

Astounding **SCIENCE FICTION**

MAY 1947
25 CENTS



GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT
WORLD DESTROYED
BY ATOMIC FIRE

FURY

BY
LAWRENCE
O'DONNELL

When the Bough Breaks

and other short stories

Henry Kuttner

When the Bough Breaks

Published in Astounding Science Fiction, Vol. 34, No. 3 (November 1944).

The characters are rather clearly modelled on Kuttner and Moore themselves

(maybe this story explains why they never had children).

They were surprised at getting the apartment, what with high rents and written-in clauses in the lease, and Joe Calderon felt himself lucky to be only ten minutes subway ride from the University. His wife, Myra, fluffed up her red hair in a distracted fashion and said that landlords presumably expected parthenogenesis in their tenants, if that was what she meant. Anyhow, it was where an organism split in two and the result was two mature specimens. Calderon grinned, said, "Binary fission, chump," and watched young Alexander, aged eighteen months, backing up on all fours across the carpet, preparatory to assuming a standing position on his fat bowlegs.

It was a pleasant apartment, at that. The sun came into it at times, and there were more rooms than they had any right to expect, for the price. The next-door neighbor, a billowy blonde who talked of little except her migraine, said that it was hard to keep tenants in 4-d. It wasn't exactly haunted, but it had the queerest visitors. The last lessee, an insurance man who drank heavily, moved out one day talking about little men who came ringing the bell at all hours asking for a Mr. Pott, or somebody like that. Not until some time later did Joe identify Pott with Cauldron--or Calderon.

They were sitting on the couch in a pleased manner, looking at Alexander. He was quite a baby. Like all infants, he had a collar of fat at the back of his neck, and his legs, Calderon said, were like two vast and trunkless limbs of stone--at least they gave that effect. The

eyes stopped at their incredible bulging pinkness, fascinated. Alexander laughed like a fool, rose to his feet, and staggered drunkenly toward his parents, muttering unintelligible gibberish. "Madman," Myra said fondly, and tossed the child a floppy velvet pig of whom he was enamored.

"So we're all set for the winter," Calderon said. He was a tall, thin, harassed-looking man, a fine research physicist, and very much interested in his work at the University. Myra was a rather fragile red-head, with a tilted nose and sardonic red-brown eyes. She made deprecatory noises.

"If we can get a maid. Otherwise I'll char."

"You sound like a lost soul," Calderon said. "What do you mean, you'll char?"

"Like a charwoman. Sweep, cook, clean. Babies are a great trial. Still, they're worth it."

"Not in front of Alexander. He'll get above himself."

The doorbell rang. Calderon uncoiled himself, wandered vaguely across the room, and opened the door. He blinked at nothing. Then he lowered his gaze somewhat, and what he saw was sufficient to make him stare a little.

Four tiny men were standing in the hall. That is, they were tiny below the brows. Their craniums were immense, watermelon large and watermelon shaped, or else they were wearing abnormally huge helmets of glistening metal. Their faces were wizened, peaked tiny masks that were nests of lines and wrinkles. Their clothes were garish, unpleasantly colored, and seemed to be made of paper.

"Oh?" Calderon said blankly.

Swift looks were exchanged among the four. One of them said, "Are you Joseph Calderon?"

"Yeah."

"We," said the most wrinkled of the quartet, "are your son's descendants. He's a super child. We're here to educate him."

"Yes," Calderon said. "Yes, of course. I... listen!"

"To what?"

"Super--"

"There he is," another dwarf cried. "It's Alexander! We've hit the right time at last!" He scuttled past Calderon's legs and into the room. Calderon made a few futile snatches, but the small men easily evaded him. When he turned, they were gathered around Alexander. Myra had drawn up her legs under her and was watching with an amazed expression.

"Look at that," a dwarf said. "See his potential tefeetzie?" It sounded like tefeetzie.

"But his skull, Bordent," another put in. "That's the important part. The vyrings are almost perfectly coblastably."

"Beautiful," Bordent acknowledged. He leaned forward. Alexander reached forward into the nest of wrinkles, seized Bordent's nose, and twisted painfully. Bordent bore it stoically until the grip relaxed.

"Undeveloped," he said tolerantly. "We'll develop him."

Myra sprang from the couch, picked up her child, and stood at bay, facing the little men. "Joe," she said, "are you going to stand for this? Who are these bad-mannered goblins?"

"Lord knows," Calderon said. He moistened his lips. "What kind of a gag is that? Who sent you?"

"Alexander," Bordent said. "From the year... ah... about 2450, reckoning roughly. He's practically immortal. Only violence can kill one of the Supers, and there's none of that in 2450."

Calderon sighed. "No, I mean it. A gag's a gag. But--"

"Time and again we've tried. In 1940, 1944, 1947--all around this era. We were either too early or too late. But now we've hit on the right time-sector. It's our job to educate Alexander. You should feel proud of being his parents. We worship you, you know. Father and mother of the new race."

"Tuh!" Calderon said. "Come off it!"

"They need proof, Dobish," someone said. "Remember, this is their first inkling that Alexander is homo superior."

"Homo nuts," Myra said. "Alexander's a perfectly normal baby."

"He's perfectly supernormal," Dobish said. "We're his descendents."

"That makes you a superman," Calderon said skeptically, eyeing the small man.

"Not in toto. There aren't many of the x Free type. The biological norm is specialization. Only a few are straight-line super. Some specialize in logic, others in vervainity, others--like us--are guides. If we were x Free supers, you couldn't stand there and talk to us. Or

look at us. We're only parts. Those like Alexander are the glorious whole."

"Oh, send them away," Myra said, getting tired of it. "I feel like a Thurber woman."

Calderon nodded. "o.k. Blow, gentlemen. Take a powder. I mean it."

"Yes," Dobish said, "they need proof. What'll we do? Skyskinate?"

"Too twisty," Bordent objected. "Object lesson, eh? The stiller."

"Stiller?" Myra asked.

Bordent took an object from his paper clothes and spun it in his hands. His fingers were all double-jointed. Calderon felt a tiny electric shock go through him.

"Joe," Myra said, white-faced. "I can't move."

"Neither can I. Take it easy. This is... it's--" He slowed and stopped.

"Sit down," Bordent said, still twirling the object. Calderon and Myra backed up to the couch and sat down. Their tongues froze with the rest of them.

Dobish came over, clambered up, and pried Alexander out of his mother's grip. Horror moved in her eyes.

"We won't hurt him," Dobish said. "We just want to give him his first lesson. Have you got the basics, Finn?"

"In the bag." Finn extracted a foot-long bag from his garments. Things came out of that bag. They came out incredibly. Soon the carpet was littered with stuff--problematical in design, nature, and

use. Calderon recognized a tesseract.

The fourth dwarf, whose name, it turned out, was Quat, smiled consolingly at the distressed parents. "You watch. You can't learn; you've not got the potential. You're homo saps. But Alexander, now--"

Alexander was in one of his moods. He was diabolically gay. With the devil-possession of all babies, he refused to collaborate. He crept rapidly backwards. He burst into loud, squalling sobs. He regarded his feet with amazed joy.

He stuffed his fist into his mouth and cried bitterly at the result. He talked about invisible things in a soft, cryptic monotone. He punched Dobish in the eye.

The little men had inexhaustible patience. Two hours later they were through. Calderon couldn't see that Alexander had learned much.

Bordent twirled the object again. He nodded affably, and led the retreat. The four little men went out of the apartment, and a moment later Calderon and Myra could move.

She jumped up, staggering on numbed legs, seized Alexander, and collapsed on the couch. Calderon rushed to the door and flung it open. The hall was empty.

"Joe--" Myra said, her voice small and afraid. Calderon came back and smoothed her hair. He looked down at the bright fuzzy head of Alexander.

"Joe. We've got to do--do something."

"I don't know," he said. "If it happened--"

"It happened. They took those things with them. Alexander. Oh!"

"They didn't try to hurt him," Calderon said hesitatingly.

"Our baby! He's no superchild."

"Well," Calderon said, "I'll get out my revolver. What else can I do?"

"I'll do something," Myra promised. "Nasty little goblins! I'll do something, just wait."

And yet there wasn't a great deal they could do.

Tacitly they ignored the subject the next day. But at 4 p.m., the same time as the original visitation, they were with Alexander in a theater, watching the latest Technicolor film. The four little men could scarcely find them here--

Calderon felt Myra stiffen, and even as he turned, he suspected the worst. Myra sprang up, her breath catching. Her fingers tightened on his arm.

"He's gone!"

"G-gone?"

"He just vanished. I was holding him... let's get out of here."

"Maybe you dropped him," Calderon said inanely, and lit a match. There were cries from behind. Myra was already pushing her way toward the aisle. There were no babies under the seat, and Calderon caught up with his wife in the lobby.

"He disappeared," Myra was babbling. "Like that. Maybe he's in the future. Joe, what'll we do?"

Calderon, through a miracle, got a taxi. "We'll go home. That's the most likely place. I hope."

"Yes. Of course it is. Give me a cigarette."

"He'll be in the apartment--"

He was, squatting on his haunches, taking a decided interest in the gadget Quat was demonstrating. The gadget was a gayly-colored egg beater with four-dimensional attachments, and it talked in a thin, high voice. Not in English.

Bordent flipped out the stiller and began to twirl it as the couple came in. Calderon got hold of Myra's arms and held her back, "Hold on," he said urgently. "That isn't necessary. We won't try anything."

"Joe!" Myra tried to wriggle free. "Are you going to let them--"

"Quiet!" he said. "Bordent, put that thing down. We want to talk to you."

"Well—if you promise not to interrupt--"

"We promise." Calderon forcibly led Myra to the couch and held her there. "Look, darling. Alexander's all right. They're not hurting him."

"Hurt him, indeed!" Finn said. "He'd skin us alive in the future if we hurt him in the past."

"Be quiet," Bordent commanded. He seemed to be the leader of the four. "I'm glad you're co-operating, Joseph Calderon. It goes against my grain to use force on a demigod. After all, you're Alexander's father."

Alexander put out a fat paw and tried to touch the whirling rainbow

egg beater. He seemed to be fascinated. Quat said, "The kivelish is sparking. Shall I vastinate?"

"Not too fast," Bordent said. "He'll be rational in a week, and then we can speed up the process. Now, Calderon, please relax. Anything you want?"

"A drink."

"They mean alcohol," Finn said. "The Rubaiyat mentions it, remember?"

"Rubaiyat?"

"The singing red gem in Twelve Library."

"Oh, yes," Bordent said. "That one. I was thinking of the Yahveh slab, the one with the thunder effects. Do you want to make some alcohol, Finn?"

Calderon swallowed. "Don't bother. I have some in that sideboard. May I--"

"You're not prisoners." Bordent's voice was shocked. "It's just that we've got to make you listen to a few explanations, and after that--well, it'll be different."

Myra shook her head when Calderon handed her a drink, but he scowled at her meaningly. "You won't feel it. Go ahead."

She hadn't once taken her gaze from Alexander. The baby was imitating the thin noise of the egg beater now. It was subtly unpleasant.

"The ray is working," Quat said. "The viewer shows some slight

cortical resistance, though."

"Angle the power," Bordent told him.

Alexander said, "Modjewabba?"

"What's that?" Myra asked in a strained voice. "Super language?"

Bordent smiled at her. "No, just baby talk."

Alexander burst into sobs. Myra said, "Super baby or not, when he cries like that, there's a good reason. Does your tutoring extend to that point?"

"Certainly," Quat said calmly. He and Finn carried Alexander out. Bordent smiled again.

"You're beginning to believe," he said. "That helps." Calderon drank, feeling the hot fumes of whiskey along the backs of his cheeks. His stomach was crawling with cold uneasiness.

"If you were human--" he said doubtfully.

"If we were, we wouldn't be here. The old order changeth. It had to start sometime. Alexander is the first homo superior."

"But why us?" Myra asked.

"Genetics. You've both worked with radioactivity and certain short-wave radiations that effected the germ plasm. The mutation just happened. It'll happen again from now on. But you happen to be the first. You'll die, but Alexander will live on. Perhaps a thousand years."

Calderon said, "This business of coming from the future... you say Alexander sent you?"

"The adult Alexander. The mature superman. It's a different culture, of course--beyond your comprehension. Alexander is one of the x Frees. He said to me, through the interpreting-machine, of course, 'Bordent, I wasn't recognized as a super till I was thirty years old. I had only ordinary homo sap development till then. I didn't know my potential myself. And that's bad.' It is bad, you know," Bordent digressed. "The full capabilities of an organism can't emerge unless it's given the fullest chance of expansion from birth on. Or at least from infancy. Alexander said to me, 'It's about five hundred years ago that I was born. Take a few guides and go into the past. Locate me as an infant. Give me specialized training, from the beginning. I think it'll expand me.'"

"The past," Calderon said. "You mean it's plastic?"

"Well, it affects the future. You can't alter the past without altering the future, too. But things tend to drift back. There's a temporal norm, a general level. In the original time sector, Alexander wasn't visited by us. Now that's changed. So the future will be changed. But not tremendously. No crucial temporal apexes are involved, no keystones. The only result will be that the mature Alexander will have his potential more fully realized."

Alexander was carried back into the room, beaming. Quat resumed his lesson with the egg beater.

"There isn't a great deal you can do about it," Bordent said. "I think you realize that now."

Myra said, "Is Alexander going to look like you?" Her face was strained.

"Oh, no. He's a perfect physical specimen. I've never seen him, of course, but--"

Calderon said, "Heir to all the ages. Myra, are you beginning to get the idea?"

"Yes. A superman. But he's our baby."

"He'll remain so," Bordent put in anxiously. "We don't want to remove him from the beneficial home and parental influence. An infant needs that. In fact, tolerance for the young is an evolutionary trait aimed at providing for the superman's appearance, just as the vanishing appendix is such a preparation. At certain eras of history mankind is receptive to the preparation of the new race. It's never been quite successful before--there were anthropological miscarriages, so to speak. My squeevers, it's important! Infants are awfully irritating. They're helpless for a very long time, a great trial to the patience of the parents--the lower the order of the animal, the faster the infant develops. With mankind, it takes years for the young to reach an independent state. So the parental tolerance increases in proportion. The superchild won't mature, actually, till he's about twenty."

Myra said, "Alexander will still be a baby then?"

"He'll have the physical standards of an eight-year-old specimen of homo sap. Mentally... well, call it irrationality. He won't be leveled out to an intellectual or emotional norm. He won't be sane, any more than any baby is. Selectivity takes quite a while to develop. But his peaks will be far, far above the peaks of, say, you as a child."

"Thanks," Calderon said.

"His horizons will be broader. His mind is capable of grasping and assimilating far more than yours. The world is really his oyster. He won't be limited. But it'll take a while for his mind, his personality, to shake down."

"I want another drink," Myra said.

Calderon got it. Alexander inserted his thumb in Quat's eye and tried to gouge it out. Quat submitted passively.

"Alexander!" Myra said.

"Sit still," Bordent said. "Quat's tolerance in this regard is naturally higher developed than yours."

"If he puts Quat's eye out," Calderon said, "it'll be just too bad."

"Quat isn't important, compared to Alexander. He knows it, too."

Luckily for Quat's binocular vision, Alexander suddenly tired of his new toy and fell to staring at the egg beater again. Dobish and Finn leaned over the baby and looked at him. But there was more to it than that, Calderon felt.

Induced telepathy," Bordent said. "It takes a long time to develop, but we're starting now. I tell you, it was a relief to hit the right time at last. I've rung this doorbell at least a hundred times. But never till now--"

"Move," Alexander said clearly. "Real. Move."

Bordent nodded. "Enough for today. We'll be here again tomorrow. You'll be ready?"

"As ready," Myra said, "as we'll ever be, I suppose." She finished her drink.

They got fairly high that night and talked it over. Their arguments were biased by their realization of the four little men's obvious resources. Neither doubted any more. They knew that Bordent and his companions had come from five hundred years in the future, at

the command of a future Alexander who had matured into a fine specimen of superman.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Myra said. "That fat little blob in the bedroom turning into a twelfth-power Quiz Kid."

"Well, it's got to start somewhere. As Bordent pointed out."

"And as long as he isn't going to look like those goblins--ugh!"

"He'll be super. Deucalion and what's-her-name--that's us. Parents of a new race."

"I feel funny," Myra said. "As though I'd given birth to a moose."

"That could never happen," Calderon said consolingly. "Have another slug."

"It might as well have happened. Alexander is a swoose."

"Swoose?"

"I can use that goblin's doubletalk, too. Vopishly woggle in the grand foyer. So there."

"It's a language to them," Calderon said.

"Alexander's going to talk English. I've got my rights."

"Well, Bordent doesn't seem anxious to infringe on them. He said Alexander needed a home environment."

"That's the only reason I haven't gone crazy," Myra said. "As long as he... they... don't take our baby away from us--"

A week later it was thoroughly clear that Bordent had no intention of encroaching on parental rights—at least, any more than was necessary, for two hours a day. During that period the four little men fulfilled their orders by cramming Alexander with all the knowledge his infantile but super brain could hold. They did not depend on blocks or nursery rhymes or the abacus. Their weapons in the battle were cryptic, futuristic, but effective. And they taught Alexander, there was no doubt of that. As b-1 poured on a plant's roots forces growth, so the vitamin teaching of the dwarfs soaked into Alexander, and his potentially superhuman brain responded, expanding with brilliant, erratic speed.

He had talked intelligibly on the fourth day. On the seventh day he was easily able to hold conversations, though his baby muscles, lingually undeveloped, tired easily. His cheeks were still sucking-disks; he was not yet fully human, except in sporadic flashes. Yet those flashes came oftener now, and closer together.

The carpet was a mess. The little men no longer took their equipment back with them; they left it for Alexander to use. The infant crept—he no longer bothered to walk much, for he could crawl with more efficiency—among the Objects, selected some of them, and put them together. Myra had gone out to shop. The little men wouldn't show up for half an hour. Calderon, tired from his day's work at the University, fingered a highball and looked at his offspring.

"Alexander," he said.

Alexander didn't answer. He fitted a gadget to a Thing, inserted it peculiarly in a Something Else, and sat back with an air of satisfaction. Then—"Yes?" he said. It wasn't perfect pronunciation, but it was unmistakable. Alexander talked somewhat like a toothless old man.

"What are you doing?" Calderon said.

"No."

"What's that?"

"No."

"No?"

"I understand it," Alexander said. "That's enough."

"I see." Calderon regarded the prodigy with faint apprehension. "You don't want to tell me."

"No."

"Well, all right."

"Get me a drink," Alexander said. For a moment Calderon had a mad idea that the infant was demanding a highball. Then he sighed, rose, and returned with a bottle.

"Milk," Alexander said, refusing the potation.

"You said a drink. Water's a drink, isn't it?" My God, Calderon thought, I'm arguing with the kid. I'm treating him like... like an adult. But he isn't. He's a fat little baby squatting on his behind on the carpet, playing with a tinkertoy.

The tinkertoy said something in a thin voice. Alexander murmured, "Repeat." The tinkertoy did.

Calderon said, "What was that?"

"No."

"Nuts." Calderon went out to the kitchen and got milk. He poured himself another shot. This was like having relatives drop in suddenly--relatives you hadn't seen for ten years. How the devil did you act with a superchild?

He stayed in the kitchen, after supplying Alexander with his milk. Presently Myra's key turned in the outer door. Her cry brought Calderon hurrying.

Alexander was vomiting, with the air of a research man absorbed in a fascinating phenomenon.

"Alexander!" Myra cried. "Darling, are you sick?"

"No," Alexander said. "I'm testing my regurgitative processes. I must learn to control my digestive organs."

Calderon leaned against the door, grinning crookedly. "Yeah. You'd better start now, too."

"I'm finished," Alexander said. "Clean it up."

Three days later the infant decided that his lungs needed developing. He cried. He cried at all hours, with interesting variations--whoops, squalls, wails, and high-pitched bellows. Nor would he stop till he was satisfied. The neighbors complained. Myra said, "Darling, is there a pin sticking you? Let me look--"

"Go away," Alexander said. "You're too warm. Open the window. I want fresh air."

"Yes, d-darling. Of course." She came back to bed and Calderon put his arm around her. He knew there would be shadows under her

eyes in the morning. In his crib Alexander cried on.

So it went. The four little men came daily and gave Alexander his lessons. They were pleased with the infant's progress. They did not complain when Alexander indulged in his idiosyncrasies, such as batting them heavily on the nose or ripping their paper garments to shreds. Bordent tapped his metal helmet and smiled triumphantly at Calderon.

"He's coming along. He's developing."

"I'm wondering. What about discipline?"

Alexander looked up from his rapport with Quat. "Homo sap discipline doesn't apply to me, Joseph Calderon."

"Don't call me Joseph Calderon. I'm your father, after all."

"A primitive biological necessity. You are sufficiently well developed to provide the discipline I require. Your purpose is to give me parental care."

"Which makes me an incubator," Calderon said.

"But a deified one," Bordent soothed him. "Practically a logos. The father of the new race."

"I feel more like Prometheus," the father of the new race said dourly. "He was helpful, too. And he ended up with a vulture eating his liver."

"You will learn a great deal from Alexander."

"He says I'm incapable of understanding it."

"Well, aren't you?"

"Sure. I'm just the papa bird," Calderon said, and subsided into a sad silence, watching Alexander, under Quat's tutelary eye, put together a gadget of shimmering glass and twisted metal. Bordent said suddenly. "Quat! Be careful of the egg!" And Finn seized a bluish ovoid just before Alexander's chubby hand could grasp it.

"It isn't dangerous," Quat said. "It isn't connected."

"He might have connected it."

"I want that," Alexander said. "Give it to me."

"Not yet, Alexander," Bordent refused. "You must learn the correct way of connecting it first. Otherwise it might harm you."

"I could do it."

"You are not logical enough to balance your capabilities and lacks as yet. Later it will be safe. I think now, perhaps, a little philosophy, Dobish--eh?"

Dobish squatted and went en rapport with Alexander. Myra came out of the kitchen, took a quick look at the tableau, and retreated. Calderon followed her out.

"I will never get used to it if I live a thousand years," she said with slow emphasis, hacking at the doughy rim of a pie. "He's my baby only when he's asleep."

"We won't live a thousand years," Calderon told her. "Alexander will, though. I wish we could get a maid."

"I tried again today," Myra said wearily. "No use. They're all in war plants. I mention a baby--"

"You can't do all this alone."

"You help," she said, "when you can. But you're working hard too, fella. It won't be forever."

"I wonder if we had another baby... if--"

Her sober gaze met his. "I've wondered that, too. But I should think mutations aren't as cheap as that. Once in a lifetime. Still, we don't know."

"Well, it doesn't matter now, anyway. One infant's enough for the moment."

Myra glanced toward the door. "Everything all right in there? Take a look. I worry."

"It's all right."

"I know, but that blue egg--Bordent said it was dangerous, you know. I heard him."

Calderon peeped through the door-crack. The four dwarfs were sitting facing Alexander, whose eyes were closed. Now they opened. The infant scowled at Calderon.

"Stay out," he requested. "You're breaking the rapport."

"I'm so sorry," Calderon said, retreating. "He's o.k., Myra. His own dictatorial little self."

"Well, he is a superman," she said doubtfully.

"No. He's a super-baby. There's all the difference."

"His latest trick," Myra said, busy with the oven, "is riddles. Or something like riddles. I feel so small when he catches me up. But he says it's good for his ego. It compensates for his physical frailness."

"Riddles, eh? I know a few too."

"They won't work on Alexander," Myra said, with grim assurance.

Nor did they. "What goes up a chimney up?" was treated with the contempt it deserved; Alexander examined his father's riddles, turned them over in his logical mind, analyzed them for flaws in semantics and logic, and rejected them. Or else he answered them, with such fine accuracy that Calderon was too embarrassed to give the correct answers. He was reduced to asking why a raven was like a writing desk, and since not even the Mad Hatter had been able to answer his own riddle, was slightly terrified to find himself listening to a dissertation on comparative ornithology. After that, he let Alexander needle him with infantile gags about the relations of gamma rays to photons, and tried to be philosophical. There are few things as irritating as a child's riddles. His mocking triumph pulverizes itself into the dust in which you grovel.

"Oh, leave your father alone," Myra said, coming in with her hair disarranged. "He's trying to read the paper."

"That news is unimportant."

"I'm reading the comics," Calderon said. "I want to see if the Katzenjammers get even with the Captain for hanging them under a waterfall."

"The formula for the humor of an incongruity predicament," Alexander began learnedly, but Calderon disgustedly went into the bedroom, where Myra joined him.

"He's asking me riddles again," she said. "Let's see what the Katzenjammers did."

"You look rather miserable. Got a cold?"

"I'm not wearing make-up. Alexander says the smell makes him ill."

"So what? He's no petunia."

"Well," Myra said, "he does get ill. But of course he does it on purpose."

"Listen. There he goes again. What now?"

But Alexander merely wanted an audience. He had found a new way of making imbecilic noises with his fingers and lips. At times the child's normal phases were more trying than his super periods. After a month had passed, however, Calderon felt that the worst was yet to come. Alexander had progressed into fields of knowledge hitherto untouched by homo sap, and he had developed a leechlike habit of sucking his father's brains dry of every scrap of knowledge the wretched man possessed.

It was the same with Myra. The world was indeed Alexander's oyster. He had an insatiable curiosity about everything, and there was no longer any privacy in the apartment. Calderon took to locking the bedroom door against his son at night--Alexander's crib was now in another room--but furious squalls might waken him at any hour.

In the midst of preparing dinner, Myra would be forced to stop and explain the caloric mysteries of the oven to Alexander. He learned all she knew, took a jump into more abstruse aspects of the matter, and sneered at her ignorance. He found out Calderon was a physicist, a fact which the man had hitherto kept carefully concealed, and

thereafter pumped his father dry. He asked questions about geodetics and geopolitics. He inquired about monotremes and monorails. He was curious about biremes and biology. And he was skeptical, doubting the depth of his father's knowledge. "But," he said, "you and Myra Calderon are my closest contacts with homo sap as yet, and it's a beginning. Put out that cigarette. It isn't good for my lungs."

"All right," Calderon said. He rose wearily, with his usual feeling these days of being driven from room to room of the apartment, and went in search of Myra. "Bordent's about due. We can go out somewhere. o. k.?"

"Swell." She was at the mirror, fixing her hair, in a trice. "I need a permanent. If I only had the time--!"

"I'll take off tomorrow and stay here. You need a rest."

"Darling, no. The exams are coming up. You simply can't do it."

Alexander yelled. It developed that he wanted his mother to sing for him. He was curious about the tonal range of homo sap and the probable emotional and soporific effect of lullabies. Calderon mixed himself a drink, sat in the kitchen and smoked, and thought about the glorious destiny of his son. When Myra stopped singing, he listened for Alexander's wails, but there was no sound till a slightly hysterical Myra burst in on him, dithering and wide-eyed.

"Joe!" She fell into Calderon's arms. "Quick, give me a drink or... or hold me tight or something."

"What is it?" He thrust the bottle into her hands, went to the door, and looked out. "Alexander? He's quiet. Eating candy."

Myra didn't bother with a glass. The bottle's neck clicked against her

teeth. "Look at me. Just look at me. I'm a mess."

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Alexander's turned into a black magician, that's all." She dropped into a chair and passed a palm across her forehead. "Do you know what that genius son of ours just did?"

"Bit you," Calderon hazarded, not doubting it for a minute.

"Worse, far worse. He started asking me for candy. I said there wasn't any in the house. He told me to go down to the grocery for some. I said I'd have to get dressed first, and I was too tired."

"Why didn't you ask me to go?"

"I didn't have the chance. Before I could say boo that infantile Merlin waved a magic wand or something. I... I was down at the grocery. Behind the candy counter."

Calderon blinked. "Induced amnesia?"

"There wasn't any time-lapse. It was just phweet--and there I was. In this rag of a dress, without a speck of makeup on, and my hair coming down in tassels. Mrs. Busherman was there, too, buying a chicken--that cat across the hall. She was kind enough to tell me I ought to take more care of myself. Meow," Myra ended furiously.

"Good Lord."

"Teleportation. That's what Alexander says it is. Something new he's picked up. I'm not going to stand for it, Joe. I'm not a rag doll, after all." She was half hysterical.

Calderon went into the next room and stood regarding his child.

There was chocolate smeared around Alexander's mouth.

"Listen, wise guy," he said. "You leave your mother alone, hear me?"

"I didn't hurt her," the prodigy pointed out, in a blobby voice. "I was simply being efficient."

"Well, don't be so efficient. Where did you learn that trick, anyhow?"

"Teleportation? Quat showed me last night. He can't do it himself, but I'm x Free super, so I can. The power isn't disciplined yet. If I'd tried to teleport Myra Calderon over to Jersey, say, I might have dropped her in the Hudson by mistake."

Calderon muttered something uncomplimentary. Alexander said, "Is that an Anglo-Saxon derivative?"

"Never mind about that. You shouldn't have all that chocolate, anyway. You'll make yourself sick. You've already made your mother sick. And you nauseate me."

"Go away," Alexander said. "I want to concentrate on the taste."

"No. I said you'd make yourself sick. Chocolate's too rich for you. Give it here. You've had enough." Calderon reached for the paper sack. Alexander disappeared. In the kitchen Myra shrieked.

Calderon moaned despondently, and turned. As he had expected, Alexander was in the kitchen, on top of the stove, hoggishly stuffing candy into his mouth. Myra was concentrating on the bottle.

"What a household," Calderon said. "The baby teleporting himself all over the apartment, you getting stewed in the kitchen, and me heading for a nervous breakdown." He started to laugh. "o.k., Alexander. You can keep the candy. I know when to shorten my

defensive lines strategically."

"Myra Calderon," Alexander said. "I want to go back into the other room."

"Fly in," Calderon suggested. "Here, I'll carry you."

"Not you. Her. She has a better rhythm when she walks."

"Staggers, you mean," Myra said, but she obediently put aside the bottle, got up, and laid hold of Alexander. She went out. Calderon was not much surprised to hear her scream a moment later. When he joined the happy family, Myra was sitting on the floor, rubbing her arms and biting her lips. Alexander was laughing.

"What now?"

"H-he sh-shocked me," Myra said in a child's voice. "He's like an electric eel. He d-did it on purpose, too. Oh, Alexander, will you stop laughing!"

"You fell down," the infant crowed in triumph. "You yelled and fell down."

Calderon looked at Myra, and his mouth tightened. "Did you do that on purpose?" he asked.

"Yes. She fell down. She looked funny."

"You're going to look a lot funnier in a minute. x Free super or not, what you need is a good paddling."

"Joe--" Myra said.

"Never mind. He's got to learn to be considerate of the rights of

others."

"I'm homo superior," Alexander said, with the air of one clinching an argument.

"It's homo posterior I'm going to deal with," Calderon announced, and attempted to capture his son. There was a stinging blaze of jolting nervous energy that blasted up through his synapses; he went backwards ignominiously, and slammed into the wall, cracking his head hard against it. Alexander laughed like an idiot.

"You fell down, too," he crowed. "You look funny."

"Joe," Myra said. "Joe. Are you hurt?"

Calderon said sourly that he supposed he'd survive. Though, he added, it would probably be wise to lay in a few splints and a supply of blood plasma. "In case he gets interested in vivisection."

Myra regarded Alexander with troubled speculation. "You're kidding, I hope."

"I hope so, too."

"Well--here's Bordent. Let's talk to him."

Calderon answered the door. The four little men came in solemnly. They wasted no time. They gathered about Alexander, unfolded fresh apparatus from the recesses of their paper clothes, and set to work. The infant said, "I teleported her about eight thousand feet."

"That far, eh?" Quat said. "Were you fatigued at all?"

"Not a bit."

Calderon dragged Bordent aside. "I want to talk to you. I think Alexander needs a spanking."

"By voraster!" the dwarf said, shocked. "But he's Alexander! He's x Free type super!"

"Not yet. He's still a baby."

"But a superbaby. No, no, Joseph Calderon. I must tell you again that disciplinary measures can be applied only by sufficiently intelligent authorities."

"You?"

"Oh, not yet," Bordent said. "We don't want to overwork him. There's a limit even to super brain power, especially in the very formative period. He's got enough to do, and his attitudes for social contacts won't need forming for a while yet."

Myra joined them. "I don't agree with you there. Like all babies, he's antisocial. He may have superhuman powers but he's subhuman as far as mental and emotional balance go."

"Yeah," Calderon agreed. "This business of giving us electric shocks--"

"He's only playing," Bordent said.

"And teleportation. Suppose he teleports me to Times Square when I'm taking a shower?"

"It's only his play. He's a baby still."

"But what about us?"

"You have the hereditary characteristic of parental tolerance," Bordent explained. "As I told you before, Alexander and his race are the reason why tolerance was created in the first place. There's no great need for it with homo sap. I mean there's a wide space between normal tolerance and normal provocation. An ordinary baby may try his parents severely for a few moments at a time, but that's about all. The provocation is far too small to require the tremendous store of tolerance the parents have. But with the x Free type, it's a different matter."

"There's a limit even to tolerance," Calderon said. "I'm wondering about a creche."

Bordent shook his shiny metallic-sheathed head. "He needs you."

"But," Myra said, "but! Can't you give him just a little discipline?"

"Oh, it isn't necessary. His mind's still immature, and he must concentrate on more important things. You'll tolerate him."

"It's not as though he's our baby any more," she murmured. "He's not Alexander."

"But he is. That's just it. He's Alexander!"

"Look, it's normal for a mother to want to hug her baby. But how can she do that if she expects him to throw her halfway across the room?"

Calderone was brooding. "Will he pick up more... more super powers as he goes along?"

"Why, yes. Naturally."

"He's a menace to life and limb. I still say he needs discipline. Next

time I'll wear rubber gloves."

"That won't help," Bordent said, frowning. "Besides, I must insist... no, Joseph Calderon, it won't do. You mustn't interfere. You're not capable of giving him the right sort of discipline--which he doesn't need yet anyway."

"Just one spanking," Calderon said wistfully. "Not for revenge. Only to show him he's got to consider the rights of others."

"He'll learn to consider the rights of other x Free supers. You must not attempt anything of the sort. A spanking--even if you succeeded, which is far from probable--might warp him psychologically. We are his tutors, his mentors. We must protect him. You understand?"

"I think so," Calderon said slowly. "That's a threat."

"You are Alexander's parents, but it's Alexander who is important. If I must apply disciplinary measures to you, I must."

"Oh, forget it," Myra sighed. "Joe, let's go out and walk in the park while Bordent's here."

"Be back in two hours," the little man said. "Good-by."

As time went past, Calderon could not decide whether Alexander's moronic phases or his periods of keen intelligence were more irritating. The prodigy had learned new powers; the worst of that was that Calderon never knew what to expect, or when some astounding gag would be sprung on him. Such as the time when a mess of sticky taffy had materialized in his bed, filched from the grocery by deft teleportation. Alexander thought it was very funny. He laughed.

And, when Calderon refused to go to the store to buy candy because he said he had no money--"Now don't try to teleport me. I'm broke."--

Alexander had utilized mental energy, warping gravity lines shockingly. Calderon found himself hanging upside-down in midair, being shaken, while loose coins cascaded out of his pocket. He went after the candy.

Humor is a developed sense, stemming basically from cruelty. The more primitive a mind, the less selectivity exists. A cannibal would probably be profoundly amused by the squirmings of his victim in the seething kettle. A man slips on a banana peel and breaks his back. The adult stops laughing at that point, the child does not. And a civilized ego finds embarrassment as acutely distressing as physical pain. A baby, a child, a moron, is incapable of practicing empathy. He cannot identify himself with another individual. He is regrettably autistic; his own rules are arbitrary, and garbage strewn around the bedroom was funny to neither Myra nor Calderon.

There was a little stranger in the house. Nobody rejoiced. Except Alexander. He had a lot of fun.

"No privacy," Calderon said. "He materializes everywhere, at all hours. Darling, I wish you'd see a doctor."

"What would he advise?" Myra asked. "Rest, that's all. Do you realize it's been two months since Bordent took over?"

"And we've made marvelous progress," Bordent said, coming over to them. Quat was en rapport with Alexander on the carpet, while the other two dwarfs prepared the makings of a new gadget. "Or, rather, Alexander has made remarkable progress."

"We need a rest," Calderon growled. "If I lose my job, who'll support that genius of yours?" Myra looked at her husband quickly, noting the possessive pronoun he had used.

Bordent was concerned. "You are in difficulty?"

"The Dean's spoken to me once or twice. I can't control my classes any more. I'm too irritable."

"You don't need to expend tolerance on your students. As for money, we can keep you supplied. I'll arrange to get some negotiable currency for you."

"But I want to work. I like my job."

"Alexander is your job."

"I need a maid," Myra said, looking hopeless. "Can't you make me a robot or something? Alexander scares every maid I've ever managed to hire. They won't stay a day in this madhouse."

"A mechanical intelligence would have a bad effect on Alexander," Bordent said. "No."

"I wish we could have guests in once in a while. Or go out visiting. Or just be alone," Myra sighed.

"Some day Alexander will be mature, and you'll reap your reward. The parents of Alexander. Did I ever tell you that we have images of you two in the Great Foggy Hall?"

"They must look terrible," Calderon said. "I know we do now."

"Be patient. Consider the destiny of your son."

"I do. Often. But he gets a little wearing sometimes. That's quite an understatement."

"Which is where tolerance comes in," Bordent said. "Nature planned

well for the new race."

"Mm-m-m."

"He is working on sixth-dimensional abstractions now. Everything is progressing beautifully."

"Yeah," Calderon said. And he went away, muttering, to join Myra in the kitchen.

Alexander worked with facility at his gadgets, his pudgy fingers already stronger and surer. He still had an illicit passion for the blue ovoid, but under Bordent's watchful eye he could use it only along the restricted lines laid out by his mentors. When the lesson was finished, Quat selected a few of the objects and locked them in a cupboard, as was his custom. The rest he left on the carpet to provide exercise for Alexander's ingenuity.

"He develops," Bordent said. "Today we've made a great step."

Myra and Calderon came in in time to hear this. "What goes?" he asked.

"A psychic bloc-removal. Alexander will no longer need to sleep."

"What?" Myra said.

"He won't require sleep. It's an artificial habit anyway. The super race has no need of it."

"He won't sleep any more, eh?" Calderon said. He had grown a little pale.

"Correct. He'll develop faster now, twice as fast."

At 3:30 a. m. Calderon and Myralay in bed, wide awake, looking through the open door in to the full blaze of light where Alexander played. Seen there clearly, as if upon a lighted stage, he did not look quite like himself any more. The difference was subtle, but it was there. Under the golden down his head had changed shape slightly, and there was a look of intelligence and purpose upon the blobby features. It was not an attractive look. It didn't belong there. It made Alexander look less like a super-baby than a debased oldster. All a child's normal cruelty and selfishness--perfectly healthy, natural traits in the developing infant--flickered across Alexander's face as he played absorbedly with solid crystal blocks which he was fitting into one another like a Chinese puzzle. It was quite a shocking face to watch.

Calderon heard Myra sigh beside him.

"He isn't our Alexander any more," she said. "Not a bit."

Alexander glanced up and his face suddenly suffused. The look of paradoxical age and degeneracy upon it vanished as he opened his mouth and bawled with rage, tossing the blocks in all directions. Calderon watched one roll through the bedroom door and come to rest upon the carpet, spilling out of its solidity a cascade of smaller and smaller solid blocks that tumbled winking toward him. Alexander's cries filled the apartment. After a moment windows began to slam across the court, and presently the phone rang. Calderon reached for it, sighing.

When he hung up he looked across at Myra and grimaced. Above the steady roars he said, "Well, we have notice to move."

Myra said, "Oh. Oh, well."

"That about covers it."

They were silent for a moment. Then Calderon said, "Nineteen years more of it. I think we can expect about that. They did say he'd mature at twenty, didn't they?"

"He'll be an orphan long before then," Myra groaned. "Oh, my head! I think I caught cold when he teleported us up to the roof just before dinner. Joe, do you suppose we're the first parents who ever got... got caught like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, was there ever another super-baby before Alexander? It does seem like a waste of a lot of tolerance if we're the first to need it."

"We could use a lot more. We'll need a lot." He said nothing more for awhile, but he lay there thinking and trying not to hear his super-child's rhythmic howling. Tolerance. Every parent needed a great deal of it. Every child was intolerable from time to time. The race had certainly needed parental love in vast quantities to permit its infants to survive. But no parents before had ever been tried consistently up to the very last degree of tolerance. No parents before had ever had to face twenty years of it, day and night, strained to the final notch. Parental love is a great and all-encompassing emotion, but--

"I wonder," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we are the first."

Myra's speculations had been veering. "I suppose it's like tonsils and appendix," she murmured. "They've outlived their use, but they still hang on. This tolerance is vestigial in reverse. It's been hanging on all these millenniums, waiting for Alexander."

"Maybe. I wonder-- Still, if there ever had been an Alexander before now, we'd have heard of him. So--"

Myra rose on one elbow and looked at her husband. "You think so?" she said softly. "I'm not so sure. I think it might have happened before."

Alexander suddenly quieted. The apartment rang with silence for a moment. Then a familiar voice, without words, spoke in both their brains simultaneously.

"Get me some more milk. And I want it just warm, not hot."

Joe and Myra looked at one another again, speechless. Myra sighed and pushed the covers back. "I'll go this time," she said. "Something new, eh? I--"

"Don't dawdle," said the wordless voice, and Myra jumped and gave a little shriek. Electricity crackled audibly through the room, and Alexander's bawling laughter was heard through the doorway.

"He's about as civilized now as a well-trained monkey, I suppose," Joe remarked, getting out of bed. "I'll go. You crawl back in. And in another year he may reach the elevation of a bushman. After that, if we're still alive, we'll have the pleasure of living with a super-powered cannibal. Eventually he may work up to the level of practical joker. That ought to be interesting." He went out, muttering to himself.

Ten minutes later, returning to bed, Joe found Myra clasping her knees and looking into space.

"We aren't the first, Joe," she said, not glancing at him. "I've been thinking. I'm pretty sure we aren't."

"But we've never heard of any supermen developing--"

She turned her head and gave him a long, thoughtful look. "No," she

said.

They were silent. Then, "Yes, I see what you mean," he nodded.

Something crashed in the living room. Alexander chuckled and the sound of splintering wood was loud in the silence of the night. Another window banged somewhere outside.

"There's a breaking point," Myra said quietly. "There's got to be."

"Saturation," Joe murmured. "Tolerance saturation—or something. It could have happened."

Alexander trundled into sight, clutching something blue. He sat down and began to fiddle with bright wires. Myra rose suddenly.

"Joe, he's got that blue egg! He must have broken into the cupboard."

Calderon said, "But Quat told him--"

"It's dangerous!"

Alexander looked at them, grinned, and bent the wires into a cradle-shape the size of the egg.

Calderon found himself out of bed and halfway to the door. He stopped before he reached it. "You know," he said slowly, "he might hurt himself with that thing."

"We'll have to get it away from him," Myra agreed, heaving herself up with tired reluctance.

"Look at him," Calderon urged. "Just look."

Alexander was dealing competently with the wires, his hands flickering into sight and out again as he balanced a tesseract beneath the cradle. That curious veil of knowledge gave his chubby face the debased look of senility which they had come to know so well.

"This will go on and on, you know," Calderon murmured. "Tomorrow he'll look a little less like himself than today. Next week--next month--what will he be like in a year?"

"I know." Myra's voice was an echo. "Still, I suppose we'll have to--" Her voice trailed to a halt. She stood barefoot beside her husband, watching.

"I suppose the gadget will be finished," she said, "once he connects up that last wire. We ought to take it away from him."

"Think we could?"

"We ought to try."

They looked at each other. Calderon said, "It looks like an Easter egg. I never heard of an Easter egg hurting anybody."

"I suppose we're doing him a favor, really," Myra said in a low voice. "A burnt child dreads the fire. Once a kid burns himself on a match, he stays away from matches."

They stood in silence, watching.

It took Alexander about three more minutes to succeed in his design, whatever it was. The results were phenomenally effective. There was a flash of white light, a crackle of split air, and Alexander vanished in the dazzle, leaving only a faint burnt smell behind him.

When the two could see again, they blinked distrustfully at the empty place. "Teleportation?" Myra whispered dazedly.

"I'll make sure." Calderon crossed the floor and stood looking down at a damp spot on the carpet, with Alexander's shoes in it. He said, "No. Not teleportation." Then he took a long breath. "He's gone, all right. So he never grew up and sent Bordent back in time to move in on us. It never happened."

"We weren't the first," Myra said in an unsteady, bemused voice. "There's a breaking point, that's all. How sorry I feel for the first parents who don't reach it!"

She turned away suddenly, but not so suddenly that he could not see she was crying. He hesitated, watching the door. He thought he had better not follow her just yet.

Dust of the Gods

Published in *Weird Tales*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (August 1934).

"Pass the whisky, N.W.," said Yarol the Venusian persuasively.

Northwest Smith shook the black bottle of Venusian segir whisky tentatively, evoked a slight gurgle, and reached for his friend's glass. Under the Venusian's jealous dark gaze he measured out exactly half of the red liquid. It was not very much.

Yarol regarded his share of the drink disconsolately.

"Broke again," he murmured. "And me so thirsty." His glance of cherubic innocence flashed along the temptingly laden counters of the Martian saloon wherein they sat. His face with its look of holy innocence turned to Smith's, the wise black gaze meeting the Earthman's pale-steel look questioningly. Yarol lifted an arched brow.

"How about it?" he suggested delicately. "Mars owes us a drink anyhow, and I just had my heat-gun recharged this morning. I think we could get away with it."

Under the table he laid a hopeful hand on his gun. Smith grinned and shook his head.

"Too many customers," he said. "And you ought to know better than to start anything here. It isn't healthful."

Yarol shrugged resigned shoulders and drained his glass with a gulp.

"Now what?" he demanded.

"Well, look around. See anyone here you know? We're open for business--any kind."

Yarol twirled his glass wistfully and studied the crowded room from under his lashes. With those lashes lowered he might have passed for a choir boy in any of Earth's cathedrals. But too dark a knowledge looked out when they rose for that illusion to continue long.

It was a motley crowd the weary black gaze scrutinized--hard-faced Earthmen in space-sailors'leather, sleek Venusians with their sidelong, dangerous eyes, Martian drylanders muttering the blasphemous gutturals of their language, a sprinkling of outlanders and half-brutes from the wide-flung borders of civilization. Yarol's eyes returned to the dark, scarred face across the table. He met the pallor of Smith's no-colored gaze and shrugged.

"No one who'd buy us a drink," he sighed. "I've seen one or two of 'em before, though. Take those two space-rats at the next table: the little rca-faced Earthman--the one looking over his shoulder--and the drylander with an eye gone. See? I've heard they're hunters."

"What for?"

Yarol lifted his shoulders in the expressive Venusian shrug. His brows rose too, quizzically.

"No one knows what they hunt--but they run together."

"Hm-m." Smith turned a speculative stare toward the neighboring table. "They look more hunted than hunting, if you ask me."

Yarol nodded. The two seemed to share one fear between them, if over-the-shoulder glances and restless eyes spoke truly. They huddled together above their segir glasses, and though they had the faces of hard men, inured to the space-way dangers, the look on

those faces was curiously compounded of many unpleasant things underlying a frank, un-reasoning alarm. It was a look Smith could not quite fathom—a haunted, uneasy dread with nameless things behind it.

"They do look as if Black Pharo were one jump behind," said Yarol. "Funny, too. I've always heard they were pretty tough, both of 'em. You have to be in their profession."

Said a husky half-whisper in their very ears,

"Perhaps they found what they were hunting."

It produced an electric stillness. Smith moved almost imperceptibly sidewise in his chair, the better to clear his gun, and Yarol's slim fingers hovered above his hip. They turned expressionless faces toward the speaker.

A little man sitting alone at the next table had bent forward to fix them with a particularly bright stare. They met his in silence, hostile and waiting, until the husky half-whisper spoke again.

"May I join you? I couldn't help overhearing that—that you were open for business."

Without expression Smith's colorless eyes summed up the speaker, and a puzzlement clouded their paleness, as he looked. Rarely does one meet a man whose origin and race are not apparent even upon close scrutiny. Yet here was one whom he could not classify: Under the deep burn of the man's skin might be concealed a fair Venusian pallor or an Earthman bronze, canal-Martian rosiness or even a leathery dryland hide. His dark eyes could have belonged to any race, and his husky whisper, fluent in the jargon of the spaceman, effectively disguised its origin. Little and unobtrusive, he might have

passed for native on any of the three planets.

Smith's scarred, impassive face did not change as he looked, but after a long moment of scrutiny he said, "Pull up," and then bit off the words as if he had said too much.

The brevity must have pleased the little man, for he smiled as he complied, meeting the passively hostile stare of the two without embarrassment. He folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. The husky voice began without preamble,

"I can offer you employment--if you're not afraid. It's dangerous work, but the pay's good enough to make up for it--if you're not afraid."

"What is it?"

"Work they--those two--failed at. They were--hunters--until they found what they hunted. Look at them now."

Smith's no-colored eyes did not swerve from the speaker's face, but he nodded. No need to look again upon the fear-ridden faces of the neighboring pair. He understood.

"What's the job?" he asked.

The little man hitched his chair closer and sent a glance round the room from under lowered lids. He scanned the faces of his two companions half doubtfully. He said, "There have been many gods since time's beginning," then paused and peered dubiously into Smith's face.

Northwest nodded briefly. "Go on," he said.

Reassured, the little man took up his tale, and before he had gone far enthusiasm drowned out the doubtfulness in his husky voice, and

a tinge of fanaticism crept in.

"There were gods who were old when Mars was a green planet, and a verdant moon circled an Earth blue with steaming seas, and Venus, molten-hot, swung round a younger sun. Another world circled in space then, between Mars and Jupiter where its fragments, the planetoids, now are. You will have heard rumors of it--they persist in the legends of every planet. It was a mighty, world, rich and beautiful, peopled by the ancestors in mankind. And on that world dwelt a mighty Three in a temple of crystal, served by strange slaves and worshipped by a world. They were not wholly abstract, as most modern gods have become. Some say they were from beyond, and real, in their way, as flesh and blood.

"Those three gods were the origin and beginning of all other gods that mankind has known. All modern gods are echoes of them, in a world that has forgotten the very name of the Lost Planet. Saig they called one, and Lsa was the second. You will never have heard of them--they died before your world's hot seas had cooled. No man knows how they vanished, or why, and no trace of them is left anywhere in the universe we know. But there was a Third--a mighty Third set above these two and ruling the Lost Planet; so mighty a Third that even today, unthinkably long afterward, his name has not died from the lips of man. It has become a byword now--his name; that once no living man dared utter! I heard you call upon him not ten minutes past--Black Pharol!"

His husky voice sank to a quiver as it spoke the hackneyed name. Yarol gave a sudden snort of laughter, quickly hushed, and said, "Pharol! Why--"

"Yes, I know. Pharol, today, means unmentionable rites to an ancient no-god of utter darkness. Pharol has tunk so low that his very name denotes nothingness. But in other days--ah, in other days! Black

Pharol has not always been a blur of dark worshipped with obscenity. In other days men knew what things that darkness hid, nor dared pronounce the name you laugh at, lest unwittingly they stumble upon that secret twist of its inflection which opens the door upon the dark that is Pharol. Men have been engulfed before now in that utter blackness of the god, and in that dark have seen fearful things. I know"--the raw voice trailed away into a murmur--"such fearful things that a man might scream his throat hoarse and never speak again above a whisper...."

Smith's eyes flicked Yarol's. The husky murmur went on after a moment.

"So you see the old gods have not died utterly. They can never die as we know death: they come from too far Beyond to know either death or life as we do. They came from so very far that to touch us at all they had to take a visible form among mankind--to incarnate themselves in a material body through which, as through a door, they might reach out and touch the bodies and minds of men. The form they chose does not matter now--I do not know it. It was a material thing, and it has gone to dust so long ago that the very memory of its shape has vanished from the minds of men. But that dust still exists. Do you hear me? That dust which was once the first and the greatest of all gods, still exists! It was that which those men hunted. It was that they found, and fled in deadly terror of what they saw there. You look to be made of firmer stuff. Will you take up the search where they left it?"

Smith's pale stare met Yarol's black one across the table. Silence hung between them for a moment. Then Smith said,

"Any objection to us having a little talk with those two over there?"

"None at all," answered the hoarse whisper promptly. "Go now, if you

like."

Smith rose without further words. Yarol pushed back his chair noiselessly and followed him. They crossed the floor with the spaceman's peculiar, shifting walk and slid into opposite chairs between the huddling two.

The effect was startling. The Earthman jerked convulsively and turned a pasty face, eloquent with alarm, toward the interruption. The drylander stared from Smith's face to Yarol's in dumb terror. Neither spoke.

"Know that fellow over there?" inquired Smith abruptly, jerking his head toward the table they had quitted..

After a moment's hesitation the two heads turned as one. When they faced around again the terror on the Earthman's face was giving way to a dawning comprehension. He said from a dry throat, "He--he's hiring you, eh?"

Smith nodded. The Earthman's face crumpled into terror again and he cried,

"Don't do it. For God's sake, you don't know!"

"Know what?"

The man glanced furtively round the room and licked his lips uncertainly. A curious play of conflicting emotions flickered across his face.

"Dangerous--" he mumbled. "Better leave well enough alone. We found that out."

"What happened?"

The Earthman stretched out a shaking hand for the segir bottle and poured a brimming glass. He drained it before he spoke, and the incoherence of his speech may have been due to the glasses that had preceded it.

"We went up toward the polar mountains, where he said. Weeks... it was cold. The nights get dark up there... dark. Went into the cave that goes through the mountain--a long way.... Then our lights went out--full-charged batteries in new super-Tomlinson tubes, but they went out like candles, and in the dark--in the dark the white thing came...."

A shudder went over him strongly. He reached out shaking hands for the segir bottle and poured another glass, the rim clicking against his teeth as he drank. Then he set down the glass hard and said violently,

"That's all. We left. Don't remember a thing about getting out--or much more than starving and freezing in the saltlands for a long time. Our supplies ran low--hadn't been for him"--nodding across the table--"we'd both have died. Don't know how we did get out finally--but we're out, understand? Out! Nothing could hire us to go back--we've seen enough. There's something about it that--that makes your head ache--we saw... never mind. But--"

He beckoned Smith closer and sank his voice to a whisper. His eyes rolled fearfully.

"It's after us. Don't ask me what... I don't know. But--feel it in the dark, watching--watching in the dark...."

The voice sank to a mumble and he reached again for the segir bottle.

"It's here now--waiting--if the lights go out--watching--mustn't let the

lights go out--more segir."

The bottle clinked on the glass-rim, the voice trailed away into drunken mutterings.

Smith pushed back his chair and nodded to Yarol. The two at the table did not seem to notice their departure. The drylander was clutching the segir bottle in turn and pouring out red liquid without watching the glass--an apprehensive one-eyed stare turned across his shoulder.

Smith laid a hand on his companion's shoulder and drew him across the room toward the bar. Yarol scowled at the approaching bartender and suggested,

"Suppose we get an advance for drinks, anyhow."

"Are we taking it?"

"Well, what d'you think?"

"It's dangerous; You know, there's something worse than whisky wrong with those two. Did you notice the Earthman's eyes?"

"Whites showed all around," nodded Yarol. "I've seen madmen look like that."

"I thought of that, too. He was drunk, of course, and probably wouldn't be so wild-sounding, sober--but from the looks of him he'll never be sober again till he dies. No use trying to find out anything more from him. And the other--well, did you ever try to find out anything from a drylander? Even a sober one?"

Yarol lifted expressive shoulders. "I know. If we go into this, we go blind. Never dig any more out of those drunks. But something

certainly scared them."

"And yet," said Smith, "I'd like to know more about this. Dust of the gods--and all that. Interesting. Just what does he want with this dust, anyhow?"

"Did you believe that yarn?"

"Don't know--I've come across some pretty funny things here and there. He does ~t half-cracked, of course, but--well, those fellows back there certainly found something out of the ordinary, and they didn't go all the way at that."

"Well, if he'll buy us a drink I say let's take the job," said Yarol. "I'd as soon be scared to death later as die of thirst now. What do you say?"

"Good enough," shrugged Smith. "I'm thirsty, too."

The little man looked up hopefully as they reseated themselves at the table.

"If we can come to terms," said Smith, "we'll take it. And if you can give us some idea of what we're looking for, and why."

"The dust of Pharol," said the husky voice impatiently. "I told you that."

"What d'you want with it?"

The little bright eyes stared suspiciously across the table into Smith's calm gaze.

"What business is it of yours?"

"We're risking our necks for it, aren't we?"

Again the bright, small eyes bored into the Earthman's. The husky voice fell lower, to the very echo of a whisper, and he said, secretly,

"I'll tell you, then. After all, why not? You don't know how to use it--it's of no value to anyone but me. Listen, then--I told you that the Three incarnated themselves into a material form to use as a door through which they could reach humanity. They had to do it, but it was a door that opened both ways--through it, if one dared, man could reach the Three. No one dared in those days--the power beyond was too terrible. It would have been like walking straight through a gateway into hell. But time has passed since then. The gods have drawn away from humanity into farther realms. The terror that was Pharol is only an echo in a forgetful world. The spirit of the god has gone--but not wholly. While any remnant of that shape which was once incarnate Pharol exists, Pharol can be reached. For the man who could lay hands on that dusk, knowing the requisite rites and formulae, all knowledge, all power would lie open like a book. To enslave a god!"

The raw whisper rasped to a crescendo; fanatic lights flared in the small, bright eyes. He had forgotten them entirely--his piercing stare fixed on some shining future, and his hands on the table clenched into white-knuckled fists.

Smith and Yarol exchanged dubious glances. Obviously the man was mad....

"Fifty thousand dollars to your account in any bank you choose," the hoarse voice, eminently sane, broke in abruptly upon their dubiety. "All expenses, of course, will be paid. I'll give you charts and tell you all I know about how to get there. When can you start?"

Smith grinned. Touched the man might be, but just then Smith would have stormed the gates of hell, at any madman's request, for fifty thousand Earth dollars.

"Right now," he said laconically. "Let's go."

||

Northward over the great curve of Mars, red slag and red dust and the reddish, low-lying dryland vegetation gave way to the saltlands around the Pole. Scrub grows there, and sparse, coarse grass, and the snow that falls by night lies all the cold, thin day among the tough grass-roots and on the hillocks of the dry salt soil.

"Of all the God-forsaken countries," said Northwest Smith, looking down from his pilot seat at the gray lands slipping past under the speed of their plane, "this must be the worst. I'd sooner live on Luna or one of the asteroids."

Yarol tilted the segir bottle to his lips and evoked an eloquent gurgle from its depths.

"Five days of flying over this scenery would give anyone the jitters," he pronounced. "I'd never have thought I'd be glad to see a mountain range as ugly as that, but it looks like Paradise now," and he nodded toward the black, jagged slopes of the polar mountains that marked their journey's end so far as flying was concerned; for despite their great antiquity the peaks were jagged and rough as mountains new-wrenched from a heaving world.

Smith brought the plane down at the foot of the rising black slopes. There was a triangular gap there with a streak of white down its side, a landmark he had been watching for, and the plane slid quietly into the shelter to lie protected under the shelving rock. From here progress must be made afoot and painfully through the mountains. There was no landing-place any nearer their goal than this. Yet in measure of distance they had not far to go.

The two climbed stiffly out. Smith stretched his long legs and sniffed the air. It was bitterly cold, and tinged with that nameless, dry salt smell of eon-dead seas which is encountered nowhere in the known universe save in the northern saltlands of Mars. He faced the mountains doubtfully. From their beginnings here, he knew, they rolled away, jagged and black and deadly, to the very Pole. Snow lay thickly upon them in the brief Martian winter, unmarked by any track until it melted for the canals, carving deeper runnels into the already jig-sawed peaks.

Once in the very long-past days, so the little whispering fanatic had said, Mars was a green world. Seas had spread here, lapping the feet of gentler mountains, and in the slopes of those hills a mighty city once lay--a nameless city, so far as the present generations of man remembered, and a name-less star shone down upon it from a spot in the heavens now empty--the Lost Planet, shining on a lost city. The dwellers there must have seen the catastrophe which blasted that sister planet from the face of the sky. And if the little man were right, the gods of that Lost Planet had been saved from the wreckage and spirited across the void to a dwelling-place in this greatly honored city of the mountains that is not even a memory today.

And time passed, so the story went. The city aged--the gods aged--the planet aged. At last, in some terrible catastrophe, the planet heaved under the city's foundations, the mountains shook it into ruins and folded themselves into new and dreadful shapes. The seas receded, the fertile soil sluffed away from the rocks and time swallowed up the very memory of that city which once had been the dwelling-place of gods--which was still, so the hoarse whisper had told them, the dwelling-place of gods.

"Must have been right around here somewhere," said Smith, "that those two found the cave."

"Out around the slope to the left," agreed Yarol. "Let's go." He squinted up at the feeble sun. "Not very long past dawn. We ought to be back again by dark if things go right."

They left the ship in its shelter and struck out across the salt drylands, the harsh scrub brushing about their knees and their breath clouding the thin air as they advanced. The slope curved away to the left, rising in rapid ascent to black peaks that were unscalable and forbidding. The only hope of penetrating that wall lay in finding the cavern that their predecessors had fled... and in that cavern-- Smith loosened the heat-gun in its holster at his side.

They had plodded for fifteen minutes through the scrub, dry snow rising under their feet and the harsh salt air frosting their breath, before the mouth of the cave they were hunting appeared darkly under the overhanging rock they had been told of.

The two peered in doubtfully. That jagged floor might never have known the tread of human feet, so far as one might know by the look of it. Powdered snow lay undisturbed in the deep crannies, and daylight did not penetrate very far into the forbidding dark beyond. Smith drew his gun, took a deep breath and plunged into the blackness and the cold, with Yarol at his heels.

It was like leaving everything human and alive for some frosty limbo that had never known life. The cold struck sharply through their leather garments. They took out their Tomlinson tubes before they had gone more than twenty paces, and the twin beams illumined a scene of utter desolation, more dead than death, for it seemed never to have known life.-

For perhaps fifteen minutes they stumbled through the cold dark. Smith kept his beam focused on the floor beneath them; Yarol's roved the walls and pierced the blackness ahead. Rough walls and

ragged ceiling and teeth of broken stone projecting from the floor to slash at their boots--no sound but their footsteps, nothing but the dark and the frost and the silence. Then Yarol said, "It's foggy in here," and something clouded the clear beams of the lights for an instant; then darkness folded round them as suddenly and completely as the folds of a cloak.

Smith stopped dead-still, tense and listening. No sound. He felt the lens of his light-tube and knew that it still burned--it was warm, and the faint vibration under the glass told him that the tubes still functioned. But something intangible and strange blotted it out at the source... a thick, stifling blackness that seemed to muffle their senses. It was like a bandage over the eyes-- Smith, holding the burning light-lens to his eyes, could not detect even its outline in that all-cloaking dark.

For perhaps five minutes that dead blackness held them. Vaguely they knew what to expect, but when it came, the shock of it took their breath away. There was no sound, but quite suddenly around a bend of the cavern came a figure of utter whiteness, seen at first fragmentarily through a screen of rock-toothed jags, then floating full into view against the background of the dark. Smith thought he had never seen whiteness before until his incredulous eyes beheld this creature--if creature it could be. Somehow he thought it must be partly below the level of the floor along which it moved; for though in that blind black he had no way of gauging elevation, it seemed to him that the apparition, moving with an effortless glide, advanced unopposed through the solid rock of the floor. And it was whiter than anything living or dead had ever been before--so white that it sickened him, somehow, and the flesh crept along his spine. Like a cut-out figure of paper, it blazed against the flat black beyond. The dark did not affect it, no shadows lay upon its surface; in two arbitrary dimensions only, blind white superimposed upon blind dark, it

floated toward them. And it was tall, and somehow man-formed, but of no shape that words could describe.

Smith heard Yarol catch his breath in a gasp behind him. He heard no other sound, though the whiteness floated swiftly forward through the rocky floor. He was sure of that now--a part of it extended farther down than his feet, and they were planted upon solid rock. And though his skin crawled with unreasoning terror, and the hair on his neck prickled with the weird, impossible approach of the impossible thing, he kept his head enough to see that it was apparently solid, yet somehow milkily translucent; that it had form and depth, though no shadows of that darkness lay upon it; that from where no face should have been a blind, eyeless visage fronted him impassively. It was very close now, and though the extremities of it trailed below the floor line, its height lifted far above his head.

And a nameless, blind force beat out from it and assailed him, a force that somehow seemed to be driving him into unnamable things--an urge to madness, beating at his brain with the reasonless buffeting of insanity, but a wilder, more incomprehensible insanity than the sane mind could understand.

Something frantic within him clamored for instant, head-long flight--he heard Yarol's breathing panicky behind him and knew that he too wavered on the verge of bolting--but something insistent at the roots of his brain held him firm before the whiteness bearing down in its aura of madness--something that denied the peril, that hinted at solution.

Scarcely realizing that he had moved, he found the heatgun in his hand, and on a sudden impulse jerked his arm up and sent a long, blue-hot streamer of flame straight at the advancing apparition. For the briefest of instants the blue dazzle flashed a light-blade through the dark. It struck the floating whiteness full--vanished--Smith heard a

faint crackle of sparks from the invisible floor beyond and knew that it had passed through the creature without meeting resistance. And in that flashing second while the blue gaze split the thickness of the dark he saw it shine luridly upon a splinter of rock in its path, but not upon the white figure. No blaze of blueness affected the deathly pallor of it—he had a sudden conviction that though a galaxy of colored lights were played upon it no faintest hint of color could ever tinge it with any of man's hues. Fighting the waves of madness that buffeted at his brain, he realized painfully that it must be beyond the reach of men—and therefore— He laughed unsteadily and holstered his gun.

"Come on," he yelled to Yarol, reaching out blindly to grasp his comrade's arm, and—suppressing a tingle of terror—plunged straight through that towering horror.

There was an instant of blaze and blinding whiteness, a moment of turmoil while dizziness swirled round him and the floor rocked under his feet and a maelstrom of mad impulses battered through his brain; then everything was black again and he was plunging recklessly ahead through the dark, dragging a limply acquiescent Yarol behind him.

After a while of stumbling progress, punctuated with falls, while the white horror dropped away behind them, not following, though the muffling dark still sealed their eyes—the almost forgotten light in Smith's hand suddenly blazed forth again. In its light he faced Yarol, blinking at the abrupt illumination. The Venusian's face was a mask of question, his black eyes bright with inquiry.

"What happened? What was it? How did you—how could we—"

"It can't have been real," said Smith with a shaky grin. "I mean, not material in the sense that we know. Looked awful enough, but—well,

there were too many things about it that didn't hitch up. Notice how it seemed to trail through the solid floor? And neither light nor dark affected it--it had no shadows, even in that blackness, and the flash of my gun didn't even give it a blue tinge. Then I remembered what that little fellow had told us about his three gods: that, though they had real existence, it was on such a widely different plane from ours that they couldn't touch us except by providing themselves with a material body. I think this thing was like that also: visible, but too other-dimensional to reach us except through sight. And when I saw that the floor didn't offer any resistance to it I thought that maybe, conversely, it wouldn't affect us either. And it didn't. We're through."

Yarol drew a deep breath.

"The master-mind," he gibed affectionately. "Wonder if anyone else ever figured that out, or are we the first to get through?" .

"Don't know. Don't get the idea it was just a scarecrow, though. I think we moved none too soon. A minute or two longer and--and--I felt as if someone were stirring my brains with a stick. Nothing seemed--right. I think I know now what was wrong with those other two--they waited too long before they ran. Good thing we moved when we did."

"But what about that darkness?"

"I suppose we'll never really know. Must have had some relation to the other--the white thing, possibly some force or element out of that other dimension; because just as dark couldn't touch the whiteness of that thing, so light had no effect on the dark. I got the impression, somehow, that the dark space is a fixed area there, as if a section out of the other world has been set down in the cave, for the white thing to roam about in--a bath of blackness across the way. And I don't suppose that it can move outside the darkness. But I may be

wrong--let's go!"

"Right behind you!" said Yarol. "Get along."

The cave extended for another fifteen-minute walk, cold and silent and viciously rough underfoot, but no further mishap broke the journey. Tomlinson lights gleaming, they traversed it, and the glow of cold day at the far end looked like the gleam of paradise after that journey through the heart of the dead rock.

They looked-out upon the ruins of that city where once the gods had dwelt--jagged rock, great splintered teeth of stone upflung, the bare black mountainside folded and tortured into wild shapes of desolation. Here and there, buried in the debris of ages, lay huge six-foot blocks of hewn stone, the only reminder that here had stood Mars'holiest city, once, very long ago.

After five minutes of search Smith's eyes finally located the outline of what might, millions of years ago, have been a street. It led strait away from the slope at the cave-mouth, and the blocks of hewn stone, the crevices and folded ruins of earthquake choked it, but the course it once had run was not entirely obliterated even yet. Palaces and temples must have lined it once. There was no trace of them now save in the blocks of marble lying shattered among the broken stones.

Time had erased the city from the face of Mars almost as completely as from the memories of man. Yet the trace of this one street was all they needed now to guide them.

The going was rough. Once down among the ruins it was difficult to keep in the track, and for almost an hour they clambered over broken rock and jagged spikes of stone, leaping the crevices, skirting great mounds of ruin. Both were scratched and breathless by the time they

came to the first landmark they recognized--a black, leaning needle of stone, half buried in fragments of broken marble. Just beyond it lay two blocks of stone, one upon the other, perhaps the only two in the whole vast ruin which still stood as the hands of man had laid them hundreds of centuries ago.

Smith paused beside them and looked at Yarol, breathing a little heavily from exertion.

"Here it is," he said. "The old boy was telling the truth after all."

"So far," amended Yarol dubiously, drawing his heat-gun. "Well, we'll see."

The blue pencil of flame hissed from the gun's muzzle to splatter along the crack between the stones. Very slowly Yarol traced that line, and in spite of himself excitement quickened within him. Two-thirds of the way along the line the flame suddenly ceased to spatter and bit deep. A blackening hole appeared in the stone. It widened swiftly, and smoke rose, and there came a sound of protesting rock wrenched from its bed of eons as the upper stone slowly ground half around on the lower, tottered a moment and then fell.

The lower stone was hollow. The two bent over curiously, peering down. A tiny breath of unutterable antiquity rose in their faces out of that darkness, a little breeze from a million years ago. Smith flashed his light-tube downward and saw level stone a dozen feet below. The breeze was stronger now, and dust danced up the shaft from the mysterious depths--dust that had lain there undisturbed for unthinkably long ages.-

"We'll give it awhile to air out," said Smith, switching off his light. "Must be plenty of ventilation, to judge from that breeze; and the dust will probably blow away before long. We can be rigging up some sort

of ladder while we wait."

By the time a knotted rope had been prepared and anchored about a near-by needle of rock the little wind was blowing cleanly up the shaft, still laden with that indefinable odor of ages, but breathable. Smith swung over first, lowering himself cautiously until his feet touched the stone. Yarol, when he came down, found him swinging the Tomlinson-beam about a scene of utter lifelessness. A passageway stretched before them, smoothly polished as to walls and ceiling, with curious, unheard-of-frescoes limned in dim colors under the glaze. Antiquity hung, almost tangibly in the air. The little breeze that brushed past their faces seemed sacrilegiously alive in this tomb of dead dynasties.

That glazed and patterned passageway led downward into the dark. They followed it dubiously, feet stirring in the dust of a dead race, light-beams violating the million-years night of the underground. Before they had gone very far the circle of light from the shaft disappeared from sight beyond the up-sloping floor behind them, and they walked through antiquity with nothing but the tiny, constant breeze upon their faces to remind them of the world above.

They walked a very long way. There was no subterfuge about the passage, no attempt to confuse the traveler. No other halls opened from it--it led straight forward and down through the stillness, the dark, the odor of very ancient death. And when at long last they reached the end, they had passed no other corridor-mouth, no other openings at all save the tiny ventilation holes at intervals along the ceiling.

At the end of that passage a curving wall of rough, un-worked stone bulged like the segment of a sphere, closing the corridor. It was a different stone entirely from that under the patterned glaze of the way along which they had come. In the light of their Tomlinson-tubes they

saw a stone door set flush with the slightly bulging wall that held it. And in the door's very center a symbol was cut deep and vehement and black against the gray background. Yarol, seeing it, caught his breath.

"Do you know that sign?" he said softly, his voice reverberating in the stillness of the underground, and echoes whispered behind him down the darkness, "---know that sign... know that sign?"---

"I can guess," murmured Smith, playing his light on the black outline of it.

"The symbol of Pharol," said the Venusian in a near-whisper, but the echoes caught it and rolled back along the passage in diminishing undertones, "--Pharol... Pharol... Pharol!"

"I saw it once carved in the rock of an asteroid," whispered Yarol. "Just a bare little fragment of dead stone whirling around and around through space. There was one smooth surface on it, and this same sign was cut there. The Lost Planet must really have existed, N.W., and that must have been a part of it once, with the god's name cut so deep that even the explosion of a world couldn't wipe it out."

Smith drew his gun. "We'll soon know," he said. "This will probably fall, so stand back."

The blue pencil of heat traced the door's edges, spattering against the stone as Yarol's had in the city above. And as before, in its course it encountered the weak place in the molding and the fire bit deep. The door trembled as Smith held the beam steady; it uttered an ominous creaking and began slowly to tilt outward at the top. Smith snapped off his gun and leaped backward, as the great stone slab tottered outward and fell. The mighty crash of it reverberated through the dark, and the concussion of its fall shook the solid floor

and flung both men staggering against the wall.

They reeled to their feet again, shielding blinded eyes from the torrent of radiance that poured forth out of the doorway. It was a rich, golden light, somehow thick, yet clear, and they saw almost immediately, as their eyes became accustomed to the sudden change from darkness, that it was like no light they had ever known before. Tangibly it poured past them down the corridor in hurrying waves that lapped one another and piled up and flowed as a gas might have done. It was light which had an unnamable body to it, a physical, palpable body which yet did not affect the air they breathed.

They walked forward into a sea of radiance, and that curious light actually eddied about their feet, rippling away from the forward motion of their bodies as water might have done. Widening circles spread away through the air as they advanced, breaking soundlessly against the wall, and behind them a trail of bright streaks steamed away like the wake of a ship in water.

Through the deeps of that rippling light they walked a passage hewn from ragged stone, a different stone from that of the outer corridor, and somehow older. Tiny speckles of brightness glinted now and again on the rough walls, and neither could remember ever having seen just such mottled, bright-flecked rock before.

"Do you know what I think this is?" demanded Smith suddenly, after a few minutes of silent progress over the uneven floor. "An asteroid! That rough wall bulging into the corridor outside was the outer part of it. Remember, the three gods were supposed to have been carried away from the catastrophe on the other world and brought here. Well, I'll bet that's how it was managed--a fragment of that planet, enclosing a room, possibly, where the gods'images stood, was somehow detached from the Lost Planet and hurled across space to Mars. Must have buried itself in the ground here, and the people of

this city tunneled in to it and built a temple over the spot. No other way, you see, to account for that protruding wall and the peculiar formation of this rock. It must have come from the lost world--never saw anything like it anywhere, myself."

"Sounds logical," admitted Yarol, swinging his foot to start an eddy of light toward the wall. "And what do you make of this funny light?"

"Whatever other-dimensional place those gods came from, we can be pretty sure that light plays funny tricks there. It must be nearly material--physical. You saw it in that white thing in the cave, and in the dark that smothered our tubes. It's as tangible as water, almost. You saw how it flowed out into the passage when the door fell, not as real light does, but in succeeding waves, like heavy gas. Yet I don't notice any difference in the air. I don't believe--say! Look at that!"

He stopped so suddenly that Yarol bumped into him from behind and muttered a mild Venusian oath. Then across Smith's shoulder he saw it too, and his hand swept downward to his gun. Something like an oddly shape hole opening onto utter dark had appeared around the curve of the passage. And as they stared, it moved. It was a something blacker than anything in human experience could ever have been before--as black as the guardian of the cave had been white--so black that the eye refused to compass it save as a negative quality, an emptiness. Smith, remembering the legends of Pharol the No-God of utter nothingness, gripped his gun more firmly and wondered if he stood face to face with one of the elder gods.

The Thing had shifted its shape, flowing to a stabler outline and standing higher from the floor. Smith felt that it must have form and thickness--at least three dimensions and probably more--but try though he would, his eyes could not discern it save as a flat outline of nothingness against the golden light.

And as from the white dweller in darkness, so from this black denizen of the light there flowed a force that goaded the brain to madness. Smith felt it battering in blind waves at the foundations of his mind—but he felt more than the reasonless urge in this force assailing him. He sensed a struggle of some sort, as if the black guardian were turning only a part of its attention to him—as if it fought against something unseen and powerful. Feeling this, he began to see signs of that combat, in the black outlines of the thing. It rippled and flowed, its shape shifted fluidly, it writhed in protest against something he could not comprehend. Definitely now he felt that it fought a desperate battle with some unseen enemy, and a little shudder crawled down his back as he watched.

Quite suddenly it dawned upon him what was happening. Slowly, relentlessly, the black nothingness was being drawn down the passage. And it was—it must be—the flow of the golden radiance that drew it, as a fish might be carried forward down a stream. Somehow the opening of the door must have freed the pent-up lake of light, and it was flowing slowly out down the passage as water flows, draining the asteroid, if asteroid it was. He could see now that though they had halted, the wake of rippling illumination behind them did not cease. Past them in a bright tide streamed the light. And on that outflowing torrent the black guardian floated, struggling but helpless.

It was closer now, and the beat of insistent impulses against Smith's brain was stronger, but he was not greatly alarmed by it. The panic of the thing must be deep, and the waves of force that washed about him were dizzying but not deep-reaching. Because of this increasing dizziness, as the thing approached, he was never sure afterward just what had happened. Rapidly it drew nearer, until he could have put out his hand and touched it—though instinctively he felt that, near as it seemed, it was too far away across dimensional gulfs for him ever to lay hand upon it. The blackness of it, at close range, was stupefying, a blackness that the eye refused to comprehend—that could not be,

and was.

With the nearness of it his brain seemed to leave its moorings and plunge in mad, impossible curves through a suddenly opened space wherein the walls of the passage were shadows dimly seen and his own body no more than a pillar of mist in a howling void. The black thing must have rolled over him in passing, and engulfed him in its reasonless and incredible dark. He never knew. When his plunging brain finally ceased its lunges through the void and returned reluctantly to his body, the horror of nothingness had receded past them down the corridor, still struggling, and the waves of its blinding force weakened with the distance.

Yarol was leaning against the wall, wide-eyed and gasping. "Did it get you, too?" he managed to articulate after several attempts to control his hurrying breath.-

Smith found his own lungs laboring. He nodded breathless.

"I wonder," he said when he had recovered a measure of normality, "if that thing would look as white in the dark as it did in the light? I'll bet it would. And do you suppose it can't exist outside the light? Reminded me of a jelly-fish caught in a mill-race. Say, if the light's flowing out that fast, d'you think it may go entirely? We'd better be moving."

Under their feet the passage sloped downward still. And when they reached the end of their quest, it came very suddenly. The curve of the passage sharpened to an angle, and round the bend the corridor ended abruptly at the threshold of a great cavity in the heart of the asteroid.

In the rich golden light it glittered like the ceilter of a many-faceted diamond--that vast crystal room. The light brimmed it from wall to

wall, from floor to ceiling. And it was strange that in this mellow flood of radiance the boundaries of the room seemed hard to define--somehow it looked limitless, though the walls were clear to be seen.

All this, though, they were realizing only subconsciously. Their eyes met the throne in the center of the crystal vault and clung there, fascinated. It was a crystal throne, and it had been fashioned for no human occupant. On this the Mighty Three of measureless antiquity had sat. It was not an altar--it was a throne where incarnate godhood reigned once, too long ago for the mind to comprehend. Roughly triform, it glittered under the great arch of the ceiling. There was no knowing from the shape of it now, what form the Three had worn who sat upon it. But the forms must have been outside modern comprehension--nothing the two explorers had ever seen in all their wanderings could have occupied it.

Two of the pedestals were empty. Saig and Lsa had vanished as completely as their names from man's memory. On the third--the center and the highest.... Smith's breath caught in his throat suddenly. Here then, on the great throne before them, lay all that was left of a god--the greatest of antiquity's deities. This mound of gray dust. The oldest thing upon three worlds--older than the mountains that held it, older than the very old beginnings of the mighty race of man.

Great Pharol--dust upon a throne.

"Say, listen," broke in Yarol's matter-of-fact voice.

"Why did the image turn to dust when the room and the throne didn't? The whole room must have come from that crystal temple on the other world. You'd think--"

"The image must have been very old long before the temple was

built," said Smith softly. He was thinking how dead it looked, lying there in a soft gray mound on the crystal. How dead! how immeasurably old!--yet if the little man spoke truly, life still dwelt in these ashes of forgotten deity. Could he indeed forge from the gray dust a cable that would reach out irresistibly across the gulfs of time and space, into dimensions beyond man's understanding, and draw back the vanished entity which had once been Great Pharol? Could he? And if he could--suddenly doubt rose up in Smith's mind. What man, with a god to do his bidding, would stop short of domination over the worlds of space--perhaps of godhood for himself? And if that man were half mad?...

He followed Yarol across the shining floor in silence. It took them longer to reach the throne than they had expected--there was something deceptive about the crystal of that room, and the clarity of the brimming golden light.

The translucent heights of the triumvirate structure that had enthroned gods towered high over their heads. Smith looked upward toward that central pedestal bearing its eon-old burden, wondering what men had stood here before him at the foot of the throne, what men of nameless races and forgotten worlds, worshipping the black divinity that was Pharol. On this crystal floor the feet of-- A scrambling sound interrupted his wondering. The irreverent Yarol, his eyes on the gray dust above them, was climbing the crystal throne. It was slippery, and never meant for mounting, and his heavy boots slid over the smoothness of it. Smith stood watching with a half-smile. For long ages no living man had dared approach this place save in reverence, on his knees, not venturing so much as to lift his eyes to that holy of holies where sat incarnate godhood. Now-- Yarol's foot slipped on the last step of the ascent and he muttered under his breath, reaching out to clutch the pedestal, where Great Pharol, first of the living gods, had ruled a mightier world than any men inhabit now.

At the summit he paused, looking down from an eminence whence no eyes save those of gods had ever looked before. And he frowned in a puzzled way as he looked.

"Something wrong here, N.W.," he said. "Look up. What's going on around the ceiling?"

Smith's pale gaze rose. For a moment he stared in utter bewilderment. For the third time that day his eyes were beholding something so impossible that they refused to register the fact upon an outraged brain. Something dark and yet not dark was closing down upon them. The roof seemed to lower--and panic stirred within him briefly. The ceiling, coming down to crush them? Some further guardian of the gods descending like a blanket over theft heads? What?

And then understanding broke upon him, and his laugh of sheer relief echoed almost blasphemously in the silence of the place.

"The light's running out," he said. "Like water, just draining away. That's all."

And the incredible thing was true. That shining lake of light which brimmed the crystal hollow was ebbing, pouring through the door, down the passage, out into the upper-air, and darkness, literally, was flowing in behind it. And it was flowing fast.

"Well," said Yarol, casting an imperturbable glance up-ward, "we'd better be moving before it all runs out. Hand me up the box, will you?"

Hesitantly, Smith unslung the little lacquered steel box they had been given. Suppose they brought him back the dust to weld it from--what then? Such limitless power even in the hands of an eminently wise,

eminently sane and balanced man would surely be dangerous. And in the hands of the little whispering fanatic-- Yarol, looking down from his height, met the troubled eyes and was silent for a moment. Then he whistled softly and said, though Smith had not spoken, "I never thought of that.... D'you suppose it really could be done? Why, the man's half crazy!"

"I don't know," said Smith. "Maybe he couldn't--but he told us the way here, didn't he? He knew this much--I don't think we'd better risk his not knowing any more. And suppose he did succeed, Yarol--suppose he found some way to bring this--this monster of the dark--through into our dimension--turned it loose on our worlds. Do you think he could hold it? He talked about enslaving a god, but could he? I haven't much doubt that he knows some way of opening a door between dimensions to admit the thing that used to be Pharol--it can be done. It has been done. But once he gets it opened, can he close it? Could he keep the thing under control? You know he couldn't! You know it'd break loose, and--well, anything could happen then."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Yarol again. "Gods! Suppose--"

He broke off, staring in fascination at the gray dust that held such terrible potentialities. And there was silence for a while in the crystal place.

Smith, looking upward at the throne and his friend, saw that the dark was flowing in faster and faster. And the light thinned about them, and long streaks of brilliance wavered out behind him as the light ebbed by a racing torrent.

"Suppose we don't take it back, then," said Yarol suddenly. "Say we couldn't find the place--or that it was buried under debris or something. Suppose we--gods, but it's getting dark in here!"

The line of light was far down the walls now. Above them the black night of the underground brimmed in relentlessly.

They watched in half-incredulous wonder as the tidemark of radiance ebbed down and down along the crystal. Now it touched the level of the throne, and Yarol gasped as he was plunged head and shoulders into blackness, staring down as into a sea of light in which his own lower limbs moved shimmeringly, sending long ripples outward as they stirred.

Very swiftly the tide-race ran. Fascinated, they watched it ebb away, down Yarol's legs, down beyond him entirely, so that he perched in darkness above the outrunning tide, down the heights of the throne, down to touch Smith's tall head with blackness. Uncannily he stood in the midst of a receding sea, shoulder-deep--waist-deep---knee-deep....

The light that so short a time before--for so many countless ages before--had brimmed this chamber lay in a shallow, gleaming sea ankle-deep on the floor.... For the first time in eons the throne of the Three stood in darkness.

Not until the last dregs of illumination were snaking along a black floor in rivulets that ran swiftly, like fiery snakes, toward the door, did the two men awake from their wonder. The last of the radiance that must have been lighted on a lost world millions of years ago, perhaps by the hands of the first gods--ebbed doorward. Smith drew a deep breath and turned in the blackness toward the spot where the throne must be standing in the first dark it had known for countless ages.

Those snakes of light along the floor did not seem to give out any radiance--the place was blacker than any night above ground. Yarol's light-tube suddenly stabbed downward, and Yarol's voice said from

the dark,

"Whew! Should have bottled some of that to take home. Well, what d'you say, N.W.? Do we leave with the dust or without it?"

"Without it," said Smith slowly. "I'm sure of that much, anyhow. But we can't leave it here. The man would simply send others, you know. With blasting material, maybe, if we said the place was buried. But he'd get it."

Yarol's beam shifted, a white blade in the dark, to the gray, enigmatic mound beside him. In the glare of the Tomlinson-tube it lay inscrutably, just as it had lain for all the eons since the god forsook it--waiting, perhaps, for this moment. And Yarol drew his gun.

"Don't know what that image was made of," he said, "but rock or metal or anything else will melt into nothing in the full-power heat of a gun."

And in a listening silence he flicked the catch. Blue-white and singing, the flame leaped irresistibly from his muzzle--struck full in an intolerable violence of heat upon that gray mound which had been a god. Rocks would have melted under the blast. Rocket-tube steel would have glowed molten. Nothing that the hands of man can fashion could have resisted the heat-blast of a ray-gun at full strength. But in its full blue glare the mound of dust lay motionless.

Above the hissing of the flame Smith heard Yarol's muttered "Shar!" of amazement. The gun muzzle thrust closer into the gray heap, until the crystal began to glow in the reflected heat and blue sparks spattered through the darkness. And very slowly the edges of the mound began to turn red and sullen. The redness spread. A little blue flame licked up; another.

Yarol flipped off the gun catch and sat watching as the dust began to blaze. Presently, as the brilliance of it grew stronger, he slid down from his pedestal and made his precarious way along the slippery crystal to the floor. Smith scarcely realized that he had come. His eyes were riveted on the clear, burning flame that was once a god. It burned with a fierce, pale light flickering with nameless evanescent colors--the dust that had been Pharol of the utter darkness burning slowly away in a flame of utter light.

And as the minutes passed and the flame grew stronger, the reflections of it began to dance eerily in the crystal walls and ceiling, sending long wavers downward until the floor was carpeted with dazzles of flame. An odor of unnamable things very faintly spread upon the air--smoke of dead gods.... It went to Smith's head dizzily, and the reflections wavered and ran together until he seemed to be suspended in a space while all about him pictures of flame went writhing through the dark--pictures of flame--nebulous, unreal pictures waving across the walls and vanishing--flashing by uncertainly overhead, running under his feet, circling him round from wall to wall in reeling patterns, as if reflections made eons ago on another world and buried deep in the crystal were waking to life at the magic touch of the burning god.

With the smoke eddying dizzily in his nostrils he watched--and all about him, overhead, underfoot, the strange, wild pictures ran blurrily through the crystal and vanished. He thought he saw mighty landscapes ringed by such mountains as none of today's world know... he thought he saw a whiter sun than has shone for eons, lighting a land where rivers thundered between green banks... thought he saw many moons parading across a purple night wherein shone constellations that haunted him with familiarity in the midst of their strangeness... saw a green star where red Mars should be, and a far pin-prick of white where the green point that is Earth hangs. Cities reeled past across the crystal darkness in shapes stranger

than any that history records. Peaks and spires and angled domes towered high and shining under the hot white sun--strange ships riding the airways.... He saw battles--weapons that have no names today blasting the tall towers into ruins, wiping great smears of blood across the crystal--saw triumphant marches where creatures that might have been the forerunners of men paraded in a blaze of color through shining streets... strange, sinuous creatures, half seen, that were men, yet not men.... Nebulously the history of a dead and forgotten world flared by him in the dark.

He saw the man-things in their great shining cities bowing down before a--something--of darkness that spread monstrosly across the white-lit heavens... saw the beginnings of Great Pharol... saw the crystal throne in a room of crystal where the sinuous, man-formed beings lay face down in worshipping windrows about a great triple pedestal toward which, for the dazzle and the darkness of it, he could not turn his eyes. And then without warning, in a mighty blast of violence, all the wild pictures in the flickering flamelight ran together and shivered before his dizzied eyes, and a great burst of blinding light leaped across the walls until the whole great chamber once more for an instant blazed with radiance--but a radiance so searing that it did not illuminate but stunned, blinded, exploded in the very brains of the two men who watched.

In the flash of an instant before oblivion overtook him, Smith knew they had looked upon the death of a world. Then, with blinded eyes and reeling brain, he stumbled and sank into darkness.

Blackness was all about them when they opened their eyes again. The fire on the throne had burnt away into eternal darkness. Stumblingly they followed the white guidance of their tube-lights down the long passage and out into the upper air. The pale Martian day was darkening over the mountains.

Red Gem of Mercury

Published in Super Science Stories, Vol. 3, No. 2 (November 1941).

Contents

Chapter 1 Stone from the Stars

Chapter 2 The Gift of Power

Chapter 3 The Man Who Was Dead

Chapter 4 The Road to Life

A stone from the stars kept vigil, and a dead man smiled, as Steve Vane bore a death token from Mercury to the man who had promised him--murder!

Chapter 1

Stone from the Stars

The noise of pursuit was growing louder. Steve Vane's lungs ached with each knife-thrust, gasping breath of the icy air. His gray prison garments were no protection against the wintry breeze, and his thin shoes were already wet with snow and beginning to freeze.

It was hard to keep going. It would be far easier to give up the mad attempt, to stop and wait, with his hands in the air, till the guards came and took him back to the bare gray walls of his cell. But--Vane took a quick glance at the grim-faced man racing along beside him--if tough little Tony Apollo could keep going, certainly husky, big-shouldered Steve Vane could grit his teeth and stagger along. But where would it end? The break had been hopeless from the start, doomed to certain failure. Only the iron determination of Tony Apollo,

and the burning sense of injustice rankling within Vane had kept the latter's will firm.

"Pasqual framed us both," Apollo had said, his dark face sombre with hatred. "I've been in here longer than you have--but I'm getting out now. If you're smart, you're coming with me. One of us has a chance to get Pasqual before the cops nail us."

And so the two had planned and fled. Blue and shaking with cold, they plunged along the bank of the river gorge toward the cabin Apollo had said would serve as a hideout.

"How--how much further?" Vane managed to gasp, and hated himself for the weakness his question betrayed. Apollo managed a twisted grin.

"Just over the ridge, kid. Dunno if I can make it. Those damn guards--that bullet went into my lungs. Steve, if I--if I croak, get Pasqual for me. When he framed me into the big house, I told him I'd come back, and he knows I've never broke my word. I--"

Apollo grimaced and coughed blood. He lurched; Vane gripped the smaller man's arm and pulled him along for a few steps. Then the gangster pulled free and plunged ahead, ploughing up snow as he ran.

True enough, Vane thought, Apollo had never broken his word. The whole set-up was fantastic. Two years ago Tony Apollo had been the underworld king of Kentonville, and had tried to bribe Vane and failed. For, in those days, Steve Vane had been a struggling, idealistic lawyer in the slum district.

Then big Mike Pasqual, Apollo's lieutenant, had stepped in. Very cleverly he had framed his chief. Apollo had gone to prison and

Pasqual reigned in his place. Anybody who got in his way was crushed. As Steve Vane had been crushed--suspended from the bar and given a long prison term because of certain papers Pasqual had had forged. Now the two doomed men fled along the snowy brink of the gorge in a gray, ominous half-light, with a wintry breeze numbing their bodies. And behind them came men with guns.

Almost at the summit of the ridge it happened. Apollo clutched at his side, lurched, and cried out sharply. Vane whirled; his hand went out in a futile gesture. For already the little gangster was falling....

The treacherous snow banked on the edge of the abyss crumbled beneath him. He was gone almost before Vane realized it. Sick with horror, the lawyer moved forward and peered over. He saw the body, far below, bound off a rock and vanish into the swift, turbulent river.

Tony Apollo was dead, and he had failed to keep his last promise.

A shout sounded eerily from the distance. Vane heard the noise of a shot--the high whine and the sharp report. He glanced over his shoulder, saw three dark forms, and caught his breath, hesitating. What now? He had not realized before just how much he had come to depend on Apollo's grim, iron will. But the gangster was gone--

The hideout! It lay just over the ridge. Perhaps there were guns there. Vane broke into a stumbling run, topped the rise, and saw below him a broad, shallow valley. A cabin, its roof pillowed with snow, was not far away. Pines rose thickly from the whiteness of the ground. The key was hidden in the hollow log Apollo had mentioned. Vane burst into the cabin in a flurry of snow, kicking the door shut behind him and barring it. His first glance showed him a rack of well-oiled rifles within easy reach. The feel of the smooth stock was comforting to his fingers.

He went to a window and peered out. The pursuers were just coming over the rise. It would be easy to pick them off now, one by one. Vane cuddled the rifle against his cheek; his finger tightened on the trigger. But he did not fire.

He had never yet killed a man. Even though his ideals had changed, in the slow torment of months of prison, into a dull, burning hatred and resentment, yet he realized that this rage was focused on one man only. Pasqual. The squat gangster chief who had framed him into disgrace. The guards--well, they would not hesitate to shoot him down, given the opportunity. But that was their job. Vane said "Hell" under his breath and fired over the heads of the three.

They paused very briefly and then dived for cover. After a time Vane could see them cautiously coming closer, taking advantage of every hiding place. He fired again.

One of the guards yelled, "Come on out! You can't get away!"

"I've got plenty of ammunition," Vane shouted back. "And I'm staying right here."

Then, without warning, it happened. A shrill keening almost above the threshold of hearing grew suddenly louder. Vane, startled, glanced up. Beyond the tops of the pines he saw the gray, cloudy sky--

He screamed, dropping the gun, and flung up his arms to shield his face, falling back in instant reaction. For rushing toward him from the sky came a dot--a circle--a huge black thing that grew larger by split-seconds. It was like standing on a railroad track and watching a locomotive plunge toward you. One had only the single impression of something--a meteor?--rushing, expanding, growing--

Earth-shaking and thunderous was the explosion. Vane felt the floor rise up under his feet; he was hurled through the air, his ear-drums almost broken by the violence of the sound. Swift movement, and a flash of blinding light, and then darkness, complete and quiet....

He could not have been unconscious long. He woke to find himself lying in the snow, his head throbbing with pain. Dazedly he heard a voice say, "Alive, eh? You looked like a goner to me."

Vane sat up and looked around. He realized that there were handcuffs on his wrists. He was under a pine, and some distance away was what was left of the cabin. It was like a house of cards that had collapsed. Only a miracle had enabled Vane to survive.

He looked up and saw the blue-jowled, bulldog face of a guard. The man nodded and jerked his thumb down the slope.

"There," he said. "That's what hit. Airship or something."

Vane looked, and his eyes widened with amazement. An airship--no! No Earthly vessel, obviously. Shaped like a tear-drop, it had fallen thirty feet from the cabin and had dug a crater out of the snowy ground. Its hull was split and riven in a dozen places by the shock of the impact. A crystalline green powder carpeted the ground and cloaked the trees for yards around.

The ship itself was perhaps twenty feet long, made of a dully-shining metal, bluish in hue. The two remaining guards were busy, pulling something through a yawning gap that split the hull.

The man standing over Vane bent and jerked the prisoner to his feet. "Somebody was in it," he grunted. "Hurt or probably dead. Come along." Vane let himself be pulled toward the wreck. Despite the sick hopelessness that filled him at his capture, he was also conscious of

an overwhelming curiosity. Would it be that for the first time in human history a--spaceship had reached the Earth? And its passenger--what would he be like?

The two guards were kneeling beside the body, one of them trying to force brandy between the alien being's lips. Vane's captor halted behind them, his hand tightly gripping the lawyer's arm. A whistle of amazement escaped his lips.

"Jeez!" he muttered. "What a freak!"

A freak, truly, Vane thought, in this world. Fully eight feet tall the being was, man-shaped, with a tremendous barrel chest and thick legs jointed in several places. The clothing was skin tight, ripped and torn to reveal greenish skin that gleamed with pale radiance.

The lips, Vane saw, were broad, fleshy, and indigo-blue in color. And there was but one eye; the other had vanished in a crimson smear that matched in hue the red jewel that gleamed on the being's forehead.

Vane stared at the strange gem, conscious of an inexplicable fascination that seemed to radiate from it. Larger than a hen's egg, it seemed to be embedded in the greenish flesh of the bulging forehead and the bone beneath.

And--it lived!

Chapter 2

The Gift of Power

One guard took the bottle from the bluish lips. "It's dead," he said slowly. "I don't--"

The monster groaned. The massive head turned. The single eye passed over the faces of the four men. Vane felt an odd sense of shock as the weird gaze focused briefly upon him.

Simultaneously an icy chill shook Vane's mind. He went sick, giddy, and momentarily blind. Beside him, he heard the guards gasp, and realized that they felt as he did.

It passed. Vane heard a voice inside his mind.

Inaudible, yes--but clearer than any bell-tone he heard it.

"For Gawd's sake!" a guard said, amazedly. "I--I'm hearing things--"

He paused.

The inaudible voice commanded, "Silence!" And the word's meaning was somehow as clear to Vane as it would have been if spoken aloud in modern English.

"I am Zaravin," the mental voice said. "I must give you four my message swiftly, for I have little time left. I am from... the planet you call Mercury. The innermost planet."

Vane tried to draw back, but could not. His muscles seemed frozen into paralysis. Sweat was cold on his forehead.

Unreasoning horror of the unknown made his stomach a sick void.

The telepathic voice went on.

"Listen.... Two months out from Mercury I fell ill... with the sleeping death. When I awoke, all was lost. The ship needed continual guidance. Since I could not carry sufficient fuel, I had to manufacture

it on the way... and I awoke too late. There was not enough fuel for me to prevent this crash."

The jewel on Zaravin's forehead flamed with red, baleful light. It held Vane's gaze.

The Mercurian went on:

"It is the Stone from the Stars that you see. It is the bestower of all power. Ages ago it fell, embedded in a meteorite, brought from some alien Universe, perhaps... it is alive. All knowledge, all strength, is hidden in it. You doubt me, I see.... Jaeckel, Bester, Hanley.... Stephen Vane.... How, then, do I know the names of you four?"

There was silence. All around the green dust sparkled eerily, and drifted down from the trees. A chill wind blew up flurries of snow. The distant sound of the tumbling river seemed very loud in the utter silence.

"The Stone from the Stars gives all power," Zaravin told the Earthmen soundlessly. "It is... what you call... symbiosis. For it lives, with a strange, silicate life of its own. Perhaps, in the unknown abyss from which it came, it drew its life-force from rays... alien suns.... I do not know. On Mercury, it feeds upon the life-energy of its host. And now I am its host."

The blue, fleshy lips twisted in pain. Shining blood made a pool around the bulbous head.

"It is a parasite and drains the lifeforce. But in return it shares its own wonderful powers with the owner--powers of telepathy and will. These powers must be used sparingly, for they are exhausting. The owner of the gem at times falls into a state of suspended animation, during which the jewel rests and revitalizes itself. When I started this

first interplanetary voyage, our ruler gave it to me, knowing that only with its aid could I conquer the tremendous obstacles. And there was only one way for the Stone to be removed. Once it finds a host, it remains there during the entire life-span of that host. Our ruler was forced to kill himself in order that I might have the gem...."

The weird, soundless voice grew urgent.

"The power of the jewel must not die! Even though it is lost to Mercury, it will aid the men of Earth. Take it, one of you--use it! And when your race has conquered space-travel, take the Stone from the Stars back to my people. Remember--it gives all power to the owner!"

The Mercurian's body twisted convulsively. A torrent of blood gushed from between the thick blue lips. A choking gasp sounded as the huge body jerked. The bulbous head rolled aside as the single eye glazed in death.

And--the Stone from the Stars leaped from Zaravin's forehead!

Vane realized that the Mercurian was lifeless. His horrified eyes followed the path of the jewel.

It soared out swiftly, turning over and over, rolled down a little slope of snow, and then lay still and shimmering.

Silence. Time itself had stopped. The murmur of the river was a deafening thunder.

One of the guards gave a curious gasping sound. It broke the spell. Vane drew an unsteady breath, shivering a little. And then, before any of his captors could move, he wrenched free from the grasp on his arm and dived forward.

He fell on his knees. His handcuffed wrists hit together painfully. His cupped fingers found the Stone from the Stars and lifted it.

It lay in his palm, red against the snow he had scooped up with it.

"Vane!" a guard roared. "Drop that--that--"

The Stone blazed, throwing unearthly reddish reflections on white snow and cold-pallid skin.

It held fascination for Vane. He lifted it toward his forehead. A heavy hand gripped his shoulder, flung him back. But too late.

The Stone from the Stars leaped from Vane's palm. He felt an instant of grinding, sickening agony clashing within his brain. It lasted only a moment, and was gone.

He stood up, throwing off the hand that held his shoulder. The guard--it was bulldog-faced Hanley--went for his gun.

As he drew it, something made Vane say curtly, "Drop it! Drop the gun, Hanley! Quick!"

"Like hell I will," the guard snarled. There was a soft little plop at his feet. The automatic had fallen into the snow. Hanley said, "Whup!" and started to bend over to recover the weapon.

Vane said, "Don't move!" Hanley froze. The lawyer whirled toward the others. "Don't move, any of you!"

And the guards stood motionless. Jaeckel was caught off balance, with one leg in the air. He wavered, toppled, and fell flat on his face.

Vane stood unmoving for a time. Presently he reached up and gingerly touched the gem. His fingers groped searchingly.

The Stone had attached itself permanently to his forehead. It had sunk in, blazing like a caste mark of some Hindu sect, above and between his brows....

Unreasoning horror shook Vane. He clawed at the jewel, tried to wrench it from its place. He could not budge the gem. His nails slipped off the smooth, cold surface. His wrists began to bleed as the handcuffs dug into them.

It was nightmare--the guards living statues, the jewel flaming in his living flesh and bone, the dead silence, broken only by the river's murmur....

Vane lowered his hands slowly and stood staring at the cuffs. Apparently Zaravin had not lied. The Stone from the Stars gave its possessor strange powers.

And that meant--

Suddenly Vane thought of Pasqual. Big Mike Pasqual, ruthless, all-powerful lord of Kentonville's underworld. Too smart for the law. Too strong for his enemies. All-powerful--

Like hell!

Vane's smile was not good to see. He was visualizing Pasqual, frozen motionless as the guards had been, screaming for help, facing the death he had arranged for so many others.

The lawyer turned to Hanley. His young face, with lines of bitterness months of prison had engraved upon it, was hard.

"Unlock my handcuffs, one of you," he said quietly.

"Yeah?" Hanley's voice was strained but mocking. "I don't know what you've done to me, but I'm not going to take those cuffs off. I won't--I won't--"

His voice rose into a scream. Because all the time he was talking, Hanley was reaching into his pocket, taking out a key-ring, selecting a small key, walking forward and reaching toward Vane's extended wrists....

"Thanks," Vane said as the lock clicked. He shook the cuffs off and gingerly massaged his wrists. "Now--let's see. These prison clothes. They won't do. But a guard's uniform--" He shook his head, pondering.

"And I can't leave you here. You'd freeze in no time. I don't know why the devil I care about that, but-- I've got it. Listen, the three of you. In ten minutes you'll be perfectly normal again. You'll go directly back to the prison. You won't remember anything that happened after you came into this valley. Tony Apollo and I are dead. You saw us fall into the gorge. We're dead. Do you understand?"

"We understand," the three chorused. Jaeckel's voice was muffled as he lay face down in the snow.

Vane grinned suddenly. "Okay, boys," he said, turning. "Good luck!" And he hurried up the slope toward the ridge and freedom....

His mind was furiously active. What now? First of all, he had to get rid of these betraying clothes and find more suitable garments.

What about the guards? For a second Vane felt an unreasoning premonition, but dismissed it casually. After all, he owned the magic gem that gave its owner incredible powers. And--so far--it seemed to work.

It worked on a tourist Vane stopped, too. The man was about his build, he noticed, and was driving a sedan slowly along the highway that twisted through the mountains near by. Vane simply stood beside the road and commanded--inaudibly--"Slow down and stop. Be careful." He did not wish to see the man kill himself by plunging over the precipice that gaped across the highway.

The sedan stopped. The man got out. He stared at Vane and gasped, "You're the escaped con! Don't shoot--"

"Take off your clothes," Vane said.

"I will not!" the man said in a shocked voice, shucking his overcoat. He removed his necktie. "Undress in the open-air? I've never done such a thing in my life!" He pulled off his pants. "I won't undress and that's that!"

"Keep your underwear," Vane smiled, as the man continued to strip. "Swell. Now get in back and cover yourself up with that afghan I saw there."

"I won't," the man said, crawling into the back seat and pulling the afghan over him. "I won't."

"Now keep quiet."

There was no answer. Vane donned the garments and got in the front seat. He found a comb in an inner pocket and adjusted his hair till a lock of it fell over the jewel that flamed on his forehead. Still he was not satisfied. He picked up the black Homburg that lay on the seat beside him, turned down the brim, and pulled it over his eyes. Peering into the rear-view mirror, he nodded, satisfied. It would do. The gem was hidden from casual scrutiny.

Vane was whistling softly as he slid the car into gear and began the long journey into Kentonville....

Chapter 3

The Man Who Was Dead

Six hours later, at five-thirty, Vane reached his destination. He paused on the outskirts and bought a paper from an excited newsboy.

"Big mystery, mister," the kid was yelping. "Men from Mars--escaped convict--jeez!"

"Sure," Vane said, and gave the boy a dollar he found in his pocket. Later he parked under a street light and examined the headlines. A worried frown puckered his brows.

There was trouble he had not anticipated. His plan had not been successful. The three guards had awakened ten minutes after he left them and started plodding back to the prison. But before they topped the rise they were halted by reinforcements the warden had sent out. The newcomers saw the spaceship, and, worse, they had followed the tracks in the snow.

They read the signs correctly. One of the escaped convicts had fallen into the gorge. The other had escaped; his tracks ended at the highway, where he had obviously boarded an automobile. The dragnet was still out. The mystery of the surviving convict's identity wasn't solved by Hanley, Jaeckel, or Bester. In the face of plain evidence and sane logic, they continued to contend firmly that both Apollo and Vane had fallen into the gorge.

The spaceship made headlines. Wild guesses were made as to its

origin. Naturally, the three guards added little light to the problem. They had never seen the ship before. Obvious they were lying, since their tracks in the snow told a different story. Jaeckel, Hanley, and Bester were now protesting against their confinement in the observation ward.

Vane grinned.

There was a watch in his vest pocket, he found. Five-thirty-five. And, as the newspaper showed, this was Thursday. The lawyer shoved the car into gear.

"Unless Pasqual has changed his methods since I was sent up," he murmured, "his boys are making the rounds on East Third Street right now. Wonder if Uncle Tobe's still in business?"

He had decided on a definite plan. Swiftly he treaded the familiar streets of Kentonville, feeling an odd sense of pleasure at seeing well-known sights again. The City Hall--the old Mattingly mansion--Curlew Park--and the slums.

The tenement district, where Vane had been born and where he had fought his way up from the gutter. The slums were part of Vane. Beneath the squalor and the filth he saw something else, a high, unwavering courage that kept on where all else failed. Kids playing naked under the hydrants, bent old shopkeepers saving their pennies to send their children to school, shapeless, tired-eyed mothers slaving over oven-hot stoves in the blazing summers....

Vane parked the car and turned his head. He said to the man lying under the afghan, "In two minutes you'll wake up and drive to your home. You won't remember anything that's happened since I met you."

There was no answer. Vane emerged from the car and crossed the street, looking up at the twilight sky. Ramshackle tenements loomed all around. Tiny, grimy little shops were visible everywhere. Pushcarts were visible here and there.

Vane entered a small grocery whose window bore the legend: Elite Grocery.

A bell tinkled as he stepped across the threshold, looking around the gloomy interior. A glass showcase, filled with cheap candy, was at his left. The place looked just the same--like any other grocery in slumtown.

A boy came from the back--a sallow, taffy-haired kid whose thin face was splashed with freckles. He stared at Vane.

"Steve! Jez--" He whirled. "Pop! Hey! Steve's here!"

"Eh? Who? What--" Uncle Tobe came into view. He looked like a gnome, except for his lack of beard. His face was brown and wrinkled as a walnut, and the faded blue eyes blinked at the intruder.

Then, suddenly, he was running forward unsteadily, gripping Vane's arm with skeletal fingers, drawing him back into the store.

"Steve! Come in here, quick! They're all looking for you. Did anyone see you come in?"

Vane smiled, but let himself be pulled back through faded curtains into the back room, where Uncle Tobe lived with his adopted grandson. He sank down on a rickety couch and pulled his hat lower over his eyes. No use frightening his hosts.

"Hold on," he said. "I'm in no danger, Uncle Tobe. Really. I--the police can't touch me."

"You're cleared? They know you were framed?"

"Not--yet," Vane said slowly, and hurried on. "Listen, I want some information. Does Pasqual still collect his protection dough from you?"

"Yeah," the boy broke in. "He sure does. Raised the ante, too. That dirty gorilla of his--he busted Uncle Tobe smack across the face when we was half a buck short. We cleaned out the till, too, but we couldn't make it."

The old man's eyes searched Vane's face. "Something's happened to you, Steve," he said, frowning. "What is it?"

"Never mind that. When is the collector due again?"

"Today," the youngster burst out. "I'm going to stick a knife in--"

"Mickey!" Uncle Tobe's voice was sharp. "You want to grow up to be a gangster? You shut up!"

Vane said, "Okay. I'm going to wait right here. I want some information from Pasqual's thug, but when he comes I want you to pay him off as usual."

Uncle Tobe bit his lips nervously. "I haven't the money this week, Steve. I'm five dollars short. I've been trying to borrow it, but everybody else is hard up too."

"Swell. Don't worry about that." Vane paused as he heard the sound of a motor starting across the street. He smiled a little. His weird power was still with him. He stood up and put his hand on the old man's stooped shoulder.

"Don't worry about it, Uncle Tobe," he said quietly. "Remember when I was a little kid, you used to slip me candy whenever I came in the store? Remember why you did that?"

The other nodded. "Sure, Steve. You swiped a peppermint stick out of the case once, and I caught you at it. You never did it again."

"No. I remember what you told me--that there was always a right way and a wrong way of getting things, and the wrong way wasn't ever necessary. You said if I wanted candy, you'd give it to me. Well--I owe you plenty, Uncle Tobe. I've thought of what you said a lot of times. And--"

The bell tinkled. Mickey went to the curtain and turned back a white face. "It's Stohm. Uncle Tobe--don't go. I'll go--"

The old man shook his head, smiling, and went past the boy into the shop. Mickey followed. Vane stepped to the curtains, parted them a trifle, and peered through the aperture.

Uncle Tobe was talking to a hulking, unshaved man who looked like a prizefighter. His cauliflower ear seemed to verify that conclusion. His neck made a beefy roll of red fat over a dirty collar. Small black eyes, embedded in little pits of gristle, watched the old grocer.

Stohm's hand lay palm up on the counter. He turned it over and smacked it against the wood.

"I can't help that," he grunted. "I want the dough. And now."

"I'd give you all I have," Uncle Tobe said. "I'll make up the rest next week."

Stohm said nothing, but waited. Mickey stood against the counter and glared, his freckles standing out against rage-pallid skin.

Slowly the old man counted out greasy bills, silver, and pennies into the fat palm. Stohm thrust the money carelessly into his pocket.

He said, "Just to make sure you don't forget to make up the difference next week." His heavy foot pushed against a showcase, and it fell over with a shattering crash. Candy showered the floor.

Uncle Tobe sprang forward as Stohm turned to another case. The blue-veined old hand clutched a brawny arm. With a contemptuous grin the gangster swung his fist and knocked the grocer down.

From his hiding-place behind the curtain, Vane watched, feeling a hot tide of rage surge through him at the sight. Before he could move, however, Mickey had leaped forward and drove his small, hard fist into Stohm's stomach.

The thug grinned. He picked up Mickey by the shirt, holding him helpless in midair.

Stohm said, "Don't get smart with me, sprout. I'm gonna twist your ears off--"

Vane's hand lifted. He brushed the hat off his head. The Stone from the Stars flamed with unearthly crimson light.

The lawyer's lips moved silently. And Stohm stood helpless, frozen, still gripping Mickey....

"Don't move, Stohm," Vane whispered softly. "Don't move a muscle. Just stay like that...."

The gangster's eyes were wide. His face was twisted into a grimace. He glared at Mickey as the boy twisted and struck out with his small, fury-driven fists.

They drove into Stohm's face. They flattened his nose and split his lips. They blacked his eyes and raised red welts on his cheeks.

"Leggo o'me!" Mickey shrilled. "Lemme go!"

But Stohm didn't relax his grip, He couldn't. He couldn't even yell for help. Only his eyes spoke of stark horror as he continued to hold the boy before him.

Blood spurted from the gangster's nose, dripped down his chin. Uncle Tobe staggered forward and seized Mickey about the waist. He tore the boy's shirt free from the iron fingers that held it.

"Mickey! Stop it! Stop!" He thrust the lad behind him. "Don't touch him, Stohm. If you do--"

Uncle Tobe stopped, staring at the other.

Vane readjusted the hat on his head and stepped through the curtains. He patted the grocer's shoulder.

"It's okay, Uncle Tobe. I told you it'd be. You're a good scrapper, Mickey. Now be quiet for a bit."

He turned to Stohm.

"Where's Pasqual?"

The gangster's face remained expressionless, but his voice said thickly, "I dunno."

"When were you to see him again?"

"Tonight. At eight. He's throwing a party tonight at his house. He's celebrating because Tony Apollo's dead."

"Yeah," Vane said thoughtfully. "That's right. Pasqual was always afraid of Apollo. Well, listen to me, Stohm. You're coming along to headquarters, and you're going to confess--answer truthfully every question that's put to you. Hear me?"

"Yes," Stohm said dully.

"My God!" Uncle Tobe's thin frame was shaking. "What'd you do to him, Steve? Hypnotize him?"

"Call it that," Vane nodded. "See you later." He turned to the door.

"You can't go out in the street. You'll be recognized."

The lawyer pulled the Homburg lower over his forehead. "Oh, I dunno. Even if I am--I don't think I'll be arrested." He grinned at the old grocer. "You've helped me a lot, Uncle Tobe. And you, too, Mickey. Fists are better than knives, aren't they?"

"Me," the boy said, eyeing his hands with awe, "they sure are, Steve."

"Come on," Vane commanded Stohm, and the gangster followed him out of the shop.

Realizing that the latter's bruised face would attract attention, Vane soon managed to find a taxi. The driver was suspicious, but a brief command from the lawyer had instantaneous effects.

"Police station," Vane directed, and settled back on the cushions beside the dazed Stohm.

Newsboys were yelling extras as they rode on. "Spaceship from Mars! Read all about it! Convict still at large!"

"Wonder why people figure Mars is the only planet that has life?" Vane mused. "Well--" His thoughts turned to Pasqual. Eight o'clock. He had a rendezvous with the underworld king at eight... He was conscious of an overwhelming hunger. What had the Mercurian said? Vane tried to remember. The Stone from the Stars feeds on life-energy--that would speed up his own basal metabolism, of course. And there was something else--some warning Zaravin had given. What--well, it didn't matter. Nothing could harm Vane as long as the red jewel glowed on his forehead.

He was soon to learn how wrong he was in thinking this.

Chief of Police Lankershim looked up casually as his office door opened. Then he caught his breath and rose half upright, staring at the man on the threshold. Lankershim's hard-bitten, tired face was suddenly ludicrous with amazement.

"Vuh--" he said, and tried again. "Vane!"

"Hello," the intruder smiled. "How are you, Chief?"

Lankershim's eyes flickered to Vane's hands, empty at his sides. Then he looked again at the other's face.

"Give a dog a bad name," Vane observed. "I'm not armed."

"How the devil did you get in here? I--" The chief of police abruptly shot out his arm toward the call-buzzer on his desk.

"Stop," Vane said.

Lankershim's forefinger touched the little button, but did not press it. The chief stood there, his left hand flat on the desk, his right arm extended. Slowly his gaze swiveled toward Vane.

His mouth gaped for a shout to summon aid, but no sound emerged.

"That's it," the lawyer nodded. "Remain perfectly quiet and don't say a word. Just listen. I've got a prisoner for you. I left him outside--Stohm, one of Pasqual's men. He'll talk. All you have to do is ask him questions."

Vane glanced at his watch. "I've an appointment soon. See you later. You're an honest cop, Lankershim, and I remember when you used to pound the pavements on the East Side. So I'm turning Stohm over to you. You won't need to third-degree him. For myself--" He hesitated "--I'm not going back to prison. It'll do you no good to throw out a dragnet for me."

Vane turned to the door. "You'll be all right in three minutes. Adios, Chief."

He went out, leaving Lankershim an apoplectic statue. The hall wasn't empty. Vane pulled the Homburg lower over his eyes and walked swiftly toward the door. Uniformed men eyed him and turned away.

But one man didn't turn. Vane saw his face light with recognition. He opened his mouth and thrust out a finger in a swift gesture.

He stayed that way, briefly. He was paralyzed, immobile, with one foot in the air and his arm extended. Then, off balance, he flopped to the floor, while a nearby officer stared and came hurriedly forward to administer first-aid.

No one else recognized Vane, and he left. Nobody expected to see him in police headquarters, so he had no difficulty in walking out and hailing a taxi. He was driven to Pasqual's home.

It was an old-fashioned mansion set alone amid wide grounds. Vane noticed a number of cars parked near by. He remembered that Big Mike was throwing a party that night.

He was again conscious of an overwhelming hunger, and a strange, inexplicable lassitude that weakened him. He fought it down, staring at the frog-faced man who opened the door.

"Yeah?"

"Tell Pasqual Steve Vane's here," the lawyer said.

The other stepped back a pace. His hand dived into his pocket.

Vane extended his arms slightly from his sides.

Frog-face said, "Come in," and closed the door as the lawyer entered. Then he deftly frisked his guest. After that he nodded to a chair set against the wall and vanished hurriedly.

Vane sat and looked around. This had once been a palatial Georgian mansion, but Pasqual had redecorated it to suit himself. The bright hall was furnished in the height of garishly bad taste. Vane blinked sleepily. He felt very tired....

Frog-face returned. "Come along," he grunted, and led the way upstairs. He paused before a door, thrust it open, and gestured. Vane stepped over the threshold.

He heard the door shut behind him--and lock. He was in a bare room, empty save for curtains that covered one wall. There were no windows. Two men stepped out from behind the drapes. They held guns aimed unwaveringly at Vane.

"Pasqual's busy," one of them said jeeringly. "He sent us to--"

Briefly the odd lassitude left Vane as he realized the death that menaced him. He snapped, "Drop those guns! Quick!"

"Like hell!"

The automatics clanked on the bare floor. The killers stared down at them, at Vane, and simultaneously lunged forward. They halted in mid-course, paralyzed.

Vane said, "Go tell Pasqual I want to see him."

The two turned Stimy and vanished behind the curtains. A door shut metallically. The lawyer rubbed his forehead with a shaking hand, wincing as he felt the chill surface of the jewel. He felt weak and sick. And tired. His thoughts spun chaotically. What--

The room was moving. No, it was his dizziness. There was a choking, unfamiliar odor in Vane's nostrils. Reeling a little, he went to the drapes and drew them aside.

There was a metal door in the wall. It was locked.

Vane felt icy cold. His head was bursting.

It was extremely difficult to move. He turned, staggered, and fell full length on the bare floor.

His body was like ice. He could not move a muscle. He was paralyzed....

Gas! Pasqual had pumped anaesthetic gas into the room. Vane recognized the strange odor now. But what manner of gas could have this effect? His brain was perfectly clear, yet he was immobile as a statue. He lay, waiting.

Time passed. A burly man in a gas mask pulled through the drapes, a gun in one hand. He paused to eye the figure on the floor. Then he pocketed the gun, bent, picked up Vane, and carried him into the next room, shutting the door carefully behind him.

Vane's vision was restricted. He could only stare up at the ceiling. Then a new face appeared, swart, thick-lipped, and brutal. It was Pasqual.

The stocky gangster stood looking down at Vane. His hoarse voice asked, "Dead?"

"Yeah." The other man was removing his gas mask.

Pasqual put his palm flat on Vane's breast. He took a small mirror from his pocket and held it to the lawyer's lips.

"He's stiff, all right," the gangster nodded, rising. "Didn't take much gas to knock him out, either. I dunno what he did to Jim and Oscar, but they said he hexed 'em. Well--" Pasqual's gold teeth flashed in a grin. "That settles one thing. It was Tony Apollo who fell into the gorge up in the mountains. This calls for a celebration, all right."

He pulled at his thick lip, pinching it between thumb and forefinger. "I don't want Vane's body found here. Get the boys to dump him in the river."

The Homburg was still jammed over Vane's forehead. Pasqual bent, tugged at it, and changed his mind. He stood up again.

"Okay," he grunted. "Snap it up. When the boys get back, they can help celebrate. I spent a cool thousand on champagne."

He went out. Vane tried desperately to move, to speak. It was

useless. Yet he wasn't dead. He could hear and see. But he wasn't breathing. His heart had stopped beating. Poison gas--that didn't explain it.

Quite suddenly Vane remembered a sentence Zaravin, the Mercurian, had emphasized.

"The owner of the gem at times falls into a state of suspended animation, during which the jewel rests and revitalizes itself."

Suspended animation! Good God! How long would it last? Vane thought frantically, Will I come back to life at the bottom of the river, with rocks tied to my ankles? How long--

Rough hands lifted him. He was wrapped in sacking and carried. Downstairs, by the feel of the jolting motion. Then he lay motionless, till he heard the sound of a car's motor starting.

"Head for the river," a low voice commanded.

Traffic sounds came to him. Someone muttered, "Hurry up. There's a police car next to us--"

And a siren began to scream ominously.

What was happening? Vane cursed silently, furiously. If he could only move! But no, he could merely lie helpless as the roar of the motor mounted louder and louder and the car jolted more uncomfortably.

"They're catching up...."

"Throw the stiff out," somebody suggested. "Under their wheels. That'll stop 'em. If we don't--"

A door-latch clicked. Vane felt himself moving. He fell heavily, rolled

over and over, and lay still.

Brakes screeched. Footsteps pounded on the pavement. The gunny-sacking was stripped from Vane's face.

Staring up glassily, he saw a uniformed officer bending over him, dim against a star-sprinkled night sky.

"It's Vane!" the man gasped. "The escaped con!"

He turned, shouting. "Keep on after those mugs. Radio headquarters to send a car out. Tell 'em I got Vane--and he's dead!"

Chapter 4

The Road to Life

Vane lay on an operating table, a sheet over his naked body, and stared blankly at a bare white ceiling. He could not move. He could not tell the coroner or the medical examiner that he was alive, that an autopsy would be murder, that he had agonizingly felt the cut of a scalpel into his arm, though no blood flowed from the pale-lipped wound.

The coroner, his face partly hidden under a gauze mask, came forward, holding a probe. He bent over Vane and delicately felt around the edges of the jewel on the lawyer's forehead.

"Funny," he said over his shoulder. "I've never seen anything like it. By rights it ought to have killed the man--it goes right through the bone. Maybe it did kill him. I can't find any surface wounds on the body."

A deeper voice growled, "Too damn bad the murderers got away. I

know Pasqual did this, but I can't pin a thing on him."

Vane realized that Chief of Police Lankershim was speaking.

"And there's something funny about this whole thing, Doc," the official went on. "When Vane walked into my office an hour or two ago--well, I told you what happened, didn't I?"

The coroner's gray eyebrows drew together. Level dark eyes scrutinized the jewel on Vane's forehead as the medico nodded.

"About Stohm? Yes. He confessed, didn't he?"

Lankershim expelled his breath with an angry sound. "He started to--answered every question I asked him. But he was so bruised up I sent him to the hospital for first aid. And--now he's dead."

"Dead?"

"Poisoned. I don't know how. I'm checking up on the trustees and the internes. One of 'em tied up with Pasqual, I know, and he managed to kill Stohm before the man could sign a confession. And now Vane--"

Lankershim came into the lawyer's range of vision. The hard, seamed face was very tired.

"I feel sorry for the kid. Maybe he was framed, maybe he wasn't. The cards were stacked against him, anyhow. And now he's cooling on a slab--" The chief's lips tightened. "Go ahead and find out what killed him, Doc. If I can pin this on Pasqual, so help me, I'll send him to the chair."

A scalpel gleamed in the bright white glare. Vane felt a wave of hopeless sickness. His body tingled with expectation of the searing

pain of sharp steel.

His body... tingled....

Yes. It felt like--like pins-and-needles, the prickling sensation in a limb when circulation is restored to it after a long time. A pulsating, faint stir, too brief to be called a movement, came....

His heart! It was beginning to beat again! But already the coroner was placing the point of his scalpel below Vane's sternum, preparing for the incision.

Vane tried desperately to move. He managed to make one eyelid quiver. Neither the medico nor Lankershim noticed. The lawyer threw all his will into a silent, frantic command.

The coroner hesitated, bent again to his task.

Suddenly he threw his arm out in a convulsive gesture. The scalpel flew from his hand and rebounded off the wall, to clatter upon the floor.

Lankershim said, "What the hell--"

"I--funny! I couldn't help it! Some reflex--"

It was no reflex. As life returned to Vane, the power of the Stone from the Stars waxed strong. His heartbeat was distinctly detectable now.

The coroner recovered the scalpel, stared at it, and thrust it into a sterilizer. He donned another pair of rubber gloves, and, with a different scalpel, advanced again upon the corpse.

Then he stopped. His eyes and mouth expanded to their ultimate limits of flexibility. He gurgled inarticulately.

Behind him, Lankershim gasped, "My God! Look at that!"

The corpse sat up.

Vane winced, stretched out his arms, and yawned. He swung his feet from the table and sat eyeing the two astounded men.

The coroner whispered, "You're dead! You're dead!"

Lankershim came out of his trance. He sprang forward.

Vane frowned and said, "Don't move, either of you." His voice was harsh, husky. His throat felt tight and dry.

Water. He needed that, first. Clutching the sheet about him, he went to a cooler in the corner and drank nearly a quart of icy liquid. After that he felt better. He turned to stare at the two men, who were immobile statues.

A warm stickiness on his arm drew his gaze. The incision the coroner had made was beginning to bleed as blood flowed again through Vane's arteries. Luckily, the wound was not deep, and there was adhesive tape in a glass cabinet nearby. Gingerly he fingered the jewel on his forehead. It was still there, chill, glassy, alien.

He thought swiftly. Pasqual was a shrewd, ruthless antagonist, and he himself was not as powerful as he had imagined. These trances might overtake him at any time. Again he felt the tug of painful hunger. Food was the immediate necessity. He was weak as a cat.

Food--and clothing. Neither the coroner nor Lankershim wore garments large enough to fit Vane's big-boned frame. The lawyer hesitated and finally said, "You'll both wake up in half an hour. Lankershim, I'm going to have a show-down with Pasqual tomorrow

morning. At six a. m. I'm going to his office on the East Side. I want you to be there, and I want you to see that Pasqual's there, too. I don't care how you do it, but that's an order. Understand?"

"I understand," Lankershim said dully.

"Swell. Now--I'll need some decent clothes...."

Gray dawn broke over the East Side. Smoke rose greasily from the chimneys. People rose early in the slums; they had to. Garbage trucks, milk wagons rattled past. Pushcarts were loaded for the day's trade.

In the back of Uncle Tobe's grocery, Steve Vane stood up from the table. Mickey was watching him with awed eyes. The lawyer smiled at the boy.

"Gosh, you can sure stow it away! I never seen a guy eat so much."

Vane pulled the hat lower over his eyes. "I was hungry. Don't wake Uncle Tobe. I'll be seeing you."

He pushed through the curtains, went through the shop, unlocked the front door. He stepped out in the street, and, with a quick glance around, began to walk swiftly southward. It was nearly six a.m. Time for the rendezvous.

Pasqual's office was a dingy, mean little place squeezed in between tenements. Through the glass window Vane could see the squat gangster seated uncomfortably at his desk, shooting occasional glances behind him, where, no doubt, Lankershim was hidden. Vane wondered what means of coercion the chief had used on Pasqual to induce the gangster to keep this appointment. Well, that didn't matter. The lawyer's lips tightened grimly.

He walked into the store. Pasqual shot up from his chair. His hand was hidden in his coat. Vane smiled.

"I'm unarmed," he said.

The gangster's thick lips twisted. He called, "Lankershim! Quick!"

From the back of the office came the sound of hurrying feet. The chief, flanked by four uniformed patrolmen, stepped into view. He walked toward Vane.

"I don't know why I did this," he said. "But I had to, somehow. Vane, you're under arrest. Put up your hands."

Vane said, "All right," and obeyed. He was thinking fast. At a word from him he could force Pasqual to commit suicide. Certainly the gangster deserved death....

No. There was another way. But--

Lankershim was walking forward, handcuffs clinking as he held them. "Come on, Vane."

"Wait a minute."

The chief stopped.

Vane looked at Pasqual. The squat gangster still kept his right hand out of sight under his flashy sport coat. His little eyes were fixed on the lawyer. He snarled. "For God's sake, put those cuffs on him!"

"I just wanted to tell you something, Pasqual," Vane said, very softly. "Remember Tony Apollo? Remember how he used to lick the tar out of you when we were kids? Remember how much you hated and feared him? Tony swore to get you, Pasqual, and he never broke his

word."

"Apollo's dead," the gang chief lashed out.

"He told me nothing could kill him till he'd kept his last promise."

Pasqual started to reply, but no sound came from the thick lips. The tiny eyes turned toward the door. It was opening, very slowly.

Tony Apollo stood on the threshold.

Pasqual sucked in his breath sharply. A sound came from his throat. It wasn't intelligible.

Lankershim whispered, "Apollo!" He reached for his gun.

Vane said, "Don't move, Chief." His glance took in the four patrolmen. "Or you either. This is between Pasqual and Tony Apollo."

Pasqual glanced around frantically. His face was a sickly butter-color.

Tony Apollo walked forward.

Pasqual screamed and clawed out his gun. He fired point-blank at the other.

Blood gushed from Apollo's chest. He didn't stop. He ignored the wounds. He kept on walking toward Big Mike Pasqual.

And Big Mike Pasqual wasn't big any more. He was just a terrified little rat, yelling and picking up the telephone from the desk and hurling it at Apollo. The latter's nose was crushed by the impact. The fixed, unchanging smile did not fade.

Tony Apollo kept on walking forward.

Pasqual seized a chair, lifted it, and smashed it down on Apollo's head.

"Keep away from me!" he mouthed. "Damn you, leave me alone! I never framed you! For God's sake, Tony--"

Pasqual picked up a heavy lamp from the desk and used it like a club. He kept hitting again and again at his opponent's face. Apollo didn't try to resist or protect himself. He just stood there, while his features slowly vanished in a mangle of red, pulped flesh.

Tony Apollo came walking on.....

Horrified gasps went up from the crowd outside. Pasqual whirled suddenly and made for the door. He forced his way through the mob, and men and women alike shrank from the hysterical lord of the underworld--now a shaking, shrieking wreck. Pasqual looked over his shoulder.

Tony Apollo was following.

Vane said to Lankershim, "Come on, all of you." He nodded at the officers, and they trailed him out on the sidewalk. Amid the seething crowd, they stared after Pasqual.

The gangster was climbing a fire-escape, in a frantic attempt to escape from his pursuer. Up and up he went, five stories above the ground to the roof. White faces watched him from the tenement's windows. On the summit Pasqual vanished for an instant, and then reappeared, holding in his hands a brick he had wrenched from a crumbling chimney.

Tony Apollo was climbing the fire-escape.

And Tony Apollo wasn't a man any longer. He was a red butchered Thing from which blood dripped in a steady stream to the pavement below. The street was filled now with a huge mob; hundreds of eyes were turned up to the roof.

"Keep away from me! I didn't frame you! Stay back!"

The brick shot down with the force of a bullet. It smashed against Apollo's shoulder. The man's body was torn from its grip. It plummeted down through the air.

Silence, after that a dull, heavy thud. Then, suddenly, Pasqual screamed like a damned soul. For Tony Apollo was getting up, slowly, carefully, and starting to climb the fire-escape again.

Pasqual found more bricks and hurled them down. Some found their mark; some missed. But Apollo did not lose his grip again. He reached the third story--the fourth--the fifth. White faces watched him with horror from the windows. Apollo ignored them.

He had no face. Blood was literally pouring from his body. And he kept on smiling, silently, horribly, as he climbed.

Pasqual suddenly began to scream, "Stop, Tony! I framed you! I framed you! But I'll give everything back--everything! Only don't come any closer--"

Tony Apollo pulled himself over the edge of the roof. He stood up. Pasqual staggered back, clawing at the air, sobbing hysterically.

Then he fell, and was hidden beyond the parapet of the roof. Tony Apollo fell, too.

Vane turned to Lankershim. "Better send your men up to the roof. I think our friend Pasqual will talk now. If he's still sane...."

The chief barked a command. Two officers raced forward, clambered up the fire-escape. After a moment one returned, while the other, carrying Pasqual's limp body, followed more slowly.

The first officer halted before Lankershim. His voice was puzzled.

"Apollo wasn't up there."

"He got away?"

The patrolman swallowed convulsively. "I--I guess so. There wasn't any blood on the roof--"

Lankershim expelled his breath in disbelief. "No blood! Why, the pavement's covered with it. Look!" He pointed--and then his jaw dropped.

There wasn't any blood visible. It had vanished....

A month had passed. Vane sat in the back of Uncle Tobe's shop, eating Hasenpfeffer with gusto. The old man was smoking a battered corncob and nodding thoughtfully.

"Business is better for everyone now that Pasqual's gang is broken up. He confessed everything, didn't he--how he framed you--everything?"

"That's right."

Uncle Tobe suddenly leaned over the table. "I've been thinking, Steve--they never found Tony Apollo after he disappeared from that roof."

"Probably dead," Vane grunted. "A wonder he kept alive as long as he did."

The grocer smiled. "I have been thinking of various things," he said, apparently at random. "The way you hypnotized Stohm when he knocked over my showcase--and that red stone you used to have on your forehead."

Vane looked up sharply. His face was immobile for an instant. Then, abruptly, he grinned.

"All right," he said. "You saw the jewel, eh?"

"I got a glimpse of it, yes. And now there is a little scar in the center of your forehead--"

"Operation. I'd figured that I'd have to wear that stone till I died, like the original owner. But he wasn't--exactly human." Vane hesitated. "Maybe his race didn't know much about surgery. Maybe their nervous structure was more sensitive. I dunno. An operation removed the jewel, and I'm still alive."

"I see. And what really happened to Tony Apollo?"

"He died the first day after we broke out of prison. Before that, he asked me to get Pasqual for him if he failed. Tony Apollo was a crook and a gangster, but he played square, in his own way. And he never broke a promise."

"But it wasn't Apollo who followed Pasqual up that fire-escape."

Vane smiled grimly. "Pasqual saw him. The Chief saw him. The whole crowd saw him--so did you."

"Yes, I saw him," Uncle Tobe nodded. "But--did you?"

There was a brief silence. Then Vane shook his head.

"No, I didn't see him. He wasn't there, except in the minds of Pasqual and the chief and all the rest. I--well, let's say I used hypnotism." Involuntarily the lawyer's hand went up to the scar on his forehead.

Uncle Tobe tugged at his lower lip, "The red jewel? You still have it? What did you do with it?"

"It's safe," Vane said. "Some day--perhaps I may be forced to use it again. Anyway--" He picked up his fork "--this Hasenpfeffer is swell. How about another helping?"

"The Cold Gray God"

Published in *Weird Tales*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (October 1935).

Snow fell over Righa, pole city of Mats. Bitter snow, whirling in ice-hard particles on the thin, keen wind that always seems to blow through Righa's streets. These cobblestoned ways were nearly empty today. Squat stone houses crouched low under the assaults of that storm-laden wind, and the dry snow eddied in long gusts down the reaches of the Lakklan, Righa's central street. The few pedestrians along the Lakklan huddled collars high about their ears and hurried over the cobbles.

But there was one figure in the street that did not hurry. It was a woman's figure, and by the swing of her gait and the high poise of her head one might guess that she was young, but it would be no more than a guess, for the fur cloak she clutched about her muffled every line of her body and the peaked hood of it hid her face. That fur was the sleek white hide of the almost extinct saltland snow-cat, so that one might presuppose her wealth. She walked with a swinging

grace rarely encountered in Righa's streets. For Righa is an outlaw city, and young women, wealthy and beautiful and unattended, are seldom seen upon the Lakklan.

She strolled slowly down the broad, uneven way, her long hooded cloak making a white enigma of her. But she was somehow alien to this bleak, bitter scene. That almost dancing liveness which attended her motion, eloquent even through the concealing folds of rich snow-cat fur, was not a characteristic of Martian women, even the pink beauties of the canals. Indefinably she was foreign--exotically foreign.

From the shadow of her hood an eager gaze roved the street, avidly scanning the few faces she passed. They were hard-featured faces for the most part, bleak and cold as the gray city about them. And the eyes that met hers boldly or slyly, according to the type of passer-by, were curiously alike in their furtiveness, their shadow of alert and hunted watching. For men came to Righa quietly, by devious ways, and dwelt in seclusion and departed without ostentation. And their eyes were always wary.

The girl's gaze flicked by them and went on. If they stared after her down the street she did not seem to know, or greatly to care. She paced unhurriedly on over the cobbles.

Ahead of her a broad, low door opened to a burst of noise and music, and warm light streamed briefly out into the gray day as a man stepped over the sill and swung the door shut behind him. Sidelong she watched the man as he belted his heavy coat of brown pole-deer hide and stepped briskly out into the street. He was tall, brown as leather, hard-featured under the pole-deer cap pulled low over his eyes. They were startling, those eyes, cold and steady, icily calm. Indefinably he was of Earth. His scarred dark face had a faintly piratical look, and he was wolfishly lean in his spaceman's leather as

he walked lightly down the Lakklan, turning up the deer-hide collar about his ears with one hand. The other, his right, was hidden in the pocket of his coat.

The woman swerved when she saw him. He watched her subtly swaying approach without a flicker of expression on his face. But when she laid a milkily white hand upon his arm he gave a queer little start, involuntarily, like a shiver quickly suppressed. A ripple of annoyance crossed his face briefly and was gone, as if the muscular start had embarrassed him. He turned upon her an absolutely expressionless stare and waited.

"Who are you?" cooed a throatily velvet voice from the depths of the hood.

"Northwest Smith." He said it crisply, and his lips snapped shut again. He moved a little away from her, for her hand still lay upon his right arm, and his right hand was still hidden in the coat pocket. He moved far enough to free his arm, and stood waiting.

"Will you come with me?" Her voice throbbed like a pigeon's from the shadow of her hood.

For a quick instant his pale eyes appraised her, as caution and curiosity warred within him. Smith was a wary man, very wise in the dangers of the spaceways life. Not for a moment did he mistake her meaning. Here was no ordinary woman of the streets. A woman robed in snow-cat furs had no need to accost casual strangers along the Lakklan.

"What do you want?" he demanded. His voice was deep and harsh, and the words fairly clicked with a biting brevity.

"Come," she cooed, moving nearer again and slipping one hand

inside his arm. "I will tell you that in my own house. It is so cold here."

Smith allowed himself to be pulled along down the Lakklan, too puzzled and surprised to resist. That simple act of hers had amazed him out of all proportion to its simplicity. He was revising his judgment of her as he walked along over the snow-dust cobbles at her side. For by that richly throaty voice that throbbed as colorfully as a dove's, and by the milky whiteness of her hand on his arm, and by the subtle swaying of her walk, he had been sure, quite sure, that she came from Venus. No other planet breeds such beauty, no other women are born with the instinct of seduction in their very bones. And he had thought, dimly, that he recognized her voice.

But no, if she were Venus-bred, and the woman he half suspected her of being, she would never have slid her arm through his with that little intimate gesture or striven to override his hesitation with the sheer strength of her own charm. His one small motion away from her hand on his arm would have warned a true Venusian not to attempt further intimacy. She would have known by the look in his still eyes, by the wolfish, scarred face, tight-mouthed, that his weakness did not lie along the lines she was mistress of. And if she were the woman he suspected, all this was doubly sure. No, she could not be Venus-bred, nor the woman her voice so recalled to him.

Because of this he allowed her to lead him down the Lakklan. Not often did he permit curiosity to override his native caution, or he would never have come unscathed through the stormy years that lay behind him. But there was something so subtly queer about this woman, so contradictory to his preconceived opinions. Very vital to Smith were his own quick appraisements, and when one went all awry from the lines he intuitively expected, he felt compelled to learn why. He went on at her side, shortening his strides to the gliding gait of the woman on his arm. He did not like the contact of her hand, although he could not have said why.

No further words passed between them until they had reached a low stone building ten minutes' walk on down the Lakklan. She rapped on the heavy door with a quick, measured beat, and it swung open upon dimness. Her bare white hand in the crook of Smith's arm pulled him inside.

A gliding servant took his coat and fur cap. Without ostentation, as he removed the coat he slipped out the gun which had lain in his right hand pocket and upon which his hand had rested all the while he was in the street. He tucked it inside his leather jacket and followed the still cloaked woman down a short hallway and through a low arch under which he had to stoop his head. The room they entered was immemorably ancient, changelessly Martian. Upon the dark stone floor, polished by the feet of countless generations, lay the furs of saltland beasts and the thick-pelted animals of the pole. The stone walls were incised with those inevitable, mysterious symbols which have become nothing more than queer designs now, though a million years ago they bore deep significance. No Martian house, old or new, lacks them, and no living Martian knows their meaning.

Remotely they must be bound up with the queer, cold darkness of that strange religion which once ruled Mars and which dwells still in the heart of every true Martian, though its shrines are secret now and its priests discredited. Perhaps if one could read those symbols they would tell the name of the cold god whom Mars worships still, in its heart of hearts, yet whose name is never spoken.

The whole room was fragrant and a little mysterious with the aromatic fumes of the braziers set at intervals about the irregularly shaped room, and the low ceiling pressed the perfume down so that it hung in smoky layers in the sweet, heavy air.

"Be seated," murmured the woman from the depths of her hood.

Smith glanced about in distaste. The room was furnished in the luxuriant Martian style so at odds with the harsh characteristics of the Martian people. He selected the least voluptuous-looking of the couches and sat down, regarding the woman obliquely as he did so.

She had turned a little away from him now and was slowly unfastening her furs. Then in one slow, graceful motion she flung back the cloak.

Smith caught his breath involuntarily, and a little shiver rippled over him, like the queer shock which had shaken his usually iron poise in the street. He could not be certain whether it were admiration or distaste he felt more strongly. And this despite her breath-taking beauty. Frankly he stared.

Yes, she was Venusian. Nowhere save upon that sunless, mist-drenched planet are such milk-white women bred. Voluptuously slim she was, in the paradoxical Venusian way, and the sweet, firm curves of her under velvet were more eloquent than a love-song. Her deeply crimson robe swathed her close in the traditional Venusian way, leaving one arm and rose-white shoulder bare and slit so that at every other step her milky thigh gleamed through. Heavy lids veiled her eyes from him as she turned. Unmistakably, exquisitely, she was Venusian, and from head to foot so lovely that despite himself Smith's pulses quickened.

He bent forward, eyes eager upon her face. It was flawlessly lovely, the long eyes subtly tilted, the planes of her cheekbones and the set of her chin eloquent of the beauty which dwelt in the very bones beneath her sweet white flesh, so that even her skull must be lovely. And with an odd little catch in his breath, Smith admitted to himself that she was indeed the woman he had guessed. He had not mistaken the throbbing richness of her voice. But—he looked closer, and wondered if he really did catch some hint of—wrongness—in that

delicately tinted face, in the oddly averted eyes. For a moment his mind ran backward, remembering.

Judai of Venus had been the toast of three planets a few years past. Her heart-twisting beauty, her voice that throbbed like a dove's, the glowing charm of her had captured the hearts of every audience that heard her sing. Even the far outposts of civilization knew her. That colorful, throaty voice had sounded upon Jupiter's moons and sent the cadences of Starless Night ringing over the bare rocks of asteroids and through the darkness of space.

And then she vanished. Men wondered awhile, and there were searches and considerable scandal, but no one saw her again. All that was long past now. No one sang Starless Night any more, and it was the Earth-born Rose Robertson's voice which rang through the solar system in lilting praise of The Green Hills of Earth. Judai was years forgotten.

Smith knew her in the first glimpse he had of that high-cheeked, rose-tinted face. He had felt before he saw her that surely no two women of the same generation could speak in a voice so richly colored, so throbbingly sweet. And yet there was a hint of something alien in those gorgeously rich tones; something indefinably wrong in her unforgettable face; something that sent a little shock of distaste through him in the first glimpse he had of her beauty.

Yes, his ears and his eyes told him that she was Judai, but that infallible animal instinct which had saved him so often in such subtly warning ways told him just as surely that she was not—could not be. Judai, of all women, to make such un-Venusian errors of intuition! Feeling a little dizzy, he sat back and waited.

She glided across the floor to his side. The subtly provocative sway of her body as she moved was innately Venusian, but she moved to

the couch beside him and allowed her body to touch his in a brushing contact that sent a little thrill through him involuntarily, though he moved away. No, Judai would never have done that. She would have known better.

"You know me--yes?" she queried, richly murmurous.

"We haven't met before," he said non-committally.

"But you know Judai. You remember. I saw it in your eyes. You must keep my secret, Northwest Smith. Can I trust you?"

"That--depends." His voice was dry.

"I left, that night in New York, because something called which was stronger than I. No, it was not love. It was stronger than love, Northwest Smith. I could not resist it."

There was a subtle amusement in her voice, as if she told some secret jest that had meaning to none but her. Smith moved a little farther from her on the couch.

"I have been searching a long while," she went on in her low, rich voice, "for such a man as you--a man who can be entrusted with a dangerous task." She paused.

"What is it?"

"There is a man in Righa who has something I very much want. He lives on the Lakklan by that drinking-house they call The Spaceman's Rest."

Again she paused. Smith knew the place well, a dark, low-roofed den where the shadier and more scrupulously wary transients in Righa gathered. For the Spaceman's Rest was owned by a grim-

jawed, leathery old drylander named Mhici, who was rumored to have great influence with the powers in Righa; so that a drink in The Spaceman's Rest was safely taken, without danger of interruption. He knew old Mhici well. He turned a mildly inquiring eye upon Judai, waiting for her to go on.

Her own eyes were lowered, but she seemed to feel his gaze, for she took up her story again instantly, without lifting her lashes.

"The man's name I do not know, but he is of Mars, from the canal-countries, and his face is deeply scarred across both cheeks. He hides what I want in a little ivory box of drylander carving. If you can bring that to me you may name your own reward."

Smith's pale eyes turned again, reluctantly, to the woman beside him. He wondered briefly why he disliked even to look at her, for she seemed lovelier each time his gaze rested upon that exquisitely tinted face. He saw that her eyes were still lowered, the feather lashes brushing her cheeks. She nodded without looking up as he echoed,

"Any price I ask?"

"Money or jewels or--what you will."

"Ten thousand gold dollars to my name in the Great Bank at Lakkjourna, confirmed by viziphone when I hand you the box."

If he expected a flicker of displeasure to cross her face at his matter-of-factness, he was disappointed. She rose in one long gliding motion and stood quietly before him. Smoothly, without lifting her eyes, she said,

"It is agreed, then. I will see you here tomorrow at this hour."

Her voice dropped with a note of finality and dismissal. Smith glanced up into her face, and at what he saw there started to his feet in an involuntary motion, staring undisguisedly. She was standing quite still, with downcast eyes, and all animation and allure were draining away from her face. Uncomprehending, he watched humanity fading as if some glowing inward tide ebbed away, leaving a husk of sweet, inanimate flesh where the radiant Judai had stood a moment before.

An unpleasant little coldness rippled down his back as he watched. Uncertainly he glanced toward the door, feeling more strongly than ever that inexplicable revulsion against some inner alienness he could not understand. As he hesitated, "Go, go!" came in an impatient voice from between her scarcely moving lips. And in almost ludicrous haste he made for the door. His last glance as it swung to of its own weight behind him revealed Judai standing motionless where he had left her, a still figure silhouetted white and scarlet against the immemorial pattern of the wall beyond. And he had a curious impression that a thin gray fog veiled her body in a lowly spreading nimbus that was inexplicably unpleasant.

Dusk was falling as he came out into the street again. A shadowy servant had given him his coat, and Smith departed so quickly that he was still struggling into the sleeves as he stepped out under the low arch of the door and drew a deep breath of the keen, icy air in conscious relief. He could not have explained, even to himself, the odd revulsion which Judai and her house had roused in him, but he was very glad to be free of them both and out in the open street again.

He shrugged himself deep into the warm fur coat and set off with long strides down the Lakklan. He was headed for The Spaceman's Rest. Old Mhici, if Smith found him in the right mood and approached him through the proper devious channels, might have

information to give about the lovely lost singer and her strange house--and her credit at the Great Bank of Lakkjourna. Smith had small reason to doubt her wealth, but he took no needless chances.

The Spaceman's Rest was crowded. Smith made his way through the maze of tables toward the long bar at the end of the room, threading the crowd of hard-faced men whose wide diversity of races seemed to make little difference in the curious similarity of expression which dwelt upon every face. They were quiet and watchful-eyed and wore the indefinable air of those who live by their wits and their guns. The low-roofed place was thick with a pungent haze from the nuari which nearly all were smoking, and that in itself was evidence that in Mhici's place they considered themselves secure, for nuari is mildly opiate.

Old Mhici himself came forward to the voiceless summoning in Smith's single pale-eyed glance as it met his in the crowd about the bar. The Earthman ordered red segir-whisky, but he did not drink it immediately.

"I know no one here," he observed in the drylander idiom, which was a flagrant misstatement, but heavy with meaning. For the hospitable old saltlands' custom demands that the proprietor share a drink with any stranger who comes into his bar. It is a relic from the days when strangers were rare in the saltlands, and is very seldom recalled in populous cities like Righa, but Mhici understood. He said nothing, but he took the black Venusian bottle of segir by the neck and motioned Smith toward a corner table that stood empty.

When they were settled there and Mhici had poured himself a drink, Smith took one gulp of the red whisky and hummed the opening bars of Starless Night, watching the old drylander's pointed, leathery features. One of Mhici's eyebrows went up, which was the equivalent of a start of surprise in another man.

"Starless nights," he observed, "are full of danger, Smith."

"And of pleasure sometimes, eh?"

"Ur-r! Not this one."

"Oh?"

"No. And where I do not understand, I keep away."

"You're puzzled too, eh?"

"Deeply. What happened?"

Smith told him briefly. He knew that it is proverbial never to trust a drylander, but he felt that old Mhici was the exception. And by the old man's willingness to come to the point with a minimum of fencing and circumlocution he knew that he must be very perturbed by Judai's presence in Righa. Old Mhici missed little, and if he was puzzled by her presence Smith felt that his own queer reactions to the Venusian beauty had not been unjustified.

"I know the box she means," Mhici told him when he had finished. "There's the man, over there by the wall. See?"

Under his brows Smith studied a lean, tall canal-dweller with a deeply scarred face and an air of restless uneasiness. He was drinking some poisonously green concoction and smoking nuari so heavily that the clouds of it veiled his face. Smith grunted contemptuously.

"If the box is valuable he's not putting himself into any shape to guard it," he said. "He'll be dead asleep in half an hour if he keeps that up."

"Look again," murmured Mhici. And Smith, wondering a little at the dryness of the old man's voice, turned his head and studied the canal-dweller more carefully.

This time he saw what had escaped him before. The man was frightened, so frightened that the nuari pouring in and out of his lungs was having little effect. His restless eyes were hot with anxiety, and he had maneuvered his back to the wall so that he could command the whole room as he drank. That in itself, here in Mhici's place, was flagrant. Mhici's iron fist and ready gun had established order in The Spaceman's Rest long ago, and no man in years had dared break it. Mhici commanded not only physical but also moral respect, for his influence with the powers of Righa was exerted not only to furnish immunity to his guests but also to punish peace-breakers. The Spaceman's Rest was sanctuary. No, for a man to sit with his back to the wall here bespoke terror of something more deadly than guns.

"They're following him, you know," Mhici murmured over the rim of his glass. "He stole that box somewhere along the canals, and now he's afraid of his shadow. I don't know what's in the box, but it's damn valuable to someone and they're out to get it at any cost. Do you still want to relieve him of it?"

Smith squinted at the drylander through narrowed eyes. How old Mhici learned the secrets he knew, no one could guess, but he had never been caught in error. And Smith had little desire to call down upon himself the enmity of whatever perils it was which kindled the fear of death in the canal-dweller's eyes. Yet curiosity rode him still. The puzzle of Judai was a tantalizing mystery which he felt he must solve.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I've got to know."

"I'll get you the box," said Mhici suddenly. "I know where he hides it,

and there's a way between here and the house next door that will let me at it in five minutes. Wait here."

"No," said Smith quickly. "That's not fair to you. I'll get it."

Mhici's wide mouth curved.

"I'm in little danger," he said. "Here in Righa no one would dare--and besides, that way is secret. Wait."

Smith shrugged. After all, Mhici knew how to take care of himself. He sat there gulping down segir as he waited, and watching the canal-dweller across the room. Terror played in changing patterns across the scarred face.

When Mhici reappeared he carried a small wooden crate labeled conspicuously in Venusian characters. Smith translated, "Six Pints Segir, Vanda Distilleries, Ednes, Venus."

"It's in this," murmured Mhici, setting down the box. "You'd better stay here tonight. You know, the back room that opens on the alley."

"Thanks," said Smith in some embarrassment. He was wondering why the old drylander had taken such pains in his behalf. He had expected no more than a few words of warning. "I'll split the money, you know."

Mhici shook his head.

"I don't think you'll get it," he said candidly. "And I don't think she really wants the box. Not half so much as she wants you, anyhow. There were any number of men who could have got the box for her. And you remember how she said she'd been looking a long time for someone like yourself. No, it's the man she wants, I think. And I can't figure out why."

Smith wrinkled his brows and traced a design on the tabletop in spilt segir.

"I've got to know," he said stubbornly.

"I've passed her in the street. I've felt that same revulsion, and I don't know why. I don't like this, Smith. But if you feel you have to go through with it, that's your affair. I'll help if I can. Let's drop it, eh? What are you doing tonight? I hear there's a new dancer at the Lakkta now."

Much later, in the shifting light of Mars'hurrying moons, Smith stumbled up the little alley behind The Spaceman's Rest and entered the door in the rear of the bar. His head was a bit light with much segir, and the music and the laughter and the sound of dancing feet in the Lakkta's halls made an echoing beat through his head. He undressed clumsily in the dark and stretched himself with a heavy sigh on the leather couch which is the Martian bed.

Just before sleep overtook him he found himself remembering Judai's queer little quirking smile when she said, "I left New York because something called--stronger than love...." And he thought drowsily, "What is stronger than love?..." The answer came to him just as he sank into oblivion. "Death."

Smith slept late the next day. The tri-time steel watch on his wrist pointed to Martian noon when old Mhici himself pushed open the door and carried in a tray of breakfast.

"There's been excitement this morning," he observed as he set down his burden.

Smith sat up and stretched luxuriously.

"What?"

"The canal man shot himself."

Smith's pale eyes sought out the case labeled "Six Pints Segir" where it stood in the corner of the room. His brows went up in surprise.

"Is it so valuable as that?" he murmured. "Let's look at it."

Mhici shot the bolts on the two doors as Smith rose from the leather couch and dragged the box into the center of the floor. He pried up the thin board that Mhici had nailed down the night before over the twice-stolen box, and pulled out an object wrapped in brown canvas. With the old drylander bending over his shoulder he unwound the wrappings. For a full minute thereafter he squatted on his heels staring in perplexity at the thing in his hands. It was not large, this little ivory box, perhaps ten inches by four, and four deep. Its intricate drylander carving struck him as remotely familiar, but he had been staring at it for several seconds before it dawned upon him where he had seen those odd spirals and queer twisted characters before. Then he remembered. No wonder they looked familiar, for they had stared down upon him bafflingly from the walls of countless Martian dwellings.

He lifted his eyes and saw a band of them circling the walls above him now. But they were large, and these on the box intricately tiny, so that at first glance they looked like the merest waving lines incised delicately all over the box's surface.

Not until then, following those crawling lines, did he see that the box had no opening. To all appearances it was not a box at all, but a block of carved ivory. He shook it, and something within shifted slightly, as if it were packed in loose wrappings. But there was no

opening anywhere. He turned it over and over, peering and prying, but to no avail. Finally he shrugged and wrapped the canvas back about the enigma.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Mhici shook his head.

"Great Shar alone can tell," he murmured half in derision, for Shar is the Venusian god, a friendly deity whose name rises constantly to the lips of the Hot Planet's dwellers. The god whom Mars worships, openly or in secret, is never named aloud.

They discussed the puzzle of it off and on the rest of the afternoon. Smith spent the hours restlessly, for he dared not smoke nuari nor drink much, with the interview so close ahead. When the shadows were lengthening along the Lakklan he got into his deer-hide coat again and tucked the ivory box into an inner pocket. It was bulky, but not betrayingly so. And he made sure his flame-gun was charged and ready.

In the late afternoon sun that sparkled blindingly upon the snow crystals blowing along the wind', he went down the Lakklan again with his right hand in his pocket and his eyes raking the street warily under the shadow of his cap. Evidently the pursuers of that box had not traced it, for he was not followed.

Judai's house squatted dark and low at the edge of the Lakklan. Smith fought down a rising revulsion as he lifted his hand to knock, but the door swung open before his knuckles had touched the panel. That same shadowy servant beckoned him in. This time he did not put his gun away when he shifted it from his coat pocket. He took the canvas-wrapped box in one hand and the flame-pistol in the other, and the servant opened the door he had passed last night upon the

room where Judai was waiting.

She stood exactly as he had left her in the center of the floor, white and scarlet against the queer traceries on the wall beyond. He had the curious notion that she had not stirred since he left her last night. She moved a little sluggishly as she turned her head and saw him, but it was a lethargy which she quickly overcame. She motioned him toward the divan, taking her seat at his side with the flowing, feline ease of every true Venusian. And as before, he shrank involuntarily from the contact of that fragrant, velvet-sheathed body, with an inner revulsion he could not understand.

She said nothing, but she held out her two hands cupped up in entreaty, and she did not lift her eyes to his face as she did so. He laid the box in her upturned palm. At that moment for the first time it occurred to him that not once had he met her eyes. She had never lifted those veiling lashes and looked into his. Wondering, he watched.

She was unwrapping the canvas with quick, delicate motions of her pink-stained fingers. When the box lay bare in her hands she sat quite motionless for a while, her lowered eyes fixed upon the carved block of the thing which had cost at least one life. And her quiet was unnatural, trance-like. He thought she must have ceased to breathe. Not a lash fluttered, not a pulse stirred in her round white wrists as she held the little symbol-traced box up. There was something indescribably horrid in her quiet as she sat and stared, all her being centered in one vast, still concentration upon the ivory box. Then he heard such a deep breath rush out through her nostrils that it might have been life itself escaping, a breath that thinned into a high, shuddering hum like the whine of wind through wires. It was not a sound that any human creature could make.

Without realizing that he had moved, Smith leaped. Of their own

volition his muscles tensed into a spring of animal terror away from that high-whining thing on the couch. He ground himself half crouched a dozen paces away, his gun steady in a lifted hand and his hair stiffening at the roots as he faced her. For by the thin, high, shuddering noise he knew surely that she was not human.

For a long instant he crouched there, taut, feeling his scalp crawl with a prickling terror as his pale eyes searched for some reason in this madness which had come over them both. She still sat rigid, with lowered eyes, but though she had not stirred, something told him unerringly that his first instinct had been right, his first intuitive flinching from her hand on his arm--she was not human. Warm white flesh and fragrant hair and subtle, curving roundness of her under velvet, all this was camouflage to conceal--to conceal--he could not guess what, but he knew that loveliness for a lie, and all down his back the nerves tingled with man's involuntary shudder from the unknown.

She rose. Cradling the ivory box against the sweet high curve of her bosom, she moved slowly forward, her lashes making two dim crescents on her exquisitely tinted cheeks. He had never seen her lovelier, or more hideously repulsive. For in some obscure part of his brain he knew that the humanity which she had clutched like a cloak about her was being dropped. In another instant....

She paused before him, very near, so near that the muzzle of his half-forgotten gun was pressed against the velvet that sheathed her body, and the fragrance of her rose in a vague cloud to his nostrils. For one tense instant they stood so, she with lowered lashes, cradling her ivory box, he rigid with prickling revulsion, gun nosing her side, pale eyes set in a narrow-lidded stare as he waited shudderingly for what must come next. In the split second before her eyelids rose, he wanted overwhelmingly to fling up a hand and shut out the sight of what lay behind them, to run blindly out of the room and out of the

house and never stop until the doors of The Spaceman's Rest closed shelteringly upon him. He could not stir. Caught in a frozen trance, he stared. The lashes fluttered. Slowly, very slowly, her lids rose.

The cold shock that jolted him into incredulity then made every detail of the picture so clear that he was never to forget, no matter how hard he tried, the vividness of that first glimpse into Judai's eyes. Yet for a full minute he did not realize what he saw. It was too incredible for the brain to grasp. With thickly beating heart he stood rigid, staring into the weird face turned to his.

From under those deep-curved lashes looked out no such luminous depths of darkness as he had expected. There were no eyes behind Judai's creamy lids. Instead he was looking into two lash-fringed, almond-shaped pits of gray smoke, smoke that seethed and shifted and boiled within itself, unresting as smoke from the fires of hell. He knew then that there dwelt in the curved and milk-white body which had been Judai's a thing more evil than any devil hell's fire ever spawned. How it came into that body he never knew, but he did know that the real Judai was gone. Looking into that restlessly seething smoky blindness, he was sure of that, and revulsion surged through him as he strained at his own body for the will to blast this hell-tenanted beauty into nothingness, and could not stir. Helpless in the frozen grip of his own horror, he watched.

She--it stood straight before him, staring blankly. And he was aware of a slow seepage from the gray pits of the eyes. Smoke was curling out into the room in delicate whirls and plumes. Sickness came over him as he realized it, and an extravagant terror, for it was not the sweet-smelling, clean smoke of fire. There was no physically perceptible odor to it, but from the unspeakably evil stench his very soul shuddered away. He could smell evil, taste it, perceive it with more senses than he knew he possessed, despite the intangibility of the swirling stuff that billowed now in deepening waves from under

the lash-fringed lids that once had been Judai's. Once before he had been dimly aware of this, when he had looked back as he left, the night before, to see that vague gray veiling a woman's milk-whiteness in obscurity that was somehow--unpleasant. Even that remote hinting at what he saw now in full strength had been enough to send a warning shudder through him. But now--now it billowed about him in thickening deeps through which he could scarcely make out the pale shape of the figure before him, and the grayness was seeping through his body and mind and soul with a touch more dreadful than the touch of every ugly thing in creation. It was not tangible, but it was slimier and more unclean than anything he could have named. Not upon his flesh but upon his soul that wet slime crawled.

Dimly through the swirl of it he saw the lips of Judai's body move. A ghost of a voice fluted into the grayness, a sweet, rich, throbbing thread of sound. So lovely had been Judai's voice that even the horror which stirred it now into speech could not evoke discords from a throat that had never uttered any sound but music.

"I am ready to take you now, Northwest Smith. The time has come to discard this body and these ways of seduction, and put on a man's strength and straightforwardness, so that I may complete what I came to do. I shall not need it long, but your force and vitality I must have before I surrender them ufjjj to mighty ----- . And then I may go forth in my true form to bring the worlds under great -----'s reign."

Smith blinked. There had been a gap in her words where he should have heard a name, but it had not been a gap of silence. Her lips had moved, though no sound came forth, and the air shook with a wordless cadence so deeply stirring that he felt involuntary awe--if it were possible to feel awe at the utterance of a word without sound.

That sweetly murmurous voice was whispering through the fog that

had thickened now until he could scarcely see the outlines of the figure before him.

"I have waited so long for you, Northwest Smith--for a man with a body and a brain like yours, to serve my needs. I take you now, in great -----'s name. In that name, I bid you surrender your body. Go!"

The last word cracked through the mist, and abruptly blindness swept over him. His feet no longer pressed the floor. He was wallowing in a fog of such revolting horror that his very soul writhed within him for escape. Slimily the gray stuff seeped through his being, crawling and sliding and oozing, and the touch of it upon his brain was a formless madness, so that the soul which shuddered from such indescribable dreadfulness would have fled into hell itself to escape.

Dimly he knew what was happening. His body was being made untenable to force his consciousness to leave it. And knowing this, realizing what its portent was, yet he found himself struggling desperately for release. The crawling ooze was a slime upon his very soul. There could be no alternative so frightful as this sickening reality. Madness was in the frightened writhing of self to escape the horror that enfolded him. Frantically he fought for release.

It came, suddenly. He was aware of a distinct snapping, as of something tangible, and then freedom. On the instant those gray, crawling swaths of revulsion ceased to be. He floated free and light and impalpable in a void without light or dark, conscious of nothing but the blessed release from torment.

Gradually realization came back to him. He had no form or substance now, but he was aware. And he knew that he must seek his body again; how, he did not know, but the thought of it was a poignant longing, and his whole intangible being so concentrated upon that thought that in a moment or two the room he had left began

to take shape about him, and his own tall figure swam hazily through the veiling fog. With a mighty effort he bent his thoughts upon that figure, and at last began to understand what was taking place.

He could see now with clear, unhampered vision around all points of the compass at once. Floating in nothingness, he watched the room. It was a little difficult at first to see any one thing, for he no longer had the focus of eyes to help him and the room was a wide panorama without center. But after a while he learned the trick of concentration, and saw clearly for the first time his own relinquished self, broad and tall and leather-brown, standing rigid in the midst of a sliding fog that curled about it in thick, slimy glidings which brought back memories of sickening vividness. At the feet of that brown, fog-veiled shape lay the body of Judai. Exquisitely graceful, it stretched in a glimmer of white and scarlet across the dark floor. He knew she was dead now. The breath of alien life which had been infused into her was withdrawn. Death's curious flatness was eloquent in the piteously lovely body rounding under the velvet robe. The Thing was done with her.

He turned his attention again to his own body. That horribly alive fog had thickened still more, into heavy, half-palpable robes of sliding slime that crawled unceasingly over and around the tall figure. But it was disappearing. It was seeping slowly, remorselessly, into the flesh he had vacated. Now it was more than half gone, and into that frozen body a semblance of life was stealing. He watched while the last of the gray stuff which was the Thing took possession of his lost self, waking it into a cold and alien life. He saw it seize upon the nerves and muscles he had trained, so that its first motion was the familiar quick gesture to slip the flame-gun into its holster under his arm. He saw his own broad shoulders shrug unconsciously to be sure the strap was in place. He watched himself crossing the room with the long, light steps that had once been his. He saw his own hands pick up the ivory box from the slim, pink-stained fingers of

Judai.

Not until then did he realize that thoughts were open to his reading now, as clearly as words had been before. The only thoughts in the room had been the alien ones of the Thing and until this moment they had not taken forms human enough to have meaning to him. But now he began to understand many things, and the strangeness of them whirled through his consciousness in half-incomprehensible patterns.

Then abruptly a name flashed through those thoughts, and the power of it struck him with such force that for an instant his hold upon the scene slipped and he whirled back into that void again where neither light nor darkness dwelt. As he fought his way back into the room his unbodied mind was struggling to put together the pieces of newly acquired knowledge, in which that name flamed like a beacon, the center and focus for all the patterns of the knowledge.

It was the name his ears had not been able to hear when Judai's lips spoke it. He knew now that though human lips could frame its syllables, no brain that was wholly human could send the impulses for that framing; so that it could never be spoken by a sane man, nor heard or understood by him. Even so, the wordless vibrations of it had eddied through his brain in waves of awe. And now, when its unveiled force struck full upon his unprotected consciousness, the mightiness of that name was enough to send him reeling all out of focus and control.

For it was the name of a Thing so powerful that even in his unreality he shuddered at the thought; a thing whose full might no flesh-veiled consciousness could grasp. Only in his disembodied awareness could he realize it, and he turned his mind away from that awful name even as he delved deeper into the alien thoughts that flashed before him from the creature which wore his semblance.

He knew now why the Thing had come. He knew the purpose of that which bore the name. And he knew why the men of Mars never spoke their cold god's title. They could not. It was not a name human brains could grasp or human lips utter without compulsion from Outside. Slowly the origins of that curious religion took shape in his mind.

The name had dwelt like some vast, brooding shadow among the earliest ancestors of Martian men, millions upon millions of years ago. It had come from its lair Outside, and dwelt dreadfully among mankind, sucking life from its worshippers and reigning with such awe and terror that even now, after countless eons had gone by, though its very existence was forgotten, that terror and awe lived yet in the minds of these remote descendants.

Nor was the name wholly gone, even now. It had withdrawn, for reasons too vast for comprehension. But it had left behind it shrines, and each of them was a little doorway into that presence, so that the priests who tended them furnished tribute. Sometimes they were possessed by the power of their god, and spoke the name which their devotees could not hear, yet whose awful cadences were a storm of power about them. And this was the origin of that strange, dark religion which upon Mars has been discredited for so long, though it has never died in the hearts of men.

Smith understood now that the Thing which dwelt in his body was a messenger from Outside, although he could never quite grasp in what capacity. It might have been a part of that vast composite power which bore the name. He never knew. Its thoughts when they wandered in that direction were too alien to carry any meaning into his mind. When it even turned those thoughts backward toward its origin, and the might of the name flashed through them, Smith quickly learned to shrink within himself, withdrawing his consciousness until that thought had passed. It was like gazing through an opened door

into the furnaces of hell.

He watched himself turn the box slowly over between his hands, while his own pale eyes searched its surface. Or were they his eyes? Did there dwell now under his own lids the grayness of the Thing? He could not be sure, for he could not bring himself to concentrate directly upon that foggy dweller within his body. Its touch was so alien, so repulsive.

Now his hands had found some hidden opening. He could not tell exactly what happened, but suddenly he saw himself wrenching at the ivory box, with a queer, twisting motion, and the two halves of it fell apart along an uneven line of cleavage. Out of it a thick mist rose, a heavy, semitangible stuff in which the hands of his body groped as if through folds of cloth.

Sluggishly the mist spilled floorward, while from the box he saw himself drawing a thing which cleared away a little of the mystery that shrouded so much of what had happened. For he recognized the curious symbol that had lain in the mist-filled box. It was wrought from a substance which has no duplicate anywhere on the three worlds, a translucent metal through whose depths a smoky dimness was diffused in vague curls and plumes. And its shape was the duplicate of a symbol repeated often in the wall-carvings of every Martian house. Smith had heard whispers of this talisman passed from mouth to mouth in the secrecy of space-pirates' rendezvous. For its very existence was a secret to all save those rovers of the space ways from whom nothing is wholly hidden.

The symbol, so those whispers said, was a talisman from the old religion, used in the worship of the nameless god in the ages before discredit had forced the worship into secrecy--a thing of terrible power had any living man known how to use it. It was said to be kept in inviolable hiding somewhere in one of the canal cities. He

understood now in what terror of the canal-dweller with the scarred face must have gone, knew why he had not dared face the consequences of his own theft. The priests of the name were held in the more terror for the darkness of their calling.

The story behind that theft he was never to know. It was enough that the Thing had the priceless talisman now. Through his own efforts that immemorial symbol had fallen into the only hands which would know how to wield it: paradoxically, the hands that had once been his. Helplessly he watched.

His own fingers lifted it up familiarly. It was not more than twelve inches long, a thing of subtle curves and arcs. Suddenly he knew what the symbol meant. From the cloudy alienness of the mind which dwelt where his mind had dwelt, he drew the certainty that the talisman had been wrought into the shape of the written name: that unspeakable word, crystallized into nameless metal. The Thing handled it with a sort of unhuman awe.

He watched himself turning slowly round as if in an effort to orient his body with some unknown point at a measureless distance. His hand, holding the symbol, rose high. The room was full of a tense solemnity, an unbreathing hush, as if some long-awaited moment of tremendous awe and portent had been reached at last. Slowly, with stiff steps, his lost body paced toward the eastern wall, the symbol held rigidly before it.

At that tracery-incised wall it stopped, and with a gesture full of ritualistic slowness lifted the talisman and set its curved apex against an identical symbol on the wall, the carven counterpart of the name. And from that point it drew the talisman down and crosswise as if it were painting an unseen curve on the wall. As he watched that moving apex Smith realized what was happening. Invisibly, with the metal-wrought talisman following lines in the symbols on the wall, it

was tracing that name. And the ritual was invested with a depth of power and a nameless portent that sent sudden terror thrilling through him. What was the meaning of it? Cold with a bodiless chill of foreboding, he watched the rite to its close. The talisman sketched the last lines of that pattern upon the wall, completely enclosing a space that covered perhaps six square feet of tracery. And then his own tall body flourished the metal symbol like one who welcomes a caller through an opened door, and dropped to its knees before the outlined pattern.

For a minute--for two minutes--nothing happened. Then, watching the wall, Smith thought he could discern the shape of the symbol that had been traced. Somehow it was becoming clear among the painted characters. Somehow a grayness was spreading within the outlines he had watched his own hands trace, a fogginess that strengthened and grew clearer and clearer, until he could no longer make out the tracteries enclosed within its boundaries, and a great, misty symbol stood out vividly across the wall.

He did not understand for a moment. He watched the grayness take on density and grow stronger with each passing moment, but he did not understand until a long curl of fog drifted lazily out into the room, and the grayness began to spill over its own edges and eddy and billow as if that wall were afire. And from very far away, over measureless voids, he caught the first faint impact of a power so great that he knew in one flash the full horror of what he watched.

The name, traced upon that wall with its own metal counterpart, had opened a doorway for the Thing which bore the name to enter. It was coming back to the world it had left millions of years ago. It was oozing through the opened door, and nothing he could do would stop it.

He was a bodiless awareness drifting through voids that held neither

light nor dark—he was a nothingness, and he must watch his own body bring down the destruction of the worlds he had dwelt in without any strength to oppose a feather's weight of resistance.

Despairingly he watched a long plume of the dawning terror brush his body's bent head. At the contact that body rose stiffly, as if in answer to a command, and backed slowly across the room to where the body of Judai lay sprawled upon the floor. It stooped like an automaton and lifted her in its arms. It came forward again, walking mechanically, and laid her down under the billowing symbol that was a gateway into deeper depths than hell. The smoke wreathed downward hungrily, hiding the white and scarlet of her from view.

For an instant it writhed and boiled about the spot where she had been engulfed, and the impact of greater force struck in one mighty blow against Smith's consciousness. For across the measureless gulfs the power of the name was nearing. Whatever of energy it had absorbed from the body of Judai had brought it nearer with a long leap, so that now the might of it echoed round and round the symbol-walled room like the beat of drums. There was triumph in that beating. Remotely, in the recurrent waves of thunderous power, he understood at last the purpose of those symbols.

All this had been planned eons ago, when the Unnamable One departed from Mars. Perhaps the ages had been no more than a moment to its timeless might. But it had left with full meaning to return, and so had given more deeply than time could erase on the minds of its worshippers the need for those symbols upon their walls. Only the need; not the reason. They were to make full access into this world possible again. The remote touch which its priests kept through their shrines to the Nameless One were like tiny windows, but here, hidden among the traceries, opened a mighty gateway through which all that measureless power could sweep irresistibly when the hour came. And it had come.

Dimly he caught a vision of triumph from the mind of the Thing which stood rigid in his body before the billowing wall, a vision of other worlds wherever the symbols were graven opening like doors for the great gray surges to come flooding through, a vision of worlds engulfed and seething in one unbroken blanket of gray that writhed and eddied and sucked avidly at the bodies and souls of men.

Smith's consciousness shuddered in the void where it drifted, raged against its own helplessness, watched in horror-struck fascination the surges of billowing gray that rolled slowly into the room. The body of Judai had wholly vanished now. And the long fog-fingers were groping blindly as if in search for other food. In a swimming horror he watched his own tall body stumble forward and sink to its knees under the plumes of ravenous gray.

Somehow the vivid despair of that moment was strong enough to do something which nothing that preceded it had accomplished. The prospect of the world's destruction had made him sick with a hopeless dread; but the thought of his own body offered up as a sacrifice to the flooding gray, leaving him to drift for eternity through voids, cracked like a whiplash against his consciousness in one flash of hot rebellion that jerked him all out of focus to the scene he watched. Violent revolt surged up in him against the power of the Thing and the awful force of that which bore the name.

How it happened he did not know, but suddenly he was no longer floating disembodied through nothingness. Suddenly he was bursting the bonds that parted him from reality. Suddenly he was violently back again into the world from which he had been thrust, fighting desperately to gain access once more into his body, struggling in panic terror to force an entry against the thick grayness of what dwelt there now. It was a nauseous and revolting struggle, so close to the slimy presence of the Thing, but he scarcely heeded its nearness in

his frenzy to save the body that was his.

For the moment he was not striving for full possession, but he pushed and raged and fought to seize his own muscles and drag his body back from the billows that were rolling hungrily toward it. It was a more desperate struggle than any hand-to-hand combat, the struggle of two entities for a single body.

The Thing that opposed him was strong, and firmly entrenched in the nerve-centers and brain-cells that had been his, but he was fighting the more hotly for the familiarity of the field he sought to win. And slowly he won entrance. Perhaps it was because he was not striving at first for full possession. In its struggles to cling fast to what it held, the Thing could not oppose his subtle sliding in among the centers that controlled motion, and by jerky degrees he dragged his own body to its feet and backward, step by hotly contested step, away from the seething pattern that oozed upon the wall. Sick to the very soul with the closeness of the Thing, he fought.

He was struggling now to force it wholly out, and if he was not driving it away, at least he held his own. It could not dislodge him from the foothold he had won. There were flashes when he saw the room through his own eyes again, and felt the strength of his body like a warm garment about the nakedness of the self which strove for its possession, yet a body through which crawled and slid the dreadfulness of that sickening fog-fluid which was a slime upon his innermost soul.

But the Thing was strong. It had rooted its tendrils deep in the body he fought for, and would not let go. And through the room in recurrent thunders beat the might of the coming name, impatient, insistent, demanding sustenance that it might pass wholly through the gateway. Its long fog-fingers stretched clutchingly out into the room. And in Smith a faint hope was growing that it must have his body

before it could come farther. If he could prevent that, perhaps all was not yet lost. If he could prevent it--but the Thing he struggled with was strong....

Time had ceased to have meaning for him. In a dream of horror he wallowed amid the thick and sickening slime of his enemy, fighting for a more precious thing than his own life.

He fought for Death. For if he could not win his body, yet he knew he must enter it long enough to die somehow, by his own hand, cleanly; else he would drift through eternity in the void where neither light nor darkness dwelt. How long it went on he never knew. But in one of those moments when he had won a place in his own body again, and perceived with its senses, he heard the sound of an opening door.

With infinite effort he twisted his head around. Old Mhici stood in the opening, flame-gun in hand, blinking bewilderedly into the fog-dim room. There was a dawning terror in his eyes as he stared, a terror deep-rooted and age-old, heritage from those immemorial ancestors upon whose minds the name had been graven too deeply for time to efface. Half comprehending, he stood in the presence of the god of his fathers, and Smith could see a paralyzing awe creeping slowly across his face. He could not have known from the sight of that fog-oozing wall what it was he looked upon, but an inner consciousness seemed to make clear to him that the thing which bore the name was a presence in the room. And it must have realized Mhici's presence, for about the walls in tremendous beats of command roared the thunderous echoes of that far-away might, ravenous to feed again upon man. Old Mhici's eyes glazed with obedience. He stumbled forward one mechanical step.

Something cracked in Smith's consciousness. If Mhici reached the wall, all his struggles would be for nothing. With that nourishment the name might enter. Well, at any rate he could save himself--perhaps.

He must die before that happened. And with all the strength that was in him summoned up in one last despairing surge he crowded the Thing that dwelt with him momentarily out of control, and fell upon Mhici with clawed hands clutching for his throat.

Whether the old drylander understood or not, whether he could see in the pale eyes that had been his friend's the slow writhing of the Thing, Smith could not guess. He saw the horror and incredulity upon the leathery features of the Martian as he lunged, and then, in blessed relief, felt wiry fingers at his own neck. Yet he knew that Mhici was striving not to injure him, and he struggled in desperation to lash the old drylander into self-defensive fury. He struck and gouged and tore, and felt in overwhelming relief the old man's strong grip tighten at last about his neck.

He relaxed then in the oncoming oblivion of those releasing fingers.

From very far away a hoarse voice calling his name dragged Smith up through layer upon layer of cloudy nothingness. He opened heavy eyes and stared. Gradually old Mhici's anxious face swam into focus above him. Segir was burning in his mouth. He swallowed automatically, and the pain of his bruised throat as the fiery liquid went down roused him into full consciousness. He struggled to a sitting position, pressing one hand to his reeling head and blinking dazedly about.

He lay upon the dark stone floor where oblivion had overtaken him. The patterned walls looked down. His heart suddenly leaped into thick beating. He twisted round, seeking that wall which had oozed grayness through a door that opened upon Outside. And with such relief that he sank back against Mhici's shoulder in sudden weakness, he saw that the Unnamable One no longer billowed out into the room. Instead, that wall was a cracked and charred ruin down which long streams of half-melted rock were congealing. The

room was pungent and choking with the odor of a flame-gun's blast.

He turned questioning eyes to Mhici, croaking something inarticulate in the depths of his swollen throat.

"I--I burnt it," said Mhici in a strange half-shame.

Smith jerked his head round again and stared at the ruined wall, a hot chagrin flooding over him. Of course, if the pattern were destroyed, that door would close through which the One which bore the name was entering. Somehow that had never occurred to him. Somehow he had wholly forgotten that a flame-gun was sheathed under his arm during all the long struggle he had held with the Thing co-dwelling in his body. He realized in a moment why. The awful power which in his bodiless state had thundered about him from that infinity of might which bore the name was so measureless that the very thought of a flame-gun seemed too futile to dwell upon. But Mhici had not known. He had never felt that vast furnace-blast of force beating about him. And quite simply, with one flash of his ray-gun, he had closed the door to Outside.

His voice was beating insistently in Smith's ears, shaking with emotion and reaction, and cracking a little now and then like the voice of an old man. For the first time old Mhici was showing his age.

"What happened? What in your own God's name--no, don't tell me now. Don't try to talk. I--I--you can tell me later." And then rapidly, in disjointed sentences, as if he were talking to drown out the sound of his own thoughts, "Perhaps I can guess--never mind. Hope I haven't hurt you. You must have been crazy, Smith. Better now? After you--you--when I saw you on the floor, there was a--well, a fog, I guess--thick as slime, that came rolling up from you like--I can't say what. And suddenly I was mad. That awful gray, rolling out of the wall--I don't know what happened. First I knew I was blazing away into the

depths of it, and then the wall beyond cracked and melted, and the whole fog mass was fading out. Don't know why. Don't know what happened then. I must have been--out--a little while myself. It's gone now. I don't know why, but it's gone....

"Here, have some more segir."

Smith stared up at him unseeingly. A vague wonder was circling in his mind as to why the Thing that had tenanted his body surrendered. Perhaps Mhici had choked life out of that body, so that the Thing had to flee and his own consciousness could enter unopposed. Perhaps--he gave it up. He was too tired to think about it now. He was too tired to think at all. He sighed deeply and reached for the segir bottle.

"Dr. Cyclops"

Published in Thrilling Wonder Stories, Vol. 16, No. 3 (June 1940).

Contents

- Chapter I Camp in the Jungle
- Chapter II The Little People
- Chapter III Death in the Jungle
- Chapter IV The Cyclops

Chapter I

Camp in the Jungle

Bill Stockton stood in the compound gate, watching Pedro driving the mules down to the river pasture. The swarthy half-breed's face was split by a broad grin; he twirled his black mustache and sang loudly of a cantina in Buenos Aires, thousands of miles to the east.

"How the devil does he do it?" Stockton moaned, shaking the perspiration out of his eyes. "I can hardly drag myself around in this heat. And that guy actually sings--" Yet it wasn't only the heat, Stockton knew. There was more to it than that. A feeling of sombre menace hung heavy above this wilderness encampment. During the weeks of jungle travel from the Andes, through tropical swamp and pest-infested jungle, the feeling had grown stronger. It was in the humid, sticky air. It was in the sickly-sweet, choking perfume of the great orchids that grew outside the stockade. Most of all, it was in the actions of Dr. Thorkel.

"He's supposed to be the greatest scientific wizard of the age," Stockton thought skeptically. "But for my money he's nuts. Sends a message to the Royal Academy demanding the services of a biologist and a mineralogist, and then asks us to look into a microscope. That's all. Won't even let us get inside that mud house of his!"

There was reason for Stockton's bitterness. He had been literally forced into this adventure. Hardy, the mineralogist, had been taken ill at Lima, and Dr. Bulfinch, his colleague, had sought vainly for a substitute. None was available. None, that is, save for a certain beachcomber who was going rapidly to hell with the aid of a native girl, bad gin, and rubber checks.

Bulfinch's assistant, Dr. Mary Phillips, had solved the problem. She had bought up the bad checks, threatened Stockton with jail if he refused to come along. Under the circumstances, the one-time mineralogist had shrugged and acceded. Now he was wondering if he had made a mistake.

There was menace here. Stockton sensed it, with the psychic keenness of a professional adventurer. Secrecy was all around him. Why was the mine yard generally kept locked, if the mine actually

was worthless, as Thorkel contended? Why had Thorkel seemed so excited when Stockton had mentioned the iron crystals, crystals Thorkel had been unable to see because of his weak vision?

Then, too, there was the matter of the Dicotylinae--certain bones Mary Phillips had found. They were the bones of a native wild pig, but the molar surfaces had proved it a species of midget swine entirely unknown to science--four inches long at maturity. That was odd.

Finally, only an hour ago, Thorkel had blandly said good-bye, only twenty-three hours after the arrival of his guests. Bulfinch had, Stockton mused with a chuckle, thrown a fit. The goatish face had gone gray; the unkempt Vandyke had bristled.

"Are you attempting to intimate that you summoned me--Dr. Rupert Bulfinch--ten thousand miles just to look into a microscope?" he had roared.

"Correct," Thorkel had answered, and went back to his mud house.

So far, so good. But there was trouble ahead. Neither Bulfinch nor Mary would think of leaving, even though that meant defiance of Thorkel. And Thorkel, Stockton felt, was a dangerous customer, cold-blooded and unscrupulous. His round face, with its bristling mustache and bald dome, could settle into grim, deadly lines.

Moreover, from the first a quiet, unspoken sort of conflict had arisen between Thorkel and Baker, the guide who had accompanied the party from the Andes. Stockton shrugged and gave it up.

Dr. Bulfinch came up behind Stockton and touched his arm. There was repressed excitement in the biologist's goatish face.

"Come along," he said softly. "I've found something."

Stockton followed Bulfinch into a nearby tent. Mary Phillips was there, mounting the bones of the midget pig. She was, Stockton thought, much too pretty to be a biologist. A wealth of red-gold hair cascaded over her shoulders, and she had a face that belonged on the silver screen rather than in the lab. She also had a hell of a temper.

"Hello, beautiful," said Stockton.

"Oh, shut up," the girl murmured. "What's the matter, Dr. Bulfinch?"

The biologist thrust a rock sample at Stockton.

"Test this."

The younger man's eyes widened.

"This isn't--hell, it can't be!"

"You've seen pitchblende before," Bulfinch said with heavy sarcasm.

"Where'd you get it?" Stockton asked, excited.

"Baker found it near the mine shaft."

"It's uranium ore," he said quietly, "and it's a hundred times richer than any deposit ever discovered. No wonder Thorkel wants to get rid of us!" Mentally Stockton added, "And I'll bet he wouldn't stop at murder to shut us up!"

"Good God!" Bulfinch whispered. "Radium! Think of the medical benefits of such a find--the help it can give to science!"

There was an interruption. A black streak shot into the tent, followed by a gaunt, disreputable dog, barking wildly. The two circled a table

and fled outside again. There was the sound of a scuffle.

Hastily Stockton raised the tent-flap. Pedro, Thorkel's man-of-all-work, was holding the dog, while a cat retreated hastily into the distance.

The half-breed looked up with a flash of white teeth. "I am sorry. This foolish Paco--" He pulled the dog's tail. "He does not know he can never catch Satanas. He just wants to play, though. Since Pinto went away, he is lonesome."

"Yeah?" Stockton asked, eyeing the man. "Who was Pinto?"

"My little mule. Ah, Pinto was smart. But not smart enough, I suppose."

Pedro shrugged expressively. "Poor mule."

A man came out of the gathering twilight--a tall, rangy figure, with a hard-bitten, harsh face--a Puritan gone to seed.

"Hello, Baker," Stockton grunted.

"Bulfinch told you about the radium?" Baker said, without preamble. "It's valuable, eh?"

"Yeah. Plenty valuable." Stockton's eyes narrowed. "I've been wondering about that. Wondering why you were so anxious to come along when you could have sent a native. Maybe you'd heard about this radium mine, eh?"

Baker's harsh face did not change, but he sent a glance of sheer black hatred toward the house.

"I don't blame you," he said under his breath. "It does look screwy.

But--listen, Bill, I had a good reason for wanting to come here. If I'd come alone, Thorkel would have been suspicious--shot me on sight, maybe. I'd have had no chance at all to investigate--"

"Investigate what?" Stockton asked impatiently.

"I used to know a little native girl. Nice kid. Mira, her name was. I--well, I thought a lot of her. One day she went off to act as Thorkel's housekeeper. And that was the last I ever heard of the girl."

"She isn't here now," Stockton said. "Unless she's in the house."

Baker shook his head. "I've been talking to Pedro. He says Mira was here--and disappeared. Like Pinto, his albino mule."

The swift tropic night had fallen. A bright moon silvered the compound.

And suddenly the two men heard the faint, shrill neigh of a horse, from the direction of Thorkel's house.

Simultaneously the figure of Pedro appeared, running from behind a tent. He cried, "Pinto! My mule Pinto is in the house. He has come back!"

Before the half-breed could reach the door of the house, it opened abruptly. Thorkel appeared. In the moonlight his bald head and gleaming, thick-lensed spectacles looked oddly inhuman.

"Well, Pedro?" he asked quietly, in a sneering voice.

The other jerked to a halt. He moistened his lips.

"It is Pinto, senor--" he whispered.

"You are imagining things," Thorkel said, with cold emphasis. "Go back to your work. Do you think I'd keep a mule in the house?"

A new voice broke in.

"Just what do you keep in there, Doctor?"

It was Bulfinch. The biologist emerged from the tent and approached, a lean, gaunt figure in the moonlight. Mary was behind him. Baker and Stockton joined the group. Thorkel held the door closed behind him.

"That is nothing to you," he said, icily.

"On the contrary," Bulfinch snapped, "as I told you, I intend to remain here until I have received an explanation."

"And as I told you," Thorkel said, almost whispering, "you do so at your own peril. I will not tolerate interference or prying. My secrets are my own. I warn you: I shall protect those secrets!"

"Are you threatening us?" the biologist growled.

Thorkel suddenly smiled.

"If I showed you what I have in my house, I think you would--regret it," he observed, a suggestion of subtle menace in his silky tones. "I wish to be left alone. If I find you still here tomorrow morning, I shall take... protective measures."

His eyes, behind the thick-lensed spectacles, included the group in one ominous glance. Then, without another word, he reentered the house, locking the door behind him.

"Still staying, Doc?" Stockton asked.

Bulfinch growled. "I certainly am!"

There was a brief pause. Then Pedro, who had been listening intently, made a commanding gesture.

"Come with me. I will show you something--" He hurried around the corner of the house, trailed by the dog Paco.

Bulfinch, his thin lips working, followed, and so did the others.

A tall bamboo fence blocked their way. Pedro pointed, and applied his eye to a crack. Stockton tested the gate, which had previously been open. It was barred now, so he joined Pedro and the others .

"Wait," the half-breed whispered. "I have seen this before."

They could see the mine-shaft, with a crude windlass surmounting it.

And then a gross, strange figure entered their range of vision. It resembled, at first glance, a man in a diving suit. Every inch of the stocky body was covered with the rubberlike fabric. A cylindrical helmet shielded the head.

Through two round eyeplates could be seen the heavy spectacles of Dr. Thorkel.

"Uh-huh," Stockton whispered. "Protective suit. Radium's dangerous stuff."

Thorkel went to the mine and began to turn the windlass. Abruptly Stockton felt a hand touch his arm. He turned.

It was Baker.

"Come along," the other said softly. "I've opened the door. Cheap

lock--and Mary uses hairpins. Now we'll be able to see what he's got hidden in that house."

"Si! The doctor will be busy in the yard for a long time--" Pedro said, nodding.

Silently the group retraced their steps. The door of the mud house was ajar.

From within came the sound of a shrill neigh, incredibly high and thin....

Chapter II

The Little People

The room was disappointingly bare. Across from the front door was another, apparently leading to the mine yard. Another door was in the right-hand wall, and a small mica window was let into it.

There were heavy wooden chairs, a work-bench, and a table bearing microscope and notebooks. On the bench were several small wicker baskets.

Littered carelessly about the floor were a rack of test-tubes, books, a beaker, two or three small boxes, and a dirty shirt or two.

Pedro pointed to the floor.

"Hoof prints--Pinto was here, yes!"

Mary bent over the microscope, while Bulfinch examined the notebooks.

"Thieves!"

Thorkel stood in the doorway leading to the mine yard, his eyes glaring behind the glasses. He was whitely livid with rage.

"So you would steal my discoveries. You have no right here! You are merely my employees whom I have discharged and instructed to leave!"

He saw the notebook in Bulfinch's hand, and his voice rose to a scream of rage.

"My notes!"

Stockton and Baker seized him as he sprang at the biologist. Bulfinch smiled coldly.

"Restrain yourself, Dr. Thorkel. Your actions are not reassuring."

Thorkel relaxed, panting.

"I--you have no right here."

"You are behaving irrationally. For your own good, and for the benefit of science, I must demand an explanation. To leave you here in the jungle would be nothing short of criminal. You are grossly overworked. You are not"--he hesitated--"not in a normal state mentally. There is no reason to be suspicious or to fear persecution."

Thorkel sighed, removed his glasses, and rubbed his blind eyes with a weary gesture. "I am sorry," he murmured. "Perhaps you are right, Doctor. I--I am experimenting with radioactivity."

He went to the mica-paned door and opened it, revealing a small closet, plated with lead. From the ceiling hung a projector, resembling the type used medically to treat cancer by radium rays.

"This is my condenser," Thorkel said. "You may examine it, Dr. Bulfinch. I must trust you--I have shown this to no one else in the world."

Bulfinch entered the closet. The others were at his heels, intently scrutinizing the projector which seemed the heart of the mystery.

Pedro paid no attention. He was opening, one by one, the boxes on the bench. And, abruptly, he paused, transfixed with astonishment. His lips formed the word, "Pinto!"

A white mule was within the box. An albino mule, no more than eight inches high!

"Pedro!" Thorkel called sharply. The half-breed sprang up. His elbow overturned the box, which clattered to the floor.

The midget mule was flung out. Only Thorkel and Pedro saw the beast as it struggled up and raced across the floor.

The door was still ajar. The mannikin animal fled out into the night.

For a second Thorkel's eyes clashed with Pedro's.

"Come here," the scientist said tonelessly. "I want you to see this, too."

The half-breed went toward Thorkel, his face blank with amazement. "What--what has happened to--"

Thorkel smiled. He pointed to the closet where the others were still examining the projector. Pedro turned to look.

Thorkel moved with the swiftness of an uncoiled steel spring. He struck at Pedro. Caught unawares, the half-breed was hurled into the

closet. The door slammed shut behind him.

Thorkel locked it with a swift movement. His hand closed on one of the switches nearby; he pulled it down. Instantly there was a low hum, which rose swiftly to a sibilant crackling buzz.

Green light blazed through the mica window.

From a shelf Thorkel took a heavy helmet and donned it. He leaned forward to peer through the mica pane.

"Thieves!" he whispered. "I told you to go! I could not force you--but if you insist on staying, I must be sure that you will not interfere with my experiments or try to steal my secret. So you wished to help me, Dr. Bulfinch? Well, you shall--but not quite as you expected!" Thorkel's laughter rose above the crackling snarl of the condenser.

The infra-red lamp suspended from the ceiling sent down a rich, warm glow.

Beneath it was a glass dish, containing a colorless liquid that was boiling gently, warmed by an electrode. From the dish steamed a whitish vapor which shrouded the floor, almost hiding the dim outlines nearby.

One of these figures writhed and sat up, tearing away the silken wrappings that bound it. The swart face of Pedro appeared. He sprang up, knee-deep in the white vapor, coughing and choking for breath.

Beside him another form stirred. Bill Stockton rose shakily, breathing in great gasps.

"Air--air's better up here... what the hell!" Discovering that he was naked save for the silk shroud, he adjusted it, looking rather like a

Roman, with his harsh eagle face and keen eyes.

Mary and Baker were the next to appear. Then came the grim face of Dr. Bulfinch. For a moment each was busy adjusting their makeshift garments.

"Where are we?" Pedro gasped. "I cannot see--" He choked and coughed.

"Calm down," Bulfinch said curtly. "We won't be asphyxiated." He sniffed and glanced at the light above. "Ozone, ammonia, humidity, temperature--calculated to revive consciousness."

"Where are we?" Mary asked. "In the mine?"

They could not see beyond the small circle of light. Stockton gripped Pedro's arm.

"You know this place better than we do. Where are we? What's Thorkel done?"

Suddenly horror grew in Pedro's eyes as he remembered something.

"Pinto," he gasped. "He has made Pinto--little!"

"Nuts," Stockton grunted. "Let's grab hands and feel our way around. Come on!"

"He has made me little like my mule!" Pedro whispered.

Without warning the faint red glow of the lamp faded and died. It was almost utterly black. Stockton felt Mary's hand tighten in his own, and squeezed it reassuringly.

Light shafted in whitely. Instantly Stockton saw that they were in a cellar, at the foot of a flight of stairs that led up to an opening door.

On the threshold stood Dr. Thorkel, looking down at them. Satanus, the cat, crouched by the scientist's feet.

"He has made us little!" Pedro screamed.

And it was true! Thorkel was--a giant! A thirty-foot titan towered over them! The cellar door seemed as big as a two-story house; Satanus was a sabre-toothed tiger!

Bulfinch was chalk-white. He sprang back suddenly as Satanus spat down at the tiny group. Thorkel hastily bent down and picked up the cat.

His voice was booming thunder.

"No, no--you must not frighten them," he told the cat. Thorkel stepped down into the cellar, and the others shrank from this colossus. Mary's voice rose in a scream.

"Good," said Thorkel. "Vocal cords unimpaired, eh? You have no temperature? Dr. Bulfinch, will you be good enough to take the pulse of your companions?"

Pedro broke and raced for the stairway. Thorkel nodded, smiling.

"Little creatures--their first instinct is to escape. Run if you like, then."

And the wee folk fled....

Climbing those stairs was a feat. Each tread came up to their breasts.

But, pushing, pulling, scrambling, the miniature humans swarmed up toward the light. Soon they were gone from sight. Thorkel put down the cat and followed, shutting the cellar door. He turned to glance around the room.

The little people had hidden themselves.

"Come out. You have nothing to fear," he said smoothly.

Thorkel waited, and then sank down into a chair.

"Where is your scientific spirit, Dr. Bulfinch?" He smiled. "Did you not wish to join me in my experiments?" He mopped perspiration from his bald head and slid the chair away from the patch of sunlight that slanted in through the window fronting the mine yard.

Bulfinch's head appeared cautiously from behind one of Thorkel's discarded boots. He walked toward the giant.

"Come closer," Thorkel urged.

Bulfinch obeyed, staring up at the other.

"What is the matter?" Thorkel said fearfully. "Can you not speak?"

The biologist's voice was thin and high.

"Yes, I can speak. What have you done--and why?"

Thorkel leaned forward, his huge hand reaching toward the tiny figure on the floor. Bulfinch retreated in alarm.

"I only wish to weigh and measure you," he said softly. He rose and settled back in his chair. "Come out. I won't eat you. As you can see, I have reduced your size."

His pale eyes, behind the thick glasses, watched intently as, emboldened, the others appeared one by one. Pedro had been hiding behind a chair leg; the others behind a stack of books on the floor.

They advanced until they were in a group with Bulfinch.

"You should be proud," Thorkel said. "You are almost the first successful experiment--Pinto was the first, Pedro. Too bad you let him escape. Again I thank you, Mr. Stockton, for identifying the iron crystals. They gave me the last clue."

He blinked down at then. "Till you came, I could reduce organic substances, but life could not be preserved in them. It is a matter of electronic compression of matter under ray bombardment. The radium in the mine gave me unimaginable power. Look." He lifted a sponge from the table and squeezed it in his fist. "That is it. Compression. But energy is required, rather than brute force--"

Baker spoke up suddenly. "Did you do this to Mira?"

"The native girl--my housekeeper? Why, yes. But I failed--she was reduced in size, but she was dead. How do you know of her?" Thorkel did not wait for an answer. He rubbed his eyes wearily. "I am very tired. It has taken days to reduce you, and I have not had one moment's sleep...." His voice trailed off wearily. Sleep smothered him.

Stockton was staring around.

"We've got to get out of here. Do you realize that this fiend intends to kill us all?"

Bulfinch looked a question. "That scarcely--"

"He told us he murdered the native girl, didn't he? He's a cold-blooded devil."

Instinctively they glanced at the door. The bar that locked it from the inside was thrice the height of Stockton's head.

Human beings--scarcely more than half a foot tall!

On the floor nearby a book stood on end--Human Physiology, by Granger.

Stockton went to stand beside it. His head scarcely came to the top of the volume.

"Well?" he asked bitterly. "Any suggestions?"

Bulfinch nodded. "Yes. Books are handy things. If we can pile them up and reach the door-latch...."

It took time, but Thorkel did not awaken. A pencil, used as a lever, opened the door a crack. And then the little people were outside in the compound. Strange sight! A cactus patch not far away was taller than the tallest tree. The camp tables were fantastically high. A chicken was moving jerkily in its quest for food--and its bobbing comb rose higher than Stockton's head!

If it saw them, it made no hostile move. Slowly the tiny group moved forward, toward Bulfinch's tent. Each box and crate was a mountain to be skirted. The rough ground hurt their bare feet.

Pedro was glancing around nervously. Abruptly he cried out and pointed.

Stockton whirled with the others, and he showed his panic.

Out of a crumbling hole in the mud hut's base Satanás, the cat, was crawling. The creature's eyes were intent on the little people.

More formidable than a tiger, it wriggled free and bounded toward them, sharp fangs bared!

Chapter III

Death in the Jungle

Stockton seized Mary by the hand and dragged her toward the shelter of the cactus clump. The others were not slow in following. Baker paused to hurl a pebble at the cat, but the gesture was futile.

Snarling, Satanás came on. The cacti were too far away for safety.

Hopelessness tore at Stockton as he realized that none of them could reach the clump. He could almost feel sharp fangs sinking into his flesh.

The cat spat viciously. There was an uproar of furious barks. As the little people miraculously found concealment amid the cactus spines, they turned to see Satanás fleeing from Paco, Pedro's dog.

"Whew!" Baker gasped. "That was a close one."

Bulfinch regarded him sombrely, tugging at his Vandyke. "There will be more 'close ones,'" he said with grim meaning. "Every creature larger than a rat is apt to be a deadly menace."

"What can we do?" Mary asked.

"First--food, weapons," Stockton said. "Then we'll deal with Thorkel and find some way out of this."

The day dragged on, and Thorkel still slept. Satanás did not reappear.

Mary engaged herself in making sandals, a difficult task at best, and worse when the knife is larger than you are.

As for Stockton, he managed to take the screw out of a pair of scissors, and one blade provided him with a serviceable weapon, about the size of a sword.

Thorkel's voice startled them when it came. He was leaning out the window, like a giant in the sky, regarding them.

"You are resourceful, my small friends," his voice boomed out. "But now come back. I must weigh and measure all of you."

The group drew together. Thorkel laughed evilly at them.

"I won't harm you. Come, Dr. Bulfinch," he said silkily.

"I demand that you restore us to our normal size," the biologist snapped.

"That is impossible," the other said. "At present, anyway. All my energies have been devoted to the problem of atomic shrinkage--compression. Perhaps, in time, I can find the antidote, the ray that will turn men to giants. But it will take months of research and experiment--perhaps years."

"Do you mean we must remain like this--"

"I shall not harm you," Thorkel smiled. "Come--" He leaned forward.

Bulfinch drew back, and, with an impatient grunt, Thorkel disappeared from the window. His feet thudded across the floor.

Bulfinch hastily fled back to the others.

"The cactus," he gasped, panting. "Let's hide!"

But already Thorkel was emerging from the door. His figure loomed gigantic. A few quick strides, and he had cut off the retreat of his quarry. He crouched down, spreading his fingers wide.

Escape was impossible. Mary and Baker were gathered up in one titan hand.

With the other Thorkel reached for the fleeing Bulfinch.

Pedro had secured a fork from somewhere, and held it like a spear. He thrust at the huge hand.

Chuckling, Thorkel brushed the weapon aside, knocking Pedro headlong.

Contemptuously he stood up, still gripping Mary and Baker.

"Dr. Bulfinch!" His voice was thunderous. "Listen to me!"

The biologist was peering out from the depths of the cactus. "Yes?"

"I wish to weigh and measure you. You are a scientist; your reactions will be more valuable than those of the others. I am conducting an experiment for Germany--my fatherland. If my reduction method proves successful, we will be able to reduce our armies to miniature size. Our men will be able to steal into enemy territory, sabotage industrial centers. And no one will suspect the destruction due to--men in miniature. You will not be harmed. I promise you that. Will you come out?"

Bulfinch shook his head stubbornly. His whole being revolted at the

ruthless plan outlined by this sinister genius. A plan that might mean the death of thousands of innocent civilians.

"No? Then, perhaps, if I apply a little pressure--a very little--to these tiny people I hold so gently in my hand--" The constricting fingers tightened. From Baker's lips came a grunt of pain. Mary's voice rose in a scream.

"Oh, damn!" Bulfinch snarled. "All right, Thorkel. You win. Put them down." He emerged from the cactus as the scientist gently deposited Baker and Mary on the ground. They were unharmed, but so giddy from the rapid descent that they could scarcely stand.

Calmly, Thorkel picked up Bulfinch's tiny figure. The biologist made no resistance. The others were left staring as Thorkel walked back to the mud house; then, swiftly, they fled into the cactus. There was silence.

"He won't hurt him," Pedro said, without conviction.

Stockton stepped out from the protection of the cactus. "I'll just make sure. Wait here." He started toward the house, gripping his scissor-blade harder than was necessary.

It was minutes later when he reached the door, still slightly ajar. He peered through the crack, just in time to hear Bulfinch's cry and witness the murder of the biologist.

Thorkel was seated at his table. With one hand he gripped the tiny Bulfinch; with the other he pressed a wad of cotton down over his victim's face.

Then, swiftly, he dropped the limp body into a glass beaker. Stockton drew back, sick with horror, and his improvised sword made a noise against the door. Thorkel glanced down and saw the small watcher.

"So you would spy on me?" he asked quietly, and without haste picked up a butterfly net from the table. As he rose Stockton fled.

Thorkel got to the door just in time to see him disappear into the cactus.

Nodding, he found a shovel and followed his quarry.

It took ten minutes to clear and break down the cactus bed. And then Thorkel realized that he was looking at the outlet of a tile drain pipe that extended to and under the compound wall. He straightened, staring nearsightedly across the barrier.

"You had better come back!" Thorkel shouted. "You cannot live an hour in the jungle--and there is a storm approaching!"

Storm in the jungle--the greatest rain forest in the world. Bear, deer, and monkey fleeing from thunderbolt and unchained devils of the lightning.

The screaming of parrots clinging to their wind-buffeted perches.

The black hell of night closed upon the jungle.

Through that madness fled the little people. And, by sheer luck, they found a cave in which they cowered through the eternal, dragging hours of shaking fury, helpless, hopeless beings in a world of gigantic menace....

It was dawn. Chilled, dispirited, and shivering, the little people emerged from their refuge. In the dawn light they examined each other.

"We look like hell," Stockton said.

"I'm glad you include yourself," Mary told him, trying to adjust her tangled hair. "I wish I had a few pins."

"They'd be as big as you are, about. What now?"

Baker had been talking to the half-breed. Now he turned to face the others.

"Pedro has an idea. If we can get to the river and find a boat, we can float downstream to civilization. There'll be help there."

"That's an idea," Stockton nodded. "Which way is the water, Pedro?"

The half-breed pointed, and without delay they set out, plodding through the rain-wet jungle. Once a monkey, larger to them than a gorilla, swung down uncomfortably close, and once the inconceivable ferocity of a bear crossed their path, luckily without seeing them.

They kept to a well-trodden path, but on all sides the monolithic trees stretched up, higher than skyscrapers. The weedy grass rose above their heads. It was a world of stark fantasy and lurking menace.

Once Stockton, lagging behind the others, saw Paco, the dog. He was frisking about an albino colt which was diligently cropping grass. For a second Stockton considered the idea of catching and riding the colt, but gave it up immediately. The beast was much too large. He shrugged and followed the rest of the band.

The river bank did not prove an insurmountable obstacle, though it took time to descend. They went upstream to a little cove, where Pedro, he said, had moored his canoe. Picking their way around a thick patch of weeds, they reached the craft. It was gigantic. Beached on the sand, it remained immovable no matter how they strained and pushed.

"Great idea," Stockton grunted. "It's like trying to move a steamship."

"Well, even that can be done," the girl told him. "If you use rollers."

"Isn't she smart?" Pedro said with naive admiration. "We can cut bamboo--"

"Sure!" Baker joined in. "We can rig up a lever and windlass--it'll take time, but that's all right."

It took even more time than they had thought. With their crude tools, and the unexpected toughness of the plant-life to tiny hands, it took hours, and the morning dragged on with little accomplished.

Pedro lifted his head and dashed sweat from his dripping mustache. "I hear--Paco, I think," he said doubtfully.

"Never mind Paco," Baker told him. "Lend a hand with this windlass."

"But Paco--he is a hunting dog. Dr. Thorkel knows that. If he--"

"Time to rest," Stockton decreed, and straightened, rubbing his aching back. Mary, who had been toiling with the rest, sank down with a groan. She tossed her red-gold hair back from her tired young face.

Stockton made a cup out of a tiny leaf and brought the girl water from the river. She drank it gratefully.

"No use to boil it," the man explained. "If there're any germs in the water, we can see 'em without a microscope."

Pedro and Baker flung themselves down full length on the sand and

lay panting. "This is devil work," the half-breed observed with conviction. "If I live, I shall burn twenty candles before my patron saint."

"If I live, I'll kill twenty bottles," Baker said. "But there's one guy I'd like to kill first." His face darkened. He was remembering Mira, the native girl, whom Thorkel had murdered so casually. And poor Bulfinch.

"What about you, Bill?" Mary asked.

He glanced at her. "I know what you mean. Well--I wouldn't even make a good beachcomber now. I might go native with the field mice."

Abruptly Stockton turned to face her. "No. I didn't mean that. This is pretty terrible, but it's shown me something. All this--" He flung out an arm toward the towering grasses in the background. "Wonder and strangeness, which we never quite realize--until we're small. I--I was a good mineralogist once. I could be again. Remember those checks I tore up, Mary? I'm going to pay you back every cent they cost you. That's rather important to me now...." He frowned. "If we come out of this alive--"

In the distance Paco barked again. Pedro stood up, shading his eyes with a calloused palm. "It is Dr. Thorkel," he stated. "He carries a specimen box, and Paco leads him."

"Damn!" Stockton snapped. "We've got to hide. Take to the water, to break the trail."

"No," Pedro said. "There are alligators." He nodded toward the tall patch of grass near them. "We can hide in--" He stopped, and horror grew in his eyes.

Mary, following his glance, gave a little gasp and recoiled.

For something was coming out of the high grasses. Dragonlike and hideous it slid forward, cold eyes intent on the little people. The sunlight gleamed on rough, warty scales.

Only a lizard--but to Thorkel's victims it was like a triceratops, a dinosaur out of Earth's ferocious past!

Stockton barely had time to snatch up his scissor-blade sword before the reptile rushed. He was bowled over by that blind charge. Gasping, still clinging to his weapon, he scrambled to his feet.

Mary was backed up against a tall weed-stem, her eyes a-brim with fear.

Before her Pedro had planted his squat form. He gripped a bit of wood, holding it like a cudgel--a matchstick in the hands of a mannikin!

The lizard came back, jaws agape, hissing. Baker had found a sharpened splinter of bamboo, and held it as a spear. He thrust, and the point glanced off the reptile's armored flank.

The barking of Paco was thunderously loud. A shadow fell on the group.

Something seemed to swoop down out of the sky--and the vast face of Dr. Thorkel stared at them as the man crouched down.

"So there you are!" he boomed. "What is this? A lizard? Wait--" In his left hand he gathered the struggling forms of Mary and Pedro. They struck vainly at the huge, imprisoning fingers. He reached toward Stockton.

Simultaneously the lizard rushed again. Stockton drove his blade at

the gaping jaws; Baker thrust at the wattled throat. The creature gave back, writhed aside. Thorkel's hand reached out. The reptile's jaws closed upon it! Thorkel screamed in pain as he jerked back, cursing with agonized fury. Mary and Pedro dropped unnoticed from the scientist's other hand.

Stockton fled toward them. "The bushes! Quick!"

Habit made him say that. Actually, they darted into the concealing stems of the high grasses, thicker than a forest of bamboo. Behind them they heard Thorkel cursing; then he fell silent.

Paco barked.

"That damn dog of yours," Baker growled. "He's a hunter, all right."

Thorkel's voice sounded. "Come out! I know you're in the grass. Come out or I'll fire it."

Stockton glanced at Mary's white face, and whispered an oath. Baker's thin lips were grim. Pedro rubbed his mustache.

"Paco--he will follow me," the half-breed said. "You stay here."

And he was gone, racing through the grass forest.

There was a moment of silence. Then Stockton, galvanized into activity, crept forward, parting the fronds till he could see Thorkel.

The scientist was holding a match-box in his fingers.

Blood dripped from the hand to the ground.

Paco's bark came from further away. Thorkel hesitated, looked around, and then extracted a match.

From downstream came Pedro's voice.

"Paco! Fuera! Fuera!"

Thorkel, lighting the match, looked up.

Abruptly he dropped it and snatched at the rifle he had laid down. He took steady aim.

The boom of the gun was deafening thunder.

Pedro screamed once. There was a faint splash from far away.

Sickness tugged at Stockton's stomach as he saw Thorkel go striding off.

He went back to the others.

"Pedro's done for. That leaves three of us."

"Damn Thorkel!" Baker ground out. Mary said nothing, but there was both pity and sorrow in her eyes. They heard Paco go racing past, to leap into the river and swim out.

Then the first coiling tendrils of smoke drifted through the grasses.

Instantly Stockton remembered the lit match that Thorkel had dropped.

He seized Mary's hand and urged her forward.

"Come on, Steve," he said urgently to Baker. "He's trying to smoke us out. We can't stay here--"

"Come out!" roared the bellowing voice of Thorkel. "Hear me?" His

huge boots stamped through the grass patch.

And the fire spread, remorselessly, hungrily.

Mary was gasping with strain. "I can't--go any further, Bill."

"That's right," Baker seconded. "If we come out in the open, he'll see us. We're trapped."

Stockton stared around. The flames were closing in upon them. Black smoke billowed up. Abruptly Stockton saw something that made his eyes widen.

The specimen case!

Thorkel's box, lying at the edge of the grasses!

Without a word Stockton raced toward it. He still had his improvised sword, and, leaping to a rock beside the box, he used it as a lever to pry the lid open. Instantly the others saw his intention.

Awkwardly, frantic with the need for haste, they clambered in. The lid had scarcely fallen before a jolt and a sense of swinging movement told them that Thorkel had remembered his property.

Through the small ventilators, covered with copper-wire mesh, daylight slanted in vaguely.

Would Thorkel open the case? they wondered.

Chapter IV

The Cyclops

It was night before Thorkel gave up the search. Wearily he pushed

open the door of the mud house, put the shotgun on a chair, and dropped the specimen case on the table.

"They must be dead," he groaned. "But I must be sure. I must!"

He polished his spectacles, peering at them vaguely. His watery eyes blinked in puzzlement. Then he went to the door of the radium room and peered through the mica panel. Something he saw there made him turn to the mine-yard door. He flung it open, switched on a floodlight, and went out, leaving the door ajar.

As soon as he had left, the lid of the specimen case lifted. Three tiny people emerged. Fearfully they clambered out, crossed the plain of the table-top, and leaped down to the seat of Thorkel's chair. They gained the floor, and went toward the open door.

"He's busy with the windlass," Mary whispered. "Hurry!"

Stockton halted suddenly. "Okay," he said. "But--I've stopped running. You two go on. I'm going to stay and--kill Thorkel, somehow."

The others stared at him. "But Bill!" Mary gasped. "It's impossible! If we reach civilization--"

Stockton laughed bitterly. "We've just been fooling ourselves all along. We can never reach civilization. If we launched a boat, we could never get ashore. We'd starve to death, or crack up in the rapids. We're imprisoned here, as surely as though we were in jail. We can't get away."

"If we--" the girl began.

Stockton cut her short. "It's no use! We can't live long in the forest. Only luck has saved us so far. If we were savages--Indians, perhaps--but we're not. If we go out in the jungle again, it means death."

"And if we stay here?" Baker asked.

Stockton's smile was grim. "Thorkel will kill us. Unless we murder him first."

"All right, suppose we manage to kill Thorkel," Mary asked quietly. "What then?"

"Then? We live." Stockton nodded, a queer look in his eyes. "I know. The projector only works one way. We can't regain our normal size, ever. Even if we were large enough to operate the machine, if we could rig up some windlass or lever, it wouldn't help. Thorkel is, I think, the only man in the world who could work out the formula for returning us to our normal size. There's not much chance of his doing that."

Baker said slowly, "If we kill Thorkel, we'll have to remain--like this--forever?"

"Yeah. And if we don't--he'll get us, sooner or later. Well?"

"It's a--a hard choice," Mary whispered. "But at least we'd be alive--"

Baker nodded, and pointed to where Thorkel's discarded gun lay across the chair.

It was aimed at the scientist's cot.

"By God!" Stockton grunted. "That's it!"

Having come to a decision, the three acted quickly. They climbed the chair, and using books as props and the scissor-blade as a lever, adjusted the shotgun.

"Sight it at his pillow," Stockton told Baker, who was looking down the gun barrel. "Up a little... there! Right at his left ear!"

Mary was tying a piece of thread to the gun. "Can you cock it, Bill?"

"Yeah." He was straining with the lever. "Okay." But, despite Stockton's apparent assurance, he was feeling slightly sick. The choice was--horrible! To die at Thorkel's hands, or else to remain in this world of littleness forever....

"Thorkel's coming back!" There was panic in Mary's voice.

The three scurried to cover. Stockton managed to capture the thread's dangling end, and ran with it around a box, out of sight. Mary and Baker found shelter beside him.

The scientist's shadow fell across the threshold. He entered, yawning wearily.

Carelessly he scaled his hat on a corner and sat down on the cot, unlacing his boots.

Stockton's hand tightened on the thread. Would the titan notice the altered position of the shotgun?

Thorkel dropped his boots to the floor and started to lie down. Then, struck by a thought, he rose again and went to a cupboard, taking from it a dish of smoked meat and some cassava bread.

Placing this on the table, he drew up a chair and began to eat.

Apparently his eyes ached. Several times he polished his glasses, and presently discarded them entirely, substituting another pair which he took from a tray on the table. He ate slowly, nodding with weariness.

And at last he removed the new pair of spectacles and slumped down, pillowing his head in his arms.

He slept.

"Oh, damn!" Baker said with heart-felt fury. "We can't use the gun now. We couldn't prop it up at the right angle. It looks like the jungle, after all--unless maybe we can use a knife on him."

Stockton looked speculatively at the scissor-blade. "Wouldn't be sure enough. We've got to kill him, not disable him."

"Disable him--that's it!" Mary said suddenly. "Bill, he's blind without his glasses!"

The three stared at each other, new hope springing to life within them "That's it!" Stockton approved. "We can hide them, and bargain with him, perhaps--"

"We must be quiet," Mary warned.

But Thorkel slept heavily. He did not stir when the little people climbed up to the table, and, one by one, handed down the spectacles till they could be thrust out of sight through a hole in the floor.

"That's the last pair," Mary said with satisfaction, peering down into the depths. "He won't find them in a hurry."

"The last but one," Baker denied. "Bill--" He stopped. Stockton was gone.

They saw him back on the table-top, tip-toeing toward the sleeping Thorkel. He skirted the specimen box and approached the

spectacles, gripped in the scientist's huge hand.

Gingerly he attempted to disengage them. Thorkel stirred. He mumbled something, and his head lifted, slow with sleep.

Fear tightened Stockton's throat. On impulse he jerked the spectacles from Thorkel's hand and fled behind the specimen box.

Blinking, Thorkel felt around for the glasses. His pale eyes stared unseeingly.

There was a little thud. Stockton, crouching at the table-edge, saw the spectacles hit the floor, without breaking. He did not see Thorkel rise and fumble toward the specimen box.

Mary's voice was ice-shrill. "Jump, Bill, jump!"

Hastily, Stockton slipped over the edge, hung by his hands, and dropped. The floor rushed up to meet him. He landed heavily, but sprang up and fled before Thorkel could see the movement.

The scientist said, a curious tremor in his voice, "So you've come back. So you are here, eh?"

There was no answer. Thorkel stumbled to the back door, closed it, and put his back against it.

And, for the first time, Thorkel knew fear.

Thorkel tugged at his mustache. His voice shook when he spoke.

"You would dare attack me? Well, that is a mistake. You are shut up in this room. And I will find you--" He whirled at a fancied movement or sound, glaring blindly, swinging his bald head from side to side with a slow, jerky motion.

"I will find you!"

Stockton pulled Mary back farther into their place of concealment behind a crate. "He's crazy with fear. Keep quiet!"

Thorkel began to stumble around the room, kicking aside apparatus, boxes, clothing.

He fell, and when he rose there was blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

His hand closed on the shotgun. He snatched it up, and stood silent, waiting.

Without warning Thorkel flung up the gun and fired. The crashing echoes filled the room. Stockton peered out, saw that there was a gaping, splintered hole in the bottom of the back door.

Thorkel waited. Then a grim smile twisted his lips. He felt his way to the table and sought for the tray of extra glasses. His hand encountered nothing. The room was utterly still.

"Then--this is war?" Thorkel asked slowly. With a sudden furious motion he broke down the shotgun and gripped the barrel, holding it like a club.

He dropped to hands and knees and felt beneath the table. Slowly he advanced. In a moment, Stockton realized, he would find the glasses where they lay.

Stockton's sandaled feet made no sound as he raced forward. Before Thorkel could react, the geologist had sprung beneath his nose, snatched up the glasses, and smashed them against the table-leg.

Thorkel swung viciously with the gun-barrel.

Stockton, perforce, dropped the glasses and fled. The huge metal club missed him by inches. He vanished into the shadows.

Crouching in their hiding-places, the three little people stared, frozen, as the titan form of Thorkel rose above the table-edge. He was donning his glasses. One lens was splintered and useless.

Blood-stained, dirt-smearred, and terrible, the giant towered there.

His voice rose in a shout of laughter.

"Now!" he roared. "Now you can call me Cyclops!"

Swiftly he strode forward. With methodical haste he began to search the room, overturning boxes, flinging the cot aside to examine some cases beneath it. Stockton made a peremptory signal. Mary and Baker dashed out from their hiding-place between Thorkel's discarded boots.

They followed Stockton swiftly toward the back door.

"Outside, quick!" he whispered. "He can't see us. The cot's in the way."

They clambered through the gaping hole the shotgun charge had made. It was not easy, and Mary's clothing caught on a sharp splinter.

The cloth ripped as Stockton jerked at it.

Footsteps thudded across the floor. The door was flung open. Thorkel switched on the floodlight.

His shadow momentarily hid the three as they raced forward. The mouth of the mine-shaft loomed up before them, a plank stretched across the pit.

"Down there!" Stockton gasped. "It's our only chance."

It was the only possible place of concealment. But Thorkel's one good eye did not miss the little people's movements as they scrambled over the brink and down the steep rock of the shaft-walls. Skirting the windlass, he fell to his hands and knees and crawled out upon the plank, steadying himself with one hand on the rope that ran down into black depths.

Stockton, clinging to a rock, realized that he still held his scissor-blade sword.

He lifted it in futile threat.

There was a splintering crack as Thorkel struck at his quarry. The gun-barrel clashed on rock. And, abruptly, the plank caved in and dropped.

Thorkel still gripped the windlass-rope with one hand, and that saved him.

For a second he swung wildly, while the echoing crash of the falling wood and the gun-barrel echoed up from the depths. Then his grip became surer.

Panting, he hung there briefly, his bald head gleaming with sweat.

He began to climb up the rope.

Stockton glanced around quickly. Mary was clinging to a sloping rock, her white face turned toward the giant.

Baker was looking at the mineralogist, and his gaunt gray features were twisted with hopeless fury.

Stockton made a quick gesture, pointed to his sword, and began to swarm back up to the surface.

Instantly Baker caught his meaning. If the rope to which Thorkel clung could be cut— But it was thick, terribly thick, for a tiny man and a scissor-blade!

Thorkel pulled himself slowly upward. In a moment Baker saw, he would reach safety. The trader's lips drew back from his teeth in a mirthless grin; he abruptly rose and edged forward a few paces.

Then he sprang.

Out and down he went, and his clutching hands found Thorkel's collar.

Before the scientist could understand what had happened, Baker was clawing and snarling like a terrier at his throat. Thorkel almost lost his grip.

Gasping with fear and rage, he shook his head violently, trying to knock his assailant free.

"You dirty killer!" Baker snarled.

He was tossed about madly, once almost crushed between Thorkel's chin and chest. And then, suddenly, Thorkel was falling.

With a whine and a whir the windlass ran out as the rope was severed.

A long, quavering cry burst from Thorkel's throat as he dropped away into the darkness. Higher and higher it rose--and ended.

Stockton ran to the brink and peered over. Mary was clambering weakly up toward him. And, behind her, was Baker.

Bill was standing beside an upright book, a curious expression on his face. He looked around vaguely.

"The machine--" he told Mary. "Can you work it?"

Mary was poring over Thorkel's notebooks. She said despondently, "It's no good, Bill. The device is only a condensor. It can't bring people back to normal size. We'll have to remain this size the rest of our lives. And now, we've got to get back to civilization, somehow--"

"As we are?" Baker's face fell. "That's impossible."

"Wait a minute," Stockton interrupted. "I've a hunch--do you remember when we first saw Thorkel, after he reduced us?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"He wasn't trying to kill us then. He just wanted to weigh and measure us. But after he examined Dr. Bulfinch, he turned into a vicious killer. Why do you suppose that happened?"

"He probably intended to kill us all along. For trying to steal his secrets," Baker suggested. "He was probably afraid that we would warn the Allies of his plans."

"Maybe. But he wasn't in any hurry at first. He knew he could dispose of us any time he wanted. Only after he examined Dr. Bulfinch he--found out something that made it necessary to get rid of us in a hurry."

Mary caught her breath. "What?"

"I saw a white mule in the jungle a while ago. A colt. Paco was playing with it. At first I figured it might be Pinto's colt, but mules are sterile, of course. That meant two albino mules here--which isn't very probable--or else it was Pinto. Remember, Pedro said the dog used to play with the mule."

"How big was the mule?" Baker asked abruptly.

"The size of a half-grown colt. Listen, Steve, when we first came out of the cellar I measured myself against that book--Human Physiology. It was just higher than my head. But now it only comes up to my chest!"

"We're growing!" Mary whispered. "That's it."

"Sure. That's what Thorkel found out when he examined Dr. Bulfinch, and why he tried to kill us before we grew back to normal size. I think it's a progressively accelerative process. In two weeks, or perhaps ten days, we'll be back to normal."

"It's logical," the girl commented. "Once the compressive force of radium power is removed, we expand--slowly but elastically. The electrons swing back to their normal orbits. The energy we absorbed under the ray will be liberated in quanta--"

"Ten days," Baker murmured. "And then we can go back down the river again!"

But it was a month before the three, once more normal in size, reached the Andean village that was their first destination. The sight of human beings, no longer gigantic, was warmly reassuring. Indians leaned against the huts, scratching lazily for fleas. Peering down the

archway along the street, a ragged Bill Stockton turned to grin at Mary.

"Looks good, eh?"

Baker was absorbed in thought. "We've got to decide," he said, scratching his stubbled chin. "One way, we get our pictures in the paper and tanks of free pulque. But it's just as likely we'll end up in a padded cell if we tell the truth. If we don't tell the truth--" He paused, stiffening. A mangy cat had appeared from beyond the arch.

Baker's muscles tensed; his breath burst out in an explosive "Scat!" as he sprang forward.

The cat vanished, shocked to the core.

Baker's chest inflated several inches. "Well," he said, with the quiet pride of achievement, "did either of you see that?"

"No," murmured Stockton, who was seizing the opportunity to kiss Mary. "Go away. Quietly. And quickly."

Baker shrugged and followed the cat, a predatory gleam in his eye.

"The Bright Illusion"

Published in Astounding Stories, Vol. 14, No. 2 (October 1934).

Through the blinding shimmer of sun upon sand, Dixon squinted painfully at the curious mirage ahead. He was reeling with thirst and heat and weariness, and about him the desert heaved in long, blurred waves, but through the haze of his own weakness, and through the sun haze upon the desert, he peered anxiously at the thing and could not make it out.

Nothing he had ever seen or heard of could cause a mirage as this. It was a great oval of yellow light, bulging up convexly from the earth like some translucent golden egg half buried in the sand. And over its surface there seemed to be an immense busyness, as if it was covered with tiny, shimmering things that moved constantly. He had never seen anything remotely resembling it before.

As he toiled through the sand toward the bright illusion, he became aware of darker specks around it haphazardly, specks that as he approached took on the aspect of men grotesquely sprawled in attitudes of death. He could not make it out. Of course it was a mirage, yet it did not recede as he advanced, and the details of those sprawled bodies became clearer and clearer, and the great translucent oval loomed up against the sky mystifyingly.

He thought he must be dreaming, or perhaps a little unbalanced by the heat and thirst. He had been struggling through this burning sand under this burning sun for a long while now, and there were times when the rush of illusion swallowed him up, and he could hear water splashing and fountains tinkling in the empty desert about him. This must be a hallucination, then, for it could scarcely be a mirage. He was almost upon it, and it had so real a look--those bodies, sprawling-- He stumbled over the first, for somehow his muscles did not co-ordinate very well now. It was the sun-withered body of an old man in the Legion uniform, his kepi fallen forward over his face. The next was that of an Arab in a tangle of dirty white garments, and beyond him was the almost-fresh corpse of a boy in khaki shorts and sun helmet.

Dixon wondered dully what had happened to them and why the bodies were in such varying stages of decomposition. He lifted a dragging head and peered at the great egg-shape thing bulging up from the sand. It reminded him of a huge bubble of golden water, save that bubbles were round, and-- Belatedly, caution returned to

him. These dead men must have met their deaths somehow through the presence of the great egg. He had better advance more cautiously or-- And then the pull seized him. He had come too near. Something inexorable and slow was dragging him forward--or was it that the great bubble was advancing toward him?

Sky and sand reeled. And the distance between him and the great egg-shaped thing lessened and lessened and--and somehow he found himself flat against a great golden translucency that shivered against him with the strangest motion, as if it was alive and hungry for-- He felt that he should be afraid, yet somehow he was not aware of fear at all. The golden light was closing over him and around him with a queer, engulfing motion. He shut his eyes and relaxed utterly in the impassive grip of the thing.

Dixon was lying motionless in the midst of a golden radiance that seemed crystal clear, yet so obstructed his vision that he could see only a few yards away, and the desert landscape outside was as unreal as a dream. The most delicious sensation of rest and well-being was surging through him in slow waves that succeeded one another like ripples on a shore, each leaving an increasing residue of serenity and luxurious comfort. Thirst and hunger and weariness had vanished in a breath. He knew no fear or anxiety. In a trancelike calm he lay there, feeling the waves flow through him unbroken, staring up into the lucid golden light without wonder or surprise.

How long he lay there he never knew. In the perfect peace of the glow enfolding him, he was very dimly aware that the all-penetrating waves were washing through him in a way which queerly suggested searching. They permeated every atom of him, flooding his brain with light and calmness.

In his tranced quiet he knew, without actually realizing, that memory in lightning flashes was reeling through his mind. Abstract memories of

things he had learned in college and in afterlife. Snatches of literature, fragments of sciences. Mathematical problems solved in breathtaking speed and supplanted by chemical formulas that melted into the bits of psychology remembered from schooldays. Impassively he lay there, scarcely realizing the flashing reviews that passed through his light-flooded brain.

And then the tempo of the ripples that went over him began to change. His mind awoke by degrees from its pleasant coma, though his body still lay relaxed. And now the wavelets in the queerest way were beating upon his brain tantalizingly. Little fragments of thoughts not his own blew through his mind and faded.

He struggled to grasp them. He clutched at the vanishing tags, striving to weld them together, feeling obscurely that if he could retain each small flutter as it wavered through his mind, if he could put them together and fuse them in a unit, he might understand.

Very slowly he succeeded. Very slowly the waves as they flowed through him began to surrender their meanings to his clutching mind: meanings that solidified and amplified with each succeeding wave, building themselves up slowly as ripple after ripple washed serenely through the straining brain that was learning so painfully to comprehend their significance.

By degrees Dixon realized that some intelligence was striving to communicate with him. The knowledge did not come in words or even word forms introduced into his brain. But it came, slowly and inexorably, building up and up as wave after measured wave flowed through him and vanished, leaving a residue of knowledge to be increased by the next.

And the vast, the almost divine, impersonality of it staggered him. This being--intelligence, presence--was so utterly abstract a thing

that even in the knowledge it imparted to him there was no hint of personality or consciousness of individual being. There could have been no "I" in its supervocabulary of thought ripples. Divinely serene, divinely abstract, it allowed knowledge to flow through the brain of the man suspended in its heart. And by measured degrees that knowledge built itself up in his mind.

He had been chosen. For a long while this being had been waiting here, trapping the men who came near enough, sending its light waves in floods through their minds to illuminate their thoughts and their capacity for knowledge, probing their intelligences. All those others, lying outside had been found wanting. The being had discarded them and waited, in its serene passivity, until the right man came by.

This much flowed through his brain. Then there was a hiatus, to permit him to absorb the knowledge, to understand. After a while the wavelets began to beat through him again in their measured slowness. He became aware of vast, dim voids, blank stretches empty of space or time or any of the myriad dimensions. He knew that through these, while long periods elapsed which yet had no relation to the time he understood, the great light-bubble had traveled from some origin unthinkably far away, on a quest. He realized that it had at last emerged from those gray, formless voids into the interstellar space of his own universe; that it had made its way here, driven by a vast purpose he could not grasp, and had come to rest upon the desert sands, to lie in wait.

Again there was a gap in the thought waves, and again Dixon lay still, assimilating that stunning knowledge. And yet, somehow, he was not greatly surprised or in the remotest way skeptical. He waited.

Presently the flow began again. There was, in another part of space,

a world which this being desired--or no, not desired; there was nothing so human or personal a thing as desire about it. A world which it meant to have; a very alien world, he gathered, from the sort he knew. Peopled by alien creatures and built in other dimensions than those which formed his own universe.

These people worshiped a powerful god. And it was this worship--this godhood--which the being that enfolded him meant to possess. It tried to give him a glimpse of why, but the thought waves which flowed through his brain were incomprehensible and remote--not knowledge, but a jumble of unrelated impressions, without coherence. After a few vain attempts to instill the reason for its purpose into his mind, the being apparently dismissed the point as unnecessary and went on.

This god which it meant to dispossess was very powerful; so powerful that of itself the being could do nothing to overthrow it, could not even pass the barriers set up to guard the strange world. It had need of an intelligent, animate creature from a world different enough in structure so that the god's peculiar powers would have no effect upon him.

Gradually the measured beats made it clear to Dixon that he was the chosen envoy. He was to be transported there, armed in potent ways, sent out into the new world to overthrow the god's domain and make way for his sponsor to take possession.

There was a long hiatus after that. Dixon lay quiet, rather stunned by the magnitude of the thing. The being which engulfed him must have sensed the growing rebellion in his mind, for after a while the beats began again. And Dixon knew that the proposition was not a compulsory one. But--the knowledge flowed casually through him--though he was free to be released and set back upon his journey if he refused the plan, he would inevitably die soon, die very

unpleasantly.

There was no water within any possible reach, and a band of veiled Tuaregs was scouring the desert nearby in search of that Arab who lay in a huddle of dirty white robes outside the egg-shaped bubble. If he did not die of thirst before they caught him, he would die in a manner infinitely more undesirable at their hands. But, of course, if he so desired, he was free to go.

Dixon digested this information thoughtfully, hesitatingly, though he knew he had no choice. His blind stumbling through the desert could have no other end than slow death, as he had been aware even before he came upon the great bubble. And if there were Tuaregs near-- Even in the bodily trance that cradled him he shuddered. He had seen victims of Tuareg tortures, miraculously alive after days and days of-- He turned his mind from that. No; he had no choice.

And gradually a little spark of excitement began to burn in him. What an adventure! And though death might lie at the end of it, there was at least a hope for life, and he knew he had not even that if he refused. Consent was forming in his mind, but, even before it crystallized, the being must have known, for about him the lucid radiance suddenly began to cloud and change. Milkiness flooded through it and through his body and his brain. Oblivion swallowed him up.

When realization returned to Dixon it came slowly. Layer by layer the oblivion melted from his mind. He had a vague impression of vast spaces traversed and barriers surmounted, and somehow he sensed an indefinable difference in the space that surrounded the bubble, though it was indefinite how he knew it. A little beat quivered through him, and another, clearing away the fogs of his consciousness. Then knowledge began to pulse again through him in measured flow.

They had crossed gulfs greater than he could comprehend. They were suspended now above the world of their destination. He was to look briefly upon it, for even through the protecting walls of the light-bubble the thing that he would see was so alien to him that in his present form he could not bear to gaze upon it long.

Then the light about Dixon cleared to translucence, and somehow he was looking out and down upon a scene that stunned his eyes with its violence. He had an instant's impression of a land that shrieked and raved with maniacal color beyond any conception of color as he knew it. He turned his eyes wincingly away and stared down at the scene immediately below. And though in point of actual space it must have been very far away, he could see everything quite clearly and with a wider radius of vision than he was accustomed to. It was as if in one glance he encompassed the whole circle of the horizon.

The world below was one vast city that reeled away in terrace below crazy terrace out to a skyline that shimmered with white dazzle. And the colors that blazed and howled and agonized over the insane angles of the place turned him sick and dizzy. They were incredible angles and impossible colors, the tints and the tilts of madness--wild, staggering lines and arcs and jagged peaks, crazy inclines broken by ridges of eruptive color, zigzag bridges, buildings that leaned out in gravity-defying angles.

All these incredible terraces mounted up and up in diminishing arcs to the topmost tier of all. This was small and smooth, though over its pavement the insane colors sprawled blotchily. And in the very center a mighty column rose, blacker than any darkness he had ever seen before. On its height burned a pale flame.

But the inhabitants! Dixon could see them quite clearly despite the distance. They were sinuous and serpentine, and their motions were

blurs of swiftness, poems of infinite grace. They were not men—they had never been men in any stage of their evolution. And if the colors of the buildings were agony to his eyes, the living, unstable hues that writhed and crawled over the beings below were so frightful that his gaze rebelled. For this reason he never knew just how they were shaped.

There was one standing just below the great black pillar whereon burned the flame, and of this he had the clearest view. It was boneless and writhing, livid with creeping color. Its single great eye, lucid and expressionless, stared from an unfeatured, mouthless face, half scarlet and half purple, between which two shades a wedge of nameless green broadened as he looked away.

He had seen this much before the pellucid crystal began to cloud about him once more and the slow knowledge began its beat through his brain. He must look no longer, or something disastrous might happen to his benumbed senses. He understood by now that it was not in his own form that he was to go out into the crazy land. He was sure, even without that seeping knowledge, that his own body could never endure the colors of the place, nor could his own material feet tread the dizzy angles. Many of the streets and bridges were too steep for human feet to walk.

And he was understanding, as the slow waves flowed on, how different these people were from his own kind. Not only in appearance; their very substance was different from flesh and blood, the atoms arranged in different patterns. They obtained nourishment in an incomprehensible way from some source he could not understand. Their emotions and habits and purposes were alien to all his experience, and among them even the sexes were not those he knew. They were more numerous than mankind's two, and their functions were entirely different. Reproduction here was based on an utterly alien principle.

When the pause came in the waves of knowledge, Dixon was a little dizzy with the complete strangeness of this place and with wonder how he would be enabled to enter it. He lay still, wondering, until the flow began again.

Then the knowledge of the way he was to be introduced into the strange god's domain began to surge in deliberate beats through his brain. It seemed simple, yet the magnitude of it was staggering. A sort of veil of illusion was to be dropped between him and these alien beings. To them, his form would seem one of their own. Through the veil his speech would be filtered and changed into their indescribable mode of communication. And to him they would have the appearance of humanity, their speech would be understandable, their curious emotions translated into familiarity.

Even their multiple sexes would be resolved arbitrarily into two. For though this being could not approach any nearer the strange god whose flame burned upon the pillar, it seemed to have immense power even from this distance in the crazy world below.

The slow-beating waves made him aware that during his sojourn in the strange place he would be guided and in a measure protected, and that this knowledge would still flow through his brain. All this was possible, he understood, because of his own complete difference from anything in this world--such a difference that he would not cause even a ripple upon the surface of the god's consciousness until the time came for his overthrow.

Then again the cloudiness began to clear, until Dixon was looking out through crystal walls upon that reeling city below. For an instant it shuddered with mad colors before his aching eyes. And then over the whole crazy panorama the queerest blurring came. He looked down upon a changing world wherein the wild colors faded and ran

together and the staggering angles of that mighty vista below were obscured in structural changes whose purpose he began to understand.

Before his eyes a splendid and stately city was taking shape. Out of the ruin of eye-wrenching color rose tier beyond tier of white pillars and translucent domes. Roofs of alabaster formed themselves under a sky whose pallor was deepening into blue.

When he tore his eyes away from that magnificent vista, terrace dropping away below terrace, crowned with domes and spires and columns wreathed in green, far out to the distant horizon, he saw that over the crowded streets with their swarms of multicolored horrors a stranger change was falling. Out of the mingling indistinctnesses of those colors without name, the semblance of humanity grew. People of noble stature and stately bearing, robed in garments of shining steel, took form before his eyes.

In less time than it takes to tell, a metropolis of familiar aspect stretched invitingly under his gaze. That nightmare of colors was gone as a nightmare goes, leaving no faintest trace behind. Yet he knew as he looked down that in reality nothing was changed. The writhing people still flashed with infinite speed and grace through tiptilted streets of gravity-defying angles. He blinked and looked again, but the illusion held steady--a stupendous city, smiling under a blue, familiar sky.

Slowly through his consciousness beat the realization that, once down there in the metamorphosed world, he must search out the temple of the god, find its vulnerable spot, provide as it were a window, so that through his eyes the being which had brought him here could see its enemy's weakness and instruct Dixon further. And it was impressed upon him, too, that all possible speed must be made, for though there was little danger that the god would realize

the inimical presence, yet his very safeguard was his greatest danger. Dixon was so alien to the ultimate particles of his being that, though this protected him from the god, it made his maintenance in the strange world very difficult. It was a strain even upon the vast powers of the light-bubble being to keep that veil of illusion stretched protectingly between him and this world, the very sight and touch of which would send him mad if he was exposed to it long unguarded.

There was a little pause after this, and Dixon lay still, awed by the unthinkable difference between his own structure of mind and body and that of the strange place and people below. Then with breathtaking abruptness, darkness dropped over him. One instant he lay serenely cradled in golden radiance, the next he was dropping through blackness with a queer, high scream in his ears as if he fell through some resisting atmosphere which was not air. Physically he was protected, but he could hear the thin sound of it in varying intensities.

And then without warning the darkness broke, and he found his feet upon solid ground without any hint of jar. He was simply standing upon a marble pavement under a clear blue sky and looking out over a breath-stopping vista of world-city, dropping away in terrace below shining terrace to a distant skyline, out and away in broadening tiers. Light shimmered dazzlingly upon faraway steel figures moving through the streets below, away and away until they were no more than tiny pinpricks of shimmer on the horizon's edge. From each broad circular terrace a marble ramp led down to the next beneath, and over these the steel-bright people were swarming in busy hordes.

And Dixon knew, even as he stared with caught breath at the magnificence of it, that in reality he stood at the apex of a city of madness that reeled away below him in tier after crazy tier, a nightmare of meaningless angles and raving color, through whose

streets writhing and dreadful and a crowd with living hues were flashing with movements of blurring speed. All this splendor was a veil across his eyes. What unknowable activities were really taking place below? On what nameless errands were these busy crowds bound? Then a little sound at his side turned him from the dizzy thoughts tormenting his brain, and he flashed an abrupt glance sidewise, alert for danger. Then he caught his breath and stared.

She was slim as a sword blade in her steel robe, standing under the mighty tower of the black pillar, and she was lovelier than a dream. Her hair swung in black page-boy curls to her shoulders, and from under the darkness of it eyes as blue as steel met his unwaveringly. She was all bright metal to his first glance, steel-molded curves of her under the armored robe, steel lights upon her burnished hair, steel-bright eyes shining. All steel and brightness--but Dixon saw that her mouth was soft and colored like hot embers. And for an instant he wanted to burst into crazy song. It was an inexplicable feeling that he had never known before, a heady delight in being alive. But even through the exultation, he knew that he looked upon an illusion. He knew that she was a faceless, crawling thing, without sex, without any remotest kinship to anything he knew. And yet this illusion was very lovely and-- She was looking up at him with startled eyes, and now she spoke, a little breathlessly, in a sweet, tinkling voice. "You--you have come? Oh, whence have you come?" And he thought that she was striving hard not to believe something which she wanted with all her soul to think true.

There was no answer he could give. He glanced around helplessly at the blue, empty sky, at the great pillar rising behind her, at the pale flame burning so steadily upon its summit. The blaze held him for an instant, and in the instant he stood with eyes uplifted the girl must have thought she had her answer, for she caught her breath in a gasp that was half a sob, and in one swift motion she fell to her knees before him, a miracle of sliding grace in that close gown of

steel, so that the light rippled all down her sweet, slim body and lay bluely on the wings of her hair that swung forward as she bent her head.

"I knew it! I knew!" she breathed. "I knew my god would send you! Oh, praise great il, who has sent me such an envoy!"

Dixon looked down upon the bent black head, his eyes troubled. If she believed him a messenger from the god, it would simplify his task enormously. And yet... He had entertained no scruples about displacing the god of a maniacal world peopled with writhing monstrosities, but this was different, somehow. This girl.

"I am the high priestess of our god," she murmured, as if in answer to his half-formed query. "I have served il with all my heart for many cycles now, but only he knows how I have prayed for the coming of an envoy among us. Such honor is enough to--to--" The sweet voice choked suddenly on a sob, as if the answer to her prayer was too much for her to endure unmoved.

Dixon bent and took her chin in his hand, lifting her face to his. The steel-bright eyes were dazzling with diffused tears. The red mouth trembled. She was looking up at him with awe and worship upon her face, and suddenly he knew that he wanted no worship from her. He resented that look of respect and awe. He wanted--well, he wanted her to see a man, not a divine messenger. He wanted to-- Then the queerest madness came over him, deliciously--and he acted. He stooped swiftly and set his lips over the trembling red lips of the girl, and for an instant the whole strange world reeled and swam in a heady pleasure like nothing he had ever known before.

When he straightened and stood looking down upon her, she met his eyes with purest bewilderment in hers, one hand hovering at her lips and incomprehension radiant in every line of her. Her blue gaze was

traveling over him from head to foot in swift, puzzled glances.

And then realization swept back upon him tremendously. To her he wore the writhing shape that was hers in reality. That troubled blue gaze was the gaze of a single pale eye which traveled over the crawling limbs of a monster. He was not even sure that, to her, kneeling denoted homage and wondered in what alien way she was actually expressing her awe.

It was an uncanny feeling which was to haunt him through all his hours here--the knowledge that what he looked upon was unreal, the wonder as to what was actually taking place behind the mask of humanity which only he could see. That kiss--how had it seemed to her? What nameless gesture had he seemed to perform before her eyes--her eye? For he had kissed a monstrosity that had no mouth. Remembering the glimpse he had caught of a one-eyed, featureless face crawling with alive colors, he shuddered and turned back to the kneeling girl as if for reassurance.

Dixon was aware of a curious emptiness within him because of this beauty which was only an illusion--had never been, would never be. He was looking straight into her steel-blue eyes now, and she was smiling very tremulously and with that puzzled look still upon her face. He could see the little shimmering tumult her heart made under the dazzle of her robe. And she was not even female! He narrowed his eyes and strove to pierce the mirage for a moment; to convince himself that here knelt a colored horror of sinuosity and sexlessness. And everything within him cried out protestingly. She was human--she was lovely--she was everything desirable and sweet. And she did not even exist save as a crawling horror upon whom in her normal guise he could never dare to look.

Then, as if to refute that, she flashed up at him a small, uncertain smile which made her so unmistakably human and sweet that he

disbelieved everything but her own reality, and she said, "What--what was the meaning of that, O divine envoy?"

He frowned. "You are to call me Dixon," he said. "And that was--well, just a form of greeting."

"The way they greet one another in great il's domain--in Paradise? Then...." She rose in one swift motion. Before he realized what was happening she had risen upon her sandaled toes and her warm mouth was brushing his. "Then I return your greeting, O Dixon."

Involuntarily his arms closed around her. Her body was firm and soft and warm in his clasp--the body of a living human girl, a mirage more real than reality. And again he wondered what nameless rites she was actually performing behind the illusory veil which masked her real, writhing self. And because she felt so pleasant in his arms he released her abruptly and stepped back, knowing the first quickening of uneasiness. Good heaven, could it be possible for a man to fall in love with a hallucination?

She looked up at him serenely, evidently feeling that she had mastered a difficult point of divine etiquette.

"How pleasant a thing is this new way of greeting!" she murmured, half to herself. "And now, O Dixon, you have but to command me in all things. What would you in il's world-city?"

Dixon debated swiftly with himself. After all, lovely though she seemed, she was--and he must bear this in mind constantly, lest something dangerous befall--she was a sinuous, faceless thing, a creeping horror with the tints of an incredible spectrum. She was no more than this, and he must find his way, by her help, into the god il's temple and let the light-being look through his eyes so that he might find il's vulnerable spot. After that--well, he must do as he was

commanded. it would be overthrown, his own sponsor would usurp the godship, and that would be all. As for these beings which peopled the world, no doubt the change of gods would be a startling thing, but there was no help for it. He had but to perform his own part and then go.

"O Dixon!" the sweet, light voice of the girl broke in upon his thoughts. "O Dixon, would you see how il's temple is kept by his worshipers? Would you see how devoutly his world adores him?"

"Yes," said Dixon thankfully. "You may lead me to il's temple."

She genuflected again, a poem of grace in that steel gown along which the light slid in long lines as she moved, and the dark hair swung forward about her face. Then she turned and crossed the terrace toward a ramp which led down into the city. They went down the slope of it--what eye-tormenting angles of spanning actually led downward he could not even guess--and emerged upon a broad street lined with pillared buildings. There were throngs of steel-robed people here who parted in devout rows as the priestess came down the ramp.

She paused at the head of the street and lifted her arms, and Dixon heard her voice ringing clearly over the crowd. "Great il has answered our prayers at last," she cried. "He has sent us an envoy from his own divinity. Here is the messenger from our god!"

A murmur went over the crowd--a murmur of awe and rejoicing. And then they knelt in long, sinuous rows as if a wind had blown across a field of sword blades. And with incredible swiftness the whisper ran back along the street, from mouth to mouth. He imagined it rippling out and out, down and down, from terrace to terrace, until it reached the ultimate limits of the whole tiered world.

They stepped down among the kneeling throngs, walking a lane of steel worshipers, and by the time they had reached the end of the street Dixon could see flecks of light far away below hurrying upward as the news spread. Up through the pillared streets and the green terraces they came swarming, men and women in robes of linked metal, with intent, awe-struck faces upturned. Dixon moved on with a long stride, a divine messenger from a god marching in triumph through a city without ends or boundaries, for as far as he could see the steel flecks that were people flashed up through the buildings below. And their multitudes were breathtaking. The whole vast city swarmed with living steel as wave after wave of armored people rolled upward toward the heights. His brain reeled with the numbers of them.

Over the bowed heads of the throngs as they advanced, Dixon glanced curiously at the buildings which lined the streets, casting about for some clue to the sort of life those people led. He found nothing. The marble pillars and walls rose as blankly as stage sets along the streets. A mask had been set for him over the realities of the place, but it was not a living mask. There were no shops, no markets, no residences. Rows of noncommittal pillars faced him blankly, betraying no secrets. Apparently the light-being had been unable to do more than mask the strangeness of this world. It could not infuse into it the spirit of a daily life so utterly alien as man's.

They went on through the dead-faced streets, down another ramp, and always the people dropped to their knees, perfectly the illusion of humanity. What, he wondered, were they actually doing? In what weird, incredible way were they really expressing their devotion? It was, of course, better not to know.

Dixon watched the girl before him walking proudly and lightly through the homage-stricken throngs, her dark head high, the steel robe rippling over the loveliness of her body as she moved. Presently she

paused for him, smiling over her shoulder in a way that made his heart quicken, and turned in under the great arch of a doorway.

It was not a particularly imposing structure; no more than a marble-columned building with a huge dark portal. But, once inside, Dixon stopped in stunned astonishment at the vastness spread out before him.

It must have occupied the whole interior of all the terraces above--a mighty dome about which the buildings and streets overhead were the merest shell. In the dimness he could not descry the limits of it, but he saw that the whole vast temple was built in the shape of a great dome. For temple it must be. He knew that instinctively. There was the shadow of divinity in it, somehow--a vast calm. And for an instant, as he stared about the great place, he forgot even the presence of the girl at his side.

In the very center of the wide, dark floor lay a pool of pale radiance which somehow gave the impression that it seethed and boiled, though its surface lay untroubled under the lofty dome of the roof. And above the pool the ceiling was shaped like a burning lens to gather and concentrate the radiance arising from it. This centered at the apex of the roof in a dazzle of light at which he could not look directly. He realized that the center of this burning brilliance must be just under the pillar which crowned the topmost terrace--the pillar upon which burned the flame of il.

Beyond the column of light rising from the pool, Dixon saw dimly in the gloom of the great temple the glimmer of steel robes. There was an arch in the far wall, so distant he could scarcely make it out, and in this doorway a small steel figure stood. As he watched, the sonorous boom of a gong rang through the dimness. The air trembled with sound, and through the shaking twilight the figure stepped out resolutely, crossing the floor with even, unhurried strides. He could

not tell at the distance if it was man or woman, but it approached the radiant pool with, somehow, a sort of restrained eagerness that he was at a loss to understand. It reached the brink and did not pause. The haze of light rising from the pool swallowed it without a flicker. And the great dome was empty again save for themselves.

Dixon turned, awe-struck, to the girl, questions hovering on his mouth. Just in time he remembered his role and rephrased the query:

"And how do you interpret this, priestess?"

She smiled up at him bewilderingly. It irritated him that his heart made that odd little leap whenever she smiled so, and he missed the first of her answer in watching the way her lips moved to frame the words she spoke.

"--continually, at every beat of the signal," she was saying, "so that there is never an interval through all time when one of us has not completed his cycles and is ready to return into the flame." The gong sounded above her light voice. "See? Here comes another. And for countless ages it has been so, for our numbers are great enough so that the stream of voluntary sacrifices need never falter. So we nourish it's flame and keep it burning."

Dixon said nothing. His eyes were upon her, but the bright illusion was swimming curiously in a mist that was closing down over him, and he was becoming aware of a strange pulsing of his own blood, as if--yes, as if familiar waves of knowledge were beginning their beat through his receptive brain. For a timeless interval he stood rigid, receiving that intelligence, feeling all he had seen and heard draining out of him into the vast reservoir of knowledge which was the light-being, feeling the voiceless commands of it flowing in. Ripple after ripple of the incoming tide rose in his brain. And

gradually, in measured beats, he learned that this pool was the source of the pale flame burning upon the pillar, but that it was not essentially a part of it. The god il drew his power from the dissolving lives of those people who sacrificed themselves--and this was the only way to destroy them, for they could not die otherwise--but il was not present in the pool. il was the flame on the column, no more, feeding upon the reflection from below. And if the rising light could be cut off temporarily il's power would fail at its source. The invader could make an entrance and fight it out with him.

And now for an instant all the thought flow ceased; then in sharply clear ripples of intense emphasis came the syllables of a word. It was a word without meaning to Dixon, a word whose very sounds were unlike those of any language that man speaks. But he knew that he must speak it, and that the cadences of the sound would somehow open the way for the light-being to enter. With the impression of that word upon him the ripples ceased. A profound quiet reigned in his mind.

Out of that quiet the great domed temple slowly took form about him again. He heard the gong notes trembling through the air and saw another steel-robed figure pacing toward the pool. He turned his head and looked down into the high priestess'face at his shoulder. He had only to speak the word now and accomplish il's overthrow--and then leave. Leave her--never see her again, except perhaps in dreams.

Her eyes met his with a little kindling under the blueness of them, and her mouth trembled into a smile as she met his gaze. She had the look of one eager and taut and waiting, and there was perfect faith in her eyes. And in that instant he knew he could not betray it.

"No," he murmured aloud. "No, my dear; I can't--I simply can't do it!"

Her brows drew together in exquisite bewilderment. "Do what?" she asked in a light whisper, to match his own lowered tone. "Do what?" But somehow the answer seemed not to interest her, for she did not pause for a reply. She had met his eyes and was staring up in a sort of dazed surprise, her blue gaze plunging into his with rigid intensity. And slowly she began to speak, in a tiny, breathless murmur. "I think... I think I see, O Dixon, the strangest things... in your eyes. Dreadful things and shapes without meaning... and something like a veil between us... Dixon... nothing is clear... and yet--and yet, Dixon, my own face is looking back at me out of your eyes."

He caught his breath suddenly in a painful gasp, and in one involuntary motion he had her in his arms. She clung to him blindly. He could feel the trembling that shivered through her steel-sheathed body, and her heart's pounding shook them both.

"I am afraid, Dixon--I am afraid!" she wailed softly. "What is it that frightens me so, Dixon?"

He did not answer. There was no answer. But he hugged her close and felt the sweet firmness of her body against his and knew helplessly that he loved the illusion that was herself and would always love it.

Dixon was frightened, too; frightened at the depth of the emotion that shook him, for he was remembering the clinging of her soft mouth to his, and how beautifully her body curved under the embrace of her metal robe, and that the loveliness which filled his arms and his heart was no more than an illusion to mask something so grotesque that he could never bear to look upon it unmasked. Lovely body, lovely face, sweet, warm mouth upon his--was this all? Could love rise from no more than a scrap of beautifully shaped flesh? Could any man love more than that with such intensity as shook him now?

He loosed her from one arm and set his finger under her chin, lifting her face to his. Her eyes met his own, blue and puzzled and afraid, and shining with something very splendid which all but blotted out her bewilderment and her terror.

"I love you," he murmured. "I don't care--I love you."

"Love?" she echoed in her light whisper. "Love?" And he saw in her eyes that the word had no meaning for her.

The room reeled about him for an instant. Somehow he had never thought of that. Knowing as he did of the immense gulf between them and the strangeness of the emotions which swayed these creatures of such alien race, yet it had not occurred to him that anywhere throughout the cosmos where living beings dwelt there could be a species to which love had no meaning. Was she, then, incapable of feeling it? Good heaven, was he doomed to love an empty body, soulless, the mirage masking a sexless being who could not return any emotion he knew?

He looked down and saw the diffused radiance behind her eyes, shining and very tender, and the bewilderment upon her face, and he thought, somehow, that he was hovering on the very brink of something vaster than anything he had ever known before--an idea too splendid to be grasped. Yet when he looked down into her eyes he thought he understood--almost-- Suddenly all about him the world trembled. It was as if the whole vast place were the reflection in a pool, and a ripple had passed blurringly over the surface. Then everything righted itself. But he understood. He had been here too long. The veil between him and this alien world was wearing thin.

"No--I can't go!" he groaned and gripped the girl closer in his arms.

He must have spoken aloud, for he felt her stir against him and heard

her anxious voice. "Go? O Dixon, Dixon--take me with you! Don't leave me, Dixon!"

Some fantastic hope flowered suddenly within him. "Why not?" he demanded. "Why not? Tell me!" And he shook her a little in his urgency.

"I don't know," she faltered. "I only know that--that--O Dixon, that I shall be so lonely when you have gone. Take me--please take me!"

"Why?" he demanded inexorably. For he thought now that he was hovering very near the understanding of the vast and splendid thing which had almost dawned upon him before the world shook.

"Because I... because... I don't understand it, Dixon, I can't tell you why--I haven't the words. But since you came I--is it that I have been waiting for you always? For I never knew until you came how lonely I had been. And I cannot let you go without me. O Dixon, is this what you call love?"

There was pain in her voice and in her veiled eyes. And the thought came to him that love was like an infectious germ, spreading pain wherever it rooted itself. Had he brought it to her--infected her, too, with the hopeless passion he knew? For it was wildly hopeless. In a moment or so he must leave this alien place forever, and no power existent could maintain very long the illusory veil through which they knew love.

Could his own new love for her endure the sight of her real self? And what would happen to this strange flowering of an emotion nameless and unknown to her--her love for him? Could it bear the look of his human shape, unmasked? And yet, he asked himself desperately, could a love as deep and sincere as the love he bore her be so transient a thing that he could not endure the sight of her in another

guise? Could-- Again that queer flickering flashed over the world. Dixon felt the ground underfoot tilt dangerously, and for a moment insane colors stabbed at his eyes and the whole room reeled and staggered. Then it was still again. He had scarcely noticed. He swung her around to face him, gripping her shoulders and staring down compellingly into her eyes.

"Listen!" he said rapidly, for he knew his time was limited now, perhaps to seconds. "Listen! Have you any idea what you are asking?"

"Only to go with you," she said. "To be with you, wherever you are. And if you are indeed il's messenger--perhaps a part of his godhead--then shall I enter the flame and give myself to il? In that way can I join you and be one with you?"

He shook his head. "I am not from il. I have been sent to destroy him. I'm a man from a world so different from yours that you could never bear to look upon me in my real form. You see me as an illusion, just as I see you. And I must go back to my own world now-- alone."

Her eyes were dizzy with trying to understand.

"You are--not from il? Not as you seem? Another world? Oh, but take me with you! I must go--I must!"

"But, my dearest, I can't. Don't you understand? You couldn't live an instant in my world--nor I much longer in yours."

"Then I will die," she said calmly. "I will enter the flame and wait for you in death. I will wait forever."

"My darling, not even that." He said it gently. "Not even in death can we be together. For when you die you go back to il, and I go--I go--back to another god. perhaps. I don't know. But not to il."

She stood, blank-eyed, in his grasp, trying to force her mind into the incredible belief. When she spoke, the words came slowly, as if her thoughts were speaking aloud.

"I don't understand," she said. "But I know... you speak the truth. If I die by the flame--in the only way there is for me to die--we are parted forever. I can't! I won't! I will not let you go! Listen to me--" and her voice dropped to a soft whisper--"you say you came to destroy il? Why?"

"As the envoy of another god, who would take his place."

"I have given my whole life to the worship of il," she murmured to herself, very gently. And then, in a stronger voice: "But destroy him, Dixon! There may be a chance that way--there is none now. Oh, I may be a traitor--worse than a traitor. There is no word to describe one who betrays his god into destruction, no word terrible enough. But I would do it--yes, gladly, now. Destroy him, and let me seek another death somewhere, somehow--let me die as you die. Perhaps your god can release me into your sort of death, and I can wait for you there until you come. Oh, Dixon, please!"

The idea was a staggering one, but for a wild moment Dixon knew hope again. Might it not be that--that-- Quite suddenly he understood. He looked down on the loveliness of her with unseeing eyes. In these past few moments of insanity, learning that she loved him, too, enough that she begged death of him if in that way they might be united, in these few moments he came to realize that the flesh meant nothing. It was not her body he loved. And a great relief flooded him, to be sure that--sure that it was not merely infatuation, or desire for the loveliness which did not exist save as a mirage before his eyes. No, it was love, truly and completely, despite the shape she wore, despite the nameless sex that was hers. Love for herself--the

essential self, however deeply buried beneath whatever terrible guise. And though her very substance was alien to him, and though no creature in all her ancestry had ever known love before, she loved him. Nothing else mattered.

And then without warning the great dome before him wavered and contorted into impossible angles, like the reflections in a flawed mirror. And Dixon felt the firm curved body in his arms melting fluidly into a different form and texture. It squirmed.

He stood at the entrance to a mighty room that staggered with frantic color, reeling with eye-stunning angles and incredible planes. And in his arms-- He looked down. He clasped a creature at which he could not bear to look directly, a thing whose wild-looped limbs and sinuous body rippled and crawled with the moving tints of madness. It was slippery and horrible to the touch, and from the midst of a shifting, featureless face a great lucid eye stared up at him with desperate horror, as if it was looking upon something so frightful that the very sight was enough to unseat its reason.

Dixon closed his eyes after that one revolting glimpse, but he had seen in the eye upturned to him enough of dawning comprehension to be sure that it was she whom he held. And he thought that despite the utter strangeness of that one staring eye there was somewhere in the clarity of it, and the steadfastness, a glimmer of the innermost spark which was the being he loved--that spark which had looked from the blue gaze he had seen in its human shape. With that inner spark of life she was the same.

He tightened his grip upon her--or it--though his flesh crept at the contact and he knew that the feel was as revolting to it as to himself, and looked out over that shallow, color-stained head upon the vast room before him. His eyes throbbed savagely from those fierce colors never meant for human eyes to see. And though the creature

in his arms hung acquiescent, he knew the effort it must cost to preserve that calm.

A lump rose in his throat as he realized the significance of that--such utter faith in him, though he wore a shape terrible enough to bring the fear of madness into that great lucid eye when it rested upon him. But he knew he could not stand there long and retain his own sanity. Already the colors were raving almost audibly through his brain, and the ground heaved underfoot, and he was sure that neither of them could endure much more of this. So he gripped the dreadful thing which housed the being he loved, and almost of itself he felt that incredibly alien word rip itself from his lips.

It was not a word to be set down in any written characters. Its sound to his ears was vague and indeterminate, like a whisper heard over too great distances to have any form. But the moment it left his lips he felt a vast, imponderable shifting in the substance of the temple. And, like a shutter's closing, the room went black. Dixon gave one involuntary sob of relief as the maniacal colors ceased their assault upon his brain, and he felt the dreadful thing in his arms go rigid in the utter blackness. For a moment everything was still as death.

And then through the dark around them a tiny shiver ran, the least little stir of motion, the thinnest thread of sound. It pierced Dixon's very eardrums and shuddered thrillingly along his nerves. And with incredible swiftness that tiny stirring and that infinitesimal sound grew and swelled and ballooned into a maelstrom of rushing tumult, louder and louder, shriller and shriller. Around them in the blackness swooped and stormed the sounds of a mightier conflict than any living man could ever have heard before--a battle of gods, invisible in the blackness of utter void.

That stunning uproar mounted and intensified until he thought his head would burst with the infinite sound of it, and forces beyond

comprehension stormed through the air. The floor seemed to dissolve under him, and space whirled in the dark so that he was conscious of neither up nor down. The air raved and shrieked. Blind and deafened and stunned by the magnitude of the conflict, Dixon hugged his dreadful burden and waited.

How long it went on he never knew. He was trying to think as the turmoil raged around his head, trying to guess what would come next; if the light-being in its victory could unite them in any way, in life or in death. He could think of that quite calmly now, death and union. For life without her, he knew unquestioningly, would be a sort of living death, alone and waiting. Living was where she was, and if she were dead, then life lay only in death for him. His head reeled with the wild wonderings and with the noise of battle raving about them both. For eternities, it seemed to him, the whole universe was a maelstrom, insanity shrieked in his ears, and all the powers of darkness swooped and screamed through the void about him. But, after an endless while, very gradually he began to realize that the tumult was abating. The roaring in his ears faded slowly; the wild forces storming through the dark diminished. By infinite degree the uproar died away.

Presently again the stillness of death descended through the blackness upon the two who waited.

There was a long interval of silence, nerve-racking, ear-tormenting. And then, at long last, out of that darkness and silence spoke a voice, vast and bodiless and serene. And it was not the voice of the light-being. It spoke audibly in Dixon's brain, not in words, but in some nameless speech which used instead of syllables some series of thought forms that were intelligible to him.

"My chosen priestess," said the voice passionlessly, "so you would have had me destroyed?"

Dixon felt the convulsive start of the creature in his arms and realized dimly that the same wordless speech, then, was intelligible to them both. He realized that only vaguely, with one corner of his mind, for he was stunned and overwhelmed with the realization that it must be the god it speaking--that his own sponsor had been overcome.

"And you, Dixon," the voice went on evenly, "sent by my enemy to open the way. You are a very alien creature, Dixon. Only by the power I wrested from that being which assaulted me can I perceive you at all, and your mind is a chaos to me. What spell have you cast over my chosen priestess, so that she no longer obeys me?"

"Have you never heard of love?" demanded Dixon aloud.

The query faded into the thick darkness without an echo, and a profound stillness followed in its wake. He stood in the blind dark and utter silence, clutching his love, waiting. Out of that quiet the god-voice came at last:

"Love"--in a musing murmur. "Love--no! there is no such thing in all my universe. What is it?"

Dixon stood helpless, mutely trying to frame an answer. For who can define love? He groped for the thought forms, and very stumblingly he tried to explain, knowing as he did so that it was as much for the benefit of her he held in his arms as for the god, because, although she loved, she could not know the meaning of love, or what it meant to him. When he had ceased, the silence fell again heavily.

At last it said, "So--the reigning principle of your own system and dimension. I understand that much. But there is no such thing here. Why should it concern you? Love is a thing between the two sexes of your own race. This priestess of mine is of another sex than those you understand. There can be no such thing as this love between

you."

"Yet I saw her first in the form of a woman," said Dixon. "And I love her."

"You love the image."

"At first it may be that I did. But now--no; there's much more of it than that. We may be alien to the very atoms. Our minds may be alien, and all our thoughts, and even our souls. But, after all, alien though we are, that alienage is of superficial things. Stripped down to the barest elemental beginning, we have one kinship--we share life. We are individually alive, animate, free-willed. Somewhere at the very core of our beings is the one vital spark of life, which in the last analysis is self, and with that one spark we love each other."

The deepest silence fell again when he had ended--a silence of the innermost brain.

Out of it at last he said, "And you, my priestess? What do you say? Do you love him?"

Dixon felt the shape in his arms shudder uncontrollably. She--he could not think of her as "it"--stood in the very presence of her god, heard him address her in the black blindness of his presence, and the awe and terror of it was almost enough to shake her brain. But after a moment she answered in a small, faltering murmur, the very ghost of a reply, and in some curious mode of speech which was neither vocal nor entirely thought transfer. "I--I do not know that word, O mighty il. I know only that there is no living for me outside his presence. I would have betrayed your godhead to free me, so that I might die in his way of death, and meet him again beyond--if there can be any beyond for us. I would do all this again without any hesitation if the choice was given me. If this is what you call love--

yes; I love him."

"He is," said il, "a creature of another race and world and dimension. You have seen his real form, and you know."

"I do not understand that," said the priestess in a surer voice. "I know nothing except that I cannot--will not live without him. It is not his body I... love, nor do I know what it is which commands me so. I know only that I do love him."

"And I you," said Dixon. It was a very strange sensation to be addressing her thus, from brain to brain. "The sight of you was dreadful to me, and I know how I must have looked to you. But the shock of that sight has taught me something. I know now. The shape you wear and the shape you seemed to wear before I saw you in reality are both illusions, both no more than garments which clothe that... that living, vital entity which is yourself--the real you. And your body does not matter to me now, for I know that it is no more than a mirage."

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, I understand. You are right. The bodies do not matter now. It goes so much deeper than that."

"And what," broke in the voice of il, "is your solution of this problem?"

It was Dixon who broke the silence that fell in mute answer to the query. "There can be no such thing as union for us anywhere in life. In death, perhaps--but I do not know. Do you?"

"No," said il surprisingly.

"You--you do not? You--a god?"

"No. I have taken these beings who worship me back into the flame. The energy which was theirs in life supports me--but something

escapes. I do not know what. Something too intangible even for me to guess at. No--I am a god, and I do not know what comes after death."

Dixon pondered that for a long while. There was an implication in it somewhere which gave him hope, but his brain was so dazed he could not grasp it. At last the light broke, and he said joyfully, "Then--why, then you cannot keep us apart! We can die and be free."

"Yes. I have no hold over you. Even if I would wreak vengeance upon you for your part in my betrayal, I could not. For death will release you into--I do not know what. But it will be release."

Dixon swallowed hard. Half-doubts and hesitations crowded his mind, but he heard his own voice saying steadily, "Will you do that for us--release us?"

In the silence as he waited for an answer he was trying to realize that he stood on the threshold of death; trying to understand, his mind probing ahead eagerly for the answer which might lie beyond. And in the timeless moment he waited he was very sure, for whatever lay ahead could not be extinction and surely not separation. This was the beginning; surely it could not end so soon, unfulfilled, all the questions unanswered.

No; this love which linked them, two beings so alien, could not flicker out with their lives. It was too great--too splendid, far too strong. He was no longer uncertain, no longer afraid, and hope began to torment him exquisitely. What lay beyond? What vast existences? What starry adventures, together? Almost impatiently he poised on the brink of death.

Through this il's voice spoke with a vast, passionless calm. "Die then," said il.

For an instant the darkness lay unbroken about them. Then a little flicker ran indescribably through it. The air shook for a breathless moment.

And it was alone.

Black God's Shadow

Published in *Weird Tales*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (December 1934).

Through Jirel's dreams a faraway voice went wailing. She opened yellow eyes upon darkness and lay still for a while, wondering what had waked her and staring into the gloom of her tower chamber, listening to the familiar night sounds of the sentry on the battlements close overhead, the rattle of armor and the soft shuffle of feet in the straw laid down to muffle the sound so that Joiry's lady might sleep in peace.

And as she lay there in the dark, quite suddenly the old illusion came over her again. She felt the pressure of strong mailed arms and the weight of a bearded mouth insolently upon hers, and she closed her red lips on an oath at her own weakness and knew again the sting of helpless tears behind her eyelids.

She lay quiet, remembering. Guillaume--so hatefully magnificent in his armor, grinning down upon her from her own dais in her own castle hall where her own dead soldiers lay scattered about upon the bloody flags. Guillaume--his arms hard about her, his mouth heavy upon her own. Even now anger swept like a flame across her memory in answer to the arrogance and scorn of that conqueror's kiss. Yet was it anger?--was it hatred? And how had she to know, until he lay dead at last at her vengeful feet, that it was not hate which bubbled up so hotly whenever she remembered the insolence of his arms, or that he had defeated her men and conquered unconquerable Joiry? For she had been the commander of the strongest fortress in the kingdom, and called no man master, and it was her proudest boast that Joiry would never fall, and that no lover dared lay hands upon her save in answer to her smile.

No, it had not been hatred which answered Guillaume's overwhelming arrogance. Not hate, though the fire and fury of it had gone stemming like madness through her. So many loves had blown lightly through her life before--how was she to know this surge of heady violence for what it was, until too late? Well, it was ended now.

She had gone down the secret way that she and one other knew, down into that dark and nameless hell which none who wore a cross might enter, where God's dominion ended at the portals, and who could tell what strange and terrible gods held sway instead? She remembered the starry darkness of it, and the voices that cried along the wind, and the brooding perils she could not understand. No other thing than the flame of her--hatred?--could have driven her down, and nothing but its violence could have sustained her along the dark ways she went seeking a weapon worthy to slay Guillaume.

Well, she had found it. She had taken the black god's kiss. Heavy and cold upon her soul she had carried it back, feeling the terrible weight bearing down upon some intangible part of her that shuddered and shrank from the touch. She had fouled her very soul with that burden, but she had not guessed what terrible potentialities it bore within it, like some egg of hell's spawning to slay the man she loved.

Her weapon was a worthy one. She smiled grimly, remembering that--remembering her return, and how triumphantly he had accepted that kiss from hell, not understanding.... Again she saw the awful fruition of her vengeance, as the chill of her soul's burden shifted, through the meeting of their mouths, from her soul to his. Again she saw the spreading of that nameless emotion from Beyond through his shuddering body, an iron despair which no flesh and blood could endure.

Yes, a worthy weapon. She had periled her soul in the seeking of it,

and slain him with a god-cursed kiss, and known too late that she would never love another man. Guillaume--tall and splendid in his armor, the little black beard split by the whiteness of his grin, and arrogance sneering from his scarred and scornful face. Guillaume--whose kiss would haunt her all the nights of her life. Guillaume--who was dead. In the dark she hid her face upon her bent arm, and the red hair fell forward to smother her sobs.

When sleep came again she did not know. But presently she was alone in a dim, formless place through whose mists the faraway voice wailed fretfully. It was a familiar voice with strange, plaintive overtones--a sad little lost voice wailing through the dark.

"Oh, Jirel," it moaned reedily, the tiniest thread of sound. "Oh, Jirel--my murderess...."

And in the dream her heart stood still, and--though she had killed more men than one--she thought she knew that voice, tiny and thin though it was in the bodiless dark of her sleep. And she held her breath, listening. It came again, "Oh, Jirel! It is Guillaume calling--Guillaume, whom you slew. Is there no end to your vengeance? Have mercy, oh my murderess! Release my soul from the dark god's torment. Oh Jirel--Jirel--I pray your mercy!"

Jirel awoke wet-eyed and lay there staring into the dark, recalling that pitiful little reedy wail which had once been Guillaume's rich, full-throated voice. And wondering. The dark god? True, Guillaume had died unshriven, with all his sins upon him, and because of this she had supposed that his soul plunged straight downward to the gates of hell.

Yet--could it be? By the power of that infernal kiss which she had braved the strange dark place underground to get as a weapon against him--by the utter strangeness of it, and the unhuman death he

died, it must be that now his naked soul wandered, lost and lonely, through that nameless hell lit by strange stars, where ghosts moved in curious forms through the dark. And he asked her mercy--Guillaume, who in life had asked mercy of no living creature.

She heard the watch changing on the battlements above, and dropped again into an uneasy slumber, and once more entered the dim place where the little voice cried through the mist, wailing piteously for mercy from her vengeance. Guillaume--the proud Guillaume, with his deep voice and scornful eyes. Guillaume's lost soul wailing through her dreams. . . "Have mercy upon me, oh my murderess!"...and again she woke with wet eyes and started up, staring wildly around her in the gloom and thinking that surely she heard yet the echo of the little lost voice crying. And as the sound faded from her ears she knew that she must go down again.

For a while she lay there, shivering a little and forcing herself into the knowledge. Jirel was a brave woman and a savage warrior, and the most reckless soldier of all her men-at-arms. There was not a man for miles about who did not fear and respect Joiry's commander--her sword-keen beauty and her reckless courage and her skill at arms. But at the thought of what she must do to save Guillaume's soul the coldness of terror blew over her and her heart contracted forebodingly. To go down again--down into the perilous, star-lit dark among dangers more dreadful than she could put words to--dared she? Dared she go?

She rose at last, cursing her own weakness. The stars through the narrow windows watched her pull on her doeskin shirt and the brief tunic of linked mail over it. She buckled the greaves of a long-dead Roman legionary on her slim, strong legs, and, as on that unforgettable night not long since when she had dressed for this same journey, she took her two-edged sword unsheathed in her hand.

Again she went down through the dark of the sleeping castle. Joiry's dungeons are deep, and she descended a long way through the oozing, dank corridors underground, past cells where the bones of Joiry's enemies rotted in forgotten chains. And she, who feared no living man, was frightened in that haunted dark, and gripped her sword closer and clutched the cross at her neck with nervous fingers. The silence hurt her ears with its weight, and the dark was like a bandage over her straining eyes.

At the end of the last oozing passage, far underground, she came to a wall. With her free hand she set to work pulling the unmortared stones from their places, making an opening to squeeze through—trying not to remember that upon this spot that dreadful night tall Guillaume had died, with the black god's kiss burning upon his mouth and un-namable torment in his eyes. Here upon these stones. Against the darkness vividly she could see that torch-lit scene, and Guillaume's long, mailed body sprawled across the floor. She would never forget that. Perhaps even after she died she would remember the smoky, acrid smell of the torches, and the coldness of the stones under her bare knees as she knelt beside the body of the man she had killed; the choke in her throat, and the brush of the red hair against her cheek, falling forward to mask her tears from the stolid men-at-arms. And Guillaume, Guillaume....

She took her lip between her teeth resolutely, and turned her mind to the pulling out of stones. Presently there was a hole big enough for her slim height, and she pushed through into the solid dark beyond. Her feet were upon a ramp, and she went down cautiously, feeling her way with exploring toes. When the floor leveled she dropped to her knees and felt for the remembered circle in the pavement. She found that, and the curious cold ring in its center, of some nameless metal which daylight had never shone upon, metal so smooth and cold and strange that her fingers shuddered as she gripped it and

heaved. That lid was heavy. As before, she had to take her sword in her teeth, for she dared not lay it down, and use both hands to lift the stone circle. It rose with an odd little sighing sound, as if some suction from below had gripped it and were released.

She sat on the edge for a moment, swinging her feet in the opening and gathered all her courage for the plunge. When she dared hesitate no longer, for fear she would never descend if she delayed another instant, she caught her breath and gripped her sword hard and plunged.

It must have been the strangest descent that the world has known--not a shaft but a spiral twisting down in smooth, corkscrew loops, a spiral made for no human creature to travel, yet into whose sides in some forgotten era a nameless human had cut notches for hands and feet, so that Jirel went down more slowly than if she had had to take an unbroken plunge. She slipped smoothly along down the spirals, barely braking her passage now and again by grasping at the notches in the wall when she felt herself sliding too fast.

Presently the familiar sickness came over her--that strange, inner dizziness as if the spiral were taking her not only through space but through dimensions, and the very structure of her body were altering and shifting with the shifting spirals. And it seemed, too, that down any other shaft she would have fallen more swiftly. This was not a free glide downward--she scarcely seemed to be falling at all. In the spiral there was neither up nor down, and the sickness intensified until in the whirling loops and the whirling dizziness she lost all count of time and distance, and slid through the dark in a stupor of her own misery.

At long last the spiral straightened and began to incline less steeply, and she knew that she approached the end. It was hard work then, levering herself along the gentle slope on hands and knees, and

when she came out at last into open darkness she scrambled to her feet and stood panting, sword in hand, straining her eyes against the impenetrable dark of this place that must be without counterpart anywhere in the world, or outside it. There were perils here, but she scarcely thought of them as she set out through the dark, for remembering those greater perils beyond.

She went forward warily for all that, swinging her sword in cautious arcs before her that she might not run full-tilt into some invisible horror. It was an unpleasant feeling, this groping through blackness, knowing eyes upon her, feeling presences near her, watching. Twice she heard hoarse breathing, and once the splat of great wet feet upon stone, but nothing touched her or tried to bar her passage.

Nevertheless she was shaking with tension and terror when at last she reached the end of the passage. There was no visible sign to tell her that it was ended, but as before, suddenly she sensed that the oppression of those vast weights of earth on all sides had lifted. She was standing at the threshold of some mighty void. The very darkness had a different quality--and at her throat something constricted.

Jirel gripped her sword a little more firmly and felt for the crucifix at her neck--found it--lifted the chain over her head.

Instantly a burst of blinding radiance smote her dark-accustomed eyes more violently than a blow. She stood at a cave-mouth, high on the side of a hill, staring out over the most blazing day she had ever seen. Heat and light shimmered in the dazzle: strangely colored light, heat that danced and shook. Day, over a dreadful land.

Jirel cried out inarticulately and clapped a hand over her outraged eyes, groping backward step by step into the sheltering dark of the cave. Night in this land was terrible enough, but day--no, she dared

not look upon the strange hell save when darkness veiled it. She remembered that other journey, when she had raced the dawn up the hillside, shuddering, averting her eyes from the terror of her own misshapen shadow forming upon the stones. No, she must wait, how long she could not guess; for though it had been night above ground when she left, here was broad day, and it might be that day in this land was of a different duration from that she knew.

She drew back farther into the cave, until that dreadful day was no more than a blur upon the darkness, and sat down with her back to the rock and the sword across her bare knees, waiting. That blurred light upon the walls had a curious tinge of color such as she had never seen in any earthly daylight. It seemed to her that it shimmered--paled and deepened and brightened again as if the illumination were not steady. It had almost the quality of firelight in its fluctuations.

Several times something seemed to pass across the cave-mouth, blotting out the light for an instant, and once she saw a great, stooping shadow limned upon the wall, as if something had paused to peer within the cave. And at the thought of what might rove this land by day Jirel shivered as if in a chill wind, and groped for her crucifix before she remembered that she no longer wore it.

She waited for a long while, clasping cold hands about her knees, watching that blur upon the wall in fascinated anticipation. After a time she may have dozed a little, with the light, unresting sleep of one poised to wake at the tiniest sound or motion. It seemed to her that eternities went by before the light began to pale upon the cave wall.

She watched it fading. It did not move across the wall as sunlight would have done. The blur remained motionless, dimming slowly, losing its tinge of unearthly color, taking on the blueness of evening. Jirel stood up and paced back and forth to limber her stiffened body.

But not until that blur had faded so far that no more than the dimmest glimmer of radiance lay upon the stone did she venture out again toward the cave-mouth.

Once more she stood upon the hilltop, looking out over a land lighted by strange constellations that sprawled across the sky in pictures whose outlines she could not quite trace, though there was about them a dreadful familiarity. And, looking up upon the spreading patterns in the sky, she realized afresh that this land, whatever it might be, was no underground cavern of whatever vast dimensions. It was open air she breathed, and stars in a celestial void she gazed upon, and however she had come here, she was no longer under the earth.

Below her the dim country spread. And it was not the same landscape she had seen on that other journey. No mighty column of shadowless light swept skyward in the distance. She caught the glimmer of a broad river where no river had flowed before, and the ground here and there was patched and checkered with pale radiance, like luminous fields laid out orderly upon the darkness.

She stepped down the hill delicately, poised for the attack of those tiny, yelping horrors that had raved about her knees once before. They did not come. Surprised, hoping against hope that she was to be spared that nauseating struggle, she went on. The way down was longer than she remembered. Stones turned under her feet, and coarse grass slashed at her knees. She was wondering as she descended where her search was to begin, for in all the dark, shifting land she saw nothing to guide her, and Guillaume's voice was no more than a fading memory from her dream. She could not even find her way back to the lake where the black god crouched, for the whole landscape was changed unrecognizably.

So when, unmolested, she reached the foot of the hill, she set off at

random over the dark earth, running as before with that queer dancing lightness, as if the gravity pull of this place were less than that to which she was accustomed, so that the ground seemed to skim past under her flying feet. It was like a dream, this effortless glide through the darkness, fleet as the wind.

Presently she began to near one of those luminous patches that resembled fields, and saw now that they were indeed a sort of garden. The luminosity rose from myriads of tiny, darting lights planted in even rows, and when she came near enough she saw that the lights were small insects, larger than fireflies, and with luminous wings which they beat vainly upon the air, darting from side to side in a futile effort to be free. For each was attached to its little stem, as if they had sprung living from the soil. Row upon row of them stretched into the dark.

She did not even speculate upon who had sowed such seed here, or toward what strange purpose. Her course led her across a corner of the field, and as she ran she broke several of the stems, releasing the shining prisoners. They buzzed up around her instantly, angrily as bees, and wherever a luminous wing brushed her a hot pain stabbed. She beat them off after a while and ran on, skirting other fields with new wariness.

She crossed a brook that spoke to itself in the dark with a queer, whispering sound so near to speech that she paused for an instant to listen, then thought she had caught a word or two of such dreadful meaning that she ran on again, wondering if it could have been only an illusion.

Then a breeze sprang up and brushed the red hair from her ears, and it seemed to her that she caught the faintest, far wailing. She stopped dead-still, listening, and the breeze stopped too. But she was almost certain she had heard that voice again, and after an

instant's hesitation she turned in the direction from which the breeze had blown.

It led toward the river. The ground grew rougher, and she began to hear water running with a subdued, rushing noise, and presently again the breeze brushed her face. Once more she thought she could hear the dimmest; echo of the voice that had cried in her dreams.

When she came to the brink of the water she paused for a moment, looking down to where the river rushed between steep banks. The water had a subtle difference in appearance from water in the rivers she knew--somehow thicker, for all its swift flowing. When she leaned out to look, her face was mirrored monstrously upon the broken surface, in a way that no earthly water would reflect, and as the image fell upon its torrent the water broke there violently, leaping upward and splashing as if some hidden rock had suddenly risen in its bed. There was a hideous eagerness about it, as if the water were ravening for her, rising in long, hungry leaps against the rocky walls to splash noisily and run back into the river. But each leap came higher against the wall, and Jirel started back in something like alarm, a vague unease rising within her at the thought of what might happen if she waited until the striving water reached high enough.

At her withdrawal the tumult lessened instantly, and after a moment or so she knew by the sound that the river had smoothed over its broken place and was flowing on undisturbed. Shivering a little, she went on upstream whence the fitful breeze seemed to blow.

Once she stumbled into a patch of utter darkness and fought through in panic fear of walking into the river in her blindness, but she won free of the curious air-pocket without mishap. And once the ground under her skimming feet quaked like jelly, so that she could scarcely

keep her balance as she fled on over the unstable section. But ever the little breeze blew and died away and blew again, and she thought the faint echo of a cry was becoming clearer. Almost she caught the far-away sound of "Jirel--" moaning upon the wind, and quickened her pace.

For some while now she had been noticing a growing pallor upon the horizon, and wondering uneasily if night could be so short here, and day already about to dawn. But no--for she remembered that upon that other terrible dawn which she had fled so fast to escape, the pallor had ringed the whole horizon equally, as if day rose in one vast circle clear around the nameless land. Now it was only one spot on the edge of the sky which showed that unpleasant, dawning light. It was faintly tinged with green that strengthened as she watched, and presently above the hills in the distance rose the rim of a vast green moon. The stars paled around it. A cloud floated across its face, writhed for an instant as if in some skyey agony, then puffed into a mist and vanished, leaving the green face clear again.

And it was a mottled face across which dim things moved very slowly. Almost it might have had an atmosphere of its own, and dark clouds floating sluggishly; and if that were so it must have been self-luminous, for these slow masses dimmed its surface and it cast little light despite its hugeness. But there was light enough so that in the land through which Jirel ran great shadows took shape upon the ground, writhing and shifting as the moon-clouds obscured and revealed the green surface, and the whole night scene was more baffling and unreal than a dream. And there was something about the green luminance that made her eyes ache.

She waded through shadows as she ran now, monstrous shadows with a hideous dissimilarity to the things that cast them, and no two alike, however identical the bodies which gave them shape. Her own shadow, keeping pace with her along the ground, she did not look at

after one shuddering glance. There was something so unnatural about it, and yet—yet it was like her, too, with a dreadful likeness she could not fathom. And more than once she saw great shadows drifting across the ground without any visible thing to cast them—nothing but the queerly shaped blurs moving soundlessly past her and melting into the farther dark. And that was the worst of all.

She ran on upwind, ears straining for a repetition of the far crying, skirting the shadows as well as she could and shuddering whenever a great dark blot drifted noiselessly across her path. The moon rose slowly up the sky, tinting the night with a livid greenness, bringing it dreadfully to life with moving shadows. Sometimes the sluggishly moving darks across its face clotted together and obscured the whole great disk, and she ran on a few steps thankfully through the unlighted dark before the moon-clouds parted again and the dead green face looked blankly down once more, the cloud-masses crawling across it like corruption across a corpse's face.

During one of these darks something slashed viciously at her leg, and she heard the grate of teeth on the greave she wore. When the moon unveiled again she saw a long bright scar along the metal, and a drip of phosphorescent venom trickling down. She gathered a handful of grass to wipe it off before it reached her unprotected foot, and the grass withered in her hand when the poison touched it.

All this while the river had been rushing past her and away, and as she ran it began to narrow and diminish; so she knew she must be approaching its head. When the wind blew she was sure now that she heard her own name upon it, in the small wail which had once been Guillaume's scornful voice. Then the ground began to rise, and down the hillside she mounted, the river fell tinkling, a little thread of water no larger than a brook.

The tinkling was all but articulate now. The river's rush had been no

more than a roaring threat, but the voice of the brook was deliberately clear, a series of small, bright notes like syllables, saying evil things. She tried not to listen, for fear of understanding.

The hill rose steeper, and the brook's voice sharpened and clarified and sang delicately in its silvery poisonous tones, and above her against the stars she presently began to discern something looming on the very height of the hill, something like a hulking figure motionless as the hill it crowned. She gripped her sword and slackened her pace a little, skirting the dark thing warily. But when she came near enough to make it out in the green moonlight she saw that it was no more than an image crouching there, black as darkness, giving back a dull gleam from its surface where the lividness of the moon struck it. Its shadow moved uneasily upon the ground.

The guiding wind had fallen utterly still now. She stood in a breathless silence before the image, and the stars sprawled their queer patterns across the sky and the sullen moonlight poured down upon her and nothing moved anywhere but those quivering shadows that were never still.

The image had the shape of a black, shambling thing with shallow head sunk between its shoulders and great arms dragging forward on the ground. But something about it, something indefinable and obscene, reminded her of Guillaume. Some aptness of line and angle parodied in the ugly hulk the long, clean lines of Guillaume, the poise of his high head, the scornful tilt of his chin. She could not put a finger on any definite likeness, but it was unmistakably there. And it was all the ugliness of Guillaume--she saw it as she stared. All his cruelty and arrogance and brutish force. The image might have been a picture of Guillaume's sins, with just enough of his virtues left in to point its dreadfulness.

For an instant she thought she could see behind the black parody, rising from it and irrevocably part of it, a nebulous outline of the Guillaume she had never known, the scornful face twisted in despair, the splendid body writhing futilely away from that obscene thing which was himself--Guillaume's soul, rooted in the ugliness which the image personified. And she knew his punishment--so just, yet so infinitely unjust.

And what subtle torment the black god's kiss had wrought upon him! To dwell in the full, frightful realization of his own sins, chained to the actual manifestation, suffering eternally in the obscene shape that was so undeniably himself--his worst and lowest self. It was just, in a way. He had been a harsh and cruel man in life. But the very fact that such punishment was agony to him proved a higher self within his complex soul--something noble and fine which writhed away from the unspeakable thing--himself. So the very fineness of him was a weapon to torture his soul, turned against him even as his sins were turned.

She understood all this in the timeless while she stood there with eyes fixed motionless upon the hulking shape of the image, wringing from it the knowledge of what its ugliness meant. And something in her throat swelled and swelled, and behind her eyelids burnt the sting of tears. Fiercely she fought back the weakness, desperately cast about for some way in which she might undo what she had unwittingly inflicted upon him.

And then all about her something intangible and grim began to form. Some iron presence that manifested itself only by the dark power she felt pressing upon her, stronger and stronger. Something coldly inimical to all things human. The black god's presence. The black god, come to defend his victim against one who was so alien to all his darkness--one who wept and trembled, and was warm with love and sorrow and desperate with despair.

She felt the inexorable force tightening around her, freezing her tears, turning the warmth and tenderness of her into gray ice, rooting her into a frigid immobility. The air dimmed about her, gray with cold, still with the utter deadness of the black god's unhuman presence. She had a glimpse of the dark place into which he was drawing her--a moveless, twilight place, deathlessly still. And an immense weight was pressing her down. The ice formed upon her soul, and the awful, iron despair which has no place among human emotions crept slowly through the fibers of her innermost self.

She felt herself turning into something cold and dark and rigid--a black image of herself--a black, hulking image to prison the spark of consciousness that still burned.

Then, as from a long way off in another time and world, came the memory of Guillaume's arms about her and the scornful press of his mouth over hers. It had not happened to her. It had happened to someone else, someone human and alive, in a far-away place. But the memory of it shot like fire through the rigidity of the body she had almost forgotten was hers, so cold and still it was--the memory of that curious, raging fever which was both hate and love. It broke the ice that bound her, for a moment only, and in that moment she fell to her knees at the dark statue's feet and burst into shuddering sobs, and the hot tears flowing were like fire to thaw her soul.

Slowly that thawing took place. Slowly the ice melted and the rigidity gave way, and the awful weight of the despair which was no human emotion lifted by degrees. The tears ran hotly between her fingers. But all about her she could feel, as tangibly as a touch, the imminence of the black god, waiting. And she knew her humanity, her weakness and transience, and the eternal, passionless waiting she could never hope to outlast. Her tears must run dry--and then--

She sobbed on, knowing herself in hopeless conflict with the vastness of death and oblivion, a tiny spark of warmth and life fighting vainly against the dark engulfing it; the perishable spark, struggling against inevitable extinction. For the black god was all death and nothingness, and the powers he drew upon were without limit--and all she had to fight him with was the flicker within her called life.

But suddenly in the depths of her despair she felt something stirring. A long, confused blurring passed over her, and another, and another, and the strangest emotions tumbled through her mind and vanished. Laughter and mirth, sorrow and tears and despair, love, envy, hate. She felt somehow a lessening in the oppressive peril about her, and she lifted her face from her hands.

Around the dark image a mist was swirling. It was tenuous and real by turns, but gradually she began to make out a ring of figures--girls'figures, more unreal than a vision--dancing girls who circled the crouching statue with flying feet and tossing hair--girls who turned to Jirel her own face in as many moods as there were girls. Jirel laughing, Jirel weeping, Jirel convulsed with fury, Jirel honey-sweet with love. Faster they swirled, a riot of flashing limbs, a chaos of tears and mirth and all humanity's moods. The air danced with them in shimmering waves, so that the land was blurred behind them and the image seemed to shiver within itself.

And she felt those waves of warmth and humanity beating insistently against the hovering chill which was the black god's presence. Life and warmth, fighting back the dark nothingness she had thought unconquerable. She felt it wavering about her as a canopy wavers in the wind. And slowly she felt it melting. Very gradually it lifted and dissipated, while the wild figures of gayety and grief and all kindred emotions whirled about the image and the beat of their aliveness pulsed through the air in heat-waves against the grayness of the

god's cold.

And something in Jirel knew warmly that the image of life as a tiny spark flickering out in limitless black was a false one--that without light there can be no darkness--that death and life are interdependent, one upon the other. And that she, armored in the warmth of her aliveness, was the black god's equal, and a worthy foe. It was an even struggle. She called up the forces of life within her, feeling them hurled against the darkness, beating strongly upon the cold and silence of oblivion. Strength flowed through her, and she knew herself immortal in the power of life.

How long this went on she never knew. But she felt victory pulsing like wine through her veins even before the cold pall lifted. And it lifted quite suddenly. In a breath, without warning, the black god's presence was not. In that breath the swirling dancers vanished, and the night was empty about her, and the singing of triumph ran warmly through her body.

But the image--the image! The queerest change was coming over it. The black, obscene outlines were unstable as mist. They quavered and shook, and ran together and somehow melted.... The green moon veiled its face again with clouds, and when the light returned the image was no more than a black shadow running fluidly upon the ground; a shadow which bore the outlines of Guillaume--or what might have been Guillaume....

The moon-shadows moved across the livid disk, and the shadow on the ground moved too, a monstrous shadow latent with a terrible implication of the horrors dormant within the being which cast the shadow, dreadful things that Guillaume might have been and done. She knew then why the misshapen shadows were so monstrous. They were a dim, leering hinting at what might have been--what might yet be--frightful suggestions of the dreadfulnesses dormant

within every living being. And the insane suggestions they made were the more terrible because, impossible beyond nightmares though they seemed, yet the mind intuitively recognized their truth....

A little breeze sprang up fitfully, and the shadow moved, slipping over the stones without a sound. She found herself staggering after it on legs that shook, for the effort of that battle with the god had drained her of all strength. But the shadow was gliding faster now, and she dared not lose it. It floated on without a sound, now fast, now slow, its monstrous outlines shifting continually into patterns each more terribly significant than the last. She stumbled after it, the sword a dead weight in her hand, her red head hanging.

In five minutes she had lost all sense of direction. Beyond the hilltop the river ceased. The moving moonlight confused her and the stars traced queer pictures across the sky, from which she could get no bearings. The moon was overhead by now, and in those intervals when its clouds obscured the surface and the night was black around her, Guillaume's misshapen shadow vanished with the rest, and she suffered agonies of apprehension before the light came out again and she took up the chase anew.

The dark blot was moving now over a rolling meadow-land dotted with queerly shaped trees. The grass over which she ran was velvet-soft, and she caught whiffs of perfume now and again from some tree that billowed with pale bloom in the moonlight. The shadow wavering ahead of her moved forward to pass one tall tree a little apart from the rest, its branches hanging in long, shaking streamers from its central crown. She saw the dark shape upon the ground pause as it neared the tree, and shiver a little, and then melt imperceptibly into the shadow cast by its branches. That tree-shadow, until Guillaume's touched it, had borne the shape of a monster with crawling tentacles and flattened, thrusting head, but at the moment of conjunction the two melted into one--all the tentacles

leaped forward to embrace the newcomer, and the two merged into an unnamably evil thing that lay upon the ground and heaved with a frightful aliveness of its own.

Jirel paused at its edge, looking down helplessly. She disliked to set her foot even upon the edge of that hideous black shape, though she knew intuitively that it could not harm her. The joined shadows were alive with menace and evil, but only to things in their own plane. She hesitated under the tree, wondering vainly how to part her lover's shade from the thing that gripped it. She felt somehow that his shadow had not joined the other altogether willingly. It was rather as if the evil instinct in the tree-shape had reached out to the evil in Guillaume, and by that evil held him, though the fineness that was still his revolted to the touch.

Then something brushed her shoulder gently, and lapped around her arm, and she leaped backward in a panic, too late. The tree's swinging branches had writhed round toward her, and one already was wrapped about her body. That shadow upon the ground had been a clear warning of the danger dormant within the growth, had she only realized it before--a tentacled monster, lying in wait. Up swung her sword in a flash of green-tinged moonlight, and she felt the gripping branch yield like rubber under the blow. It gave amazingly and sprang back again, jerking her almost off her feet. She turned the blade against it, hewing desperately as she saw other branches curling around toward her. One had almost come within reach of her sword-arm, and was poising for the attack, when she felt her blade bite into the rubbery surface at last. Then with a root-deep shudder through all its members the tree loosed its hold and the severed limb fell writhing to the ground.

Thick black sap dripped from the wound. And all the branches hung motionless, but upon the ground the shadow flung wildly agonized tentacles wide, and from the released grip Guillaume's shadow

sprang free and glided away over the grass. Shaking with reaction, Jirel followed.

She gave more attention to the trees they passed now. There was one little shrub whose leaves blew constantly in shivering ripples, even when there was no wind, and its shadow was the shadow of a small leaping thing that hurled itself time and again against some invisible barrier and fell back, only to leap once more in panic terror. And one slim, leafless tree writhed against the stars with a slow, unceasing motion. It made no sound, but its branches twisted together and shuddered and strained in an agony more eloquent than speech. It seemed to wring its limbs together, agonized, dumb, with a slow anguish that never abated. And its shadow, dimly, was the shadow of a writhing woman.

And one tree, a miracle of bloom in the moonlight, swayed its ruffled branches seductively, sending out wave upon wave of intoxicating perfume and making a low, delightful humming, somehow like the melody of bees. Its shadow upon the ground was the shadow of a coiled serpent, lifting to strike.

Jirel was glad when they left the region of the trees and curved to the left down a long hill slope across which other shadows, without form, blew unceasingly with nothing to cast them. They raced noiselessly by, like wind-driven clouds. Among them she lost and found and lost again the shape she followed, until she grew dizzy from trying to keep her footing upon a ground that quavered with the blowing shadows so that she never knew upon what her feet were stepping, and the dim thing she followed was a nothingness that threaded its way in and out of the cloud-shapes bafflingly.

She had the idea now that the shadow of her lover was heading toward some definite goal. There was purpose in its dim gliding, and she looked ahead for some sign of the place it aimed toward. Below

the hill the land stretched away featurelessly, cloud-mottled in the livid moonlight. Drifts of mist obscured it, and there were formless dark patches and pale blotches upon the night, and here and there a brook crawled across the blackness. She was completely lost now, for the river had long since vanished and she saw no hill which might have been the one upon which she had emerged.

They crossed another belt of quaking land, and the shadow gained upon her as she staggered over the jelly-like surface. They came to a pale brook across which the shadow glided without a pause. It was a narrow, swift brook whose water chuckled thickly to itself in the dark. One stepping-stone broke the surface in the center of the stream, and she held her breath and leaped for it, not daring to slacken her pace. The stone gave under her foot like living flesh, and she thought she heard a groan, but she had gained the farther bank and did not pause to listen.

Then they were hurrying down another slope, the shadow gliding faster now, and more purposefully. And the slope went down and down, steeply, until it became the side of a ravine and the rocks began to roll under her stumbling feet. She saw the fleeting shadow slip over a ledge and down a steep bank and then plunge into the darkness which lay like water along the bottom of the gully, and she gave a little sob of despair, for she knew now that she had lost it. But she struggled on into the dark that swallowed her up.

It was like wading deeper and deeper into a tangible oblivion. The blackness closed over her head, and she was groping through solid night. It filled the hollow in a thick flood, and in the depths of it she could not even see the stars overhead. There was a moment of this blindness and groping, and then the moon rose.

Like a great leprous face it swung over the ravine's edge, the moon-clouds crawling across its surface. And that green light was an agony

to her eyes, obscurely, achingly. It was like no mortal moonlight. It seemed endowed with a poisonous quality that was essentially a part of the radiance, and that unearthly, inexplicable light had an effect upon the liquid dark in the gully's bottom which no earthly moonlight could have had. It penetrated the blackness, broke it up into myriad struggling shadows that did not lie flat upon the ground, as all shadows should, but stood upright and three-dimensional and danced about her in a dizzy riot of nothingness taken shape. They brushed by her and through her without meeting obstruction, because for all their seeming solidity they were no more than shadows, without substance.

Among them danced the shape of Guillaume, and the outlines of it made her faint with terror, they were so like--and so dreadfully unlike--the Guillaume she had known, so leeringly suggestive of all the evil in him, and all the potential evil of mankind. The other shapes were ugly too, but they were the shapes of things whose real form she did not know, so that the implications latent in them she did not understand. But she missed no subtle half-tone of the full dreadfulness which was Guillaume, and her mind staggered with the suggestions the shadow-form made.

"Guillaume--" she heard herself sobbing, "Guillaume!" and realized that it was the first articulate sound which had passed her lips since she entered here. At her voice the reeling shadow slowed a little and hesitated, and then very reluctantly began to drift toward her through the spinning shades.

And then without warning something immeasurably cold and still closed down around her once more. The black god's presence. Again she felt herself congealing, through and through, as the ice of eternal nothingness thickened upon her soul and the gray, dim, formless place she remembered took shape about her and the immense weight of that iron despair descended again upon her

shuddering spirit. If she had had warning she could have struggled, but it came so suddenly that before she could marshal her forces for the attack she was frigid to the core with the chill of unhumanity, and her body did not belong to her, and she was turning slowly into a black shadow that reeled among shadows in a dreadful, colorless void....

Sharply through this stabbed the fire-hot memory that had wakened her before--the weight of a man's bearded mouth upon hers, the grip of his mailed arms. And again she knew the flash of violence that might have been hate or love, and warmth flowed through her again in a sustaining tide.

And she fought. All the deeps of warmth and humanity in her she drew upon to fight the cold, all the violence of emotion to combat the terrible apathy which had gripped her once and was stretching out again for her soul.

It was not an easy victory. There were moments when the chill all but conquered, and moments when she felt herself drawn tenuously out of the congealing body which was hers to reel among the other shadows--a dim thing whose shape hinted at unspeakable possibilities, a shadow with form and depth and no reality. She caught remote beats of the insane harmony they danced to, and though her soul was fainting, her unreal shade went whirling on with the rest. She shared their torment for long minutes together.

But always she pulled herself free again. Always she fought back somehow into the ice-fettered body and shook off the frigid apathy that bound it, and hurled her weapons of life and vitality against the dark god's frosty presence.

And though she knew she would win this time, a little creeping doubt had entered her mind and would not be ousted. She could beat the

god off, but she could never destroy him. He would always return. She dared not destroy him--a vision of her thought-picture came back to her, of the tiny life-spark burning against eternal darkness. And though if there were no light there could be no dark, yet it was true in reverse too, and if the power upon which the black god drew were destroyed--if the dark were dissipated, then there would be no light. No life. Interdependence, and eternal struggle....

All this she was realizing with a remote part of herself as she fought. She realized it very vaguely, for her mind had not been trained to such abstractions. With her conscious self she was calling up the memories of love and hate and terror, the exultation of battle, the exultation of joy. Everything that was alive and pulsing and warm she flung against the black god's chill, feeling her thoughts rise up in a protecting wall about her, to shut out all menace.

Victory, as before, came very suddenly. Without warning a blaze of light sprang up around her. The dark presence melted into oblivion. In that abrupt glare she closed her dazzled eyes, and when she opened them again familiar moonlight was flooding the glen. The fluid dark had vanished, the shadows no longer danced. That light had blasted them out of existence, and as it died she stared round the dim ravine with startled eyes, searching for the thing that was all she had seen of Guillaume. It was gone with the rest. The tangible dark which had brimmed the place was utterly gone. Not a shadow moved anywhere. But on the wind that was blowing down the ravine a small voice wailed.

And so again the weary chase went on. But she had less than ever to guide her now--only a fitful crying in the dark. "Jirel--" it wailed, "Jirel--Jirel--" and by that calling she followed. She could see nothing. Guillaume was no more than a voice now, and she could follow him by ear alone. Empty the landscape stretched before her.

She had come out of the ravine's end upon a broad fan-shaped slope which tilted downward into darkness. Water was falling somewhere near, but she could not see it. She ran blindly, ears strained for the small wailing cry. It led out over the slope and skirted the foot of a hill and passed by the place where water fell in a thin cascade down a cliffside, and whispered evilly to itself as it fell.

The sound obscured the sound she followed, and when she had passed beyond the whisper of the falls she had to stop and listen for a long time, while her heart thudded and the land around her crept with small, inexplicable noises, before she caught the far-away wail, "Jirel--Jirel--"

She set off in the direction from which the sound came, and presently heard it again more clearly, "Jirel! Jirel, my murderess!"

It was a heart-breaking course she ran, with no more than a fitful wailing to guide her and unknown perils lurking all about in the dark, and her own body and soul so drained of all strength by that second struggle with the god that the misty darkness wavered before her eyes and the ground underfoot heaved up to meet her time after time.

Once she fell, and lay still for a second to catch her struggling breath. But it seemed to her that the ground against her body was too warm, somehow, and moving gently as if with leisured breathing. So she leaped up again in swift alarm, and went skimming on with that dreamlike speed over the dark grass.

It seemed to her that, as the shadow she had pursued had fled through shadowy places where she all but lost it time and again, now the fleeing voice led her through noisy places where she could scarcely hear it above the talking of brooks and the rush of falls and the blowing of the wind. She heard sounds she had never heard

before--small, tenuous voices murmuring in the wind, the whispering of grass saying things in a murmurous language, the squeak of insects brushing past her face and somehow almost articulate. She had heard no birds here, though once a great, dark, shapeless thing flapped heavily through the air a little distance ahead. But there were frog voices from the swamps she skirted, and hearing these she remembered what she had met in another swamp on her first visit here, and a little chill went down her back.

In every sound she heard ran the thread of evil inextricably tangled with a thread of purest despair--a human despair even through the grasses'rustling and in the murmur of the wind--voices wailing so hopelessly that more than once tears started unbidden to her eyes, but so indistinctly that she could never be sure she had heard. And always through the wailing rippled the chuckle of dim evils without any names in human languages. And with all these sounds she heard many others that meant nothing to her and upon whose origins she dared not speculate.

Through this welter of incomprehensible noises she followed the one far crying that had meaning for her. It led in a long arc across rolling ground, over muttering brooks that talked morbidly in the dark. Presently she began to catch faint strains of the most curious music. It did not have the quality of composition, or even unity, but seemed to consist of single groups of notes, like sprays of music, each unrelated to the rest, as if thousands of invisible creatures were piping tiny, primitive tunes, every one deaf to the songs of his fellows. The sound grew louder as she advanced, and she saw that she was coming to a luminous patch upon the dark ground. When she reached the edge she paused in wonder.

The music was rising from the earth, and it rose visibly. She could actually see the separate strains wavering upward through the still air. She could never have described what she saw, for the look of

that visible music was beyond any human words. Palely the notes rose, each singing its tiny, simple tune. There seemed to be no discords, for all the non-unity of the sounds. She had the mad fancy that the music was growing--that if she wished she could wade through the ranks of it and gather great sheaves of sound--perhaps bouquets which, if they were carefully selected, would join together and play a single complex melody.

But it was not music she dared listen to long. There was in it the queerest little gibbering noise, and as she lingered that sound intensified and ran through her brain in small, giggling undernotes, and she caught herself laughing senselessly at nothing at all. Then she took fright, and listened for the voice that was Guillaume. And terrifyingly she heard it strongly in the very midst of the little mad jinglings. It deepened and grew, and drowned out the smaller sounds, and the whole field was one vast roar of insane laughter that thundered through her head in destroying waves--a jarring laughter that threatened to shake her very brain into a jelly, and shivered through her body irresistibly and wrung tears from her eyes even as she laughed.

"Guillaume!" she called again in the midst of her agony. "Oh Guillaume!" and at the sound of her voice all laughter ceased and a vast, breathless silence fell upon the whole dark world. Through that silence the tiniest wail threaded itself reedily, "Jirel--." Then other sounds came back to life, and the wind blew and the wail diminished in the distance. Again the chase went on.

By now the moon's dead, crawling face had sunk nearly to the horizon, and the shadows lay in long patterns across the ground. It seemed to her that around the broad ring of the sky a pallor was rising. In her weariness and despair she did not greatly care now, knowing though she did that should day catch her here it meant a death more terrible than any man can die on earth, and an eternity,

perhaps, of torment in one of the many shapes she had seen and recognized as the spirits of the damned. Perhaps a writhing tree--or imprisonment in an obscenely revelatory image, like Guillaume--or no more than a wailing along the wind for ever. She was too tired to care. She stumbled on hopelessly, hearing the voice that cried her name grow fainter and fainter in the distance.

The end of the chase came very suddenly. She reached a stream that flowed smoothly under the arch of a low, dark bridge, and crossed over it, seeing her face look up at her from the water with a wild mouthing of soundless cries, though her own lips were closed. She met her reflected eyes and read warning and despair and the acutest agony in their depths, and saw her own face writhing all out of familiarity with anguish and hopelessness. It was a frightful vision, but she scarcely saw it, and ran on without heeding the image in the water or the landscape around her or even the broadening dawn around the horizon.

Then close ahead of her sounded the thin small voice she followed, and she woke out of her stupor and stared around. That bridge had not ended upon the far side of the brook, but somehow had arched up its sides and broadened its floor and become a dark temple around whose walls ran a more bestial sculpture than anything imagined even in dreams. Here in this carved and columned building was the epitome of the whole dim hell through which she had been running. Here in these sculptures she read all the hideous things the shadows had hinted at, all the human sorrow and despair and hopelessness she had heard in the wind's crying, all the chuckling evil that the water spoke. In the carvings she could trace the prisoned souls of men and beasts, tormented in many ways, some of which she had already seen, but many that she had not, and which she mercifully could not understand. It was not clear for what they were punished, save that the torture was tinged just enough with justice so that it seemed the more hideously unjust in its exaggerations. She

closed her eyes and stood swaying a little, feeling the triumphant evil of the temple pulsing around her, too stunned and sick even to wonder what might come next.

Then the small voice was beating around her head. Almost she felt the desperate hammering of wings, as if some little, frantic bird were flying against her face. "Jirel!--Jirel!" it cried in the purest agony, over and over, a final, wild appeal. And she did not know what to do. Helplessly she stood there, feeling it beating round her head, feeling the temple's obscene triumph surging through her.

And without warning, for the third time the black god's presence folded like a cloak about her. Almost she welcomed it. Here was something she knew how to fight. As from a long distance away she heard the small voice crying in diminishing echoes, and the frigid twilight was forming about her, and the gray ice thickened upon her soul. She called up the memories of hate and love and anger to hurl against it, thinking as she did so that perhaps one who had lived less violently than herself and had lesser stores of passions to recall might never be able to combat the god's death-chill. She remembered laughter, and singing and gayety--she remembered slaughter and blood and the wild clang of mail--she remembered kisses in the dark, and the hard grip of men's arms about her body.

But she was weary, and the dawn was breaking terribly along the sky, and the dark god's power was rooted in a changeless oblivion that never faltered. And she began to realize failure. The memories she flung out had no power against the gray pall of that twilight place wherein he dwelt, and she knew the first seeping of the iron despair through her brain. Gradually the will to struggle congealed with her congealing body, until she was no longer a warm, vital thing of flesh and blood, but something rigid and icebound, dwelling bodilessly in the twilight.

There was one small spark of her that the god could not freeze. She felt him assailing it. She felt him driving it out of the cold thing that had been her body--drawing it forth irresistibly--she was a thin, small crying in the dark.... Helplessly she felt herself whirling to and fro upon currents she had never felt before, and dashing against unseen obstacles, wailing wordlessly. She had no substance, and the world had faded from around her. She was aware of other things--dim, vague, like beating pulses, that were whirling through the dark, small lost things like herself, bodiless and unprotected, buffeted by every current that blew; little wailing things, shrieking through the night.

Then one of the small vagueness blew against her and through her, and in the instant of its passage she caught the faint vibration of her name, and knew that this was the voice that had summoned her out of her dreams, the voice she had pursued: Guillaume. And with that instant's union something as sustaining as life itself flashed through her wonderfully, a bright spark that swelled and grew and blazed, and--

She was back again in her body amidst the bestial carvings of the temple--a thawing, warming body from which the shackles of icy silence were falling, and that hot blaze was swelling still, until all of her being was suffused and pulsing with it, and the frigid pall of dark melted away unresistingly before the hot, triumphant blaze that dwelt within her.

In her ecstasy of overwhelming warmth she scarcely realized her victory. She did not greatly care. Something very splendid was happening....

Then the air trembled, and all about her small, thin sounds went shivering upward, as if ribbons of high screams were rippling past her across a background of silence. The blaze within her faded slowly, paled, imperceptibly died away, and the peace of utter

emptiness flooded into her soul. She turned wearily backward across the bridge. Behind her the temple stood in a death-like quiet. The evil that had beat in long pulses through it was stilled for a while by something stunningly splendid which had no place in the starry hell; something human and alive, something compounded of love and longing, near-despair and sacrifice and triumph.

Jirel did not realize how great a silence she left behind, nor very clearly what she had done. Above her against the paling sky she saw a familiar hilltop, and dimly knew that in all her long night of running she had been circling round toward her starting-place. She was too numb to care. She was beyond relief or surprise.

She began the climb passionlessly, with no triumph in the victory she knew was hers at last. For she had driven Guillaume out of the image and into the shadow, and out of the shadow into the voice, and out of the voice into--clean death, perhaps. She did not know. But he had found peace, for his insurances no longer beat upon her consciousness. And she was content.

Above her the cave-mouth yawned. She toiled up the slope, dragging her sword listlessly, weary to the very soul, but quite calm now, with a peace beyond all understanding.

The Energy Eaters

with Arthur K. Barnes

Published in Thrilling Wonder Stories, Vol. 14, No. 2 (October 1939).
Reprinted in Startling Stories, Vol. 22, No. 1 (September 1950).

Contents

- Chapter I. Storm Over Gerry
- Chapter II. The Prometheans
- Chapter III. Panic on the Moon
- Chapter IV. The Ark Arrives
- Chapter V. Short Circuit

Chapter I.

Storm Over Gerry

Nobody knows exactly what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable body. Science, with a view to solving that bewhiskered problem, had been eagerly watching the feud between Nine Planets Films, Inc. and Gerry Carlyle, the Catch-'em-Alive woman. But so far honors had been about even, though Gerry's hot temper had become even fierier under the strain, and Von Zorn, president of the great motion picture company, had been under a doctor's care for some time.

At the moment he was sitting behind his gleaming glass desk and twitching slightly as he glared at Anthony Quade, ace director and trouble-shooter extraordinary for Nine Planets.

"Look," he said in a deceptively soft voice, "I don't ask for much, Mr.

Quade. Just a little cooperation from my staff. All I want is a signature, two short words on this contract. That's not too much to expect from a billion dollar organization with the cream of the System's technical and promotional brains, is it?"

Quade settled his large, big-boned body more comfortably in the chrome and leather chair and blinked sleepily. Von Zorn changed his tone and his voice quavered slightly as he went on.

"I'm a sick man, Tony. I can't stand this continual worry. Somehow I don't think I have long to live. My heart. And all I ask you to do is get a signature on this contract."

"A great act, Chief," Quade said approvingly. "But I've heard it a few dozen times before. I think I'm allergic to your heart. Every time you get angry I find myself dodging Whip's on Venus or shooting energy-storms on Mars. I need a vacation."

"Afraid?" Von Zorn asked tauntingly.

"Sure," Quade said. "I've fought haywire robots from Pluto; I've handled the worst temperaments on the Moon; I've even brought you pix of the Martian Inferno. But I positively won't risk my life with that--that Roman candle in skirts."

"Think of the box office."

"I know. It's worth millions to have Gerry Carlyle tied up in a contract so she won't go off and bring back a cargo of Martian monsters for the London Zoo every time we shoot a Mars epic with robots. I don't like it any better than you do, Chief. That dame scoops us every time--and the public won't look at our robots when they can see the real thing. I can see myself asking Gerry Carlyle to sign that contract."

Von Zorn hesitated. "Tony, I'd ask her myself. Only--"

"Only what?"

"She won't sign."

Quade nodded, frowning. "We've got nothing she wants. You can offer her a fortune and she'd still say no. The only--wait a minute!"

Von Zorn tensed. "Got an idea?"

"Maybe. Gerry Carlyle will sell her soul for one thing--a new monster. Something nobody's ever captured or even seen before. Jumping Jupiter, I've got it! If she'll make a flicker for us, we'll give her the beast for her Zoo."

Von Zorn said, "And just where do we get this beast?"

"Just leave that to me. I've plenty of technical resources in the labs."

"If you're thinking of a synthetic monster--"

"What I'm thinking of will surprise you," Quade said mysteriously. "Give me thirty days, and I'll get you a beast that'll make Gerry Carlyle turn green. Chief, she'll be begging you to let her sign that contract."

Grinning, Quade went out, leaving Von Zorn licking his lips at the prospect of a defeated and supplicant Gerry Carlyle.

It was bedlam. Newscasters swarmed in the office; photographers snapped their flashbulbs continually; questions and shouts filled the place with babble. Through it all the central figure posed gracefully against the massive desk, cool and unperturbed as an iceberg.

She was dressed in mirror-polished high boots, riding pants, and

polo shirt open at her tanned throat; these were the badges of her profession. For this was the New York office of Gerry Carlyle, grim huntress of fierce monsters on the inhospitable planets of the solar System, serene and gracious hostess now.

But the occasion was one that tried to the utmost the steel control she placed on her fiery temper. For Gerry, according to the delighted newsmen, had been scooped--and how!

"No two ways about it, Miss Carlyle," said one of the reporters. "This what's-his-name has really got something--a form of life nobody's ever seen before."

"Seeing is believing," said Gerry sweetly.

"Every newscast from the Moon, for the last six hours has had something about these jiggers. From Mercury, the guy says."

Gerry quirked up an eyebrow. "I've scoured Mercury's twilight zone twice for life-forms; I've brought back the only living things ever seen by man on the surface of Mercury. I even went over the dark side once."

"These animals come from Hotside."

"That, to begin with, is a bare-faced lie," Gerry smiled. "D'you know what the temperature is on the sunward side of Mercury? No matter what kind of insulation he used in his spacesuit, a man's brains would boil in a split second."

"Sure," said the reporter. "But this guy has the creatures, Miss Carlyle, and nobody has ever seen anything like 'em before, and he claims they're from Hotside."

"Well, you're just wasting your time, boys, if you've come up, here to

get my statement. I've already told you it's a hoax."

"Professor Boleur looked 'em over. He says they're the McCoy," persisted the nervy reporter, defying the lightning.

Gerry scowled at this, and more flashbulbs went off. Boleur's reputation was unimpeachable, impossible to ignore.

Just then Gerry's secretary came in, looking apprehensive.

"A telecall, Miss Carlyle. From--er--from the Moon."

Electric tension filled the room. Gerry took a deep breath, opened her mouth, and closed it again. She said very softly, "If it's from Mr. Von Zorn, tell him I'm not in."

"No, it's a Mr. Anthony Quade."

"I've never heard of him," Gerry said witheringly, and turned away. But a dozen eager voices informed her that Tony Quade was the man who had brought back the monsters from Mercury, and that he was one of the biggest figures in the film industry.

"Really!" said Gerry scornfully, and strode into the televisor room, dark eyes narrowed dangerously. The reporters trailed her.

Quade was visible on the screen, leaning negligently forward, puffing on a blackened briar. He opened his mouth to speak, but the woman gave him no chance.

"You," she stated, "are Quade, Von Zorn's stooge. For months your unpleasant boss has been after me to make a picture for Nine Planets. Whatever this nonsense is about bringing back a monster from Hotside, its purpose is to trick me into signing a contract. The answer is--no! But definitely!" The cold, incisive words made Quade

blink. Obviously he had underestimated this very capable young woman.

He shrugged.

"You're quite right, Miss Carlyle. Except that there's no trickery involved. It's a straight business proposition. As a rule I don't like to do business with women because they're apt to use their emotions instead of their brains, but--" Quade paused, eyeing Gerry blandly.

The woman's lips tightened. For her, Catch-'em-Alive Carlyle, to be accused of feminine weaknesses, was insupportable.

"Go ahead, Mr. Quade," she said. "I'm listening."

Quade nodded slightly, and Von Zorn himself moved into focus. His small, simian face was twisted into a somewhat frightful smile. Between cupped hands he held what appeared, at first glance, to be a large ball of fur, perhaps a trifle larger than a porcupine. It was amorphous, settling itself constantly into new positions like a jellyfish.

Von Zorn lifted one hand and literally poured the remarkable creature from one palm to the other. As he did so, a myriad pale orange and blue sparks flickered about the tips of the animal's furlike coat.

Gerry's lips parted to form a round, red "o." For a moment she stood undecided, her extreme distaste for Von Zorn battling with her natural instincts as a huntress.

Curiosity won. She moved closer to the screen.

"It's something new," she admitted reluctantly. "I've never run across anything just like it. Where did you get it, Mr. Quade?"

"Mercury Hotside. That's the truth."

"Well--how?"

Von Zorn broke in, leering slightly.

"That's a professional secret."

Gerry looked through the man without apparent difficulty.

"What sort of creature is it, Mr. Quade? It hasn't any eyes, nose, ears or limbs, as far as I can see."

"Quite right," Quade said, "It has no visible sensory organs. Our labs are working on that angle right now, investigating. If you'd like to examine one of these closely--we have several of 'em--they'll be in the Nine Planets exhibit room on Lunar Boulevard. I'd like to send you one for the London Zoo, but--"

Von Zorn broke in.

"I can send one to you by spacemail right now, if--" He held up a sheet of paper that was obviously a contract. "If you get what I mean!" Gerry's rigid control snapped. She struck savagely at the television switch, and the screen went blank. The reporters surged around her. This was a story! Gerry Carlyle beaten fairly, forced to dicker with her most hated enemy if she wished to keep the reputation of the London Zoo as the only complete collection of the System's life.

Gerry impaled everyone in the room with a scorching glance. "I know what you're thinking," she snapped. "And the answer is no. Finally and irrevocably--no!"

The reporters left with the air of men retreating from the brink of a volcano, and presently Gerry Carlyle was alone.

The volcano paced the room, seething. After a time Gerry paused, and let out a quiet whistle. She called her secretary

"Yes, Miss Carlyle?"

"Give the London Zoo a call, will you? Tell 'em to send over Volume 7 from my private file. By stratosphere plane. I'm in a hurry." Gerry's notebooks, compiled into a library of incredible fact that read like fantasy, were the result of years spent exploring the alien worlds of the System.

She remembered now that, during one of her earliest trips, she had discovered a microscopic Martian spore that in some respects resembled Von Zorn's Mercurian importation. Unfortunately she couldn't recall much about it, but nevertheless a vague uneasiness gnawed at the back of her mind.

She had a hunch that Von Zorn and Quade were running into trouble.

Chapter II.

The Prometheans

Dr. Phineas McColm was a small, wiry man who was appalled by his unconventional mind. Science, to him, was an ever-new and ever-delightful adventure. Often his startling theories had brought down on him thunderbolts of his colleagues, but somehow McColm always had a way of proving his wild guesses--which, actually, weren't guesses at all. A less capable man could never have become chief of staff for the Nine Planets Films labs.

As though to make up for his mental Bohemianism, McColm always wore the most correct garments in a neat and dignified manner, and

inevitably a pince-nez dangled by a black ribbon from his lapels. He had never been known to look through them, however, since, despite his years of experiment in eye-straining laboratory work and the fantasy magazines he read for relaxation, he had the eyesight of a hawk.

Right now he was sitting in Von Zorn's office, reading a copy of Thrilling Wonder Stories. He stuck the magazine in his pocket and stood up as the door opened and Von Zorn and Quade came in. Quade held one of the Mercurian creatures in his cupped hands.

"Hello, there," he said to McColm. "Found out anything?"

"A little," the scientist admitted. "There's something I want to know, though. How'd you manage to get those things from Hotside."

"Robots and remote control," Quade said. "Keep this under your hat, though. I took a specially-insulated space ship to Mercury and sent out some robots, using a very narrow control beam--and even then I got plenty of interference from the sun."

"By the looks of your expense sheet," Von Zorn growled, "you must have had plenty of interference all round."

"It took power, Chief. I was fighting the sun's energy, and even at a distance of thirty-six million miles that's no joke. Lucky we've got the best robots in the System and the perfected beam control."

"That's true," McColm said. "These--what you call 'em?"

"Prometheans," Quade supplied. "After Prometheus, who lit his torch from the sun."

"Good name. That's exactly what these creatures do, you know. They get energy directly from the sun. Those spines"--McColm took the

Promethean from Quade's hands and scrutinized it closely--"they look like heavy fur, but they're largely of mineral content. They serve a dual purpose. Tiny muscles activate them so they can function as legs, and when the Prometheans move, which isn't very often, they can scurry along like caterpillars. But these spines also develop electric energy on which the creature lives.

"One of the metals we've isolated in the spines is selenium. Now it's obvious that under the conditions of terrific heat and light on Hotside, the selenium reacts with some other metal--it might be one of several--to generate a weak electric current. We can do that in the lab, of course. The Prometheans store the electricity, like condensers, using what little they need whenever necessary." McColm's chubby face was alight with interest.

Von Zorn said hesitantly, "You mean--they eat electricity?"

"Don't we all?" Quade asked, and the scientist nodded.

"Of course. You eat solar energy, or you couldn't live. You'll find chloroplasts--tiny gobular bodies--in the green leaves of vegetation. They contain chlorophyll. And they store sunlight as chemical energy. Photosynthesis enables a plant to change simple inorganic compounds into the complex molecules which form a great part of our own food. Here's the cycle: the plant uses chlorophyll to transform carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates, which give us solar energy in usable form when we eat the green leaf.

"These Prometheans simply take a short cut--which they can do because matter is basically electric. Millikan proved that with his oil-drop experiment. The atomic structure of a Promethean enables it to absorb energy direct without any intermediate stages."

Von Zorn, who had been listening with eyes closed, gave a slight

start and opened them.

"How about keeping 'em alive? We're a long way from Mercury."

McColm tut-tutted.

"We've solved that one," he answered. "We used a dry cell. The Promethean wrapped itself around the terminals and sucked the juice out of the battery in no time at all. And for a while it was quite active, too. It had more energy than it gets in many a long day on Mercury. Figuratively speaking, of course, for it's always day on Hotside. I compute that a Promethean needs one dry cell a week to keep it healthy."

The annunciator buzzed. Simultaneously Ailyn Van entered.

An unusual woman, Ailyn. She was the ultra-modern star of Nine Planets, and her fan mail had strained the struts of many a spaceship. Despite the streamlined boniness of her face, she was, as the saying goes, a knockout. Her platinum-tattooed eyes passed over McColm, annihilated Quade, and raised Von Zorn's temperature.

"I want a Promethean," she said, and that was that.

Von Zorn gulped.

"Uh--I don't know, Ailyn. We only have nine of them, and the lab boys need them for experiments. What do you want one for, anyway?"

"They're so cunning," Ailyn explained. "And I'm having some publicity stills taken tomorrow. It'll be lovely publicity."

Spying the Promethean McColm still held, she strode over and calmly appropriated the Mercurian, which made no comment save

for a faintly fluorescent sparkle.

"Well," said Ailyn, pouring the creature from one hand to another and watching the fireworks. "It tingles."

"Mild electric shock," McColm explained. "Whenever it's moved about, it has to adjust itself. This means expenditure of energy, hence the sparkling. It lives on electric energy, You feed it a dry cell once a week--"

"How quaint." Ailyn stabbed the unfortunate scientist with a platinum glance, and went out trailing orange and blue sparks. And quite suddenly Quade felt an icy qualm of uneasiness.

He turned to the others.

"I wonder if we were wise in letting that creature out of our hands before we know everything there is to know about it," he said slowly.

McColm shrugged.

"They can't be dangerous. They aren't large enough to hold a strong electric charge."

The annunciator buzzed again. A voice said, "Mr. Von Zorn--Miss Kathleen Gregg to see you. She wants a--one of the Mercurians."

And that was the beginning. The Prometheans were the latest rage of the stars--the newest fad of Hollywood on the Moon. There were nine of the electric creatures to pass around among a hundred stars and featured players, not to mention the wives of the board of directors. Von Zorn helplessly permitted the Prometheans to be taken from him, with the one proviso, of course, that they remain on the Moon so Gerry Carlyle might not have a chance to acquire one of them. The price of a Promethean skyrocketed overnight into the

thousands, with no sellers.

And less than twenty-four hours later--the Moon started to go haywire. Quade and McColm were leaving the offices of Nine Planets with the intention of absorbing solar energy as prepared by the Silver Spacesuit's renowned chef. They got into Quade's surface-car but the automatic starter did not immediately operate. Quade investigated.

"Battery must be dead," he grunted. Getting out, he lifted the hood and let out a soft whistle of amazement. Wrapped about the battery terminals like a drowsy cat was one of the Prometheans.

"Just look at that," Quade said to McColm over his shoulder. "The little devil's deliberately sucked all the juice out of the battery. Wonder who put him there? A corny gag, if you ask me." He slipped on a glove and ungently removed the Promethean, tossing the creature to the street, where it lay sparkling vigorously and continuously. But, more surprising, it was much increased in size over any of the other Mercurians.

"It was hungry," McColm said, "that's all. Or shall we say thirsty? Our little friend here has been tapping a sort of fountain of youth. More electricity at one time than he ever got on Mercury. Naturally the size increased. Doubtless its activity will increase proportionately."

Taking the cue, the Promethean arose, sparkling indignantly, and moved off down the street with precise movements of its under-spines. The dignity of its progress was somewhat impaired by a pronounced libration.

The Promethean wobbled.

Quade and McColm exchanged looks and suddenly grinned. Though

the creature bore no resemblance to anything human, it somehow managed to convey a perfect impression of an intoxicated reveler veering homeward with alcoholic dignity.

"He can't take it," Quade chuckled. "He's tight."

"Too much energy," McColm nodded. "He's drunk with energy, more electricity than he's ever had before at one time."

Quade recaptured the Promethean and left the scientist briefly to take his prisoner into the Nine Planets building and turn him over to the labs. When he returned he found McColm waiting with a taxi. They drove to the Silver Spacesuit and found a table near the stages, where hundreds of important acts were striving valiantly to catch the eye of movie mogul and talent scout.

Right now a trio of acrobatic dancers were performing. The woman had form-fitting gravity plates, powered by wires invisible in the tricky lighting, and weighed less than a pound, so that her companions could perform seemingly incredible feats of skill and strength. But this was an old stunt, and attracted little attention.

Without warning the lights flickered and dimmed. Simultaneously the woman, who was at the moment shooting rapidly through the air, fell heavily upon an assistant director who was absorbedly eating lobster at a ringside table. There was an immediate confusion of acrobat, assistant director, and lobster. The audience laughed with genial approval.

Then the mirth changed to indignation as the lights went out altogether. There was mild excitement as the early evening crowd milled around aimlessly in the dark.

Wordlessly Quade and McColm ploughed through the mob toward

the rear. There, where the power lead-ins passed through the meter box, another of the Prometheans was found coiled around the bared wires. The headwaiter, gripping a flashlight, was staring in wide-eyed amazement at the object and shaking his free hand.

"It--it shocked me," he murmured. "Ouch."

Quade found a glove in his pocket, and with its aid he ripped the rapidly growing Promethean from the wires. The lights flared up again. With the Mercurian under one arm he fled back through the cocktail bar in a short cut to Lunar Boulevard, McColm at his heels.

"If any more of these little devils are loose, they may get into the central power house. That'd be plain hell."

And, just then, every light on Hollywood on the Moon except those on vehicles wavered and went out.

"You're a little late, Tony," McColm said. "They're taking the juice from the generator terminals right now."

Chapter III.

Panic on the Moon

Quade hailed a taxi, leaped for its running-board. He promptly found himself sailing up in an astounding jump, hurtling completely over the surface-car and coming down lightly on the other side.

The cabbie thrust her head unwarily through the window to stare at this athletic marvel, and dived ungracefully out to crack her head smartly against the paving of Lunar Boulevard.

McColm, guessing what had happened, hastily glided around the taxi

and helped the two men to their feet.

"The gravity plates below us," he said tonelessly. "They're not working either. More Prometheans sucking away the power."

"You don't tell me," said Quade bitterly, experimenting with a tender ankle. "Take us to Central Power, buddy, and make it fast." As the taxi jerked into motion he murmured, "Thank God there's only nine of these blasted things altogether." He still held the captive Promethean and now, opening a baggage compartment, he thrust the creature inside and slammed the panel.

Men and women were pouring from night spots and buildings along Lunar Boulevard. Even late workers on the sets of Nine Planets gave up and joined the tumultuous throng. Surface autocars, with their individual batteries and lights, were small oases in the absolute blackness of interstellar space. Hollywood on the Moon was half frightened and half amused by what they considered something of a gag while a temporary difficulty in the power rooms was repaired.

Through the mob Quade's taxi scooted skillfully, heading for the entrance to the lunar caverns, where gigantic generators produced the electric power that was the very life-blood of the Moon. Arriving at the skyscraper that masked the mighty machines beneath, Quade and McColm piled out.

"Turn around so your headlights shine down the entrance ramp," Quade commanded, thrusting a bill in the driver's hand. Without waiting for an answer he followed McColm down into gloom.

The elevator bank was motionless and dark, but not silent. From within two of the shafts floated up a terrific shouting from carloads of passengers trapped between floors and suspended precariously by emergency brakes.

Quade ran to the stairs and led the way down the descending spiral. Two minutes of clattering, reckless flight in total darkness brought the men to the power room level. A flickering red glow guided them to the central cavern, a vast natural chasm filled with the dynamos, generators, and huge machines that kept the Moon alive. Several piles of cotton waste were burning here and there.

Normally everything in the power house is more or less automatic, and few attendants are necessary. At the moment one of these, a burly man with a harassed expression, was striving frantically to pry loose one of the Prometheans from the terminals of a generator.

Since the Mercurian was more than ten feet in diameter and spread over most of the generator's surface, the burly man's efforts were not notably successful. Indeed, his attempt to pry the creature loose with a crowbar seemed merely a gesture.

Quade ran forward. The whole cavern seemed to explode in a blinding blaze of flame. There was a deafening thunderclap, and an invisible hand seemed to lift Quade and McColm and smash them back. The attendant vanished. A spouting, roaring fountain of sparkling pinwheels showered over the power room's plastic floor.

Presently the world stopped reeling and Quade clambered unsteadily to his feet. The electric lights were again burning—blue mercury and pinkish helium globes glowed here and there among the others. With numbed surprise Quade noticed that the Promethean no longer clung to the naked power lines. But all over the room were scattered dozens of small Prometheans, glittering madly as they poured in a drunken rout toward the generators. A score of them reached the bared terminals, and the lights went out again."

The cotton waste still burned. McColm arose, his round face grimy.

"Did you see that?" he breathed. "They've reproduced. When they get so much electricity stored up in them they can afford to share it with offspring, they divide by multiple fission."

Quade was kneeling beside the attendant's motionless body.

"Yeah... he's still alive. That's a miracle. McColm." He stood up, lips tightening grimly. "This is pretty serious. We've got to stop those things right away."

The two men marched into the sparkling sea, kicking a path toward the generators. Quade, with his gloved hand, began pulling the Prometheans from the terminals, McColm tried to help, but was promptly knocked sprawling by a savage electric shock from one of the visibly growing Prometheans.

"Never mind," Quade said swiftly. "I can pull 'em off faster than they can climb back on. Find a bag or something to put them in."

But it was too late, The Prometheans were, so to speak, in their cups, and large enough and active enough to cause Quade trouble. In some obscure fashion they realized that Quade was an enemy, trying to prevent them from reaching the intoxicating electric current. So they advanced with drunken persistence and surrounded him.

An electric shock is not calculated to induce calm. Quade yelped and fell down, his legs momentarily paralyzed. The Prometheans sparkled with a vaguely triumphant air and advanced.

McColm rushed in, kicking vigorously, and dragged Quade to safety.

"This'll never do," the scientist gasped. "There's no bag to hold them in, and they'd burn their way out anyhow. We've got to get weapons."

Quade stood up, tottering slightly.

"Where? The only weapons are in the prop department on the lot. This is a city, not a fortress. The police have gas guns and bullets, but the Prometheans don't breathe and are too homogeneous to be harmed by explosives. They haven't any vital parts. They'd just be blown apart and we'd have a lot of new Prometheans to fight."

"Heat rays?" McColm said. "No, they'd absorb the energy. Wait! We might short-circuit them. They must have a positive and negative end, or they'd never be able to absorb the electricity as they do. If we could place an iron bar so as to touch each end--"

"Walking over a metal plate would act the same way," Quade said, and pointed. One of the Prometheans was crawling idly over the iron housing of a turbine, completely unconcerned.

McColm blinked.

"Well--we might douse them with water and short them that way."

Quade went to a drinking fountain and bent over it. Usually this broke a light-beam impinging on a photoelectric cell, and sent water spouting up. Nothing happened. The lights were out, of course.

Quade found a manually-operated fountain, but this, too, was useless.

"The pumps aren't working," he grunted. "They take power too, you know."

When architects had designed the fantastic beauty and utility of Hollywood on the Moon, they had decided against placing any unsightly water tanks above ground for gravity flow water. Instead, they had placed the storage tanks in the Moon's caverns, with

powerful pumps to direct an upward flow.

"Well," McColm said desperately, "let's try clubs. Maybe we can beat them to a pulp." With this ferocious intention he found a crowbar for himself and one for Quade, and turned back to the Prometheans. These creatures, no longer molested, had returned to sucking juice from generators, and were having an uproarious time in their strange manner, dropping occasionally to the floor to reel about with dizzy delight, sparkling in all colors of the spectrum.

One of them wobbled toward Quade and made a playful dash at his ankles. The crowbar crashed down. But the Promethean seemed to ooze out from under the blow, squirting away to carom against one of its colleagues some distance away. The two Mercurians conferred for a moment, and then staggered off to a generator, sparkling mockingly at the discomfited Quade.

It was impossible to kill the creatures thus. And before long another terrific explosion rocked the power room and a second Promethean burst flaming into a score of smaller ones. Quade seized McColm's arm and drew him back to the comparative safety of the stairs.

"We're wasting our time," he panted. "Look at those devils crawling toward us to give us the works. We'll have to have help, that's all there is to it." He paused to lift the unconscious attendant to his shoulder and followed McColm up the stairs. A few Prometheans followed, but in their condition the puzzle of climbing steps was difficult if not insurmountable, and presently they all rolled down again.

The taxi-driver was still waiting, listening to the radio in her car.

"Nine Planet's office, quick," snapped Quade.

"You won't find nobody there," said the driver. "Von Zorn's ordered everybody to evacuate the Moon until the Mercurian menace is under control."

"Mercurian menace," Quade groaned. "That baboon would be melodramatic on his death-bed. All right--to the space port, then." As the taxi started he called, "How long were we down below?"

"Pretty long. Seemed like a century. A half hour, I guess. Von Zorn's speech kicked open the emergency circuit, so everybody on the Moon must have listened in."

"Radio?" McColm rasped. "Where'd they get the power?"

"Emergency batteries, of course," Quade said.

They sped through a stricken city.

The panic was on. All Hollywood on the moon was fleeing for the space ships and safety. Occasionally a wild-eyed man sprang into the taxi's path to flag a ride, but the expert driver tooted her car around without losing speed. Three times they heard distant explosions and saw momentary flares of sparks against the backdrop of starry darkness. Prometheans were multiplying

"It wouldn't be so bad if they hadn't all managed to get loose at the same time," Quade muttered. "It was so damned quick. They had control before we knew there was any danger."

With decreased gravity pedestrians bounced about like rubber balls. Luckily the street was level, but whenever the car hit a bump it rose for some distance, with the motor roaring and the wheels spinning madly. The space port was a shrieking bedlam of milling humanity in the fitful light of automobile lamps and improvised flares. Quade smiled grimly as he watched some of Nine Planets'ruqqedest he-

men battling past frenzied women to get passage on the ships.

Occasionally Prometheans scurried about, kicked at and abused, almost pathetic in their apparent lonely helplessness. But the stars, who had not long past displayed them proudly at social events, now screamed and ran at the very sight of a Mercurian.

Presently the outgoing ship was jammed full of humanity, and the airlock closed. Attendants shoved the crowd back to safety and signaled the okay to take off.

Nothing happened. Minutes passed. A chill wave of apprehension passed over the crowd. Then the lock swung ponderously open and the ship's commander stood in the opening. He held in both hands a swollen, sparkling Promethean.

"All the juice is gone from the storage batteries," he called. "Can't generate a spark in the rocket chambers. And it'll take hours to build up enough current to energize the gravity plates."

The same condition was found to exist on four other space ships. That left only a few, not nearly enough to evacuate a quarter of the Moon's inhabitants. But these took off and sped toward Earth, sending frantic radio signals for aid. The Moon's emergency radio equipment had gone dead when a Promethean found it, and signals broadcast from New York and London to the relay ships beyond the Heavside layer brought little hope. All spacecraft within a wide radius had been ordered to converge on the Moon at top speed. But the distances were those of interplanetary space, and it would take time for the nearest vessel to arrive.

And time was important, terribly so.

Without power the air rectifiers were failing, the gigantic heating

plates and coils died, and the beams holding down the artificial atmosphere were useless. In three or four hours the Moon would be literally a dead world.

The air was cold, rapidly getting colder. A knifing wind blew coldly from the Great Rim--a wind on the Moon, where none had blown for illimitable eons. Already the trapped atmosphere was moving out from the gigantic crater that held Hollywood on the Moon. With neither gravity nor force beams to hold it, the air was seeping over the Rim, diffusing to all parts of the surface, and dissipating in the vacuum of space.

Panic came swiftly to those caught in the death-trap. The most glamorous and beautiful city in the System now. And in four hours, it would be--a morgue!

Chapter IV.

The Ark Arrives

Gerry Carlyle paced the control room of the Ark and watched her chief pilot, Michaels, as he sat with lined, strong face intent on the instruments. The woman's stubborn chin was set, her silken blond hair tousled.

"Pep it up, Michaels, can't you?" she burst out. "It's been an hour or more since the last signal came in from the Moon."

"The refugee ships are still sending messages." he grunted.

"What of? For all we know the Moon may be dead right now. I wish I'd radioed Von Zorn or Quade when I first got the dope on that Martian spore."

"What was that?"

Gerry halted and frowned at the pilot. "I ran across it long ago in a Martian volcanic area. It's microscopic, but it resembles these--these Prometheans. It absorbed energy directly from the volcanic activity. I saw them grow, Michaels, and reproduce. It's no wonder the signals from the Moon have stopped." The woman hurried away as a thought struck her. The radio transmitter was in a nearby cabin, and quickly she adjusted it for sending. Not for the first time she wished her lieutenant and fiancé, Tommy Strike, were along, but Strike had gone fishing for mariloca in the Martian canali, and she couldn't spare the time to pick him up.

When Gerry, after studying the notebook sent her by stratosphere from the London Zoo, had noticed the possible danger, she had immediately manned the Ark with a skeleton crew and pointed its nose toward the Moon. She had thought of televising Von Zorn or Quade and warning them, but hesitated.

For that the Prometheans actually were dangerous was only a theory on Gerry's part, and the possibility of Von Zorn's ridiculing her wasn't pleasant. Moreover, the president of Nine Planets would never believe the woman, would think it only a trick on her part to gain possession of the Mercurians.

Gerry went off to investigate firsthand. And, almost at her destination, she received the first warning broadcast from Von Zorn. After that events moved thick and fast.

Gerry kicked over a switch and leaned close to the transmitter.

"Calling Hollywood on the Moon. Calling Hollywood on the Moon!"

No answer. But Gerry had expected none. She went on, "Message

for Anthony Quade. Carlyle of the Ark calling Anthony Quade of Nine Planets Films. Please relay this message to Quade. Message follows. Quote. Meet me at the Central Space port in twenty minutes. Bring Prometheans for experimental purposes. Signed, Gerry Carlyle. Unquote."

She repeated the message several times, and then went back to pace the control room. It seemed an eternity before Michaels lowered the ship on a cleared space, faintly illuminated by car headlights.

He pointed through a porthole.

"Look at that mob. You're not going out there, Miss Carlyle?"

"I am," Gerry said grimly, buckling on a gun-belt. "So are you." She handed a rifle to the pilot and led the way.

As the space port swung open a surging flood of humanity, terrified, shouting, screaming, pressed forward.

"Let us in. Let us in!"

"Ten thousand dollars for a passage."

Gerry stepped back involuntarily. Then her stubborn chin jutted. She drew the gun, waved it menacingly. Her voice cracked out, cold and incisive.

"Get back. All of you!"

Michaels, behind her, lifted the rifle. The mob hesitated, and a man shoved his way through, a Promethean under either arm. Gerry recognized him. "Quade. Here!" she cried.

He broke into a stumbling run. The crowd broke and surged forward. Quade reached the space port a few steps before the first of the mob. Gerry hauled him into the ship, planted a capable fist on the nose of a man trying to scramble aboard, and dodged inside. Michaels slammed the port, locked it.

"Lift the ship," Gerry snapped. The pilot hurried to obey. Quade stood silent, looking embarrassed. His face was grimy, and a long cut ran from forehead to chin where a flying splinter of glass had grazed him.

"In here," Gerry said, and led the way to her laboratory. Once there she stood arms akimbo and glared at Quade.

His attempt to smile was not notably successful. "Okay," he said. "Go ahead. Pour it on."

"Not at all," Gerry observed sweetly. "I've run into incompetence before."

She made a hopeless gesture.

"I've got a comet by the tail. Damn it, Miss Carlyle, I'm responsible for all this. So far nobody's been seriously injured, but in a few more hours the whole Moon will be dead. Unless--"

"Now you--listen to me," Gerry said, the stubborn set of her chin presaging trouble. "I haven't got the resources of Nine Planets Films behind me. When I want a new monster, I have to go out and fight for it. My men too risk death every time they follow me. That takes something, Tony. Anybody with a few billion can use robots to collect specimens."

The man winced.

"Oh. You guessed that."

"Sure. Robots are the backbone of Nine Planets, aren't they? Give me that animated firework." She snatched a Promethean and reached for a magnifying lens. "No, I haven't your resources. I can't pick the finest brains in the System when I want to know something. But my knowledge is practical, Quade, and I got it from knocking around the planets for years."

"We've shut off all the power," Quade said hopelessly. "McColm--he's the head of the labs--is superintending that. But once we turn it on again, the Prometheans will suck the electricity. There must be hundreds of them now."

"This creature has a positive and a negative pole," Gerry Carlyle told him. "And there's a device to seal over the poles when they move around. That's natural, since they came from a highly metallic world."

"Yeah," Quade said, "That's why we couldn't short circuit them."

Suddenly Gerry smiled, but not pleasantly. "I can short circuit them," she observed. "I can clean up the Moon for you in a jiffy."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes. I can destroy every Promethean here. Except one. I want one left alive."

Quade didn't answer. Gerry took a paper from her pocket and laid it out on a table. "Here's a pen," she said. "I can write contracts too."

"What's the squeeze?"

The woman's eyes blazed dangerously. "The squeeze--as you inelegantly term it--is simply my fee for saving the moon, I want one

surviving Promethean for the London Zoo. And I want your assurance that you won't import any more from Mercury."

"But Von Zorn--"

Gerry said angrily, "I could make this a lot harder for you if I wanted to. I'll give you sixty seconds to sign that agreement."

Quade scowled but signed. He dropped the pen and said grimly, "What now?"

"I'll need a large cleared space. Where?"

"The Plaza."

"Okay. Show Michaels how to get there."

Without a word Quade went out. Presently the Ark grounded. Gerry was at a porthole in a jiffy. Looking out over the broad, parklike expanse, she nodded with satisfaction.

"Plenty of room. That'll help."

Gerry had an idea of how she could destroy the Mercurians. It was simple enough. More than one scientist on the Moon had already had a similar inspiration, but unfortunately power was needed to carry it out. And the, only power available was in Gerry's Ark. It would be hours before any other ship arrived.

The woman locked the Prometheans in one of the numerous cages around the room, smilingly patted the contract--in her pocket, and set to work.

"The Prometheans, must be highly sensitive to electricity," she said to Quade, who had wandered in. "Or to any source of power. They'll

be coming around here pretty soon."

"What's your plan?" Quade asked.

"I'm a trapper by trade, so I'm using a trap. The most primitive of weapons. As soon as I can set up a portable power plant--"

This didn't take long, for Gerry had capable assistants. Quade, at the woman's suggestion, went outside the ship and went through the gathering crowd, organizing an emergency police staff. A large area was roped off, and the streets leading into the Plaza were cleared. And now, in the distance, the first of the Prometheans was seen arriving in a blaze of sparkling glory.

Quade, who was in conference with some of the studio staff, returned to inform Gerry of the arrival. She brushed a strand of blond hair from her eyes and murmured absently, "Not ready yet. Keep 'em away."

She didn't explain how, but nevertheless Quade went out and sent out a hurry call for a long wooden-handled shovel. Already the Prometheans were arriving in force. There was now no need for the ropes to keep the crowd back; the mob shrank away terrified from the blazing beauty of the creatures.

Faster they came, and faster. Men and women sought safety in flight. Only a few of the hardier men--many of them belonging to Quade's personal staff, handpicked and efficient--remained. But even these could not withstand the onslaught for long.

Slowly Quade's men were forced back to the Ark's port. Under the impact of violent electric shocks gasping curses and groans went up. The space ship was the center of a flaming, whirling, incandescent glare of rainbow light. Flame-red, sun-yellow, eerie blue and green and violet, it was a fantastic spectacle of terrifying beauty.

Beauty that meant death.

Chapter V.

Short Circuit

Gerry opened the port and said, "You can come in now." She looked cool as a cucumber. Quade angrily suspected that she had spent a few minutes renewing her lipstick and touching up her hair while he and his men struggled against the Mercurians.

"Thanks a lot," he grunted, following the others into the ship. A Promethean wobbled in after him, but a sharp kick disillusioned the creature and sent it scooting into the night. Quade slammed the port.

"Come on," Gerry said. "We're all ready." She led him down a sloping passage and opened a door. Quade saw a large circular room, carpeted, apparently, with grass.

"This compartment has a sliding floor," she said. "Sometimes we set the Ark down over a monster, slide the floor back into position, replace the outer insulation, and we've got him safely."

Quade was eyeing a portable power plant which had been set up near by. An iron plate lay flat on the ground, and Gerry pointed at this casually.

"The Prometheans have to unseal their poles when they feed," she explained. "See that grounded wire? It's just a device for short-circuiting. I'll show you--" She called to Michaels; presently he appeared bearing one of the creatures. Gerry took the Promethean and dropped him to the ground, where he remained still a moment.

Then he moved directly toward the power plant. His round body slid

on to the iron plate. He reached up toward a bare, dangling wire--Puff.

"He's dead," Gerry observed. "Caught with his seals open. His condenser charge is gone just like that."

And, sure enough, the Promethean lay flabby and motionless, all the gay fireworks gone, limp and obviously dead. Gerry kicked the creature off the plate. "Organize a bucket squad," she called to Michaels. "And open the wall--two foot radius."

Silently a gap widened in the space ship's hull. Rainbow sparklings brightened as the Prometheans surged forward. Quade suddenly noticed that Gerry wore high rubber boots, and that the woman was eyeing him with a certain malicious amusement. With grimly set lips he took the pail she handed him and waited.

The Mercurians poured in through the gap. But only a few at a time could enter, and they sped in an unerring, narrow stream toward the power plant. And, like the first Promethean, they reached up toward the dangling wire, and-- Puff!

"Scoop 'em up," Gerry commanded tartly. "We need elbow room here."

Quade obeyed. Along the sloping corridor men stood at intervals, a bucket brigade that passed along empty pails as Quade sent up Promethean-filled ones. There were more of them than he had thought. Presently his arms began to ache, and the glances he sent toward Gerry, who was lounging negligently against the wall, were expressive.

"Keep your temper," she advised. "You're not out of the soup yet."

Since this was true. Quade didn't answer but bent to his task with

renewed vigor. There must have been five or six hundred of the creatures from Mercury. But at last they were killed--all but a few too large to enter the narrow opening.

At Gerry's command, Michaels enlarged the gap so the rest of the Promes could surge in. Quade made a bound for safety, but the woman ahead of him and blocked the passage. "Don't just stand there," he said. "One of those things is heading for me."

"Sorry," Gerry said, and with a dexterous movement managed to propel Quade back, where he collided with a fat Promethean and was hurled to the ground by an electric shock. Muttering, he rose and watched the last of the creatures die. Gerry's cool voice came from the passage. "That's all. There isn't any more."

Simultaneously lights flared up all over Hollywood on the Moon. Michaels had sent out a reassuring message, and the power once more went racing through a maze of cables and wires. The jet starry sky faded and paled as the lighting system went into action. The air rectifiers lunged into frantic operation; the force beams flared out; the heating plates and coils glowed red and then white.

Quade followed Gerry into the control room. The woman sank down into a chair and lit a cigarette. "Well?" she inquired. "What's keeping you?"

Quade blushed. "Not a thing," he said. "Except--I want to say thanks."

"Don't thank me. I've got my fee," Gerry's sly sideward glance took in Quade's somewhat flushed face. "There's one Promethean left, and he's tucked away safely in my lab."

"You're welcome to him. Only...." Quade's voice became suddenly

earnest. "Miss Carlyle, do you realize what a picture this would make? Gerry Carlyle in The Energy-Eaters! Can't you see that billing placarded all over the system. We could make it easily. One word from you and I'll have our best scriptwriters grinding out a story. Have a special premier at Froman's Mercurian Theater--it'd clean up. You'd have enough dough to build a dozen Arks. And we could shoot the pic in three weeks with double exposures and robots...."

"Robots!" Gerry bounced up, crushed out the cigarette viciously. But Quade failed to heed the warning signals.

"Sure. We can fake 'em easily--"

"Mr. Quade," Gerry interrupted sternly, "first of all, I should like you to understand that I am not a fake. The name Gerry Carlyle means the real thing. I have never let down the public, and I do not intend to begin now. And, once and for all, I will not make a fool of myself by appearing in one of your corny pictures"

Quade stared, his mouth open.

"Did you say--corny?" he asked unbelievably.

"Yes."

"My pictures?"

"Yes," Gerry said, pouring acid on the wound. "They smell."

"That ends it," Quade snapped. "Nine Planets will keep its agreement with you. Take your Promethean. Though I doubt if it will survive your company for long." With that he turned and marched out of the Ark, leaving Gerry chuckling happily to herself.

However, if she, had seen the object Quade took out of his pocket

with such care a few moments later, she might not have been so pleased.

Twenty hours later Gerry Carlyle and Tommy Strike strolled along Broadway. Strike had just treated to hot-dogs, and with the corner of his handkerchief wiped mustard, from Gerry's nose. "Thanks," she said. "But don't interrupt. Tommy, do you know what this means to us?"

"What?"

"A fortune. Customers will come like flies--that Promethean will draw millions of 'em to the Zoo, and, they'll pay, too."

"Well," Strike said slowly, "I suppose so. Only I'm not sure you were right in turning down that guy Quade's offer. You'd be a knockout in pictures."

Gerry snapped, "I don't wish to hear any more about that. You know very well that when I make up my mind to something, it's settled." She paused. "Tommy! You're not listening."

Strike was staring, eyes and mouth wide open, at a blazing neon-and-mercury marquee above the entrance to a Broadway theatre.

"Gerry--look at that!" he gasped.

"What?" Gerry demanded. "I don't--oh."

Strike read the sign aloud. "Scoop. Lunar disaster! See Gerry Carlyle capture the Energy-Eaters."

"Get tickets," the woman said weakly.

Inside the theater they had not long to wait. Presently the feature

ended and the special newsreel came on. And it was all there-- Gerry's arrival in the Ark, the exciting scenes at the Plaza filmed in eerie ultraviolet, even the final destruction of the Prometheans inside the space ship.

"Just look at me," Gerry whispered fiercely to Strike. "My hair's a mess."

"You look all right to me," Strike chuckled. "Wonder how he got those shots without your seeing the camera?"

"He had one inside his shirt--one of the tiny automatic cameras, with sensitized wire film. He was double-crossing me all along. The worst of it is, I can't sue Nine Planets-- Newsreel stuff is common property. Come on--let's get out of here."

They had to fight their way through the crowded lobby. As they emerged Gerry paused to eye two long queues that stretched far along Broadway. The rush was beginning. Already radios and advertising gyroplanes were blaring: "See Gerry Carlyle capture the Energy Eaters! A Nine Planets Film."

Strike couldn't resist rubbing it in.

"So when you make up your mind to something, it's settled, eh?" he said.

Gerry looked at him a long moment. Then a half-smile hovered on her lips as she looked around at the increasing crowd. "Well," she said, "anyhow, I'm packing them in!"

"Tryst in Time"

Published in Astounding Stories, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December 1936).

Eric Rosner at twenty had worked his way round the world on cattle boats, killed his first man in a street brawl in Shanghai, escaped a firing squad by a hairbreadth, stowed away on a pole-bound exploring ship.

At twenty-five he had lost himself in Siberian wilderness, led a troupe of Tatar bandits, commanded a Chinese regiment, fought in a hundred battles, impartially on either side.

At thirty there was not a continent nor a capital that had not known him, not a jungle nor a desert nor a mountain range that had not left scars upon his great Viking body. Tiger claws and the Russian knout, Chinese bullets and the knives of savage black warriors in African forests had written their tales of a full and perilous life upon him. At thirty he looked backward upon such a gorgeous, brawling, color-splashed career as few men of sixty can boast. But at thirty he was not content.

Life had been full for him, and yet as the years passed he was becoming increasingly aware of a need for something which those years were empty of. What it was he did not know. He was not even consciously aware of missing anything, but as time went on he turned more and more to a search for something new--anything new. Perhaps it was his subconscious hunting blindly for what life had lacked.

There was so very little that Eric Rosen had not done in his thirty riotous years that the search for newness rapidly became almost feverish, and almost in vain. Riches he had known, and poverty, much pleasure and much pain, and the extremes of human experience were old tales to him. Ennui replaced the zest for living that had sent him so gayly through the exultant years of his youth. And for a man like Eric Rosner ennui was like a little death.

Perhaps, in part, all this was because he had missed love. No girl of all the girls that had kissed him and adored him and wept when he left them had mattered a snap of the fingers to Eric Rosner. He searched on restlessly.

In this mood of feverish hunting for new things, he met the scientist, Walter Dow. It happened casually, and they might never have met a second time had not Eric said something offhand about the lack of adventure which life had to offer a man. And Dow laughed.

"What do you know about adventure?" he demanded. He was a little man with a shock of prematurely white hair and a face that crinkled into lines of derision as he laughed. "You've spent your life among dangers and gunfire--sure! But that's not real adventure. Science is the only field where true adventure exists. I mean it! The things that are waiting to be discovered offer fields of excitement like nothing you ever heard of. One man in a lifetime couldn't begin to touch the edges of what there is to know. I tell you I--"

"Oh, sure," interrupted Eric lazily. "I see what you mean. But all that's not for me. I'm a man of action; I haven't any brains. Hunching over a microscope isn't my idea of fun."

The argument that began then developed into a queer sort of antagonistic friendship which brought the two men together very often in the weeks that passed. But they were to know one another much more intimately than that before the true urgency of what lay in the minds of each became clear to the other.

Walter Dow had spent a lifetime in the worship of one god--inertia. "There is a bedrock," he used to say reverently, "over which the tides of time ebb and flow, over which all things material and immaterial, as the layman sees them, change and fade and form again. But the bedrock remains. Complete inertia! What couldn't we do if we

attained it!"

"And what," asked Eric, "is inertia?"

Dow shot him a despairing glance.

"Everybody knows what inertia is. Newton's first law of motion is the law of inertia, stating that every body remains in a state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line unless impressed forces change it. That's what makes people in a moving car swerve to one side when the car goes round a bend. It's what makes it so difficult for a horse to start a heavy load moving, though once it's in motion the strain eases. There's nothing that doesn't obey the law--nothing!

"But Newton didn't dream what measureless abysses of force lay behind his simple statement. Or what an understatement it was. Describing inertia by stating Newton's law is like describing the sea by saying there's foam on the waves. The inertia force is inherent in everything, just as there's moisture in everything. But behind that inertia, manifest so obscurely in matter, is a vastness of power much greater comparatively than the vastnesses of the seas which are the storehouses for the relatively tiny amounts of moisture in everything you see.

"I can't make you understand; you don't speak the language. And I sometimes wonder if I could explain even to another physicist all that I've discovered in the past ten years. But I do very firmly believe that it would be possible to anchor to that bedrock of essential, underlying inertia which is the base upon which matter builds and--and allow time itself to whirl by!"

"Yeah, and find yourself floating in space when you let go." Eric grinned. "Even I've heard that the universe is in motion through space. I don't know about time, but I'm pretty sure space would block

your little scheme."

"I didn't mean you'd have to--to dig your anchor right into the rock," explained Dow with dignity. "It'd be a sort of a drag to slow you down, not a jerk that would snatch you right off the Earth. And it'd involve--immensities--even then. But it could be done. It will be done. By Heaven, I'll do it!"

Eric's sunburned face sobered.

"You're not kidding?" he asked. "A man could--could drag his anchor and let time go by, and 'up-anchor' in another age? Say! Make me an anchor, and I'll be your guinea pig!"

Dow did not smile.

"That's the worst of it," he said. "All this is pure theory and will have to remain that, in spite of all I've bragged. It would be absolutely blind experimenting, and the very nature of the element I'm experimenting with precludes any proof of success or failure. I could--to be frank with you I have--sent objects out through time--"

"You have!" Eric leaned forward with a jerk and laid an urgent hand on Dow's arm. "You really have?"

"Well, I've made them vanish. I think it proves I've succeeded, but I have no way of knowing. The chances are countless millions to one against my landing an experiment in my own immediate future, with all the measureless vastness of time lying open. And, of course, I can't guide it."

"Suppose you landed in your own past?" queried Eric.

Dow smiled.

"The eternal question," he said. "The inevitable objection to the very idea of time travel. Well, you never did, did you? You know it never happened! I think there must be some inflexible law which forbids the same arrangement of matter, the pattern which is one's self, from occupying the same space time more than once. As if any given section of space time were a design in which any arrangement of atoms is possible, except that no pattern may appear exactly twice.

"You see, we know of time only enough to be sure that it's far beyond any human understanding. Though I think the past and the future may be visited, which on the face of it seems to predicate an absolutely preordained future, a fixed and unchangeable past--yet I do not believe that time is arbitrary. There must be many possible futures. The one we enter upon is not the only way. Have you ever heard that theory explained? It's not a new one--the idea that at every point of our progress we confront crossroads, with a free choice as to which we take. And a different future lies down each.

"I can transport you into the past, and you can create events there which never took place in the past we know--but the events are not new. They were ordained from the beginning, if you took that particular path. You are simply embarking upon a different path into a different future, a fixed and preordained future, yet one which will be strange to you because it lies outside your own layer of experience. So you have infinite freedom in all your actions, yet everything you can possibly do is already fixed in time."

"Why, then--then there's no limit to the excitement a man could find in navigating time," said Eric almost reverently. And then in sudden urgency, "Dow, you've got to fix it up for me! This is what I've been hunting!"

"Are you crazy, boy? This is nothing that can ever be proved safe except by the actual experiment, and the experiment could never

return. You know that, don't you? From what blind groping I've done, it seems to me that time is not a constant flow, but an ebb and flux that can't be measured. It would be hard to explain to you. But you couldn't return--couldn't guide yourself. You wouldn't dare try it!"

"I'm fed up with certainty and safety! And as for returning, what have I here to return to? No, you can't scare me. I've got to try it!"

"Absolutely no," said Dow firmly.

But three months later he was standing under the great skylight of his laboratory, watching Eric buckle a flat metal pack on his heavy young shoulders. Though reluctance still lined the scientist's face, under its shock of white hair he was alight almost as hotly as the younger man, with the tremendous adventure of what was about to happen. It had taken weeks of persuasion and argument, and he was not wholly at ease even yet about the experiment, but the fever that burned in Eric Rosner was not to be denied.

Now that the way was open, it seemed to Eric that all his life he had lived toward this moment in the laboratory. The need for this launching upon time's broad river was what had driven him restless and feverish through the petty adventures which life had shown him. Peace was upon him now for the first time in months. There was something rather awe-inspiring about it.

"Look here," broke in Walter Dow upon the raptness of his mood. "Are you sure you understand?"

"I don't understand anything about the works, and I don't much care," said Eric. "All I know is I'm to snap these switches here"--he laid big sunburned hands on the two rods at his belt--"when I want to move along. That will throw out the anchor. Right?"

"As far as it goes, yes. That will increase your inertia sufficiently to make you immune to time and space and matter. You will be inert mentally and physically. You'll sink down, so to speak, to the bedrock, while time flows past you. I have in this pack on your back, connecting with the switches in the belt, the means to increase your inertia until no outside force can interrupt it. And a mechanism there will permit the switches to remain thrown until one small part, insulated from the inertia in a tiny time space of its own, trips the switches again and up-anchors. And if my calculations are correct--and I think they are--there you'll be in some other age than ours. You can escape from it by throwing the switches again and returning to inertia, to be released after an interval by the automatic insulated mechanism in your pack. Got it?"

"Got it!" Eric grinned all over his good-looking, sunburned face. "Everything ready now?"

"Yes--yes, except that--are you sure you want to risk it? This may be plain murder, boy! I don't know what will happen!"

"That's the beauty of it--not knowing. Don't worry, Walter. Call it suicide, not murder, if that helps you any. I'm going now. Good-by."

Dow choked a little as he gripped the younger man's hand hard, but Eric's face was shining with the fever to be gone, and at the last the scientist was almost reconciled by the sight of that rapt face. Almost he saw in the last instant before the switches closed a purpose vaster than his own, sweeping the work of his hands and the exultant young man before him into a whole that fulfilled some greater need than he could guess.

Then Eric's hands dropped to his belt. One last instant he stood there, tall under the clear radiance of the skylight, blond and sunburned, the tale of his riotous, brawling life clear upon his

scarred, young face, but upon it, too, a raptness and an eagerness that sent a quick stab of unreasoning hope through the scientist's mind. Surely success would crown this experiment. Surely all the vital, throbbing aliveness, the strength and seasoned toughness of this brawny young man before him could not snuff into nothing as the switches closed. Danger awaited him--yes, danger against which the gun at his belt might not avail at all. But splendor, too. Splendor--Envy clouded Dow's eyes for a moment, as the switches closed.

Past Eric's eyes eternity ebbed blindingly. Rushing blankness closed over him, but he was conscious of infinite motion, infinite change passing over him, by him, through him, as events beyond imagination streamed past that anchorage in inertia's eternal bedrock. For a timeless eternity it lasted. And then--and then-- A confusion of noises from very far away began to sound in his ears.

That rushing blurriness abated and slowed and by degrees took on a nebulous shape. He was looking down from a height of about thirty feet upon a street scene which he identified roughly as Elizabethan by the costumes of those who moved through the crowd below him.

Something was wrong. The machine could not have worked perfectly somehow, for he did not feel that he was actually present. The scene was uncertain and wavery, like a faulty film reflecting upon an uneven screen. There must have been an obstruction somewhere in that particular time section, though what it was he never knew.

He leaned forward for a few minutes, looking down eagerly through the hazy uncertainty that shrouded the place. He did not seem to himself to be resting on anything; yet he was conscious of that forward bending as he looked down. It was inexplicable.

The noises rose up to him now loudly, now softly, from the shifting, pushing throng. Shopkeepers bawled their wares from both sides of

the street. Apprentice boys darted to and fro through the crowd, waylaying passers-by.

A girl in a scarlet cloak flung open a window and leaned out to wave a message to someone below, her bright hair falling about her face. In the room behind her, dimly seen, another girl moved forward and flung both arms about her waist, laughing, dragging her back. Their merriment rose clearly to Eric's ears.

But all this was not real. That cloudiness hazed it over time and again, until his eyes ached from trying to follow what was happening.

Regretfully, he reached for the switches at his belt, and in a breath the whole place shimmered and vanished. Oblivion in a torrent poured over him as the centuries plunged by over the bedrock inertia to which he was anchored.

The automatic workings of the time machine on his shoulders clicked on. Then the switches threw themselves and the blankness cleared from Eric's mind again. He found himself staring through a screen of leaves upon a grassy meadow through which trickled a small brook. He was tangibly, actually here this time, standing on soft turf and feeling the stir of a breeze through the leaves.

Over the slope of the meadow before him dingy white sheep moved slowly. A little curly-haired boy in a brief leather garment leaned on the grass drowsily, watching them. Sun lay yellow over the whole scene. It was peaceful and dreamy as an idyl, but for some obscure reason Eric's hands moved to his belt almost of their own accord, a feeling of disappointment stirring vaguely in his mind. This was not what he sought. Sought? Was he seeking? Almost one might think so, he told himself.

The thought troubled him as he clicked the switches at his belt. What

was it that by its absence here made him dismiss the idyllic scene with a glance? He was hunting something, restlessly searching through the ages for--something. Then the tidal rush of the centuries over his anchorage blotted out wonder and all else in its oblivion.

Sunlight like a physical blow crashed down about him--blazing hot sun that beat violently upon marble pavement and struck blindingly up again into his eyes. For a few seconds he was aware of nothing more than this intolerable glare. Gradually out of the blazing heat the lines of marble walls became clear about him. He stood upon the floor of a dazzling white marble pit about twenty feet square. Against the opposite wall lay a man whose naked, blood-spattered body was so still under the down-blazing heat that Eric could not be sure that he was alive.

He had seen this much before the rising babble of excited voices above him mounted loud enough to pierce his dazed surprise. He looked up. Leaning over the pit's rim were faces--faces and arms and here and there a trail of velvet robe, a bright scarf's fringe. They were the faces of aristocrats, fine and dissipated and cruel. But all expression was wiped from every one now.

In that first glance he had of them he thought they must be Romans. He had little to judge by save their hair dressing, and only a momentary glimpse of that; for, as he raised his head, his eyes met the strange, smoke-blue eyes of a woman who leaned upon the marble rim just in front of him, and above. A little space separated her from those on each side. He had the swift impression that she was of higher rank than the rest--some fleeting touch of arrogance and pride in the face looking down on him. And it was a familiar face. Why he could not guess, but in that glimpse of her he was sure that he had seen those features somewhere before, and recently.

Then she lifted one bare arm upon whose whiteness the sun struck

dazzlingly, and pointed downward. From behind her came the sound of metal upon stone, and in the blinding light he saw a man's arm move swiftly. The sun struck upon a long shaft of steel. The spear was hurtling straight for his breast as his hands flew to his belt. The switches clicked, and in one great sweeping blur the whole scene vanished.

After that came a blurry interval of unthinkable inertness. The centuries poured past. Then reality burst upon him again as the switches clicked off. He choked suddenly and gasped as air thicker and moister than the air of a tropical swamp smothered his lungs. He stood there for a moment struggling with it, forcing himself to evener breathing, as his bewildered gaze swept the scene before him.

He stood in a square of ruined walls that must once have been a small building, though roof and sides had vanished now and little was left but a crumbling square outlining the long-fallen house. To one side a higher heap of stone, which was all that was left of the western wall, obstructed his view of what lay beyond. Over the fallen blocks before him he could see a vast paved square dotted with other buildings fallen into ruin. And beyond these, under a heavily clouded sky through which the obscured sun poured in a queer, grayly radiant light, buildings of barbaric colors and utterly alien architecture lifted their Cyclopean heights, massive as the walls of Karnak, but too strangely constructed to awake any memories.

Even at this distance he recognized those darker blotches upon the tremendous walls as the sign of a coming dissolution. It was a city more awfully impressive than any he had ever dreamed of, standing gigantic under the low, gray sky of this swamplike world—but its glory was past. Here and there gaps in the colossal walls spoke of fallen blocks and ruined buildings. By the thick, primordial air and the swamp smell and the unrecognizable architecture he knew that he gazed upon a scene of immortal antiquity, and his breath came

quicker as he stared, wondering where the people were whose Cyclopean city this was, what name they bore and if history had ever recorded it.

A medley of curious sounds coming nearer awoke him from the awed trance into which he had sunk. Feet shuffling over pavement, the clang of metal shivering against metal, hoarse breathing, and a strange, intermittent hissing he could not account for. It came from that part of the great square which the crumbling wall beside him hid.

That queer hissing sounded loud. Some one yelled in a growling guttural, and he heard the beat of running feet, staggering and uncertain, coming nearer. Then a figure that was a dazzle of white and scarlet flashed through the aperture in the crumbling wall where a door must once have been. It was a girl. Her choked breath beat loud in the narrow place, and the scarlet that stained and streaked her was bright blood that gushed in ominous spurts from a deep gash in her side. She was incredibly white in the sunless day of this primordial city. Afterward he could never remember much more than that—her dazzling whiteness and the blood pumping in measured spurts from severed arteries—and the smoke blueness of her eyes.

He did not know what she had worn, or anything else about her, for his eyes met the smoky darkness of hers, and for a timeless moment they stared at one another, neither moving. He knew her. She was that royal Roman who had condemned him to death in the sun-hot pit; she was the laughing, red-cloaked girl who had leaned from the Elizabethan window. Incredibly, unquestionably, they three were the same blue-eyed girl.

A yell and a scrambling sound outside roused her from her tranced stare. He wondered wildly if he had not seen puzzled recognition in her filming eyes in that one long instant before she swung staggering toward the door. He knew she was dying as she turned, but some

inner compulsion held him back, so that he did not offer to support her, only stood watching. After all, there was no help for her now. The smoke-blue eyes were glazing and life gushed scarlet out of her riven side.

He saw her reel back against the broken wall, and again he heard that strange hissing as her right hand rose and from a shining cylinder grasped in it a long stream of blue heat flared. There was a yell from outside. A throbbing silence broken only by the spatter of the girl's blood on the pavement. And then something very strange happened.

She turned and glanced over her shoulder and her eyes met his. Something choked in his throat. He was very near understanding a great many things in that instant while her filming blue gaze held his-- why he had felt so urgently all his life long the need of something he had never neared, until now-- Words rushed to his lips, but he never spoke them. The instant passed in a flash.

The girl in that illuminating moment must have realized something yet hidden from him, for her lips trembled and an infinite tenderness softened her glazing eyes. And at the same instant her hand rose again, and for the last time he heard that searing hiss. She had turned her nameless weapon upon herself.

In a flare of blue brilliance he saw her literally melt before his eyes. The stones glowed hot, and the smell of burned flesh filled the inclosure. And Eric went sick with a sensation of devastating loss. She was dead--gone--out of all reach now, and the universe was so empty that-- He had no time to waste on his own emotion, for through the broken wall was pouring a mob of shambling things that were not yet men.

Big, hairy, apish brutes brandishing clubs and heavy stones, they

surged in a disordered mob through the ruined stones. One or two of them carried curiously shaped rusty swords of no recognizable pattern. And Eric understood.

Dying, the girl would not leave even her untenanted body to their defilement. Pride had turned her hand to lay the consuming beam upon herself--an inbred pride that could have come only from generations of proud ancestry. It was a gesture as aristocratic and as intensely civilized as the weapon that destroyed her. He would have known by that gesture alone, without her flame-thrower or the unmistakable fineness of her body and her face, that she was eons in advance of the beasts she fled.

In the brief second while the brute-men stood awed in the broken wall,, staring at the charred heap upon the pavement and at the tall golden man who stood over it, Eric's mind was busy, turning over quick wonderings and speculations even as his hands reached for the switches at his belt.

Her race must have reared that immense, unearthly city, long ago. A forgotten race, wise in forgotten arts. Perhaps not born of earth. And the hordes of brutish things which would one day become men must have assailed them as time beat down their Cyclopean city and thinned their inbred ranks.

This girl, this unknown, unimaginably far-distant girl, perhaps starborn, certainly very alien--had died as all her race must be doomed to die, until the last flicker of that stupendous civilization was stamped out and earth forgot the very existence of the slim, long-legged human race which had once dwelt upon her surface when her own primordial man was still an apish beast.

But--they had not wholly died. He had seen her in other ages. Her smoky eyes had looked down upon him in the Roman pit; her own

gay voice had called across the Elizabethan street. He was very sure of that. And the queer, stunning sense of loss which had swept over him as he saw her die lightened. She had died, but she was not gone. Her daughters lived through countless ages. He would find her again, somewhere, somehow, in some other age and land. He would comb the centuries until he found her. And he would ask her then what her last long stare had meant, so meltingly tender, so surely recognizing, as she turned the blue-hot blaze upon herself. He would- A deep-throated bellow from the doorway in the wall startled him out of his thoughts even as he realized their absurdity. The foremost of the brute-men had overcome his awe. He lifted a rusty sword, forged by what strange hands for what unknown and forever forgotten purpose there was no way of knowing, and plunged forward.

Barely in time, Eric's hands closed on the switches and the stupendous, time-forgotten city swirled sidewise and melted forever into the abysses of the past.

In the mental and physical inertia that drowned him with its oblivion as the current closed he waited moveless, and once more the centuries rushed by. The inexorable machinery clicked on. After a timeless interval light broke again. He awoke into more than tropical sultriness, the stench of mud and musk and welter of prehistoric swamps. There was nothing here save great splashing monsters and the wriggling life of hot seas. He flicked the switches again.

The next time a broad plain surrounded him, featureless to the horizon, unrecognizable, and the next a horde of hairy, yelling men charged up a rocky hill upon whose height he had materialized. After that he visited and left in rapid succession a ruined temple in the midst of a jungle, a camp of ragged nomads with slant eyes and crooked legs, and an inexplicable foggy place through which reverberated the roar of staccato guns which sounded like no guns he had ever heard. Nowhere appeared the girl with the smoke-blue

eyes.

He was beginning to despair, when, after so many flashing scenes that he had lost count of them, the darkness of rushing centuries faded into a dawning scene of noise and confusion. He stood upon the trampled earth of a courtyard, hot under the rays of a broiling, noon-high sun.

He heard shouts in an unknown tongue, the trample of horses'feet and the impatient jingle of harness, the creak of wheels. Through the shining dust that eddied, cloudlike, under the feet of the crowd that bustled about the inclosure, he made out a train of heavy wagons about which strange, short, bearded men swarmed in busy confusion, heaving crates and bales into the vehicles and calling in odd gutturals. Men on horseback galloped to and fro recklessly through the crowd, and the heavy-headed oxen stood in patient twos at each wagon.

Eric found himself in a corner of the low wall that circled the yard, and, in the tumult, quite unnoticed so far. He stood there quietly, hand resting lightly on the butt of his revolver, watching the scene. He could not guess where he was, in what land or time, in the presence of what alien race. The men were all little and dark and hairy, and somehow crooked, like gnomes. He had never heard a tongue like the gutturals they mouthed.

Then at the far side of the courtyard a lane opened in the crowd, and through it a column of the crooked brown men with curly-pronged pikes across their shoulders came marching. They had a captive with them--a girl. A tall girl, slim and straight, high-headed. Eric leaned forward eagerly. Yes, it was she. No mistaking the poise of that high, dark head, the swing of her body as she walked. As she came nearer he saw her eyes, but he did not need the smoky blue darkness of them to convince him.

She wore manacles on her wrists, and chains clanked between her ankles as she walked. A leather tunic hung from one shoulder in tatters, belted at the waist by a twisted thong from which an empty scabbard swung. She walked very proudly among the gnarled soldiers, looking out over their heads in studied disdain. At a glance the highbred aristocracy of her was clear, and he could not mistake the fact that her own people must be centuries in advance of the squat, dark race which held her captive.

The clamor had quieted now in the courtyard. Dust was settling over the long wagon train, the low-headed oxen, the horsemen stationed at intervals along the line. In silence, the crowd fell back as the soldiers and their aloof captive paced slowly across the courtyard. Tension was in the air.

Eric had the vague feeling that he should know what was to come. A haunting familiarity about this scene teased him. He racked a reluctant memory as he watched the procession near the center of the great yard. A stone block stood there, worn and stained. Not until the tall girl had actually reached that block, and the soldiers were forcing her to her knees, did Eric remember. Sacrifice--always before a caravan set forth in the very old days, when the gods were greedy and had to be bribed with human lives.

His gun was in his hand and he was plunging forward through the startled crowd before he quite realized what he was doing. They gave way before him in sheer amazement, falling back and staring with bulging eyes at this sudden apparition in their midst of a tall, yellow-headed Juggernaut yelling like a madman as he surged forward.

Not until he had reached the line of soldiers did he meet any resistance. They turned on him in gutturally shouting fury, and he shot

them down as fast as his revolver would pump bullets. At that range he could not miss, and six of the squat gnomes crumpled to the dust in a haze of blue gun smoke.

They must have thought him a god, dealing death in a crash of thunder and the hot blaze of lightning. They shrieked in panic terror, and the courtyard emptied like magic. Horses plunged and reared, squealing. Pandemonium streamed out of the inclosure, leaving behind only a haze of churned dust, slowly settling. Through the shimmer of it, across the huddle of bodies, Eric looked again into the smoky eyes of that girl he had last seen under the stupendous walls of the time-buried city. And again he thought he saw a puzzled and uncomprehending recognition on her face, shining even through her terror. She fronted him resolutely, standing up proudly in her chains and staring with frightened eyes that would not admit their fear.

"Don't be afraid," he said in as gentle a voice as he could command, for he knew the tone would convey a message, though the words did not. "We'd better get out of here before they come back."

He was reloading his gun as he spoke. She still did nothing but stare, wide-eyed, rigid in sternly suppressed terror. There was no time to waste now trying to quiet her fears. Already he saw dark, bearded faces peering around corners at him. He skirted the heap of fallen soldiers and swung the girl off her feet. She gasped as his arms closed, but no other sound escaped her as he hoisted her over one shoulder, holding her there with a clasp around her knees so that he might have his gun hand free. With long, unhurried strides he left the courtyard.

A mud-walled village ringed the big inclosure. Serenely, he went down the dusty street, wary eyes scanning the building, gun ready in one hand and the chained girl slung across his heavy shoulder. From behind shelter they watched him go, tall and golden under the

noonday sun, a god out of nowhere. Legends were to grow up about that noon's events--a god come down to earth to claim his sacrifice in person.

When he reached the outskirts of the village he paused and set the girl on her feet, turning his attention to the shackles that bound her. The chains were apparently for ceremonial use rather than utilitarian, for in his powerful hands they snapped easily, and after a brief struggle with the metal links he had her free of chains, though the anklets and cuffs still gripped her limbs. These he could not loosen, but they were not heavy and she could, he thought, wear them without discomfort. He rose as the last chain gave in his hands, and stared round the wide circle of rolling hills that hemmed them in.

"What now?" he asked, looking down at her.

The uncertainty of his attitude and the query in his voice must have reassured her that he was at least human, for the look of terror faded a little from her eyes and she glanced back down the street as if searching for pursuers, and spoke to him--for the first time he heard her voice--in a low, lilting tongue that startled him by the hint of familiarity he caught in its cadences. He had a smattering of many languages, and he was sure that this was akin to one he knew, but for the moment he could not place it.

When he did not answer she laid an impatient hand on his arm and pulled him along a few steps, then paused and looked up inquiringly. Clearly she was anxious to leave the village. He shrugged and gestured helplessly. She nodded, as if in understanding, and set off at a rapid pace toward the hills. He followed her.

It was a tireless pace she set. The metal circles on wrists and ankles seemed not to hinder her, and she led the way over hill after hill, through clumps of woodland and past a swamp or two, without

slackening her pace. For hours they traveled. The sun slid down the sky; the shadows lengthened across the hills. Not until darkness came did she pause. They had reached a little hollow ringed with trees. On one side of it a rocky outcropping formed a shelter, and a spring bubbled up among the stones. It was an ideal spot for a camp.

She turned and spoke for the second time, and he knew then why her language was familiar. Definitely it was akin to the Basque tongue. He had once had opportunity to pick up a little of that queer, ancient language, perhaps the oldest spoken in the world. It is thought to be the last remnant of the pre-Aryan tongues, and linked with vanished races and forgotten times. And the supposition must have been true, for this girl's speech echoed it in bafflingly familiar phrases. Or--he paused here--was he in the future or the past from his own time? Well, no matter--she was saying something all but incomprehensible about fire, and looking about among the underbrush. Eric shrugged off his speculations on the subject of tongues and helped her gather firewood.

His matches caused her a few minutes of awe-struck terror when the fire was kindled under the overhanging rocks of the hillside. She quieted after a bit, though, and presently pressed him to a seat by the fire and vanished into the dark. He waited uneasily until she returned, stepping softly into the light with a kicking rabbit in her hands. He never understood, then or later, how it was that she could vanish into the hills and return with some small animal unhurt in her arms. He could scarcely believe her swift enough to run them down, and she had nothing with which to make snares. It was one of the many mysteries about her that he never fathomed.

They skinned and cleaned the little beast with his hunting knife, and she broiled it over the smoldering coals. It was larger and stronger than the rabbits of his own day, and its meat was tough and sharply

tangy.

Afterward they sat by the carefully banked fire and tried to talk. Her name was Maia. Her people lived in a direction vaguely eastward and about one day's journey away, in a white-walled city. All his attempts to learn in what age he found himself were fruitless. He thought from her almost incomprehensible speech that she was telling him how ancient her race was, and how it had descended through countless generations from a race of gods who dwelt in a sky-high city in the world's beginning. It was all so vague and broken that he could not be sure.

She looked at him a great deal out of grave blue eyes as she talked, and there was in their depths a haunted remembrance. He was to recall that look of hers more clearly than anything else about her, afterward. So many times he caught the puzzled, brooding gaze searching his face in troubled incomprehension.

He sat there silently, scarcely heeding the occasional low cadences of her voice. He was learning the grave, sweet lines of her young face, the way her eyes tilted ever so faintly at the corners, the smooth plane of her cheek, the curved line on which her lips closed. And sometimes the wonder of their meeting, through so many ages, came down upon him breathlessly, the realization of something too vast and strange and wonderful to put into words, and he stared into the sweet, familiar face almost with awe, thinking of those other grave, dark eyes and serene faces, so like hers, that ranged through time. There was a tremendous purpose behind that patterning of faces through the centuries, too great for him to grasp.

He watched her talk, the firelight turning that dearly familiar face ruddy, and shining in the deep, troubled blueness of her eyes, and a strange and sudden tenderness came over him. He bent forward, a catch in his throat, laying his hands over hers, looking into the

memory-haunted depths of her eyes.

He said not a word, but he stared deep and long, and he could have sworn that sudden answer lighted in her gaze, for one swift instant blotting out that puzzled straining after remembrance and turning her whole face serene and lovely with understanding. The moment held them enchanted, warm in the deeps of something so breathlessly lovely that he felt the sting of sudden hotness behind his eyes. In that instant all puzzlement and incomprehension was swept aside and the answer to the great purpose behind their meetings hovered almost within grasp.

Then, without warning, the girl's face crumpled into tears and she snatched her hands away, leaping to her feet with the long, startled bound of a wild thing and facing him in the firelight with clenched fists and swimming eyes. It was not rebellion against his clasp of her hands--surely she could see that he meant no violence--but a revolt against some inner enemy that dwelt behind the tear-bright blue eyes. She stood irresolutely there for a moment, then made a helpless little gesture and dropped to the ground once more, sitting there with bowed shoulders and bent head, staring into the embers.

Presently her voice began softly, speaking in little disconnected phrases that fell monotonously into the silence. He made out enough to understand her sudden revulsion against that strange and lovely oneness of understanding that had gripped them both. She was betrothed. She made him realize that it was more than the simple plighting of vows between lovers. He caught vague references to religious ceremonies, marriage of high priest and chosen virgin, temple rites and the anger of a jealous god. That much he understood.

She must fulfill the requisites of the priest god's bride. No man must touch her until she came into the holy embrace of the church. She

must not even know love for another man. And that, perhaps, was why she had pulled away from him in the firelight and struggled through tears with an inner enemy that reached traitorously out to the golden stranger who held her hands.

She was unshakable in her devotion to that concept. Eric had known, from the moment he first looked into her smoke-filled eyes, that she would be faithful to any ideal that stirred her. A girl like this had destroyed the body from which her soul was slipping, that barbarians might not defile it. A girl like this, imperiously royal and inflexibly cruel, had watched torture in a sun-hot pit, refusing to doubt her civilization's concept of the divine right of emperors over their subjects' lives. She was stubborn, this girl. Stubborn in her beliefs whether they were kind or cruel. She was of the stuff from which martyrs are made.

They stood watch in turn over the fire that night, she insisting on her share of it with a grave certainty that brooked no opposition. What the dangers were which made it impossible for both to sleep at once he did not know. On those times when he dropped off into slumber the last thing his closing eyes saw was the girl Maia's figure, slim and round in her torn leather tunic, warm in the firelight, serene in her determination upon her life's ordered plan. Nothing could swerve her. She was so fine-- An ache came up in his throat as he closed his eyes.

When he awoke in the morning she had brought in a brace of small, fat birds like quail and was preparing them at the edge of the spring. She smiled gravely as he sat up, but she said nothing, and she did not look at him any more than she could help. She was taking no chances with that traitor within.

In silence, they shared the birds she cooked over the embers. Afterward he tried to make her understand that he would take her as

far as the gates of her city. At first she demurred. She knew this country well. She was strong and young, wise in the lore of the hills. She needed no escort. But Eric could not bring himself to leave her until he must. That moment of crystal understanding, the warm, sweet unity they had shared even for so short a breath had forged a bond between them that he could not bear to break.

And at last she consented. They spoke very little after that. They put out the fire and set off again over the rolling hills toward the bright patch on the sky where the sun was rising. All day they traveled. In her mysterious, secret way she found another rabbit when hunger came on them around noontide, and they paused to eat. In the afternoon the pack on his back that held that time machine began to irk Eric's Viking strength. She eyed it curiously as he hitched his load forward to ease its burden, but she said nothing.

Twilight was darkening over the hills when Maia paused on the crest of a little rise and pointed ahead. Eric saw a pattern of white houses ringed by a broken wall a little way distant upon the crown of a higher hill than the rest. And here she made it clear that she must leave him. He was not to accompany her within sight of the city walls.

He stood on the hilltop, watching her go. She did not look back. She walked lightly, surely, the long grass breaking like green surf about her knees, her head high and resolute. He watched her until she passed, a little far-off figure, under the broken wall, and its gateway swallowed her up out of his sight forever. And in his heart was a mingling of pain and loss and high anticipation. For he was growing increasingly sure now that there was much more than chance behind these brief and seemingly so futile meetings with the one deathless, blue-eyed girl.

He laid his hands on the switches at his belt confidently as that proudly moving young figure vanished under the gate. He had lost

her--but not for long. Somewhere in the veiled, remote future, somewhere in the unexplored past she waited him. His fingers closed over the switch.

Darkly the rush of centuries swept over him, blotting away the hills and the green meadows between, and the nameless white city that was crumbling into decay. He would never see Maia again, but there were other Maias, waiting. Oblivion swallowed him up and his impatience and his dawning conviction of a vast purpose behind his journeyings, in the great grayness of its peace.

Out of that blankness a blue day dawned, bright over a moated castle's battlements. From a hilltop perhaps a quarter of a mile away he saw the surge of armored men under the walls, heard shouts and the clang of metal on metal drifting to him on the gentleness of a little breeze. And it occurred to him how often it was upon scenes of strife and sudden death that he chanced in his haphazard journeying. He wondered if they had been so thick in the past that the odds were against his coming into peaceful places, or if his own life of danger and adventuring had any influence upon the points in time which he visited so briefly.

But it mattered little. He looked around searchingly, wondering if another blue-eyed Maia dwelt near him in this medieval world. But there was nothing here. Green forest closed in at the hill's foot. Save for the castle there was no sign of civilization, no sign of men but for the shouting besiegers. Perhaps she lived somewhere in this blue, primitive world, but he could not risk a search for her. She was elsewhere, too.

Suddenly he was awed by the certainty of that--the incomprehensible vastness of his certainty and of her presence. She was everywhere. From time's beginning to time's close--she was. No era had not known her; no spot on the world's surface had not felt the press of her

feet. And though the infinite future and the infinite past held her, and the earth's farthest corners, yet in reality every incarnation of her was here and now, available to him with no greater interval between her countless daughters than the instant flash of the centuries that poured over him when the switches closed. She was omnipresent, eternal. He knew her presences in the oblivion that swallowed him as his hands gripped the switches again and the beleaguered castle melted into the past.

Two children were playing by a shallow river. Eric walked slowly toward them through the warm sand. A little girl, a little boy in brief tunics of soiled white. Perhaps ten years old they were, and absorbed in their play at the water's edge. Not until his shadow fell across their castle of rocks and sand did they look up. And the girl child's eyes were blue as smoke in her small, tanned face.

Those familiar eyes met his. For a long moment she stared. Then she smiled hesitantly, very sweetly, and rose to her bare feet, shaking the sand from her tunic and looking up at him still with that grave, sweet smile illuminating her small face and a queer hesitation checking her speech.

At last she said, "Ou e'voo?" in the softest, gentlest voice imaginable. It was remotely recognizable as a tongue that might one day be--or once had been--French. "Who are you?"

"Je suis Eric," he told gravely.

She shook her head a little. "Zh n'compTen----." she began doubtfully, in that strange, garbled tongue so like French. But she broke off in her denial, for though the name was strange to her yet he was sure he saw recognition begin to dawn in the smoke-blue eyes he knew so well. "Zh voo z'ai vu?"

"Have you?" he asked her very gently, trying to distort his French into the queer sounds of hers. "Have you really seen me before?"

"I thought so," she murmured shyly, bewilderment muting her speech until it sounded scarcely above a childish whisper. "I have seen your face before--somewhere, once--long ago. Have I? Have I--Eric? I do not know your name. I never heard it before. But your face-- you-- O, Eric dear--I do love you!"

Halfway through that speech she had changed her "voo" to the "tu" of intimacy, and the last of it came out on a little rush of childish affection, "Eric, cher-zh t'aime!"

Somewhere back among the willows that lined the shallow stream a woman's voice called sharply. The sound of feet among dead leaves approached. The little boy jumped to his feet, but the girl seemed not to hear. She was looking up at Eric with wide blue eyes, her small face rapt with a child's swift adoration. Ten years older and she might have questioned the possibility of that instant recognition, perhaps unconsciously checked the instant warmth that rose within her, but the child's mind accepted it without question.

The woman was very near now. He knew he must not frighten her. He stooped and kissed the little girl's cheek gently. Then he took her by the shoulders and turned her toward the woods into which the boy had already vanished.

"Go to your mother," he told her softly. And he laid his hands again on the switches. She was beginning to know him, he thought, as the river bank swirled sidewise into nothingness. Each time they met the recognition grew stronger. And though there was no continuity in their meetings, so that he seemed to be jumping back and forth through time and this child might be the remote ancestress or the far descendant of his resolute Maia, yet somehow--by no racial memory

surely, for it was not down a direct line of women that he progressed, but haphazardly to and fro through their ranks--somehow they were beginning to know him. Oblivion blotted out his puzzling.

Out of the rushing dark a steel-walled city blazed into sudden, harsh life. He stood on one tower of its many heights, looking out and down over a dizzy vista of distances that swam with the reflections of sunlight on steel. He stood still for a moment, shading his eyes and staring. But he was impatient. Something instinctive in him, growing stronger now and surer of itself as this strange chain of circumstance and meeting drew on to its conclusion, told him that what he sought lay nowhere in this section out of time. Without a glance around the stupendous steel marvel of the city he gripped the switches once more, and in a shimmer and a dazzle the shining metropolis melted into oblivion.

A burst of wild yelling like the voices of wolves baying from savage human throats smote through the darkness at him even before the sight of what was coming. Then a plank flooring was under his feet and he looked out over a tossing surface of tousled heads and brandished fists and weapons, toward another platform, this of stone, the height of his across the thunderous sea of the mob. The crackle of flames was mounting even above that roaring. On the other platform, bound to a tall, charred stake, ringed with fagots and rising flames, the blue-eyed girl stood proudly. She was very straight against the pillar, chin high, looking out in disdain over the tumult below.

For the breath of a second Eric glanced round him, snatching at straws in a frantic effort to find some way of saving her. On the platform behind him speechless amazement had stricken dumb a little party of men and women in brightly colored garments of 16th Century cut. They must have been nobles, viewing the burning from this favored seat. Eric wasted only one glance at their stupefied

surprise. He swung round again, his desperate eyes raking the mob. No hope there. It clamored for the tall girl's life in one tremendous, wolf-savage baying that ripped from every throat there in a single blending roar.

"Witch!" they yelled. "Death to the witch!" in an archaic English that he understood without too much difficulty, a blood-hungry baying that brooked no denial. They had not seen him yet. But the girl had.

Over their heads, through the little shimmering heat waves that were rising about her already in veils of scorching breath, her smoke-blue eyes met his. It was a meeting as tangible almost as the meeting of hands. And like the grip of hands so that gaze held, steady and unswerving for a long moment--burning witch of old England and tall young adventurer of modern America gazing with sure recognition in the eyes of each. Eric's heart jumped into a quickened beating as he saw the sureness in those smoke-blue eyes he had gazed into so often. She knew him--without any question or doubt she recognized him.

Over the wolf-baying of the mob he heard her voice in one high, clear scream.

"You've come! I knew you'd come!"

At the sound of it silence dropped over the crowd. Almost in one motion they swung round to follow her ecstatic stare. And in the instant of their stricken surprise at the man they saw there, tall and golden against the sky, a figure out of no experience they had ever had before--the witch's voice rang clear.

"You've come! O, I knew you would, in the end. They always said you would. They knew! And I must die for the knowledge I got from Them--but by that knowledge I know this is not the end. Somewhere, some

day, we will meet again. Good-by--good-by, my dearest!"

Her voice had not faltered, though the flames were licking up about her, and now, in a great burst of crimson, they caught in the fagots and blazed up in a gush that enveloped her in raving inferno. Choked with horror, Eric swung up his gun hand. The bark of the report sent half the crowd to its knees in terror, and he saw through the flames the girl's tall figure slump suddenly against her bonds. This much at least he could do.

Then, in the midst of a silence so deep that the creak of the planks under his feet was loud as he moved, he sheathed the gun and closed his hands over the switches. Impatience boiled up in him as the prostrate crowd and the flame-wrapped witch and the whole ugly scene before him reeled into nothingness.

He was coming near the goal now. Each successive step found recognition surer in her eyes. She knew him in this incarnation, and he was full of confidence now that the end and the solution was near. For though in all their meetings there had been barriers, so that they two could never wholly know one another or come into the unity of love and comprehension which each meeting promised, yet he knew very surely that in the end they must. All this had not been in vain.

In the oblivion that washed over him was so sure a consciousness of her omnipresence--in all the centuries that were sweeping past, in all the lands those centuries washed over, throughout time and space and life itself, her ever-present loveliness--that he welcomed the darkness as if he embraced the girl herself. It was full of her, one with her. He could not lose her or be far from her or even miss her now. She was everywhere, always. And the end was coming. Very soon--very soon he would know-- He woke out of the oblivion, blindly into darkness. Like the fold of wings it engulfed him. If he was standing on solid earth, he did not know it. He was straining every faculty to

pierce that blinding dark, and he could not. It was a living darkness, pulsing with anticipation. He waited in silence.

Presently she spoke.

"I have waited so long," she said out of the blackness in her sweet, clear voice that he knew so well he did not need the evidence of his eyes to tell him who spoke.

"Is this the end?" he asked her breathlessly. "Is this the goal we've been traveling toward so long?"

"The end?" she murmured with a little catch of mirth in her voice. "Or the beginning, perhaps. Where in a circle is end or beginning? It is enough that we are together at last."

"But what--why--"

"Something went wrong, somewhere," she told him softly. "It doesn't matter now. We have expiated the forgotten sins that kept us apart to the very end. Our troubled reflections upon the river of time sought each other and never wholly met. And we, who should have been time's masters, struggled in the changing currents and knew only that everything was wrong with us, who did not know each other.

"But all that is ended now. Our lives are lived out and we can escape time and space into our own place at last. Our love has been so great a thing that though it never fulfilled itself, yet it brimmed time and the void to overflowing, so that everywhere you adventured the knowledge of my present tormented you--and I waited for you in vain. Forget it now. It's over. We have found ourselves at last."

"If I could only see you," he said fretfully, reaching out into the blackness. "It's so dark here. Where are we?"

"Dark?" the gentle voice laughed softly. "Dark? My dearest--this is not darkness! Wait a moment--here!"

Out of the night a hand clasped his. "Come with me."

Together they stepped forward.

Two-Handed Engine

Published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Vol. 9, No. 2 (#51, August 1955). Also collected in No Boundaries, Ballantine: 1955.

[Ballantine, 1955, paperback] [Ballantine, 1955, hard cover]

Ever since the days of Orestes there have been men with Furies following them. It wasn't until the Twenty-Second Century that mankind made itself a set of real Furies, out of steel. Mankind had reached a crisis by then. They had a good reason for building man-shaped Furies that would dog the footsteps of all men who kill men. Nobody else. There was by then no other crime of any importance.

It worked very simply. Without warning, a man who thought himself safe would suddenly hear the steady footfalls behind him. He would turn and see the two-handed engine walking towards him, shaped like a man of steel, and more incorruptible than any man not made of steel could be. Only then would the murderer know he had been tried and condemned by the omniscient electronic minds that knew society as no human mind could ever know it.

For the rest of his days, the man would hear those footsteps behind him. A moving jail with invisible bars that shut him off from the world. Never in life would he be alone again. And one day--he never knew when--the jailer would turn executioner.

Danner leaned back comfortably in his contoured restaurant chair and rolled expensive wine across his tongue, closing his eyes to enjoy the taste of it better. He felt perfectly safe. Oh, perfectly protected. For nearly an hour now he had been sitting here, ordering the most expensive food, enjoying the music breathing softly through

the air, the murmurous, well-bred hush of his fellow diners. It was a good place to be. It was very good, having so much money--now.

True, he had had to kill to get the money. But no guilt troubled him. There was no guilt if you aren't found out, and Danner had protection. Protection straight from the source, which was something new in the world. Danner knew the consequences of killing. If Hartz hadn't satisfied him that he was perfectly safe, Danner would never have pulled the trigger....

The memory of an archaic word flickered through his mind briefly. Sin. It evoked nothing. Once it had something to do with guilt, in an incomprehensible way. Not any more. Mankind had been through too much. Sin was meaningless now.

He dismissed the thought and tried the heart-of-palms salad. He found he didn't like it. Oh well, you had to expect things like that. Nothing was perfect. He sipped the wine again, liking the way the glass seemed to vibrate like something faintly alive in his hand. It was good wine. He thought of ordering more, but then he thought no, save it, next time. There was so much before him, waiting to be enjoyed. Any risk was worth it. And of course, in this there had been no risk.

Danner was a man born at the wrong time. He was old enough to remember the last days of utopia, young enough to be trapped in the new scarcity economy the machines had clamped down on their makers. In his early youth he'd had access to free luxuries, like everybody else. He could remember the old days when he was an adolescent and the last of the Escape Machines were still operating, the glamorous, bright, impossible, vicarious visions that didn't really exist and never could have. But then the scarcity economy swallowed up pleasure. Now you got necessities but no more. Now you had to work. Danner hated every minute of it.

When the swift change came, he'd been too young and unskilled to compete in the scramble. The rich men today were the men who had built fortunes on cornering the few luxuries the machines still produced. All Danner had left were bright memories and a dull, resentful feeling of having been cheated. All he wanted were the bright days back, and he didn't care how he got them.

Well, now he had them. He touched the rim of the wine glass with his finger, feeling it sing silently against the touch. Blown glass? he wondered. He was too ignorant of luxury items to understand. But he'd learn. He had the rest of his life to learn in, and be happy.

He looked up across the restaurant and saw through the transparent dome of the roof the melting towers of the city. They made a stone forest as far as he could see. And this was only one city. When he was tired of it, there were more. Across the country, across the planet the network lay that linked city with city in a webwork like a vast, intricate, half-alive monster. Call it society.

He felt it tremble a little beneath him.

He reached for the wine and drank quickly. The faint uneasiness that seemed to shiver the foundations of the city was something new. It was because--yes, certainly it was because of a new fear.

It was because he had not been found out.

That made no sense. Of course the city was complex. Of course it operated on a basis of incorruptible machines. They, and only they, kept man from becoming very quickly another extinct animal. And of these the analog computers, the electronic calculators, were the gyroscope of all living. They made and enforced the laws that were necessary now to keep mankind alive. Danner didn't understand much of the vast changes that had swept over society in his lifetime,

but this much even he knew.

So perhaps it made sense that he felt society shiver because he sat here luxurious on foam-rubber, sipping wine, hearing soft music, and no Fury standing behind his chair to prove that the calculators were still guardians for mankind.

If not even the Furies are incorruptible, what can a man believe in?

It was at that exact moment that the Fury arrived.

Danner heard every sound suddenly die out around him. His fork was halfway to his lips, but he paused, frozen, and looked up across the table and the restaurant towards the door.

The Fury was taller than a man. It stood there for a moment, the afternoon sun striking a blinding spot of brightness from its shoulder. It had no face, but it seemed to scan the restaurant leisurely, table by table. Then it stepped in under the doorframe and the sun-spot slid away and it was like a tall man encased in steel, walking slowly between the tables.

Danner said to himself, laying down his untested food, "Not for me. Everyone else here is wondering. I know."

And like a memory in a drowning man's mind, clear, sharp and condensed into a moment, yet every detail clear, he remembered what Hartz had told him. As a drop of water can pull into its reflection a wide panorama condensed into a tiny focus, so time seemed to focus down to a pinpoint the half-hour Danner and Hartz had spent together, in Hartz's office with the walls that could go transparent at the push of a button.

He saw Hartz again, plump and blond, with the sad eyebrows. A man

who looked relaxed until he began to talk, and then you felt the burning quality about him, the air of driven tension that made even the air around him seem to be restlessly trembling. Danner stood before Hartz's desk again in memory, feeling the floor hum faintly against his soles with the heartbeat of the computers. You could see them through the glass, smooth, shiny things with winking lights in banks like candles burning in colored glass cups. You could hear their faraway chattering as they ingested facts, meditated them, and then spoke in numbers like cryptic oracles. It took men like Hartz to understand what the oracles meant.

"I have a job for you," Hartz said. "I want a man killed."

"Oh no," Danner said. "What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

"Now wait a minute. You can use money, can't you?"

"What for?" Danner asked bitterly. "A fancy funeral?"

"A life of luxury. I know you're not a fool. I know damned well you wouldn't do what I ask unless you got money and protection. That's what I can offer. Protection."

Danner looked through the transparent wall at the computers.

"Sure," he said.

"No, I mean it. I--" Hartz hesitated, glancing around the room a little uneasily, as if he hardly trusted his own precautions for making sure of privacy. "This is something new," he said. "I can redirect any Fury I want to."

"Oh, sure," Danner said again.

"It's true. I'll show you. I can pull a Fury off any victim I choose."

"How?"

"That's my secret. Naturally. In effect, though, I've found a way to feed in false data, so the machines come out with the wrong verdict before conviction, or the wrong orders after conviction."

"But that's--dangerous, isn't it?"

"Dangerous?" Hartz looked at Danner under his sad eyebrows. "Well, yes. I think so. That's why I don't do it often. I've done it only once, as a matter of fact. Theoretically, I'd worked out the method. I tested it, just once. It worked. I'll do it again, to prove to you I'm telling the truth. After that I'll do it once again, to protect you. And that will be it. I don't want to upset the calculators any more than I have to. Once your job's done, I won't have to."

"Who do you want killed?"

Involuntarily Hartz glanced upward, towards the heights of the building where the top-rank executive offices were. "O'Reilly," he said.

Danner glanced upward too, as if he could see through the floor and observe the exalted shoe-soles of O'Reilly, Controller of the Calculators, pacing an expensive carpet overhead.

"It's very simple," Hartz said. "I want his job."

"Why not do your own killing, then, if you're so sure, you can stop the Furies?"

"Because that would give the whole thing away," Hartz said impatiently. "Use your head. I've got an obvious motive. It wouldn't take a calculator to figure out who profits most if O'Reilly dies. If I

saved myself from a Fury, people would start wondering how I did it. But you've got no motive for killing O'Reilly. Nobody but the calculators would know, and I'll take care of them."

"How do I know you can do it?"

"Simple. Watch."

Hartz got up and walked quickly across the resilient carpet that gave his steps a falsely youthful bounce. There was a waist-high counter on the far side of the room, with a slanting glass screen on it. Nervously Hartz punched a button, and a map of a section of the city sprang out in bold lines on its surface.

"I've got to find a sector where a Fury's in operation now," he explained. The map flickered and he pressed the button again. The stable outlines of the city streets wavered and brightened and then went out as he scanned the sections fast and nervously. Then a map flashed on which had three wavering streaks of colored light criss-crossing it, intersecting at one point near the center. The point moved very slowly across the map, at just about the speed of a walking man reduced to miniature in scale with the street he walked on. Around him the colored lines wheeled slowly, keeping their focus always steady on the single point.

"There," Hartz said, leaning forward to read the printed name of the street. A drop of sweat fell from his forehead on to the glass, and he wiped it uneasily away with his fingertip. "There's a man with a Fury assigned to him. All right, now. I'll show you. Look here."

Above the desk was a news screen. Hartz clicked it on and watched impatiently while a street scene swam into focus. Crowds, traffic noises, people hurrying, people loitering. And in the middle of the crowd a little oasis of isolation, an island in the sea of humanity.

Upon that moving island two occupants dwelt, like a Crusoe and a Friday, alone. One of the two was a haggard man who watched the ground as he walked. The other islander in this deserted spot was a tall, shining man-formed shape that followed at his heels.

As if invisible walls surrounded them, pressing back the crowds they walked through, the two moved in an empty space that closed in behind them, opened up before them. Some of the passers-by stared, some looked away in embarrassment or uneasiness. Some watched with a frank anticipation, wondering perhaps at just what moment the Friday would lift his steel arm and strike the Crusoe dead.

"Watch, now," Hartz said nervously. "Just a minute. I'm going to pull the Fury off this man. Wait." He crossed to his desk, opened a drawer, bent secretively over it. Danner heard a series of clicks from inside, and then the brief chatter of tapped keys. "Now," Hartz said, closing the drawer. He moved the back of his hand across his forehead. "Warm in here, isn't it? Let's get a closer look You'll see something happen in a minute."

Back to the news screen. He flicked the focus switch and the street scene expanded, the man and his pacing jailer swooped upward into close focus. The man's face seemed to partake subtly of the impassive quality of the robot's. You would have thought they had lived a long time together, and perhaps they had. Time is a flexible element, infinitely long sometimes in a very short space.

"Wait until they get out of the crowd," Hartz said. "This mustn't be conspicuous. There, he's turning now." The man, seeming to move at random, wheeled at an alley corner and went down the narrow, dark passage away from the thoroughfare. The eye of the news screen followed him as closely as the robot.

"So you do have cameras that can do that," Danner said with interest. "I always thought so. How's it done? Are they spotted at every corner, or is it a beam trans--"

"Never mind," Hartz said. "Trade secret. Just watch. We'll have to wait until--no, no! Look, he's going to try it now!"

The man glanced furtively behind him. The robot was just turning the corner in his wake. Hartz darted back to his desk and pulled the drawer open. His hand poised over it, his eyes watched the screen anxiously. It was curious how the man in the alley, though he could have no inkling that other eyes watched, looked up and scanned the sky, gazing directly for a moment into the attentive, hidden camera and the eyes of Hartz and Danner. They saw him take a sudden, deep breath, and break into a run.

From Hartz's drawer sounded a metallic click. The robot, which had moved smoothly into a run the moment the man did, checked itself awkwardly and seemed to totter on its steel for an instant. It slowed. It stopped like an engine grinding to a halt. It stood motionless.

At the edge of the camera's range you could see the man's face, looking backward, mouth open with shock as he saw the impossible happen. The robot stood there in the alley, making indecisive motions as if the new orders Hartz pumped into its mechanisms were grating against inbuilt orders in whatever receptor it had. Then it turned its steel back upon the man in the alley and went smoothly, almost sedately, away down the street, walking as precisely as if it were obeying valid orders, not stripping the very gears of society in its aberrant behavior.

You got one last glimpse of the man's face, looking strangely stricken, as if his last friend in the world had left him.

Hartz switched off the screen. He wiped his forehead again. He went to the glass wall and looked out and down as if he were half afraid the calculators might know what he had done. Looking very small against the background of the metal giants, he said over his shoulder, "Well, Danner?"

Was it well? There had been more talk, of course, more persuasion, a raising of the bribe. But Danner knew his mind had been made up from that moment. A calculated risk, and worth it. Well worth it. Except--

In the deathly silence of the restaurant all motion had stopped. The Fury walked calmly between the tables, threading its shining way, touching no one. Every face blanched, turned towards it. Every mind thought, "Can it be for me?" Even the entirely innocent thought, "This is the first mistake they've ever made, and it's come for me. The first mistake, but there's no appeal and I could never prove a thing." For while guilt had no meaning in this world, punishment did have meaning, and punishment could be blind, striking like the lightning.

Danner between set teeth told himself over and over, "Not for me. I'm safe. I'm protected. It hasn't come for me." And yet he thought how strange it was, what a coincidence, wasn't it, that there should be two murderers here under this expensive glass roof today? Himself, and the one the Fury had come for.

He released his fork and heard it clink on the plate. He looked down at it and the food, and suddenly his mind rejected everything around him and went diving off on a fugitive tangent like an ostrich into sand. He thought about food. How did asparagus grow? What did raw food look like? He had never seen any. Food came ready-cooked out of restaurant kitchens or automatic slots. Potatoes, now. What did they look like? A moist white mash? No, for sometimes they were oval slices, so the thing itself must be oval. But not round. Sometimes you

got them in long strips, squared off at the ends. Something quite long and oval, then chopped into even lengths. And white, of course. And they grew underground, he was almost sure. Long, thin roots twining white arms among the pipes and conduits he had seen laid bare when the streets were under repair. How strange that he should be eating something like thin, ineffectual human arms that embraced the sewers of the city and writhed pallidly where the worms had their being. And where he himself, when the Fury found him, might.

He pushed the plate away.

An indescribable rustling and murmuring in the room lifted his eyes for him as if he were an automaton. The Fury was halfway across the room now, and it was almost funny to see the relief of those whom it had passed by. Two or three of the women had buried their faces in their hands, and one man had slipped quietly from his chair in a dead faint as the Fury's passing released their private dreads back into their hidden wells.

The thing was quite close now. It looked to be about seven feet tall, and its motion was very smooth, which was unexpected when you thought about it. Smoother than human motions. Its feet fell with a heavy, measured tread upon the carpet. Thud, thud, thud. Danner tried impersonally to calculate what it weighed. You always heard that they made no sound except for that terrible tread, but this one creaked very slightly somewhere. It had no features, but the human mind couldn't help sketching in lightly a sort of airy face upon that blank steel surface, with eyes that seemed to search the room.

It was coming closer. Now all eyes were converging towards Danner. And the Fury came straight on. It almost looked as if-- "No!" Danner said to himself. "Oh, no, this can't be!" He felt like a man in a nightmare, on the verge of waking. "Let me wake soon," he thought. "Let me wake now, before it gets here!"

But he did not wake. And now the thing stood over him, and the thudding footsteps stopped. There was the faintest possible creaking as it towered over his table, motionless, waiting, its featureless face turned towards his.

Danner felt an intolerable tide of heat surge up into his face--rage, shame, disbelief. His heart pounded so hard the room swam and a sudden pain like jagged lightning shot through his head from temple to temple.

He was on his feet, shouting.

"No, no!" he yelled at the impassive steel. "You're wrong! You've made a mistake! Go away, you damned fool! You're wrong, you're wrong!" He groped on the table without looking down, found his plate and hurled it straight at the armored chest before him. China shattered. Spilled food smeared a white and green and brown stain over the steel. Danner floundered out of his chair, around the table, past the tall metal figure towards the door.

All he could think of now was Hartz.

Seas of faces swam by him on both sides as he stumbled out of the restaurant. Some watched with avid curiosity, their eyes seeking him. Some did not look at all, but gazed at their plates rigidly or covered their faces with their hands. Behind him the measured tread came on, and the rhythmic faint creak from somewhere inside the armor.

The faces fell away on both sides and he went through a door without any awareness of opening it. He was in the street. Sweat bathed him and the air struck icy, though it was not a cold day. He looked blindly left and right, and then plunged for a bank of phone booths half a block away, the image of Hartz swimming before his eyes so clearly

he blundered into people without seeing them. Dimly he heard indignant voices begin to speak and then die into awestruck silence.

The way cleared magically before him. He walked in the newly created island of his isolation up to the nearest booth.

After he had closed the glass door the thunder of his own blood in his ears made the little sound-proofed booth reverberate. Through the door he saw the robot stand passionlessly waiting, the smear of spilled food still streaking its chest like some robotic ribbon of honor across a steel shirt front.

Danner tried to dial a number. His fingers were like rubber. He breathed deep and hard, trying to pull himself together. An irrelevant thought floated across the surface of his mind. I forgot to pay for my dinner. And then: A lot of good the money will do me now. Oh, damn Hartz, damn him, damn him!

He got the number.

A girl's face flashed into sharp, clear colors on the screen before him. Good, expensive screens in the public booths in this part of town, his mind noted impersonally.

"This is Controller Hartz's office. May I help you?"

Danner tried twice before he could give his name. He wondered if the girl could see him, and behind him, dimly through the glass, the tall waiting figure. He couldn't tell, because she dropped her eyes immediately to what must have been a list on the unseen table before her.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Hartz is out. He won't be back today."

The screen drained of light and color.

Danner folded back the door and stood up. His knees were unsteady. The robot stood just far enough back to clear the hinge of the door. For a moment they faced each other. Danner heard himself suddenly in the midst of an uncontrollable giggling which even he realized verged on hysteria. The robot with the smear of food like a ribbon of honor looked so ridiculous. Danner to his dim surprise found that all this while he had been clutching the restaurant napkin in his left hand.

"Stand back," he said to the robot. "Let me out. Oh, you fool, don't you know this is a mistake?" His voice quavered. The robot creaked faintly and stepped back.

"It's bad enough to have you follow me," Danner said. "At least, you might be clean. A dirty robot is too much--too much--" The thought was idiotically unbearable, and he heard tears in his voice. Half-laughing, half-weeping, he wiped the steel chest clean and threw the napkin to the floor.

And it was at that very instant, with the feel of the hard chest still vivid in his memory, that realization finally broke through the protective screen of hysteria, and he remembered the truth. He would never in life be alone again. Never while he drew breath. And when he died, it would be at these steel hands, perhaps upon this steel chest, with the passionless face bent to his, the last thing in life he would ever see. No human companion, but the black steel skull of the Fury.

It took him nearly a week to reach Hartz. During the week, he changed his mind about how long it might take a man followed by a Fury to go mad. The last thing he saw at night was the street light shining through the curtains of his expensive hotel suite upon the metal shoulder of his jailer. All night long, waking from uneasy slumber, he could hear the faint creaking of some inward mechanism

functioning under the armor. And each time he woke it was to wonder whether he would ever wake again. Would the blow fall while he slept? And what kind of blow? How did the Furies execute? It was always a faint relief to see the bleak light of early morning shine upon the watcher by his bed. At least he had lived through the night. But was this living? And was it worth the burden?

He kept his hotel suite. Perhaps the management would have liked him to go, but nothing was said. Possibly they didn't dare. Life took on a strange, transparent quality, like something seen through an invisible wall. Outside of trying to reach Hartz, there was nothing Danner wanted to do. The old desires for luxuries, entertainment, travel, had melted away. He wouldn't have traveled alone.

He did spend hours in the public library, reading all that was available about the Furies. It was here that he first encountered the two haunting and frightening lines Milton wrote when the world was small and simple--mystifying lines that made no certain sense to anybody until man created a Fury out of steel, in his own image. But that two-handed engine at the door Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more....

Danner glanced up at his own two-handed engine, motionless at his shoulder, and thought of Milton and the long-ago times when life was simple and easy. He tried to picture the past. The twentieth century, when all civilizations together crashed over the brink in one majestic downfall to chaos. And the time before that, when people were... different, somehow. But how? It was too far and too strange. He could not imagine the time before the machines.

But he learned for the first time what had really happened, back there in his early years, when the bright world finally blinked out entirely and gray drudgery began. And the Furies were first forged in the likeness of man.

Before the really big wars began, technology advanced to the point where machines bred upon machines like living things, and there might have been an Eden on earth, with everybody's wants fully supplied, except that the social sciences fell too far behind the physical sciences. When the decimating wars came on, machines and people fought side by side, steel against steel and man against man, but man was the more perishable. The wars ended when there were no longer two societies left to fight against each other. Societies splintered apart into smaller and smaller groups until a state very close to anarchy set in.

The machines licked their metal wounds meanwhile and healed each other as they had been built to do. They had no need for the social sciences. They went on calmly reproducing themselves and handing out to mankind the luxuries which the age of Eden had designed them to hand out. Imperfectly of course. Incompletely, because some of their species were wiped out entirely and left no machines to breed and reproduce their kind. But most of them mined their raw materials, refined them, poured and cast the needed parts, made their own fuel, repaired their own injuries and maintained their breed upon the face of the earth with an efficiency man never even approached.

Meanwhile mankind splintered and splintered away. There were no longer any real groups, not even families. Men didn't need each other much. Emotional attachments dwindled. Men had been conditioned to accept vicarious surrogates and escapism was fatally easy. Men reoriented their emotions to the Escape Machines that fed them joyous, impossible adventure and made the waking world seem too dull to bother with. And the birth rate fell and fell. It was a very strange period. Luxury and chaos went hand in hand, anarchy and inertia were the same thing. And still the birth rate dropped....

Eventually a few people recognized what was happening. Man as a species was on the way out. And man was helpless to do anything about it. But he had a powerful servant. So the time came when some unsung genius saw what would have to be done. Someone saw the situation clearly and set a new pattern in the biggest of the surviving electronic calculators. This was the goal he set: "Mankind must be made self-responsible again. You will make this your only goal until you achieve the end."

It was simple, but the changes it produced were worldwide and all human life on the planet altered drastically because of it. The machines were an integrated society, if man was not. And now they had a single set of orders which all of them reorganized to obey.

So the days of the free luxuries ended. The Escape Machines shut up shop. Men were forced back into groups for the sake of survival. They had to undertake now the work the machines withheld, and slowly, slowly, common needs and common interests began to spawn the almost lost feeling of human unity again.

But it was so slow. And no machine could put back into man what he had lost--the internalized conscience. Individualism had reached its ultimate stage and there had been no deterrent to crime for a long while. Without family or clan relations, not even feud retaliation occurred. Conscience failed, since no man identified with any other.

The real job of the machines now was to rebuild in man a realistic superego to save him from extinction. A self-responsible society would be a genuinely interdependent one, the leader identifying with the group, and a realistically internalized conscience which would forbid and punish "sin"--the sin of injuring the group with which you identify.

And here the Furies came in.

The machines defined murder, under any circumstances, as the only human crime. This was accurate enough, since it is the only act which can irreplaceably destroy a unit of society.

The Furies couldn't prevent crime. Punishment never cures the criminal. But it can prevent others from committing crime through simple fear, when they see punishment administered to others. The Furies were the symbol of punishment. They overtly stalked the streets on the heels of their condemned victims, the outward and visible sign that murder is always punished, and punished most publicly and terribly. They were very efficient. They were never wrong. Or at least, in theory they were never wrong, and considering the enormous quantities of information stored by now in the analog computers, it seemed likely that the justice of the machines was far more efficient than that of humans could be.

Some day man would rediscover sin. Without it he had come near to perishing entirely. With it, he might resume his authority over himself and the race of mechanized servants who were helping him to restore his species. But until that day, the Furies would have to stalk the streets, man's conscience in metal guise, imposed by the machines man created a long time ago.

What Danner did during this time he scarcely knew. He thought a great deal of the old days when the Escape Machines still worked, before the machines rationed luxuries. He thought of this sullenly and with resentment, for he could see no point at all in the experiment mankind was embarked on. He had liked it better in the old days. And there were no Furies then, either.

He drank a good deal. Once he emptied his pockets into the hat of a legless beggar, because the man like himself was set apart from society by something new and terrible. For Danner it was the Fury.

For the beggar it was life itself. Thirty years ago he would have lived or died unheeded, tended only by machines. That a beggar could survive at all, by begging, must be a sign that society was beginning to feel twinges of awakened fellow feeling with its members, but to Danner that meant nothing. He wouldn't be around long enough to know how the story came out.

He wanted to talk to the beggar, though the man tried to wheel himself away on his little platform.

"Listen," Danner said urgently, following, searching his pockets. "I want to tell you. It doesn't feel the way you think it would. It feels--"

He was quite drunk that night, and he followed the beggar until the man threw the money back at him and thrust himself away rapidly on his wheeled platform, while Danner leaned against a building and tried to believe in its solidity. But only the shadow of the Fury, falling across him from the street lamp, was real.

Later that night, somewhere in the dark, he attacked the Fury. He seemed to remember finding a length of pipe somewhere, and he struck showers of sparks from the great, impervious shoulders above him. Then he ran, doubling and twisting up alleys, and in the end he hid in a dark doorway, waiting, until the steady footsteps resounded through the night.

He fell asleep, exhausted.

It was the next day that he finally reached Hartz.

"What went wrong?" Danner asked. In the past week he had changed a good deal. His face was taking on, in its impassivity, an odd resemblance to the metal mask of the robot.

Hartz struck the desk edge a nervous blow, grimacing when he hurt

his hand. The room seemed to be vibrating not with the pulse of the machines below but with his own tense energy.

"Something went wrong," he said. "I don't know yet. I--"

"You don't know!" Danner lost part of his impassivity.

"Now wait." Hartz made soothing motions with his hands. "Just hang on a little longer. It'll be all right. You can--"

"How much longer have I got?" Danner asked. He looked over his shoulder at the tall Fury standing behind him, as if he were really asking the question of it, not Hartz. There was a feeling, somehow, about the way he said it that made you think he must have asked that question many times, looking up into the blank steel face, and would go on asking hopelessly until the answer came at last. But not in words....

"I can't even find that out," Hartz said. "Damn it, Danner, this was a risk. You knew that."

"You said you could control the computer. I saw you do it. I want to know why you didn't do what you promised."

"Something went wrong, I tell you. It should have worked. The minute this--business--came up I fed in the data that should have protected you."

"But what happened?"

Hartz got up and began to pace the resilient flooring. "I just don't know. We don't understand the potentiality of the machines, that's all. I thought I could do it. But--"

"You thought!"

"I know I can do it. I'm still trying. I'm trying everything. After all, this is important to me, too. I'm working as fast as I can. That's why I couldn't see you before. I'm certain I can do it, if I can work this out my own way. Damn it, Danner, it's complex. And it's not like juggling a comptometer. Look at those things out there."

Danner didn't bother to look.

"You'd better do it," he said. "That's all."

Hartz said furiously. "Don't threaten me! Let me alone and I'll work it out. But don't threaten me."

"You're in this too," Danner said.

Hartz went back to his desk and sat down on the edge of it.

"How?" he asked.

"O'Reilly's dead. You paid me to kill him."

Hartz shrugged. "The Fury knows that," he said. "The computers know it. And it doesn't matter a damn bit. Your hand pulled the trigger, not mine."

"We're both guilty. If I suffer for it, you--"

"Now wait a minute. Get this straight. I thought you knew it. It's a basis of law enforcement, and always has been. Nobody's punished for intention. Only for actions. I'm no more responsible for O'Reilly's death than the gun you used on him."

"But you lied to me! You tricked me! I'll--"

"You'll do as I say, if you want to save yourself. I didn't trick you, I just made a mistake. Give me time and I'll retrieve it."

"How long?"

This time both men looked at the Fury. It stood impassive.

"I don't know how long," Danner answered his own question. "You say you don't. Nobody even knows how he'll kill me, when the time comes. I've been reading everything that's available to the public about this. Is it true that the method varies, just to keep people like me on tenterhooks? And the time allowed--doesn't that vary too?"

"Yes, it's true. But there's a minimum time--I'm almost sure. You must still be within it. Believe me, Danner, I can still call off the Fury. You saw me do it. You know it worked once. All I've got to find out is what went wrong this time. But the more you bother me the more I'll be delayed. I'll get in touch with you. Don't try to see me again."

Danner was on his feet. He took a few quick steps towards Hartz, fury and frustration breaking up the impassive mask which despair had been forming over his face. But the solemn footsteps of the Fury sounded behind him. He stopped.

The two men looked at each other.

"Give me time," Hartz said. "Trust me, Danner."

In a way it was worse, having hope. There must until now have been a kind of numbness of despair that had kept him from feeling too much. But now there was a chance that after all he might escape into the bright and new life he had risked so much for--if Hartz could save him in time.

Now, for a period, he began to savor experience again. He bought

new clothes. He traveled, though never, of course, alone. He even sought human companionship again and found it--after a fashion. But the kind of people willing to associate with a man under this sort of death sentence was not a very appealing type. He found, for instance, that some women felt strongly attracted to him, not because of himself or his money, but for the sake of his companion. They seemed enthralled by the opportunity for a close, safe brush with the very instrument of destiny. Over his very shoulder, sometimes, he would realize they watched the Fury in an ecstasy of fascinated anticipation. In a strange reaction of jealousy, he dropped such people as soon as he recognized the first coldly flirtatious glance one of them cast at the robot behind him.

He tried farther travel. He took the rocket to Africa, and came back by way of the rain-forests of South America, but neither the night clubs nor the exotic newness of strange places seemed to touch him in any way that mattered. The sunlight looked much the same, reflecting from the curved steel surfaces of his follower, whether it shone over lion-colored savannahs or filtered through the hanging gardens of the jungles. All novelty grew dull quickly because of the dreadfully familiar thing that stood for ever at his shoulder. He could enjoy nothing at all.

And the rhythmic beat of footfalls behind him began to grow unendurable. He used earplugs, but the heavy vibration throbbed through his skull in a constant measure like an eternal headache. Even when the Fury stood still, he could hear in his head the imaginary beating of its steps.

He bought weapons and tried to destroy the robot. Of course he failed. And even if he succeeded he knew another would be assigned to him. Liquor and drugs were no good. Suicide came more and more often into his mind, but he postponed that thought, because Hartz had said there was still hope.

In the end, he came back to the city to be near Hartz--and hope. Again he found himself spending most of his time in the library, walking no more than he had to because of the footsteps that thudded behind him. And it was here, one morning, that he found the answer.

He had gone through all available factual material about the Furies. He had gone through all the literary references collated under that heading, astonished to find how many there were and how apt some of them had become--like Milton's two-handed engine--after the lapse of all these centuries. "Those strong feet that followed, followed after," he read. ". . . with unhurrying chase, And unperturbed pace, Deliberate speed, majestic instancy..." He turned the page and saw himself and his plight more literally than any allegory: I shook the pillaring hours And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears, I stand amid the dust of the mounded years-- My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.

He let several tears of self-pity fall upon the page that pictured him so clearly.

But then he passed on from literary references to the library's store of filmed plays, because some of them were cross-indexed under the heading he sought. He watched Orestes hounded in modern dress from Argos to Athens with a single seven-foot robot Fury at his heels instead of the three snake-haired Erinyes of legend. There had been an outburst of plays on the theme when the Furies first came into usage. Sunk in a half-dream of his own boyhood memories when the Escape Machines still operated, Danner lost himself in the action of the films.

He lost himself so completely that when the familiar scene first flashed by him in the viewing booth he hardly questioned it. The

whole experience was part of a familiar boyhood pattern and he was not at first surprised to find one scene more vividly familiar than the rest. But then memory rang a bell in his mind and he sat up sharply and brought his fist down with a bang on the stop-action button. He spun the film back and ran the scene over again.

It showed a man walking with his Fury through city traffic, the two of them moving in a little desert island of their own making, like a Crusoe with a Friday at his heels.... It showed the man turn into an alley, glance up at the camera anxiously, take a deep breath and break into a sudden run. It showed the Fury hesitate, make indecisive motions and then turn and walk quietly and calmly away in the other direction, its feet ringing on the pavement hollowly.

Danner spun the film back again and ran the scene once more, just to make doubly sure. He was shaking so hard he could scarcely manipulate the viewer.

"How do you like that?" he muttered to the Fury behind him in the dim booth. He had by now formed a habit of talking to the Fury a good deal, in a rapid, mumbling undertone, not really aware he did it. "What do you make of that, you? Seen it before, haven't you? Familiar, isn't it? Isn't it! Isn't it! Answer me, you damned dumb hulk!" And reaching backward, he struck the robot across the chest as he would have struck Hartz if he could. The blow made a hollow sound in the booth, but the robot made no other response, though when Danner looked back inquiringly at it, he saw the reflections of the over-familiar scene, running a third time on the screen, running in tiny reflection across the robot's chest and faceless head, as if it too remembered.

So now he knew the answer. And Hartz had never possessed the power he claimed. Or if he did, had no intention of using it to help Danner. Why should he? His risk was over now. No wonder Hartz

had been so nervous, running that film-strip off on a news-screen in his office. But the anxiety sprang not from the dangerous thing he was tampering with, but from sheer strain in matching his activities to the action in the play. How he must have rehearsed it, timing every move! And how he must have laughed, afterwards.

"How long have I got?" Danner demanded fiercely, striking a hollow reverberation from the robot's chest. "How long? Answer me! Long enough?"

Release from hope was an ecstasy, now. He need not wait any longer. He need not try any more. All he had to do was get to Hartz and get there fast, before his own time ran out. He thought with revulsion of all the days he had wasted already, in travel and time-killing, when for all he knew his own last minutes might be draining away now. Before Hartz's did.

"Come along," he said needlessly to the Fury. "Hurry!"

It came, matching its speed to his, the enigmatic timer inside it ticking the moments away towards that instant when the two-handed engine would smite once, and smite no more.

Hartz sat in the Controller's office behind a brand-new desk, looking down from the very top of the pyramid now over the banks of computers that kept society running and cracked the whip over mankind. He sighed with deep content.

The only thing was, he found himself thinking a good deal about Danner. Dreaming of him, even. Not with guilt, because guilt implies conscience, and the long schooling in anarchic individualism was still deep in the roots of every man's mind. But with uneasiness, perhaps.

Thinking of Danner, he leaned back and unlocked a small drawer

which he had transferred from his old desk to the new. He slid his hand in and let his fingers touch the controls lightly, idly. Quite idly.

Two movements, and he could save Danner's life. For, of course, he had lied to Danner straight through. He could control the Furies very easily. He could save Danner, but he had never intended to. There was no need. And the thing was dangerous. You tamper once with a mechanism as complex as that which controlled society, and there would be no telling where the maladjustment might end. Chain-reaction, maybe, throwing the whole organization out of kilter. No.

He might some day have to use the device in the drawer. He hoped not. He pushed the drawer shut quickly, and heard the soft click of the lock.

He was Controller now. Guardian, in a sense, of the machines which were faithful in a way no man could ever be. Quis custodiet, Hartz thought. The old problem. And the answer was: Nobody. Nobody, today. He himself had no superiors and his power was absolute. Because of this little mechanism in the drawer, nobody controlled the Controller. Not an internal conscience, and not an external one. Nothing could touch him.

Hearing the footsteps on the stairs, he thought for a moment he must be dreaming. He had sometimes dreamed that he was Danner, with those relentless footfalls thudding after him. But he was awake now.

It was strange that he caught the almost subsonic beat of the approaching metal feet before he heard the storming steps of Danner rushing up his private stairs. The whole thing happened so fast that time seemed to have no connection with it. First he heard the heavy, subsonic beat, then the sudden tumult of shouts and banging doors downstairs, and then last of all the thump, thump of Danner charging up the stairs, his steps so perfectly matched by the

heavier thud of the robot's that the metal trampling drowned out the tramp of flesh and bone and leather.

Then Danner flung the door open with a crash, and the shouts and tramplings from below funnelled upward into the quiet office like a cyclone rushing towards the hearer. But a cyclone in a nightmare, because it would never get any nearer. Time had stopped.

Time had stopped with Danner in the doorway, his face convulsed, both hands holding the revolver because he shook so badly he could not brace it with one.

Hartz acted without any more thought than a robot. He had dreamed of this moment too often, in one form or another. If he could have tampered with the Fury to the extent of hurrying Danner's death, he would have done it. But he didn't know how. He could only wait it out, as anxiously as Danner himself, hoping against hope that the blow would fall and the executioner strike before Danner guessed the truth. Or gave up hope.

So Hartz was ready when trouble came. He found his own gun in his hand without the least recollection of having opened the drawer. The trouble was that time had stopped. He knew, in the back of his mind, that the Fury must stop Danner from injuring anybody. But Danner stood in the doorway alone, the revolver in both shaking hands. And farther back, behind the knowledge of the Fury's duty, Hartz's mind held the knowledge that the machines could be stopped. The Furies could fail. He dared not trust his life to their incorruptibility, because he himself was the source of a corruption that could stop them in their tracks.

The gun was in his hand without his knowledge. The trigger pressed his finger and the revolver kicked back against his palm, and the spurt of the explosion made the air hiss between him and Danner.

He heard his bullet clang on metal.

Time started again, running double-pace to catch up. The Fury had been no more than a single pace behind Danner after all, because its steel arm encircled him and its steel hand was deflecting Danner's gun. Danner had fired, yes, but not soon enough. Not before the Fury reached him. Hartz's bullet struck first.

It struck Danner in the chest, exploding through him, and rang upon the steel chest of the Fury behind him. Danner's face smoothed out into a blankness as complete as the blankness of the mask above his head. He slumped backwards, not falling because of the robot's embrace, but slowly slipping to the floor between the Fury's arm and its impervious metal body. His revolver thumped softly to the carpet. Blood welled from his chest and back.

The robot stood there impassive, a streak of Danner's blood slanting across its metal chest like a robotic ribbon of honor.

The Fury and the Controller of the Furies stood staring at each other. And the Fury could not, of course, speak, but in Hartz's mind it seemed to.

"Self-defense is no excuse," the Fury seemed to be saying. "We never punish intent, but we always punish action. Any act of murder. Any act of murder."

Hartz barely had time to drop his revolver in his desk drawer before the first of the clamorous crowd from downstairs came bursting through the door. He barely had the presence of mind to do it, either. He had not really thought the thing through this far.

It was, on the surface, a clear case of suicide. In a slightly unsteady voice he heard himself explaining. Everybody had seen the madman

rushing through the office, his Fury at his heels. This wouldn't be the first time a killer and his Fury had tried to get at the Controller, begging him to call off the jailer and forestall the executioner. What had happened, Hartz told his underlings calmly enough, was that the Fury had naturally stopped the man from shooting Hartz. And the victim had then turned his gun upon himself. Powder-burns on his clothing showed it. (The desk was very near the door.) Back-blast in the skin of Danner's hands would show he had really fired a gun.

Suicide. It would satisfy any human. But it would not satisfy the computers.

They carried the dead man out. They left Hartz and the Fury alone, still facing each other across the desk. If anyone thought this was strange, nobody showed it.

Hartz himself didn't know if it was strange or not. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Nobody had ever been fool enough to commit murder in the very presence of a Fury. Even the Controller did not know exactly how the computers assessed evidence and fixed guilt. Should this Fury have been recalled, normally? If Danner's death were really suicide, would Hartz stand here alone now?

He knew the machines were already processing the evidence of what had really happened here. What he couldn't be sure of was whether this Fury had already received its orders and would follow him wherever he went from now on until the hour of his death. Or whether it simply stood motionless, waiting recall.

Well, it didn't matter. This Fury or another was already, in the present moment, in the process of receiving instructions about him. There was only one thing to do. Thank God there was something he could do.

So Hartz unlocked the desk drawer and slid it open, touched the clicking keys he had never expected to use. Very carefully he fed the coded information, digit by digit, into the computers. As he did, he looked out through the glass wall and imagined he could see down there in the hidden tapes the units of data fading into blankness and the new, false information flashing into existence.

He looked up at the robot. He smiled a little.

"Now you'll forget," he said. "You and the computers. You can go now. I won't be seeing you again."

Either the computers worked incredibly fast--as of course they did--or pure coincidence took over, because in only a moment or two the Fury moved as if in response to Hartz's dismissal. It had stood quite motionless since Danner slid through its arms. Now new orders animated it, and briefly its motion was almost jerky as it changed from one set of instructions to another. It almost seemed to bow, a stiff little bending motion that brought its head down to a level with Hartz's.

He saw his own face reflected in the blank face of the Fury. You could very nearly read an ironic note in that stiff bow, with the diplomat's ribbon of honor across the chest of the creature, symbol of duty discharged honorably. But there was nothing honorable about this withdrawal. The incorruptible metal was putting on corruption and looking back at Hartz with the reflection of his own face.

He watched it stalk towards the door. He heard it go thudding evenly down the stairs. He could feel the thuds vibrate in the floor, and there was a sudden sick dizziness in him when he thought the whole fabric of society was shaking under his feet.

The machines were corruptible.

Mankind's survival still depended on the computers, and the computers could not be trusted. Hartz looked down and saw that his hands were shaking. He shut the drawer and heard the lock click softly. He gazed at his hands. He felt their shaking echoed in an inner shaking, a terrifying sense of the instability of the world.

A sudden, appalling loneliness swept over him like a cold wind. He had never felt before so urgent a need for the companionship of his own kind. No one person, but people. Just people. The sense of human beings all around him, a very primitive need.

He got his hat and coat and went downstairs rapidly, hands deep in his pockets because of some inner chill no coat could guard against. Halfway down the stairs he stopped dead still.

There were footsteps behind him.

He dared not look back at first. He knew those footsteps. But he had two fears and he didn't know which was worse. The fear that a Fury was after him--and the fear that it was not. There would be a sort of insane relief if it really was, because then he could trust the machines after all, and this terrible loneliness might pass over him and go.

He took another downward step, not looking back. He heard the ominous footfall behind him, echoing his own. He sighed one deep sigh and looked back.

There was nothing on the stairs.

He went on down after a timeless pause, watching over his shoulder. He could hear the relentless feet thudding behind him, but no visible Fury followed. No visible Fury.

The Erinyes had struck inward again, and an invisible Fury of the

mind followed Hartz down the stairs.

It was as if sin had come anew into the world, and the first man felt again the first inward guilt. So the computers had not failed, after all.

Hartz went slowly down the steps and out into the street, still hearing as he would always hear the relentless, incorruptible footsteps behind him that no longer rang like metal.

Hercules Muscles In

A Complete Pete Manx Novelet

By Kelvin Kent

Author of "Knight Must Fall," "A Comedy of Eras," etc.

Published in Thrilling Wonder Stories, Vol. 19, No. 2 (February 1941)

under the pseudonym Kelvin Kent. The same issue also featured "Trouble on Titan" by Arthur K. Barnes, and ended with two essays: "The Story Behind the Story: Trouble on Titan" (by Barnes) and "The Story Behind the Story: Hercules Muscles In" (by "Kent") but sadly I have neither.

Contents

Chapter I Back to 700 B.C.

Chapter II Strong Man Fills Strong-Box

Chapter III Home on the Range

Chapter IV The Last Roundup

When the Strong Man of Peloponnesos Finds Himself in a Labor Daze, Year-Leaper Pete Proves That a Brain and Brawn Trust Is Mightier Than Zeus!

Chapter I

Back to 700 B.C.

Pete Manx rubbed his bullet head reflectively, put the derby back upon it, and glanced at his companion in the taxicab.

"You just don't understand, Biggie," he said wearily. "Lots of guys have the same trouble."

Mr. Bigpig Callahan, one-time bronco-wrangler and currently a wrestler both owned and managed by Pete, looked glum. Or, at least, one supposed he did. It is difficult to detect emotion in a face like a slab of beef, slashed by a lipless gap, dotted by two tiny, glittering eyes, and fringed with bristling red hair and a couple of scalloped objects that were probably ears.

Bigpig's face had not always been thus. Raised in New York's East Side, he had brawled his way from Jersey to Montana, remaining in the latter place for six years learning how to punch cattle. Pete had a well-founded idea that a cow had once stepped on Bigpig's uncomely face, a process scarcely calculated to improve on nature. At any rate, it was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever.

"Flors," said Mr. Callahan. "Dey, git me."

Pete translated mentally. Roses, petunias, or tulips to Bigpig came under the classification of flors. But it was only goldenrod that was poison.

"You're allergic to the things," Pete pointed out. "See? It's like having hayfever."

"Alloigic, huh? Izzat good or bad?"

"It's bad. And we get out here. The Doc'll fix you up. He's a smart fella. He found out I was alloi--allergic to time traveling."

But this was utterly beyond Bigpig's comprehension. He could never have understood the principles of Mayhem's device that had more than once projected Pete Manx back into historical eras and long-

past centuries. Once Pete's consciousness had been sent back to Rome to inhabit the body of a citizen of that interesting city, once he had visited Egypt.

But those days were gone forever for Pete. Every time he had visited an ancient time-sector, he had got into trouble. Right now he was sitting pretty, or had been till lately. He'd given up his job as concessionaire at Coney Island, and instead was managing Bigpig Callahan, Mammoth of the Mat. And Bigpig was good--there was no doubt about that.

Built like an ox to begin with, his years of wrangling on the range had developed lightning-quick reactions in what Pete hopefully called his brain. The mauler had only two serious faults. He had fallen arches. On another man that might be unimportant, but Bigpig's arches reminded Pete vaguely of the Brooklyn Bridge. His other really dangerous weakness was his allergy.

Doctor Horatio Mayhem's scrawny figure appeared in the door in response to a ring. The scientist's mild eyes blinked at the callers.

"Ah. Hello, Pete," he greeted. "Come in."

They were ushered into Mayhem's laboratory, where wires, rheostats, converters, generators, and tubes made a baffling jigsaw puzzle. Two metal chairs, looking rather deadly, stood in the corner. Pete averted his gaze. He had sat in those chairs more than once, and each time he had been flung back into past centuries. They were part of Mayhem's time machine, that released the ego of the individual and sent it out to possess the body of some inhabitant of an ancient time-sector.

"This," said Pete, "is Bigpig Callahan." Swiftly he explained the situation, while Bigpig shifted unhappily from one foot to another.

"So we had a scrap scheduled for last night, Doc. And it was all fixed, only Biggie ran into some goldenrod in a florist's shop. He swelled up fit to bust and we forfeited the purse. He couldn't fight. He couldn't even talk."

"Allergy, eh?" Mayhem asked.

"Yeah. The Purple Python was a set-up for Biggie--but he lost the purse. It was winner take all."

"I'da moidered da bum," Mr. Callahan remarked at random. "I'da thrown him outa da ring."

"Sure," Pete soothed his fighter. "Just relax, Biggie. Don't bother us." Bigpig wandered away in a vague manner, while Mayhem and Manx went on talking.

"Some people are allergic to goldenrod pollen, of course," the doctor nodded. "But--"

"It hits Bigpig bad. His throat swells up so he can hardly breathe. Now look, Doc, you're smart. Can you cure Biggie so he won't be allergic any more?"

Instead of answering, Mayhem yelled sharply. He sprang forward, making frantic gestures.

"Stop! Don't do that! The current's turned on--"

"My feet hoit," explained Bigpig, and sank down in one of the metal chairs.

Electricity crackled. Mr. Callahan looked surprised, and then an expression of utter calm flooded his face. He ceased to breathe, and relaxed, to all appearances a large, uncomely, and repugnant

corpse.

"Biggie!" Pete cried desperately. "Look out!"

Mayhem shut off the current, but he was too late. Bigpig Callahan was no longer among those present. Pete Manx clawed at the wrestler's shoulder.

"Wake up, you bird-brained dope! You can't do this to me! It ain't legal--"

The scientist drew Pete back.

"He isn't dead. He's just been sent into a past era."

"Oh... oh, yeah. That's right. Well, what are we waiting for? Bring him back, Doc, will you?"

Mayhem hesitated.

"I'm afraid I can't, just yet. I was making some adjustments on my machine, and I'd dismantled part of the apparatus. The device only works one way now. Never mind, though," the doctor consoled. "I'll be able to wake your friend up in a week or so, maybe."

Pete writhed in anguish. "Where is he now?"

"Um--let's see." Mayhem referred to various gauges. "Beyond 700 b. c. Maybe 800 b. c."

"Huh," said Pete unhappily. "Back to the dinosaurs, huh?"

"Oh, no. Ancient Greece--Peloponnesos--is where he's gone, I think. There was a culture there, you know."

Pete went off on a tangent.

"That dumb ox! All my dough tied up in him, and he goes visiting Greeks. He'll get in trouble. He's too dopey to keep out of it." A great inward struggle seemed to be taking place within Mr. Manx's soul, but at last virtue triumphed. "Doc!" Pete said suddenly. "I gotta look after that monkey. I know how this time racket works. Can you send me back to Greece too?"

Mayhem nodded.

"Yes. But I can't return you to our present time-sector for some time, until I've finished my repairs--"

"I'll get along. I can take care of myself--but Biggie can't. Okay. Shoot the works, Doc." And Pete seated himself in the second of the two chairs.

Mayhem went to the instrument board and pulled a lever. Pete was surprised to discover that it was the Fourth of July. His head had become a Roman candle.

Sssss--swish!

Pete Manx stopped breathing and relaxed. He was on his way to 700 b. c.!

Chapter II

Strong Man Fills Strong-Box

Pete opened his eyes to sunlight and a face. The face was unprepossessing, decorated with a bristling black beard and an assortment of scars. The man was wearing armor, and a plume

waved from his bronze helmet.

He leaned over Pete and jabbed the prostrate man in the stomach with a spear.

"Hey!" said Mr. Manx. "Don't do that. It ain't friendly."

"No runaway slave can make a fool out of one of the King's Guard," the soldier growled, and used the spear again. Pete scrambled hurriedly to his feet, staring around.

He was in the midst of a fairly big city. This was seemingly the main stem, for a number of chariots were rolling past, filled with people heading for a masquerade. They wore an assortment of tunics, togas, pillow-slips, and armor, or so it seemed to Pete. He yelped and dodged the spear.

"Slave?" Pete said aggrievedly. "Where in Hellene am I?"

"In the city of Tiryns, of course, in the Peloponnesos, as if you didn't know," said the soldier. "And I was taking you to the king for judgment when you pretended sunstroke and fell down. Come along!"

Pete obeyed. There was nothing else he could do. He was, he decided, talking Greek, for his memory-center connected with speech had automatically hitched itself to the brain of the body he was inhabiting. Mayhem had once explained all this very carefully. The miserable luck that pursued Manx whenever he took a time tour had struck again. So he was a runaway slave this time. Pete swore softly at his ill fate. Glancing down, he suppressed a shout, a short, sharp cry of dismay. He seemed to be clad only in an inadequate pillow-slip.

"Oh-oh." Pete murmured. "First thing I gotta find myself a pair of

pants--"

Haled through Tiryns at the point of a spear, he found himself wondering about Bigpig Callahan. He had not the slightest idea what Biggie would look like in his Hellenic incarnation.

They reached the palace. It was a dump, compared to the White House, Pete thought. They entered, presently finding themselves in the throne room, a big, chilly place with a raised dais at one end. It was filled with a motley throng, but Pete's eyes were riveted to the throne and the man who sat upon it.

The king was a husky old man with a long gray beard and a vicious gleam in his eye. Beside him stood a dapper, handsome officer in gilded armor, who occasionally leaned forward to whisper in the ruler's ear.

Before the dais stood a very giant of a man--a brawny figure clad in a dilapidated lion skin and nothing else. Mild blue eyes searched the room in a dazed manner.

Pete's captor dragged him into a corner. "We'll have to wait," he muttered. "Hercules is in trouble again, and I'll wager Nessus is responsible."

"Huh?" The guard turned away, scowling, but a friendlier soldier nearby answered Pete. "Nessus is the officer standing beside the throne. He used to be the city's chief hero, till Hercules came. But nobody looks at him now."

The name of the man in the lion-skin was vaguely familiar.

"Hercules, eh?" Pete said. "What's his racket?"

Animation showed in the other's face. "You must be a stranger, not to

know of Hercules. He's under bond to the throne, and King Eurystheus makes him do dirty jobs like cleaning the stables, but Hercules is a hero indeed. He killed Geryon--a human monster with three bodies--and brought his herd of red cattle to the king. And he slew the lion of Nemea--that's the skin he's wearing."

"A Frank Buck, huh?"

"I know not the name. He captured the man-eating horses of Diomedes, too. They're penned up now, of course, and malefactors are fed to them. Eurystheus doesn't like Hercules; he's afraid of his growing popularity with the people. But he doesn't dare kill him outright. He just gives him harder and harder tasks to perform."

Nessus bent toward the king and whispered again. Eurystheus smiled and stroked his beard. He stared at Hercules.

"It has come to our knowledge," the king rumbled, "that you struck a costermonger and dislocated his jaw. What was his offense?"

"Gosh," Hercules said plaintively, "he stepped on my corns. He was tryin'to sell me some goldenrod an'I can't stand the stuff. An'he wouldn't go away. I don't get this set-up, anyway--"

"Yipee!" The involuntary cry burst from Pete's lips. The guard made a frantic clutch as his captive sprang forward. A spear whizzed past Mr. Manx's head, and a soldier shouted, "An assassin! Slay him!"

But Pete wasn't heading toward the king. He was embracing Hercules. "Biggie! It's you!" Pete gurgled at the lion-skinned man.

"Hey--you sound like Pete!" Hercules said. "What'sa idea of this whacky get-up, anyhow? What--"

Pete scrambled to safety behind the hero's brawny legs as a soldier

approached, waving a spear. But King Eurystheus lifted a hand.

"A friend of yours, Hercules? Who is this helot?"

"Manx is the name, your honor--"

"Silence!" Pete's guard bellowed. He bowed low before the king. "A runaway slave, your majesty. I caught him and brought him back for judgment."

"I see." Eurystheus scabbled in his beard. "Well, throw him to the man-eating horses. We can't have such goings-on in Tiryns. It's bad enough with the imperial treasury running at a deficit and the people objecting to our taxes, without slaves getting above themselves. To the man-eaters with him."

Two soldiers grabbed Pete, who clung frantically to Bigpig's pillarlike legs.

"Make 'em go 'way," Manx babbled. "Sock 'em, Biggie--quick!"

Mr. Callahan hesitated, scratched his head thoughtfully, and then swung immense arms. The soldiers described an irregular orbit across the room, ending up by folding around an impassive pillar. They slid down gently to the floor.

"Sedition!" Nessus cried, his thin, handsome face alight with malice. "Slay them both!"

"Hey, wait a minute," Biggie roared, suddenly getting the idea. "Pete's a pal of mine. You can't push him around."

There was a silence. Eurystheus leaned toward Nessus.

"I can't order Hercules killed," he whispered. "The people won't stand

for it."

"Well, kill the slave," said Nessus, with what Pete thought an unnecessary enthusiasm.

But Biggie folded his arms and scowled.

"Pete's my pal. If anybody lays a finger on him--"

There was a silence. It was a deadlock, and no one realized this as well as Mr. Manx. From his experience with kings and Pharaohs, he knew how important it was for regents to keep face, and his mind was working furiously in an attempt to find an out. Maybe there was a way

"Now wait a minute, your majesty," he said, gulping. "I got an idea we can settle this out of court. You said the treasury was running in the red. Suppose I show you a way to clean up plenty--"

"Kill him!" Nessus snapped, but the king leaned forward interestedly.

"Eh? Are you talking about--"

"Money," Pete said enticingly. "Gold. Dinero. The long green."

Eurystheus shushed Nessus with a lifted hand.

"He may know where some treasure is hidden. Come forward, slave. I shall hear from you."

Pete glanced around.

"This has gotta be a private audience. Just you and me and--uh--Hercules here."

There was a little wrangle about this, but presently the courtroom was cleared. Nessus, however, remained, glaring at Pete and Hercules with vicious eyes.

"Now," said Eurystheus, "speak up, or my torturers will make you. Where is this treasure buried?"

By this time Pete had had time to consider possible angles. Somehow his mind had gone blank. What Tiryns needed was some up-to-date racket that would pay dividends--but what? Not knowing much about the culture and life of the Hellenic city, it was impossible to say. Pete cast back to what he had seen during his progress toward the palace. Chariots....

"Who owns all these two-wheel jalopies around here?" he asked.

"Don't change the subject," the king growled. "About this treasure--"

"It's on the main stem, just waiting to be picked up," Pete said hurriedly. "Your transportation system's lousy. No subways, no El's, no buses. It'd be tough to make those here in Tiryns, sure, but you've got a ready-made business here with these chariots. It's too hot to walk. What Tiryns needs are taxis...."

It took an hour to explain the situation to Eurystheus, but Pete's glib tongue finally convinced the king.

"But I gotta get something out of it, King," he argued. "I'll fix up the whole business for you--take care of all the angles--but you gotta give me a franchise on the main stem. Only my cabs can run there. No competition. We can keep the fares up that way."

"A franchise?" The king pondered. "Well, you say you'll give me fifty per cent of all the profits. How long will this arrangement keep up?"

Nessus whispered in the royal ear. Eurystheus smiled and turned to Hercules.

"You vouch for this slave? Good. Then he is safe for your lifetime, Hercules. We are merciful. The franchise is valid as long as you live."

And, despite Pete's objections, so it was arranged.

When Manx started something, he finished it. He got a moneylender to put up a small amount of gold, with Hercules' famous lion-skin as security, and with this as a basis, took an option on a few dozen cheap chariots. Creating taximeters was not too great a problem, once Pete understood the monetary exchange of the city. Cogged gears, connected with the chariot wheels, caused various dials to revolve, indicating the fare.

"You gotta put on a front," Pete explained to the wide-eyed Biggie. "Help me splash on some of this gilt paint." It wasn't long before the chariots were finished. Nobody would have recognized them.

They gleamed like gold, and had striped awnings to protect the occupants from the heat of the sun. On the backs were stenciled glaring red signs:

Petros Mankos Cabs
Six Can Ride for the Price of One
Why Walk? Ride in Cool Comfort

Pete had purposely bought small, light chariots, for he saw no reason to incur the expense of purchasing and caring for horses. Instead, it was easy, with a little labor, to transform the conveyances into rickshaws, which could be drawn easily by the drivers themselves.

"It worked at the Fair," Pete mused smugly, "so why not here?"

And it did work! For years the common people had enviously eyed the chariots which they could not afford to own. Now they paid gladly to ride briefly on a level with nobles. The nobles; however, didn't like it. They had a way of driving recklessly into Pete's cabs and overturning them.

Mr. Manx was equal to the occasion. Within a few days a new fleet of cabs made their appearance on the streets of Tiryns. They were purple, with golden spangles, and had bright orange awnings with tassels. Small fans, connected with the turning wheels, helped to keep the riders cool. The fare was double that of the plebian chariots, but these cabs modestly advertised the legend:

Ultra Limousine Service
For Those Who Can Afford the Best
Fans and Music Provided!

The limousine charioteers were specially picked and trained by Pete. In the absence of radios, he decided to depend on the human voice, and soon the limousine cabs were rolling along merrily, drawn by huskies who yodeled popular songs Pete taught them. "Wagon Wheels," "My Merry Oldsmobile," and "Heigh-Ho" were the favorites, until the charioteers got short of wind and threatened to strike for a ten-song-a-day minimum.

Pete installed a special seat at the back of the cabs, and placed on each one a neatly-uniformed blonde with a zither, who thereafter sang and played while the cabmen devoted their energies to pulling. The nobles, who heretofore had preferred their own private, horse-drawn chariots, now flocked to the Ultra Limousine Service. "Honey draws flies," Pete remarked sagely to Bigpig. "And honeys draw guys. Not bad, eh?"

Chapter III

Home on the Range

Pete found no difficulty in renewing the options on the chariots, and more were immediately added. Tiryns was a changed city. By the end of the second week Pete was able to present King Eurystheus with three bags filled with gold. He was, however, distressed to find Nessus closeted with the king, obviously up to no good.

"I don't like that shavetail," he told Biggie--and his fears were justified when the pair were summoned to the palace the next day. Eurystheus showered them with compliments and praised the cut of Hercules' lion skin, which Pete had redeemed out of hock. "A mighty hero," he said tauntingly, glancing at Nessus. "How long has it been since you killed Geryon? A year? You must grow stale here with nothing to do. Suppose you trot off to Elis and clean the Augean stables."

"Suppose he don't?" Pete made the mistake of inquiring.

"Hercules is under bond to me," said the king. "In expiation of various crimes. If he fails to obey me and refuses the tasks I set him, he dies. But the mighty Hercules will obey, I am sure."

"Okay," said Pete, shrugging. "We're in. So we're stable-boys. But don't think I don't get the angle--"

He didn't finish. It wasn't necessary. But, later, he got Nessus aside and proceeded to insult the officer vigorously.

"You put the king up to this, shavetail. My franchise is good as long as Hercules lives, but Eurystheus doesn't like the idea of splitting the take with us. If Hercules just happens to kick the bucket, I lose the franchise--"

"And will be flung to the man-eating horses," Nessus said nastily. "I'll make sure of that, slave."

Pete was feeling none too well when he and Bigpig arrived at the neighboring kingdom of Elis. King Augeias was a huge, fat man with a helpless air of incompetence whenever he ordered people executed, which he did far too often for Pete's peace of mind. Cleaning the Augean stables was no small task. They hadn't been cleaned for thirty years!

"Well, we'll be finished in thirty years, maybe," said Biggie, staring at the mess. Pete shook his head.

"Won't do. There's a time limit. There's gotta be an out--there always is, if you look hard enough. Though I dunno--"

"Can't you high-pressure the big shot into giving us some help?" Bigpig asked.

"No. We've got to do it ourselves--wait!" Pete's eyes widened. "High pressure--you said something that time, pal. I got an idea--and what an idea!"

He fled, dragging the bewildered Hercules with him. Pete had remembered that two great rivers--the Alpheios and the Peneios--flowed near the stables, and that higher up the slope was a natural lake. King Augeias was willing to provide Hercules with all the facilities he required, but not with any man-power. So Pete took advantage of the royal offer and laid a pipe-line from the lake down to the stables.

Force of gravity did the rest. When a valve was turned, a jet of water, hard as a bar of iron, thrust itself resistlessly out of the nozzle. It took all of Bigpig's Herculean strength to manipulate the hose, but the

gadget worked! A deluge flooded the stables, and, even before Pete expected, the job was finished.

"Quicker than the wpa could have done it," Pete remarked cryptically.

"Thanks," said King Augeias. "Come back in thirty years and do it again, eh?"

King Eurystheus nibbled his beard and Nessus cursed in vicious monotone when Pete and Hercules returned to Tiryns. The taxicab business was booming. Gold poured into the coffers. Half of it went to the king, but the latter wanted it all. Pete suspected that he was thinking up some even more difficult task for Hercules to perform.

Unexpectedly, trouble came from Bigpig himself. Ill at ease in this alien time-sector, he kept wandering about, picking fights and getting in jams until Pete was really worried. It was vital that Hercules keep the good will of the people, for that protected him from the king's malice.

"No," Mr. Manx said coldly. "You can't open a beer joint. Ain't the taxicab racket good enough for you?"

"I wisht I was back in Montana," Bigpig mourned. "If I had a cayuse between my legs--"

"Uh! That's an idea. It'll keep you out of trouble, anyway. Listen, Biggie; suppose I help you start a Dude Ranch?"

"Huh?"

"It'll clean up." Pete was rapidly becoming enthusiastic about his own project. "The people'll eat it up...."

Also it would keep Bigpig out of the king's icy eye, but that was not entirely dependable, with Nessus around. Nevertheless the plan went forward. Soon the streets of Tiryns were placarded with large, flaming signs. The chariot-cabs carried them, too.

Hercules' Dude Ranch
Mgr., Petros Mankos
Open to the Public on Next Saturn's Day
Big Free Show
Cow-punchers—bulldogging—bronco-busting
Rodeo! Why go to the beach on your vacation?
Spend a week or two at
Hercules'Dude Ranch!

The grand opening was a huge success. Vast mobs attended. Celebrities were brought free to the premiere in the Petros Mankos cabs for the occasion.

They all applauded loudly, and were conquered. Bigpig begged to be allowed to wear a pair of chaps like the other hands, whom he had trained, but Pete was adamant.

"That lion-skin's your trademark," he insisted. "Everybody knows it."

"Heck," said Mr. Callahan. "It smells."

Though this was undeniable, Bigpig knew Pete too well to argue further. As for the other Greek lads, they threw themselves into their duties with excited glee. Already good horsemen, they soon learned the western lore Pete and Bigpig taught them. There were, of course, no guitars, but the boys were provided with zithers, and managed to master some ballads. Around the campfire that night the crowds listened intently while, "Git along, little dogie," resounded dulcetly over the broad Hellenic plains.

There was a barbecue. The rodeo was overwhelmingly successful,

especially when Hercules bulldogged a giant steer. He had taught the hands how to handle lariats, and there was an exhibition of lassoing that was a highlight of the day. By the time most of the crowd had left, success was assured. Already there were more reservations than Pete could handle.

"We'll build new bunk-houses," Manx told Bigpig. "These mugs are used to sleeping on anything. We'll cram 'em in like sardines and tell 'em they're roughing it. What a take! And we don't have to split a penny with old Sticky-whiskers."

Just then a messenger arrived from old Sticky-whiskers. "A new labor for you, Hercules !" was the announcement. "The marshes of Arkadian Stymphalos are overrun with man-eating birds. King Eurystheus orders you to slay these demons."

A cheer went up from the remaining guests.

"Hercules! Son of Zeus! A new labor for Hercules!"

Pete cheered faintly with the rest, but his heart was descending rapidly. It thumped almost audibly into his sandals. Man-eating birds? Vultures? Eagles? Whatever they were, Hercules would have to obey the king--or else suffer unpleasant consequences. And, in the latter contingency, Pete himself would provide fodder for the man-eating horses.

"I always knew horses would ruin me," Mr. Manx moaned. "But not like this!"

However, two days later, Pete and Hercules marshaled the group of cowhands and rode toward the land of Arcady. A skeleton crew was left to take care of the ranch and the dudes; the taxicab business could take care of itself. But most of the punchers were with Pete

and Bigpig, cantering on with lariats looped at their odd-looking saddles, armed with spears and short swords instead of six-guns.

The manufacture of a pistol was beyond Pete's capabilities, though he was already making up a stock of fireworks for the next big rodeo.

"Nessus was behind this," Pete informed Hercules, who was writhing uncomfortably in the lion skin. "Stop scratching, will you?"

"Gosh--"

"Shut up. Nessus put the king up to setting you after these man-eating birds."

"Well, anyhow we know what they are," said Bigpig.

"Yeah. Somebody who'd seen 'em described 'em to me. Ostriches, that's what. How they got into this part of the country I dunno, but they did."

"How do you kill an ostrich, Pete?" For answer Mr. Manx grinned and patted the lariat at his saddle-horn.... It made a good story after they got back from Arkadian Stymphalos, after having fulfilled their errand. Centuries later the same story would be famous as one of Hercules' Twelve Labors; it would be written that the hero killed the birds one by one with his unerring arrows.

The actual incident was somewhat different. For one thing, Hercules played no part in it. He ran into a field of goldenrod and was incapacitated for several days. Pete and the punchers galloped after the ostriches, lassoed them, and killed the giant birds with their sharp blades. Thereafter, for a short time, Pete's taxi-drivers sold their customers ostrich-plumes at extremely exorbitant prices.

"Buy a feather for your girl friend's hair, buddy?" went the cry. And

more money went into Pete's pockets, to the fury of Nessus and the king, whose plots once more had rebounded.

"What I can't figure out," Pete said bitterly as he sat on the corral and watched Hercules wash his lion skin," is why you should be allergic to goldenrod now. You're not Bigpig. At least you haven't got his body. Your body belongs to Hercules."

"Maybe he was allergic to goldenrod, too, huh?"

Pete shrugged.

"Maybe. Wish we could get back to Nineteen-forty. The king's bound to get us sooner or later. He's after that franchise, and Nessus is after our hides."

Two days later Pete found himself locked out of his office. A king's soldier was on guard, and he grinned at Manx unpleasantly.

"You can't come in," he said. "His Majesty's taken over."

Pete's jaw dropped.

"Huh? Why, he can't do that! It's unconstitutional!"

"What's a constitution?" the soldier asked interestedly.

Pete didn't answer. He was hastening toward the palace. The bitterest pill of all was the fact that he had to pay to ride in one of his own taxicabs.

King Eurystheus and Nessus were, as usual, together. Pete burst into impassioned speech without preamble, but a spear jabbed into his midriff brought him to a halt.

"Be silent," the king said, stroking his beard. "Slaves are usually brought into the royal presence only for judgment."

"You can't swipe my business like this," Pete said stubbornly. "I got a franchise--" A horrible thought struck him. Two hours had passed since he had seen Bigpig. "Is Hercules okay?" he asked fearfully.

"As far as I know," was the response. "However, your franchise is worthless. We had forgotten, until today, that no slave can hold property in Tiryns. So, naturally, our agreement is invalid, and your company reverts to the crown."

Pete sputtered. Nessus grinned.

"I have given a new franchise to my faithful servant here," Eurystheus said, indicating the officer. "He now owns the--what is it--"

"The Nessus Cab Corporation," interjected the officer.

"I get it!" Manx's voice was bitter. "And you're giving the king a lot bigger rake-off than I did. Okay, shave-tail. You asked for it--and you're going to get it."

"We are merciful," said the king. "We allow you to live. Guards, throw this bum out." Eurystheus had picked up some of Pete's own picturesque language....

Mr. Manx wasted no time in giving his ready cash to Hercules who, being a freed man, could legally possess it. That done, he went into action. By this time he knew the ropes in Tiryns. He knew, for example, that the official who passed for chief of police was not above making a dishonest penny.

Thus it came about that Larsyas, this official, became extremely busy. Signs made their appearance in the streets. They said, "No

Parking," "Parking Limit 100 Pulse-Beats," "Deliveries Only," and the like. Certain curbs were painted red. And, somehow, Nessus'taxi-drivers ran into trouble continually with the police force of Tiryns.

"I don't want a cent out of it," Pete explained to Larsyas. "I'm just showing you how to make yourself some dough. Maybe sometime you can do me a favor. Here's how it works. Whenever somebody gets a ticket, you fine 'em--see?"

"But--"

"And you need a speed limit. Make it different for each block, and keep the signs out of sight if you can. That's the way we work it back in the u. s. a."

Nessus blew up. He interviewed the bland Larsyas, who was already counting his ill-gotten gains, but got nowhere.

"Law is law," said the chief of police. "Every good citizen should uphold it."

Nessus said something unprintable.

"You're fined fifty gold pieces for contempt of court," Larsyas smiled. "What's that? Oh, you do, eh? That'll be fifty more."

Somehow the officer managed to choke back his retort. He turned to stride out.

"One moment," the chief called. "Something that will interest you. I'm making the--uh--main stem of Tiryns a one-way street hereafter."

"What?" Nessus turned green. "Why, you'll cut my fares in half!"

But Larsyas was drinking contentedly from a gilded bottle, filled with home-made brandy that Pete had distilled for him.

"Petros Mankos is behind this," Nessus choked. "I'm going to the king!"

Chapter IV

The Last Roundup

The days passed, while Pete gloated over the wreckage of what had been a thriving taxicab industry. The officers were well-trained. They arrested drivers on every possible pretext, and, if they could, egged them on to fury, so that the additional charge of resisting an officer could be brought. Nessus refused to pay the fines himself, until he found nobody would work for him. It was too expensive.

"That'll show him," Pete grinned, idly rolling a pair of dice he had made. "We're cleaning up here at the dude ranch, and it's in your name. Nessus can go hang. We got the gravy."

"What if the big shot gets frisky again?" Bigpig asked.

"I found out something. You were bound out to Eurystheus for only twelve labors. The ostriches were the eleventh. One more, and you'll be free. The king won't be able to put the bee on you any more."

"Swell." Hercules was busy grinding charcoal. "Wait'll we pull off the next rodeo. It'll wow 'em, huh?"

It would, Pete thought. Everything was prepared for the second rodeo to advertise the ranch. This time there was an admission fee charged. Tiryns was placarded with announcements, cowboys in sandwich-boards rode about, and policemen energetically sold

tickets to protesting taxi-drivers. The chef d'oeuvre of the affair was to be a fireworks display at night. For some time Pete had been busy manufacturing sparklers, Roman candles, crackers, and torpedoes. Saltpeter, willow charcoal, and sulphur were all he needed.

And then Tiryns heard of the hydra, a man-eating monster that laired in a salt-marsh near the sea!

Nessus smiled darkly. King Eurystheus grinned in his beard and set the date. In three days Hercules must set out to slay the hydra. If he failed--he would die, for the monster was carnivorous. If Hercules refused to undertake the task, he would be stoned to death.

Pete was far more worried than Bigpig. The latter had almost come to believe in his heroic prowess. Moreover, he had been practicing with the Hellenic weapons, and mastered them fairly well. Bigpig could now handle a sword, spear, or bow almost as well as any Greek soldier. He told Pete not to worry, and that he'd chop the hydra into mincemeat.

"I'll moider da bum," he remarked. "In de foist round."

Against his better judgment, Pete almost allowed himself to be convinced. After all, the body of Hercules was gigantic. It would take a pretty big monster to overcome the son of Zeus. But--what was the hydra?

Stories conflicted, each one more incredible than the last. Pete finally decided it was a sea-snake, and felt better.

On the morning of the fatal day Bigpie rose and called for his lion skin. "Some rat swiped it," he declared. "I hoid somebody movin'around my room last night."

He went to the window.

"See? Footprints. Hey, Pete--"

"Here's the lion skin," Mr. Manx said wearily. "It was hanging out on the line. Dive into it and get going." Bigpig obeyed. He tied the paws together over his chest and beamed. "The boys are going to ride down to the swamp with me an' watch the killin'. You comin', Pete?"

"Sure. By the way, the king's got a lot of his soldiers camped on the plain a ways off. Wants to make sure you don't take a powder, I guess. Ready?"

There was no answer. Pete there at Bigpig, caught his breath.

"Biggie!" he yelled. "What the--"

"Flors!" gasped the unfortunate Mr. Callahan. "Flors! Glup-- I can't breathe!"

His face purpled. Pete slapped him on the back, and a cloud of dust rose from the lion skin. Goldenrod-pollen!

"Take it off, Biggie !" Pete's fingers were tearing at the garment. "Peel, quick!"

But it was too late. By the time the skin was thrown out the window, Hercules was suffering the worst effects of allergy. He lay in a corner, gasping and kicking.

Pete's lips tightened. So there had been an intruder last night! Sabotage--that's what it was. Somebody had discovered Bigpig's weakness, and had dusted the lion skin with the fatal goldenrod-pollen.

"Nessus," Pete gritted. "I'll bet he did it. That low-lived rat!"

A cry came from without. "Hercules! Hasten! We wait!" But Hercules was beyond answering.

He lay prostrate, face swollen to twice its normal size, breathing hoarsely.

He would recover presently--but not for a while. In the meantime he needed rest.

"We'll be along in a few hours," Pete called.

There was silence. Then: "The king's soldiers say that if Hercules doesn't start out in ten minutes they'll come after him."

Manx cursed. For the Hellenes to discover their popular hero stricken by a "curse from the gods" would be fatal. Somehow, Hercules had to ride to the hydra's swamp. And he had to start within ten minutes.

"These things always happen to me," Pete moaned, and slipped off his pillow-slip. He recovered the lion skin and donned it. The pollen didn't effect him, of course, and at a distance he might be mistaken for Hercules. But--

He bent over Bigpig.

"Listen, Biggie. I'm riding to the swamp. As soon as you can make it, come after me and take over. I'll try and stall till you get there. Okay?"

"Glup... yeah, sure... I'll moider da bum."

Pete went out by the back way. The ranch-hands were gathered there, and he explained part of the situation to them. They were ready to help in any way they could.

"Keep me screened from the troopers, see? We can't let 'em get too close. Let's see--where's the nag?"

Hercules' horse, a huge black stallion, was led up, ready. It was equipped with short-sword, javelins, bow and arrows, and a dozen lariats hanging around the saddle. Pete vaulted into place.

"Hightail it, boys," he yelled, setting the example. The fake Hercules and his followers galloped off, while the army of King Eurystheus, caught unprepared, milled in confusion. One small band of troopers broke from the rest and set out in pursuit. Looking back, Pete recognized the standard of Nessus--a golden centaur.

Hard and fast they rode. Perspiration covered them, and hours had passed before they reached the swamp, a low, desolate region of dark pools and quicksand, where a few thick, stunted trees grew. The troop of Nessus had reined in some distance back, unwilling to approach the lair of the monster.

Now the cowboys halted, looking askance at one another. Pete's heart sank. There was no sign of Hercules.

"Well," he said. "Guess I'll ride on a bit. Those Cossacks back there can still see me too plainly. Stick around, fellas."

Somebody handed Pete a chunk of beef. "That'll draw the hydra if you throw it into the water," he was informed.

Manx dropped the meat as though it had been death itself.

"Hey! I'm just going to stall till Hercules gets here. I'm no stand-in stunt man!"

There was no answer. The cowhands sat motionless in their saddles

and watched Pete ride on, to halt by a gnarled tree not too close to the water's edge. He sat uneasily for a time, waiting. No Hercules. What a spot!

Pete examined his weapons. Javelins. Bow and arrows. Lots of lariats. A saddlebag containing--what? He investigated. Fireworks. The childish-minded Hercules had stuffed an assorted conglomeration of fireworks into the bag, apparently intending to let them off at some appropriate moment.

"What a slap-happy stumble-bum!" Pete remarked, and then turned into ice.

He hadn't thrown the beef into the water. There was nothing to draw the monster out of the depths. But-- The hydra was coming!

A ripple broke the surface. A snakelike object twisted up, heading straight for the shore where Pete stood in his stirrups frozen, his hands twisted in the reins. Three more snakes popped up, and the wake of a gigantic bulk swirled into view. The horse went crazy.

Never completely broken, it bucked and sunfished like the wild thing it was. Pete saw himself sailing over the horse's head into the water. He shut his eyes and clung frantically. Something had to give. The girths snapped.

Pete and saddle thumped together on the ground, while the mustang departed for safer climes. Simultaneously a coil wound itself around Mr. Manx's leg.

His hand touched a rope. He managed to get to his knees, and saw a dozen tentacles reaching out of the water toward him. The body of a giant squid was darkly visible under the surface--a sea monster that had been washed into the salt marshes by some freak tidal

wave. The grip on Pete's ankle was inexorable. He was being pulled toward the water.

The stunted tree wasn't too far away. Pete whirled the rope around his head and let fly. If he missed. . .

He didn't miss. The lasso settled and tightened over a stumpy, thick limb. Pete was pulled over backward, but managed to wind a coil of the rope about his waist. He took a timber hitch in it. The rope sang with strain.

Pete tried to pull himself free, but could not. Another tentacle curled about his thighs, binding his legs together. He got hold of a javelin and dug it again and again into the cold, slimy flesh, but without result. The baleful eyes of the hydra glared at him unwinkingly through the water.

No use to yell for help. He'd get none. Nessus was probably laughing at the sight of his supposed enemy being devoured by the monster.

Pete started to get mad. Just then he saw the bag of fireworks.

His eyes lit up. Maybe—He had an idea.

Pete had manufactured matches long ago. He had some in his pocket. It was almost impossible to get them out, but at last he managed. Meanwhile the dragging strain was almost cutting him in two.

Roman candles! They were the things. Pete lit a handful and pointed them at the thick, cablelike tentacles. Red fire burst forth, sputtering and flaming angrily.

It worked! Where steel hadn't daunted the monster, fire did. Or, at least, the hydra was surprised. The tentacles drew back from the

searing flames, and Pete instantly sprang to his feet and ran like hell. He stopped only when the rope jerked him back.

He looked around. The squid lay with its tentacles waving, its huge body submerged. Out of its reach, Pete was safe. Then, cautiously, he gathered the other lariats.

The first loop he flung settled over a tentacle, but slipped free. The second try was more successful. One by one Pete lassoed the waving arms of the creature, anchoring them to the tree. Whether or not the ropes would hold he couldn't say; he could only wait. And, still clutching a Roman candle, he did.

The ropes drew taut. They sang and snapped--but held. Luckily, Pete had captured all of the squid's tentacles, and on this flat, shelving bottom, the monster could get no purchase grip to make use of its weight and strength.

The ropes held! The hydra was conquered!

Pete turned and yelled. The monster could be slain at leisure now, or simply left to starve to death. Right now he needed his cowboys, so he could get a horse and gallop back to the ranch before the deception was discovered.

The thunder of hoofs came to his ears. He saw Nessus bearing down on him, handsome face twisted in a gloating smile, eyes gleaming. Before Pete could stir, he was picked up bodily and thrown across the saddle in front of the Greek officer. The point of a dagger pricked his back.

"Don't move, Petros Mankos--impostor!" Nessus commanded. "We're going to the king--and I'll show him that it's you, not Hercules, who wears the lion's skin!"

Pete was acutely uncomfortable. The horse's gallop jarred him till he was nearly seasick, and sometimes the dagger would slip down painfully. He heard a cry,

"Ride 'im, cowboy!"

He looked back. The mustangs of the cowhands were racing in pursuit, dust rising from their heels. Beyond them, far behind, came the troop of Nessus. Could Pete's would-be rescuers reach him in time?

Nessus laughed and dug his spurs deep. The steed sprang forward with renewed speed. The officer bent low as an arrow whistled past.

"Hey!" Pete yelled. "You'll hit me!"

But the cowboys didn't care about that. As long as Hercules' reputation went untarnished, they'd be satisfied--; if they had to kill both Nessus and Pete to accomplish their ends. Their wails went up to the blue sky.

"Yippee! Ride 'im, cowboy! Yippee!"

In another moment, Pete knew, the arrows would find their mark. Nessus, grimly silent, drove the horse on. His dagger did not stir from the captive's back. Pete noticed, abruptly, that he held something in his hand. The Roman candle....

Somehow he got the matches out of his pocket without attracting Nessus' attention. How he lit the fuse he never knew, in that gusting wind. Arrows were singing viciously past him. The dust-clouds choked him. The thunder of hoofs deafened him. He lit the candle and aimed it--

Swish! In front of the horse's nose a spurt of raving fire blasted! The

horrified animal tried to turn inside out and start running the other way. It only succeeded in doing a somersault. But that was effective enough. Pete felt himself flying through the air, and fell heavily atop a body that whooped hoarsely once and was silent.

He got up dizzily from Nessus' prostrate form. The officer was out cold.

The cowhands came riding up. One of them extended a hand, and helped Pete vault to the saddle behind him. "Ride 'im, cowboy!"

They fled toward the ranch, hopelessly outdistancing the troop. Pete breathed again. Nessus' story would never be believed now. Hercules' reputation was safe--even enhanced. For the son of Zeus had slain the hydra!

Bang!

* * *

"Hello, Pete," said Doctor Mayhem. "How are you feeling?"

"Wh-what?" Mr. Manx stared around at the laboratory. Greece had vanished.

The cowboys were gone. He was back in New York.

"I finally succeeded in repairing the machine," Dr. Mayhem said. "I brought back your wrestler friend, Bigpig, first."

Pete staggered erect.

"Where is he?"

"I sent him to the hospital. He had a bad case of--well, he must have

run into some goldenrod. But he'll come around in a day or so. What happened, anyhow, Pete?"

It was a long story, but at last it was finished, to Mayhem's intense satisfaction. He had been hanging on every word.

"Hercules, eh? That clears up so many mysteries. The man-eating birds--ostriches, you say? And the hydra was a squid? Amazing. Even the shirt of Nessus that was supposed to have killed Hercules--" Doctor Mayhem seemed amused.

"Yeah." Pete glanced at the door. "It seems to me I came here with the idea of asking you if you could cure Bigpig. That was quite a while ago, but I'd still like to know."

"I'm afraid not." The scientist's voice was regretful.

Manx sighed. "I guess I'll just have to keep him away from goldenrod, if I expect him to stay in condition for more fights, then," he said.

Mayhem slapped his hand to his forehead.

"Oh, I forget, Pete. Your friend told me to tell you he was finished with the wrestling profession. He said that when he got out of the hospital he was going back to Montana."

There was silence for two minutes. At length Pete drew himself together and made for the door.

"See you later, Doc," he said. "I've got something important to attend to, right away."

"You have? What?"

Mr. Manx's grin was enough to frighten babies.

"Oh, nothing much," he shrugged, as he closed the door behind him. "I just want to send Biggie some--flowers!"

"Lost Paradise"

Published in *Weird Tales*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (July 1936).

Across the table-top Yarol the Venusian reached a swift hand that closed on Northwest Smith's wrist heavily. "Look!" he said in a low voice.

Smith's no-colored eyes turned leisurely in the direction of the little Venusian's almost imperceptible nod.

The panorama that stretched out under his casual gaze would have caught at a newcomer's breath with its very magnitude, but to Smith the sight was an old story. Their table was one of many ranged behind a rail along the edge of a parapet below which the dizzy gulf of New York's steel terraces dropped away in a thousand-foot sweep to the far earth. Lacing that swooning gulf of emptiness the steel spans of the traffic bridges arched from building to building, aswarm with New York's countless hordes. Men from the three planets, wanderers and space-rangers and queer, brutish things that were not wholly human mingled with the throngs of Earth as they streamed endlessly over the great, steel bridges spanning the gulfs of New York. From the high parapet table where Smith and Yarol sat one could watch the solar system go by, world upon world over the arches that descended by tiers and terraces into the perpetual darkness, and twinkling, far-off lights of the deeps where solid earth lay hidden. In mighty swoops and arcs they latticed the void yawning below the parapet on which Yarol leaned a negligent elbow and stared.

Smith's pale eyes, following that stare, saw only the usual crowd of

pedestrians swarming across the steel span of the bridge a story below.

"See?" murmured Yarol. "That little fellow in the red leather coat. The white-haired one, walking slow at the edge of the rail. See?"

"Um-m." Smith made a non-committal noise in his throat as he found the object of Yarol's interest. It was an odd-looking specimen of humanity that loitered slowly along in the outer edges of the crowd surging across the bridge. His red coat was belted about a body whose extreme fragility was apparent even at this elevation; though from what Smith could see of his foreshortened figure he did not seem like one in ill health. On his uncovered head the hair grew silky and silvery, and under one arm he clutched a squarish package which he was careful, Smith noticed, to keep on the railing side, away from the passing crowd.

"I'll bet you the next drinks," murmured Yarol, his wise black eyes twinkling under long lashes, "that you can't guess what race that little fellow's from, or where it originated."

"The next drinks are on me anyhow," grinned Smith. "No, I can't guess. Does it matter?"

"Oh—curious, that's, all. I've seen a member of that race only once before in my life, and I'll bet you never saw one. And yet it's an Earth race, perhaps the very oldest. Did you ever hear of the Seles?"

Smith shook his head silently, his eyes on the little figure below, which was slowly drawing out of sight beneath the overhang of the terrace on which they sat.

"They live somewhere in the remotest part of Asia, no one knows exactly where. But they're not Mongolian. It's a pure race, and one

that has no counterpart anywhere in the solar system that I ever heard of. I think, even among themselves their origin has been forgotten, though their legends go back so far it makes you dizzy to think of it. They're queer-looking, all white-haired and fragile as glass. Keep very much to themselves, of course. When one ventures out into the world you can be sure it's for some tremendously important reason. Wonder why that fellow--oh well, not that it matters. Only seeing him reminded me of the queer story that's told about them. They have a Secret. No, don't laugh; it's supposed to be something very strange and wonderful, which their race life is dedicated to keeping quiet. I'd give a lot to know what it is, just for curiosity's sake."

"None of your business, my boy," said Smith sleepily. "Like as not it's better for you that you don't know. These secrets have a way of being uncomfortable things to know."

"No such luck," Yarol shrugged. "Let's have another drink--on you, remember--and forget it."

He lifted a finger to summon the hurrying waiter.

But the summons was never given. For just then, around the corner of the railing which separated the little enclosure of tables from the street running along the edge of the terrace came a flash of red that caught Yarol's eye abruptly. It was the little white-haired man, hugging his squarish parcel and walking timorously, as if he were not accustomed to thronged streets and terraces a thousand feet high in steel-shimmering air.

And at the moment Yarol's eye caught him, something happened. A man in a dirty brown uniform, whose defaced insignia was indecipherable pushed forward and jostled the red-coated stroller roughly. The little man gave a squeak of alarm and clutched

frantically at his parcel, but too late. The jostling had knocked it almost out from under his arm, and before he could recover his grip the burly assailant had seized it and shouldered quickly away through the crowd.

Stark terror was livid on the little man's face as he stared wildly around. And in the first desperate glance his eyes encountered the two men at the table watching him with absorbing interest. Across the rail his gaze met theirs in a passion of entreaty. There was something about the attitude of them, their worn spaceman's leather and faces stamped with the indefinable ideal of lives lived dangerously, which must have told him in that desperate glimpse that perhaps help lay here. He gripped the rail, white-knuckled, and gasped across it,

"Follow him! Get it back--reward--oh, hurry!"

"How much of a reward?" demanded Yarol with sudden purpose in his voice.

"Anything--your own price--only hurry!"

"You swear that?"

The little man's face was suffusing with anguished scarlet. "I swear it--of course I swear it! But hurry! Hurry, or you'll--"

"Do you swear it by--" Yarol hesitated and cast a curiously guilty glance over his shoulder at Smith. Then he rose and leaned across the rail, whispering something in the stranger's ear. Smith saw a look of intense terror sweep across the flushed face. In its wake the crimson drained slowly away, leaving the man's moon-white features blank with an emotion to which Smith could put no name. But he nodded frantically. In a voice that had strained itself to a hoarse and

gasping whisper he said,

"Yes, I swear. Now go!"

With no further words Yarol vaulted the rail and plunged into the crowd in the wake of the vanishing thief. The little man stared after him for an instant, then came slowly around to the gate in the railing and threaded the empty tables to Smith's. He sank into the chair Yarol had left and buried his silkily silver head in hands that shook.

Smith regarded him impassively. He was somewhat surprised to see that it was not an old man who sat here opposite him. The mark of no more than middle years lay upon the anxiety-ravaged face, and the hands which were clenched above the bowed head were strong and firm, with a queerly fragile slenderness that somehow did not belie the sense of indwelling strength which he had noticed in his first glance. It was not, thought Smith, an individual slenderness, but, as Yarol had said, a racial trait that made the man look as if a blow would break him into fragments. And the race, had he not known better, he would have sworn dwelt upon some smaller planet than Earth, some world of lesser gravity where such delicate bone-structure as this would have purpose.

After a while the stranger's head rose slowly and he stared at Smith with haggard eyes. They were a queer color, those eyes--dark, soft, veiled in a sort of filmed translucency so that they seemed never to dwell directly upon anything. They gave the whole face a look of withdrawn, introspective peace wildly at odds now with the anguish of unrest upon the delicate features of the man.

He was scrutinizing Smith, the desperation in his eyes robbing the long stare of any impertinence. With averted eyes Smith let him look. Twice he was aware that the other's lips had parted and his breath caught as if for speech; but he must have seen something in that

dark, impassive face across the table, scarred with the tale of many battles, cold-eyed, emotionless, which made him think better of attempting questions. So he sat there silently, hands twisting on the table, naked anguish in his eyes, waiting.

The minutes went by slowly. It must have been all of a quarter of an hour before Smith heard a step behind him and knew by the light which dazzled across the face of the man opposite that Yarol had returned. The little Venusian pulled up a chair and sank into it silently, grinning and laying on the table a flat, squansh package.

The stranger pounced upon it with a little, inarticulate cry, running anxious hands over the brown paper in which it was wrapped, testing the brown seals which splotched the side where the edges of the covering came together. Satisfied then, he turned to Yarol. The wild desperation had died upon his face now, magically allowing it to fall into lines of a vast tranquility. Smith thought he had never seen a face so suddenly and serenely at peace. And yet there was in its peacefulness a queer sort of resignation, as if something lay ahead of him which he accepted without a struggle; as if, perhaps, he was prepared to pay whatever tremendous price Yarol asked, and knew it would be high.

"What is it," he asked Yarol in a gentle voice, "that you wish as your reward?"

"Tell me the Secret," said Yarol boldly. He was grinning as he said it. The rescue of the package had not been a task of any great difficulty for a man of his knowledge and character. How he had accomplished it not even Smith knew--the ways of Venusians are strange--but he had had no doubt that Yarol would succeed. He was not looking now at the Venusian's fair, cherubic face with its wise black eyes dancing. He was watching the stranger, and he saw no surprise upon the man's delicate features, only a little flash of quickly

darkened brightness behind the veiled eyes, a little spasm of pain and acknowledgment twisting his face for a moment.

"I might have known that," he said quietly, in his soft, low voice that held a taint of some alien inflection of speech beneath its careful English. "Have you any conception of what it is you ask?"

"A little." Yarol's voice was sobering under the graveness of the other's toils. "I--I knew one of your race once--one of the Seles--and learned just enough to make me want very badly the whole Secret."

"You learned--a name, too," said the little man gently. "And I swore by it to give you what you asked. I shall give it to you. But you must understand that I would never have given that oath had even so vital a thing as my own life depended upon it. I, or any of the Seles, would die before swearing by that name in a cause less great than--than the one for which I swore. By that"--he smiled faintly--"you may guess how precious a thing this package is. Are you sure, are you very sure you wish to know our secret?"

Smith recognized the stubbornness that was beginning to shadow Yarol's finely featured face.

"I am," said the Venusian firmly. "And you promised it to me in 'the name of--'" he broke off, faintly mouthing syllables he did not utter. The little man smiled at him with a queer hint of pity on his face.

"You are invoking powers," he said, "which you very clearly know nothing of. A dangerous thing to do. But--yes, I have sworn, and I will tell you. I must tell you now, even if you did not wish to know; for a promise made in that name must be fulfilled, whatever it cost either promiser or promised. I am sorry--but now you must know."

"Tell us, then," urged Yarol, leaning forward across the table.

The little man turned to Smith, his face serene with a peace that vaguely roused unease in the Earthman's mind.

"Do you, too, wish to know?" he asked.

Smith hesitated for an instant, weighing that nameless unease against his own curiosity. Despite himself he felt curiously impelled to know the answer to Yarol's question, though he sensed more surely as he thought it over a queer, quiet threat behind the little stranger's calmness. He nodded shortly and scowled at Yarol.

Without further ado the man crossed his arms on the table over his precious parcel, leaned forward and began to speak in his soft, slow voice. And as he talked, it seemed to Smith that a greater serenity even than before was coming into his eyes, something as vast and calm as death itself. He seemed to be leaving life behind as he spoke, with every word sinking deeper and deeper into a peace that nothing in life could trouble. And Smith knew that the precious secret must not be thus on the verge of betrayal, and its betrayer so deathly calm, unless a peril as great as death itself lay behind the revelation. He caught his breath to check the disclosures, but a compulsion seemed to be on him now that he could not break. Almost apathetically he listened.

"You must imagine," the little man was saying quietly, "the analogy of--well, for example, of a race of people driven by necessity into pitch-black caverns where their children and grandchildren are reared without ever once having seen light or made any use of their eyes. As the generations passed a legend would grow up around the ineffable beauty and mystery of Sight. It would become a religion, perhaps, the tale of a greater glory than words could describe--for how can one describe sight to the blind?--which their forebears had known and which they still possessed the organs for perceiving, if conditions were such as to permit it.

"Our race has such a legend. There is a faculty--a sense--that we have lost through the countless eons since at our peak and origin we possessed it. With us 'peak'and 'origin'are synonymous; for, like no other race in existence, our most ancient legends begin in a golden age of the infinitely long past. Beyond that they do not go. We have no stories among us of any crude beginnings, like other races. Our origin is lost to us, though the legends of our people go farther back than I could make you believe. But so far as history tells us, we sprang full-fledged from some remote, unlegended birth into highly civilized, perfectly cultured being. And in that state of perfection we possessed the lost sense which exists only in veiled tradition today.

"In the wilderness of Tibet the remnants of our once mighty race dwell. Since Earth's beginnings we have dwelt there, while in the outside world mankind struggled slowly up out of savagery. And by infinite degrees we have declined, until to the majority of us the Secret is lost. Yet our past is too splendid to forget, and we disdain even now to mingle with the young civilizations that have risen. For our glorious Secret is not wholly gone. Our priests know it, and guard it with dreadful magics, and though it is not meet that even the whole of our own race should share the mystery, yet the meanest of us would scorn even so much as the crown of your greatest empire, because we, who inherited the Secret, are so far greater than kings."

He paused, and the withdrawn look in his queer, translucent eyes deepened. Yarol said urgently, as if to call him back into the present again,

"Yes, but what is it? What is the Secret?"

The soft eyes turned to him compassionately.

"Yes--you must be told. There is no escape for you now. How you

learned that name by which you invoked me I cannot guess, but I know that you did not learn much more, or you would never have used the power of it to ask me this question. It is--unfortunate---for us all that I can answer you--that I am one of the few who know. None but we priests ever venture outside our mountain retreat. So you have asked your question of one of the little number who could answer--and that is a misfortune for you as well as for me."

Again he paused, and Smith saw that vast tranquility deepening upon his serene features. So might a man look who gazes, without protest, into the face of death.

"Go on," urged Yarol impatiently. "Tell us. Tell us the Secret."

"I can't," the little man's white head shook. He smiled faintly. "There are no words. But I will show you. Look."

He reached out one fragile hand and tilted the glass that stood at Smith's elbow so that the red dregs of the segir-whisky spilled in a tiny pool on the table.

"Look," he said again.

Smith's eyes sought the shining redness of the spilled liquid. There was a darkness in it through which pale shadows moved so strangely that he bent closer to see, for nothing near them could possibly have cast such reflections.

He was conscious that Yarol too was leaning to look, but after that he was conscious of nothing but the red darkness of the pool stirred with pale flickerings, and his eyes were plunging so deeply into its secretness that he could not stir a muscle, and the table and the terrace and the whole great teeming city of steel about him was a mist that faded into oblivion.

From a great way off he heard that soft, slow voice, full of infinite resignation, infinite calm, and a vast, transcendent pity.

"Do not struggle," it said gently. "Surrender your minds to mine and I will show you, poor foolish children, what you ask. I must, by virtue of the name. And it may be that the knowledge you gain will be worth even the price it costs us all--for we three must die when the secret is revealed. You understand that, surely? Our whole race-life, from ages immemorial, is dedicated to the Secret's keeping, and any outside the circle of our priesthood who learn it must die that the knowledge be not betrayed. And I, who in my foolishness swore by the name, must tell you what you ask, and see that you die before I pay the price of my own weakness--with my own death.

"Well, this was ordained. Do not struggle against it--it is the pattern into which our lives are woven, and from our births we three moved forward to this moment around a table, together. Now watch, and listen--and learn.

"In the fourth dimension, which is time, man can travel only with the flow of its stream. In the other three he can move freely at will, but in time he must submit to the forward motion which is all he knows. Incidentally, only this dimension of the four affects him physically. As he moves along the fourth dimension he ages. Now once we knew the secret of moving as freely through time as through space, and in a way that did not affect our bodies any more than the motion of stepping forward or back, up or down. That secret involved the use of a special sense which I believe all men possess, though through ages of disuse it has atrophied almost to non-existence. Only among the Seles does even a memory of it exist, and only among our priesthood have we those who possess that ancient sense in its full power.

"It is not physically that even we can move at will through time. Nor

can we in any way affect what has gone before or is to come after, save in the knowledge of past and future which we gain in our journeyings. For our motion in time is confined strictly to what you may call memory. Through that all but lost sense we can look back into the lives of those who went before, or forward through the still unbodied but definitely existent 'memories' of those who come after us. For as I have said, all life is woven into a finished pattern, in which future and past are irrevocably limned.

"There is danger, even in this way of traveling. Just what it is no one knows, for none who meet the danger return. Perhaps the voyager chances into the memories of a man dying, and cannot escape. Or perhaps-- I do not know. But sometimes the mind does not return--snaps out.

"Though there are no limits to any of these four dimensions so far as mankind is concerned, yet the distance which we may venture along any one of them is limited to the capacity of the mind that journeys. No mind, however powerful, could trace life back to its origin. For that reason we have no knowledge of our own beginnings, before that golden age I spoke of. But we do know that we are exiles from a place too lovely to have lasted, a land more exquisite than anything Earth can show. From a world like a jewel we came, and our cities were so fair that even now children sing songs of Baloise the Beautiful, and ivory-walled Ingala and Nial of the white roofs.

"A catastrophe drove us out of that land--a catastrophe that no one understands. Legend says that our gods were angered and forsook us. What actually happened no-one seems to know. But we mourn still for the lovely world of Seles where we were born. It was--but look, you shall see."

The voice had been a low rising and falling of undernotes upon a sea of darkness; but now Smith, all his consciousness still centred upon

the reflecting pool of hypnotic red, was aware of a stirring and subtle motion deep down in its darkness. Things were moving, rising, dizziness so that his head swam and the void trembled about him.

Out of that shaking darkness a light began to glow. Reality was taking shape about him, a new substance and a new scene, and as the light and the landscape formed out of darkness, so his own mind clothed itself in flesh again, taking on reality by slow degrees.

Presently he was standing on the slope of a low hill, velvet with dark grass in the twilight. Below him in that lovely half-translucency of dusk Baloise the Beautiful lay out-spread, ivory-white, glimmering through the dimness like a pearl half drowned in dark wine. Somehow he knew the city for what it was, knew its name and loved every pale spire and dome and archway spread out in the dusk below him. Baloise the Beautiful, his lovely city---

He had no time to wonder at this sudden, aching familiarity; for beyond the ivory roofs a great moony shimmer was beginning to lighten the dim sky, such a vast and far-spreading glow that he caught his breath as he stood watching; for surely no moon that ever rose on Earth gave forth so mighty an illumination. It spread behind the stretch of Baloise's ivory roof-tops in a great halo that turned the whole night breathless with coming miracle. Then beyond the city he saw the crest of a vast silver circle glimmering through a wash of ground vapor, and suddenly he understood.

Slowly, slowly it rose. The ivory roof-tops of Baloise the Beautiful took that great soft glimmering light and turned it into pearly gleaming, and the whole night was miraculous with the wonder of rising Earth.

On the hillside Smith was motionless while the vast bright globe swung clear of the roofs and floated free at last in the pale light of the

Moon. He had seen this sight before, from a dead and barren satellite, but never the exquisite luminance of Earth through the vapors of Moon-air that veiled the vast globe in a shimmer of enchantment as it swung mistily through the dusk, all its silvery continents faintly flushed with green, the translucent wonder of its seas shining jewel-clear, jewel-pale, colored like opals in the lucid tranquility of the Earth-bright dark.

It was almost too lovely a sight for man to gaze on unprepared. His mind was an ache of beauty too vivid for eyes to dwell on long as he found himself moving slowly down the hill. Not until then did he realize that this was not his own body through whose eyes he looked. He had no control over it; he had simply borrowed it to convey him through the moony dusk down the hillside, that he might perceive by its perceptions the immeasurably long-ago time which he was beholding now. This, then, was the "sense" the little stranger had spoken of. In some eons-dead moon-dweller's memory the sight of rising Earth, marvelous over the spires of the forgotten city, had been graven so deeply that the ash of countless ages could not blot it away. He was seeing now, feeling now what this unknown man had known on a hillside on the Moon a million years ago.

Through the magic of that lost "sense" he walked the Moon's verdant surface toward that exquisite city which was lost to everything but dreams so many eons ago. Well, he might have guessed from the little priest's extreme fragility alone that his race was not a native of Earth. The lesser gravity of the Moon would have bred a race of bird-like delicacy. Curious that they had moon-silver hair and eyes as translucent and remote as the light of the dead Moon. A queer, illogical link with their lost homeland.

But there was little time for wonder and speculation now. He was watching the loveliness of Baloise floating nearer and nearer through the dusk that seemed aswim with a radiance so softly real that it was

like walking through darkly shining water. He was testing just how much latitude this new experience allowed him. He could see what his host saw, and he began to realize now that the man's other senses were open to his perception too. He could even share in his emotions, for he had known a moment of passionate longing for the whole white city of Baloise as he looked down from the hill, longing and love such as an exile might feel for his native city.

Gradually, too, he became aware that the man was afraid. A queer, dark, miasmatic terror lurked just below the surface of his conscious thoughts, something whose origin he could not fathom. It gave the loveliness he looked on a poignancy almost as sharp as pain, etching every white spire and gleaming dome of Baloise deep into his remembering mind.

Slowly, moving in the shadow of his own dark terror, the man went down the hill. The ivory wall that circled Baloise rose over him, a low wall with a crest fretted into a band of lacy carving upon whose convolutions the lucent Earthlight lay like silver. Under a pointed arch he walked, still moving with that slow resolute step as if he approached something dreadful from which there was no escape. And strongly and more strongly Smith was aware of the fear that drowned the man's unformulated thoughts, washing in a dark tide beneath the consciousness of everything he did. And stronger still the poignant love for Baloise ached in him and his eyes lingered like slow caresses on the pale roofs and Earth-washed walls and the pearly dimness that lay shadowily between, where the light of rising Earth was only a reflection. He was memorizing the loveliness of Baloise, as an exile might do. He was lingering upon the sight of it with a yearning so deep that it seemed as if even unto death he must carry behind his eyes the Earth-lit loveliness on which he gazed.

Pale walls and translucent domes and arches rose about him as he walked slowly along a street paved in white sea-sand, so that his feet

fell soundlessly upon its surface and he might have been walking in a translucent dream. Now Earth had swum higher above the reflecting roofs, and the great shining globe of it floated free overhead, veiled and opalescent with the rainbow seas of its atmosphere. Smith, looking up through the eyes of this unknown stranger, could scarcely recognize the configuration of the great green continents spread out beneath their veils of quivering air, and the shapes of the shining seas were strange to him. He looked into a past so remote that little upon his native planet was familiar to him.

Now his strange host was turning aside from the broad, sandy street. He went down a little paved alley, dim in the swimming light of Earth, and pushed open the gate of grille-work that closed its end. Under the opened arch he walked into a garden, beyond whose Earth-bright loveliness a low white house rose pale as ivory against dark trees.

There was a pool in the garden's center, Earth swam like a great glimmering opal in its darkness, brimming the water with a greater glory than ever shone into earthly pool. And bending over that basin of spilled Earthlight was a woman.

The silvery cascade of her hair swung forward about a face paler than the pallor of rising Earth, and lovely with a delicacy more exquisite than ever shaped an Earthwoman's features into beauty. Her moon-born slimness as she bent above the pool was the slimness of some airy immortal; for no Earthly woman ever walked whose delicacy was half so sweet and fragile.

She lifted her head as the grille-gate opened, and swayed to her feet in a motion so unearthly light that she scarcely seemed to touch the grass as she moved forward, a creature of pale enchantment in an enchanted Moon-garden. The man crossed the grass to her reluctantly, and Smith was aware in him of a dread and a soul-deep

aching that choked up in his throat until he could scarcely speak. The woman lifted her face, clear now in the Earthlight and so delicately modeled that it was more like some exquisite jewel-carving than a face of bone and Moon-white flesh. Her eyes were great and dark with an unnamed dread. She breathed in the lightest echo of a voice,

"It has come?"... and the tongue she spoke rippled like running water, in strange, light, breathing cadences that Smith understood only through the mind of the man whose memory he shared.

His host said in a voice that was a little too loud in its resolution not to quiver,

"Yes--it has come."

At that the woman's eyes closed involuntarily, her whole exquisite face crumpling into sudden, stricken grief so heavy that it seemed those fragile creatures must be crushed under the weight of it, the whole delicate body sinking overburdened to the grass. But she did not fall. She stood swaying for an instant, and then the man's arms were about her, holding her close in a desperate embrace. And through the memory of the long-dead man who held her, Smith could feel the delicacy of the eons-dead woman, the warm softness of her flesh, the tiny bones, like a bird's. Again he felt futilely that she was too fragile a creature to know such sorrow as racked her now, and a helpless anger rose in him against whatever unnamed thing it was that kindled such terror and heartbreak in them both.

For a long moment the man held her close, feeling the soft fragility of her body warm against him, the rack of silent sobs that must surely tear her very bones apart, so delicate were they, so desperate her soundless agony. And in his own throat the tightness of sorrow was choking, and his own eyes burned with unshed tears. The dark miasma of terror had strengthened until the Earth-lit garden was

blotted out behind it, and nothing remained but the black weight of his fear, the pain of his hopeless grief.

At last he loosed the girl in his arms a little and murmured against her silvery hair, "Hush, hush, my darling. Do not sorrow so--we knew that this must come some day. It comes to everyone alive--it has come to us too. Do not weep so...."

She sobbed once more, a deep ache of pure pain, and then stood back in his arms and nodded, shaking back the silver hair.

"I know," she said. "I know." She lifted her head and looked up toward Earth's great haloed mystery swimming through veils of colored enchantment above them. The light of it glistened in the tears on her face. "Almost," she said, "I wish we two had gone there."

He shook her a little in his arms.

"No--life in the colonies, with only Seles' little glimmer of green light shining down on us to tear our hearts with memories of home--no, my dear. That would have been a lifetime of longing and yearning to return. We have lived in happiness here, knowing only this moment of pain at the end. It is better."

She bent her head and laid her forehead against his shoulder, shutting out the sight of risen Earth.

"Is it?" she asked him thickly, her voice indistinct with tears. "Is a lifetime of nostalgia and grieving, with you, not better than paradise without you? Well, the choice is made now. I am happy only in this--that you have been summoned first and need not know this--this dreadfulness--of facing life alone. You must go now--quickly, or I shall never let you. Yes--we knew it must end--that the summons must come. Good-bye--my very dear."

She lifted her wet face and closed her eyes.

Smith would have looked away then if it had been possible for him. But he could not detach himself even in emotion from the host whose memory he shared, and the unbearable instant stabbed as deeply at his own heart as it did at the man whose memory he shared. He took her gently again into his arms and kissed the quivering mouth, salt with the taste of her tears. And then without a backward glance he turned toward the open gate and walked slowly out under its arch, moving as a man moves to his doom.

He went down the narrow way into the open street again, under the glory of risen Earth. The beauty of the eons-dead Baloise he walked through ached like a dull pain in his heart beneath the sharper anguish of that farewell. The salt of the girl's tears was still on his lips, and it seemed to him that not even the death he went to could give him ease from the pain of the moments he had just passed through. He went on resolutely.

Smith realized that they were turning now toward the center of Baloise the Beautiful. Great open squares here and there broke the ivory ranks of the buildings, and there were men and women moving infrequently through the streets, fragile as birds in their Moon-born delicacy, silvery pale under the immense pale disk of high-swinging Earth that dominated that scene until nothing seemed real but its vast marvel hanging overhead. The buildings were larger here, and though they lost none of their enchanted beauty they were more clearly places of industry than had been those domed and grille-fretted dwellings on the outskirts of the city.

Once they skirted a great square in whose center bulked a vast sphere of silvery sheen that reflected the brightness of the sky-filled Earth. It was a ship--a space-ship. Smith's eyes would have told him that even if the knowledge that floated through his mind from the

mind of the Moon-dweller had not made it clear. It was a space-ship loaded with men and machinery and supplies for the colonies struggling against the invening jungles upon steamy, prehistoric Earth.

They watched the last passengers filing up the ramps that led to orifices in its lower curve, Moon-white people moving silently as people in a dream under the vast pale glowing of the Moon-high Earth. It was queer how silent they were. The whole great square and the immense sphere that filled it and the throngs moving up and down the ramps might have been figures in a dream. It was hard to realize that they were not--that they had existed, flesh and blood, stone and steel, under the light of a vast, heaven-filling globe haloed in its rainbowy haze of atmosphere, once, milleniums ago.

As they neared the farther side of the square, Smith saw through his host's scarcely observing eyes the ramps lower and the orifices close in the huge bubble-ship. The Moonman was too wrapped in his agony and heartbreak and despair to pay much heed to what was taking place there in the square, so that Smith caught only abstract glimpses of the great ship floating bubble-light up from the pavement, silently, effortlessly, with no such bursts of thunderous noise and great washes of flame as attend the launching of modern space-ships. Curiosity rode him hard, but he could do nothing. His only glimpses of this ages-past scene must be taken through the eyes of his host's memory. They went on out of the square.

A great dark building loomed up above the pale-roofed houses. It was the only dark thing he had seen in Baloise, and the sight of it woke into sudden life the terror that had been dwelling formlessly and deep in the mind of his host. But he went on unhesitatingly. The broad street led straight up to the archway that opened in the dark wall's facade, a portal as cavernous and blackly threatening as the portals of death itself.

Under the shadow of it the man paused. He looked back lingeringly upon the pearly pallor of Baloise. Over the domed and pinnacled roofs the great pale light of Earth brooded. Earth itself, swimming in seas of opalescent atmosphere, all its continents silver-green, all its seas colored like veiled jewels, glowed down upon him for the last time. The full tide of his love for Baloise, of his love for the lost girl in the garden, of his love for the whole green, sweet satellite he lived on came choking up in his throat, and his heart was near bursting with the sweet fullness of the life he must leave.

Then he turned resolutely and went in under the dark archway. Through his set eyes Smith could see nothing within but a gloom like moonlight shining through mist, so that the space inside was full of a grayness faintly translucent, faintly luminous. And the terror that clogged the man's mind was laying hold on his own as they went steadily forward, in sick fright, through the gloom.

The dimness brightened as they advanced. More and more inexplicable in Smith's mind grew the wonder that, though fear was turning the Moon-dweller's very brain icy with dread, yet he went unhesitatingly forward, no compulsion driving him but his own will. It was death he went to--there was no doubt about that now, from the glimpses he had of his host's mind--a death from which by instinct he shrank with every fiber of his being. But he went on.

Now walls were becoming visible through the dim fog of the darkness. They were smooth walls, black, unfeatured. The interior of this great dark building was appalling in its very simplicity. Nothing but a wide black corridor whose walls rose into invisibility overhead. Contrasting with the ornateness of every other man-made surface in Baloise, the stark severity of the building struck a note of added terror into the numbed brain of the man who walked here.

The darkness staled and brightened. The corridor was widening. Presently its walls had fallen back outside range of sight; and over a black, unclustered floor, through misty brightness the Moon-man walked forward to his death.

The room into which the hail had widened was immense. Smith thought it must comprise the whole interior of the great dark building; for many minutes passed while his host paced steadily, slowly forward over the darkness of the floor.

Gradually through that queer bright dimness a flame began to glow. It danced in the mist like the light of a windblown fire, brightening, dimming, flaring up again so that the mist pulsed with its brilliance. There was the regularity of life in that pulsing.

It was a wall of pale flame, stretching through the misty dimness as far as the eye could reach on either side. The man paused before it, with bowed head, and he tried to speak.

Terror thickened his voice so that it was only on the third attempt that he managed to articulate, very low, in a choked voice, "Hear me, O Mighty. I am come."

In the silence after his voice ceased, the wall of beating flame flickered once again, like a heart's beat, and then rolled back on both sides like curtains. Beyond the back-drawn flame a high-roofed hollow in the mist loomed dimly. It had no more tangibility than the mist itself, the inside of a sphere of dim clarity. And in that mist-walled hollow three gods sat. Sat? They crouched, dreadfully, hungrily, with such a bestial ravaging in their poise that only gods could maintain the awful dignity which veiled them with terror despite the ugly humped hunger of their posture.

This one glimpse through glazing eyes Smith caught as the

Moonman flung himself face down on the black floor, the breath stopping in his throat, choking against unbearable terror as a drowning man chokes against sea-water. But as the eyes through which he looked lost sight of the three ravenous figures, Smith had an instant's glimpse of the shadow behind them, monstrous on the curved mist-wall that hollowed them in, cast waveringly by the back-drawn flame. And it was a single shadow. These three were One.

And the One spoke. In a voice like the lick of flames, tenuous as the mist that reflected it, terrible as the voice of death itself, the One said:

"What mortal dares enter our immortal Presence?"

"One whose god-appointed cycle is complete," gasped the prostrate man, his voice coming in little puffs as if he had been running hard. "One who fulfills his share of his race's debt to the Three who are One."

The voice of the One had been a voice full, complete, an individual speaking. Now out of the dim hollow where the three crouched a thin, flickering voice, like hot flame, less than full, less than complete, came quavering.

"Be it remembered," said the thin, hot little voice, "that all the world of Seles owes its existence to ourselves, who by our might hold fire and air and water around its globe. Be it remembered that only through ourselves does the flesh of life clothe this little world's bare bones. Be it remembered!"

The man on the floor shuddered in one long quiver of acquiescence. And Smith, his mind aware as that other mind was aware, knew that it was true. The Moon's gravity was too weak, even in this long-vanished era, to hold its cloak of life-supporting air without the aid of

some other force than its own. Why these Three furnished that power he did not know, but he was beginning to guess.

A second little voice, hungry as flame, took up the ritual chant as the first died away.

"Be it remembered that only for a price do we wrap the robe of life about Seles'bones. Be that bargain remembered that the progenitors of the race of Seles made with the Three who are One, in the very long ago when even the gods were young. Let the price be not forgotten that every man must pay at the end of his appointed cycle. Be it remembered that only through our divine hunger can mankind reach us to pay his vow. All who live owe us the debt of their living, and by the age-old pact of their forefathers must return when we summon them into the shadow that gives their loved world life."

Again the prostrate man shuddered, deep and coldly, acknowledging the ritual truth. And a third voice quavered out of that misty hollow with a flame's flickering hunger in its sound.

"Be it remembered that all who come to pay the race's debt and buy anew our favor that their world may live, must come to us willingly, with no resistance against our divine hunger--must surrender without struggle. And be it remembered that if so much as one man alone dares resist our will, then in that instant is our power withdrawn, and all our anger called down upon the world of Seles. Let one man struggle against our desire, and the world of Seles goes bare to the void, all life upon it ceasing in a breath. Be that remembered!"

On the floor the Moonman's body shivered again. Through his mind ran one last ache of love and longing for the beautiful world whose greenness and Earth-lit wonder his death was to preserve. Death was a little thing, if by it Seles lived.

In one full, round thunder the One said terribly, "Come you willingly into our Presence?"

From the prone man's hidden face a voice choked, "Willingly--that Seles may live."

And the voice of the One pulsed through the flame-washed dimness so deeply that the ears did not hear, and only the beat of the Moonman's heart, the throbbing of his blood, caught the low thunder of the gods' command.

"Then come!"

He stirred. Very slowly he got to his feet. He faced the three. And for the first time Smith knew a quickened fear for his own safety. Heretofore the awe and terror he had shared with the Moon-host had been solely for the man himself. But now--was death not reaching out for him no less than for his host? For he knew of no way to dissociate his own spectator mind from the mind with which it was united that it might be aware of this fragment of the measureless past. And when the Moonman went forward into oblivion, must not oblivion engulf his own mind too? This, then, was what the little priest had meant when he told them that some, adventuring backward through the minds of their forebears, never returned. Death in one guise or another must have swallowed them up with the minds they looked through. Death yawned for himself, now, if he could not escape. For the first time he struggled, testing his independence. And it was futile. He could not break away.

With bowed head the Moonman stepped forward through the curtain of flame. It hissed hotly on either side, and then it was behind and he was close to that dim hell where the three gods sat, their shadow hovering terribly behind them on the mist. And it looked in that uncertain light, as if the three strained forward eagerly, hunger

ravenous in every dreadful line of them, and the shadow behind spread itself like a waiting mouth.

Then with a swishing roar the flame-curtains swept to behind him, and darkness like the dark of death itself fell blindingly upon the hollow of the Three. Smith knew naked terror as he felt the mind he had ridden thus far falter as a horse falters beneath its rider--fail as a mount fails--and he was falling, falling into gulfs of vertiginous terror, emptier than the space between the worlds, a blind and empty hungriness that out-ravened vacuum itself.

He did not fight it. He could not. It was too tremendous. But he did not yield. One small conscious entity in an infinity of pure hunger, while sucking emptiness raved around him, he was stubborn and unwavering. The hunger of the Three must never before have known anything but acquiescence to the debt man owed them, and now fury roared through the vacuum of their hunger more terribly than any mortal mind could combat. In the midst of it, Smith clung stubbornly to his flicker of consciousness, incapable of doing anything more than resist feebly the ravenous desire that sucked at his life.

Dimly he realized what he was doing. It was the death of a world he compassed, if resistance to the hunger of the Three meant what they had threatened. It meant the death of every living thing on the satellite--of the girl in the Earth-bright garden; of all who walked Baloise's streets, of Baloise herself in the grinding eons, unprotected from the bombarding meteors that would turn this sweet green world into a pitted skull....

But the urge to live was blind in him. He could not have relinquished it if he would, so deeply rooted is the life-desire in us all, the raw, animal desperation against extinction. He would not die--he would not surrender, let the price be what it might. He could not fight that blind ravening that typhooned about him, but he would not submit. He

was simply a passive stubbornness against the hunger of the Three, while eons swirled about him and time ceased and nothing had existence but himself, his living, desperate self, rebellious against death.

Others, adventuring through the past, must too have met this peril, must have succumbed to it in the weakness of their inborn love for the green Moon-world. But he had no such weakness. Nothing was so important as life--his own life, here and now. He would not surrender. Deep down under the veneer of his civilized self lay a bed-rock of pure savage power that nothing on any world he knew had ever tested beyond its strength. It supported him now against the anger of divinity, the unshakable foundation of his resolution not to yield.

And slowly, slowly, the ravening hunger abated its fury about him. It could not absorb what refused to surrender, and all its fury could not terrorize him into acquiescence. This, then, was why the Three had demanded and reiterated the necessity for submission to their hunger. They had not the power to overcome that unshakable life-urge if it were not willingly put aside, and they dared not let the world they terrorized know this weakness in their strength. For a flashing moment he visioned the vampire Three, fattening on race that dared not defy them for love of the beautiful cities, the soft gold days and Earth-bright miracles of nights that counted more to mankind than its own life counted. But it was ended now.

One last furnace-blast of white-hot hunger raved around Smith's stubbornness. But whatever vampiric things they were, spawned in what unknown, eons-forgotten place, the Three who were One had not the power to break down that last rock-steady savagery in which all that was Smith rooted deep. And at last, in one final burst of typhoon-fury, which roared about him in tornado-blasts of hunger and defeat, the vacuum ceased to be.

For one blinding instant sight flashed unbearably through his brain. He saw sleeping Seles, the green Moonworld that time itself was to forget, pearl-pale under the glory of risen Earth, washed with the splendor of a brighter night than man was to know again, the mighty globe swimming through seas of floating atmosphere, veiled in it, glorious for one last brief instant in the wonder of its misty continents, its pearly seas. Baloise the Beautiful slept under the luminance of high-riding Earth. For one last radiant moment the exquisite Moonworld floated through its dream-pale darkness that no world in space was ever to equal again, nor any descendant of the race that knew it ever wholly forget.

And then--disaster. In a stunned, remote way Smith was aware of a high, ear-splitting wail that grew louder, louder-- intolerably louder until his very brain could no longer endure the agony of its sound. And over Baloise, over Seles and all who dwelt thereon, a darkness began to fall. High-swimming Earth shimmered through gathering dark, and from the rolling green hills and verdant meadows and silver sea of Seles the atmosphere ripped away. In long, opalescent streamers, bright under the light of Earth, the air of Seles was forsaking the world it cloaked. Not in gradual dissipation, but in abrupt, angry destruction as if the invisible hands of the Three were tearing it in long bright ribbons from the globe of Seles--so the atmosphere fell away.

That was the last Smith saw of it as darkness closed him in--Seles, lovely even in its destruction, a little green jewel shimmering with color and brightness, unrolling from its cloak of life as the long, streaming ribbons of rainbowy translucency tore themselves away and trailed in the void behind, slowly paling into the blackness of space.

Then darkness closed in about him, and oblivion rolled over him and

nothing--nothing.

He opened his eyes, and startlingly, New York's steel towers were all about him, the hum of traffic in his ears.

Irresistibly his eyes sought the sky, where a moment before, so it seemed to him, the great bright globe of pearly Earth hung luminous. And then, realization coming back slowly, he lowered his eyes and met across the table the wide, haunted stare of the little priest of the Moon-people. The face he saw shocked him. It had aged ten years in the incalculable interval of his journey back into the past. Anguish, deeper than any personal anguish could strike, had graven sharp lines into his unearthly pallor, and the great strange eyes were nightmare-haunted.

"It was through me, then," he was whispering, as if to himself. "Of all my race I was the one by whose hand Seles died. Oh, gods--"

"I did it!" Smith broke in harshly, driven out of his habit of silence in a blind effort to alleviate something of that unbearable anguish. "I was the one!"

"No--you were the instrument, I the wielder. I sent you back. I am the destroyer of Baloise and Nial and ivory-white Ingala, and all the green loveliness of our lost world. How can I ever look up again by night upon the bare white skull of the world I slew? It was I--!"

"What the devil the you two talking about?" demanded Yarol across the table. "I didn't see a thing, except a lot of darkness and lights, and a sort of moon...."

"And yet"--that haunted whisper went on, obviously--"yet I have seen the Three in their temple. No other of all my race ever saw them before, for no living memory ever returned out of that temple save the

memory that broke them. Of all my race only I know the secret of the Disaster. Our legends tell of what the exiles saw, looking up that night in terror through the thick air of Earth--but I know! And no man of flesh and blood can bear that knowledge long--who murdered a world by his blundering. Oh gods of Seles--help me!"

His Moon-white hands groped blindly over the table, found the square package that had cost him so dear a price. He stumbled to his feet. Smith rose too, actuated by some inarticulate emotion he could not have named. But the Moonpriest shook his head.

"No," he said, as if in answer to some question of his own mind, "you are not to blame for what happened so many eons ago--and yet in the last few minutes. This tangle of time and space, and the disaster that a living man can bring to something dead millenniums ago--it is far beyond our narrow grasp of understanding. I was chosen to be the vessel of that disaster--yet not I alone am responsible, for this was ordained from time's beginning. I could not have changed it had I known at the beginning what the end must be. It is not for what you did, but for what you know now--that you must die!"

The words had not wholly left his lips before he was swinging up his square parcel like a deadly weapon. Close against Smith's face he held it, and the shadow of death was in his Moon-pale eyes and dark upon his anguished white face. For the flash of an instant it seemed to Smith that a blaze of intolerable light was bursting out all around the square of the package, though actually he could see nothing but the commonplace outlines of it in the priest's white hands.

For the breath of an instant almost too brief to register on his brain, death brushed him hungrily. But in that instant as the threatening hands swung up there was a burst of blue-white flame behind the priest's back, the familiar crackle of a gun. The little man's face turned livid with pain for an instant, and then peace in a great gush of

calmness washed across it, blanking the anguished dark eyes. He slumped, sidewise, the square box falling.

Across the huddle of his body on the floor Yarol's crouched figure loomed, slipping the heat-gun back into its holster as he glanced across his shoulder.

"Come on--come on!" he whispered urgently. "Let's get out of here!"

There was a shout from behind Smith, the beat of running feet. He cast one covetous glance at the fallen square of that mysterious package, but it was a fleeting one as he cleared the body in a leap and on Yarol's flying heels made for the lower ramp to the crowded level beneath. He would never know.

Werewoman

Published in Leaves, #2 (1938). Reprinted in Horrors Unknown (ed. Sam Moskowitz), Walker & Co.: 1971.

With the noise of battle fading behind him down the wind, Northwest Smith staggered into the west and the twilight, stumbling as he went. Blood spattered brightly behind him on the rocks, leaving a clear trail to track him by, but he knew he would not be followed far. He was headed into the salt wastelands to the westward, and they would not follow him there.

He urged his reluctant feet faster, for he knew that he must be out of sight in the grey waste before the first of the scavengers came to loot the dead. They would follow--that trail of blood and staggering footsteps would draw them like wolves on his track, hot in the hope of further spoils--but they would not come far. He grinned a little wryly at the thought, for he was going into no safety here, though he left certain death behind. He was stumbling, slow step by step, into almost as certain a death, of fever and thirst and hunger in the wastelands, if no worse death caught him first. They told tales of this grey salt desert....

He had never before come even this far into the cold waste during all the weeks of their encampment. He was too old an adventurer not to know that when people shun a place completely and talk of it in whispers and tell little half-finished, fearful stories of it over campfires, that place is better left alone. Some might have been spurred by that very reticence into investigation, but Northwest Smith had seen too many strange things in his checkered career to doubt the basis of fact behind folktales or care to rush in heedlessly where others had learned by experience not to tread.

The sound of battle had dwindled to a faint murmur on the evening breeze. He lifted his head painfully and stared into the gathering dark ahead with narrowed eyes the no-colour of pale steel. The wind touched his keen, scarred face with a breath of utter loneliness and desolation. No man-smell of smoke or byre or farmstead tainted it, blowing clear across miles beyond miles of wastelands. Smith's nostrils quivered to that scent of unhumanity. He saw the greyness stretching before him, flat and featureless, melting into the dark. There was a sparse grass growing, and low shrub and a few stunted trees, and brackish water in deep, still pools dotted the place at far intervals. He found himself listening....

Once in very long-ago ages, so campfire whispers had told him, a forgotten city stood here. Who dwelt in it, or what, no man knew. It was a great city spreading over miles of land, rich and powerful enough to wake enmity, for a mighty foe had come at last out of the lowlands and in a series of tremendous battles razed it to the ground. What grievance they had against the dwellers in the city no one will ever know now, but it must have been dreadful, for when the last tower was laid to earth and the last stone toppled from its foundation they had sown the land with salt, so that for generations no living thing grew in all the miles of desolation. And not content with this, they had laid a curse upon the very earth wherein the city had its roots, so that even today man shun the place without understanding why.

It was very long past, that battle, and history forgot the very name of the city, and victor and vanquished alike sank together into the limbo of the forgotten. In time the salt-sown lands gained a measure of life again and the sparse vegetation that now clothed it struggled up through the barren soil. But men still shunned the place.

They said, in whispers, that there were dwellers yet in the salt-lands. Wolves came out by night sometimes and carried off children

straying late; sometimes a new-made grave was found open and empty in the morning, and people breathed of ghouls.... Late travellers had heard voices wailing from the wastes by night, and those daring hunters who ventured in search of the wild game that ran through the underbrush spoke fearfully of naked werewomen that howled in the distances. No one knew what became of the adventurous souls who travelled too far alone into the desolation of the place. It was accursed for human feet to travel, and those who dwelt there, said the legends, must be less than human.

Smith discounted much of this when he turned from the bloody shambles of that battle into the wastelands beyond. Legends grow, he knew. But a basis for the tales he did not doubt, and he glanced ruefully down at the empty holsters hanging low on his legs. He was completely unarmed, perhaps for the first time in more years than he liked to remember; for his path had run for the most part well outside the law, and such men do not go unarmed anywhere--even to bed.

Well, no help for it now. He shrugged a little, and then grimaced and caught his breath painfully, for that slash in the shoulder was deep, and blood still dripped to the ground, though not so freely as before. The wound was closing. He had lost much blood--the whole side of his leather garments was stiff with it, and the bright stain spattering behind him told of still greater losses. The pain of his shoulder stabbed at him yet, but it was being swallowed up now in a vast, heaving greyness....

He drove his feet on stubbornly over the uneven ground, though the whole dimming landscape was wavering before him like a sea--swelling monstrously--receding into vague distances.... The ground floated up to meet him with surprising gentleness.

He opened his eyes presently to a grey twilight, and after a while staggered up and went on. No more blood flowed, but the shoulder

was stiff and throbbing, and the wasteland heaved still like a rolling sea about him. The singing in his ears grew loud, and he was not sure whether the faint echoes of sound he heard came over grey distances or rang in his own head--long, faint howls like wolves wailing their hunger to the stars. When he fell the second time he did not know it, and was surprised to open his eyes upon full dark with stars looking down on him and the grass tickling his cheek.

He went on. There was no great need of it now--he was well beyond pursuit, but the dim urge to keep moving dinned in his weary brain. He was sure now that the long howls were coming to him over the waste stretches; coming nearer. By instinct his hand dropped to clutch futilely at the empty holster.

There were queer little voices going by overhead in the wind. Thin, shrill. With immense effort he slanted a glance upward and thought he could see, with the clarity of exhaustion, the long, clean lines of the wind streaming across the sky. He saw no more than that, but the small voices shrilled thinly in his ears. Presently he was aware of motion beside him--life of some nebulous sort moving parallel to his course, invisible in the starlight. He was aware of it through the thrill of evil that prickled at the roots of his hair, pulsing from the dimness at his side--though he could see nothing. But with that clarity of inner vision he felt the vast and shadowy shape lurching, formlessly through the grass at his side. He did not turn his head again, but the hackles of his neck bristled. The howls were nearing, too. He set his teeth and drove on, unevenly.

He fell for the third time by a clump of stunted trees, and lay for a while breathing heavily while long, slow waves of oblivion washed over him and receded like waves over sand. In the intervals of lucidity he knew that those howls were coming closer and closer over the greyness of the salt-lands. He went on. The illusion of that formless walker-in-the-dark still haunted him through the grass, but he was

scarcely heeding it now. The howls had changed to short, sharp yaps, crisp in the starlight, and he knew that the wolves had struck his trail. Again, instinctively, his hand flashed downward toward his gun, and a spasm of pain crossed his face. Death he did not mind--he had kept pace with it too many years to fear that familiar visage--but death under fangs, unarmed.... He staggered on a little faster, and the breath whistled through his clenched teeth.

Dark forms were circling his, slipping shadowily through the grass. They were wary, these beasts of the outlands. They did not draw near enough for him to see them save as shadows gliding among the shadows, patient and watching. He cursed them futilely with his failing breath, for he knew now that he dared not fall again. The grey waves washed upward, and he shouted something hoarse in his throat and called upon a last reservoir of strength to bear him up. The dark forms started at his voice.

So he went on, wading through oblivion that rose waist-high, shoulder-high, chin-high--and receded again before the indomitable onward drive that dared not let him rest. Something was wrong with his eyes now--the pale-steel eyes that had never failed him before--for among the dark forms he was thinking he saw white ones, slipping and gliding wraithlike in the shadow....

For an endless while he stumbled on under the chilly stars while the earth heaved gently beneath his feet and the greyness was a sea that rose and fell in blind waves, and white figures weaved about his through the hollow dark. Quite suddenly he knew that the end of his strength had come. He knew it surely, and in the last moment of lucidity left to him he saw a low tree outlined against the stars and staggered to it--setting his broad back against the trunk, fronting the dark watchers with lowered head and pale eyes that glared defiance. For that one moment he faced them resolutely--then the tree-trunk was sliding upward past him--the ground was rising-- He gripped the

sparse grass with both hands, and swore as he fell.

When he opened his eyes again he stared into a face straight out of hell. A woman's face, twisted into a diabolical smile, stooped over him--glare-eyed in the dark. White fangs slavered as she bent to his throat.

Smith choked back a strangled sound that was half-oath, half-prayer, and struggled to his feet. She started back with a soundless leap that set her wild hair flying, and stood staring him in the face with wide slant eyes that glared greenly from the pallor of her face. Through the dark her body was white as a sickle moon half-veiled in the long, wild hair.

She glared with hungry fangs a-drip. Beyond her he sensed other forms, dark and white, circling restlessly through the shadows--and he began to understand dimly, and knew that there was no hope in life for him, but he spread his long legs wide and gave back glare for glare, pale-eyed and savage.

The pack circled him, dim blurs in the dark, the green glare of eyes shining alike from white shapes and black. And to his dizzied eyes it seemed that the forms were not stable; shifting from dark to light and back again with only the green-glowing eyes holding the same glare through all the changing. They were closing in now, the soft snarls rising and sharp yaps impatiently breaking through the guttural undernotes, and he saw the gleam of teeth, white under the stars.

He had no weapon, and the wasteland reeled about him and the earth heaved underfoot, but he squared his shoulders savagely and fronted them in hopeless defiance, waiting for the wave of darkness and hunger to come breaking over him in an overwhelming tide. He met the green desire of the woman's wild eyes as she stooped forward, gathering herself for the lunge, and suddenly something

about the fierceness of her struck a savage chord within him, and--facing death as he was--he barked a short, wild laugh at her, and yelled into the rising wind. "Come on, werewoman! Call your pack!"

She stared for the briefest instant, half poised for leaping--while something like a spark seemed to flash between them, savageness calling to savageness across the barriers of everything alive--and suddenly she flung up her arms, the black hair whirling, and tossed back her head and bayed to the stars; a wild, long, ululating yell that held nothing of humanity, a triumphant bay of fierce delight echoing down the wind. All about her in the dark, hoarse throats caught up the yell and tossed it from voice to voice across the salt-lands until the very stars shivered at the wild, exultant baying.

And as the long yell trembled into silence something inexplicable happened to Smith. Something quivered in answer within him, agonisingly, the grey oblivion he had been fighting so long swallowed him up at a gulp--and then he leaped within himself in a sudden, ecstatic rush; and while one part of him slumped to its knees and then to its face in the grass, the living vital being that was Smith sprang free into the cold air that stung like sharp wine.

The wolf-pack rushed clamorously about him, the wild, high yells shivering delightfully along every nerve of his suddenly awakened body. And it was as if a muffling darkness had lifted from his senses, for the night opened up in all directions to his new eyes, and his nostrils caught fresh, exciting odours on the streaming wind, and in his ears a thousand tiny sounds took on sudden new clarity and meaning.

The pack that had surged so clamorously about him was a swirl of dark bodies for an instant--then in a blur and a flash they were dark no longer--rose on hind legs and cast off the darkness as they rose--and slim, white, naked werewomen swirled around him in a tangle of

flashing limbs and streaming hair.

He stood half dazed at the transition, for even the wide salt moor was no longer dark and empty, but pale grey under the stars and peopled with nebulous, unstable beings that wavered away from the white wolf-pack which ringed him, and above the clamour of wild voices that thin, shrill chattering went streaming down the wind overhead.

Out of the circling pack a white figure broke suddenly, and he felt cold arms about his neck and a cold, thin body pressing his. Then the white whirl parted violently and another figure thrust through--the fierce-eyed woman who had called him across the barriers of flesh into this half-land of her own. Her green-glaring eyes stabbed at the sister wolf whose arms twined Smith's neck, and the growl that broke from her lips was a wolf's guttural. The woman fell away from Smith's embrace, crouching at bay, as the other, with a toss of wild hair, bared her fangs and launched herself straight at the throat of the interloper. They went down in a tangle of white and tossing dark, and the pack fell still so that the only sound was the heavy breathing of the fighters and the low, choked snarls that rippled from their throats. Then over the struggle of white and black burst a sudden torrent of scarlet. Smith's nostrils flared to the odour that had a new, fascinating sweetness now--and the werewoman rose, bloody-mouthed, from the body of her rival. The green-glowing eyes met his, and a savage exultation flowing from them met as savage a delight wakening in him, and her keen, moon-white face broke into a smile of hellish joy.

She flung up her head again and bayed a long, triumphant cry to the stars, and the pack about her took up the yell, and Smith found his own face turned to the sky and his own throat shouting a fierce challenge to the dark.

Then they were running--jostling one another in savage play, flying

over the coarse grass on feet that scarcely brushed the ground. It was like the rush of the wind, that effortless racing, as the earth flowed backward under their spurning feet and the wind streamed in their nostrils with a thousand tingling odours. The white werewoman raced at his side, her long hair flying behind her like a banner, her shoulder brushing his.

They ran through strange places. The trees and the grass had taken on new shapes and meanings, and in a vague, half-realised way he was aware of curious forms looming round him--buildings, towers, walls, high turrets shining in the starlight, yet so nebulous that they did not impede their flight. He could see these shadows of a city very clearly sometimes--sometimes he ran down marble streets, and it seemed to him that his feet rang in golden sandals on the pavement and rich garments whipped behind him in the wind of his speed, and a sword clanked at his side. He thought the woman beside him fled in bright-coloured sandals too, and her long skirts rippled away from her flying limbs and the streaming hair was twined with jewels--yet he knew he ran naked beside a moon-bare wolf-woman over coarse grass that rustled to his tread.

And sometimes, too, it seemed to him that he fled on four legs, not two--fleetly as the wind, thrusting a pointed muzzle into the breeze and lolling a red tongue over dripping fangs....

Dim shapes fled from their sweeping onward rush--great, blurred, formless things; dark beings with eyes; thin wraiths wavering backward from their path. The great moor teemed with these half-seen monstrosities; fierce-eyed, some of them, breathing out menace, and evil, angry shapes that gave way reluctantly before the were-pack's sweep. But they gave way. There were terrible things in that wasteland, but the most terrible of all were the werewomen, and all the dreadful, unreal beings made way at the bay of those savage voices. All this he knew intuitively. Only the thin chattering that

streamed down the wind did not hush when the were-voices howled.

There were many odours on the wind that night, sharp and sweet and acrid, wild odours of wild, desolate lands and the dwellers therein. And then, quite suddenly on a vagrant breeze, lashing their nostrils like a whip--the harsh, rich, blood-tingling scent of man. Smith flung up his head to the cold stars and bayed long and shudderingly, and the wild wolf-yell rang from throat to throat through the pack until the whole band of them was shaking the very air to that savage chorus. They loped down the wind-stream, nostrils flaring to that full, rich scent.

Smith ran at the forefront, shoulder to shoulder with the wild white creature who had fought for him. The man-smell was sweet in his nostrils, and hunger wrenched at him as the smell grew stronger and faint atavistic stirrings of anticipation rose in his memory.... Then they saw them.

A little band of hunters was crossing the moorland, crashing through the underbrush, guns on their shoulders. Blindly they walked, stumbling over hummocks that were clear to Smith's new eyes. And all about them the vague denizens of the place were gathering unseen. Great, nebulous, cloudy shapes dogged their footsteps through the grass, lurching along formlessly. Dark things with eyes flitted by, turning a hungry glare unseen upon the hunters. White shapes wavered from their path and closed in behind. The men did not see them. They must have sensed the presence of inimical beings, for now and then one would glance over his shoulder nervously, or hitch a gun forward as if he had almost seen--then lower it sheepishly and go on.

The very sight of them fired that strange hunger in Smith's new being, and again he flung back his head and yelled fiercely the long wolf-cry toward the frosty stars. At the sound of it a ripple of alarm went

through the unclean, nebulous crowd that dogged the hunters' footsteps. Eyes turned toward the approaching pack, glaring angrily from bodies as unreal as smoke. But as they drew nearer the press began to melt away, the misty shapes wavering off reluctantly into the pallor of the night before the sweep of the wolves. They skimmed over the grass, flying feet spurning the ground, and with a rush and a shout they swooped down around the hunters, yelling their hunger. The men had huddled into a little knot, backs together and guns bristling outward as the were-pack eddied round them. Three or four men fired at random into the circling pack, the flash and sound of it sending a wavering shudder through the pale things that had drawn back to a safe distance, watching. But the wolf-woman paid no heed.

Then the leader—a tall man in a white fur cap—shouted suddenly in a voice of panic terror. "No use to fire! No use—don't you see? These aren't real wolves...."

Smith had a fleeting realisation that to human eyes they must, then, seem wolf-formed, though all about him in the pale night he saw clearly only white, naked women with flying hair circling the hunters and baying hungrily with wolf-voices as they ran.

The dark hunger was ravaging him as he paced the narrowing circle with short, nervous steps—the human bodies so near, smelling so richly of blood and flesh. Vaguely memories of that blood running sweetly eddied through his mind, and the feel of teeth meeting solidly in flesh; and beyond that a deeper hunger, inexplicably, for something he could not name. Only he felt he would never have peace again until he had sank his teeth into the throat of that man in the white fur cap; felt blood gushing over his face....

"Look!" shouted the man, pointing as his eyes met Smith's ravenous glare. "See—the big one with white eyes, running with the she-wolf...."

He fumbled for something inside his coat. "The Devil himself--all the rest are green-eyed, but--white eyes--see?"

Something in the sound of his voice lashed that hunger in Smith to the breaking point. It was unbearable. A snarl choked up in his throat and he gathered himself to spring. The man must have seen the flare of it in the pale eyes meeting his, for he gasped, "God in Heaven!..." and clawed desperately at his collar. And just as Smith's feet left the ground in a great, steel-muscle spring straight for that tempting throat the man ripped out what he had been groping for and the starlight caught the glint of it upraised--a silver cross dangling from a broken chain.

Something blinding exploded in Smith's innermost brain. Something compounded of thunder and lightning smote him in midair. An agonised howl ripped itself from his throat as he fell back, blinded and deafened and dazed, while his brain rocked to its foundations and long shivers of dazzling force shuddered through the air about him.

Dimly, from a great distance, he heard the agonized howls of the werewomen, the shouts of men, the trample of shod feet on the ground. Behind his closed eyes he could still see that cross upheld, a blinding symbol from which streamers of forked lightning blazed away and the air crackled all around. When the tumult had faded in his ears and the blaze died away and the shocked air shuddered into stillness again, he felt the touch of cold, gentle hands upon him and opened his eyes to the green glare of other eyes bending over him. He pushed her away and struggled to his feet, swaying a little as he stared round the plain. All the white werewomen were gone save the one at his side. The huntsmen were gone. Even the misty denizens of the place were gone. Empty in the grey dimness the wasteland stretched away. Even the thin piping overhead had fallen into shocked silence. All about them the plain lay still, shuddering a

little and gathering its forces again after the ordeal.

The werewoman had trotted off a little way and was beckoning to him impatiently over her shoulder. He followed, instinctively anxious to leave the spot of the disaster. Presently they were running again, shoulder to shoulder across the grass, the plain spinning away under their flying feet. The scene of that conflict fell behind them, and strength was flowing again through Smith's light-footed body, and overhead, faintly, the thin, shrill chattering began anew.

With renewed strength the old hunger flooded again through him, compellingly. He tossed up his head to test the wind, and a little whimper of eagerness rippled from his throat. An answering whine from the running woman replied to it. She tossed back her hair and sniffed the wind, hunger flaming in her eyes. So they ran through the pale night, hunter and huntress, while dim shapes wavered from their path and the earth reeled backward under their spurning feet.

It was pleasant to run so, in perfect unison, striding effortlessly with the speed of the wind, arrogantly in the knowledge of their strength, as the dreadful dwellers of the aeon-cursed moor fled from their approach and the very air shuddering when they bayed.

Again the illusion of misty towers and walls wavered in the dimness before Smith's eyes. He seemed to run down marble-paved streets, and felt again the clank of a belted sword and the ripple of rich garments, and saw the skirts of the woman beside him moulded to her limbs as she fled along with streaming, jewel-twined hair. He thought that the buildings rising so nebulously all around were growing higher as they advanced. He caught vague glimpses of arches and columns and great domed temples, and began, somehow uneasily, to sense presences in the streets, unseen but thronging.

Then simultaneously his feet seemed to strike a yielding resistance, as if he had plunged at a stride knee-deep into heavy water, and the woman beside him threw up her arms wildly in a swirl of hair and tossed back her head and screamed hideously, humanly, despairingly--the first human sound he had heard from her lips--and stumbled to her knees on the grass that was somehow a marble pavement.

Smith bent to catch her as she fell, plunging his arms into unseen resistance as he did so. He felt it suck at her as he wrenched the limp body out of those amazing, invisible wavelets that were lapping higher and higher up his legs with incredible swiftness. He swung her up clear of them, feeling the uncontrollable terror that rippled out from her body course in unbroken wavelets through his own, so he shook with nameless panic, not understanding why. The thick tide had risen mufflingly about his thighs when he turned back the way he had come and began to fight his way out of the clinging horror he could not see, the woman a weight of terror in his arms.

It seemed to be a sort of thickness in the air, indescribable, flowing about him in deepening waves that lapped up and up as if some half-solidified jelly were swiftly and relentlessly engulfing him. Yet he could see nothing but the grass underfoot, the dim, dreamlike marble pavement, the night about, the cold stars overhead. He struggled forward, dragging his legs by main force through the invisible thickness. It was worse than trying to run through water, with the retarded motion of nightmares. It sucked at him, draggingly, as he struggled forward through the deeps of it, stumbling, not daring to fall, the woman a dead weight in his arms.

And very slowly he won free. Very slowly he forced his way out of the clinging horror. The little lapping waves of it ceased to mount. He felt the thickness receding downward, past his knees, down about his ankles, until only his feet sucked and stumbled in invisibility, the

nameless mass shuddering and quaking. And at long last he broke again, and as his feet touched the clear ground he leaped forward wildly, like an arrow from a bow, into the delightful freedom of the open air. It felt like pure flying after that dreadful struggle through the unseen. Muscles exulting at the release, he fled over the grass like a winged thing while the dim buildings reeled away behind him and the woman stirred a little in his arms, an inconsidered weight in the joy of freedom.

Presently she whimpered a little, and he paused by a stunted tree to set her down again. She glanced round wildly. He saw from the look on her bone-white face that the danger was not yet past, and glanced round himself, seeing nothing but the dim moor with wraith-like figures wavering here and there and the stars shining down coldly. Overhead the thin shrilling went by changelessly in the wind. All this was familiar. Yet the werewoman stood poised for instant flight, seeming unsure in just what direction danger lay, and her eyes glared panic into the dimness. He knew then that dreadful though the were-pack was, a more terrible thing haunted the wasteland--invisibly, frightfully indeed to wake in the wolf-woman's eyes that staring horror. Then something touched his foot.

He leaped like the wild thing he was, for he knew that feel--even in so short a time he knew that feel. It was flowing round his foot, sucking at his ankle even as he poised for flight. He seized the woman's wrist and twisted round, wrenching his foot from the invisible grip, leaping forward arrow-swift into the pale darkness. He heard her catch her breath in a sobbing gasp, eloquent of terror, as she fell into stride beside him.

So they fled, invisibility ravaging at their heels. He knew, somehow, that it followed. The thick, clutching waves of it were lapping faster and faster just short of his flying feet, and he strained to the utmost, skimming over the grass like something winged and terror-stricken,

the sobbing breath of the woman keeping time to his stride. What he fled he could not even guess. It had no form in any image he could conjure up. Yet he felt dimly that it was nothing alien, but rather something too horribly akin to him... and the deadly danger he did not understand spurred on his flying feet.

The plain whirled by blurrily in their speed. Dim things with eyes fluttered away in panic as they neared, clearing a terror-stricken way for the dreadful were-people who fled in such blind horror of something more dreadful yet.

For eternities they ran. Misty towers and walls fell away behind them. In his terror-dimmed mind it seemed to him in flashes that he was that other runner clad in rich garments and belted with the sword, running beside that other fleeing woman from another horror whose nature he did not know. He scarcely felt the ground underfoot. He ran blindly, knowing only that he must run and run until he dropped, that something far more dreadful than any death he could die was lapping hungrily at his heels, threatening him with an unnameable, incomprehensible horror--that he must run and run and run....

And so, very slowly, the panic cleared. Very gradually sanity returned to him. He ran still, not daring to stop, for he knew the invisible hunger lapped yet not far behind--knew it surely without understanding how--but his mind had cleared enough for him to think, and his thoughts told curious things, half-realised things that formed images in his brain unbidden, drawn from some far source beyond his understanding. He knew, for instance, that the thing at their heels was unescapable. He knew that it would never cease its relentless pursuit, silent, invisible, remorseless, until the thick waves of it had swallowed up its quarry, and what followed that--what unimaginable horror--he somehow knew, but could not form even into thought-pictures. It was something too far outside any experience for the mind to grasp it.

The horror he felt instinctively was entirely within himself. He could see nothing pursuing him, feel nothing, hear nothing. No tremor of menace reached toward him from the following nothingness. But within him horror swelled and swelled balloon-like, a curious horror akin to something that was part of him, so it was as if he fled in terror of himself; and with no more hope of ever escaping than if indeed he fled his own shadow.

The panic had passed. He no longer ran blindly, but he knew now that he must run and run forever, hopelessly... but his mind refused to picture the end. He thought the woman's panic had abated, too. Her breathing was even, not the frantic gasping of that first frenzy, and he no longer felt the shaking waves of pure terror beating out from her against the ephemeral substance that was himself.

And now, as the grey landscape slid past changelessly and the thin shapes still wavered from their path and the piping went by overhead, he became conscious as he ran of a changing in the revulsion that spurred him on. There were little moments when the horror behind drew him curiously, tightening its hold on that part of his being so strangely akin to it. As a man might stare over a precipice-edge and feel the mounting urge to fling himself over, even in the face of his horror of falling, so Smith felt the strong pull of the thing that followed, if thing it might be called. Without abatement in his horror the curious desire grew to turn and face it, let it come lapping over him, steep himself in the thick invisibility--even though his whole being shuddered violently from the very thought.

Without realising it, his pace slackened. But the woman knew, and gripped his hand fiercely, a frantic appeal rippling through him from the contact. At her touch the pull abated for a while and he ran on in an access of revulsion, very conscious of the invisibility lapping at their heels.

While the access was at its height he felt the grip of her hand loosen a little and knew that the strange tugging at something within was reaching out for her. His hand tightened over hers and he felt the little shake she gave to free herself of that blind pull.

So they fled, the strength in each bearing the other up. Behind them relentlessly the Something followed. Twice a forward lapping wave of it brushed Smith's heel. And stronger and stronger grew the blind urge within him to turn, to plunge into the heavy flow of what followed, to steep himself in invisibility until--until-- He could form no picture of that ultimate, but each time he reached the point of picturing it a shudder went over him and blankness clouded his mind. And ever within him that thing akin to the Follower strengthened and grew, a blind urge from his innermost being. It grew so strong that only the grip of the werewoman's hand held him from turning, and the plain faded from about him like a grey dream and he ran through a curving void--a void that he somehow knew was bending back upon itself so that he must eventually, if he ran on, come round behind his pursuer and overtake it, wade head-on into the thick deeps of invisibility... yet he dared not slacken his running, for then it would catch him from behind. So he spun in the treadmill, terror ahead, terror behind, with no choice but to run and no hope for all his running.

When he saw the plain at all it was in dim flashes, unaccountably blurred and not always at the correct angles. It tilted without reason. Once he saw a dark pool of water slanting before him like a door, and once a whole section of landscape hung mirage-like above his head. Sometimes he panted up steep inclines, sometimes he skimmed fleetly down steeper slopes--yet he knew the plain in reality lay flat and featureless from edge to edge.

And now, though he had long ago left those misty towers and walls far behind, he began to be aware that his flight had somehow twisted

and they loomed once more, shadowily, overhead. With a sickening sense of futility he fled again down the dream-vague marble pavements between rows of cloudy palaces.

Through all these dizzy metamorphoses the pursuer flowed relentlessly behind, lapping at his heels when he slowed. He began to realise, very dimly, that it might have overtaken him with ease, but that he was being spurred on thus for some vast, cloudy purpose--perhaps so that he might complete the circle he was so vaguely aware of and plunge of his own effort headlong into the very thing from which he fled. But he was not fleeing now, he was being driven.

The dim shapes of buildings reeled past. The woman running at his side had become something cloudy and vague too, a panting presence flying from the same peril--into the same peril--but unreal as a dream. He felt himself unreal too, a phantom fleeing hand in hand with another phantom through the streets of a phantom city. And all reality was melting away save the unreal, invisible thing that pursued him, and only it had reality while everything else faded to shapes of nothingness. Like driven ghosts they fled.

And as reality melted about them, the shadowy city took firmer shape. In the reversal everything real became cloudy, grass and trees and pools dimming like some forgotten dream, while the unstable outlines of the towers loomed up more and more clearly in the pale dark, colours flushing them as if reviving blood ran through the stones. Now the city stood firm and actual around them, and vague trees thrust themselves mistily through unbroken masonry, shadows of grass waved over firm marble pavements. Superimposed upon the unreal, the real world seemed vague as a mirage.

It was a curious architecture that rose around them now, so old and so forgotten that the very shapes of it were fantastic to Smith's eyes.

Men in silk and steel moved down the streets, wading to their greave-clad knees in shadowy grass they did not seem to see. Women, too, brushed by in mail as fine-linked and shining as gowns of silver tissue, belted with swords like the men. Their faces were set in a strained stare, and though they hurried they gave an impression of aimlessness, as if moved by some outer compulsion they did not understand.

And through the hurrying crowd, past the strange coloured towers, over the grass-shadowed streets, were-woman and wolf-man fled like the shadows they had become, pale wraiths blowing through the crowds unseen, the invisible follower lapping at their feet when they faltered. That force within which had urged them to turn and meet the pursuer now commanded them irresistibly to flee--to flee toward that same ending, for they knew now that they ran toward what they fled, roundaboutly; yet dared not stop running for deadly fear of what flowed along behind.

Yet in the end they did turn. The werewoman ran now in blind submission, all the strength dissolved that at first had carried her on. She was like a ghost blowing along on a gale, unresisting, unquestioning, hopeless. But in Smith a stouter spirit dwelt. And something strong and insistent was urging him to turn--an insistence that had no relation to the other urge to wait. It may have been a very human revolt against being driven, it may have been a deeply ingrained dislike of running from anything, or of allowing death to overtake him from behind. It had been bred in him to face danger when he could not escape it, and the old urge that every fighting thing knows--even a cornered rat will turn--drove him at last to face what followed him and die resisting--not in flight. For he felt that the end must be very near now. Some instinct stronger than the force that harried them told him that.

And so, ignoring the armoured crowd that eddied round them, he

gripped the werewoman's wrist hard and slackened his speed, fighting against the urge that would have driven him on, choking down the panic that rose involuntarily as he waited for the thick waves to begin their surging round his feet. Presently he saw the shadow of a tree leaning through the smooth stone of a building, and instinctively he chose that misty thing he knew to be real for a bulwark to set his back against, rather than the unreal wall that looked so solid to his eyes. He braced his shoulders, holding a firm grip on the woman's wrist as she struggled and whimpered and moaned in her wolf-voice, straining to break the hold and run on. About, the mail-clad crowd hurried by heedlessly.

And very soon he felt it--the lapping wavelets touching his toes. He shuddered through all his unreal body at the feel, but he stood steady, gripping the struggling wolf-woman in a resolute hold, feeling the thick waves flowing around his feet, creeping up to his ankles, lapping higher and higher round his legs.

For a while he stood at bay, feeling terror choke up and up in his throat as the waves rose round him, scarcely heeding the woman's struggles to be free. And then a further rebellion began to stir. If die he must, let it be neither in headlong flight nor in dazed and terrified quiescence, but violently, fighting against it, taking some toll, if he could, to pay for the life he was to lose. He gasped a deep breath and plunged forward into the quaking, unseen mass that had risen almost to his waist. Behind him at arm's length the werewoman stumbled unwillingly.

He lurched forward. Very swiftly the unseen rose about him, until arms and shoulders were muffled in thickness, until the heavy invisibility brushed his chin, his closed mouth, sealed his nostrils... closed over his head.

Through the clear deeps he forged on, moving like a man in a

nightmare of retarded motion. Every step was an immense effort against that flow, dragged through resisting depths of jelly-like nothingness. He had all but forgotten the woman he dragged along behind. He had wholly forgotten the coloured city and the shining, armoured people hurrying past. Blinded to everything but the deep-rooted instinct to keep moving, he forced his slow way onward against the flow. And indescribably he felt it begin to permeate him, seeping in slowly through the atoms of his ephemeral being. He felt it, and felt a curious change coming over him by degrees, yet could not define it or understand what was happening. Something urged him fiercely to go on, to struggle ahead, not to surrender--and so he fought, his mind whirling and the strange stuff of the thing that engulfed him soaking slowly through his being.

Presently the invisibility took on a faint body, a sort of clear opaqueness, so that the things outside were streaked and blurred a little and the splendid dream city with its steel-robed throngs wavered through the walls of what had swallowed him up. Everything was shaking and blurring and somehow changing. Even his body no longer obeyed him completely, as if it trembled on the verge of transition into something different and unknown. Only the driving instinct to fight on held clear in his dazed mind. He struggled forward.

And now the towered city was fading again, its mailed people losing their outlines and melting into the greyness. But the fading was not a reversal--the shadow-grass and trees grew more shadowy still. It was as if by successive steps he was leaving all matter behind. Reality had faded almost to nothing, even the cloudy unreality of the city was going now, and nothing but a grey blankness remained, a blankness through which he forged stubbornly against the all-engulfing flow that steeped him in nothingness.

Sometimes in flashes he ceased to exist--joined the grey nothing as part of it. The sensation was not that of unconsciousness. Somehow

utter nirvana swallowed him up and freed him again, and between the moments of blank he fought on, feeling the transition of his body taking place very slowly, very surely, into something that even now he could not understand.

For grey eternities he struggled ahead through the clogging resistance, through darkneses of non-existence, through flashes of near-normality, feeling somehow that the path led in wild loops and whorls through spaces without name. His time-sense had stopped. He could hear and see nothing, he could feel nothing but the immense effort of dragging his limbs through the stuff that enfolded him, and the effort was so great that he welcomed those spaces of blankness when he did not exist even as an unconsciousness. Yet stubbornly, unceasingly, the blind instinct drove him on.

There was a while when the flashes of non-existence crowded closer and closer, and the metamorphosis of his body was all but complete, and only during brief winks of consciousness did he realise himself as an independent being. Then in some unaccountable way the tension slackened. For a long moment without interludes he knew himself a real being struggling upstream through invisibility and dragging a half-fainting woman by the wrist. The clarity of it startled him. For a while he could not understand--then it dawned upon him that his head and shoulders were free--free! What had happened he could not imagine, but he was free of it.

The hideous grey nothingness had gone--he looked out over a plain dotted with low trees and low, white, columned villas like no architecture he had ever seen before. A little way ahead a stone slab no higher than himself leaned against a great boulder in a hollow fringed with trees. Upon the slab an indescribable symbol was incised. It was like no symbol of any writing he had ever seen before. It was so different from all the written characters men make that it scarcely seemed akin to writing at all, nor traced by any human hand.

Yet there was a curious familiarity about it that did not even puzzle him. He accepted it without question. He was somehow akin to it.

And between him and the engraved slab the air writhed and undulated. Streamers of invisibility flowed toward him, mounting as they flowed. He struggled forward, exultation surging within him, for-- he knew, now. And as he advanced the thick resistance fell away from him, sliding down his shoulders, ebbing lower and lower about his struggling body. He knew that whatever the invisibility was, its origin lay in that symbol on the stone. From that it flowed. Half-visibly, he could see it. And toward that stone he made his way, a dim purpose forming in his brain.

He heard a little gasp and quickened breathing behind him, and turned his head to see the werewoman, moon-white in the undulating, almost-visible flow, staring about with wakened eyes and incomprehension clouding her face. He saw that she did not remember anything of what had happened. Her green-glowing eyes were empty as if they had just opened from deep slumber.

He forged on swiftly now through the waves that lapped futilely around his waist. He had won. Against what he did not yet know, nor from what cloudy terror he had saved himself and her, but he was not afraid now. He knew what he must do, and he struggled on eagerly toward the slab.

He was still waist-deep in the resisting flow when he reached it, and for a dizzy instant he thought he could not stop; that he must wade on into the very substance of that unnameable carving out of which came the engulfing nothingness. But with an effort he wrenched round and waded cross-stream, and after a while of desperate struggle he broke free into the open air.

It was like a cessation of gravity. In the release from that dragging

weight he felt he must scarcely be touching the ground, but there was no time now to exult in his freedom. He turned purposefully toward the slab.

The werewoman was just floundering clear of the stream when she saw what he intended, and she flung up her hands with a shriek of protest that startled Smith into a sidewise leap, as if some new terror were coming upon him. Then he saw what it was, and gave her an amazed stare as he turned again to the stone, lifting his arms to grapple with it. She reeled forward and seized him in a cold, desperate embrace, dragging backward with all her might. Smith glared at her and shook his shoulders impatiently. He had felt the rock give a little. But when she saw that, she screamed again piercingly, and her arms twined like snakes as she struggled to drag him away.

She was very strong. He paused to unwind the fierce clasp, and she fought savagely to prevent it. He needed all his strength to break her grip, and he pushed her from him then with a heavy shove that sent her reeling. The pale eyes followed her, puzzling why, though she had fled in such a frenzy of terror from what flowed out of the stone, she still strove to prevent him from destroying it. For he was quite sure, without understanding why, that if the slab were broken and the symbol destroyed that stream would cease to flow. He could not understand her. He shook his shoulders impatiently and turned again to the stone.

This time she was on him with an animal spring, snarling low in her throat and clawing with frantic hands. Her fangs snapped just clear of his throat. Smith wrenched free with a great effort, for she was steel-strong and very desperate, and gripped her by the shoulder, swinging her away. Then he set his teeth and drove a heavy fist into her face, smashing against the fangs. She yelped, short and sharply, and collapsed under his hand, sinking to the grass in a huddle of

whiteness and wild black hair.

He turned to the stone again. This time he got a firm grip on it, braced his legs wide, heaved. And he felt it give. He heaved again. And very slowly, very painfully, he uprooted its base from the bed where for ages it must have lain. Rock ground protestingly against rock. One edge rose a little, then settled. And the slab tilted. He heaved again, and very deliberately he felt it slipping from his hands. He stood back, breathing heavily, and watched. Majestically the great slab tottered. The stream flowing invisibly from its incised symbol twisted in a streaked path through the air, long whorls of opacity blurring the landscape beyond. Smith thought he felt a stirring in the air, a shiver, as of warning. All the white villas dimly seen through the dark wavered a little before his eyes, and something hummed through the air like a thin, high wailing too sharp to be heard save as a pain to the ears. The chattering overhead quickened suddenly. All this in the slow instant while the slab tottered.

Then it fell. Deliberately slow, it leaned outward and down. It struck the ground with a rush and a splintering crash. He saw the long cracks appear miraculously upon its surface as the great, fantastic symbol broke into fragments. The opacity that had flowed outward from it writhed like a dragon in pain, flung itself high-arching into the shivering air--and ceased. In that moment of cessation the world collapsed around him. A mighty wind swooped down in a deafening roar, blurring the landscape. He thought he saw the white villas melting like dreams, and he knew the werewoman on the grass must have recovered consciousness, for he heard a wolf-yell of utter agony from behind him. Then the great wind blotted out all other things, and he was whirling through space in a dizzy flight.

In that flight understanding overtook him. In a burst of illumination he knew quite suddenly what had happened and what would happen now--realised without surprise, as if he had always known it, that the

dwelers of this wasteland had dwelt here under the protection of that mighty curse laid upon the land in the long-past century when the city fell. And he realised that it must have been a very powerful curse, laid down by skill and knowledge that had long since vanished even from the legends of man, for in all the ages since, this accursed moor had been safe haven for all the half-real beings that haunt mankind, akin to the evil that lay like a blanket over the moor.

And he knew that the curse had its origin in the nameless symbol which some sorcerer of forgotten times had inscribed upon the stone, a writing from some language which can have no faintest kinship with man. He knew that the force flowing out from it was a force of utter evil, spreading like a river over the whole salt waste. The stream of it lapped to and fro in changing courses over the land, and when it neared some dweller of the place, the evil that burnt for a life-force in that dweller acted as a magnet to the pure evil which was the stream. So, evil answering to evil, the two fused into one, the unfortunate dweller swallowed up into a nirvana of nonexistence in the heart of that slow-flowing stream.

It must have worked strange changes in them. That city whose shapes of shadow still haunted the place assumed reality, taking on substance and becoming more and more actual as the reality of the captive waned and melted into the power of the stream.

He thought, remembering those hurrying throngs with their strained, pale faces, that the spirits of the people who had died in the lost city must be bound tenuously to the spot of their death. He remembered that young, richly garmented warrior he had been one with in fleeting moments, running golden-sandaled through the streets of the forgotten city in a panic of terror from something too long past to be remembered--the jewelled woman in her coloured sandals and rippling robes running at his side--and wondered in the space of a second what their story had been so many ages ago. He thought that

course must somehow have included the dwellers in the city, chaining them in earth-bound misery for centuries. But of this he was not sure.

Much of all this was not clear to him, and more he realised without understanding, but he knew that the instinct which guided him to turn up-stream had not been a false one--that something human and alien in him had been a talisman to lead his staggering feet back toward the source of his destroyer. And he knew that with the breaking up of the symbol that was a curse, the curse ceased to be, and the warm, sweet, life-giving air that humanity breathes swept in a flood across the barrens, blowing away all the shadowy, unclean creatures to whom it had been haven for so long. He knew--he knew....

Greyneess swooped round him, and all knowledge faded from his mind and the wind roared mightily in his ears. Somewhere in that roaring flight oblivion overtook him.

When he opened his eyes again he could not for an instant imagine where he lay or what had happened. Weight pressed upon his entire body suffocatingly, pain shot through it as jagged flashes. His shoulder ached deeply. And the night was dark, dark about him. Something muffling and heavy had closed over his senses, for no longer could he hear the tiny, sharp sounds of the plain or scent those tingling odours that once blew along the wind. Even the chattering overhead had fallen still. The place did not even smell the same. He thought he could catch from afar the odour of smoke, and somehow the air, as nearly as he could tell with his deadened senses, no longer breathed of desolation and loneliness. The smell of life was in the wind, very faintly. Little pleasant odours of flower-scent and kitchen smoke seemed to tinge it.

"--wolves must have gone," someone was saying above him. "They stopped howling a few minutes ago--notice?--first time since we came into this damned place. Listen."

With a painful effort Smith rolled his head sidewise and stared. A little group of men was gathered around him, their eyes lifted just now to the dark horizon. In the new density of the night he could not see them clearly, and he blinked in irritation, striving to regain that old, keen, clarity he had lost. But they looked familiar. One wore a white fur cap on his head. Someone said, indicating something beyond Smith's limited range of vision,

"Fellow here must have had quite a tussle. See the dead she-wolf with her throat torn out? And look--all the wolf-tracks everywhere in the dust. Hundreds of them. I wonder...."

"Bad luck to talk about them," broke in the fur-capped leader. "Werewolves, I tell you--I've been in this place before, and I know. But I never saw or heard tell of a thing like what we saw tonight--that big white-eyed one running with the she-wolves. God! I'll never forget those eyes."

Smith moved his head and groaned. The men turned quickly.

"Look, he's coming to," said someone, and Smith was vaguely conscious of an arm under his head and some liquid, hot and strong, forced between his lips. He opened his eyes and looked up. The fur-capped man was bending over him. Their eyes met. In the starlight Smith's were colourless as pale steel.

The man choked something inarticulate and leaped back so suddenly that the flask spilled its contents half over Smith's chest. He crossed himself frankly with a hand that shook.

"Who--who are you?" he demanded unsteadily. Smith grinned wearily and closed his eyes.

Call Him Demon

Published in Thrilling Wonder Stories, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Fall [October] 1946) under the pseudonym Keith Hammond.

Contents

Chapter 1 Wrong Uncle

Chapter 2 Raw, Red Meat

Chapter 3 Sated Eater

Chapter 4 End of the Game

Chapter 1

Wrong Uncle

A long time afterward she went back to Los Angeles and drove past Grandmother Keaton's house. It hadn't changed a great deal, really, but what had seemed an elegant mansion to her childish, 1920 eyes was now a big ramshackle frame structure, grey with scaling paint.

After twenty-five years the--insecurity--wasn't there any more, but there still persisted a dull, irrational, remembered uneasiness, an echo of the time Jane Larkin had spent in that house when she was nine, a thin, big-eyed girl with the Buster Brown bangs so fashionable then.

Looking back, she could remember too much and too little. A child's mind is curiously different from an adult's. When Jane went into the living-room under the green glass chandelier, on that June day in 1920, she made a dutiful round of the family, kissing them all. Grandmother Keaton and chilly Aunt Bessie and the four uncles. She

did not hesitate when she came to the new uncle—who was different.

The other kids watched her with impassive eyes. They knew. They saw she knew. But they said nothing just then. Jane realised she could not mention the—the trouble—either, until they brought it up. That was part of the silent etiquette of childhood. But the whole house was full of uneasiness. The adults merely sensed a trouble, something vaguely wrong. The children, Jane saw, knew.

Afterward they gathered in the back yard, under the big date-palm. Jane ostentatiously fingered her new necklace and waited. She saw the looks the others exchanged—looks that said, 'Do you think she really noticed?' And finally Beatrice, the oldest, suggested hide-and-seek.

"We ought to tell her, Bee," little Charles said.

Beatrice kept her eyes from Charles.

"Tell her what? You're crazy, Charles."

Charles was insistent, but vague.

"You know."

"Keep your old secret," Jane said. "I know what it is, anyhow. He's not my uncle."

"See?" Emily crowed. "She did too see it. I told you she'd notice."

"It's kind of funny," Jane said. She knew very well that the man in the living-room wasn't her uncle and never had been, and he was pretending quite hard—hard enough to convince the grown-ups—that he had always been here. With the clear, unprejudiced eye of immaturity, Jane could see that he wasn't an ordinary grown-up. He

was sort of--empty.

"He just came," Emily said. "About three weeks ago."

"Three days," Charles corrected, trying to help, but his temporal sense wasn't dependent on the calendar. He measured time by the yardstick of events, and days weren't standard size for him. They were longer when he was sick or when it rained, and far too short when he was riding the merry-go-round at Ocean Park or playing games in the back yard.

"It was three weeks," Beatrice said.

"Where'd he come from?" Jane asked.

There were secret glances exchanged.

"I don't know," Beatrice said carefully.

"He came out of a big round hole that kept going around," Charles said. "It's like a Christmas tree through there, all fiery."

"Don't tell lies," Emily said. "Did you ever truly see that, Charles?"

"No. Only sort of."

"Don't they notice?" Jane meant the adults.

"No," Beatrice told her, and the children all looked toward the house and pondered the inscrutable ways of grown-ups. "They act like he's always been here. Even Granny. Aunt Bessie said he came before I did. Only I knew that wasn't right."

"Three weeks," Charles said, changing his mind.

"He's making them all feel sick," Emily said. "Aunt Bessie takes aspirin all the time."

Jane considered. On the face of it, the situation seemed a little silly. An uncle three weeks old? Perhaps the adults were merely pretending, as they sometimes did, with esoteric adult motives. But somehow that didn't seem quite the answer. Children are never deceived very long about such things.

Charles, now that the ice was broken and Jane no longer an outsider, burst suddenly into excited gabble.

"Tell her, Bee! The real secret--you know. Can I show her the Road of Yellow Bricks? Please, Bee? Huh?"

Then the silence again. Charles was talking too much. Jane knew the Road of Yellow Bricks, of course. It ran straight through Oz from the Deadly Desert to the Emerald City.

After a long time Emily nodded.

"We got to tell her, you know," she said. "Only she might get scared. It's so dark."

"You were scared," Bobby said. "You cried, the first time."

"I didn't. Anyhow it--it's only make-believe."

"Oh, no!" Charles said. "I reached out and touched the crown last time."

"It isn't a crown," Emily said. "It's him, Ruggedo."

Jane thought of the uncle who wasn't a real uncle--who wasn't a real person. "Is he Ruggedo?" she asked.

The children understood.

"Oh, no," Charles said. "Ruggedo lives in the cellar. We give him meat. All red and bluggy. He likes it! Gobble, gobble!"

Beatrice looked at Jane. She nodded toward the clubhouse, which was a piano-box with a genuine secret lock. Then, somehow, quite deftly, she shifted the conversation onto another subject. A game of cowboys-and-Indians started presently and Bobby, howling terribly, led the route around the house.

The piano-box smelled pleasantly of acacia drifting through the cracks. Beatrice and Jane, huddled together in the warm dimness, heard diminishing Indian-cries in the distance. Beatrice looked curiously adult just now.

"I'm glad you came, Janie," she said. "The little kids don't understand at all. It's pretty awful."

"Who is he?"

Beatrice shivered. "I don't know. I think he lives in the cellar." She hesitated. "You have to get to him through the attic, though. I'd be awfully scared if the little kids weren't so--so--they don't seem to mind at all."

"But Bee. Who is he?"

Beatrice turned her head and looked at Jane, and it was quite evident then that she could not or would not say. There was a barrier. But because it was important, she tried. She mentioned the Wrong Uncle.

"I think Ruggedo's the same as him. I know he is, really. Charles and

Bobby say so--and they know. They know better than I do. They're littler.... It's hard to explain, but--well, it's sort of like the Scoodlers. Remember?"

The Scoodlers. That unpleasant race that dwelt in a cavern on the road to Oz and had the unconventional ability to detach their heads and hurl them at passers-by. After a moment the parallel became evident. A Scoodler could have his head in one place and his body in another. But both parts would belong to the same Scoodler.

Of course the phantom uncle had a head and a body both. But Jane could understand vaguely the possibility of his double nature, one of him moving deceptively through the house, focus of a strange malaise, and the other nameless, formless, nesting in a cellar and waiting for red meat....

"Charles knows more than any of us about it," Beatrice said. "He was the one who found out we'd have to feed R-Ruggedo. We tried different things, but it has to be raw meat. And if we stopped--something awful would happen. We kids found that out."

It was significant that Jane didn't ask how. Children take their equivalent of telepathy for granted.

"They don't know," Beatrice added. "We can't tell them."

"No," Jane said, and the two girls looked at one another, caught in the terrible, helpless problem of immaturity, the knowledge that the mores of the adult world are too complicated to understand, and that children must walk warily.

Adults are always right. They are an alien race.

Luckily for the other children, they had come upon the Enemy in a body. One child alone might have had violent hysterics. But Charles.

who made the first discoveries, was only six, still young enough so that the process of going insane in that particular way wasn't possible for him. A six-year-old is in a congenitally psychotic state; it is normal to him.

"And they've been sick ever since he came," Beatrice said.

Jane had already seen that. A wolf may don sheepskin and slide unobserved into a flock, but the sheep are apt to become nervous, though they can not discover the source of their discomfort.

It was a matter of mood. Even he showed the same mood--uneasiness, waiting, sensing that something was wrong and not knowing what--but with him it was simply a matter of camouflage. Jane could tell he didn't want to attract attention by varying from the arbitrary norm he had chosen--that of the human form.

Jane accepted it. The uncle who was--empty--the one in the cellar called Ruggedo, who had to be fed regularly on raw meat, so that Something wouldn't happen....

A masquerader, from somewhere. He had power, and he had limitations. The obvious evidences of his power were accepted without question.

Children are realists. It was not incredible to them, for this hungry, inhuman stranger to appear among them--for here he was.

He came from somewhere. Out of time, or space, or an inconceivable place. He never had any human feelings; the children sensed that easily. He pretended very cleverly to be human, and he could warp the adult minds to implant artificial memories of his existence. The adults thought they remembered him. An adult will recognise a mirage; a child will be deceived. But conversely, an

intellectual mirage will deceive an adult, not a child.

Ruggedo's power couldn't warp their minds, for those were neither quite human nor quite sane, from the adult standpoint. Beatrice, who was oldest, was afraid. She had the beginnings of empathy and imagination.

Little Charlie felt mostly excitement. Bobbie, the smallest, had already begun to be bored....

Perhaps later Beatrice remembered a little of what Ruggedo looked like, but the others never did. For they reached him by a very strange road, and perhaps they were somewhat altered themselves during the time they were with him. He accepted or rejected food; that was all. Upstairs, the body of the Scoodler pretended to be human, while the Scoodler's head lay in that little, horrible nest he had made by warping space, so he was invisible and intangible to anyone who didn't know how to find the Road of Yellow Bricks.

What was he? Without standards of comparison--and there are none, in this world--he cannot be named. The children thought of him as Ruggedo. But he was not the fat, half-comic, inevitably frustrated Gnome King.

He was never that.

Call him demon.

As a name-symbol, it implies too much and not enough. But it will have to do. By the standard of maturity he was monster, alien, super-being. But because of what he did, and what he wanted--call him demon.

Chapter 2

Raw, Red Meat

One afternoon, a few days later, Beatrice hunted up Jane. "How much money have you got, Janie?" she asked.

"Four dollars and thirty-five cents," Jane said, after investigation. "Dad gave me five dollars at the station. I bought some popcorn and--well--different things."

"Gee, I'm glad you came when you did." Beatrice blew out a long breath. Tacitly it was agreed that the prevalent socialism of childhood clubs would apply in this more urgent clubbing together of interests. Jane's small hoard was available not for any individual among them, but for the good of the group. "We were running out of money," Beatrice said. "Granny caught us taking meat out of the icebox and we don't dare any more. But we can get a lot with your money."

Neither of them thought of the inevitable time when that fund would be exhausted. Four dollars and thirty-five cents seemed fabulous, in that era. And they needn't buy expensive meat, so long as it was raw and bloody.

They walked together down the acacia-shaded street with its occasional leaning palms and drooping pepper-trees. They bought two pounds of hamburger and improvidently squandered twenty cents on sodas.

When they got back to the house, Sunday lethargy had set in. Uncles Simon and James had gone out for cigars, and Uncle Lew and Bert were reading the papers, while Aunt Bessie crocheted. Grandmother Keaton read 'Young's Magazine', diligently seeking spicy passages. The two girls paused behind the beaded portieres, looking in.

"Come on, kids, Lew said in his deep, resonant voice. "Seen the funnies yet? Mutt and Jeff are good. And Spark Plug--"

"Mr. Gibson is good enough for me," Grandmother Keaton said. "He's a real artist. His people look like people."

The door banged open and Uncle James appeared, fat, grinning, obviously happy from several beers. Uncle Simon paced him like a personified conscience.

"At any rate, it's quiet," he said, turning a sour glance on Jane and Beatrice. "The children make such a rumpus sometimes I can't hear myself think."

"Granny," Beatrice asked, "where are the kids?"

"In the kitchen, I think, dear. They wanted some water for something."

"Thanks." The two girls went out, leaving the room filled with a growing atmosphere of sub-threshold discomfort. The sheep were sensing the wolf among them, but the sheepskin disguise was sufficient. They did not know....

The kids were in the kitchen, busily painting one section of the comics with brushes and water. When you did that, pictures emerged. One page of the newspaper had been chemically treated so that moisture would bring out the various colours, dull pastels, but singularly glamorous, in a class with Japanese flowers that would bloom in water, and the Chinese paper-shelled almonds that held tiny prizes.

From behind her, Beatrice deftly produced the butcher's package.

"Two pounds," she said. "Janie had some money, and Merton's was open this afternoon. I thought we'd better...."

Emily kept on painting diligently. Charles jumped up.

"Are we going up now, huh?"

Jane was uneasy. "I don't know if I'd better come along. I--"

"I don't want to either," Bobby said, but that was treason. Charles said Bobby was scared.

"I'm not. It just isn't any fun. I want to play something else."

"Emily," Beatrice said softly. "You don't have to go this time."

"Yes I do." Emily looked up at last from her painting. "I'm not scared."

"I want to see the lights," Charles said. Beatrice whirled on him.

"You tell such lies, Charles! There aren't any lights."

"There are so. Sometimes, anyhow."

"There aren't."

"There are so. You're too dumb to see them. Let's go and feed him."

It was understood that Beatrice took command now. She was the oldest. She was also, Jane sensed, more afraid than the others, even Emily.

They went upstairs, Beatrice carrying the parcel of meat. She had already cut the string. In the upper hall they grouped before a door.

"This is the way, Jane," Charles said rather proudly. "We gotta go up to the attic. There's a swing-down ladder in the bathroom ceiling. We have to climb up on the tub to reach."

"My dress," Jane said doubtfully.

"You won't get dirty. Come on."

Charles wanted to be first, but he was too short. Beatrice climbed to the rim of the tub and tugged at a ring in the ceiling. The trap-door creaked and the stairs ascended slowly, with a certain majesty, beside the tub. It wasn't dark up there. Light came vaguely through the attic windows.

"Come on, Janie," Beatrice said, with a queer breathlessness, and they all scrambled up somehow, by dint of violent acrobatics.

The attic was warm, quiet and dusty. Planks were laid across the beams. Cartons and trunks were here and there.

Beatrice was already walking along one of the beams. Jane watched her.

Beatrice didn't look back; she didn't say anything. Once her hand groped out behind her; Charles, who was nearest, took it. Then Beatrice reached a plank laid across to another rafter. She crossed it. She went on--stopped--and came back, with Charles.

"You weren't doing it right," Charles said disappointedly. "You were thinking of the wrong things."

Beatrice's face looked oddly white in the golden, faint light.

Jane met her cousin's eyes. "Bee--"

"You have to think of something else," Beatrice said quickly. "It's all right. Come on."

Charles at her heels, she started again across the plank. Charles was saying something, in a rhythmic, mechanical monotone:

'One, two, buckle my shoe, Three, four, knock at the door, Five, six, pick up sticks--'

Beatrice disappeared.

'Seven, eight, lay them--'

Charles disappeared.

Bobby, his shoulders expressing rebelliousness, followed. And vanished.

Emily made a small sound.

"Oh--Emily!" Jane said.

But her youngest cousin only said, "I don't want to go down there, Janie."

"You don't have to."

"Yes, I do," Emily said. "I'll tell you what. I won't be afraid if you come right after me. I always think there's something coming up behind me to grab--but if you promise to come right after, it'll be all right."

"I promise," Jane said.

Reassured, Emily walked across the bridge. Jane was watching closely this time. Yet she did not see Emily disappear. She was suddenly--gone. Jane stepped forward, and stopped as a sound came from downstairs.

"Jane!" Aunt Bessie's voice. "Jane!" It was louder and more peremptory now. "Jane, where are you? Come here to me!"

Jane stood motionless, looking across the plank bridge. It was quite empty, and there was no trace of Emily or the other children. The attic was suddenly full of invisible menace. Yet she would have gone on, because of her promise, if--

"Jane!"

Jane reluctantly descended and followed the summons to Aunt Bessie's bedroom. That prim-mouthed woman was pinning fabric and moving her lips impatiently.

"Where on earth have you been, Jane? I've been calling and calling."

"We were playing," Jane said. "Did you want me, Aunt Bessie?"

"I should say I did," Aunt Bessie said. "This collar I've been crocheting. It's a dress for you. Come here and let me try it on. How you grow, child!"

And after that there was an eternity of pinning and wriggling, while Jane kept thinking of Emily, alone and afraid somewhere in the attic. She began to hate Aunt Bessie. Yet the thought of rebellion or escape never crossed her mind. The adults were absolute monarchs. As far as relative values went, trying on the collar was more important, at this moment, than anything else in the world. At least, to the adults who administered the world.

While Emily, alone and afraid on the bridge that led to--elsewhere....

The uncles were playing poker. Aunt Gertrude, the vaudeville actress, had unexpectedly arrived for a few days and was talking with Grandmother Keaton and Aunt Bessie in the living-room. Aunt

Gertrude was small and pretty, very charming, with bisque delicacy and a gusto for life that filled Jane with admiration. But she was subdued now.

"This place gives me the creeps," she said, making a dart with her folded fan at Jane's nose. "Hello, funny-face. Why aren't you playing with the other kids?"

"Oh, I'm tired," Jane said, wondering about Emily. It had been nearly an hour since--

"At your age I was never tired," Aunt Gertrude said. "Now look at me. Three a day and that awful straight man I've got--Ma, did I tell you--" The voices pitched lower.

Jane watched Aunt Bessie's skinny fingers move monotonously as she darted her crochet hook through the silk.

"This place is a morgue," Aunt Gertrude said suddenly. "What's wrong with everybody? Who's dead?"

"It's the air," Aunt Bessie said. "Too hot the year round."

"You play Rochester in winter, Bessie my girl, and you'll be glad of a warm climate. It isn't that, anyway. I feel like--mm-m--it's like being on stage after the curtain's gone up."

"It's your fancy," her mother said.

"Ghosts," Aunt Gertrude said, and was silent. Grandmother Keaton looked sharply at Jane.

"Come over here, child," she said.

Room was made on the soft, capacious lap that had held so many

youngsters.

Jane snuggled against the reassuring warmth and tried to let her mind go blank, transferring all sense of responsibility to Grandmother Keaton. But it wouldn't work. There was something wrong in the house, and the heavy waves of it beat out from a centre very near them.

The Wrong Uncle. Hunger and the avidity to be fed. The nearness of bloody meat tantalising him as he lay hidden in his strange, unguessable nest elsewhere--otherwhere--in that strange place where the children had vanished.

He was down there, slaving for the food; he was up here, empty, avid, a vortex of hunger very nearby.

He was double, a double uncle, masked but terrifyingly clear....

Jane closed her eyes and dug her head deeper into Grandmother Keaton's shoulder.

Aunt Gertrude gossiped in an oddly tense voice, as if she sensed wrongness under the surface and was frightened subtly.

"I'm opening at Santa Barbara in a couple of days, Ma," she said. "I--what's wrong with this house, anyhow? I'm as jumpy as a cat today!--and I want you all to come down and catch the first show. It's a musical comedy. I've been promoted."

"I've seen the 'Prince of Pilsen'before," Grandmother Keaton said.

"Not with me in it. It's my treat. I've engaged rooms at the hotel already. The kids have to come, too. Want to see your auntie act, Jane?"

Jane nodded against her grandmother's shoulder.

"Auntie," Jane said suddenly. "Did you see all the uncles?"

"Certainly I did."

"All of them? Uncle James and Uncle Bert and Uncle Simon and Uncle Lew?"

"The whole kaboodle. Why?"

"I just wondered."

So Aunt Gertrude hadn't noticed the Wrong Uncle either. She wasn't truly observant, Jane thought.

"I haven't seen the kids, though. If they don't hurry up, they won't get any of the presents I've brought. You'd never guess what I have for you, Janie."

But Jane scarcely heard even that exciting promise. For suddenly the tension in the air gave way. The Wrong Uncle who had been a vortex of hunger a moment before was a vortex of ecstasy now. Somewhere, somehow, at last Ruggedo was being fed. Somewhere, somehow, that other half of the double uncle was devouring his bloody fare....

Jane was not in Grandmother Keaton's lap any more. The room was a spinning darkness that winked with tiny lights--Christmas tree lights, Charles had called them--and there was a core of terror in the centre of the whirl. Here in the vanished room the Wrong Uncle was a funnel leading from that unimaginable nest where the other half of him dwelt, and through the funnel, into the room, poured the full ecstatic tide of his satiety.

Somehow in this instant Jane was very near the other children who must stand beside that spinning focus of darkness. She could almost sense their presence, almost put out her hand to touch theirs.

Now the darkness shivered and the bright, tiny lights drew together, and into her mind came a gush of impossible memories. She was too near him. And he was careless as he fed. He was not guarding his thoughts. They poured out, formless as an animal's filling the dark. Thoughts of red food, and of other times and places where that same red food had been brought to him by other hands.

It was incredible. The memories were not of Earth, not of this time or place. He had travelled far, Ruggedo. In many guises. He remembered now, in a flow of shapeless fissions, he remembered tearing through furred sides that squirmed away from his hunger, remembered the gush of hot, sweet redness through the fur.

Not the fur of anything Jane had ever imagined before....

He remembered a great court paved with shining things, and something in bright chains in the centre, and rings of watching eyes as he entered and neared the sacrifice.

As he tore his due from its smooth sides, the cruel chains clanked around him as he fed....

Jane tried to close her eyes and not watch. But it was not with eyes that she watched. And she was ashamed and a little sickened because she was sharing in that feast, tasting the warm red sweetness with Ruggedo in memory, feeling the spin of ecstasy through her head as it spun through his.

"Ah--the kids are coming now," Aunt Gertrude was saying from a long way off.

Jane heard her dimly, and then more clearly, and then suddenly Grandmother Keaton's lap was soft beneath her again, and she was back in the familiar room. "A herd of elephants on the stairs, eh?" Aunt Gertrude said.

They were returning. Jane could hear them too now. Really, they were making much less noise than usual. They were subdued until about half-way down the stairs, and then there was a sudden outburst of clattering and chatter that rang false to Jane's ears.

The children came in, Beatrice a little white, Emily pink and puffy around the eyes. Charles was bubbling over with repressed excitement, but Bobby, the smallest, was glum and bored. At sight of Aunt Gertrude, the uproar redoubled, though Beatrice exchanged a quick, significant glance with Jane.

Then presents and noise, and the uncles coming back in; excited discussion of the trip to Santa Barbara—a strained cheeriness that, somehow, kept dying down into heavy silence.

None of the adults ever really looked over their shoulders, but—the feeling was of bad things to come.

Only the children—not even Aunt Gertrude—were aware of the complete emptiness of the Wrong Uncle. The projection of a lazy, torpid, semi-mindless entity. Superficially he was as convincingly human as if he had never focused his hunger here under this roof, never let his thoughts whirl through the minds of the children, never remembered his red, dripping feasts of other times and places.

He was very sated now. They could feel the torpor pulsing out in slow, drowsy waves so that all the grown-ups were yawning and wondering why. But even now he was empty. Not real. The 'Nobody-there' feeling was as acute as ever to all the small, keen, perceptive

minds that saw him as he was.

Chapter 3

Sated Eater

Later, at bedtime, only Charles wanted to talk about the matter. It seemed to Jane that Beatrice had grown up a little since the early afternoon. Bobby was reading 'The Jungle Book', or pretending to, with much pleased admiration of the pictures showing Shere Khan, the tiger. Emily had turned her face to the wall and was pretending to be asleep.

"Aunt Bessie called me," Jane told her, sensing a faint reproach. "I tried as soon as I could to get away from her. She wanted to try that collar thing on me."

"Oh." The apology was accepted. But Beatrice still refused to talk. Jane went over to Emily's bed and put her arm around the little girl.

"Mad at me, Emily?"

"No."

"You are, though. I couldn't help it, honey."

"It was all right," Emily said. "I didn't care."

"All bright and shiny," Charles said sleepily. "Like a Christmas tree."

Beatrice whirled on him. "Shut up!" she cried. "Shut up, Charles! Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Aunt Bessie put her head into the room.

"What's the matter, children?" she asked.

"Nothing, Auntie," Beatrice said. "We were just playing."

Fed, temporarily sated, it lay torpid in its curious nest. The house was silent, the occupants asleep. Even the Wrong Uncle slept, for Ruggedo was a good mimic.

The Wrong Uncle was not a phantasm, not a mere projection of Ruggedo. As an amoeba extends a pseudopod toward food, so Ruggedo had extended and created the Wrong Uncle. But there the parallel stopped. For the Wrong Uncle was not an elastic extension that could be withdrawn at will. Rather, he--it--was a permanent limb, as a man's arm is. From the brain through the neural system the message goes, and the arm stretches out, the fingers constrict--and there is food in the hand's grip.

But Ruggedo's extension was less limited. It was not permanently bound by rigid laws of matter. An arm may be painted black. And the Wrong Uncle looked and acted human, except to clear immature eyes.

There were rules to be followed, even by Ruggedo. The natural laws of a world could bind it to a certain extent. There were cycles. The life-span of a moth-caterpillar is run by cycles, and before it can spin its cocoon and metamorphose, it must eat--eat--eat. Not until the time of change had come can it evade its current incarnation. Nor could Ruggedo change, now, until the end of its cycle had come. Then there would be another metamorphosis, as there had already, in the unthinkable eternity of its past, been a million curious mutations.

But, at present, it was bound by the rules of its current cycle. The extension could not be withdrawn. And the Wrong Uncle was a part

of it, and it was a part of the Wrong Uncle.

The Scoodler's body and the Scoodler's head.

Through the dark house beat the unceasing, drowsy waves of satiety--slowly, imperceptibly quickening toward that nervous pulse of avidity that always came after the processes of indigestion and digestion had been completed.

Aunt Bessie rolled over and began to snore. In another room, the Wrong Uncle, without waking, turned on his back and also snored.

The talent of protective mimicry was well developed....

It was afternoon again, though by only half an hour, and the pulse in the house had changed subtly in tempo and mood.

"If we're going up to Santa Barbara," Grandmother Keaton had said, "I'm going to take the children down to the dentist today. Their teeth want cleaning, and it's hard enough to get an appointment with Dr. Hover for one youngster, not to mention four. Jane, your mother wrote me you'd been to the dentist a month ago, so you needn't go."

After that the trouble hung unspoken over the children. But no one mentioned it. Only, as Grandmother Keaton herded the kids out on the porch, Beatrice reached behind her without looking, fumbled, found Jane's hand, and squeezed it hard. That was all.

But the responsibility had been passed on. No words had been needed. Beatrice had said plainly that it was Jane's job now. It was her responsibility.

She dared not delay too long. She was too vividly aware of the rising tide of depression affecting the adults. Ruggedo was getting hungry again.

She watched her cousins till they vanished beneath the pepper-trees, and the distant rumble of the trolley put a period to any hope of their return. After that, Jane walked to the butcher shop, and bought two pounds of meat. She drank a soda. Then she came back to the house.

She felt the pulse beating out faster.

She got a tin pan from the kitchen and put the meat on it, and slipped up to the bathroom. It was hard to reach the attic with her burden and without help, but she did it. In the warm stillness beneath the roof she stood waiting, half-hoping to hear Aunt Bessie call again and relieve her of this duty. But no voice came.

The simple mechanics of what she had to do were sufficiently prosaic to keep fear at a little distance. Besides, she was scarcely nine. And it was not dark in the attic.

She walked along the rafter, balancing, till she came to the plank bridge. She felt its resilient vibration underfoot.

'One, two, buckle my shoe, Three, four, knock at the door, Five, six, pick up sticks, Seven, eight--'

She missed the way twice. The third time she succeeded. The mind had to be at just the right pitch of abstraction.... She crossed the bridge, and turned, and--

It was dim, almost dark, in this place. It smelled cold and hollow, of the underground. Without surprise, she knew she was deep down, perhaps beneath the house, perhaps very far away from it. That was as acceptable to her as the rest of the strangeness. She felt no surprise.

Curiously, she seemed to know the way. She was going into a tiny enclosure, and yet at the same time she wandered for a while through low-roofed, hollow spaces, endless, very dim, smelling of cold and moisture. An unpleasant place to the mind, and a dangerous place as well to wander through with one's little pan of meat.

It found the meat acceptable.

Looking back later, Jane had no recollection whatever of it. She did not know how she had proffered the food, or how it had been received, or where in that place of paradoxical space and smallness it lay dreaming of other worlds and eras.

She only knew that the darkness spun around her again, winking with little lights, as it devoured its food. Memories swirled from its mind to hers as if the two minds were of one fabric. She saw more clearly this time. She saw a great winged thing caged in a glittering pen, and she remembered as Ruggedo remembered, and leaped with Ruggedo's leap, feeling the wings buffet about her and feeling her rending hunger rip into the body, and tasting avidly the hot, sweet, salty fluid bubbling out.

It was a mixed memory. Blending with it, other victims shifted beneath Ruggedo's grip, the feathery pinions becoming the beast of great clawed arms and the writhe of reptilian litherness. All his victims became one in memory as he ate.

One flash of another memory opened briefly toward the last. Jane was aware of a great swaying garden of flowers larger than herself, and of cowed figures moving silently among them, and of a victim with showering pale hair lying helpless upon the lip of one gigantic flower, held down with chains like shining blossoms. And it seemed to Jane that she herself went cowed among those silent figures, and

that he--it--Ruggedo--in another guise walked beside her toward the sacrifice.

It was the first human sacrifice he had recalled. Jane would have liked to know more about that. She had no moral scruples, of course. Food was food. But the memory flickered smoothly into another picture and she never saw the end. She did not really need to see it. There was only one end to all these memories. Perhaps it was as well for her that Ruggedo did not dwell overlong on that particular moment of all his bloody meals.

'Seventeen, eighteen, Maids in waiting, Nineteen, twenty--'

She tilted precariously back across the rafters, holding her empty pan. The attic smelled dusty. It helped to take away the reek of remembered crimson from her mind....

When the children came back, Beatrice said simply, "Did you?" and Jane nodded. The taboo still held. They would not discuss the matter more fully except in case of real need. And the drowsy, torpid heat in the house, the psychic emptiness of the Wrong Uncle, showed plainly that the danger had been averted again--for a time....

"Read me about Mowgli, Granny," Bobby said. Grandmother Keaton settled down, wiped and adjusted her spectacles, and took up Kipling. Presently the other children were drawn into the charmed circle. Grandmother spoke of Shere Khan's downfall--of the cattle driven into the deep gulch to draw the tiger--and of the earth-shaking stampede that smashed the killer into bloody pulp.

"Well," Grandmother Keaton said, closing the book, "that's the end of Shere Khan. He's dead now."

"No he isn't," Bobby roused and said sleepily.

"Of course he is. Good and dead. The cattle killed him."

"Only at the end, Granny. If you start reading at the beginning again, Shere Khan's right there."

Bobby, of course, was too young to have any conception of death. You were killed sometimes in games of cowboys-and-Indians, an ending neither regrettable nor fatal. Death is an absolute term that needs personal experience to be made understandable.

Uncle Lew smoked his pipe and wrinkled the brown skin around his eyes at Uncle Bert, who bit his lips and hesitated a long time between moves. But Uncle Lew won the chess game anyway. Uncle James winked at Aunt Gertrude and said he thought he'd take a walk, would she like to come along? She would.

After their departure, Aunt Bessie looked up, sniffed.

"You just take a whiff of their breaths when they come back, Ma," she said. "Why do you stand for it?"

But Grandmother Keaton chuckled and stroked Bobby's hair. He had fallen asleep on her lap, his hands curled into small fists, his cheeks faintly flushed.

Uncle Simon's gaunt figure stood by the window.

He watched through the curtains, and said nothing at all.

"Early to bed," Aunt Bessie said, "if we're going to Santa Barbara in the morning, children!"

And that was that.

Chapter 4

End of the Game

By morning Bobby was running a temperature, and Grandmother Keaton refused to risk his life in Santa Barbara. This made Bobby very sullen, but solved the problem the children had been wondering about for many hours. Also, a telephone call from Jane's father said that he was arriving that day to pick up his daughter, and she had a little brother now. Jane, who had no illusions about the stork, was relieved, and hoped her mother wouldn't be sick any more now.

A conclave was held in Bobby's bedroom before breakfast.

"You know what to do, Bobby," Beatrice said. "Promise you'll do it?"

"Promise. Uh-huh."

"You can do it today, Janie, before your father comes. And you'd better get a lot of meat and leave it for Bobby."

"I can't buy any meat without money," Bobby said. Somewhat reluctantly Beatrice counted out what was left of Jane's small hoard, and handed it over. Bobby stuffed the change under his pillow and pulled at the red flannel wound around his neck.

"It scratches," he said. "I'm not sick, anyway."

"It was those green pears you ate yesterday," Emily said very meanly. "You thought nobody saw you, didn't you?"

Charles came in; he had been downstairs. He was breathless.

"Hey, know what happened?" he said. "He hurt his foot. Now he can't

go to Santa Barbara. I bet he did it on purpose."

"Gosh," Jane said. "How?"

"He said he twisted it on the stairs. But I bet it's a lie. He just doesn't want to go."

"Maybe he can't go--that far," Beatrice said, with a sudden flash of intuition, and they spoke no more of the subject. But Beatrice, Emily and Charles were all relieved that the Wrong Uncle was not to go to Santa Barbara with them, after all.

It took two taxis to carry the travellers and their luggage. Grandmother Keaton, the Wrong Uncle and Jane stood on the front porch and waved. The automobiles clattered off, and Jane promptly got some money from Bobby, and went to the butcher store, returning heavy-laden.

The Wrong Uncle, leaning on a cane, hobbled into the sun-parlour and lay down. Grandmother Keaton made a repulsive but healthful drink for Bobby, and Jane decided not to do what she had to do until afternoon. Bobby read 'The Jungle Book', stumbling over the hard words, and, for the while, the truce held.

Jane was not to forget that day quickly. The smells were sharply distinct; the odour of baking bread from the kitchen, the sticky-sweet flower scents from outside, the slightly dusty, rich-brown aroma exhaled by the sun-warmed rugs and furniture. Grandmother Keaton went up to her bedroom to cold-cream her hands and face, and Jane lounged on the threshold, watching.

It was a charming room, in its comfortable, unimaginative way. The curtains were so stiffly starched that they billowed out in crisp whiteness, and the bureau was cluttered with fascinating objects--a

pin-cushion shaped like a doll, a tiny red china shoe, with tinier grey china mice on it, a cameo brooch bearing a portrait of Grandmother Keaton as a girl.

And slowly, insistently, the pulse increased, felt even here, in this bedroom, where Jane felt it was a rather impossible intrusion.

Directly after lunch the bell rang, and it was Jane's father, come to take her back to San Francisco. He was in a hurry to catch the train, and there was time only for a hurried conversation before the two were whisked off in the waiting taxi. But Jane had found time to run upstairs, and say good-bye to Bobby--and tell him where the meat was hidden.

"All right, Janie," Bobby said. "Good-bye."

She knew she should not have left the job to Bobby. A nagging sense of responsibility haunted her all the way to the railroad station. She was only vaguely aware of adult voices saying the train would be very late, and of her father suggesting that the circus was in town....

It was a good circus. She almost forgot Bobby and the crisis that would be mounting so dangerously unless he met it as he had promised. Early evening was blue as they moved with the crowd out of the tent. And then through a rift Jane saw a small, familiar figure, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. She knew.

Mr. Larkin saw Bobby in almost the same instant. He called sharply, and a moment later the two children were looking at one another, Bobby's plump face sullen.

"Does your grandmother know you're here, Bobby?" Mr. Larkin said.

"Well, I guess not," Bobby said.

"You ought to be paddled, young man. Come along, both of you. I'll have to phone her right away. She'll be worried to death."

In the drug store, while he telephoned, Jane looked at her cousin. She was suffering the first pang of maturity's burden, the knowledge of responsibility misused.

"Bobby," she said. "Did you?"

"You leave me alone," Bobby said with a scowl. There was silence.

Mr. Larkin came back. "Nobody answered. I've called a taxi. There'll be just time to get Bobby back before our train leaves."

In the taxi also there was mostly silence. As for what might be happening at the house, Jane did not think of that at all. The mind has its own automatic protections. And in any case, it was too late now....

When the taxi drew up, the house was blazing with orange squares of windows in the dusk. There were men on the porch, and light glinted on a police officer's shield.

"You kids wait here," Mr. Larkin said uneasily. "Don't get out of the car."

The taxi driver shrugged and pulled out a folded newspaper as Mr. Larkin hurried toward the porch. In the back seat Jane spoke to Bobby, her voice very soft.

"You didn't," she whispered. It was not even an accusation.

"I don't care," Bobby whispered back. "I was tired of that game. I wanted to play something else." He giggled. "I won, anyhow," he declared.

"How? What happened?"

"The police came, like I knew they would. He never thought of that. So I won."

"But how?"

"Well, it was sort of like 'The Jungle Book'. Shooting tigers, remember? They tied a kid to a stake and, when the tiger comes-- bang! Only the kids were all gone to Santa Barbara, and you'd gone too. So I used Granny. I didn't think she'd mind. She plays games with us a lot. And anyhow she was the only one left."

"But Bobby, a kid doesn't mean a kid like us. It means a baby goat. And anyhow--"

"Oh!" Bobby whispered. "Oh--well, anyhow, I thought Granny would be all right. She's too fat to run fast." He grinned scornfully. "He's dumb," he said. "He should have known the hunters always come when you tie a kid out for the tiger. He doesn't know anything. When I told him I'd locked Granny in her room and nobody else was around, I thought he might guess." Bobby looked crafty. "I was smart. I told him through the window. I thought he might think about me being a kid. But he didn't. He went right upstairs--fast. He even forgot to limp. I guess he was pretty hungry by then." Bobby glanced toward the swarming porch. "Prob'ly the police have got him now," he added carelessly. "It was easy as pie. I won."

Jane's mind had not followed these fancies.

"Is she dead?" she asked, very softly.

Bobby looked at her. The word had a different meaning for him. It had no meaning, beyond a phase in a game. And, to his knowledge,

the tiger had never harmed the tethered kid.

Mr. Larkin was coming back to the taxi now, walking very slowly and not very straight.

Jane could not see his face...

It was hushed up, of course, as much as possible. The children, who knew so much more than those who were shielding them, were futilely protected from the knowledge of what had happened. As futilely as they, in their turn, had tried to protect their elders. Except for the two oldest girls, they didn't particularly care. The game was over. Granny had had to go away on a long, long journey, and she would never be back.

They understood what that meant well enough.

The Wrong Uncle, on the other hand, had had to go away too, they were told, to a big hospital where he would be taken care of all his life.

This puzzled them a little, for it fell somewhat outside the limits of their experience. Death they understood very imperfectly, but this other thing was completely mystifying. They didn't greatly care, once their interest faded, though Bobby for some time listened to readings of 'The Jungle Book' with unusual attention, wondering if this time they would take the tiger away instead of killing him on the spot. They never did, of course. Evidently in real life tigers were different...

For a long time afterward, in nightmares, Jane's perverse imagination dwelt upon and relived the things she would not let it remember when she was awake. She would see Granny's bedroom as she had seen it last, the starched curtains billowing, the sunshine, the red china shoe, the doll pin-cushion. Granny, rubbing cold cream

into her wrinkled hands and looking up more and more nervously from time to time as the long, avid waves of hunger pulsed through the house from the thing in its dreadful hollow place down below.

It must have been very hungry. The Wrong Uncle, pretending to a wrenched ankle downstairs, must have shifted and turned upon the couch, that hollow man, empty and blind of everything but the need for sustenance, the one red food he could not live without. The empty automaton in the sun-porch and the ravenous being in its warp below pulsing with one hunger, ravening for one food....

It had been very wise of Bobby to speak through the window when he had delivered his baited message.

Upstairs in the locked room, Granny must have discovered presently that she could not get out. Her fat, mottled fingers, slippery from cold-creaming, must have tugged vainly at the knob.

Jane dreamed of the sound of those footsteps many times. The tread she had never heard was louder and more real to her than any which had ever sounded in her ears. She knew very surely how they must have come bounding up the stairs, thump thump, thump, two steps at a time, so that Granny would look up in alarm, knowing it could not be the uncle with his wrenched ankle. She would have jumped up then, her heart knocking, thinking wildly of burglars.

It can't have lasted long. The steps would have taken scarcely the length of a heartbeat to come down the hall. And by now the house would be shaking and pulsing with one triumphant roar of hunger almost appeased. The thumping steps would beat its rhythm to it, the long quick strides coming with dreadful purposefulness down the hall. And then the key clicking in the lock. And then--

Usually then Jane awoke....

A little boy isn't responsible. Jane told herself that many times, then and later. She didn't see Bobby again very often, and when she did he had forgotten a great deal; new experiences had crowded out the old. He got a puppy for Christmas, and he started school. When he heard that the Wrong Uncle had died in the asylum he had to think hard to remember who they meant, for to the younger children the Wrong Uncle had never been a member of the family, only a part in a game they had played and won.

Gradually the nameless distress which had once pervaded the household faded and ceased. It was strongest, most desperate, in the days just after Granny's death, but everyone attributed that to shock. When it died away they were sure.

By sheer accident Bobby's cold, limited logic had been correct. Ruggedo would not have been playing fair if he had brought still another Wrong Uncle into the game, and Bobby had trusted him to observe the rules. He did observe them, for they were a law he could not break.

Ruggedo and the Wrong Uncle were parts of a whole, indissolubly bound into their cycle. Not until the cycle had been successfully completed could the Wrong Uncle extension be retracted or the cord broken. So, in the end, Ruggedo was helpless.

In the asylum, the Wrong Uncle slowly starved. He would not touch what they offered. He knew what he wanted, but they would not give him that. The head and the body died together, and the house that had been Grandmother Keaton's was peaceful once more.

If Bobby ever remembered, no one knew it. He had acted with perfect logic, limited only by his experience. If you do something sufficiently bad, the policeman will come and get you. And he was tired of the game. Only his competitive instinct kept him from simply

quitting it and playing something else.

As it was, he wanted to win--and he had won.

No adult would have done what Bobby did--but a child is of a different species. By adult standards, a child is not wholly sane. Because of the way his mind worked, then--because of what he did, and what he wanted--

Call him demon.

"This Is the House"

Published in Astounding Science Fiction, Vol. 36, No. 6 (February 1946) under the pseudonym Lawrence O'Donnell (later published under the Lewis Padgett name in *A Gnome There Was*, Simon & Schuster: 1950). This issue also contained the second and concluding part of the novella "The Fairy Chessmen" (also by Padgett).

Melton walked somberly into the living room and headed for the front windows, where he remained, brooding over some dark thought and twisting his hands idly behind him. His wife, Michaela, lifted her head and watched him, while the whirring of the sewing machine faded into silence. After a moment she said, "You're in my light, Bob."

"Am I? Sorry," Melton murmured, and moved aside.

But he still kept his back to the room, and his fingers still moved nervously behind him. Michaela frowned, sent a slow, rather questioning glance around the room, and pushed back her chair.

"Let's have a drink," she said. "Your silhouette looks vaguely rocky. A short, strong cocktail, perhaps--huh?"

"A short, strong snort of rye, I'd say," Melton expanded, brightening a trifle. "I'll fix it. Hm-m-m." He had taken a step toward the hall door, but now he paused, almost imperceptibly. Michaela remembered the refrigerator then. "I'll do it," she said, but Melton growled something and went on out, his footsteps heavy and determined.

Michaela crossed to the divan under the window and curled up on it, biting her lower lip and listening hard. As she expected, Bob was delaying opening the refrigerator. She heard the rattle of glasses, the clink of bottles, and a gurgle. The last time Bob had had occasion to investigate the refrigerator, there had been a gasp and a string of blazing, subdued oaths. But he had refused to tell why. Remembering other incidents that had occurred in the last three days, Michaela moved her shoulders, uneasily. Not that she was cold. The house was warm, almost too warm, and that in itself implied certain disturbing factors they had already noticed. Because the coal furnace in the basement was working rather impossibly well.

Melton came back with two highballs. He gave one glass to Michaela and slumped into a chair near her. There was a long silence.

"o.k.," Melton said presently. "So I didn't put any ice in the drinks."

"What of it?"

"Because there's ice today. There wasn't yesterday. But today the icetrays are full. Only it's red ice."

"Red ice," Michaela repeated. "I didn't do it."

Her husband looked at her darkly. "I made no accusations," he pointed out. "I didn't really think you cut a vein and bled into the icetrays, simply to worry me. I'm just saying that the ice is red now."

"That's easily solved. We'll drink the rye straight. Where's the bottle?"

Melton produced it from behind his chair. "I thought we could use several. Did you phone the agent today, Mike?"

"Yes. Nothing came of it. He got the idea we had termites."

"I wish we had. Better termites than.... Well, what about the former tenant? Hadn't he been able to find out anything at all?"

"No, and he thinks we're busybodies."

"I don't care"--Melton took a long swig from his glass--"what he thinks. We bought this house on the understanding that it wasn't--wasn't--" He slowed down and stopped. Michaela exchanged a long glance with him.

Melton nodded. "Sure. That's the way it is. What can we say?"

"Harmon kept talking about electricians and plumbers. He recommended several."

"That helps a lot."

"You're a defeatist," Michaela said, "and give me another drink. Thanks. After all, we're saving coal."

"At the expense of my sanity."

"Could be you don't understand this sort of furnace."

Melton put down his glass and glared at her. "I've handled furnace accounts at the office." He worked with a New York advertising agency, which was one reason they had taken this house, half an hour from Manhattan and pleasantly isolated on the outskirts of a small Hudson River town. "I've had to find out a little about how they

worked. There's a place for a draft, there's a vent where the gases go out, and there's a boiler built into the furnace. You put coal in, and, presumably, it burns out, heats the water in the boiler, and is circulated through the house radiators. There's also a blower that doesn't work. Look. If you light a match, it burns up, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It burns up."

"But the coal doesn't," Melton said triumphantly. "Three days ago I put a couple of shovels of coal in the furnace. I've had a red bed of coals ever since. The house is warm. It shouldn't be." He reached over to an end table and scabbled at some papers. "I even figured out how long it should have taken the coal to burn. The answer is four hours at the outside. Not three days."

"What about that automatic stoker idea?" Michaela asked. "Did you look?"

"Well, I didn't use an x-ray. But I looked. Yeah. I'll show you." He stood up, seized Michaela's hand, and they headed for the cellar, bypassing the eccentric refrigerator.

The cellar was capacious, cement-floored, and with six-by-six vertical supporting beams here and there. In one corner, by the coal bin, was the furnace, a bulging, dirty-white object with insulated pipes sticking out of it and wandering across the beams of the ceiling. All the drafts were shut, but the hydrostatic thermometer atop the boiler read 150. Melton opened the metal door. The bed of coals glowed red; ripples of wavy heat-motion ran across its surface.

"Where's the stoker?" he asked.

"Built in," Michaela suggested, hopelessly. "It's a big furnace."

"The boiler's like a jacket. That fattens it out."

"Why not let the fire go out and start another? Maybe--"

"Let it go out? I can't make it go out. I can't even shake it through the grate." He seized an iron crank and demonstrated. "The house is too hot, even with all the windows open. When snow sets in, I don't know what we'll do."

Michaela turned abruptly toward the stairs. Melton said, "What's the matter?"

"The doorbell."

"I didn't hear it."

On the landing, Michaela paused to look down at her husband. "No," she said reflectively, "one doesn't. Hadn't you noticed?" She made a despairing gesture and departed, leaving Melton to stare after her. Now that he thought of it, not once in the past three days had he heard the doorbell ring. Yet, he recalled now, there had been callers--mostly salesmen determined to sell the new tenants insulation, paint jobs, extermination equipment, and subscriptions to magazines. Somehow it had always been Michaela who had answered the door. Melton had taken it for granted that he had been in a part of the house where it wasn't easy to hear the bell.

He scowled at the furnace, his thin, saturnine face set in troubled lines. Very easy to say, "Ignore the matter." But you couldn't. Not even the single matter of the furnace. And there had been others. What was wrong with the house?

Superficially nothing. Certainly nothing that a prospective tenant would notice on inspection. The title search had showed no flaws; an architect had approved Melton's plan to buy the place. So they had

moved in, grateful for a pied a terre after months of vain house-hunting.

Sixteen Pinehurst Drive seemed exactly what they wanted. It wasn't ultra-modern; it had a certain solid air of assurance about it. It had sat for fifteen years facing the Hudson Palisades across the river, like a prim dowager austerey gathering gray stone skirts about her. The foundation was stone; the upper stories--it was a two-story house--were wooden frame. And the layout of the rooms was ideal for their manage, Melton and Michaela and her brother Phil, who lived with them when he wasn't off on a binge, as he was, presumably, at present.

So they had moved in, the furniture had been installed, and the trouble began. Melton wished Phil were here. The guy, for all his erratic tendencies, had the ability to take things for granted; he exuded reassurance. But Phil hadn't even seen the new house yet.

He did not, therefore, know about the hall light, upstairs, which after a few experiments the Meltons had decided not to use at all. There was something about it. It altered complexions oddly, and had a quality of semi-fluorescence. Not quite that, but neither Michaela nor Melton liked to see each other in its illumination. The bulb wasn't at fault; they'd tried several--new ones at that--and the quality of the light was unchanged.

Now, why in the devil--

Yesterday, when Melton had gone to the refrigerator for ice cubes, he had got a tremendous shock. Electrical disturbance of some sort, obviously; but to see an aurora borealis effect in your refrigerator is inevitably disturbing. And there were other things, shading into subtleties of sensation and emotion, that couldn't be captured in words. The house wasn't haunted. It was rather, Melton felt, simply

too efficient--in an extremely off-beam way.

The windows had been hard to open, extremely hard--for a while. Then, without any particular reason, they had all yielded as though greased, just in time to prevent the Meltons from dashing out of their overheated house to get a breath of fresh air. Melton decided to look up a friend whom he'd met while handling the Instar Electric account. The man was a technician of some kind, and might be able to explain a few puzzling matters. Like the mice. If they were mice. There was something scuttling around at night--certainly too small to be a troll, Michaela contended--and the traps Melton set caught nothing.

"Not those mice," Michaela had remarked. "They're too smart. One morning you're going down in the cellar and find a trap reset, with a tiny glass of whiskey as the bait. That'll be the end of you."

Melton was not amused.

A shrunken little man in baggy pants and a suede jacket appeared suddenly on the staircase landing and looked at Melton. Melton looked back in a baffled manner.

"Furnace trouble, huh?" the man said. "Your wife said you couldn't figure it out."

Michaela came into view. "This is Mr. Garr. I phoned him today."

Garr's leathery face cracked into a grin. "Got my name in the phone book under about everything," he said. "Wiring, plumbing, painting--plenty of folks get trouble that ain't just in one line. Like your furnace." He walked over to examine it. "Tinsmith--furnace man--electrician--you got to be all of 'em to get along. What's the matter with the thing?"

"The blower doesn't work," Melton said, avoiding Michaela's accusing stare.

Garr used a flashlight, traced wires, and did things with a screwdriver. Sparks scattered. He finally examined the hydrostat atop the boiler, lifted its cap, and clucked. "Leak," he said. "See the steam coming out? All rusted. The wires are grounded."

"Can you fix it?"

"Gotta get another hydrostat. I'll pick one up, Mr.--uh--Melton. You don't need a blower much anyway. That all?"

Michaela said firmly, "No, it isn't. We put a few shovels of coal in that furnace three days ago, and it's still going."

Garr didn't seem impressed. He looked into the furnace, nodded in a pleased sort of way, and asked, "How many shovels didja say?"

"Four," Melton told him.

"Ain't enough," Garr said helpfully. "You keep the coal a few inches lower than the door, see? That way, you get better heat."

"The house is too hot now. How do you make a furnace go out?"

"She goes out. Just leave her alone. Or shake her down through the grate."

"She won't shake. Try it yourself."

Garr tried it. "That's right. Guess she's fused. I'll have to get some tools and new grates to fix that, maybe." He straightened and peered around the cellar. "Darn nice house you got here, though. She's well built. Good, solid beams."

"Mice," Melton said.

"Li'l field mice. You get 'em all around this part of the country. You keep a cat?"

"No."

"Keep one," Garr advised. "I got one, but she's always having kittens. Next time she has a batch, I'll save one for you. Yep, you got a nice house here. Anything else need fixing?"

Melton refrained from mentioning that Garr hadn't fixed anything yet. "You might look at the refrigerator," he suggested. "It's been giving some trouble."

Upstairs, in the kitchen, the refrigerator looked as though butter would melt in its mouth, which was true. The ice cubes were still red, but Garr no doubt decided the Meltons were freezing strawberry pop or cherry juice. He produced a can of oil and squirted some into the motor. "Don't ever use heavy oil on this," he observed. "She'll gum up on you." He indicated bottles of beer in the refrigerator. "Good brand, that. I always get it."

"Have a glass," Melton said. He poured for the two of them. Michaela refused beer and went in search of the dregs of her cocktail. Melton perched himself on the edge of the sink, kicking his long legs idly, and watched the refrigerator balefully.

"I was thinking there might be a short somewhere," he suggested. "I--uh--got a bit of a shock when I opened the thing yesterday."

Garr set down his glass. "Yeah? Let's see." He unscrewed the metal wall plate and blinked at what he saw. "Funny. I never saw a hook-up like that."

Melton leaned forward. "That so?"

"Hm-m-m. She's d.c., but--somebody screwed this up for you, Mr. Melton."

"How?"

"Amateur electricians," Garr said scornfully. "What's this wire doing here? And this thing--what is it, anyhow?"

"Plastic?"

"Part of a thermometer, maybe. I dunno. Hm-m-m." Garr wagged his head, made sparks fly with his screwdriver, and jerked a little. "I better throw the switch."

"I'll do it," Melton said. He went down into the cellar, studied a few fuse boxes, and located the master switch. He threw it to the "Off" position, yelling the news up to Garr. After a moment Garr yelped. Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Garr, rubbing his hand, appeared. "You didn't throw the switch," he said reproachfully.

"Sure I did," Melton said. "Look."

"Oh. Yeah. Well, maybe--" He fumbled around. Presently he unscrewed some of the fuses. "You go up in the kitchen and lemme know when the refrigerator stops working. I plugged it in again."

Melton obeyed.

Michaela came to watch. "Find anything?" she asked.

"I dunno," Melton said, listening to the low purr of the motor. "The

previous tenant probably rewired the house."

"Who was he?" Michaela murmured. "Einstein? Or a Martian?"

"Probably a ham electrician who thought he knew more than he did."

Michaela stroked the sleek white enamel of the refrigerator. "Only two years old. It really hasn't been weaned yet, Bob. The wrong kind of juice might upset its digestion."

"If I had the variety of food inside me that that icebox has in its innards, I'd be screaming for soda bicarb," Melton said. "Hello, Mr. Garr. Fix it yet?"

Garr's withered brown face looked troubled. "She's still running, huh?" he remarked. "Never stopped once?"

"Not once."

"She ain't on any of those fuses, then. I'd have to tear down the wall to trace the circuit." He looked doubtfully at the wall socket.

"Listen," Melton said, "I've a pair of rubber gloves somewhere. Would they help?"

"Yep," Garr nodded. "I'll just finish my beer while you get 'em. Goes flat in a hurry, don't it?"

"Mike," Melton said, "replenish Mr. Garr's glass." He departed.

"Yep," Garr said. "Mm-m.... Thanks, Miz Melton. You got a nice place here. I was telling your husband. Well built."

"It'll do, for a while. Later on I want to get a lot of new stuff in the kitchen. Those glass-fronted ovens and refrigerators--you know?"

Garr made a face. "I seen the ads. Ain't practical. Glass," he said plaintively, "what's the use of it? o.k. to let the sun in, maybe, but--nuts, if you'll pardon the expression, Miz Melton."

"Sure," Michaela said.

"A glass front on the ice box. She'll frost up. Same with the oven--steam. Might as well have good, solid metal. Visible this, visible that, all over the kitchen." He pointed to a metal container on the floor. "Visible garbage. That's where it'll end."

"I could do without that."

"All that stuff's o.k., I suppose, but the average guy won't want it. I wouldn't. I got my house fixed up the way I want. I'm handy around the place. Got my lamps rigged so they'll slide up and down their poles. Fixed a cut-off on the phone so I won't be bothered nights. A man monkeys around his house and fixes it up to suit himself."

"Here're the gloves," Melton said, coming back. "I think you can pretty much tell what a man's like by seeing where he lives."

Garr nodded emphatically. "That's right. A place fixed up like in one of them home-furnishing magazines--it may be pretty, but you don't dare set down in a chair without dusting your pants."

"Well," Michaela said practically, "this house was empty when we moved in."

"First time I've been in it for ten years," Garr said. "People named Courtney lived here then. Contractor, he was. The whole family went to California, and a guy named French moved in."

"What was he like?" Melton asked quickly.

"I never seen him. He didn't go out much."

"He never called you for repair work?"

"Guess he did it himself," Garr said, with a scornful look at the wall socket. "I'll fix this." He did, with swift accuracy. After he had screwed the plate back in and plugged the socket into place, he stood up with a grunt. "That'll do it. Anything else?"

"The bell."

"Won't she work?"

"Not exactly," Melton said. "That is--"

"Mind going out and trying her?" Garr suggested.

"o.k."

Michaela watched Garr. After a few seconds Garr gave her a quick glance. "She's all right," he said. "No short there, anyway."

"You, uh, heard the bell?"

"Sure I heard it. Why? Didn't you?"

"I--yes, I heard it," Michaela said, though she had only felt it. "It works now, Bob," she added, as Melton came back into the kitchen.

"It does?"

"Right as a trivet," Garr said. "Well, I'll be getting along, then."

"What do I owe you?" Melton asked.

Garr named a low sum. Melton paid it, they had another beer, and Michaela said, "There's the bell. Excuse me."

Melton finished his beer in a hurry. He hadn't heard anything. Michaela reappeared, said, "It's Phil. He wants a drink," and left the cocktail shaker on the sink. Garr shook hands cordially and departed. Melton sighed, glanced up thoughtfully at the bell annunciator on the wall, and opened the icebox. A ghastly blue radiance hit him in the face. His left hand, outstretched to seize a tray of ice cubes, started to tremble. The skin and flesh was gone from it. He slammed the door, then looked at his hand again. It had returned to normal.

Melton picked up a bottle and several glasses, and went into the living room, where Phil Barclay, his brother-in-law, was slouched casually on the couch. Phil was a small, slender man of forty, immaculately dressed as always, with a round, mild face that was slightly bloated at the moment. He cocked a blond eyebrow at Melton.

"Straight, Bob?"

"Straight," Melton said grimly. "You'll take it and like it."

"I always do," Phil said. He poured whiskey down his throat, shivered, and relaxed. "Ah. A hair of the dog. Oooh."

"Hangover?" Michaela asked sympathetically.

"Certainly," Phil said with dignity, fumbling in a pocket. He handed a folded paper to his sister. "Here's the check on 'Nymph's Secret.' Wesley had it for me down at the Gallery Friday."

"Not bad at all," Michaela said, examining the check.

"Not bad for a week's work on that canvas. Well, put it in the family fund. No more work for me for months at least. Another drink, please."

"You look like you've had plenty," Melton said.

Phil gave him a long, probing stare. "You don't look too good yourself," he said. "In fact, you're sweating."

"It's hot."

"It's too hot," Phil agreed. "You'll use up all the coal in a month at this rate. Or is it oil?"

"Coal," Melton said, "and we won't use it up. Not in this house."

"I don't like it either," Phil said unexpectedly. Michaela put her palms together and leaned forward.

"What is it, Phil?" she asked.

He grinned. "Nothing. This is the first time I've been inside here, you know. No, I don't want to look around. I--came up here day before yesterday."

"Weren't we home? You had a key, though."

"I had a key," Phil said, staring at nothing, "but I decided not to use it. The bell wasn't working, so I knocked on the door. Then--"

Melton's tongue circled his lips. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Phil said flatly. "Nothing at all."

"Then why--"

"I was a little high. I was jittery. There weren't any ghosts. There was--"
Phil paused. "I really don't know, Bob. But I decided to go back to town."

"Were you afraid?" Michaela asked.

Phil shook his head. "That was odd. I wasn't afraid, really. There was nothing to be afraid of. I simply decided against coming in."

"But why?" Michaela wanted to know. Her voice was high-pitched.
"That's no reason, and you know it."

Phil poured the last drops from the bottle, and held it up. "See this? It's empty. But you know what's been in it. You can smell the whiskey."

Melton slammed his fist down on his knee. "That's it," he snapped. "That so-and-so French! Who was he? And what did he do to this house? Hex it?"

Quite suddenly there was a sound, a mournful, hooting cry with a curious timbre of hollow distance. Melton felt a second's disorientation. Then he identified it: a tug, on the twilit river.

"You've got it bad," Phil said quietly. "If that can make you jump--"

"So I need a sedative. I've been working hard."

"Well," Phil said, getting up, "I guess I'll look around the joint, after all. Stay put, Mickey. I'll find my way. o.k., if you insist, Bob."

They went through the house. Melton said very little, but he switched on the light in the upstairs hall and waited for Phil's reaction. Phil didn't remark on it. But he was oddly intrigued by the cellar. He poked and probed around there a good deal.

"What are you looking for?" Melton inquired. "A secret vault?"

"Huh? Well, no." Phil gave a last, long look at the bare wall and headed for the stairs. "You say a chap named French lived here last?"

"John French. It's on the title search papers. But as far as I can find out, nobody ever saw French. He had his stuff delivered. Never had any mail. No telephone."

"What about recommendations? He must have had some when he moved in."

"Ten years ago. I checked that, too. Ordinary stuff--a bank, an attorney."

"Profession?"

"Retired."

Phil experimentally turned on the sink faucets. "It's a--bad house," he said. "Yet it isn't haunted, or evil, or anything in the Gothic line. Why is it so hot?"

Melton explained.

Then, on impulse, he looked up, through the open door of the kitchen. In the dining room adjoining someone was standing motionless watching him. His reaction, he felt with curious objectivity, was extremely odd.

For, at first, after a very brief doubt, he felt that the figure's presence was normal enough; his racing mind jumped at logic--a delivery boy, the mailman--and then, instantly after that, came a shocking sense of

utter disorientation and realization that the person in the next room didn't belong there. Hard on the heels of that jarring impact came the sudden knowledge that the silent figure was--

Was Michaela.

That was the worst of all. He hadn't known her at all. For that short, shocking passage of time, he had seen her as a total stranger. His stomach was sweating, and he felt his heart pounding. The whole incident was over so quickly that no one noticed; Michaela came on into the kitchen, and Melton turned hurriedly to get a fresh bottle out of the cupboard.

"How do you like the place?" Michaela asked. Phil smiled crookedly.

"Very efficient," he said, and Melton swallowed.

"Do you believe in the psychic impregnation of the inanimate?" Phil asked two days later, as he pushed a pillow under his head and curled up on the couch.

"What?" Melton said. It was early morning, and Melton was drinking coffee and watching the clock. They'd brought out the tiny alarm clock, since the electric model didn't run too well.

"An old, old theory," Phil said lazily. "If a man lives in a house for a long time, his psychic emanations seep into the walls and spoil the wallpaper. Or something. You know."

"No," Melton said. "Shut up. I've got a headache."

"So have I. And a hangover, too. Hm-m-m. I can see that a coffin might acquire psychic emanations, but that's merely because it's functional. If a man sees a coffin, he knows what it's for."

"I'd like to see your coffin," Melton remarked without malice. "And you in it."

"Well, I thought you'd like to know I didn't believe in that crap either. It's my opinion that Mr. French fixed up this house to suit himself. He must have been a strange man. Man? Well, anyhow, have you noticed the woodwork?"

"It's got shellac on it, if that's what you mean."

"It's got something on it, but not shellac. I made some tests. You can't get the stuff off. There's a coating on every inside wall, ceiling, floor, and door in this house. Like insulation."

"Well, it isn't. There isn't even insulation in the attic. Maybe I'll have rock wool put down."

"If you do, we'll roast alive."

Melton was moving his own train of thought. "Renovating's what the place needs. I think I'll have exterminators come."

"What for?"

"Mice. In the walls."

"Mice! Oh, no."

"What, then?" Melton inquired. "Rattlesnakes?"

"Machinery."

"You're crazy. I went up in the attic and looked down between the walls."

"Did you see any mice?"

"No, but they probably saw me. That's why I didn't see them."

"Now you're confusing me," Phil said unhappily. "Besides, we're not talking about the same thing. I don't mean turbines and dynamos and atom-smashers. Machines can be so simple they're unrecognizable. Like that poker over there."

"That's no machine."

"It's a lever, isn't it?" Phil said, and his brother-in-law snorted.

"All right, so we've got levers in the walls. Who uses 'em? That poker won't pick itself up and—" Melton stopped suddenly and looked at the poker. Then he met Phil's gaze. Phil was grinning.

"Yeah," he said cryptically.

Melton rose, flinging his napkin to the table. "Machines in the walls, hell," he remarked.

"Very simple and very complicated. And unrecognizable. Paint is just paint, but you can do a Mona Lisa with it."

"So French coated the inside walls with paint that acts like a machine?"

"Invisible and intangible--how should I know? As for those noises at night--" He hesitated.

"Well?"

"I think the house is just recharging itself," Phil said, and Melton fled, muttering under his breath.

He lunched with Tom Garrett, the technician from Instar Electric. Garrett was a fat little butterball of a man with a gleaming bald head and thick spectacle lenses through which he blinked myopically. And he had little to advise on the matter of the house.

"Well, what have you?" he asked finally. "Some unusual electrical currents. And, if you want me to be frank--"

"You will anyhow," Melton said. "Shoot."

"--a neurosis."

"Affecting three people?"

"Certainly. A house can do that. Environment is a pretty strong influence. Br-r-rp. Excuse me. I'd be more inclined to suggest a vacation or a doctor than a rewiring job."

"I had the place rewired. It didn't make any difference."

"Well, you're not crazy," Garrett said consolingly. "At least not yet. Your skeleton hand in the icebox--you know very well that in a strong light your hand shows translucent. You can see the outline of the bones."

"Yeah. Every time I look out of a window I expect to see something else."

"What?"

"I don't know. Just something different."

"Do you see it?"

After a pause Melton said, "No."

Garrett stared. "I wonder. I'd like to run up and take a look at that wiring of yours."

"Delighted to have you. When?"

Garrett consulted a notebook. "I'm tied up for a bit, but--suppose I phone you?"

"The sooner the better. I'm thinking about moving, anyway, though."

"Where else could you find a furnace like the one you've got?"

"I wish that were as funny as you think," Melton said somberly. "And I'd like to see you check that wiring for me. I've a hunch you'll be surprised. My brother-in-law has even wilder ideas than I have, so--"

"What?"

Melton went into detail.

Garrett was surprisingly intrigued. "You know, his idea about machines isn't at all illogical. The further we go, the simpler gadgets get. The klystron, for example--far less complicated than the average specialized vacuum tube. When we deal with electro-magnetic energies, neutrons and so on, we sometimes find that the best sort of machine to handle them is--well, a plain metal bar."

"But--paint!"

"I've seen paint that is a machine," Garrett said. "Luminous. It gathers in sunlight during the day and releases it at night. Not that I take any stock in your brother-in-law's theories; I'm just riding my own hobby. Eventually the world of the future--I think--won't be burdened with immense, complicated gadgets. Everything will be so simple--or

seem so simple--that a man from the twentieth century might find it quite homelike, except for the results."

"Yeah," Melton said. "They'd be a bit different, wouldn't they?"

"Quite a bit, I expect. Well, I must go. I'll give you a ring, Melton. And take my advice and have a doctor check you up."

"Don't tell me I'm sound as a bell," Melton said. "You might be thinking of the Liberty Bell. That's cracked."

Dr. Farr touched his mustache and apparently liked the sensation, for he began to stroke it rhythmically. "How should I know, Bob?" he asked. "Half of my patients are slightly nuts, and, as long as they don't know it, they get along fine. Just a matter of compensation and adjustment."

"Four-bit words."

"By the tests you may be a bit psychotic," Farr said, referring to his notes. "Especially on orientation. That's an especially significant symptom. However, I've known you for years, and I'd stake my reputation, such as it is, that this business is objective and not subjective."

"Then it's the house?"

"That may be the trigger. A fixation. You could have it about anything. It just happens to be the house. Get out of it."

"I intend to," Melton said.

Farr leaned back and looked at his diploma on the wall. "Your friend was right about environment. Lock a kid up in a dark closet, and he's apt to be afraid of the dark ever after. And why? Because it's the

wrong environment. If the house makes you nervous, pack up and git."

"What about Mike and Phil?"

"They could catch it from you. Or the other way around. Phil's a dipsomaniac, anyway. He'll be heading for d.t.s presently. Too bad; he's a fine artist."

Melton said, rather defensively, "You know what would happen to Phil if he didn't live with us. And he certainly pays his way."

"When he works. A couple of pictures a year. Ah, well. I'm a doctor, not a reformer. Is he still on his binge?"

Melton scowled. "He hasn't touched a drop for a couple of days. That's funny, too. Because he's high most of the time. I know the signs."

"Maybe he's got a bottle cached away."

"Not Phil. He does his drinking publicly; he's not ashamed of it. He'll get tanked any time, without apology. That is funny, now that I think of it."

"How does he act?"

"As usual. He spends a lot of time in the cellar."

"Maybe there are some bottles down there," Farr suggested. "Don't let him develop any guilt complexes. Get him to drink with you, if he's got the urge. The psychological angle is pretty important. He trusts Mike and you completely, but—well. Tell him to drop in and see me. I want to check his heart, anyway, and I'll buy him a drink at the same time."

"You're some doctor," Melton said, chuckling. "Well, I've got to do some checking up on a man. See you soon."

"Move out of that house," Farr called after Melton's retreating figure. "It's probably haunted."

It wasn't haunted. Yet, that evening, as Melton paused on the porch, his key out, he knew very definitely that he didn't want to go in. He remembered a line from de la Mare: " 'Is there anybody there?' said the traveler... knocking on the moonlit door...." And--how did it go?

"Only a host of listeners... listening... to that voice from the world of men."

Something like that. Indefinable and intangible, as much so as dust motes in moonlight. Move your hand through the shaft, and there's no resistance; the motes swirl away and return.

Melton grimaced and unlocked the door. In the living room, Phil was slumped on the couch, half asleep. Michaela dropped her sewing and stood up to greet him.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Nothing new," Michaela said. "Let me take your coat. I'll hang it up." She went out. Melton picked up the cloth Michaela had been sewing on; she hadn't got very far. He stared at Phil.

"No remarks?"

"I am happy," Phil said. "No remarks are necessary."

"Have a drink?"

"Nope."

"Doc Farr wants to see you, when you're in town."

"Why not?" Phil said. "Find out anything about John French?"

"Yes, how about that?" Michaela asked, coming back from upstairs.

"You said you were going to check up."

Melton dropped into a chair. "I did check up. Through an agency. But it's no use. The guy simply didn't exist Nobody ever saw him."

"Naturally," Phil said.

Melton sighed. "All right. Who was he? Santa Claus?"

"Timeo Danaos-- The furnace is still going strong."

"And it's still too hot. Why don't you open a window?"

"They're stuck again," Michaela said. "We can't get 'em open at all now."

The lights went on. Melton said, "Did you do that, Phil?"

"No."

Melton went over to the switch and tested it. The lights stayed on.

"Good old John French," Phil murmured. "Good old Jack. This is the house that Jack built. And how!" He rose and went out to the kitchen. Melton heard footsteps on the cellar stairs.

"Yeah," Michaela said. "He's been going down there all day."

"He's high as a kite, you know."

"Of course I know. And--it isn't his usual binge."

"I know it isn't," Melton said. "Well, he must get the stuff in the cellar. Maybe Jack--maybe French left some bottles down there."

"Of what? Uh! Let's not think about it."

"What did you do today?" Melton asked.

"Nothing. Literally, nothing. I tried to do some sewing, but time passes too fast here. It was six o'clock before I knew it."

"Always teatime. What's for dinner?"

Michaela put her hand to her mouth. "Oh. Beat me, Bob. I forgot about dinner."

"I think you've been in the cellar, too," Melton said jokingly, but Michaela gave him a look of strained distress.

"No, Bob. I haven't--not once." Melton watched her for a moment. Then he got up, went out to the kitchen, and opened the cellar door.

The light was on, and he could see Phil in a corner, standing motionless.

"Come on up," he said. "We'll have to drink our dinner."

"In a minute," Phil said.

Melton went back to the living room. Presently Phil joined them, weaving a little in his walk. Melton nodded darkly.

"This is the rat that ate the malt," he remarked.

"Oh, don't," Michaela said. "I keep thinking about the man all tattered and torn."

"I keep thinking about Jack," Phil said. "Little man who wasn't there. Out of the everywhere into the here. Look, Bob. If you spent ten years with the Ubangis, what would you do?"

"Give up kissing," Melton said.

"No, I mean it. If you had to move into a Ubangi hut and stay there. You wouldn't have anything in common with the natives, would you?"

"No."

"Well?"

"Well, what? What would you do?"

"Change the hut a bit," Phil said. "Especially if I wanted to pretend I was a Ubangi, too. I wouldn't alter it outside, but I'd fix it up a bit inside, for my own convenience, and I wouldn't let anybody else come in. Chairs instead of grass mats. I wonder how French had this place furnished."

"Just who do you think French was?" Melton asked.

"I don't know. I don't think I could know, even. But I know what he wasn't."

"What wasn't he?"

"Human," Phil said.

Michaela stirred and sucked in her underlip. Phil nodded at her.

"We're in the house more than you are, Bob. Mickey and I. And it's alive. It's a machine, too. Sort of half and half."

Melton grimaced. "I suppose it's been talking to you."

"Of course not. It wasn't designed for that. Jack didn't build this house, but he moved in and fixed it up to suit himself. To suit his special requirements. Whatever they were. He liked--or needed--plenty of heat. That's not too far off the beam. But some of the other things--

"Like the refrigerator," Phil said. "There weren't any marks on the linoleum, and there would have been some, in ten years. I looked. Something else was hooked up to that socket. Rewiring won't help any, Bob. Jack didn't need wires. He may have switched 'em around a bit, for convenience; but I suppose all he had to do was juggle a couple of atoms and--he'd have a machine."

"A living house. Yeah. Nuts."

"A robot house, could be. A robot wouldn't have to look like a man. We've got robots now, really, and they're functionally designed."

"All right," Melton said harshly. "We can move."

"We'd better. Because this house was made for Jack, not for us. It isn't working just right. The refrigerator's acting funny, but that's because it's plugged into a socket meant for some other gadget."

"I tried it in some other plugs."

"Any luck?"

Melton shook his head. "It was still--uh--funny." He moved uneasily. "Why should French--I mean, why would he want to--"

"Why would a white man live in a Ubangi village? To study ethnology or entomology, perhaps. Or for the climate. Or simply to rest—to hibernate. Wherever Jack came from, he's gone back there now, and he didn't bother to put the house in its original condition. Yeah." Phil rose and went out. The cellar door closed softly.

Melton went over to Michaela, knelt, and put his arm around her slim shoulders, feeling the yielding warmth of her. "We'll move, darling," he said.

She stared out of the window. "It'd be so lovely, if—well. The view's magnificent. I wish we didn't have to move. But it's the only thing. When, Bob?"

"Want to start looking for another place tomorrow? A city apartment, maybe?"

"All right," Michaela said. "A day or so more won't make much difference, will it?"

He could hear Michaela's soft breathing beside him, there in the dark. He could hear other things, too. They were not mice, he knew. Within the walls, there was a subtle, slow movement, at the threshold of hearing and consciousness. The house was recharging itself. The robot was preparing itself for the next day's work.

It was mindless; it was not alive; it had no consciousness or sense of ego. It was a machine. But it was a machine so enormously versatile that only miraculous simplicity made its existence possible. How? A new pattern for electronic orbits? Or something quite unimaginable.

We can see into the microcosm with the electronic microscope, Melton thought. But we can't see far enough. Beyond....

There was an off-beat, distant rhythm in the quiet movement within the walls. This is the house that Jack built. This is the malt That lay in the house that Jack built....

And so on. Melton followed the nursery rhythm to its conclusion. The inevitable growth, line by line, acquired a sort of horror to him. Yet he could not stop. He finished it and started all over.

Who had John French been?

Or what?

Suddenly and sickeningly, he felt the disorientation. Without looking at Michaela, he sprang from bed, fumbled his way downstairs, and stood motionless in the hall, waiting.

There was nothing. This is the house that Jack built. This is the rat....

He went out to the kitchen. The cellar door was open. He could not see Phil, but he knew that his brother-in-law was at the foot of the stairs.

"Phil," he said softly.

"Yes, Bob."

"Come on up."

Phil mounted the steps. His pajamaed figure came into view, swaying slightly.

"What's down there?" Melton asked.

"Nothing."

"Liquor?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing," Phil said, his eyes glazed and bright. "I stand in the corner, my head against the wall, and--I--paint." He slowed down and stopped. "No," he said after a moment. "It isn't painting, is it? But I thought--"

"What?"

"The house suited Jack, didn't it?" Phil said. "But then we don't know what Jack was or what he wanted. I wonder if he came from the future. Or from another planet. One thing--he certainly came from a place that was rather remarkable."

"We're moving," Melton said. "As soon as I can find a place."

"All right."

"Let's go to bed."

"Sure," Phil said. "Why not? Good night, Bob."

"Good night, Phil."

For a long time he lay awake, unable to sleep.

This is the house that Jack built.

I wonder if Jack might come back--sometime.

The house suited Jack.

The house was alive.

No, it wasn't. It was a machine.

Any house could be such a machine--with a little renovation. By Jack.

The machine suited Jack. Sure. But what effect would it have on human beings? Mutation? Translation, eventually, into another world? Something thoroughly unusual, at any rate.

Melton was not tempted to find out.

I'll find an apartment tomorrow, he resolved. And, a little comforted, he went to sleep.

He got home the next evening somewhat early, and let himself into the house without hesitation. Michaela and Phil were in the living room. They were sitting silently, but turned to watch him as he entered.

"I've got an apartment," Melton announced triumphantly. "We can start packing right away. How does that sound?"

"Swell," Michaela said. "Can we move tomorrow morning?"

"Sure. Jack can have his house back."

The lights came on. Melton gave them a quick glance.

"Still at it, eh? Well, who cares now? Drink? How about a cocktail, Mike? I'll even tackle the icebox tonight."

"No, thanks."

"Mm-mm. Phil?"

"No. I don't want any."

"Well, I do," Melton said. He went into the kitchen, decided against ice cubes after all, and came back with a straight shot in a tiny glass. "Are we eating out tonight?" he demanded.

"Oh," Michaela said. "I forgot dinner again."

"I think we'd better move tomorrow," Melton said, "if not tonight." He sat down. "It's too early to eat now, but we can kill time with a drink or two." He looked at the clock. It was 4:20.

He looked again.

It was 10:40.

Nothing had changed. But the sky was black outside the window. Outside of that, nothing had altered; Michaela and Phil had not moved, and Melton's drink was untasted in his hand.

For a moment he thought wildly of amnesia. Then he realized that the truth was much simpler. He had simply let his mind go blank--he could even remember doing it--so that the time had, incredibly, slipped past until--

It was 10:40.

The shock of disorientation came, more slowly this time. It passed and was gone.

Neither Michaela nor Phil moved.

Melton looked at the clock. Simultaneously he felt a leaden, dull blankness creeping over his mind. This is like hibernation, he thought, gray, formless, without--

It was 8:12.

The sky was blue outside. The river was blue. Morning sunlight blazed on green patterns of leaves.

"Mike," Melton said.

It was 3:35.

But it was not time that had altered. Melton knew that very clearly. The fault lay in the house.

It was night.

It was 9:20.

The telephone rang. Melton reached out and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

"Hello," he said.

Dr. Farr's distant voice sounded loud in the still, hot room. Michaela and Phil sat like carved figures under the bright overhead light. Presently Melton said, "No. No, we changed our minds. We're not going to move."

He hung up.

Hibernation, he thought. The process had cumulative acceleration. For this was the house that Jack built. This was the den that Jack built. Some races--not human races--may need periods of hibernation. And they will build robot machines--very simple machines--to care for them while they sleep.

Adaptable machines. Machines that can adapt to other organisms. Human organisms. With a difference.

Hibernation for Jack--yes. But for Melton and Michaela and Phil--it wouldn't work out in quite the same manner. For they were not of Jack's breed or race.

"We're never going to move," Melton said softly, and saw that it was 1:03.

Within the walls the machine stirred, recharging itself. Moonlight came through the windows, distorted by some quality in the clear panes. The three figures sat motionless, not even waiting now, in the house that Jack built.

Time Locker

Published in Astounding Science-Fiction, Vol. 30, No. 5 (January 1943). The same issue also had "Nothing But Gingerbread Left" under Kuttner's name.

Mr. Padgett does more playing with time, time plus the fourth dimension--and concocts a locker that needed no lock. Wherein things shrank out of sight and out of time... until it was timely and convenient for them to reappear. A good place to hide stolen property, but even in the fourth dimension, crime does not pay!

Galloway played by ear, which would have been all right had he been a musician--but he was a scientist. A drunken and erratic one, but good. He'd wanted to be an experimental technician, and would have been excellent at it, for he had a streak of genius at times. Unfortunately, there had been no funds for such specialized education, and now Galloway, by profession an integrator machine supervisor, maintained his laboratory purely as a hobby. It was the damndest-looking lab in six states. Galloway had spent ten months building what he called a liquor organ, which occupied most of the space. He could recline on a comfortably padded couch and, by manipulating buttons, siphon drinks of marvelous quantity, quality, and variety down his scarified throat. Since he had made the liquor organ during a protracted period of drunkenness, he never remembered the basic principles of its construction. In a way, that was a pity.

There was a little of everything in the lab, much of it incongruous. Rheostats had little skirts on them, like ballet dancers, and vacuously grinning faces of clay. A generator was conspicuously labeled, "Monstro," and a much smaller one rejoiced in the name of "Bubbles." Inside a glass retort was a china rabbit, and Galloway

alone knew how it had got there. Just inside the door was a hideous iron dog, originally intended for Victorian lawns or perhaps for Hell, and its hollowed ears served as sockets for test tubes.

"But how do you do it?" Vanning asked.

Galloway, his lank form reclining under the liquor organ, siphoned a shot of double Martini into his mouth. "Huh?"

"You heard me. I could get you a swell job if you'd use that screwball brain of yours. Or even learn to put up a front."

"Tried it," Galloway mumbled. "No use. I can't work when I concentrate, except at mechanical stuff. I think my subconscious must have a high i.q."

Vanning, a chunky little man with a scarred, swarthy face, kicked his heels against Monstro. Sometimes Galloway annoyed him. The man never realized his own potentialities, or how much they might mean to Horace Vanning, Commerce Analyst. The "commerce," of course, was extra-legal, but the complicated trade relationships of 1970 left many loopholes a clever man could slip through. The fact of the matter was, Vanning acted in an advisory capacity to crooks. It paid well. A sound knowledge of jurisprudence was rare in these days; the statutes were in such a tangle that it took years of research before one could even enter a law school. But Vanning had a staff of trained experts, a colossal library of transcripts, decisions, and legal data, and, for a suitable fee, he could have told Dr. Crippen how to get off scot-free.

The shadier side of his business was handled in strict privacy, without assistants. The matter of the neuro-gun, for example--Galloway had made that remarkable weapon, quite without realizing its importance. He had hashed it together one evening, piecing out

the job with court plaster when his welder went on the fritz. And he'd given it to Vanning, on request. Vanning didn't keep it long. But already he had earned thousands of credits by lending the gun to potential murderers. As a result, the police department had a violent headache.

A man in the know would come to Vanning and say, "I heard you can beat a murder rap. Suppose I wanted to--"

"Hold on! I can't condone anything like that."

"Huh? But--"

"Theoretically, I suppose a perfect murder might be possible. Suppose a new sort of gun had been invented, and suppose--just for the sake of an example--it was in a locker at the Newark Stratoship Field."

"Huh?"

"I'm just theorizing. Locker Number 7~, combination thirty-blue-eight. These little details always help one to visualize a theory, don't they?"

"You mean--"

"Of course if our murderer picked up this imaginary gun and used it, he'd be smart enough to have a postal box ready, addressed to, say... Locker 40, Brooklyn Port. He could slip the weapon into the box, seal it, and get rid of the evidence at the nearest mail conveyor. But that's all theorizing. Sorry I can't help you. The fee for an interview is three thousand credits. The receptionist will take your check."

Later, conviction would be impossible. Ruling 87-m, Illinois Precinct, case of State vs. Dupson, set the precedent. Cause of death must be determined. Element of accident must be considered. As Chief

Justice Duckett had ruled during the trial of Sanderson vs. Sanderson, which involved the death of the accused's mother-in-law - Surely the prosecuting attorney, with his staff of toxicological experts, must realize that- And in short, your honor, I must respectfully request that the case be dismissed for lack of evidence and proof of *cams mortis*- Galloway never even found out that his neuro-gun was a dangerous weapon. But Vanning haunted the sloppy laboratory, avidly watching the results of his friends'scientific doodling. More than once he had acquired handy little devices in just this fashion. The trouble was, Galloway wouldn't work!

He took another sip of Martini, shook his head, and unfolded his lanky limbs. Blinking, he ambled over to a cluttered workbench and began toying with lengths of wire.

"Making something?"

"Dunno. Just fiddling. That's the way it goes. I put things together, and sometimes they work. Trouble is, I never know exactly what they're going to do. Tsk!" Galloway dropped the wires and returned to his couch. "Hell with it."

He was, Vanning reflected, an odd duck. Galloway was essentially amoral, thoroughly out of place in this too-complicated world. He seemed to watch, with a certain wry amusement, from a vantage point of his own, rather disinterested for the most part. And he made things--

But always and only for his own amusement. Vanning sighed and glanced around the laboratory, his orderly soul shocked by the melee. Automatically he picked up a rumpled smock from the floor, and looked for a hook. Of course there was none. Galloway, running short of conductive metal, had long since ripped them out and used them in some gadget or other.

The so-called scientist was creating a zombie, his eyes half closed. Vanning went over to a metal locker in one corner and opened the door. There were no hooks, but he folded the smock neatly and laid it on the floor of the locker.

Then he went back to his perch on Monstro.

"Have a drink?" Galloway asked.

Vanning shook his head. "Thanks, no. I've got a case coming up tomorrow."

"There's always thiamin. Filthy stuff. I work better when I've got pneumatic cushions around my brain."

"Well, I don't."

"It is purely a matter of skill," Galloway hummed, "to which each may attain if he will.... What are you gaping at?"

"That--locker," Vanning said, frowning in a baffled way. "What the--" He got up. The metal door hadn't been securely latched and had swung open. Of the smock Vanning had placed within the metal compartment there was no trace.

"It's the paint," Galloway explained sleepily. "Or the treatment. I bombarded it with gamma rays. But it isn't good for anything."

Vanning went over and swung a fluorescent into a more convenient position. The locker wasn't empty, as he had at first imagined. The smock was no longer there, but instead there was a tiny blob of--something, pale-green and roughly spherical.

"It melts things?" Vanning asked, staring.

"Uh-huh. Pull it out. You'll see."

Vanning felt hesitant about putting his hand inside the locker. Instead, he found a long pair of test-tube clamps and teased the blob out. It was-- Vanning hastily looked away. His eyes hurt. The green blob was changing in color, shape and size. A crawling, nongeometrical blur of motion rippled over it. Suddenly the clamps were remarkably heavy.

No wonder. They were gripping the original smock.

"It does that, you know," Galloway said absently. "Must be a reason, too. I put things in the locker and they get small. Take 'em out, and they get big again. I suppose I could sell it to a stage magician." His voice sounded doubtful.

Vanning sat down, fingering the smock and staring at the metal locker. It was a cube, approximately 3 x 3 x 5, lined with what seemed to be grayish paint, sprayed on. Outside, it was shiny black.

"How'd you do it?"

"Huh? I dunno. Just fiddling around." Galloway sipped his zombie. "Maybe it's a matter of dimensional extension. My treatment may have altered the spatio-temporal relationships inside the locker. I wonder what that means?" he murmured in a vague aside. "Words frighten me sometimes."

Vanning was thinking about tesseract. "You mean it's bigger inside than it is outside?"

"A paradox, a paradox, a most delightful paradox. You tell me. I suppose the inside of the locker isn't in this space-time continuum at all. Here, shove that bench in it. You'll see." Galloway made no move

to rise; he waved toward the article of furniture in question.

"You're right. That bench is bigger than the locker."

"So it is. Shove it in a bit at a time. That corner first. Go ahead."

Vanning wrestled with the bench. Despite his shortness, he was stockily muscular.

"Lay the locker on its back. It'll be easier."

"I... uh!... o. k. Now what?"

"Edge the bench down into it."

Vanning squinted at his companion, shrugged, and tried to obey. Of course the bench wouldn't go into the locker. One corner did, that was all. Then, naturally, the bench stopped, balancing precariously at an angle.

"Well?"

"Wait."

The bench moved. It settled slowly downward. As Vanning's jaw dropped, the bench seemed to crawl into the locker, with the gentle motion of a not-too-heavy object sinking through water. It wasn't sucked down. It melted down. The portion still outside the locker was unchanged. But that, too, settled, and was gone.

Vanning craned forward. A blur of movement hurt his eyes. Inside the locker was--something. It shifted its contours, shrank, and became a spiky sort of scalene pyramid, deep-purple in hue.

It seemed to be less than four inches across at its widest point.

"I don't believe it," Vanning said.

Galloway grinned. "As the Duke of Wellington remarked to the subaltern, it was a demned small bottle, sir."

"Now, wait a minute. How the devil could I put an eight-foot bench inside of a five-foot locker?"

"Because of Newton," Galloway said. "Gravity. Go fill a test tube with water and I'll show you."

"Wait a minute... o. k. Now what?"

"Got it brim-full? Good. You'll find some sugar cubes in that drawer labeled 'Fuses.' Lay a cube on top of the test tube, one corner down so it touches the water."

Vanning racked the tube and obeyed. "Well?"

"What do you see?"

"Nothing. The sugar's getting wet. And melting."

"So there you are," Galloway said expansively. Vanning gave him a brooding look and turned back to the tube. The cube of sugar was slowly dissolving and melting down.

Presently it was gone.

"Air and water are different physical conditions. In air a sugar cube can exist as a sugar cube. In water it exists in solution. The corner of it extending into water is subject to aqueous conditions. So it alters physically, though not chemically. Gravity does the rest."

"Make it clearer."

"The analogy's clear enough, dope. The water represents the particular condition existing inside that locker. The sugar cube represents the workbench. Now! The sugar soaked up the water and gradually dissolved it, so gravity could pull the cube down into the tube as it melted. See?"

"I think so. The bench soaked up the... the x condition inside the locker, eh? A condition that shrank the bench--"

"In partis, not in toto. A little at a time. You can shove a human body into a small container of sulphuric acid, bit by bit."

"Oh," Vanning said, regarding the cabinet askance. "Can you get the bench out again?"

"Do it yourself. Just reach in and pull it out."

"Reach in? I don't want my hand to melt!"

"It won't. The action isn't instantaneous. You saw that yourself. It takes a few minutes for the change to take place. You can reach into the locker without any ill effects, if you don't leave your hand exposed to the conditions for more than a minute or so. I'll show you." Galloway languidly arose, looked around, and picked up an empty demijohn. He dropped this into the locker.

The change wasn't immediate. It occurred slowly, the demijohn altering its shape and size till it was a distorted cube the apparent size of a cube of sugar. Galloway reached down and brought it up again, placing the cube on the floor.

It grew. It was a demijohn again.

"Now the bench. Look out."

Galloway rescued the little pyramid. Presently it became the original workbench.

"You see? I'll bet a storage company would like this. You could probably pack all the furniture in Brooklyn in here, but there'd be trouble in getting what you wanted out again. The physical change, you know--"

"Keep a chart," Vanning suggested absently. "Draw a picture of how the thing looks inside the locker, and note down what it was."

"The legal brain," Galloway said. "I want a drink." He returned to his couch and clutched the siphon in a grip of death.

"I'll give you six credits for the thing," Vanning offered.

"Sold. It takes up too much room anyway. Wish I could put it inside itself." The scientist chuckled immoderately. "That's very funny."

"Is it?" Vanning said. "Well, here you are." He took credit coupons from his wallet. "Where'll I put the dough?"

"Stuff it into Monstro. He's my bank.... Thanks."

"Yeah. Say, elucidate this sugar business a bit, will you? It isn't just gravity that affects the cube so it slips into a test tube. Doesn't the water soak up into the sugar--"

"You're right at that. Osmosis. No, I'm wrong. Osmosis has something to do with eggs. Or is that ovulation? Conduction, convection--absorption! Wish I'd studied physics; then I'd know the right words. Just a zoot stoop, that's me. I shall take the daughter of the Vine to spouse," Galloway finished incoherently and sucked at the siphon.

"Absorption," Vanning scowled. "Only not water, being soaked up by the sugar. The... the conditions existing inside the locker, being soaked up by your workbench--in that particular case.

"Like a sponge or a blotter."

"The bench?"

"Me," Galloway said succinctly, and relapsed into a happy silence, broken by occasional gurgles as he poured liquor down his scarified gullet. Vanning sighed and turned to the locker. He carefully closed and latched the door before lifting the metal cabinet in his muscular arms.

"Going? G'night. Fare thee well, fare thee well--"

"Night."

"Fare--thee--well!" Galloway ended, in a melancholy outburst of tunefulness, as he turned over preparatory to going to sleep.

Vanning sighed again and let himself out into the coolness of the night. Stars blazed in the sky, except toward the south, where the aurora of Lower Manhattan dimmed them. The glowing white towers of skyscrapers rose in a jagged pattern. A sky-ad announced the virtues of Vambulin--"It Peps You Up."

His speeder was at the curb. Vanning edged the locker into the trunk compartment and drove toward the Hudson Floataway, the quickest route downtown. He was thinking about Poe.

The Purloined Letter, which had been hidden in plain sight, but re-folded and re-addressed, so that its superficial appearance was changed. Holy Hutton! What a perfect safe the locker would make!

No thief could crack it, for the obvious reason that it wouldn't be locked. No thief would want to clean it out. Vanning could fill the locker with credit coupons and instantly they'd become unrecognizable. It was the ideal cache.

How the devil did it work?

There was little use in asking Galloway. He played by ear. A prim rose by the river's rim a simple primrose was to him--not *Primula vulgaris*. Syllogisms were unknown to him. He reached the conclusion without the aid of either major or minor premises.

Vanning pondered. Two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Ergo, there was a different sort of space in the locker-- But Vanning was pumping at conclusions. There was another answer--the right one. He hadn't guessed it yet.

Instead, he toiled the speeder downtown to the office building where he maintained a floor, and brought the locker upstairs in the freight lift. He didn't put it in his private office; that would have been too obvious. He placed the metal cabinet in one of the store-rooms, sliding a file cabinet in front of it for partial concealment. It wouldn't do to have the clerks using this particular locker.

Vanning stepped back and considered. Perhaps-- A bell rang softly. Preoccupied, Vanning didn't hear it at first.

When he did, he went back to his own office and pressed the acknowledgment button on the Winchell. The gray, harsh, bearded face of Counsel Hatton appeared, filling the screen.

"Hello," Vanning said.

Hatton nodded. "I've been trying to reach you at your home. Thought I'd try the office--"

"I didn't expect you to call now. The trial's tomorrow. It's a bit late for discussion, isn't it?"

"Dugan & Sons wanted me to speak to you. I advised against it."

"Oh?"

Hatton's thick gray brows drew together. "I'm prosecuting, you know. There's plenty of evidence against Macllson."

"So you say. But peculation's a difficult charge to prove."

"Did you get an injunction against scop?"

"Naturally," Vanning said. "You're not using truth serum on my client!"

"That'll prejudice the jury."

"Not on medical grounds. Scop affects Macllson harmfully. I've got a covering prognosis."

"Harmfully is right!" Hatton's voice was sharp. "Your client embezzled those bonds, and I can prove it."

"Twenty-five thousand in credits, it comes to, eh? That's a lot for Dugan & Sons to lose. What about that hypothetical case I posed? Suppose twenty thousand were recovered--"

"Is this a private beam? No recordings?"

"Naturally. Here's the cut-off." Vanning held up a metal-tipped cord. "This is strictly sub rosa."

"Good," Counsel Hatton said. "Then I can call you a lousy shyster."

"Tch!"

"Your gag's too old. It's moth-eaten. Macllson swiped five grand in bonds, negotiable into credits. The auditors start checking up. Macllson comes to you. You tell him to take twenty grand more, and offer to return that twenty if Dugan & Sons refuse to prosecute. Macllson splits with you on the five thousand, and on the plat standard, that ain't hay."

"I don't admit to anything like that."

"Naturally you don't, not even on a closed beam. But it's tacit. However, the gag's moth-eaten, and my clients won't play ball with you. They're going to prosecute."

"You called me up just to tell me that?"

"No, I want to settle the jury question. Will you agree to let 'em use scop on the panel?"

"o. k.," Vanning said. He wasn't depending on a fixed jury to-morrow. His battle would be based on legal technicalities. With scop-tested talesmen, the odds would be even. And such an arrangement would save days or weeks of argument and challenge.

"Good," Hatton grunted. "You're going to get your pants licked off."

Vanning replied with a mild obscenity and broke the connection. Reminded of the pending court fight, he forced the matter of the fourth-dimensional locker out of his mind and left the office. Later-- Later would be time enough to investigate the possibilities of the remarkable cabinet more thoroughly. Just now, he didn't want his brain cluttered with nonessentials. He went to his apartment, had the servant mix him a short highball, and dropped into bed.

And, the next day, Vanning won his case. He based it on complicated technicalities and obscure legal precedents. The crux of the matter was that the bonds had not been converted into government credits. Abstruse economic charts proved that point for Vanning. Conversion of even five thousand credits would have caused a fluctuation in the graph line, and no such break existed. Vanning's experts went into monstrous detail.

In order to prove guilt, it would have been necessary to show, either actually or by inference, that the bonds had been in existence since last December 20th, the date of their most recent check-and-recording. The case of Donovan vs. Jones stood as a precedent.

Hatton jumped to his feet. "Jones later confessed to his defalcation, your honor!"

"Which does not affect the original decision," Vanning said smoothly. "Retroaction is not admissible here. The verdict was not proven."

"Counsel for the defense will continue."

Counsel for the defense continued, building up a beautifully intricate edifice of casuistic logic.

Hatton writhed. "Your honor! I--"

"If my learned opponent can produce one bond--just one of the bonds in question--I will concede the case."

The presiding judge looked sardonic. "Indeed! If such a piece of evidence could be produced, the defendant would be jailed as fast as I could pronounce sentence. You know that very well, Mr. Vanning. Proceed."

"Very well. My contention, then, is that the bonds never existed. They

were the result of a clerical error in notation."

"A clerical error in a Pederson Calculator?"

"Such errors have occurred, as I shall prove. If I may call my next witness--"

Unchallenged, the witness, a math technician, explained how a Pederson Calculator can go haywire. He cited cases.

Hatton caught him up on one point. "I protest this proof. Rhodesia, as everyone knows, is the location of a certain important experimental industry. Witness has refrained from stating the nature of the work performed in this particular Rhodesian factory. Is it not a fact that the Henderson United Company deals largely in radioactive ores?"

"Witness will answer."

"I can't. My records don't include that information."

"A significant omission," Hatton snapped. "Radioactivity damages the intricate mechanism of a Pederson Calculator. There is no radium nor radium by-product in the offices of Dugan & Sons."

Vanning stood up. "May I ask if those offices have been fumigated lately?"

"They have. It is legally required."

"A type of chlorine gas was used."

"Yes."

"I wish to call my next witness."

The next witness, a physicist and official in the Ultra Radium Institute, explained that gamma radiations affect chlorine strongly, causing ionization. Living organisms could assimilate by-products of radium and transmit them in turn. Certain clients of Dugan & Sons had been in contact with radioactivity--

"This is ridiculous, your honor! Pure theorization--"

Vanning looked hurt. "I cite the case of Dangerfield vs. Austro Products, California, 1963. Ruling states that the uncertainty factor is prime admissible evidence. My point is simply that the Pederson Calculator which recorded the bonds could have been in error. If this be true, there were no bonds, and my client is guiltless."

"Counsel will continue," said the judge, wishing he were Jeffries so he could send the whole damned bunch to the scaffold. Jurisprudence should be founded on justice, and not be a three-dimensional chess game. But, of course, it was the natural development of the complicated political and economic factors of modern civilization. It was already evident that Vanning would win his case.

And he did. The jury was directed to find for the defendant. On a last, desperate hope, Hatton raised a point of order and demanded scop, but his petition was denied. Vanning winked at his opponent and closed his brief case.

That was that.

Vanning returned to his office. At four-thirty that afternoon trouble started to break. The secretary announced a Mr. Macllson, and was pushed aside by a thin, dark, middle-aged man lugging a gigantic suedette suitcase.

"Vanning! I've got to see you--"

The attorney's eye hooded. He rose from behind his desk, dismissing the secretary with a jerk of his head. As the door closed, Vanning said brusquely, "What are you doing here? I told you to stay away from me. What's in that bag?"

"The bonds," Macclson explained, his voice unsteady. "Something's gone wrong--"

"You crazy fool! Bringing the bonds here--" With a leap Vanning was at the door, locking it. "Don't you realize that if Hatton gets his hands on that paper, you'll be yanked back to jail? And I'll be disbarred! Get 'em out of here."

"Listen a minute, will you? I took the bonds to Finance Unity, as you told me, but... but there was an officer there, waiting for me. I saw him just in time. If he'd caught me--"

Vanning took a deep breath. "You were supposed to leave the bonds in that subway locker for two months."

Macclson pulled a news sheet from his pocket. "But the government's declared a freeze on ore stocks and bonds. It'll go into effect in a week. I couldn't wait--the money would have been tied up indefinitely."

"Let's see that paper." Vanning examined it and cursed softly. "Where'd you get this?"

"Bought it from a boy outside the jail. I wanted to check the current ore quotations."

"Uh-huh. I see. Did it occur to you that this sheet might be faked?"

Macllson's jaw dropped. "Fake?"

"Exactly. Hatton figured I might spring you, and had this paper ready. You bit. You led the police right to the evidence, and a swell spot you've put me in."

"B-but--"

Vanning grimaced. "Why do you suppose you saw that cop at Finance Unity? They could have nabbed you any time. But they wanted to scare you into heading for my office, so they could catch both of us on the same hook. Prison for you, disbarment for me. Oh, hell!"

Macllson licked his lips. "Can't I get out a back door?"

"Through the cordon that's undoubtedly waiting? Orbs! Don't be more of a sap than you can help."

"Can't you--hide the stuff?"

"Where? They'll ransack this office with x rays. No, I'll just--" Vanning stopped. "Oh. Hide it, you said. Hide it--"

He whirled to the dictograph. "Miss Horton? I'm in conference. Don't disturb me for anything. If anybody hands you a search warrant, insist on verifying it through headquarters. Got me? o. k."

Hope had returned to Macllson's face. "Is it all right?"

"Oh, shut up!" Vanning snapped. "Wait here for me. Be back directly." He headed for a side door and vanished. In a surprisingly short time he returned, awkwardly lugging a metal cabinet.

"Help me... oh!... here. In this corner. Now get out."

"But--"

"Flash," Vanning ordered. "Everything's under control. Don't talk. You'll be arrested, but they can't hold you without evidence. Come back as soon as you're sprung." He urged MacIlson to the door, unlocked it, and thrust the man through. After that, he returned to the cabinet, swung open the door, and peered in. Empty. Sure.

The suedette suitcase--

Vanning worked it into the locker, breathing hard. It took a little time, since the valise was larger than the metal cabinet. But at last he relaxed, watching the brown case shrink and alter its outline till it was tiny and distorted, the shape of an elongated egg, the color of a copper cent piece.

"Whew!" Vanning said.

Then he leaned closer, staring. Inside the locker, something was moving. A grotesque little creature less than four inches tall was visible. It was a shocking object, all cubes and angles, a bright green in tint, and it was obviously alive.

Someone knocked on the door.

The tiny--thing--was busy with the copper-colored egg. Like an ant, it was lifting the egg and trying to pull it away. Vanning gasped and reached into the locker. The fourth-dimensional creature dodged. It wasn't quick enough. Vanning's hand descended, and he felt wriggling movement against his palm.

He squeezed.

The movement stopped. He let go of the dead thing and pulled his

hand back swiftly.

The door shook under the impact of fists.

Vanning closed the locker and called, "Just a minute."

"Break it down," somebody ordered.

But that wasn't necessary. Vanning put a painful smile on his face and turned the key. Counsel Hatton came in, accompanied by bulky policemen. "We've got MacIlson," he said.

"Oh? Why?"

For answer Hatton jerked his hand. The officers began to search the room, Vanning shrugged.

"You've jumped the gun," he said. "Breaking and entering--"

"We've got a warrant."

"Charge?"

"The bonds, of course." Hatton's voice was weary. "I don't know where you've hid that suitcase, but we'll find it."

"What suitcase?" Vanning wanted to know.

"The one MacIlson had when he came in. The one he didn't have when he went out."

"The game," Vanning said sadly, "is up. You win."

"Eh?"

"If I tell you what I did with the suitcase, will you put in a good word for

me?"

"Why... yeah. Where--"

"I ate it," Vanning said, and retired to the couch, where he settled himself for a nap. Hatton gave him a long, hating look. The officers tore in-- They passed by the locker, after a casual glance inside. The x rays revealed nothing, in walls, floor, ceiling, or articles of furniture. The other offices were searched, too. Vanning applauded the painstaking job.

In the end, Hatton gave up. There was nothing else he could do.

"I'll clap suit on you tomorrow," Vanning promised. "Same time I get a habeas corpus on Macllson."

"Step to hell," Hatton growled.

"By now."

Vanning waited till his unwanted guests had departed. Then, chuckling quietly, he went to the locker and opened it.

The copper-colored egg that represented the suedette suitcase had vanished. Vanning groped inside the locker, finding nothing. The significance of this didn't strike Vanning at first. He swung the cabinet around so that it faced the window. He looked again, with identical results.

The locker was empty.

Twenty-five thousand credits in negotiable ore bonds had disappeared.

Vanning started to sweat. He picked up the metal box and shook it.

That didn't help. He carried it across the room and set it up in another corner, returning to search the floor with painstaking accuracy. Holy-- Hatton?

No. Vanning hadn't let the locker out of his sight from the time the police had entered till they left. An officer had swung open the cabinet's door, looked inside, and closed it again. After that the door had remained shut, till just now.

The bonds were gone.

So was the abnormal little creature Vanning had crushed. All of which meant--what?

Vanning approached the locker and closed it, clicking the latch into position. Then he reopened it, not really expecting that the copper-colored egg would reappear.

He was right. It didn't.

Vanning staggered to the Winchell and called Galloway.

"Whatzit? Huh? Oh. What do you want?" The scientist's gaunt face appeared on the screen, rather the worse for wear. "I got a hang-over. Can't use thiamin, either. I'm allergic to it. How'd your case come out?"

"Listen," Vanning said urgently, "I put something inside that damn--locker of yours and now it's gone."

"The locker? That's funny."

"No! The thing I put in it. A... a suitcase."

Galloway shook his head thoughtfully. "You never know, do you? I

remember once I made a--"

"The hell with that. I want that suitcase back!"

"An heirloom?" Galloway suggested.

"No, there's money in it."

"Wasn't that a little foolish of you? There hasn't been a bank failure since 1949. Never suspected you were a miser, Vanning. Like to have the stuff around, so you can run it through your birdlike fingers, eh?"

"You're drunk."

"I'm trying," Galloway corrected. "But I've built up an awful resistance over a period of years. It takes time. Your call's already set me back two and a half drinks. I must put an extension on the siphon, so I can Winchell and guzzle at the same time."

Vanning almost chattered incoherently into the mike. "My suitcase! What happened to it? I want it back."

"Well, I haven't got it."

"Can't you find out where it is?"

"Dunno. Tell me the details. I'll see what I can figure out." Vanning complied, revising his story as caution prompted. "o. k.," Galloway said at last, rather unwillingly. "I hate working out theories, but just as a favor.... My diagnosis will cost you fifty credits."

"What? Now listen--"

"Fifty credits," Galloway repeated unflinchingly. "Or no prognosis."

"How do I know you can get it back for me?"

"Chances are I can't. Still, maybe... I'll have to go over to Mechanistra and use some of their machines. They charge a good bit, too. But I'll need forty-brainpower calculators--"

"o. k., o. k.!" Vanning growled. "Hop to it. I want that suitcase back."

"What interests me is that little bug you squashed. In fact, that's the only reason I'm tackling your problem. Life in the fourth dimension--" Galloway trailed off, murmuring. His face faded from the screen. After a while Vanning broke the connection.

He re-examined the locker, finding nothing new. Yet the suedette suitcase had vanished from it, into thin air. Oh, hell!

Brooding over his sorrows, Vanning shrugged into a top coat and dined vinously at the Manhattan Roof. He felt very sorry for himself.

The next day he felt even sorrier. A call to Galloway had given the blank signal, so Vanning had to mark time. About noon MacIlson dropped in. His nerves were shot.

"You took your time in springing me," he started immediately. "Well, what now? Have you got a drink anywhere around?"

"You don't need a drink," Vanning grunted. "You've got a skin-ful already, by the look of you. Run down to Florida and wait till this blows over."

"I'm sick of waiting. I'm going to South America. I want some credits."

"Wait'll I arrange to cash the bonds."

"I'll take the bonds. A fair half, as we agreed."

Vanning's eyes narrowed. "And walk out into the hands of the police. Sure."

MacClson looked uncomfortable. "I'll admit I made a boner. But this time--no, I'll play smart now."

"You'll wait, you mean."

"There's a friend of mine on the roof parking lot, in a helicopter. I'll go up and slip him the bonds, and then I'll just walk out. The police won't find anything on me."

"I said no," Vanning repeated. "It's too dangerous."

"It's dangerous as things are. If they locate the bonds--"

"They won't."

"Where'd you hide 'em?"

"That's my business."

MacClson glowered nervously. "Maybe. But they're in this building. You couldn't have finagled 'em out yesterday before the cops came. No use playing your luck too far. Did they use x rays?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I heard Counsel Hatton's got a batch of experts going over the blueprints on this building. He'll find your safe. I'm getting out of here before he does."

Vanning patted the air. "You're hysterical. I've taken care of you, haven't I? Even though you almost screwed the whole thing up."

"Sure," MacIlson said, pulling at his lip. "But I"-- He chewed a fingernail. "Oh, damn! I'm sitting on the edge of a volcano with termites under me. I can't stay here and wait till they find the bonds. They can't extradite me from South America--where I'm going, anyway."

"You're going to wait," Vanning said firmly. "That's your best chance."

There was suddenly a gun in MacIlson's hand. "You're going to give me half the bonds. Right now. I don't trust you a little bit. You figure you can stall me along--hell, get those bonds!"

"No," Vanning said.

"I'm not kidding."

"I know you aren't. I can't get the bonds."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Ever heard of a time lock?" Vanning asked, his eyes watchful. "You're right; I put the suitcase in a concealed safe. But I can't open that safe till a certain number of hours have passed."

"Mm-m." MacIlson pondered. "When--"

"Tomorrow."

"All right. You'll have the bonds for me then?"

"If you want them. But you'd better change your mind. It'd be safer."

For answer MacIlson grinned over his shoulder as he went out. Vanning sat motionless for a long time. He was, frankly, scared.

The trouble was, Maclison was a manic-depressive type. He'd kill. Right now, he was cracking under the strain, and imagining himself a desperate fugitive. Well--precautions would be advisable.

Vanning called Galloway again, but got no answer. He left a message on the recorder and thoughtfully looked into the locker again. It was empty, depressingly so.

That evening Galloway let Vanning into his laboratory. The scientist looked both tired and drunk. He waved comprehensively toward a table, covered with scraps of paper.

"What a headache you gave me! If I'd known the principles behind that gadget, I'd have been afraid to tackle it. Sit down. Have a drink. Got the fifty credits?"

Silently Vanning handed over the coupons. Galloway shoved them into Monstro. "Fine. Now--" He settled himself on the couch. "Now we start. The fifty credit question."

"Can I get the suitcase back?"

"No," Galloway said flatly. "At least, I don't see how it can be worked. It's in another spatio-temporal sector."

"Just what does that mean?"

"It means the locker works something like a telescope, only the thing isn't merely visual. The locker's a window, I figure. You can reach through it as well as look through it. It's an opening into Now plus x."

Vanning scowled. "So far you haven't said anything."

"So far all I've got is theory, and that's all I'm likely to get. Look. I was wrong originally. The things that went into the locker didn't appear in

another space, because there would have been a spatial constant. I mean, they wouldn't have got smaller. Size is size. Moving a one-inch cube from here to Mars wouldn't make it any larger or smaller."

"What about a different density in the surrounding medium? 'Wouldn't that crush an object?'"

"Sure, and it'd stay squashed. It wouldn't return to its former size and shape when it was taken out of the locker again. X plus y never equals xy . But x times y --"

"So?"

"That's a pun," Galloway broke off to explain. "The things we put in the locker went into time. Their time-rate remained constant, but not the spatial relationships. Two things can't occupy the same place at the same time. Ergo, your suitcase went into a different time. Now plus x . And what x represents I don't know, though I suspect a few million years."

Vanning looked dazed. "The suitcase is a million years in the future?"

"Dunno how far, but--I'd say plenty. I haven't enough factors to finish the equation. I reasoned by induction, mostly, and the results are screwy as hell. Einstein would have loved it. My theorem shows that the universe is expanding and contracting at the same time."

"What's that got to do--"

"Motion is relative," Galloway continued inexorably. "That's a basic principle. Well, the Universe is expanding, spreading out like a gas, but its component parts are shrinking at the same time. The parts don't actually grow, you know--not the suns and atoms. They just run away from the central point. Galloping off in all directions... where

was I? Oh. Actually, the Universe, taken as a unit, is shrinking."

"So, it's shrinking. Where's my suitcase?"

"I told you. In the future. Inductive reasoning showed that. It's beautifully simple and logical. And it's quite impossible of proof, too. A hundred, a thousand, a million years ago the Earth--the Universe--was larger than it is now. And it continues to contract. Sometime in the future the Earth will be just half as large as it is now. Only we won't notice it because the Universe will be proportionately smaller."

Galloway went on dreamily. "We put a workbench into the locker, so it emerged sometime in the future. The locker's an open window into a different time, as I told you. Well, the bench was affected by the conditions of that period. It shrank, after we gave it a few seconds to soak up the entropy or something. Do I mean entropy? Allah knows. Oh, well."

"It turned into a pyramid."

"Maybe there's geometric distortion, too. Or it might be a visual illusion. Perhaps we can't get the exact focus. I doubt if things will really look different in the future--except that they'll be smaller--but we're using a window into the fourth dimension. We're taking a pleat in time. It must be like looking through a prism. The alteration in size is real, but the shape and color are altered to our eyes by the fourth-dimensional prism."

"The whole point, then, is that my suitcase is in the future. Eh? But why did it disappear from the locker?"

"What about that little creature you squashed? Maybe he had pals. They wouldn't be visible till they came into the very narrow focus of the whatchmaycallit, but--figure it out. Sometime in the future, in a

hundred or a thousand or a million years, a suitcase suddenly appears out of thin air. One of our descendants investigates. You kill him. His pals come along and carry the suitcase away, out-of range of the locker. In space it may be anywhere, and the time factor's an unknown quantity. Now plus x. It's a time locker. Well?"

"Hell!" Vanning exploded. "So that's all you can tell me? I'm supposed to chalk it up to profit and loss?"

"Uh-huh. Unless you want to crawl into the locker yourself after your suitcase. Lord knows where you'd come out, though. The proportions of the air probably would have changed in a few thousand years. There might be other alterations, too."

"I'm not that crazy."

So there he was. The bonds were gone, beyond hope of redemption. Vanning could resign himself to that loss, once he knew the securities wouldn't fall into the hands of the police. But MacIlson was another matter, especially after a bullet spattered against the glassolex window of Vanning's office.

An interview with MacIlson had proved unsatisfactory. The defaulter was convinced that Vanning was trying to bilk him. He was removed forcibly, yelling threats. He'd go to the police--he'd confess-- Let him. There was no proof. The hell with him. But, for safety's sake, Vanning clapped an injunction on his quondam client. It didn't land. MacIlson clipped the official on the jaw and fled.

Now, Vanning suspected, he lurked in dark corners, armed, and anxious to commit homicide. Obviously a manic-depressive type.

Vanning took a certain malicious pleasure in demanding a couple of plain-clothes men to act as his guards. Legally, he was within his

rights, since his life had been threatened. Until MacIlson was under sufficient restriction, Vanning would be protected. And he made sure that his guards were two of the best shots on the Manhattan force. He also found out that they had been told to keep their eyes peeled for the missing bonds and the suedette suitcase. Vanning Winchelled Counsel Hatton and grinned at the screen.

"Any luck yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"My watchdogs. Your spies. They won't find the bonds, Hatton. Better call 'em off. Why make the poor devils do two jobs at once?"

"One job would be enough. Finding the evidence. If MacIlson drilled you, I wouldn't be too unhappy."

"Well, I'll see you in court," Vanning said. "You're prosecuting Watson, aren't you?"

"Yes. Are you waiving scop?"

"On the jurors? Sure. I've got this case in the bag."

"That's what you think," Hatton said, and broke the beam.

Chuckling, Vanning donned his topcoat, collected the guards, and headed for court. There was no sign of MacIlson--

Vanning won the case, as he had expected. He returned to his offices, collected a few unimportant messages from the switchboard girl, and walked toward his private suite. As he opened the door, he saw the suedette suitcase on the carpet in the corner.

He stopped, hand frozen on the latch. Behind him he could hear the

heavy footsteps of the guards. Over his shoulder Vanning said, "Wait a minute," and dodged into the office, slamming and locking the door behind him. He caught the tail end of a surprised question.

The suitcase. There it was, unequivocally. And, quite as unequivocally, the two plain-clothes men, after a very brief conference, were hammering on the door, trying to break it down.

Vanning turned green. He took a hesitant step forward, and then saw the locker, in the corner to which he had moved it. The time locker-- That was it. If he shoved the suitcase inside the locker, it would become unrecognizable. Even if it vanished again, that wouldn't matter. What mattered was the vital importance of getting rid-- immediately!--of incriminating evidence.

The door rocked on its hinges. Vanning scuttled toward the suitcase and picked it up. From the corner of his eye he saw movement.

In the air above him, a hand had appeared. It was the hand of a giant, with an immaculate cuff fading into emptiness. Its huge fingers were reaching down-- Vanning screamed and sprang away. He was too slow. The hand descended, and Vanning wriggled impotently against the palm. The hand contracted into a fist. When it opened, what was left of Vanning dropped squashily to the carpet, which it stained. The hand withdrew into nothingness. The door fell in and the plain-clothes men stumbled over it as they entered.

It didn't take long for Hatton and his cohorts to arrive. Still, there was little for them to do except clean up the mess. The suedette bag, containing twenty-five thousand credits in negotiable bonds, was carried off to a safer place. Vanning's body was scraped up and removed to the morgue. Photographers flashed pictures, fingerprint experts insufflated their white powder, x ray men worked busily. It was all done with swift efficiency, so that within an hour the office was

empty and the door sealed.

Thus there were no spectators to witness the advent of a gigantic hand that appeared from nothingness, groped around as though searching for something, and presently vanished once more--The only person who could have thrown light on the matter was Galloway, and his remarks were directed to Monstro, in the solitude of his laboratory. All he said was:

"So that's why that workbench materialized for a few minutes here yesterday. Hm-m-m. Now plus x--and x equals about a week. Still, why not? It's all relative. But--I never thought the Universe was shrinking that fast!"

He relaxed on the couch and siphoned a double Martini.

"Yeah, that's it," he murmured after a while. "Whew! I guess Vanning must have been the only guy who ever reached into the middle of next week and--killed himself! I think I'll get tight."

And he did.