such entities, it was thought, could have built, despatched, and guided the vessel in which they were held captive.

The flier went on for at least an hour, traversing an immense territory in which, after many miles, the initial sandy desolation yielded place to a sort of swamp. Here, where sluggish waters webbed and marly soil, the winding creeper swelled to incredible proportions, with lush leaves that embowered the marshy ground for almost a mile on either side of the overlooming stalk.

Here, too, the foliage assumed a richer and more vivid greenness, fraught with sublime vital exuberance; and the stem itself displayed an indescribable succulence, together with a shining and glossy luster, a bloom that was weirdly and incongruously suggestive of well-nourished flesh. The thing seemed to palpitate at regular and rhythmic intervals beneath the eyes of the observers, like a living entity; and in places there were queerly shaped nodes or attachments on the stem, whose purpose no one could imagine.

Gaillard called the attention of Stilton to the strange throbbing that was noticeable in the plant; a throbbing which seemed to communicate itself even to the hundred-foot leaves, so that they trembled like plumes.

"Humph!" said Stilton, shaking his head with an air of mingled disbelief and disgust. "That palpitation is altogether impossible. There must be something wrong with our eyes—some disturbance of focus brought on by the velocity of our voyage, perhaps. Either that, or there is some peculiar refractive quality in the atmosphere, which gives the appearance of movement to stable objects."

Gaillard refrained from calling his attention to the fact that this imputed phenomenon of visual disorder or aerial refraction was confined in its application entirely to the plant and did not extend its range to the bordering landscape.

Soon after this, the vessel came to an enormous branching of the plant; and the earth-men discovered that the stalk they had been following was merely one of three that ramified from a vaster stem to intersect the boggy soil at widely divergent angles and vanish athwart opposing horizons. The junction was marked by a mountainous double node that bore a bizarre likeness to human hips. Here the throbbing was stronger and more perceptible than ever; and odd veinings and mottlings of a reddish color were visible on the pale surface of the stem.

The savants became more and more excited by the unexampled magnitude and singular characteristics of this remarkable growth. But revelations of a still more extraordinary nature were in store. After poising a moment above the monstrous joint, the vessel flew on at a higher elevation with increased speed, along the main stem, which extended for an incalculable distance into the occident of Mars. It revealed fresh ramifications at variable intervals, and growing ever larger and more luxuriant as it penetrated marshy regions which were doubtless the residual ooze of a sunken sea.

"My God! the thing must surround the entire planet," said one of the reporters in an awed voice.

"It looks that way," Gaillard assented gravely. "We must be travelling almost in a line with the equator; and we have already followed the plant for hundreds of miles. From what we have seen, it would seem that the Martian 'canals' are merely its branchings; and perhaps the areas mapped as 'seas' by astronomers are masses of its foliage."

"I can't understand it," grumbled Stilton. "The dammed thing is utterly contrary to science, and against nature—it oughtn't to exist in any rational or conceivable cosmos.

"Well," said Gaillard, a little tartly, "it does exist; and I don't see how you are going to get away from it. Apparently, too, it is the only vegetable form on the planet; at least, so far, we have failed to find anything else of the sort. After all, why shouldn't the floral life of Mars be concentrated in a single type? And why shouldn't there be just one example of that type? It shows a

marvellous economy on the part of nature. There is no reason at all for assuming that the vegetable or even the animal kingdoms on other worlds would exhibit the same fission and multiplicity that are shown on earth."

Stilton, as he listened to this unorthodox argument, glared at Gaillard like a Mohammedan at some errant infidel, but was either too angry or too disgusted for further speech.

The attention of the scientists was now drawn to a greenish area along the line of their flight, covering many square miles. Here, they saw that the main stem had put out a multitude of tendrils, whose foliage hid the underlying soil like a thick forest, Even as Gaillard had postulated, the origin of the sea-like areas on Mars was now explained.

Forty or fifty miles beyond this mass of foliation, they came to another that was even more extensive. The vessel soared to a great height, and they looked down on the realm-wide expanse of leafage. In its middle they discerned a circular node, leagues in extent, and rising like a rounded alp, from which emanated in all directions the planet-circling stems of the weird growth. Not only the size, but also certain features of the immense node, were provocative of utter dumbfoundment in the beholders. It was like the head of some gargantuan cuttle-fish, and the stalks that ran away on all sides were suggestive of tentacles. And, strangest of all, the men descried in the center of the head two enormous masses, clear and lucent like water, which combined the size of lakes with the form and appearance of optic organs!

The whole plant palpitated like a breathing bosom; and the awe with which the involuntary explorers surveyed it was incommunicable by human words. All were compelled to recognize that ever aside from its unparalleled proportions and habit of growth, the thing was in no sense alliable with any mundane botanic genera. And to Gaillard, as well as to others, the thought occurred that it was a sentient organism, and that the throbbing mass on which they now gazed was the brain or central ganglion of its unknown nervous system.

The vast eyes, holding the sunlight like colossal dew-drops, seemed to return their scrutiny with an unreadable and superhuman intelligence: and Gaillard was obsessed by the feeling that preternatural knowledge and wisdom bordering upon omniscience were hidden in those hyaline depths.

The vessel began to descend, and settled vertically down in a sort of valley close to the mountainous head, where the foliation of two departing stems had left a patch of clear land. It was like a forest glade, with impenetrable woods on three sides, and a high crag on the fourth. Here, for the first time during the experience of its occupants, the flier came to rest on the soil of Mars; floating gently down without jar or vibration; and almost immediately after its landing, the valves of the main port unfolded, and the metal stairway descended to the ground, in obvious readiness to disembark the human passengers.

One by one, some with caution and timidity, others with adventuresome eagerness, the men filed out of the vessel and started to inspect their surroundings. They found that the Martian air differed little if at all from that which they had been breathing in the space-flier; and at that hour, with the sun still pouring into the strange valley from the west, the temperature was moderately warm.

It was an outré and fantastic scene; and the details were unlike those of any tellurian landscape. Underfoot was a soft, resilient soil, like a moist loess, wholly devoid of grass, lichens, fungi or any minor plant-forms. The foliage of the mammoth vine, with horizontal fronds of a baroque type, feathery and voluminous, hung about the glade to an altitudinous height like that of ancient evergreens, and quivered in the windless air with the pulsation of the stems.

Close at hand there rose the vast, flesh-colored wall of the central plant-head, which sloped upward like a hill toward the hidden eyes and was no doubt deeply embedded and rooted in the Martian soil. Stepping close to the living mass, the earthmen saw that its surface was netted with millions of wrinkle-like reticulations, and was filled with great pores resembling those of animal skin beneath some extra-powerful microscope. They conducted

their inspection in an awe-struck silence; and for some time no one felt able to voice the extraordinary conclusions to which most of them had now been driven.

The emotions of Gaillard were almost religious as he contemplated the scarce-imaginable amplitude of this ultra-terrene life-form, which seemed to him to exhibit attributes nearer to those of divinity than he had found in any other manifestation of the vital principle.

In it, he saw the combined apotheosis of the animal and the vegetable. The thing was so perfect and complete and all-sufficing, so independent of lesser life in its world-enmeshing growth. It poured forth the sense of aeonian longevity, perhaps of immortality. And to what arcanic and cosmic consciousness might it not have attained during the cycles of its development! What super-normal senses and faculties might it not possess! What powers and potentialities beyond the achievement of more limited, more finite forms! In a lesser degree, many of his companions were aware of similar feeling. Almost, in the presence of this portentous and sublime anomaly, they forgot the unsolved enigma of the space-vessel and their voyage across the heretofore unbridged immensities. But Stilton and his brother-conservatives were highly scandalized by the inexplicable nature of it all; and if they had been religiously minded, they would have expressed their sense of violation and outrage by saying that the monstrous plant, as well as the unexampled events in which they had taken an unwilling part, were tainted with the most grievous heresy and flagrant blasphemy. Gresham, who had been eyeing his surroundings with a pompous and puzzled solemnity, was the first to break the silence.

"I wonder where the local Government hangs out?" he queried. "Who the hell is in power here anyway? Hey, Mr. Gaillard, you astronomers know a lot about Mars. Ain't there a U. S. Consulate somewhere in this god-forsaken hole?"

Gaillard was compelled to inform him that there was no consular service on Mars, and also that the form of government on that planet, as well as its official location, was still an open problem.

"However," he went on, "I shouldn't be surprised to learn that we are now in the presence of the sole and supreme ruler of the Martian realms."

"Huh! I don't see anyone," grunted Gresham with a troubled frown, as he surveyed the quivering masses of foliage and the alp-like head of the great plant. The import of Gaillard's observation was too far beyond his intellectual orbit.

Gaillard had been inspecting the flesh-tinted wall of the head with supreme and fascinated interest. At some distance, to one side, he perceived certain peculiar outgrowths, either shrunken or vestigial, like drooping and flaccid horns. They were large as a man's body, and might at some time have been much larger. It seemed as if the plant had put them forth for some unknown purpose, and had allowed them to wither when the purpose had been accomplished. They still retained an uncanny suggestion of semi-human parts and members, of strange appendages, half arms and half tentacles, as if they had been modelled from some exemplar of undiscovered Martian animal life.

Just below them, on the ground, Gaillard noticed a litter of queer metallic tools, with rough sheets and formless ingots of the same coppery material from which the space-flier had been constructed.

Somehow, the spot suggested an abandoned ship-yard; though there were no scaffoldings such as would ordinarily be used in the building of a vessel. An odd inkling of the truth arose in Gaillard's mind as he surveyed the metal remnants, but he was too thoroughly bemused and overawed by the wonder of all that had occurred, as well as by all he had ascertained or surmised, to communicate his inferences to the other savants.

In the meanwhile the entire party had wandered about the glade, which comprised an area of several hundred yards. One of the astronomers, Philip Colton, who had made a side-line of botany, was examining the serried foliage of the super-gigantic creepers with a mingling of utmost interest and perplexity. The fronds or branches were lined with pinnate needles covered by a long, silk pubescence; and each of these needles was four feet in length

by three or four inches in thickness, possibly with a hollow and tubular structure. The fronds grew in level array from the main creeper, filling the air like a horizontal forest, and reaching to the very ground in close, imbricated order.

Colton took a jack-knife from his pocket and tried to cut a section from one of the pinnate leaves. At the first touch of the keen blade, the whole frond recoiled violently beyond his reach; and then swinging back, it dealt him a tremendous blow which stretched him on the ground and hurled the knife from his fingers to a considerable distance.

If it had not been for the lesser gravity of Mars, he would have been severely injured by the fall. As it was, he lay bruised and breathless, staring with ludicrous surprise at the great frond, which had resumed its former position among its fellows, and now displayed no other movement than the singular trembling due to the rhythmic palpitation of the stem to which it was attached.

Colton's discomfiture had been noticed by his confreres; and all at once, as if their tongues had been loosed by this happening, a babel of discussion arose among them. It was no longer possible for anyone to doubt the animate or half-animate nature of the growth; and even the outraged and ireful Stilton, who considered that the most sacred laws of scientific probity were being violated, was driven to concede the presence of a biologic riddle not to be explained in terms of orthodox morphology.

Gaillard, who did not care to take any great part in this discussion, preferring his own thoughts and conjectures, continued to watch the throbbing growth. He stood a little apart from the others, and nearer than they to the fleshy and multiporous slope of the huge head; and all at once, as he watched, he saw the sprouting of what appeared to be a new tendril from the surface, at a distance of about four feet above the ground.

The thing grew like something in a slow moving-picture, lengthening out and swelling visibly, with a bulbous knob at the end. This knob soon became a large, faintly convoluted mass, whose outlines puzzled and

tantalized Gaillard with their intimation of something he had once seen but could not now remember. There was a bizarre hint of nascent limbs and members, which soon become more definite; and then, with a sort of shock, he saw that the thing resembled a human foetus!

His involuntary exclamation of amazement drew others; and soon the whole delegation was grouped about him, watching the incredible development of the new growth with bated breath. The thing had put forth two well-formed legs, which now rested on the ground, supporting with their five-toed feet the upright body, on which the human head and arms were fully evolved, though they had not yet attained adult size.

The process continued; and simultaneously, a sort of woolly floss began to appear around the trunk, arms and legs, like the rapid spinning of some enormous cocoon. The hands and neck were bare; but the feet were covered with a different material, which took on the appearance of green leather. When the floss thickened and darkened to an iron-grey, and assumed quite modish outlines, it became obvious that the figure was being clothed in garments such as were worn by the earth-men, probably in deference to human ideas of modesty.

The thing was unbelievable; and stranger and more incredible than all else was the resemblance which Gaillard and his companions began to note in the face of the still growing figure. Gaillard felt as if he were looking into a mirror; for in all essential details the face was his own! The garments and shoes were faithful replicas of those worn by himself; and every limb and part of this outré being, even to the finger-tips, was proportioned like his!

The scientists saw that the process of growth was apparently complete. The figure stood with shut eyes and a somewhat blank and expressionless look on its features, like that of a man who has not yet awakened from slumber. It was still attached by a thick tendril to the breathing, mountainous node; and this tendril issued from the base of the brain, like an oddly misplaced umbilical cord.

The figure opened its eyes and stared at Gaillard with a long, level, enigmatic gaze that deepened his sense of shock and stupefaction. He sustained this gaze with the weirdest feeling imaginable—the feeling that he was confronted by his alter ego, by a Doppelganger in which was also the soul or intellect of some alien and vaster entity. In the regard of the cryptic eyes, he felt the same profound and sublime mystery that had looked out from the lake-sized orbs of shining dew or crystal in the plant-head.

The figure raised its right hand and seemed to beckon to him. Gaillard went slowly forward till he and his miraculous double stood face to face. Then the strange being placed its hand on his brow; and it seemed to Gaillard that a mesmeric spell was laid upon him from that moment. Almost without his own volition, for a purpose he was not yet permitted to understand, he began to speak; and the figure, imitating his every tone and cadence, repeated the words after him.

It was not till many minutes had elapsed, that Gaillard realized the true bearing and significance of this remarkable colloquy. Then with a start of clear consciousness, he knew that he was giving the figure lessons in the English language! He was pouring forth in a fluent, uninterrupted flood the main vocabulary of the tongue, together with its grammatical rules. And somehow, by a miracle of super-intellect, all that he said was being comprehended and remembered by his interlocutor.

Hours must have gone by during this process; and the Martian sun was now dipping toward the serrate walls of foliage. Dazed and exhausted, Gaillard realized that the long lesson was over; for the being removed its hand from his brow and addressed him in scholarly, well-modulated English:

"Thank you. I have learned all that I need to know for the purposes of linguistic communication. If you and your confreres will now attend me, I shall explain all that has mystified you, and declare the reasons for which you have been brought from your own world to the shores of a foreign planet."

Like men in a dream, barely crediting the fantastic evidence of their senses and yet unable to refute or repudiate it, the earth-men listened while Gaillard's amazing double continued:

"The being through whom I speak, made in the likeness of one of your own party, is a mere special organ which I have developed so that I could communicate with you. I, the informing entity, who combine in myself the utmost genius and energy of those two divisions of life which are known to you as the plant and the animal—I, who possess the virtual omniety and immortality of a god, have had no need of articulate speech or formal language at any previous time in my existence. But since I include in myself all potentialities of evolution, together with mental powers that verge upon omniscience, I have had no difficulty whatever in acquiring this new faculty.

"It was I who constructed, with other special organs that I had put forth for this purpose, the space-flier that descended upon your planet and then returned to me a delegation, most of whom, I have surmised, would represent the scientific fraternities of man-kind. The building of the flier, and its mode of control, will be made plain when I tell you that I am the master of many cosmic forces beyond the rays and energies known to tellurian savants. These forces I can draw from the air, the soil or the ether at will, or can even summon from remote stars and nebulae.

"The space-vessel was wrought from metal which I had integrated from molecules floating at random through the atmosphere; and I used the solar rays in concentrated form to create the temperature at which these metals were fused into a single sheet. The power used in propelling and guiding the vessel is a sort of super-electric energy whose exact nature I shall not elucidate, other than to say that it is associated with the basic force of gravity, and also with certain radiant properties of the interstellar ether not detectible by any instruments which you possess. I established in the flier the gravitation of Mars, and supplied it with Martian air and water, and also with chemically created food-stuffs, in order to accustom you during your voyage to the conditions that prevail on Mars.

"I am, as you may have already surmised, the sole inhabitant of this world. I could multiply myself if necessary; but so far, for reasons which you will soon apprehend, I have not felt that this would be desirable. Being complete and perfect in myself, I have had no need of companionship with other entities; and long ago, for my own comfort and security, I was compelled to extirpate certain rival plant-forms, and also certain animals who resembled slightly the mankind of your world; and who, in the course of their evolution, were becoming troublesome and even dangerous to me.

"With my two great eyes, which possess an optic magnifying power beyond that of your strongest telescopes, I have studied Earth and the other planets during the Martian nights, and have learned much regarding the conditions that exist upon each. The life of your world, your history, and the state of your civilization have been in many ways an open book to me; and I have also formed an accurate idea of the geological, faunal and floral phenomena of your globe. I understand your imperfections, your social injustice and maladjustment, and the manifold disease and misery to which you are liable, owing to the dissonant, multiple entities into which the expression of your life-principle has been subdivided.

"From all such evils and error, I am exempt. I have attained to well-nigh absolute knowledge and masterdom; and there is no longer anything in the universe for me to fear, aside from the inevitable process of dehydration and dessication which Mars is slowly undergoing, like all other aging planets.

"This process I am unable to retard, except in a limited and partial manner; and I have already been compelled to tap the artesian waters of the planet in many places. I could live upon sunlight and air alone; but water is necessary to maintain the alimental properties of the atmosphere; and without it, my immortality would fail in the course of time; my giant stems would shrink and shrivel; and my vast innumerable leaves would grow sere for want of the vital humor.

"Your world is still young, with superabundant seas and streams and a moisture-laden air. You have more than is requisite of the element which I lack; and I have brought you here, as representative members of mankind,

to propose an exchange which cannot be anything but beneficial to you as well as to myself.

"In return for a modicum of the water of your world, I will offer you the secrets of eternal life and infinite energy, and will teach you to overcome your social imperfections and to master wholly your planetary environment. Because of my great size, my stems and tendrils which girdle the Martian equator and reach even to the poles, it would be impossible for me to leave my natal world; but I will teach you how to colonize the other planets and explore the universe beyond. For these various ends, I suggest the making of an intermundane treaty and a permanent alliance between myself and the peoples of Earth.

'Consider well what I offer you; for the opportunity is without example or parallel. In relation to men, I am like a god in comparison with insects. The benefits which I can confer upon you are inestimable; and in return I ask only that you establish on Earth, under my instruction, certain transmitting stations using a super-potent wave-length, by means of which the essential elements of sea-water, minus the undesirable saline properties, can be teleported to Mars. The amount thus abstracted will make little or no difference in your tide-levels or in the humidity of your air; but for me, it will mean an assurance of everlasting life."

The figure ended its peroration, and stood regarding the earth-men in polite and somewhat inscrutable silence. It waited for their answer.

As might have been expected, the emotions with which the delegation-members had heard this singular address were far from unanimous in their tenor. All the men were beyond mere surprise or astonishment, for miracle had been piled upon miracle till their brains were benumbed with wonder; and they had reached the point where they took the creation of a human figure and its endowment with human utterance wholly for granted. But the proposal made by the plant-entity through its man-like organ was another matter, and it played upon varying chords in the minds of the scientists, the reporters, the Mayor, and the Chief of Police.

Gaillard, who felt himself wholly in accord with this proposition, and more and more thoroughly en rapport with the Martian entity, wished to accede at once and to pledge his own support and that of his fellows to a furthering of the suggested treaty and plan of exchange. He was forced to point out to the Martian that the delegation, even if single-minded in its consent, was not empowered to represent the peoples of Earth in forming the projected alliance; that the most it could do would be to lay the offer before the Government of the U.S. and of other terrestrial realms.

Half the scientists, after some deliberation, announced themselves as being in favor of the plan and willing to promote it to the utmost of their ability. The three reporters were also willing to do the same; and they promised, perhaps rashly, that the influence of the world-press would be added to that of the renowned savants.

Stilton and the other dogmatists of the party, however, were emphatically and even rapidly opposed, and declined to consider the Martian's offer for an instant. Any treaty or alliance of the sort, they maintained, would be highly undesirable and improper. It would never do for the nations of Earth to involve themselves in an entanglement of such questionable nature, or to hold commerce of any sort with a being such as the plant-monster, which had no rightful biologic status. It was unthinkable that orthodox and sound-minded scientists should lend their advocacy to anything so dubious. They felt too that there was a savor of deception and trickery about the whole business; and at any rate it was too irregular to be countenanced, or even to be considered with anything but reprehension.

The schism among the savants was rendered final by a hot argument, in which Stilton roundly denounced Gaillard and the other pro-Martians as virtual traitors to humanity, and intellectual Bolsheviks whose ideas were dangerous to the integrity of human thought. Gresham and Poison were on the side of mental law and order, being professionally conservative; and thus the party was about evenly divided between those who favored accepting the Martian's offer, and those who spurned it with more or less suspicion and indignation.

During the course of this vehement dispute, the sun had fallen behind the high ramparts of foliage, and an icy chill, such as might well be looked for in a semi-desolate world with attenuating air, had already touched the pale rose twilight. The scientists began to shiver; and their thoughts were distracted from the problem they had been debating by the physical discomfort of which they were increasingly conscious.

They heard the voice of the strange manikin in the dusk:

"I can offer you a choice of shelters for the night and also for the duration of your stay on Mars. You will find the space-flier well-lighted and warmed, with all the facilities which you may require. Also, I can offer you another hospitality.

Look beneath my foliage, a little to your right, where I am now preparing a shelter no less commodious and comfortable than the vessel—a shelter which will help to give you an idea of my varied powers and potentialities."

The earth-men saw that the flier was brilliantly illuminated, pouring out a gorgeous amethystine radiance from its violet ports. Then, beneath the foliage close at hand, they perceived another and stranger luminosity which seemed to be emitted, like some sort of radio-active or noctilucous glow, by the great leaves themselves.

Even where they were standing, they felt a balmy warmth that began to temper the frigid air; and stepping toward the source of these phenomena, they found that the crowded leaves had lifted and arched themselves into a roomy alcove. The ground beneath was lined with a fabric-like substance of soft hues, deep and elastic underfoot, like a fine mattress. Ewers filled with liquids and platters of food-stuffs were disposed on low tables; and the air in the alcove was gentle as that of the spring night in a subtropic land.

Gaillard and the other pro-Martians, filled with profound awe and wonder, were ready to avail themselves at once of the shelter of this thaumaturgic hostelry. But the anti-Martians would have none of it, regarding it as the workmanship of the devil. Suffering keenly from the cold, with chattering teeth and shivering limbs, they promenaded the open glade for some time,

and at last were driven to seek the hospitable port of the space-flier, thinking it the lesser of two evils by some queer twist of logic.

The others, after eating and drinking from the mysteriously provided tables, laid themselves down on the mattress-like fabrics. They found themselves greatly refreshed by the liquid in the ewers, which was not water but some kind of roseate, aromatic wine. The food, a literal manna, was more agreeably flavored than that of which they had partaken during their voyage in the space-vessel. In the nerve-wrought and highly excited state that was consequent upon their experiences, none of them had expected to sleep. The unfamiliar air, the altered gravity, the unknown radiations of the exotic soul, as well as their unprecedented journey and the miraculous discoveries and revelations of the day, were all profoundly upsetting and conducive to a severe disequilibrium of mind and body.

However, Gaillard and his companions fell into a deep and dreamless slumber as soon as they had laid themselves down. Perhaps the liquid and solid refreshments which they had taken many have conduced to this; or perhaps there was some narcotic or mesmeric influence in the air, falling from the vast leaves or proceeding from the brain of the plant-lord.

The anti-Martians did not fare so well in this respect, and their slumber was restless and broken. Most of them had touched the proffered viands in the space-flier very sparingly; and Stilton, in particular, had refused to eat or drink at all. Doubtless, too, their antagonistic frame of mind was such as to make them more resistant to the hypnotic power of the plant, if such were being exerted. At any rate, they did not share in the benefits conferred upon the others.

A little before dawn, when Mars was still shrouded in crepuscular gloom but slightly lightened by the two small moons, Phobos and Deimos, Stilton arose from the soft couch on which he had tossed in night-long torment, and began to experiment once more, undeterred by his previous failure and discomfiture, with the mechanical controls of the vessel.

To his surprise, he found that the odd-shaped keys were no longer resistant to his fingers. He could move and arrange them at will; and he soon discovered the principle of their working and was able to levitate and steer the flier.

His confreres had now joined him, summoned by his shout of triumph. All were wide-awake, and jubilant with the wild hope of escaping from Mars and the jurisdiction of the plant-monster. Thrilling with this hope, and fearing every moment that the Martian would re-assert its esoteric control of the mechanism, they rose unhindered from the darkling glade to the alien skies and headed toward the brilliant green orb of Earth, desecrated among the unfamiliar constellations.

Looking back, they saw the vast eyes of the Martian watching them weirdly from the gloom, like pools of clear and bluish phosphorescence; and they shuddered with the dread of being recalled and re-captured. But, for some inscrutable reason, they were permitted to maintain their earthward course without interference. However, the voyage was fraught with a certain amount of disaster; and Stilton's clumsy pilotage hardly formed an ample substitute for the half-divine knowledge and skill of the Martian. More than once, the vessel collided with meteors; none of which, fortunately, were heavy enough to penetrate its hull. And when, after many hours, they approached the earth, Stilton failed to secure the proper degree of deceleration. The flier fell with terrible precipitancy and was saved from destruction only by dropping into the South Atlantic. The jarred mechanism was rendered unworkable by the fall, and most of the occupants were severely bruised and stunned.

After floating at random for days, the coppery bulk was sighted by a northward-going liner and was towed to port in Lisbon. Here the scientists abandoned it, and made their way back to America, after detailing their adventures to representatives of the world-press, and issuing a solemn warning to all the world-peoples against the subversive designs and infamous proposals of the ultra-planetary monster.

The sensation created by their return and by the news they brought was tremendous. A tide of profound alarm and panic, due in part to the immemorial human aversion toward the unknown, swept immediately upon the nations; and immense, formless, exaggerated fears were bred like shadowy hydras in the dark minds of men.

Stilton and his fellow-conservatives continued to foster these fears, and to create with their pronouncements a globe-wide wave of anti-Martian prejudice, of blind opposition and dogmatic animosity. They enlisted on their side as many of the scientific fraternity as they could; that is to say, all those who were minded like themselves, as well as others overawed or subdued by the pressure of authority. They sought also, with much success, to marshal the political powers of the world in a strong league the would ensure the repudiation of any further offers of alliance from the Martian.

In all this gathering of inimical forces, this regimenting of earthly conservatism and insularity and ignorance, the religious factor, as was inevitable, soon asserted itself. The claim to divine knowledge and power made by the Martian, was seized upon by all the various mundane hierarchies, by Christian and Muhammadan, by Buddhist and Parsee and Voodooist alike, as forming a supremely heinous blasphemy. The impiety of such claims, and the menace of a non-anthropomorphic god and type of worship that might be introduced on earth, could not be tolerated for a moment. Khalif and Pope, lama and imaum, parson and mahatma, all made common cause against this ultra-terrestrial invader.

Also, the reigning political powers felt that there might be something Bolshevistic behind the offer of the Martian to promote an Utopian state of society on earth. And the financial, commercial, and manufacturing interests likewise thought that it might imply a threat to their welfare or stability. In short, every branch of human life and activity was well represented in the anti-Martian movement.

In the interim, on Mars, Gaillard and his companions had awoken from their sleep to find that the luminous glow of the arching leaves had given place to the ardent gold of morn. They discovered that they could venture forth with

comfort from the alcove; for the air of the glade without had grown swiftly warm beneath the rising sun.

Even before they had noticed the absence of the coppery flier, they were apprised of its departure by the man-organ of the great plant. This being, unlike its human prototypes, was exempt from fatigue; and it had remained standing or reclining all night against the fleshy wall to which it was attached. It now addressed the earth-men thus:

"For reasons of my own, I have made no attempt to prevent the flight of your companions, who with their blindly hostile attitude, would be worse than useless to me, and whose presence could only hinder the rapport which should exist between you and myself. They will reach the earth, and will try to warn its peoples against me and to poison their minds against my beneficent offer. Such an outcome, alas, cannot be avoided, even if I were to bring them back to Mars or divert their flight by means of my control and send them speeding forever through the void beyond the worlds. I perceive that there is much ignorance and dogmatism and blind self-interest to be overcome, before the excelling light which I proffer can illumine the darkness of earthly minds.

"After I have kept you here for a few days, and have instructed you thoroughly in the secrets of my transcendent wisdom, and have imbued you with surprising powers that will serve to demonstrate my omnivalent superiority to the nations of Earth, I shall send you back to Earth as my ambassadors, and though you will meet with much opposition from your fellows, my cause will prevail in the end, beneath the infallible support of truth and science.

Gaillard and the others received this communication as well as the many that followed it, with supreme respect and semi-religious reverence. More and more they became convinced that they stood in the presence of a higher and ampler entity than man; that the intellect which thus discoursed to them through the medium of a human form was well-nigh inexhaustible in its range and depth, and possessed many characteristics of infinitude and more than one attribute of deity.

Agnostic though most of them were by nature or training, they began to accord a certain worship to this amazing plant-lord; and they listened with an attitude of complete submission if not of abjection, to the out-pourings of cycle-gathered lore, and immortal secrets of cosmic law and life and energy, in which the great being proceeded to instruct them.

The illumination thus accorded them was both simple and esoteric. The plant-lord began by dwelling at some length upon the monistic nature of all phenomena, of matter, light, color, sound, electricity, gravity, and all other forms of irradiation, as well as time and space; which, it said, were only the various perceptual manifestations of a single underlying principle or substance.

The listeners were then taught the evocation and control, by quite rudimentary chemical media, of many forces and rates of energy that had hitherto lain beyond the detection of human senses or instruments. They were taught also the terrific power obtainable by refracting with certain sensitized elements the ultraviolet and infra-red rays of the spectrum; which, in a highly concentrated form, could be used for the disintegration and rebuilding of the molecules of matter.

They learned how to make engines that emitted beams of destruction and transmutation; and how to employ these unknown beams, more potent even than the so-called "cosmic rays," in the renewal of human tissues and the conquest of disease and old age.

Simultaneously with this tuition, the plant-lord carried on the building of a new space-car, in which the earth-men were to return to their own planet and preach the Martian evangel. The construction of this car, whose plates and girders seemed to materialize out of the void air before their very gaze, was a practical lesson in the use of arcanic natural forces. Atoms that would form the requisite alloys were brought together from space by the play of invisible magnetic beams, were fused by concentrated solar heat in a specially refractive zone of atmosphere, and were then moulded into the desired form as readily as the bottle that shapes itself from the pipe of the glass-blower.

Equipped with this new knowledge and potential masterdom, with a cargo of astounding mechanism and devices made for their use by the plant-lord, the pro-Martians finally embarked on their earthward voyage.

A week after the abduction of the thirty-five earth-men from the stadium at Berkeley, the space-car containing the Martian's proselytes landed at noon in this same stadium. Beneath the infinitely skilful and easy control of the far-off plant-being, it came down without accident, lightly as a bird; and as soon as the news of its arrival had spread, it was surrounded by a great throng, in which the motives of hostility and curiosity were almost equally paramount.

Through the denunciation of the dogmatists led by Stilton, the savants and the three reporters beneath the leadership of Gaillard had been internationally outlawed before their arrival. It was expected that they would return sooner or later through the machinations of the plant-lord; and a special ruling that forbade them to land on terrene soil, under penalty of imprisonment, had been made by all the Governments.

Ignorant of this, and ignorant also of how wide-spread and virulent was the prejudice against them, they opened the vessel's port and stood in readiness to emerge.

Gaillard, going first, paused at the head of the metal stairway, and something seemed to arrest him as he looked down on the milling faces of the mob that had gathered with incredible swiftness. He saw enmity, fear, hatred, suspicion, in many of these faces; and in others a gaping and zany-like inquisitiveness, such as might be shown before the freaks of some travelling circus. A small corps of policemen, elbowing and thrusting the rabble aside with officious rudeness, was pushing toward the front; and cries of derision and hatred, gathering by two and threes and uniting to a rough roar, were now hurled at the occupants of the car.

"Damn the pro-Martians! Down with the dirty traitors! Hang the --- dogs!"

An overripe tomato, large and dripping, sailed toward Gaillard and splashed on the steps at his feet. Hisses and hoots and cat-calls added to the roaring bedlam, but above it all, he and his comrades heard a quiet voice that spoke within the car; the voice of the Martian, borne across inestimable miles of ether:

"Beware, and defer your landing. Resign yourselves to my guidance. and all will be well"

Gaillard stepped back as he heard this minatory voice, and the valvular port closed quickly behind the folded stairs, just as the policemen who had come to arrest the vessel's occupants broke from the forefront of the throng.

Peering out on those hateful faces, Gaillard and his brother-savants beheld an astounding manifestation of the Martian's power. A wall of violet flame, descending from the remote heavens to the ground, seemed to intervene between the car and the crowd, and the policemen, bruised and breathless but uninjured, were hurled backward as if by a great wave. This flame, whose color changed to blue and green and yellow and scarlet like a sort of aurora, played for hours about the vessel and rendered it impossible for anyone to approach. Retreating to a respectful distance, awe-struck and terrified, the crowd looked on in silence; and the police waited in vain for a chance to fulfill their commission. After awhile, the flame became white and misty, and upon it, as upon the bosom of a cloud, a bizarre and mirage-like scene was imprinted, visible alike to the occupants of the car and the throng without. This scene was the Martian landscape in which the central brain of the plant-lord was located; and the crowd gasped with astonishment as it met the gaze of the enormous telescopic eyes, and saw the unending stems and league-wide masses of sempervirent foliage. Other scenes and demonstrations followed, all of which were calculated to impress upon the throng the wonder-working powers and marvelous faculties of this remote being. Pictures that illustrated the historic life of the Martian, as well as the various arcanic natural energies subject to its dominion, followed each other in rapid succession. The purpose of the desired alliance with Earth, and the benefits which would accrue thereby to humanity, were also depicted. The divine benignity and wisdom of this puissant being, its superior organic

nature, and its vital and scientific supremacy, were made plain to the dullest observer.

Many of those who had come to scoff, or had been prepared to receive the pro-Martians and their evangel with scorn and hate and violence, became converted to the alien cause forthwith by these sublime demonstrations.

However, the more dogmatic scientists, the true "die-hards" as represented by Godfrey Stilton, maintained an adamant obstructionism, in which they were supported by the officers of law and government, as well as by the presbyters of the various religions. The world-wide dissidence of opinion which soon resulted, became the cause of many civil wars or revolution, and, in one or two cases, ended in actual warfare between nations.

Numerous efforts were made to apprehend or destroy the Martian space-car, which, beneath the guidance of its ultra-planetary master, appeared in many localities all over the world, descending suddenly from the stratosphere to perform incredible scientific miracles before the eyes of astonished multitudes. In all quarters of the globe, the mirage-like pictures were flashed on the screen of cloudy fire, and more and more people went over to the new cause.

Bombing planes pursued the vessel and sought to drop their deadly freight upon it, but without success; for whenever the car was endangered, the auroral flames intervened, deflecting and hurling back the exploded bombs, often to the detriment of their launchers.

Gaillard and his confreres, with leonine boldness, emerged many times from the car, to display before crowds or selected bodies of savants the marvellous inventions and chemical thaumaturgies with which they had been endowed by the Martian. Everywhere the police sought to arrest them, maddened mobs endeavored to do them violence, armed regiments tried to surround them and cut them off from the car. But with an adroitness that seemed no less than supernatural, they contrived always to elude capture; and often they discomfited their pursuers by astonishing displays or

evocations of esoteric force, temporarily paralyzing the civic officers with unseen rays, or creating about themselves a defensive zone of intolerable heat or trans-arctic cold.

In spite of all these myriad demonstrations, however, the citadels of human ignorance and insularity remained impregnable in many places.

Deeply alarmed by this ultra-terrene menace to their stability, the governments and religious of Earth, as well as the more conservative scientific elements, rallied their resources in a most heroic and determined effort to stem the incursion. Men of all ages, everywhere, were conscripted for service in the national armies; and even women and children were equipped with the deadliest weapons of the age for use against the pro-Martians, who, with their wives and families, were classed as infamous renegades to be hunted down and killed without ceremony like dangerous beasts.

The internecine warfare that ensued was the most terrible in human history. Class became divided against class and family against family. New and more lethal gases than any heretofore employed, were devised by chemists, and whole cities or territories were smothered beneath their agonizing pall. Others were blown into skyward-flying fragments by single charges of superpotent explosives; and war was carried on by planes, by rocketships, by submarine, by dreadnaughts, by tanks, by every vehicle and engine of death or destruction that the homicidal ingenuity of man had yet created.

The pro-Martians, who had won several victories at first, were gravely outnumbered; and the tide of battle began to turn against them. Scattered in many lands, they found themselves unable to unite and organize their forces to the same degree as those of their official opponents. Though Gaillard and his devoted confreres went everywhere in the space-vessel, aiding and abetting the radicals, and instructing them in the use of new weapons and cosmic energies, the party suffered great reverses through the sheer brute preponderance of its foes. More and more it became split up into small bands, hunted and harried, and driven to seek refuge in the wilder or less explored sections of the earth.

In North America, however, a large army of the scientific rebels, whose families had been compelled to join them, contrived to hold the antagonists at bay for awhile. Surrounded at last, and faced by overwhelming odds, this army was on the verge of a crushing defeat.

Gaillard, hovering above the black, voluminous clouds of the battle, in which poisonous gases mingled with the fumes of high explosives, felt for the first time the encroachment of actual despair. It seemed to him, and also to his companions, that the Martian had abandoned them, disgusted perhaps with the bestial horror of it all and the hateful, purblind narrowness and fanatic nescience of mankind.

Then, through the smoke-smothered air, a fleet of coppery-golden cars descended, to land on the battle-front among the Martian adherents. There were thousands of these cars; and from all the entrance-ports, which had opened simultaneously, there issued the voice of the planet-lord, summoning its supporters and bidding them enter the vessels.

Saved from annihilation by this act of Martian providence, the entire army obeyed the command; and as soon as the last man, woman and child had gone aboard, the ports closed again, and the fleet of space-cars, wheeling in graceful and derisive spirals above the heads of the baffled conservatives, soared from the battle-clouds like a flock of reddish-golden birds and vanished in the noon-tide heavens, led by the car containing Gaillard's party.

At the same time, in all portions of the world where the little bands of heroic radicals had been cut off and threatened with capture or destruction, other cars descended in like manner and carried away the pro-Martians and their families even to the last unit. These vessels joined the main fleet in mid-space; and them all continued their course beneath the mysterious piloting of the plant-lord, flying at super-cosmic velocity through the star-surrounded gulf.

Contrary to the anticipations of the mundane exiles, the vessels were not drawn toward Mars; and it soon became evident that their objective was the

planet Venus. The voice of the Martian, speaking athwart the eternal ether, made the following announcement:

"In my infinite wisdom, my supreme foreprescience, I have removed you from the hopeless struggle to establish on Earth the sovereign light and truth which I offer. You alone I have found worthy; and the moiety of mankind, who have refused salvation with hatred and contumely, preferring the natal darkness of death and disease and ignorance in which they were born, must be left henceforward to their inevitable fate."

"You, as my loyal and well-trusted servants, I am sending forth to colonize beneath my tutelage a great continent on the planet Venus, and to found amid the primal exuberance of this new world a super-scientific nation."

The fleet soon approached Venus, and circled the equator for a great distance in the steam-thick atmosphere, through which nothing could be descried other than a hot and over-fuming ocean, close to the boiling-point, which seemed to cover the entire plane. Here, beneath the never-settling sun, intolerable temperatures prevailed everywhere, such as would have parboiled the flesh of a human being exposed directly to the semi-aqueous air. Suffering even in their insulated cars from this terrific heat, the exiles wondered how they were to exist in such a world.

At least, however, their destination came in view and their doubts were resolved. Nearing the nightward side of Venus which is never exposed to daylight, in a latitude where the sun slanted far behind them as over arctic realms, they beheld through thinning vapors an immense tract of land, the sole continent amid the planetary sea. This continent was covered by rich jungles, containing a flora and fauna similar to those of pre-glacial eras on the earth. Calamites and cycads and fern-plants of unbelievable luxuriance revealed themselves to the earth-men; and they saw everywhere the great, brainless reptiles, the megalosaurs, plesiosaurs, labyrinthodons and pterodactyls of Jurassic times.

Beneath the instruction of the Martian, before landing, they slew these reptiles, incinerating them completely with infra-red beams, so that not

even their carcasses would remain to taint the air with putrefactive effluvia. When the whole continent had been cleared of its noxious life, the cars descended; and emerging, the colonists found themselves in a terrain of unequalled fertility, whose very soil seemed to pulsate with primordial vigors, and whose air was rich with ozone and oxygen and nitrogen.

Here the temperature, though still sub-tropic, was agreeable and balmy; and through the use of protective fabrics provided by the Martian, the earth-men soon accustomed themselves to the eternal sunlight and intense ultra-violet radiation. With the super-knowledge at their disposal, they were able to combat the unknown, highly pernicious bacteria peculiar to Venus, and even to exterminate such bacteria in the course of time. They became the lords of salubrious climate, dowered with four mild and equable seasons by the slight annual rotation of the planet; but having one eternal day, like the mythic Isles of the Blest beneath a low and undeparting sun.

Beneath the leadership of Gaillard, who remained in close rap port and continual communication with the plant-lord, the great forests were cleared in many places. Cities of lofty and ethereal architecture, lovely as those of some trans-stellar Eden, builded by the use of force-beams, began to rear their graceful turrets and majestic cumuli of domes above the gigantic calamites and ferns.

Through the labors of the terrene exiles, a truly Utopian nation was established, giving allegiance to the plant-lord as to some tutelary deity; a nation devoted to cosmic progress, to scientific knowledge, to spiritual tolerance and freedom; a happy, law-abiding nation, blest with millennial longevity, and exempt from sorrow and disease and error.

Here, too, on the shores of the Venusian sea, were builded the great transmitters that sent through interplanetary space, in ceaseless waves of electronic radiation, the water required to replenish the dehydrated air and soil of Mars, and thus to ensure for the plant-being a perpetuity of god-like existence.

In the meanwhile, on earth, unknown to Gaillard and his fellow-exiles, who had made no effort to communicate with the abandoned world, an amazing thing had occurred; a final proof of the virtual omnipotence and all-inclusive sapience of the Martian.

In the great vale of Kashmeer, in Northern India, there descended one day from the clear heavens a mile-long seed, flashing Like a huge meteor, and terrifying the superstitious Asian peoples, who saw in its fall the portent of some tremendous disaster. The seed rooted itself in this valley; and before its true nature had been ascertained, the supposed meteorite began to sprout and send forth on all sides a multitude of mammoth tendrils which burst immediately into leaf. It covered both the southward plains and the eternal snows and rock of the Hindu Kush and Himalayas with their gigantic verdure.

Soon the Afghan mountaineers could hear the explosion of its leaf-buds amid their passes, echoing like distant thunder; and, at the same time, it rushed like a Juggernaut upon Central India. Spreading in all directions, and growing with the speed of express-trains, the tendrils of the mighty vine proceeded to enmesh the Asian realms. Overshadowing vales, peaks, hills, plateaus, deserts, cities and sea-boards with its titan leaves, it invaded Europe and Africa; and then, bridging Bering Straits, it entered North America and ran southward, ramifying on all sides till the whole continent, and also South America even to Tierra de Fuego, had been buried beneath the masses of insuperable foliage.

Frantic efforts to stay the progress of the plant were made by armies with bombs and cannon, with lethal sprays and gases; but all in vain. Everywhere humanity was smothered beneath the vast leaves, like those of some omnipresent upas, which emitted a stupefying and narcotic odor that conferred upon all who inhaled it a swift euthanasia.

Soon the plant had netted the whole globe; for the seas offered little or no barrier to its full-grown stems and tendrils. When the process of growth was complete, the anti-Martian moiety of the human race had joined the uncouth monsters of pre-historic time in that limbo of oblivion to which all

superseded and out-dated genera have gone. But, through the divine clemency of the plant-lord, the final death that overtook the "die-hards" was no less easy than irresistible.

Stilton and a few of his associates contrived to evade the general doom for awhile by fleeing in a rocket-ship to the Antarectic plateau. Here, as they were congratulating themselves on their escape, they saw far-off on the horizon the rearing of the swift stems, beneath whose foliage the ice and snow appeared to melt away in rushing torrents. These torrents soon became a diluvial sea, in which the last dogmatists were drowned. Only in this way did they elude the euthanasia of the great leaves, which had overtaken all their fellows.

After a plot by F. M. Johnston.

SOMETHING NEW

"Tell me something new," she moaned, twisting in his arms on the sofa. "Say or do something original—and I'll love you. Anything but the wheezy gags, the doddering compliments, the kisses that were stale before Antony passed them off on Cleopatra"

"Alas," he said, "there is nothing new in the world except the rose and gold and ivory of your perfect loveliness. And there is nothing original except my love for you."

"Old stuff," she sneered, moving away from him. "They all say that."

"They ?" he queried, jealously.

"The ones before you, of course," she replied, in a tone of languid reminiscence. "It only took four lovers to convince me of the quotidian sameness of man. After that, I always knew what to expect. It was maddening: they came to remind me of so many cuckoo docks, with the eternal monotony of their advances, the punctuality of their compliments. I soon knew the whole repertory. As for kissing—each one began with my hands, and ended with my lips. There was one genius, though, who kissed me on the throat the first time. I might have taken him, if he had lived up to the promise of such a beginning."

"What shall I say?" he queried, in despair. "Shall I tell you that your eyes are the unwaning moons above the cypress-guarded lakes of dream-land? Shall I say that your hair is colored like the sunsets of Coccagne ?"

She kicked off one of her slippers, with a little jerk of disgust.

"You aren't the first poet that I've had for a lover. One of them used to read me that sort of stuff by the hour. All about moons, and stars and sunsets, and rose-leaves and lotus-petals."

"Ah," he cried hopefully, gazing at the slipperless foot. "Shall I stand on my head and kiss your tooty-wootsies?"

She smiled briefly. "That wouldn't be so bad. But you're not an acrobat, my dear. You'd fall over and break something—provided you didn't fall on me."

"Well, I give it up," he muttered, in a tone of hopeless resignation "I've done my darndest to please you for the past four months; and I've been perfectly faithful and devoted, too; I haven't so much as looked corner-wise at another woman—not even that blue-eyed brunette who tried to vamp me at the Artists' Ball the other night."

She sighed impatiently. "What does that matter? I am sure you needn't be faithful unless you want to be. As for pleasing me—well you did give a thrill once upon a time, during the first week of our acquaintance. Do you remember? We were lying out under the pines on the old rug that we had taken with us; and you suddenly turned to me and asked me if I would like to be a hamadryad . . . Ah! there is a hamadryad in every women; but it takes a faun to call it forth . . . My dear, if you had only been a faun!"

"A real faun would have dragged you off by the hair," he growled, "So you wanted some of that caveman stuff, did you? I suppose that's what you mean by 'something new.'"

"Anything, anything, providing it is new," she drawled, with ineffable languor. Looking like a poem to Ennui by Baudelaire, she leaned back and lit another cigarette in her holder of carved ivory.

He look at her, and wondered if any one female had ever before hidden so much perversity, capriciousness, and incomprehensibility behind a rose-bud skin and harvest-coloured hair. A sense of acute exasperation mounted in him—something that had smouldered for months, half-restrained by his natural instincts of chivalry and gentleness. He remembered an aphorism from Nietzsche: "When thou goest to women, take thy whip." "By Jove, the old boy had the right dope," he thought. "Too bad I didn't think to take my whip with me; but after all, I have my hands, and a little rough stuff can't make matters any worse."

Aloud, he said: "It's a pity no one ever thought to give you a good paddling. All women are spoiled and perverse, more or less, but you--" He broke off, and drew her across his knees like a naughty child, with a movement so muscular and sudden that she had neither the time nor the impulse to resist or cry out.

"I'm going to give you the spanking of your life," he growled, as his right hand rose and descended . . . The cigarette holder fell from her lips to the Turkish carpet, and began to burn a hole in the flowered pattern. . . . A dozen smart blows, with a sound like the clapping of shingles, and then he released her, and rose to his feet. His anger had vanished, and his only feeling was an overpowering sense of shame and consternation. He could merely wonder how and why he had done it.

"I suppose you will never forgive me," he began.

"Oh, you are wonderful," she breathed. "I didn't think you had it in you. My faun! My cave-man! Do it again."

Doubly dumbfounded as he was, he had enough presence of mind to adjust himself to the situation. "Women are certainly the limit," he thought, dazedly. "But one must make the best of them, and miss no chances."

Preserving a grim and mysterious silence, he picked her up in his arms.

STRANGE SHADOWS, OR I AM YOUR SHADOW

Downing his thirteenth dry Martini, Gaylord Jones drew a complacent sigh and regarded the barroom floor with grave attention. He was drunk. He knew that he was drunk. With superb lucidity, he calculated the exact degree of his inebriation.

A great white light was pivoted in his brain. He could turn this light, instantly, on the most obscure corners of the nothingness called life. At last he was able to appreciate the absurd logic of the cosmos. It was all very simple . Nothing mattered in the least.

It was all very simple, and nothing mattered as long as one could keep himself sufficiently pickled. Ah, that was the problem. Reflecting long and deeply, Jones decided that just one more Martini would help to maintain his intoxication at the right stage.

He had, however, consumed three drinks in a row at this particular bar. The Martinis were well mixed. The bartender's manners were unexceptionable. But Jones felt that he should not play any favorites when it came to barrooms. There were so many others that deserved his patronage. In fact, there was one just around the corner on his homeward route.

"I wonder often what the vintners buy one-half so precious as the stuff they sell," he quoted, muttering to himself, as he descended carefully from his seat.

Jones prided himself on knowing his capacity. So far, he had never had the misfortune to overestimate it. He could carry one, two, three, even four more drinks if necessary, without deviating from the proverbial chalk line. Every night, for at least a month past, he had collected a full cargo at various alcoholic ports between his office and hotel. The stuff never hurt him. He had never been known to stagger or even wobble at any point along the route. His morning headaches, if any, were light and fleeting.

He stood up and looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar. Yes, he could hold his liquor. No casual observer would be able to tell that he had

had three Martinis, let alone thirteen. His eyes were clear, his face no redder or paler than usual. He adjusted his tie neatly, bade the bartender a crisp goodnight, and started toward the door.

Of course, his locomotor faculties were under perfect control. He knew that they would not fail him as long as he observed due caution and didn't move too precipitately. His senses had never played him tricks either. But, as he crossed the long room, Jones received a curious impression. The room was empty except for a few late patrons at the bar or remote tables. Yet once, twice, thrice, it seemed to him that he had trodden on someone's heels. It was a baffling and disconcerting sensation, since, visibly, no one was in front of him or even near at hand. With some effort, each time, he checked himself from stumbling.

Jones went on, feeling slightly disturbed and annoyed. Again, as he approached the door, the mysterious sensation was repeated. It was as if his toes had collided with the heel of some stranger who preceded him down the room. This time, Jones nearly fell on his face before he could recover himself.

"Who the hell--" he started to mumble. But, as before, there was no one, nothing, against whom or which he could have tripped. Looking down, he could see only his own shadow, now stretching doorward in the light cast by the electric chandeliers.

Jones stood peering at the shadow with a vague but growing puzzlement. It was a funny sort of shadow, he thought. There must be something queer about the lights in that barroom. It didn't look like his own shadow, or, in fact, the shadow of any human being. He wasn't squeamish. He had never been a stickler for aesthetic propriety or any kind of propriety. But he felt a sense of actual shock when he began to consider the various things that were wrong with the shadow's outline.

Though he himself was correctly attired, there was no suggestion that the caster of the shadow wore either clothing, hat or shoes. Indeed, it hardly seemed to indicate any sort of creature that would wear clothing.

Jones thought of the gargoyles of Notre Dame. He thought of antique satyrs. He thought of goats and swine. The shadow was gargoylish, it was satyr-like. It was goatish and porcine—it was even worse. It was the adumbration of some shambling, obscene, pot-bellied monster, trying to stand upright like a man on its hind legs, and holding its forelegs a little away from the body on each hand.

Its edges were hairy as the silhouette of an ape. Appendages that were huge ears or horns rose above its swollen head. The rear shanks were bent at a bestial angle. Something like a tail depended between them. The four feet gave the appearance of hooves. The two lifted feet were visibly cloven.

Apart from these deformities of outline, the shadow possessed an unnatural thick blackness. It was like a pool of tar. Sometimes it seemed to swell upward from the floor, to take on a third dimension.

Sobriety had almost returned to Jones. But now the thirteen cumulative Martinis resumed their work. By one of those sudden shifts of a drunkard's mood, he began to forget his feelings of shock and perplexity. The shadow's very grotesquery began to amuse him.

"Must be another guy's shadow," he chuckled. "But what a guy!" He stepped forward cautiously, holding out his right arm at a dead level and parting all the fingers of his right hand. The shadow moved with him. Its right fore-member rose and protruded at the angle of his arm. But still there was only the shadow of a cloven hoof where the shadows of five outspread fingers should have registered.

Jones shook his head bewilderedly. Maybe it was the lights, after all. There must be some explanation.

He stepped backward, maintaining a balance that had become slightly precarious. This time, the shadow did not follow his change of position. It lay as before, its hind hooves separated from his own nattily shod feet by an interval of light.

Jones felt a confused outrage. Here was a problem that defied the blazing white logic of alcohol. What could one make of a shadow that not only failed to reproduce its owner's periphery, but refused to follow all his movements?

To make matters worse, he saw that the shadow had now begun to display an activity of its own. Lurching and weaving while he stood stock still, it danced abominably from side to side on the floor, like the shadow of a drunken satyr. It capered and cavorted. It made vile gestures with its forelegs.

At this moment a patrolman, parched, no doubt, from his long evening vigil, entered the barroom. He was formidably tall and broad. Giving Jones the tail of a truculent eye, he passed on toward the bar without seeming to notice the outrageous behavior of Jones' errant shadow.

Behind the patrolman's bulk there trailed a shadow like that of some diminutive monkey. It appeared to cower at his heels. It seemed to scamper and scuttle behind the arrogant pomp of his advance. It was incredibly thin, wizened, puny-looking.

Jones rubbed his eyes. Here, perhaps, was something to reassure him. If his own shadow had gone screwy, the patrolman's was equally haywire.

This conclusion was instantly confirmed. The shadow that, by courtesy, Jones called his own, had ceased its indecorous caperings. It wheeled about suddenly and ran past him as if following the officer. At the same time the policeman's monkey-like shadow detached itself from its owners' heels and fled swiftly toward a remote corner of the room. Jones' shadow pursued it in great, goatish leaps, with gesticulations of obscene anger and menace. The officer, quite oblivious of his loss, continued barward. Jones heard him order a beer.

Jones decided that he had lingered all too long in that particular drinking-place. Matters had grown slightly embarrassing, not to say compromising. Shadow or no shadow, he would speed his progress to the next bar. After two or three additional Martinis, he could manage well enough without a

shadow. Good riddance, anyway. Let the policeman keep the damned thing in order if he could.

The street outside was well-lighted but almost empty of pedestrians. With a sense of urgency and compulsion, Jones hurried to the saloon around the corner. He avoided looking down at the pavement as he went.

Ordering three Martinis, he drank them down as fast as the bartender could mix and pour them. The result was all that he had hoped for. His feeling of cosmic detachment and independence returned to him. What was a shadow, anyway? The one cast by the bartender's hand and arm, moving over the bar, was not that of a normal human limb; but Jones refused to consider it. He could take his shadows or leave them.

He took three more drinks. His sense of alcoholic caution told him that it was now curfew-time. Promptly, though a little unsteadily, he began the last lap of his homeward journey.

Somewhere on the way, he perceived rather vaguely that his shadow had rejoined him. It was more monstrous than ever under the streetlamps—more obscene and unnatural. Then, suddenly, there were two shadows. This, however, was not surprising, since he had begun to see telephone-posts, lights, cars, hydrants, people, and other objects along his route in duplicate.

He awoke the next morning with a dull headache and a confused impression that the scheme of things had somehow gone wrong. Just how or why it had gone wrong he could not remember at first. But he had had one or two drinks too many and had fallen asleep in his clothes on top of the bedding.

Groaning, he pulled himself from the bed and stood up groggily with his back to the bright sunlight that streamed in through his apartment windows. It seemed that something rose with him—a black, solid silhouette that stood erect for an instant in the air. Horribly startled, he saw the thing resolve itself into a shadow stretching across the floor. It was the gargoylish, goatish, satyrish, porcine shadow of the previous night.

It was something that neither sunlight nor lamplight, by any trick or distortion, could conceivably have wrought from Jones' head, limbs and body. In the bright glare, it was blacker, grosser, more hirsute than before. Curiously, it was broader and less elongated than a shadow should have been in the full early light.

It was like some foul incubus of legend—a separate entity that companioned him in place of his rightful shadow.

Jones felt thoroughly frightened. He was sober, with the profound, excessive sobriety of the morning after. He did not believe in the supernatural. Plainly, he had become the victim of a set of bizarre hallucinations, confined to one subject. Otherwise, his sensory perceptions were quite normal. Perhaps, without realizing it, he had been drinking too much and had developed a new kind of delirium tremens. He knew that alcoholism didn't always result in the seeing of mauve elephants and cerise reptiles.

Or maybe it was something else. There were all sorts of obscure mental diseases, symptomized by aberrant or deluded sense-perceptions. He knew little of such things, but knew that the possibilities were infinitely various and terrifying.

Averting his eyes from the shadow, he fled to his bathroom, where there was no direct sunlight. Even here he had the sensation of being accompanied. Again, as in the barroom, he seemed to stumble over the heels of some unseen person who had preceded him.

With nightmare difficulty he concentrated on the tasks of washing and shaving himself. A dreadful gulf had opened at his feet amid the solid reality of things.

A clock struck somewhere in the apartment-house, and Jones realized that he had overslept and must hurry to his office. There was no time for breakfast, even if he had not lacked the appetite.

Dogged by his weirdly altered shadow, he went out on the crowded street in the clear April morning. Embarrassment mingled with his sense of horror. It seemed that everyone must notice the black changeling that followed him like a wizard's familiar.

However, the early throng, hurrying intently to the day's work or pleasure, paid no more attention to Jones and his shadow than on any other morning. It was more and more obvious that he suffered from some sort of visual hallucination: for the people about him were apparently quite untroubled by the oddities which he perceived in their shadows as well as in his own.

Studying these shadows with a morbid fascination as they passed by on the walls and pavements, Jones well-nigh forgot the dark miscreation at his own heels. It was like looking at the shadows of some hellish menagerie. Among them all, there was none that corresponded to the visible physique of its owner. And now and then some person went by, like the legendary vampire, without appearing to cast a shadow at all.

Demure young girls were attended by adumbrations that might have been those of lascivious she-apes or coquetting sphinxes. A benign priest was followed by the shadow of some murderous devil. A rich and popular society matron was paired with the four-legged shadow of a humpbacked cow. Shadows like those of hyenas trotted behind respectable bankers and aldermen.

Jones noted that the shadows cast by inorganic objects, such as trees and buildings, had not shared in the change. But the shadows of animals bore as little likeness to their casters as those of men. Oddly, those of dogs and horses were often quasihuman, seeming to indicate a rise rather than a degradation in the scale of being.

Sometimes, as on the evening before, Jones witnessed the incredible behavior of shadows that moved and acted with complete detachment from their owners. He saw pantomimes that were grotesque, ludicrous, often indecent.

It was in the mental state of a man bewitched that he reached the office of his young but thriving insurance business. Miss Owens, the rather mature typist, was already settled at her machine. She raised her well-plucked eyebrows at his lateness.

Jones noted mechanically that his business partner, Caleb Johnson, was even later than himself. A moment afterwards, Johnson entered. He was heavy-set, darkly florid, older than Jones. As usual, he looked like the aftermath of a season of misspent nights. The rings under his eyes were strongly marked as those of a raccoon's tail. Miss Owens did not appear to notice his entrance, but bent closer above her machine.

Johnson grunted by way of greeting. It was a one-syllable, Anglo-Saxon grunt. He went to his desk, which was opposite Miss Owens'. The office settled to its daily routine.

Jones, trying to control his whirling wits and fix them on his work, was thankful for the diffused light at that hour. Somehow, he succeeded in applying himself to a pile of letters, and even dictated a few replies. Several clients came in. There were some new applicants for fire and accident insurance. It reassured Jones a little, to find that he could talk and answer questions without betraying the incoherence of his thoughts.

Part of the morning went by. At times the mad mystery that troubled him receded to the margin of consciousness. It was too unreal, too much like the phantasms of dreams. But he would go easy on drinking in the future. No doubt the hallucinations would wear off when he had freed his system from any residue of alcohol. Perhaps his nerves were already righting themselves and he wouldn't see any more crazy shadows.

At that moment he happened to look over toward Johnson and Miss Owens. The rays of the sun in its transit had now entered the broad plate-glass window, spreading obliquely across them both and casting their shadows on the floor.

Jones, who was no prude, almost blushed at the outlines formed by Miss Owen's shadow. It showed a figure that was not only outrageously

unclothed but betrayed proclivities more suitable to a witches' Sabbath than a modern business office. It moved forward in an unseemly fashion while Miss Owens remained seated. It met the shadow cast by Johnson ... which, without going into detail, was hardly that of a respectable business man

Miss Owens, looking up from her Remington, intercepted Jones' eye. His expression seemed to startle her. A natural flush deepened her brunette rouge.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Jones?" she queried.

Johnson also looked up from the account book in which he was making entries. He too appeared startled. His heavy-lidded eyes became speculative.

"Nothing is wrong, as far as I know," said Jones, shamefacedly, averting his eyes from the shadows. He had begun to wonder about something. Johnson was a married man with two half-grown children. But there had been hints ... More than once, Jones had met him with Miss Owens after business hours. Neither of them had seemed particularly pleased by such meetings. Of course, it wasn't Jones' affair what they did. He was not interested. What did interest him now was the behavior of the shadows. After all, was there at times some hidden relevance, some bearing upon reality, in the phenomena that he had regarded as baseless hallucinations? The thought was far from pleasant in one sense. But he decided to keep his eyes and his mind open.

Jones had lunched with more semblance of appetite than he had believed possible. The day drew on toward five o'clock. The lowering sun filled a westward window with its yellow blaze. Johnson stood up to trim and light a cigar. His strong black shadow was flung on the gold-lit door of the company's big iron safe in the corner beyond.

The shadow, Jones noted, was not engaged in the same action as its owner. There was nothing like the shadow of a cigar in its outthrust hand. The black fingers seemed trying to manipulate the dial on the safe's door. They moved deftly, spelling out the combination that opened the safe. Then they

made the movement of fingers that draw back a heavy hinged object. The shadow moved forward, stooping and partly disappearing. It returned and stood erect. Its fingers carried something. The shadow of the other hand became visible. Jones realized, with a sort of startlement, that Johnson's shadow was counting a roll of shadowy bills. The roll was apparently thrust into its pocket, and the shadow went through the pantomime of closing the safe.

All this had set Jones to thinking again. He had heard, vaguely, that Johnson gambled—either on stocks or horses, he couldn't remember which. And Johnson was the firm's bookkeeper. Jones had never paid much attention to the bookkeeping, apart from noting cursorily that the accounts always seemed to balance.

Was it possible that Johnson had been using, or meant to use, the firm's money for irregular purposes? Large sums were often kept in the safe. Offhand, Jones thought that there must be more than a thousand dollars on hand at present.

Oh, well, maybe it was preferable to think that excess cocktails had endowed him with a new brand of heebie-jeebies. It would be better than believing that Johnson was a possible embezzler.

End of the section common to Versions II and III; at this point they diverge. The conclusion of Version II is presented first, followed by that of Version III.

That evening he visited a doctor instead of making the usual round of barrooms.

The doctor frowned very learnedly as Jones described his strange affliction. He took Jones' pulse and temperature, tested his knee-jerk and other reflexes, flashed a light into his eyes, looked at his tongue.

"You haven't any fever, and there's no sign of d.t.," he reassured finally. "Your nerves seem to be sound though jumpy. I don't think you're likely to go insane—at least not for some time. Probably it's your eyes. You'd better

see a good oculist tomorrow. In the meanwhile I'll prescribe a sedative for your nervousness. Of course you ought to ease up on liquor—maybe the alcohol is affecting your eyesight."

Jones hardly heard the doctor's advice. He had been studying the doctor's shadow, flung across an expensive rug by a tall and powerful floor-lamp. It was the least human and most unpleasant of all the shadows he had yet seen. It had the contours and the posture of a ghoul stooping over a ripe carrion.

After leaving the doctor's office, Jones remembered that he had a fiancée. He had not seen her for a week. She did not approve of Martinis—at least not in such quantities as Jones had been collecting nightly for the past month. Luckily—unless he collected them in her company—she was unable to tell whether he had had two drinks or a dozen. He was very fond of Marcia. Her quaint ideas about temperance weren't too much of a drawback. And anyway he was going to be temperate himself till he got rid of the shadows. It would be something to tell Marcia.

On second thought he decided to leave out the shadow part. She would think he had the heebie-jeebies.

Marcia Dorer was a tall blonde, slender almost to thinness. She gave Jones a brief kiss. Sometimes her kisses made him feel slightly refrigerated. This was one of the times.

"Well, where have you been keeping yourself?" she asked. There was a sub-acid undertone in her soprano. "In front of all the bars in town, I suppose?"

"Not today," said Jones gravely. "I haven't had a drink since last night. In fact, I have decided to quit drinking."

"Oh, I'm glad," she cooed, "if you really mean it. I know liquor can't be good for you—at least, not so much of it. They say it does things to your insides."

She pecked him again, lightly, between cheek and lips. Just at that moment Jones thought to look at their shadows on the parlor wall. What would Marcia's shadow be like?

In spite of the queer phenomena he had already seen, Jones was unpleasantly surprised, even shocked. He hardly knew what he had expected, but certainly it wasn't anything like this.

To begin with, there were three shadows on the wall. One was Jones', porcine, satyr-like as usual. In spite of his physical proximity to Marcia, it stood far apart from hers.

Marcia's shadow he could not clearly distinguish from the third one, since, with its back turned to Jones', it was united with the other in a close embrace. It resembled Marcia only in being a shadow of a female. The other shadow was plainly male. It lifted a grossly swollen, bearded profile above the head of its companion. It was not a refined-looking shadow. Neither was Marcia's.

Marcia had never embraced him like that, thought Jones. He felt disgusted; but after all, he couldn't be jealous of an unidentified shadow.

Somehow, it was not a very successful evening. Jones turned his eyes away from the wall and refrained from looking at it again. But he could not forget the shadows. Marcia chattered without seeming to notice his preoccupation; but there was something perfunctory in her chatter, as if she too were preoccupied.

"I guess you'd better go, darling," she said at last. "Do you mind? I didn't sleep well, and I'm tired tonight." Jones looked at his wrist-watch. It was only twenty minutes past nine. "Oh, all right," he assented, feeling a vague relief. He kissed her and went out, seeing with the tail of his eye that the third shadow was still in the room. It was still on the parlor wall, with Marcia's shadow in its arms.

Halfway down the block, beside a lamp-post, Jones passed Bertie Filmore. The two nodded. They knew and liked each other very slightly. Jones

peered down at Filmore's shadow on the sidewalk as he went by. Filmore was a floorwalker in a department store—a slim, sleek youth who neither drank, smoked nor indulged in any known vice. He attended the Methodist church every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. Jones felt a profane and cynical curiosity as to what his shadow would look like.

The adumbration that he saw was shortened by the nearby lamp. But its profile was unmistakably the gross, bearded profile of the third shadow on Marcia's wall! It bore no resemblance to Filmore.

"What the hell!" thought Jones, very disagreeably startled. "Is there something in this?"

He slackened his pace and glanced back at Filmore's receding figure. Filmore sauntered on as if out for an airing, without special objective, and did not turn to look back at Jones. He went in at the entrance of Marcia's home.

"So that's why she wanted me to leave early," Jones mused. It was all plain to him now... plain as the clinching shadows. Marcia had expected Filmore. The shadows weren't all katzen-jammer, not by a jugful.

His pride was hurt. He had known that Marcia was acquainted with the fellow. But it was a shock to think that Filmore had displaced him in her affections. In Jones' estimation, the fellow was a cross between a Sunday school teacher and a tailor's dummy. No color or character to him.

Chewing the cud of his bitterness, Jones hesitated at several barroom doors. Perhaps he would see worse shadows if he killed another row of Martinis. Or... maybe he wouldn't. What the hell

He went into the next bar without hesitating.

The morning brought him a headache worthy of the bender to which twenty — or was it twenty-one — more or less expert mixologists had contributed.

He reached his office an hour behind time. Surprisingly, Miss Owens, who had always been punctual, was not in evidence. Less surprisingly, Johnson was not there either. He often came late.

Jones was in no mood for work. He felt as if all the town clocks were striking twelve in his head. Moreover, he had a heart which, if not broken, was deeply cracked. And there was still the nerve-wracking problem of those strangely distorted and often misplaced shadows.

He kept seeing in his mind the shadows on Marcia's wall. They nauseated him... or perhaps his stomach was slightly upset from more than the due quota of Martinis. Then, as many minutes went by and neither Miss Owens nor Johnson appeared, he recalled the queer shadow-play in his office of the previous afternoon. Why in hell hadn't he thought of that before? Perhaps---

His unsteady fingers spun the combination of the safe, drew back the door. Cash, negotiable bonds, a few checks that had come in too late for banking—all were gone. Johnson must have returned to the office that night. Or perhaps he had cleared out the safe before leaving in the late afternoon. Both he and Miss Owens had stayed after Jones' departure. They often did that, and Jones hadn't thought much about it since both were busy with unfinished work.

Jones felt paralyzed. One thing was clear, however: Johnson's shadow had forewarned him with its pantomime of opening the safe, removing and counting money. It had betrayed its owner's intention beforehand. If he had watched and waited, Jones could no doubt have caught his partner in the act. But he had felt so doubtful about the meaning of the shadows, and his main thought when he left the office had been to see a doctor. Later, the discovery of Marcia's deceit had upset him, made him forget all else.

The telephone broke into his reflections with its jangling . A shrill female voice questioned him hysterically. It was Mrs. Johnson. "Is Caleb there? Have you seen Caleb?"

"No. I haven't seen him since yesterday."

"Oh, I'm so worried, Mr. Jones. Caleb didn't come home last night but phoned that he was working very late at the office. Said he might not get in till after midnight. He hadn't come in when I fell asleep; and he wasn't here this morning. I've been trying to get the office for the past hour."

"I was late myself," said Jones. "I'll tell Johnson to call you when he comes. Maybe he had to go out of town suddenly." He did not like the task of telling Mrs. Johnson that her husband had embezzled the firm's cash and had probably eloped with the typist.

"I'm going to call the police," shrilled Mrs. Johnson. "Something dreadful must have happened to Caleb."

Jones kept remembering that other shadow-scene in his office which had made him almost blush. More as a matter of form than anything else, he rang up the apartment house at which Miss Owens roomed. She had returned there as usual the previous evening but had left immediately with a valise, saying that she was called away by the sudden death of an aunt and would not be back for several days.

Well, that was that. Jones had lost a good typist, together with more cash than he could afford to lose. As to Johnson—well, the fellow had been no great asset as a partner. Jones, who had no head for figures, had been glad to delegate the bookkeeping to him. But he could have hired a good accountant at far less expense.

There was nothing to do but put the matter in the hands of the police. Jones had reached again for the receiver, when the mailman entered, bringing several letters and a tiny registered package.

The package was addressed to Jones in Marcia's neat and somewhat prim handwriting. One of the letters bore the same hand. Jones signed for the package and broke the letter open as soon as the mailman had gone. It read:

Dear Gaylord,

I am returning your ring. I have felt for some time past that I am not the right girl to make you happy. Another man, of whom I am very fond, wishes to marry me. I hope you will find someone better suited to you than I should be.

Always yours,

Marcia

Jones put the little package aside without opening it. His thoughts were bitter. Marcia must have written to him and mailed the package early that morning. Filmore, of course, was the other man. Probably he had proposed to her the night before, after Jones had passed him on the street.

Jones could definitely add a sweetheart to his other losses. And he had gained, it seemed, a peculiar gift for seeing shadows that did not correspond to their owners' physical outlines... which did not always duplicate their movements... shadows that were sometimes revelatory of hidden intentions, prophetic of future actions.

It seemed, then, that he possessed a sort of clairvoyance. But he had never believed in such things. What good was it doing him anyway?

After he phoned the police about Johnson, he would call it a day and gather enough drinks to dissolve the very substance of reality into a shadow.

SYMPOSIUM OF THE GORGON

I do not remember where or with whom the evening had begun. Nor can I recall what vintages, brews and distillations I had mingled by the way. In those nights of an alcoholically flaming youth I was likely to start anywhere, drink anything and end up anywhere else than at the port of embarkation.

It was therefore with interest but with little surprise that I found myself among the guests at the symposium in the Gorgon's hall. Do not ask me how I got there: I am still vague about it myself. It would be useless to tell you even if I could, unless you are one of the rare few elected for similar adventures. And if you are one of these, the telling would be needless.

Liquor brings oblivion to most; but to certain others, enfranchisement from time and space, the awareness of Tao, of all that is or has ever been or will ever be. By liquor I mean of course the true essence poured from the Dive Bouteille. But, on occasion, any bottle can be divine.

Just why, at that particular time, after what must have been a round of mundane bar-rooms, I should have entered the mythologic palace of Medusa, is a matter hardly apparent but determined, no doubt, by the arcanic and inflexible logic of alcohol. The night had been foggy, not to say wet; and on such nights one is prone to stray into the unlikeliest places. It was not the first time I had gotten a little mixed up in regard to the Einsteinian continuum.

Having read Bullfinch and other mythologists, I had small difficulty in orienting myself to the situation. At the moment of my entrance into the spacious early Grecian hall, I was stopped by a slave-girl attired only in three garlands of roses arranged to display and enhance her charms. This girl presented me with a bright-ly polished silver mirror, the rim and handle of which were twined appropriately with graven serpents. She also gave me a capacious wine-cup of unglazed clay. In a low voice, in the purest

Greek of pre-Euripidean drama, she told me, the mirror's purpose. The cup I could fill as often as I pleased, or was able, at a fountain of yellow wine in the foreground, rilling from the open mouth of a marble sea nymph that rose from amidst its bubbling ripples.

Thus forewarned, I kept my eyes on the mirror which reflected the room before me with admirable -clearness. I saw that my fellow-guests — at least any who possessed hands-had also been considerably equipped with mirrors, in which they could look with safety at their hostess whenever politeness required.

Medusa sat in a high-armed chair at the hall's cen-ter, weeping constant tears that could not dim the ter-rible brightness of her eyes. Her tonsure of curling serpents writhed and lifted incessantly. On each arm of the chair perched a woman-headed, woman-breasted fowl that I recognized as a harpy. In other chairs, the two sisters of Medusa sat immobile with lowered eyes.

All three were draining frequent cups served with averted eyes by the slave-girls, but showed no sign of intoxication.

There seemed to be a lot of statuary about the place: men, women, dogs, goats, and other animals as well as birds-. These, the first slave-girl whispered as she passed me, consisted of the various unwary victims turned to stone by the Gorgon's glance. In a whisper lower still, she added that the fatal visit of Perseus, coming to be-head Medusa, was momentarily expected.

I felt that it was high time for a drink, and moved forward to the verge of the vinous pool. A number of ducks and swans, standing unsteadily about it with wine-splashed plumage, dipped their beaks in the fluid and tilted their heads back. with obvious relish. They hissed at me viciously as I stepped among them. I slipped on their wet droppings and plunged hastily into the pool, but still retained the cup and the mirror as well as my footing. The fluid was quite shallow. Amid the loud quacking of the startled birds and the giggling of several golden-tressed sirens and russet-haired Nereids who

sat on the farther edge, stirring the pool to luminous ripples with their cod-like tails, I stepped forward, splashing ankle-deep, to the marble sea-girl and lifted my cup to the yellow stream that issued from her grinning mouth. The cup filled instant-ly and slopped over, drenching my shirt-front. I drained it at a gulp. The wine was strong and good, though tast-ing heavily of resin like other antique vintages.

Before I could raise the cup for a second draft, it seemed that a flash of lightning, together with a vio-lent wind, leapt horizontally across the hall from the open doorway. My face was fanned as if by the pass-ing of a god. Forgetting the danger, I raised my eyes toward Medusa, over whom the lightning hovered and swung back with the movement of a weapon about to strike.

I remember my mythology. It was indeed the sword of Perseus, who wore Mercury's winged shoes and the helmet loaned by Hades which made him invisible. (Why the sword alone should be perceptible to sight, no myth-maker has explained.) The sword fell, and the head of Medusa sprang from her seated body and rolled in a spatter of blood across the floor and into the pool where I stood petrified. It was a moment of pande-monium. The ducks and geese scattered, quacking, honking madly, and the sirens and Nereids fled shriek-ing. They dropped their mirrors as they went. The head sank with a great splash, then rose to the surface. I caught a sidelong flick of one dreadful agonized eye — -the left — as the head rolled over and soared from the water, its snaky locks caught in an unseen armored grip by the pursuing demigod. Then, Perseus and his victim were gone, with a last lightning flash of the sword, through the doorway where the nymphs had vanished.

I climbed from the reddening pool, too dazed to wonder why I stiff retained power of movement after meeting the Gorgon's eye. The slave-girls had disap-peared. The trunk of Medusa had fallen forward from its chair, upon which the harpies still perched.

Beside Medusa stood a beautiful winged white horse, dabbled from hoofs to mane with the blood that still ran from the fallen monster's neck. I knew

that it must be Pegasus, born of her decapitation according to myth.

Pegasus pranced lightly toward me, neighing in excellent Greek:

"We must go. The decrees of the gods have been fulfilled. I see that you are a stranger from another time and space. I will take you wherever you wish to go, or as near to it as possible."

Pegasus kneeled and I mounted him bareback, since he had been born without saddle or reins.

"Cling tightly to my mane. I will not unhorse you," he promised, "whatever the speed or altitude of our journey."

He trotted out through the doorway, spread his shin-ing wings on an orient dawn, and took off toward the reddening cirrus clouds. I turned my head a little later. An ocean lay behind us, far down, with raging bil-lows turned to mere ripples by distance. The lands of morning gleamed before us.

"To what period of time, and what region?" asked Pegasus above the rhythmic drumming of his wings.

"I came from a country known as America, in the 20th century," I replied, raising my voice to reach his ears through the thunder.

Pegasus bridled and almost stopped in mid-flight. -

"My prophetic insight forbids me to oblige you. I cannot visit the century, and, in particular, the country, that you name. Any poets who are born there- must do without me-must hoist themselves to inspiration by their own bootstraps, rather than by the steed of the Muses. If I ventured to land there, I should be im-pounded at once and my wings clipped. Later they would sell me for horse meat."

"You underrate their commercial acumen," I said. "They'd put you in a side-show and charge a stiff en-trance fee. You're well known, in a way. Your

name and picture are on sideboards at many gas-stations. A synonym for speed if nothing else.

"Anyway, there is little inducement for me to re-turn. I have been trying to drink myself out of it for years and decades. Why end up, as I will sooner or later, at the highly expensive mercy of doctors, hospitals and undertakers?"

"You are certainly sensible, will you indicate a place and period more to your liking?"

I mused awhile, reviewing all I could remember of both history and geography.

"Well," I decided at last, "some South Sea island might do, before the discovery by Captain Cook and the coming of the missionaries."

Pegasus began to accelerate his flight. Day and dark-ness shuttled by, sun, moon and stars were streaks above, and the regions below were blurred by inconceivable speed, so that I could not distinguish fertile from desert, land from water. We must have circled the earth innumerable times, through the birth and death of millenniums.

Gradually the speed of the winged horse decelerated. A cloudless sun became stable overhead. A balmy subtropic sea, full of green islands, rolled softly on all sides to the horizon.

Pegasus made an easy landing on the nearest island, and I slipped dizzily from his back.

"Good luck, he neighed. Then, stretching his wings once more, he soared toward the sun and disappeared with the suddenness of a time-machine.

Feeling that Pegasus had abandoned me in a rather summary fashion, I peered about at my surroundings. At first sight I had been left in an uninhabited isle, on a coral reef lined with untrodden grass and rimmed with pandanus and breadfruit trees.

Presently the foliage stiffed and several natives crept forth. They were elaborately tattooed and armed with wooden clubs studded with sharks' teeth. Judging from their gestures of fear and wonder, they had never seen a white man or a horse of any color, winged or un-winged. They dropped their clubs as they neared me, and pointed questioning fingers, a trifle shaky, at the skies where Pegasus had vanished.

"Think nothing of it," I said in my suavest and most reassuring tones. Remembering a vague religious up-bringing, I made the sign of benediction.

The savages grinned shyly, displaying an array of filed teeth only less formidable than the sharks' inci-sors and molars that decorated their clubs. Plainly they were losing their fear and making me welcome to the island. Their eyes appraised me with inscrutable bland-ness, like those of innocent children who expect some-one to feed them.

I am pencilling this account in a small notebook found in one of my pockets. Three weeks have passed since Pegasus left me among the cannibals. They have treated me well and have fattened me with all the abundance that the isle affords. With taro and roast pig, with breadfruit, cocoanuts, guavas, and many un-known delicious vegetables. I feel like a thanksgiving turkey.

How do I know they are cannibals? By human bones, hair, skin, piled or strewn about as animal remnants are in the neighborhood of slaughter-houses. Appar-ently they have moved their feasting places only when the bones got too thick. Bones of men, women, children, mixed with those of birds, pigs and small four—footed creatures. An untidy lot, even for anthropophagi.

The island is of small extent, perhaps no more than a mile in width by two in length. I have not learned its name and am uncertain to which of the many far-flung archipelagos it belongs. But I have picked up a few words of the soft, many-vowelled language — main-ly the names of foodstuffs.

They have domiciled me in a clean enough hut, which I occupy alone. None of the women, who are comely enough and quite friendly, has offered to share it with me. Perhaps this is for therapeutic reasons — perhaps they fear I might lose weight if I were to indulge in amorous activity. Anyway, I am relieved. AR women are cannibalistic, even if they don't literally tear the meat from one's bones. They devour time, money, attention, and give treachery in return. I have long learned to avoid them. Long ago my devotion to drink became single-hearted. Liquor at least has been faithful to me. It requires no eloquence, no flattery, no blandishments. To me, at least, it makes no false promises.

I wish Pegasus would return and carry me off again. Truly I made a chuckle-headed choice in selecting one of the South Sea isles. I am weaponless; and I don't swim very well. The natives could overtake me quickly if I stole one of their outrigger canoes. I never was much good at boating even in my college days. Barring a miracle, I am destined to line the gizzards of these savages.

The last few days they have allowed me all the palm-wine I can drink. Perhaps they believe it will improve the flavor. I swig it frequently and lie on my back staring at the bright blue skies where only parrots and seabirds pass. I cannot get drunk and delirious enough to imagine that any of them is the winged horse. And I curse them in five languages, in English, Greek, French, Spanish, Latin, because they cannot be mistaken for Pegasus. Perhaps, if I had plenty of high-proof Scotch and Bourbon, I could walk out of this particular time-plexus into something quite, different ... as I did from modern New York into the ancient palace of Medusa.

Another entry, which I hardly expected to make. I don't know the day, the month, the year, the century. But according to these misguided islanders — and mine — it was pot day. They brought out the pot at mid-morning: a huge vessel of blackening battered bronze inscribed around the sides with Chinese characters. It must have been left here by some far-strayed or storm-wrecked junk. I don't like to conjecture the fate of the crew, if any survived and came ashore. Being boiled in their own cooking-pot must have been a curious irony.

To get back to my tale. The natives had set out huge quantities of palm-wine in crude earthen vessels, and they and I were getting ginned up as fast as we could. I wanted a share of the funeral feast, even if I was slated to afford the piece-de-resistance.

Presently there was a lot of jabbering and gesticulating. The chief, a big burly ruffian, was giving orders. A number of the natives scattered into the woods, and some returned with vessels full of springwater which they emptied into the pot, while others piled dry grass and well-seasoned fagots around its base. A fire was started with flint and an old piece of metal which looked like the broken-off end of a Chinese sword-blade. It was probably a relic of the same junk that had provided the pot.

I hoped that the user had broken it only after laying out a long file of cannibals.

In a rather futile effort to raise my spirits, I began to sing the Marseillaise, and followed it with Lulu and various other bawdies. Presently the water was bubbling, and the cooks turned their attention to me. They seized me, stripped off my ragged clothes, and trussed me up adroitly, knees to chest and arms doubled at the sides, with some sort of tough vegetable fiber. Then, singing what was doubtless a cannibal chanty, they picked me up and heaved me into the pot, where I landed with a splash and settled more or less upright in a sitting position.

At least, I had thought they would knock me on the head beforehand rather than boil me like a live lobster.

In my natural fright and confusion it took me some moments to realize that the water, which had seemed scalding hot, was in reality no warmer to the epidermis than my usual morning tub. In fact it was quite agreeable. Judging by the violence with which it bubbled beneath my chin, it was not likely to grow much hotter.

This anomaly of sensation puzzled me mightily. By all rights I should be suffering agonies. Then, like a flash of lightning, I remembered the passing

sidelong flick of Medusa's left eye and the apparent lack of effect at the time. Her glance had in no way petrified me—but in some strange fashion it must have tough-ened my skin, which was now impervious to the normal effects of heat; and perhaps also to other phenomena. Perhaps, to cause the mythic petrification, it was nec-essary to sustain the regard of both the Gorgon's eyes.

These things are mysteries. Anyway, it was as if I had been given a flexible asbestos hide. But, curiously enough, my keenness of touch was unimpaired.

Through the veering smoke I saw that the cooks were coming back, laden with basket of vegetables. They were all getting drunker; and the chief was the drunkest. He lurched about, waving his war-club, while the others emptied their baskets into the kettle. Only then did they perceive that things had not proceeded according to culinary rules. Their eyes grew rounder and they yelled with surprise to see me g at them from the steaming ebullient contents. One of the cooks made a pass at my throat with a stone knife—and the knife broke in the middle. Then the chief stepped for-ward, shouting ferociously, and hoisted his toothed war—club.

I ducked under water and to one side. The club descended, making a huge splash—and missed me. Judging from their outcries, some of the cooks must have been scalded by the flying water. The chief fared worse. Over-balanced by that mighty stroke, he lurched against the pot, which careened heavily, spilling much of the contents. Using my weight repeatedly against the side, I managed to overthrow the vessel, and rolled out in a torrent of water, smoke, and vegetables.

The chief, yowling from what must have been third—degree burns, was trying to extricate himself from the brands and embers into which he had fallen. Limping, he got to his feet after several vain attempts and stag-gered away. The other cooks, and the expectant feast-ers, had already decamped. I had the field to myself.

Looking around, I noticed the broken-off sword which had been used in striking fire, and levered my-self in its direction. Holding it clumsily, I

contrived to work my wrist-fetters against the edge. The blade was still fairly sharp and I soon had my hands free. After that it was no trick to untruss my legs.

The wine had worn off but there were many unemp-tied pots of it still around. I collected two or three, and put some of the spilled vegetables to roast amid the glowing coals. Then, waiting comfortably for the can-nibals' return, I began to laugh.

I was washing down a well-baked taro root with the' second pot of wine when the first of them crawled out of the woods and fell prostrate before me. I learned afterwards that they were deprecating my anger and were very sorry they had not recognized me as a god.

They have christened me in their own tongue. The—One-who-cannot-be-cooked.

I wish that Pegasus would return.

THE ABOMINATIONS OF YONDO

The sand of the desert of Yondo is not as the sand of other deserts; for Yondo lies nearest of all to the world's rim; and strange winds, blowing from a pit no astronomer may hope to fathom, have sown its ruinous fields with the gray dust of corroding planets, the black ashes of extinguished suns. The dark, orblike mountains which rise from its wrinkled and pitted plain are not all its own, for some are fallen asteroids half-buried in that abysmal sand. Things have crept in from nether space, whose incursion is forbid by the gods of all proper and well-ordered lands; but there are no such gods in Yondo, where live the hoary genii of stars abolished and decrepit demons left homeless by the destruction of antiquated hells.

It was noon of a vernal day when I came forth from that interminable cactus-forest in which the Inquisitors of Ong had left me, and saw at my feet the gray beginnings of Yondo. I repeat, it was noon of a vernal day; but in that fantastic wood I had found no token or memory of a spring; and the swollen, fulvous, dying and half-rotten growths through which I had pushed my way, were like no other cacti, but bore shapes of abomination scarcely to be described. The very air was heavy with stagnant odors of decay; and leprous lichens mottled the black soil and russet vegetation with increasing frequency. Pale-green vipers lifted their heads from prostrate cactus-boles and watched me with eyes of bright ochre that had no lids or pupils. These things had disquieted me for hours past; and I did not like the monstrous fungi, with hueless stems and nodding heads of poisonous mauve, which grew from the sodden lips of fetid tarns; and the sinister ripples spreading and fading on the yellow water at my approach were not reassuring to one whose nerves were still taut from unmentionable tortures. Then, when even the blotched and sickly cacti became more sparse and stunted, and rills of ashen sand crept in among them, I began to suspect how great was the hatred my heresy had aroused in the priests of Ong and to guess the ultimate malignancy of their vengeance.

I will not detail the indiscretions which had led me, a careless stranger from far-off lands, into the power of those dreadful magicians and mysteriarchs who serve the lion-headed Ong. These indiscretions, and the particulars of my arrest, are painful to remember; and least of all do I like to remember the racks of dragon-gut strewn with powdered adamant, on which men are stretched naked; or that unlit room with six-inch windows near the sill, where bloated corpse worms crawled in by hundreds from a neighboring catacomb. Sufficient to say that, after expending the resources of their frightful fantasy, my inquisitors had borne me blindfolded on camel-back for incomputable hours, to leave me at morning twilight in that sinister forest. I was free, they told me, to go whither I would; and in token of the clemency of Ong, they gave me a loaf of coarse bread and a leathern bottle of rank water by way of provision. It was at noon of the same day that I came to the desert of Yondo.

So far, I had not thought of turning back, for all the horror of those rotting cacti, or the evil things that dwelt among them. Now, I paused knowing the abominable legend of the land to which I had come; for Yondo is a place where few have ventured wittingly and of their own accord. Fewer still have returned - babbling of unknown horrors and strange treasure; and the life-long palsy which shakes their withered limbs, together with the mad gleam in their starting eyes beneath whitened brows and lashes, is not an incentive for others to follow. So it was that I hesitated on the verge of those ashen sands, and felt the tremor of a new fear in my wrenched vitals. It was dreadful to go on, and dreadful to go back, for I felt sure that the priests had made provision against the latter contingency. So after a little I went forward, singing at each step in loathly softness, and followed by certain long-legged insects that I had met among the cacti. These insects were the color of a week-old corpse and were as large as tarantulas; but when I turned and trod upon the foremost, a mephitic stench arose that was more nauseous even than their color. So, for the nonce, I ignored them as much as possible.

Indeed, such things were minor horrors in my predicament. Before me, under a huge sun of sickly scarlet, Yondo reached interminable as the land of a hashish-dream against the black heavens. Far-off, on the utmost rim,

were those orb-like mountains of which I have told; but in between were awful blanks of gray desolation, and low, treeless hills like the backs of half-buried monsters. Struggling on, I saw great pits where meteors had sunk from sight; and divers-colored jewels that I could not name glared or glistened from the dust. There were fallen cypresses that rotted by crumbling mausoleums, on whose lichen blotted marble fat chameleons crept with royal pearls in their mouths. Hidden by the low ridges, were cities of which no stela remained unbroken - immense and immemorial cities lapsing shard by shard, atom by atom, to feed infinities of desolation. I dragged my torture-weakened limbs over vast rubbish-heaps that had once been mighty temples; and fallen gods frowned in rotting pasammite or leered in riven porphyry at my feet. Over all was an evil silence, broken only by the satanic laughter of hyenas, and the rustling of adders in thickets of dead thorn or antique gardens given to the perishing nettle and fumitory.

Topping one of the many mound-like ridges, I saw the waters of a weird lake, unfathomably dark and green as malachite, and set with bars of profulgent salt. These waters lay far beneath me in a cup-like hollow; but almost at my feet on the wave-worn slopes were heaps of that ancient salt; and I knew that the lake was only the bitter and ebbing dregs of some former sea. Climbing down, I came to the dark waters, and began to lave my hands; but there was a sharp and corrosive sting in that immemorial brine, and I desisted quickly preferring the desert dust that had wrapped me about like a slow shroud. Here I decided to rest for a little; and hunger forced me to consume part of the meager and mocking fare with which I had been provided by the priests. It was my intention to push on if my strength would allow and reach the lands that lie to the north of Yondo. Theses lands are desolate, indeed, but their desolation is of a more usual than that of Yondo; and certain tribes of nomads have been known to visit them occasionally. If fortune favored me, I might fall in with one of these tribes.

The scant fare revived me, and, for the first time in weeks of which I had lost all reckoning, I heard the whisper of a faint hope. The corpse-colored insects had long since ceased to follow me; and so far despite the eeriness of the sepulchral silence and the mounded dust of timeless ruin, I had met

nothing half so horrible as those insects. I began to think that the terrors of Yondo were somewhat exaggerated. It was then that I heard a diabolic chuckle on the hillside above me. The sound began with a sharp abruptness that startled me beyond all reason, and continued endlessly, never varying its single note, like the mirth of an idiotic demon. I turned, and saw the mouth of a dark cave fanged with green stalactites, which I had not perceived before. The sound appeared to come from within this cave.

With a fearful intentness I stared at the black opening. The chuckle grew louder, but for awhile I could see nothing. At last I caught a whitish glimmer in the darkness; then, with all the rapidity of nightmare, a monstrous Thing emerged. It had a pale, hairless, egg-shaped body, large as that of a gravid she-goat; and this body was mounted on nine long wavering legs with many flanges, like the legs of some enormous spider. The creature ran past me to the water's edge; and I saw that there were no eyes in its oddly sloping face; but two knife-like ears rose high above its head, and a thin, wrinkled snout hung down across its mouth, whose flabby lips, parted in that eternal chuckle, revealed rows of bats' teeth. It drank acidly of the bitter lake then, with thirst satisfied, it turned and seemed to sense my presence, for the wrinkled snout rose and pointed toward me, sniffing audibly. Whether the creature would have fled, or whether it meant to attack me, I do not know; for I could bear the sight no longer but ran with trembling limbs amid the massive boulders and great bars of salt along the lakeshore.

Utterly breathless I stopped at last, and saw that I was not pursued, I sat down, still trembling, in the shadow of a boulder. But I was to find little respite, for now began the second of those bizarre adventures which forced me to believe all the mad legends I had heard. More startling even than that diabolic chuckle was the scream that rose at my very elbow from the salt-compounded sand - the scream of a woman possessed by some atrocious agony, or helpless in the grip of devils. Turning, I beheld a veritable Venus, naked in a white perfection that could fear no scrutiny, but immersed to her navel in the sand. Her terror-widened eyes implored me and her lotus hands reached out with beseeching gesture. I sprang to her side - and touched a marble statue, whose carven lids were drooped in some enigmatic dream of

dead cycles, and whose hands were buried with the lost loveliness of hips and thighs. Again I fled, shaken with a new fear; and again I heard the scream of a woman's agony. But this time I did not turn to see the imploring eyes and hands.

Up the long slope to the north of that accursed lake stumbling over boulders of basanite and ledges that were sharp with verdigris-covered metals; floundering in pits of salt, on terraces wrought by the receding tide in ancient aeons. I fled as a man flies from dream to baleful dream of some cacodemoniacal night. At whiles there was a cold whisper in my ear, which did not come from the wind of my flight; and looking back as I reached one of the upper terraces, I perceived a singular shadow that ran pace by pace with my own. This shadow was not the shadow of man nor ape nor any known beast; the head was too grotesquely elongated, the squat body too gibbous ; and I was unable to determine whether the shadow possessed five legs, or whether what appeared to be the fifth was merely a tail.

Terror lent me new strength, and I had reached the hilltop when I dared to look back again. But still the fantastic shadow kept pace by pace with mine; and now I caught a curious and utterly sickening odor, foul as the odor of bats who have hung in a charnel-house amid the mold of corruption. I ran for leagues, while the red sun slanted above the asteroidal mountains to the west; and the weird shadow lengthened with mine but kept always at the same distance behind me.

An hour before sunset I came to a circle of small pillars that rose miraculously unbroken amid ruins that were like a vast pile of potsherds. As I passed among these pillars I heard a whimper, like the whimper of some fierce animal, between rage and fear, and saw that the shadow had not followed me within the circle. I stopped and waited, conjecturing at once that I had found a sanctuary my unwelcome familiar would not dare to enter; and in this the action of the shadow confirmed me, the Thing hesitated, then ran about the circle of columns pausing often between them; and, whimpering all the while, at last went away and disappeared in the desert toward the setting sun.

For a full half hour I did not dare to move; then, the imminence of night, with all its probabilities of fresh terror, urged me to push on as far as I could to the north. For I was now in the very heart of Yondo where demons or phantoms might dwell who would not respect the sanctuary of the unbroken columns. Now, as I toiled on, the sunlight altered strangely; for the red orb nearing the mounded horizon, sank and smouldered in a belt of miasmal haze, where floating dust from all the shattered fanes and necropoli of Yondo was mixed with evil vapors coiling skyward from black enormous gulfs lying beyond the utmost rim of the world. In that light, the entire waste, the rounded mountains, the serpentine hills, the lost cities, were drenched with phantasmal and darkening scarlet.

Then, out of the north, where shadows mustered, there came a curious figure C a tall man fully caparisoned in chain-mail - or, rather, what I assumed to be a man. As the figure approached me, clanking dismally at each step on the sharded ground, I saw that its armor was of brass mottled with verdigris; and a casque of the same metal furnished with coiling horns and a serrate comb, rose high above its head. I say its head, for the sunset was darkening, and I could not see clearly at any distance; but when the apparition came abreast, I perceived that there was no face beneath the brows of the bizarre helmet whose empty edges were outlined for a moment against the smouldering light. Then the figure passed on, still clanking dismally and vanished.

But on its heels ere the sunset faded, there came a second apparition, striding with incredible strides and halting when it loomed almost upon me in the red twilight - the monstrous mummy of some ancient king still crowned with untarnished gold but turning to my gaze a visage that more than time or the worm had wasted. Broken swathings flapped about the skeleton legs, and above the crown that was set with sapphires and orange rubies, a black something swayed and nodded horribly; but, for an instant, I did not dream what it was. Then, in its middle, two oblique and scarlet eyes opened and glowed like hellish coals, and two ophidian fangs glittered in an ape-like mouth. A squat, furless, shapeless head on a neck of disproportionate extent leaned unspeakably down and whispered in the mummy's ear. Then, with one stride, the titanic lich took half the distance

between us, and from out the folds of the tattered sere-cloth a gaunt arm arose, and fleshless, taloned fingers laden with glowering gems, reached out and fumbled for my throat . . .

Back, back through aeons of madness and dread, in a prone, precipitate flight I ran from those fumbling fingers that hung always on the dusk behind me, back, back forever, unthinking, unhesitating, to all the abominations I had left; back in the thickening twilight toward the nameless and sharded ruins, the haunted lake, the forest of evil cacti, and the cruel and cynical inquisitors of Ong who waited my return.

THE BEAST OF AVEROIGNE

1. The Deposition of Brother Gerome

I, a poor scrivener and the humblest monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Perigon, have been asked by our abbot Theophile to write down this record of a strange evil that is still rampant, still unquelled. And, ere I have done writing, it may be that the evil shall come forth again from its lurking-place, and again be manifest.

We, the friars of Perigon, and all others who have knowledge of this thing, agree that its advent was coeval with the first rising of the red comet which still burns nightly, a flying balefire, above the moonless hills. Like Satan's rutilant hair, trailing on the wind of Gehenna as he hastens worldward, it rose below the [^]Dragon[^] [Lion] in early summer; and now it follows the Scorpion toward the western woods. Some say that the horror came from the comet, flying without wings to earth across the stars. And truly, before this summer of 1369, and the lifting of that red, disastrous scourge upon the heavens, there was no rumor or legend of such a thing in all Averoigne.

As for me, I must deem that the beast is a spawn of the seventh hell, a foulness born of the bubbling, flame-blent ooze; for it has no likeness to the beasts of earth, to the creatures of air and water. And the comet may well have been the fiery vehicle of its coming.

To me, for my sins and unworthiness, was it first given to behold the beast. Surely the sight thereof was a warning of those ways which lead to perdition: for on that occasion I had broken the rule of St. Benedict which forbids eating during a one-day's errand away from the monastery. I had tarried late, after bearing a letter from Theophile to the good priest of Ste. Zenobie, though I should have been back well before evensong. And also, apart from eating, I had drunk the mellow white wine of Ste. Zenobie with its kindly people. Doubtless because I had done these things, I met the nameless, night-born terror in the woods behind the abbey when I returned.

The day had vanished, fading unaware; and the long summer eve, without moon, had thickened to a still and eldritch darkness ere I approached the abbey postern. And hurrying along the forest path, I felt an eerie fear of the gnarled, hunchback oaks and their pit-deep shadows. And when I saw between their antic boughs the vengefully streaming fire of the new comet, which seemed to pursue me as I went, the goodly warmth of the wine died out and I began to regret my truancy. For I knew that the comet was a harbinger of ill, an omen of death and Satanry to come.

Now, as I passed among the ancient trees that tower thickly, growing toward the postern, I thought that I beheld a light from one of the abbey windows and was much cheered thereby. But, going on, I saw that the light was near at hand, beneath a lowering bough beside my path; and moreover, it moved as with the flitting of a restless fenfire, and was wholly dissimilar to the honest glow of a lamp, lantern or taper. And the light was of changeable color, being pale as a corposant, or ruddy as new-spilled blood, or green as the poisonous distillation that surrounds the moon.

Then, with ineffable terror, I beheld the thing to which the light clung like a hellish nimbus, moving as it moved, and revealing dimly the black abomination of head and limbs that were not those of any creature wrought by God. The horror stood erect, rising to the height of a tall man, and it moved with the swaying of a great serpent, and its members undulated as if they were boneless. The round black head, having no visible ears or hair, was thrust forward on a neck of snakish length. Two eyes, small and lidless, glowing hotly as coals from a wizard's brazier, were set low and near together in the [^]noseless[^] [formless] face above the serrate gleaming of bat-like teeth.

This much I saw, and no more, ere the thing went past me with the strange nimbus flaring from venomous green to a wrathful red. Of its actual shape, and the number of its limbs, I could form no just notion. It uttered no sound, and its motion was altogether silent. Running and slithering rapidly, it disappeared in the bough-black night, among the antique oaks; and I saw the hellish light no more.

I was nigh dead with fear when I reached the abbey and sought admittance at the postern. And the porter who came at last to admit me, after I had knocked many times, forbore to chide me for my tardiness when I told him of that which I had seen in the moonless wood.

On the morrow, I was called before Theophile, who rebuked me sternly for my breach of discipline, and imposed a penance of daylong solitude. Being forbidden to hold speech with the others, I did not hear till the second morn of the thing that was found before nones in the wood behind Perigon, where I had met the nameless beast.

The thing was a great stag which had been slain in some ungodly fashion, not by wolf or hunter or poacher. It was unmarked by any wound, other than a wide gash that had laid bare the spine from neck to tail; and the spine itself had been shattered and the white marrow sucked therefrom; but no other portion of the stag had been devoured. None could surmise the nature of the beast that slew and ravened in such a manner; but many, for the first time, began to credit my tale, which the abbot and the brothers had hitherto looked upon as a sort of drunken dream. Verily, they said, a creature from the Pit was abroad, and this creature had killed the stag and had sucked the marrow from its broken spine. And I, aghast with the recollection of that loathly vision, marveled at the mercy of God, which had permitted me to escape the doom of the stag.

None other, it seemed, had beheld the monster on that occasion; for all the monks, save me, had been asleep in the dormitory; and Theophile had retired early to his cell. But, during the nights that followed the slaying of the stag, the presence of this baleful thing was made manifest to all.

Now, night by night, the comet greatened, burning like an evil mist of blood and fire, while the stars bleached before it and terror shadowed the thoughts of men. And in our prayers, from prime to evensong, we sought to deprecate the unknown ills which the comet would bring in its train. And day by day, from peasants, priests, woodcutters and others who came to visit the abbey, we heard the tale of fearsome and mysterious depredations, similar in all ways to the killing of the stag.

Dead wolves were found with their chins laid open and the spinal marrow gone; and an ox and a horse were treated in like fashion. Then, it would seem, the beast grew bolder—or else it wearied of such humble prey as deer and wolves, horses and oxen.

At first, it did not strike at living men, but assailed the helpless dead like some foul eater of carrion. Two freshly buried corpses were found lying in the cemetery at Ste. Zenobie, where the thing had dug them from their graves and had laid open their vertebrae. In each case, only a little of the marrow had been eaten; but as if in rage or disappointment, the cadavers had been torn into shreds from crown to heel, and the tatters of their flesh were mixed inextricably with the rags of their cerements. From this, it would seem that only the spinal marrow of creatures newly killed was pleasing to the monster.

Thereafter the dead were not molested; but a grievous toll was taken from the living. On the night following the desecration of the graves, two charcoal-burners, who plied their trade in the forest at a distance of no more than a mile from Perigon, were slain foully in their hut. Other charcoal-burners, dwelling nearby, heard the shrill screams that fell to sudden silence; and peering fearfully through the chinks of their bolted doors, they saw anon in the grey starlight the departure of a black, obscenely glowing shape that issued from the hut. Not till dawn did they dare to verify the fate of their hapless fellows, who, they then discovered, had been served in the same manner as the wolves and other victims of the beast.

When the tale of this happening was brought to the abbey, Theophile called me before him and questioned me closely anent the apparition which I had encountered. He, like the others, had doubted me first, deeming that I was frightened by a shadow or by some furtive creature of the wood. But, after the series of atrocious maraudings, it was plain to all that a fiendish thing such as had never been fabled in Averoine, was abroad and ravening through the summer woods. And moreover it was plain that this thing was the same which I had beheld on the eve of my return from Ste. Zenobie.

Our good abbot was greatly exercised over this evil, which had chosen to manifest itself in the neighborhood of the abbey, and whose depredations were all committed within a five-hours' journey of Perigon. Pale from his over-strict austerities and vigils, with hollow cheeks and burning eyes, Theophile called me before him and made me tell my story over and over, listening as one who flagellates himself for a fancied sin. And though I, like all others, was deeply sensible of this hellish horror and the scandal of its presence, I marvelled somewhat at the godly wrath and indignation of our abbot, in whom blazed a martial ardor against the minions of Asmodai. "Truly," he said, "there is a great devil among us, that has risen with the comet from Malebolge. We, the monks of Perigon, must go forth with cross and holy water to hunt the devil in its hidden lair, which lies haply at our very portals."

So, on the afternoon of that same day, Theophile, together with myself and six others chosen for their hardihood, sallied forth from the abbey and made search of the mighty forest for miles around, entering with lifted crosses, by torchlight, the deep caves to which we came, but finding no fiercer thing than wolf or badger. Also, we searched the vaults of the ruined castle of Faussesflamms, which is said to be haunted by vampires. But nowhere could we trace the sable monster, or find any sign of its lairing.

Since then, the middle summer has gone by with nightly deeds of terror, beneath the blasting of the comet. Beasts, men, children, women, have been done to death by the monster, which, though seeming to haunt mainly the environs of the abbey, has ranged afield even to the shores of the river Isoile and the gates of La Frênaie and Ximes. And some have beheld the monster at night, a black and slithering foulness clad in changeable luminescence; but no man has ever beheld it by day.

Thrice has the horror been seen in the woods behind the abbey; and once, by full moonlight, a brother peering from his window descried it in the abbey garden, as it glided between the rows of peas and turnips, going toward the forest. And all agree that the thing is silent, uttering no sound, and is swifter in its motion than the weaving viper.

Much have these occurrences preyed on our abbot, who keeps ~to} his cell in unremitting prayer and vigil, and comes forth no longer, as was his wont, to dine and hold converse with the guests of the abbey. Pale and meager as a dying saint he grows, and a strange illness devours him as if with perpetual fever; and he mortifies the flesh till he totters with weakness. And we others, living in the fear of God, and abhorring the deeds of Satan, can only pray that the unknown scourge be lifted from the land, and pass with the passing of the comet.

[NOTE. Soon after the above deposition, Brother Gerome was found dead in his cell. His body was in the same condition, had been served in the same manner, as the other victims of the Beast.]

2. The Letter of Theophile to Sister Therèse

... To you, my sister in God as well as by consanguinity, I must ease my mind (if this be possible) by writing again of the dread thing that harbors close to Perigon: for this thing has struck once more within the abbey walls, coming in darkness and without sound or other ostent than the Phlegethonian luster that surrounds its body and members.

I have told you of the death of Brother Gerome, slain at evening, in his cell, while he was copying an Alexandrian manuscript. Now the fiend has become even bolder; for last night it entered the dormitory, where the brothers sleep in their robes, girded and ready to arise instantly. And without waking the others, on whom it must have cast a Lethean spell, it took Brother Augustin, slumbering on his pallet at the end of the row. And the fell deed was not discovered till daybreak, when the monk who slept nearest to Augustin awakened and saw his body, which lay face downward with the back of the robe and the flesh beneath a mass of bloody tatters.

On this occasion, the Beast was not beheld by anyone; but at other times, full often, it has been seen around the abbey; and its craftiness and hardihood are beyond belief, except as those of an arch-devil. And I know

not where the horror will end; for exorcisms and the sprinkling of holy water at all doors and windows have failed to prevent the intrusion of the Beast; and God and Christ and all the holy Saints are deaf to our prayers.

Of the terror laid upon Averoigne by this thing, and the bale and mischief it has wrought outside the abbey, I need not tell, since all this will have come to you as a matter of common report. But here, at Perigon, there is much that I would not have rumored publicly, lest the good fame of the abbey should suffer. I deem it an humiliating thing, and a derogation and pollution of our sanctity, that a foul fiend should have ingress to our halls unhindered and at will.

There are strange whispers among the brothers, who believe that Satan himself has risen to haunt us. Several have met the Beast even in the chapel, where it has left an unspeakably blasphemous sign of its presence. Bolts and locks are vain against it; and vain is the lifted cross to drive it away. It comes and goes at its own choosing; and they who behold it flee in irrestrainable terror. None knows where it will strike next; and there are those among the brothers who believe it menaces me, the elected abbot of Perigon; since many have seen it gliding along the hall outside my cell. And Brother Constantin, the cellarer, who returned late from a visit to Vyones not long ago, swears that he saw it by moonlight as it climbed the wall toward that window of my cell which faces the great forest. And seeing Constantin, the thing dropped to the ground like a huge ape and vanished among the trees.

All, it would seem, save me, have beheld the monster. And now, my sister, I must confess a strange thing, which above all else would attest the influential power of Hell in this matter, and the hovering of the wings of Asmodai about Perigon.

Each night, since the coming of the comet and the Beast, I have retired early to my cell, with the intention of spending the nocturnal hours in vigil and prayer, as I am universally believed to do. And each night a stupor falls upon me as I kneel before Christ on the silver crucifix; and oblivion steps my senses in its poppy; and I lie without dreams on the cold floor till dawn.

Of that which goes on in the abbey I know nothing; and all the brothers might be done to death by the Beast, and their spines broken and sucked as is its invariable fashion, without my knowledge.

Haircloth have I worn, and thorns and thistle-burs have I strewn on the floor, to awake me from this evil and ineluctable slumber that is like the working of some Orient drug. But the thorns and thistles are as a couch of paradisaal ease, and I feel them not till dawn. And dim and confused are my senses when I awaken; and deep languor thralls my limbs. And day by day a lethal weakness grows upon me, which all ascribe to saintly pernoctations of prayer and austerity.

Surely I have become the victim of a spell, and am holden by a baleful enchantment while the Beast is abroad with its hellish doings. Heaven, in its inscrutable wisdom, punishing me for what sin I know not, has delivered me utterly to this bondage and has thrust me down the sloughs of a Stygian despair.

Ever I am haunted by an eerie notion, that the Beast comes nightly to earth from the red comet which passes like a fiery wain above Averoigne; and by day it returns to the comet, having eaten its fill of that provender for which it seeks. And only with the comet's fading will the horror cease to harry the land and infest Perigon. But I know not if this thought is madness, or a whisper from the Pit.

Pray for me, Therèse, in my bewitchment and my despair: for God has abandoned me, and the yoke of hell has somehow fallen upon me; and naught can I do to defend the abbey from this evil. And I, in turn, pray that such things may touch you not nor approach you in the quiet cloisters of the convent at Ximes

3. The Story of Luc le Chaudronnier

Old age, like a moth in some fading arras, will gnaw my memories oversoon, as it gnaws the memories of all men. Therefore I write this record of the true origin and slaying of that creature known as the Beast of Averoigne. And when I have ended the writing, the record shall be sealed in a brazen box, and that box be set in a secret chamber of my house at Ximes, so that no man shall learn the dreadful verity of this matter till many years and decades have gone by. Indeed, it were not well for such evil prodigies to be divulged while any who took part in the happening are still on the earthward side of Purgatory. And at present the truth is known only to me and to certain others who are sworn to maintain secrecy.

The ravages of the Beast, however, are common knowledge, and have become a tale with which to frighten children. Men say that it slew fifty people, night by night, in the summer of 1369, devouring in each case the spinal marrow. It ranged mostly about the abbey of Perigon and to Ximes and Ste. Zenobie and La Fr~naie. Its nativity and lairing-place were mysteries that none could unravel; and church and state were alike powerless to curb its maraudings, so that a dire terror fell upon the land and people went to and fro as in the shadow of death.

From the very beginning, because of my own commerce with occult things and with the spirits of darkness, the baleful Beast was the subject of my concern. I knew that it was no creature of earth or of the terrene hells, but had come with the flaming comet from ulterior space; but regarding its character and attributes and genesis, I could learn no more at first than any other. Vainly I consulted the stars and made use of geomancy and necromancy; and the familiars whom I interrogated professed themselves ignorant, saying that the Beast was altogether alien and beyond the ken of sublunar devils.

Then I bethought me of the ring of Eibon, which I had inherited from my fathers, who were also wizards. The ring had come down, it was said, from ancient Hyperborea; and it was made of a redder gold than any that the earth yields in latter cycles, and was set with a great purple gem, somber and smouldering, whose like is no longer to be found. And in the gem an

antique demon was held captive, a spirit from pre-human worlds and ages, which would answer the interrogation of sorcerers.

So, from a rarely opened casket, I brought out the ring of Eibon and made such preparations as were needful for the questioning of the demon. And when the purple stone was held inverted above a small brazier filled with hotly burning amber, the demon made answer, speaking in a voice that was like the shrill singing of fire. It told me the origin of the Beast, which belonged to a race of stellar devils that had not visited the earth since the foundering of Atlantis; and it told me the attributes of the Beast, which, in its own proper form, was invisible and intangible to men, and could manifest itself only in a fashion supremely abominable. Moreover, it informed me of a method by which the Beast could be banished, if overtaken in a tangible shape. And even to me, the student of darkness [and evil], the revelations were a source of horror and surprise.

Musing on these dark matters, I waited among my books and braziers and alembics, for the stars had warned me that my intervention would be required in good time.

Toward the end of August, when the great comet was beginning to decline a little, there occurred the lamentable death of Sister Therèse, killed by the Beast in her cell at the Benedictine convent of Ximes. On this occasion, the Beast was plainly seen by late passers as it ran down the convent wall by moonlight from a window; and others met it in the shadowy streets or watched it climb the city ramparts, running like a monstrous beetle or spider on the sheer stone as it fled from Ximes to regain its hidden lair.

To me, following the death of Therèse, there came privily the town marshal, together with a priest from the household of the Bishop of Ximes. And the two, albeit with palpable hesitation, begged my advice and assistance in the laying of the Beast.

"You, Messire le Chaudronnier," they said, "are reputed to know the arcanic arts of sorcery, and the spells that summon or dismiss evil demons and other spirits. Therefore, in dealing with this devil, it may be that you shall

succeed where all others have failed. Not willingly do we employ you in the matter, since it is not seemly for the church and the law to ally themselves with wizardry. But the need is desperate, lest the demon should take other victims; and in return for your aid, we can promise you a goodly reward of gold and a guarantee of lifelong immunity from all inquisition and prosecution which your doings might otherwise invite. The Bishop of Ximes, and the Archbishop of Vyones, are privy to this offer, which must remain secret."

"I ask no reward," I replied, "if it be in my power to rid Averoine of this scourge. But you have set me a difficult task, and I must prepare myself for the undertaking, in which I shall require certain aid."

"All assistance that we can give you shall be yours to command," they said. "Men-at-arms shall attend you, if need be; and all doors shall be opened at your request. We have consulted Theophile, the abbot of Perigon, and the grief-smitten brother of the lately slain Therèse, who is most zealous for the laying of the fiend, and will admit you to the abbey. The horror seems to center thereabout, and two of the monks have been done to death, and the abbot himself, it is rumored, has been haunted by the Beast. Therefore, it may be that you will wish to visit Perigon."

I reflected briefly, and said:

"Go now, but send to me, an hour before sunset, two men-at-arms with horses and a third steed; and let the men be chosen for their valor and discretion: for this very night I shall visit the abbey."

Now, when the priest and the marshal had gone, I spent several hours in making ready for my journey. It was necessary, above all other things, to compound a certain rare powder that had been recommended by the demon in the purple gem; for only by the casting of this powder could the Beast be driven away before its time. The ingredients of the powder were named in the Book of Eibon, that manual written by an old Hyper-borean wizard, who in his day had dealt with ultra-mundane spirits akin to the demon of the comet; and had also been the owner of the ring.

Having compounded the powder, I stored it in a bag of viper-skin. And soon after I had finished my preparations, the two men-at-arms and the horses came to my house, as had been stipulated.

The men were stout and tested warriors, clad in chain-mail, and carrying spears and swords. I mounted the third horse, a black and spirited mare, and we rode forth from Ximes toward Perigon, taking a direct and little-used way which ran for many miles through the werewolf-haunted forest.

My companions were taciturn, speaking only in brief answer to some question; and this pleased me, for I knew that they would maintain a discreet silence regarding that which might occur before dawn. Swiftly we rode, while the sun sank in a redness as of welling blood among the tall trees; and the darkness wove its thickening webs from bough to bough, closing upon us like some inextricable net of death and evil. Deeper we went, into the brooding woods; and even I, the master of sorceries, trembled a little at the knowledge of all that was abroad in the darkness.

Undelayed and unmolested, however, we came to the abbey at late moonrise, when all the monks, except the aged porter, had retired to their dormitory. The porter, who had received word of our coming, would have admitted us; but this, as it happened, was no part of my plan. Saying I had reason to believe that the Beast would re-enter the abbey that very night, I told the porter my intention of waiting outside the walls to intercept it, and merely asked him to accompany us in a tour of the building's exterior, so that he could point out the various rooms. This he did, and during the course of the tour, he indicated a certain high window in the second story as being that of the abbot Theophile's chamber. The window faced the forest, and I remarked the abbot's rashness in leaving it open. This, the porter told me, was his invariable habit. Behind the window we could see the glimmering of a taper, as if the abbot were keeping late vigil.

We had committed our horses to the porter's care. After he had conducted us around the abbey and had left us, we returned to the space beneath Theophile's window and began our long watch in silence.

Pale and hollow as the face of a corpse, the moon rose higher, swimming above the somber oaks and pines, and pouring a spectral silver on the grey stone of the abbey walls. In the west the comet flared among the lusterless Signs, veiling the lifted sting of the Scorpion as it sank.

We waited hour by hour in the shortening shadow of a high pine, where none could see us from the abbey. When the moon had passed over, falling westward, the shadow began to lengthen toward the wall. All was mortally still, and we saw no movement, apart from the slow changing of the light and shade. Half-way between midnight and dawn, the taper went out in Theophile's cell, as if it had burned to the socket; and thereafter the room remained dark.

Unquestioning, with ready spears, the two men-at-arms companioned me in that vigil. Well they knew the demonian terror which they might face before dawn; but there was no trace of trepidation in their bearing. And knowing much that they could not know, I held in my hands for instant use the bag of viper-skin that contained the Hyperborean powder.

The men stood nearer than I to the forest, facing it perpetually according to a strict order that I had given. But nothing stirred in the fretted gloom; and the skies grew paler, as if with morning twilight. Then, an hour before sunrise, when the shadow of the great pine had reached the wall and was climbing toward Theophile's window, there came the thing which I had anticipated. Very suddenly it came, and with no warning of its nearness, a horror of hellish red light, swift as a kindling, windblown flame, that leapt from the forest gloom and sprang upon us where we stood stiff and weary from our night-long vigil.

One of the men-at-arms was borne to the ground, and I saw above him, in a floating redness as of blood, the black and serpentine form of the Beast. A round and snakish head, without ears or nose, was tearing at the man's armor with sharp innumerable teeth, and I heard the teeth grate and clash on the linked iron as I stepped forward and flung the powder of Eibon at the Beast. The second man-at-arms, undaunted, would have assailed it with his spear, but this I forbade.

The floating powder, fine as a dust of mummia, seemed to dim the bloody light as it fell; and the Beast relinquished the fallen man, writhing away like a burnt serpent from the fire. Its members and body were loathfully convulsed; and the thing seemed to change horribly beneath our gaze, undergoing an incredible metamorphosis. Moment by moment it took on the wavering similitude of man, like a werewolf that returns from his beasthood; and the red light grew dimmer, and the unclean blackness of its flesh appeared to flow and swirl, assuming the weft of cloth, and becoming the folds of a dark robe and cowl such as are worn by the Benedictines. Then, from the cowl, a face began to peer, glimmering pale and thin in the shadow; and the thing covered its face with sooty claws that were turning into hands, and shrank away from me as I pressed upon it, sprinkling it with the remainder of the powder.

Now I had driven it against the abbey wall; and there, with a wild, despairing cry that was half-human, half-demoniac, the thing turned from me and clawed frantically at the gray stone as if it would climb toward the abbot's window in that monstrous fashion that had been its wont. Almost, for a breath, it seemed to run upward, hanging to the wall like a bat or a great beetle. But the change had progressed too far, and it dropped back in the shadow of a pine, and tottering strangely as if with sudden mortal weakness, fell to the ground and lay huddled in its monkish garments like a black night-bird with broken vans.

The rays of the gibbous moon, sifting thinly through the boughs, lay cold and cadaverous on the dead face; though the body was immersed in shadow. And the face, even as I had expected, was that of the abbot Theophile, who had once been pointed out to me in Ximes. Already the peace of death was upon him; and horror had left no sign on the shut eyelids and the sealed lips; and there was no mark on the worn and haggard cheeks, other than that which might come from the saintly rigor of prolonged austerities.

The man-at-arms who had been struck down by the Beast was unharmed, though sorely bruised beneath his mail. He and his fellow stood beside me, saying naught; and I knew that they had recognized the dead abbot. So, while the moon grew grey with the nearness of dawn, I made them swear an

awful oath of secrecy, and enjoined them to bear faithful witness to the statement I must make before the monks of Perigon.

Then, having settled this matter, so that the good renown of the holy Theophile should rest unharmed, we aroused the porter and acquainted him with the abbot's lamentable death. And we told this story, averring that the Beast had come upon us unaware, and had gained the abbot's cell before we could prevent it, and had come forth again, carrying Theophile with its snakish members as if to bear him away to the sunken comet. Then, by means of a wizard powder, I had routed the unclean Beast, compelling it to relinquish its prey. And the thing had vanished in a cloud of sulphurous fire and vapor; but Theophile had died from the horror of his plight while the Beast was descending the wall. His death, I said, was a true martyrdom, and would not be in vain: the Beast would no longer plague the country or bedevil Perigon, since the use of Hyperborean powder was a sure exorcism.

This tale was accepted by the Brothers, who grieved mightily for their good abbot. Indeed, the tale was true enough in its fashion, for Theophile had been innocent and was wholly ignorant of the foul change that had come upon him nightly in his cell, and the deeds that were done by the Beast through his loathfully transfigured body. Each night the thing had come from the comet to assuage its hellish hunger; and being otherwise impalpable and powerless, it had used the abbot for its energumen, moulding his flesh in the image of some obscene monster from beyond the stars.

After Theophile's death, the Beast was seen no more in Averoigne; and the murderous deeds were not repeated. And in time the comet passed to other heavens, fading slowly; and the black terror it had wrought became a varying legend, even as all other bygone things. And they who read this record in future ages will believe it not, saying that no demon or malign spirit could ever have prevailed upon true holiness. Indeed, it were well that none should believe the story: for strange abominations pass evermore between earth and moon and athwart the galaxies; and the gulf is haunted by that which it were madness for man to know. Unnameable things have

come to us in alien horror, and shall come again. And the evil of the stars is not as the evil of earth.

THE BRONZE IMAGE

It was a small bronze image of the God Ganesha, the elephant-headed, who is the [Hindu] deity of wisdom, and it stood on my writing desk. I had picked it up at an auction, it having formed part of a large collection which the owner, owing to financial embarrassment, had been compelled to sell. (The price was ridiculously low, there being no competitor, and I left thinking that I had made a bargain.)

The image was of Benares workmanship, and Allah alone knew how old. Also it was just the size for a paper-weight, and quite appropriate.

Holden dropped in about a week later. He is an old friend of mine—a grave, reticent sort of man. We had conversed for some time, when he suddenly caught sight of the image, and starting violently, cried out in amazement.

"Where did you get the Ganesha, Lane?" he asked. I told him.

"The last time I saw that image," he said, "was in Benares."

"I was not aware of your previous acquaintance with my paperweight," said I. Looking at him, I saw that he was deeply absorbed in thought.

"Well," he said finally, "I see that you are anxiously awaiting the story." He then proceeded to tell it as follows . . .

While at Calcutta, two years ago, I was employed by a certain firm, whose name I would prefer not to mention. I was sent up to Benares to negotiate with a Bengali merchant, one Lalji Chatterji. It was important that these negotiations be kept secret, at least for some time, and because of my previous experience with natives, and my general knowledge of India, I was chosen for the work.

So I went up to Benares, with full instructions and certain papers hidden securely in an inner pocket which were to be handed over to Lalji Chatterji.

My identity I deemed it best to conceal. So it was not in the person of Albert Holden that I reached Benares, but I stepped off the train as Fulsi Lal, and to all outward appearances a baboo of the deepest dye.

A baboo is an indigenous production; he belongs exclusively to India and there is nothing resembling him in all the world. From his spectacles to his English, which last is truly marvelous, he is individual.

How the son of Shaitan, who was representing a Central Indian Rajah, a gentleman much interested in my negotiations with Lalji Chatterji, discovered my identity I do not pretend to know. But it is a fact that he did.

When I arrived at Benares, and stepped out of a third class carriage into the teeming, seething station, I discovered a blue-turbaned, side whiskered, Rajput at my elbow, whose general description tallied essentially with that of a man whom I had been warned to avoid; namely, the agent of Baghwan Deos, the Central India Rajah.

Endeavors to lose this man in the crowd were in vain; it was not until I had traversed half the city of Benares and ended up eventually in the Monkey Temple, that I lost sight of the blue Turban and the side whiskers. I thanked Allah devoutly, emerged at the rear entrance, followed by all the monkeys in the neighborhood who evinced a most sociable disposition, and set off toward the Ganges.

Near the Burning-Ghats I again met Baghwan Deos's representative. We exchanged glances of mutual distrust. Once more I tried to shake my tenacious follower.

It was his mission I know, to keep the papers which I carried from reaching Lalji Chatterji. For certain reasons, into which I cannot here enter, Baghwan Deos did not wish this, and to this end had sent his agent to Benares. This man, I was aware, would not scruple at anything; he would kill me if necessary to gain possession of the papers.

About midday he was joined by another Rajput, and intuition told me that several more of these gentry probably lurked in the neighborhood of Lalji Chatterji's house, with instructions to prevent a certain specified baboo from entering. So, for a time, I abandoned hope of reaching the Bengali, and, entering a Khan, sat down to think.

The outcome of this was that Lalji Chatterji shortly afterwards received a letter instructing him to be at the Golden Temple at nine precisely the following morning. There he would receive some important papers from a Moslem horse-merchant.

At the appointed time he arrived. I had been waiting in the person of the aforesaid merchant about half-an-hour, and the local priests were getting suspicious. I had begun to fear that he had not received my letter, or that some accident had occurred, when Lalji Chatterji, a sleek, smiling, clean-shaven Bengali, entered, and looking about him sharply, at length perceived me. He came over, and we exchanged greetings.

"What a disguise, sahib," he said, "You are a perfect horse-trader; the very odor of the serai seems to emanate from you. Truly, I should never have suspected. And you have the papers? Ah, that is good. Now Baghwan Deos's emissaries can wait in vain. They have been hanging about my house for the last three days, following me everywhere, and making great nuisances of themselves. It was with the utmost difficulty that I this morning evaded their surveillance. But I know Benares like a book: her tangled streets are an open page and somewhere near Manikaranika Ghat two Rajputs are doubtless, at this moment, calling down curses on all Bengalis."

He laughed heartily, and I was about to pull the papers from my inner pocket when three men entered hastily, and seeing us, stopped. In one of them I recognized Baghwan Deos's agent. The other two I had not heretofore seen.

They looked at us keenly, and then about the temple in a furtive manner. The priests had disappeared. We were alone, and I felt a bit uneasy as to

what would happen. The Rajputs were looking ugly, and I saw that they were armed. I had unfortunately left my revolver at the Khan, and was without weapons. Lalji Chatterji was also unarmed.

The three men began to edge towards us, in a casual manner, and sought, though they doubtless knew that we were aware of their identity, to appear oblivious of our presence, and totally without intentions toward us.

At last the Rajah's agent drew a revolver, and advancing to within a few steps, leveled it in my direction. His two companions stood just behind him in case he should need assistance.

"Sahib," he said, "you have in your possession certain documents which I have been ordered to secure. I request that you hand them over to me. If you do not—"

Here his words were interrupted by the entrance of a priest. He dropped the revolver for a moment and hesitated. In that moment I looked about for some weapon, and perceiving a small bronze image of Ganesha in a niche in the temple wall, snatched it up, and hurled it straight at the Rajput's head. There was a dull impact, a shriek, and image and Rajput struck the ground together, the latter with a crushed skull.

There is very little more to tell. The other Rajputs upon perceiving the fall of their leader, rushed from the temple, and Lalji Chatterji and myself followed close upon their heels. In the resultant confusion we made our escape, and did not pause until we had reached the Ghats. There, after a hasty consultation, we parted, Lalji Chatterji and the papers leaving shortly for Cawnpore, where it was in intention to hide for some time, and myself, having reassumed the baboo disguise, for Calcutta.

Baghwan Deos, I believe, used all his influence to keep the affair quiet. The death of his agent set down officially as an accident, and attracted but little attention. The bronze image which you possess is the same that crushed the skull of the Rajah's agent.

THE CHAIN OF AFORGOMON

It is indeed strange that John Milwarp and his writings should have fallen so speedily into semi-oblivion. His books, treating of Oriental life in a somewhat flowery, romantic style, were popular a few months ago. But now, in spite of their range and penetration, their pervasive verbal sorcery, they are seldom mentioned; and they seem to have vanished unaccountably from the shelves of book-stores and libraries.

Even the mystery of Milwarp's death, baffling to both law and science, has evoked but a passing interest, an excitement quickly lulled and forgotten.

I was well acquainted with Milwarp over a term of years. But my recollection of the man is becoming strangely blurred, like an image in a misted mirror. His dark, half-alien personality, his preoccupation with the occult, his immense knowledge of Eastern life and lore, are things I remember with such effort and vagueness as attends the recovery of a dream. Sometimes I almost doubt that he ever existed. It is as if the man, and all that pertains to him, were being erased from human record by some mysterious acceleration of the common process of obliteration.

In his will, he appointed me his executor. I have vainly tried to interest publishers in the novel he left among his papers: a novel surely not inferior to anything he ever wrote. They say that his vogue has passed. Now I am publishing as a magazine story the contents of the diary kept by Milwarp for a period preceding his demise.

Perhaps, for the open-minded, this diary will explain the enigma of his death. It would seem that the circumstances of that death are virtually forgotten, and I repeat them here as part of my endeavor to revive and perpetuate Milwarp's memory.

Milwarp had returned to his house in San Francisco after a long sojourn in Indo-China. We who knew him gathered that he had gone into places

seldom visited by Occidentals. At the time of his demise he had just finished correcting the typescript of a novel which dealt with the more romantic and mysterious aspects of Burma.

On the morning of April 2nd, 1933, his housekeeper, a middle-aged woman, was startled by a glare of brilliant light which issued from the half-open door of Milwarp's study. It was as if the whole room were in flames. Horrified, the woman hastened to investigate. Entering the study, she saw her master sitting in an armchair at the table, wearing the rich, somber robes of Chinese brocade which he affected as a dressing-gown. He sat stiffly erect, a pen clutched unmoving in his fingers on the open pages of a manuscript volume. About him, in a sort of nimbus, glowed and flickered the strange light; and her only thought was that his garments were on fire.

She ran toward him, crying out a warning. At that moment the weird nimbus brightened intolerably, and the wan early dayshine, the electric bulbs that still burned to attest the night's labor, were alike blotted out. It seemed to the housekeeper that something had gone wrong with the room itself; for the walls and table vanished, and a great, luminous gulf opened before her; and on the verge of the gulf, in a seat that was not his cushioned armchair but a huge and rough-hewn seat of stone, she beheld her master stark and rigid. His heavy brocaded robes were gone, and about him, from head to foot, were blinding coils of pure white fire, in the form of linked chains. She could not endure the brilliance of the chains, and cowering back, she shielded her eyes with her hands. When she dared to look again, the weird glowing had faded, the room was as usual; and Milwarp's motionless figure was seated at the table in the posture of writing.

Shaken and terrified as she was, the woman found courage to approach her master. A hideous smell of burnt flesh arose from beneath his garments, which were wholly intact and without visible trace of fire. He was dead, his fingers clenched on the pen and his features frozen in a stare of tetanic agony. His neck and wrists were completely encircled by frightful burns that had charred them deeply. The coroner, in his examination, found that these burns, preserving an outline as of heavy links, were extended in long unbroken spirals around the arms and legs and torso. The burning was

apparently the cause of Milwarp's death: it was as if iron chains, heated to incandescence, had been wrapped about him.

Small credit was given to the housekeeper's story of what she had seen. No one, however, could suggest an acceptable explanation of the bizarre mystery. There was, at the time, much aimless discussion; but, as I have hinted, people soon turned to other matters. The efforts made to solve the riddle were somewhat perfunctory. Chemists tried to determine the nature of a queer drug, in the form of a gray powder with pearly granules, to whose use Milwarp had become addicted. But their tests merely revealed the presence of an alkaloid whose source and attributes were obscure to Western science.

Day by day, the whole incredible business lapsed from public attention; and those who had known Milwarp began to display the forgetfulness that was no less unaccountable than his weird doom. The housekeeper, who had held steadfastly in the beginning to her story, came at length to share the common dubiety. Her account, with repetition, became vague and contradictory; detail by detail, she seemed to forget the abnormal circumstances that she had witnessed with overwhelming horror.

The manuscript volume, in which Milwarp had apparently been writing at the time of death, was given into my charge with his other papers. It proved to be a diary, its last entry breaking off abruptly. Since reading the diary, I have hastened to transcribe it in my own hand, because, for some mysterious reason, the ink of the original is already fading and has become almost illegible in places.

The reader will note certain lacunae, due to passages written in an alphabet which neither I nor any scholar of my acquaintance can transliterate. These passages seem to form an integral part of the narrative, and they occur mainly toward the end, as if the writer had turned more and more to a language remembered from his ancient avatar. To the same mental reversion one must attribute the singular dating, in which Milwarp, still employing English script, appears to pass from our contemporary notation to that of some premundane world.

I give hereunder the entire diary, which begins with an undated footnote:

This book, unless I have been misinformed concerning the qualities of the drug souvara, will be the record of my former life in a lost cycle. I have had the drug in my possession for seven months, but fear has prevented me from using it. Now, by certain tokens, I perceive that the longing for knowledge will soon overcome the fear. Ever since my earliest childhood I have been troubled by intimations, dim, unplaceable, that seemed to argue a forgotten existence. These intimations partook of the nature of feelings rather than ideas or images: they were like the wraiths of dead memories. In the background of my mind there has lurked a sentiment of formless, melancholy desire for some nameless beauty long perished out of time. And, coincidentally, I have been haunted by an equally formless dread, an apprehension as of some bygone but still imminent doom.

Such feelings have persisted, undiminished, throughout my youth and maturity, but nowhere have I found any clue to their causation. My travels in the mystic Orient, my delvings into occultism have merely convinced me that these shadowy intuitions pertain to some incarnation buried under the wreck of remotest cycles.

Many times, in my wanderings through Buddhistic lands, I had heard of the drug souvara, which is believed to restore, even for the uninitiate, the memory of other lives. And at last, after many vain efforts, I managed to procure a supply of the drug. The manner in which I obtained it is a tale sufficiently remarkable in itself, but of no special relevance here. So far — perhaps because of that apprehension which I have hinted — I have not dared to use the drug.

March 9th, 1933. This morning I took souvara for the first time, dissolving the proper amount in pure distilled water as I had been instructed to do. Afterward I leaned back easily in my chair, breathing with a slow, regular rhythm. I had no preconceived idea of the sensations that would mark the drug's initial effect, since these were said to vary prodigiously with the temperament of the users; but I composed myself to await them with tranquility, after formulating clearly in my mind the purpose of the

experiment. For a while there was no change in my awareness. I noticed a slight quickening of the pulse, and modulated my breathing in conformity with this. Then, by slow degrees, I experienced a sharpening of visual perception. The Chinese rugs on the floor, the backs of the serried volumes in my bookcases, the very wood of chairs, table and shelves, began to exhibit new and unimagined colors. At the same time there were curious alterations of outline, every object seeming to extend itself in a hitherto unsuspected fashion. Following this, my surroundings became semi-transparent, like molded shapes of mist. I found that I could see through the marbled cover the illustrations in a volume of John Martin's edition of *Paradise Lost*, which lay before me on the table.

All this, I knew, was a mere extension of ordinary physical vision. It was only a prelude to those apperceptions of occult realms which I sought through *souvara*. Fixing my mind once more on the goal of the experiment, I became aware that the misty walls had vanished like a drawn arras. About me, like reflections in rippled water, dim sceneries wavered and shifted, erasing one another from instant to instant. I seemed to hear a vague but ever-present sound, more musical than the murmurs of air, water or fire, which was a property of the unknown element that environed me.

With a sense of troublous familiarity, I beheld the blurred unstable pictures which flowed past me upon this never-resting medium. Orient temples, flashing with sun-struck bronze and gold; the sharp, crowded gables and spires of medieval cities; tropic and northern forests; the costumes and physiognomies of the Levant, of Persia, of old Rome and Carthage, went by like blown, flying mirages. Each succeeding tableau belonged to a more ancient period than the one before it — and I knew that each was a scene from some former existence of my own.

Still tethered, as it were, to my present self, I reviewed these visible memories, which took on tri-dimensional depth and clarity. I saw myself as warrior and troubadour, as noble and merchant and mendicant. I trembled with dead fears, I thrilled with lost hopes and raptures, and was drawn by ties that death and *Lethe* had broken. Yet never did I fully identify myself

with those other avatars: for I knew well that the memory I sought pertained to some incarnation of older epochs.

Still the fantasmagoria streamed on, and I turned giddy with vertigo ineffable before the vastness and diurnity of the cycles of being. It seemed that I, the watcher, was lost in a gray land where the homeless ghosts of all dead ages went fleeing from oblivion to oblivion.

The walls of Nineveh, the columns and towers of unnamed cities, rose before me and were swept away. I saw the luxuriant plains that are now the Gobi desert. The sealost capitals of Atlantis were drawn to the light in unquenched glory. I gazed on lush and cloudy scenes from the first continents of Earth. Briefly I relived the beginnings of terrestrial man — and knew that the secret I would learn was ancients even than these.

My visions faded into black voidness — and yet, in that void, through fathomless eons, it seemed that I existed still like a blind atom in the space between the worlds. About me was the darkness and repose of that night which antedated the Earth's creation. Time flowed backward with the silence of dreamless sleep....

The illumination, when it came, was instant and complete. I stood in the full, fervid blaze of day amid royally towering blossoms in a deep garden, beyond whose lofty, vine-clad walls I heard the confused murmuring of the great city called Kalood. Above me, at their vernal zenith, were the four small suns that illumed the planet Hestan. Jewel-colored insects fluttered about me, lighting without fear on the rich habiliments of gold and black, enwrought with astronomic symbols, in which I was attired. Beside me was a dial-shaped altar of zoned agate, carved with the same symbols, which were those of the dreadful omnipotent time-god, Aforgomon, whom I served as a priest.

I had not even the slightest memory of myself as John Milwarp, and the long pageant of my terrestrial lives was as something that had never been — or was yet to be. Sorrow and desolation choked my heart as ashes fill some urn consecrated to the dead; and all the hues and perfumes of the

garden about me were redolent only of the bitterness of death. Gazing darkly upon the altar, I muttered blasphemy against Aforgomon, who, in his inexorable course, had taken away my beloved and had sent no solace for my grief. Separately I cursed the signs upon the altar: the stars, the worlds, the suns, the moons, that meted and fulfilled the processes of time. Belthoris, my betrothed, had died at the end of the previous autumn: and so, with double maledictions, I cursed the stars and planets presiding over that season.

I became aware that a shadow had fallen beside my own on the altar, and knew that the dark sage and sorcerer Atmox had obeyed my summons. Fearfully but not without hope I turned toward him, noting first of all that he bore under his arm a heavy, sinister-looking volume with covers of black steel and hasps of adamant. Only when I had made sure of this did I lift my eyes to his face, which was little less somber and forbidding than the tome he carried.

"Greeting, O Calaspa," he said harshly. "I have come against my own will and judgment. The lore that you request is in this volume; and since you saved me in former years from the inquisitorial wrath of the time-god's priests, I cannot refuse to share it with you. But understand well that even I, who have called upon names that are dreadful to utter, and have evoked forbidden presences, shall never dare to assist you in this conjuration. Gladly would I help you to hold converse with the shadow of Belthoris, or to animate her still unwithered body and draw it forth from the tomb. But that which you purpose is another matter. You alone must perform the ordained rites, must speak the necessary words: for the consequences of this thing will be direr than you deem.'

"I care not for the consequences," I replied eagerly, "if it be possible to bring back the lost hours which I shared with Belthoris. Think you that I could content myself with her shadow, wandering thinly back from the Borderland? Or that I could take pleasure in the fair clay that the breath of necromancy has troubled and has made to arise and walk without mind or soul? Nay, the Belthoris I would summon is she on whom the shadow of death has never yet fallen!

It seemed that Atmox, the master of doubtful arts, the vassal of umbrageous powers, recoiled and blanched before my vehement declaration.

"Bethink you," he said with minatory sternness, "that this thing will constitute a breach of the sacred logic of time and a blasphemy against Aforgomon, god of the minutes and the cycles. Moreover, there is little to be gained: for not in its entirety may you bring back the season of your love, but only one single hour, torn with infinite violence from its rightful period in time.... Refrain, I adjure you, and content yourself with a lesser sorcery."

"Give me the book," I demanded. "My service to Aforgomon is forfeit. With due reverence and devotion I have worshipped the time-god, and have done in his honor the rites ordained from eternity; and for all this the god has betrayed me."

Then, in that high-climbing, luxuriant garden beneath the four suns, Atmox opened the adamantine clasps of the steel-bound volume; and, turning to a certain page, he laid the book reluctantly in my hands. The page, like its fellows, was of some unholy parchment streaked with musty discolorations and blackening at the margin with sheer antiquity; but upon it shone unquenchably the dread characters a primal age had written with an ink bright as the newshed ichor of demons. Above this page I bent in my madness, conning it over and over till I was dazzled by the fiery runes; and, shutting my eyes, I saw them burn on a red darkness, still legible, and writhing like hellish worms.

Hollowly, like the sound of a far bell, I heard the voice of Atmox: "You have learned, O Calaspa, the unutterable name of that One whose assistance can alone restore the fled hours. And you have learned the incantation that will rouse that hidden power, and the sacrifice needed for its propitiation. Knowing these things, is your heart still strong and your purpose firm?"

The name I had read in the wizard volume was that of the chief cosmic power antagonistic to Aforgomon; the incantation and the required offering

were those of a foul demonolatry. Nevertheless, I did not hesitate, but gave resolute affirmative answer to the somber query of Atmox.

Perceiving that I was inflexible, he bowed his head, trying no more to dissuade me. Then, as the flame-runed volume had bade me do, I defiled the altar of Aforgomon, blotting certain of its prime symbols with dust and spittle.

While Atmox looked on in silence, I wounded my right arm to its deepest vein on the sharp-tipped gnomon of the dial; and, letting the blood drip from zone to zone, from orb to orb on the graven agate, I made unlawful sacrifice, and intoned aloud, in the name of the Lurking Chaos, Xexanoth, an abominable ritual composed by a backward repetition and jumbling of litanies sacred to the time-god.

Even as I chanted the incantation, it seemed that webs of shadow were woven foully athwart the suns; and the ground shook a little, as if colossal demons trod the world's rim, striding stupendously from abysses beyond. The garden walls and trees wavered like a wind-blown reflection in a pool; and I grew faint with the loss of that life-blood I had poured out in demonolatrous offering. Then, in my flesh and in my brain, I felt the intolerable racking of a vibration like the long-drawn shock of cities riven by earthquake, and coasts crumbling before some chaotic sea; and my flesh was torn and harrowed, and my brain shuddered with the toneless discords sweeping through me from deep to deep.

I faltered, and confusion gnawed at my inmost being. Dimly I heard the prompting of Atmox, and dimmer still was the sound of my own voice that made answer to Xexanoth, naming the impious necromancy which was to be effected only through its power. Madly I implored from Xexanoth, in despite of time and its ordered seasons, one hour of that bygone autumn which I had shared with Belthoris; and imploring this, I named no special hour: for all, in memory, had seemed of an equal joy and gladness.

As the words ceased upon my lips, I thought that darkness fluttered in the air like a great wing; and the four suns went out, and my heart was stilled as

if in death. Then the light returned, falling obliquely from suns mellow with full-tided autumn; and nowhere beside me was there any shadow of Atmox; and the altar of zoned agate was bloodless and undefiled. I, the lover of Belthoris, witting not of the doom and sorrow to come, stood happily with my beloved before the altar, and saw her young hands crown its ancient dial with the flowers we had plucked from the garden.

Dreadful beyond all fathoming are the mysteries of time. Even I, the priest and initiate, though wise in the secret doctrines of Aforgomon, know little enough of that elusive, ineluctable process whereby the present becomes the past and the future resolves itself into the present. All men have pondered the riddles of duration and transience; have wondered, vainly, to what bourn the lost days and the sped cycles are consigned. Some have dreamt that the past abides unchanged, becoming eternity as it slips from our mortal ken; and others have deemed that time is a stairway whose steps crumble one by one behind the climber, falling into a gulf of nothing.

Howsoever this may be, I know that she who stood beside me was the Belthoris on whom no shadow of mortality had yet descended. The hour was one new-born in a golden season; and the minutes to come were pregnant with all wonder and surprise belonging to the untried future.

Taller was my beloved than the frail, unbowed lilies of the garden. In her eyes was the sapphire of moonless evenings sown with small golden stars. Her lips were strangely curved, but only blitheness and joy had gone to their shaping. She and I had been betrothed from our childhood, and the time of the marriage-rites was now approaching. Our intercourse was wholly free, according to the custom of that world. Often she came to walk with me in my garden and to decorate the altar of that god whose revolving moons and suns would soon bring the season of our felicity.

The moths that flew about us, winged with aerial cloth-of-gold, were no lighter than our hearts. Making blithe holiday, we fanned our frolic mood to a high flame of rapture. We were akin to the full-hued, climbing flowers, the swift-darting insects, and our spirits blended and soared with the perfumes that were drawn skyward in the warm air. Unheard by us was the

loud murmuring of the mighty city of Kalood lying beyond my garden walls; for us the many-peopled planet known as Hestan no longer existed; and we dwelt alone in a universe of light, in a blossomed heaven. Exalted by love in the high harmony of those moments, we seemed to touch eternity; and even I, the priest of Aforgomon, forgot the blossom-fretting days, the system-devouring cycles.

In the sublime folly of passion, I swore then that death or discord could never mar the perfect communion of our hearts. After we had wreathed the altar, I sought the rarest, the most delectable flowers; frail-curving cups of winewashed pearl, of moony azure and white with scrolled purple lips; and these I twined, between kisses and laughter, in the blaze maze of Belthoris' hair; saying that another shrine than that of time should receive its due offering.

Tenderly, with a lover's delay, I lingered over the wreathing; and, ere I had finished, there fluttered to the ground beside us a great, crimson-spotted moth whose wing had somehow been broken in its airy voyaging through the garden. And Belthoris, ever tender of heart and pitiful, turned from me and took up the moth in her hands; and some of the bright blossoms dropped from her hair unheeded. Tears welled from her deep blue eyes; and seeing that the moth was sorely hurt and would never fly again, she refused to be comforted; and no longer would she respond to my passionate wooing. I, who grieved less for the moth than she, was somewhat vexed; and between her sadness and my vexation, there grew between us some tiny, temporary rift....

Then, ere love had ended the misunderstanding; then while we stood before the dread altar of time with Sundered hands, with eyes averted from each other, it seemed that a shroud of darkness descended upon the garden. I heard the crash and crumbling of shattered worlds, and a black flowing of ruinous things that went past me through the darkness. The dead leaves of winter were blown about me, and there was a falling of tears or rain.... Then the vernal suns came back, high-stationed in cruel splendor; and with them came the knowledge of all that had been, of Belthoris' death and my sorrow, and the madness that had led to forbidden sorcery. Vain now, like all other

hours, was the resummoned hour; and doubly irredeemable was my loss. My blood dripped heavily on the dishallowed altar, my faintness grew deathly, and I saw through murky mist the face of Atmox beside me; and the face was like that of some comminatory demon....

March 13th. I, John Milwarp, write this date and my name with an odd dubiety. My visionary experience under the drug souvara ended with that rilling of my blood on the symbolized dial, that glimpse of the terror-distorted face of Atmox. All this was in another world, in a life removed from the present by births and deaths without number; and yet, it seems, not wholly have I returned from the twice-ancient past. Memories, broken but strangely vivid and living, press upon me from the existence of which my vision was a fragment; and portions of the lore of Hestan, and scraps of its history, and words from its lost language, arise unbidden in my mind.

Above all, my heart is still shadowed by the sorrow of Calaspa. His desperate necromancy, which would seem to others no more than a dream within a dream, is stamped as with fire on the black page of recollection. I know the awfulness of the god he had blasphemed; and the foulness of the demonolatry he had done, and the sense of guilt and despair under which he swooned. It is this that I have striven all my life to remember, this which I have been doomed to re-experience. And I fear with a great fear the further knowledge which a second experiment with the drug will reveal to me.

The next entry of Milwarp's diary begins with a strange dating in English script: 'The second day of the moon Occalat, in the thousand-and-ninth year of the Red Eon.' This dating, perhaps, is repeated in the language of Hestan: for, directly beneath it, a line of unknown ciphers is set apart. Several lines of the subsequent text are in the alien tongue; and then, as if by an unconscious reversion, Milwarp continues the diary in English. There is no reference to another experiment with souvara: but apparently such had been made, with a continued revival of his lost memories.

...What genius of the nadir gulf had tempted me to this thing and had caused me to overlook the consequences? Verily, when I called up for myself and Belthoris an hour of former autumn, with all that was attendant upon the

hour, that bygone interim was likewise evoked and repeated for the whole world Hestan, and the four suns of Hestan. From the full midst of spring, all men had stepped backward into autumn, keeping only the memory of things prior to the hour thus resurrected, and knowing not the events future to the hour. But, returning to the present, they recalled with amazement the unnatural necromancy; and fear and bewilderment were upon them; and none could interpret the meaning.

For a brief period, the dead had lived again; the fallen leaves had returned to the bough; the heavenly bodies had stood at a long-abandoned station; the flower had gone back into the seed, the plant into the root. Then, with eternal disorder set among all its cycles, time had resumed its delayed course.

No movement of any cosmic body, no year or instant of the future, would be precisely as it should have been. The error and discrepancy I had wrought would bear fruit in ways innumerable. The suns would find themselves at fault; the worlds and atoms would go always a little astray from their appointed bourns.

It was of these matters that Atmox spoke, warning me, after he had staunched my bleeding wound. For he too, in that reluminated hour, had gone back and had lived again through a past happening. For him the hour was one in which he had descended into the nether vaults of his house. There, standing in a many-pentacled circle, with burning of unholy incense and uttering of accursed formulae, he had called upon a malign spirit from the bowels of Hestan and had questioned it concerning the future. But the spirit, black and voluminous as the fumes of pitch, refused to answer him directly and pressed furiously with its clawed members against the confines of the circle. It said only: "Thou hast summoned me at thy peril. Potent are the spells thou hast used, and strong is the circle to withstand me, and I am restrained by time and space from the wreaking of my anger upon thee. But haply thou shalt summon me again, albeit in the same hour of the same autumn; and in that summoning the laws of time shall be broken, and a rift shall be made in space; and through the rift, though with some delay and divagation, I will yet win to thee."

Saying no more, it prowled restlessly about the circle; and its eyes burned down upon Atmox like embers in a highlifted sooty brazier; and ever and anon its fanged mouth was flattened on the spell-defended air. And in the end he could dismiss it only after a double repetition of the form of exorcism.

As he told me this tale in the garden, Atmox trembled; and his eyes searched the narrow shadows wrought by the high suns; and he seemed to listen for the noise of some evil thing that burrowed toward him beneath the earth.

Fourth day of the moon Occalat. Stricken with terrors beyond those of Atmox, I kept apart in my mansion amid the city of Kalood. I was still weak with the loss of blood I had yielded to Xexanoth; my senses were full of strange shadows; my servitors, coming and going about me, were as phantoms, and scarcely I heeded the pale fear in their eyes or heard the dreadful things they whispered.... Madness and chaos, they told me, were abroad in Kalood; the divinity of Aforgomon was angered. All men thought that some baleful doom impended because of that unnatural confusion which had been wrought among the hours of time.

This afternoon they brought me the story of Atmox's death. In bated tones they told me how his neophytes had heard a roaring as of a loosed tempest in the chamber where he sat alone with his wizard volumes and paraphernalia. Above the roaring, for a little, human screams had sounded, together with a dashing as of hurled censers and braziers, a crashing as of overthrown tables and tomes. Blood rilled from under the shut door of the chamber, and, rilling, it took from instant to instant the form of dire ciphers that spelt an unspeakable name. After the noises had ceased, the neophytes waited a long while ere they dared to open the door. Entering at last, they saw the floor and the walls heavily bespattered with blood, and rags of the sorcerer's raiment mingled everywhere with the sheets of his torn volumes of magic, and the shreds and manglings of his flesh strewn amid broken furniture, and his brains daubed in a horrible paste on the high ceiling.

Hearing this tale, I knew that the earthly demon feared by Atmox had found him somehow and had wreaked its wrath upon him. In ways unguessable, it had reached him through the chasm made in ordered time and space by one hour repeated through necromancy. And because of that lawless chasm, the magician's power and lore had utterly failed to defend him from the demon....

Fifth day of the moon Occalat. Atrnox, I am sure, had not betrayed me: for in so doing, he must have betrayed his own implicit share in my crime.... Howbeit, this evening the priests came to my house ere the setting of the westernmost sun: silent, grim, with eyes averted as if from a foulness innominable. Me, their fellow, they enjoined with loth gestures to accompany them....

Thus they took me from my house and along the thoroughfares of Kalood toward the lowering suns. The streets were empty of all other passers, and it seemed that no man desired to meet or behold the blasphemer....

Down the avenue of gnomon-shaped pillars, I was led to the portals of Aforgomon's fane: those awfully gaping portals arched in the likeness of some devouring chimera's mouth....

Sixth day of the moon Occalat. They had thrust me into an oubliette beneath the temple, dark, noisome and soundless except for the maddening, measured drip of water beside me. There I lay and knew not when the night passed and the morning came. Light was admitted only when my captors opened the iron door, coming to lead me before the tribunal...

...Thus the priests condemned me, speaking with one voice in whose dreadful volume the tones of all were indistinguishably blended. Then the aged high-priest Helpenor called aloud upon Aforgomon, offering himself as a mouthpiece to the god, and asking the god to pronounce through him the doom that was adequate for such enormities as those of which I had been judged guilty by my fellows.

Instantly, it seemed, the god descended into Helpenor; and the figure of the high-priest appeared to dilate prodigiously beneath his mufflings; and the

accents that issued from his mouth were like thunders of the upper heaven:

"O Calaspa, thou hast set disorder amid all future hours and eons through this evil necromancy. Thereby, moreover, thou hast wrought thine own doom: fettered art thou for ever to the hour thus unlawfully repeated, apart from its due place in time. According to hieratic rule, thou shalt meet the death of the fiery chains: but deem not that this death is more than the symbol of thy true punishment. Thou shalt pass hereafter through other lives in Hestan, and shalt climb midway in the cycles of the world subsequent to Hestan in time and space. But through all thine incarnations the chaos thou hast invoked will attend thee widening ever like a rift. And always, in all thy lives, the rift will bar thee from reunion with the soul of Belthoris; and always, though merely by an hour, thou shalt miss the love that should otherwise have been oftentimes regained."

"At last, when the chasm has widened overmuch, thy soul shall fare no farther in the onward cycles of incarnation. At that time it shall be given thee to remember clearly thine ancient sin; and remembering, thou shalt perish out of time. Upon the body of that latter life shall be found the charred imprint of the chains, as the final token of thy bondage. But they that knew thee will soon forget, and thou shalt belong wholly to the cycles limited for thee by thy sin."

March 29th. I write this date with infinite desperation, trying to convince myself that there is a John Milwarp who exists on Earth, in the Twentieth Century. For two days running, I have not taken the drug souvara: and yet I have returned twice to that oubliette of Aforgomon's temple, in which the priest Calaspa awaits his doom. Twice I have been immersed in its stagnant darkness, hearing the slow drip of water beside me, like a clepsydra that tells the black ages of the damned.

Even as I write this at my library table, it seems that an ancient midnight plucks at the lamp. The bookcases turn to walls of oozing, nighted stone. There is no longer a table ... nor one who writes... and I breathe the noisome dankness of a dungeon lying unfathomed by any sun, in a lost world.

Eighteenth day of the moon Occalat. Today, for the last time, they took me from my prison. Helpenor, together with three others, came and led me to the adytum of the god. Far beneath the outer temple we went, through spacious crypts unknown to the common worshippers. There was no word spoken, no glance exchanged between the others and me; and it seemed that they already regarded me as one cast out from time and claimed by oblivion.

We came ultimately to that sheer-falling gulf in which the spirit of Aforgomon is said to dwell. Lights, feeble and far-scattered, shone around it like stars on the rim of cosmic vastness, shedding no ray into the depths. There, in a seat of hewn stone overhanging the frightful verge, I was placed by the executioners; and a ponderous chain of black unruined metal, stapled to the solid rock, was wound about and about me, circling my naked body and separate limbs, from head to foot.

To this doom, others had been condemned for heresy or impiety... though never for a sin such as mine. After the chaining of the victim, he was left for a stated interim, to ponder his crime — and haply to confront the dark divinity of Aforgomon. At length, from the abyss into which his position forced him to peer, a light would dawn, and a bolt of strange flame would leap upward, striking the many coiled chain about him and heating it instantly to the whiteness of candescent iron. The source and nature of the flame were mysterious, and many ascribed it to the god himself rather than to mortal agency....

Even thus they have left me, and have gone away. Long since the burden of the massy links, cutting deeper and deeper into my flesh, has become an agony. I am dizzy from gazing downward into the abyss — and yet I cannot fall. Beneath, immeasurably beneath, at recurrent intervals, I hear a hollow and solemn sound. Perhaps it is the sigh of sunken waters ... of cavern-straying winds ... or the respiration of One that abides in the darkness, meting with his breath the slow minutes, the hours, the days, the ages.... My terror has become heavier than the chain, my vertigo is born of a two-fold gulf....

Eons have passed by and all the worlds have ebbed into nothingness, like wreckage borne on a chasm-falling stream, taking with them the lost face of Belthoris. I am poised above the gaping maw of the Shadow.... Somehow, in another world, an exile phantom has written these words... a phantom who must fade utterly from time and place, even as I, the doomed priest Calaspa. I cannot remember the name of the phantom.

Beneath me, in the black depths, there is an awful brightening...

THE CHARNEL GOD

"Mordiggian is the god of Zul-Bha-Sair," said the innkeeper with unctuous solemnity. "He has been the god from years that are lost to man's memory in shadow deeper than the subterranean of his black temple. There is no other god in Zul-Bha-Sair. And all who die within the walls of the city are sacred to Mordiggian. Even the kings and the optimates, at death, are delivered into the hands of his muffled priests. It is the law and the custom. A little while, and the priests will come for your bride."

"But Elaith is not dead," protested the youth Phariom for the third or fourth time, in piteous desperation. "Her malady is one that assumes the lying likeness of death. Twice before has she lain insensible, with a pallor upon her cheeks and a stillness in her very blood, that could hardly be distinguished from those of the tomb; and twice she has awakened after an interim of days."

The innkeeper peered with an air of ponderous unbelief at the girl who lay white and motionless as a mown lily on the bed in the poorly furnished attic chamber.

"In that case you should not have brought her into Zul-Bha-Sair," he averred in a tone of owlish irony. "The physician has pronounced her dead; and her death has been reported to the priests. She must go to the temple of Mordiggian."

"But we are outlanders, guests of a night. We have come from the land of Xylac, far in the north; and this morning we should have gone on through Tasuun, toward Pharaad, the capital of Yoros, which lies near to the southern sea. Surely your god could have no claim upon Elaith, even if she were truly dead."

"All who die in Zul-Bha-Sair are the property of Mordiggian," insisted the taverner sententiously. "Outlanders are not exempt. The dark maw of his

temple yawns eternally, and no man, no child, no woman, throughout the years, has evaded its yawning. All mortal flesh must become, in due time, the provender of the god."

Phariom shuddered at the oily and portentous declaration.

"Dimly have I heard of Mordiggian, as a legend that travellers tell in Xylac," he admitted. "But I had forgotten the name of his city; and Elaith and I came ignorantly into Zul-Bha-Sair... Even had I known, I should have doubted the terrible custom of which you inform me. ...What manner of deity is this, who imitates the hyena and the vulture? Surely he is no god, but a ghoul."

"Take heed lest you utter blasphemy," admonished the innkeeper. "Mordiggian is old and omnipotent as death. He was worshipped in former continents, before the lifting of Zothique from out the sea. Through him, we are saved from corruption and the worm. Even as the people of other places devote their dead to the consuming flame, so we of Zul-Bha-Sair deliver ours to the god. Awful is the fane, a place of terror and obscure shadow untrod by the sun, into which the dead are borne by his priests and are laid on a vast table of stone to await his coming from the nether vault in which he dwells. No living men, other than the priests, have ever beheld him; and the faces of the priests are hidden behind masks of silver, and even their hands are shrouded, that men may not gaze on them that have seen Mordiggian."

"But there is a king in Zul-Bha-Sair, is there not? I shall appeal to him against this heinous and horrible injustice. Surely he will heed me."

"Phenquor is the king; but he could not help you even if he wished. Your appeal will not even be heard. Mordiggian is above all kings, and his law is sacred. Hark! — for already the priests come."

Phariom, sick at heart with the charnel terror and cruelty of the doom that impended for his girlish wife in this unknown city of nightmare, heard an evil, stealthy creaking on the stairs that led to the attic of the inn. The sound drew nearer with inhuman rapidity, and four strange figures came into the

room, heavily garbed in funereal purple, and wearing huge masks of silver graven in the likeness of skulls. It was impossible to surmise their actual appearance, for, even as the taverner had hinted, their very hands were concealed by fingerless gloves; and the purple gowns came down in loose folds that trailed about their feet like unwinding cerecloths. There was a horror about them, of which the macabre masks were only a lesser element; a horror that lay partly in their unnatural, crouching attitudes, and the beastlike agility with which they moved, unhampered by their cumbersome habiliments.

Among them, they carried a curious bier, made from interwoven strips of leather, and with monstrous bones that served for frame and handles. The leather was greasy and blackened as if from long years of mortuary use. Without speaking to Phariom or the innkeeper, and with no delay or formality of any sort, they advanced toward the bed on which Elaith was lying.

Undeterred by their more than formidable aspect, and wholly distraught with grief and anger, Phariom drew from his girdle a short knife, the only weapon he possessed. Disregarding the minatory cry of the taverner, he rushed wildly upon the muffled figures. He was quick and muscular, and, moreover, was clad in light, close-fitting raiment, such as would seemingly have given him a brief advantage.

The priests had turned their backs upon him; but, as if they had foreseen his every action, two of them wheeled about with the swiftness of tigers, dropping the handles of bone that they carried. One of them struck the knife from Phariom's hand with a movement that the eye could barely follow in its snaky darting. Then both assailed him, beating him back with terrible flailing blows of their shrouded arms, and hurling him half across the room into an empty corner. Stunned by his fall, he lay senseless for a term of minutes.

Recovering glazedly, with eyes that blurred as he opened them, he beheld the fact of the stout taverner stooping above him like a tallow-colored moon. The thought of Elaith, more sharp than the thrust of a dagger,

brought him back to agonizing consciousness. Fearfully he scanned the shadowy room, and, saw that the ceremented priests were gone, that the bed was vacant. He heard the orotund and sepulchral croaking of the taverner.

"The priests of Mordiggian are merciful, they make allowance for the frenzy and distraction of the newly bereaved. It is well for you that they are compassionate, and considerate of mortal weakness."

Phariom sprang erect, as if his bruised and aching body were scorched by a sudden fire. Pausing only to retrieve his knife, which still lay in the middle of the room, he started toward the door. He was stopped by the hand of the hosteler, clutching greasily at his shoulder.

"Beware, lest you exceed the bounds of the mercy of Mordiggian. It is an ill thing to follow his priests — and a worse thing to intrude upon the deathly and sacred gloom of his temple."

Phariom scarcely heard the admonition. He wrenched himself hastily away from the odious fingers and turned to go; but again the hand clutched him.

"At least, pay me the money that you owe for food and lodging, ere you depart," demanded the innkeeper. "Also, there is the matter of the physician's fee, which I can settle for you, if you will entrust me with the proper sum. Pay now — for there is no surety that you will return."

Phariom drew out the purse that contained his entire worldly wealth, and filled the greedily cupped palm before him with coins that he did not pause to count. With no parting word or backward glance, he descended the moldy and musty stairs of the worm-eaten hostelry, as if spurred by an incubus, and went out into the gloomy, serpentine streets of Zul-Bha-Sair.

Perhaps the city differed little from others, except in being older and darker; but to Phariom, in his extremity of anguish, the ways that he followed were like subterrene corridors that led only to some profound and monstrous charnel. The sun had risen above the overjutting houses, but it seemed to him that there was no light, other than a lost and doleful glimmering such as might descend into mortuary depths. The people, it may have been, were

much like other people, but he saw them under a malefic aspect, as if they were ghouls and demons that went to and fro on the ghastly errands of a necropolis.

Bitterly, in his distraction, he recalled the previous evening, when he had entered Zul-Bha-Sair at twilight with Elaith, the girl riding on the one dromedary that had survived their passage of the northern desert, and he walking beside her, weary but content. With the rosy purple of afterglow upon its walls and cupolas, with the deepening golden eyes of its lit windows, the place had seemed a fair and nameless city of dreams, and they had planned to rest there for a day or two before resuming the long, arduous journey to Pharaad, in Yoros.

This journey had been undertaken only through necessity. Phariom, an impoverished youth of noble blood, had been exiled because of the political and religious tenets of his family, which were not in accord with those of the reigning emperor, Caleppos. Taking his newly wedded wife, Phariom had set out for Yoros, where certain allied branches of the house to which he belonged had already established themselves, and would give him a fraternal welcome.

They had travelled with a large caravan of merchants, going directly southward to Tasuun. Beyond the borders of Xylac, amid the red sands of the Celotian waste, the caravan had been attacked by robbers, who had slain many of its members and dispersed the rest. Phariom and his bride, escaping with their dromedaries, had found themselves lost and alone in the desert, and, failing to regain the road toward Tasuun, had taken inadvertently another track, leading to Zul-Bha-Sair, a walled metropolis on the south-western verge of the waste, which their itinerary had not included.

Entering Zul-Bha-Sair, the couple had repaired for reasons of economy to a tavern in the humbler quarter. There, during the night, Elaith had been overcome by the third seizure of the cataleptic malady to which she was liable. The earlier seizures, occurring before her marriage to Phariom, had been recognized in their true character by the physicians of Xylac, and had been palliated by skillful treatment. It was hoped that the malady would not

recur. The third attack, no doubt, had been induced by the fatigues and hardships of the journey. Phariom had felt sure that Elaith would recover, but a doctor of Zul-Bha-Sair, hastily summoned by the innkeeper, had insisted that she was actually dead; and, in obedience to the strange law of the city, had reported her without delay to the priests of Mordiggian. The frantic protests of the husband had been utterly ignored.

There was, it seemed, a diabolic fatality about the whole train of circumstances through which Elaith, still living, though with that outward aspect of the tomb which her illness involved, had fallen into the grasp of the devotees of the charnel god. Phariom pondered this fatality almost to madness, as he strode with furious, aimless haste along the eternally winding and crowded streets.

To the cheerless information received from the taverner, he added, as he went on, more and more of the tardily remembered legends which he had heard in Xylac. Ill and dubious indeed was the renown of Zul-Bha-Sair, and he marvelled that he should have forgotten it, and cursed himself with black curses for the temporary but fatal forgetfulness. Better would it have been if he and Elaith had perished in the desert, rather than enter the wide gates that stood always open, gaping for their prey, as was the custom of Zul-Bha-Sair.

The city was a mart of trade, where outland travelers came, but did not care to linger, because of the repulsive cult of Mordiggian, the invisible eater of the dead, who was believed to share his provender with the shrouded priests. It was said that the bodies lay for days in the dark temple and were not devoured till corruption had begun. And people whispered of fouler things than necrophagism, of blasphemous rites that were solemnized in the ghoul-ridden vaults, and nameless uses to which the dead were put before Mordiggian claimed them. In all outlying places, the fate of those who died in Zul-Bha-Sair was a dreadful byword and a malediction. But to the people of that city, reared in the faith of the ghoulish god, it was merely the usual and expected mode of mortuary disposal. Tombs, graves, catacombs, funeral pyres, and other such nuisances, were rendered needless by this highly utilitarian deity.

Phariom was surprised to see the people of the city going about the common businesses of life. Porters were passing with bales of household goods upon their shoulders. Merchants were squatting in their shops like other merchants. Buyers and sellers chattered loudly in the public bazaars. Women laughed and chattered in the door ways. Only by their voluminous robes of red, black and violet, and their strange, uncouth accents, was he able to distinguish the men of Zul-Bha-Sair from those who were outlanders like himself. The murk of nightmare began to lift from his impressions; and gradually, as he went on, the spectacle of everyday humanity all about him helped to calm a little his wild distraction and desperation. Nothing could dissipate the horror of his loss, and the abominable fate that threatened Elaith. But now, with a cool logic born of the cruel exigence, he began to consider the apparently hopeless problem of rescuing her from the ghoulish god's temple.

He composed his features, and constrained his febrile pacing to an idle saunter, so that none might guess the preoccupations that racked him inwardly. Pretending to be interested in the wares of a seller of men's apparel, he drew the dealer into converse regarding Zul-Bha-Sair and its customs, and made such inquiries as a traveler from far lands might make. The dealer was talkative, and Phariom soon learned from him the location of the temple of Mordiggian, which stood at the city's core. He also learned that the temple was open at all hours, and that people were free to come and go within its precincts. There were, however, no rituals of worship, other than certain private rites that were celebrated by the priesthood. Few cared to enter the fane, because of a superstition that any living person who intruded upon its gloom would return to it shortly as the provender of the god.

Mordiggian, it seemed, was a benign deity in the eyes of the inhabitants of Zul-Bha-Sair. Curiously enough, no definite personal attributes were ascribed to him. He was, so to speak, an impersonal force akin to the elements — a consuming and cleansing power, like fire. His hierophants were equally mysterious; they lived at the temple and emerged from it only in the execution of their funeral duties. No one knew the manner of their recruiting, but many believed that they were both male and female, thus

renewing their numbers from generation to generation with no ulterior commerce. Others thought that they were not human beings at all, but an order of subterranean earth-entities, who lived for ever, and who fed upon corpses like the god himself. Through this latter belief, of late years, a minor heresy had risen, some holding that Mordiggian was a mere hieratic figment, and the priests were the sole devourers of the dead. The dealer, quoting this heresy, made haste to disavow it with pious reprobation.

Phariom chatted for awhile on other topics, and then continued his progress through the city, going as forthrightly toward the temple as the obliquely running thoroughfares would permit. He had formed no conscious plan, but desired to reconnoiter the vicinage. In that which the garment-dealer had told him, the one reassuring detail was the openness of the fane and its accessibility to all who dared enter. The rarity of visitors, however, would make Phariom conspicuous, and he wished above all to avoid attention. On the other hand, any effort to remove bodies from the temple was seemingly unheard of — a thing audacious beyond the dreams of the people of Zul-Bha-Sair. Through the very boldness of his design, he might avoid suspicion, and succeed in rescuing Elaith.

The streets that he followed began to tend downward, and were narrower, dimmer and more tortuous than any he had yet traversed. He thought for awhile that he had lost his way, and he was about to ask the passersby to redirect him, when four of the priests of Mordiggian, bearing one of the curious litter-like biers of bone and leather, emerged from an ancient alley just before him.

The bier was occupied by the body of a girl, and for one moment of convulsive shock and agitation that left him trembling, Phariom thought that the girl was Elaith. Looking again, he saw his mistake. The gown that the girl wore, though simple, was made of some rare exotic stuff. Her features, though pale as those of Elaith, were crowned with curls like the petals of heavy black poppies. Her beauty, warm and voluptuous even in death, differed from the blond pureness of Elaith as tropic lilies differ from narcissi.

Quietly, and maintaining a discreet interval, Phariom followed the sullenly shrouded figures and their lovely burden. He saw that people made way for the passage of the bier with awed, unquestioning alacrity; and the loud voices of hucksters and chafferers were hushed as the priests went by. Overhearing a murmured conversation between two of the townsfolk, he learned that the dead girl was Arctela, daughter of Quaos, a high noble and magistrate of Zul-Bha-Sair. She had died very quickly and mysteriously, from a cause unknown to the physicians, which had not marred or wasted her beauty in the least. There were those who held that an undetectable poison, rather than disease, had been the agency of death; and others deemed her the victim of malefic sorcery.

The priests went on, and Phariom kept them in sight as well as he could in the blind tangle of streets. The way steepened, without affording any clear prospect of the levels below, and the houses seemed to crowd more closely, as if huddling back from a precipice. Finally the youth emerged behind his macabre guides in a sort of circular hollow at the city's heart, where the temple of Mordiggian loomed alone and separate amid pavements of sad onyx, and funerary cedars whose green had blackened as if with the undeparting charnel shadows bequeathed by dead ages.

The edifice was built of a strange stone, hued as with the blackish purple of carnal decay: a stone that refused the ardent luster of noon, and the prodigality of dawn or sunset glory. It was low and windowless, having the form of a monstrous mausoleum. Its portals yawned sepulchrally in the gloom of the cedars.

Phariom watched the priests as they vanished within the portals, carrying the girl Arctela like phantoms who bear a phantom burden. The broad area of pavement between the recoiling houses and the temple was now deserted, but he did not venture to cross it in the glare of betraying daylight. Circling the area, he saw that there were several other entrances to the great fane, all open and unguarded. There was no sign of activity about the place; but he shuddered at the thought of that which was hidden within its walls, even as the feasting of worms is hidden in the marble tomb.

Like a vomiting of charnels, the abominations of which he had heard rose up before him in the sunlight; and again he drew close to madness, knowing that Elaith must lie among the dead, in the temple, with the foul umbrage of such things upon her, and that he, consumed with unremitting frenzy, must wait for the favorable shrouding of darkness before he could execute his nebulous, doubtful plan of rescue. In the meanwhile, she might awake, and perish from the mortal horror of her surroundings... or worse even than this might befall, if the whispered tales were true...

Abnon-Tha, sorcerer and necromancer, was felicitating himself on the bargain he had made with the priests of Mordiggian. He felt, perhaps justly, that no one less clever than he could have conceived and executed the various procedures that had made possible this bargain, through which Arctela, daughter of the proud Quaos, would become his unquestioning slave. No other lover, he told himself, could have been resourceful enough to obtain a desired woman in this fashion. Arctela, betrothed to Alos, a young noble of the city, was seemingly beyond the aspiration of a sorcerer. Abnon-Tha, however, was no common hedge-wizard, but an adept of long standing in the most awful and profound arcana of the black arts. He knew the spells that kill more quickly and surely than knife or poison, at a distance; and he knew also the darker spells by which the dead can be reanimated, even after years or ages of decay. He had slain Arctela in a manner that none could detect, with a rare and subtle invultuation that had left no mark; and her body lay now among the dead, in Mordiggian's temple. Tonight, with the tacit connivance of the terrible, shrouded priests, he would bring her back to life.

Abnon-Tha was not native to Zul-Bha-Sair, but had come many years before from the infamous, half-mythic isle of Sotar, lying somewhere to the east of the huge continent of Zothique. Like a sleek young vulture, he had established himself in the very shadow of the charnel fane, and had prospered, taking to himself pupils and assistants.

His dealings with the priests were long and extensive, and the bargain he had just made was far from being the first of its kind. They had allowed him the temporary use of bodies claimed by Mordiggian, stipulating only that

these bodies should not be removed from the temple during the course of any of his experiments in necromancy. Since the privilege was slightly irregular from their viewpoint, he had found it necessary to bribe them — not, however, with gold, but with the promise of a liberal purveyance of matters more sinister and corruptible than gold. The arrangement had been satisfactory enough to all concerned: cadavers had poured into the temple with more than their usual abundance ever since the coming of the sorcerer; the god had not lacked for provender; and Abnon-Tha had never lacked for subjects on which to employ his more baleful spells.

On the whole, Abnon-Tha was not ill-pleased with himself. He reflected, moreover, that, aside from his mastery of magic and his sleightful ingenuity, he was about to manifest a well-nigh unexampled courage. He had planned a robbery that would amount to dire sacrilege: the removal of the reanimated body of Arctela from the temple. Such robberies (either of animate or exanimate corpses) and the penalty attached to them, were a matter of legend only; for none had occurred in recent ages. Thrice terrible, according to common belief, was the doom of those who had tried and failed. The necromancer was not blind to the risks of his enterprise; nor, on the other hand, was he deterred or intimidated by them.

His two assistants, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, apprised of his intention, had made with all due privacy the necessary preparations for their flight from Zul-Bha-Sair. The strong passion that the sorcerer had conceived for Arctela was not his only motive, perhaps, in removing from that city. He was desirous of change, for he had grown a little weary of the odd laws that really served to restrict his necromantic practices, while facilitating them in a sense. He planned to travel southward, and establish himself in one of the cities of Tasuun, an empire famous for the number and antiquity of its mummies.

It was now sunset-time. Five dromedaries, bred for racing, waited in the inner courtyard of Abnon-Tha's house, a high and moldering mansion that seemed to lean forward upon the open, circular area belonging to the temple. One of the dromedaries would carry a bale containing the sorcerer's

most valuable books, manuscripts, and other impedimenta of magic. Its fellows would bear Abnon-Tha, the two assistants — and Arctela.

Narghai and Vemba-Tsith appeared before their master to tell him that all was made ready. Both were much younger than Abnon-Tha; but, like himself, they were outlanders in Zul-Bha-Sair. They came of the swart and narrow-eyed people of Naat, an isle that was little less infamous than Sotar.

"It is well," said the necromancer, as they stood before him with lowered eyes, after making their announcement. "We have only to await the favorable hour. Midway between sunset and moonrise, when the priests are at their supper in the nether adytum, we will enter the temple and perform that which must be done for the rising of Arctela. They feed well tonight, for I know that many of the dead grow ripe on the great table in the upper sanctuary; and it may be that Mordiggian feeds also. None will come to watch us at our doings."

"But, master," said Narghai, shivering a little beneath his robe of nacarat red, "is it wise, after all, to do this thing? Must you take the girl from the temple? Always, ere this, you have contented yourself with the brief loan that the priests allow, and have rendered back the dead in the required state of exanimation. Truly, is it well to violate the law of the god? Men say that the wrath of Mordiggian, though seldom loosed, is more dreadful than the wrath of all other deities. For this reason, none has dared to defraud him in latter years, or attempt the removal of any of the corpses from his fane. Long ago, it is told, a high noble of the city bore hence the cadaver of a woman he had loved, and fled with it into the desert; but the priests pursued him, running more swiftly than jackals ...and the fate that overtook him is a thing whereof the legends whisper but dimly."

"I fear neither Mordiggian nor his creatures," said Abnon-Tha, with a solemn vainglory in his voice. "My dromedaries can outrun the priests — even granting that the priests are not men at all, but ghouls, as some say. And there is small likelihood that they will follow us: after their feasting tonight, they will sleep like gorged vultures. The morrow will find us far on the road to Tasuun, ere they awake."

"The master is right," interpolated Vemba-Tsith, "We have nothing to fear."

"But they say that Mordiggian does not sleep," insisted Narghai, "and that he watches all things eternally from his black vault beneath the temple."

"So I have heard," said Abnon-Tha, with a dry and learned air. "But I consider that such beliefs are mere superstition. There is nothing to confirm them in the real nature of corpse-eating entities. So far, I have never beheld Mordiggian, either sleeping or awake; but in all likelihood he is merely a common ghoul. I know these demons and their habits. They differ from hyenas only through their monstrous shape and size, and their immortality."

"Still, I must deem it an ill thing to cheat Mordiggian," muttered Narghai beneath his breath.

The words were caught by the quick ears of AbnonTha. "Nay, there is no question of cheating. Well have I served Mordiggian and his priesthood, and amply have I larded their black table. Also, I shall keep, in a sense, the bargain I have made concerning Arctela: the providing of a new cadaver in return for my necromantic privilege. Tomorrow, the youth Alos, the betrothed of Arctela, will lie in her place among the dead. Go now, and leave me, for I must devise the inward involution that will rot the heart of Alos, like a worm that awakens at the core of fruit."

To Phariom, fevered and distraught, it seemed that the cloudless day went by with the sluggishness of a corpse-clogged river. Unable to calm his agitation, he wandered aimlessly through the thronged bazaars, till the western towers grew dark on a heaven of saffron flame, and the twilight rose like a gray and curdling sea among the houses. Then he returned to the inn where Elaith had been stricken, and claimed the dromedary which he had left in the tavern stables. Riding the animal through dim thoroughfares, lit only by the covert gleam of lamps or tapers from half-closed windows, he found his way once more to the city's center.

The dusk had thickened into darkness when he came to the open area surrounding Mordiggian's temple. The windows of mansions fronting the

area were shut and lightless as dead eyes, and the fane itself, a colossal bulk of gloom, was rayless as any mausoleum beneath the gathering stars. No one, it seemed, was abroad, and though the quietude was favorable to his project, Phariom shivered with a chill of deathly menace and desolation. The hoofs of his camel rang on the pavement with a startling and preternatural clangor, and he thought that the ears of hidden ghouls, listening alertly behind the silence, must surely hear them.

However, there was no stirring of life in that sepulchral gloom. Reaching the shelter of one of the thick groups of ancient cedars, he dismounted and tied the dromedary to a low-growing branch. Keeping among the trees, like a shadow among shadows, he approached the temple with infinite wariness, and circled it slowly, finding that its four doorways, which corresponded to the four quarters of the Earth, were all wide open, deserted, and equally dark. Returning at length to the eastern side, on which he had tethered his camel, he emboldened himself to enter the blackly gaping portal.

Crossing the threshold, he was engulfed instantly by a dead and clammy darkness, touched with the faint feter of corruption, and a smell as of charred bone and flesh. He thought that he was in a huge corridor, and feeling his way forward along the right-hand wall, he soon came to a sudden turn, and saw a bluish glimmering far ahead, as if in some central adytum where the hall ended. Massy columns were silhouetted against the glimmering; and across it, as he drew nearer, several dark and muffled figures passed, presenting the profiles of enormous skulls. Two of them were sharing the burden of a human body which they carried in their arms. To Phariom, pausing in the shadowy hall, it appeared that the vague taint of putrescence upon the air grew stronger for a few instants after the figure had come and gone.

They were not succeeded by any others, and the fane resumed its mausolean stillness. But the youth waited for many minutes, doubtful and trepidant, before venturing to go on. An oppression of mortuary mystery thickened the air, and stifled him like the noisome effluvia of catacombs. His ears became intolerably acute, and he heard a dim humming, a sound of deep

and viscid voices indistinguishably bent, that appeared to issue from crypts beneath the temple.

Stealing at length to the hall's end, he peered beyond into what was obviously the main sanctuary: a low and many-pillared room, whose vastness was but half-revealed by the bluish fires that glowed and flickered in numerous urnlike vessels borne aloft on slender stelae.

Phariom hesitated upon that awful threshold, for the mingled odors of burnt and decaying flesh were heavier on the air, as if he had drawn nearer to their sources; and the thick humming seemed to ascend from a dark stairway in the floor, beside the left-hand wall. But the room, to all appearance, was empty of life, and nothing stirred except the wavering lights and shadows. The watcher discerned the outlines of a vast table in the center, carved from the same black stone as the building itself. Upon the table, half lit by the flaming urns, or shrouded by the umbrage of the heavy columns, a number of people lay side by side; and Phariom knew that he had found the black altar of Mordiggian, whereon were disposed the bodies claimed by the god.

A wild and stifling fear contended with a wilder hope in his bosom. Trembling, he went toward the table; and a cold clamminess, wrought by the presence of the dead, assailed him. The table was nearly thirty feet in length, and it rose waist-high on a dozen mighty legs. Beginning at the nearer end, he passed along the row of corpses, peering fearfully into each upturned face. Both sexes, and many ages and differing ranks were represented. Nobles and rich merchants were crowded by beggars in filthy rags. Some were newly dead, and others, it seemed, had lain there for days, and were beginning to show the marks of corruption. There were many gaps in the ordered row, suggesting that certain of the corpses had been removed. Phariom went on in the dim light, searching for the loved features of Elaith. At last, when he was nearing the further end, and had begun to fear that she was not among them, he found her.

With the cryptic pallor and stillness of her strange malady upon her, she lay unchanged on the chill stone. A great thankfulness was born in the heart of

Phariom, for he felt sure that she was not dead — and that she had not awakened at any time to the horrors of the temple. If he could bear her away from the hateful purlieus of Zul-Bha-Sair without detection, she would recover from her death-simulating sickness.

Cursorily, he noted that another woman was lying beside Elaith, and recognized her as the beautiful Arctela, whose bearers he had followed almost to the portals of the fane. He gave her no second glance, but stooped to lift Elaith in his arms.

At that moment, he heard a murmur of low voices in the direction of the door by which he had entered the sanctuary. Thinking that some of the priests had returned, he dropped swiftly on hands and knees and crawled beneath the ponderous table, which afforded the only accessible hiding-place. Retreating into shadow beyond the glimmering shed from the lofty urns, he waited and looked out between the pillar-thick legs.

The voices grew louder, and he saw the curiously sandaled feet and shortish robes of three persons who approached the table of the dead and paused in the very spot where he himself had stood a few instants before. Who they were, he could not surmise; but their garments of light and swarthy red were not the shroudings of Mordiggian's priests. He was uncertain whether or not they had seen him; and crouching in the low space beneath the table, he plucked his dagger from its sheath.

Now, he was able to distinguish three voices, one solemn and unctuously imperative, one somewhat guttural and growling, and the other shrill and nasal. The accents were alien, differing from those of the men of Zul-Bha-Sair, and the words were often strange to Phariom. Also, much of the converse was inaudible.

"... here... at the end," said the solemn voice. "Be swift... We have no time to loiter."

"Yes, Master," came the growling voice. "But who is this other?... Truly, she is very fair."

A discussion seemed to take place, in discreetly lowered tones. Apparently the owner of the guttural voice was urging something that the other two opposed. The listener could distinguish only a word or two here and there; but he gathered that the name of the first person was Vembi-Tsith, and that the one who spoke in a nasal shrilling was called Narghai. At last, above the others, the grave accents of the man addressed only as the Master were clearly audible:

"I do not altogether approve... It will delay our departure... and the two must ride on one dromedary. But take her, Vemba-Tsith, if you can perform the necessary spells unaided. I have no time for a double incantation... It will be a good test of your proficiency."

There was a mumbling as of thanks or acknowledgment from Vemba-Tsith. Then the voice of the Master: "Be quiet now and make haste." To Phariom, wondering vaguely and uneasily as to the import of this colloquy, it seemed that two of the three men pressed closer to the table, as if stooping above the dead. He heard a rustling of cloth upon stone, and an instant later, he saw that all three were departing among the columns and stelae, in a direction opposite to that from which they had entered the sanctuary. Two of them carried burdens that glimmered palely and indistinctly in the shadows.

A black horror clutched at the heart of Phariom, for all too clearly he surmised the nature of those burdens and the possible identity of one of them. Quickly he crawled forth from his hiding-place and saw that Elaith was gone from the black table, together with the girl Arctela. He saw the vanishing of shadowy figures in the gloom that zoned the chamber's western wall. Whether the abductors were ghouls, or worse than ghouls, he could not know, but he followed swiftly, forgetful of all caution in his concern for Elaith.

Reaching the wall, he found the mouth of a corridor, and plunged into it headlong. Somewhere in the gloom ahead, he saw a ruddy glimmering of light. Then he heard a sullen, metallic grating; and the glimmer narrowed to

a slit-like gleam, as if the door of the chamber from which it issued were being closed.

Following the blind wall, he came to that slit of crimson light. A door of darkly tarnished bronze had been left ajar, and Phariom peered in on a weird, unholy scene, illumined by the blood-like flames that flared and soared unsteadily from high urns upborne on sable pedestals.

The room was full of a sensuous luxury that accorded strangely with the dull, funereal stone of that temple of death. There were couches and carpets of superbly figured stuffs, vermilion, gold, azure, silver; and jeweled censers of unknown metals stood in the corners. A low table at one side was littered with curious bottles, and occult appliances such as might be used in medicine or sorcery.

Elaith was lying on one of the couches, and near her, on a second couch, the body of the girl Arctela had been disposed. The abductors, whose faces Phariom now beheld for the first time, were busying themselves with singular preparations that mystified him prodigiously. His impulse to invade the room was repressed by a sort of wonder that held him enthralled and motionless.

One of the three, a tall, middle-aged man whom he identified as the Master, had assembled certain peculiar vessels, including a small brazier and a censer, and had set them on the floor beside Arctela. The second, a younger man with lecherously slitted eyes, had placed similar impedimenta before Elaith. The third, who was also young and evil of aspect, merely stood and looked on with an apprehensive, uneasy air.

Phariom divined that the men were sorcerers when, with a deftness born of long practice, they lit the censers and braziers, and began simultaneously the intonation of rhythmically measured words in a strange tongue accompanied by the sprinkling, at regular intervals, of black oils that fell with a great hissing on the coals in the braziers and sent up enormous clouds of pearly smoke. Dark threads of vapor serpented from the censers, interweaving themselves like veins through the dim, misshapen figures as

of ghostly giants that were formed by the lighter fumes. A reek of intolerably acrid balsams filled the chamber, assailing and troubling the senses of Phariom, till the scene wavered before him and took on a dreamlike vastness, a narcotic distortion.

The voices of the necromancers mounted and fell as if in some unholy paean. Imperious, exigent, they seemed to implore the consummation of forbidden blasphemy. Like thronging phantoms, writhing and swirling with malignant life, the vapors rose about the couches on which lay the dead girl and the girl who bore the outward likeness of death.

Then, as the fumes were riven apart in their baleful seething, Phariom saw that the pale figure of Elaith had stirred like a sleeper who awakens, that she had opened her eyes and was lifting a feeble hand from the gorgeous couch. The younger necromancer ceased his chanting on a sharply broken cadence; but the solemn tones of the other still went on, and still there was a spell on the limbs and senses of Phariom, making it impossible for him to stir.

Slowly the vapors thinned like a rout of dissolving phantoms. The watcher saw that the dead girl, Arctela, was rising to her feet like a somnambulist. The chanting of Abnon-Tha, standing before her, came sonorously to an end. In the awful silence that followed, Phariom heard a weak cry from Elaith, and then the jubilant, growling voice of Vemba-Tsith, who was stooping above her:

"Behold, O Abnon-Tha! My spells are swifter than yours, for she that I have chosen awakened before Arctela!"

Phariom was released from his thralldom, as if through the lifting of an evil enchantment. He flung back the ponderous door of darkened bronze, that ground with protesting clangors on its hinges. His dagger drawn, he rushed into the room.

Elaith, her eyes wide with piteous bewilderment, turned toward him and made an ineffectual effort to arise from the couch. Arctela, mute and submissive before Abnon-Tha, appeared to heed nothing but the will of the necromancer. She was like a fair and soulless automaton. The sorcerers,

turning as Phariom entered, sprang back with instant agility before his onset, and drew the short, cruelly crooked swords which they all carried. Narghai struck the knife from Phariom's fingers with a darting blow that shattered its thin blade at the hilt, and VembaTsith, his weapon swinging back in a vicious arc, would have killed the youth promptly if Abnon-Tha had not intervened and bade him stay.

Phariom, standing furious but irresolute before the lifted swords, was aware of the darkly searching eyes of Abnon-Tha, like those of some nyctalopic bird of prey.

"I would know the meaning of this intrusion," said the necromancer. "Truly, you are bold to enter the temple of Mordiggian."

"I came to find the girl who lies yonder," declared Phariom. "She is Elaith, my wife, who was claimed unjustly by the god. But tell me, why have you brought her to this room, from the table of Mordiggian, and what manner of men are you, that raise up the dead as you have raised this other woman?"

"I am Abnon-Tha, the necromancer, and these others are my pupils, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith. Give thanks to Vemba-Tsith, for verily he has brought back your wife from the purlieus of the dead with a skill excelling that of his master. She awoke ere the incantation was finished!"

Phariom glared with implacable suspicion at Abnon-Tha. "Elaith was not dead, but only as one in a trance," he averred. "It was not your pupil's sorcery that awakened her. And verily whether Elaith be dead or living is not a matter that should concern any but myself. Permit us to depart, for I wish to remove with her from Zul-Bha-Sair, in which we are only passing travelers."

So speaking, he turned his back on the necromancers, and went over to Elaith, who regarded him with dazed eyes but uttered his name feebly as he clasped her in his arms.

"Now, this is a remarkable coincidence," purred Abnon-Tha. "I and my pupils are also planning to depart from Zul-Bha-Sair, and we start this very

night. Perhaps you will honor us with your company."

"I thank you," said Phariom, curtly. "But I am not sure that our roads lie together. Elaith and I would go toward Tasuun."

"Now, by the black altar of Mordiggian, that is still stranger coincidence, for Tasuun is also our destination. We take with us the resurrected girl Arctela, whom I have deemed too fair for the charnel god and his ghouls."

Phariom divined the dark evil that lay behind the oily, mocking speeches of the necromancer. Also, he saw the furtive and sinister sign that Abnon-Tha had made to his assistants. Weaponless, he could only give a formal assent to the sardonic proposal. He knew well that he would not be permitted to leave the temple alive, for the narrow eyes of Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, regarding him closely, were alight with the red lust of murder.

"Come," said Abnon-Tha, in a voice of imperious command. "It is time to go." He turned to the still figure of Arctela and spoke an unknown word. With vacant eyes and noctambulistic paces, she followed at his heels as he stepped toward the open door. Phariom had helped Elaith to her feet, and was whispering words of reassurance in an effort to lull the growing horror and confused alarm that he saw in her eyes. She was able to walk, albeit slowly and uncertainly. Vemba-Tsith and Narghai drew back, motioning that she and Phariom should precede them; but Phariom, sensing their intent to slay him as soon as his back was turned, obeyed unwillingly and looked desperately about for something that he could seize as a weapon.

One of the metal braziers, full of smoldering coals, was at his very feet. He stooped quickly, lifted it in his hands, and turned upon the necromancers. Vemba-Tsith, as he had suspected, was prowling toward him with upraised sword, and was making ready to strike. Phariom hurled the brazier and its glowing contents full in the necromancer's face, and Vemba-Tsith went down with a terrible, smothered cry. Narghai, snarling ferociously, leapt forward to assail the defenseless youth. His scimitar gleamed with a wicked luster in the lurid glare of the urns as he swung it back for the blow. But the weapon did not fall; and Phariom, steeling himself against the

impending death, became aware that Narghai was staring beyond him as if petrified by the vision of some Gorgonian specter.

As if compelled by another will than his own, the youth turned and saw the thing that had halted Narghai's blow. Arctela and Abnon-Tha, pausing before the open door, were outlined against a colossal shadow that was not wrought by anything in the room. It filled the portals from side to side, it towered above the lintel — and then, swiftly, it became more than a shadow: it was a bulk of darkness, black and opaque, that somehow blinded the eyes with a strange dazzlement. It seemed to suck the flame from the red urns and fill the chamber with a chill of utter death and voidness. Its form was that of a worm-shapen column, huge as a dragon, its further coils still issuing from the gloom of the corridor; but it changed from moment to moment, swirling and spinning as if alive with the vortical energies of dark eons. Briefly it took the semblance of some demoniac giant with eyeless head and limbless body; and then, leaping and spreading like smoky fire, it swept forward into the chamber.

Abnon-Tha fell back before it, with frantic mumblings of malediction or exorcism; but Arctela, pale and slight and motionless, remained full in its path, while the thing enfolded her and enveloped her with a hungry flaring until she was hidden wholly from view.

Phariom, supporting Elaith, who leaned weakly on his shoulder as if about to swoon, was powerless to move. He forgot the murderous Narghai, and it seemed that he and Elaith were but faint shadows in the presence of embodied death and dissolution. He saw the blackness grow and wax with the towering of fed flame as it closed about Arctela; and he saw it gleam with eddying hues of somber iris, like the spectrum of a sable sun. For an instant, he heard a soft and flame-like murmuring. Then, quickly and terribly, the thing ebbed from the room. Arctela was gone, as if she had dissolved like a phantom on the air. Borne on a sudden gust of strangely mingled heat and cold, there came an acrid odor, such as would rise from a burnt-out funeral pyre.

"Mordiggian!" shrilled Narghai, in hysteric terror. "It was the god Mordiggian! He has taken Arctela!"

It seemed that his cry was answered by a score of sardonic echoes, unhuman as the howling of hyenas, and yet articulate, that repeated the name Mordiggian. Into the room, from the dark hall, there poured a horde of creatures whose violet robes alone identified them in Phariom's eyes as the priests of the ghoul-god. They had removed the skull-like masks, revealing heads and faces that were half anthropomorphic, half canine, and wholly diabolic. Also, they had taken off the fingerless gloves... There were at least a dozen of them. Their curving talons gleamed in the bloody light like the hooks of darkly tarnished metal; their spiky teeth, longer than coffin nails, protruded from snarling lips. They closed like a ring of jackals on Abnon-Tha and Narghai, driving them back into the farthest corner. Several others, entering tardily, fell with a bestial ferocity on Vemba-Tsith, who had begun to revive, and was moaning and writhing on the floor amid the scattered coals of the brazier.

They seemed to ignore Phariom and Elaith, who stood looking on as if in some baleful trance. But the hindmost, ere he joined the assailants of Vemba-Tsith, turned to the youthful pair and addressed them in a hoarse, hollow voice, like a tomb-reverberate barking:

"Go, for Mordiggian is a just god, who claims only the dead, and has no concern with the living. And we, the priests of Mordiggian, deal in our own fashion with those who would violate his law by removing the dead from the temple."

Phariom, with Elaith still leaning on his shoulder, went out into the dark hall, hearing a hideous clamor in which the screams of men were mingled with a growling as of jackals, a laughter as of hyenas. The clamor ceased as, they entered the blue-lit sanctuary and passed toward the outer corridor, and the silence that filled Mordiggian's fane behind them was deep as the silence of the dead on the black altar-table.

THE CITY OF THE SINGING FLAME

Foreword

When Giles Angarth disappeared, nearly two years ago, we had been friends for a decade or more, and I knew him as well as anyone could purport to know him. Yet the thing was no less a mystery to me than to others at the time, and until now, it has remained a mystery.

Like the rest, I sometimes thought that he and Ebbonly had designed it all between them as a huge, insoluble hoax; that they were still alive, somewhere, and laughing at the world that was so sorely baffled by their disappearance. And, until I at last decided to visit Crater Ridge and find, if I could, the two boulders mentioned in Angarth's narrative, no one had uncovered any trace of the missing men or heard even the faintest rumor concerning them. The whole affair, it seemed then, was likely to remain a most singular and exasperating riddle.

Angarth, whose fame as a writer of fantastic fiction was already very considerable, had been spending that summer among the Sierras, and had been living alone until the artist, Felix Ebbonly, went to visit him. Ebbonly, whom I had never met, was well known for his imaginative paintings and drawings, and had illustrated more than one of Angarth's novels.

When neighboring campers became alarmed over the prolonged absence of the two men, and the cabin was searched for some possible clue, a package addressed to me was found lying on the table; and I received it in due course of time, after reading many newspaper speculations concerning the double vanishment. The package contained a small, leather-bound notebook, and Angarth had written on the fly-leaf:

'Dear Hastane, You can publish this journal sometime, if you like. People will think it the last and wildest of all my fictions — unless they take it for one of your own. In either case, it will be just as well. Good-bye.

Faithfully, GILES ANGARTH.'

Feeling that it would certainly meet with the reception he anticipated, and being unsure, myself, whether the tale was truth or fabrication, I delayed

publishing his journal. Now, from my own experience, I have become satisfied of its reality; and am finally printing it, together with an account of my personal adventures. Perhaps, the double publication, preceded as it is by Angarth's return to mundane surroundings, will help to ensure the acceptance of the whole story for more than mere fantasy.

Still, when I recall my own doubts, I wonder.... But let the reader decide for himself. And first, as to Giles Angarth's journal:

I. The Dimension Beyond

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July 31st, 1938. — I have never acquired the diary-keeping habit — mainly, because of my uneventful, mode of existence, in which there has seldom been anything to chronicle. But the thing which happened this morning is so extravagantly strange, so remote from mundane laws and parallels, that I feel impelled to write it down to the best of my understanding and ability. Also, I shall keep account of the possible repetition and continuation of my experience. It will be perfectly safe to do this, for no one who ever reads the record will be likely to believe it....

I had gone for a walk on Crater Ridge, which lies a mile or less to the north of my cabin near Summit. Though differing markedly in its character from the usual landscapes round about, it is one of my favorite places. It is exceptionally bare and desolate, with little more in the way of vegetation than mountain sunflowers, wild currant bushes, and a few sturdy, wind-warped pines and supple tamaracks.

Geologists deny it a volcanic origin; yet its outcroppings of rough, nodular stone and enormous rubble-heaps have all the air of scoriac remains — at least, to my non-scientific eye. They look like the slag and refuse of Cyclopean furnaces, poured out in pre-human years, to cool and harden into shapes of limitless grotesquerie.

Among them are stones that suggest the fragments of primordial bas-reliefs, or small prehistoric idols and figurines; and others that seem to have been

graven with lost letters of an indecipherable script. Unexpectedly, there is a little tarn lying on one end of the long, dry Ridge — a tarn that has never been fathomed. The hill is an odd interlude among the granite sheets and crags, and the fir-clothed ravines and valleys of this region.

It was a clear, windless morning, and I paused often to view the magnificent perspectives of varied scenery that were visible on every hand — the titan battlements of Castle Peak; the rude masses of Donner Peak, with its dividing pass of hemlocks; the remote, luminous blue of the Nevada Mountains, and the soft green of willows in the valley at my feet. It was an aloof, silent world, and I heard no sound other than the dry, crackling noise of cicadas among the currant-bushes.

I strolled on in a zigzag manner for some distance, and coming to one of the rubble-fields with which the Ridge is interstrewn, I began to search the ground closely, hoping to find a stone that was sufficiently quaint and grotesque in its form to be worth keeping as a curiosity: I had found several such in my previous wanderings. Suddenly, I came to a clear space amid the rubble, in which nothing grew — a space that was round as an artificial ring. In the center were two isolated boulders, queerly alike in shape, and lying about five feet apart.

I paused to examine them. Their substance, a dull, greenish-grey stone, seemed to be different from anything else in the neighborhood; and I conceived at once the weird, unwarrantable fancy that they might be the pedestals of vanished columns, worn away by incalculable years till there remained only these sunken ends. Certainly, the perfect roundness and uniformity of the boulders was peculiar, and though I possess a smattering of geology, I could not identify their smooth, soapy material.

My imagination was excited, and I began to indulge in some rather overheated fantasies. But the wildest of these was a homely commonplace in comparison with the thing that happened when I took a single step forward in the vacant space immediately between the two boulders. I shall try to describe it to the utmost of my ability; though human language is

naturally wanting in words that are adequate for the delineation of events and sensations beyond the normal scope of human experience.

Nothing is more disconcerting than to miscalculate the degree of descent in taking a step. Imagine, then, what it was like to step forward on level, open ground, and find utter nothingness underfoot! I seemed to be going down into an empty gulf; and, at the same time, the landscape before me vanished in a swirl of broken images and everything went blind. There was a feeling of intense, hyperborean cold, and an indescribable sickness and vertigo possessed me, due, no doubt, to the profound disturbance of equilibrium. Either from the speed of my descent or for some other reason, I was, too, totally unable to draw breath.

My thoughts and feelings were unutterably confused, and half the time it seemed to me that I was falling upward rather than downward, or was sliding horizontally or at some oblique angle. At last, I had the sensation of turning a complete somersault; and then I found myself standing erect on solid ground once more, without the least shock or jar of impact. The darkness cleared away from my vision, but I was still dizzy, and the optical images I received were altogether meaningless for some moments.

When, finally, I recovered the power of cognisance and was able to view my surroundings with a measure of perception, I experienced a mental confusion equivalent to that of a man who might find himself cast without warning on the shore of some foreign planet. There was the same sense of utter loss and alienation which would assuredly be felt in such a case; the same vertiginous, overwhelming bewilderment, the same ghastly sense of separation from all the familiar environmental details that give color, form and definition to our lives and even determine our very personalities.

I was standing in the midst of a landscape which bore no degree or manner of resemblance to Crater Ridge. A long, gradual slope, covered with violet grass and studded at intervals with stones of monolithic size and shape, ran undulantly away beneath me to a broad plain with sinuous, open meadows and high, stately forests of an unknown vegetation whose predominant hues were purple and yellow. The plain seemed to end in a wall of impenetrable,

golden-brownish mist, that rose with phantom pinnacles to dissolve on a sky of luminescent amber in which there was no sun.

In the foreground of this amazing scene, not more than two or three miles away, there loomed a city whose massive towers and mountainous ramparts of red stone were such as the Anakim of undiscovered worlds might build. Wall on beetling wall, spire on giant spire, it soared to confront the heavens, maintaining everywhere the severe and solemn lines of a rectilinear architecture. It seemed to overwhelm and crush down the beholder with its stern and crag-like imminence.

As I viewed this city, I forgot my initial sense of bewildering loss and alienage, in an awe with which something of actual terror was mingled; and, at the same time, I felt an obscure but profound allurement, the cryptic emanation of some enslaving spell. But after I had gazed awhile, the cosmic strangeness and bafflement of my unthinkable position returned upon me, and I felt only a wild desire to escape from the maddeningly oppressive bizarrerie of this region and regain my own world. In an effort to fight down my agitation I tried to figure out, if possible, what had really happened.

I had read a number of transdimensional stories — in fact, I had written one or two myself; and I had often pondered the possibility of other worlds or material planes which may exist in the same space with ours, invisible and impalpable to human senses. Of course, I realized at once that I had fallen into some such dimension. Doubtless, when I took that step forward between the boulders, I had been precipitated into some sort of flaw or fissure in space, to emerge at the bottom in this alien sphere — in a totally different kind of space.

It sounded simple enough, in a way, but not simple enough to make the modus operandi anything but a brainracking mystery, and in a further effort to collect myself, I studied my immediate surroundings with a close attention. This time, I was impressed by the arrangement of the monolithic stones I have spoken of, many of which were disposed at fairly regular

intervals in two parallel lines running down the hill, as if to mark the course of some ancient road obliterated by the purple grass.

Turning to follow its ascent, I saw right behind me two columns, standing at precisely the same distance apart as the two odd boulders on Crater Ridge, and formed of the same soapy, greenish-gray stone. The pillars were perhaps nine feet high, and had been taller at one time, since the tops were splintered and broken away. Not far above them, the mounting slope vanished from view in a great bank of the same golden-brown mist that enveloped the remoter plain. But there were no more monoliths, and it seemed as if the road had ended with those pillars.

Inevitably, I began to speculate as to the relationship between the columns in this new dimension and the boulders in my own world. Surely, the resemblance could not be a matter of mere chance. If I stepped between the columns, could I return to the human sphere by a reversal of my precipitation therefrom? And if so, by what inconceivable beings from foreign time and space had the columns and boulders been established as the portals of a gateway between the two worlds? Who could have used the gateway, and for what purpose?

My brain reeled before the infinite vistas of surmise that were opened by such questions. However, what concerned me most was the problem of getting back to Crater Ridge. The weirdness of it all, the monstrous walls of the near-by town, the unnatural hues and forms of the outlandish scenery, were too much for human nerves, and I felt that I should go mad if forced to remain long in such a milieu. Also, there was no telling what hostile powers or entities I might encounter if I stayed.

The slope and plain were devoid of animate life, as far as I could see; but the great city was presumptive proof of its existence. Unlike the heroes in my own tales, who were wont to visit the Fifth Dimension or the worlds of Algol with perfect sang froid, I did not feel in the least adventurous, and I shrank back with man's instinctive recoil before the unknown. With one fearful glance at the looming city and the wide plain with its lofty gorgeous vegetation, I turned and stepped back between the columns.

There was the same instantaneous plunge into blind and freezing gulfs, the same indeterminate falling and twisting, which had marked my descent into this new dimension. At the end I found myself standing, very dizzy and shaken, on the sane spot from which I had taken my forward step between the greenish-gray boulders. Crater Ridge was swirling and reeling about me as if in the throes of earthquake, and I had to sit down for a minute or two before I could recover my equilibrium.

I came back to the cabin like a man in a dream. The experience seemed, and still seems, incredible and unreal; and yet it has overshadowed everything else, and has colored and dominated all my thoughts. Perhaps, by writing it down, I can shake it off a little. It has unsettled me more than any previous experience in my whole life, and the world about me seems hardly less improbable and nightmarish than the one which I have penetrated in a fashion so fortuitous.

August 2nd. — I have done a lot of thinking in the past few days, and the more I ponder and puzzle, the more mysterious it all becomes. Granting the flaw in space, which must be an absolute vacuum, impervious to air, ether, light and matter, how was it possible for me to fall into it? And having fallen in, how could I fall out — particularly into a sphere that has no certifiable relationship with ours?

But, after all, one process would be as easy as the other, in theory. The main objection is: how could one move in a vacuum, either up or down, or backward or forward? The whole thing would baffle the comprehension of an Einstein, and I cannot feel that I have even approached the true solution.

Also, I have been fighting the temptation to go back, if only to convince myself that the thing really occurred. But, after all, why shouldn't I go back? An opportunity has been vouchsafed to me such as no man may even have been given before, and the wonders I shall see, the secrets I shall learn, are beyond imagining. My nervous trepidation is inexcusably childish under the circumstances....

II. The Titan City

August 3rd. — I went back this morning, armed with a revolver. Somehow, without thinking that it might make a difference, I did not step in the very middle of the space between the boulders. Undoubtedly, as a result of this, my descent was more prolonged and impetuous than before, and seemed to consist mainly of a series of spiral somersaults. It must have taken me several minutes to recover from the ensuing vertigo, and when I came to, I was lying on the violet grass.

This time, I went boldly down the slope, and keeping as much as I could in the shelter of the bizarre purple and yellow vegetation, I stole toward the looming city. All was very still; there was no breath of wind in those exotic trees, which appeared to imitate, in their lofty, upright boles and horizontal foliage, the severe architectural lines of the Cyclopean buildings.

I had not gone far when I came to a road in the forest — a road paved with stupendous blocks of stone at least twenty feet square. It ran toward the city. I thought for a while that it was wholly deserted, perhaps disused; and I even dared to walk upon it, till I heard a noise behind me and, turning, saw the approach of several singular entities. Terrified, I sprang back and hid myself in a thicket, from which I watched the passing of those creatures, wondering fearfully if they had seen me. Apparently, my fears were groundless, for they did not even glance at my hiding place.

It is hard for me to describe or even visualize them now, for they were totally unlike anything that we are accustomed to think of as human or animal. They must have been ten feet tall, and they were moving along with colossal strides that took them from sight in a few instants, beyond a turn of the road. Their bodies were bright and shining, as if encased in some sort of armor, and their heads were equipped with high, curving appendages of opalescent hues which nodded above them like fantastic plumes, but may have been antennae or other sense-organs of a novel type. Trembling with excitement and wonder, I continued my progress through the richly-colored undergrowth. As I went on, I perceived for the first time that there were no shadows anywhere. The light came from all portions of the sunless, amber heaven, pervading everything with a soft, uniform luminosity. All was

motionless and silent, as before; and there was no evidence of bird, insect or animal life in all this preternatural landscape.

But, when I had advanced to within a mile of the city -as well as I could judge the distance in a realm where the very proportions of objects were unfamiliar — I became aware of something which at first was recognizable as a vibration rather than a sound. There was a queer thrilling in my nerves; the disquieting sense of some unknown force or emanation flowing through my body. This was perceptible for some time before I heard the music, but having heard it, my auditory nerves identified it at once with the vibration.

It was faint and far-off, and seemed to emanate from the very heart of the Titan city. The melody was piercingly sweet, and resembled at times the singing of some voluptuous feminine voice. However, no human voice could have possessed that unearthly pitch, the shrill, perpetually sustained notes that somehow suggested the light of remote worlds and stars translated into sound.

Ordinarily, I am not very sensitive to music; I have even been reproached for not reacting more strongly to it. But I had not gone much farther when I realized the peculiar mental and emotional spell which the far-off sound was beginning to exert upon me. There was a siren-like allurements which drew me on, forgetful of the strangeness and potential perils of my situation; and I felt a slow, drug-like intoxication of brain and senses.

In some insidious manner, I know not how nor why, the music conveyed the ideas of vast but attainable space and altitude, of superhuman freedom and exultation; and it seemed to promise all the impossible splendors of which my imagination has vaguely dreamt....

The forest continued almost to the city walls. Peering from behind the final boscage, I saw their overwhelming battlements in the sky above me, and noted the flawless jointure of their prodigious blocks. I was near the great road, which entered an open gate large enough to admit the passage of behemoths. There were no guards in sight, and several more of the tall, gleaming entities came striding along and went in as I watched.

From where I stood, I was unable to see inside the gate, for the wall was stupendously thick. The music poured from that mysterious entrance in an ever-strengthening flood, and sought to draw me on with its weird seduction, eager for unimaginable things. It was hard to resist; hard to rally my will-power and turn back. I tried to concentrate on the thought of danger — but the thought was tenuously unreal.

At last, I tore myself away and retraced my footsteps, very slowly and lingeringly, till I was beyond reach of the music. Even then, the spell persisted, like the effects of a drug; and all the way home I was tempted to return and follow those shining giants into the city.

August 5th. — I have visited the new dimension once more. I thought I could resist that summoning music, and I even took some cotton-wadding with which to stuff my ears if it should affect me too strongly. I began to hear the supernal melody at the same distance as before, and was drawn onward in the same manner. But, this time, I entered the open gate!

I wonder if I can describe that city? I felt like a crawling ant upon its mammoth pavements, amid the measureless Babel of its buildings, of its streets and arcades. Everywhere there were columns, obelisks and the perpendicular pylons of fane-like structures that would have dwarfed those of Thebes and Heliopolis. And the people of the city! How is one to depict them, or give them a name!

I think that the gleaming entities I first saw are not the true inhabitants, but are only visitors, perhaps from some other world or dimension, like myself. The real people are giants, too; but they move slowly, with solemn, hieratic paces. Their bodies are nude and swart, and their limbs are those of caryatides — massive enough, it would seem, to uphold the roofs and lintels of their own buildings. I fear to describe them minutely, for human words would give the idea of something monstrous and uncouth, and these beings are not monstrous, but they have merely developed in obedience to the laws of another evolution than ours; the environmental forces and conditions of a different world.

Somehow, I was not afraid when I saw them — perhaps the music had dragged me till I was beyond fear. There was a group of them just inside the gate, and they seemed to pay me no attention whatever as I passed them. The opaque, jet-like orbs of their huge eyes were impassive as the carven eyes of androsphinxes, and they uttered no sound from their heavy, straight, expressionless lips. Perhaps they lack the sense of hearing, for their strange, semi-rectangular heads were devoid of anything in the nature of external ears.

I followed the music, which was still remote and seemed to increase little in loudness. I was soon overtaken by several of those beings whom I had previously seen on the road outside the walls; and they passed me quickly and disappeared in the labyrinth of buildings. After them there came other beings of a less gigantic kind, and without the bright shards or armor worn by the first-comers. Then, overhead, two creatures with long, translucent, blood-colored wings, intricately veined and ribbed, came flying side by side and vanished behind the others. Their faces, featured with organs of unsurmountable use, were not those of animals, and I felt sure that they were beings of a high order of development.

I saw hundreds of those slow-moving, somber entities whom I have identified as the true inhabitants, but none of them appeared to notice me. Doubtless they were accustomed to seeing far weirder and more unusual kinds of life than humanity. As I went on, I was overtaken by dozens of improbable-looking creatures, all going in the same direction as myself, as if drawn by the same siren melody.

Deeper and deeper I went into the wilderness of colossal architecture, led by that remote, ethereal, opiate music. I soon noticed a sort of gradual ebb and flow in the sound, occupying an interval of ten minutes or more; but, by imperceptible degrees, it grew sweeter and nearer. I wondered how it could penetrate that manifold maze of builded stone and be heard outside the walls....

I must have walked for miles, in the ceaseless gloom of those rectangular structures that hung above me, tier on tier, at an awful height in the amber

zenith. Then, at length, I came to the core and secret of it all. Preceded and followed by a number of those chimerical entities, I emerged on a great square, in whose center was a temple-like building more immense than the others. The music poured, imperiously shrill and loud, from its many-columned entrance.

I felt the thrill of one who approaches the sanctum of some hierarchal mystery, when I entered the halls of that building. People who must have come from many different worlds or dimensions went with me, and before me, along the titanic colonnades, whose pillars were graven with indecipherable runes and enigmatic bas-reliefs. The dark, colossal inhabitants of the town were standing or roaming about, intent, like all the others, on their own affairs. None of these beings spoke, either to me or to one another, and though several eyed me casually, my presence was evidently taken for granted.

There are no words to convey the incomprehensible wonder of it all. And the music? I have utterly failed to describe that, also. It was as if some marvelous elixir had been turned into sound-waves — an elixir conferring the gift of superhuman life, and the high, magnificent dreams which are dreamt by the Immortals. It mounted in my brain like a supernal drunkenness, as I approached the hidden source. I do not know what obscure warning prompted me, now, to stuff my ears with cotton before I went any farther. Though I could still hear it, still feel its peculiar, penetrant vibration, the sound became muted when I had done this, and its influence was less powerful henceforth. There is little doubt that I owe my life to this simple and homely precaution.

The endless rows of columns grew dim for a while as the interior of a long, basaltic cavern; and then, some distance ahead, I perceived the glimmering of a soft light on the floor and pillars. The light soon became an overflowing radiance, as if gigantic lamps were being lit in the temple's heart; and the vibrations of the hidden music pulsed more strongly in my nerves.

The hall ended in a chamber of immense, indefinite scope, whose walls and roof were doubtful with unremoving shadows. In the center, amid the

pavement of mammoth blocks, there was a circular pit, above which seemed to float a fountain of flame that soared in one perpetual, slowly lengthening jet. This flame was the sole illumination, and also, was the source of the wild, unearthly music. Even with my purposely deafened ears, I was wooed by the shrill and starry sweetness of its singing; and I felt the voluptuous lure and the high, vertiginous exaltation.

I knew immediately that the place was a shrine, and that the transdimensional beings who accompanied me were visiting pilgrims. There were scores of them — perhaps hundreds; but all were dwarfed in the cosmic immensity of that chamber. They were gathered before the flame in various attitudes of worship; they bowed their exotic heads, or made mysterious gestures or adoration with unhuman hands and members. And the voices of several, deep as booming drums, or sharp as the stridulation of giant insects, were audible amid the singing of the fountain.

Spellbound, I went forward and joined them. Enthralled by the music and by the vision of the soaring flame, I paid as little heed to my outlandish companions as they to me. The fountain rose and rose, until its light flickered on the limbs and features of throned, colossal, statues behind it — of heroes, gods or demons from the earlier cycles of alien time, staring in stone from a dusk of illimitable mystery.

The fire was green and dazzling, pure as the central flame of a star; it blinded me, and when I turned my eyes away, the air was filled with webs of intricate colour, with swiftly changing arabesques whose numberless, unwonted hues and patterns were such as no mundane eye had ever beheld. And I felt a stimulating warmth that filled my very marrow with intenser life....

III. The Lure of the Flame

The music mounted with the flame; and I understood, now, its recurrent ebb and flow. As I looked and listened, a mad thought was born in my mind — the thought of how marvelous and ecstatic it would be to run forward and leap headlong into the singing fire. The music seemed to tell me that I

should find in that moment of flaring dissolution all the delight and triumph, all the splendor and exaltation it had promised from afar. It besought me; it pleaded with tones of supernal melody, and despite the wadding in my ears, the seduction was well-nigh irresistible.

However, it had not robbed me of all sanity. With a sudden start of terror, like one who has been tempted to fling himself from a high precipice, I drew back. Then I saw that the same dreadful impulse was shared by some of my companions. The two entities with scarlet wings, whom I have previously mentioned, were standing a little apart from the rest of us. Now, with a great fluttering, they rose and flew toward the flame like moths toward a candle. For a brief moment the light shone redly through their half-transparent wings, ere they disappeared in the leaping incandescence, which flared briefly and then burned as before.

Then, in rapid succession, a number of other beings, who represented the most divergent trends of biology, sprang forward and immolated themselves in the flame. There were creatures with translucent bodies, and some that shone with all the hues of the opal; there were winged colossi, and Titans who strode as with seven-league boots; and there was one being with useless, abortive wings, who crawled rather than ran, to seek the same glorious doom as the rest. But among them there were none of the city's people: these merely stood and looked on, impassive and statue-like as ever.

I saw that the fountain had now reached its greatest height, and was beginning to decline. It sank steadily, but slowly, to half its former elevation. During this interval, there were no more acts of self-sacrifice, and several of the beings beside me turned abruptly and went away, as if they had overcome the lethal spell.

One of the tall, armored entities, as he left, addressed me in words that were like clarion-notes, with unmistakable accents of warning. By a mighty effort of will, in a turmoil of conflicting emotions, I followed him. At every step, the madness and delirium of the music warred with my instincts of self-preservation. More than once, I started to go back. My homeward journey was blurred and doubtful as the wanderings of a man in opium-trance; and

the music sang behind me, and told me of the rapture I had missed, of, the flaming dissolution whose brief instant was better than aeons of mortal life....

August 9th. — I have tried to go on with a new story, but have made no progress. Anything that I can imagine, or frame in language, seems flat and puerile beside the world of unsearchable mystery to which I have found admission. The temptation to return is more cogent than ever; the call of that remembered music is sweeter than the voice of a loved woman. And always I am tormented by the problem of it all, and tantalized by the little which I have perceived and understood.

What forces are these whose existence and working I have merely apprehended? Who are the inhabitants of the city? And who are the beings that visit the enshrined flame? What rumor or legend has drawn them from outland realms and ulterior planets to that place of inenarrable danger and destruction? And what is the fountain itself, what the secret of its lure and its deadly singing? These problems admit of infinite surmise, but no conceivable solution.

I am planning to go back once more... but not alone. Someone must go with me, this time, as a witness to the wonder and the peril. It is all too strange for credence: I must have human corroboration of what I have seen and felt and conjectured. Also, another might understand where I have failed to do more than apprehend.

Who shall I take? It will be necessary to invite someone here from the outer world — someone of high intellectual and aesthetic capacity. Shall I ask Philip Hastane, my fellow fiction-writer? He would be too busy, I fear. But there is the Californian artist, Felix Ebbonly, who has illustrated some of my fantastic novels....

Ebbonly would be the man to see and appreciate the new dimension, if he can come. With his bent for the bizarre and unearthly, the spectacle of that plain and city, the Babelian buildings and arcades, and the Temple of the

Flame, will simply enthrall him. I shall write immediately to his San Francisco address.

August 12th. — Ebbonly is here: the mysterious hints in my letter, regarding some novel pictorial subjects along his own line, were too provocative for him to resist. Now, I have explained fully and given him a detailed account of my adventures. I can see that he is a little incredulous, for which I hardly blame him. But he will not remain incredulous for long, for tomorrow we shall visit together the City of the Singing Flame.

August 13th. — I must concentrate my disordered faculties, must choose my words and write with exceeding care. This will be the last entry in my journal, and the last writing I shall ever do. When I have finished, I shall wrap the journal up and address it to Philip Hastane, who can make such disposition of it as he sees fit.

I took Ebbonly into the other dimension today. He was impressed, even as I had been, by the two isolated boulders on Crater Ridge.

'They look like the guttered ends of columns established by pre-human gods,' he remarked. 'I begin to believe you now.'

I told him to go first, and indicated the place where he should step. He obeyed without hesitation, and I had the singular experience of seeing a man melt into utter, instantaneous nothingness. One moment he was there — the next, there was only bare ground, and the far-off tamaracks whose view his body had obstructed. I followed, and found him standing, in speechless awe, on the violet grass.

'This,' he said at last, 'is the sort of thing whose existence I have hitherto merely suspected, and have never been able to hint at in my most imaginative drawings.'

We spoke little as we followed the range of monolithic boulders toward the plain. Far in the distance, beyond those high and stately trees, with their sumptuous foliage, the golden-brown vapors had parted, showing vistas of an immense horizon; and past the horizon were range on range of gleaming

orbs and fiery, flying motes in the depth of that amber heaven. It was as if the veil of another universe than ours had been drawn back.

We crossed the plain, and came at length within earshot of the siren music. I warned Ebbonly to stuff his ears with cotton-wadding, but he refused.

'I don't want to deaden any new sensation I may experience,' he observed.

We entered the city. My companion was in a veritable rhapsody of artistic delight when he beheld the enormous buildings and the people. I could see, too, that the music had taken hold upon him: his look soon became fixed and dreamy as that of an opium-eater.

At first, he made many comments on the architecture and the various beings who passed us, and called my attention to details which I had not perceived before. However, as we drew nearer the Temple of the Flame, his observational interest seemed to flag, and was replaced by more and more of an ecstatic inward absorption. His remarks became fewer and briefer, and he did not even seem to hear my questions. It was evident that the sound had wholly bemused and bewitched him.

Even as on my former visit, there were many pilgrims going toward the shrine — and few that were coming away from it. Most of them belonged to evolutionary types that I had seen before. Among those that were new to me, I recall one gorgeous creature with golden and cerulean wings like those of a giant lepidoptera, and scintillating, jewel-like eyes that must have been designed to mirror the glories of some Edenic world.

I felt, too, as before, the captious thralldom and bewitchment, the insidious, gradual perversion of thought and instinct, as if the music were working in my brain like a subtle alkaloid. Since I had taken my usual precaution, my subjection to the influence was less complete than that of Ebbonly; but, nevertheless, it was enough to make me forget a number of things — among them, the initial concern which I had felt when my companion refused to employ the same mode of protection as myself. I no longer thought of his danger, or my own, except as something very distant and immaterial.

The streets were like the prolonged and bewildering labyrinth of a nightmare. But the music led us forthrightly, and always there were other pilgrims. Like men in the grip of some powerful current, we were drawn to our destination. As we passed along the hall of gigantic columns and neared the abode of the fiery fountain, a sense of our peril quickened momentarily in my brain, and I sought to warn Ebbonly once more. But all my protests and remonstrances were futile: he was deaf as a machine, and wholly impervious to anything but the lethal music. His expression and movements were those of a somnambulist. Even when I seized and shook him with such violence as I could muster, he remained oblivious of my presence.

The throng of worshippers was larger than upon my first visit. The jet of pure, incandescent flame was mounting steadily as we entered, and it sang with the pure ardor and ecstasy of a star alone in space. Again, with ineffable tones, it told me the rapture of a moth-like death in its lofty soaring, the exultation and triumph of a momentary union with its elemental essence.

The flame rose to its apex; and even for me, the mesmeric lure was well-nigh irresistible. Many of our companions succumbed, and the first to immolate himself was the giant lepidopterous being. Four others, of diverse evolutionary types, followed in appallingly swift succession.

In my own partial subjection to the music, my own effort to resist that deadly enslavement, I had almost forgotten the very presence of Ebbonly. It was too late for me to even think of stopping him, when he ran forward in a series of leaps that were both solemn and frenzied, like the beginnings of some sacerdotal dance, and hurled himself headlong into the flame. The fire enveloped him; it flared up for an instant with a more dazzling greenness, and that was all.

Slowly, as if from benumbed brain centers, a horror crept upon my conscious mind, and helped to annul the perilous mesmerism. I turned, while many others were following Ebbonly's example, and fled from the shrine and from the city. But somehow the horror diminished as I went; more and more, I found myself envying my companion's fate, and

wondering as to the sensations he had felt in that moment of fiery dissolution....

Now, as I write this, I am wondering why I came back again to the human world. Words are futile to express what I have beheld and experienced, and the change that has come upon me, beneath the play of incalculable forces in a world of which no other mortal is even cognisant. Literature is nothing more than a shadow. Life, with its drawn-out length of monotonous, reiterative days, is unreal and without meaning, now, in comparison with the splendid death which I might have had — the glorious doom which is still in store.

I have no longer any will to fight the ever-insistent music which I hear in memory. And there seems to be no reason at all why I should fight it... Tomorrow, I shall return to the city.

IV. The Third Venturer

Even when I, Philip Hastane, had read through the journal of my friend, Giles Angarth, so many times that I had almost learned it by heart, I was still doubtful as to whether the incidents related therein were fiction or verity. The transdimensional adventures of Angarth and Ebbonly; the City of the Flame, with its strange residents and pilgrims; the immolation of Ebbonly, and the hinted return of the narrator himself for a like purpose, in the last entry of the diary, were very much the sort of thing that Angarth might have imagined in one of the fantastic novels for which he had become so justly famous. Add to this the seemingly impossible and incredible nature of the whole tale, and my hesitancy in accepting it as veridical will easily be understood.

However, on the other hand, there was the unsolved and recalcitrant enigma offered by the disappearance of the two men. Both were well known, one as a writer, the other as an artist; both were in flourishing circumstances, with no serious cares or troubles; and their vanishment, all things considered, was difficult to explain on the ground of any motive less unusual or extraordinary than the one assigned in the journal. At first, as I have

mentioned in my foreword to the diary, I thought the whole affair might well have been devised as a somewhat elaborate practical joke; but this theory became less and less tenable as weeks and months went by, and linked themselves slowly into a year, without the reappearance of the presumptive jokers.

Now, at last, I can testify to the truth of all that Angarth wrote — and more. For I, too, have been in Ydmos, the City of Singing Flame, and have known also the supernal glories and raptures of the Inner Dimension. And of these I must tell, however falteringly and inadequately, with mere human words, before the vision fades. For these are things which neither I, nor any other, shall behold or experience again.

Ydmos itself is now a riven ruin; the Temple of the Flame has been blasted to its foundations in the basic rock, and the fountain of singing fire has been stricken at its source. The Inner Dimension has perished like a broken bubble, in the great war that was made upon Ydmos by the rulers of the Outer Lands....

After having finally laid down Angarth's journal, I was unable to forget the peculiar and tantalizing problems it raised. The vague, but infinitely suggestive vistas opened by the tale were such as to haunt my imagination recurrently with a hint of half-revealed mysteries. I was troubled by the possibility of some great and mystic meaning behind it all; some cosmic actuality of which the narrator had perceived merely the external veils and fringes. As time went on, I found myself pondering it perpetually, and becoming more and more possessed by an overwhelming wonder, and a sense of something which no mere action-weaver would have been likely to invent.

In the early summer of 1939, after finishing a new novel, I felt able for the first time to take the necessary leisure for the execution of a project that had often occurred to me. Putting all my affairs in order, and knitting all the loose ends of my literary labours and correspondence, in case I should not return, I left my home in Auburn, ostensibly for a week's vacation. Actually,

I went to Summit, with the idea of investigating closely the milieu in which Angarth and Ebbonly had disappeared from human ken.

With strange emotions, I visited the forsaken cabin south of Crater Ridge, that had been occupied by Angarth, and saw the rough table of pine boards upon which my friend had written his journal, and then left the sealed package containing it to be forwarded to me after his departure.

There was a weird and brooding loneliness about the place, as if the non-human infinitudes had already claimed it for their own. The unlocked door had sagged inward from the pressure of high-piled winter snows, and fir needles had sifted across the sill to strew the unswept floor. Somehow, I know not why, the bizarre narrative became more real and more credible to me, while I stood there, as if an occult intimation of all that had happened to its author still lingered around the cabin.

This mysterious intimation grew stronger when I came to visit Crater Ridge itself, and to search amid its miles of pseudo-volcanic rubble for the two boulders so explicitly described by Angarth as having a likeness to the pedestals of ruined columns. Following the northward path which he must have taken from his cabin, and trying to retrace his wanderings of the long, barren hill, I combed it thoroughly from end to end and from side to side, since he had not specified the location of the boulders. And after two mornings spent in this manner, without result, I was almost ready to abandon the quest and dismiss the queer, soapy, greenish-gray column-ends as one of Angarth's most provocative and deceptive fictions.

It must have been the formless, haunting intuition to which I have referred, that made me renew the search on the third morning. This time, after crossing and re-crossing the hill-top for an hour or more, and weaving tortuously among the cicada-haunted wild-currant bushes and sunflowers on the dusty slopes, I came at last to an open, circular, rock-surrounded space that was totally unfamiliar. I had somehow missed it in all my previous roamings. It was the place of which Angarth had told; and I saw, with an inexpressible thrill, the two rounded, worn-looking boulders that were situated in the center of the ring.

I believe that I trembled a little with excitement, as I went forward to inspect the curious stones. Bending over, but not daring to enter the bare, pebbly space between them, I touched one of them with my hand, and received a sensation of preternatural smoothness, together with a coolness that was inexplicable, considering that the boulders and the soil about them must have lain unshaded from the sultry August sun for many hours.

From that moment, I became fully persuaded that Angarth's account was no mere fable. Just why I should have felt so certain of this, I am powerless to say. But it seemed to me that I stood on the threshold of an ultramundane mystery, on the brink of uncharted gulfs. I looked about at the familiar Sierran valleys and mountains, wondering that they still preserved their wonted outlines, and were still unchanged by the contiguity of alien worlds, still untouched by the luminous glories of arcanic dimensions.

Convinced that I had indeed found the gateway between the worlds, I was prompted to strange reflections. What, and where, was this other sphere to which my friend had attained entrance? Was it near at hand, like a secret room in the structure of space? Or was it, in reality, millions or trillions of light-years away, by the reckoning of astronomic distance, in a planet of some ulterior galaxy?

After all, we know little or nothing of the actual nature of space; and, perhaps, in some way that we cannot imagine, the infinite is doubled upon itself in places, with dimensional folds and tucks, and short-cuts whereby the distance to Algenib or Aldebaran is but a step. Perhaps, also, there is more than one infinity. The spatial 'flaw' into which Angarth had fallen might well be a sort of super-dimension, abridging the cosmic intervals and connecting universe with universe.

However, because of this very certitude that I had found the inter-spheric portals, and could follow Angarth and Ebbonly if I so desired, I hesitated before trying the experiment. I was mindful of the mystic danger and irrefragable lure that had overcome the others. I was consumed by imaginative curiosity, by an avid, well-nigh feverish longing to behold the

wonders of this exotic realm; but I did not purpose to become a victim to the opiate power and fascination of the Singing Flame.

I stood for a long time, eyeing the odd boulders and the barren, pebble-littered spot that gave admission to the unknown. At length, I went away, deciding to defer my venture till the following morning. Visualizing the weird doom to which the others had gone so voluntarily, and even gladly, I must confess that I was afraid. On the other hand, I was drawn by the fateful allurements that lead an explorer into far places... and, perhaps, by something more than this.

I slept badly that night, with nerves and brain excited by formless, glowing premonitions, by intimations of half-conceived perils, and splendors and vastnesses. Early the next morning, while the sun was still hanging above the Nevada Mountains, I returned to Crater Ridge. I carried a strong hunting-knife and a Colt revolver, and wore a filled cartridge-belt, with a knapsack containing sandwiches and a thermos bottle of coffee.

Before starting, I had stuffed my ears tightly with cotton soaked in a new anaesthetic fluid, mild but efficacious, which would serve to deafen me completely for many hours. In this way, I felt that I should be immune to the demoralizing music of the fiery fountain. I peered about at the rugged landscape with its far-flung vistas, wondering if I should ever see it again. Then, resolutely, but with the eerie thrilling and sinking of one who throws himself from a high cliff into some bottomless chasm, I stepped forward into the space between the grayish-green boulders.

My sensations, generally speaking, were similar to those described by Angarth in his diary. Blackness and illimitable emptiness seemed to wrap me round in a dizzy swirl as of rushing wind or milling water, and I went down and down in a spiral descent whose duration I have never been able to estimate. Intolerably stifled, and without even the power to gasp for breath, in the chill, airless vacuum that froze my very muscles and marrow, I felt that I should lose consciousness in another moment and descend into the greater gulf of death or oblivion.

Something seemed to arrest my fall, and I became aware that I was standing still, though I was troubled for some time by a queer doubt as to whether my position was vertical, horizontal or upside-down in relation to the solid substance that my feet had encountered. Then, the blackness lifted slowly like a dissolving cloud, and I saw the slope of violet grass, the rows of irregular monoliths running downward from where I stood, and the gray-green columns near at hand. Beyond was the titan, perpendicular city of red stone that was dominant above the high and multi-coloured vegetation of the plain.

It was all very much as Angarth had depicted it; but somehow, even then, I became aware of differences that were not immediately or clearly definable, of scenic details and atmospheric elements for which his account had not prepared me. And, at the moment I was too thoroughly disequibrated and overpowered by the vision of it all to even speculate concerning the character of these differences.

As I gazed at the city, with its crowding tiers of battlements and its multitude of overlooming spires I felt the invisible threads of a secret attraction, was seized by an imperative longing to know the mysteries hidden behind the massive walls and the myriad buildings. Then, a moment later, my gaze was drawn to the remote, opposite horizon of the plain, as if by some conflicting impulse whose nature and origin were undiscoverable.

It must have been because I had formed so clear and definite a picture of the scene from my friend's narrative, that I was surprised, and even a little disturbed as if by something wrong or irrelevant, when I saw in the far distance the shining towers of what seemed to be another city -- a city of which Angarth had not written. The towers rose in serried lines, reaching for many miles in a curious arclike formation, and were sharply defined against a blackish mass of cloud that had reared behind them and was spreading out on the luminous, amber sky in sullen webs and sinister, crawling filaments.

Subtle disquietude and repulsion seemed to emanate from the far-off, glittering spires, even as attraction emanated from those of the nearer city. I

saw them quiver and pulse with an evil light, like living and moving things, through what I assumed to be some refractive trick of the atmosphere. Then, for an instant, the black cloud behind them glowed with dull, angry crimson throughout its whole mass, and even its questing webs and tendrils were turned into lurid threads of fire.

The crimson faded, leaving the cloud inert and lumpish as before; but from many of the vanward towers, lines of red and violet flame had leaped, like out-thrust lances, at the bosom of the plain beneath them. They were held thus for at least a minute, moving slowly across a wide area, before they vanished. In the spaces between the towers, I now perceived a multitude of gleaming, restless particles, like armies of militant atoms, and wondered if perchance they were living things. If the idea had not appeared so fantastical, I could have sworn, even then, that the far city had already changed its position and was advancing toward the other on the plain.

V. The Striding Doom

Apart from the fulguration of the cloud, the flames that had sprung from the towers, and the quiverings which I deemed a refractive phenomenon, the whole landscape before and about me was unnaturally still. On the strange amber air, the Tyrian-tinted grasses, and the proud, opulent foliage of the unknown trees, where lay the dead calm that precedes the stupendous turmoil of typhonic storm or seismic cataclysm. The brooding sky was permeated with intuitions of cosmic menace, and weighed down by a dim, elemental despair.

Alarmed by this ominous atmosphere, I looked behind me at the two pillars which, according to Angarth, were the gateway of return to the human world. For an instant, I was tempted to go back. Then, I turned once more to the near-by city, and the feelings I have mentioned were lost in an oversurging awesomeness and wonder. I felt the thrill of a deep, supernal exaltation before the magnitude of the mighty buildings; a compelling sorcery was laid upon me by the very lines of their construction, by the harmonies of a solemn architectural music. I forgot my impulse to return to Crater Ridge, and started down the slope toward the city.

Soon the boughs of the purple and yellow forest arched above me like the altitudes of Titan-built aisles, with leaves that fretted the rich heaven in gorgeous arabesques. Beyond them, ever and anon, I caught glimpses of the piled ramparts of my destination; but looking back in the direction of that other city on the horizon, I found that its fulgurating towers were now lost to view.

I saw, however, that the masses of the great somber cloud were rising steadily on the sky, and once again they flared to a swart, malignant red, as if with some unearthly form of sheet-lightning; and though I could hear nothing with my deadened ears, the ground beneath me trembled with long vibrations as of thunder. There was a queer quality in the vibrations, that seemed to tear my nerves and set my teeth on edge with its throbbing, lancinating discord, painful as broken glass or the torment of a tightened rack.

Like Angarth before me, I came to the paved Cyclopean highway. Following it, in the stillness after the unheard peals of thunder, I felt another and subtler vibration, which I knew to be that of the Singing Flame in the temple at the city's core. It seemed to soothe and exalt and bear me on, to erase with soft caresses the ache that still lingered in my nerves from the torturing pulsations of the thunder.

I met no one on the road, and was not passed by any of the trans-dimensional pilgrims such as had overtaken Angarth; and when the accumulated ramparts loomed above the highest trees I came forth from the wood in their very shadow, I saw that the great gate of the city was closed, leaving no crevice through which a pygmy like myself might obtain entrance.

Feeling a profound and peculiar discomfiture, such as one would experience in a dream that had gone wrong, I stared at the grim, unrelenting blackness of the gate, which seemed to be wrought from one enormous sheet of somber and lustreless metal. Then, I peered upward at the sheerness of the wall, which rose above me like an alpine cliff, and saw that the battlements were seemingly deserted. Was the city forsaken by its people, by the

guardians of the Flame? Was it no longer open to the pilgrims who came from outlying lands to worship the Flame and immolate themselves?

With a curious reluctance, after lingering there for many minutes in a sort of stupor, I turned away to retrace my steps. In the interim of my journey, the black cloud had drawn immeasurably nearer, and was now blotting out half the heaven with two portentous, wing-like formations. It was a sinister and terrible sight; and it lightened again with that ominous, wrathful flaming, with a detonation that beat upon my deaf ears like waves of disintegrative force, and seemed to lacerate the inmost fibers of my body.

I hesitated, fearing that the storm would burst upon me before I could reach the inter-dimensional portals, for I saw that I should be exposed to an elemental disturbance of unfamiliar character and supreme violence. Then, in mid-air before the imminent, ever-rising cloud, I perceived two flying creatures whom I can compare only to gigantic moths. With bright, luminous wings, upon the ebon forefront of the storm, they approached me in level but precipitate flight, and would have crashed headlong against the shut gate if they had not checked themselves with sudden, easy poise.

With hardly a flutter, they descended and paused on the ground beside me, supporting themselves on queer, delicate legs that branched at the knee-joints in floating antennae and waving tentacles. Their wings were sumptuously mottled webs of pearl and madder, opal and orange; their heads were circled by a series of convex and concave eyes, and fringed with coiling, horn-like organs from whose hollow ends there hung aerial filaments. I was startled and amazed by their aspect; but somehow, by an obscure telepathy I felt assured that their intentions toward me were friendly.

I knew that they wished to enter the city, and also that they understood my predicament. Nevertheless, I was not prepared for what happened. With movements of utmost celerity and grace, one of the giant, moth-like beings stationed himself at my right hand, and the other at my left. Then, before I could even suspect their intention, they enfolded my limbs and body with their long tentacles, wrapping me round and round as if with powerful

ropes; and carrying me between them as if my weight were a mere trifle, they rose in the air and soared at the mighty ramparts!

In that swift and effortless ascent, the wall seemed to flow downward beside and beneath us, like a wave of molten stone. Dizzily, I watched the falling away of the mammoth blocks in endless recession. Then, we were level with the broad ramparts, were flying across the unguarded parapets and over a canyon-like space, toward the immense rectangular buildings and numberless square towers.

We had hardly crossed the walls when a weird, flickering glow was cast on the edifices before us by another lightening of the great cloud. The moth-like beings paid no apparent heed, and flew steadily on into the city with their strange faces toward an unseen goal. But, turning my head to peer backward at the storm, I beheld an astounding and appalling spectacle. Beyond the city ramparts, as if wrought by black magic or the toil of genii, another city had reared, and its high towers were moving swiftly forward beneath the rufescent dome of the burning cloud!

A second glance, and I perceived that the towers were identical with those I had beheld afar on the plain. In the interim of my passage through the woods, they had traveled over an expanse of many miles, by means of some unknown motive-power, and had closed in on the City of the Flame. Looking more closely, to determine the manner of their locomotion, I saw that they were not mounted on wheels, but on short, massy legs like jointed columns of metal, that gave them the stride of ungainly colossi. There were six or more of these legs to each tower, and near the tops of the towers were rows of huge eye-like openings, from which issued the bolts of red and violet flame I have mentioned before.

The many-colored forest had been burned away by these flames in a league-wide swath of devastation, even to the walls, and there was nothing but a stretch of black, vapping desert between the mobile towers and the city. Then, even as I gazed, the long, leaping beams began to assail the craggy ramparts, and the topmost parapets were melting like lava beneath them. It was a scene of utmost terror and grandeur; but, a moment later, it was

blotted from my vision by the buildings among which we had now plunged. The great lepidopterous creatures who bore me went on with the speed of eyrie-questing eagles. In the course of that flight, I was hardly capable of conscious thought or volition; I lived only in the breathless and giddy freedom of aerial movement, or dream-like levitation above the labyrinthine maze of stone immensitudes and marvels. I was without actual cognisance of much that I beheld in that stupendous Babel of architectural imageries, and only afterward, in the more tranquil light of recollection, could I give coherent form and meaning to many of my impressions.

My senses were stunned by the vastness and strangeness of it all; I realized but dimly the cataclysmic ruin that was being loosed upon the city behind us, and the doom from which we were fleeing. I knew that war was being made with unearthly weapons and engineerings, by inimical powers that I could not imagine, for a purpose beyond my conception; but, to me, it all had the elemental confusion and vague, impersonal horror of some cosmic catastrophe.

We flew deeper and deeper into the city. Broad, platform roofs and terrace-like tiers of balconies flowed away beneath us, and the pavements raced like darkling streams at some enormous depth. Severe cubicular spires and square monoliths were all about and above us; and we saw on some of the roofs the dark, Atlantean people of the city, moving slowly and statuesquely, or standing in attitudes of cryptic resignation and despair, with their faces toward the flaming cloud. all were weaponless, and I saw no engineerings anywhere such as might be used for purposes of military defense.

Swiftly as we flew, the climbing cloud was swifter, and the darkness of its intermittently glowing dome had overarched the town while its spidery filaments had meshed the further heavens and would soon attach themselves to the opposite horizon. The buildings darkened and lightened with the recurrent fulguration, and I felt in all my tissues the painful pulsing of the thunderous vibrations.

Dully and vaguely, I realized that the winged beings who carried me between then were pilgrims to the Temple of the Flame. More and more, I became aware of an influence that must have been that of the starry music emanating from the temple's heart, There were soft, soothing vibrations in the air, that seemed to absorb and nullify the tearing discords of the unheard thunder. I felt that we were entering a zone of mystic refuge, or sidereal and celestial security, and my troubled senses were both lulled and exalted.

The gorgeous wings of the giant lepidopters began to slant downward. Before and beneath us, at some distance, I perceived a mammoth pile which I knew at once for the Temple of the Flame. Down, still down we went, in the awesome, space of the surrounding square; and then I was borne in through the lofty, ever-open entrance, and along the high hall with its thousand columns. Pregnant with strange balsams, the dim, mysterious dusk enfolded us, and we seemed to be entering realms of pre-mundane antiquity and trans-stellar immensity; to be following a pillared cavern that led to the core of some ultimate star.

It seemed that we were the last and only pilgrims, and also that the temple was deserted by its guardians, for we met no one in the whole extent of that column-crowded gloom. After a while, the dusk began to lighten, and we plunged into a widening beam of radiance, and then into the vast central chamber in which soared the fountain of green fire.

I remember only the impression of shadowy, flickering space, of a vault that was lost in the azure of infinity, of colossal and Memnonian statues that looked down from Himalaya-like altitudes; and, above all, the dazzling jet of flame that aspired from a pit in the pavement and rose into the air like the visible rapture of gods. But all this I saw for an instant only. Then, I realized that the beings who bore me were flying straight toward the Flame on level wings, without the slightest pause or flutter of hesitation.

VI. The Inner Sphere

There was no room for fear, no time for alarm, in the dazed and chaotic turmoil of my sensations. I was stupefied by all that I had experienced, and

moreover, the drug-like spell of the Flame was upon me, even though I could not hear its fatal singing. I believe that I struggled a little, by some sort of mechanical muscular revulsion, against the tentacular arms that were wound about me. But the lepidoptera gave no heed; it was plain that they were conscious of nothing but the mounting fire and its seductive music.

I remember, however, that there was no sensation of actual heat, such as might have been expected, when we neared the soaring column. Instead, I felt the most ineffable thrilling in all my fibers, as if I were being permeated by waves of celestial energy and demiurgic ecstasy. Then we entered the Flame...

Like Angarth before me, I had taken it for granted that the fate of all those who flung themselves into the Flame was an instant though blissful destruction. I expected to undergo a briefly flaring dissolution, followed by the nothingness of utter annihilation. The thing which really happened was beyond the boldest reach of speculative thought, and to give even a meager idea of my sensations would beggar the resources of language.

The Flame enfolded us like a green curtain, blotting from view the great chamber. Then it seemed to me that I was caught and carried to supercelestial heights, in an upward-rushing cataract of quintessential force and deific rapture, and an all-illuminating light. It seemed that I, and my companions, had achieved a god-like union with the Flame; that every atom of our bodies had undergone a transcendental expansion, and was winged with ethereal lightness.

It was as if we no longer existed, except as one divine, indivisible entity, soaring beyond the trammels of matter, beyond the limits of time and space, to attain undreamable shores. Unspeakable was the joy, and infinite the freedom of that ascent, in which we seemed to overpass the zenith of the highest star. Then, as if we had risen with the Flame to its culmination, had reached its very apex, we emerged and came to a pause.

My senses were faint with exaltation, my eyes blind with the glory of the fire; and the world on which I now gazed was a vast arabesque of

unfamiliar forms and bewildering hues from another spectrum than the one to which our eyes are habituated. It swirled before my dizzy eyes like a labyrinth of gigantic jewels, with interweaving rays and tangled lustres, and only by slow degrees was I able to establish order and distinguish detail in the surging riot of my perceptions.

All about me were endless avenues of super-prismatic opal and jacinth; arches and pillars of ultra-violet gems, of transcendent sapphire, of unearthly ruby and amethyst, all suffused with a multi-tinted splendor. I appeared to be treading on jewels, and above me was a jeweled sky.

Presently, with recovered equilibrium, with eyes adjusted to a new range of cognition, I began to perceive the actual features of the landscape. With the two moth-like beings still beside me, I was standing on a million-flowered grass, among trees of a paradisaical vegetation, with fruit, foliage, blossoms and trunks whose very forms were beyond the conception of tridimensional life. The grace of their drooping boughs, of their fretted fronds, was inexpressible in terms of earthly line and contour, and they seemed to be wrought of pure, ethereal substance, half-translucent to the empyrean light, which accounted for the gem-like impression I had first received.

I breathed a nectar-laden air, and the ground beneath me was ineffably soft and resilient, as if it were composed of some higher form of matter than ours. My physical sensations were those of the utmost buoyancy and well-being, with no trace of fatigue or nervousness, such as might have been looked for after the unparalleled and marvellous events in which I had played a part. I felt no sense of mental dislocation or confusion; and, apart from my ability to recognize unknown colors and non-Euclidean forms, I began to experience a queer alteration and extension of tactility, through which it seemed that I was able to touch remote objects.

The radiant sky was filled with many-colored suns, like those that might shine on a world of some multiple solar system; but as I gazed, their glory became softer and dimmer, and the brilliant lustre of the trees and grass was gradually subdued, as if by encroaching twilight. I was beyond surprise, in the boundless marvel and mystery of it all, and nothing, perhaps, would

have seemed incredible. But if anything could have amazed me or defied belief, it was the human face — the face of my vanished friend, Giles Angarth, which now emerged. from among the waning jewels of the forest, followed by that of another man whom I recognized from photographs as Felix Ebbonly.

They came out from beneath the gorgeous boughs, and paused before me. Both were clad in lustrous fabrics, finer than Oriental silk, and of no earthly cut or pattern. Their look was both joyous and meditative, and their faces had taken on a hint of the same translucency that characterized the ethereal fruits and blossoms.

'We have been looking for you,' said Angarth. 'It occurred to me that, after reading my journal, you might be tempted to try the same experiment, if only to make sure whether the account was truth or fiction. This is Felix Ebbonly, whom I believe you have never met.'

It surprised me when I found that I could hear his voice with perfect ease and clearness, and I wondered why the effect of the drug-soaked cotton should have died out so soon in my auditory nerves. Yet such details were trivial in the face of the astounding fact that I had found Angarth and Ebbonly; that they, as well as I, had survived the unearthly rapture of the Flame.

'Where are we?' I asked, after acknowledging his introduction. 'I confess that I am totally at a loss to comprehend what has happened.'

'We are now in what is called the Inner Dimension,' explained Angarth. 'It is a higher sphere of space and energy and matter than the one into which we were precipitated from Crater Ridge, and the only entrance is through the Singing Flame in the city of Ydmos. The Inner Dimension is born of the fiery fountain, and sustained by it; and those who fling themselves into the Flame are lifted thereby to this superior plane of vibration. For them, the Outer Worlds no longer exist. The nature of the Flame itself is not known, except that it is a fountain of pure energy springing from the central rock

beneath Ydmos, and passing beyond mortal ken by virtue of its own ardency.'

He paused, and seemed to be peering attentively at the winged entities, who still lingered at my side. Then, he continued:

'I haven't been here long enough to learn very much, myself; but I have found out a few things, and Ebbonly and I have established a sort of telepathic communication with the other beings who have passed through the Flame. Many of them have no spoken language, nor organs of speech, and their very methods of thought are basically different from ours, because of their divergent lines of sense-development and the varying conditions of the worlds from which they come. But we are able to communicate a few images.

'The persons who came with you are trying to tell me something,' he went on. 'You and they, it seems, are the last pilgrims who will enter Ydmos and attain the Inner Dimension. War is being made on the Flame and its guardians by the rulers of the Outer Lands, because so many of their people have obeyed the lure of the singing fountain and vanished into the higher sphere. Even now, their armies have closed in upon Ydmos and are blasting the city's ramparts with the force-bolts of their moving towers.'

I told him what I had seen, comprehending, now, much that had been obscure heretofore. He listened gravely, and then said:

'It has long been feared that such war would be made sooner or later. There are many legends in the Outer Lands concerning the Flame and the fate of those who succumb to its attraction, but the truth is not known, or is guessed only by a few. Many believe, as I did, that the end is destruction; and by some who suspect its existence, the Inner Dimension is hated as a thing that lures idle dreamers away from worldly reality. It is regarded as a lethal and pernicious chimera, as a mere poetic dream, or a sort of opium paradise.

'There are a thousand things to tell you regarding the Inner Sphere, and the laws and conditions of being to which we are now subject after the

revibration of all our component atoms in the Flame. But at present there is no time to speak further, since it is highly probable that we are all in grave danger — that the very existence of the Inner Dimension, as well as our own, is threatened by the inimical forces that are destroying Ydmos.

'There are some who say that the Flame is impregnable, that its pure essence will defy the blasting of all inferior beams, and its source remain impenetrable to the lightnings of the Outer Lords. But most are fearful of disaster, and expect the failure of the fountain itself when Ydmos is riven to the central rock.

'Because of this imminent peril, we must not tarry longer. There is a way which affords egress from the Inner Sphere to another and remoter Cosmos in a second infinity -- a Cosmos unconceived by mundane astronomers, or by the astronomers of the worlds about Ydmos. The majority of the pilgrims, after a term of sojourn here, have gone on to the worlds of this other universe; and Ebbonly and I have waited only for your coming before following them. We must make haste, and delay no more, or doom will overtake us.'

Even as he spoke, the two moth-like entities, seeming to resign me to the care of my human friends, arose on the jewel-tinted air and sailed in long, level flight above the paradisaal perspectives whose remoter avenues were lost in glory. Angarth and Ebbonly had now stationed themselves beside me, and one took me by the left arm, and the other by the right.

'Try to imagine that you are flying,' said Angarth. 'In this sphere, levitation and flight are possible through willpower, and you will soon acquire the ability. We shall support and guide you, however, till you have grown accustomed to the new conditions and are independent of such help.'

I obeyed his injunction, and formed a mental image of myself in the act of flying. I was amazed by the clearness and verisimilitude of the thought-picture, and still more by the fact that the picture was becoming an actuality! With little sense of effort, but with exactly the same feeling that

characterizes a levitational dream, the three of us were soaring from the jeweled ground, slanting easily and swiftly upward through the glowing air.

Any attempt to describe the experience would be foredoomed to futility, since it seemed that a whole range of new senses had been opened up in me, together with corresponding thought-symbols for which there are no words in human speech. I was no longer Philip Hastane, but a larger, stronger and freer entity, differing as much from my former self as the personality developed beneath the influence of hashish or kava would differ. The dominant feeling was one of immense joy and liberation, coupled with a sense of imperative haste, of the need to escape into other realms where the joy would endure eternal and unthreatened.

My visual perceptions, as we flew above the burning, lucent woods, were marked by intense, aesthetic pleasure. It was as far above the normal delight afforded by agreeable imagery as the forms and colours of this world were beyond the cognition of normal eyes. Every changing image was a source of veritable ecstasy; and the ecstasy mounted as the whole landscape began to brighten again and returned to the flashing, scintillating glory it had worn when I first beheld it.

VII. The Destruction of Ydmos

We soared at a lofty elevation, looking down on numberless miles of labyrinthine forest, on long, luxurious meadows, on voluptuously folded hills, on palatial buildings, and waters that were clear as the pristine lakes and rivers of Eden. It all seemed to quiver and pulsate like one living effulgent, ethereal entity, and waves of radiant rapture passed from sun to sun in the splendor-crowded heaven.

As we went on, I noticed again, after an interval, that partial dimming of the light; that somnolent, dreamy saddening of the colors, to be followed by another period of ecstatic brightening. The slow tidal rhythm of this process appeared to correspond to the rising and falling of the Flame, as Angarth had described it in his journal, and I suspected immediately that there was some connection. No sooner had I formulated this thought, than I became

aware that Angarth was speaking. And yet, I am not sure whether he spoke, or whether his worded thought was perceptible to me through another sense than that of physical audition. At any rate, I was cognisant of his comment:

'You are right. The waning and waxing of the fountain and its music is perceived in the Inner Dimension as a clouding and lightening of all visual images.'

Our flight began to swiften, and I realized that my companions were employing all their psychic energies in an effort to redouble our speed. The lands below us blurred to a cataract of streaming color, a sea of flowing luminosity; and we seemed to be hurtling onward like stars through the fiery air. The ecstasy of that endless soaring, the anxiety of that precipitate flight from an unknown doom, are incommunicable. But I shall never forget them, nor the state of ineffable communion and understanding that existed between the three of us. The memory of it all is housed in the deepest, most abiding cells of my brain.

Others were flying beside and above and beneath us, now, in the fluctuant glory: pilgrims of hidden worlds and occult dimensions, proceeding as we ourselves toward that other Cosmos of which the Inner Sphere was the antechamber. These beings were strange and outré beyond belief, in their corporeal forms and attributes; and yet I took no thought of their strangeness, but felt toward them the same conviction of fraternity that I felt toward Angarth and Ebbonly.

As we still went on, it appeared to me that my two companions were telling me many things; communicating, by what means I am not sure, much that they had learned in their new existence. With a grave urgency as if, perhaps, the time for imparting this information might well be brief, ideas were expressed and conveyed which I could never have understood amid terrestrial circumstances. Things that were inconceivable in terms of the five senses, or in abstract symbols of philosophic or mathematic thought, were made plain to me as the letters of the alphabet.

Certain of these data, however, are roughly conveyable or suggestible in language. I was told of the gradual process of initiation into the life of the new dimension, of the powers gained by the neophyte during his term of adaptation, of the various recondite, aesthetic joys experienced through a mingling and multiplying of all the perceptions, of the control acquired over natural forces and over matter itself, so that raiment could be woven and buildings reared solely through an act of volition.

I learned, also, of the laws that would control our passage to the further Cosmos, and the fact that such passage was difficult and dangerous for anyone who had not lived a certain length of time in the Inner Dimension. Likewise, I was told that no one could return to our present plane from the higher Cosmos, even as no one could go backward through the Flame into Ydmos.

Angarth and Ebbonly had dwelt long enough in the Inner Dimension, they said, to be eligible for entrance to the worlds beyond; and they thought that I, too, could escape through their assistance, even though I had not yet developed the faculty of spatial equilibrium necessary to sustain those who dared the interspheric path and its dreadful subjacent gulfs alone. There were boundless, unforeseeable realms, planet on planet, universe on universe, to which we might attain, and among whose prodigies and marvels we could dwell or wander indefinitely. In these worlds, our brains would be attuned to the comprehension of vaster and higher scientific laws, and states of entity beyond those of our present dimensional milieu.

I have no idea of the duration of our flight; since, like everything else, my sense of time was completely altered and transfigured. Relatively speaking, we may have gone on for hours; but it seemed to me that we had crossed an area of that supernal terrain for whose transit many years, or even centuries, might well have been required.

Even before we came within sight of it, a clear pictorial image of our destination had arisen in my mind, doubtless through some sort of thought-transference. I seemed to envision a stupendous mountain range, with alp on celestial alp, higher than the summer cumuli on Earth; and above them

all the horn of an ultra-violet peak whose head was enfolded in a hueless and spiral cloud, touched with the sense of invisible chromatic overtones, that seemed to come down upon it from skies beyond the zenith. I knew that the way to the Outer Cosmos was hidden in the high cloud....

On and on we soared; and at length the mountain range appeared on the far horizon, and I saw the paramount peak of ultra-violet with its dazzling crown of cumulus. Nearer still we came, till the strange volutes of cloud were almost above us, towering to the heavens and vanishing among the vari-colored suns; and we saw the gleaming forms of pilgrims who preceded us, as they entered the swirling folds. At this moment, the sky and the landscape had flamed again to their culminating brilliance; they burned with a thousand hues and lusters, so that the sudden, unlooked-for eclipse which now occurred was all the more complete and terrible. Before I was conscious of anything amiss, I seemed to hear a despairing cry from my friends, who must have felt the oncoming calamity through a subtler sense than any of which I was yet capable. Then, beyond the high and luminescent alp of our destination, I saw the mounting of a wall of darkness, dreadful and instant, positive and palpable, that rose everywhere and toppled like some Atlantean wave upon the irised suns and the fiery-colored vistas of the Inner Dimension.

We hung irresolute in the shadowed air, powerless and hopeless before the impending catastrophe, and saw that the darkness had surrounded the entire world and was rushing upon us from all sides. It ate the heavens, blotted the outer suns, and the vast perspectives over which we had flown appeared to shrink and shrivel like a fire-blackened paper. We seemed to wait alone, for one terrible instant, in a center of dwindling light on which the cyclonic forces of night and destruction were impinging with torrential rapidity.

The center shrank to a mere point — and then the darkness was upon us like an overwhelming maelstrom, like the falling and crashing of Cyclopean walls. I seemed to go down with the wreck of shattered worlds in a roaring sea of vortical space and force, to descend into some infra-stellar pit, some ultimate limbo to which the shards of forgotten suns and systems are flung. Then, after a measureless interval, there came the sensation of violent

impact, as if I had fallen among these shards, at the bottom of the universal night.

I struggled back to consciousness with slow, prodigious effort, as if I were crushed beneath some irremovable weight, beneath the lightless and inert débris of galaxies. It seemed to require the labors of a Titan to lift my lids, and my body and limbs were heavy, as if they had been turned to some denser element than human flesh, or had been subjected to the gravitation of a grosser planet than the Earth.

My mental processes were benumbed and painful, and confused to the last degree; but at length I realized that I was lying on a riven and tilted pavement, among gigantic blocks of fallen stone. Above me, the light of a livid heaven came down among over-turned and jagged walls that no longer supported their colossal dome. Close beside me, I saw a fuming pit from which a ragged rift extended through the floor, like the chasm wrought by an earthquake.

I could not recognize my surroundings for a time; but at last, with a toilsome groping of thought, I understood that I was lying in the ruined temple of Ydmos, and that the pit whose gray and acrid vapours rose beside me was that from which the fountain of singing flame had issued. It was a scene of stupendous havoc and devastation: the wrath that had been visited upon Ydmos had left no wall nor pylon of the temple standing. I stared at the blighted heavens from an architectural ruin in which the remains of On and Angkor would have been mere rubble-heaps.

With Herculean effort, I turned my head away from the smoking pit, whose thin, sluggish fumes curled upward in phantasmal coils where the green ardour of the Flame had soared and sung. Not until then did I perceive my companions. Angarth, still insensible, was lying near at hand, and just beyond him I saw the pale, contorted face of Ebbonly, whose lower limbs and body were pinned down by the rough and broken pediment of a fallen pillar.

Striving, as in some eternal nightmare, to throw off the leaden-clinging weight of my inertia, and able to bestir myself only with the most painful slowness and laboriousness, I got to my feet and went over to Ebbonly. Angarth, I saw at a glance, was uninjured and would presently regain consciousness, but Ebbonly, crushed by the monolithic mass of stone, was dying swiftly, and even with the help of a dozen men I could not have released him from his imprisonment; nor could I have done anything to palliate his agony.

He tried to smile, with gallant and piteous courage, as I stooped above him.

'It's no use — I'm going in a moment,' he whispered. 'Good-bye, Hastane — and tell Angarth good-bye for me, too.'

His tortured lips relaxed, his eyelids dropped and his head fell back on the temple pavement. With an unreal dreamlike horror, almost without emotion, I saw that he was dead. The exhaustion that still beset me was too profound to permit of thought or feeling; it was like the first reaction that follows the awakening from a drug-debauch. My nerves were like burnt-out wires, my muscles dead and unresponsive as clay; my brain was ashen and gutted, as if a great fire had burned within it and gone out.

Somehow, after an interval of whose length my memory is uncertain, I managed to revive Angarth, and he sat up dully and dazedly. When I told him that Ebbonly was dead, my words appeared to make no impression upon him, and I wondered for a while if he understood. Finally, rousing himself a little with evident difficulty, he peered at the body of our friend, and seemed to realize in some measure the horror of the situation. But I think he would have remained there for hours, or perhaps for all time, in his utter despair and lassitude, if I had not taken the initiative.

'Come,' I said, with an attempt at firmness. 'We must get out of this.'

'Where to?' he queried, dully. 'The Flame has failed at its source, and the Inner Dimension is no more. I wish I were dead, like Ebbonly — I might as well be, judging from the way I feel.'

'We must find our way back to Crater Ridge,' I said. 'Surely we can do it, if the inter-dimensional portals have not been destroyed.'

Angarth did not seem to hear me, but he followed obediently when I took him by the arm and began to seek an exit from the temple's heart, among the roofless halls and overturned columns....

My recollections of our return are dim and confused, and full of the tediousness of some interminable delirium. I remember looking back at Ebonny, lying white and still beneath the massive pillar that would serve as his eternal monument; and I recall the mountainous ruins of the city, in which it seemed that we were the only living beings. It was a wilderness of chaotic stone, of fused, obsidian-like blocks, where streams of molten lava still ran in the mighty chasms, or poured like torrents adown unfathomable pits that had opened in the ground. And I remember seeing, amid the wreckage, the charred bodies of those dark colossi who were the people of Ydmos and the warders of the Flame.

Like pygmies lost in some shattered fortalice of the giants, we stumbled onward, strangling in mephitic and metallic vapors, reeling with weariness, dizzy with the heat that emanated everywhere to surge upon us in buffeting waves. The way was blocked by overthrown buildings, by toppled towers and battlements, over which we climbed precariously and toilsomely; and often we were compelled to divagate from our direct course by enormous rifts that seemed to cleave the foundations of the world.

The moving towers of the wrathful Outer Lords had withdrawn; their armies had disappeared on the plain beyond Ydmos, when we staggered over the riven, shapeless and scoriac crags that had formed the city's ramparts. Before us was nothing but desolation — a fire-blackened and vapor-vaulted expanse in which no tree or blade of grass remained.

Across this waste we found our way to the slope of violet grass above the plain, which had lain beyond the path of the invader's bolts. There the guiding monoliths, reared by a people of whom we were never to learn even the name, still looked down upon the fuming desert and the mounded wrack

of Ydmos. And there, at length, we came once more to the grayish-green columns that were the gateway between the worlds.

THE COLOSSUS OF YLOURGNE

I. The Flight of the Necromancer

The thrice-infamous nathaire, alchemist, astrologer and necromancer, with his ten devil-given pupils, had departed very suddenly and under circumstances of strict secrecy from the town of Vyones. It was widely thought, among the people of that vicinage, that his departure had been prompted by a salutary fear of ecclesiastical thumbscrews and faggots. Other wizards, less notorious than he, had already gone to the stake during a year of unusual inquisitory zeal; and it was well-known that Nathaire had incurred the reprobation of the Church. Few, therefore, considered the reason of his going a mystery; but the means of transit which he had employed, as well as the destination of the sorcerer and his pupils, were regarded as more than problematic.

A thousand dark and superstitious rumours were abroad; and passers made the sign of the Cross when they neared the tall, gloomy house which Nathaire had built in blasphemous proximity to the great cathedral and had filled with a furniture of Satanic luxury and strangeness. Two daring thieves, who had entered the mansion when the fact of its desertion became well established, reported that much of this furniture, as well as the books and other paraphernalia of Nathaire, had seemingly departed with its owner, doubtless to the same fiery bourn. This served to augment the unholy mystery: for it was patently impossible that Nathaire and his ten apprentices, with several cart-loads of household belongings, could have passed the everguarded city gates in any legitimate manner without the knowledge of the custodians.

It was said by the more devout and religious moiety that the Archfiend, with a legion of bat-winged assistants, had borne them away bodily at moonless midnight. There were clerics, and also reputable burghers, who professed to have seen the flight of man-like shapes upon the blotted stars together with others that were not men, and to have heard the wailing cries of the hell-bound crew as they passed in an evil cloud over the roofs and city walls.

Others believed that the sorcerers had transported themselves from Vyones through their own diabolic arts, and had withdrawn to some unfrequented fastness where Nathaire, who had long been in feeble health, could hope to die in such peace and serenity as might be enjoyed by one who stood between the flames of the auto-da-fé and those of Abaddon. It was thought that he had lately cast his own horoscope, for the first time in his fifty-odd years, and had read therein an impending conjunction of disastrous planets, signifying early death.

Others still, among whom were certain rival astrologers and enchanters, said that Nathaire had retired from the public view merely that he might commune without interruption with various coadjutive demons; and thus might weave, unmolested, the black spells of a supreme and lycanthropic malice. These spells, they hinted, would in due time be visited upon Vyones and perhaps upon the entire region of Averroigne; and would no doubt take the form of a fearsome pestilence, or a wholesale involution, or a realm-wide incursion of succubi and incubi.

Amid the seething of strange rumours, many half-forgotten tales were recalled, and new legends were created overnight. Much was made of the obscure nativity of Nathaire and his dubitable wanderings before he had settled, six years previous, in Vyones. People said that he was fiend-begotten, like the fabled Merlin: his father being no less a personage than Alastor, demon of revenge; and his mother a deformed and dwarfish sorceress. From the former, he had taken his spitefulness and malignity; from the latter, his squat, puny physique.

He had travelled in Orient lands, and had learned from Egyptian or Saracenic masters the unhallowed art of necromancy, in whose practice he was unrivalled. There were black whispers anent the use he had made of long-dead bodies, of fleshless bones, and the service he had wrung from buried men that the angel of doom alone could lawfully raise up. He had never been popular, though many had sought his advice and assistance in the furthering of their own more or less dubious affairs. Once, in the third year after his coming to Vyones, he had been stoned in public because of his bruited necromancies, and had been permanently lamed by a well-directed

cobble. This injury, it was thought, he had never forgiven; and he was said to return the antagonism of the clergy with the hellish hatred of an Antichrist.

Apart from the sorcerous evils and abuses of which he was commonly suspected, he had long been looked upon as a corrupter of youth. Despite his minikin stature, his deformity and ugliness, he possessed a remarkable power, a mesmeric persuasion; and his pupils, whom he was said to have plunged into bottomless and ghoulish iniquities, were young men of the most brilliant promise. On the whole, his vanishment was regarded as a quite providential riddance.

Among the people of the city there was one man who took no part in the sombre gossip and lurid speculation. This man was Gaspard du Nord, himself a student of the proscribed sciences, who had been numbered for a year among the pupils of Nathaire but had chosen to withdraw quietly from the master's household after learning the enormities that would attend his further initiation. He had, however, taken with him much rare and peculiar knowledge, together with a certain insight into the baleful powers and night-dark motives of the necromancer.

Because of this knowledge and insight, Gaspard preferred to remain silent when he heard of Nathaire's departure. Also, he did not think it well to revive the memory of his own past pupilage. Alone with his books, in a sparsely furnished attic, he frowned above a small, oblong mirror, framed with an arabesque of golden vipers, that had once been the property of Nathaire.

It was not the reflection of his own comely and youthful though subtly lined face that caused him to frown. Indeed, the mirror was of another kind than that which reflects the features of the gazer. In its depths, for a few instants, he had beheld a strange and ominous-looking scene, whose participants were known to him but whose location he could not recognize or orientate. Before he could study it closely, the mirror had clouded as if with the rising of alchemic fumes, and he had seen no more.

This clouding, he reflected, could mean only one thing: Nathaire had known himself watched and had put forth a counterspell that rendered the clairvoyant mirror useless. It was the realization of this fact, together with the brief, sinister glimpse of Nathaire's present activities, that troubled Gaspard and caused a chill horror to mount slowly in his mind: a horror that had not yet found a palpable form or a name.

2. The Gathering of the Dead

The departure of Nathaire and his pupils occurred in the late spring of 1281, during the interlunar dark. Afterwards a new moon waxed above the flowery fields and bright-leafed woods and waned in ghostly silver. With its waning, people began to talk of other magicians and fresher mysteries.

Then, in the moon-deserted nights of early summer, there came a series of disappearances far more unnatural and inexplicable than that of the dwarfish, malignant sorcerer.

It was found one day, by grave-diggers who had gone early to their toil in a cemetery outside the walls of Vyones, that no less than six newly occupied graves had been opened, and the bodies, which were those of reputable citizens, removed. On closer examination, it became all too evident that this removal had not been effected by robbers. The coffins, which lay aslant or stood protruding upright from the mould, offered all the appearance of having been shattered from within as if by the use of extrahuman strength; and the fresh earth itself was upheaved, as if the dead men, in some awful, untimely resurrection, had actually dug their way to the surface.

The corpses had vanished utterly, as if hell had swallowed them; and, as far as could be learned, there were no eyewitnesses of their fate. In those devil-ridden times, only one explanation of the happening seemed credible: demons had entered the graves and had taken bodily possession of the dead, compelling them to arise and go forth.

To the dismay and horror of all Averoine, the strange vanishment was followed with appalling promptness by many others of a like sort. It seemed as if an occult, resistless summons had been laid upon the dead. Nightly, for a period of two weeks, the cemeteries of Vyones and also those of other towns, of villages and hamlets, gave up a ghastly quota of their tenants. From brazen bolted tombs, from common charnels, from shallow, unconsecrated trenches, from the marble lidded vaults of churches and cathedrals, the weird exodus went on without cessation.

Worse than this, if possible, there were newly ceremented corpses that leapt from their biers or catafalques, and disregarding the horrified watchers, ran with great bounds of automatic frenzy into the night, never to be seen again by those who lamented them.

In every case, the missing bodies were those of young stalwart men who had died but recently and had met their death through violence or accident rather than wasting illness. Some were criminals who had paid the penalty of their misdeeds; others were men-at-arms or constables, slain in the execution of their duty. Knights who had died in tourney or personal combat were numbered among them; and many were the victims of the robber bands who infested Averoine at that time. There were monks, merchants, nobles, yeomen, pages, priests; but none, in any case, who had passed the prime of life. The old and infirm, it seemed, were safe from the animating demons.

The situation was looked upon by the more superstitious as a veritable omen of the world's end. Satan was making war with his cohorts and was carrying the bodies of the holy dead into hellish captivity. The consternation increased a hundredfold when it became plain that even the most liberal sprinkling of holy water, the performance of the most awful and cogent exorcisms, failed utterly to give protection against this diabolic ravishment. The Church owned itself powerless to cope with the strange evil; and the forces of secular law could do nothing to arraign or punish the intangible agency.

Because of the universal fear that prevailed, no effort was made to follow the missing cadavers. Ghastly tales, however, were told by late wayfarers who had met certain of these liches, striding alone or in companies along the roads of Averoine. They gave the appearance of being deaf, dumb, totally insensate, and of hurrying with horrible speed and sureness towards a remote, predestined goal. The general direction of their flight, it seemed, was eastward; but only with the cessation of the exodus, which had numbered several hundred people, did any one begin to suspect the actual destination of the dead.

This destination, it somehow became rumoured, was the ruinous castle of Ylourgne, beyond the werewolf-haunted forest, in the outlying, semi-mountainous hills of Averoine.

Ylourgne, a great, craggy pile that had been built by a line of evil and marauding barons now extinct, was a place that even the goatherds preferred to shun. The wrathful spectres of its bloody lords were said to move turbulently in its crumbling halls; and its chatelaines were the Undead. No one cared to dwell in the shadow of its cliff-founded walls; and the nearest abode of living men was a small Cistercian monastery, more than a mile away on the opposite slope of the valley.

The monks of this austere brotherhood held little commerce with the world beyond the hills; and few were the visitors who sought admission at their high-perched portals. But, during that dreadful summer, following the disappearances of the dead, a weird and disquieting tale went forth from the monastery throughout Averoine.

Beginning with late spring, the Cistercian monks were compelled to take cognizance of sundry odd phenomena in the old, long-deserted ruins of Ylourgne, which were visible from their windows. They had beheld flaring lights, where lights should not have been: flames of uncanny blue and crimson that shuddered behind the broken, weed-grown embrasures or rose starwards above the jagged crenelations. Hideous noises had issued from the ruin by night together with the flames; and the monks had heard a clangour as of hellish anvils and hammers, a ringing of gigantic armour and

maces, and had deemed that Ylourgne was become a mustering-ground of devils. Mephitic odours as of brimstone and burning flesh had floated across the valley; and even by day, when the noises were silent and the lights no longer flared, a thin haze of hell-blue vapour hung upon the battlements. It was plain, the monks thought, that the place had been occupied from beneath by subterrestrial beings; for no one was seen to approach it by way of the bare, open slopes and crags. Observing these signs of the Archfoe's activity in their neighbourhood, they crossed themselves with new fervour and frequency, and said their Paters and Aves more interminably than before. Their toil and austerities, also, they redoubled. Otherwise, since the old castle was a place abandoned by men, they took no heed of the supposed occupation, deeming it well to mind their own affairs unless in case of overt Satanic hostility.

They kept a careful watch; but for several weeks they saw no one who actually entered Ylourgne or emerged therefrom. Except for the nocturnal lights and noises, and the hovering vapour by day, there was no proof of tenantry either human or diabolic. Then, one morning, in the valley below the terraced gardens of the monastery, two brothers, hoeing weeds in a carrot-patch, beheld the passing of a singular train of people who came from the direction of the great forest of Averoigne and went upwards climbing the steep, chasmy slope towards Ylourgne.

These people, the monks averred, were striding along in great haste, with stiff but flying steps; and all were strangely pale of feature and were habited in the garments of the grave. The shrouds of some were torn and ragged; and all were dusty with travel or grimed with the mould of interment. The people numbered a dozen or more; and after them, at intervals, there came several stragglers, attired like the rest. With marvellous agility and speed, they mounted the hill and disappeared at length amid the lowering walls of Ylourgne.

At this time, no rumour of the ravished graves and biers had reached the Cistercians. The tale was brought to them later, after they had beheld, on many successive mornings, the passing of small or great companies of the dead towards the devil-taken castle. Hundreds of these liches, they swore,

had filed by beneath the monastery; and doubtless many others had gone past unnoted in the dark. None, however, were seen to come forth from Ylourgne, which had swallowed them up like the undisgorging Pit.

Though direly frightened and sorely scandalized, the brothers still thought it well to refrain from action. Some, the hardest, irked by all these flagrant signs of evil, had desired to visit the ruins with holy water and lifted crucifixes, But their abbot, in his wisdom, enjoined them to wait. In the meanwhile, the nocturnal flames grew brighter, the noises louder.

Also, in the course of this waiting, while incessant prayers went up from the little monastery, a frightful thing occurred. One of the brothers, a stout fellow named Theophile, in violation of the rigorous discipline, had made over-frequent visits to the wine-casks. No doubt he had tried to drown his pious horror at these untoward happenings, At any rate, after his potations, he had the ill-luck to wander out among the precipices and break his neck.

Sorrowing for his death and dereliction, the brothers laid Theophile in the chapel and chanted their masses for his soul. These masses, in the dark hours before morning, were interrupted by the untimely resurrection of the dead monk, who, with his head lolling horribly on his broken neck, rushed as if fiend-ridden from the chapel and ran down the hill towards the demon flames and clamours of Ylourgne.

3. The Testimony of the Monks

Following the above-related occurrence, two of the brothers who had previously desired to visit the haunted castle again applied to the abbot for this permission, saying that God would surely aid them in avenging the abduction of Theophile's body as well as the taking of many others from consecrated ground. Marvelling at the hardihood of these lusty monks, who proposed to beard the Arch-enemy in his lair, the abbot permitted them to go forth, furnished with aspergilluses and flasks of holy water, and bearing

great crosses of hornbeam, such as would have served for maces with which to brain an armoured knight.

The monks, whose names were Bernard and Stephane, went boldly up at middle forenoon to assail the evil stronghold. It was an arduous climb, among overhanging boulders and along slippery scarps; but both were stout and agile, and, moreover, well accustomed to such climbing. Since the day was sultry and airless, their white robes were soon stained with sweat; but pausing only for brief prayer, they pressed on; and in good season they neared the castle, upon whose grey, time-eroded ramparts they could still descry no evidence of occupation or activity.

The deep moat that had once surrounded the place was now dry, and had been partly filled by crumbling earth and detritus from the walls. The drawbridge had rotted away; but the blocks of the barbican, collapsing into the moat, had made a sort of rough causeway on which it was possible to cross. Not without trepidation, and lifting their crucifixes as warriors lift their weapons in the escalade of an armed fortress, the brothers climbed over the ruin of the barbican into the courtyard.

This too, like the battlements, was seemingly deserted. Overgrown nettles, rank grasses and sapling trees were rooted between its paving-stones. The high, massive donjon, the chapel, and that portion of the castellated structure containing the great hall, had preserved their main outlines after centuries of dilapidation. To the left of the broad bailey, a doorway yawned like the mouth of a dark cavern in the cliffy mass of the hall-building; and from this doorway there issued a thin, bluish vapour, writhing in phantom coils towards the unclouded heavens.

Approaching the doorway, the brothers beheld a gleaming of red fires within, like the eyes of dragons blinking through infernal murk. They felt sure that the place was an outpost of Erebus, an ante-chamber of the Pit; but nevertheless, they entered bravely, chanting loud exorcisms and brandishing their mighty crosses of hornbeam.

Passing through the cavernous doorway, they could see but indistinctly in the gloom, being somewhat blinded by the summer sunlight they had left. Then, with the gradual clearing of their vision, a monstrous scene was limned before them, with evergrowing details of crowding horror and grotesquery. Some of the details were obscure and mysteriously terrifying; others, all too plain, were branded as if with sudden, ineffaceable hell-fire on the minds of the monks.

They stood on the threshold of a colossal chamber, which seemed to have been made by the tearing down of upper floors and inner partitions adjacent to the castle hall, itself a room of huge extent. The chamber seemed to recede through interminable shadow, shafted with sunlight falling through the rents of ruin: sunlight that was powerless to dissipate the infernal gloom and mystery.

The monks averred later that they saw many people moving about the place, together with sundry demons, some of whom were shadowy and gigantic, and others barely to be distinguished from the men. These people, as well as their familiars, were occupied with the tending of reverberatory furnaces and immense pear-shaped and gourd-shaped vessels such as were used in alchemy. Some, also, were stooping above great fuming cauldrons, like sorcerers, busy with the brewing of terrible drugs. Against the opposite wall, there were two enormous vats, built of stone and mortar, whose circular sides rose higher than a man's head, so that Bernard and Stephane were unable to determine their contents. One of the vats gave forth a whitish glimmering; the other, a ruddy luminosity.

Near the vats, and somewhat between them, there stood a sort of low couch or litter, made of luxurious, weirdly figured fabrics such as the Saracens weave. On this the monks discerned a dwarfish being, pale and wizened, with eyes of chill flame that shone like evil beryls through the dusk. The dwarf, who had all the air of a feeble moribund, was supervising the toils of the men and their familiars.

The dazed eyes of the brothers began to comprehend other details. They saw that several corpses, among which they recognized that of Theophile,

were lying on the middle floor, together with a heap of human bones that had been wrenched asunder at the joints, and great lumps of flesh piled like the carvings of butchers. One of the men was lifting the bones and dropping them into a cauldron beneath which there glowed a rubycoloured fire; and another was flinging the lumps of flesh into a tub filled with some hueless liquid that gave forth an evil hissing as of a thousand serpents.

Others had stripped the grave-clothes from one of the cadavers, and were starting to assail it with long knives. Others still were mounting rude flights of stone stairs along the walls of the immense vats, carrying vessels filled with semi-liquescient matters which they emptied over the high rims.

Appalled at this vision of human and Satanic turpitude, and feeling a more than righteous indignation, the monks resumed their chanting of sonorous exorcisms and rushed forward. Their entrance, it appeared, was not perceived by the heinously occupied crew of sorcerers and devils.

Bernard and Stephane, filled with an ardour of godly wrath, were about to fling themselves upon the butchers who had started to assail the dead body. This corpse they recognized as being that of a notorious outlaw, named Jacques Le Loupgarou, who had been slain a few days previous in combat with the officers of the state. Le Loupgarou, noted for his brawn, his cunning and his ferocity, had long terrorized the woods and highways of Averoine. His great body had been half eviscerated by the swords of the constabulary; and his beard was stiff and purple with the dried blood of a ghastly wound that had cloven his face from temple to mouth. He had died unshriven, but nevertheless, the monks were unwilling to see his helpless cadaver put to some unhallowed use beyond the surmise of Christians.

The pale, malignant-looking dwarf had now perceived the brothers. They heard him cry out in a shrill, imperatory tone that rose above the ominous hiss of the cauldrons and the hoarse mutter of men and demons.

They knew not his words, which were those of some outlandish tongue and sounded like an incantation. Instantly, as if in response to an order, two of the men turned from their unholy chemistry, and lifting copper basins filled

with an unknown, fetid liquor, hurled the contents of these vessels in the faces of Bernard and Stephane.

The brothers were blinded by the stinging fluid, which bit their flesh as with many serpents' teeth; and they were overcome by the noxious fumes, so that their great crosses dropped from their hands and they both fell unconscious on the castle floor.

Recovering anon their sight and their other senses, they found that their hands had been tied with heavy thongs of gut, so that they were now helpless and could no longer wield their crucifixes or the sprinklers of holy water which they carried.

In this ignominious condition, they heard the voice of the evil dwarf, commanding them to arise. They obeyed, though clumsily and with difficulty, being denied the assistance of their hands. Bernard, who was still sick with the poisonous vapour he had inhaled, fell twice before he succeeded in standing erect; and his discomfiture was greeted with a cachinnation of foul, obscene laughter from the assembled sorcerers.

Now, standing, the monks were taunted by the dwarf, who mocked and reviled them, with appalling blasphemies such as could be uttered only by a bond-servant of Satan. At last, according to their sworn testimony, he said to them:

"Return to your kennel, ye whelps of Ialdabaoth, and take with you this message: They that came here as many shall go forth as one."

Then, in obedience to a dreadful formula spoken by the dwarf, two of the familiars, who had the shape of enormous and shadowy beasts, approached the body of Le Loupgarou and that of Brother Theophile. One of the foul demons, like a vapour that sinks into a marsh, entered the bloody nostrils of Le Loupgarou, disappearing inch by inch, till its horned and bestial head was withdrawn from sight. The other, in like manner, went in through the nostrils of Brother Theophile, whose head lay weird athwart his shoulder on the broken neck.

Then, when the demons had completed their possession, the bodies, in a fashion horrible to behold, were raised up from the castle floor, the one with ravelled entrails hanging from its wide wounds, the other with a head that dropped forward loosely on its bosom. Then, animated by their devils, the cadavers took up the crosses of hornbeam that had been dropped by Stephane and Bernard; and using the crosses for bludgeons, they drove the monks in ignominious flight from the castle, amid a loud, tempestuous howling of infernal laughter from the dwarf and his necromantic crew. And the nude corpse of Le Loupgarou and the robed cadaver of Theophile followed them far on the chasm-riven slopes below Ylourgne, striking great blows with the crosses, so that the backs of the two Cistercians were become a mass of bloody bruises.

After a defeat so signal and crushing, no more of the monks were emboldened to go up against Ylourgne. The whole monastery, thereafter, devoted itself to triple austerities, to quadrupled prayers; and awaiting the unknown will of God, and the equally obscure machinations of the Devil, maintained a pious faith that was somewhat tempered with trepidation.

In time, through goatherds who visited the monks, the tale of Stephane and Bernard went forth throughout Averoine, adding to the grievous alarm that had been caused by the wholesale disappearance of the dead. No one knew what was really going on in the haunted castle or what disposition had been made of the hundreds of migratory corpses; for the light thrown on their fate by the monks' story, though lurid and frightful, was all too inconclusive; and the message sent by the dwarf was somewhat cabalistic.

Everyone felt, however, that some gigantic menace, some black, infernal enchantment, was being brewed within the ruinous walls. The malign, moribund dwarf was all too readily identified with the missing sorcerer, Nathaire; and his underlings, it was plain, were Nathaire's pupils.

4. The Going-Forth of Gaspard du Nord

Alone in his attic chamber, Gaspard du Nord, student of alchemy and sorcery and quondam pupil of Nathaire, sought repeatedly, but always in vain, to consult the viper-circled mirror. The glass remained obscure and cloudy, as with the risen fumes of Satanical alembics or baleful necromantic braziers. Haggard and weary with long nights of watching, Gaspard knew that Nathaire was even more vigilant than he.

Reading with anxious care the general configuration of the stars, he found the foretokening of a great evil that was to come upon Averoigne. But the nature of the evil was not clearly shown.

In the meanwhile the hideous resurrection and migration of the dead was taking place. All Averoigne shuddered at the manifold enormity. Like the timeless night of a Memphian plague, terror settled everywhere; and people spoke of each new atrocity in bated whispers, without daring to voice the execrable tale aloud. To Gaspard, as to everyone, the whispers came; and likewise, after the horror had apparently ceased in early midsummer, there came the appalling story of the Cistercian monks.

Now, at last, the long-baffled watcher found an inkling of that which he sought. The hiding-place of the fugitive necromancer and his apprentices, at least, had been uncovered; and the disappearing dead were clearly traced to their bourn. But still, even for the percipient Gaspard, there remained an undeclared enigma: the exact nature of the abominable brew, the hell-dark sorcery, that Nathaire was concocting in his remote den. Gaspard felt sure of one thing only: the dying, splenetic dwarf, knowing that his allotted time was short, and hating the people of Averoigne with a bottomless rancour, would prepare an enormous and maleficent magic without parallel.

Even with his knowledge of Nathaire's proclivities, and his awareness of the well-nigh inexhaustible arcanic science, the reserves of pit-deep wizardry possessed by the dwarf, he could form only vague, terrifical conjectures anent the incubated evil. But, as time went on, he felt an ever-deepening oppression, the adumbration of a monstrous menace crawling from the dark rim of the world. He could not shake off his disquietude; and finally he

resolved despite the obvious perils of such an excursion, to pay a secret visit to the neighborhood of Ylourgne.

Gaspard, though he came of a well-to-do family, was at that time in straitened circumstances; for his devotion to a somewhat doubtful science had been disapproved by his father. His sole income was a small pittance, purveyed secretly to the youth by his mother and sister. This sufficed for his meagre food, the rent of his room, and a few books and instruments and chemicals; but it would not permit the purchase of a horse or even a humble mule for the proposed journey of more than forty miles.

Undaunted, he set forth on foot, carrying only a dagger and a wallet of food. He timed his wanderings so that he would reach Ylourgne at nightfall in the rising of a full moon. Much of his journey lay through the great, lowering forest, which approached the very walls of Vyones on the eastern side and ran in a sombre arc through Averoigne to the mouth of the rocky valley below Ylourgne. After a few miles, he emerged from the mighty wood of pines and oaks and larches; and thenceforward, for the first day, followed the river Isoile through an open, well-peopled plain. He spent the warm summer night beneath a beech-tree, in the vicinity of a small village, not caring to sleep in the lonely woods where robbers and wolves — and creatures of a more baleful repute — were commonly supposed to dwell.

At evening of the second day, after passing through the wildest and oldest portion of the immemorial wood, he came to the steep, stony valley that led to his destination. This valley was the fountain-head of the Isoile, which had dwindled to a mere rivulet. In the brown twilight, between sunset and moonrise, he saw the lights of the Cistercian monastery; and opposite, on the piled, forbidding scarps, the grim and rugged mass of the ruinous stronghold of Ylourgne, with wan and wizard fires flickering behind its high embrasures. Apart from these fires, there was no sign of occupation; and he did not hear at any time the dismal noises reported by the monks.

Gaspard waited till the round moon, yellow as the eye of some immense nocturnal bird, had begun to peer above the darkling valley. Then, very

cautiously, since the neighbourhood was strange to him, he started to make his way towards the sombre, brooding castle.

Even for one well-used to such climbing, the escalade would have offered enough difficulty and danger by moonlight. Several times, finding himself at the bottom of a sheer cliff, he was compelled to retrace his hard-won progress; and often he was saved from falling only by stunted shrubs and briars that had taken root in the niggard soil. Breathless, with torn raiment and scored and bleeding hands, he gained at length the shoulder of the craggy height, below the walls.

Here he paused to recover breath and recuperate his flagging strength. He could see from his vantage the pale reflection as of hidden flames, that beat upwards on the inner walls of the high-built donjon. He heard a low hum of confused noises, whose distance and direction were alike baffling. Sometimes they seemed to float downwards from the black battlements, sometimes to issue from subterranean depths far in the hill.

Apart from this remote, ambiguous hum, the night was locked in a mortal stillness. The very winds appeared to shun the vicinity of the dread castle. An unseen, clammy cloud of paralyzing evil hung removeless upon all things; and the pale, swollen moon, the patroness of witches and sorcerers, distilled her green poison above the crumbling towers in a silence older than time.

Gaspard felt the obscenely clinging weight of a more burdenous thing than his own fatigue when he resumed his progress towards the barbican. Invisible webs of the waiting, ever-gathering evil seemed to impede him. The slow, noisome flapping of intangible wings was heavy in his face. He seemed to breathe a surging wind from unfathomable vaults and caverns of corruption. Inaudible howlings, derisive or minatory, thronged in his ears, and foul hands appeared to thrust him back. But, bowing his head as if against a blowing gale, he went on and climbed the mounded ruin of the barbican, into the weedy courtyard.

The place was deserted, to all seeming; and much of it was still deep in the shadows of the walls and turrets. Near by, in the black, silver-crenellated pile, Gaspard saw the open, cavernous doorway described by the monks. It was lit from within by a lurid glare, wannish and eerie as marsh-fires. The humming noise, now audible as a muttering of voices, issued from the doorway; and Gaspard thought that he could see dark, sooty figures moving rapidly in the lit interior.

Keeping in the farther shadows, he stole along the courtyard, making a sort of circuit amid the ruins. He did not dare to approach the open entrance for fear of being seen; though, as far as he could tell, the place was unguarded.

He came to the donjon, on whose upper wall the wan light flickered obliquely through a sort of rift in the long building adjacent. This opening was at some distance from the ground; and Gaspard saw that it had been formerly the door to a stony balcony. A flight of broken steps led upwards along the wall to the half-crumbled remnant of this balcony; and it occurred to the youth that he might climb the steps and peer unobserved into the interior of Ylourgne.

Some of the stairs were missing; and all were in heavy shadow. Gaspard found his way precariously to the balcony, pausing once in considerable alarm when a fragment of the worn stone, loosened by his footfall, dropped with a loud clattering on the courtyard flags below. Apparently it was unheard by the occupants of the castle; and after a little he resumed his climbing.

Cautiously he neared the large, ragged opening through which the light poured upwards. Crouching on a narrow ledge, which was all that remained of the balcony, he peered in on a most astounding and terrific spectacle, whose details were so bewildering that he could barely comprehend their import till after many minutes.

It was plain that the story told by the monks — allowing for their religious bias — had been far from extravagant. Almost the whole interior of the half-ruined pile had been torn down and dismantled to afford room for the

activities of Nathaire. This demolition in itself was a superhuman task for whose execution the sorcerer must have employed a legion of familiars as well as his ten pupils.

The vast chamber was fitfully illumed by the glare of athanors and braziers; and, above all, by the weird glimmering from the huge stone vats. Even from his high vantage, the watcher could not see the contents of these vats; but a white luminosity poured, upwards from the rim of one of them, and a flesh-tinted phosphorescence from the other.

Gaspard had seen certain of the experiments and evocations of Nathaire, and was all too familiar with the appurtenances of the dark arts. Within certain limits, he was not squeamish; nor was it likely that he would have been terrified overmuch by the shadowy, uncouth shapes of demons who toiled in the pit below him side by side with the blackclad pupils of the sorcerer. But a cold horror clutched his heart when he saw the incredible, enormous thing that occupied the central floor: the colossal human skeleton a hundred feet in length, stretching for more than the extent of the old castle hall; the skeleton whose bony right foot the group of men and devils, to all appearance, were busily clothing with human flesh!

The prodigious and macabre framework, complete in every part, with ribs like arches of some Satanic nave, shone as if it were still heated by the fires of an infernal welding. It seemed to shimmer and burn with unnatural life, to quiver with malign disquietude in the flickering glare and gloom. The great fingerbones, curving claw-like on the floor, appeared as if they were about to close upon some helpless prey. The tremendous teeth were set in an everlasting grin of sardonic cruelty and malice. The hollow eye-sockets, deep as Tartarean wells, appeared to seethe with myriad, mocking lights, like the eyes of elementals swimming upwards in obscene shadow.

Gaspard was stunned by the shocking and stupendous fantasmagoria that yawned before him like a peopled hell. Afterwards he was never wholly sure of certain things, and could remember very little of the actual manner in which the work of the men and their assistants was being carried on. Dim, dubious, bat-like creatures seemed to be flitting to and fro between

one of the stone vats and the group that toiled like sculptors, clothing the bony foot with a reddish plasm which they applied and moulded like so much clay. Gaspard thought, but was not certain later, that this plasm, which gleamed as if with mingled blood and fire, was being brought from the rosy-litten vat in vessels borne by the claws of the shadowy flying creatures. None of them, however, approached the other vat, whose wannish light was momentarily enfeebled, as if it were dying down.

He looked for the minikin figure of Nathaire, whom he could not distinguish in the crowded scene. The sick necromancer — if he had not already succumbed to the little-known disease that had long wasted him like an inward flame — was no doubt hidden from view by the colossal skeleton and was perhaps directing the labours of the men and demons from his couch.

Spellbound on that precarious ledge, the watcher failed to hear the furtive, cat-like feet that were climbing behind him on the ruinous stairs. Too late, he heard the clink of a loose fragment close upon his heels; and turning in startlement, he toppled into sheer oblivion beneath the impact of a cudgel-like blow, and did not even know that the beginning fall of his body towards the courtyard had been arrested by his assailant's arms.

5. The Horror of Ylourgne

Gaspard, returning from his dark plunge into Lethean emptiness, found himself gazing into the eyes of Nathaire: those eyes of liquid night and ebony, in which swam the chill, malignant fires of stars that had gone down to irremeable perdition. For some time, in the confusion of his senses, he could see nothing but the eyes, which seemed to have drawn him forth like baleful magnets from his swoon. Apparently disembodied, or set in a face too vast for human cognizance, they burned before him in chaotic murk; Then, by degrees, he saw the other features of the sorcerer, and the details of a lurid scene; and became aware of his own situation.

Trying to lift his hands to his aching head, he found that they were bound tightly together at the wrists. He was half lying, half leaning against an object with hard planes and edges that irked his back. This object he discovered to be a sort of alchemic furnace, or athanor, part of a litter of disused apparatus that stood or lay on the castle floor. Cupels, aludels, cucurbits, like enormous gourds and globes, were mingled in strange confusion with the piled, iron-clasped books and the sooty cauldrons and braziers of a darker science.

Nathaire, propped among Saracenic cushions with arabesques of sullen gold and fulgurant scarlet, was peering upon him from a kind of improvised-couch, made with bales of Orient rugs and arrases, to whose luxury the rude walls of the castle, stained with mould and mottled with dead fungi, offered a grotesque foil. Dim lights and evilly swooping shadows flickered across the scene; and Gaspard could hear a guttural hum of voices behind him. Twisting his head a little, he saw one of the stone vats, whose rosy luminosity was blurred and blotted by vampire wings that went to and fro.

"Welcome," said Nathaire, after an interval in which the student began to perceive the fatal progress of illness in the painpinched features before him. "So Gaspard du Nord has come to see his former master!" The harsh, imperatory voice, with demoniac volume, issued appallingly from the wizened frame.

"I have come," said Gaspard, in laconic echo. "Tell me, what devil's work is this in which I find you engaged? And what have you done with the dead bodies that were stolen by your accursed familiars?"

The frail, dying body of Nathaire, as if possessed by some sardonic fiend, rocked to and fro on the luxurious couch in a long, violent gust of laughter, without other reply.

"If your looks bear creditable witness," said Gaspard, when the baleful laughter had ceased, "you are mortally ill, and the time is short in which you can hope to atone for your deeds of malice and make your peace with God — if indeed it still be possible for you to make peace. What foul and

monstrous brew are you preparing, to ensure the ultimate perdition of your soul?"

The dwarf was again seized by a spasm of diabolic mirth.

"Nay, nay, my good Gaspard," he said finally. "I have made another bond than the one with which puling cowards try to purchase the good will and forgiveness of the heavenly Tyrant. Hell may take me in the end, if it will; but Hell has paid, and will still pay, an ample and goodly price. I must die soon, it is true, for my doom is written in the stars: but in death, by the grace of Satan, I live again, and shall go forth endowed with the mighty thews of the Anakim, to visit vengeance on the people of Averoigne, who have long hated me for my necromantic wisdom and have held me in derision for my dwarf stature."

"What madness is this whereof you dream?" asked the youth, appalled by the more than human frenzy and malignity that seemed to dilate the shrunken frame of Nathaire and stream in Tartarean lustre from his eyes.

"It is no madness, but a veritable thing: a miracle, mayhap, as life itself is a miracle.... From the fresh bodies of the dead, which otherwise would have rotted away in charnel foulness, my pupils and familiars are making for me, beneath my instruction, the giant form whose skeleton you have beheld. My soul, at the death of its present body, will pass into this colossal tenement through the working of certain spells of transmigration in which my faithful assistants have also been carefully instructed."

"If you had remained with me, Gaspard, and had not drawn back in your petty, pious squeamishness from the marvels and profundities that I should have unveiled for you, it would now be your privilege to share in the creation of this prodigy.... And if you had come to Ylourgne a little sooner in your presumptuous prying, I might have made a certain use of your stout bones and muscles... the same use I have made of other young men, who died through accident or violence. But it is too late even for this, since the building of the bones has been completed, and it remains only to invest them with human flesh. My good Gaspard, there is nothing whatever to be

done with you — except to put you safely out of the way. Providentially, for this purpose, there is an oubliette beneath the castle: a somewhat dismal lodging-place, no doubt, but one that was made strong and deep by the grim lords of Ylourgne."

Gaspard was unable to frame any reply to this sinister and extraordinary speech. Searching his horror-frozen brain for words, he felt himself seized from behind by the hands of unseen beings who had come, no doubt, in answer to some gesture of Nathaire: a gesture which the captive had not perceived. He was blindfolded with some heavy fabric, mouldy and musty as a gravecloth, and was led stumbling through the litter of strange apparatus, and down a winding flight of ruinous, narrow stairs from which the noisome breath of stagnating water, mingled with the oily muskiness of serpents, arose to meet him.

He appeared to descend for a distance that would admit of no return. Slowly the stench grew stronger, more insupportable; the stairs ended; a door clanged sullenly on rusty hinges; and Gaspard was thrust forward on a damp, uneven floor that seemed to have been worn away by myriad feet.

He heard the grating of a ponderous slab of stone. His wrists were untied, the bandage was removed from his eyes, and he saw by the light of flickering torches a round hole that yawned in the oozing floor at his feet. Beside it was the lifted slab that had formed its lid. Before he could turn to see the faces of his captors, to learn if they were men or devils, he was seized rudely and thrust into the gaping hole. He fell through Erebus-like darkness, for what seemed an immense distance, before he struck bottom. Lying half stunned in a shallow, fetid pool, he heard the funereal thud of the heavy slab as it slid back into place far above him.

6. The Vaults of Ylourgne

Gaspard was revived, after a while, by the chillness of the water in which he lay. His garments were half soaked; and the slimy mephitic pool, as he

discovered by his first movement, was within an inch of his mouth. He could hear a steady, monotonous dripping somewhere in the rayless night of his dungeon. He staggered to his feet, finding that his bones were still intact, and began a cautious exploration, Foul drops fell upon his hair and lifted face as he moved; his feet slipped and splashed in the rotten water; there were angry, vehement hissings, and serpentine coils slithered coldly across his ankles.

He soon came to a rough wall of stone, and following the wall with his finger-tips, he tried to determine the extent of the oubliette. The place was more or less circular, without corners, and he failed to form any just idea of its circuit. Somewhere in his wanderings, he found a shelving pile of rubble that rose above the water against the wall; and here, for the sake of comparative dryness and comfort, he ensconced himself, after dispossessing a number of outraged reptiles. These creatures, it seemed, were inoffensive, and probably belonged to some species of watersnake; but he shivered at the touch of their clammy scales.

Sitting on the rubble-heap, Gaspard reviewed in his mind the various horrors of a situation that was infinitely dismal and desperate. He had learned the incredible, soul-shaking secret of Ylourgne, the unimaginably monstrous and blasphemous project of Nathaire; but now, immured in this noisome hole as in a subterranean tomb, in depths beneath the devil-haunted pile, he could not even warn the world of imminent menace.

The wallet of food, now more than half empty, with which he had started from Vyones, was still hanging at his back; and he assured himself by investigation that his captors had not troubled to deprive him of his dagger. Gnawing a crust of stale bread in the darkness, and caressing with his hand the hilt of the precious weapon, he sought for some rift in the all-environing despair.

He had no means of measuring the black hours that went over him with the slowness of a slime-clogged river, crawling in blind silence to a subterrene sea. The ceaseless drip of water, probably from sunken hill-springs that had supplied the castle in former years alone broke the stillness; but the sound

became in time an equivocal monotone that suggested to his half-delirious mind the mirthless and perpetual chuckling of unseen imps. At last, from sheer bodily exhaustion, he fell into troubled nightmare-ridden chamber.

He could not tell if it were night or noon in the world without when he awakened; for the same stagnant darkness, unrelieved by ray or glimmer, brimmed the oubliette. Shivering, he became aware of a steady draught that blew upon him: a dank, unwholesome air, like the breath of unsunned vaults that had wakened into cryptic life and activity during his sleep. He had not noticed the draught heretofore; and his numb brain was startled into sudden hope by the intimation which it conveyed. Obviously there was some underground rift or channel through which the air entered; and this rift might somehow prove to be a place of egress from the oubliette.

Getting to his feet, he groped uncertainly forward in the direction of the draught. He stumbled over something that cracked and broke beneath his heels, and narrowly checked himself from falling on his face in the slimy, serpent-haunted pool. Before he could investigate the obstruction or resume his blind groping, he heard a harsh, grating noise above, and a wavering shaft of yellow light came down through the oubliette's opened mouth. Dazzled, he looked up, and saw the round hole ten or twelve feet overhead, through which a dark hand had reached down with a flaring torch. A small basket, containing a loaf of coarse bread and a bottle of wine, was being lowered at the end of a cord.

Gaspard took the bread and wine, and the basket was drawn up. Before the withdrawal of the torch and the re-depositing of the slab, he contrived to make a hasty survey of his dungeon. The place was roughly circular, as he had surmised, and was perhaps fifteen feet in diameter. The thing over which he had stumbled was a human skeleton, lying half on the rubble-heap, half in the filthy water. It was brown and rotten with age, and its garments had long melted away in patches of liquid mould.

The walls were guttered and runnelled by centuries of ooze and their very stone, it seemed, was rotting slowly to decay. In the opposite side, at the bottom, he saw the opening he had, suspected: a low mouth, not much

bigger than a foxes' hole, into which the sluggish water flowed. His heart sank at the sight; for, even if the water were deeper than it seemed, the hole was far too strait for the passage of a man's body. In a state of hopelessness that was like a veritable suffocation, he found his way back to the rubble-pile when the light had been withdrawn.

The loaf of bread and the bottle of wine were still in his hands. Mechanically, with dull, sodden hunger, he munched and drank. Afterwards he felt stronger; and the sour, common wine served to warm him and perhaps helped to inspire him with the idea which he presently conceived.

Finishing the bottle, he found his way across the dungeon to the low, burrow-like hole. The entering air current had strengthened, and this he took for a good omen, Drawing his dagger, he started to pick with the point at the half-rotten, decomposing wall, in an effort to enlarge the opening. He was forced to kneel in noisome silt; and the writhing coils of water-snakes, hissing frightfully, crawled across his legs as he worked. Evidently the hole was their means of ingress and egress, to and from the oubliette.

The stone crumbled readily beneath his dagger, and Gaspard forgot the horror and ghastliness of his situation in the hope of escape. He had no means of knowing the thickness of the wall; or the nature and extent of the subterrenes that lay beyond; but he felt sure that there was some channel of connection with the outer air.

For hours or days, it seemed, he toiled with his dagger, digging blindly at the soft wall and removing the dèbris that splashed in the water beside him. After a while, prone on his belly, he crept into the hole he had enlarged; and burrowing like some laborious mole, he made his way onwards inch by inch.

At last, to his prodigious relief, the dagger-point went through into empty space. He broke away with his hands the thin shell of obstructing stone that remained; then, crawling on in the darkness, he found that he could stand upright on a sort of shelving floor.

Straightening his cramped limbs, he moved on very cautiously. He was in a narrow vault or tunnel, whose sides he could touch simultaneously with his outstretched finger-tips. The floor was a downwards incline; and the water deepened, rising to his knees and then to his waist, Probably the place had once been used as an underground exit from the castle; and the roof, falling in, had dammed the water.

More than a little dismayed, Gaspard began to wonder if he had exchanged the foul, skeleton-haunted oubliette for something even worse. The night around and before him was still untouched by any ray, and the air-current, though strong, was laden with dankness and mouldiness as of interminable vaults.

Touching the tunnel-sides at intervals as he plunged hesitantly into the deepening water, he found a sharp angle, giving upon free space at his right. The space proved to be the mouth of an intersecting passage, whose flooded bottom was at least level and went no deeper into the stagnant foulness, Exploring it, he stumbled over the beginning of a flight of upward steps. Mounting these through the shoaling water, he soon found himself on dry stone.

The stairs, narrow, broken, irregular, without landings, appeared to wind in some eternal spiral that was coiled lightlessly about the bowels of Ylourgne. They were close and stifling as a tomb, and plainly they were not the source of the air-current which Gaspard had started to follow. Whither they would lead he knew not; nor could he tell if they were the same stairs by which he had been conducted to his dungeon. But he climbed steadily, pausing only at long intervals to regain his breath as best he could in the dead, mephitic-burdened air.

At length, in the solid darkness, far above, he began to hear a mysterious, muffled sound: a dull but recurrent crash as of mighty blocks and masses of falling stone. The sound was unspeakably ominous and dismal, and it seemed to shake the unfathomable walls around Gaspard, and to thrill with a sinister vibration in the steps on which he trod,

He climbed now with redoubled caution and alertness, stopping ever and anon to listen. The recurrent crashing noise grew louder, more ominous, as if it were immediately above; and the listener crouched on the dark stairs for a time that might have been many minutes, without daring to go farther. At last, with disconcerting suddenness, the sound came to an end, leaving a strained and fearful stillness.

With many baleful conjectures, not knowing what fresh enormity he should find, Gaspard ventured to resume his climbing. Again, in the blank and solid stillness, he was met by a sound: the dim, reverberant chanting of voices, as in some Satanic mass or liturgy with dirge-like cadences that turned to intolerably soaring paeans of evil triumph. Long before he could recognize the words, he shivered at the strong, malefic throbbing of the measured rhythm, whose fall and rise appeared somehow to correspond to the heartbeats of some colossal demon.

The stairs turned, for the hundredth time in their tortuous spiral; and coming forth from that long midnight, Gaspard blinked in the wan glimmering that streamed towards him from above. The choral voices met him in a more sonorous burst of infernal sound, and he knew the words for those of a rare and potent incantation, used by sorcerers for a supremely foul, supremely maleficent purpose. Affrightedly, as he climbed the last steps, he knew the thing that was taking place amid the ruins of Ylourgne.

Lifting his head warily above the castle floor, he saw that the stairs ended in a far corner of the vast room in which he had beheld Nathaire's unthinkable creation. The whole extent of the internally dismantled building lay before him, filled with a weird glare in which the beams of the slightly gibbous moon were mingled with the ruddy flames of dying athanors and the coiling, multi-coloured tongues that rose from necromantic braziers.

Gaspard, for an instant, was puzzled by the flood of full moonlight amid the ruins. Then he saw that almost the whole inner wall of the castle, giving on the courtyard, had been removed. It was the tearing-down of the prodigious blocks, no doubt through an extrahuman labour levied by sorcery, that he had heard during his ascent from the subterrene vaults. His blood curdled,

he felt an actual horripilation, as he realized the purpose for which the wall had been demolished.

It was evident that a whole day and part of another night had gone by since his immurement; for the moon rode high in the pale sapphire welkin. Bathed in its chilly glare, the huge vats no longer emitted their eerie and electric phosphorescence. The couch of Saracen fabrics, on which Gaspard had beheld the dying dwarf, was now half hidden from view by the mounting fumes of braziers and thuribles, amid which the sorcerer's ten pupils, clad in sable and scarlet, were performing their hideous and repugnant rite, with its malefically measured litany.

Fearfully, as one who confronts an apparition reared up from nether hell, Gaspard beheld the colossus that lay inert as if in Cyclopean sleep on the castle flags. The thing was no longer a skeleton: the limbs were rounded into bossed, enormous thews, like the limbs of Biblical giants; the flanks were like an insuperable wall; the deltoids of the mighty chest were broad as platform; the hands could have crushed the bodies of men like millstones.... But the face of the stupendous monster, seen in profile athwart the pouring moon, was the face of the Satanic dwarf, Nathaire — remagnified a hundred times, but the same in its implacable madness and malevolence!

The vast bosom seemed to rise and fall; and during a pause of the necromantic ritual, Gaspard heard the unmistakable sound of a mighty respiration, The eye in the profile was closed; but its lid appeared to tremble like a great curtain, as if the monster were about to wake; and the outflung hand, with fingers pale and bluish as a row of corpses, twitched unquietly on the castle flags.

An insupportable terror seized the watcher; but even this terror could not induce him to return to the noisome vaults he had left. With infinite hesitation and trepidation, he stole forth from the corner, keeping in a zone of ebon shadow that flanked the castle wall.

As he went, he saw for a moment, through bellying folds of vapour, the couch on which the shrunken form of Nathaire was lying pallid and motionless. It seemed that the dwarf was dead, or had fallen into a stupor preceding death. Then the choral voices, crying their dreadful incantation, rose higher in Satanic triumph; the vapours eddied like a hell-born cloud, coiling about the sorcerers in python-shaped volumes, and hiding again the Orient couch and its corpse-like occupant.

A thraldom of measureless evil oppressed the air. Gaspard felt that the awful transmigration, evoked and implored with everswelling, liturgic blasphemies, was about to take place — had perhaps already occurred. He thought that the breathing giant stirred, like one who tosses in light slumber.

Soon the towering, massively recumbent hulk was interposed between Gaspard and the chanting necromancers. They had not seen him; and he now dared to run swiftly, and gained the courtyard unpursued and unchallenged. Thence, without looking back, he fled like a devil-hunted thing upon the steep and chasm-riven slopes below Ylourgne.

7. The Coming of the Colossus

After the cessation of the exodus of liches, a universal terror still prevailed; a wide-flung shadow of apprehension, infernal and funereal, lay stagnantly on Averoigne. There were strange and disastrous portents in the aspect of the skies: flame-bearded meteors had been seen to fall beyond the eastern hills; a comet far in the south had swept the stars with its luminous bosom for a few nights, and had then faded, leaving among men the prophecy of bale and pestilence to come. By day the air was oppressed and sultry, and the blue heavens were heated as if by whitish fires. Clouds of thunder, darkling and withdrawn, shook their fulgurant lances on the far horizons, like some beleaguering Titan army. A murrain, such as would come from the working of wizard spells, was abroad among the cattle. All these signs and prodigies were an added heaviness on the burdened spirits of men, who

went to and fro in daily fear of the hidden preparations and machinations of hell.

But, until the actual breaking-forth of the incubated menace, there was no one, save Gaspard du Nord, who had knowledge of its veritable form. And Gaspard, fleeing headlong beneath the gibbous moon towards Vyones, and fearing to hear the tread of a colossal pursuer at any moment, had thought it more than useless to give warning in such towns and villages as lay upon his line of sight. Where, indeed — even if warned — could men hope to hide themselves from the awful thing, begotten by Hell on the ravished charnel, that would walk forth like the Anakim to visit its roaring wrath on a trampled world?

So, all that night, and throughout the day that followed, Gaspard du Nord, with the dried slime of the oubliette on his briar-shredded raiment, plunged like a madman through the towering woods that were haunted by robbers and were-wolves. The westward-falling moon flickered in his eyes betwixt the gnarled sombre boles as he ran; and the dawn overtook him with the pale shafts of its searching arrows. The noon poured over him its white sultriness, like furnace-heated metal sublimed into light; and the clotted filth that clung to his tatters was again turned into slime by his own sweat. But still he pursued his nightmare-harried way, while a vague, seemingly hopeless plan took form in his mind.

In the interim, several monks of the Cistercian brotherhood, watching the grey wall of Ylourgne at early dawn with their habitual vigilance, were the first, after Gaspard, to behold the monstrous horror created by the necromancers. Their account may have been somewhat tinged by a pious exaggeration; but they swore that the giant rose abruptly, standing more than waist-high above the ruins of the barbican, amid a sudden leaping of long-tongued fires and a swirling of pitchy fumes erupted from Malbolge. The giant's head was level with the high top of the donjon, and his right arm, out-thrust, lay like a bar of stormy cloud athwart the new-risen sun.

The monks fell grovelling to their knees, thinking that the Archfoe himself had come forth, using Ylourgne for his gateway from the Pit. Then, across

the mile-wide valley, they heard a thunderous peal of demoniac laughter; and the giant, climbing over the mounded barbican at a single step, began to descend the scarped and craggy hill.

When he drew nearer, bounding from slope to slope, his features were manifestly those of some great devil animated with ire and malice towards the sons of Adam. His hair, in matted locks, streamed behind him like a mass of black pythons; his naked skin was livid and pale and cadaverous, with the skin of the dead; but beneath it, the stupendous thews of a Titan swelled and rippled. The eyes, wide and glaring flamed like lidless cauldrons heated by the fires of the unplumbed Pit.

The rumour of his coming passed like a gale of terror through the Monastery. Many of the Brothers, deeming discretion the better part of religious fervour, hid themselves in the stone-hewn cellars and vaults. Others crouched in their cells, mumbling and shrieking incoherent pleas to all the Saints. Still others, the most courageous, repaired in a body to the chapel and knelt in solemn prayer before the wooden Christ on the great crucifix.

Bernard and Stephane, now somewhat recovered from their grievous beating, alone dared to watch the advance of the giant. Their horror was inexpressibly increased when they began to recognize in the colossal features a magnified likeness to the lineaments of that evil dwarf who had presided over the dark, unhallowed activities of Ylourgne; and the laughter of the colossus, as he came down the valley, was like a tempest-borne echo of the damnable cachinnation that had followed their ignominious flight from the haunted stronghold. To Bernard and Stephane, however, it seemed merely that the dwarf, who was no doubt an actual demon, had chosen to appear in his natural form.

Pausing in the valley-bottom, the giant stood opposite the monastery with his flame-filled eyes on a level with the window from which Bernard and Stephane were peering. He laughed again — an awful laugh, like a subterranean rumbling — and then, stooping, he picked up a handful of boulders as if they had been pebbles, and proceeded to pelt the monastery.

The boulders crashed against the walls, as if hurled from great catapults or mangonels of war; but the stout building held, though shaken grievously.

Then, with both hands, the colossus tore loose an immense rock that was deeply embedded in the hillside; and lifting this rock, he flung it at the stubborn walls. The tremendous mass broke in an entire side of the chapel; and those who had gathered therein were found later, crushed into bloody pulp amid the splinters of their carven Christ.

After that, as if disdainful to palter any further with a prey so insignificant, the colossus turned his back on the little monastery, and like some fiend-born Goliath, went roaring down the valley into Averoine.

As he departed, Bernard and Stephane, still watching from their window, saw a thing they had not perceived heretofore: a huge basket made of planking, that hung suspended by ropes between the giant's shoulders. In the basket, ten men — the pupils and assistants of Nathaire — were being carried like so many dolls or puppets in a peddler's pack.

Of the subsequent wanderings and depredations of the colossus, a hundred legends were long current throughout Averoine: tales of an unexampled ghastliness, a wanton diabolism without parallel in all the histories of that demon-pestered land.

The goatherds of the hills below Ylourgne saw him coming, and fled with their nimble-footed flocks to the highest ridges. To these he paid little heed, merely trampling them down like beetles when they could not escape from his path. Following the hillstream that was the source of the river Isoile, he came to the verge of the great forest; and here, it is related, he tore up a towering ancient pine by the roots, and snapping off the mighty boughs with his hands, shaped it into a cudgel which he carried henceforward.

With this cudgel, heavier than a battering-ram, he pounded into shapeless ruin a wayside shrine in the outer woods. A hamlet fell in his way, and he strode through it, beating in the roofs, toppling the walls, and crushing the inhabitants beneath his feet.

To and fro in a mad frenzy of destruction, like a deathdrunken Cyclops, he wandered all that day. Even the fierce beasts of the woodland ran from him in fear. The wolves, in mid-hunt, abandoned their quarry and retired, howling dismally with terror, to their rocky dens. The black, savage hunting-dogs of the forest barons would not face him, and hid whimpering in their kennels.

Men heard his mighty laughter, his stormy bellowing; they saw his approach from a distance of many leagues, and fled or concealed themselves as best they could. The lords of moated castles called in their men-at-arms, drew up their drawbridges and prepared as if for the siege of an army. The peasants hid themselves in caverns, in cellars, in old wells, and even beneath hay-mounds, hoping that he would pass them by unnoticed. The churches were crammed with refugees who sought protection of the Cross, deeming that Satan himself, or one of his chief lieutenants, had risen to harry and lay waste the land.

In a voice like summer thunder, mad maledictions, unthinkable obscenities and blasphemies were uttered ceaselessly by the giant as he went to and fro. Men heard him address the litter of black-clad figures that he carried on his back, in tones of admonishment or demonstration such as a master would use to his pupils. People who had known Nathaire recognized the incredible likeness of the huge features, the similarity of the swollen voice to his. A rumour went abroad that the dwarf sorcerer, through his loathly bond with the Adversary, had been permitted to transfer his hateful soul into this Titanic form; and, bearing his pupils with him, had returned to vent an insatiable ire, a bottomless rancour, on the world that had mocked him for his puny physique and reviled him for his sorcery. The charnel genesis of the monstrous avatar was also rumoured; and, indeed it was said that the colossus had openly proclaimed his identity.

It would be tedious to make explicit mention of all the enormities, all the atrocities, that were ascribed to the marauding giant.... There were people — mostly priests and women, it is told — whom he picked up as they fled, and pulled limb from limb as a child might quarter an insect.... And there were worse things, not to be named in this record....

Many eye-witnesses told how he hunted Pierre, the Lord of La Frênaie, who had gone forth with his dogs and men to chase a noble stag in the nearby forest. Overtaking horse and rider, he caught them with one hand, and bearing them aloft as he strode over the tree-tops, he hurled them later against the granite walls of the Chateau of La Frênaie in passing. Then, catching the red stag that Pierre had hunted, he flung it after them; and the huge bloody blotches made by the impact of the bashed bodies remained long on the castle stone, and were never wholly washed away by the autumn rains and the winter snows.

Countless tales were told, also, of the deeds of obscene sacrilege and profanation committed by the colossus: of the wooden Virgin that he flung into the Isoile above Ximes, lashed with human gut to the rotting, mail-clad body of an infamous outlaw; of the wormy corpses that he dug with his hands from unconsecrated graves and hurled into the courtyard of the Benedictine abbey of Perigon; of the Church of Ste. Zenobie, which he buried with its priests and congregation beneath a mountain of ordure made by the gathering of all the dungheaps from neighbouring farms.

8. The Laying of the Colossus

Back and forth, in an irregular, drunken, zigzag course, from end to end and side to side of the harried realm, the giant strode without pause, like an energumen possessed by some implacable fiend of mischief and murder, leaving behind him, as a reaper leaves his swath, an ever-lengthening zone of havoc, of rapine and carnage. And when the sun, blackened by the smoke of burning villages, had set luridly beyond the forest, men still saw him moving in the dusk, and heard still the portentous rumbling of his mad, stormy cachinnation.

Nearing the gates of Vyones at sunset, Gaspard du Nord saw behind him, through gaps in the ancient wood, the far-off head and shoulders of the

terrible colossus, who moved along the Isoile, stooping from sight at intervals in some horrid deed.

Though numb with weariness and exhaustion, Gaspard quickened his flight. He did not believe, however, that the monster would try to invade Vyones, the especial object of Nathaire's hatred and malice, before the following day. The evil soul of the sorcerous dwarf, exulting in its almost infinite capacity for harm and destruction, would defer the crowning act of vengeance, and would continue to terrorize, during the night, the outlying villages and rural districts.

In spite of his rags and filth, which rendered him practically unrecognizable and gave him a most disreputable air, Gaspard was admitted without question by the guards at the city gate. Vyones was already thronged with people who had fled to the sanctuary of its stout walls from the adjacent countryside; and no one, not even of the most dubious character, was denied admittance. The walls were lined with archers and pike-bearers, gathered in readiness to dispute the entrance of the giant. Crossbowmen were stationed above the gates, and mangonels were mounted at short intervals along the entire circuit of the ramparts. The city seethed and hummed like an agitated hive.

Hysteria and pandemonium prevailed in the streets. Pale, panic-stricken faces milled everywhere in an aimless stream. Hurrying torches flared dolorously in the twilight that deepened as if with the shadow of impending wings arisen from Erebus. The gloom was clogged with intangible fear, with webs of stifling oppression. Through all this rout of wild disorder and frenzy, Gaspard, like a spent but indomitable swimmer breasting some tide of eternal, viscid nightmare, made his way slowly to his attic lodgings.

Afterwards, he could scarcely remember eating and drinking. Overworn beyond the limit of bodily and spiritual endurance, he threw himself down on his pallet without removing his ooze-stiffened tatters, and slept soddenly till an hour half-way between midnight and dawn.

He awoke with the death-pale beams of the gibbous moon shining upon him through his window; and rising, spent the balance of the night in making certain occult preparations which, he felt, offered the only possibility of coping with the fiendish monster that had been created and animated by Nathaire.

Working feverishly by the light of the westering moon and a single dim taper, Gaspard assembled various ingredients of familiar alchemic use which he possessed, and compounded from these, through a long and somewhat cabalistic process, a dark-grey powder which he had seen employed by Nathaire on numerous occasions. He had reasoned that the colossus, being formed from the bones and flesh of dead men unlawfully raised up, and energized only by the soul of a dead sorcerer, would be subject to the influence of this powder, which Nathaire had used for the laying of resurrected liches. The powder, if cast in the nostrils of such cadavers, would cause them to, return peacefully to their tombs and lie down in a renewed slumber of death.

Gaspard made a considerable quantity of the mixture, arguing that no mere finger-pinch would suffice for the lulling of the gigantic charnel monstrosity. His guttering yellow candle was dimmed by the white dawn as he ended the Latin formula of fearsome verbal invocation from which the compound would derive much of its efficacy. The formula, which called for the cooperation of Alastor and other evil spirits, he used with unwillingness. But he knew that there was no alternative: sorcery could be fought only with sorcery.

Morning came with new terrors to Vyones. Gaspard had felt, through a sort of intuition, that the vengeful colossus, who was said to have wandered with unhuman tirelessness and diabolic energy all night through Averoine, would approach the hated city early in the day. His intuition was confirmed; for scarcely had he finished his occult labours when he heard a mounting hubbub in the streets, and above the shrill, dismal clamour of frightened voices, the far-off roaring of the giant.

Gaspard knew that he must lose no time, if he were to post himself in a place of vantage from which he could throw his powder into the nostrils of the hundred-foot colossus. The city walls and even most of the church spires, were not lofty enough for this purpose; and a brief reflection told him that the great cathedral, standing at the core of Vyones, was the one place from whose roof he could front the invader with success. He felt sure that the men-at-arms on the walls could do little to prevent the monster from entering and wreaking his malevolent will. No earthly weapon could injure a being of such bulk and nature; for even a cadaver of normal size, reared up in this fashion, could be shot full of arrows or transfixed by a dozen pikes without retarding its progress.

Hastily he filled a huge leathern pouch with the powder; and carrying the pouch at his belt, he joined the agitated press of pople in the street. Many were fleeing towards the cathedral, to seek the shelter of its august sanctity; and he had only to let himself be borne along by the frenzy-driven stream.

The cathedral nave was packed with worshippers, and solemn masses were being said by priests whose voices faltered at times with inward panic. Unheeded by the wan, despairing throng, Gaspard found a flight of coiling stairs that led tortuously to the gargoyle-warded roof of the high tower.

Here he posted himself, crouching behind the stone figure of a cat-headed griffin. From his vantage he could see, beyond the crowded spires and gables, the approaching giant, whose head and torso loomed above the city walls. A cloud of arrows, visible even at that distance, rose to meet the monster, who apparently did not even pause to pluck them from his hide. Great boulders hurled from mangonels were no more to him than a pelting of gravel; the heavy bolts of arbalests, embedded in his flesh, were mere slivers.

Nothing could stay his advance. The tiny figures of a company of pikemen, who opposed him with out-thrust weapons, swept from the wall above the eastern gate by a single sidelong blow of the seventy-foot pine that he bore for a cudgel. Then, having cleared the wall, the colossus climbed over it into Vyones.

Roaring, chuckling, laughing like a maniacal Cyclops, he strode along the narrow streets between houses that rose only to his waist, trampling without mercy everyone who could not escape in time, and smashing in the roofs with stupendous blows of his bludgeon. With a push of his left hand he broke off the protruding gables, and overturned the church steeples with their bells clanging in dolorous alarm as they went down. A woeful shrieking and wailing of hysteria-laden voices accompanied his passing.

Straight towards the cathedral he came, as Gaspard had calculated, feeling that the high edifice would be made the special butt of his malevolence.

The streets were now emptied of people; but, as if to hunt them out and crush them in their hiding-places, the giant thrust his cudgel like a battering-ram through walls and windows and roofs as he went by. The ruin and havoc that he left was indescribable.

Soon he loomed opposite the cathedral tower on which Gaspard waited behind the gargoyle. His head was level with the tower, and his eyes flamed like wells of burning brimstone as he drew near. His lips were parted over stalactitic fangs in a hateful snarl; and he cried out in a voice like the rumbling of articulate thunder:

"Ho! Ye puling priests and devotees of a powerless God! Come forth and bow to Nathaire the master, before he sweeps you into limbo!"

It was then that Gaspard, with a hardihood beyond comparison, rose from his hiding-place and stood in full view of the raging colossus.

"Draw nearer, Nathaire, if indeed it be you, foul robber of tombs and charnels," he taunted. "Come close, for I would hold speech with you."

A monstrous look of astonishment dimmed the diabolic rage on the colossal features. Peering at Gaspard as if in doubt or incredulity, the giant lowered his lifted cudgel and stepped close to the tower, till his face was only a few feet from the intrepid student. Then, when he had apparently convinced himself of Gaspard's identity, the look of maniacal wrath returned, flooding his eyes with Tartarean fire and twisting his lineaments into a mask of

Apollyon-like malignity. His left arm came up in a prodigious arc, with twitching fingers that poised horribly above the head of the youth, casting upon him a vulture-black shadow in the full-risen sun. Gaspard saw the white, startled faces of the necromancer's pupils, peering over his shoulder from their plank-built basket.

"Is it you, Gaspard, my recreant pupil?" the colossus roared stormily. "I thought you were rotting in the oubliette beneath Ylourgne — and now I find you perched atop of this accursed cathedral which I am about to demolish! ... You had been far wiser to remain where I left you, my good Gaspard."

His breath, as he spoke, blew like a charnel-polluted gale on the student. His vast fingers, with blackened nails like shovelblades, hovered in ogreish menace. Gaspard had furtively loosened his leathern pouch that hung at his belt, and had untied its mouth. Now, as the twitching fingers descended towards him, he emptied the contents of the pouch in the giant's face, and the fine powder, mounting in a dark-grey cloud, obscured the snarling lips and palpitating nostrils from his view.

Anxiously he watched the effect, fearing that the powder might be useless after all, against the superior arts and Satanical resources of Nathaire. But miraculously, as it seemed, the evil lambence died in the pit-deep eyes, as the monster inhaled the flying cloud. His lifted hand, narrowly missing the crouching youth in its sweep, fell lifelessly at his side. The anger was erased from the mighty, contorted mask, as if from the face of a dead man; the great cudgel fell with a crash to the empty street; and with drowsy, lurching steps, and listless, hanging arms, the giant turned his back to the cathedral and retraced his way through the devastated city.

He muttered dreamily to himself as he went; and people who heard him swore that the voice was no longer the awful, thunderswollen voice of Nathaire, but the tones and accents of a multitude of men, amid which the voices of certain of the ravished dead were recognizable. And the voice of Nathaire himself, no louder now than in life, was heard at intervals through the manifold mutterings, as if protesting angrily.

Climbing the eastern wall as it had come, the colossus went to and fro for many hours, no longer wreaking a hellish wrath and rancour, but searching, as people thought, for the various tombs and graves from which the hundreds of bodies that composed it had been so foully reft. From charnel to charnel, from cemetery to cemetery it went, through all the land; but there was no grave anywhere in which the dead colossus could lie down.

Then, towards evening, men saw it from afar on the red rim of the sky, digging with its hands in the soft, loamy plain beside the river Isoile. There, in a monstrous and self-made grave, the colossus laid itself down, and did not rise again. The ten pupils of Nathaire, it was believed, unable to descend from their basket, were crushed beneath the mighty body; for none of them was ever seen thereafter.

For many days no one dared to approach the place where the corpse lay uncovered in its self-dug grave. And so the thing rotted prodigiously beneath the summer sun, breeding a mighty stench that wrought pestilence in that portion of Averoigne. And they who ventured to go near in the following autumn, when the stench had lessened greatly, swore that the voice of Nathaire, still protesting angrily, was heard by them to issue from the enormous, rook-haunted bulk.

Of Gaspard du Nord, who had been the saviour of the province, it was related that he lived in much honour to a ripe age, being the one sorcerer of that region who at no time incurred the disapprobation of the Church.

THE COMING OF THE WHITE WORM

(Chapter IX of the Book of Eibon)

Rendered from the Old French manuscript of Gaspard du Nord.

Evagh the warlock, dwelling beside the boreal sea, was aware of many strange and untimely portents in mid-summer. Frorely burned the sun above Mhu Thulan from a welkin clear and wannish as ice. At eve the aurora was hung from zenith to earth, like an arras in a high chamber of gods. Wan and rare were the poppies and small the anemones in the cliff-sequestered vales lying behind the house of Evagh; and the fruits in his walled garden were pale of rind and green at the core. Also, he beheld by day the unseasonable flight of great multitudes of fowl, going southward from the hidden isles beyond Mhu Thulan; and by night he heard the distressful clamor of other passing multitudes. And always, in the loud wind and crying surf, he harkened to the weird whisper of voices from realms of perennial winter.

Now Evagh was troubled by these portents, even as the rude fisher-folk on the shore of the haven below his house were troubled. Being a past-master of all sortilege, and a seer of remote and future things, he made use of his arts in an effort to divine their meaning. But a cloud was upon his eyes through the daytime; and a darkness thwarted him when he sought illumination in dreams. His most cunning horoscopes were put to naught; his familiars were silent or answered him equivocally; and confusion was amid all his geomancies and hydromancies and haruspications. And it seemed to Evagh that an unknown power worked against him, mocking and making impotent in such fashion the sorcery that none had defeated heretofore. And Evagh knew, by certain tokens perceptible to wizards, that the power was an evil power, and its boding was of bale to man.

Day by day, through the middle summer, the fisher-folk went forth in their coracles of elk-hide and willow, casting their seines. But in the seines they drew dead fishes, blasted as if by fire or extreme cold; and they drew living monsters, such as their eldest captains had never beheld: things triple-headed and tailed and finned with horror; black, shapeless things that turned

to a liquid foulness and ran away from the net; or headless things like bloated moons with green, frozen rays about them; or things leprous-eyed and bearded with stiffly-oozing slime.

Then, out of the sea-horized north, where ships from Cerngoth were wont to ply among the Arctic islands, a galley came drifting with idle oars and aimlessly veering helm. The tide beached it among the boats of the fishermen, which fared no longer to sea but were drawn up on the sands below the cliff-built house of Evagh. And, thronging about the galley in awe and wonder, the fishers beheld its oarsmen still at the oars and its captain at the helm. But the faces and hands of all were stark as bone, and were white as the flesh of leprosy; and the pupils of their open eyes had faded strangely, being indistinguishable now from the whites; and a blankness of horror was within them, like ice in deep pools that are fast frozen to the bottom. And Evagh himself, descending later, also beheld the galley's crew, and pondered much concerning the import of this prodigy.

Loath were the fishers to touch the dead men; and they murmured, saying that a doom was upon the sea, and a curse upon all sea-faring things and people. But Evagh, deeming that the bodies would rot in the sun and would breed pestilence, commanded them to build a pile of driftwood about the galley; and when the pile had risen above the bulwarks, hiding from view the dead rowers, he fired it with his own hands.

High flamed the pile, and smoke ascended black as a storm-cloud, and was borne in windy volumes past the tall towers of Evagh on the cliff. But later, when the fire sank, the bodies of the oarsmen were seen sitting amid the mounded embers; and their arms were still outstretched in the attitude of rowing, and their fingers were clenched; though the oars had now dropped away from them in brands and ashes. And the captain of the galley stood upright still in his place: though the burnt helm had fallen beside him. Naught but the raiment of the marble corpses had been consumed; and they shone white as moon-washed marble above the charrings of wood; and nowhere upon them was there any blackness from the fire.

Deeming this thing an ill miracle, the fishers were all aghast, and they fled swiftly to the uppermost rocks. There remained with Evagh only his two servants, the boy Ratha and the ancient crone Ahilidis, who had both witnessed many of his conjurations and were thus well inured to sights of magic. And, with these two beside him, the sorcerer awaited the cooling of the brands.

Quickly the brands darkened; but smoke arose from them still throughout the noon and afternoon; and still they were over-hot for human treading when the hour drew toward sunset. So Evagh bade his servants to fetch water in urns from the sea and cast it upon the ashes and charrings. And after the smoke and the hissing had died, he went forward and approached the pale corpses. Nearing them, he was aware of a great coldness, such as would emanate from trans-Arctic ice; and the coldness began to ache in his hands and ears, and smote sharply through the mantle of fur. Going still closer, he touched one of the bodies with his forefinger-tip; and the finger, though lightly pressed and quickly withdrawn, was seared as if by flame.

Evagh was much amazed: for the condition of the corpses was a thing unknown to him heretofore; and in all his science of wizardry there was naught to enlighten him. He bethought him that a spell had been laid upon the dead: an ensorcelling such as the wan polar demons might weave, or the chill witches of the moon might devise in their caverns of snow. And he deemed it well to retire for the time, lest the spell should now take effect upon others than the dead.

Returning to his house ere night, he burned at each door and window the gums that are most offensive to the northern demons; and at each angle where a spirit might enter, he posted one of his own familiars to guard against all intrusion. Afterwards, while Ratha and Ahilidis slept, he perused with sedulous care the writings of Pnom, in which are collated many powerful exorcisms. But ever and anon, as he read again, for his comfort, the old rubrics, he remembered ominously the saying of the prophet Lith, which no man had understood: "There is One that inhabits the place of utter cold, and One that respireth where none other may draw breath. In the days

to come He shall issue forth among the isles and cities of men, and shall bring with Him as a white doom the wind that slumbereth in his dwelling."

Though a fire burned in the chamber, piled with fat pine and terebinth, it seemed that a deadly chill began to invade the air toward midnight. Then, as Evagh turned uneasily from the parchments of Pnom, and saw that the fires blazed high as if in no need of replenishment, he heard the sudden turmoil of a great wind full of sea-birds eerily shrieking, and the cries of land-fowl driven on helpless wings, and over all a high laughter of diabolic voices. Madly from the north the wind beat upon his square-based towers; and birds were cast like blown leaves of autumn against the stout-paned windows; and devils seemed to tear and strain at the granite walls. Though the room's door was shut and the windows were tight-closed, an icy gust went round and round, circling the table where Evagh sat, snatching the broad parchments of Pnom from beneath his fingers, and plucking at the lamp-flame.

Vainly, with numbing thoughts, he strove to recall that counter-charm which is most effective against the spirits of the boreal quarter. Then, strangely, it seemed that the wind fell, leaving a mighty stillness about the house. The chill gust was gone from the room, the lamp and the fire burned steadily, and something of warmth returned slowly into the half-frozen marrow of Evagh.

Soon he was made aware of a light shining beyond his chamber windows, as if a belated moon had now risen above the rocks. But Evagh knew that the moon was at that time a thin crescent, declining with eventide. It seemed that the light shone from the north, pale and frigid as fire of ice; and going to the window he beheld a great beam that traversed all the sea, coming as if from the hidden pole. In that light the rocks were paler than marble, and the sands were whiter than sea-salt, and the huts of the fishermen were as white tombs. The walled garden of Evagh was full of the beam, and all the green had departed from its foliage and its blossoms were like flowers of snow. And the beam fell bleakly on the lower walls of his house, but left still in shadow the wall of that upper chamber from which he looked.

He thought that the beam poured from a pale cloud that had mounted above the sea-line, or else from a white peak that had lifted skyward in the night; but of this he was uncertain. Watching, he saw that it rose higher in the heavens but climbed not upon his walls. Pondering in vain the significance of the mystery, he seemed to hear in the air about him a sweet and wizard voice. And, speaking in a tongue that he knew not, the voice uttered a rune of slumber. And Evagh could not resist the rune, and upon him fell such a numbness of sleep as overcomes the outworn watcher in a place of snow.

Walking stiffly at dawn, he rose up from the floor where he had lain, and witnessed a strange marvel. For, lo, in the harbour there towered an iceberg such as no vessel had yet sighted in all its sea-faring to the north, and no legend had told of among the dim Hyperborean isles. It filled the broad haven from shore to shore, and sheered up to a height immeasurable with piled escarpments and tiered precipices; and its pinnacles hung like towers in the zenith above the house of Evagh. It was higher than the dread mountain Achoravomas, which belches rivers of flame and liquid stone that pour unquenched through Tscho Vulpanomi to the austral main. It was steeper than the mountain Yarak, which marks the site of the boreal pole; and from it there fell a wan glittering on sea and land. Deathly and terrible was the glittering, and Evagh knew that this was the light he had beheld in the darkness.

Scarce could he draw breath in the cold that was on the air; and the light of the huge iceberg seared his eyeballs with an exceeding froreness. Yet he perceived an odd thing, that the rays of the glittering fell indirectly and to either side of his house; and the lower chambers, where Ratha and Ahilidis slept, were no longer touched by the beam as in the night; and upon all his house there was naught but the early sun and the morning shadows.

On the shore below he saw the charrings of the beached galley, and amid them the white corpses incombustible by fire. And along the sands and rocks, the fisher-folk were lying or standing upright in still, rigid postures, as if they had come forth from their hiding-places to behold the pale beam and had been smitten by a magic sleep. And the whole harbour-shore, and

the garden of Evagh, even to the front threshold of his house, was like a place where frost has fallen thickly over all.

Again he remembered the saying of Lith; and with much foreboding he descended to the ground story. There, at the northern windows, the boy Ratha and the hag Ahilidis were leaning with faces turned to the light. Stiffly they stood, with wide-open eyes, and a pale terror was in their regard, and upon them was the white death of the galley's crew. And, nearing them, the sorcerer was stayed by the terrible chillness that smote upon him from their bodies.

He would have fled from the house, knowing his magic wholly ineffectual against this thing. But it came to him that death was in the direct falling of the rays from the iceberg, and, leaving the house, he must perforce enter that fatal light. And it came to him also that he alone, of all who dwelt on that shore, had been exempted from the death. He could not surmise the reason of his exemption; but in the end he deemed it best to remain patiently and without fear, waiting whatever should befall.

Returning to his chamber he busied himself with various conjurations. But his familiars had gone away in the night, forsaking the angles at which he had posted them; and no spirit either human or demoniacal made reply to his questions. And not in any way known to wizards could he learn aught of the iceberg or divine the least inkling of its secret.

Presently, as he laboured with his useless cantrips, he felt on his face the breathing of a wind that was not air but a subtler and rarer element cold as the moon's ether. His own breath forsook him with agonies unspeakable, and he fell down on the floor in a sort of swoon that was near to death. In the swoon he was doubtfully aware of voices uttering unfamiliar spells. Invisible fingers touched him with icy pangs; and about him came and went a bleak radiance, like a tide that flows and ebbs and flows again. Intolerable was the radiance to all his senses; but it brightened slowly, with briefer ebbings; and in time his eyes and his flesh were tempered to endure it. Full upon him now was the light of the iceberg through his northern

windows; and it seemed that a great Eye regarded him in the light. He would have risen to confront the Eye; but his swoon held him like a palsy.

After that, he slept again for a period. Waking, he found in all his limbs their wonted strength and quickness. The strange light was still upon him, filling all his chamber; and peering out he witnessed a new marvel. For, lo, his garden and the rocks and sea-sands below it were visible no longer. In their stead were level spaces of ice about his house, and tall ice-pinnacles that rose like towers from the broad battlements of a fortress. Beyond the verges of the ice he beheld a sea that lay remotely and far beneath; and beyond the sea the low looming of a dim shore.

Terror came to Evagh now, for he recognized in all this the workings of a sorcery plenipotent and beyond the power of all mortal wizards. For plain it was that his high house of granite stood no longer on the coast of Mhu Thulan, but was based now on some upper crag of the iceberg. Trembling, he knelt then and prayed to the Old Ones, who dwell secretly in subterrene caverns, or abide under the sea or in the supermundane spaces. And even as he prayed, he heard a loud knocking at the door of his house.

In much fear and wonder he descended and flung wide the portals. Before him were two men, or creatures who had the likeness of men. Both were strange of visage and bright-skinned, and they wore for mantles such rune-woven stuffs as wizards wear. The runes were uncouth and alien; but when the man bespoke him he understood something of their speech, which was in a dialect of the Hyperborean isles.

"We serve the One whose coming was foretold by the prophet Lith," they said. "From spaces beyond the limits of the north he hath come in his floating citadel, the ice-mountain Yikilth, to voyage the mundane oceans and to blast with a chill splendour the puny peoples of humankind. He hath spared us alone amid the inhabitants of the broad isle Thulask, and hath taken us to go with him in his sea-faring upon Yikilth. He hath tempered our flesh to the rigour of his abode, and hath made respirable for us the air in which no mortal man may draw breath. Thee also he hath spared and hath acclimated by his spells to the coldness and the thin ether that go

everywhere with Yikilth. Hail, O Evagh, whom we know for a great wizard by this token: since only the mightiest of warlocks are thus chosen and exempted."

Sorely astonished was Evagh; but seeing that he had now to deal with men who were as himself, he questioned closely the two magicians of Thulask. They were named Dooni and Ux Loddhan, and were wise in the lore of the elder gods. The name of the One that they served was Rlim Shaikorth, and he dwelt in the highest summit of the ice-mountain. They told Evagh nothing of the nature or properties of Rlim Shaikorth; and concerning their own service to this being they avowed only that it consisted of such worship as is given to a god, together with the repudiation of all bonds that had linked them heretofore to mankind. And they told Evagh that he was to go with them before Rlim Shaikorth, and perform the due rite of obeisance, and accept the bond of final alienage.

So Evagh went with Dooni and Ux Loddhan and was led by them to a great pinnacle of ice that rose unmeltable into the wan sun, beetling above all its fellows on the flat top of the berg. The pinnacle was hollow, and climbing therein by stairs of ice, they came at last to the chamber of Rlim Shaikorth, which was a circular dome with a round block at the center, forming a dais. And on the dais was that being whose advent prophet Lith had foretold obscurely.

At sight of this entity, the pulses of Evagh were stilled for an instant by terror; and, following quickly upon the terror, his gorge rose within him through excess of loathing. In all the world there was naught that could be likened for its foulness to Rlim Shaikorth. Something he had of the semblance of a fat white worm; but his bulk was beyond that of the sea-elephant. His half-coiled tail was thick as the middle folds of his body; and his front reared upward from the dais in the form of a white round disk, and upon it were imprinted vaguely the lineaments of a visage belonging neither to beast of the earth nor ocean-creature. And amid the visage a mouth curved uncleanly from side to side of the disk, opening and shutting incessantly on a pale and tongueless and toothless maw. The eye-sockets of Rlim Shaikorth were close together between his shallow nostrils; and the

sockets were eyeless, but in them appeared from moment to moment globules of a blood-coloured matter having the form of eyeballs; and ever the globules broke and dripped down before the dais. And from the ice-floor of the dome there ascended two masses like stalagmites, purple and dark as frozen gore, which had been made by the ceaseless dripping of the globules.

Dooni and Ux Loddhan prostrated themselves before the being, and Evagh deemed it well to follow their example. Lying prone on the ice, he heard the red drops falling with a splash as of heavy tears; and then, in the dome above him, it seemed that a voice spoke; and the voice was like the sound of some hidden cataract in a glacier hollow with caverns.

"Behold, O Evagh," said the voice. "I have preserved thee from the doom of thy fellow-men, and have made thee as they that inhabit the bourn of coldness, and they that inhale the airless void. Wisdom ineffable shall be thine, and mastery beyond the conquest of mortals, if thou wilt but worship me and become my thrall. With me thou shalt voyage amid the kingdoms of the north, and shalt pass among the green southern islands, and see the white falling of death upon them in the light from Yikilth. Our coming shall bring eternal frost on their gardens, and shall set upon their people's flesh the seal of that gulf whose rigor paleth one by one the most ardent stars, and putteth rime at the core of suns. All this thou shalt witness, being as one of the lords of death, supernal and immortal; and in the end thou shalt return with me to that world beyond the uttermost pole, in which is mine abiding empire. For I am he whose coming even the gods may not oppose."

Now, seeing that he was without choice in the matter, Evagh professed himself willing to yield worship and service to the pale worm. Beneath the instruction of Dooni and Ux Loddhan, he performed the sevenfold rite that is scarce suitable for narration here, and swore the threefold vow of unspeakable alienation.

Thereafter, for many days and nights, he sailed with Rlim Shaikorth adown the coast of Mhu Thulan. Strange was the manner of that voyaging, for it seemed that the great iceberg was guided by the sorcery of the worm,

prevailing ever against wind and tide. And always, by night or day, like the beams of a deathly beacon, the chill splendour smote afar from Yikilth. Proud galleys were overtaken as they fled southward, and their crews were blasted at the oars; and often ships were caught and embedded in the new bastions of ice that formed daily around the base of that ever-growing mountain.

The fair Hyperborean ports, busy with maritime traffic, were stilled by the passing of Rlim Shaikorth. Idle were their streets and wharves, idle was the shipping in their harbours, when the pale light had come and gone. Far inland fell the rays, bringing to the fields and gardens a blight of trans-Arctic winter; and forests were frozen and the beasts that roamed them were turned as if into marble, so that men who came long afterward to that region found the elk and bear and mammoth still standing in all the postures of life. But, dwelling upon Yikilth, the sorcerer Evagh was immune to the icy death; and, sitting in his house or walking abroad on the berg, he was aware of no sharper cold than that which abides in summer shadows.

Now, beside Dooni and Ux Loddhan, the sorcerers of Thulask, there were five other wizards that went with Evagh on that voyage, having been chosen by Rlim Shaikorth. They too had been tempered to the coldness by Yikilth, and their houses had been transported to the berg by unknown enchantment. They were outlandish and uncouth men, called Polarians, from islands nearer the pole than broad Thulask; and Evagh could understand little of their ways; and their sorcery was foreign to him, and their speech was unintelligible; nor was it known to the Thulaskians.

Daily the eight wizards found on their tables all the provender necessary for human sustenance; though they knew not the agency by which it was supplied. All were united in the worship of the white worm; and all, it seemed, were content in a measure with their lot, and were fain of that unearthly lore and dominion which the worm had promised them. But Evagh was uneasy at heart, and rebelled in secret against his thralldom to Rlim Shaikorth; and he beheld with revulsion the doom that went forth eternally from Yikilth upon lovely cities and fruitful ocean-shores. Ruthfully he saw the blasting of flower-girdled Cerngoth, and the boreal

stillness that descended on the thronged streets of Leqquan, and the frost that seared with sudden whiteness the garths and orchards of the sea-fronting valley of Aguil. And sorrow was in his heart for the fishing-coracles and the biremes of trade and warfare that floated manless after they had met Yikilth.

Ever southward sailed the great iceberg, bearing its lethal winter to lands where the summer sun rode high. And Evagh kept his own counsel, and followed in all ways the custom of Dooni and Ux Loddhan and the others. At intervals that were regulated by the motions of the circumpolar stars, the eight wizards climbed to that lofty chamber in which Rlim Shaikorth abode perpetually, half-coiled on his dais of ice. There, in a ritual whose cadences corresponded to the falling of those eye-like tears that were wept by the worm, and with genuflections timed to the yawning and shutting of his mouth, they yielded to Rlim Shaikorth the required adoration. Sometimes the worm was silent, and sometimes he bespoke them, renewing vaguely the promises he had made. And Evagh learned from the others that the worm slept for a period at each darkening of the moon; and only at that time did the sanguine tears suspend their falling, and the mouth forbear its alternate closing and gaping.

At the third repetition of the rites of worship, it came to pass that only seven wizards climbed to the tower. Evagh, counting their number, perceived that the missing man was one of the five outlanders. Afterwards, he questioned Dooni and Ux Loddhan regarding this matter, and made signs of inquiry to the four northrons; but it seemed that the fate of the absent warlock was a thing mysterious to them all. Nothing was seen or heard of him from that time; and Evagh, pondering long and deeply, was somewhat disquieted. For, during the ceremony in the tower chamber, it had seemed to him that the worm was grosser of bulk and girth than on any prior occasion.

Covertly he asked what manner of nutriment was required by Rlim Shaikorth. Concerning this, there was much dubiety and dispute: for Ux Loddhan maintained that the worm fed on nothing less unique than the hearts of white Arctic bears; while Dooni swore that his rightful nourishment was the liver of whales. But, to their knowledge, the worm had

not eaten during their sojourn upon Yikilth; and both averred that the intervals between his times of feeding were longer than those of any terrestrial creature, being computable not in hours or days but in whole years.

Still the iceberg followed its course, ever vaster and more prodigious beneath the heightening sun; and again, at the star-appointed time, which was the forenoon of every third day, the sorcerers convened in the presence of Rlim Shaikorth. To the perturbation of all, their number was now but six; and the lost warlock was another of the outlanders. And the worm had greatened still more in size; and the increase was visible as a thickening of his whole body from head to tail.

Deeming these circumstances an ill augury, the six made fearful supplication to the worm in their various tongues, and implored him to tell them the fate of their absent fellows. And the worm answered; and his speech was intelligible to Evagh and Ux Loddhan and Dooni and the three northrons, each thinking that he had been addressed in his native language.

"This matter is a mystery concerning which ye shall all receive enlightenment in turn. Know this: the two that have vanished are still present; and they and ye also shall share even as I have promised in the ultramundane lore and empery of Rlim Shaikorth."

Afterwards, when they had descended from the tower, Evagh and the two Thulaskians debated the interpretation of this answer. Evagh maintained that the import was sinister, for truly their missing companions were present only in the worm's belly; but the others argued that these men had undergone a more mystical translation and were now elevated beyond human sight and hearing. Forthwith they began to make ready with prayer and austerity, in expectation of some sublime apotheosis which would come to them in due turn. But Evagh was still fearful; and he could not trust the equivocal pledges of the worm; and doubt remained with him.

Seeking to assuage his doubt and peradventure to find some trace of the lost Polarians, he made search of the mighty berg, on whose battlements his

own house and the houses of the other warlocks were perched like the tiny huts of fishers on ocean-cliffs. In this quest the others would not accompany him, fearing to incur the worm's displeasure. From verge to verge of Yikilth he roamed unhindered, as if on some broad plateau with peaks and horns; and he climbed perilously on the upper scarps, and went down into deep crevasses and caverns where the sun failed and there was no other light than the strange luster of that unearthly ice. Embedded here in the walls, as if in the stone of nether strata, he saw dwellings such as men had never built, and vessels that might belong to other ages or worlds; but nowhere could he detect the presence of any living creature; and no spirit or shadow gave response to the necromatic evocations which he uttered oftentimes as he went along the chasms and chambers.

So Evagh was still apprehensive of the worm's treachery; and he resolved to remain awake on the night preceding the next celebration of the rites of worship; and at eve of that night he assured himself that the other wizards were all housed in their separate mansions, to the number of five. And, having ascertained this, he set himself to watch without remission the entrance of Rlim Shaikorth's tower, which was plainly visible from his own windows.

Weird and chill was the shining of the berg in the darkness; for a light as of frozen stars was effulgent at all times from the ice. A moon that was little past the full arose early on the orient seas. But Evagh, holding vigil at his window till midnight, saw that no visible form emerged from the tall tower, and none entered it. At midnight there came upon him a sudden drowsiness, such as would be felt by one who had drunk some opiate wine; and he could not sustain his vigil any longer but slept deeply and unbrokenly throughout the remainder of the night.

On the following day there were but four sorcerers who gathered in the ice-dome and gave homage to Rlim Shaikorth. And Evagh saw that two more of the outlanders, men of bulk and stature dwarfish beyond their fellows, were now missing.

One by one thereafter, on nights preceding the ceremony of worship, the companions of Evagh vanished. The last Polarian was next to go; and it came to pass that only Evagh and Ux Loddhan and Dooni went to the tower; and then Evagh and Ux Loddhan went alone. And terror mounted daily in Evagh, for he felt that his own time drew near; and he would have hurled himself into the sea from the high ramparts of Yikilth, if Ux Loddhan, who perceived his intention, had not warned him that no man could depart therefrom and live again in solar warmth and terrene air, having been habituated to the coldness and thin ether. And Ux Loddhan, it seemed, was wholly oblivious to his doom, and was fain to impute an esoteric significance to the ever-growing bulk of the white worm and the vanishing of the wizards.

So, at that time when the moon had waned and darkened wholly, it occurred that Evagh climbed before Rlim Shaikorth with infinite trepidation and loath, laggard steps. And, entering the dome with downcast eyes, he found himself to be the sole worshipper.

A palsy of fear was upon him as he made obeisance; and scarcely he dared to lift his eyes and regard the worm. But even as he began to perform the customary genuflections, he became aware that the red tears of Rlim Shaikorth no longer fell on the purple stalagmites; nor was there any sound such as the worm was wont to make by the perpetual opening and shutting of his mouth. And venturing at last to look upward, Evagh beheld the abhorrently swollen mass of the monster, whose thickness was such as to overhang the dais' rim; and he saw that the mouth and eye-holes of Rlim Shaikorth were closed as if in slumber; and thereupon he recalled how the wizards of Thulask had told him that the worm slept for an interval at the darkening of each moon; which was a thing he had forgotten temporarily in his extreme dread and apprehension.

Now was Evagh sorely bewildered, for the rites he had learned from his fellows could be fittingly performed only while the tears of Rlim Shaikorth fell down and his mouth gaped and closed and gaped again in measured alternation. And none had instructed him as to what rites were proper and

suitable during the slumber of the worm. And, being in much doubt, he said softly:

"Wakest thou, O Rlim Shaikorth?"

In reply, he seemed to hear a multitude of voices that issued obscurely from out the pale, tumid mass before him. The sound of the voices was weirdly muffled, but among them he distinguished the accents of Dooni and Ux Loddhan; and there was a thick muttering of outlandish words which Evagh knew for the speech of the five Polarians; and beneath this he caught, or seemed to catch, innumerable undertones that were not the voices of men or beasts, nor such sounds as would be emitted by earthly demons. And the voices rose and clamoured, like those of a throng of prisoners in some profound oubliette.

Anon, as he listened in horror ineffable, the voice of Dooni became articulate above the others; and the manifold clamour and muttering ceased, as if a multitude were hushed to hear its own spokesman. And Evagh heard the tones of Dooni, saying:

"The worm sleepeth, but we whom the worm hath devoured are awake. Direly has he deceived us, for he came to our houses in the night, devouring us bodily one by one as we slept under the enchantment he had wrought. He has eaten our souls even as our bodies, and verily we are part of Rlim Shaikorth, but exist only as in a dark and noisome dungeon; and while the worm wakes we have no separate or conscious being, but are merged wholly in the ultraterrestrial being of Rlim Shaikorth.

"Hear then, O Evagh, the truth we have learned from our oneness with the worm. He has saved us from the white doom and has taken us upon Yikilth for this reason, because we alone of all mankind, who are sorcerers of high attainment and mastery, may endure the lethal ice-change and become breathers of the airless void, and thus, in the end, be made suitable for the provender of such as Rlim Shaikorth.

"Great and terrible is the worm, and the place wherefrom he cometh and whereto he returneth is not to be dreamt of by living men. And the worm is

omniscient, save that he knows not the waking of them he has devoured, and their awareness during his slumber. But the worm, though ancient beyond the antiquity of worlds, is not immortal and is vulnerable in one particular. Whosoever learneth the time and means of his vulnerability and hath heart for this undertaking, may slay him easily. And the time for the deed is during his term of sleep. Therefore we adjure thee now by the faith of the Old Ones to draw the sword thou wearest beneath thy mantle and plunge it in the side of Rlim Shaikorth: for such is the means of his slaying.

"Thus alone, O Evagh, shall the going forth of the pale death be ended; and only thus shall we, thy fellow-sorcerers, obtain release from our blind thralldom and incarceration; and with us many that the worm hath betrayed and eaten in former ages and upon distant worlds. And only by the doing of this thing shalt thou escape the wan and loathly mouth of the worm, nor abide henceforward as a doubtful ghost among other ghosts in the evil blackness of his belly. But know, however, that he who slayeth Rlim Shaikorth must necessarily perish in the slaying."

Evagh, being wholly astounded, made question of Dooni and was answered readily concerning all that he asked. And often-times the voice of Ux Loddhan replied to him; and sometimes there were unintelligible murmurs as outcries from certain others of those foully enmewed phantoms. Much did Evagh learn of the worm's origin and essence; and he was told the secret of Yikilth, and the manner wherein Yikilth had floated down from trans-Arctic gulfs to voyage the seas of Earth. Ever, as he listened, his abhorrence greatedened: though deeds of dark sorcery and conjured devils had long indurated his flesh and soul, making him callous to more than common horrors. But of that which he learned it were ill to speak now.

At length there was silence in the dome; for the worm slept soundly, and Evagh had no longer any will to question the ghost of Dooni; and they that were imprisoned with Dooni seemed to wait and watch in a stillness of death.

Then, being a man of much hardihood and resolution, Evagh delayed no more but drew from its ivory sheath the short but well-tempered sword of

bronze which he carried always at his baldric. Approaching the dais closely, he plunged the blade in the over-swelling mass of Rlim Shaikorth. The blade entered easily with a slicing and tearing motion, as if he had stabbed a monstrous bladder, and was not stayed even by the broad pommel; and the whole right hand of Evagh was drawn after it into the wound.

He perceived no quiver or stirring of the worm, but out of the wound there gushed a sudden torrent of black liquescent matter, swiftening and deepening irresistibly till the sword was caught from Evagh's grasp as if in a mill-race. Hotter far than blood, and smoking with strange steam-like vapors, the liquid poured over his arms and splashed his raiment as it fell. Quickly the ice was a-wash about his feet; but still the fluid welled as if from some inexhaustible spring of foulness; and it spread everywhere in pools and runlets that came together.

Evagh would have fled then; but the sable liquid, mounting and flowing, was above his ankles when he neared the stair-head; and it rushed adown the stairway before him like a cataract in some steeply pitching cavern. Hotter and hotter it grew, boiling, bubbling; while the current strengthened, and clutched at him and drew him like malignant hands. He feared to essay the downward stairs; nor was there any place now in all the dome where he could climb for refuge. He turned, striving against the tide for bare foothold, and saw dimly through the reeking vapours the throned mass of Rlim Shaikorth. The gash had widened prodigiously, and a stream surged from it like the waters of a broken weir, billowing outward around the dais; and yet, as if in further proof of the worm's unearthly nature, his bulk was in no wise diminished thereby. And still the black liquid came in an evil flood; and it rose swirling about the knees of Evagh; and the vapours seemed to take the forms of a myriad press of phantoms, wreathing obscurely together and dividing once more as they went past him. Then, as he tottered and grew giddy on the stair-head, he was swept away and was hurled to his death on the ice-steps far below.

That day, on the sea to eastward of middle Hyperborea, the crews of certain merchant galleys beheld an unheard-of thing. For, lo, as they sped north, returning from far ocean-isles with a wind that aided their oars, they sighted

in the late forenoon a monstrous iceberg whose pinnacles and crags loomed high as mountains. The berg shone in part with a weird light; and from its loftiest pinnacle poured an ink-black torrent; and all the ice-cliffs and buttresses beneath were a-stream with rapids and cascades and sheeted falls of the same blackness, that fumed like boiling water as they plunged oceanward; and the sea around the iceberg was clouded and streaked for a wide interval as if with the dark fluid of the cuttlefish.

The mariners feared to sail closer; but, full of awe and marvelling, they stayed their oars and lay watching the berg; and the wind dropped, so that their galleys drifted within view of it all that day. They saw that the berg dwindled swiftly, melting as though some unknown fire consumed it; and the air took on a strange warmth, and the water about their ships grew tepid. Crag by crag the ice was runneled and eaten away; and huge portions fell off with a mighty splashing; and the highest pinnacle collapsed; but still the blackness poured out as from an unfathomable fountain. The mariners thought, at whiles, that they beheld houses running seaward amid the loosened fragments; but of this they were uncertain because of those ever-mounting vapours. By sunset-time the berg had diminished to a mass no larger than a common floe; yet still the welling blackness overstreamed it; and it sank low in the wave; and the weird light was quenched altogether. Thereafter, the night being moonless, it was lost to vision; and a gale rose, blowing strongly from the south; and at dawn the sea was void of any remnant.

Concerning the matters related above, many and various legends have gone forth throughout Mhu Thulan and all the extreme Hyperboreal kingdoms and archipelagoes, even to the southmost isle of Oszhtor. The truth is not in such tales: for no man has known the truth heretofore. But I, the sorcerer Eibon, calling up through my necromancy the wave-wandering spectre of Evagh, have learned from him the veritable history of the worm's advent. And I have written it down in my volume with such omissions as are needful for the sparing of mortal weakness and sanity. And men will read this record, together with much more of the elder lore, in days long after the coming and melting of the great glacier.

THE DARK AGE

The laboratory was like a citadel. It stood on a steep eminence, overtopped only by the loftier mountains, and looked out across numberless fir-thick valleys and serried ridges. The morning sunlight came to it above peaks of perennial snow; and the sunsets burned beyond a rivered plain, where forest saplings had taken the battlefields of yesteryear, and skin-clad savages prowled amid the mounded ruins of sybaritic cities.

They who had built the laboratory, in the years when Earth's loftiest civilization was crumbling swiftly, had designed it for a fortress of science, in which something of man's lore and wisdom should be preserved throughout the long descent into barbaric night.

The walls were of squared boulders from a glacial moraine; and the woodwork was of mountain cedar, mightily beamed as that which was used in Solomon's temple. High above the main edifice there soared an observatory tower, from which the heavens and the surrounding lands could be watched with equal facility. The hill-top had been cleared of pine and fir. Behind the building there were sheer cliffs that forbade approach; and all around it a zone of repellent force, which could be made lethally destructive if desired, was maintained by machines that conserved the solar radiations and turned them into electricity.

The dwellers in the laboratory looked upon themselves as the priests of a sacred trust. They called themselves the Custodians. In the beginning they had numbered eight couples, men and women of the highest ability and attainment, specializing in all the main branches of science, who had withdrawn to this secluded place from a world ravaged by universal war, famine and disease, in which all other scientists and technicians were doomed to perish. The region about the laboratory was, at that time, unpeopled; and the building, reared with utmost secrecy, escaped destruction in the warfare that wiped out whole cities and covered great empires with low-lying clouds of death.

Later, into the hills and valleys below the laboratory, there came a wretched remnant of city-dwellers from the plain. With these people, already brutalized by their sufferings and hardships, the handful of scientists held little commerce. Over a course of generations, the Custodians, intermarrying, decreased gradually in number through sterility; while the other fugitives multiplied, reverting more and more to a state of barbarism, and retaining only as a dim tribal legend the memory of the civilization from which they had fallen.

Living in mountain caves, or rude huts, hunting the forest animals with crudely made spears and bows, they lost all vestige of the high knowledge and mastery over nature possessed by their forefathers. They understood no longer the machines that rusted in the rotting cities. Through a sort of atavistic animism, they began to worship the elements that their fathers had subdued and controlled. At first they tried to assail the laboratory, impelled by a savage lust for loot and bloodshed; but, driven back with dire loss by the zone of deadly force, they soon abandoned their siege. In time they came to regard the Custodians as actual demigods, wielding mysterious, awful powers, and working incomprehensible miracles. Few of them now dared to approach the environs of the building, or to follow the wild boar and deer into the wooded valleys about it.

For many years, none of the Custodians was seen by the hill-people. Sometimes, by day, there were strange vapors that mounted to the clouds above the observatory; and at night the lofty windows burned like hill-descended stars. The Custodians, it was thought, were forging their thunderbolts in godlike secrecy.

Then, from the dreadful house on the height there came down one morning a single Custodian. He bore no weapon but carried an armful of heavy books. Approaching a small village of the tribesmen, he raised his right hand in the universal gesture of peace.

Many of the more timid fled before him, hiding themselves in their dark huts or amid the thick forest; and the other villagers received him with superstitious fear and suspicion. Speaking a language they could hardly

understand, he told them that he had come to live among them. His name was Atullos. By degrees he won their confidence; and afterwards he mated with a woman of the tribe. Like Prometheus, bringer of fire to ancient mankind, he sought to enlighten these savages; and undertook to reproduce for their benefit some of the inventions preserved in the laboratory. He told them nothing of his reasons for leaving the other Custodians, with whom he had held no communication since joining the hillpeople.

Atullos had brought with him no other equipment than his few books. For lack of even the most rudimentary tools and materials, his scientific labors were fraught with immense difficulty. The savages, in their reversion, had lost even the knowledge of metals. Their weapons were those of the Stone Age; their ploughshares crooked sticks of fire-hardened wood. Atullos was compelled to spend whole years in mining and smelting the ores that he required for his tools and machines; and he even made long, hazardous journeys to obtain a supply of certain elements lacking in that region. From one of these journeys he failed to return; and it was believed that he had been slain by the warriors of a hostile and very brutal tribe upon whose territory he had intruded in his search.

He left behind him one child, the boy Torquane, whose mother had died shortly after the child's birth. Also, as a legacy to the tribe, he left a few tools of copper and iron, in whose forging he had instructed some of the more intelligent men. The machines on which he had labored with such pain and patience were only half-completed; and following his disappearance, no one was competent to finish them. They were designed for the development of electric power, and the use and control of certain cosmic radiation; but the tribesmen who had assisted Atullos knew nothing of their purpose and the principles involved.

Atullos had meant to instruct his son Torquane in all the lore of the Custodians; and thus the elder sciences, conserved so jealously by a few might again have become in time the heritage of all mankind. Torquane had reached the age of four when Atullos vanished; and he had learned no more than the alphabet and a few simple rules of arithmetic. For lack of his father's guidance, this rudimentary knowledge was of little use to him; and,

though naturally precocious and brilliant beyond his age, he could not continue for himself the education that Atullos had begun.

In the soul of Torquane, however, as he grew to manhood among primitive companions, there burned the spark of a restless aspiration, an inherited craving for knowledge, that set him apart from the others.

He remembered more of his father than most children recall when deprived of the parent at so early an age; and he learned from his fellows that Atullos had been one of the Custodians, who were looked upon by the tribe as beings with divine powers and attributes. It was commonly believed that the Custodians had banished Atullos from their midst because of his desire to help and enlighten the hill-people. Slowly, as his mind matured, there came to Torquane an understanding of the altruistic aims of his father, who had dreamt of restoring the old sciences in a darkened world.

Torquane lived the rude life of the tribesmen, hunting the hare, the boar and the deer, and climbing the precipitous crags and mountains. Excelling in all barbarous sports, he became very hardy and self-reliant. Outwardly he differed little from the other lads, except for his fairer skin and straighter features, and the dreaminess that filmed his bright eyes on occasion. As he neared his full growth, he became a leader among the youths, and was regarded with peculiar respect as the son of that Atullos who had become a sort of tutelary god for the hillmen after his death.

Often the boy visited the deep, dry cave which his father had used as a workshop. Here the tools, the half-built engines, the chemicals, books and manuscripts of Atullos were stored. Torquane examined them all with a great and growing wistfulness, trying vainly to guess the secret of the machines, and spelling painfully, letter by letter, the words in the mouldering volumes, whose meaning he could not divine. Like a man who dwells in a dark place, yearning blindly for the sun, he felt himself on the threshold of a luminous world; but light was denied him, and all his strivings ended only in deeper confusion.

Often, as he grew older, his thoughts turned to the mystery of the high and guarded citadel from which his father had come down to join the tribesmen. From certain points on the higher hills he could see its observatory towers looming darkly above the cleared eminence. His comrades, like their forefathers, shunned the neighborhood as a place of supernatural peril, where the Custodians' thunderbolts would promptly strike down the intruder. For many years no one had beheld the Custodians; the voices which, it was said, had, formerly spoken like the mountain thunder, threatening or warning the whole countryside, were no longer heard. But no man dreamt of penetrating their seclusion.

Torquane, however, knowing his kinship to the Custodians, wondered much concerning them. A strange curiosity drew him again and again to the hills below the laboratory. From such viewpoints, however, he could see nothing of the occupants or their activities. All was still and silent, and this very stillness, by degrees, emboldened the boy and drew him nearer to the dreaded eyrie.

Using all his stealth of woodcraft, and treading with utmost care lest a leaf or twig should crackle beneath him, he climbed one day the steep, heavily forested slope toward the building. Breathless with awe and apprehension, he peered at last from behind the bole of a gnarly pine that grew just beyond the verges of the laboratory grounds.

Grim, repellent, fortress-like, the rectilinear walls and square towers bulked above him against a heaven of light clouds. The windows glimmered blankly, withholding all their secrets. In the building's front an open doorway arched, beyond which, in silver flashes, Torquane discerned the leaping of fountains amid a sunlit court.

Sapling firs and pines had begun to invade the level, cleared area of the grounds. Some of them were already shoulder-high, while others rose only to a man's waist or knees, offering little obstruction to the view. Amid these miniature thickets Torquane heard a vengeful humming that might have been made by some invisible throng of bees. The sound maintained always the same position, the same pitch. Peering closely, he saw that there was a

yard-wide line of bare, vacant soil running like a path amid the young conifers, and following the apparent course of the sound. This line, he knew suddenly, betokened the force-barrier beyond which no man could pass; and the humming was the noise made by the repellent, lethal power.

Much of the area between the saplings and the laboratory was filled with rows of vegetables and there was also a small flower garden. The place bore evidence of careful tending and had been watered recently; but no one was in sight at the time. In the building itself, as Torquane stared and listened, there began a sonorous iron throbbing whose cause, in his complete ignorance of machinery, he could not imagine. Alarmed by the loudening noise, which seemed full of mysterious menace, Torquane fled on the wooded slope, and did not venture to return for many days.

Curiosity, and some emotion deeper than curiosity, whose nature and origin he could not have defined, impelled him to revisit the place in spite of his vague, half-superstitious fears and intuitions of danger.

Peering, as before, from the shelter of the ancient pines, he beheld for the first time one of the building's occupants. At a distance of no more than twenty yards from his hiding-place, a girl was stooping above the violets and pansies in the trimly plotted flower garden.

Torquane thought that he gazed upon a goddess: for, among all the village girls, there was none half so lovely and graceful as this incredible being. Clad in a gown of light April green, her hair falling in a luminous yellow cloud about her shoulders, she seemed to cast a brightness on the flowers as she moved among them.

Drawn by a strange fascination such as he had never before experienced, the boy leaned from behind the sheltering pine, forgetful of his fears, and unconscious that he was exposing himself to view. Only when the girl happened to glance toward him, and gave a low, startled cry as her eyes met his, did he realize the indiscretion into which he had been betrayed.

Torquane was torn between the impulse of flight and a strong, unreasoned attraction that made him unwilling to go. This girl, he knew, was one of the

Custodians; and the Custodians were demigods who wished no intercourse with men. Yet, through his father he was able to claim kinship with these lofty beings. And the girl was so beautiful, and her eyes, meeting his across the flower-pot were so kind and gentle in spite of their startlement, that he ceased to apprehend the instant doom that his daring might perhaps have earned. Surely, even if he remained and spoke to her, she would not loose against him the dreadful lightning of the Custodians.

Raising his hand in a gesture of placation, he stepped forward among the seedling conifers, stopping only when he neared the vicious humming of the invisible force-barrier. The girl watched him with palpable amazement, her eyes widening, and her face paling and then reddening as she grew aware of Torquane's comeliness and the undisguised ardor of his gaze. For a moment it seemed that she would turn and leave the garden. Then, as if she had conquered her hesitancy, she came a little nearer to the barrier.

"You must go away," she said, in words that differed somewhat from those of the dialect familiar to Torquane. But he understood the words and to him their strangeness savored of divinity. Without heeding the admonition, he stood like one enchanted.

"Go quickly," warned the girl, a sharper note in her voice. "It is not allowable that any barbarian should come here."

"But I am not a barbarian," said Torquane proudly. "I am the son of Atullos, the Custodian. My name is Torquane. Can we not be friends?"

The girl was plainly surprised and perturbed. At the mention of Atullos' name, a shadow darkened her eyes; and behind the shadow an obscure terror seemed to lurk.

"No, no," she insisted. "It is impossible. You must not come here again. If my father knew--"

At that instant the humming of the barrier deepened, loud and angry as the buzzing of a million wasps, and Torquane felt in his flesh an electric tingling, such as he had felt during violent thunderstorms. All at once the air

was lined with sparks and bright fiery threads, and was swept by a wave of ardent heat. Before Torquane the little pines and firs appeared to wither swiftly, and some of them leapt into sudden flame.

"Go! go!" he heard the crying of the girl, as he fell back before the moving barrier. She fled toward the laboratory, looking back over her shoulder as she went. Torquane, half blinded by the weaving webs of fire, saw that a man had appeared in the portals, as if coming to meet her. The man was old and white-bearded, and his face was stern as that of some irate deity.

Torquane knew that this being had perceived his presence. His fate would be that of the seared saplings if he lingered. Again a superstitious terror rose within him, and he ran swiftly into the sheltering gloom of the ancient forest.

Heretofore Torquane had known only the aimless longings of adolescence. He had cared little for any of the savage though often not uncomely maidens of the hill-people. Doubtless he would have chosen one of them in time; but, having seen the fair daughter of the Custodian, he thought only of her, and his heart became filled with a turmoil of passion that was all the wilder because of its overweening audacity and apparent hopelessness.

Proud and reticent by nature, he concealed this love from his companions, who wondered somewhat at his gloomy moods and the fits of idleness that alternated with feverish toil, and sport.

Sometimes he would sit for whole days in a deep study, contemplating the machines and volumes of Atullo; sometimes he would lead the younger men on the chase of some dangerous animal, risking his own life with a madder disregard than ever before. And often he would absent himself on lonely expeditions that he never explained to the others.

These expeditions were always to the region about the laboratory. For a youth of Torquane's ardor and courage, the peril of such visits became an excitant rather than a deterrent. He was careful, however, to keep himself hidden from view; and he maintained a respectful distance from the humming barrier.

Often he saw the girl as she moved about her garden labors, tending the blossoms and vegetables; and he fed his desperate longing on such glimpses, and dreamed wildly of carrying her away by force, or of making himself the master of the laboratory. He suspected, shrewdly, that the Custodians were few in number, since he had seen only the girl and the old man who was probably her father. But it did not occur to him that these were the sole tenants of the massive citadel.

It seemed to Torquane, pondering with a lover's logic, that the girl had not disliked him. She had warned him to go away, had called him a barbarian. Nevertheless he felt that she had not been offended by his presumption in accosting her. He was sure that he could win her love if given the opportunity. Mating with a daughter of the Custodians, he would win admittance to that world of light and knowledge from which his father had come; that world which had tantalized his dreams. Tirelessly he schemed and plotted, trying to devise a way in which he could pass the force-barrier, or could communicate with the girl without bringing upon himself the Custodian's anger.

Once, by moonlight, he attempted to climb the cliffs behind the laboratory, working his way hazardously from coign to coign. He abandoned the attempt only when he came to an overhanging wall of rock that was smooth as beaten metal. There came the day when Torquane, revisiting the woods that pressed close upon the laboratory garden, grew aware of an unwonted silence weighing oppressively upon all things. For a few instants he was puzzled, failing to comprehend the cause, Then he realized that the silence was due to a cessation of that humming noise which had signalized the presence of the barrier.

The grounds were deserted, and, for the first time, the building's heavy cedar portals had been closed. Nowhere was there any sound or visual sign of human occupation.

For awhile Torquane was suspicious, apprehending a trap with the instinct of a wild creature. Knowing nothing of machinery, it did not occur to him

that the repellent power had failed through the wearing out of its hidden generators. Perplexed and wondering, he waited for hours, hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl. But the garden remained empty, and no one opened the frowning portals.

Alert and vigilant, the boy still watched. The forest's afternoon shadows began to lengthen, invading the laboratory grounds. Screaming harshly, a mountain bluejay flashed from the pine above Torquane, and flew unharmed across the area that the lethal screen had formerly barred to all ingress of living things. An inquisitive squirrel raced among the saplings, over the bare path of the barrier, and chattered impudently in a plot of young corn and beans. Half incredulous, Torquane knew that the barrier was gone; but still his caution prevailed, and he went away at last.

"Varia, we cannot repair the generators," said the aged Phabar to his daughter. "The work is beyond my strength or yours. Also, metals are required which we cannot procure in their native state, and can no longer make with the weakening atomic transformers. Sooner or later the savages will learn that the force-barrier has ceased to exist. They will attack the laboratory — and will find only an old man and a girl to oppose them."

"The end draws near, for in any case I have not long to live. Alas! if there were only some younger man to assist me in my labors, and in defending the laboratory — some worthy and well-trained youth to whose care I could leave you, and could leave our heritage of science! But I am the last of the Custodians — and soon the darkness into which mankind has fallen will be complete, and none will remember the ancient knowledge."

"What of that boy who calls himself the son of Atullos?" ventured Varia timidly. "I am sure he is intelligent; and he would learn quickly if you were to receive him into the laboratory."

"Never!" cried Phabar, his quavering voice grown loud and deep with an old anger. "He is a mere savage, like the rest of mankind — and moreover I would rather receive a wild beast than the progeny of the false Atullos — that Atullos whom I drove from the laboratory because of his evil passion

for your mother. One would think you were enamored of this young forest wolf. Speak not of him again."

He glared suspiciously at the girl, the rancor of unquenched enmity and jealousy toward Atullos glowing in his sunken eyes, and then turned with palsy-shaken fingers to the testtubes and retorts among which he was still wont to busy himself in pottering experiments.

Torquane, returning the next day, verified his discovery of the barrier's failure. He could now approach the building if he wished, without peril of being blasted from existence at the first step. Boldly he went forward into the gardens and followed a little path that led to the shut portals. Coming in plain view of the windows, he laid his bow and arrows on the ground as a token of his peaceful intent.

When he neared the portals, a man appeared on one of the high towers and trained downward a long metal tube revolving on a pivot. It was the old man he had seen before. From the tube's mouth there leaped in swift succession a number of little shafts of silent flame that played around Torquane and blackened the soil and flower-beds wherever they struck. Phabar's aim was uncertain, due to his aging eyesight and trembling hands, for none of the fire-bolts found its mark. Torquane went away, concluding that his overtures were still undesired by the Custodians.

As he entered the woods, he was startled by a human shape that drew back stealthily into the shadows. It was the first time he had seen anyone lurking in that century-shunned locality. In that brief glimpse, Torquane knew the man for a stranger. He wore no garment except a wolf-skin, and carried for weapon only a crude spear tipped with flint. His features were brutal and degraded, and his forehead was striped with red and yellow earths, identifying him as a member of that extremely degenerate tribe which was believed to have slain Torquane's father.

Torquane hailed the man but received no answer other than the crackling of twigs and the sound of running footsteps. He dispatched an arrow after the intruder, and lost sight of him among the tree-trunks before he could notch a

second arrow to the string. Feeling that the man's presence boded no good to the Custodians or his own people, he followed for some distance, trailing the stranger easily but failing to overtake him.

Disturbed and uneasy, he returned to the village. After that, for long hours daily, and sometimes by night, he watched the hills about the laboratory, glimpsing more than once the strange tribesman together with others plainly of the same clan. These savages were very furtive, and in spite of all his woodcraft they avoided any direct encounter with Torquane. It became manifest that the laboratory was the center of their interest, since he found them lurking always somewhere in its neighborhood. From day to day their numbers increased; and Torquane soon conceived the idea that they were planning an attack upon the building. Henceforth the torments of his baffled love became mingled with fears for the safety of its object.

He had kept this love and his trips and vigils secret from his comrades. Now, calling together the young men and boys who acknowledged him as their leader, he told them all what he had experienced and observed. Some, learning that the force-barrier was dead, urged an immediate assault upon the laboratory, and promised Torquane their assistance in capturing the girl. Torquane, however, shook his head, saying:

"A deed such as this would ill become the son of Atullos. I will take no woman against her will. Rather would I have you aid me in protecting the Custodians, who are now few and feeble, against the marauding of this alien tribe."

Torquane's followers were no less willing to fight the intruders than to assail the laboratory. Indeed, the alien clansmen were regarded as natural foes; and their slaying of Atullos had not been forgotten. When it became generally known that they were lurking about the laboratory, many of the tribe's older warriors pledged assistance to Torquane in repelling them; and the youth soon found himself the leader of a small army.

Scouts were sent out to watch closely the movements of the foreigners, who had grown bolder with daily re-enforcements. At midnight some of the

scouts reported that they were gathering on the slope below the laboratory. Their exact number was hard to determine because of the thick forest. Some of them had been seen stripping a fallen pine of its boughs with stone axes; and it seemed plain that the attack was imminent, and that the pine would be used as a sort of battering-ram to break in the portals.

Torquane marshalled immediately his entire force, numbering close to a hundred men and boys. They were armed with copper knives or spears, well-seasoned oak or dogwood bows, and quivers filled with copper-tipped arrows. In addition to his own bow and knife, Torquane carried with much caution a small earthen jar filled with a grey powder, which he had taken from Atullos' workshop. Years before during his boyhood, prompted by a spirit of crude experimentation, he had dropped a pinch of the powder upon a bed of coals, and had been startled by the loud explosion that resulted. After that, realizing his complete ignorance of such matters, he had feared to experiment with any more of the chemicals prepared and stored by his father. Now, recalling the powder's properties, it occurred to him that he might make an effective use of it in the battle against the invaders.

Marching with all possible speed, the little army reached in an hour the starlit height on which stood the dark laboratory. The wooded slope was apparently clear of the alien savages who had swarmed upon it earlier that night; and Torquane began to fear that they had already assaulted and taken the building. However, when he and his men emerged from the forest on the edge of the gardens, they saw that the attack had just begun. The grounds swarmed with stealthy, silent shapes, dimly discernible, who moved with a concerted surging toward the still and unlit edifice. It was as if an army of shadows had beleaguered a phantom fortress. Then the eerie silence was shattered by a loud crashing together with an outburst of ferocious howling from the savages.

Torquane and his followers, rushing forward, saw the center of the dark horde surge backward a little. They knew that the battering-ram had failed to break in the cedar portals at its first impact and was being withdrawn for a second attempt.

Torquane, running well ahead of his men, ignited with a pitchy pine brand the fuse of tinder vegetable fibre which he had prepared for the earthen jar. The fuse burned perilously close to the jar's contents ere he came within hurling distance of that savage horde. He heard another and harsher crashing, followed by wild shouts of triumph, as if the door had given way. Then the jar, flung with all his strength, exploded with a great flash that lit the entire scene, together with a deafening detonation as of mountain thunder. Torquane, who had been prepared for some violent result, was hurled backward to the ground with stunning force; and his followers stood aghast, believing that they had witnessed the falling of a fiery bolt launched by some hidden Custodian.

A similar belief, it seemed, had been impressed even more powerfully upon the minds of the besiegers: for they fled on all sides in dire disorder. Some were speared in the darkness by Torquane's men, and the rest scattered amid the pines with frightful howls.

Thus, for the first time since the beginning of the dark era, gunpowder was used in battle.

Torquane, regaining his feet, found that the combat was already over. He advanced cautiously, and came upon the dismembered bodies of several of the invaders lying strewn about a garden plot that had been blasted and deeply pitted by the explosion. All the others, it seemed, had either escaped or been accounted for by his warriors. There was small likelihood that the savages would repeat their assault on the laboratory.

However, for the remainder of that night he and his followers kept watch about the building. Lest its inmates should mistake them for enemies, he went more than once to the portals, which had been shattered inward by the pine ram, and shouted aloud to declare his peaceful intentions. He had hoped for some sign from the girl: but in the courtyard beyond the broken door there was naught but the ghostly splashing of fountains. All the windows remained lightless; and a tomblike silence hung upon the building.

At earliest dawn, Torquane, accompanied by two of his warriors, ventured to enter the courtyard. In an angle of its opposite side, they came to an open doorway giving admission to a long empty hall illuminated dimly by a single globe of mysterious blue light. They followed the hall, and Torquane shouted as they went but was answered only by hollow-sounding echoes. A little awed, and wondering if the silence might betoken some cunning trap, they reached the hall's end and paused on the threshold of an immense chamber.

The place was crowded with unknown, intricate machines. Tall dynamos towered to the skylighted roof; and everywhere, on wooden benches and shelves or stone-topped tables, there were huge and strangely shaped vessels, and vials and beakers filled with hueless or colored liquids. Gleaming, silent motors bulked in the corners. Apparatuses of a hundred forms, whose use the young barbarians could not imagine, littered the paved floor and were piled along the walls.

In the midst of all this paraphernalia, an old man sat before one of the vial-laden tables in a chair of cedarwood. The light of sunless morning, livid and ghastly, mingled with the glow of blue lamps on his sunken features. Beside him the girl stood, confronting the intruders with startled eyes.

"We come as friends," cried Torquane, dropping his bow on the floor.

The old Custodian, glowering with half-senile anger, made no effort to rise from his chair, but sank back as if the exertion were beyond his strength. He spoke faintly, and motioned with weak fingers to the girl, who, lifting from the table a glass filled with a water-clear liquid, held it firmly to his lips. He drank a portion of the liquid, and then, after a single convulsive shudder, he rested limply in the chair, his head lolling on his bosom and his body seeming to sag and shrivel beneath its garments.

For an instant, with dilated eyes and pallid features, the girl turned again toward Torquane. It seemed that she hesitated. Then, draining the remainder of the hueless liquid from the glass in her hand, she fell to the floor like a toppling statue.

Torquane and his companions, amazed and mystified, went forward into the room. A little doubtful of the strange contrivances that surrounded them, they ventured to inspect the fallen girl and the seated ancient. It was plain that both were dead; and it dawned upon them that the water-clear liquid must have been a poison more swift and violent than any with which they were familiar: a poison that was part of the lost science of the Custodians.

Torquane, peering down at the still, inscrutable face of Varia, was filled with a blind mingling of sorrow and bafflement. It was not thus that he had dreamt of entering the guarded citadel and winning the Custodian's daughter. Never would he retrieve the mysterious lore of the Custodians or understand their machines, or read their ciphered books. It was not for him to finish the Promethean labors of Atullos, and re-illuminate the dark world with science. These things, with the girl Varia for mate and instructress, he might have done. But now, many centuries and cycles would pass, ere the lifting of the night of barbarism; and other hands than those of Torquane, or the sons of Torquane, would rekindle the lamp of ancient knowledge.

Still, though he knew it not in his sorrow and frustration, there remained other things: the clean, sweet lips of the simple hill-girl who would bear his children; the wild, free life of man, warring on equal terms with nature and maintaining her laws obediently; the sun and stars unclouded by the vapors of man's making; the air untainted by his seething cities.

THE DARK EIDOLON

Thasaidon, lord of seven hells Wherein the single Serpent dwells, With
volumes drawn from pit to pit Through fire and darkness infinite —
Thasaidon, sun of nether skies, Thine ancient evil never dies, For aye thy
somber fulgors flame On sunken worlds that have no name, Man's heart
enthrones thee, still supreme, Though the false sorcerers blaspheme.

-- The Song of Xeethra

On Zothique, the last continent on Earth, the sun no longer shone with the whiteness of its prime, but was dim and tarnished as if with a vapor of blood. New stars without number had declared themselves in the heavens, and the shadows of the infinite had fallen closer. And out of the shadows, the older gods had returned to man: the gods forgotten since Hyperborea, since Mu and Poseidonis, bearing other names but the same attributes. And the elder demons had also returned, battenning on the fumes of evil sacrifice, and fostering again the primordial sorceries.

Many were the necromancers and magicians of Zothique, and the infamy and marvel of their doings were legended everywhere in the latter days. But among them all there was none greater than Namirrha, who imposed his black yoke on the cities of Xylac, and later, in a proud delirium, deemed himself the veritable peer of Thasaidon, lord of Evil.

Namirrha had built his abode in Ummaos, the chief town of Xylac, to which he came from the desert realm of Tasuun with the dark renown of his thaumaturgies like a cloud of desert storm behind him. And no man knew that in coming to Ummaos he returned to the city of his birth; for all deemed him a native of Tasuun. Indeed, none could have dreamt that the great sorcerer was one with the beggar-boy Narthos, an orphan of questionable parentage, who had begged his daily bread in the streets and bazaars of Ummaos. Wretchedly had he lived, alone and despised; and a hatred of the cruel, opulent city grew in his heart like a smothered flame

that feeds in secret, biding the time when it shall become a conflagration consuming all things.

Bitterer always, through his boyhood and early youth, was the spleen and rancor of Narthos toward men. And one day the prince Zotulla, a boy but little older than he, riding a restive palfrey, came upon him in the square before the imperial palace; and Narthos implored an alms. But Zotulla, scorning his plea, rode arrogantly forward, spurring the palfrey; and Narthos was ridden down and trampled under its hooves. And afterward, nigh to death from the trampling, he lay senseless for many hours, while the people passed him by unheeding. And at last, regaining his senses, he dragged himself to his hovel; but he limped a little thereafter all his days, and the mark of one hoof remained like a brand on his body, fading never. Later, he left Ummaos, and was forgotten quickly by its people. Going southward into Tasuun, he lost his way in the great desert, and was near to perishing. But finally he came to a small oasis, where dwelt the wizard Ouphaloc, a hermit who preferred the company of honest jackals and hyenas to that of men. And Ouphaloc, seeing the great craft and evil in the starveling boy, gave succor to Narthos and sheltered him. He dwelt for years with Ouphaloc, becoming the wizard's pupil and the heir of his demon-wrested lore. Strange things he learned in that hermitage, being fed on fruits and grain that had sprung not from the watered earth, and wine that was not the juice of terrene grapes. And like Ouphaloc, he became a master in devildom and drove his own bond with the archfiend Thasaidon. When Ouphaloc died, he took the name of Namirrha, and went forth as a mighty sorcerer among the wandering peoples and the deep-buried mummies of Tasuun. But never could he forget the miseries of his boyhood in Ummaos and the wrong he had endured from Zotulla; and year by year he spun over in his thoughts the black web of revenge. And his fame grew ever darker and vaster, and men feared him in remote lands beyond Tasuun. With bated whispers they spoke of his deeds in the cities of Yoros, and in Zul-Bha-Shair, the abode of the ghoulish deity Mordiggian. And long before the coming of Namirrha himself, the people of Ummaos knew him as a fabled scourge that was direr than simoom or pestilence.

Now, in the years that followed the going-forth of the boy Narthos from Ummaos, Pithaim, the father of Prince Zotulla, was slain by the sting of a small adder that had crept into his bed for warmth on an autumn night. Some said that the adder had been purveyed by Zotulla, but this was a thing that no man could verily affirm. After the death of Pithaim, Zotulla, being his only son, was emperor of Xylac, and ruled evilly from his throne in Ummaos. Indolent he was, and tyrannic, and full of strange luxuries and cruelties; but the people, who were also evil, acclaimed him in his turpitude. So he prospered, and the lords of Hell and Heaven smote him not. And the red suns and ashen moons went westward over Xylac, falling into that seldom-voyaged sea, which, if the mariners' tales were true, poured evermore like a swiftening river past the infamous isle of Naat, and fell in a worldwide cataract upon nether space from the far, sheer edge of Earth.

Grosser still he grew, and his sins were as overswollen fruits that ripen above a deep abyss. But the winds of time blew softly; and the fruits fell not. And Zotulla laughed amid his fools and his eunuchs and his lemans; and the tale of his luxuries was borne afar, and was told by dim outland peoples, as a twin marvel with the bruited necromancies of Namirrha.

It came to pass, in the year of the Hyena, and the month of the star Canicule, that a great feast was given by Zotulla to the inhabitants of Ummaos. Meats that had been cooked in exotic spices from Sotar, isle of the east, were spread everywhere; and the ardent wines of Yoros and Xylac, filled as with subterranean fires, were poured inexhaustibly from huge urns for all. The wines awoke a furious mirth and a royal madness; and afterward they brought a slumber no less profound than the Lethe of the tomb. And one by one, as they drank, the revellers fell down in the streets, the houses and gardens, as if a plague had struck them; and Zotulla slept in his banquet-hall of gold and ebony, with his odalisques and chamberlains about him. So, in all Ummaos, there was no man or woman wakeful at the hour when Sirius began to fall toward the west.

Thus it was that none saw or heard the coming of Namirrha. But awakening heavily in the latter forenoon, the emperor Zotulla heard a confused babble, a troublous clamor of voices from such of his eunuchs and women as had

awakened before him. Inquiring the cause, he was told that a strange prodigy had occurred during the night; but, being still bemused with wine and slumber, he comprehended little enough of its nature, till his favorite concubine, Obexah, led him to the eastern portico of the palace, from which he could behold the marvel with his own eyes.

Now the palace stood alone at the center of Ummaos, and to the north, west and south, for wide intervals of distance, there stretched the imperial gardens, full of superbly arching palms and loftily spiring fountains. But to eastward was a broad open area, used as a sort of common, between the palace and the mansions of high optimates. And in this space, which had lain wholly vacant at eve, a building towered colossal and lordly beneath the full-risen sun, with domes like monstrous fungi of stone that had come up in the night. And the domes, rearing level with those of Zotulla, were builded of death-white marble; and the huge façade, with multi-columned porticoes and deep balconies, was wrought in alternate zones of night-black onyx and porphyry hued as with dragons' blood. And Zotulla swore lewdly, calling with hoarse blasphemies on the gods and devils of Xylac; and great was his dumfoundment, deeming the marvel a work of wizardry. The women gathered about him, crying out with shrill cries of awe and terror; and more and more of his courtiers, awakening, came to swell the hub-bub; and the fat castradoes diddered in their cloth-of-gold like immense black jellies in golden basins. But Zotulla, mindful of his dominion as emperor of all Xylac, strove to conceal his own trepidation, saying:

"Now who is this that has presumed to enter Ummaos like a jackal in the dark, and has made his impious den in proximity and counterview of my palace? Go forth, and inquire the miscreant's name; but ere you go, instruct the headsman to make sharp his double-handed sword."

Then, fearing the emperor's wrath if they tarried, certain of the chamberlains went forth unwillingly and approached the portals of the strange edifice. It seemed that the portals were deserted till they drew near, and then, on the threshold, there appeared a titanic skeleton, taller than any man of earth; and it strode forward to meet them with ell-long strides. The skeleton was swathed in a loin-cloth of scarlet silk with a buckle of jet, and

it wore a black turban, starred with diamonds, whose topmost foldings nearly touched the high lintel. Eyes like flickering marsh-fires burned in its deep eye-sockets; and a blackened tongue like that of a long-dead man protruded between its teeth; but otherwise it was clean of flesh, and the bones glittered whitely in the sun as it came onward.

The chamberlains were mute before it, and there was no sound except the golden creaking of their girdles, the shrill rustling of their silks, as they shook and trembled. And the foot-bones of the skeleton clicked sharply on the pavement of black onyx as it paused; and the putrefying tongue began to quiver between its teeth; and it uttered these words in an unctuous, nauseous voice:

"Return, and tell the emperor Zotulla that Namirrha, seer and magician, has come to dwell beside him."

Hearing the skeleton speak as if it had been a living man, and hearing the dread name of Namirrha as men hear the tocsin of doom in some fallen city, the chamberlains could stand before it no longer, and they fled with ungainly swiftness and bore the message to Zotulla.

Now, learning who it was that had come to neighbor with him in Ummaos, the emperor's wrath died out like a feeble and blustering flame on which the wind of darkness had blown; and the vinous purple of his cheeks was mottled with a strange pallor; and he said nothing, but his lips mumbled loosely as if in prayer or malediction. And the news of Namirrha's coming passed like the flight of evil night-birds through all the palace and throughout the city, leaving a noisome terror that abode in Ummaos thereafter till the end. For Namirrha, through the black renown of his thaumaturgies and the frightful entities who served him, had become a power that no secular sovereign dared dispute; and men feared him everywhere, even as they feared the gigantic, shadowy lords of Hell and of outer space. And in Ummaos, people said that he had come on the desert wind from Tasuun with his underlings, even as the pestilence comes, and had reared his house in an hour with the aid of devils beside Zotulla's palace. And they said that the foundations of the house were laid on the

adamantine cope of Hell; and in its floors were pits at whose bottom burned the nether fires, or stars could be seen as they passed under in lowermost night. And the followers of Namirra were the dead of strange kingdoms, the demons of sky and earth and the abyss, and mad, impious, hybrid things that the sorcerer himself created from forbidden unions.

Men shunned the neighborhood of his lordly house; and in the palace of Zotulla few cared to approach the windows and balconies that gave thereon; and the emperor himself spoke not of Namirra, pretending to ignore the intruder; and the women of the harem babbled evermore with an evil gossip concerning Namirra and his concubines. But the sorcerer himself was not beheld by the people of that city, though some believed that he walked forth at will, clad with invisibility. His servitors were likewise not seen; but a howling as of the damned was sometimes heard to issue from his portals; and sometimes there came a strange cachinnation, as if some adamantine image had laughed aloud; and sometimes there was a chuckling like the sound of shattered ice in a frozen hell. Dim shadows moved in the porticoes when there was neither sunlight nor lamp to cast them; and red, eery lights appeared and vanished in the windows at eve, like a blinking of demoniac eyes. And slowly the ember-colored suns went over Xylac, and were quenched in far seas; and the ashy moons were blackened as they fell nightly toward the hidden gulf. Then, seeing that the wizard had wrought no open evil, and that none had endured palpable harm from his presence, the people took heart; and Zotulla drank deeply, and feasted in oblivious luxury as before; and dark Thasaïdon, prince of all turpitudes, was the true but never-acknowledged lord of Xylac. And in time the men of Ummaos bragged a little of Namirra and his dread thaumaturgies, even as they had boasted of the purple sins of Zotulla.

But Namirra, still unbeheld by living men and living women, sat in the inner walls of that house which his devils had reared for him, and spun over and over in his thoughts the black web of revenge. And the wrong done by Zotulla to Narthos in old times was the least of those cruelties which the emperor had forgotten.

Now, when the fears of Zotulla were somewhat lulled, and his women gossiped less often of the neighboring wizard, there occurred a new wonder and a fresh terror. For, sitting one eve at his banquet-table with his courtiers about him, the emperor heard a noise as of myriad iron-shod hooves that came trampling through the palace gardens. And the courtiers also heard the sound, and were startled amid their mounting drunkenness; and the emperor was angered, and he sent certain of his guards to examine into the cause of the trampling. But peering forth upon the moon-bright lawns and parterres, the guards beheld no visible shape, though the loud sounds of trampling still went to and fro. It seemed as if a rout of wild stallions passed and re-passed before the façade of the palace with tumultuous gallopings and capricoles. And a fear came upon the guards as they looked and listened; and they dared not venture forth, but returned to Zotulla. And the emperor himself grew sober when he heard their tale; and he went forth with high blusterings to view the prodigy. And all night the unseen hooves rang out sonorously on the pavement of onyx, and ran with deep thuddings over the grasses and flowers. The palm-fronds waved on the windless air as if parted by racing steeds; and visibly the tall-stemmed lilies and broad-petaled exotic blossoms were trodden under. And rage and terror nested together in Zotulla's heart as he stood in a balcony above the garden, hearing the spectral tumult, and beholding the harm done to his rarest flower-beds. The women, the courtiers and eunuchs cowered behind him, and there was no slumber for any occupant of the palace; but toward dawn the clamor of hooves departed, going toward Namirrha's house.

When the dawn was full-grown above Ummaos, the emperor walked forth with his guards about him, and saw that the crushed grasses and broken-down stems were blackened as if by fire where the hooves had fallen. Plainly were the marks imprinted, like the tracks of a great company of horses, in all the lawns and parterres; but they ceased at the verge of the gardens. And though everyone believed that the visitation had come from Namirrha, there was no proof of this in the grounds that fronted the sorcerer's abode; for here the turf was untrodden.

"A pox upon Namirrha, if he has done this!" cried Zotulla. "For what harm have I ever done him? Verily, I shall set my heel on the dog's neck; and the

torture-wheel shall serve him even as these horses from Hell have served my blood-red lilies of Sotar and my vein-colored irises of Naat and my orchids from Uccastrog which were purple as the bruises of love. Yea, though he stand the viceroy of Thasaidon above Earth, and overlord of ten thousand devils, my wheel shall break him, and fires shall heat the wheel white-hot in its turning, till he withers black as the seared blossoms." Thus did Zotulla make his brag; but he issued no orders for the execution of his threat; and no man stirred from the palace towards Namirra's house. And from the portals of the wizard none came forth; or if any came there was no visible sign or sound.

So the day went over, and the night rose, bringing later a moon that was slightly darkened at the rim. And the night was silent; and Zotulla, sitting long at the banquet-table, drained his wine-cup often and wrathfully, muttering new threats against Namirra. And the night wore on, and it seemed that the visitation would not be repeated. But at midnight, lying in his chamber with Obexah, and fathom-deep in his slumber from the wine, Zotulla was awakened by a monstrous clangor of hooves that raced and capered in the palace porticoes and in the long balconies. All night the hooves thundered back and forth, echoing awfully in the vaulted stone, while Zotulla and Obexah, listening, huddled close amid their cushions and coverlets; and all the occupants of the palace, wakeful and fearful, heard the noise but stirred not from their chambers. A little before dawn the hooves departed suddenly; and afterward, by day, their marks were found on the marble flags of the porches and balconies; and the marks were countless, deep-graven, and black as if branded there by flame.

Like mottled marble were the emperor's cheeks when he saw the hoof-printed floors; and terror stayed with him henceforth, following him to the depths of his inebriety, since he knew not where the haunting would cease. His women murmured and some wished to flee from Ummaos, and it seemed that the revels of the day and evening were shadowed by ill wings that left their umbrage in the yellow wine and bedimmed the aureate lamps. And again, toward midnight, the slumber of Zotulla was broken by the hooves, which came galloping and pacing on the palace-roof and through all the corridors and the halls. Thereafter, till dawn, the hooves filled the

palace with their iron clatterings, and they rung hollowly on the topmost domes, as if the coursers of gods had trodden there, passing from heaven to heaven in tumultuous cavalcade.

Zotulla and Obexah, lying together while the terrible hooves went to and fro in the hall outside their chamber, had no heart or thought for sin, nor could they find any comfort in their nearness. In the gray hour before dawn they heard a great thundering high on the barred brazen door of the room, as if some mighty stallion, rearing, had drummed there with his forefeet. And soon after this, the hooves went away, leaving a silence like an interlude in some gathering storm of doom. Later, the marks of the hooves were found everywhere in the halls, marring the bright mosaics. Black holes were burnt in the golden-threaded rugs and the rugs of silver and scarlet; and the high white domes were pitted pox-wise with the marks; and far up on the brazen door of Zotulla's chamber the prints of a horse's forefeet were incised deeply.

Now, in Ummaos, and throughout Xylac, the tale of this haunting became known, and the thing was deemed an ominous prodigy, though people differed in their interpretations. Some held that the sending came from Namirrha, and was meant as a token of his supremacy above all kings and emperors; and some thought that it came from a new wizard who had risen in Tinarath, far to the east, and who wished to supplant Namirrha. And the priests of the gods of Xylac held that their various deities had dispatched the haunting, as a sign that more sacrifices were required in the temples.

Then, in his hall of audience, whose floor of sard and jasper had been grievously pocked by the unseen hooves, Zotulla called together many priests and magicians and soothsayers, and asked them to declare the cause of the sending and devise a mode of exorcism. But, seeing that there was no agreement among them, Zotulla provided the several priestly sects with the wherewithal of sacrifice to their sundry gods, and sent them away; and the wizards and prophets, under threat of decapitation if they refused, were enjoined to visit Namirrha in his mansion of sorcery and learn his will, if haply the sending were his and not the work of another.

Loth were the wizards and the soothsayers, fearing Namirrha, and caring not to intrude upon the frightful mysteries of his obscure mansion. But the swordsmen of the emperor drove them forth, lifting great crescent blades against them when they tarried; so one by one, in a straggling order, the delegation went towards Namirrha's portals and vanished into the devil-built house.

Pale, muttering and distraught, like men who have looked upon hell and have seen their doom, they returned before sunset to the emperor. And they said that Namirrha had received them courteously and had sent them back with this message:

"Be it known to Zotulla that the haunting is a sign of that which he has long forgotten; and the reason of the haunting will be revealed to him at the hour prepared and set apart by destiny. And the hour draws near: for Namirrha bids the emperor and all his court to a great feast on the afternoon of the morrow."

Having delivered this message, to the wonder and consternation of Zotulla, the delegation begged his leave to depart. And though the emperor questioned them minutely, they seemed unwilling to relate the circumstances of the visit to Namirrha; nor would they describe the sorcerer's fabled house, except in a vague manner, each contradicting the other as to what he had seen. So, after a little, Zotulla bade them go, and when they had gone he sat musing for a long while on the invitation of Namirrha, which was a thing he cared not to accept but feared to decline. That evening he drank even more liberally than was his wont; and he slept a Lethian slumber, nor was there any noise of trampling hooves about the palace to awaken him. And silently, during the night, the prophets and magicians passed like furtive shadows from Ummaos; and no man saw them depart; and at morning they were gone from Xylac into other lands, never to return....

Now, on that same evening, in the great hall of his house, Namirrha sat alone, having dismissed the familiars who attended him ordinarily. Before him, on an altar of jet, was the dark, gigantic statue of Thasaidon which a

devil-begotten sculptor had wrought in ancient days for an evil king of Tasuun, called Pharnoc. The archdemon was depicted in the guise of a full-armed warrior, lifting a spiky mace as if in heroic battle. Long had the statue lain in the desert-sunken palace of Pharnoc, whose very site was disputed by the nomads; and Namirrha, by his divination, had found it and had reared up the infernal image to abide with him always thereafter. And often, through the mouth of the statue, Thasaidon would utter oracles to Namirrha, or would answer interrogations.

Before the black-armored image there hung seven silver lamps, wrought in the form of horses' skulls, with flames issuing changeably in blue and purple and crimson from their eye-sockets. Wild and lurid was their light, and the face of the demon, peering from under his crested helmet, was filled with malign, equivocal shadows that shifted and changed eternally. And sitting in his serpent-carven chair, Namirrha regarded the statue grimly, with a deep-furrowed frown between his eyes: for he had asked a certain thing of Thasaidon, and the fiend, replying through the statue, had refused him. And rebellion was in the heart of Namirrha, grown mad with pride, and deeming himself the lord of all sorcerers and a ruler by his own right among the princes of devildom. So, after long pondering, he repeated his request in a bold and haughty voice, like one who addresses an equal rather than the all-formidable suzerain to whom he had sworn a fatal fealty.

"I have helped you heretofore in all things," said the image, with stony and sonorous accents that were echoed metallically in the seven silver lamps. "Yea, the undying worms of fire and darkness have come forth like an army at your summons, and the wings of nether genii have risen to occlude the sun when you called them. But, verily, I will not aid you in this vengeance you have planned: for the emperor Zotulla has done me no wrong and has served me well though unwittingly; and the people of Xylac, by reason of their turpitudes, are not the least of my terrestrial worshippers. Therefore, Namirrha, it were well for you to live in peace with Zotulla, and well to forget this olden wrong that was done to the beggar-boy Narthos. For the ways of destiny are strange, and the workings of its laws sometimes hidden; and truly, if the hooves of Zotulla's palfrey had not spurned you and trodden you under, your life had been otherwise, and the name and renown of

Namirrha had still slept in oblivion as a dream undreamed. Yea, you would tarry still as a beggar in Ummaos, content with a beggar's guerdon, and would never have fared forth to become the pupil of the wise and learned Ouphaloc; and I, Thasaïdon, would have lost the lordliest of all necromancers who have accepted my service and my bond. Think well, Namirrha, and ponder these matters: for both of us, it would seem, are indebted to Zotulla in all gratitude for the trampling he gave you."

"Yea, there is a debt," Namirrha growled implacably. "And truly I will pay the debt tomorrow, even as I have planned.... There are Those who will aid me, Those who will answer my summoning in your despite."

"It is an ill thing to affront me," said the image, after an interval. "And also, it is not wise to call upon Those that you designate. However, I perceive clearly that such is your intent. You are proud and stubborn and revengeful. Do then, as you will, but blame me not for the outcome."

So, after this, there was silence in the hall where Namirrha sat before the eidolon; and the flames burned darkly, with changeable colors, in the skull-shapen lamps; and the shadows fled and returned, unresting, on the face of the statue and the face of Namirrha. Then, toward midnight, the necromancer arose and went upward by many spiral stairs to a high dome of his house in which there was a single small round window that looked forth on the constellations. The window was set in the top of the dome; but Namirrha had contrived, by means of his magic, that one entering by the last spiral of the stairs would suddenly seem to descend rather than climb, and, reaching the last step, would peer downward through the window while stars passed under him in a giddy gulf. There, kneeling, Namirrha touched a secret spring in the marble, and the circular pane slid back without sound. Then, lying prone on the interior of the dome, with his face over the abyss, and his long beard trailing stiffly into space, he whispered a pre-human rune, and held speech with certain entities who belonged neither to Hell nor the mundane elements, and were more fearsome to invoke than the infernal genii or the devils of earth, air, water, and flame. With them he made his contract, defying Thasaïdon's will, while the air curdled about him

with their voices, and rime gathered palely on his sable beard from the cold that was wrought by their breathing as they leaned earthward.

Laggard and loth was the awakening of Zotulla from his wine; and quickly, ere he opened his eyes, the daylight was poisoned for him by the thought of that invitation which he feared to accept or decline. But he spoke to Obexah, saying:

"Who, after all, is this wizardly dog, that I should obey his summons like a beggar called in from the street by some haughty lord?"

Obexah, a golden-skinned and oblique-eyed girl from Uccastrog, Isle of the Torturers, eyed the emperor subtly, and said:

"O Zotulla, it is yours to accept or refuse, as you deem fitting. And truly, it is a small matter for the lord of Ummaos and all Xylac, whether to go or to stay, since naught can impugn his sovereignty. Therefore, were it not as well to go?" For Obexah, though fearful of the wizard, was curious regarding that devil-built house of which so little was known; and likewise, in the manner of women, she wished to behold the famed Namirrha, whose mien and appearance were still but a far-brought legend in Ummaos.

"There is something in what you say," admitted Zotulla. "But an emperor, in his conduct, must always consider the public good; and there are matters of state involved, which a woman can scarcely be expected to understand."

So, later in the forenoon, after an ample and well-irrigated breakfast, he called his chamberlains and courtiers about him and took counsel with them. And some advised him to ignore the invitation of Namirrha; and others held that the invitation be accepted, lest a graver evil than the trampling of ghostly hooves be sent upon the palace and the city.

Then Zotulla called the many priesthoods before him in a body, and sought to resummon the wizards and soothsayers who had fled privily in the night. Among all the latter, there was none who answered the crying of his name through Ummaos; and this aroused a certain wonder. But the priests came in

a greater number than before, and thronged the hall of audience so that the paunches of the foremost were straightened against the imperial dais and the buttocks of the hindmost were flattened on the rear walls and pillars. And Zotulla debated with them the matter of acceptance or refusal. And the priests argued, as before, that Namirrha was nowherewise concerned with the sending ; and his invitation, they said, portended no harm nor bale to the emperor; and it was plain, from the terms of the message, that an oracle would be imparted to Zotulla by the wizard; and this oracle, if Namirrha were a true archimage, would confirm their own holy wisdom and reëstablish the divine source of the sending; and the gods of Xylac would again be glorified.

Then, having heard the pronouncement of the priests, the emperor instructed his treasurers to load them down with new offerings; and calling unctuously upon Zotulla and all his household the vicarious blessings of the several gods, the priests departed. And the day wore on, and the sun passed its meridian, falling slowly beyond Ummaos through the spaces of the afternoon that were floored with sea-ending deserts. And still Zotulla was irresolute; and he called his wine-bearers, bidding them pour for him the strongest and most magistral of their vintages; but in the wine he found neither certitude nor decision.

Sitting still on his throne in the hall of audience, he heard, toward middle afternoon, a mighty and clamorous outcry that arose at the palace portals. There were deep wailings of men and the shrillings of eunuchs and women, as if terror passed from tongue to tongue, invading the halls and apartments. And the fearful clamor spread throughout all the palace, and Zotulla, rousing from the lethargy of wine, was about to send his attendants to inquire the cause.

Then, into the hall, there filed an array of tall mummies, clad in royal cerements of purple and scarlet, and wearing gold crowns on their withered craniums. And after them, like servitors, came gigantic skeletons who wore loin-cloths of nacarat orange and about whose upper skulls, from brow to crown, live serpents of banded saffron and ebon had wrapped themselves

for head-dresses. And the mummies bowed before Zotulla, saying with thin, sere voices:

"We, who were kings of the wide realm of Tasuun aforetime, have been sent as a guard of honor for the emperor Zotulla, to attend him as is befitting when he goes forth to the feast prepared by Namirrha."

Then with dry clickings of their teeth, and whistlings as of air through screens of fretted ivory, the skeletons spoke:

"We, who were giant warriors of a race forgotten, have also been sent by Namirrha, so that the emperor's household, following him to the feast, should be guarded from all peril and should fare forth in such pageantry as is meet and proper."

Witnessing these prodigies, the wine-bearers and other attendants covered about the imperial dais or hid behind the pillars, while Zotulla, with pupils swimming starkly in a bloodshot white, with face bloated and ghastly pale, sat frozen on his throne and could utter no word in reply to the ministers of Namirrha.

Then, coming forward, the mummies said in dusty accents: "All is made ready, and the feast awaits the arrival of Zotulla." And the cerements of the mummies stirred and fell open at the bosom, and small rodent monsters, brown as bitumen, eyed as with accursed rubies, reared forth from the eaten hearts of the mummies like rats from their holes and chattered shrilly in human speech, repeating the words. The skeletons in turn took up the solemn sentence; and the black and saffron serpents hissed it from their skulls; and the words were repeated lastly in baleful rumblings by certain furry creatures of dubious form, hitherto unseen by Zotulla, who sat behind the ribs of the skeletons as if in cages of white wicker.

Like a dreamer who obeys the doom of dreams, the emperor rose from his throne and went forward, and the mummies surrounded him like an escort. And each of the skeletons drew from the reddish-yellow folds of his loin-cloth a curiously pierced archaic flute of silver; and all began a sweet and evil and deathly fluting as the emperor went out through the halls of the

palace. A fatal spell was in the music: for the chamberlains, the women, the guards, the eunuchs, and all members of Zotulla's household even to the cooks and scullions, were drawn like a procession of night-walkers from the rooms and alcoves in which they had vainly hidden themselves; and marshaled by the flutists, they followed after Zotulla. A strange thing it was to behold this mighty company of people, going forth in the slanted sunlight toward Namirrha's house, with a cortège of dead kings about them, and the blown breath of skeletons thrilling eldritchly in the silver flutes. And little was Zotulla comforted when he found the girl Obexah at his side, moving, as he, in a thralldom of involitive horror, with the rest of his women close behind.

Coming to the open portals of Namirrha's house, the emperor saw that they were guarded by great crimson-wattled things, half dragon, half man, who bowed before him, sweeping their wattles like bloody besoms on the flags of dark onyx. And the emperor passed with Obexah between the louting monsters, with the mummies, the skeletons and his own people behind him in strange pageant, and entered a vast and multicolumned hall, where the daylight, following timidly, was drowned by the baleful arrogant blaze of a thousand lamps.

Even amid his horror, Zotulla marvelled at the vastness of the chamber, which he could hardly reconcile with the mansion's outer length and height and breadth, though these indeed were of most palatial amplitude. For it seemed that he gazed down great avenues of topless pillars, and vistas of tables laden with piled-up viands and thronged urns of wine, that stretched away before him into luminous distance and gloom as of starless night.

In the wide intervals between the tables, the familiars of Namirrha and his other servants went to and fro incessantly, as if a fantasmagoria of ill dreams were embodied before the emperor. Kingly cadavers in robes of time-rotted brocade, with worms seething in their eye-pits, poured a blood-like wine into cups of the opalescent horn of unicorns. Lamias, trident-tailed, and four-breasted chimeras, came in with fuming platters lifted high by their brazen claws. Dog-headed devils, tongued with lolling flames, ran forward to offer themselves as ushers for the company. And before Zotulla

and Obexah, there appeared a curious being with the full-fleshed lower limbs and hips of a great black woman and the clean-picked bones of some titanic ape from thereupward.

Verily, it seemed to Zotulla that they had gone a long way into some malignly litten cavern of Hell, when they came to that perspective of tables and columns down which the monster had led them. Here, at the room's end, apart from the rest, was a table at which Namirrha sat alone, with the flames of the seven horse-skull lamps burning restlessly behind him, and the mailed black image of Thasaidon towering from the altar of jet at his right hand. And a little aside from the altar, a diamond mirror was upborne by the claws of iron basilisks.

Namirrha rose to greet them, observing a solemn and funereal courtesy. His eyes were bleak and cold as distant stars in the hollows wrought by strange fearful vigils. His lips were like a pale-red seal on a shut parchment of doom. His beard flowed stiffly in black-anointed banded locks across the bosom of his vermilion robe, like a mass of straight black serpents. Zotulla felt the blood pause and thicken about his heart, as if congealing into ice. And Obexah, peering beneath lowered lids, was abashed and frightened by the visible horror that invested this man and hung upon him even as royalty upon a king. But amid her fear, she found room to wonder what manner of man he was in his intercourse with women.

"I bid you welcome, O Zotulla, to such hospitality as is mine to offer," said Namirrha, with the iron ringing of some hidden funereal bell deep down in his hollow voice. "Prithee, be seated at my table."

Zotulla saw that a chair of ebony had been placed for him opposite Namirrha; and another chair, less stately and imperial, had been placed at the left hand for Obexah. And the twain seated themselves; and Zotulla saw that his people were sitting likewise at other tables throughout the huge hall, with the frightful servants of Namirrha waiting upon them busily, like devils attending the damned.

Then Zotulla perceived that a dark and corpse-like hand was pouring wine for him in a crystal cup; and upon the hand was the signet-ring of the emperors of Xylac, set with a monstrous fire-opal in the mouth of a golden bat: even such a ring as Zotulla wore perpetually on his index-finger. And, turning, he beheld at his right hand a figure that bore the likeness of his father, Pithaim, after the poison of the adder, spreading through his limbs, had left behind it the purple bloating of death. And Zotulla, who had caused the adder to be placed in the bed of Pithaim, cowered in his seat and trembled with a guilty fear. And the thing that wore the similtude of Pithaim, whether corpse or an image wrought by Namirrha's enchantment, came and went at Zotulla's elbow, waiting upon him with stark, black, swollen fingers that never fumbled. Horribly he was aware of its bulging, unregarding eyes, and its livid purple mouth that was locked in a rigor of mortal silence, and the spotted adder that peered at intervals with chill orbs from its heavy-folded sleeve as it leaned beside him to replenish his cup or to serve him with meat. And dimly, through the icy mist of his terror, the emperor beheld the shadowy-armored shape, like a moving replica of the still, grim statue of Thasaidon, which Namirrha had reared up in his blasphemy to perform the same office for himself. And vaguely, without comprehension, he saw the dreadful ministrant that hovered beside Obexah: a flayed and eyeless corpse in the image of her first lover, a boy from Cyntrom who had been cast ashore in shipwreck on the Isle of the Torturers. There Obexah had found him, lying behind the ebbing wave, and reviving the boy, she had hidden him awhile in a secret cave for her own pleasure, and had brought him food and drink. Later, wearying, she had betrayed him to the Torturers, and had taken a new delight in the various pangs and ordeals inflicted upon him before death by that cruel, pernicious people.

"Drink," said Namirrha, quaffing a strange wine that was red and dark as if with disastrous sunsets of lost years. And Zotulla and Obexah drank the wine, feeling no warmth in their veins thereafter, but a chill as of hemlock mounting slowly toward the heart.

"Verily, 'tis a good wine," said Namirrha, "and a proper one in which to toast the furthering of our acquaintance: for it was buried long ago with the

royal dead, in amphorae of somber jasper shapen like funeral urns; and my ghouls found it, whenas they came to dig in Tasuun."

Now it seemed that the tongue of Zotulla froze in his mouth, as a mandrake freezes in the rime-bound soil of winter; and he found no reply to Namirra's courtesy.

"Prithee, make trial of this meat," quoth Namirra, "for it is very choice, being the flesh of that boar which the Torturers of Uccastrog are wont to pasture on the well-minced leavings of their wheels and racks; and, moreover, my cooks have spiced it with the powerful balsams of the tomb, and have farced it with the hearts of adders and the tongues of black cobras."

Naught could the emperor say; and even Obexah was silent, being sorely troubled in her turpitude by the presence of that flayed and piteous thing which had the likeness of her lover from Cyntrom. And the dread of the necromancer grew prodigiously; for his knowledge of this old, forgotten crime, and the raising of the fantasm, appeared to her a more baleful magic than all else.

"Now, I fear," said Namirra, "that you find the meat devoid of savor, and the wine without fire. So, to enliven our feasting, I shall call forth my singers and my musicians."

He spoke a word unknown to Zotulla or Obexah, which sounded throughout the mighty hall as if a thousand voices in turn had taken it up and prolonged it. Anon there appeared the singers, who were she-ghouls with shaven bodies and hairy shanks, and long yellow tushes full of shredded carrion curving across their chaps from mouths that fawned hyena-wise on the company. Behind them entered the musicians, some of whom were male devils pacing erect on the hind-quarters of sable stallions and plucking with the fingers of white apes at lyres of the bone and sinew of cannibals from Naat; and others were pied satyrs puffing their goatish cheeks at hautboys formed from the bosom-skin of Negro queens and the horn of rhinoceri.

They bowed before Namirra with grotesque ceremony. Then, without delay, the she-ghouls began a most dolorous and execrable howling, as of jackals that have sniffed their carrion; and the satyrs and devils played a lament that was like the moaning of desert-born winds through forsaken palace harems. And Zotulla shivered, for the singing filled his marrow with ice, and the music left in his heart a desolation as of empires fallen and trod under by the iron-shod hooves of time. Ever, amid that evil music, he seemed to hear the sifting of sand across withered gardens, and the windy rustling of rotted silks upon couches of bygone luxury, and the hissing of coiled serpents from the low fusts of shattered columns. And the glory that had been Ummaos seemed to pass away like the blown pillars of the simoom.

"Now that was a brave tune," said Namirra when the music ceased and the she-ghouls no longer howled. "But verily I fear that you find my entertainment somewhat dull. Therefore, my dancers shall dance for you."

He turned toward the great hall, and described in the air an enigmatic sign with the fingers of his right hand. In answer to the sign, a hueless mist came down from the high roof and hid the room like a fallen curtain for a brief interim. There was a babel of sounds, confused and muffled, beyond the curtain, and a crying of voices faint as if with distance.

Then, dreadfully, the vapor rolled away, and Zotulla saw that the leaden tables had gone. In the wide interspaces of the columns, his palace-inmates, the chamberlains, the eunuchs, the courtiers and odalisques and all the others, lay trussed with thongs on the floor, like so many fowls of glorious plumage. Above them, in time to a music made by the lyrists and flutists of the necromancer, a troupe of skeletons pirouetted with light clickings of their toe-bones; and a rout of mummies bowed stiffly; and others of Namirra's creatures moved with mysterious caperings. To and fro they leapt on the bodies of the emperor's people, in the paces of an evil saraband. At every step they grew taller and heavier, till the saltant mummies were as the mummies of Anakim, and the skeletons were boned as colossi; and louder the music rose, drowning the faint cries of Zotulla's people. And huger still became the dancers, towering far into vaulted shadow among the

vast columns, with thudding feet that wrought thunder in the room; and those whereon they danced were as grapes trampled for a vintage in autumn; and the floor ran deep with a sanguine must.

As a man drowning in a noisome, night-bound fen, the emperor heard the voice of Namirra:

"It would seem that my dancers please you not. So now I shall present you a most royal spectacle. Arise and follow me, for the spectacle is one that requires an empire for its stage."

Zotulla and Obexah rose from their chairs in the fashion of night-walkers. Giving no backward glance at their ministering phantoms, or the hall where the dancers bounded, they followed Namirra to an alcove beyond the altar of Thasaidon. Thence, by the upward-coiling stairways, they came at length to a broad high balcony that faced Zotulla's palace and looked forth above the city roofs toward the bourn of sunset.

It seemed that several hours had gone by in that hellish feasting and entertainment; for the day was near to its close, and the sun, which had fallen from sight behind the imperial palace, was barring the vast heavens with bloody rays.

"Behold," said Namirra, adding a strange vocable to which the stone of the edifice resounded like a beaten gong.

The balcony pitched a little, and Zotulla, looking over the balustrade, beheld the roofs of Ummaos lessen and sink beneath him. It seemed that the balcony flew skyward to a prodigious height, and he peered down across the domes of his own palace, upon the houses, the tiled fields and the desert beyond, and the huge sun brought low on the desert's verge. And Zotulla grew giddy; and the chill airs of the upper heavens blew upon him. But Namirra spoke another word, and the balcony ceased to ascend.

"Look well," said the necromancer, "on the empire that was yours, but shall be yours no longer." Then, with arms outstretched toward the sunset, he called aloud the twelve names that were perdition to utter, and after them

the tremendous invocation: Gna padambis devompra thungis furidor avoragomon.

Instantly, it seemed that great ebon clouds of thunder beetled against the sun. Lining the horizon, the clouds took the form of colossal monsters with heads and members somewhat resembling those of stallions. Rearing terribly, they trod down the sun like an extinguished ember; and racing as if in some hippodrome of Titans, they rose higher and vaster, coming towards Ummaos. Deep, calamitous rumblings preceded them, and the earth shook visibly, till Zotulla saw that these were not immaterial clouds, but actual living forms that had come forth to tread the world in macrocosmic vastness. Throwing their shadows for many leagues before them, the coursers charged as if devil-ridden into Xylac, and their feet descended like falling mountain crags upon far oases and towns of the outer wastes.

Like a many-turreted storm they came, and it seemed that the world shrank gulfward, tilting beneath the weight. Still as a man enchanted into marble, Zotulla stood and beheld the ruining that was wrought on his empire. And closer drew the gigantic stallions, racing with inconceivable speed, and louder was the thundering of their footfalls, that now began to blot the green fields and fruited orchards lying for many miles to the west of Ummaos. And the shadow of the stallions climbed like an evil gloom of eclipse, till it covered Ummaos; and looking up, the emperor saw their eyes halfway between earth and zenith, like baleful suns that glare down from soaring cumuli.

Then, in the thickening gloom, above that insupportable thunder, he heard the voice of Namirra, crying in mad triumph:

"Know, Zotulla, that I have called up the coursers of Thamogorgos, lord of the abyss. And the coursers will tread your empire down, even as your palfrey trod and trampled in former time a beggar-boy named Narthos. And learn also that I, Namirra, was that boy." And the eyes of Namirra, filled with a vainglory of madness and bale, burned like malign, disastrous stars at the hour of their culmination.

To Zotulla, wholly mazed with the horror and tumult, the necromancer's words were no more than shrill, shrieked overtones of the tempest of doom; and he understood them not. Tremendously, with a rending of staunch-built roofs, and an instant cleavage and crumbling down of mighty masonries, the hooves descended upon Ummaos. Fair temple-domes were pashed like shells of the haliotis, and haughty mansions were broken and stamped into the ground even as gourds; and house by house the city was trampled flat with a crashing as of worlds beaten into chaos. Far below, in the darkened streets, men and camels fled like scurrying emmets but could not escape. And implacably the hooves rose and fell, till ruin was upon half the city, and night was over all. The palace of Zotulla was trodden under, and now the forelegs of the coursers loomed level with Namirra's balcony, and their heads towered awfully above. It seemed that they would rear and trample down the necromancer's house; but at that moment they parted to left and right, and a dolorous glimmering came from the low sunset; and the coursers went on, treading under them that portion of Ummaos which lay to the eastward. And Zotulla and Obexah and Namirra looked down on the city's fragments as on a shard-strewn midden, and heard the cataclysmic clamor of the hooves departing toward eastern Xylac.

"Now that was a goodly spectacle," quoth Namirra. Then, turning to the emperor, he added malignly: "Think not that I have done with thee, however, or that doom is yet consummate."

It seemed that the balcony had fallen to its former elevation, which was still a lofty vantage above the sharded ruins. And Namirra plucked the emperor by the arm and led him from the balcony to an inner chamber, while Obexah followed mutely. The emperor's heart was crushed within him by the trampling of such calamities, and despair weighed upon him like a foul incubus on the shoulders of a man lost in some land of accursed night. And he knew not that he had been parted from Obexah on the threshold of the chamber, and that certain of Namirra's creatures, appearing like shadows, had compelled the girl to go downward with them by the stairs, and had stifled her outcries with their rotten cerements as they went.

The chamber was one that Namirrha used for his most unhallowed rites and alchemies. The rays of the lamps that illumed it were saffron-red like the spilt ichor of devils, and they flowed on aludels and crucibles and black athanors and alembics whereof the purpose was hardly to be named by mortal man. The sorcerer heated in one of the alembics a dark liquid full of star-cold lights, while Zotulla looked on unheeding. And when the liquid bubbled and sent forth a spiral vapor, Namirrha distilled it into goblets of gold-rimmed iron, and gave one of the goblets to Zotulla and retained the other himself. And he said to Zotulla with a stern imperative voice: "I bid thee quaff this liquor."

Zotulla, fearing that the draft was poison, hesitated. And the necromancer regarded him with a lethal gaze, and cried loudly: "Fearest thou to do as I?" and therewith he set the goblet to his lips.

So the emperor drank the draft, constrained as if by the bidding of some angel of death, and a darkness fell upon his senses. But, ere the darkness grew complete, he saw that Namirrha had drained his own goblet.

Then, with unspeakable agonies, it seemed that the emperor died; and his soul float free; and again he saw the chamber, though with bodiless eyes. And discarnate he stood in the saffron-crimson light, with his body lying as if dead on the floor beside him, and near it the prone body of Namirrha and the two fallen goblets.

Standing thus, he beheld a strange thing: for anon his own body stirred and arose, while that of the necromancer remained still as death. And Zotulla looked at his own lineaments and his figure in its short cloak of azure samite sewn with black pearls and balas-rubies; and the body lived before him, though with eyes that held a darker fire and a deeper evil than was their wont. Then, without corporeal ears, Zotulla heard the figure speak, and the voice was the strong, arrogant voice of Namirrha, saying:

"Follow me, O houseless phantom, and do in all things as I enjoin thee."

Like an unseen shadow, Zotulla followed the wizard, and the twain went downward by the stairs to the great banquet hall. They came to the altar of

Thasaidon and the mailed image, with the seven horse-skull lamps burning before it as formerly. Upon the altar, Zotulla's beloved leman Obexah, who alone of all women had power to stir his sated heart, was lying bound with thongs at Thasaidon's feet. But the hall beyond was deserted, and nothing remained of that Saturnalia of doom except the fruit of the treading, which had flowed together in dark pools among the columns.

Namirra, using the emperor's body in all ways for his own, paused before the dark eidolon; and he said to the spirit of Zotulla: "Be imprisoned in this image, without power to free thyself or to stir in any wise."

Being wholly obedient to the will of the necromancer, the soul of Zotulla was embodied in the statue, and he felt its cold, gigantic armor about him like a straight sarcophagus, and he peered forth immovably from the bleak eyes that were overhung by its carven helmet.

Gazing thus, he beheld the change that had come on his own body through the sorcerous possession of Namirra: for below the short azure cloak, the legs had turned suddenly to the hind legs of a black stallion, with hooves that glowed redly as if heated by infernal fires. And even as Zotulla watched this prodigy, the hooves glowed white and incandescent, and fumes mounted from the floor beneath them.

Then, on the black altar, the hybrid abomination came pacing haughtily toward Obexah, and smoking footprints appeared behind it as it came. Pausing beside the girl, who lay supine and helpless regarding it with eyes that were pools of frozen horror, it raised one glowing hoof and set the hoof on her naked bosom between the small breast-cups of golden filigree begemmed with rubies. And the girl screamed beneath that atrocious treading as the soul of one newly damned might scream in hell; and the hoof glared with intolerable brilliance, as if freshly plucked from a furnace wherein the weapons of demons were forged.

At that moment, in the cowed and crushed and sodden shade of the emperor Zotulla, close-locked within the adamantine image, there awoke the manhood that had slumbered unaroused before the ruining of his empire

and the trampling of his retinue. Immediately a great abhorrence and a high wrath were alive in his soul, and mightily he longed for his own right arm to serve him, and a sword in his right hand.

Then it seemed that a voice spoke within him, chill and bleak and awful, and as if uttered inwardly by the statue itself. And the voice said: "I am Thasaïdon, lord of the seven hells beneath the earth, and the hells of man's heart above the earth, which are seven times seven. For the moment, O Zotulla, my power is become thine for the sake of a mutual vengeance. Be one in all ways with the statue that has my likeness, even as the soul is one with the flesh. Behold! there is a mace of adamant in thy right hand. Lift up the mace, and smite."

Zotulla was aware of a great power within him, and giant thews about him that thrilled with the power and responded agilely to his will. He felt in his mailed right hand the haft of the huge spiky-headed mace; and though the mace was beyond the lifting of any man in mortal flesh, it seemed no more than a goodly weight to Zotulla. Then, rearing he mace like a warrior in battle, he struck down with one crashing blow the impious thing that wore his own rightful flesh united with the legs and hooves of a demon courser. And the thing crumpled swiftly down and lay with the brain spreading pulpily from its shattered skull on the shining jet. And the legs twitched a little and then grew still; and the hooves glowed from a fiery, blinding white to the redness of red-hot iron, cooling slowly.

For a space there was no sound, other than the shrill screaming of the girl Obexah, mad with pain and the terror of those prodigies which she had beheld. Then in the soul of Zotulla, grown sick with that screaming, the chill, awful voice of Thasaïdon spoke again:

"Go free, for there is nothing more for thee to do." So the spirit of Zotulla passed from the image of Thasaïdon and found in the wide air the freedom of nothingness and oblivion.

But the end was not yet for Namirrha, whose mad, arrogant soul had been loosened from Zotulla's body by the blow, and had returned darkly, not in

the manner planned by the magician, to its own body lying in the room of accursed rites and forbidden transmigrations. There Namirrha woke anon, with a dire confusion in his mind, and a partial forgetfulness: for the curse of Thasaïdon was upon him now because of his blasphemies.

Nothing was clear in his thought except a malign, exorbitant longing for revenge; but the reason thereof, and the object, were as doubtful shadows. And still prompted by that obscure animus, he arose; and girding to his side an enchanted sword with runic sapphires and opals in the hilt, he descended the stairs and came again to the altar of Thasaïdon, where the mailed statue stood as impassive as before, with the poised mace in its immovable right hand, and below it, on the altar, the double sacrifice.

A veil of weird darkness was upon the senses of Namirrha, and he saw not the stallion-legged horror that lay dead with slowly blackening hooves; and he heard not the moaning of the girl Obexah, who still lived beside it. But his eyes were drawn by the diamond mirror that was upheld in the claws of black iron basilisks beyond the altar; and going to the mirror, he saw therein a face that he knew no longer for his own. And because his eyes were shadowed and his brain filled with the shifting webs of delusion, he took the face for that of the emperor Zotulla. Insatiable as Hell's own flame, his old hatred rose within him; and he drew the enchanted sword and began to hew therewith at the reflection. Sometimes, because of the curse laid upon him, and the impious transmigration which he had performed, he thought himself Zotulla warring with the necromancer; and again, in the shiftings of his madness, he was Namirrha smiting at the emperor; and then, without name, he fought a nameless foe. And soon the sorcerous blade, though tempered with formidable spells, was broken close to the hilt, and Namirrha beheld the image still unharmed. Then, howling aloud the half-forgotten runes of a most tremendous curse, made invalid through his own forgettings, he hammered still with the heavy sword-hilt on the mirror, till the runic sapphires and opals cracked in the hilt and fell away at his feet in little fragments.

Obexah, dying on the altar, saw Namirrha battling with his image, and the spectacle moved her to mad laughter like the pealing of bells of ruined

crystal. And above her laughter, and above the cursings of Namirra, there came anon like the rumbling of a swift-driven storm the thunder made by the macrocosmic stallions of Thamogorgos, returning gulfward through Xylac over Ummaos, to trample down the one house that they had spared aforetime.

THE DART OF RASASFA

Jon Montrose and his wife Mildred were passing Belaran, a sun obscured to earth-astronomers by a small dense nebula ^{^many^} [ten] million miles beyond Alpha Centauri. Its existence had been discovered nine years previously by an expedition which had gone by to remoter spatial objectives. Jon and Mildred were the only crew of the space-flier Daedalus in which they had left earth two years before, and were making maximum speed of several light-years a week by atomic power.

In their reflectors Belaran, a white sun similar to our own, displayed a system of seven worlds. The tint was unusual — most suns in proximity to nebulae were blue or red. They were nearest to the fourth world when the trouble began — a sudden and violent veering toward the planet, which lay to starboard. Jon's quick inspection showed that the steering apparatus was in good order. Some obscure magnetic force, not classified by their instruments, was drawing them downward to the unknown world, which soon revealed a conformation of plains and mountains below. The plains broadened, the mountains leapt upward with tops and slopes that assumed color and sharp definitude.

"God! We're going to crash!" Jon cried. He and Mildred watched helplessly as the vessel slanted past the high peaks with no visible snow but a lichen-like purplish vegetation. They dipped into a long steep ravine showing threads of water or other liquid at the bottom, and then landed on a sort of shelf, their prow plunging into soil and rocks deeply enough to hold the ship from sliding further.

Stunned by the impact, the voyagers soon regained full consciousness. They had held instinctively to the steering seat, but were bruised and bleeding. The engines grew silent. Air blowing in their faces drew their attention to the manhole in the slanted wall. It had been forced half open, and their atmosphere was tempered by a cool fresh breeze from outside which

seemed to have no deleterious effects but was perhaps a little higher in oxygen than that to which they were accustomed.

Jon examined the atomic engines. They had been turned off automatically by a breakage in the rod which connected them with the steering gear. The rod was made of carborundum and zeronium, the last-named a new element found on the moon and certain other planets. How it had been broken, unless flawed, was a mystery: the alloy was harder than diamond. Unless the break could be mended, they would be powerless to resume their journey.

Jon cursed in a low voice, remembering that they had neglected to bring along any spare parts, and wondering if the local landscape would afford the required materials. If so, they had a furnace for smelting and fusing and could mend the rod, even if rather crudely.

He told Mildred the problem, adding: "There's nothing for us to do except get out and hunt. Otherwise we'll be stuck here till the Second Coming."

He packed a knapsack with food and a thermos bottle of coffee, and gave it to Mildred. Then, carrying slung from his shoulders a pick and shovel and a complicated new instrument for detecting all known minerals and elements up to a depth of ten or more feet, he forced the manhole lid open enough to climb out and descend to the ledge on a crazily slanted ladder. His wife followed, having strapped the knapsack about her neck.

They could see much of the surrounding terrain. Far in the distance of the flat country below, towers or tall buildings glimmered. At their feet a series of rough projections in the stone made feasible their descent to the stream-bed where liquid pools and cascades gurgled between steep walls partly mantled with lichen or other short growth harder to classify.

The climbed down to the stream-bed, testing each of the salients carefully before trusting their full weight upon it. The pools were indistinguishable from common water at close view but might contain poisonous elements. They did not pause to test it but stepped across the stream and began to ascend the opposite side, stopping many times to try the detection

instrument, which showed only minerals and metals of ordinary kind, including traces of gold, silver, iron, and mercury.

By slow degrees they worked diagonally toward the plain, crossing several ridges and streams, one of the latter a cataract which they had to circumnavigate laboriously. At last, on a downward slope, they found evidence of carborundum; and, not far away, a small deposit of zeronium. Jon started to dig. He had gone down about five feet and had struck the carborundum, Mildred over beside him, when an interruption occurred. A heavy net of some clinging ropy material dropped over their heads and tightened. Beyond the meshes a group of incredible beings, reptile-headed but upright, bluish in color, with two hands and feet, were standing over them, holding the long handle of the net. One of these beings carried a sharp-pointed spear with which he touched them in turn, pricking through their clothes between the meshes. Unconsciousness quickly followed a spreading numbness at the touch of the spear.

Mildred awoke in a dungeon-like roofed enclosure, lit sparsely by small globes in the walls which had the look of staring violescent eyes. She was lying on a low couch of some soft and colorless material. Beside her on the floor was a flattish bowl containing, she conjectured, some sort of food-stuff. Still dazed and sick, she did not feel tempted to taste it. Anyway, the odor was not appetizing: it suggested stale fish.

She raised herself dizzily on her elbow. The floor seemed to reel, the lights in the walls to dance. Around a corner, swaying with the room's apparent motion, walked three of the bluish reptile-headed beings. One of them strapped an apparatus like an electrode to her forehead and held the other end to his own. She noticed for the first time that his hands were four-fingered. She heard in her brain a weird buzzing which began to shape itself into sounds that she could not recognize as words until after an interval. Presently she surmised that the sounds were a telepathic attempt at translation into English from a radically different tongue, in which many letters were hissed rather than spoken, but in words that were well-nigh unpronounceable by the human mouth-structure.

Mildred made out: "To the temple you must go where waits Asasfa {sic} Other person not yourself to sacrifice. Will result for us much benefit... much learning."

The sounds changed, becoming more rapid and less distinct, with a tone of stern command. Perhaps a hypnotic suggestion was being administered. At any rate she could not remember its nature or import when the being withdrew the instrument.

Her captors drew her upright. Their clammy touch made her shudder. Mildred's arms were supported while a reptile mask, whitish rather than blue, was fastened over her face. She became aware for the first time that she had been quite naked, when a short pale dress was draped around her. Then they led her from the room through an open doorway and up several flights of coiling steps and along endless dim corridors.

Somewhere the hilt of a stained, blackish, upward-pointing knife was placed in her hand, and her fingers were clasped tightly around it by cold reptile pressure. She could not recall why, or for what purpose, she was to use it. But a strong sense of predestination was upon her, and a feeling that she would be enlightened in due time.

Light opened before her. She was led through a high broad doorway into a vast edifice where a reptile being, taller than any she had yet seen, stood before an open alcove which gave forth a golden glimmering. The alcove's entrance looked like a huge broad keyhole. The being held in his hand a sickle-butted dart. The walls of the alcove behind him seemed inlaid with oblique oblongs of yellow mosaic, and the floor was partly littered with unnameable objects.

Mildred was half-pushed, half-carried, and made to stand on an indented pedestal at the right hand of the armed entity. She faced a deeply bowing silent congregation of reptilians in the nave, which appeared lit by sunlight between pillars at the rear.

Still half dazed, she perceived that a man had entered at the left and had paused in front of the dart-bearer. For a while she failed to recognize that

the man was Jon: his features seemed blurred with the faces of others she had known, had liked or disliked in former years. An impulse of sudden hatred made her raise the black knife, and she was about to fling it toward him.

She never knew what checked her. Perhaps the hypnotic command implanted in her mind had suddenly been reversed. She paused, while the dart-bearer lifted his weapon and hurled it violently at Jon, piercing his shirt at the side as he dodged agilely with muscles trained by a multitude of tasks.

Something (perhaps a remaining part of the hypnosis) told her that the dart-bearer was Asasfa[r], priest of an ultraplanetary sect. She leaped from the pedestal and stabbed him deeply in the side. Almost simultaneously, in his convulsive struggles, he scratched her breast with the dart-point before he dropped.

Jon and Mildred both underwent a strange hallucination, identical in all details, which they could never afterward forget. They had the sense of falling immeasurably, plunging through uncharted depths and dimensions, to hang insecurely poised on the verge of an alien hell, from which pointed flames and obscenely writhing monsters, dragon-like creatures with several heads and bodies, reached upward around their feet and sometimes over towered them, breathing a fetid stench in their faces. Not the least horror was the figure of Rasasfa standing close at hand, and thrusting with his dart at the monsters. And they, in turn, seemed to assail him with a special menace and venom, looming far up and lengthening fantastically into the skyless vault. He paid no attention to the humans, apparently oblivious of their presence either as foes or allies.

At last the lurid glow, like ashen embers, dimmed in the depths. The figures grew vaporous, and broke up like wind-blown clouds, trailing and mingling and finally dissolving. Jon and Mildred stood alone on the precipice, which tottered and fell apart.

They awoke in the nave. The crowd had vanished. The reptile had dropped his dart but was still writhing. Pierced in a vital part by Mildred's knife, he was dying very slowly, as snakes die.

They found their way from the edifice, meeting no one. Jon had picked up the dart and carried it. The sun had abandoned the skies, leaving a multitude of stars. Using a small pocket-compass, of which his captors had not deprived him, they left the city. The place lay entirely dark and silent, as if deserted by its inhabitants; and quitting its narrow, tortuous streets, they returned toward the mountains. They surmised that the slaying of Asasfa had wrought profound terror. Doubtless the people had believed him a supernatural or immortal being.

For two days they traveled across a semi-desert land. The sun leaned over them, warm until evening. They followed the compass toward a magnetic pole in what they liked to believe was the north. The air was very cold at night, and they slept a few hours in each other's arms. Fearing pursuit, they peered often backward at the city, which sank gradually on the horizon. Presently they found the tracks of the reptile people going cityward from the mountains, deeply printed because of the weight of the unconscious humans whom they carried. No doubt there were other cities in this world; but Jon and Mildred were glad to forgo any curiosity concerning them. Their one experience had been enough for several lifetimes.

Late in the second afternoon the footsteps led them to the hollow in which Jon had been digging when they were captured by the falling net. Their tools and sacks and thermos lay where they had left them, their captors plainly thinking these appurtenances of no particular account.

The coffee was still warm in the thermos. They gulped some of it down eagerly. Then Jon resumed his digging while Mildred remained on the ridge watching the remote city, which seemed to waver and flicker like a mirage. Jon had filled one of the sacks with crude carborundum and was beginning to uncover the zeronium when he heard Mildred cry out in warning. Hastily he climbed the ridge beside her, taking with him the dart-weapon and a pistol snatched from his pack.

A half-dozen of the reptile-men, climbing noiselessly, were hard upon them. All were armed with darts. They paused when Jon brandished Rasasfa's weapon, as if realizing its weird powers and superiority to their own. Then they resumed their advance. Jon dropped two of them with the pistol, which was a sort of flame-thrower, and short-ranged. The others fell back and concealed themselves behind boulders. They had estimated closely the range of the flame-thrower.

"Take over while I get the zeronium," Jon instructed, giving Mildred the pistol. She obeyed while Jon finished laying bare the needed element and partly filled the other sack. He attached the tools and sacks to his shoulder-band, and telling Mildred to follow, began to escalate toward the space-flier.

It was a close race. He heard the snap and hiss of the pistol and Mildred's cry of triumph as at least one of their pursuers fell back. Then he was climbing the flier's ladder and pushing his loads through the manhole. Hanging at one side, he made sure that Mildred preceded him, snatching the pistol from her hand as she went past. One of the reptile-men was starting to climb the ladder, but fell into the ravine when Jon fired. Jon went through the manhole and made fast the outer and inner lids.

They worked on their repairs for much of the night, hearing the baffled cries of the reptiles and the futile crash of their weapons against the hull and windows.

The furnaces had done their fusing, and the rod was welded and left to cool.

At earliest morning they took off and regained the outer skies.

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