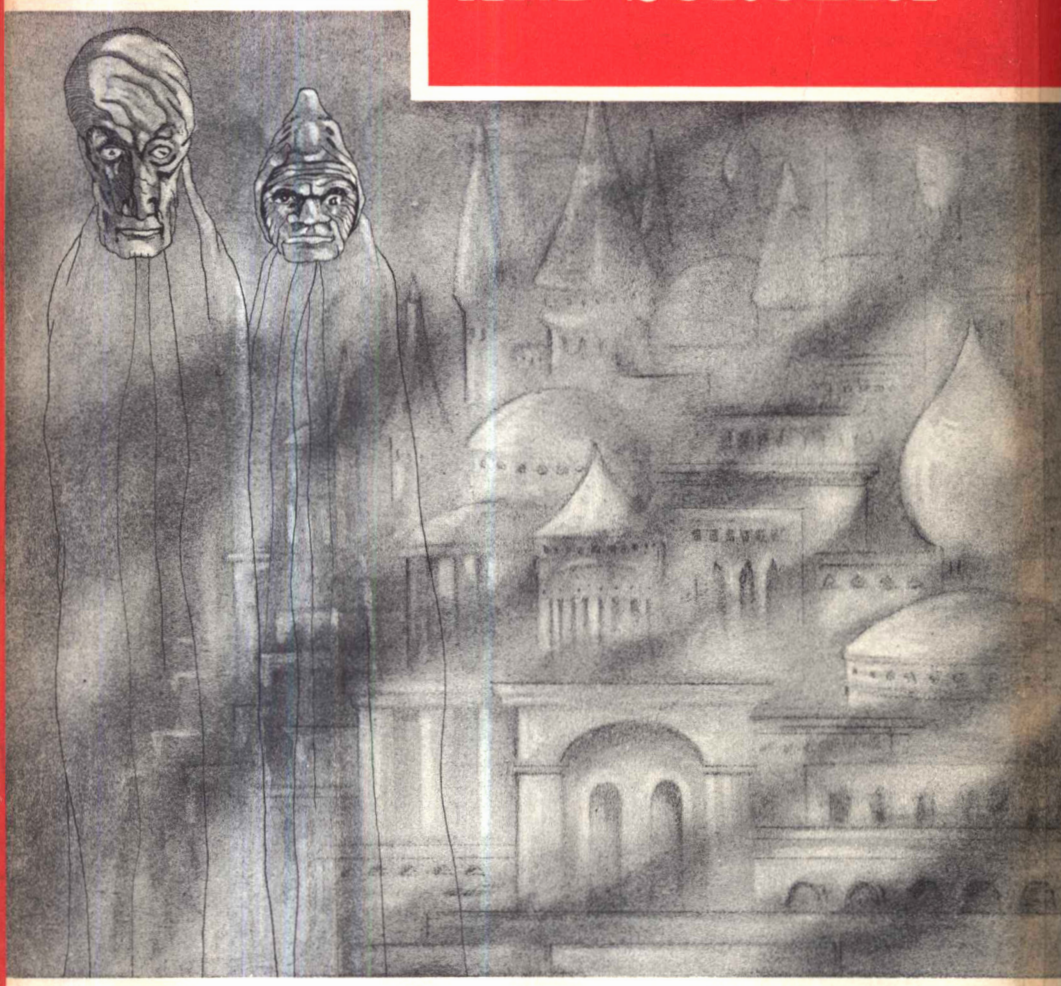
TALES OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY



CLARK ASHTON SMITH

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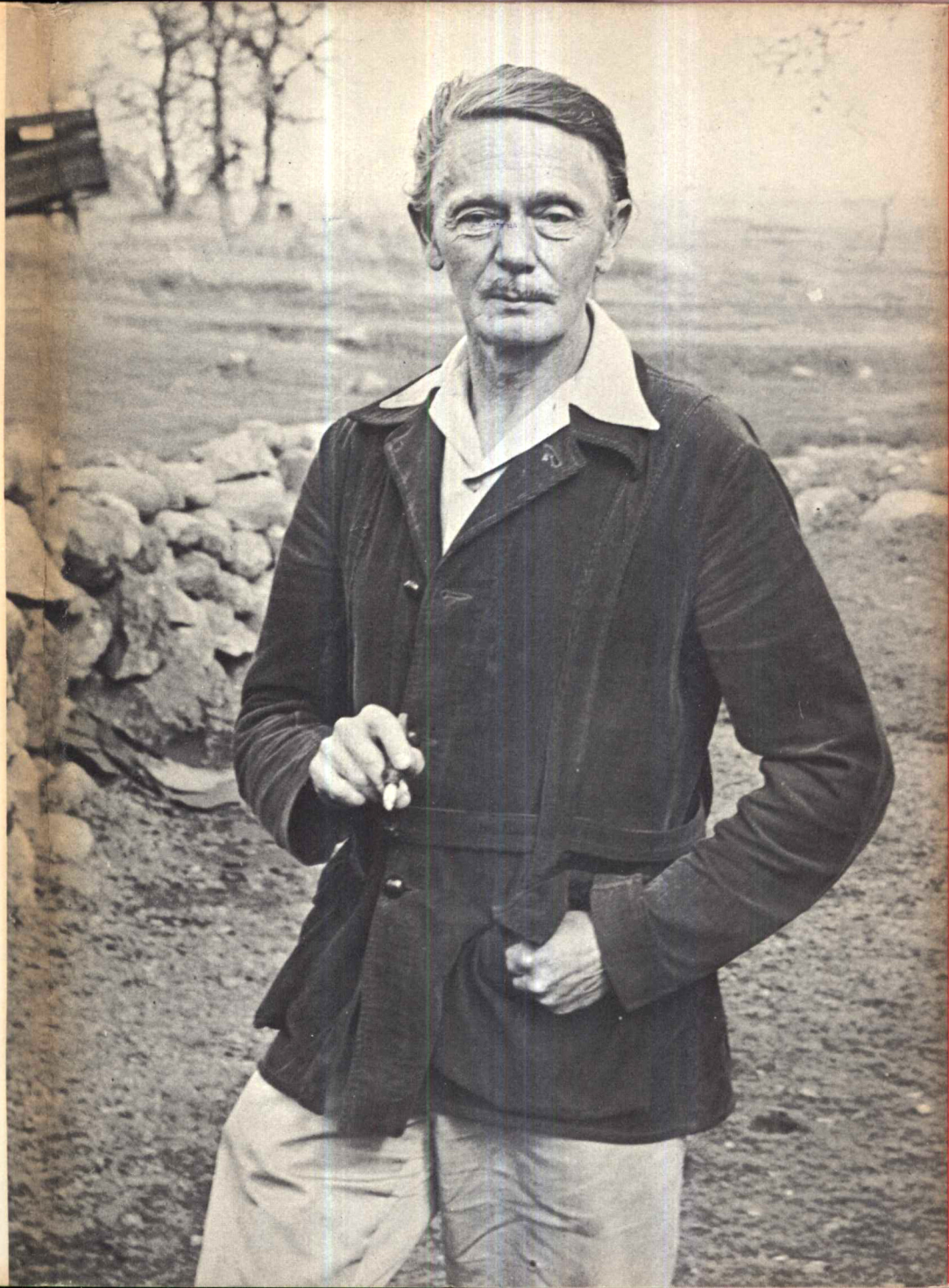

TALES OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY

Also by Clark Ashton Smith

Prose

OUT OF SPACE AND TIME
LOST WORLDS
GENIUS LOCI AND OTHER STORIES
THE ABOMINATIONS OF YONDO

Poetry

THE STAR-TREADER AND OTHER POEMS
EBONY AND CRYSTAL
ODES AND SONNETS
NERO AND OTHER POEMS
THE DARK CHATEAU
SPELLS AND PHILTRES
THE HILL OF DIONYSUS

In Preparation

POEMS IN PROSE
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Tales of Science and Sorcery

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Arkham House: Publishers 1964 Sauk City, Wisconsin

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TALES OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY

Clark Ashton Smith: A Memoir

by

E. Hoffmann Price

The rutted wagon-track became worse as I tooled my way around a bend and shifted to low to pick the best way among the rocks jutting up from the roadbed. Trees on either side formed a tunnel, which appeared to come to a dead-end. I wondered whether, misunderstanding the Indian's words and gestures, I had overlooked a fork that I should have taken. Little chance for any U-turn, even with a Model "A."

A not unpleasant stretch of woodland, although too silent. Shadiness had its merits, on an afternoon in May, but there was something overdone about all this. Everything was asleep in this odd spot. If Smith didn't live here, he should. It was a bit too much like a scene by Lovecraft.

Then I saw the marker, done in black paint, a long time ago, with uncertain brush and unsteady hand: *Timeus Smith.*

Emerging from a dusky tunnel, I entered a clearing of hard earth, and of grass sun-blasted to California hillside-brown. A cabin, weathered gray, squatted in the middle of the nearest of Timeus Smith's thirty-nine acres. No well-house—no spring —no stream—no cistern—no one lived here, nor had, for a long time. But the Indian at least had pointed the way to the lands of a man named Smith.

Upon my arrival on the Pacific Coast, in mid-April of 1934, Clark Ashton Smith had written to assure me that I'd find him at home any time I could make the 165 mile drive from Oakland to Auburn. There were two Auburns, the new, and the old town. The latter was the original gold rush settlement, a mile or so beyond which, and just a piece past the railway tracks, was the road to Smith's home.

The sound of the Ford and the slam of its door called Smith from the cabin and down the slope. Tall, thin, fragile, he at once did, and did not resemble the person portrayed by the snapshot he had mailed before I set out from New Orleans. I heard and saw, as it were, two Smiths at once.

There was an old, old Smith, weary and not too steady, and a little stooped; grave and ancient of expression; high-keyed, sensitive, with a slight twitch near the corners of the mouth. Also, in front of this—or behind, and looking through, I couldn't tell which!—was a smiling, boyish Smith, with a twinkle in the eye, a glint as though he spent much of his time relishing the total silliness and absurdity of things, seeing through surface and substance and laughing at most of what he saw. There was all this during a moment which left me at an emotional standstill, simply because I could not move in two or three directions at once.

Then the Smith Presence, the Smith letters, the Smith Duality, all fused into a firm hand grip, a cordial welcome. I was entirely at home, and glad that I had found the way.

Clark lived with his parents. Each was past eighty, and at first sight, seemed old beyond numbering. The irises of Mr. Smith's eyes had faded to colorlessness, exaggerating the appearance of age. By no means unfriendly, he was nonetheless reserved, midway between noncommittal and remote.

Mrs. Smith, white-haired, slight, sharp-faced, moved quickly, spoke with animation and sparkle, restoring the balance at once. And, she lost no time giving me a tour of the cabin.

To my right was a comfortable, welcoming kitchen of the sort I remembered from old times, with its wood stove, its dining table, and work table. To the left, I glanced into the duskiness of Clark's study, which seemed spacious, although it was no more than one of the four quarters of the house, the remaining two being the bedrooms.

Stepping into her son's workshop, Mrs. Smith pointed out the figures sculptured in talc. "Clark gets the material from my brother's mine. When the carving is completed—" She picked a miniature monster, one of Cthulhu's kinfolk, from atop the bookcase that lined the entire wall. "He fires it in the kitchen stove."

Many were android: subhuman, quasi-human, superhuman—comfortably gross—acutely devilish—stupidly comfortable—sinister—malicious—full figures—busts—mere heads—

Turning to Clark, I caught his relishing of my amazement.

"Where's Pickman's model? I never heard talk of your sculptures."

"The models? I keep them in an abandoned mine shaft."

Then Mrs. Smith resumed charge:

"I must show you some of Clark's drawings—"

Pencil—crayon—water color—many, pen-drawn, with inks of diverse colors, these being done in laboriously minute detail. Some were two-dimensional equivalents of his sculpture. Others were ornate and highly stylized representations of plant life which appeared to be merging with the animal kingdom.

"*Last Mermaid?*" I remarked, and "Could be, *The Saturnienne?*"

He liked my reference to the two compositions *Weird Tales* had published, which had led to my first writing him.

"Sometimes a story suggests the sculpture or drawing. Again, it's the other way about."

The tour being completed, Mrs. Smith shifted to the immediately practical. "Clark, before you settle down to visiting, I wish

you'd get a pail of water and bring some things from the cooler."

Following him up the slope, some twenty paces from the cabin, I saw what I had first missed: a low parapet of earth, with a plank roof.

"A mine shaft," he explained. "Come on down."

A ladder slanted down to a ledge on the further face. From this scanty footing, a second ladder reached to the bottom.

"We filled the shaft up to the forty foot level, at the spring."

The trickle of water from the rock collected in a pool from which he dipped a pailful. Nearby, in the chilly dusk, were eggs and butter, vegetables, and milk.

"These hills are dotted with shafts and tunnels," Clark continued. "Most of them are open and unguarded."

We filed up the ladders, delivered the supplies, and then made for the wooded rim of Timeus Smith's acres. There, near a wind-felled oak that persisted in full foliage, were cots, a table, and camp chairs.

"I do all my work out here till winter drives me indoors. Sleep here, too. Unless you'd prefer my room, and a roof over your head?"

"This is too good to pass up! If I ever collect from *Weird Tales,* I'd like to get out of Oakland, and find a spot in the hills!"

Well past mid-afternoon, when we needed relief from my yarns of visiting Lovecraft in Providence, Robert Howard in Cross Plains, Texas, and many another of the *Weird Tales* group, Clark proposed a stroll to Auburn, for a word with Jackson Gregory, the novelist.

I learned quickly that this frail, fragile-seeming recluse could set a long-legged pace across the hills and maintain it effortlessly. He had plenty of breath for telling about the pursuits necessary to supplement income from fiction sales, and the sale of sculptures.

He dug wells. He worked in the orchards that dotted the slopes below Auburn. He sawed and split wood. Turning his hand to whatever he could find to do, he was able to write what he pleased, as he pleased, and be damned to such editors as were not pleased! Clark neither envied the hard-driving, production-line fictioneer, nor did he belittle the benefit of constant and substantial income. Being sufficiently content, self-complete, he had no feeling at all of "sacrificing" anything to retain "artistic integrity."

That Jackson Gregory was a large scale operator was apparent from the moment he welcomed us to his enormous studio overlooking the American River. Clark and I spent a pleasant half hour in an establishment such as I hoped one day to possess, and such as neither he nor I ever did attain. Looking back, I think that Clark had not the least craving for any such splendor. Over the years, I never once heard him express, even in whimsy, a wish for anything beyond what he actually had.

That evening, sitting about the kitchen table, our appetites were honed by the smell of biscuits baking in the wood-fired oven, the savor of chops in the griddle, and gravy reaching a fine brown. And Timeus Smith, warming up from his reserve, told me of his travels, matching my reference to the Philippines with his going ashore in Macao; mention of Madeira wine evoked a few words about Funchal; and things Portuguese finally led to the time he met Dom Pedro, Emperor of Brazil . . .

Dry, colorless, laconic—understanding and underplaying his memoirs made the old man impressive.

There was no writer shop-talk during this meal. Such trivia were reserved for after supper, as Clark and I sat by lantern-light near the fallen oak. And it was very good, finally, to sleep under the stars, and in the mountain coolness.

Having scouted out the land, I brought my wife the next time, some months later, and thus, second hand, I learned more of

Clark's background, bits she gleaned during dish washing sessions with Mrs. Smith.

Sensitive as a race horse or a duelling pistol, young Clark could not endure the confusion and clash of schools. After seeing and sharing his four or five years of torment, the Smiths took their son out of grammar school and settled down to giving him a home-made education. In addition to his overwhelming mastery of English, he won sufficient command of French to translate Baudelaire, and enough of Spanish to compose verse in that language.

That autumn, Mrs. Smith, visiting relatives in Oakland, was our dinner guest. In anticipation of seeing us, that amazing old lady had scrambled far and wide over the hills to pick Mariposa lilies for my wife, who during her visit in Auburn had said she'd never heard of such a flower. The picking of wild flowers had long been prohibited by law in California, but statutes in this respect no more inhibited Mrs. Smith than had laws concerning compulsory education for children. In her odd moments, she had engineered the printing, at family expense, of a collection of Clark's poems, and had reached at least the break-even point in promoting the sale of the book.

To this day, I do not know whether Clark supported his parents, or whether they had income from investments sufficient to keep them. I know only that there was an intense solidarity and solicitude, each for the others of the trio.

Mrs. Smith died, as nearly as I can recall, in 1935 or 1936.

In 1937, I piloted Henry Kuttner and his mother to Auburn. We brought bottled gifts. And while Clark was giving the newcomers the tour which his mother had in times past conducted, I sat in the kitchen with Timeus Smith. His taste for Spanish sherry warmed my heart.

"Mr. Smith, your glass is empty—"

I can still see his hand, gnarled, wrinkled, shakily advance the

tumbler, and the appreciative gleam light his faded old eyes.

"I used to take an ounce of Holland gin per diem," he remarked. "For my kidneys."

"Mmm . . . you mean, those bottles, the green, coffin-shaped ones in Clark's workshop?"

He nodded. "Empties. A. V. K. gin. I had to quit."

"Doctor's orders?"

My solicitude amused him. "Not at all. Simply no more A. V. K., nor any other Holland gin in the entire county."

"Nasty business, Mr. Smith. By the way, your glass is empty." Then, dividing the scanty remainder of sherry, "Next time I come up, I'll bring a square-face of gin."

We spoke again of prospecting, historical, not current. He got a box of specimens to exemplify his remarks. One chunk of ore, the size and shape of a small, oval cake of soap, its shape and texture suggesting its origin, the bed of a stream, was flecked with wheat-colored gold.

"My compliments," Mr. Smith said. "Keep this as a souvenir."

This was in September.

Whenever I savored the recollection of that visit, my promise came to mind, and a nagging, sibilant voice said, "Send the old man a bottle of Bols gin, it's just as good as the unprocurable A. V. K."

My answer: "I said I'd *bring* it, next time I come up."

Business had taken one of those periodical dips, and a Pierce Arrow as long as a Chinese dream would require thirty-five gallons of fuel for the drive. But for sentiment I would have processed the ore sample.

The wordless dialogue was repeated in October.

I dismissed the nagging several times in November.

The thing became something twitchy as December began.

"Ship a bottle—by express—it's quite legal, within the state."

I countered, with iron firmness: "I promised I'd *bring* it, next trip."

Timeus Smith died the day after Christmas.

It was mid-1939 before I drove to Auburn.

Clark and I didn't go into the house at once, as we had formerly done. I dug bottles out of the trunk, followed him to the fallen oak, and set the trio on the table.

"I waited too long. I'll have no delay, now that it's too late."

He went to get glasses. I set to work with my key-ring corkscrew. Bols, distilling gin since 1575, A.D., had not got around to screw tops, or twist-stoppers.

The stuff was oily as glycerine. The reek of juniper billowed up as I poured three finger dollops into each tumbler.

We rose. "I dedicate this glass to Timeus Smith."

Bottoms up.

Smooth, but nasty.

"Just as well your dad didn't live to taste this muck."

Clark grimaced acquiescence. "Rather vile, but I do relish your sentiment."

I grabbed the fifth of brandy. "This'll cut the taste. Or would you prefer Demerara rum?"

A splash of brandy did obliterate the juniper oil . . . we opened the rum, and drank again to the memory of Timeus Smith . . . Curious, but we did not dedicate a glass to Clark's mother. I've always wondered why—

Before sentiment and liquor took charge overwhelmingly, Clark said, "You've never met my Uncle Ed. Would you like to drive out to his place at Kilaga Springs—it's rather interesting."

"That's where you get the talc for your sculptures?"

"That's the spot."

"How about taking him a drink?"

"He'll have something on hand."

We set out, passing the old Golconda and other mines that dotted the hills. The only hazard was a rustic bridge held together by prayer and fasting.

Ed Gaylord—Uncle Ed—was solid, ruddy, white-haired and beaming, happy to see Nephew Clark. He was equally happy because there were no customers to interfere with a good visit. He owned the abandoned copper mine, as well as the Kilaga mineral spring whose curative waters fed a dozen or more tubs in the bath house, as well as the mud pools in one wing of the building.

The mine dump was a vast heap of fragments ranging in color from yellow to maroon. I call the substance "talc" out of ignorance, and because of the softness that permitted jack-knife carving. One look down the ruined shaft made it plain that I'd have no tour. The mine was flooded.

Presently we headed for Mr. Gaylord's cozy home among the tall trees.

"And I bottle Kilaga Springs water," he said, setting out an eight-ounce sample. "The Indians had for centuries come to these springs to cure all manner of ailments." He was eloquent, expansive, glowing. "Good for cuts and burns—dandruff—scalp ailments in general—even scalped Indians found it most helpful—"

Clark broke in. "Uncle Ed, do you happen to have a drink in the house?"

Uncle Ed lost no time pouring Bourbon. With his free hand, he unstoppered a bottle of Kilaga.

Bottoms up.

"As a chaser—" He filled my glass with Kilaga. "It's different."

It was. I gagged. Choked. Sputtered. The stuff was astringent, biting, bitter, so paralyzing that I swallowed none.

"Won't hurt you! Kilaga is good for indigestion. Here, take this big bottle. Take it home—good for poison oak—dandruff—eczema—"

The old devil so thoroughly enjoyed my spitting and grimacing that I began to enjoy the joke myself. It was a happy meeting, and I was glad we'd made the side trip.

As we risked the bridge a second time, Clark said, "Could you guess how old my uncle is?"

"Must be sixty at least."

"He's eighty."

In the morning, as we turned out of our cots, I said to Clark, "A nip of rum would cut the mountain chill."

Clark agreed.

Then sentiment and remorse took charge. "Wait! This meeting is principally out of respect to your late father. It'll be Holland gin."

Clark did not flinch. I poured the oily stuff. We eyed each other. "Not much worse than Kilaga water," he said, grimly, and we tossed off the morning dram.

We regarded each other amazedly.

"Be God damned! Not as loathesome as I expected."

Clark said, "Not as vile as last night."

"Just takes getting used to."

Clark reached out with his glass. "Out of respect to my late father—"

After breakfast, we finished the jug.

Liquor had no perceptible effect on Clark, beyond its evoking a glow of enjoyment. The only time he was ever a guest in my house, I opened a bottle of 151-proof Demerara rum. The others cut it with water, or laced their coffee with it, or cautiously ventured a nip from a liqueur glass of the smooth, powerful stuff. Clark let me pour him a three-finger dollop into a tumbler. He savored it, drank it as he would a glass of Spanish sherry. He took a second, and a third. Nothing happened. Nothing, except that the deep-lined melancholy of his old, old face brightened slightly, and a new twinkle came into his eyes.

In 1940, I led the last safari to Smith's place: Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, and Diego del Monte, who wrote for the adventure pulps under the name of Felix Flammonde, were the *convoyes;* none of them had ever met Smith. He still lived alone in the cabin he had once shared with his parents. He was there, unchanged and unswerving. He had been digging wells. One of the guests was a Turkish well digger. We drank rum, diluted with water from the mine shaft. And this was my final visit to the enchanted area which I could have seen, but did not see as often as many times since that last visit I wished I had. First it was wartime restrictions on gasoline, and later, it was the disintegration of my fiction business that kept me from travelling. We exchanged letters of casual gossip, and he would mail me a copy of each of his various Arkham House publications. He was keenly interested in the horoscope I cast for him, but I am sure that astrological analysis and forecast in no way influenced his decisions.

Unchanging, unchangeable Smith—

Until, late 1954, came the news clipping with a few words penned on the margin: Clark Ashton Smith and Mrs. Carol Dorman had been married in Monterey, and were living in adjacent Pacific Grove. Early in 1955, I went to see him and his bride.

Clark was then 62, and seemed older. His bearing had tapered off, and his enunciation was not as sharp as it had once been. He was stooped, and frail, and shaky. In contrast to vibrant and vital Carol, he seemed all the more indrawn and feeble. Those first few moments in the comfortably cluttered library-living room left me distressed and sad, and groping. Then came a flash of something from behind the surface. The Smith-Shadow became Clark Ashton Smith himself, and I was back again with him in 1934, with only this difference—there was more of him.

This new Smith was happy in a way he had never been in the old days. The oldest honeymooners I'd ever met, these were in their mature expression, also the most radiant—the youngest. The

glances they exchanged during pauses in our scramble to blend old memories with the present showed how he and she had found something new and splendid and contenting.

All this they had, and despite a potentially disastrous background: the former Mrs. Dorman's three teen-agers by an earlier marriage bristled with hostility. Unspoken antagonism lanced and prodded until I felt that Clark must have attained his equanimity only through long study with a master of Zen. He was too fully occupied in savoring Carol's presence to have any attention for animosity. Although the youngsters had to resent the old fellow Mommie had married, they could not knife him into defense or retaliation.

Clark and Carol posed on the front steps for their pictures. He was jaunty, with beret and cocked head and gleam-in-the-eye, and she no longer seemed so much younger than he.

When he autographed *The Dark Chateau, "For Edgar, in memory of many happy meetings, from Clark, Feb. 13, 1955,"* it was in sprawling script which dashed recklessly across the page as did lines he had penned on a fly leaf in 1942.

Clark and Carol had been married when he was 61. This, his first marriage, so late in life, evokes the question, "What of her predecessors, the romances never culminating in matrimony?" One answer lies in the tales of Averoigne, and in some of his verses.

Compare these with the entire body of compositions of some of Clark's contemporaries who, whatever experience they may have gleaned from life, had in effect, if not absolutely, by-passed women.

Then, there were unavoidable references, although Clark and I had never had any curiosity concerning each other's personal life. There were quotings and no doubt misquotings of those who knew, might know, or might be imagining. Yet these vague, infrequent bits cohered and were compatible with circumstances which, taken singly, had no force. But the summation of all these bits is

that as to women Clark's life had not been lonely, and that there had been at least one long-term relationship of great importance.

And there was another, a fellow writer, a woman I met through Clark's letter of introduction. I know only that they had known each other in Auburn. Whenever we met, there was that toned-down, casual-eager wondering as to news of Clark, and a like mode of response when I told her. Once there must have been more between them than when she and I met. What else could have cut communication between friends? I never asked her. She died some while before he did.

Many an old friendship has been scuttled when one of the comrades marries. Here, I had no qualms. My second visit, mid-1955, confirmed my feeling that Carol was expanding Clark's life, not restricting it. However vivacious and intense and high-keyed, she did not overwhelm him. She drew him out, built him up, so that he was more expressive than of old. And as I left, I repeated to myself what I had said to Clark and Carol: "This is very good, we are neighbors again, and we will hoist many a jug, enjoying old times made new again, and better."

A few months later, I got a card written by Carol. Vandals had burned Clark's cabin. "*We need you. Phone's cut off. We're going to Lima, Peru . . .*" A confusing message, all the more so in its entirety. I wrote asking for clarification, saying that while the coming week-end was engaged beyond any chance, I'd see them wherever they were, before they made for Lima.

There was no answer. The letter was never returned unclaimed. I wondered how my failure to drive at once to Pacific Grove could have offended Clark—wondered whether Carol had taken offense and had turned him against me.

Each of the several times when I had planned to see the Smiths, during a visiting tour of the Monterey peninsula, the attempts were frustrated by last minute upsets. My own life had become

ever more complicated and crowded, and thus I was not as persistent in my efforts as I could have been. Then came the rehabilitation of my house, gone to ruin after 13 bachelor years, and soon thereafter my third marriage.

In August, 1961 I learned from Glenn Lord, in Texas, that Clark had died, age 68. I spent the ensuing two months trying to convince myself that I had not neglected Clark, or our friendship. I reminded myself that over the years I had always gone to see him. Only once had he been my guest. I won each debate, but remained disturbed.

My wife—Loriena—and I set out for Pacific Grove. Carol's welcome made me feel better. I got at once to the cryptic message.

She said, "He never felt that you had let him down. When he got your letter, he just smiled and said, 'Break down of communication.' Often and often he spoke of you, warmly as ever."

Her earnestness convinced me, but did not console me.

There was much about the 39 acres of hillside, desired by a real estate speculator, for a subdivision. She was convinced that burning the cabin had been the final of a series of vandalisms to goad him into selling the land.

Carol told of their holidays in the Big Sur country, some fifty miles south, and of the literati, including the late Robinson Jeffers, who found seclusion in the coastal woodlands. She told of how, during one of her critical illnesses, Clark had taken her to Gilroy Hot Springs, a Japanese resort where he and the solicitous Asiastics pampered her back to health. Although she did not make it clear whether Clark had "become" a Buddhist, he had gone far in that direction.

We went into the little patio to sit in the afternoon sun.

"Clark planted these—" Carol gestured. "He made this dead, dry little square come to life. When he wasn't earning a few dollars, tending to other peoples' gardens."

Despite a succession of minor "strokes," which depleted his

body but did not impair his mind, he earned a living until the end.

Carol, with Loriena following, went into the house to get glasses and a jug of Burgundy. She paused to say, "Mind getting one of the little tables out of the basement?"

What with woman to woman talk, they were taking their time about things. I sat there, inert. The plants and flowers were simply plants and flowers. Clark's garden did nothing at all to or for me. I was neither happy, nor sad. This was emotional anaesthesia, something quite comfortable.

Finally I stepped into the basement's clutter and waited for my eyes to accommodate to the dimness. I saw the aluminum patio-tables after a moment of blinking.

Someone welcomed me into the cool duskiness. There was neither sight nor sound nor touch, nor was any other sense in any way affected, yet I was suddenly aware of a presence, Clark-in-Essence, Clark-as-Friendliness, abstraction more real than reality. Psychologists and others have proved, by logic and otherwise, that one can respond only to stimulus of the senses. I know otherwise.

1934-1955: first meeting, final meeting.

I stood there, happy and renewed. All was well between me and Clark. All had always been well between us. During that unmeasured shred of time, communication had been complete—that is, *without detail.*

I carried the table to the patio and sat there, feet out-thrust, hands comfortably folded. Already the reality in the basement had become a memory that summed up happy meetings, long ago.

Presently, the women came out with jug and glasses.

"Carol—as I went to get the table—"

She nodded. "Clark is still around the house—he told you—"

Later, I sat in his second floor room and looked at the sea, and read one of his magazine publications until I fell asleep, waiting for dinner call . . .

Master of the Asteroid

Man's conquest of the interplanetary gulfs has been fraught with many tragedies. Vessel after vessel, like venturous motes, disappeared in the infinite—and had not returned. Inevitably, for the most part, the lost explorers have left no record of their fate. Their ships have flared as unknown meteors through the atmosphere of the further planets, to fall like shapeless metal cinders on a never-visited terrain; or have become the dead, frozen satellites of other worlds or moons. A few, perhaps, among the unreturning fliers, have succeeded in landing somewhere, and their crews have perished immediately, or survived for a little while amid the inconceivably hostile environment of a cosmos not designed for men.

In later years, with the progress of exploration, more than one of the early derelicts has been descried, following a solitary orbit; and the wrecks of others have been found on ultra-terrene shores. Occasionally—not often—it has been possible to reconstruct the details of the lone, remote disaster. Sometimes, in a fused and twisted hull, a log or record has been preserved intact. Among others, there is the case of the *Selenite,* the first known rocket ship to dare the zone of the asteroids.

At the time of its disappearance, fifty years ago, in 1980, a dozen voyages had been made to Mars, and a rocket base had been established in Syrtis Major, with a small permanent colony of terres-

trials, all of whom were trained scientists as well as men of uncommon hardihood and physical stamina.

The effects of the Martian climate, and the utter alienation from familiar conditions, as might have been expected, were extremely trying and even disastrous. There was an unremitting struggle with deadly or pestiferous bacteria new to science, a perpetual assailment by dangerous radiations of soil and air and sun. The lessened gravity played its part also, in contributing to curious and profound disturbances of metabolism. The worst effects were nervous and mental. Queer, irrational animosities, manias or phobias never classified by alienists, began to develop among the personnel at the rock base.

Violent quarrels broke out between men who were normally controlled and urbane. The party, numbering fifteen in all, soon divided into several cliques, one against the others; and this morbid antagonism led at times to actual fighting and even bloodshed.

One of the cliques consisted of three men, Roger Colt, Phil Gershom and Edmond Beverly. These three, through banding together in a curious fashion, became intolerably antisocial toward all the others. It would seem that they must have gone close to the borderline of insanity, and were subject to actual delusions. At any rate, they conceived the idea that Mars, with its fifteen Earthmen, was entirely too crowded. Voicing this idea in a most offensive and belligerent manner, they also began to hint their intention of faring even further afield in space.

Their hints were not taken seriously by the others, since a crew of three was insufficient for the proper manning of even the lightest rocket vessel used at that time. Colt, Gershom and Beverly had no difficulty at all in stealing the *Selenite,* the smaller of the two ships then reposing at the Syrtis Major base. Their fellow-colonists were aroused one night by the cannon-like roar of the discharging tubes, and emerged from their huts of sheet-iron in time

to see the vessel departing in a fiery streak toward Jupiter.

No attempt was made to follow it; but the incident helped to sober the remaining twelve and to calm their unnatural animosities. It was believed, from certain remarks that the malcontents had let drop, that their particular objective was Ganymede or Europa, both of which were thought to possess an atmosphere suitable for human respiration.

It seemed very doubtful, however, that they could pass the perilous belt of the asteroids. Apart from the difficulty of steering a course amid these innumerable far-strewn bodies, the *Selenite* was not fueled or provisioned for a voyage of such length. Gershom, Colt and Beverly, in their mad haste to quit the company of the others, had forgotten to calculate the actual necessities of their proposed voyage, and had wholly overlooked its dangers.

After that departing flash on the Martian skies, the *Selenite* was not seen again; and its fate remained a mystery for thirty years. Then, on tiny, remote Phocea, its dented wreck was found by the Holdane expedition to the asteroids.

Phocea, at the time of the expedition's visit, was in aphelion. Like others of the planetoids, it was discovered to possess a rare atmosphere, too thin for human breathing. Both hemispheres were covered with thin snow; and lying amid this snow, the *Selenite* was sighted by the explorers as they circled about the little world.

Much interest prevailed, for the shape of the partially bare mound was plainly recognizable and not to be confused with the surrounding rocks. Holdane ordered a landing, and several men in space suits proceeded to examine the wreck. They soon identified it as the long-missing *Selenite.*

Peering in through one of the thick, unbreakable neocrystal ports, they met the eyeless gaze of a human skeleton, which had fallen forward against the slanting, overhanging wall. It seemed to grin a sardonic welcome. The vessel's hull was partly buried

in the stony soil, and had been crumpled and even slightly fused, though not broken, by its plunge. The manhole lid was so thoroughly jammed and soldered that it was impossible to effect an entrance without the use of a cutting-torch.

Enormous, withered, cryptogamous plants with the habit of vines, that crumbled at a touch, were clinging to the hull and the adjacent rocks. In the light snow beneath the skeleton-guarded port, a number of sharded bodies were lying, which proved to be those of tall insect forms, like giant *phasmidae.*

From the posture and arrangement of their lank, pipy members, longer than those of a man, it seemed that they had walked erect. They were unimaginably grotesque, and their composition, due to the almost non-existent gravity, was fantastically porous and unsubstantial. Many other bodies, of a similar type, were afterwards found on other portions of the planetoid, but no living thing was discovered. All life, it was plain, had perished in the trans-arctic winter of Phocea's aphelion.

When the *Selenite* had been entered, the party learned from a sort of log or notebook found on the floor, that the skeleton was all that remained of Edmond Beverly. There was no trace of his two companions; but the log, on examination, proved to contain a record of their fate as well as the subsequent adventures of Beverly almost to the very moment of his own death from a doubtful, unexplained cause.

The tale was a strange and tragic one. Beverly, it would seem, had written it day by day, after the departure from Syrtis Major, in an effort to retain a semblance of morale and mental coherence amid the black alienation and disorientation of infinitude. I transcribe it herewith, omitting only the earlier passages, which were full of unimportant details and personal animadversions. The first entries were all dated, and Beverly had made an heroic attempt to measure and mark off the seasonless night of the void in terms of

earthly time. But after the disastrous landing on Phocea, he had abandoned this; and the actual length of time covered by his entries can only be conjectured.—

* * *

Sept. 10th. Mars is only a pale-red star through our rear ports; and according to my calculations we will soon approach the orbit of the nearest asteroids. Jupiter and its system of moons are seemingly as far off as ever, like beacons on the unattainable shore of immensity. More even that at first, I feel that dreadful suffocation illusion, which accompanies ether-travel, of being perfectly stationary in a static void.

Gershom, however, complains of a disturbance of equilibrium, with much vertigo and a frequent sense of falling, as if the vessel were sinking beneath him through bottomless space at a headlong speed. The causation of such symptoms is rather obscure, since the artificial gravity regulators are in good working order. Colt and I have not suffered from any similar disturbance. It seems to me that the sense of falling would be almost a relief from this illusion of nightmare immobility; but Gershom appears to be greatly distressed by it, and says that his hallucination is growing stronger, with fewer and briefer intervals of normalcy. He fears that it will become continuous.

* * *

Sept. 11th. Colt has made an estimate of our fuel and provisions and thinks that with careful husbandry we will be able to reach Europa. I have been checking up on his calculations, and find that he is altogether too sanguine. According to my estimate, the fuel will give out while we are still midway in the belt of the asteroids; though the food, water and compressed air would possibly take us most of the way to Europa.

This discovery I must conceal from the others. It is too late to turn back. I wonder if we have all been mad, to start out on this

errant voyage into cosmical immensity with no real preparation or thought of consequences. Colt, it would seem, has lost the power of mathematical calculation: his figures are full of the most egregious errors.

Gershom has been unable to sleep, and is not even fit to take his turn at the watch. The hallucination of falling obsesses him perpetually, and he cries out in terror, thinking that the vessel is about to crash on some dark, unknown planet to which it is being drawn by an irresistible gravitation. Eating, drinking and locomotion are very difficult for him, and he complains that he cannot even draw a full breath—that the air is snatched away from him in his precipitate descent. His condition is indeed painful and pitiable.

* * *

Sept. 12th. Gershom is worse—bromide of potassium and even a heavy dose of morphine from the *Selenite's* medicine lockers, have not relieved him or enabled him to sleep. He has the look of a drowning man and seems to be on the point of strangulation. It is hard for him to speak.

Colt has become very morose and sullen, and snarls at me when I address him. I think that Gershom's plight has preyed sorely upon his nerves—as it has on mine. But my burden is heavier than Colt's: for I know the inevitable doom of our insane and ill-starred expedition. Sometimes I wish it were all over. . . . The hells of the human mind are vaster than space, darker than the night between the worlds . . . and all three of us have spent several eternities in hell. Our attempt to flee has only plunged us into a black and shoreless limbo, through which we are fated to carry still our own private perdition.

I, too, like Gershom, have been unable to sleep. But, unlike him, I am tormented by the illusion of eternal immobility. In spite of the daily calculations that assure me of our progress through the gulf, I cannot convince myself that we have moved at all. It

seems to me that we hang suspended like Mohammed's coffin, remote from earth and equally remote from the stars, in an incommensurable vastness without bourn or direction. I cannot describe the awfulness of the feeling.

* * *

Sept. 13th. During my watch, Colt opened the medicine locker and managed to shoot himself full of morphine. When his turn came, he was in a stupor and I could do nothing to rouse him. Gershom had gotten steadily worse and seemed to be enduring a thousands deaths . . . so there was nothing for me to do but keep on with the watch as long as I could. I locked the controls, anyway, so that the vessel would continue its course without human guidance if I should fall asleep.

I don't know how long I kept awake—nor how long I slept. I was aroused by a queer hissing whose nature and cause I could not identify at first. I looked around and saw that Colt was in his hammock, still lying in a drug-induced sopor. Then I saw that Gershom was gone, and began to realize that the hissing came from the air-lock. The inner door of the lock was closed securely—but evidently someone had opened the outer manhole, and the sound was being made by the escaping air. It grew fainter and ceased as I listened.

I knew then what had happened—Gershom, unable to endure his strange hallucination any longer, had actually flung himself into space from the *Selenite!* Going to the rear ports, I saw his body, with a pale, slightly bloated face and open, bulging eyes. It was following us like a satellite, keeping an even distance of ten or twelve feet from the lee of the vessel's stern. I could have gone out in a space suit to retrieve the body; but I felt sure that Gershom was already dead, and the effort seemed more than useless. Since there was no leakage of air from the interior, I did not even try to close the manhole.

I hope and pray that Gershom is at peace. He will float forever in cosmic space—and in that further void where the torment of human consciousness can never follow.

* * *

Sept. 15th. We have kept our course somehow, though Colt is too demoralized and drug-sodden to be of much assistance. I pity him when the limited supply of morphine gives out.

Gershom's body is still following us, held by the slight power of the vessel's gravitational attraction. It seems to terrify Colt in his more lucid moments; and he complains that we are being haunted by the dead man. It's bad enough for me, too, and I wonder how much my nerves and mind will stand. Sometimes I think that I am beginning to develop the delusion that tortured Gershom and drove him to his death. An awful dizziness assails me, and I fear that I shall start to fall. But somehow I regain my equilibrium.

* * *

Sept. 16th. Colt used up all the morphine, and began to show signs of intense depression and uncontrollable nervousness. His fear of the satellite corpse appeared to grow upon him like an obsession; and I could do nothing to reassure him. His terror was deepened by an eerie, superstitious belief.

"I tell you, I hear Gershom calling us," he cried. "He wants company, out there in the black, frozen emptiness; and he won't leave the vessel till one of us goes out to join him. You've got to go, Beverly—it's either you or me—otherwise he'll follow the *Selenite* forever."

I tried to reason with him, but in vain. He turned upon me in a sudden shift of maniacal rage.

"Damn you, I'll throw you out, if you won't go any other way!" he shrieked.

Clawing and mouthing like a mad beast, he leaped toward me where I sat before the *Selenite's* control-board. I was almost over-

borne by his onset, for he fought with a wild and frantic strength . . . I don't like to write down all that happened, for the mere recollection makes me sick . . . Finally he got me by the throat, with a sharp-nailed clutch that I could not loosen and began to choke me to death. In self-defense, I had to shoot him with an automatic which I carried in my pocket. Reeling dizzily, gasping for breath, I found myself staring down at his prostrate body, from which a crimson puddle was widening on the floor.

Somehow, I managed to put on a space suit. Dragging Colt by the ankles, I got him to the inner door of the air-lock. When I opened the door, the escaping air hurled me toward the open manhole together with the corpse; and it was hard to regain my footing and avoid being carried through into space. Colt's body, turning traversely in its movement, was jammed across the manhole; and I had to thrust it out with my hands. Then I closed the lid after it. When I returned to the ship's interior, I saw it floating, pale and bloated, beside the corpse of Gershom.

* * *

Sept. 17th. I am alone—and yet most horribly I am pursued and companioned by the dead men. I have sought to concentrate my faculties on the hopeless problem of survival, on the exigencies of space navigation; but it is all useless. Ever I am aware of those stiff and swollen bodies, swimming in the awful silence of the void, with the white, airless sun like a leprosy of light on their upturned faces.

I try to keep my eyes on the control-board—on the astronomic charts—on the log I am writing—on the stars toward which I am travelling. But a frightful and irresistable magnetism makes me turn at intervals, and mechanically, helplessly, to the rearward ports. There are no words for what I feel and think—and words are as lost things along with the worlds I have left so far behind.

I sink in a chaos of vertiginous horror, beyond all possibility of return.

* * *

Sept. 18th. I am entering the zone of the asteroids—those desert rocks, fragmentary and amorphous, that whirl in far-scattered array between Mars and Jupiter. Today the *Selenite* passed very close to one of them—a small body like a broken-off mountain, which heaved suddenly from the gulf with knife-sharp pinnacles and black gullies that seemed to cleave to its very heart.

The *Selenite* would have crashed full upon it in a few instants, if I had not reversed the power and steered in an abrupt diagonal to the right. As it was, I passed near enough for the bodies of Colt and Gershom to be caught by the gravitational pull of the planetoid; and when I looked back at the receding rock, after the vessel was out of danger, they had disappeared from sight. Finally I located them with the telescopic reflector, and saw that they were revolving in space, like infinitesimal moons, about that awful, naked asteroid. Perhaps they will float thus forever, or will drift gradually down in lessening circles, to find a tomb in one of those bleak, bottomless ravines.

* * *

Sept. 19th. I have passed several more of the asteroids—irregular fragments, little larger than meteoric stones; and all my skill of spacemanship has been taxed severely to avert collision. Because of the need for unrelaxing vigilance, I have been compelled to keep awake at all times. But sooner or later, sleep will overpower me, and the *Selenite* will crash to destruction.

After all, it matters little: the end is inevitable, and must come soon enough in any case. The store of concentrated food, the tanks of compressed oxygen, might keep me alive for many months, since there is no one but myself to consume them. But

the fuel is almost gone, as I know from my former calculations. At any moment, the propulsion may cease. Then the vessel will drift idly and helplessly in this cosmic limbo, and be drawn to its doom on some asteroidal reef.

* * *

Sept. 21st. (?) Everything I have expected has happened, and yet by some miracle of chance—or mischance—I am still alive.

The fuel gave out yesterday (at least I think it was yesterday). But I was too close to the nadir of physical and mental exhaustion to realize clearly that the rocket-explosions had ceased. I was dead for want of sleep, and had gotten into a state beyond hope or despir. Dimly I remember setting the vessel's controls through automatic force of habit; and then I lashed myself in my hammock and fell asleep instantly.

I have no means of guessing how long I slept. Vaguely, in the gulf beyond dreams, I heard a crash as of far-off thunder, and felt a violent vibration that jarred me into dull wakefulness. A sensation of unnatural, sweltering heat began to oppress me as I struggled toward consciousness; but when I had opened my heavy eyes, I was unable to determine for some little time what had really happened.

Twisting my head so that I could peer out through one of the ports, I was startled to see, on a purple-black sky, an icy, glittering horizon of saw-edged rocks.

For an instant, I thought that the vessel was about to strike on some looming planetoid. Then, overwhelmingly, I realized that *the crash had already occurred*—that I had been awakened from my coma-like slumber by the falling of the *Selenite* upon one of those cosmic islets.

I was wide-awake now, and I hastened to unlash myself from the hammock. I found that the floor was pitched sharply, as if the vessel had landed on a slope or had buried its nose in the alien

terrain. Feeling a queer, disconcerting lightness, and barely able to re-establish my feet on the floor, I gradually made my way to the nearest port. It was plain that the artificial gravity-system of the flier had been thrown out of commission by the crash, and that I was now subject only to the feeble gravitation of the asteroid. It seemed to me that I was light and incorporeal as a cloud—that I was no more than the airy specter of my former self.

The floor and walls were strangely hot; and it came to me that the heating must have been caused by the passage of the *Selenite* through some sort of atmosphere. The asteroid, then, was not wholly airless, as such bodies are commonly supposed to be; and probably it was one of the larger fragments, with a diameter of many miles—perhaps hundreds. But even this realization failed to prepare me for the weird and surprising scene upon which I gazed through the port.

The horizon of serrate peaks, like a miniature mountain-range, lay at a distance of several hundred yards. Above it, the small, intensely brilliant sun, like a fiery moon in its magnitude, was sinking with visible rapidity in the dark sky that revealed the major stars and planets.

The *Selenite* had plunged into a shallow valley, and had half-buried its prow and bottom in a soil that was formed by decomposing rock, mainly basaltic. All about were fretted ridges, guttering pillars and pinnacles; and over these, amazingly, there clambered frail, pipy, leafless vines with broad, yellow-green tendrils flat and thin as paper. Insubstantial-looking lichens, taller than a man, and having the form of flat antlers, grew in single rows and thickets along the valley.

Between the thickets, I saw the approach of certain living creatures who rose from behind the middle rocks with the suddenness and lightness of leaping insects. They seemed to skim the ground with long, flying steps that were both easy and abrupt.

There were five of these beings, who, no doubt, had been attracted by the fall of the *Selenite* from space and were coming to inspect it. In a few moments, they neared the vessel and paused before it with the same effortless ease that had marked all their movements.

What they really were, I do not know; but for want of other analogies, I must liken them to insects. Standing perfectly erect, they towered seven feet in air. Their eyes, like faceted opals, at the end of curving protractile stalks, rose level with the port. Their unbelievably thin limbs, their stem-like bodies, comparable to those of the *phasmidae,* or "walking-sticks," were covered with grey-green shards. Their heads, triangular in shape, were flanked with immense, perforated membranes, and were fitted with mandibular mouths that seemed to grin eternally.

I think that they saw me with those weird, inexpressive eyes; for they drew nearer, pressing against the very port, till I could have touched them with my hand if the port had been open. Perhaps they too were surprised: for the thin eye-stalks seemed to lengthen as they stared and there was a queer waving of their sharded arms, a quivering of their horny mouths, as if they were holding converse with each other. After a while they went away, vanishing swiftly beyond the near horizon.

Since then, I have examined the *Selenite* as fully as possible, to ascertain the extent of the damage. I think that the outer hull has been crumpled or even fused in places: for when I approached the manhole, clad in a space suit, with the idea of emerging, I found that I could not open the lid. My exit from the flier has been rendered impossible, since I have no tools with which to cut the heavy metal or shatter the tough, neo-crystal ports. I am sealed in the *Selenite* as in a prison; and the prison, in due time, must also become my tomb.

Later. I shall no longer try to date this record. It is impossible, under the circumstances, to retain even an approximate sense of earthly time. The chronometers have ceased running, and their machinery has been hopelessly jarred by the vessel's fall. The diurnal periods of this planetoid are, it would seem, no more than an hour or two in duration; and the nights are equally short. Darkness swept upon the landscape like a black wing after I had finished writing my last entry; and since then, so many of these ephemeral days and nights have shuttled by, that I have now ceased to count them. My very sense of duration is becoming oddly confused. Now that I have grown somewhat used to my situation, the brief days drag with immeasurable tedium.

The beings whom I call the walking-sticks have returned to the vessel, coming daily, and bringing scores and hundreds of others. It would seem that they correspond in some measure to humanity, being the dominant life-form of this little world. In most ways, they are incomprehensibly alien; but certain of their actions bear a remote kinship to those of men, and suggest similar impulses and instincts.

Evidently they are curious. They crowd around the *Selenite* in great numbers, inspecting it with their stalk-borne eyes, touching the hull and ports with their attenuated members. I believe they are trying to establish some sort of communication with me. I cannot be sure that they emit vocal sounds, since the hull of the flier is soundproof; but I am sure that the stiff, semaphoric gestures which they repeat in a certain order before the port as soon as they catch sight of me, are fraught with conscious and definite meaning.

Also, I surmise an actual veneration in their attitude, such as would be accorded by savages to some mysterious visitant from the heavens. Each day, when they gather before the ship, they

bring curious spongy fruits and porous vegetable forms which they leave like a sacrificial offering on the ground. By their gestures, they seem to implore me to accept these offerings.

Oddly enough, the fruits and vegetables always disappear during the night. They are eaten by large, luminous, flying creatures with filmy wings, that seem to be wholly nocturnal in their habits. Doubtless, however, the walking-sticks believe that I, the strange ultra-stellar god, have accepted the sacrifice.

It is all strange, unreal, immaterial. The loss of normal gravity makes me feel like a phantom; and I seem to live in a phantom world. My thoughts, my memories, my despair—all are no more than mists that waver on the verge of oblivion. . . . And yet, by some fantastic irony, I am worshipped as a god! . . .

* * *

Innumerable days have gone by since I made the last entry in this log. The seasons of the asteroid have changed: the days have grown briefer, the nights longer; and a bleak wintriness pervades the valley. The frail, flat vines are withering on the rocks, and the tall lichen-thickets have assumed funereal autumn hues of madder and mauve. . . . The sun revolves in a low arc above the sawtoothed horizon, and its orb is small and pale as if it were receding into the black gulf among the stars.

The people of the asteroid appear less often, they seem fewer in number, and their sacrificial gifts are rare and scant. No longer do they bring sponge-like fruits, but only pale and porous fungi that seem to have been gathered in caverns.

They move slowly, as if the winter cold were beginning to numb them. Yesterday, three of them fell, after depositing their gifts, and lay still before the flier. They have not moved, and I feel sure that they are dead. The luminous night-flying creatures have ceased to come, and the sacrifices remain undisturbed beside their bearers.

* * *

The awfulness of my fate has closed upon me today. No more of the walking-sticks have appeared. I think that they have all died—the ephemerae of this tiny world that is bearing me with it into Arctic limbo of the solar system. Doubtless their lifetime corresponds only to its summer—to its perihelion.

Thin clouds have gathered in the dark air, and snow is falling like fine powder. I feel an unspeakable desolation—a dreariness that I cannot write. The heating-apparatus of the *Selenite* is still in good working-order; so the cold cannot reach me. But the black frost of space has fallen upon my spirit. Strange—I did not feel so utterly bereft and alone while the insect people came daily. Now that they come no more, I seem to have been overtaken by the ultimate horror of solitude, by the chill terror of an alienation beyond life. I can write no longer, for my brain and my heart fail me.

* * *

Still, it would seem, I live after an eternity of darkness and madness in the flier, of death and winter in the world outside. During that time, I have not written in the log; and I know not what obscure impulse prompts me to resume a practice so irrational and futile.

I think it is the sun, passing in a higher and longer arc above the dead landscape, that has called me back from the utterness of despair. The snow has melted from the rocks, forming little rills and pools of water; and strange plant-buds are protruding from the sandy soil. They lift and swell visibly as I watch them. I am beyond hope, beyond life, in a weird vacuum; but I see these things as a condemned captive sees the stirring of spring from his cell. They rouse in me an emotion whose very name I had forgotten.

My food-supply is getting low, and the reserve of compressed air is even lower. I am afraid to calculate how much longer it will last. I have tried to break the neo-crystal ports with a large

monkey-wrench for hammer; but the blows, owing partly to my own weightlessness, are futile as the tapping of a feather. Anyway, in all likelihood, the outside air would be too thin for human respiration.

The walking-stick people have reappeared before the flier. I feel sure, from their lesser height, their brighter coloring, and the immature development of certain members, that they all represent a new generation. None of my former visitors have survived the winter; but somehow the new ones seem to regard the *Selenite* and me with the same curiosity and reverence that were shown by their elders. They, too, have begun to bring gifts of unsubstantial-looking fruit; and they strew filmy blossoms below the port . . . I wonder how they propagate themselves, and how knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another. . . .

* * *

The flat, lichenous vines are mounting on the rocks, are clambering over the hull of the *Selenite*. The young walking-sticks gather daily to worship—they make those enigmatic signs which I have never understood, and they move in swift gyrations about the vessel, as in the measures of a hieratic dance. . . . I, the lost and doomed, have been the god of two generations. Perhaps they will still worship me when I am dead. I think the air is almost gone—I am more light-headed than usual today, and there is a queer constriction in my throat and chest. . . .

* * *

Perhaps I am a little delirious, and have begun to imagine things; but I have just perceived an odd phenomenon, hitherto unnoted. I don't know what it is. A thin, columnar mist, moving and writhing like a serpent, with opal colors that change momently, has appeared among the rocks and is approaching the vessel. It seems like a live thing—like a vaporous entity; and somehow,

it is poisonous and inimical. It glides forward, rearing above the throng of *phasmidae,* who have all prostrated themselves as if in fear. I see it more clearly now: it is half-transparent, with a web of grey threads among its changing colors; and it is putting forth a long, wavering tentacle.

It is some rare life-form, unknown to earthly science; and I cannot even surmise its nature and attributes. Perhaps it is the only one of its kind on the asteroid. No doubt it has just discovered the presence of the *Selenite,* and has been drawn by curiosity, like the walking-stick people.

The tentacle has touched the hull—it has reached the port behind which I stand, pencilling these words. The grey threads in the tentacle glow as if with sudden fire. My God—*it is coming through the neo-crystal lens....*

The Seed from the Sepulcher

"Yes, I found the place," said Falmer. "It's a queer sort of place, pretty much as the legends describe it." He spat quickly into the fire, as if the act of speech had been physically distasteful to him, and, half averting his face from the scrutiny of Thone, stared with morose and somber eyes into the jungle-matted Venezuelan darkness.

Thone, still weak and dizzy from the fever that had incapacitated him for continuing their journey to its end, was curiously puzzled. Falmer, he thought, had undergone an inexplicable change during the three days of his absence; a change that was too elusive in some of its phases to be fully defined or delimited.

Other phases, however, were all too obvious. Falmer, even during extreme hardship or illness, had heretofore been unquenchably loquacious and cheerful. Now he seemed sullen, uncommunicative, as if preoccupied with far-off things of disagreeable import. His bluff face had grown hollow—even pointed—and his eyes had narrowed to secretive slits. Thone was troubled by these changes, though he tried to dismiss his impressions as mere distempered fancies due to the influence of the ebbing fever.

"But can't you tell me what the place was like?" he persisted.

"There isn't much to tell," said Falmer, in a queer grumbling tone.

"Just a few crumbling walls and falling pillars."

"But didn't you find the burial-pit of the Indian legend, where the gold was suppose to be?"

"I found it . . . but there was no treasure," Falmer's voice had taken on a forbidding surliness; and Thone decided to refrain from further questioning.

"I guess," he commented lightly, "that we had better stick to orchid-hunting. Treasure trove doesn't seem to be in our line. By the way, did you see any unusual flowers or plants during the trip?"

"Hell, no," Falmer snapped. His face had gone suddenly ashen in the firelight, and his eyes had assumed a set glare that might have meant either fear or anger. "Shut up, can't you? I don't want to talk. I've had a headache all day; some damned Venezuelan fever coming on, I suppose. We'd better head for the Orinoco tomorrow. I've had all I want of this trip."

James Falmer and Roderick Thone, professional orchid hunters, with two Indian guides, had been following an obscure tributary of the upper Orinoco. The country was rich in rare flowers; and, beyond its floral wealth, they had been drawn by vague but persistent rumors among the local tribes concerning the existence of a ruined city somewhere on this tributary; a city that contained a burial pit in which vast treasures of gold, silver, and jewels had been interred together with the dead of some nameless people. The two men had thought it worth while to investigate these rumors. Thone had fallen sick while they were still a full day's journey from the site of the ruins, and Falmer had gone on in a canoe with one of the Indians, leaving the other to attend to Thone. He had returned at nightfall of the third day following his departure.

Thone decided after a while, as he lay staring at his companion, that the latter's taciturnity and moroseness were perhaps due to disappointment over his failure to find the treasure. It must have

been that, together with some tropical infection working in the man's blood. However, he admitted doubtfully to himself, it was not like Falmer to be disappointed or downcast under such circumstances.

Falmer did not speak again, but sat glaring before him as if he saw something invisible to others beyond the labyrinth of fire-touched boughs and lianas in which the whispering, stealthy darkness crouched. Somehow, there was a shadowy fear in his aspect. Thone continued to watch him, and saw that the Indians, impassive and cryptic, were also watching him, as if with some obscure expectancy. The riddle was too much for Thone, and he gave it up after a while, lapsing into restless, fever-turbulent slumber from which he awakened at intervals, to see the set face of Falmer, dimmer and more distorted each time with the slowly dying fire and the invading shadows.

Thone felt stronger in the morning: his brain was clear, his pulse tranquil once more; and he saw with mounting concern the indisposition of Falmer, who seemed to rouse and exert himself with great difficulty, speaking hardly a word and moving with singular stiffness and sluggishness. He appeared to have forgotten his announced project of returning toward the Orinoco, and Thone took entire charge of the preparations for departure. His companion's condition puzzled him more and more: apparently there was no fever and the symptoms were wholly ambiguous. However, on general principles, he administered a stiff dose of quinine to Falmer before they started.

The paling saffron of sultry dawn sifted upon them through the jungle tops as they loaded their belongings into the dugouts and pushed off down the slow current. Thone sat near the bow of one of the boats, with Falmer in the rear, and a large bundle of orchid roots and part of their equipment filling the middle. The

two Indians occupied the other boat, together with the rest of the supplies.

It was a monotonous journey. The river wound like a sluggish olive snake between dark, interminable walls of forest, from which the goblin faces of orchids leered. There were no sounds other than the splash of paddles, the furious chattering of monkeys, and petulant cries of fiery-colored birds. The sun rose above the jungle and poured down a tide of torrid brilliance.

Thone rowed steadily looking back over his shoulder at times to address Falmer with some casual remark or friendly question. The latter, with dazed eyes and features queerly pale and pinched in the sunlight, sat dully erect and made no effort to use his paddle. He offered no reply to the queries of Thone, but shook his head at intervals with a sort of shuddering motion that was plainly involuntary. After a while he began to moan thickly, as if in pain or delirium.

They went on in this manner for hours. The heat grew more oppressive between the stifling walls of jungle. Thone became aware of a shriller cadence in the moans of his companion. Looking back, he saw that Falmer had removed his sun-helmet, seemingly oblivious of the murderous heat, and was clawing at the crown of his head with frantic fingers. Convulsions shook his entire body, the dugout began to rock dangerously as he tossed to and fro in a paroxysm of manifest agony. His voice mounted to a high un-human shrieking.

Thone made a quick decision. There was a break in the lining palisade of somber forest, and he headed the boat for shore immediately. The Indians followed, whispering between themselves and eyeing the sick man with glances of apprehensive awe and terror that puzzled Thone tremendously. He felt that there was some devilish mystery about the whole affair; and he could not

imagine what was wrong with Falmer. All the known manifestations of malignant tropical diseases rose before him like a rout of hideous fantasms; but, among them, he could not recognize the thing that had assailed his companion.

Having gotten Falmer ashore on a semicircle of liana-latticed beach without the aid of the Indians, who seemed unwilling to approach the sick man, Thone administered a heavy hypodermic injection of morphine from his medicine chest. This appeared to ease Falmer's suffering, and the convulsions ceased. Thone, taking advantage of their remission, proceeded to examine the crown of Falmer's head.

He was startled to find, amid the thick disheveled hair, a hard and pointed lump which resembled the tip of a beginning horn, rising under the still unbroken skin. As if endowed with erectile and resistless life, it seemed to grow beneath his fingers.

At the same time, abruptly and mysteriously, Falmer opened his eyes and appeared to regain full consciousness. For a few minutes he was more his normal self than at any time since his return from the ruins. He began to talk, as if anxious to relieve his mind of some oppressing burden. His voice was peculiarly thick and toneless, but Thone was able to follow his mutterings and piece them together.

"The pit! the pit!" said Falmer—"the infernal thing that was in the pit, in the deep sepulcher! . . . I wouldn't go back there for the treasure of a dozen El Dorados . . . I didn't tell you much about those ruins, Thone. Somehow it was hard—impossibly hard-to-talk."

"I guess the Indian knew there was something wrong with the ruins. He led me to the place . . . but he wouldn't tell me anything about it: and he waited by the riverside while I searched for the treasure.

"Great gray walls there were, older than the jungle—old as death and time. They must have been quarried and reared by peo-

ple from some lost planet. They loomed and leaned, at mad, unnatural angles, threatening to crush the trees about them. And there were columns too: thick, swollen columns of unholy form, whose abominable carvings the jungle had not wholly screened from view.

"There was no trouble finding that accursed burial pit. The pavement above had broken through quite recently, I think. A big tree had pried with its boa-like roots between the flagstones that were buried beneath centuries of mold. One of the flags had been tilted back on the pavement, and another had fallen through into the pit. There was a large hole, whose bottom I could see dimly in the forest-strangled light. Something glimmered palely at the bottom; but I could not be sure what it was.

"I had taken along a coil of rope, as you remember. I tied one end of it to a main root of the tree, dropped the other through the opening, and went down like a monkey. When I got to the bottom I could see little at first in the gloom, except the whitish glimmering all around me, at my feet. Something that was unspeakably brittle and friable crunched beneath me when I began to move. I turned on my flashlight, and saw that the place was fairly littered with bones. Human skeletons lay tumbled everywhere. They must have been removed long ago. I groped around amid the bones and dust, feeling pretty much like a ghoul, but couldn't find anything of value, not even a bracelet or a finger ring on any of the skeletons.

"It wasn't until I thought of climbing out that I noticed the real horror. In one of the corners—the corner nearest to the opening in the roof—I looked up and saw it in the webby shadows. Ten feet above my head it hung, and I had almost touched it, unknowing, when I descended the rope.

"It looked like a sort of white lattice work at first. Then I saw that the lattice was partly formed of human bones—a complete

skeleton very tall and stalwart, like that of a warrior. A pale, withered thing grew out of the skull, like a set of fantastic antlers ending in myriads of long and stringy tendrils that had spread upward till they reached the roof. They must have lifted the skeleton, or body, along with them as they climbed.

"I examined the thing with my flashlight. It must have been a plant of some sort, and apparently it had started to grow in the cranium. Some of the branches had issued from the cloven crown, others through the eye holes, the mouth, and the nose holes, to flare upward. And the roots of the blasphemous thing had gone downward, trellising themselves on every bone. The very toes and fingers were ringed with them, and they drooped in writhing coils. Worst of all, the ones that had issued from the toe ends *were rooted in a second skull,* which dangled just below, with fragments of the broken-off root system. There was a litter of fallen bones on the floor in the corner. . . .

"The sight made me feel a little weak, somehow, and more than a little nauseated—that abhorrent, inexplicable mingling of the human and the plant. I started to climb the rope, in a feverish hurry to get out, but the thing fascinated me in its abominable fashion, and I couldn't help pausing to study it a little more when I had climbed half way. I leaned toward it too fast, I guess, and the rope began to sway, bringing my face lightly against the leprous, antler-shaped boughs above the skull.

"Something broke—possibly a sort of pod on one of the branches. I found my head enveloped in a cloud of pearl-gray powder, very light, fine, and scentless. The stuff settled on my hair, it got into my nose and eyes, nearly choking and blinding me. I shook it off as well as I could. Then I climbed on and pulled myself through the opening. . . ."

As if the effort of coherent narration had been too heavy a strain, Falmer lapsed into disconnected mumblings. The mysteri-

ous malady, whatever it was, returned upon him, and his delirious ramblings were mixed with groans of torture. But at moments he regained a flash of coherence.

"My head! my head!" he muttered. "There must be something in my brain, something that grows and spreads; I tell you, I can feel it there. I haven't felt right at any time since I left the burial pit. . . . My mind has been queer ever since. . . . It must have been the spores of the ancient devil-plant. . . . The spores have taken root . . . the thing is splitting my skull, going down into my brain—a plant that springs out of a human cranium—as if from a flower pot!"

The dreadful convulsions began once more, and Falmer writhed uncontrollably in his companion's arms, shrieking with agony. Thone, sick at heart, and shocked by his sufferings, abandoned all effort to restrain him and took up the hypodermic. With much difficulty, he managed to inject a triple dose, and Falmer grew quiet by degrees, and lay with open glassy eyes, breathing stertorously. Thone, for the first time, perceived an odd protrusion of his eyeballs, which seemed about to start from their sockets, making it impossible for the lids to close, and lending the drawn features an expression of mad horror. It was as if something were pushing Falmer's eyes from his head.

Thone, trembling with sudden weakness and terror, felt that he was involved in some unnatural web of nightmare. He could not, dared not, believe the story Falmer had told him, and its implications. Assuring himself that his companion had imagined it all, had been ill throughout with the incubation of some strange fever, he stooped over and found that the horn-shaped lump on Falmer's head had now broken through the skin.

With a sense of unreality, he stared at the object that his prying fingers had revealed amid the matted hair. It was unmistakably a plant-bud of some sort, with involuted folds of pale green

and bloody pink that seemed about to expand. The thing issued from above the central suture of the skull.

A nausea swept upon Thone, and he recoiled from the lolling head and its baleful outgrowth, averting his gaze. His fever was returning, there was a woeful debility in all his limbs, and he heard the muttering voice of delirium through the quinine-induced ringing in his ears. His eyes blurred with a deathly and miasmal mist.

He fought to subdue his illness and impotence. He must not give way to it wholly; he must go on with Falmer and the Indians and reach the nearest trading station, many days away on the Orinoco, where Falmer could receive aid.

As if through sheer volition, his eyes cleared, and he felt a resurgence of strength. He looked around for the guides, and saw, with a start of uncomprehending surprise, that they had vanished. Peering further, he observed that one of the boats—the dugout used by the Indians—had also disappeared. It was plain that he and Falmer had been deserted. Perhaps the Indians had known what was wrong with the sick man, and had been afraid. At any rate, they were gone, and they had taken much of the camp equipment and most of the provisions with them.

Thone turned once more to the supine body of Falmer, conquering his repugnance, with effort. Resolutely he drew out his clasp knife, and, stooping over the stricken man, he excised the protruding bud, cutting as close to the scalp as he could with safety. The thing was unnaturally tough and rubbery; it exuded a thin, sanguinous fluid; and he shuddered when he saw its internal structure, full of nerve-like filaments, with a core that suggested cartilage. He flung it aside, quickly, on the river sand. Then, lifting Falmer in his arms, he lurched and staggered towards the remaining boat. He fell more than once, and lay half swooning across the inert body. Alternately carrying and dragging his burden, he reached

the boat at last. With the remainder of his failing strength, he contrived to prop Falmer in the stern against the pile of equipment.

His fever was mounting apace. After much delay, with tedious, half-delirious exertions, he pushed off from the shore, till the fever mastered him wholly and the oar slipped from oblivious fingers. . . .

He awoke in the yellow glare of dawn, with his brain and his senses comparatively clear. His illness had left a great languor, but his first thought was of Falmer. He twisted about, nearly falling overboard in his debility, and sat facing his companion.

Falmer still reclined, half sitting, half lying, against the pile of blankets and other impedimenta. His knees were drawn up, his hands clasping them as if in tetanic rigor. His features had grown as stark and ghastly as those of a dead man, and his whole aspect was one of mortal rigidity. It was this, however, that caused Thone to gasp with unbelieving horror.

During the interim of Thone's delirium and his lapse into slumber, the monstrous plant bud, merely stimulated, it would seem, by the act of excision, had grown again with preternatural rapidity, from Falmer's head. A loathsome pale-green stem was mounting thickly, and had started to branch like antlers after attaining a height of six or seven inches.

More dreadful than this, if possible, similar growths had issued from the eyes, and their stems, climbing vertically across the forehead, had entirely displaced the eyeballs. Already they were branching like the thing from the crown. The antlers were all tipped with pale vermilion. They appeared to quiver with repulsive animations, nodding rhythmically in the warm, windless air . . . From the mouth, another stem protruded, curling upward like a long and whitish tongue. It had not yet begun to bifurcate.

Thone closed his eyes to shut away the shocking vision. Behind his lids, in a yellow dazzle of light, he still saw the cadaverous

features, the climbing stems that quivered against the dawn like ghastly hydras of tomb-etiolated green. They seemed to be waving toward him, growing and lengthening as they waved. He opened his eyes again, and fancied, with a start of new terror, that the antlers were actually taller than they had been a few moments previous.

After that, he sat watching them in a sort of baleful hypnosis. The illusion of the plant's visible growth and freer movement—if it were illusion—increased upon him. Falmer, however, did not stir, and his parchment face appeared to shrivel and fall in, as if the roots of the growth were draining his blood, were devouring his very flesh in their insatiable and ghoulish hunger.

Thone wrenched his eyes away and stared at the river shore. The stream had widened and the current had grown more sluggish. He sought to recognise their location, looking vainly for some familiar landmark in the monotonous dull-green cliffs of jungle that lined the margin. He felt hopelessly lost and alienated. He seemed to be drifting on an unknown tide of madness and nightmare, accompanied by something more frightful than corruption itself.

His mind began to wander with an odd inconsequence, coming back always, in a sort of closed circle, to the thing that was devouring Falmer. With a flash of scientific curiosity, he found himself wondering to what genus it belonged. It was neither fungus nor pitcher plant, nor anything that he had ever encountered or heard of in his explorations. It must have come, as Falmer had suggested, from an alien world: it was nothing that the earth could conceivably have nourished.

He felt, with a comforting assurance, that Falmer was dead. That at least, was a mercy. But, even as he shaped the thought, he heard a low, gutteral moaning, and, peering at Falmer in a horrible startlement, saw that his limbs and body were twitching

slightly. The twitching increased, and took on a rhythmic regularity, though at no time did it resemble the agonized and violent convulsions of the previous day. It was plainly automatic, like a sort of galvanism; and Thone saw that it was timed with the languorous and loathsome swaying of the plant. The effect on the watcher was insidiously mesmeric and somnolent; and once he caught himself beating the detestable rhythm with his foot.

He tried to pull himself together, groping desperately for something to which his sanity could cling. Ineluctably, his illness returned: fever, nausea, and revulsion worse than the loathliness of death. But, before he yielded to it utterly, he drew his loaded revolver from the holster and fired six times into Falmer's quivering body . . . He knew that he had not missed, but, after the final bullet, Falmer still moaned and twitched in unison with the evil swaying of the plant, and Thone, sliding into delirium, heard still the ceaseless, automatic moaning.

There was no time in the world of seething unreality and shoreless oblivion through which he drifted. When he came to himself again, he could not know if hours or weeks had elapsed. But he knew at once that the boat was no longer moving; and lifting himself dizzily, he saw that it had floated into shallow water and mud and was nosing the beach of a tiny, jungle-tufted isle in midriver. The putrid odor of slime was about him like a stagnant pool; and he heard a strident humming of insects.

It was either late morning or early afternoon, for the sun was high in the still heavens. Lianas were drooping above him from the island trees like uncoiled serpents, and epiphytic orchids, marked with ophidian mottlings, leaned toward him grotesquely from lowering boughs. Immense butterflies went past on sumptuously spotted wings.

He sat up, feeling very giddy and lightheaded, and faced again the horror that accompanied him. The thing had grown incredi-

bly: the three-antlered stems, mounting above Falmer's head, had become gigantic and had put out masses of ropy feelers that tossed uneasily in the air, as if searching for support—or new provender. In the topmost antlers, a prodigious blossom had opened—a sort of fleshy disk, broad as a man's face and white as leprosy.

Falmer's features had shrunken till the outlines of every bone were visible as if beneath tightened paper. He was a mere death's head in a mask of human skin; and beneath his clothing the body was little more than a skeleton. He was quite still now, except for the communicated quivering of the stems. The atrocious plant had sucked him dry, had eaten his vitals and his flesh.

Thone wanted to hurl himself forward in a mad impulse to grapple with the growth. But a strange paralysis held him back. The plant was like a living and sentient thing—a thing that watched him, that dominated him with its unclean but superior will. And the huge blossom, as he stared, took on the dim, unnatural semblance of a face. It was somehow like the face of Falmer but the lineaments were twisted all awry, and were mingled with those of something wholly devilish and nonhuman. Thone could not move—he could not take his eyes from the blasphemous abnormality.

By some miracle, his fever had left him; and it did not return. Instead, there came an eternity of frozen fright and madness, in which he sat facing the mesmeric plant. It towered before him from the dry, dead shell that had been Falmer, its swollen, glutted stems and branches swaying gently, its huge flower leering perpetually upon him with its impious travesty of a human face. He thought that he heard a low, singing sound, ineffably sweet, but whether it emanated from the plant or was a mere hallucination of his overwrought senses, he could not know.

The sluggish hours went by, and a gruelling sun poured down its beams like molten lead from some titanic vessel of torture. His

head swam with weakness and the fetor-laden heat, but he could not relax the rigor of his posture. There was no change in the nodding monstrosity, which seemed to have attained its full growth above the head of its victim. But after a long interim Thone's eyes were drawn to the shrunken hands of Falmer, which still clasped the drawn-up knees in a spasmodic clutch. Through the ends of the finger, tiny white rootlets had broken and were writhing slowly in the air—groping, it seemed, for a new source of nourishment. Then, from the neck and chin, other tips were breaking, and over the whole body the clothing stirred in a curious manner, as if with the crawling and lifting of hidden lizards.

At the same time the singing grew louder, sweeter, more imperious, and the swaying of the great plant assumed an indescribably seductive tempo. It was like the allurement of voluptuous sirens, the deadly languor of dancing cobras. Thone felt an irresistible compulsion: a summons was being laid upon him, and his drugged mind and body must obey it. The very fingers of Falmer, twisting viperishly, seemed beckoning to him. Suddenly he was on his hands and knees in the bottom of the boat.

Inch by inch, with terror and fascination contending his brain, he crept forward, dragging himself over the disregarded bundle of orchid-plants—inch by inch, foot by foot, till his head was against the withered hands of Falmer, from which hung and floated the questing roots.

Some cataleptic spell had made him helpless. He felt the rootlets as they moved like delving fingers through his hair and over his face and neck, and started to strike in with agonizing, needle-sharp tips. He could not stir, he could not even close his lids. In a frozen stare, he saw the gold and carmine flash of a hovering butterfly as the roots began to pierce his pupils.

Deeper and deeper went the greedy roots, while new filaments grew out to enmesh him like a witch's net. . . . For a while, it

seemed that the dead and the living writhed together in leashed convulsions . . . At last Thone hung supine amid the lethal, ever-growing web; bloated and colossal, the plant lived on; and in its upper branches, through the still, stifling afternoon, a second flower began to unfold.

The Root of Ampoi

A circus had arrived in Auburn. The siding at the station was crowded with long lines of cars from which issued a medley of exotic howls, growls, snarls and trumpetings. Elephants and zebras and dromedaries were led along the main streets; and many of the freaks and performers wandered about the town.

Two bearded ladies passed with the graceful air and walk of women of fashion. Then came a whole troupe of midgets, trudging along with the look of mournful, sophisticated children. And then I saw the giant, who was slightly more than eight feet tall and magnificently built, with no sign of the disproportion which often attends giantism. He was merely a fine physical specimen of the ordinary man, somewhat more than life-size. And even at first glance, there was something about his features and his gait which suggested a seaman.

I am a doctor; and the man provoked my medical curiosity. His abnormal bulk and height, without trace of acromegaly, was something I had never happened to meet before.

He must have felt my interest, for he returned my gaze with a speculative eye; and then, lurching in sailor-like fashion, he came over to me.

"I say, sir, could a chap buy a drink in this 'ere town?" He queried cautiously.

I made a quick decision.

"Come with me," I replied. "I'm an allopath; and I can tell without asking that you're a sick man."

We were only a block from my office. I steered the giant up the stairs and into my private sanctum. He almost filled the place, even when he sat down at my urging. I brought out a bottle of rye and poured a liberal glassful for him. He downed it with manifest appreciation. He had worn an air of mild depression when I first met him; now he began to brighten.

"You wouldn't think, to look at me, that I wasn't always a bloomin' giant," he soliloquized.

"Have another drink," I suggested.

After the second glass, he resumed a little mournfully: "No, sir, Jim Knox wasn't always a damn circus freak."

Then, with little urging on my part, he told me his story.

Knox, an adventurous Cockney, had followed half the seas of the world as a common sailor and boatswain in his younger years. He had visited many strange places, had known many bizarre experiences. Before he had reached the age of thirty, his restless and daring disposition led him to undertake an incredibly fantastic quest.

The events preceding this quest were somewhat unusual in themselves. Ship-wrecked by a wild typhoon in the Banda Sea, and apparently the one survivor, Knox had drifted for two days on a hatch torn from the battered and sinking vessel. Then, rescued by a native-fishing-proa, he had been carried to Salawatti.

The Rajah of Salawatti, an old and monkey-like Malay, was very nice to Knox. The Rajah was a teller of voluminous tales; and the boatswain was a patient listener. On this basis of congeniality, Knox became an honored guest for a month or more in the Rajah's palace. Here, among other wonders retailed by his host, he heard for the first time the rumor of a most remarkable Papuan tribe.

This unique tribe dwelt on a well-nigh inaccessible plateau of the Arfak Mountains. The women were nine feet tall and white as milk; but the men, strangely, were of normal stature and darker hue. They were friendly to the rare travelers who reached their domains; and they would trade for glass beads and mirrors the pigeon's blood rubies in which their mountain-slopes abounded. As proof of the latter statement, the Rajah showed Knox a large, flawless, uncut ruby, which he claimed had come from this region.

Knox was hardly inclined to credit the item about the giant women; but the rubies sounded far less improbable. It was characteristic of him that, with little thought of danger, difficulty, or the sheer absurdity of such a venture, he made up his mind at once to visit the Arfak Mountains.

Bidding farewell to his host, who mourned the loss of a good listener, he continued his odyssey. By means that he failed to specify in history, Knox procured two sackfuls of mirrors and glass beads, and managed to reach the coast of northwestern New Guinea. At Andai, in Arrak, he hired a guide who purported to know the whereabouts of the giant Amazons, and struck boldly inland toward the mountains.

The guide, who was half Malay and half Papuan, bore one of the sacks of baubles on his shoulders; and Knox carried the other. He fondly hoped to return with the two sacks full of smouldering dark-red rubies.

It was a little known land. Some of the peoples were reputed to be head-hunters and cannibals; but Knox found them friendly enough. But somehow, as they went on, the guide began to exhibit a growing haziness in his geography. When they reached the middle slopes of the Arfak range, Knox realized that the guide knew little more than he himself regarding the location of the fabulous ruby-strewn plateau.

They went on through the steepening forest. Before them

above trees that were still tall and semi-tropical, arose the granite scarps and crags of a high mountain-wall, behind which the afternoon sun had disappeared. In the early twilight, they camped at the foot of a seemingly insuperable cliff.

Knox awoke in a blazing yellow dawn, to discover that his guide had departed, taking one of the sacks of trinkets—which, from a savage viewpoint, would constitute enough capital to set the fellow up in business for life. Knox shrugged his shoulders and swore a little. The guide wasn't much of a loss; but he didn't like having his jewel-purchasing power diminished by half.

He looked at the cliffs above. Tier on tier they towered in the glow of dawn, with tops scarce distinguishable from the clouds about them. Somehow, the more he looked the surer he became that they were the cliffs which guarded the hidden plateau. With their silence and inaccessible solitude, their air of eternal reserve and remoteness, they couldn't be anything else but the ramparts of a realm of titan women and pigeon's blood rubies.

He shouldered his pack and followed the granite wall in search of a likely starting-place for the climb he had determined to attempt. The upright rock was smooth as a metal sheet, and didn't offer a toehold for a spider monkey. But at last he came to a deep chasm which formed the bed of a summer-dried cataract. He began to ascend the chasm, which was no mean feat in itself, for the stream-bed was a series of high shelves, like a giant stairway.

Half the time he dangled by his fingers without a toehold, or stretched on tiptoe and felt precariously for a finger-grip. The climb was a ticklish business, with death on the pointed rocks below as the penalty of the least miscalculation.

He dared not look back on the way he had climbed in that giddy chasm. Toward noon, he saw above him the menacing overhang of a huge crag, where the straitening gully ceased in a black-mouthed cavern.

He scrambled up the final shelf into the cave, hoping that it led, as was likely, to an upper entrance made by the mountain torrent. By the light of struck matches, he scaled a slippery incline. The cave soon narrowed; and Knox could often brace himself between the walls, as if in a chimney's interior.

After long upward groping, he discerned a tiny glimmering ahead, like a pin-prick in the solid gloom. Knox, nearly worn out with his efforts, was immensely heartened. But again the cave narrowed, till he could squeeze no farther with the pack on his back. He slid back a little distance and removed the sack, which he then proceeded to push before him up a declivity of forty-five degrees. In those days, Knox was of average height and somewhat slender; but even so, he could barely wriggle through the last ten feet of the cavern.

He gave the sack a final heave and landed it on the surface without. Then he squirmed through the opening and fell exhausted in the sunlight. He lay almost at the fountain-head of the dried stream, in a saucer-like hollow at the foot of a gentle slope of granite beyond whose bare ridge the clouds were white and near.

Knox congratulated himself on his gift as an alpine climber. He felt no doubt whatever that he had reached the threshold of the hidden realm of rubies and giant women.

Suddenly, as he lay there, several men appeared against the clouds, on the ridge above. Striding like mountaineers, they came toward him with excited jabberings and gestures of amazement; and he rose and stood awaiting them.

Knox must have been a singular spectacle. His clothing and face were bestreaked with dirt and with the stains of parti-colored ores acquired in his passage through the cavern. The approaching men seemed to regard him with a sort of awe.

They were dressed in short reddish-purple tunics, and wore

leather sandals. They did not belong to any of the lowland types: their skin was a light sienna, and their features were good even according to European standards. All were armed with long javelins but seemed friendly. Wide-eyed, and apparently somewhat timorous, they addressed Knox in a language which bore no likeness to any Melanesian tongue he had ever heard.

He replied in all the languages of which he had the least smattering: but plainly they could not understand him. Then he untied his sack, took out a double handful of beads, and tried to convey by pantomine the information that he was a trader from remote lands.

The men nodded their heads. Beckoning him to follow them, they returned toward the cloud-rimmed ridge. Knox trudged along behind them, feeling quite sure that he had found the people of the Rajah's tale.

Topping the ridge, he saw the perspectives of a long plateau, full of woods, streams and cultivated fields. In the mild and slanting sunlight, he and his guides descended a path among flowering willow-herbs and rhododendrons to the plateau. There it soon became a well-trodden road, running through forests of dammar and fields of wheat. Houses of rough-hewn stone with thatched roofs, evincing a higher civilization than the huts of the Papuan seaboard, began to appear at intervals.

Men, garbed in the same style as Knox's guides, were working in the fields. Then Knox perceived several women, standing together in an idle group. Now he was compelled to believe the whole story about the hidden people, for these women were eight feet or more in height and had the proportions of shapely godesses! Their complexion was not of a milky fairness, as in the Rajah's tale, but was tawny and cream-like and many shades lighter than that of the men. Knox felt a jubilant excitement as they turned their calm gaze upon him and watched him with the air of

majestic statues. He had found the legendary realm; and he peered among the pebbles and grasses of the wayside, half expecting to see them intersown with rubies. None was in evidence, however.

A town appeared, circling a sapphire lake with one-storied but well built houses laid out in regular streets. Many people were strolling or standing about; and all the women were tawny giantesses, and all the men were of average stature, with umber or sienna complexions.

A crowd gathered about Knox; and his guides were questioned in a quite peremptory manner by some of the titan females, who eyed the boatswain with embarrassing intentions. He divined at once the respect and obeisance paid these women by the men, and inferred the superior position which they held. They all wore the tranquil and assured look of empresses.

Knox was led to a building near the lake. It was larger and more pretentious than the others. The roomy interior was arrased with roughly pictured fabrics and furnished with chairs and couches of ebony. The general effect was rudely sybaritic and palatial, and much enhanced by the unusual height of the ceilings.

In a sort of audience-room, a woman sat enthroned on a broad dias. Several others stood about her like a bodyguard. She wore no crown, no jewels, and her dress differed in no wise from the short kilts of the other women. But Knox knew that he had entered the presence of a queen. The woman was fairer than the rest, with long rippling chestnut hair and fine oval features. The gaze that she turned upon Knox was filled with a feminine mingling of mildness and severity.

The boatswain assumed his most gallant manner, which must have been a little nullified by his dirt-smeared face and apparel. He bowed before the giantess; and she addressed him with a few soft words in which he sensed a courteous welcome. Then he

opened his pack and selected a mirror and a string of blue beads, which he offered to the queen. She accepted the gifts gravely, showing neither pleasure nor surprise.

After dismissing the men who had brought Knox to her presence, the queen turned and spoke to her female attendants. They came forward and gave Knox to understand that he must accompany them. They led him to an open court, containing a huge bath fed by the waters of the blue lake. Here, in spite of his protests and strugglings, they undressed him as if he had been a little boy. Then they plunged him into the water and scrubbed him thoroughly with scrapers of stiff vegetable fiber. One of them brought him a brown tunic and a pair of sandals in lieu of his former raiment.

Though somewhat discomforted and abashed by his summary treatment, Knox couldn't help feeling like a different man after his renovation. And when the women brought in a meal of taro and millet-cake and roast pigeon, piled on enormous platters, he began to forgive them for his embarrassment.

Two of his fair attendants remained with him during the meal; and afterwards they gave him a lesson in their language by pointing at various objects and naming them. Knox soon acquired a knowledge of much domestic nomenclature.

The queen herself appeared later and proceeded to take a hand in his instruction. Her name, he learned, was Mabousa. Knox was an apt pupil; and the day's lesson was plainly satisfactory to all concerned. Knox realized more clearly than before that the queen was a beautiful woman; but he wished that she was not quite so large and imposing. He felt so juvenile beside her. The queen, on her part, seemed to regard Knox with a far from unfavorable gravity. He saw that she was giving him a good deal of thought and consideration.

Knox almost forgot the rubies of which he had come in search;

and when he remembered them, he decided to wait till he had learned more of the language before broaching the subject.

A room in the palace was assigned to him; and he inferred that he could remain indefinitely as Mabousa's guest. He ate at the same table with the queen and half-dozen attendants. It seemed that he was the only man in the establishment. The chairs were all designed for giantesses, with one exception, which resembled the high chair in which a child sits at table amongs its elders. Knox occupied this chair.

Many days went by; and he learned enough of the language for all practical purposes. It was a tranquil but far from unpleasant life. He soon grew familiar with the general conditions of life in the country ruled by Mabousa, which was called Ondoar. It was quite isolated from the world without, for the mountain walls around it could be scaled only at the point which Knox had so fortuitously discovered. Few strangers had ever obtained entrance. The people were prosperous and contented, leading a pastoral existence under the benign but absolute matriarchy of Mabousa. The women governed their husbands by sheer virtue of physical superiority; but there seemed to be fully as much domestic amity as in the households of countries where a reverse dominion prevails.

Knox wondered greatly about the superior stature of the women, which struck him as being a strange provision of nature. Somehow he did not venture to ask any questions; and no one volunteered to tell him the secret.

He kept an eye open for rubies, and was puzzled by the paucity of these gems. A few inferior rubies, as well as small sapphires and emeralds, were worn by some of the men as ear-ring pendants, though none of the women was addicted to such ornaments. Knox wondered if they didn't have a lot of rubies stored away somewhere. He had come there to trade for red corundum and had car-

ried a whole sack-load of the requisite medium of barter up an impossible mountainside; so he was loath to relinquish the idea.

One day he resolved to open the subject with Mabousa. For some reason, he never quite knew why, it was hard to speak of such matters to the dignified and lovely giantess. But business was business.

He was groping for suitable words, when he suddenly noticed that Mabousa too had something on her mind. She had grown uncommonly silent and the way she kept looking at him was disconcerting and even embarrassing. He wondered what was the matter; also, he began to wonder if these people were cannibalistic. Her gaze was so eager and avid.

Before he could speak of the rubies and his willingness to buy them with glass beads, Mabousa startled him by coming out with a flatly phrased proposal of marriage. To say the least, Knox was unprepared. But it seemed uncivil, as well as unpolitic, to refuse. He had never been proposed to before by a queen or a giantess, and he thought it would be hardly the proper etiquette to decline a heart and hand of such capacity. Also, as Mabousa's husband, he would be in a most advantageous position to negotiate for rubies. And Mabousa was undeniably attractive, even though she was built on a grand scale. After a little hemming and hawing, he accepted her proposal, and was literally swept off his feet as the lady gathered him to the gargantuan charms of her bosom.

The wedding proved to be a very simple affair: a mere matter of verbal agreement in the presence of several female witnesses. Knox was amazed by the ease and rapidity with which he assumed the bonds of holy matrimony.

He learned a lot of things from his marriage with Mabousa. He found at the wedding-supper that the high chair he had been occupying at the royal table was usually reserved for the queen's consort. Later, he learned the secret of the women's size and sta-

ture. All the children, boys and girls, were of ordinary size at birth; but the girls were fed by their mothers on a certain root which caused them to increase in height and bulk beyond the natural limits.

The root was gathered on the highest mountain slopes. Its peculiar virtue was mainly due to a mode of preparation whose secret had been carefully guarded by the women and handed down from mother to daughter. Its use had been known for several generations. At one time the men had been the ruling sex; but an accidental discovery of the root by a down-trodden wife named Ampoi had soon led to a reversal of this domination. In consequence the memory of Ampoi was highly venerated by the females, as that of a savioress.

Knox also acquired much other information, on matters both social and domestic. But nothing was ever said about rubies. He was forced to decide that the plenitude of these jewels in Ondoar must have been sheer fable; a purely decorative addition to the story of the giant Amazons.

His marriage led to other disillusionments. As the queen's consort, he had expected to have a share in the government of Ondoar, and had looked forward to a few kingly prerogatives. But he soon found that he was merely a male adjunct of Mabousa, with no legal rights, no privileges other than those which she, out of wifely affection, might choose to accord him. She was kind and loving, but also strong-minded, not to say bossy; and he learned that he couldn't do anything or go anywhere without first consulting her and obtaining permission.

She would sometimes reprimand him, would often set him right on some point of Ondoarian etiquette, or the general conduct of life, in a sweet but strict manner; and it never occurred to her that he might even wish to dispute any of her mandates. He, however, was irked more and more by this feminine tyranny. His male

pride, his manly British spirit, revolted. If the lady had been of suitable size he would, in his own phrase, "have knocked her about a little." But, under the circumstances, any attempt to chasten her by main strength hardly seemed advisable.

Along with all this, he grew quite fond of her in his fashion. There were many things that endeared her to him; and he felt that she would be an exemplary wife, if there were only some way of curbing her deplorable tendency to domineer.

Time went on, as it has a habit of doing. Mabousa seemed to be well enough satisfied with her spouse. But Knox brooded a good deal over the false position in which he felt that she had placed him, and the daily injury to his manhood. He wished that there were some way of correcting matters, and of asserting his natural rights and putting Mabousa in her place.

One day he remembered the root on which the women of Ondoar were fed. Why couldn't he get hold of some of it and grow big himself like Mabousa, or bigger? Then he would be able to handle her in the proper style. The more he thought about it, the more this appealed to him as the ideal solution of his marital difficulties.

The main problem, however, was to obtain the root. He questioned some of the other men in a discreet way, but none of them could tell him anything about it. The women never permitted the men to accompany them when they gathered the stuff; and the process of preparing it for consumption was carried on in deep caverns. Several men had dared to steal the food in past years; two of them, indeed, had grown to giant stature in what they had stolen. But all had been punished by the women with life-long exile from Ondoar.

All this was rather discouraging. Also, it served to increase Knox's contempt for the men of Ondoar, whom he looked upon

as a spineless, effeminate lot. However, he didn't give up his plan. But, after much deliberation and scheming, he found himself no nearer to a solution of the problem than before.

Perhaps he would have resigned himself, as better men have done, to an inevitable life-long henpecking. But at last, in the birth of a female baby to Mabousa and himself, he found the opportunity he had been seeking.

The child was like any other girl infant, and Knox was no less proud of it, no less imbued with the customary parental sentiments, than other fathers have been. It did not occur to him, till the baby was old enough to be weaned and fed on the special food, that he would now have in his own home a first-rate chance to appropriate some of this food for his personal use.

The simple and artless Mabousa was wholly without suspicion of such unlawful designs. Male obedience to the feministic law of the land was so thoroughly taken for granted that she even showed him the strange foodstuff and often fed the child in his presence. Nor did she conceal from him the large earthen jar in which she kept her reserve supply.

The jar stood in the palace kitchen, among others filled with more ordinary staples of diet. One day, when Mabousa had gone to the country on some political errand, and the waiting women were all preoccupied with other than culinary matters, Knox stole into the kitchen and carried away a small bagful of the stuff, which he then hid in his own room. In his fear of detection, he felt more of an actual thrill than at any time since the boyhood days when he had pilfered apples from London street-barrows behind the backs of the vendors.

The stuff looked like a fine variety of sago, and had an aromatic smell and spicy taste. Knox ate a little of it at once but dared not indulge himself to the extent of a full meal for fear that the con-

sequences would be visible. He had watched the incredible growth of the child, which had gained the proportions of a normal six-year old girl in a fortnight under the influence of the miraculous nutrient; and he did not wish to have his theft discovered, and the further use of the food prevented, in the first stage of his own development toward gianthood.

He felt that some sort of seclusion would be advisable till he could attain the bulk and stature which would ensure a position as master in his own household. He must somehow remove himself from all female supervision during the period of growth.

This, for one so thoroughly subject to petticoat government, with all his goings and comings minutely regulated, was no mean problem. But again fortune favored Knox: for the hunting season in Ondoar had now arrived; a season in which many of the men were permitted by their wives to visit the higher mountains and spend days or weeks in tracking down a certain agile species of alpine deer, known as the *oklah.*

Perhaps Mabousa wondered a little at the sudden interest shown by Knox in *oklah*-hunting, and his equally sudden devotion to practice with the javelins used by the hunters. But she saw no reason for denying him permission to make the desired trip; merely stipulating that he should go in company with certain other dutiful husbands, and should be very careful of dangerous cliffs and crevasses.

The company of other husbands was not exactly in accord with Knox's plan; but he knew better than to argue the point. He had contrived to make several more visits to the palace pantry, and had stolen enough of the forbidden food to turn him into a robust and wife-taming titan. Somehow, on that trip among the mountains, in spite of the meek and law-abiding males with whom he was condemned to go, he would find chances to consume all he

had stolen. He would return a conquering Anakim, a roaring and swaggering Goliath; and everyone, especially Mabousa, would stand from under.

Knox hid the food, disguised as a bag of millet meal, in his private supply of provisions. He also carried some of it in his pockets, and would eat a mouthful or two whenever the other men weren't looking. And at night, when they were all sleeping quietly, he would steal to the bag and devour the aromatic stuff by the handful.

The result was truly phenomenal, for Knox could watch himself swell after the first square meal. He broadened and shot up inch by inch, to the manifest bewilderment of his companions, none of whom, at first, was imaginative enough to suspect the true reason. He saw them eyeing him with a sort of speculative awe and curiosity, such as civilized people would display before a wild man from Borneo. Obviously they regarded his growth as a kind of biological anomaly, or perhaps as part of the queer behaviour that might well be expected from a foreigner of doubtful antecedents.

The hunters were now in the highest mountains, at the northernmost end of Ondoar. Here, among stupendous riven crags and piled pinnacles, they pursued the elusive *oklah;* and Knox began to attain a length of limb that enabled him to leap across chasms over which the others could not follow.

At last one or two of them must have gotten suspicious. They took to watching Knox, and one night they surprised him in the act of devouring the sacred food. They tried to warn him, with a sort of holy horror in their demeanor, that he was doing a dreadful and forbidden thing, and would bring himself the direct consequences.

Knox, who was beginning to feel as well as look like an actual

giant, told them to mind their own business. Moreover, he went on to express his frank and uncensored opinion of the sapless, decadent and effeminate males of Ondoar. After that the men left him alone, but murmured fearfully among themselves and watched his every move with apprehensive glances. Knox despised them so thoroughly, that he failed to attach any special significance to the furtive disappearance of two members of the party. Indeed, at the time, he hardly noticed that they had gone.

After a fortnight of alpine climbing, the hunters had slain their due quota of long-horned and goat-footed *oklah;* and Knox had consumed his entire store of the stolen food and had grown to proportions which, he felt sure, would enable him to subdue his domineering helpmate and show her the proper inferiority of the female sex. It was time to return: Knox's companions would not have dreamt of exceeding the limit set by the women, who had enjoined them to come back at the end of a fortnight; and Knox was eager to demonstrate his new-won superiority of bulk and brawn.

As they came down from the mountains and crossed the cultivated plain, Knox saw that the other men were lagging behind more and more, with a sort of fearfulness and shrinking timidity. He strode on before them, carrying three full-sized *oklah* slung over his shoulders, as a lesser man would have carried so many rabbits.

The fields and roads were deserted, and none of the titan women was in sight anywhere. Knox wondered a little about this; but feeling himself so much the master of the general situation, he did not over-exert his mind in curious conjectures.

However, as they approached the town, the desolation and silence became a trifle ominous. Knox's fellow-hunters were obviously stricken with dire and growing terror. But Knox did not

feel that he should lower his dignity by even asking the reason.

They entered the streets, which were also strangely quiet. There was no evidence of life, other than the pale and frightened faces of a few men that peered from windows and furtively opened doors.

At last they came in sight of the palace. Now the mystery was explained, for apparently all the women of Ondoar had gathered in the square before the building! They were drawn up in a massive and appallingly solid formation, like an army of giant Amazons; and their utter stillness was more dreadful than the shouting and tumult of battle-fields. Knox felt an unwilling but irresistible dismay before the swelling thews of their mighty arms, the solemn heaving of gargantuan bosoms, and the awful and austere gaze with which they regarded him in unison.

Suddenly he perceived that he was quite alone—the other men had faded away like shadows, as if they did not even dare to remain and watch his fate. He felt an almost undeniable impulse to flee; but his British valor prevented him from yielding to it. Pace by pace he forced himself to go on toward the embattled women.

They waited for him in stony silence, immovable as caryatides. He saw Mabousa in the front rank, her serving-women about her. She watched him with eyes in which he could read nothing but unutterable reproach. She did not speak; and somehow the jaunty words with which he had intended to greet her were congealed on his lips.

All at once, with a massed and terrible striding movement, the women surrounded Knox. He lost sight of Mabousa in the solid wall of titanesses. Great, brawny hands were grasping him, tearing the spear from his fingers and the *oklah* from his shoulders. He struggled as became a doughty Briton. But one man, even

though he had eaten the food of giantesses, could do nothing against the whole tribe of eight-foot females.

Maintaining a silence more formidable than any outcry, they bore him through the town and along the road by which he had entered Ondoar, and up the mountain path to the outmost ramparts of the land. There, from the beetling crag above the gully he had climbed, they lowered him with a tackle of heavy ropes to the dry torrent-bed two hundred feet below, and left him to find his way down the perilous mountainside and back to the outer world that would accept him henceforward only as a circus freak.

The Immortals of Mercury

I

Cliff Howard's first sensation, as he came back to consciousness, was one of well-nigh insufferable heat. It seemed to beat upon him from all sides in a furnace-like blast and to lie upon his face, limbs and body with the heaviness of molten metal. Then, before he had opened his eyes, he became aware of the furious light that smote upon his lids, turning them to a flame-red curtain. His eyeballs ached with the muffled radiation; every nerve of his being cringed from the pouring sea of incalescence; and there was a dull throbbing in his scalp, which might have been either headache induced by the heat, or the pain of a somewhat recent blow.

He recalled, very dimly, that there had been an expedition—somewhere—in which he had taken part; but his efforts to remember the details were momentarily distracted by new and inexplicable sensations. He felt now that he was moving swiftly, borne on something that pitched and bounded against a high wind that seared his face like the breath of hell.

He opened his eyes, and was almost blinded when he found himself staring at a whitish heaven where blown columns of steam went by like spectral genii. Just below the rim of his vision, there was something vast and incandescent, toward which, instinctively, he feared to turn. Suddenly he knew what it was, and be-

gan to realize his situation. Memory came to him in a tumbling torment of images; and with it, a growing wonder and alarm.

He recalled the ramble he had taken, alone, amid the weird and scrubby jungles of the twilight zone of Mercury—that narrow belt, warm and vaporous, lying beneath the broiling deserts on which an enormous sun glares perpetually, and the heaped and mountainous glaciers of the planet's nightward side.

He had not gone far from the rocket-ship—a mile at most, toward the sulphurous, fuming afterglow of the sun, now wholly hidden by the planet's libration. Johnson, the head of that first scientific expedition to Mercury, had warned him against these solitary excursions; but Howard, a professional botanist, had been eager to hasten his investigations of the unknown world, in which they had now sojourned for a week of terrestrial time.

Contrary to expectation, they had found a low, thin, breathable atmosphere, fed by the melting of ice in the variable twilight belt—an air that was drawn continually in high winds toward the sun; and the wearing of special equipment was unnecessary. Howard had not anticipated any danger; for the shy, animal-like natives had shown no hostility and had fled from the earth-men whenever approached. The other life-forms, as far as had been determined, were of low, insensitive types, often semi-vegetative, and easily avoided when poisonous or carnivorous.

Even the huge, ugly, salamander-like reptiles who seemed to roam at will from the twilight zone to the scalding deserts beneath an eternal day, were seemingly quite inoffensive.

Howard had been examining a queer, unfamiliar growth resembling a large truffle, which he had found in an open space, among the pale, poddy, wind-bowed shrubs. The growth, when he touched it, had displayed signs of sluggish animation and had started to conceal itself, burrowing into the boggy soil. He was prodding the thing with the sponge-light branch of a dead shrub,

and was wondering how to classify it, when, looking up, he had found himself surrounded by the Mercutian savages. They had stolen upon him noiselessly from the semi-fungoid thickets; but he was not alarmed at first, thinking merely that they had begun to overcome their shyness and show their barbaric curiosity.

They were gnarled and dwarfish creatures, who walked partially erect at most times; but ran upon all fours when frightened. The earth-men had named them the Dlukus, because of the clucking sounds resembling this word which they often made. Their skins were heavily scaled, like those of reptiles; and their small, protruding eyes appeared to be covered at all times with a sort of thin film. Anything ghastlier or more repulsive than these beings could hardly have been found on the inner planets. But when they closed in upon Howard, walking with a forward crouch and clucking incessantly, he had taken their approach for a sort of overture and had neglected to draw his tonanite pistol. He saw that they were carrying rough pieces of some blackish mineral, and had surmised, from the way in which their webbed hands were held toward him, that they were bringing him a gift or peace-offering.

Their savage faces were inscrutable; and they had drawn very close before he was disillusioned as to their intent. Then, without warning, in a cool, orderly manner, they had begun to assail him with the fragments of mineral they carried. He had fought them; but his resistance had been cut short by a violent blow from behind, which had sent him reeling into oblivion.

All this he remembered clearly enough; but there must have been an indefinite blank, following his lapse into insensibility. What, he wondered, had happened during this interim, and where was he going? Was he a captive among the Dlukus? The glaring light and scorching heat could mean only one thing—that he had been carried into the sunward lands of Mercury. That incandescent

thing toward which he dared not look was the sun itself, looming in a vast arc above the horizon.

He tried to sit up, but succeeded merely in raising his head a little. He saw that there were leathery thongs about his chest, arms and legs, binding him tightly to some mobile surface that seemed to heave and pant beneath him. Slewing his head to one side, he found that this surface was horny, rounding and reticulated. It was like something he had seen.

Then, with a start of horror, he recognized it. He was bound, Mazeppa-like, to the back of one of those salamandrine monsters to which the earth-scientists had given the name of "heat-lizards." These creatures were large crocodiles, but possessed longer legs than any terrestrial saurian. Their thick hides were apparently, to an amazing extent, non-conductors of heat, and served to insulate them against temperatures that would have parboiled any other known form of life.

The exact range of their habitat had not yet been learned; but they had been seen from the rocket-ship, during a brief sunward dash, in deserts where water was perpetually at the boiling point; where rills and rivers, flowing from the twilight zone, wasted themselves in heavy vapors from terrible cauldrons of naked rock.

Howard's consternation, as he realized his plight and his probable fate, was mingled with a passing surprise. He felt sure that the Dlukus had bound him to the monster's back, and wondered that beings so low in the evolutionary scale should have been intelligent enough to know the use of thongs. Their act showed a certain power of calculation, as well as a devilish cruelty. It was obvious that they had abandoned him deliberately to an awful doom.

However, he had little time for reflection. The heat-lizard, with an indescribable darting and running motion, went swiftly onward into the dreadful hell of writhing steam and heated rock.

The great ball of insupportable whiteness seemed to rise higher momently and to pour its beams upon Howard like the flood of an opened furnace. The horny mail of the monster was like a hot gridiron beneath him, scorching through his clothes; and his wrists and neck and ankles were seared by the tough leather cords as he struggled madly and uselessly against them.

Turning his head from side to side, he saw dimly the horned rocks that leaned toward him from curtains of hellish mist. His head swam deliriously, and the very blood appeared to simmer in his veins. He lapsed at intervals into deadly faintness: a black shroud seemed to fall upon him, but his vague senses were still oppressed by the crushing, searing radiation. He seemed to descend into bottomless gulfs, pursued by unpitying cataracts of fire and seas of molten heat. The darkness of his swoon was turned to immitigable light.

At times, Howard came back to full consciousness, and was forced to grit his teeth to avoid screaming with agony. His eyelids seemed to scorch his eyes, as he blinked in the blinding refraction; and he saw his surroundings in broken glimpses, through turning wheels of fire and blots of torrid color, like scenes from a mad kaleidoscope.

The heat-lizard was following a tortuous stream that ran in hissing rapids, among twisted crags and chasm-riven scarps. Rising in sheets and columns, the steam of the angry water was blown at intervals toward the earth-man, scalding his bare face and hands. The thongs cut into his flesh intolerably, when the monster leapt across mighty fissures that had been made by the cracking of the super-heated stone.

Howard's brain seemed to broil in his head, and his blood was a fiery torrent in his roasted body. He fought for breath—and the breath seared his lungs. The vapors eddied about him in deepening swirls, and he heard a muffled roaring whose cause he could

not determine. He became aware that the heat-lizard had paused; and moving his head a little, saw that it was standing on the rocky verge of a great gulf, into which the waters fell to an unknown depth, amid curtains of steam.

His heart and his senses failed him, as he struggled like a dying man to draw breath from the suffocating air. The precipice and the monster seemed to pitch and reel beneath him, the vapors swayed vertiginously, and he thought that he was plunging with his weird steed into the unfathomably shrouded gulf.

Then, from the burning mist, the hooded forms of white and shining devils appeared to rise up and seize him, as if to receive him into their unknown hell. He saw their strange, unhuman faces; he felt the touch of their fingers, with a queer and preternatural coolness, on his seared flesh; and then all was darkness . . .

II

Howard awoke under circumstances that were novel and inexplicable. Instantly, with great clearness, he remembered all that had occurred prior to his final lapse, but could find no clue to his present situation.

He was lying on his back in a green radiance—a soft and soothing light that reminded him of the verdant green and emerald seawater of the far-off Earth. The light was all about him, it seemed to flow beneath and above him, laving his body with cool ripples that left a sense of supreme well-being.

He saw that he was quite naked; and he had the feeling of immense buoyancy, as if he had been rendered weightless. Wondering, he saw that his skin was entirely free of burns, and realized that he felt no pain, no ill-effects of any kind, such as would have seemed inevitable after his dread ordeal in the Mercutian desert.

For awhile, he did not associate the green luminosity with any

idea of limitation; for he seemed to be floating in a vast abyss. Then, suddenly, he perceived his error. Putting out his hands, he touched on either side the wall of a narrow vault, and saw that its roof was only a few feet above him. The floor lay at an equal distance beneath; and he himself, without visible support, was reclining in mid-air. The green light, streaming mysteriously from all the sides of the vault, had given him the illusion of unbounded space.

Abruptly, at his feet, the end of the vault seemed to disappear in a white glory like pure sunlight. Long, sinuous, six-fingered hands reached out from the glory, grasped him abount the ankles, and drew him gently from the green-lit space in which he floated. Weight seemed to return to him as his limbs and body entered the dazzling whiteness; and a moment later, he found himself standing erect in a large chamber, lined with some sort of pale, shimmering metal. Beside him, a strange, unearthly being was closing the panel-like door through which he had been drawn from the emerald-litten vault; and beyond this being, there were two others of the same type, one of whom was holding Howard's garments in his arms.

In growing astonishment, Howard gazed at these incredible entities. Each of them was about the height of a tall man, and the physical conformation was vaguely similar to that of mankind, but was marked by an almost god-like beauty and grace of contour, such as could hardly have been found in the most perfect of antique marbles.

Nostrils, ears, lips, hands, and all other features and members, were carven with well-nigh fantastic delicacy; and the skin of these beings, none of whom wore any sore or raiment, was white and translucent, and seemed to shine with an internal radiance. In place of hair, the full, intellectual heads were crowned with a mass of heavy flesh-like filaments, hued with changing iridescence,

and tossing and curling with a weird, restless life, like the serpent locks of Medusa. The feet were like those of men, except for long, horny spurs that protruded from the heels.

The three entities returned the earth-man's gaze with unreadable eyes, brilliant as diamonds and cold as far-off stars. Then, to complete his amazement, the being who had just closed the door of the vault began to address him in high, flute-sweet tones, which baffled his ears at first, but after a little, became recognizable as flawless English.

"We trust," said the being, "that you have recovered wholly from your late experience. It was fortunate that we were watching you through our televisors when you were seized by the savages and were bound to the back of the *groko*—that creature known to you as the 'heat-lizard.' These beasts are often tamed by the savages, who, being ignorant of the use of artificial heat, make a strange use of the *grokos'* proclivities for ranging the terrible sunward deserts. Captives caught from rival tribes—and sometimes even their own kin—are tied to the monsters, who carry them through oven-like temperatures till the victims are thoroughly roasted—or, as you would say, done to a turn. Then the *grokos* return to their masters—who proceed to feast on cooked meat.

"Luckily we were able to rescue you in time; for the *groko,* in its wanderings, approached one of our cavern-exits in the great desert. Your body was covered with enormous burns when we found you; and you would assuredly have died from the effects, if we had not exposed you to the healing ray in the green vault. This ray, like many others, is unknown to your scientists; and it has, among other things, the peculiar power of nullifying gravity. Hence your sensation of weightlessness under its influence."

"Where am I? And who are you?" cried Howard.

"You are in the interior of Mercury," said the being. "I am

Agvur, a savant, and a high noble of the ruling race of this world." He went on in a tone of half-disdainful explanation, as if lecturing to a child: "We call ourselves the Oumnis; and we are an old people, wise and erudite in all the secrets of nature. To protect ourselves from the intense radiations of the sun, which of course are more powerful on Mercury than on the further planets, we dwell in caverns lined with a metallic substance of our own composition. This substance, even in thin sheets, excludes all the harmful rays, some of which can pierce all other forms of matter to any depth. When we emerge to the outer world, we wear suits of this metal, whose name in our language is *mouffa.*

"Being thus insulated at all times, we are practically immortal, as well as exempt from disease; for all death and decay, in the course of nature, are caused by certain solar rays whose frequency is beyond detection of your instruments. The metal does not exclude the radiations that are beneficial and necessary to life; and by means of an apparatus similar in its principle to radio, our underworld is illumined with transmitted sunlight."

Howard began to express his thanks to Agvur. His brain was giddy with wonder, and his thoughts whirled in a maze of astounding speculations.

Agvur, with a swift and graceful gesture, seemed to wave aside his expression of gratitude. The being who bore Howard's garments came forward, and helped him, in a deft, valet-like fashion, to put them on.

Howard wanted to ask a hundred questions; for the very existence of intelligent, highly evolved beings such as the Oumnis on Mercury had been unsuspected by earth-scientists. Above all, he was curious regarding the mastery of human language displayed by Agvur. His question, as if divined by a sort of telepathy, was forestalled by the Mercutian.

"We are possessed of many delicate instruments," said Agvur,

"which enable us to see and hear—and even to pick up other sense-impressions—at immense distances. We have long studied the nearer planets, Venus, Earth and Mars, and have often amused ourselves by listening to human conversations. Our brain-development, which is vastly superior to yours, has made it a simple matter for us to learn your speech; and of course the science, history and sociology of your world is an open book to us. We watched the approach of your ether-ship from space; and all the movements of your party since landing have been observed by us."

"How far am I from the rocket-ship?" asked Howard. "I trust you can help me to get back."

"You are now a full mile beneath the surface of Mercury," said Agvur, "and the part of the twilight zone in which your vessel lies is about five miles away and could readily be reached by an incline leading upward to a small exit in a natural cavern within sight of the ship. Doubtless some of the members of your party have seen the cavern and have assumed that it was a mere animal-den. When your vessel landed, we took care to block the exit with a few loose boulders and fragments of detritus, easily removable.

"As to rejoining your comrades,—well, I fear that it will scarcely be practicable. You must be our guest—perhaps indefinitely." There was a kind of brusqueness in his tone as he concluded:

"We do not want our existence known to terrestrial explorers. From what we have seen of your world, and your dealings with the peoples of Mars and Venus, whose territories you have begun to arrogate, we think it would be unwise to expose ourselves to human curiosity and rapacity. We are few in number, and we prefer to remain in peace—undisturbed."

Before Howard could frame any sort of protest, there came a singular interruption. Loud and imperious, with clarion-like notes, a voice rang out in the empty air between Agvur and the earth-

man. Howard was ungovernably startled; and the three Mercutians all seemed to stiffen with rapt attention. The voice went on for nearly a minute, speaking rapidly, with accents of arrogant command. Howard could make nothing of the words, whose very phonetic elements were strange and unfamiliar. But a chill ran through him at something which he sensed in the formidable voice—a something that told of relentless, implacable power.

The voice ended on a high, harsh note, and the listening Mercutians made a queer gesture with their heads and hands, as if to indicate submission to a superior will.

"Our temporal ruler and chief scientist, Ounavodo," said Agvur, "has just spoken from his hall in the lower levels. After hours of deliberation, he has reached a decision regarding your fate. In a sense, I regret the decision, which seems a trifle harsh to me; but the mandates of the Shol, as we call our ancient ruler, are to be obeyed without question. I must ask you to follow me; and I shall explain as we go along. The order must be executed without delay."

In perplexity not unmingled with consternation, Howard was led by Agvur to a sort of inclined hall or tunnel, on which the chamber opened. The tunnel was seemingly interminable, and was lit by brilliant sourceless light—the transmitted sun-rays of which the Mercutian had spoken. Like the chamber, it was lined with a pale metallic substance.

An odd machine, shaped like a small open boat, and mounted on little wheels or castors, stood before the door, on the easy monotonous grade. Agvur stationed himself in its hollow prow, motioning Howard to follow. When the other Oumnis had placed themselves behind Howard, Agvur pulled a sort of curving lever, and the machine began to glide rapidly, in perfect silence, down the interminable hell.

"This tunnel," said Agvur, "runs upward to the exit near your

vessel; and it leads down to the heart of our underworld realms. If the worst happens—as I fear it may—you will see only the antechambers of our labyrinth of caverns, in which we have dwelt, immune to disease and old age, for so many centuries. I am sorry; for I had hoped to take you to my own laboratories, in the nether levels. There you might have served me . . . in certain biologic tests.

"Ounavodo," he went on, in calm explanatory tones, "has ordered the fusing and casting of a certain quantity of the *mouffa*-alloy, to be used in the making of new garments. This alloy, invented aeons ago by our metallurgists, is a compound of no less than six elements, and is made in two grades, one for the lining of our caverns, and the other exclusively for raiment.

"Both, for their perfection, require a seventh ingredient—a small admixture of living, protoplasmic matter, added to the molten metal in the furnace. Only thus—for a reason that is still mysterious to our savants—can the *mouffa* acquire its full power of insulation against the deadly solar rays.

"The *mouffa* used in comparatively heavy sheets for cavern-lining needs only the substance of inferior life-forms, such as the *grokos,* the half-animal savages of the twilight zone, and various creatures which we catch or breed in our underworld tunnels. But the higher grade of *mouffa,* employed in light, flexible sheets for suiting, requires the protoplasm of superior life.

"Regretfully, at long intervals, we have been compelled to sacrifice one of our own scanty number in the making of new metal to replace that which has become outworn. Whenever possible, we select those who in some manner have offended against our laws; but such infringements are rare, and commonly the victim has been chosen by a sort of divination.

"After studying you closely in his televisic mirror, Ounavodo has decided that you are sufficiently high in the evolutionary scale

to provide the protoplasmic element in the next lot of *mouffa.* At least, he thinks that the test is worth trying, in the interests of science.

"However, in order that you should not feel that you are being discriminated against or treated unjustly, you will merely take your chance of being chosen from among many others. The method of selection will be revealed to you in due time."

While Agvur was speaking, the vehicle had sped swiftly down the endless incline, passing several other barge-shaped cars driven by the white, naked Immortals, whose serpentine locks flowed behind them on the air. Occasionally there were openings in the tunnel wall, leading no doubt to side-caverns; and after a mile or two, they came to a triple branching, where caverns ran upward at reverse angles from the main passage. Horrified and shaken as he was by Agvur's disclosure, Howard took careful note of the route they were following.

He made no reply to the Mercutian. He felt his helplessness in the hands of an alien, extra-human race, equipped, it would seem, with scientific knowledge and power to which humanity had not yet attained. Thinking with desperate quickness, he decided that it would be better to pretend resignation to the will of his captors. His hand stole instinctively to the pocket in which he had carried the little tonanite pistol with its twelve charges of deadly heat-producing explosive; and he was dismayed, though hardly surprised, to find that the weapon was gone.

His movement was noted by Agvur; and a strange sardonic smile flickered across the unhumanly intellectual face of the savant. In his desperation, Howard thought of leaping from the car; but to do this would have meant death or serious injury at the high speed of their descent.

He became aware that the incline had ended in a large level cavern with numerous side-openings where multitudes of Oumnis

were passing in and out. Here they left the boat-like vehicle; and Howard was led by Agvur through one of the side-exits, into another vast chamber, where perhaps fifty of the white people were standing in silent, semi-circular rows.

These beings were all fronting toward the opposite wall; but many of them turned to watch the earth-man with expressions of unreadable curiosity or disdain, as Agvur drew him forward to the first of the waiting ranks and motioned him to take his place at the end.

Now, for the first time, Howard saw the singular object which the Oumnis were facing. Apparently it was some sort of rootless plant-growth, with a swollen, yellowish bole or body like that of a barrel-cactus. From this body, tall as a man, leafless branches of vivid arsenic green, fringed with a white hispidity, trailed in limp, sinuous masses on the cavern-floor.

Agvur spoke in a piercing whisper: "The plant is called the Roccalim, and we employ it to choose, from a given quota, the person who shall be cast into the furnace of molten *mouffa.* You will perceive that, including yourself, there are about fifty candidates for this honor—all of whom, for one reason or another, in varying degrees, have incurred the displeasure of Ounavodo, or have given rise to doubt regarding their social usefulness. One by one, you are to walk about the Roccalim in a complete circle, approaching well within reach of the sensitive, mobile branches; and the plant will indicate the destined victim by touching him with the tips of these branches."

Howard felt, as Agvur spoke, the chill of a sinister menace; but in the weirdness of the ceremony that followed, he almost lost his apprehension of personal peril.

One by one, from the further end of the row in which he was standing, the silent Oumnis went forward and circled the strange plant, walking slowly within a few feet of the inert branches of

poisonous green that resembled sleepy, half-coiled serpents. The Roccalim preserved a torpid stillness, without the least sign of animation, as Oumni after Oumni finished his perilous circuit and retired to the further side of the room, there to stand and watch the perambulations of the others.

About twenty of the white Immortals had undergone this ordeal, when Howard's turn came. Resolutely, with a sense of unreality and grotesquery rather than actual danger, he stepped forward and began his circuit of the living plant. The Oumnis looked on like alabaster statues; and all was utterly still and silent, except for a muffled, mysterious throbbing, as of underworld machinery at a distance.

Howard moved on in an arc, watching the green branches with a growing tenseness. He had gone half the required distance when he felt, rather than saw, a flash of swift, intense light that appeared to stab downward from the cavern roof and strike the lumpish yellow bole of the Roccalim. The light faded in the merest fraction of time, leaving Howard in doubt as to whether he had really seen it.

Then, as he went on, he perceived with startled horror that the trailing tentacular boughs had begun to twitch and quiver, and were lifting slowly from the floor and waving toward him. On and on they came, rising and straightening, like a mass of ropy kelp that flows in an ocean-stream. They reached him, they slithered with reptilian ease about his body, and touched his face with their venomous-looking tips, clammy and inquisitive.

Howard drew back, wrenching himself away from the waving mass, and found Agvur at his elbow. The face of the Mercutian was touched with an unearthly gloating; and his iridescent locks floated upward, quivering with weird restlessness, like the Roccalim branches.

At that moment, it came to Howard that his fate had been pre-

determined from the beginning; that the swift, evanescent flash of light, proceeding from an unknown source, had perhaps served in some manner to irritate the living plant and provoke the action of its tentacular limbs.

Swift anger flared in the earth-man, but he repressed it. He must be cautious, must watch for an opportunity—even the slimmest—of escape. By giving the impression that he was resigned, he might throw his captors off their guard.

He saw that a number of new Mercutians, equipped with long glittering tubes like blow-pipes, had entered the cavern and were surrounding him. The companions of his late ordeal had begun to disperse in various directions.

"I am sorry," said Agvur, "that the choice should have fallen upon you. But your death will be swift—and the time is near at hand. The fusing must be completed, and the metal must be poured off and cast in thin, malleable sheets, before the next term of darkness and slumber, which will occur in little more than an hour. During this term—three hours out of every thirty-six—the transmitted sunlight is excluded from all our chambers and passages; and most of our machinery, *which derives its power from light, is rendered inactive.*"

III

In mingled horror and dumbfoundment, Howard was taken through an opposite entrance of the Roccalim's cavern and along a sort of hall which appeared to run parallel with the one in which the incline had ended. Agvur walked at his side; and the Oumni guards were grouped before and behind him. He surmised that the glittering, hollow tubes they carried were weapons of some novel type.

As they went on, the mysterious throbbing noise drew steadily nearer. Howard saw that the far end of the corridor was illumed

with a firey red light. The air was touched with queer metallic odors; and the temperature, which had heretofore been one of unobstrusive warmth, seemed to rise slightly.

At one side, through an open door in the passage wall, as they neared the source of the red light, Howard saw a large room whose further end was filled with lofty banks of shining cylinder-shaped mechanisms. In front of these mechanisms, a solitary Mercutian stood watching an immense pivot-mounted ball which appeared to be filled nearly to the top with liquid blackness, leaving a crescent of bright crystal. Near the ball, there was a sort of inclined switch-board, from which arose many rods and levers, made of some transparent material.

"The lighting-apparatus of all our caverns is controlled from that room," said Agvur, with a sort of casual boastfulness. "When the ball has turned entirely black, the sunlight will be turned off for the three-hour period, which gives us all the sleep and rest we require."

A moment more, and the party reached the end of the passage. Howard stood blinking and breathless with wonder when he saw the source of the dazzling red light.

He was on the threshold of a cavern so enormous that its roof was lost in luminosity and gave the effect of a natural sky. Titanic machines of multiform types, some squat and ungainly and others like prodigious bulbs or huge inverted funnels, crowded the cavern-floor; and in the center, towering above the rest was a double, terrace-like platform of sable stone, thirty feet in height, with many pipes of dark metal that ramified from its two tiers to the floor, like the legs of some colossal spider. From the middle of the summit, the ruddy light arose in a great pillar. Gleaming strangely against the fiery glow, the forms of Oumnis moved like midges.

Just within the entrance of the Cyclopean room, there stood a

sort of rack, from which hung a dozen suits of the *mouffa*-metal. Their construction was very simple, and they closed and opened at the breast, with odd dove-tailings. The head was a loose, roomy hood; and the metal had somehow been rendered transparent in a crescent-like strip across the eyes.

The suits were donned by Agvur and the guards; and Howard noticed that they were extremely light and flexible. He himself, at the same time, was ordered to disrobe.

"The *mouffa* mixture, during the process of fusing, gives off some dangerous radiations," said Agvur. "These will hardly matter in your case; and the suits of finished metal will protect my companions and me against them, even as against the deadly solar rays."

Howard had now removed all his clothes, which he left lying near the rack. Still pretending his resignation, but thinking desperately all the while and observing closely the details of his situation, he was led along the crowded floor, amid the sinister throbbing and muttering of the strange engines. Steep, winding stairs gave access to the terraced mass of dark stone. The earthman saw as he went upward, that the lower tier was fitted with broad, shallow moulds, in which doubtless the metal would run off from the furnace to cool in sheets.

Howard felt an almost overpowering heat when he stood on the upper platform; and the red glare blinded him. The furnace itself, he now saw, was a circular crater, fifteen feet across, in the black stone. It was filled nearly to the rim with the molten metal, which eddied with a slow maelstrom-like movement, agitated by some unknown means, and glowing unbearably. The black stone must have been a non-conductor of heat, for it was cool beneath Howard's bare soles.

On the broad space about the furnace, a dozen Oumnis, all

sheathed in the glittering *mouffa,* were standing. One of them was turning a small, complicated-looking wheel, mounted obliquely on a miniature pillar; and as if he were regulating the temperature of the furnace, the metal glowed more brightly and eddied with new swiftness in its black crater.

Apart from this wheel, and several rods that protruded from long, notched grooves in the stone, there was no visible machinery on the platform. The stone itself was seemingly all one block, except for a slab, ten feet long and two feet wide, which ran to the crater's verge. Howard was directed to stand on this slab, at the end opposite to the furnace.

"In another minute," said Agvur, "the slab will begin to move, will tilt, and precipitate you into the molten *mouffa.* If you wish, we can administer to you a powerful narcotic, so that your death will be wholly free of fear or pain."

Overcome by an unreal horror, Howard nodded his head in mechanical assent, snatching hopelessly at the momentary reprieve. Perhaps . . . even yet . . . there might be a chance; though he could have laughed at himself for the impossible notion.

Peering again toward the awful furnace, he was startled to see an inexplicable thing. Foot by foot, from the solid stone of the crater's further lip, there rose the figure of a Mercutian, till it stood with haughty features, very tall and pale and wholly naked upon the platform. Then, as Howard gasped with incredulous awe, the figure seemed to step in a stately manner from the verge, and hang suspended in air above the glowing cauldron.

"It is the Shol, Ounavodo," said Agvur in reverent tones, "though he is now many miles away in the nether caverns, he has projected his televisual image to attend the ceremony."

One of the Mercutian guards had come forward, bearing in his hands a heavy, shallow bowl of some bronze-like substance, filled

with a hueless liquid. This he proffered to the earth-man.

"The narcotic acts immediately," said Agvur, as if in reassurance.

Giving a quick, unobstrusive glance about him, Howard accepted the bowl and raised it to his lips. The narcotic was odorless as well as colorless, and had the consistency of a thick, sluggish oil.

"Be quick," admonished Agvur. "The slab responds to a timing mechanism; and already it starts to move."

Howard saw that the slab was gliding slowly, bearing him as on a great protruding tongue toward the furnace. It began to tilt a little beneath his feet.

Tensing all his muscles, he leapt from the slab and hurled the heavy bowl in the face of Agvur, who stood close by. The Mercutian staggered, and before he could regain his balance, Howard sprang upon him, and lifting him bodily, flung him across the rising, sliding slab, which bore Agvur along in its accelerated movement. Stunned by the fall, and unable to recover himself, he rolled from the tilting stone into the white-hot maelstrom and disappeared with a splash. The liquid seethed and eddied with a swifter motion than before.

For a moment, the assembled Oumnis stood like metal statues; and the televisual image of the Shol, standing inscrutable and watchful above the furnace, had not stirred. Leaping at the foremost guards, Howard flung them aside as they started to lift their tubular weapons. He gained the platform's railless verge, but saw that several Oumnis had run to intercept him before he could reach the stairs. It was a twelve-foot drop to the second platform, and he feared to leap with bare feet. The strange curving pipes which ran from the upper platform to the main cavern-floor, offered his only possible means of escape.

These pipes were of darkish metal, perfectly smooth and jointless, and were about ten inches thick. Straddling the nearest one, where it entered the black stone just below the verge, Howard began to slide as quickly as he could toward the floor.

His captors had followed him to the platform-edge; and facing them as he slid, the earth-man saw two of the Immortals aim their weapons at him. From the hollow tubes, there issued glowing balls of yellow fire which came flying toward Howard. One of them fell short, striking the side of the great pipe, and causing it to melt away like so much solder. He saw the dripping of the molten metal as he ducked to avoid the second ball.

Others of the Oumnis were levelling their weapons; and a rain of the terrible fire-globes fell about Howard as he slid along the pipe's lower portion, where it curved sharply toward the floor. One of the balls brushed his right arm and left an agonizing burn.

He reached the floor, and saw that a dozen Immortals were descending the platform-stairs in great bounds. The main cavern, fortunately, was deserted. The earth-man leapt for the shelter of a huge rhomboidal machine, and heard the hiss and drip of liquid metal as the fire-balls struck behind him.

Threading his way among the looming mechanisms, and interposing their bulks as much as possible between himself and his pursuers, Howard made for the entrance through which he had been conducted to the furnace by Agvur. There were other exits from the immense cavern; but these would have led him deeper into the unknown labyrinth. He had no clearly formulated plan, and his ultimate escape was more than problematical; but his instincts bade him to go on as long as he could before being recaptured.

He heard the mysterious pounding of the untended mechanisms all about him; but there was no sound from his pursuers, who came

on in grim silence, with incredible leaps, gaining visibly upon him.

Then, startlingly, as he rounded one of the machines, he found himself confronted by the televisual phantom of the Shol, standing in an attitude of menace, and waving him back with imperious gestures. He felt the awful burning gaze of eyes that were hypnotic with age-old wisdom and immemorial power; and he seemed to hurl himself against an unseen barrier, as he sprang at the formidable image. He felt a slight electric shock that jarred his entire body; but apparently the phantom was capable of little more than visual manifestation. It seemed to melt away; and than it was hovering above and a little before him, pointing out his line of flight to the pursuing Oumnis.

Passing a huge squat cylinder, he came to the rack on which the suits of *mouffa* had hung. Two of them still remained. Disregarding his own garments, which lay in a heap nearby, he snatched one of the metal suits from its place and rolled the thin, marvellously flexible stuff into a bundle as he continued his flight. Perhaps, somewhere, he would have a chance to put it on; and thus disguised, might hope to prolong his freedom—or even to find his way from this tremendous underworld.

There was a broad open space between the rack and the cavern-exit. Howard's pursuers emerged from the medley of towering mechanisms before he could reach the doorway, and he was forced to dodge another fusillade of the fire-balls, which splattered in white-hot fury all around him. Before him, the menacing phantom of the Shol still hovered.

Now he had gained the corridor beyond the exit. He meant to retrace the route by which he had come with Agvur, if possible. But as he neared the door through which he had seen the watcher of the darkening globe, and the light-controlling mechanisms, he perceived that a number of Mercutians, armed with fire-tubes, were coming to intercept his flight in the corridor. Doubtless they

had been summoned through some sort of telaudition by the furnace-tenders.

Looking back, he saw that his former guards were closing upon him. In a few moments, he would be surrounded and trapped. With no conscious idea, other than the impulse to flee, he darted through the open door of the cavern of light-machines.

The solitary watcher still stood beside the massive ball with his back toward the earth-man. The crystal crescent on the dark globe had narrowed to a thin horn, like the bow of a dying moon.

A mad, audacious inspiration came to Howard, as he recalled what Agvur had told him about the control of the lighting-system. Quickly and silently he stole toward the watcher of the ball.

Again the vengeful image of the Shol stood before him, as if to drive him back; and as he neared the unsuspecting watcher, it rose in air and poised above the ball, warning the Oumni with a loud, harsh cry. The watcher turned, snatching up a heavy metal rod that lay on the floor, and leapt to meet Howard, raising his weapon for a ferocious blow.

Before the rod could descend, the earth-man's fist had caught the Mercutian full in the face, driving him back upon the slanting dial of regulative levers beside the pivet-mounted ball. There was a shivering crash as he fell among the curving crystalline rods; and at the same instant, utter overwhelming darkness rushed upon the room and blotted out the banks of gleaming mechanism, the fallen Oumni, and the phantom of Shol.

IV

Standing uncertain and bewildered, the earth-man heard a low moaning from the injured Mercutian, and a loud wail of consternation from the corridor without, where the two groups of his pursurers had found themselves overtaken by darkness. The wailing ceased abruptly; and except for the moaning near at hand,

which still went on, there was absolute silence. Howard realized that he no longer heard the mutter of the strange engines in the furnace-room. Doubtless their operation had in some manner been connected with the lighting-system, and had ceased with darkness.

Howard still retained the suit of *mouffa.* Groping about, he found the metal rod that had dropped from the hand of the watcher. It would make a highly serviceable weapon. Grasping it firmly, he started in what he surmised to be the direction of the door. He went slowly and cautiously, knowing that his pursuers would have gathered to await him, or might even be creeping toward him.

Listening intently, he heard a faint metallic rustle. Some of the Oumnis, clothed in *mouffa,* were coming to seek him in the darkness. His own bare feet were soundless; and stepping to one side, he heard the rustling pass. With redoubled caution, he stole on toward the door, stretching one hand before him.

Suddenly his fingers touched a smooth surface, which he knew to be the wall. He had missed the door in his groping. Listening again, he seemed to hear a faint sound on the left, as if he were being followed; and moving in the opposite direction, along the wall, he encountered empty space and saw a dim glimmer of seemingly sourceless light.

His eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, and he made out a mass of dubious shadows against the glimmering. He had found the door, which was lined with waiting Oumnis.

Lifting his bar, he rushed upon the shadows, striking blow after blow, and stumbling over the bodies that fell before his onslaught. There were shrill cries about him, and he broke from chill, *mouffa*-sheathed fingers that sought to clutch him in the gloom. Then, somehow, he had broken through, and was in the corridor.

The glimmering, he saw, came from the cavern of machines,

where the hidden furnace still burned. Into the dying glow that lit the entrance, there came hurrying figures, each of which appeared to have an enormous Cyclopean eye of icy green. Howard realized that more Mercutians, bearing artificial lights, were coming to join the pursuit.

Keeping close to the corridor wall, he ran as fast as he dared in the solid blackness, toward the cavern of the Roccalim. He heard a stealthy metallic rustling, as the foremost Oumnis followed; and glancing back, saw them dimly outlined against the remote glow. They came on in a cautious, lagging manner, as if they were waiting for the new contingent with the green lights. After a little, he saw that the two parties had united and were following him steadily.

Fingering the wall at intervals as he ran, Howard reached the entrance of the large chamber in whose center stood the Roccalim. The lights were gaining upon him rapidly. Calculating in his mind, as well as he could, the direction of the opposite doorway, giving on the main tunnel that led to the incline, he started toward it. As he went on, he veered a little, thinking to avoid the monstrous plant-growth. It was like plunging into a blind abyss; and he seemed to wander for an immense distance, feeling sure that he would reach the opposite wall at any moment.

Suddenly his feet tripped on an unknown obstruction, and he fell at full length, landing on what seemed to be a tangle of great hairy ropes that pricked his bare skin in a thousand places. Instantly, he knew that he had collided with the Roccalim.

The mass of python-like branches lay inert beneath him, without a quiver of animation. Doubtless, in the absense of light, the queer, semi-animal growth was torpid.

Pulling himself from the spiny couch on which he had fallen, Howard looked back and perceived the thronging of green lights, cold and malignant as the eyes of boreal dragons. His pursuers

were entering the cavern, and would overtake him in a few instants.

Still clutching the *mouffa* garments and the metal bar, he groped across the tangle of branches, pricking his feet painfully at every step. Suddenly he plunged through to the floor, and found that he was standing in an open space where the heavy arcapers, descending from the hole, had parted on either side. Crouching down, as the lights approached him, he found a low, hollow place into which he could crawl beneath the branches, close to the cactus-like stem.

The creepers were thick enough to conceal him from cranial scrutiny. Lying there, with their prickly weight upon him, he saw through narrow rifts the passing of the green lights toward the outer cavern. Apparently none of the Mercutians had thought of pausing to examine the mass of Roccalim branches.

Emerging from his fantastic hiding-place, after all the Oumnis had gone past, Howard followed them boldly. He saw the vanishing of their icy lamps as they entered the outside tunnel. Moving again in utter darkness, he found the exit. There he recovered the running pencils of light, cast by the hurrying lamps as their bearers went toward the incline.

Following, Howard stumbled against an unseen object, which was either the vehicle used by Agvur, or another of the same type. Probably, in the shutting-off of power, these vehicles were now useless: otherwise, some of them might have been employed by the earth-man's pursuers. Hunters and hunted were on an equal footing; and realizing this, Howard felt for the first time an actual thrill of hope.

Going on, with the lights moving steadily before him, he started up the interminable incline which led—perhaps—to freedom. The tunnel was deserted, except for the hunters and their human quarry; and it seemed as if the multitude of Oumnis seen by How-

ard on his arrival with Agvur had all retired with the falling of darkness. Perhaps they had to for the usual three-hour term of night and repose.

The light-bearers appeared to disregard all the side passages that ran from the main tunnel. It occurred to Howard that they were hastening toward the surface exits, with the idea of cutting off his possible escape. Afterwards they would hunt him down at leisure.

The incline ran straight ahead; and there was little danger of losing sight of the lights. Howard paused an instant to slip on the suit of *mouffa,* hoping that it might serve to deceive or baffle his hunters later on. The raiment was easily donned, and fitted him quite loosely; but the unfamiliar intricate method of fastening eluded his untaught fingers. He could not remember quite how it had been done; so he went on with the strange garment open at the breast. The queer elongated heels, made to accommodate the spurs of the Immortals, flapped behind him.

He kept as much as possible the same relative distance between himself and the Oumnis. Glancing back, after awhile, he was horrified to see, far down, the tiny green eyes of another group of lights following him. Evidently others had rallied to the pursuit.

It was a long, interminably tedious climb—mile after mile of that monotonous tunnel whose gloom was relieved only by the sinister points of green light. The Mercutians went on at a tireless pace, unhuman and implacable; and only by ceaseless exertion, half walking, half running, could the earthman maintain his position midway between the companies of lamps.

He panted heavily, and a faintness came upon him at times, in which the lights seemed to blur. A great weariness clogged his limbs and his brain. How long it was since he had eaten, he could not know. He was not aware of hunger or thirst; but he seemed to fight an ever-growing weakness. The corridor became a black

eternity, haunted by the green eyes of cosmic demons.

Hour after hour he went on, through a cycle of sunless night. He lost the sense of time, and his movements became a sort of automation. His limbs were numb and dead, and it was only his relentless will that lived and drove him on. Almost, at times, he forgot where he was going—forget everything but the blind, primitive impulse of flight. He was a nameless thing, fleeing from anonymous terror.

At last, through the crushing numbness of his fatigue, there dawned the realization that he was gaining a little on the group of lights ahead. Possibly their bearers had paused in doubt or debate. Then, suddenly, he saw that the lights were spreading out, were diverging and vanishing on either hand, till only four of them remained.

Dimly puzzled, he went on, and came to that triple division of the tunnel which he remembered passing with Agvur. He saw now that the party of Oumnis had divided into three contingents, following all the branches. Doubtless each tunnel led to a separate exit.

Recalling what Agvur had said, he kept to the middle passage. This, if Agvur had spoken truly, would lead to an exit in the twilight zone, not far from the rocket-ship. The other tunnels would lead he knew not where—perhaps to the terrible deserts of heat and the piled, chaotic glaciers of the nightward hemisphere. The one he was following, with luck, would enable him to rejoin his comrades.

A sort of second wind came to Howard now—as if hope had revived his swooning faculties. More clearly than before, he became conscious of the utter silence and profound mystery of this underworld empire, of which he had seen—was to see—so little. His hope quickened when he looked back and saw that the lights behind him had diminished in number, as if the second party had

likewise separated to follow all three of the tunnels. It was obvious that there was no general pursuit. In all likelihood the smashing of the transmission levers had deranged all the machineries of the Immortals, even to their system of communication. Howard's escape, doubtless, was known only to those who had been present or near at the time. He had brought chaos and demoralization upon this super-scientific people.

V

Mile after mile of that monotone of gloom. Then, with a start of bewilderment, the earth-man realized that the four lights in front had all disappeared. Looking back, he saw that the lamps which followed him had similarly vanished. About, before and behind there was nothing but a solid, tomb-like wall of darkness.

Howard felt a strange disconcertment, together with the leaden, crushing return of his weariness. He went on with doubtful, slackening steps, following the right hand wall with cautious fingers. After awhile he turned a sharp corner; but he did not recover the lost lights. There was a drafty darkness in the air, an odor of stone and mineral, such as he had not met heretofore in the *mouffa*-lined caverns. He began to wonder if he had somehow gone astray: there might have been other branchings of the tunnel, which he had missed in his groping. In a blind surge of alarm, he started to run, and crashed headlong against the angular wall of another turn in the passage.

Half-stunned, he picked himself up. He hardly knew, henceforth, whether he was maintaining the original course of his flight or was doubling on his own steps. For aught that he could tell, he might be lost beyond all redirection in a cross-labyrinth of caverns. He stumbled and staggered along, colliding many times with the tunnel-sides, which seemed to have closed in upon him and to have grown rough with flinty projections.

The draft in his face grew stronger, with a smell of water. Presently the blindfold darkness before him melted into a chill, bluish glimmering, which revealed the rugate walls and boulder-fanged roof of the natural passage he was following.

He came out in a huge, chamber-like cave of some marble-pallid stone with twisted columnar forms. The glimmering, he saw, was a kind of phosphorescence emitted by certain vegetable growths, probably of a thallophytic nature, which rose in thick clusters from the floor, attaining the height of a tall man. They were flabby and fulsome-looking, with abortive branches, and pendulous fruit-shaped nodes of etiolated purple along their puffy, whitish-blue stems. The phosphorescence, which issued equally from all portions of these plants, served to light the gloom for some distance around, and brought out dimly the columnated character of the cavern's further walls.

Howard saw, as he passed among them, that the plants were rootless. It seemed that they would topple at a touch; but happening to stumble against one of the clumps, he found that they supported his weight with resilient solidity. No doubt they were attached firmly by some sort of suction to the smooth stone.

In the middle of the cave, behind a lofty fringing of these luminous fungi, he discovered a pool of water, fed by a thin trickle that descended through the gloom from a high vault that the phosphorescence could not illumine. Impelled by sudden, furious thirst, he slid back the *mouffa*-hood and drank recklessly, though the fluid was sharp and bitter with strange minerals. Then, with the ravening hunger of one who has not eaten for days, he began to eye the pear-shaped nodes of the tall thallophytes. He broke one of them from its parent stem, tore off the glimmering rind, and found that it was filled with a mealy pulp. A savorous, peppery odor tempted him to taste the pulp. It was not unpleasant, and forgetting all caution (possibly he had become a little mad from his extra-human ordeals) he devoured the stuff in hasty mouthfuls.

The node must have contained a narcotic principle; for almost immediately he was overpowered by an insuperable drowsiness. He fell back and lay where he had fallen, in a deep sodden sopor without dreams, for a length of time which, as far as he could know, might have been the interim of death between two lives. He awoke with violent nausea, a racking headache, and a feeling of hopeless, irredeemable confusion.

He drank again from the bitter pool, and then began to hunt with cloudy senses and feeble, uncertain steps for another exit than the tunnel by which he had entered. His mind was dull and heavily drugged, as if from the lingering of the unknown narcotic, and he could formulate no conscious plan of action but was led only by an animal-like impulse of flight.

He discovered a second opening, low, and fanged with broken-off pillar formations, in the opposite wall of the cavern. It was filled with Stygian darkness; and before entering it, he tore a lumpy branch from one of the phosphorescent fungi, to serve him in lieu of other light.

His subsequent wanderings were nightmarish and interminable. He seemed to have gotten into some tremendous maze of natural caverns, varying greatly in size, and intersecting each other in a bewildering honeycomb fashion: an underworld that lay beyond the metal-insulated realm of the Oumnis.

There were long, tediously winding tunnels that went down into Cimmerian depth, or climbed at acolivitous angles. There were strait cubby-holes, dripping with unknown liquid ores, through which he crawled like a lizard on his belly; and Dantean gulfs that he skirted on slippery, perilous, broken ledges, hearing far below him the sullen sigh or the weirdly booming roar of sub-Mercutian waters.

For awhile, his way led mainly downward, as if he were plunging to the bowels of the planet. The air became warmer and more humid. He came at last to the sheer brink of an incommensur-

able abyss, where noctilucent fungi, vaster than any he had yet seen, grew tall as giant trees along the precipice that he followed for miles. They were like fantastic monolithic tapers; but their luminosity failed to reveal the giddy depth above and beneath.

He met none of the Oumnis in this inexhaustible world of night and silence. But after he had rounded the great gulf, and had started to re-ascend in smaller caverns, he began to encounter, at intervals, certain blind, white, repulsive creatures the size of an overgrown rat, but without even the rudiments of tail or legs. In his demoralized condition of mind and body, he felt a primitive fear of these things, rather than the mere repugnance which their aspect would normally have aroused. However, they were non-aggressive and shrank sluggishly away from him. Once, he trod inadvertently on one of the creatures and leapt away, howling with fright, when it squirmed nauseously beneath his heel. Finding he had crushed its head, he took courage and began to belabor the flopping abnormality with the metal rod which he still carried. He mashed it into an oozy pulp—a pulp that still quivered with life; and then, overcome by bestial, atavistic hunger, and forgetting all the painfully acquired prejudices of civilized man, he knelt down and devoured the pulp with shameless greed. Afterwards, replete, he stretched himself out and slept for many hours.

VI

He awoke with renewed physical strength, but with nerves and mind that were still partially shattered by his experiences. Like a savage who awakens in some primordial cave, he felt the irrational terror of darkness and mystery. His memories were dazed and broken, and he could recall the Oumnis only as a vague and almost supernatural source of fear, from which he had fled.

The fungus-bough, which had served him in lieu of a torch or

lantern, was lying beside him in the darkness. With the bough in one hand and the metal rod in the other, he resumed his wanderings. He met more of the white, legless creatures; but he had conquered his fear of them now, and looked upon them only as a possible source of food. He proceeded to kill and eat one of them anon, relishing the worm-soft flesh as an aborigine would have relished a meal of grubs or white ants.

He had lost all notion of the passing of time or its measurement. He was a thing that clambered endlessly on Tartarean cavern-slopes or along the brink of lightless rivers and pools and chasms, killing when he was hungry, sleeping when his weariness became too urgent. Perhaps he went on for days; perhaps for many weeks, in a blind, instinctive search for light and outer air.

The flora and fauna of the caverns changed. He dragged himself through passages that were wholly lined with bristling, glowing thallophytes, some of which were tough and sharp as if fibred with iron. He came to tepid lakes whose waters were infested by long, agile, hydra-bodied creatures, divided into tapeworm segments, that rose to dispute his way but were powerless to harm his *mouffa*-covered limbs with their toothless, pulpy mouths.

For awhile, he seemed to be passing through a zone of unnatural warmth, due, no doubt, to the presence of hidden volcanic activity. There were hot geysers, and gulfs from which sultry vapors rose, filling the air with queer, metallic-smelling gases that seemed to burn corrosively in his nostrils and lungs. Some remnant of his former scientific knowledge caused him to recoil from such neighborhoods and retrace his footsteps into caverns free of these gases.

Fleeing from one of the mephitic-laden caves, he found himself in a mile-wide chamber, lined with fungi of uncommon exuberance, amid whose luminiferous growths he met with one of his most terrible adventures. A vast and semi-ophidian monster, white as

the other life-forms he had met, and equally legless but owning a single, Cyclopean, phosphoric eye, leapt upon him from the unearthly vegetation and hurled him to the ground with the ram-like impact of its blunt, shapeless head. He lay half-stunned, while the monster began to ingest him in its enormous maw, starting with his feet. Seemingly the metal which he wore was no barrier to its appetite. The creature had swallowed him nearly to the hips, when he recovered his senses and realized his frightful predicament.

Smitten with hideous terror, howling and gibbering like a caveman, he lifted the metal rod, which his clutching fingers had somehow retained, and struck frantically at the awful head into whose mouth he was being drawn by inches. The blows made little or no impression on the great rubbery mass; and soon he was waist-deep in the monstrous maw. In his dire need, a trace of reasoning-power returned to him; and using the rod like a rapier, he thrust it into the immense, glaring eye, burying it to his hand, and probably penetrating whatever rudimentary semblance of brain the animal possessed. A pale and egg-like fluid oozed from the broken eye, and the slobbering lips tightened intolerably upon Howard, almost crushing him in what proved to be the death-spasm. The white, swollen barrel-thick body tossed for many minutes; and during its convulsions, Howard was knocked insensible. When he came to again, the creature was lying comparatively still; and the sack-like mouth had begun to relax, so that he was able to extricate himself from the dreadful gorge.

The shock of this experience completed his mental demoralization and drove him even further into primitive brutehood. At times, his brain was almost a blank; and he knew nothing, remembered nothing but the blind horror of those infra-planetary caverns and the dumb instinct that still impelled him to seek escape.

Several times, as he continued his way through the thickets of

fungi, he was forced to flee or hide from other monsters of the same type as the one that had so nearly ingested him. Then he entered a region of steep acclivities that took him ever upward. The air became chill and the caverns were seemingly void of vegetable or animal life. He wondered dully as to the reason of the growing cold; but his broken mind could suggest no explanation.

Before entering this realm, he had supplied himself with another fragment of luminiferous fungus to light his way. He was groping through a mountain-like wilderness of chasms and riven scarps and dolomites, when, at some distance above, he saw with inexpressible fright a glimmering as of two cold green eyes that moved among the crags. He had virtually forgotten the Oumnis and their lamps; but something—half intuition, half memory—warned him of direr peril than any he had hitherto met in the darkness.

He dropped his luminous torch and concealed himself behind one of the dolomitic formations. From his hiding-place, he saw the passing of two of the Immortals, clad in silvery *mouffa,* who descended the scarp and vanished in the craggy gulfs below. Whether or not they were hunting for him, he could not know; but when they had gone from sight, he resumed his climb, hurrying at breakneck speed and feeling that he must get as far away as possible from the bearers of those icy green lights.

The dolomites dwindled in size, and the steep chamber narrowed like the neck of a bottle and closed in upon him presently from all sides, till it was only a narrow, winding passage. The floor of the passage became fairly level. Anon, as he followed it, he was startled and blinded by a glare of light directly ahead—a light that was brilliant as pure sunshine. He cowered and stepped back, shielding his eyes with his hands till they became somewhat tempered to the glare. Then, stealthily, with a mingling of confused fears and dim, unworded hopes, he crept toward the light

and came out in an endless metal hall, apparently deserted but filled as far as eye could see with the sourceless brilliance.

The mouth of the rough natural passage from which he had emerged was fitted with a sort of valve, which had been left open, doubtless by the Immortals he had seen among the nether crags. The boat-shaped vehicle they had used was standing in the hall. This vehicle, and the hall itself, were familiar to him, and he began to recollect, in a partial way, the ordeals he had undergone among the Oumnis before his flight into outer darkness.

The hall was slightly inclined; and he seemed to remember that the upward grade would presumably lead to a lost world of freedom. Apprehensively and furtively, he began to follow it, loping like an animal.

After he had gone for perhaps a mile, the floor became perfectly level, but the hall itself started to turn in a sort of arc. He was unable to see very far ahead. Then, so abruptly that he could not check his headlong flight, he came in view of three Oumnis, clothed in metal, who were all standing with their backs to him. A boat-vehicle was near at hand. One of the Immortals was tugging at a huge, capstan-like bar that protruded from the wall of the passage; and as if in response to the bar, a sort of gleaming metal valve was descending slowly from the roof. Inch by inch, it came down like a mighty curtain; and soon it would close the entire passage and render impossible the earth-man's egress.

Somehow, it did not occur to Howard that the tunnel beyond the valve might lead to other realms than the outer air for which he longed so desperately. As if by a miracle, something of his former courage and resourcefulness had returned to him; and he did not turn and flee incontinently at sight of the Immortals as he would have done a short time before. He felt that now or never was his opportunity to escape from the sub-Mercutian levels.

Leaping forward on the unsuspecting Oumnis, all of whom were intent on the closing of the valve, he struck at the foremost with his metal bar. The Mercutian toppled and went down with a clattering of *mouffa* on the floor. The one who was operating the lever continued his task, and Howard had no time to strike him down, for the remaining Immortal, with tigerish agility, had sprung back and was levelling the deadly fire-tube which he carried.

Howard saw that the great valve was still descending—was barely two feet above the cavern floor. He made a flying dive for the opening, sprawling on all fours and then crawling prone on his stomach beneath the terrible curtain of metal.

Struggling to rise, he found himself impeded and held back. He was in utter darkness now; but getting to his knees and groping about, he determined the cause of his retardation. The fallen valve had caught the loose elongated heel of the *mouffa* on his right foot. He had all the sensations of a trapped animal as he sought to wrench himself free. The tough *mouffa* held, weighed down by the enormous valve; and it seemed that there was no escape.

Then, amid his desperation, he somehow remembered that the *mouffa*-armor was open at the breast. Awkwardly and painfully, he managed to crawl forth from it, leaving it there like a discarded lizard-skin.

Getting to his feet, he raced on in the darkness. He was without light, for he had dropped the phosphorescent bough in his dive under the closing valve. The cavern was rough and flinty to his naked feet; and he felt an icy wind, bleak as the breath of glaciers, that blew upon him as he went. The floor sloped upward, and in places it was broken into stair-like formations against which he stumbled and fell, bruising himself severely. Then he

cut his head cruelly on a sharp stone that projected from the low roof. The wet, warm blood flowed down across his brow and into his eyes.

The passage steepened and the air took on a terrible frigidity. There was no sign of pursuit from the Oumnis; but fearing they would raise the valve and follow him, the earth-man hastened on. He was puzzled by the growing Arctic cold, but the suppositional reason seemed to elude him. His naked limbs and torso were studded with goose-flesh; and he began to shiver with violent ague, in spite of the high speed at which he ran and climbed.

Now the cavern-stairs were more regular and defined. They seemed to mount forever in the darkness; and growing accustomed to them, he was able to grope his way from step to step with no more than an occasional fall or stumble. His feet were cut and bleeding; but the cold had begun to numb them and he felt little pain.

He saw a dim, circular patch of light far above him, and gasping with the icy air, which appeared to grow thinner and more irrespirable, he rushed toward it. Hundreds, thousands of those black, glaciated steps he seemed to climb before he neared the light. He came out beneath a sable heaven crowded with chill, pulseless, glaring stars, in a sort of valley-bottom among drear unending scarps and pinnacles, still and silent as a frozen dream of death. They gleamed in the starlight with reflections of myriad-angled ice; and the valley-bottom itself was lit by patches of a leprous whiteness. One of these patches fringed the mouth of the incline on whose topmost step the earth-man was standing.

He fought agonizingly for breath in the tenuous infra-zero air; and his body stiffened momently with a permeating rigor as he stood and peered in numb bewilderment at the icy, mountainous chaos of the landscape in which he had emerged. It was like a

dead crater in a world of unspeakable and perpetual desolation, where life could never have been.

The flowing blood had congealed upon his brow and cheeks. With glazing eyes, he saw, in a nearby cliff, the continuation of the cavern-steps. Hewn for some unimaginable purpose by the Immortals, they ran upward in the ice toward the higher summits.

It was not the familiar twilight zone of Mercury in which he had come forth—it was the bleak, nightward side, eternally averted from the sun, and blasted with the frightful cold of cosmic space. He felt the pinnacles and chasms close him in, relentless and rigid, like some hyperborean hell. Then the realization of his plight became something very remote and recessive, a dim thought that floated above his ebbing consciousness. He fell forward on the snow with limbs already stiff and unbending; and the mercy of the final numbness grew complete.

Murder in the Fourth Dimension

The following pages are from a note-book that was discovered lying at the foot of an oak tree beside the Lincoln Highway, between Bowman and Auburn. They would have been dismissed immediately as the work of a disordered mind, if it had not been for the unaccountable disappearance, eight days before, of James Buckingham and Edgar Halpin. Experts testified that the handwriting was undoubtedly that of Buckingham. A silver dollar, and a handkerchief marked with Buckingham's initials, were also found not far from the note-book.

* * *

Not everyone, perhaps, will believe that my ten years' hatred for Edgar Halpin was the impelling force that drove me to the perfecting of a most unique invention. Only those who have detested and loathed another man with the black fervor of the feeling I had conceived, will understand the patience with which I sought to devise a revenge that should be safe and adequate at the same time. The wrong he had done me was one that must be expiated sooner or later; and nothing short of his death would be sufficient. However, I did not care to hang, not even for a crime that I could regard as nothing more than the mere execution of justice; and, as a lawyer, I knew how difficult, how practically impossible, was the commission of a murder that would leave no betraying evidence. Therefore, I puzzled long and fruitlessly as to

the manner in which Halpin should die, before my inspiration came to me.

I had reason enough to hate Edgar Halpin. We had been bosom friends all through our school days and through the first years of our professional life as law-partners. But when Halpin married the one woman I had ever loved with complete devotion, all friendship ceased on my side and was replaced by an ice-like barrier of inexorable enmity. Even the death of Alice, five years after the marriage, made no difference, for I could not forgive the happiness of which I had been deprived—the happiness they had shared during those years, like the thieves they were. I felt that she would have cared for me if it had not been for Halpin—indeed, she and I had been almost engaged before the beginning of his rivalry.

It must not be supposed, however, that I was indiscreet enough to betray my feelings at any time. Halpin was my daily associate in the Auburn law-firm to which we belonged; and I continued to be a most welcome and frequent guest at his home. I doubt if he ever knew that I had cared greatly for Alice: I am secretive and undemonstrative by temperament; and also, I am proud. No one, except Alice herself, ever surmised my suffering; and even she knew nothing of my resentment. Halpin himself trusted me; and nurturing as I did the idea of retaliation at some future time, I took care that he should continue to trust me. I made myself necessary to him in all ways, I helped him when my heart was a cauldron of seething poisons, I spoke words of brotherly affection and clapped him on the back when I would rather have driven a dagger through him. I knew all the tortures and all the nausea of a hypocrite. And day after day, year after year, I made my varying plans for an ultimate revenge.

Apart from my legal studies and duties, during those ten years, I apprised myself of everything available that dealt with the methods of murder. Crimes of passion allured me with a fateful inter-

est, and I read untiringly the records of particular cases. I made a study of weapons and poisons; and as I studied them, I pictured to myself the death of Halpin in every conceivable way. I imagined the deed as being done at all hours of the day and night, in a multitude of places. The only flaw in these dreams was my inability to think of any spot that would assure perfect safety from subsequent detection.

It was my bent toward scientific speculation and experiment that finally gave me the clue I sought. I had long been familiar with the theory that other worlds or dimensions may co-exist in the same space with ours by reason of a different molecular structure and vibrational rate, rendering them intangible for us. One day, when I was indulging in a murderous fantasy, in which for the thousandth time I imagined myself throttling Halpin with my bare hands, it occurred to me that some unseen dimension, if one could only penetrate it, would be the ideal place for the commission of a homicide. All circumstantial evidence, as well as the corpse itself, would be lacking—in other words, one would have a perfect absence of what is known as the *corpus delicti.* The problem of how to obtain entrance to this dimension was of course an unsolved one; but I did not feel that it would necessarily prove insoluble. I set myself immediately to a consideration of the difficulties to be overcome, and the possible ways and means.

There are reasons why I do not care to set forth in this narrative the details of the various experiments to which I was drawn during the next three years. The theory that underlay my tests and researches was a very simple one; but the processes involved were highly intricate. In brief, the premise from which I worked was, that the vibratory rate of objects in the fourth dimension could be artificially established by means of some mechanism, and that things or persons exposed to the influence of the vibration could be transported thereby to this alien realm.

For a long time, all my experiments were condemned to failure, because I was groping among mysterious powers and recondite laws whose motive-principle I had not wholly grasped. I will not even hint at the basic nature of the device which brought about my ultimate success, for I do not want others to follow where I have gone and find themselves in the same dismal predicament. I will say, however, that the desired vibration was attained by condensing ultra-violet rays in a refractive apparatus made of certain very sensitive materials which I will not name.

The resultant power was stored in a kind of battery, and could be emitted from a vibratory disk suspended above an ordinary office chair, exposing everything beneath the disk to the influence of the new vibration. The range of the influence could be closely regulated by means of an insulating attachment. By the use of the apparatus, I finally succeeded in precipitating various articles into the fourth dimension: a dinner-plate, a bust of Dante, a Bible, a French novel and a house-cat, all disappeared from sight and touch in a few instants when the ultra-violet power was turned upon them. I knew that henceforth they were functioning as atomic entities in a world where all things had the same vibratory rate that had been artificially induced by means of my mechanism.

Before venturing into the invisible domain myself, it was of course necessary to have some way of returning. I invented a second battery and a second vibratory disk, through which, by the use of certain infra-red rays, the vibrations of our own world could be established. By turning the force from the disk on the very same spot where the dinner-plate and the other articles had disappeared, I succeeded in recovering all of them. All were absolutely unchanged; and though several months had gone by, the cat had not suffered in any way from its fourth-dimensional incarceration. The infra-red device was portable; and I meant to take it with me on my visit to the new realm in company with Edgar

Halpin. I—but not Halpin—would return anon to resume the threads of mundane existence.

My experiments had all been carried on with utter secrecy. To mask their real nature, as well as to provide myself with the needful privacy, I had built a small laboratory in the woods of an uncultivated ranch that I owned, lying midway between Auburn and Bowman. Here I retired at varying intervals when I had the requisite leisure, ostensibly to conduct some chemical experiments of an educative but far from unusual type. I never admitted anyone to the laboratory; and no great amount of curiosity was evinced by friends and acquaintances regarding its contents or the tests I was carrying on. Never did I breathe a syllable to anyone that could indicate the true goal of my researches.

I shall never forget the jubilation I felt when the infra-red device had proven its practicality by retrieving the plate, the bust, the two volumes and the cat. I was so eager for the consumation of my long-delayed revenge, that I did not even consider a preliminary personal trip into the fourth dimension. I had determined that Edgar Halpin must precede me when I went. I did not feel, however, that it would be wise to tell him anything concerning the real nature of my device, or the proposed excursion.

Halpin, at this time, was suffering from recurrent attacks of terrific neuralgia. One day, when he had complained more than usual, I told him under the seal of confidence that I had been working on a vibratory invention for the relief of such maladies and had finally perfected it.

"I'll take you out to the laboratory to-night, and you can try it," I said. "It will fix you up in a jiffy: all you'll have to do will be to sit in a chair and let me turn on the current. But don't say anything to anybody."

"Thanks, old man," he rejoined. "I'll certainly be grateful if

you can do anything to stop this damnable pain. It feels like electric drills boring through my head all the time."

I had chosen my time well, for all things were favorable to the maintenance of the secrecy I desired. Halpin lived on the outskirts of the town; and he was alone for the nonce, his housekeeper having gone away on a brief visit to some sick relative. The night was murky and foggy; and I drove to Halpin's house and stopped for him shortly after the dinner hour, when few people were abroad. I do not think anyone saw us when we left the town. I followed a rough and little-used by-road for most of the way to my laboratory, saying that I did not care to meet other cars in the thick fog, if I could avoid it. We passed no one, and I felt that this was a good omen and that everything had combined to further my plan.

Halpin uttered an exclamation of surprise when I turned on the lights in my laboratory.

"I didn't dream you had so much stuff here," he remarked, peering about with respectful curiosity at the long array of unsuccessful appliances which I had thrown aside in the course of my labors.

I pointed to the chair above which the ultra-violet vibrator was suspended.

"Take a seat, Ed," I enjoined him. "We'll soon cure everything that ails you."

"Sure you aren't going to electrocute me?" he joked, as he obeyed my direction.

A thrill of fierce triumph ran through me like the stimulation of some rare elixir, when he had seated himself. Everything was in my power now, and the moment of recompense for my ten years' humiliation and suffering was at hand. Halpin was so unsuspecting: the thought of any danger to himself, of any treachery

on my part, would have been fantastically incredible to him. Putting my hand beneath my coat, I caressed the hilt of the hunting-knife that I carried.

"All set?" I asked him.

"Sure, Mike. Go ahead and shoot."

I had found the exact range that would involve all of Halpin's body without affecting the chair itself. Fixing my gaze upon him, I pressed the little knob that turned on the current of vibratory rays. The result was practically instantaneous, for he seemed to melt like a puff of thinning smoke. I could still see his outlines for a moment, and the look of a fantasmal astonishment on his face. And then he was gone—utterly gone.

Perhaps it will be a source of wonderment that, having annihilated Halpin as far as all earthly existence was concerned, I was not content merely to leave him in the unseen, intangible plane to which he had been transposed. Would that I had been content to do so. But the wrong I had suffered was hot and cankerous within me, and I could not bear to think that he still lived, in any form or upon any plane. Nothing but absolute death would suffice to assuage my resentment; and the death must be inflicted by my own hand. It now remained to follow Halpin into that realm which no man had ever visited before, and of whose geographical conditions and characteristics I had formed no idea whatever. I felt sure, however, that I could enter it and return safely, after disposing of my victim. The return of the cat left no apparent room for doubt on that score.

I turned out the lights; and seating myself in the chair with the portable infra-red vibrator in my arms, I switched on the ultra-violet power. The sensation I felt was that of one who falls with nightmare velocity into a great gulf. My ears were deaf with the intolerable thunder of my descent, a frightful sickness overcame me, and I was near to losing all consciousness for a moment,

in the black vortex of roaring space and force that seemed to draw me nadir-ward through the ultimate pits.

Then the speed of my fall was gradually retarded, and I came gently down to something that was solid beneath my feet. There was a dim glimmering of light that grew stronger as my eyes accustomed themselves to it, and by this light I saw Halpin standing a few feet away. Behind him were dark, amorphous rocks and the vague outlines of a desolate landscape of low mounds and primordial treeless flats. Even though I had hardly known what to expect, I was somewhat surprised by the character of the environment in which I found myself. At a guess, I would have said that the fourth dimension would be something more colorous and complex and varied—a land of multifold hues and many-angled forms. However, in its drear and primitive desolation, the place was truly ideal for the commission of the act I had intended.

Halpin came toward me in the doubtful light. There was a dazed and almost idiotic look on his face, and he stuttered a little as he tried to speak.

"W-What h-happened?" he articulated at last.

"Never mind what happened. It isn't a circumstance to what's going to happen now."

I laid the portable vibrator aside on the ground as I spoke.

The dazed look was still on Halpin's face when I drew the hunting-knife and stabbed him through the body with one clean thrust. In that thrust, all the stifled hatred, all the cankering resentment of ten insufferable years was finally vindicated. He fell in a twisted heap, twitched a little, and lay still. The blood oozed very slowly from his side and formed a puddle. I remember wondering at its slowness, even then, for the oozing seemed to go on through hours and days.

Somehow, as I stood there, I was obsessed by a feeling of utter unreality. No doubt the long strain I had been under, the daily

stress of indurate emotions and decade-deferred hopes, had left me unable to realize the final consummation of my desire when it came. The whole thing seemed no more than one of the homicidal day-dreams in which I had imagined myself stabbing Halpin to the heart and seeing his hateful body lie before me.

At length, I decided that it was time to effect my return; for surely nothing could be gained by lingering any longer beside Halpin's corpse amid the unutterable dreariness of the fourth-dimensional landscape. I erected the vibrator in a position where its rays could be turned upon myself, and pressed the switch.

I was aware of a sudden vertigo, and felt that I was about to begin another descent into fathomless vortical gulfs. But, though the vertigo persisted, nothing happened, and I found that I was still standing beside the corpse, in the same dismal milieu.

Dumbfoundment and growing consternation crept over me. Apparently, for some unknown reason, the vibrator would not work in the way I had so confidently expected. Perhaps, in these new surroundings, there was some barrier to the full development of the infra-red power. I do not know; but at any rate, there I was, in a truly singular and far from agreeable predicament.

I do not know how long I fooled in a mounting frenzy with the mechanism of the vibrator, in the hope that something had temporarily gone wrong and could be remedied, if the difficulty were only found. However, all my tinkerings were of no avail: the machine was in perfect working-order, but the required force was wanting. I tried the experiment of exposing small articles to the influence of the rays. A silver coin and a handkerchief dissolved and disappeared very slowly, and I felt that they must have regained the levels of mundane existence. But evidently the vibrational force was not strong enough to transport a human being.

Finally I gave it up and threw the vibrator to the ground. In

the surge of a violent despair that came upon me, I felt the need of muscular action, of prolonged movement; and I started off at once to explore the weird realm in which I had involuntarily imprisoned myself.

It was an unearthly land—a land such as might have existed before the creation of life. There were undulating blanks of desolation beneath the uniform grey of a heaven without moon or sun or stars or clouds, from which an uncertain and diffused glimmering was cast upon the world beneath. There were no shadows, for the light seemed to emanate from all directions. The soil was a grey dust in places and a grey viscidity of slime in others; and the mounds I have already mentioned were like the backs of prehistoric monsters heaving from the primal ooze. There were no signs of insect or animal life, there were no trees, no herbs, and not even a blade of grass, a patch of moss or lichen, or a trace of algae. Many rocks were strewn chaotically through the desolation; and their forms were such as an idiotic demon might have devised in apeing the handiwork of God. The light was so dim that all things were lost at a little distance; and I could not tell whether the horizon was near or far.

It seems to me that I must have wandered on for several hours, maintaining as direct a course of progression as I could. I had a compass—a thing that I always carry with me; but it refused to function, and I was driven to conclude that there were no magnetic poles in this new world.

Suddenly, as I rounded a pile of the vast amorphous boulders, I came to a human body that lay huddled on the ground, and saw incredulously that it was Halpin. The blood still oozed from the fabric of his coat, and the pool it had formed was no larger than when I had begun my journey.

I felt sure that I had not wandered in a circle, as people are said to do amid unfamiliar surroundings. How, then, could I have

returned to the scene of my crime? The problem nearly drove me mad as I pondered it; and I set off with frantic vigor in an opposite direction from the one I had first taken.

For all intents and purposes, the scene through which I now passed was identical with the one that lay on the other side of Halpin's corpse. It was hard to believe that the low mounds, the drear levels of dust and ooze and the monstrous boulders, were not the same as those among which I had made my former way. As I went, I took out my watch with the idea of timing my progress; but the hands had stopped at the very moment when I had taken my plunge into unknown space from the laboratory; and though I wound it carefully, it refused to run.

After walking an enormous distance, during which, to my surprise, I felt no fatigue whatever, I came once more to the body I had sought to leave. I think that I went really mad then, for a little while.

Now, after a duration of time—or eternity—which I have no means of computing, I am writing this pencilled account on the leaves of my note-book. I am writing it beside the corpse of Edgar Halpin, from which I have been unable to flee; for a score of excursions into the dim realms on all sides have ended by bringing me back to it after a certain interval. The corpse is still fresh and the blood has not dried. Apparently, the thing we know as time is well-nigh non-existent in this world, or at any rate is seriously disordered in its action; and most of the normal concomitants of time are likewise absent; and space itself has the property of returning always to the same point. The voluntary movements I have performed might be considered as a sort of time-sequence; but in regard to involuntary things there is little or no time-movement. I experience neither physical weariness or hunger; but the horror of my situation is not to be conveyed in human language; and hell itself can hardly have devised a name for it.

When I have finished writing this narration, I shall precipitate the note-book into the levels of mundane life by means of the infra-red vibrator. Some obscure need of confessing my crime and telling my predicament to others has led me to an act of which I should never have believed myself capable, for I am the most uncommunicative of men by nature. Apart from the satisfying of this need, the composition of my narrative is something to do, it is a temporary reprieve from the desperate madness that will surge upon me soon, and the grey eternal horror of the limbo to which I have doomed myself beside the undecaying body of my victim.

*Seedling of Mars**

It was in the fall of 1947, three days prior to the annual football game between Stanford and the University of California, that the strange visitor from outer space landed in the middle of the huge stadium at Berkeley where the game was to be held.

Descending with peculiar deliberation, it was seen and pointed out by multitudes of people in the towns that border on San Francisco Bay, in Berkeley, Oakland, Alameda, and San Francisco itself. Gleaming with a fiery, copperish-golden light, it floated down from the cloudless autumn azure, dropping in a sort of slow spiral above the stadium. It was utterly unlike any known type of aircraft, and was nearly a hundred feet in length.

The general shape was ovoid, and also more or less angular, with a surface divided into scores of variant planes, and with many diamond ports of purplish material different from that of which the body was constructed. Even at first glance, it suggested the inventive genius and workmanship of some alien world, of a people whose ideas of mechanical symmetry have been conditioned by evolutional necessities and sense-faculties divergent from ours.

However, when the queer vessel had come to rest in the amphitheater, many conflicting theories regarding its origin and the purpose of its descent were promulgated in the Bay cities. There were those who feared the invasion of some foreign foe, and

* After a plot by E. M. Johnston.

who thought that the odd ship was the harbinger of a long-plotted attack from the Russian and Chinese Soviets, or even from Germany, whose intentions were still suspected. And many of those who postulated an ultra-planetary origin were also apprehensive, deeming that the visitant was perhaps hostile, and might mark the beginning of some terrible incursion from outer worlds.

In the meanwhile, utterly silent and immobile and without sign of life or occupancy, the vessel reposed in the stadium, where staring crowds began to gather about it. These crowds, however, were soon dispersed by order of the civic authorities, since the nature and intentions of the stranger were alike doubtful and undeclared. The stadium was closed to the public; and, in case of inimical manifestations, machine-guns were mounted on the higher seats with a company of Marines in attendance, and bombing-planes hovered in readiness to drop their lethal freight on the shining, coppery bulk.

The intensest interest was felt by the whole scientific fraternity, and a large group of professors, of chemists, metallurgists, astronomers, astrophysicists and biologists was organized to visit and examine the unknown object. When, on the afternoon following its landing, the local observatories issued a bulletin saying that the vessel had been sighted approaching the earth from translunar space on the previous night, the fact of its nonterrestrial genesis became established beyond dispute in the eyes of most; and controversy reigned as to whether it had come from Venus, Mars, Mercury, or one of the superior planets; or whether, perhaps, it was a wanderer from another solar system than our own.

But of course the nearer planets were favored in this dispute by the majority, especially Mars; for, as nearly as those who had

watched it could determine, the line of the vessel's approach would have formed a trajectory with the red planet.

All that day, while argument seethed, while extras with luridly speculative and fantastic headlines were issued by the local papers as well as by the press of the whole civilized world; while public sentiment was divided between apprehension and curiosity, and the guarding Marines and aviators continued to watch for signs of possible hostility, the unidentified vessel maintained its initial stillness and silence.

Telescopes and glasses were trained upon it from the hills above the stadium; but even these disclosed little regarding its character. Those who studied it saw that the numerous ports were made of a vitreous material, more or less transparent; but nothing stirred behind them; and the glimpses of queer machinery which they afforded in the ship's interior were meaningless to the watchers. One port, larger than the rest, was believed to be a sort of door or man-hole; but no one came to open it; and behind it was a weird array of motionless rods and coils and pistons, which debarred the vision from further view.

Doubtless, it was thought, the occupants were no less cautious of their alien milieu than the people of the Bay region were suspicious of the vessel. Perhaps they feared to reveal themselves to human eyes; perhaps they were doubtful of the terrene atmosphere and its effect upon themselves; or perhaps they were merely lying in wait and planning some devilish outburst with unconceived weapons or engineries of destruction.

Apart from the fears felt by some, and the wonderment and speculation of others, a third division of public sentiment soon began to crystallize. In collegiate circles and among sport-lovers, the feeling was that the strange vessel had taken an unwarrantable liberty in pre-empting the stadium, especially at a time so near to the forthcoming athletic event. A petition for its removal was

circulated, and presented to the city authorities. The great metallic hull, it was felt, no matter whence it had come or why, should not be allowed to interfere with anything so sacrosanct and of such prime importance as a football game.

However, in spite of the turmoil it had created, the vessel refused to move by so much as the fraction of an inch. Many began to surmise that the occupants had been overcome by the conditions of their transit through space; or perhaps they had died, unable to endure the gravity and atmospheric pressure of the earth.

It was decided to leave the vessel unapproached until morning of the next day, when the committee of investigation would visit it. During that afternoon and night, scientists from many states were speeding toward California by airplane and rocketship, to be on hand in time for this event.

It was felt advisable to limit the number of this committee. Among the fortunate savants who had been selected, was John Gaillard, assistant astronomer at the Mt. Wilson observatory. Gaillard represented the more radical and freely speculative trend of scientific thought, and had become well known for his theories concerning the inhabitability of the inferior planets, particularly Mars and Venus. He had long championed the idea of intelligent and highly organized life on these worlds, and had even published more than one treatise dealing with the subject, in which he had elaborated his theories with much specific detail. His excitement at the news of the strange vessel was intense. He was one of those who had sighted the gleaming and unclassifiable speck far out in space, beyond the orbit of the moon, in the late hours of the previous night; and he had felt even then a premonition of its true character. Others of the party were free and open-minded in their attitude; but no one was more deeply and vitally interested than Gaillard.

Godfrey Stilton, professor of astronomy at the University of

California, also on the committee, might have been chosen as the very antithesis of Gaillard in his views and tendencies. Narrow, dogmatic, skeptical of all that could not be proved by line and rule, scornful of all that lay beyond the bourn of a strait empiricism, he was loath to admit the ultra-terrene origin of the vessel, or even the possibility of organic life on any other world than the earth. Several of his confreres belonged to the same intellectual type.

Apart from these two men and their fellow-scientists, the party included three newspaper reporters, as well as the local chief of police, William Polson, and the Mayor of Berkeley, James Gresham, since it was felt that the forces of government should be represented. The entire committee comprised forty men; and a number of expert machinists, equipped with acetylene torches and cutting tools, were held in reserve outside the stadium, in case it should be found necessary to open the vessel by force.

At nine a.m. the investigators entered the stadium and approached the glittering multi-angled object. Many were conscious of the thrill that attends some unforeknowable danger; but more were animated by the keenest curiosity and by feelings of extreme wonderment. Gaillard, in especial, felt himself in the presence of ultramundane mystery and marvelled as he neared the coppery-golden bulk: his feeling amounted almost to an actual vertigo, such as would be experienced by one who gazes athwart unfathomable gulfs upon the arcanic secrets and the wit-transcending wonders of a foreign sphere. It seemed to him that he stood upon the verge between the determinate and the incommensurable, betwixt the finite and the infinite.

Others of the group, in lesser degree, were possessed by similar emotions. And even the hard-headed, unimaginative Stilton was disturbed by a queer uneasiness; which, being minded as he was, he assigned to the weather—or a "touch of liver."

The strange ship reposed in utter stillness, as before. The fears of those who half-expected some deadly ambush were allayed as they drew near; and the hopes of those who looked for a more amicable manifestation of living occupancy were ungratified. The party gathered before the main port, which, like all the others, was made in the form of a great diamond. It was several feet above their heads, in a vertical angle or plane of the hull; and they stood staring through its mauve transparency on the unknown, intricate mechanisms beyond, that were colored as if by the rich panes of some cathedral window.

All were in doubt as to what should be done; for it seemed evident that the occupants of the vessel, if alive and conscious, were in no hurry to reveal themselves to human scrutiny. The delegation resolved to wait a few minutes before calling on the services of the assembled mechanics and their acetylene torches; and while waiting they walked about and inspected the metal of the walls, which seemed to be an alloy of copper and red gold, tempered to a preternatural hardness by some process unfamiliar to telluric metallurgy. There was no sign of jointure in the myriad planes and facets; and the whole enormous shell, apart from its lucid ports, might well have been wrought from a single sheet of the rich alloy.

Gaillard stood peering upward at the main port, while his companions sauntered about the vessel talking and debating among themselves. Somehow, he felt an intuition that something strange and miraculous was about to happen; and when the great port began to open slowly, without visible agency, dividing into two valves that slid away at the sides, the thrill which he experienced was not altogether one of surprise. Nor was he surprised when a sort of metal escalator, consisting of narrow stairs that were little more than rungs, descended step by step from the opening and came down to the ground at his very feet.

The port had opened and the escalator had unfolded in silence, with no faintest creak or clang; but others beside Gaillard had perceived the occurrence, and all hastened in great excitement and gathered before the steps.

Contrary to their not unnatural expectations, no one emerged from the vessel; and they could see little more of the interior than had been visible through the shut valves. They looked for some exotic ambassador from Mars, some gorgeous and bizarre plenipotentiary from Venus to descend the queer steps; and the silence and solitude and mechanical adroitness of it all were uncanny. It seemed that the great ship was a living entity, and possessed a brain and nerves of its own, hidden in the metal-sheathed interior.

The open portal and stairs offered an obvious invitation; and after some hesitancy, the scientists made up their minds to enter. Some were still fearful of a trap; and five of the forty men warily decided to remain without; but all the others were more powerfully drawn by curiosity and investigative ardor; and one by one they climbed the stairs and filed into the vessel.

They found the interior even more provocative of wonder than the outer walls had been. It was quite roomy and was divided into several compartments of ample size, two of which, at the vessel's center, were lined with low couches covered by soft, lustrous, piliated fabrics of opalescent grey. The others, as well as the ante-chamber behind the entrance, were filled with machinery whose motive force and method of operation were alike obscure to the most expert among the investigators.

Rare metals and odd alloys, some of them difficult to classify, had been used in the construction of this machinery. Near the entrance there was a sort of tripodal table or instrument-board whose queer rows of levers and buttons were no less mysterious than the ciphers of some telic cryptogram. The entire ship was seemingly deserted, with no trace of human or extra-planetary life.

Wandering through the apartments and marvelling at the unsolved mechanical enigmas which surrounded them, the delegation-members were not aware that the broad valves of the main port had closed behind them with the same stealthiness and silence that had marked their opening. Nor did they hear the warning shouts of the five men who had remained outside.

Their first intimation of anything untoward came from a sudden lurching and lifting of the vessel. Startled, they looked at the window-like ports, and saw through the violet, vitreous panes the whirling and falling away of those innumerable rows of seats which ringed the immense stadium. The alien space-ship, with no visible hand to control it, was rising rapidly in air with a sort of spiral movement. It was bearing away to some unknown world the entire delegation of hardy scientists that had boarded it, together with the Berkeley Mayor and Chief of Police and the three privileged reporters who had thought to obtain an ultra-sensational "scoop" for their respective journals!

The situation was wholly without precedent, and was more than astounding; and the reactions of the various men, though quite divergent in some ways, were all marked by amazement and consternation. Many were too stunned and confounded to realize all the implications or possibilities, others were frankly terrified; and others still were indignant.

"This is an outrage!" thundered Stilton, as soon as he had recovered a little from his primary surprise. There were similar exclamations from others of the same temperament as he, all of whom felt emphatically that something should be done about the situation, and that someone (who, unfortunately, they could not locate or identify) should be made to suffer for such unparalleled audacity.

Gaillard, though he shared in the general amazement, was thrilled to the bottom of his heart by a sense of unearthly and prodigious adventure, by a premonition of interplanetary em-

prise. He felt a mystic certainty that he and the others had embarked on a voyage to some world untrodden heretofore by man; that the strange vessel had descended to earth and had opened its port to invite them for this very purpose; that an esoteric and remote power was guiding its every movement and was drawing it to an appointed destination. Vast, inchoate images of unbounded space and splendor and interstellar strangeness filled his mind, and unforelimnable pictures rose to dazzle his vision from an ultratelluric bourn.

In some incomprehensible way, he knew that his life-long desire to penetrate the mysteries of distant spheres would soon be gratified; and he (if not his companions) was resigned from the very first to that bizarre abduction and captivity in the soaring space flier.

Discussing their position with much volubility and vociferousness, the assembled savants rushed to the various ports and stared down at the world they were leaving. In a mere fraction of time, they had risen to a cloud-like altitude. The whole region about San Francisco Bay, as well as the verges of the Pacific ocean, lay stretched below them like an immense relief map; and they could already see the curvature of the horizon, which seemed to reel and dip as they went upward.

It was an awesome and magnificent prospect; but the growing acceleration of the vessel, which had now gained a speed more than equal to that of the rocket-ships which were used at that time for circling the globe in the stratosphere, soon compelled them to relinquish their standing position and seek the refuge of the convenient couches. Conversation also was abandoned, for everyone began to experience an almost intolerable constriction and oppression, which held their bodies as if with clamps of unyielding metal.

However, when they had all laid themselves on the piliated

couches, they felt a mysterious relief, whose source they could not ascertain. It seemed that a force emanated from those couches, which alleviated in some way the leaden stress of increased gravity due to the acceleration, and made it possible for the men to endure the terrific speed with which the space-flier was leaving the earth's atmosphere and gravitational zone.

Presently they found themselves able to stand up and walk around once more. Their sensations, on the whole, were almost normal; though, in contra-distinction to the initial crushing weight, there was now an odd lightness which compelled them to shorten their steps to avoid colliding with the walls and machinery. Their weight was less than it would have been on earth, but the loss was not enough to produce discomfort or sickness, and was accompanied by a sort of exhilaration.

They perceived that they were breathing a thin, rarefied and bracing air, not dissimilar to that of terrene mountain-tops, though permeated by one or two unfamiliar elements that gave it a touch of nitric sharpness. This air tended to increase the exhilaration and to quicken their respiration and pulses a little.

"This is damnable!" spluttered the indignant Stilton, as soon as he found that the powers of locomotion and breathing were reasonably subject to control. "It is contrary to all law, decency and order. The U. S. Government should do something about it immediately."

"I fear," observed Gaillard, "That we are now beyond the jurisdiction of the U. S., as well as that of all other mundane governments. No plane or rocket-ship could reach the air-strata through which we are passing; and we will penetrate the interstellar ether in a moment or so. Presumably this vessel is returning to the world from which it came; and we are going with it."

"Absurd! preposterous! outrageous!" Stilton's voice was a roar, slightly subdued and attenuated by the fine atmospheric medium.

"I've always maintained that space-travel was utterly chimerical. Even earth-scientists haven't been able to invent a space-ship; and it is ridiculous to assume that highly intelligent life, capable of such invention, could exist on other planets."

"How, then," queried Gaillard, "do you account for our situation?"

"The vessel is of human origin, of course. It must be a new and ultra-powerful type of rocket-ship, devised by the Soviets, and under automatic or radio control, which will probably land us in Siberia after travelling in the highest layers of the stratosphere."

Gaillard, smiling with gentle irony, felt that he could safely abandon the argument. Leaving Stilton to stare wrathfully through a port at the receding bulk of the world, on which the whole of North America, together with Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands, had begun to declare their coastal outlines, he joined others of the party in a renewed investigation of the ship.

Some still maintained that living beings must be hidden on board; but a close search of every apartment, corner and cranny resulted as before. Abandoning this objective, the men began to re-examine the machinery, whose motive-power and method of operation they were still unable to fathom. Utterly perplexed and mystified, they watched the instrument-board, on which certain of the keys would move occasionally, as if shifted by an unseen hand. These changes of alignment were always followed by some change in the vessel's speed, or by a slight alteration of its course, possibly to avoid collision with meteoric fragments.

Though nothing definite could be learned about the propelling mechanism, certain negative facts were soon established. The method of propulsion was plainly non-explosive, for there were no roaring and flaming discharge of rockets. All was silent, glid-

ing, and vibrationless, with nothing to betoken mechanical activity, other than the shifting of the keys and the glowing of certain intricate coils and pistons with a strange blue light. This light, cold as the scintillation of Arctic ice, was not electric in its nature, but suggested rather some unknown form of radio-activity.

After awhile, Stilton joined those who were grouped about the instrument-board. Still muttering his resentment of the unlawful and unscientific indignity to which he had been subjected, he watched the keys for a minute or so, and then, seizing one of them with his fingers, he tried to experiment, with the idea of gaining control of the vessel's movements.

To his amazement and that of his confreres, the key was immovable. Stilton strained till the blue veins stood out on his hand, and sweat poured in rills from his baldish brow. Then, one by one, he tried others of the keys, tugging desperately, but always with the same result. Evidently the board was locked against other control than that of the unknown pilot.

Still persisting in his endeavor, Stilton came to a key of larger size and different shape from the rest. Touching it, he screamed in agony, and withdrew his fingers from the strange object with some difficulty. The key was cold, as if it had been steeped in the absolute zero of space. It had actually seemed to sear his fingers with its extreme iciness. After that, he desisted, and made no further effort to interfere with the workings of the vessel.

Gaillard, after watching this interlude, had wandered back to one of the main apartments. Peering out once more from his seat on a couch of supernal softness and resilience, he beheld a breath-taking spectacle. The whole world, a great, glowing, many-tinted globe, was swimming abreast of the flier in the black and star-lined gulf. The awfulness of the undirectioned deeps, the unthinkable isolation of infinitude rushed upon him, and he felt

sick and giddy for a few instants with the shock of realization, and was swept by an overwhelming panic, limitless and without name.

Then, strangely, the terror passed, in a dawning exultation at the prospect of the novel voyage through unsounded heavens and toward untrodden shores. Oblivious of danger, forgetful of the dread alienation from man's accustomed environment, he gave himself up to magical conviction of marvellous adventure and unique destiny to come.

Others, however, were less capable of orientating themselves to these bizarre and terrific circumstances. Pale and horror-stricken, with a sense of irredeemable loss, of all-encompassing peril and giddy confusion, they watched the receding earth from whose comfortable purlieus they had been removed so inexplicably and with such awful suddenness.

Many were speechless with fear, as they realized more clearly their impotence in the grip of an all-powerful and incognizable force.

Some chattered loudly and incoherently, in an effort to conceal their perturbation. The three reporters lamented their inability to communicate with the journals they represented. James Gresham, the Mayor, and William Polson, the Chief of Police, were non-plussed and altogether at a loss as to what to do or think, in circumstances that seemed to nullify completely their wonted civic importance. And the scientists, as might have been expected, were divided into two main camps. The more radical and adventurous were more or less prone to welcome whatever might be in store, for the sake of new knowledge; while the others accepted their fate with varying degrees of reluctance, of protest and apprehension.

Several hours went by; and the moon, a ball of dazzling desolation in the great abyss, had been left behind with the waning

earth. The flier was speeding alone through the cosmic vastness, in a universe whose grandeur was a revelation even to the astronomers, familiar as they were with the magnitudes and multitudes of suns, nebulae and galaxies. The thirty-five men were being estranged from their natal planet and hurled across unthinkable immensity at a speed far beyond that of any solar body or satellite. It was hard to estimate the precise velocity; but some idea of it could be gained from the rapidity with which the sun and the nearer planets, Mars, Mercury and Venus, changed their relative positions. They seemed almost to fly athwart the heavens like so many jugglers' balls.

It was plain that some sort of artificial gravity prevailed in the ship; for the weightlessness that would otherwise have been inevitable in outer space was not experienced at any time. Also, the scientists found that they were being supplied with air from certain oddly-shapen tanks. Evidently, too, there was some kind of hidden heating-system or mode of insulation against the interspatial zero; for the temperature of the vessel's interior remained constant, at about 65° or 70°.

Looking at their watches, some of the party found that it was now noon by terrestrial time; though even the most unimaginative were impressed by the absurdity of the twenty-four hour division of day and night amid the eternal sunlight of the void.

Many began to feel hungry and thirsty, and to voice their appetence aloud. Not long after, as if in response, like the service given by a good table d'hôte, or restaurant, certain panels in the inner metal wall, hitherto unnoticed by the savants, opened noiselessly before their eyes and revealed a series of long buffets, on which were curious wide-mouthed ewers containing water and deep, tureen-like plates filled to the rim with unknown food-stuffs.

Too astonished to comment at much length on this new miracle, the delegation-members proceeded to sample the viands and bev-

erage thus offered. Stilton, still morosely indignant, refused to taste them but was alone in his abstention.

The water was quite drinkable, though slightly alkaline, as if it had come from desert wells; and the food, a sort of reddish paste, concerning whose nature and composition the chemists were doubtful, served to appease the pangs of hunger even if it was not especially seductive to the palate.

After the earth-men had partaken of this reflection, the panels closed as silently and unobtrusively as they had opened. The vessel plunged on through space, hour after hour, till it became obvious to Gaillard and his fellow-astronomers that it was either heading directly for the planet Mars or would pass very close to Mars on its way to some further orb.

The red world, with its familiar markings, which they had watched so often through observatory telescopes, and over whose character and causation they had long puzzled, began to loom before them and swelled upon the heavens with thaumaturgic swiftness. They then perceived a signal deceleration in the speed of the flier, which continued straight on toward the coppery planet, as if its goal were concealed amid the labyrinth of obscure and singular mottlings; and it became impossible to doubt any longer that Mars was their destination.

Gaillard, and those who were more or less akin to him in their interests and proclivities, were stirred by an awesome and sublime expectancy as the vessel neared the alien world. Then it began to float gently down above an exotic landscape in which the well-known "seas" and "canals", enormous with their closeness, could plainly be recognized.

Soon they approached the surface of the ruddy planet, spiraling though its cloudless and mistless atmosphere, while the deceleration slowed to a speed that was little more than that of a falling parachute. Mars surrounded them with its strait, monotonous

horizons, nearer than those of earth, and displaying neither mountains nor any salient elevation of hills or hummocks; and soon they hung above it at an altitude of a half-mile or less. Here the vessel seemed to halt and poise, without descending further.

Below them now they saw a desert of low-ridge and yellowish-red sand, intersected by one of the so-called "canals", which ran sinuously away on either side to disappear beyond the horizon.

The scientists studied this terrain in ever-growing amazement and excitement, as the true nature of the veining "canal" was forced upon their perception. It was not water, as many had heretofore presumed, but a mass of pale-green vegetation, of vast and serrate leaves or fronds, all of which seemed to emanate from a single crawing flesh-colored stalk, several hundred feet in diameter and with swollen nodular joints at half-mile intervals! Aside from this anomalous and super-gigantic vine, there was no trace of life, either animal or vegetable, in the whole landscape; and the extent of the crawling stalk, which netted the entire visible terrain but seemed by its form and characteristics to be the mere tendril of some vaster growth, was a thing to stagger the preconceptions of mundane botany.

Many of the scientists were almost stupefied with astonishment as they gazed down from the violet ports on this titanic creeper. More than ever, the journalists mourned the staggering headlines with which they would be unable, under existing circumstances, to endow their respective dailies. Gresham and Polson felt that there was something vaguely illegal about the existence of anything so monstrous in the way of a plant-form; and the scientific disapproval felt by Stilton and his academically minded confreres was most pronounced.

"Outrageous! unheard-of! ludicrous!" muttered Stilton. "This thing defies the most elementary laws of botany. There is no conceivable precedent for it."

Gaillard, who stood beside him, was so wrapt in his contemplation of the novel growth, that he scarcely heard Stilton's comment. The conviction of vast and sublime adventure which had grown upon him ever since the beginning of that bizarre, stupendous voyage, was now confirmed by a clear daylight certitude. He could give no definite form or coherence to the feeling that possessed him; but he was overwhelmed by the intimation of present marvel and future miracle, and the intuition of strange, tremendous revelations to come.

Few of the party cared to speak, or would have been capable of speech. All that had happened to them during the past few hours, and all on which they now gazed, was so far beyond the scope of human action and cognition, that the normal exercise of their faculties was more or less inhibited by the struggle for adjustment to these unique conditions.

After they had watched the gargantuan vine for a minute or two, the savants became aware that the vessel was moving again, this time in a lateral direction. Flying very slowly and deliberately, it followed the course of the creeper toward what seemed to be the west of Mars, above which a small and pallid sun was descending through the dingy, burnt-out sky and casting a thin, chilly light athwart the desolate land.

The men were overpoweringly conscious of an intelligent determination behind all that was occurring; and the sense of this remote, unknowable supervision and control was stronger in Gaillard even than in the others. No one could doubt that every movement of the vessel was timed and predestined; and Gaillard felt that the slowness with which it followed the progress of the great stalk was calculated to give the scientific delegation ample opportunity for the study of their new environment; and, in particular, for observation of the growth itself.

In vain, however, did they watch their shifting milieu for aught that could denote the presence of organic forms of a human, non-human or preter-human type, such as might imaginably exist on Mars. Of course, only such entities, it was thought, could have built, despatched, and guided the vessel in which they were held captive.

The flier went on for at least an hour, traversing an immense territory in which, after many miles, the initial sandy desolation yielded place to a sort of swamp. Here, where sluggish waters webbed and marly soil, the winding creeper swelled to incredible proportions, with lush leaves that embowered the marshy ground for almost a mile on either side of the overlooming stalk.

Here, too, the foliage assumed a richer and more vivid greenness, fraught with sublime vital exuberance; and the stem itself displayed an indescribable succulence, together with a shining and glossy luster, a bloom that was weirdly and incongruously suggestive of well-nourished flesh. The thing seemed to palpitate at regular and rhythmic intervals beneath the eyes of the observers, like a living entity; and in places there were queerly shaped nodes or attachments on the stem, whose purpose no one could imagine.

Gaillard called the attention of Stilton to the strange throbbing that was noticeable in the plant; a throbbing which seemed to communicate itself even to the hundred-foot leaves, so that they trembled like plumes.

"Humph!" said Stilton, shaking his head with an air of mingled disbelief and disgust. "That palpitation is altogether impossible. There must be something wrong with our eyes—some disturbance of focus brought on by the velocity of our voyage, perhaps. Either that, or there is some peculiar refractive quality in the atmosphere, which gives the appearance of movement to stable objects."

Gaillard refrained from calling his attention to the fact that

this imputed phenomenon of visual disorder or aerial refraction was confined in its application entirely to the plant and did not extend its range to the bordering landscape.

Soon after this, the vessel came to an enormous branching of the plant; and the earth-men discovered that the stalk they had been following was merely one of three that ramified from a vaster stem to intersect the boggy soil at widely divergent angles and vanish athwart opposing horizons. The junction was marked by a mountainous double node that bore a bizarre likeness to human hips. Here the throbbing was stronger and more perceptible than ever; and odd veinings and mottlings of a reddish color were visible on the pale surface of the stem.

The savants became more and more excited by the unexampled magnitude and singular characteristics of this remarkable growth. But revelations of a still more extraordinary nature were in store. After poising a moment above the monstrous joint, the vessel flew on at a higher elevation with increased speed, along the main stem, which extended for an incalculable distance into the occident of Mars. It revealed fresh ramifications at variable intervals, and growing ever larger and more luxuriant as it penetrated marshy regions which were doubtless the residual ooze of a sunken sea.

"My God! the thing must surround the entire planet," said one of the reporters in an awed voice.

"It looks that way," Gaillard assented gravely. "We must be travelling almost in a line with the equator; and we have already followed the plant for hundreds of miles. From what we have seen, it would seem that the Martian 'canals' are merely its branchings; and perhaps the areas mapped as 'seas' by astronomers are masses of its foliage."

"I can't understand it," grumbled Stilton. "The dammed thing is utterly contrary to science, and against nature—it oughtn't to exist in any rational or conceivable cosmos."

"Well," said Gaillard, a little tartly, "it does exist; and I don't see how you are going to get away from it. Apparently, too, it is the only vegetable form on the planet; at least, so far, we have failed to find anything else of the sort. After all, why shouldn't the floral life of Mars be concentrated in a single type? And why shouldn't there be just one example of that type? It shows a marvellous economy on the part of nature. There is no reason at all for assuming that the vegetable or even the animal kingdoms on other worlds would exhibit the same fission and multiplicity that are shown on earth."

Stilton, as he listened to this unorthodox argument, glared at Gaillard like a Mohammedan at some errant infidel, but was either too angry or too disgusted for further speech.

The attention of the scientists was now drawn to a greenish area along the line of their flight, covering many square miles. Here, they saw that the main stem had put out a multitude of tendrils, whose foliage hid the underlying soil like a thick forest. Even as Gaillard had postulated, the origin of the sea-like areas on Mars was now explained.

Forty or fifty miles beyond this mass of foliation, they came to another that was even more extensive. The vessel soared to a great height, and they looked down on the realm-wide expanse of leafage. In its middle they discerned a circular node, leagues in extent, and rising like a rounded alp, from which emanated in all directions the planet-circling stems of the weird growth. Not only the size, but also certain features of the immense node, were provocative of utter dumbfoundment in the beholders. It was like the head of some gargantuan cuttle-fish; and the stalks that ran away on all sides were suggestive of tentacles. And, strangest of all, the men descried in the center of the head two enormous masses, clear and lucent like water, which combined the size of lakes with the form and appearance of optic organs!

The whole plant palpitated like a breathing bosom; and the awe with which the involuntary explorers surveyed it was incommunicable by human words. All were compelled to recognize that even aside from its unparalleled proportions and habit of growth, the thing was in no sense alliable with any mundane botanic genera. And to Gaillard, as well as to others, the thought occurred that it was a sentient organism, and that the throbbing mass on which they now gazed was the brain or central ganglion of its unknown nervous system.

The vast eyes, holding the sunlight like colossal dew-drops, seemed to return their scrutiny with an unreadable and superhuman intelligence; and Gaillard was obsessed by the feeling that preternatural knowledge and wisdom bordering upon omniscience were hidden in those hyaline depths.

The vessel began to descend, and settled vertically down in a sort of valley close to the mountainous head, where the foliation of two departing stems had left a patch of clear land. It was like a forest glade, with impenetrable woods on three sides, and a high crag on the fourth. Here, for the first time during the experience of its occupants, the flier came to rest on the soil of Mars; floating gently down without jar or vibration; and almost immediately after its landing, the valves of the main port unfolded, and the metal stairway descended to the ground, in obvious readiness to disembark the human passengers.

One by one, some with caution and timidity, others with adventuresome eagerness, the men filed out of the vessel and started to inspect their surroundings. They found that the Martian air differed little if at all from that which they had been breathing in the space-flier; and at that hour, with the sun still pouring into the strange valley from the west, the temperature was moderately warm.

It was an outré and fantastic scene; and the details were unlike

those of any tellurian landscape. Underfoot was a soft, resilient soil, like a moist loess, wholly devoid of grass, lichens, fungi or any minor plant-forms. The foliage of the mammoth vine, with horizontal fronds of a baroque type, feathery and voluminous, hung about the glade to an altitudinous height like that of ancient evergreens, and quivered in the windless air with the pulsation of the stems.

Close at hand there rose the vast, flesh-colored wall of the central plant-head, which sloped upward like a hill toward the hidden eyes and was no doubt deeply embedded and rooted in the Martian soil. Stepping close to the living mass, the earthmen saw that its surface was netted with millions of wrinkle-like reticulations, and was filled with great pores resembling those of animal skin beneath some extra-powerful microscope. They conducted their inspection in an awe-struck silence; and for some time no one felt able to voice the extraordinary conclusions to which most of them had now been driven.

The emotions of Gaillard were almost religious as he contemplated the scarce-imaginable amplitude of this ultra-terrene life-form, which seemed to him to exhibit attributes nearer to those of divinity than he had found in any other manifestation of the vital principle.

In it, he saw the combined apotheosis of the animal and the vegetable. The thing was so perfect and complete and all-sufficing, so independent of lesser life in its world-enmeshing growth. It poured forth the sense of aeonian longevity, perhaps of immortality. And to what arcanic and cosmic consciousness might it not have attained during the cycles of its development! What supernormal senses and faculties might it not possess! What powers and potentialities beyond the achievement of more limited, more finite forms!

In a lesser degree, many of his companions were aware of simi-

lar feeling. Almost, in the presence of this portentous and sublime anomaly, they forgot the unsolved enigma of the space-vessel and their voyage across the heretofore inbridged immensities. But Stilton and his brother-conservatives were highly scandalized by the inexplicable nature of it all; and if they had been religiously minded, they would have expressed their sense of violation and outrage by saying that the monstrous plant, as well as the unexampled events in which they had taken an unwilling part, were tainted with the most grievous heresy and flagrant blasphemy.

Gresham, who had been eyeing his surroundings with a pompous and puzzled solemnity, was the first to break the silence.

"I wonder where the local Government hangs out?" he queried. "Who the hell is in power here anyway? Hey, Mr. Gaillard, you astronomers know a lot about Mars. Ain't there a U. S. Consulate somewhere in this god-forsaken hole?"

Gaillard was compelled to inform him that there was no consular service on Mars, and also that the form of government on that planet, as well as its official location, was still an open problem.

"However," he went on, "I shouldn't be surprised to learn that we are now in the presence of the sole and supreme ruler of the Martian realms."

"Huh! I don't see anyone," grunted Gresham with a troubled frown, as he surveyed the quivering masses of foliage and the alp-like head of the great plant. The import of Gaillard's observation was too far beyond his intellectual orbit.

Gaillard had been inspecting the flesh-tinted wall of the head with supreme and fascinated interest. At some distance, to one side, he perceived certain peculiar outgrowths, either shrunken or vestigial, like drooping and flaccid horns. They were large as a man's body, and might at some time have been much larger. It

seemed as if the plant had put them forth for some unknown purpose, and had allowed them to wither when the purpose had been accomplished. They still retained an uncanny suggestion of semi-human parts and members, of strange appendages, half arms and half tentacles, as if they had been modelled from some exemplar of undiscovered Martian animal life.

Just below them, on the ground, Gaillard noticed a litter of queer metallic tools, with rough sheets and formless ingots of the same coppery material from which the space-flier had been constructed.

Somehow, the spot suggested an abandoned ship-yard; though there were no scaffoldings such as would ordinarily be used in the building of a vessel. An odd inkling of the truth arose in Gaillard's mind as he surveyed the metal remnants, but he was too thoroughly bemused and overawed by the wonder of all that had occurred, as well as by all he had ascertained or surmised, to communicate his inferences to the other savants.

In the meanwhile the entire party had wandered about the glade, which comprised an area of several hundred yards. One of the astronomers, Philip Colton, who had made a side-line of botany, was examining the serried foliage of the super-gigantic creepers with a mingling of utmost interest and perplexity. The fronds or branches were lined with pinnate needles covered by a long, silk pubescence; and each of these needles was four feet in length by three or four inches in thickness, possibly with a hollow and tubular structure. The fronds grew in level array from the main creeper, filling the air like a horizontal forest, and reaching to the very ground in close, imbricated order.

Colton took a jack-knife from his pocket and tried to cut a section from one of the pinnate leaves. At the first touch of the keen blade, the whole frond recoiled violently beyond his reach; and

then swinging back, it dealt him a tremendous blow which stretched him on the ground and hurled the knife from his fingers to a considerable distance.

If it had not been for the lesser gravity of Mars, he would have been severely injured by the fall. As it was, he lay bruised and breathless, staring with ludicrous surprise at the great frond, which had resumed its former position among its fellows, and now displayed no other movement than the singular trembling due to the rhythmic palpitation of the stem to which it was attached.

Colton's discomfiture had been noticed by his confreres; and all at once, as if their tongues had been loosed by this happening, a babel of discussion arose among them. It was no longer possible for anyone to doubt the animate or half-animate nature of the growth; and even the outraged and ireful Stilton, who considered that the most sacred laws of scientific probity were being violated, was driven to concede the presence of a biologic riddle not to be explained in terms of orthodox morphology.

Gaillard, who did not care to take any great part in this discussion, preferring his own thoughts and conjectures, continued to watch the throbbing growth. He stood a little apart from the others, and nearer than they to the fleshy and multiporous slope of the huge head; and all at once, as he watched, he saw the sprouting of what appeared to be a new tendril from the surface, at a distance of about four feet above the ground.

The thing grew like something in a slow moving-picture, lengthening out and swelling visibly, with a bulbous knob at the end. This knob soon became a large, faintly convoluted mass, whose outlines puzzled and tantalized Gaillard with their intimation of something he had once seen but could not now remember. There was a bizarre hint of nascent limbs and members, which soon become more definite; and then, with a sort of shock, he saw that the thing resembled a human foetus!

His involuntary exclamation of amazement drew others; and soon the whole delegation was grouped about him, watching the incredible development of the new growth with bated breath. The thing had put forth two well-formed legs, which now rested on the ground, supporting with their five-toed feet the upright body, on which the human head and arms were fully evolved, though they had not yet attained adult size.

The process continued; and simultaneously, a sort of woolly floss began to appear around the trunk, arms and legs, like the rapid spinning of some enormous cocoon. The hands and neck were bare; but the feet were covered with a different material, which took on the appearance of green leather. When the floss thickened and darkened to an iron-grey, and assumed quite modish outlines, it became obvious that the figure was being clothed in garments such as were worn by the earth-men, probably in deference to human ideas of modesty.

The thing was unbelievable; and stranger and more incredible than all else was the resemblance which Gaillard and his companions began to note in the face of the still growing figure. Gaillard felt as if he were looking into a mirror; for in all essential details the face was his own! The garments and shoes were faithful replicas of those worn by himself; and every limb and part of this outré being, even to the finger-tips, was proportioned like his!

The scientists saw that the process of growth was apparently complete. The figure stood with shut eyes and a somewhat blank and expressionless look on its features, like that of a man who has not yet awakened from slumber. It was still attached by a thick tendril to the breathing, mountainous node; and this tendril issued from the base of the brain, like an oddly misplaced umbilical cord.

The figure opened its eyes and stared at Gaillard with a long, level, enigmatic gaze that deepened his sense of shock and stupefaction. He sustained this gaze with the weirdest feeling imagi-

nable—the feeling that he was confronted by his alter ego, by a *Doppelgänger* in which was also the soul or intellect of some alien and vaster entity. In the regard of the cryptic eyes, he felt the same profound and sublime mystery that had looked out from the lake-sized orbs of shining dew or crystal in the plant-head.

The figure raised its right hand and seemed to beckon to him. Gaillard went slowly forward till he and his miraculous double stood face to face. Then the strange being placed its hand on his brow; and it seemed to Gaillard that a mesmeric spell was laid upon him from that moment. Almost without his own volition, for a purpose he was not yet permitted to understand, he began to speak; and the figure, imitating his every tone and cadence, repeated the words after him.

It was not till many minutes had elapsed, that Gaillard realized the true bearing and significance of this remarkable colloquy. Then with a start of clear consciousness, he knew that he was giving the figure lessons in the English language! He was pouring forth in a fluent, uninterrupted flood the main vocabulary of the tongue, together with its grammatical rules. And somehow, by a miracle of super-intellect, all that he said was being comprehended and remembered by his interlocutor.

Hours must have gone by during this process; and the Martian sun was now dipping toward the serrate walls of foliage. Dazed and exhausted, Gaillard realized that the long lesson was over; for the being removed its hand from his brow and addressed him in scholarly, well-modulated English:

"Thank you. I have learned all that I need to know for the purposes of linguistic communication. If you and your confreres will now attend me, I shall explain all that has mystified you, and declare the reasons for which you have been brought from your own world to the shores of a foreign planet."

Like men in a dream, barely crediting the fantastic evidence of

their senses and yet unable to refute or repudiate it, the earthmen listened while Gaillard's amazing double continued:

"The being through whom I speak, made in the likeness of one of your own party, is a mere special organ which I have developed so that I could communicate with you. I, the informing entity, who combine in myself the utmost genius and energy of those two divisions of life which are known to you as the plant and the animal—I, who possess the virtual omniety and immortality of a god, have had no need of articulate speech or formal language at any previous time in my existence. But since I include in myself all potentialities of evolution, together with mental powers that verge upon omniscience, I have had no difficulty whatever in acquiring this new faculty.

"It was I who constructed, with other special organs that I had put forth for this purpose, the space-flier that descended upon your planet and then returned to me a delegation, most of whom, I have surmised, would represent the scientific fraternities of mankind. The building of the flier, and its mode of control, will be made plain when I tell you that I am the master of many cosmic forces beyond the rays and energies known to tellurian savants. These forces I can draw from the air, the soil or the ether at will, or can even summon from remote stars and nebulae.

"The space-vessel was wrought from metal which I had integrated from molecules floating at random through the atmosphere; and I used the solar rays in concentrated form to create the temperature at which these metals were fused into a single sheet. The power used in propelling and guiding the vessel is a sort of super-electric energy whose exact nature I shall not elucidate, other than to say that it is associated with the basic force of gravity, and also with certain radiant properties of the interstellar ether not detectible by any instruments which you possess. I established in the flier the gravitation of Mars, and supplied it with

Martian air and water, and also with chemically created foodstuffs, in order to accustom you during your voyage to the conditions that prevail on Mars.

"I am, as you may have already surmised, the sole inhabitant of this world. I could multiply myself if necessary; but so far, for reasons which you will soon apprehend, I have not felt that this would be desirable. Being complete and perfect in myself, I have had no need of companionship with other entities; and long ago, for my own comfort and security, I was compelled to extirpate certain rival plant-forms, and also certain animals who resembled slightly the mankind of your world; and who, in the course of their evolution, were becoming troublesome and even dangerous to me.

"With my two great eyes, which possess an optic magnifying power beyond that of your strongest telescopes, I have studied Earth and the other planets during the Martian nights, and have learned much regarding the conditions that exist upon each. The life of your world, your history, and the state of your civilization have been in many ways an open book to me; and I have also formed an accurate idea of the geological, faunal and floral phenomena of your globe. I understand your imperfections, your social injustice and maladjustment, and the manifold disease and misery to which you are liable, owing to the dissonant, multiple entities into which the expression of your life-principle has been subdivided.

"From all such evils and error, I am exempt. I have attained to well-nigh absolute knowledge and masterdom; and there is no longer anything in the universe for me to fear, aside from the inevitable process of dehydration and dessication which Mars is slowly undergoing, like all other aging planets.

"This process I am unable to retard, except in a limited and partial manner; and I have already been compelled to tap the artesian

waters of the planet in many places. I could live upon sunlight and air alone; but water is necessary to maintain the alimental properties of the atmosphere; and without it, my immortality would fail in the course of time; my giant stems would shrink and shrivel; and my vast innumerable leaves would grow sere for want of the vital humor.

"Your world is still young, with superabundant seas and streams and a moisture-laden air. You have more than is requisite of the element which I lack; and I have brought you here, as representative members of mankind, to propose an exchange which cannot be anything but beneficial to you as well as to myself.

"In return for a modicum of the water of your world, I will offer you the secrets of eternal life and infinite energy, and will teach you to overcome your social imperfections and to master wholly your planetary environment. Because of my great size, my stems and tendrils which girdle the Martian equator and reach even to the poles, it would be impossible for me to leave my natal world; but I will teach you how to colonize the other planets and explore the universe beyond. For these various ends, I suggest the making of an intermundane treaty and a permanent alliance between myself and the peoples of Earth.

"Consider well what I offer you; for the opportunity is without example or parallel. In relation to men, I am like a god in comparison with insects. The benefits which I can confer upon you are inestimable; and in return I ask only that you establish on Earth, under my instruction, certain transmitting stations using a superpotent wave-length, by means of which the essential elements of sea-water, minus the undesirable saline properties, can be teleported to Mars. The amount thus abstracted will make little or no difference in your tide-levels or in the humidity of your air; but for me, it will mean an assurance of everlasting life."

The figure ended its peroration, and stood regarding the earthmen in polite and somewhat inscrutable silence. It waited for their answer.

As might have been expected, the emotions with which the delegation-members had heard this singular address were far from unanimous in their tenor. All the men were beyond mere surprise or astonishment, for miracle had been piled upon miracle till their brains were benumbed with wonder; and they had reached the point where they took the creation of a human figure and its endowment with human utterance wholly for granted. But the proposal made by the plant-entity through its man-like organ was another matter, and it played upon varying chords in the minds of the scientists, the reporters, the Mayor, and the Chief of Police.

Gaillard, who felt himself wholly in accord with this proposition, and more and more thoroughly *en rapport* with the Martian entity, wished to accede at once and to pledge his own support and that of his fellows to a furthering of the suggested treaty and plan of exchange. He was forced to point out to the Martian that the delegation, even if single-minded in its consent, was not empowered to represent the peoples of Earth in forming the projected alliance; that the most it could do would be to lay the offer before the Government of the U.S. and of other terrestrial realms.

Half the scientists, after some deliberation, announced themselves as being in favor of the plan and willing to promote it to the utmost of their ability. The three reporters were also willing to do the same; and they promised, perhaps rashly, that the influence of the world-press would be added to that of the renowned savants.

Stilton and the other dogmatists of the party, however, were emphatically and even rapidly opposed, and declined to consider the Martian's offer for an instant. Any treaty or alliance of the sort, they maintained, would be highly undesirable and im-

proper. It would never do for the nations of Earth to involve themselves in an entanglement of such questionable nature, or to hold commerce of any sort with a being such as the plant-monster, which had no rightful biologic status. It was unthinkable that orthodox and sound-minded scientists should lend their advocacy to anything so dubious. They felt too that there was a savor of deception and trickery about the whole business; and at any rate it was too irregular to be countenanced, or even to be considered with anything but reprehension.

The schism among the savants was rendered final by a hot argument, in which Stilton roundly denounced Gaillard and the other pro-Martians as virtual traitors to humanity, and intellectual Bolshevists whose ideas were dangerous to the integrity of human thought. Gresham and Polson were on the side of mental law and order, being professionally conservative; and thus the party was about evenly divided between those who favored accepting the Martian's offer, and those who spurned it with more or less suspicion and indignation.

During the course of this vehement dispute, the sun had fallen behind the high ramparts of foliage, and an icy chill, such as might well be looked for in a semi-desolate world with attenuating air, had already touched the pale rose twilight. The scientists began to shiver; and their thoughts were distracted from the problem they had been debating by the physical discomfort of which they were increasingly conscious.

They heard the voice of the strange manikin in the dusk:

"I can offer you a choice of shelters for the night and also for the duration of your stay on Mars. You will find the space-flier well-lighted and warmed, with all the facilities which you may require. Also, I can offer you another hospitality.

Look beneath my foliage, a little to your right, where I am now preparing a shelter no less commodious and comfortable than the

vessel—a shelter which will help to give you an idea of my varied powers and potentialities."

The earth-men saw that the flier was brilliantly illuminated, pouring out a gorgeous amethystine radiance from its violet ports. Then, beneath the foliage close at hand, they perceived another and stranger luminosity which seemed to be emitted, like some sort of radio-active or noctilucent glow, by the great leaves themselves.

Even where they were standing, they felt a balmy warmth that began to temper the frigid air; and stepping toward the source of these phenomena, they found that the crowded leaves had lifted and arched themselves into a roomy alcove. The ground beneath was lined with a fabric-like substance of soft hues, deep and elastic underfoot, like a fine mattress. Ewers filled with liquids and platters of food-stuffs were disposed on low tables; and the air in the alcove was gentle as that of the spring night in a subtropic land.

Gaillard and the other pro Martians, filled with profound awe and wonder, were ready to avail themselves at once of the shelter of this thaumaturgic hostelry. But the anti-Martians would have none of it, regarding it as the workmanship of the devil. Suffering keenly from the cold, with chattering teeth and shivering limbs, they promenaded the open glade for some time, and at last were driven to seek the hospitable port of the space-flier, thinking it the lesser of two evils by some queer twist of logic.

The others, after eating and drinking from the mysteriously provided tables, laid themselves down on the mattress-like fabrics. They found themselves greatly refreshed by the liquid in the ewers, which was not water but some kind of roseate, aromatic wine. The food, a literal manna, was more agreeably flavored than that of which they had partaken during their voyage in the space-vessel.

In the nerve-wrought and highly excited state that was consequent upon their experiences, none of them had expected to sleep. The unfamiliar air, the altered gravity, the unknown radiations of the exotic soul, as well as their unprecedented journey and the miraculous discoveries and revelations of the day, were all profoundly upsetting and conducive to a severe disequilibration of mind and body.

However, Gaillard and his companions fell into a deep and dreamless slumber as soon as they had laid themselves down. Perhaps the liquid and solid refreshments which they had taken may have conduced to this; or perhaps there was some narcotic or mesmeric influence in the air, falling from the vast leaves or proceeding from the brain of the plant-lord.

The anti-Martians did not fare so well in this respect, and their slumber was restless and broken. Most of them had touched the proffered viands in the space-flier very sparingly; and Stilton, in particular, had refused to eat or drink at all. Doubtless, too, their antagonistic frame of mind was such as to make them more resistant to the hypnotic power of the plant, if such were being exerted. At any rate, they did not share in the benefits conferred upon the others.

A little before dawn, when Mars was still shrouded in crepuscular gloom but slightly lightened by the two small moons, Phobos and Deimos, Stilton arose from the soft couch on which he had tossed in night-long torment, and began to experiment once more, undeterred by his previous failure and discomfiture, with the mechanical controls of the vessel.

To his surprise, he found that the odd-shaped keys were no longer resistant to his fingers. He could move and arrange them at will; and he soon discovered the principle of their working and was able to leviate and steer the flier.

His confreres had now joined him, summoned by his shout of

triumph. All were wide-awake, and jubilant with the wild hope of escaping from Mars and the jurisdiction of the plant-monster. Thrilling with this hope, and fearing every moment that the Martian would re-assert its esoteric control of the mechanism, they rose unhindered from the darkling glade to the alien skies and headed toward the brilliant green orb of Earth, descried among the unfamiliar constellations.

Looking back, they saw the vast eyes of the Martian watching them weirdly from the gloom, like pools of clear and bluish phosphorescence; and they shuddered with the dread of being recalled and re-captured. But, for some inscrutable reason, they were permitted to maintain their earthward course without interference.

However, the voyage was fraught with a certain amount of disaster; and Stilton's clumsy pilotage hardly formed an ample substitute for the half-divine knowledge and skill of the Martian. More than once, the vessel collided with meteors; none of which, fortunately, were heavy enough to penetrate its hull. And when, after many hours, they approached the earth, Stilton failed to secure the proper degree of deceleration. The flier fell with terrible precipitancy and was saved from destruction only by dropping into the South Atlantic. The jarred mechanism was rendered unworkable by the fall, and most of the occupants were severely bruised and stunned.

After floating at random for days, the coppery bulk was sighted by a northward-going liner and was towed to port in Lisbon. Here the scientists abandoned it, and made their way back to America, after detailing their adventures to representatives of the world-press, and issuing a solemn warning to all the world-peoples against the subversive designs and infamous proposals of the ultra-planetary monster.

The sensation created by their return and by the news they

brought was tremendous. A tide of profound alarm and panic, due in part to the immemorial human aversion toward the unknown, swept immediately upon the nations; and immense, formless, exaggerated fears were bred like shadowy hydras in the dark minds of men.

Stilton and his fellow-conservatives continued to foster these fears, and to create with their pronouncements a globe-wide wave of anti-Martian prejudice, of blind opposition and dogmatic animosity. They enlisted on their side as many of the scientific fraternity as they could; that is to say, all those who were minded like themselves, as well as others overawed or subdued by the pressure of authority. They sought also, with much success, to marshal the political powers of the world in a strong league that would ensure the repudiation of any further offers of alliance from the Martian.

In all this gathering of inimical forces, this regimenting of earthly conservation and insularity and ignorance, the religious factor, as was inevitable, soon asserted itself. The claim to divine knowledge and power made by the Martian, was seized upon by all the various mundane hierarchies, by Christian and Muhammadan, by Buddhist and Parsee and Voodoist alike, as forming a supremely heinous blasphemy. The impiety of such claims, and the menace of a non-anthropomorphic god and type of worship that might be introduced on earth, could not be tolerated for a moment. Khalif and Pope, lama and imaum, parson and mahatma, all made common cause against this ultra-terrestrial invader.

Also, the reigning political powers felt that there might be something Bolshevistic behind the offer of the Martian to promote an Utopian state of society on earth. And the financial, commercial, and manufacturing interests likewise thought that it might imply a threat to their welfare or stability. In short, every

branch of human life and activity was well represented in the anti-Martian movement.

In the interim, on Mars, Gaillard and his companions had awaken from their sleep to find that the luminous glow of the arching leaves had given place to the ardent gold of morn. They discovered that they could venture forth with comfort from the alcove; for the air of the glade without had grown swiftly warm beneath the rising sun.

Even before they had noticed the absence of the coppery flier, they were apprised of its departure by the man-organ of the great plant. This being, unlike its human prototypes, was exempt from fatigue; and it had remained standing or reclining all night against the fleshy wall to which it was attached. It now addressed the earth-men thus:

"For reasons of my own, I have made no attempt to prevent the flight of your companions, who with their blindly hostile attitude, would be worse than useless to me, and whose presence could only hinder the rapport which should exist between you and myself. They will reach the earth, and will try to warn its peoples against me and to poison their minds against my beneficent offer. Such an outcome, alas, cannot be avoided, even if I were to bring them back to Mars or divert their flight by means of my control and send them speeding forever through the void beyond the worlds. I perceive that there is much ignorance and dogmatism and blind self-interest to be overcome, before the excelling light which I proffer can illumine the darkness of earthly minds.

"After I have kept you here for a few days, and have instructed you thoroughly in the secrets of my transcendent wisdom, and have imbued you with surprising powers that will serve to demonstrate my omnivalent superiority to the nations of Earth, I shall send you back to Earth as my ambassadors, and though you will meet with much opposition from your fellows, my cause will pre-

vail in the end, beneath the infallible support of truth and science."

Gaillard and the others received this communication as well as the many that followed it, with supreme respect and semi-religious reverence. More and more they became convinced that they stood in the presence of a higher and ampler entity than man; that the intellect which thus discoursed to them through the medium of a human form was well-nigh inexhaustible in its range and depth, and possessed many characteristics of infinitude and more than one attribute of deity.

Agnostic though most of them were by nature or training, they began to accord a certain worship to this amazing plant-lord; and they listened with an attitude of complete submission if not of abjection, to the out-pourings of cycle-gathered lore, and immortal secrets of cosmic law and life and energy, in which the great being proceeded to instruct them.

The illumination thus accorded them was both simple and esoteric. The plant-lord began by dwelling at some length upon the monistic nature of all phenomena, of matter, light, color, sound, electricity, gravity, and all other forms of irradiation, as well as time and space; which, it said, were only the various perceptual manifestations of a single underlying principle or substance.

The listeners were then taught the evocation and control, by quite rudimentary chemical media, of many forces and rates of energy that had hitherto, lain beyond the detection of human senses or instruments. They were taught also the terrific power obtainable by refracting with certain sensitized elements the ultra-violet and infra-red rays of the spectrum; which, in a highly concentrated form, could be used for the disintegration and rebuilding of the molecules of matter.

They learned how to make engines that emitted beams of destruction and transmutation; and how to employ these unknown

beams, more potent even than the so-called "cosmic rays," in the renewal of human tissues and the conquest of disease and old age.

Simultaneously with this tuition, the plant-lord carried on the building of a new space-car, in which the earth-men were to return to their own planet and preach the Martian evangel. The construction of this car, whose plates and girders seemed to materialize out of the void air before their very gaze, was a practical lesson in the use of arcanic natural forces. Atoms that would form the requisite alloys were brought together from space by the play of invisible magnetic beams, were fused by concentrated solar heat in a specially refractive zone of atmosphere, and were then moulded into the desired form as readily as the bottle that shapes itself from the pipe of the glass-blower.

Equipped with this new knowledge and potential masterdom, with a cargo of astounding mechanism and devices made for their use by the plant-lord, the pro-Martians finally embarked on their earthward voyage.

A week after the abduction of the thirty-five earth-men from the stadium at Berkeley, the space-car containing the Martian's proselytes landed at noon in this same stadium. Beneath the infinitely skilful and easy control of the far-off plant-being, it came down without accident, lightly as a bird; and as soon as the news of its arrival had spread, it was surrounded by a great throng, in which the motives of hostility and curiosity were almost equally paramount.

Through the denunciation of the dogmatists led by Stilton, the savants and the three reporters beneath the leadership of Gaillard had been internationally outlawed before their arrival. It was expected that they would return sooner or later through the machinations of the plant-lord; and a special ruling that forbade them to land on terrene soil, under penalty of imprisonment, had been made by all the Governments.

Ignorant of this, and ignorant also of how wide-spread and virulent was the prejudice against them, they opened the vessel's port and stood in readiness to emerge.

Gaillard, going first, paused at the head of the metal stairway, and something seemed to arrest him as he looked down on the milling faces of the mob that had gathered with incredible swiftness. He saw enmity, fear, hatred, suspicion, in many of these faces; and in others a gaping and zany-like inquisitiveness, such as might be shown before the freaks of some travelling circus. A small corps of policemen, elbowing and thrusting the rabble aside with officious rudeness, was pushing toward the front; and cries of derision and hatred, gathering by two and threes and uniting to a rough roar, were now hurled at the occupants of the car.

"Damn the pro-Martians! Down with the dirty traitors! Hang the — — — dogs!"

An overripe tomato, large and dripping, sailed toward Gaillard and splashed on the steps at his feet. Hisses and hoots and cat-calls added to the roaring bedlam, but above it all, he and his comrades heard a quiet voice that spoke within the car; the voice of the Martian, borne across inestimable miles of ether:

"Beware, and defer your landing. Resign yourselves to my guidance, and all will be well."

Gaillard stepped back as he heard this minatory voice, and the valvular port closed quickly behind the folded stairs, just as the policemen who had come to arrest the vessel's occupants broke from the forefront of the throng.

Peering out on those hateful faces, Gaillard and his brother-savants beheld an astounding manifestation of the Martian's power. A wall of violet flame, descending from the remote heavens to the ground, seemed to intervene between the car and the crowd, and the policemen, bruised and breathless but uninjured, were hurled backward as if by a great wave.

This flame, whose color changed to blue and green and yellow and scarlet like a sort of aurora, played for hours about the vessel and rendered it impossible for anyone to approach. Retreating to a respectful distance, awe-struck and terrified, the crowd looked on in silence; and the police waited in vain for a chance to fulfill their commission.

After awhile, the flame became white and misty, and upon it, as upon the bosom of a cloud, a bizarre and mirage-like scene was imprinted, visible alike to the occupants of the car and the throng without. This scene was the Martian landscape in which the central brain of the plant-lord was located; and the crowd gasped with astonishment as it met the gaze of the enormous telescopic eyes, and saw the unending stems and league-wide masses of sempervirent foliage.

Other scenes and demonstrations followed, all of which were calculated to impress upon the throng the wonder-working powers and marvelous faculties of this remote being.

Pictures that illustrated the historic life of the Martian, as well as the various arcanic natural energies subject to its dominion, followed each other in rapid succession. The purpose of the desired alliance with Earth, and the benefits which would accrue thereby to humanity, were also depicted. The divine benignity and wisdom of this puissant being, its superior organic nature, and its vital and scientific supremacy, were made plain to the dullest observer.

Many of those who had come to scoff, or had been prepared to receive the pro-Martians and their evangel with scorn and hate and violence, became converted to the alien cause forthwith by these sublime demonstrations.

However, the more dogmatic scientists, the true "die-hards" as represented by Godfrey Stilton, maintained an adamantine obstructionism, in which they were supported by the officers of law

and government, as well as by the presbyters of the various religions. The world-wide dissidence of opinion which soon resulted, became the cause of many civil wars or revolution, and, in one or two cases, ended in actual warfare between nations.

Numerous efforts were made to apprehend or destroy the Martian space-car, which, beneath the guidance of its ultra-planetary master, appeared in many localities all over the world, descending suddenly from the stratosphere to perform incredible scientific miracles before the eyes of astonished multitudes. In all quarters of the globe, the mirage-like pictures were flashed on the screen of cloudy fire, and more and more people went over to the new cause.

Bombing planes pursued the vessel and sought to drop their deadly freight upon it, but without success; for whenever the car was endangered, the auroral flames intervened, deflecting and hurling back the exploded bombs, often to the detriment of their launchers.

Gaillard and his confreres, with leonine boldness, emerged many times from the car, to display before crowds or selected bodies of savants the marvellous inventions and chemical thaumaturgies with which they had been endowed by the Martian. Everywhere the police sought to arrest them, maddened mobs endeavored to do them violence, armed regiments tried to surround them and cut them off from the car. But with an adroitness that seemed no less than supernatural, they contrived always to elude capture; and often they discomfited their pursuers by astonishing displays or evocations of esoteric force, temporarily paralyzing the civic officers with unseen rays, or creating about themselves a defensive zone of intolerable heat or trans-arctic cold.

In spite of all these myriad demonstrations, however, the citadels of human ignorance and insularity remained impregnable in many places.

Deeply alrmed by this ultra-terrene menace to their stability, the governments and religious of Earth, as well as the more conservative scientific elements, rallied their resources in a most heroic and determined effort to stem the incursion. Men of all ages, everywhere, were conscripted for service in the national armies; and even women and children were equipped with the deadliest weapons of the age for use against the pro-Martians, who, with their wives and families, were classed as infamous renegades to be hunted down and killed without ceremony like dangerous beasts.

The internecine warfare that ensued was the most terrible in human history. Class became divided against class and family against family. New and more lethal gases than any heretofore employed, were devised by chemists, and whole cities or territories were smothered beneath their agonizing pall. Others were blown into skyward-flying fragments by single charges of superpotent explosives; and war was carried on by planes, by rocketships, by submarine, by dreadnaughts, by tanks, by every vehicle and engine of death or destruction that the homicidal ingenuity of man had yet created.

The pro-Martians, who had won several victories at first, were gravely outnumbered; and the tide of battle began to turn against them. Scattered in many lands, they found themselves unable to unite and organize their forces to the same degree as those of their official opponents. Though Gaillard and his devoted confreres went everywhere in the space-vessel, aiding and abetting the radicals, and instructing them in the use of new weapons and cosmic energies, the party suffered great reverses through the sheer brute preponderance of its foes. More and more it became split up into small bands, hunted and harried, and driven to seek refuge in the wilder or less explored sections of the earth.

In North America, however, a large army of the scientific rebels,

whose families had been compelled to join them, contrived to hold the antagonists at bay for awhile. Surrounded at last, and faced by overwhelming odds, this army was on the verge of a crushing defeat.

Gaillard, hovering above the black, voluminous clouds of the battle, in which poisonous gases mingled with the fumes of high explosives, felt for the first time the encroachment of actual despair. It seemed to him, and also to his companions, that the Martian had abandoned them, disgusted perhaps with the bestial horror of it all and the hateful, purblind narrowness and fanatic nescience of mankind.

Then, through the smoke-smothered air, a fleet of coppery-golden cars descended, to land on the battle-front among the Martian adherents. There were thousands of these cars; and from all the entrance-ports, which had opened simultaneously, there issued the voice of the planet-lord, summoning its supporters and bidding them enter the vessels.

Saved from annihilation by this act of Martian providence, the entire army obeyed the command; and as soon as the last man, woman and child had gone aboard, the ports closed again, and the fleet of space-cars, wheeling in graceful and derisive spirals above the heads of the baffled conservatives, soared from the battle-clouds like a flock of reddish-golden birds and vanished in the noon-tide heavens, led by the car containing Gaillard's party.

At the same time, in all portions of the world where the little bands of heroic radicals had been cut off and threatened with capture or destruction, other cars descended in like manner and carried away the pro-Martians and their families even to the last unit. These vessels joined the main fleet in mid-space; and then all continued their course beneath the mysterious piloting of the plant-lord, flying at super-cosmic velocity through the star-surrounded gulf.

Contrary to the anticipations of the mundane exiles, the vessels were not drawn toward Mars; and it soon became evident that their objective was the planet Venus. The voice of the Martian, speaking athwart the eternal ether, made the following announcement:

"In my infinite wisdom, my supreme foreprescience, I have removed you from the hopeless struggle to establish on Earth the sovereign light and truth which I offer. You alone I have found worthy; and the moiety of mankind, who have refused salvation with hatred and contumely, preferring the natal darkness of death and disease and ignorance in which they were born, must be left henceforward to their inevitable fate.

"You, as my loyal and well-trusted servants, I am sending forth to colonize beneath my tutelage a great continent on the planet Venus, and to found amid the primal exuberance of this new world a super-scientific nation."

The fleet soon approached Venus, and circled the equator for a great distance in the steam-thick atmosphere, through which nothing could be descried other than a hot and over-fuming ocean, close to the boiling-point, which seemed to cover the entire planet. Here, beneath the never-settling sun, intolerable temperatures prevailed everywhere, such as would have parboiled the flesh of a human being exposed directly to the semi-aqueous air. Suffering even in their insulated cars from this terrific heat, the exiles wondered how they were to exist in such a world.

At least, however, their destination came in view and their doubts were resolved. Nearing the nightward side of Venus which is never exposed to daylight, in a latitude where the sun slanted far behind them as over arctic realms, they beheld through thinning vapors an immense tract of land, the sole continent amid the planetary sea. This continent was covered by rich jungles, containing a flora and fauna similar to those of pre-glacial eras on

the earth. Calamites and cycads and fern-plants of unbelievable luxuriance revealed themselves to the earth-men; and they saw everywhere the great, brainless reptiles, the megalosaurs, plesiosaurs, labyrinthodons and pterodactyls of Jurassic times.

Beneath the instruction of the Martian, before landing, they slew these reptiles, incinerating them completely with infra-red beams, so that not even their carcasses would remain to taint the air with putrefactive effluvia. When the whole continent had been cleared of its noxious life, the cars descended; and emerging, the colonists found themselves in a terrain of unequalled fertility, whose very soil seemed to pulsate with primordial vigors, and whose air was rich with ozone and oxygen and nitrogen.

Here the temperature, though still sub-tropic, was agreeable and balmy; and through the use of protective fabrics provided by the Martian, the earth-men soon accustomed themselves to the eternal sunlight and intense ultra-violet radiation. With the superknowledge at their disposal, they were able to combat the unknown, highly pernicious bacteria peculiar to Venus, and even to exterminate such bacteria in the course of time. They became the lords of salubrious climate, dowered with four mild and equable seasons by the slight annual rotation of the planet; but having one eternal day, like the mythic Isles of the Blest beneath a low and undeparting sun.

Beneath the leadership of Gaillard, who remained in close rapport and continual communication with the plant-lord, the great forests were cleared in many places. Cities of lofty and ethereal architecture, lovely as those of some trans-stellar Eden, builded by the use of force-beams, began to rear their graceful turrets and majestic cumuli of domes above the gigantic calamites and ferns.

Through the labors of the terrene exiles, a truly Utopian nation was established, giving allegiance to the plant-lord as to some tutelary deity; a nation devoted to cosmic progress, to scientific

knowledge, to spiritual tolerance and freedom; a happy, law-abiding nation, blest with millenial longevity, and exempt from sorrow and disease and error.

Here, too, on the shores of the Venusian sea, were builded the great transmitters that sent through interplanetary space, in ceaseless waves of electronic radiation, the water required to replenish the dehydrated air and soil of Mars, and thus to ensure for the plant-being a perpetuity of god-like existence.

In the meanwhile, on earth, unknown to Gaillard and his fellow-exiles, who had made no effort to communicate with the abandoned world, an amazing thing had occurred; a final proof of the virtual omnipotence and all-inclusive sapience of the Martian.

In the great vale of Kashmeer, in Northern India, there descended one day from the clear heavens a mile-long seed, flashing like a huge meteor, and terrifying the superstitious Asian peoples, who saw in its fall the portent of some tremendous disaster. The seed rooted itself in this valley; and before its true nature had been ascertained, the supposed meteorite began to sprout and send forth on all sides a multitude of mammoth tendrils which burst immediately into leaf. It covered both the southward plains and the eternal snows and rock of the Hindu Kush and Himalayas with their gigantic verdure.

Soon the Afghan mountaineers could hear the explosion of its leaf-buds amid their passes, echoing like distant thunder; and, at the same time, it rushed like a Juggernaut upon Central India. Spreading in all directions, and growing with the speed of express-trains, the tendrils of the mighty vine proceeded to enmesh the Asian realms. Overshadowing vales, peaks, hills, plateaus, deserts, cities and sea-boards with its titan leaves, it invaded Europe and Africa; and then, bridging Bering Straits, it entered North America and ran southward, ramifying on all sides till the

whole continent, and also South America even to Tierra de Fuego, had been buried beneath the masses of insuperable foliage.

Frantic efforts to stay the progress of the plant were made by armies with bombs and cannon, with lethal sprays and gases; but all in vain. Everywhere humanity was smothered beneath the vast leaves, like those of some omnipresent upas, which emitted a stupefying and narcotic odor that conferred upon all who inhaled it a swift euthanasia.

Soon the plant had netted the whole globe; for the seas offered little or no barrier to its full-grown stems and tendrils. When the process of growth was complete, the anti-Martian moiety of the human race had joined the uncouth monsters of pre-historic time in that limbo of oblivion to which all superseded and out-dated genera have gone. But, through the divine clemency of the plant-lord, the final death that overtook the "die-hards" was no less easy than irresistible.

Stilton and a few of his associates contrived to evade the general doom for awhile by fleeing in a rocket-ship to the Antarctic plateau. Here, as they were congratulating themselves on their escape, they saw far-off on the horizon the rearing of the swift stems, beneath whose foliage the ice and snow appeared to melt away in rushing torrents. These torrents soon became a diluvial sea, in which the last dogmatists were drowned. Only in this way did they elude the euthanasia of the great leaves, which had overtaken all their fellows.

The Maker of Gargoyles

Among the many gargoyles that frowned or leered from the roof of the new-built cathedral of Vyones, two were pre-eminent above the rest by virtue of their fine workmanship and their supreme grotesquery. These two had been wrought by the stone-carver Blaise Reynard, a native of Vyones, who had lately returned from a long sojourn in the cities of Provence, and had secured employment on the cathedral when the three years' task of its construction and ornamentation was well-nigh completed. In view of the wonderful artistry shown by Reynard, it was regretted by Ambrosius, the archbishop, that it had not been possible to commit the execution of all the gargoyles to this delicate and accomplished workman; but other people, with less liberal tastes than Ambrosius, were heard to express a different opinion.

This opinion, perhaps, was tinged by the personal dislike that had been generally felt toward Reynard in Vyones even from his boyhood; and which had been revived with some virulence on his return. Whether rightly or unjustly, his very physiognomy had always marked him out for public disfavor: he was inordinately dark, with hair and beard of a preternatural bluish-black, and slanting, ill-matched eyes that gave him a sinister and cunning air. His taciturn and saturnine ways were such as a superstitious people would identify with necromantic knowledge or complicity; and there were those who covertly accused him of being in league

with Satan; though the accusations were little more than vague, anonymous rumors, even to the end, through lack of veritable evidence.

However, the people who suspected Reynard of diabolic affiliations were wont for awhile to instance the two gargoyles as sufficient proof. No man, they contended, who was not inspired by the Arch-Enemy, could have carven anything so sheerly evil and malignant, could have embodied so consummately in mere stone the living lineaments of the most demoniacal of all the deadly Sins.

The two gargoyles were perched on opposite corners of a high tower of the cathedral. One was a snarling, murderous, cat-headed monster, with retracted lips revealing formidable fangs, and eyes that glared intolerable hatred from beneath ferine brows. This creature had the claws and wings of a griffin, and seemed as if it were poised in readiness to swoop down on the city of Vyones, like a harpy on its prey. Its companion was a horned satyr, with the vans of some great bat such as might roam the nether caverns, with sharp, clenching talons, and a look of Satanically brooding lust, as if it were gloating above the helpless object of its unclean desire. Both figures were complete, even to the hindquarters, and were not mere conventional adjuncts of the roof. One would have expected them to start at any moment from the stone in which they were mortised.

Ambrosius, a lover of art, had been openly delighted with these creations, because of their high technical merit and their verisimilitude as works of sculpture. But others, including many humbler dignitaries of the Church, were more or less scandalized, and said that the workman had informed these figures with the visible likeness of his own vices, to the glory of Belial rather than of God, and had thus perpetrated a sort of blasphemy. Of course, they admitted, a certain amount of grotesquery was requisite in gargoyles;

but in this case the allowable bounds had been egregiously overpassed.

However, with the completion of the cathedral, and in spite of all this adverse criticism, the high-poised gargoyles of Blaise Reynard, like all other details of the building, were soon taken for granted through mere everyday familiarity; and eventually they were almost forgotten. The scandal of opposition died down, and the stone-carver himself, though the town-folk continued to eye him askance, was able to secure other work through the favor of discriminating patrons. He remained in Vyones; and paid his addresses, albeit without visible success, to a taverner's daughter, one Nicolette Villom, of whom, it was said, he had long been enamored in his own surly and reticent fashion.

But Reynard himself had not forgotten the gargoyles. Often, in passing the superb pile of the cathedral, he would gaze up at them with a secret satisfaction whose cause he could hardly have assigned or delimited. They seemed to retain for him a rare and mystical meaning, to signalize an obscure but pleasurable triumph.

He would have said, if asked for the reason for his satisfaction, that he was proud of a skilful piece of handiwork. He would not have said, and perhaps would not even have known, that in one of the gargoyles he had imprisoned all his festering rancor, all his answering spleen and hatred toward the people of Vyones, who had always hated him; and had set the image of this rancor to peer venomously down for ever from a lofty place. And perhaps he would not even have dreamt that in the second gargoyle he had somehow expressed his own dour and satyr-like passion for the girl Nicolette—a passion that had brought him back to the detested city of his youth after years of wandering; a passion singularly tenacious of one object, and differing in this regard from the ordinary lusts of a nature so brutal as Reynard's.

Always to the stone-cutter, even more than to those who had

criticized and abhorred his productions, the gargoyles were alive, they possessed a vitality and a sentiency of their own. And most of all did they seem to live when the summer drew to an end and the autumn rains had gathered upon Vyones. Then, when the full cathedral gutters poured above the streets, one might have thought that the actual spittle of a foul malevolence, the very slaver of an impure lust, had somehow been mingled with the water that ran in rills from the mouths of the gargoyles.

At that time, in the year of our Lord, 1138, Vyones was the principal town of the province of Averoigne. On two sides the great, shadow-haunted forest, a place of equivocal legends, of *loups-garous* and phantoms, approached to the very walls and flung its umbrage upon them at early forenoon and evening. On the other sides there lay cultivated fields, and gentle streams that meandered among willows or poplars, and roads that ran through an open plain to the high chateaux of noble lords and to regions beyond Averoigne.

The town itself was prosperous, and had never shared in the ill-fame of the bordering forest. It had long been sanctified by the presence of two nunneries and a monastery; and now, with the completion of the long-planned cathedral, it was thought that Vyones would have henceforward the additional protection of a more august holiness; that demon and stryge and incubus would keep their distance from its heaven-favored purlieus with a more meticulous caution than before.

Of course, as in all mediaeval towns, there had been occasional instances of alleged sorcery or demoniacal possession; and, once or twice, the perilous temptations of succubi had made their inroads on the pious virtue of Vyones. But this was nothing more than might be expected, in a world where the Devil and his works were always more or less rampant. No one could possibly have anticipated the reign of infernal horrors that was to make hideous

the latter months of autumn, following the cathedral's erection.

To make the matter even more inexplicable, and more blasphemously dreadful than it would otherwise have been, the first of these horrors occurred in the neighborhood of the cathedral itself and almost beneath its sheltering shadow.

Two men, a respectable clothier named Guillaume Maspier and an equally reputable cooper, one Gerome Mazzal, were returning to their lodgings in the late hours of a November eve, after imbibing both the red and white wines of the countryside in more than one tavern. According to Maspier, who alone survived to tell the tale, they were passing along a street that skirted the cathedral square, and could see the bulk of the great building against the stars, when a flying monster, black as the soot of Abaddon, had descended upon them from the heavens and assailed Gerome Mazzal, beating him down with its heavily flapping wings and seizing him with its inch-long teeth and talons.

Maspier was unable to describe the creature with minuteness, for he had seen it but dimly and partially in the unlit street; and moreover, the fate of his companion, who had fallen to the cobblestones with the black devil snarling and tearing at his throat, had not induced Maspier to linger in that vicinity. He had betaken himself from the scene with all the celerity of which he was capable, and had stopped only at the house of a priest, many streets away, where he had related his adventure between shudderings and hiccuppings.

Armed with holy water and aspergillus, and accompanied by many of the towns-people carrying torches, staves and halberds, the priest was led by Maspier to the place of the horror; and there they had found the body of Mazzal, with fearfully mangled face, and throat and bosom lined with bloody lacerations. The demoniac assailant had flown, and it was not seen or encountered again that night; but those who had beheld its work returned

aghast to their homes, feeling that a creature of nethermost hell had come to visit the city, and perchance to abide therein.

Consternation was rife on the morrow, when the story became generally known; and rites of exorcism against the invading demon were performed by the clergy in all public places and before thresholds. But the sprinkling of holy water and the mumbling of the stated forms were futile; for the evil spirit was still abroad, and its malignity was proved once more, on the night following the ghastly death of Gerome Mazzal.

This time, it claimed two victims, burghers of high probity and some consequence, on whom it descended in a narrow alley, slaying one of them instantaneously, and dragging down the other from behind as he sought to flee. The shrill cries of the helpless men, and the guttural growling of the demon, were heard by people in the houses along the alley; and some, who were hardy enough to peer from their windows, had seen the departure of the infamous assailant, blotting out the autumn stars with the sable and misshapen foulness of its wings, and hovering in execrable menace above the house-tops.

After this, few people would venture abroad at night, unless in case of dire and exigent need; and those who did venture went in armed companies and were all furnished with flambeaux, thinking thus to frighten away the demon, which they adjudged a creature of darkness that would abhor the light and shrink therefrom, through the nature of its kind. But the boldness of this fiend was beyond measure; for it proceeded to attack more than one company of worthy citizens, disregarding the flaring torches that were thrust in its face, or putting them out with the stenchful wind of its wide vans.

Evidently it was a spirit of homicidal hate, for all the people on whom it seized were grievously mangled or torn to numberless shreds by its teeth and talons. Those who saw it, and survived,

were wont to describe it variously and with much ambiguity; but all agreed in attributing to it the head of a ferocious animal and the wings of a monstrous bird. Some, the most learned in demonology, were fain to identify it with Modo, the spirit of murder; and others took it for one of the great lieutenants of Satan, perhaps Amaimon or Alastor, gone mad with exasperation at the impregnable supremacy of Christ in the holy city of Vyones.

The terror that soon prevailed, beneath the widening scope of these Satanical incursions and depredations, was beyond all belief—a clotted, seething, devil-ridden gloom of superstitious obsession, not to be hinted at in modern language. Even by daylight, the Gothic wings of nightmare seemed to brood in underparting oppression above the city; and fear was everywhere, like the foul contagion of some epidemic plague. The inhabitants went their way in prayer and trembling; and the archbishop himself, as well as the subordinate clergy, confessed an inability to cope with the ever-growing horror. An emissary was sent to Rome, to procure water that had been specially sanctified by the Pope. This alone, it was thought, would be efficacious enough to drive away the dreadful visitant.

In the meanwhile, the horror waxed, and mounted to its culmination. One eve, toward the middle of November, the abbot of the local monastery of Cordeliers, who had gone forth to administer extreme unction to a dying friend, was seized by the black devil just as he approached the threshold of his destination, and was slain in the same atrocious manner as the other victims.

To this doubly infamous deed, a scarce-believable blasphemy was soon added. On the very next night, while the torn body of the abbot lay on a rich catafalque in the cathedral, and masses were being said and tapers burnt, the demon invaded the high nave through the open door, extinguished all the candles with one flap of its sooty wings, and dragged down no less than three

of the officiating priests to an unholy death in the darkness.

Every one now felt that a truly formidable assault was being made by the powers of Evil on the Christian probity of Vyones. In the condition of abject terror, of extreme disorder and demoralization that followed upon this new atrocity, there was a deplorable outbreak of human crime, of murder and rapine and thievery, together with covert manifestations of Satanism, and celebrations of the Black Mass attended by many neophytes.

Then, in the midst of all this pandemoniacal fear and confusion, it was rumored that a second devil had been seen in Vyones; that the murderous fiend was accompanied by a spirit of equal deformity and darkness, whose intentions were those of lechery, and which molested none but women. This creature had frightened several dames and demoiselles and maid-servants into a veritable hysteria by peering through their bedroom windows; and had sidled lasciviously, with uncouth mows and grimaces, and grotesque flappings of its bat-shaped wings, toward others who had occasion to fare from house to house across the nocturnal streets.

However, strange to say, there were no authentic instances in which the chastity of any woman had suffered actual harm from this noisome incubus. Many were approached by it, and were terrified immoderately by the hideousness and lustfulness of its demeanor; but no one was ever touched. Even in that time of horror, both spiritual and corporeal, there were those who made a ribald jest of this singular abstention on the part of the demon, and said it was seeking throughout Vyones for some one whom it had not yet found.

The lodgings of Blaise Reynard were separated only by the length of a dark and crooked alley from the tavern kept by Jean Villom, the father of Nicolette. In this tavern, Reynard had been wont to spend his evenings; though his suit was frowned upon by Jean Villom, and had received but scant encouragement from

the girl herself. However, because of his well-filled purse and his almost illimitable capacity for wine, Reynard was tolerated. He came early each night, with the falling of darkness, and would sit in silence hour after hour, staring with hot and sullen eyes at Nicolette, and gulping joylessly the potent vintages of Averoigne. Apart from their desire to retain his custom, the people of the tavern were a little afraid of him, on account of his dubious and semi-sorcerous reputation, and also because of his surly temper. They did not wish to antagonize him more than was necessary.

Like everyone else in Vyones, Reynard had felt the suffocating burden of superstitious terror during those nights when the fiendish marauder was hovering above the town and might descend on the luckless wayfarer at any moment, in any locality. Nothing less urgent and imperative than the obsession of his half-bestial longing for Nicolette could have induced him to traverse after dark the length of the winding alley to the tavern door.

The autumn nights had been moonless. Now, on the evening that followed the desecration of the cathedral itself by the murderous devil, a new-born crescent was lowering its fragile, sanguine-colored horn beyond the house-tops as Reynard went forth from his lodgings at the accustomed hour. He lost sight of its comforting beam in the high-walled and narrow alley, and shivered with dread as he hastened onward through shadows that were dissipated only by the rare and timid ray from some lofty window. It seemed to him, at each turn and angle, that the gloom was curded by the unclean umbrage of Satanic wings, and might reveal in another instant the gleaming of abhorrent eyes ignited by the everlasting coals of the Pit. When he came forth at the alley's end, he saw with a start of fresh panic that the crescent moon was blotted out by a cloud that had the semblance of uncouthly arched and pointed vans.

He reached the tavern with a sense of supreme relief, for he

had begun to feel a distinct intuition that someone or something was following him, unheard and invisible—a presence that seemed to load the dusk with prodigious menace. He entered, and closed the door behind him very quickly, as if he were shutting it in the face of a dread pursuer.

There were few people in the tavern that evening. The girl Nicolette was serving wine to a mercer's assistant, one Raoul Coupain, a personable youth and a newcomer in the neighborhood, and she was laughing with what Reynard considered unseemly gayety at the broad jests and amorous sallies of this Raoul. Jean Villom was discussing in a low voice the latest enormities of the demons with two cronies at a table in the farthest corner, and was drinking fully as much liquor as his customers.

Glowering with jealousy at the presence of Raoul Coupain, whom he suspected of being a favored rival, Reynard seated himself in silence and stared malignly at the flirtatious couple. No one seemed to have noticed his entrance; for Villom went on talking to his cronies without pause or interruption, and Nicolette and her companion were equally oblivious. To his jealous rage, Reynard soon added the resentment of one who feels that he is being deliberately ignored. He began to pound on the table with his heavy fists, to attract attention.

Villom, who had been sitting all the while his back turned, now called out to Nicolette without even troubling to face around on his stool, telling her to serve Reynard. Giving a backward smile at Coupain, she came slowly and with open reluctance to the stonecarver's table.

She was small and buxom, with reddish-gold hair that curled luxuriantly above the short, delicious oval of her face; and she was gowned in a tight-fitting dress of apple-green that revealed the firm, seductive outlines of her hips and bosom. Her air was disdainful and a little cold, for she did not like Reynard and had

taken small pains at any time to conceal her aversion. But to Reynard she was lovelier and more desirable than ever, and he felt a savage impulse to seize her in his arms and carry her bodily away from the tavern before the eyes of Raoul Coupain and her father.

"Bring me a pitcher of La Frenaie," he ordered gruffly, in a voice that betrayed his mingled resentment and desire.

Tossing her head lightly and scornfully, with more glances at Coupain, the girl obeyed. She placed the fierey, blood-dark wine before Reynard without speaking, and then went back to resume her bantering with the mercer's assistant.

Reynard began to drink, and the potent vintage merely served to inflame his smoldering enmity and passion. His eyes became venomous, his curling lips malignant as those of the gargoyles he had carved on the new cathedral. A baleful, primordial anger, like the rage of some morose and thwarted faun, burned within him with its slow red fire; but he strove to repress it, and sat silent and motionless, except for the frequent filling and emptying of his wine-cup.

Raoul Coupain had also consumed a liberal quantity of wine. As a result, he soon became bolder in his love-making, and strove to kiss the hand of Nicolette, who had now seated herself on the bench beside him. The hand was playfully with-held; and then, after its owner had cuffed Raoul very lightly and briskly, was granted to the claimant in a fashion that struck Reynard as being no less than wanton.

Snarling inarticulately, with a mad impulse to rush forward and slay the successful rival with his bare hands, he started to his feet and stepped toward the playful pair. His movement was noted by one of the men in the far corner, who spoke warningly to Villom. The tavern-keeper arose, lurching a little from his potations, and came warily across the room with his eyes on Reynard, ready to interfere in case of violence.

Reynard paused with momentary irresolution, and then went on, half insane with a mounting hatred for them all. He longed to kill Villom and Coupain, to kill the hateful cronies who sat staring from the corner, and then, above their throttled corpses, to ravage with fierce kisses and vehement caresses the shrinking lips and body of Nicolette.

Seeing the approach of the stone-carver, and knowing his evil temper and dark jealousy, Coupain also rose to his feet and plucked stealthily beneath his cloak at the hilt of a little dagger which he carried. In the meanwhile, Jean Villom had interposed his burly bulk between the rivals. For the sake of the tavern's good repute, he wished to prevent the possible brawl.

"Back to your table, stone-cutter," he roared belligerently at Reynard.

Being unarmed, and seeing himself outnumbered, Reynard paused again, though his anger still simmered within him like the contents of a sorcerer's cauldron. With ruddy points of murderous flame in his hollow, slitted eyes, he glared at the three people before him, and saw beyond them, with instinctive rather than conscious awareness, the leaded panes of the tavern window, in whose glass the room was dimly reflected with its glowing tapers, its glimmering tableware, the heads of Coupain and Villom and the girl Nicolette, and his own shadowy face among them.

Strangely, and, it would seem, inconsequently, he remembered at that moment the dark, ambiguous cloud he had seen across the moon, and the insistent feeling of obscure pursuit while he had traversed the alley.

Then, as he still gazed irresolutely at the group before him, and its vague reflection in the glass beyond, there came a thunderous crash, and the panes of the window with their pictured scene were shattered inward in a score of fragments. Ere the litter of falling glass had reached the tavern floor, a swart and monstrous

form flew into the room, with a beating of heavy vans that caused the tapers to flare troublously, and the shadows to dance like a sabbat of misshapen devils. The thing hovered for a moment, and seemed to tower in a great darkness higher than the ceiling above the heads of Reynard and the others as they turned toward it. They saw the malignant burning of its eyes, like coals in the depth of Tartarean pits, and the curling of its hateful lips on the bared teeth that were longer and sharper than serpent-fangs.

Behind it now, another shadowy flying monster came in through the broken window with a loud flapping of its ribbed and pointed wings. There was something lascivious in the very motion of its flight, even as homicidal hatred and malignity were manifest in the flight of the other. Its satyr-like face was twisted in a horrible, never-changing leer, and its lustful eyes were fixed on Nicolette as it hung in air beside the first intruder.

Reynard, as well as the other men, was petrified by a feeling of astonishment and consternation so extreme as almost to preclude terror. Voiceless and motionless, they beheld the demoniac intrusion; and the consternation of Reynard, in particular, was mingled with an element of unspeakable surprise, together with a dreadful recognizance. But the girl Nicolette, with a mad scream of horror, turned and started to flee across the room.

As if her cry had been the one provocation needed, the two demons swooped upon their victims. One, with a ferocious slash of its outstretched claws, tore open the throat of Jean Villom, who fell with a gurgling, blood-choked groan; and then, in the same fashion, it assailed Raoul Coupain. The other, in the meanwhile, had pursued and overtaken the fleeing girl, and had seized her in its bestial forearms, with the ribbed wings enfolding her like a hellish drapery.

The room was filled by a moaning whirlwind, by a chaos of wild cries and tossing, struggling shadows. Reynard heard the

guttural snarling of the murderous monster, muffled by the body of Coupain, whom it was tearing with its teeth; and he heard the lubricous laughter of the incubus, above the shrieks of the hysterically frightened girl. Then the grotesquely flaring tapers went out in a gust of swirling air, and Reynard received a violent blow in the darkness—the blow of some rushing object, perhaps of a passing wing, that was hard and heavy as stone. He fell, and became insensible.

Dully and confusedly, with much effort, Reynard struggled back to consciousness. For a brief interim, he could not remember where he was nor what had happened. He was troubled by the painful throbbing of his head, by the humming of agitated voices about him, by the glaring of many lights and the thronging of many faces when he opened his eyes; and, above all, by the sense of nameless but grievous calamity and uttermost horror that weighed him down from the first dawning of sentiency.

Memory returned to him, laggard and reluctant; and with it, a full awareness of his surroundings and situation. He was lying on the tavern floor, and his own warm, sticky blood was rilling across his face from the wound on his aching head. The long room was half filled with people of the neighborhood, bearing torches and knives and halberds, who had entered and were peering at the corpses of Villom and Coupain, which lay amid pools of wine-diluted blood and the wreckage of the shattered furniture and tableware.

Nicolette, with her green gown in shreds, and her body crushed by the embraces of the demon, was moaning feebly while women crowded about her with ineffectual cries and questions which she could not even hear or understand. The two cronies of Villom, horribly clawed and mangled, were dead beside their over-turned table.

Stupefied with horror, and still dizzy from the blow that had

laid him unconscious, Reynard staggered to his feet, and found himself surrounded at once by inquiring faces and voices. Some of the people were a little suspicious of him, since he was the sole survivor in the tavern, and bore an ill repute, but his replies to their questions soon convinced them that the new crime was wholly the work of the same demons that had plagued Vyones in so monstrous a fashion for weeks past.

Reynard, however, was unable to tell them all that he had seen, or to confess the ultimate sources of his fear and stupefaction. The secret of that which he knew was locked in the seething pit of his tortured and devil-ridden soul.

Somehow, he left the ravaged inn, he pushed his way through the gathering crowd with its terror-muted murmurs, and found himself alone on the midnight streets. Heedless of his own possible peril, and scarcely knowing where he went, he wandered through Vyones for many hours; and somewhile in his wanderings, he came to his own workshop. With no assignable reason for the act, he entered, and re-emerged with a heavy hammer, which he carried with him during his subsequent peregrinations. Then, driven by his awful and unremissive torture, he went on till the pale dawn had touched the spires and the house-tops with a ghostly glimmering.

By a half-conscious compulsion, his steps had led him to the square before the cathedral. Ignoring the amazed verger, who had just opened the doors, he entered and sought a stairway that wound tortuously upward to the tower on which his own gargoyles were ensconced.

In the chill and livid light of sunless morning, he emerged on the roof; and leaning perilously from the verge, he examined the carven figures. He felt no surprise, only the hideous confirmation of a fear too ghastly to be named, when he saw that the teeth and

claws of the malign, cat-headed griffin were stained with darkening blood; and that shreds of apple-green cloth were hanging from the talons of the lustful, bat-winged satyr.

It seemed to Reynard, in the dim ashen light, that a look of unspeakable triumph, of intolerable irony, was imprinted on the face of this latter creature. He stared at it with fearful and agonizing fascination, while impotent rage, abhorrence, and repentance deeper than that of the damned arose within him in a smothering flood. He was hardly aware that he had raised the iron hammer and had struck wildly at the satyr's horned profile, till he heard the sullen, angry clang of impact, and found that he was tottering on the edge of the roof to retain his balance.

The furious blow had merely chipped the features of the gargoyle, and had not wiped away the malignant lust and exultation. Again Reynard raised the heavy hammer.

It fell on empty air; for, even as he struck, the stone-carver felt himself lifted and drawn backward by something that sank into his flesh like many separate knives. He staggered helplessly, his feet slipped, and then he was lying on the granite verge, with his head and shoulders over the dark, deserted street.

Half swooning, and sick with pain, he saw above him the other gargoyle, the claws of whose right foreleg were firmly embedded in his shoulder. They tore deeper, as if with a dreadful clenching. The monster seemed to tower like some fabulous beast above its prey; and he felt himself slipping dizzily across the cathedral gutter, with the gargoyle twisting and turning as if to resume its normal position over the gulf. Its slow, inexorable movement seemed to be part of his vertigo. The very tower was tilting and revolving beneath him in some unnatural nightmare fashion.

Dimly, in a daze of fear and agony, Reynard saw the remorseless tiger-face bending toward him with its horrid teeth laid bare

in an eternal rictus of diabolic hate. Somehow, he had retained the hammer. With an instinctive impulse to defend himself, he struck at the gargoyle, whose cruel features seemed to approach him like something seen in the ultimate madness and distortion of delirium.

Even as he struck, the vertiginous turning movement continued, and he felt the talons dragging him outward on empty air. In his cramped, recumbent position, the blow fell short of the hateful face and came down with a dull clangor on the foreleg whose curving talons were fixed in his shoulder like meat-hooks. The clangor ended in a sharp cracking sound; and the leaning gargoyle vanished from Reynard's vision as he fell. He saw nothing more, except the dark mass of the cathedral tower, that seemed to soar away from him and to rush upward unbelievably in the livid, starless heavens to which the belated sun had not yet risen.

It was the archbishop Ambrosius, on his way to early Mass, who found the shattered body of Reynard lying face downward in the square. Ambrosius crossed himself in startled horror at the sight; and then, when he saw the object that was still clinging to Reynard's shoulder, he repeated the gesture with a more than pious promptness.

He bent down to examine the thing. With the infallible memory of a true art-lover, he recognized it at once. Then, through the same clearness of recollection, he saw that the stone foreleg, whose claws were so deeply buried in Reynard's flesh, had somehow undergone a most unnatural alteration. The paw, as he remembered it, should have been slightly bent and relaxed; but now it was stiffly outthrust and elongated, as if, like the paw of a living limb, it had reached for something, or had dragged a heavy burden with its ferine talons.

The Great God Awto

(Class-room lecture given by the Most Honorable Erru Saggus, Professor of Hamurriquanean Archaeology at the World-University of Toshtush, on the 365th day of the year 5998.)

Males, females, androgynes and neuters of the class in archaeology, you have learned, from my previous lectures, all that is known or inferred concerning the crudely realistic art and literature of the ancient Hamurriquanes. With some difficulty, owing to the fragmentary nature of the extant remains, I have reconstructed for you their bizarre and hideous buildings, their rude mechanisms.

Also, you are now familiar with the unimaginably clumsy, corrupt and inefficient legal and economic systems that prevailed among them, together with the garblings of crass superstition and scant knowledge that bore the sacred names of the sciences. You have listened, not without amusement, to my account of their ridiculous amatory and social customs, and have heard with horror the unutterable tale of their addiction to all manner of violent crimes.

Today I shall speak regarding a matter that throws into even grosser relief the low-grade barbarism, the downright savagery, of this bloody and besotted people.

Needless to say, my lecture will concern their well-nigh universal cult of human sacrifice and self-immolation to the god

Awto: a cult which many of my confreres have tried to associate with the worship of the Heendouan deity, Yokkurnot, or Jukkernot. In this cult, the wild religious fanaticism of the Hamurriquanes, together with the national blood-lust for which they were notorious, found its most congenial and spacious outlet.

If we grant the much-disputed relationship between Awto and Yokkurnudd, it seems plain that the latter god was an extremely wild and refined variation of Awto, worshipped by a gentler and more advanced people. The rites done to Yokkurnudd were localized and occasional while the sacrifices required by Awto took place at all hours on every street and highway.

However, in the face of certain respected authorities, I am inclined to doubt if the two religions had much in common. Certainly nothing apart from the ritual usage of crushing wheels of ponderous earth-vehicles, such as you have seen in our museums among the exhumed relics of antiquity.

It is my fond hope that I shall eventually find evidence to confirm this doubt, and thus vindicate the Heendouans of the blackest charge that legend and archaeology have brought against them. I shall have made a worthy contribution to science if I can show that they were among the few ancient peoples who were never tainted by the diabolic cult of Awto originating in Hamurriqua.

Because of a religion so barbarous, it has sometimes been argued that the Hamurriquanean culture—if one can term it such—must have flourished at an earlier period in man's development than the Heendouan. However, in dealing with a realm of research that borders upon prehistory, such relative chronology can be left to theorists.

Excepting, of course, in our own superior modern civilization, human progress has been slow and uncertain, with many intercalated Dark Ages, many reversions to partial or total savagery. I believe that the Hamurriquanean epoch, whether prior to that of

the Heendouans or contemporary with it, can well be classified as one of these Dark Ages.

To return to my main theme, the cult of Awto. It is doubtless well known to you that in recent years certain irresponsible so-called archaeologists, misled by a desire to create sensation at the cost of truth, have fathered the fantastic thesis that there never was any such god as Awto. They believe, or profess to believe, that the immolatory vehicles of the ancients, and the huge destruction of life and limb caused by their use, were quite without religious significance.

A premise so absurd could be maintained only by madmen or charlatans. I mention it merely that I may refute and dismiss it with all the contempt that it deserves.

Of course, I cannot deny the dubiousness of some of our archaeological deductions. Great difficulties have attended our researches in the continent-embracing deserts of Hamurriqua, where all food-supplies and water must be transported for thousands of miles.

The buildings and writings of the ancients, often made of the most ephemeral materials, lie deep in ever-drifting sands that no human foot has trod for millenniums. Therefore, it is small wonder that guesswork must sometimes fill the gaps of precise knowledge.

I can safely say, however, that few of our deductions are so completely proven, so solidly based, as those relating to the Awto cult. The evidence, though largely circumstantial, is over-whelming.

Like most religions, it would seem that this cult was obscure and shadowy in its origin. Legend and history have both lost the name of the first promulgator. The earliest cars of immolation were slow and clumsy, and the rite of sacrifice was perhaps rarely and furtively practised in the beginning. There is no doubt, too,

that the intended victims often escaped. Awto, at first, can hardly have inspired the universal fear and reverance of later epochs.

Certain scraps of Hamurriquanean printing, miraculously preserved in air-tight vaults and deciphered before they could crumble, have given us the names of two early prophets of Awto, Anriford and Dhodzh. These amassed fortunes from the credulity of their benighted followers. It was under the influence of these prophets that the dark and baleful religion spread by leaps and bounds, until no Hamurriquanean street or highway was safe from the thunderously rolling wheels of the sacrificial cars.

It is doubtful whether Awto, like most other savage and primordial deities, was ever represented by graven images. At least, no such images have been recovered in all our delvings. However, the rusty remains of the iron-built temples of Awto, called grahges, have been exhumed every-where in immense numbers.

Strange vessels and metal implements of mysterious hieratic use have been found in the grahges, together with traces of oils by which the sacred vehicles were anointed, and the vehicles lie buried in far-spread, colossal scrapheaps. All this, however, throws little light on the deity himself.

It is probable that Awto, sometimes known as Mhotawr, was simply an abstract principle of death and destruction and was believed to manifest himself through the homicidal speed and fury of the fatal machines. His demented devotees flung themselves before these vehicles as before the embodiment of the god.

The power and influence of Awto's priesthood, as well as its numbers, must have been well nigh beyond estimation. The priesthood, it would seem, was divided into at least three orders:

The mekniks, or keepers of the grahges. The shophurs, who drove the sacred vehicles. And an order—whose special name has been lost—that served as guardians of innumerable wayside

shrines. It was at these shrines where a mineral liquid called ghas, used in the fuelling of the vehicles, was dispensed from crude and curious pumping mechanisms.

Several well-preserved mummies of mekniks, in sacerdotal raiment blackened by the sacred oils, have been recovered from grahges in the central Hamurriquanean deserts, where they were apparently buried by sudden sandstorms.

Chemical analysis of the oiled garments has so far failed to confirm a certain legendary belief current among the degenerate bushmen who form the scant remnant of Hamurriqua's teaming myriads. I refer to a belief that the oils used in anointing those ancient cars were often mixed with unctuous matters obtained from the bodies of their victims.

However, a usage so barbarous would have conformed well enough with the principles of the hideous cult. Further research may establish the old legend as a truth.

From the evidence we have unearthed, it is plain that the cult assumed enormous power and wide-spread proportions within a few decades of its inception. The awful apex was reached in little more than a century. In my opinion, it is no coincidence that the whole period of the Awto cult corresponded very closely with Hamurriqua's decline and ultimate downfall.

Some will consider my statements too definite, and will ask for the evidence above mentioned. In answer, I need only point to the condition of those skeletons exhumed by thousands from tombs and vaults dated according to the Hamurriquanean chronology.

Throughout the time-period we have assigned to the Awto cult there is a steady, accelerative increase of bone-fractures, often of the most horribly complicated nature. Toward the end, when the fearful cult was at its height, we find few skeletons that do not

show at least one or two minor, if not major, breakages.

The shattered condition of these skeletons, often decapitated or wholly disarticulated, is almost beyond belief.

The rusty remains of the ancient vehicles bear similar witness. Built with an eye to ever greater speed and deadliness, they fall into types that show the ghastly growth and progress of the cult. The later types, found in prodigious numbers, are always more or less dented, broken, crumpled—often they are mere heaps of indescribably tangled wreckage.

Toward the end, it would seem that virtually the whole population must have belonged to the blood-mad priesthood. Going forth daily in the rituals of Awto, they must have turned their cars upon each other, hurtling together with the violence of projectiles. A universal mania for speed went hand in hand with a mania for homicide and suicide.

Picture, if you can, the ever-mounting horror of it all. The nation-wide madness of immolation. The carnivals of bloody holidays. The highways lined from coast to coast with crushed and dismembered sacrifices!

Can you wonder that this ancient people, their numbers decimated, their mentality sapped and bestialized by dire superstition, should have declined so rapidly? Should have fallen almost without a struggle before the hordes of the Orient?

Let history and archaeology draw the curtain. The moral is plain. But luckily, in our present state of high enlightenment, we have little need to fear the rise of any savage error such as that which attended the worship of Awto.

Obituary item broadcast from Toshtush on the 1st day of the year 5999:

We are sorry to record the sudden death of Professor Erru Saggus, who had just delivered the last of his series of lectures on

Hamurriquanean Archaeology at the University of Tosh-Tush.

Returning on the same afternoon to his home in the Himalayas Professor Saggus was the victim of a most unfortunate accident. His stratosphere ship, one of very newest and speediest models, collided within a few leagues of its destination with a ship driven by one Jar Ghoshtar, a chemistry student from the great College of Ustraleendia.

Both ships were annihilated by the impact, plunging earthward in a single flaming metoric mass which ignited and destroyed an entire Himalayan village. Several hundred people are said to have burned to death in the resultant conflagration.

Such accidents are all too frequent nowadays, owing to the crowded condition of stratosphere traffic. We must deplore the recklessness of navigators who exceed the 950 mile speed limit. All who saw the recent accident bear witness that Erru Saggus and Jar Ghoshtar were both driving at a speed very much in excess of 1000 miles per hour.

While regretting this present-day mania for mere mileage, we cannot agree with certain ill-advised satirists who have tried to draw a parallel between the fatalities of modern traffic and the ancient rites of immolation to the god Awto.

Superstition is one thing, Science is another. Such archaeologists as Professor Saggus have proven to us that the worshippers of Awto were the victims of a dark and baleful error. It is unthinkable that such superstition will ever again prevail. With pride for our achievements, and full confidence in the future, we can number the most Honorable Professor Erru Saggus among the martyrs of Science.

Mother of Toads

"Why must you always hurry away, my little one?"

The voice of Mere Antoinette, the witch, was an amorous croaking. She ogled Pierre, the apothecary's young apprentice, with eyes full-orbed and unblinking as those of a toad. The folds beneath her chin swelled like the throat of some great batrachian. Her short flat fingers, outspread on her soiled apron, revealed an appearance as of narrow webs between their first flanges.

Pierre Baudin, as usual, gave no answer but turned his eyes from Mere Antoinette with an air of impatience. Her voice, raucously coaxing, persisted:

"Stay awhile tonight, my pretty orphan. No one will miss you in the village. And your master will not mind."

Pierre tossed his head with the disdain of a young Adonis. The witch was more than twice his age, and her charms were too uncouth and unsavory to tempt him for an instant. She was repellently fat and lumpish, and her skin possessed an unwholesome pallor. Also, her repute was such as to have nullified the attractions of a younger and fairer sorceress. Her witchcraft had made her feared among the peasantry of that remote province, where belief in spells and philters was still common. The people of Averoigne called her La Mere des Crapauds, Mother of Toads, a name given for more than one reason. Toads swarmed innumerably about her hut; they were said to be her familiars; and dark

tales were told concerning their relationship to the sorceress, and the duties they performed at her bidding. Such tales were all the more readily believed because of those batrachian features that had always been remarked in her aspect.

The youth disliked her, even as he disliked the sluggish, abnormally large toads on which he had sometimes trodden in the dusk, upon the path between her hut and the village of Les Hiboux. He could hear some of these creatures croaking now; and it seemed, weirdly, that they uttered half-articulate echoes of the witch's words.

It would be dark soon, he reflected. The path along the marshes was not pleasant by night, and he felt doubly anxious to depart. Still without replying to Mere Antoinette's invitation, he reached for the black triangular vial she had set before him on her greasy table. The vial contained a philter of curious potency which his master, Alain le Dindon, had sent him to procure. Le Dindon, the village apothecary, was wont to deal surreptitiously in certain dubious medicaments supplied by the witch; and Pierre had often been on such errands to her osier-hidden hut.

The old apothecary, whose humor was rough and ribald, had sometimes rallied Pierre concerning Mere Antoinette's preference for him. Remembering certain admonitory gibes, more witty than decent, the boy flushed as he turned to go.

"Stay," insisted Mere Antoinette. "The fog is cold on the marshes; and it thickens apace. I knew that you were coming, and I have mulled for you a goodly measure of the red wine of Ximes."

She removed the lid from an earthen pitcher and poured its steaming contents into a large cup. The purplish-red wine creamed delectably, and an odor of hot, delicious spices filled the hut, overpowering the less agreeable odors from the simmering cauldron, the half-dried newts, vipers, bat-wings and evil, nauseous herbs hanging on the walls, and the reek of the black candles

of pitch and corpse-tallow that burned always, by noon or night, in that murky interior.

"I'll drink it," said Pierre, a little grudgingly. "That is, if it contains nothing of your own concoctions."

"Tis naught but sound wine, four seasons old, with spices of Arabia," the sorceress croaked ingratiatingly. "'Twill warm your stomach . . . and . . . ." She added something inaudible as Pierre accepted the cup.

Before drinking, he inhaled the fumes of the beverage with some caution but was reassured by its pleasant smell. Surely it was innocent of any drug, any philter brewed by the witch: for, to his knowledge, her preparations were all evil-smelling.

Still, as if warned by some premonition, he hesitated. Then he remembered that the sunset air was indeed chill; that mists had gathered furtively behind him as he came to Mere Antoinette's dwelling. The wine would fortify him for the dismal return walk to Les Hiboux. He quaffed it quickly and set down the cup.

"Truly, it is good wine," he declared. "But I must go now."

Even as he spoke, he felt in his stomach and veins the spreading warmth of the alcohol, of the spices . . . of something more ardent than these. It seemed that his voice was unreal and strange, falling as if from a height above him. The warmth grew, mounting within him like a golden flame fed by magic oils. His blood, a seething torrent, poured tumultuously and more tumultuously through his members.

There was a deep soft thundering in his ears, a rosy dazzlement in his eyes. Somehow the hut appeared to expand, to change luminously about him. He hardly recognized its squalid furnishings, its litter of baleful oddments, on which a torrid splendor was shed by the black candles.

It came to him, for an instant, that all this was a questionable enchantment, a glamor wrought by the witch's wine. Fear was

upon him and he wished to flee. Then, close beside him, he saw Mere Antoinette.

Briefly he wondered why he had thought her old and gross and repulsive: for it seemed that he looked upon Lilith, the first witch. The lumpish limbs and body had grown voluptuous; the pale, thick-lipped mouth enticed him with a promise of ampler kisses than other mouths could yield. He knew why the magic warmth mounted ever higher and hotter within him. . . .

"Do you like me now, my little one?" She questioned. . . .

Pierre awoke in the ashy dawn, when the tall black tapers had dwindled down and had melted limply in their sockets. Sick and confused, he sought vainly to remember where he was or what he had done. Then, turning a little, he saw beside him on the couch a thing that was like some impossible monster of ill dreams: a toadlike form, as large as a fat woman. Its limbs were somehow like a woman's arms and legs. Its pale, warty body pressed and bulged against him, and he felt the rounded softness of something that resembled a breast.

Nausea rose within him as memory of that delirious night returned. Most foully he had been beguiled by the witch, and had succumbed to her evil enchantments.

It seemed that an incubus smothered him, weighing upon all his limbs and body. He shut his eyes, that he might no longer behold the loathsome thing that was Mere Antoinette in her true semblance. Slowly, with prodigious effort, he drew himself away from the crushing nightmare shape. It did not stir or appear to waken; and he slid quickly from the couch.

Again, compelled by a noisome fascination, he peered at the thing on the couch—and saw only the gross form of Mere Antoinette. Perhaps his impression of a great toad beside him had been but an illusion, a half-dream that lingered after slumber. He lost something of his nightmarish horror; but his gorge still rose in

a sick disgust, remembering the lewdness to which he had yielded.

Fearing that the witch might awaken at any moment and seek to detain him, he stole noiselessly from the hut. It was broad daylight, but a cold, hueless mist lay everywhere, shrouding the reedy marshes, and hanging like a ghostly curtain on the path he must follow to Les Hiboux. Moving and seething always, the mist seemed to reach toward him with intercepting fingers as he started homeward. He shivered at its touch, he bowed his head and drew his cloak closer about him.

Thicker and thicker the mist swirled, coiling, writhing endlessly, as if to bar Pierre's progress. He could discern the twisting, narrow path for only a few paces in advance. It was hard to find the familiar landmarks, hard to recognize the osiers and willows that loomed suddenly before him like grey phantoms and faded again into the white nothingness as he went onward. Never had he seen such fog: it was like the blinding, stifling fumes of a thousand witch-stirred cauldrons.

Though he was not altogether sure of his surroundings, Pierre thought that he had covered half the distance to the village. Then, all at once, he began to meet the toads. They were hidden by the mist till he came close upon them. Misshapen, unnaturally big and bloated, they squatted in his way on the little footpath or hopped sluggishly before him from the pallid gloom on either hand.

Several struck against his feet with a horrible and heavy flopping. He stepped unaware upon one of them, and slipped in the squashy noisomeness it had made, barely saving himself from a headlong fall on the bog's rim. Black, miry water gloomed close beside him as he staggered there.

Turning to regain his path, he crushed others of the toads to an abhorrent pulp under his feet. The marshy soil was alive with

them. They flopped against him from the mist, striking his legs, his bosom, his very face with their clammy bodies. They rose up by scores like a devil-driven legion. It seemed that there was a malignance, an evil purpose in their movements, in the buffeting of their violent impact. He could make no progress on the swarming path, but lurched to and fro, slipping blindly, and shielding his face with lifted hands. He felt an eery consternation, an eldritch horror. It was as if the nightmare of his awakening in the witch's hut had somehow returned upon him.

The toads came always from the direction of Les Hiboux, as if to drive him back toward Mere Antoinette's dwelling. They bounded against him like a monstrous hail, like missiles flung by unseen demons. The ground was covered by them, the air was filled with their hurtling bodies. Once, he nearly went down beneath them.

Their number seemed to increase, they pelted him in a noxious storm. He gave way before them, his courage broke, and he started to run at random, without knowing that he had left the safe path. Losing all thought of direction, in his frantic desire to escape from those impossible myriads, he plunged on amid the dim reeds and sedges, over ground that quivered gelatinously beneath him. Always at his heels he heard the soft, heavy flopping of the toads; and sometimes they rose up like a sudden wall to bar his way and turn him aside. More than once, they drove him back from the verge of hidden quagmires into which he would otherwise have fallen. It was as if they were herding him deliberately and concertedly to a destined goal.

Now, like the lifting of a dense curtain, the mist rolled away, and Pierre saw before him in a golden dazzle of morning sunshine the green, thick-growing osiers that surrounded Mere Antoinette's hut. The toads had all disappeared, though he could have sworn that hundreds of them were hopping close about him

an instant previously. With a feeling of helpless fright and panic, he knew that he was still within the witch's toils; that the toads were indeed her familiars, as so many people believed them to be. They had prevented his escape, and had brought him back to the foul creature . . . whether woman, batrachian, or both . . . who was known as The Mother of Toads.

Pierre's sensations were those of one who sinks momently deeper into some black and bottomless quicksand. He saw the witch emerge from the hut and come toward him. Her thick fingers, with pale folds of skin between them like the beginnings of a web, were stretched and flattened on the steaming cup that she carried. A sudden gust of wind arose as if from nowhere, and bore to Pierre's nostrils the hot, familiar spices of the drugged wine.

"Why did you leave so hastily, my little one?" There was an amorous wheedling in the very tone of the witch's question. "I should not have let you go without another cup of the good red wine, mulled and spiced for the warming of your stomach. . . . See, I have prepared it for you . . . knowing that you would return."

She came very close to him as she spoke, leering and sidling, and held the cup toward his lips. Pierre grew dizzy with the strange fumes and turned his head away. It seemed that a paralyzing spell had seized his muscles, for the simple movement required an immense effort.

His mind, however, was still clear, and the sick revulsion of that nightmare dawn returned upon him. He saw again the great toad that had lain at his side when he awakened.

"I will not drink your wine," he said firmly. "You are a foul witch, and I loathe you. Let me go."

"Why do you loathe me?" croaked Mere Antoinette. "I can give you all that other women give . . . and more."

"You are not a woman," said Pierre. "You are a big toad. I

saw you in your true shape this morning. I'd rather drown in the marsh-waters than stay with you again."

An indescribable change came upon the sorceress before Pierre had finished speaking. The leer slid from her thick and pallid features, leaving them blankly inhuman for an instant. Then her eyes bulged and goggled horribly, and her whole body appeared to swell as if inflated with venom.

"Go, then!" She spat with a gutteral virulence. "But you will soon wish that you had stayed."

The queer paralysis had lifted from Pierre's muscles. It was as if the injunction of the angry witch had served to revoke an insidious, half-woven spell. With no parting glance or word, Pierre turned from her and fled with long, hasty steps, almost running, on the path to Les Hiboux.

He had gone little more than a hundred paces when the fog began to return. It coiled shoreward in vast volumes from the marshes, it poured like smoke from the very ground at his feet. Almost instantly, the sun dimmed to a wan silver disk and disappeared. The blue heavens were lost in the pale seething voidness overhead. The path before Pierre was blotted out till he seemed to walk on the sheer rim of a white abyss, that moved with him as he went.

Like the clammy arms of specters, with death-chill fingers that clutched and caressed, the weird mists drew closer still about Pierre. They thickened in his nostrils and throat, they dripped in a heavy dew from his garments. They choked him with the fetor of rank waters and putrescent ooze . . . and a stench as of liquefying corpses that had risen somewhere to the surface amid the fen.

Then, from the blank quietness, the toads assailed Pierre in a surging, solid wave that towered above his head and swept him

from the dim path with the force of falling seas as it descended. He went down, splashing and floundering, into water that swarmed with the numberless batrachians. Foul slime was in his mouth and nose as he struggled to regain his footing. The water, however, was only knee-deep, and the bottom, though slippery and oozy, supported him with little yielding when he stood erect.

He discerned indistinctly through the mist the nearby margin from which he had fallen. But his steps were weirdly and horribly hampered by the toad-seething waters when he strove to reach it. Inch by inch, with a hopeless panic deepening upon him, he fought toward the solid shore. The toads leaped and tumbled about him with a dizzying eddying motion. They swirled like a viscid undertow around his feet and shins. They swept and swirled in great loathsome undulations against his retarded knees.

However, he made slow and painful progress, till his outstretched fingers could almost grasp the wiry sedges that trailed from the low bank. Then, from that mist-bound shore, there fell and broke upon him a second deluge of those demoniac toads; and Pierre was borne helplessly backward into the filthy waters.

Held down by the piling and crawling masses, and drowning in nauseous darkness at the thick-oozed bottom, he clawed feebly at his assailants. For a moment, ere oblivion came, his fingers found among them the outlines of a monstrous form that was somehow toadlike . . . but large and heavy as a fat woman.

The Tomb-Spawn

Evening had come from the desert into Faraad, bringing the last stragglers of caravans. In a wineshop near the northern gate, many travelling merchants from outer lands, parched and weary, were refreshing themselves with the famed vintages of Yoros. To divert them from their fatigue, a storyteller spoke amid the clinking of the wine-cups:

"Great was Ossaru, being both king and wizard. He ruled over half the continent of Zothique. His armies were like the rolling sands, blown by the simoom. He commanded the genii of storm and of darkness, he called down the spirits of the sun. Men knew his wizardry as the green cedars know the blasting of levin.

"Half immortal, he lived from age to age, waxing in his wisdom and power till the end. Thasaidon, black god of evil, prospered his every spell and enterprise. And during his latter years he was companioned by the monster Nioth Korghai, who came down to Earth from an alien world, riding a fire-maned comet.

"Ossaru, by his skill in astrology, had foreseen the coming of Nioth Korghai. Alone, he went forth into the desert to await the monster. In many lands people saw the falling of the comet, like a sun that came down by night upon the waste; but only King Ossaru beheld the arrival of Nioth Korghai. He returned in the black, moonless hours before dawn, when all men slept, bringing the strange monster to his palace, and housing him in a vault be-

neath the throne-room, which he had prepared for Nioth Korghai's abode.

"Dwelling always thereafter in the vault, the monster remained unknown and unbeheld. It was said that he gave advice to Ossaru, and instructed him in the lore of the outer planets. At certain periods of the stars, women and young warriors were sent down as a sacrifice to Nioth Korghai; and these never returned to give account of that which they had seen. None could surmise his aspect; but all who entered the palace heard ever in the vault beneath a muffled noise as of slow-beaten drums, and a regurgitation such as would be made by an underground fountain; and sometimes men heard an evil cackling as of a mad cockatrice.

"For many years King Ossaru was served by Nioth Korghai, and gave service to the monster in return. Then Nioth Korghai sickened with a strange malady, and men heard no more the cackling in the sunken vault; and the noises of drums and fountain-mouths grew fainter, and ceased. The spells of the wizard king were powerless to avert his death; but when the monster had died, Ossaru surrounded his body with a double zone of enchantment, circle by circle, and closed the vault. And later, when Ossaru died, the vault was opened from above, and the king's mummy was lowered therein by his slaves, to repose for ever beside that which remained of Nioth Korghai.

"Cycles have gone by since then; and Ossaru is but a name on the lips of storytellers. Lost now is the palace wherein he dwelt, and the city thereabout, some saying that it stood in Yoros, and some, in the empire of Cincor, where Yethlyreom was later built by the Nimboth dynasty. And this alone is certain, that somewhere still, in the sealed tomb, the alien monster abides in death, together with King Ossaru. And about them still is the inner circle of Ossaru's enchantment, rendering their bodies incorruptible throughout all the decay of cities and kingdoms; and around this

is another circle, guarding against all intrusion: since he who enters there by the tomb's door will die instantly and will putrefy in the moment of death, falling to dusty corruption ere he strike the ground.

"Such is the legend of Ossaru and Nioth Korghai. No man has ever found their tomb; but the wizard Namirrha, prophesying darkly, foretold many ages ago that certain travellers, passing through the desert, would some day come upon it unaware. And he said that these travellers, descending into the tomb by another way than the door, would behold a strange prodigy. And he spoke not concerning the nature of the prodigy, but said only that Nioth Korghai, being a creature from some far world, was obedient to alien laws in death as in life. And of that which Namirrha meant, no man has yet guessed the secret."

The brothers Milab and Marabac, who were jewel-merchants from Ustaim, had listened raptly to the story-teller.

"Now truly this is a strange tale," said Milab. "However, as all men know, there were great wizards in the olden days, workers of deep enchantment and wonder; and also there were true prophets. And the sands of Zothique are full of lost tombs and cities."

"It is a good story," said Marabac, "but it lacks an ending. Prithee, O teller of tales, canst tell us no more than this? Was there no treasure of precious metals and jewels entombed with the monster and the king? I have seen sepulchers where the dead were walled with gold ingots, and sarcophagi that poured forth rubies like the gouted blood of vampires."

"I relate the legend as my fathers told it," affirmed the story-teller. "They who are destined to find the tomb must tell the rest —if haply they return from the finding."

Milab and Marabac had traded their store of uncut jewels, of carven talismans and small jasper and carnelian idols, making a

good profit in Faraad. Now, laden with rosy and purple-black pearls from the southern gulfs, and the black sapphires and winy garnets of Yoros, they were returning northward toward Tasuun with a company of other merchants on the long, circuitous journey to Ustaim by the orient sea.

The way had led through a dying land. Now, as the caravan approached the borders of Yoros, the desert began to assume a profounder desolation. The hills were dark and lean, like recumbent mummies of giants. Dry waterways ran down to lake-bottoms leprous with salt. Billows of gray sand were driven high on the crumbling cliffs, where gentle waters had once rippled. Columns of dust arose and went by like fugitive phantoms. Over all, the sun was a monstrous ember in a charred heaven.

Into this waste, which was seemingly unpeopled and void of life, the caravan went warily. Urging their camels to a swift trot in the narrow, deep-walled ravines, the merchants made ready their spears and claymores and scanned the barren ridges with anxious eyes. For here, in hidden caves, there lurked a wild and half-bestial people, known as the Ghorii. Akin to the ghouls and jackals, they were eaters of carrion; and also they were anthropophagi, subsisting by preference on the bodies of travellers, and drinking their blood in lieu of water or wine. They were dreaded by all who had occasion to journey between Yoros and Tasuun.

The sun climbed to its meridian, searching with ruthless beams the nethermost umbrage of the strait, steep defiles. The fine ash-light sand was no longer stirred by any puff of wind.

Now the road ran downward, following the course of some olden stream between acclivitous banks. Here, in lieu of former pools, there were pits of sand dammed up by riffles or boulders, in which the camels floundered knee-deep. And here, without the least warning, in a turn of the sinuous bed, the gully swarmed and seethed with the hideous earth-brown bodies of the Ghorii,

who appeared instantaneously on all sides, leaping wolfishly from the rocky slopes or flinging themselves like panthers from the high ledges.

These ghoulish apparitions were unspeakably ferocious and agile. Uttering no sound, other than a sort of hoarse coughing and spitting, and armed only with their double rows of pointed teeth and their sickle-like talons, they poured over the caravan in a climbing wave. It seemed that there were scores of them to each man and camel. Several of the dromedaries were thrown to earth at once, with the Ghorii gnawing their legs and haunches and chines, or hanging dog-wise at their throats. They and their drivers were buried from sight by the ravenous monsters, who began to devour them immediately. Boxes of jewels and bales of rich fabrics were torn open in the melée, jasper and onyx idols were strewn ignominiously in the dust, pearls and rubies, unheeded, lay weltering in puddled blood; for these things were of no value to the Ghorii.

Milab and Marabac, as it happened, were riding at the rear. They had lagged behind, somewhat against their will, since the camel ridden by Milab had gone lame from a stone-bruise; and thus, by good fortune, they evaded the ghoulish onset. Pausing aghast, they beheld the fate of their companions, whose resistance was overcome with horrible quickness. The Ghorii, however, did not perceive Milab and Marabac, being wholly intent on devouring the camels and merchants they had dragged down, as well as those members of their own band that were wounded by the swords and lances of the travellers.

The two brothers, levelling their spears, would have ridden forward to perish bravely and uselessly with their fellows. But, terrified by the hideous tumult, by the odor of blood and the hyena-like scent of the Ghorii, their dromedaries balked and bolted, carrying them back along the route into Yoros.

During this unpremeditated flight they soon saw another band of the Ghorii, who had appeared far off on the southern slopes and were running to intercept them. To avoid this new peril Milab and Marabac turned their camels into a side ravine. Travelling slowly because of the lameness of Milab's dromedary, and thinking to find the swift Ghorii on their heels at any moment, they went eastward for many miles with the sun lowering behind them, and came at midafternoon to the low and rainless watershed of that immemorial region.

Here they looked out over a sunken plain, wrinkled and eroded, where the white walls and domes of some innominate city gleamed. It appeared to Milab and Marabac that the city was only a few leagues away. Deeming they had sighted some hidden town of the outer sands, and hopeful now of escaping their pursuers, they began the descent of the long slope toward the plain.

For two days, on a powdery terrain that was like the bituminous dust of mummies, they travelled toward the ever-receding domes that had seemed so near. Their plight became desperate; for between them they possessed only a handful of dried apricots and a water-bag that was three-fourths empty. Their provisions, together with their stock of jewels and carvings, had been lost with the pack-dromedaries of the caravan. Apparently there was no pursuit from the Ghorii; but about them there gathered the red demons of thirst, the black demons of hunger. On the second morning Milab's camel refused to rise and would not respond either to the cursing of its master or the prodding of his spear. Thereafter, the two shared the remaining camel, riding together or by turns.

Often they lost sight of the gleaming city, which appeared and disappeared like a mirage. But an hour before sunset, on the second day, they followed the far-thrown shadows of broken obelisks and crumbling watch-towers into the olden streets.

The place had once been a metropolis; but now many of its

lordly mansions were scattered shards or heaps of downfallen blocks. Great dunes of sand had poured in through proud triumphal arches, had filled the pavements and courtyards. Lurching with exhaustion, and sick at heart with the failure of their hope, Milab and Marabac went on, searching everywhere for some well or cistern that the long desert years had haply spared.

In the city's heart, where the walls of temples and lofty buildings of state still served as a barrier to the engulfing sand, they found the ruins of an old aqueduct, leading to cisterns dry as furnaces. There were dust-choked fountains in the market-places but nowhere was there anything to betoken the presence of water.

Wandering hopelessly on, they came to the ruins of a huge edifice which, it appeared, had been the palace of some forgotten monarch. The mighty walls, defying the erosion of ages, were still extant. The portals, guarded on either hand by green brazen images of mythic heroes, still frowned with unbroken arches. Mounting the marble steps, the jewelers entered a vast, roofless hall where cyclopean columns towered as if to bear up the desert sky.

The broad pavement flags were mounded with debris of arches and architraves and pilasters. At the hall's far extreme there was a dais of black-veined marble on which, presumably, a royal throne had once reared. Nearing the dais, Milab and Marabac both heard a low and indistinct gurgling as of some hidden stream or fountain, that appeared to rise from underground depths below the palace pavement.

Eagerly trying to locate the source of the sound, they climbed the dais. Here a huge block had fallen from the wall above, perhaps recently, and the marble had cracked beneath its weight, and a portion of the dais had broken through into some underlying vault, leaving a dark and jagged aperture. It was from this opening that the water-like regurgitation rose, incessant and regular as the beating of a pulse.

The jewelers leaned above the pit, and peered down into webby

darkness shot with a doubtful glimmering that came from an indiscernible source. They could see nothing. A dank and musty odor touched their nostrils, like the breath of some long-sealed reservoir. It seemed to them that the steady fountain-like noise was only a few feet below in the shadows, a little to one side of the opening.

Neither of them could determine the depth of the vault. After a brief consultation they returned to their camel, which was waiting stolidly at the palace entrance; and removing the camel's harness they knotted the long reins and leather body-bands into a single thong that would serve them in lieu of rope. Going back to the dais, they secured one end of this thong to the fallen block, and lowered the other into the dark pit.

Milab descended hand over hand into the depths for ten or twelve feet before his toes encountered a solid surface. Still gripping the thong cautiously, he found himself on a level floor of stone. The day was fast waning beyond the palace walls; but a wan glimmer was afforded by the hole in the pavement above; and the outlines of a half-open door, sagging at a ruinous angle, were revealed at one side by the feeble twilight that entered the vault from unknown crypts or stairs beyond.

While Marabac came nimbly down to join him, Milab peered about for the source of the water-like noise. Before him in the undetermined shadows he discerned the dim and puzzling contours of an object that he could liken only to some enormous clepsydra or fountain surrounded with grotesque carvings.

The light seemed to fail momently. Unable to decide the nature of the object, and having neither torch nor candle, he tore a strip from the hem of his hempen burnoose, and lit the slow-burning clothandheld it aloft at arm's length before him. By the dull, smoldering luminance thus obtained, the jewelers beheld more clearly the thing that bulked prodigious and monstrous, rearing

above them from the fragment-littered floor to the shadowy roof.

The thing was like some blasphemous dream of a mad devil. Its main portion or body was urn-like in form and was pedestalled on a queerly tilted block of stone at the vault's center. It was palish and pitted with innumerable small apertures. From its bosom and flattened base many arm-like and leg-like projections trailed in swollen nightmare segments to the ground; and two other members, sloping tautly, reached down like roots into an open and seemingly empty sarcophagus of gilded metal, graven with weird archaic ciphers, that stood beside the block.

The urn-shaped torso was endowed with two heads. One of these heads was beaked like a cuttle-fish and was lined with long oblique slits where the eyes should have been. The other head, in close juxtaposition on the narrow shoulders, was that of an aged man, dark and regal and terrible, whose burning eyes were like balas-rubies and whose grizzled beard had grown to the length of jungle moss on the loathsomely porous trunk. This trunk, on the side below the human head, displayed a faint outline as of ribs; and some of the members ended in human hands and feet, or possessed anthropomorphic jointings.

Through heads, limbs and body there ran recurrently the mysterious noise of regurgitation that had drawn Milab and Marabac to enter the vault. At each repetition of the sound a slimy dew exuded from the monstrous pores and rilled sluggishly down in endless drops.

The jewelers were held speechless and immobile by a clammy terror. Unable to avert their gaze, they met the baleful eyes of the human head, glaring upon them from its unearthly eminence. Then, as the hempen strip in Milab's fingers burned slowly away and failed to a red smolder, and darkness gathered again in the vault, they saw the blind slits in the other head open gradually, pouring forth a hot, yellow, intolerably flaming light as they ex-

panded to immense round orbits. At the same time they heard a singular drum-like throbbing, as if the heart of the huge monster had become audible.

They knew only that a strange horror not of earth, or but partially of earth, was before them. The sight deprived them of thought and memory. Least of all did they remember the story-teller in Faraad, and the tale he had told concerning the hidden tomb of Ossaru and Nioth Korghai, and the prophecy of the tomb's finding by those who should come to it unaware.

Swiftly, with a dreadful stretching and straightening, the monster lifted its foremost members, ending in the brown, shrivelled hands of an old man, and reached out toward the jewelers. From the cuttle-fish beak there issued a shrill demonian cackling; from the mouth of the kingly graybeard head a sonorous voice began to utter words of solemn cadence, like some enchanter's rune, in a tongue unknown to Milab and Marabac.

They recoiled before the abhorrently groping hands. In a frenzy of fear and panic, by the streaming light of its incandescent orbs, they saw the anomaly rise and lumber forward from its stone seat, walking clumsily and uncertainly on its ill-assorted members. There was a trampling of elephantine pads—and a stumbling of human feet inadequate to bear up their share of the blasphemous hulk. The two stiffly sloping tentacles were withdrawn from the gold sarcophagus, their ends muffled by empty, jewel-sewn cloths of a precious purple, such as would be used for the winding of some royal mummy. With a ceaseless and insane cackling, a malign thundering as of curses that broke to senile quavers, the double-headed horror leaned toward Milab and Marabac.

Turning, they ran wildly across the roomy vault. Before them, illumined now by the pouring rays from the monster's orbits, they saw the half-open door of somber metal whose bolts and hinges

had rusted away, permitting it to sag inward. The door was of cyclopean height and breadth, as if designed for beings huger than man. Beyond it were the dim reaches of a twilight corridor.

Five paces from the doorway there was a faint red line that followed the chamber's conformation on the dusty floor. Marabac, a little ahead of his brother, crossed the line. As if checked in mid-air by some invisible wall, he faltered and stopped. His limbs and body seemed to melt away beneath the burnoose—the burnoose itself became tattered as with incalculable age. Dust floated on the air in a tenuous cloud, and there was a momentary gleaming of white bones where his outflung hands had been. Then the bones too were gone—and an empty heap of rags lay rotting on the floor.

A faint odor as of corruption rose to the nostrils of Milab. Uncomprehending, he had checked his own flight for an instant. Then, on his shoulders, he felt the grasp of slimy, withered hands. The cackling and muttering of the heads was like a demon chorus behind him. The drum-like beating, the noise of rising fountains, were loud in his ears. With one swiftly dying scream he followed Marabac over the red line.

The enormity that was both man and star-born monster, the nameless amalgam of an unearthly resurrection, still lumbered on and did not pause. With the hands of that Ossaru who had forgotten his own enchantment, it reached for the two piles of empty rags. Reaching, it entered the zone of death and dissolution which Ossaru himself had established to guard the vault for ever. For an instant, on the air, there was a melting as of mis-shapen cloud, a falling as of light ashes. After that the darkness returned, and with the darkness, silence.

Night settled above that nameless land, that forgotten city; and with its coming the Ghorii, who had followed Milab and Marabac

over the desert plain. Swiftly they slew and ate the camel that waited patiently at the palace entrance. Later, in the old hall of columns, they found that opening in the dais through which the jewelers had descended. Hungrily they gathered about the hole, sniffing at the tomb beneath. Then, baffled, they went away, their keen nostrils telling them that the scent was lost, that the tomb was empty either of life or death.

Schizoid Creator

In the private laboratory which his practice as a psychiatrist had enabled him to build, equip and maintain, Dr. Carlos Moreno had completed certain preparations that were hardly in accord with the teachings of modern science. For these preparations he had drawn instruction from old grimoires, bequeathed by ancestors who had incurred the fatherly wrath of the Spanish Inquisition. According to a rather scurrilous family legend, other ancestors had been numbered among the Inquisitors.

At the end of the long room he had cleared the cluttered floor of its equipment, leaving only an immense globe of crystal glass that suggested an aquarium. About the globe he had traced with a consecrated knife, the sorcerers' arthame, a circle inscribed with pentagrams and the various Hebrew names of the Deity. Also, at a distance of several feet, a smaller circle, similarly inscribed.

Wearing a seamless and sleeveless robe of black, he stood now within the smaller, protective circle. Upon his breast and forehead was bound the Double Triangle, wrought perfectly from several metals. A silver lamp, engraved with the same sign, afforded the sole light, shining on a stand beside him. Aloes, camphor and stroax burned in censers set about him on the floor. In his right hand he held the arthame; in his left, a hazel staff with a core of magnetized iron.

Like Dr. Faustus, Moreno designed an evocation of the Devil.

But not, however, for the same purpose that had inspired Faustus.

Pondering long and gravely on the painful mysteries of the cosmos, the discrepancy of good and evil, Moreno had at last conceived an explanation that was startlingly simple.

There could, he reasoned, be only one Creator, God, who was or had been primarily benignant. Yet all the evidence pointed to the co-existence of an evil creative principle, a Satan. God, then, must be a split or dual personality, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, manifesting sometimes as the Devil.

This duality, Moreno argued, must be a form of what is commonly called schizophrenia. He had a profound belief in the efficacy of shock treatment for such disorders. If God, in his aspect as the Devil, could be suitably confined and subjected to treatment, a cure might result. The confused problems of the universe would then resolve themselves under a sane and no longer semi-diabolic Deity.

The glass globe, specially constructed at great expense, contained at one side electrical apparatus of Moreno's own devising. The machine, far more complex than the portable apparatus used in electric shock treatment, could release a voltage powerful enough to electrocute simultaneously all the inmates of a state prison. Moreno considered that no lesser force could effect the shock necessary for the cure of a supernatural personage.

He had memorized an ancient spell for the calling up of the Devil and his confinement within a bottle. The globe would do admirably for the aforesaid bottle.

The spell was a bastard mixture of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Its exact meaning seemed doubtful. It was filled with such terms as Eloha, Tetragrammaton, Kis Elijon, Elohim, Saday and Zevaoth, the names of God. The word Bifrons recurred several times. This was no doubt one of the Devil's numerous names. But there could be only one Devil.

Moreno disregarded as childish those old demonologies that peopled Hell with a multitude of evil spirits, having each his own name, rank and office.

All, then, was in readiness. In a firm, sonorous voice which might have been that of a priest chanting the Mass, he began to recite the incantation.

When the summons came, Bifrons was busily engaged in amorous dalliance with the she-imp Foti. Like Janus, he was two-faced; and he possessed multiple members. Since Foti herself was somewhat peculiarly formed, their love-making was quite complicated.

Bifrons began to withdraw his members from about the she-imp, "Some damned sorcerer has gotten hold of that ancient spell containing my name. It's the first time in two hundred years. But I'll have to go."

"Hurry back," enjoined Foti, pouting with her four lips, two of which were located in her abdomen. "If you don't you may find me otherwise occupied."

The air sizzled behind Bifrons in his exit from the infernal regions.

Dr. Moreno felt surprised and even appalled when he saw the being that his incantation had called up in the globe. He had scarcely known what to expect, and had paid little attention to old pictures and descriptions of the Devil, seeing in them only the dementia of medieval superstition. But the teratology of this creature seemed incredible.

The two faces of Bifron bloated alternately against the globe's interior; and his arms, legs, body and numerous other parts squirmed and flattened themselves convulsively in a furious effort to escape. But through the thickness of the glass, or the power of the surrounding circle, Bifrons was bottled up as helplessly as any djinn imprisoned by Solomon. He resigned himself presently and began to relax, floating awhile in mid-air, and finally seating

himself on Moreno's electrical machine. As if feeling more at home, he looped some of his parts around the various pairs of forceps, ending in electrodes, that projected from a huge and intricate device.

"What the devil do you want?" he bellowed. The glass muffled his voice, which was still sufficiently audible. His tones bespoke anger and resentment.

"I want the Devil," said Moreno. "And I presume that you are he."

"*The* Devil?" queried Bifrons. "It's true that I'm *a* devil. But I'm not the Old Man himself. There are many thousands of us, as you should know if you've read the demonologists. I'm no infernal prince but merely a subordinate, though with special powers of my own. Again, what do you want? Money? Women? A Senatorship? The Presidency of your cock-eyed republic? Name it, and I'll grant the wish. I'm in a hellish hurry to get out of here."

"You can't fool me. I know that you are the Devil—the **only** one in the universe. And I don't want any of your gifts. All I want is to cure you."

Bifrons was startled. "Cure me? Of what? Say, what kind of a sorcerer are you anyway?"

"I'm not a sorcerer but a psychiatrist. My name is Dr. Moreno. My hope and intention is to cure you of being the Devil."

This madhouse doctor must be crazy himself, thought Bifrons. He cogitated. The trend of his cogitations was betrayed only by a sardonic one-sided twist of his left-hand mouth.

"All right, I'm the Devil," he agreed finally. "But let's get this over with. What do you mean to do with me?"

"Subject you to shock treatment," announced the doctor. "A very special high-voltage treatment. It should be the best thing for schizophrenia like yours."

"Schizo-what?" roared Bifrons. "Do you think I'm a lunatic?"

"Let me explain. I am using the term schizophrenia in its literal sense, meaning split personality—not as commonly applied to several types of psychic disintegration or regression. I think that you are really a sick Deity. Your illness consists in being Satan part of the time. A genuine case of dual and alternating egos. The Satanic self dominates at present, otherwise I shouldn't have been able to call you up. But we'll soon remedy all that."

The demon thought it well to conceal his consternation. He must get back to Hell as soon as possible and make a report. Satan, he felt, would be interested in Dr. Moreno.

"Get on with your treatment," he enjoined. "What is it, anyway?"

"Electricity."

Bifrons assumed an expression of double-faced dismay. "That's a highly dangerous and destructive force. Do you wish to annihilate me?"

"The result should be different in your case," said the doctor in his most soothing professional voice. "Are you ready?"

Bifrons gave a bicephalic nod. Moreno stepped cautiously from the circle and went over to a panel of switches and levers set in the laboratory wall. Watching the demon closely, he began to manipulate one of the levers.

The numerous forceps of the machine, on which Bifrons had so conveniently seated himself, closed themselves on various parts of his anatomy, applying their electrodes to his skin. A pair, hitherto concealed, sprang forth and seized his temples tightly.

Moreno grasped a switch firmly and turned on the full voltage. Then, still cautious, he returned to the protective circle.

A shower of sparks and short blue bolts issued from the machine within the globe. In spite of the many forceps that had tightened upon him, Bifrons writhed and tossed like a harpooned

octopus. Smoke seemed to pour from his head, body and members, muffling the apparatus that held him captive. Soon a dark-brown cloud, seething and swelling, had filled the globe's interior, concealing everything from view. The cloud was something that Bifrons could emit at will, like the fluid of a cuttlefish.

As a matter of fact, since his nature was itself electrical, he had absorbed the terrific voltage with merely a mild discomfort. The dark cloud was a necessary screen for the tactics that he now intended to use.

Perhaps, Moreno thought, the treatment had been sufficiently prolonged. He could repeat it if necessary. Emerging once more from his magic shelter, he turned off the switch and reversed the lever that had served to manipulate the forceps. Once again he went back to the circle.

After an interval of silence there issued from the clouded globe a voice which had no resemblance to that of Bifrons. It was both thunderous and mellow. To Moreno's inexperienced ear, it sounded like the Voice that spoke to Moses on the mountain.

"I am cured," it announced. "You have restored Me to My Divinity, O wise and beneficent doctor. Pronounce the formula of release and let Me go. Hell is henceforth abolished, together with all evil, sin and disease. The Devil is dead. God alone exists. And God is good."

Moreno was enraptured, believing that he had realized so quickly his fondest professional hope. Scarcely knowing what he did, he uttered the formula that served to release an imprisoned spirit.

Afterwards he asked, "Now will You reveal Yourself to me? I would behold You in all Your glory."

"It cannot be," the Voice thundered. "My glory would blast your eyes forever. Therefore the cloud with which I have surrounded myself."

A moment later the globe burst asunder in flying fragments,

like some gigantic bottle of new champagne. The released cloud, billowing vastly and voluminously, seemed to overspread the whole laboratory in an instant. Bifrons, raging behind it but still invisible, proceeded to wreck all of Moreno's equipment like a dozen baboons gone berserk. Tray-laden tables were over-turned and smashed into splinters, shelves were pulled down with a crashing of countless vials and carboys. Coiled tubings were twisted and bent and ripped apart, heavily insulated wires snapped like twine. The old volumes of magic, piled in a corner, sprang into flame and burned to ashes in a few seconds. A violent wind, coming as if from nowhere, took up the ashes and scattered them throughout the room.

Moreno, protected by the circle, alone escaped the demon's wrath. He crouched at the circle's center, cowering and gibbering, while the cloud passed away through windows from which every pane had been broken.

Several of his colleagues, coming to consult him that evening, found him still crouching on the wreckage-littered floor. He did not seem to recognize them, and had obviously become deranged. His mouthings appeared to indicate a sort of theological mania.

The colleagues held an impromptu consultation of their own. As a result, Moreno was removed gently but forcibly to the same type of institution as that to which he had committed so many of his patients. His friends and fellow-psychiatrists deplored the interruption, perhaps the ending, of an illustrious career.

The wrecking of the laboratory remained a mystery. Had there been an explosion caused by one of Moreno's experiments? Had the doctor himself destroyed his equipment in a state of violent mania? Or—should the occurrence be classified as an act of God?

Fuming at the interruption of his tryst with Foti, Bifrons nevertheless thought it incumbent upon himself to report at once to Satan when he returned to the nether realms.

He found that Master of that picturesque region occupied in

caressing a half-flayed girl. The flaying had been done to render the caresses more intimate and more exquisitely agonizing.

Satan listened gravely to the demon's account of Dr. Moreno. His tapering artistic fingers, with long-pointed nails of polished jet, ceased their occupation; and a furrow appeared like a black triangle between his luminous marble brows.

"This is all very interesting—and rather unfortunate," he said. "However, you have acted with admirable aplomb and presence of mind. The situation should be well under control as long as Moreno remains in the madhouse where you and his colleagues have landed him."

He paused, and his fingers resumed in an absent-minded fashion their gentle raking of his victim's lumbar regions.

"Of course, as you understand, Moreno was quite mad from the start. But lunatics with a speculative bent can sometimes stumble overly close to certain guarded cosmic secrets and there are spells which even *I* must answer and obey . . . not to mention to Unspeakable Name, the Shem-hamphorash, which coerces and compels Jehovah. After he recovers from his present state of shock, Moreno might be adjudged sane—and released to continue his researches and experiments.

"Such an eventuation must be forestalled permanently. My good Bifrons, you must return immediately to earth and watch over him. I have full trust in your abilities, and I confer upon you plenipotentiary powers. All I ask is, that you keep this doctor well bedeviled and legally insane until the hour of his death."

When Bifrons departed, Satan summoned his chief lieutenants before him in the halls of Pandemonium.

"I am going away for awhile," he told them. "There are certain obligations of a pressing nature that call me—and I must not neglect them too long. In my absence, I consign the management of Hell to your competent hands."

Bowing reversely, Gorson, Goap, Zimimar and Amaimon, lords of the four quarters, went out one after one, leaving their prince alone.

When they had gone, he descended from his globed throne and passed through many corridors and by upward-winding stairs to the small postern door of Hell.

The door swung open without touch of any visible hand. A long white robe seemed to weave itself swiftly from the air about Satan's form. His infernal attributes withered and dropped away. And the long white beard of the Elohim sprouted and flowed down over his bosom as he stepped across the sill into Heaven.

Symposium of the Gorgon

I do not remember where or with whom the evening had begun. Nor can I recall what vintages, brews and distillations I had mingled by the way. In those nights of an alcoholically flaming youth I was likely to start anywhere, drink anything and end up anywhere else than at the port of embarkation.

It was therefore with interest but with little surprise that I found myself among the guests at the symposium in the Gorgon's hall. Do not ask me how I got there: I am still vague about it myself. It would be useless to tell you even if I could, unless you are one of the rare few elected for similar adventures. And if you are one of these, the telling would be needless.

Liquor brings oblivion to most; but to certain others, enfranchisement from time and space, the awareness of Tao, of all that is or has ever been or will ever be. By liquor I mean of course the true essence poured from the Dive Bouteille. But, on occasion, any bottle can be divine.

Just why, at that particular time, after what must have been a round of mundane bar-rooms, I should have entered the mythologic palace of Medusa, is a matter hardly apparent but determined, no doubt, by the arcanic and inflexible logic of alcohol. The night had been foggy, not to say wet; and on such nights one is prone to stray into the unlikeliest places. It was not the first time I had gotten a little mixed up in regard to the Einsteinian continuum.

Having read Bullfinch and other mythologists, I had small difficulty in orienting myself to the situation. At the moment of my entrance into the spacious early Grecian hall, I was stopped by a slave-girl attired only in three garlands of roses arranged to display and enhance her charms. This girl presented me with a brightly polished silver mirror, the rim and handle of which were twined appropriately with graven serpents. She also gave me a capacious wine-cup of unglazed clay. In a low voice, in the purest Greek of pre-Euripidean drama, she told me the mirror's purpose. The cup I could fill as often as I pleased, or was able, at a fountain of yellow wine in the foreground, rilling from the open mouth of a marble sea nymph that rose from amidst its bubbling ripples.

Thus forewarned, I kept my eyes on the mirror, which reflected the room before me with admirable clearness. I saw that my fellow-guests—at least any who possessed hands—had also been considerately equipped with mirrors, in which they could look with safety at their hostess whenever politeness required.

Medusa sat in a high-armed chair at the hall's center, weeping constant tears that could not dim the terrible brightness of her eyes. Her tonsure of curling serpents writhed and lifted incessantly. On each arm of the chair perched a woman-headed, woman-breasted fowl that I recognized as a harpy. In other chairs, the two sisters of Medusa sat immobile with lowered eyes.

All three were draining frequent cups served with averted eyes by the slave-girls, but showed no sign of intoxication.

There seemed to be a lot of statuary about the place: men, women, dogs, goats, and other animals as well as birds. These, the first slave-girl whispered as she passed me, consisted of the various unwary victims turned to stone by the Gorgon's glance. In a whisper lower still, she added that the fatal visit of Perseus, coming to behead Medusa, was momentarily expected.

I felt that it was high time for a drink, and moved forward to

the verge of the vinous pool. A number of ducks and swans, standing unsteadily about it with wine-splashed plumage, dipped their beaks in the fluid and tilted their heads back with obvious relish. They hissed at me viciously as I stepped among them. I slipped on their wet droppings and plunged hastily into the pool, but still retained the cup and the mirror as well as my footing. The fluid was quite shallow. Amid the loud quacking of the startled birds and the giggling of several golden-tressed sirens and russet-haired Nereids who sat on the farther edge, stirring the pool to luminous ripples with their cod-like tails, I stepped forward, splashing ankle-deep, to the marble sea-girl and lifted my cup to the yellow stream that issued from her grinning mouth. The cup filled instantly and slopped over, drenching my shirt-front. I drained it at a gulp. The wine was strong and good, though tasting heavily of resin like other antique vintages.

Before I could raise the cup for a second draft, it seemed that a flash of lightning, together with a violent wind, leapt horizontally across the hall from the open doorway. My face was fanned as if by the passing of a god. Forgetting the danger, I raised my eyes toward Medusa, over whom the lightning hovered and swung back with the movement of a weapon about to strike.

I remember my mythology. It was indeed the sword of Perseus, who wore Mercury's winged shoes and the helmet loaned by Hades which made him invisible. (Why the sword alone should be perceptible to sight, no myth-maker has explained.) The sword fell, and the head of Medusa sprang from her seated body and rolled in a spatter of blood across the floor and into the pool where I stood petrified. It was a moment of pandemonium. The ducks and geese scattered, quacking, honking madly, and the sirens and Nereids fled shrieking. They dropped their mirrors as they went. The head sank with a great splash, then rose to the surface. I caught a sidelong flick of one dreadful agonized eye—the left—as the head rolled over and soared from the water, its snaky locks

caught in an unseen armored grip by the pursuing demigod. Then, Perseus and his victim were gone, with a last lightning flash of the sword, through the doorway where the nymphs had vanished.

I climbed from the reddening pool, too dazed to wonder why I still retained power of movement after meeting the Gorgon's eye. The slave-girls had disappeared. The trunk of Medusa had fallen forward from its chair, upon which the harpies still perched.

Beside Medusa stood a beautiful winged white horse, dabbled from hoofs to mane with the blood that still ran from the fallen monster's neck. I knew that it must be Pegasus, born of her decapitation according to myth.

Pegasus pranced lightly toward me, neighing in excellent Greek:

"We must go. The decrees of the gods have been fulfilled. I see that you are a stranger from another time and space. I will take you wherever you wish to go, or as near to it as possible."

Pegasus kneeled and I mounted him bareback, since he had been born without saddle or reins.

"Cling tightly to my mane. I will not unhorse you," he promised, "whatever the speed or altitude of our journey."

He trotted out through the doorway, spread his shining wings on an orient dawn, and took off toward the reddening cirrus clouds. I turned my head a little later. An ocean lay behind us, far down, with raging billows turned to mere ripples by distance. The lands of morning gleamed before us.

"To what period of time, and what region?" asked Pegasus above the rhythmic drumming of his wings.

"I came from a country known as America, in the 20th century A.D.," I replied, raising my voice to reach his ears through the thunder.

Pegasus bridled and almost stopped in mid-flight.

"My prophetic insight forbids me to oblige you. I cannot visit the century, and, in particular, the country, that you name. Any

poets who are born there must do without me—must hoist themselves to inspiration by their own bootstraps, rather than by the steed of the Muses. If I ventured to land there, I should be impounded at once and my wings clipped. Later they would sell me for horse meat."

"You underrate their commercial acumen," I said. "They'd put you in a side-show and charge a stiff entrance fee. You're well known, in a way. Your name and picture are on sideboards at many gas-stations. A synonym for speed if nothing else.

"Anyway, there is little inducement for me to return. I have been trying to drink myself out of it for years and decades. Why end up, as I will sooner or later, at the highly expensive mercy of doctors, hospitals and undertakers?"

"You are certainly sensible, will you indicate a place and period more to your liking?"

I mused awhile, reviewing all I could remember of both history and geography.

"Well," I decided at last, "some South Sea island might do, before the discovery by Captain Cook and the coming of the missionaries."

Pegasus began to accelerate his flight. Day and darkness shuttled by, sun, moon and stars were streaks above, and the regions below were blurred by inconceivable speed, so that I could not distinguish fertile from desert, land from water. We must have circled the earth innumerable times, through the birth and death of millenniums.

Gradually the speed of the winged horse decelerated. A cloudless sun became stable overhead. A balmy subtropic sea, full of green islands, rolled softly on all sides to the horizon.

Pegasus made an easy landing on the nearest island, and I slipped dizzily from his back.

"Good luck," he neighed. Then, stretching his wings once more, he soared toward the sun and disappeared with the suddenness of a time-machine.

Feeling that Pegasus had abandoned me in a rather summary fashion, I peered about at my surroundings. At first sight I had been left in an uninhabited isle, on a coral reef lined with untrodden grass and rimmed with pandanus and breadfruit trees.

Presently the foliage stirred and several natives crept forth. They were elaborately tattooed and armed with wooden clubs studded with sharks' teeth. Judging from their gestures of fear and wonder, they had never seen a white man or a horse of any color, winged or unwinged. They dropped their clubs as they neared me, and pointed questioning fingers, a trifle shaky, at the skies where Pegasus had vanished.

"Think nothing of it," I said in my suavest and most reassuring tones. Remembering a vague religious upbringing, I made the sign of benediction.

The savages grinned shyly, displaying an array of filed teeth only less formidable than the sharks' incisors and molars that decorated their clubs. Plainly they were losing their fear and making me welcome to the island. Their eyes appraised me with inscrutable blandness, like those of innocent children who expect someone to feed them.

I am pencilling this account in a small notebook found in one of my pockets. Three weeks have passed since Pegasus left me among the cannibals. They have treated me well and have fattened me with all the abundance that the isle affords. With taro and roast pig, with breadfruit, cocoanuts, guavas, and many unknown delicious vegetables. I feel like a Thanksgiving turkey.

How do I know they are cannibals? By human bones, hair, skin, piled or strewn about as animal remnants are in the neighborhood

of slaughter-houses. Apparently they have moved their feasting places only when the bones got too thick. Bones of men, women, children, mixed with those of birds, pigs and small four-footed creatures. An untidy lot, even for anthropophagi.

The island is of small extent, perhaps no more than a mile in width by two in length. I have not learned its name and am uncertain to which of the many far-flung archipelagos it belongs. But I have picked up a few words of the soft, many-vowelled language—mainly the names of foodstuffs.

They have domiciled me in a clean enough hut, which I occupy alone. None of the women, who are comely enough and quite friendly, has offered to share it with me. Perhaps this is for therapeutic reasons—perhaps they fear I might lose weight if I were to indulge in amorous activity. Anyway, I am relieved. All women are cannibalistic, even if they don't literally tear the meat from one's bones. They devour time, money, attention, and give treachery in return. I have long learned to avoid them. Long ago my devotion to drink became single-hearted. Liquor at least has been faithful to me. It requires no eloquence, no flattery, no blandishments. To me, at least, it makes no false promises.

I wish Pegasus would return and carry me off again. Truly I made a chuckle-headed choice in selecting one of the South Sea isles. I am weaponless; and I don't swim very well. The natives could overtake me quickly if I stole one of their outrigger canoes. I never was much good at boating even in my college days. Barring a miracle, I am destined to line the gizzards of these savages.

The last few days they have allowed me all the palm-wine I can drink. Perhaps they believe it will improve the flavor. I swig it frequently and lie on my back staring at the bright blue skies where only parrots and sea-birds pass. I cannot get drunk and delirious enough to imagine that any of them is the winged horse. And I curse them in five languages, in English, Greek, French,

Spanish, Latin, because they cannot be mistaken for Pegasus. Perhaps, if I had plenty of high-proof Scotch and Bourbon, I could walk out of this particular time-plexus into something quite different . . . as I did from modern New York into the ancient palace of Medusa.

Another entry, which I hardly expected to make. I don't know the day, the month, the year, the century. But according to these misguided islanders—and mine—it was pot day. They brought out the pot at mid-morning: a huge vessel of blackening battered bronze inscribed around the sides with Chinese characters. It must have been left here by some far-strayed or storm-wrecked junk. I don't like to conjecture the fate of the crew, if any survived and came ashore. Being boiled in their own cooking-pot must have been a curious irony.

To get back to my tale. The natives had set out huge quantities of palm-wine in crude earthen vessels, and they and I were getting ginned up as fast as we could. I wanted a share of the funeral feast, even if I was slated to afford the piece-de-resistance.

Presently there was a lot of jabbering and gesticulating. The chief, a big burly ruffian, was giving orders. A number of the natives scattered into the woods, and some returned with vessels full of springwater which they emptied into the pot, while others piled dry grass and well-seasoned fagots around its base. A fire was started with flint and an old piece of metal which looked like the broken-off end of a Chinese sword-blade. It was probably a relic of the same junk that had provided the pot.

I hoped that the user had broken it only after laying out a long file of cannibals.

In a rather futile effort to raise my spirits, I began to sing the Marseillaise, and followed it with Lulu and various other bawdies. Presently the water was bubbling, and the cooks turned their attention to me. They seized me, stripped off my ragged clothes, and

trussed me up adroitly, knees to chest and arms doubled at the sides, with some sort of tough vegetable fiber. Then, singing what was doubtless a cannibal chanty, they picked me up and heaved me into the pot, where I landed with a splash and settled more or less upright in a sitting position.

At least, I had thought they would knock me on the head beforehand rather than boil me like a live lobster.

In my natural fright and confusion it took me some moments to realize that the water, which had seemed scalding hot, was in reality no warmer to the epidermis than my usual morning tub. In fact it was quite agreeable. Judging by the violence with which it bubbled beneath my chin, it was not likely to grow much hotter.

This anomaly of sensation puzzled me mightily. By all rights I should be suffering agonies. Then, like a flash of lightning, I remembered the passing sidelong flick of Medusa's left eye and the apparent lack of effect at the time. Her glance had in no way petrified me—but in some strange fashion it must have toughened my skin, which was now impervious to the normal effects of heat; and perhaps also to other phenomena. Perhaps, to cause the mythic petrification, it was necessary to sustain the regard of both the Gorgon's eyes.

These things are mysteries. Anyway, it was as if I had been given a flexible asbestos hide. But, curiously enough, my keenness of touch was unimpaired.

Through the veering smoke I saw that the cooks were coming back, laden with baskets of vegetables. They were all getting drunker; and the chief was the drunkest. He lurched about, waving his war-club, while the others emptied their baskets into the kettle. Only then did they perceive that things had not proceeded according to culinary rules. Their eyes grew rounder and they yelled with surprise to see me grinning at them from the steaming ebullient contents. One of the cooks made a pass at my throat with a stone knife—and the knife broke in the middle. Then the

chief stepped forward, shouting ferociously, and hoisted his toothed war-club.

I ducked under water and to one side. The club descended, making a huge splash—and missed me. Judging from their outcries, some of the cooks must have been scalded by the flying water. The chief fared worse. Over-balanced by that mighty stroke, he lurched against the pot, which careened heavily, spilling much of the contents. Using my weight repeatedly against the side, I managed to overthrow the vessel, and rolled out in a torrent of water, smoke, and vegetables.

The chief, yowling from what must have been third-degree burns, was trying to extricate himself from the brands and embers into which he had fallen. Limping, he got to his feet after several vain attempts and staggered away. The other cooks, and the expectant feasters, had already decamped. I had the field to myself.

Looking around, I noticed the broken-off sword which had been used in striking fire, and levered myself in its direction. Holding it clumsily, I contrived to work my wrist-fetters against the edge. The blade was still fairly sharp and I soon had my hands free. After that it was no trick to untruss my legs.

The wine had worn off but there were many unemptied pots of it still around. I collected two or three, and put some of the spilled vegetables to roast amid the glowing coals. Then, waiting comfortably for the cannibals' return, I began to laugh.

I was washing down a well-baked taro root with the second pot of wine when the first of them crawled out of the woods and fell prostrate before me. I learned afterwards that they were deprecating my anger and were very sorry they had not recognized me as a god.

They have christened me in their own tongue The-One-who-cannot-be-cooked.

I wish that Pegasus would return.

The Theft of Thirty-nine Girdles

Let it be said as a foreword to this tale that I have robbed no man who was not in some way a robber of others. In all my long and arduous career, I, Satampra, Zerios of Uzuldaroum, sometimes known as the master-thief have endeavored to serve merely as an agent in the rightful redistribution of wealth. The adventure I have now to relate was no exception; though as it happened in the outcome, my own pecuniary profits were indeed meager, not to say trifling.

Age is upon me now. And sitting at that leisure which I have earned through many hazards, I drink the wines that are heartening to age. To me, as I sip, return memories of splendid loot and brave nefarious enterprise. Before me shine the outpoured sackfuls of djals or pazoors, removed so dexterously from the coffers of iniquitous merchants and money-lenders. I dream of rubies redder than the blood that was shed for them; of sapphires bluer than depths of glacial ice; of emeralds greener than the jungle in spring. I recall the escalade of pronged balconies; the climbing of terraces and towers guarded by monsters; the sacking of altars beneath the eyes of malign idols or sentinel serpents.

Often I think of Vixeela, my one true love and the most adroit and courageous of my companions in burglary. She has long since gone to the bourn of all good thieves and comrades; I have mourned her sincerely these many years. But still dear is the mem-

ory of our amorous, adventurous nights and the feats we performed together. Of such feats, perhaps the most signal and audacious was the theft of the thirty-nine girdles.

These were the golden and jeweled chastidy girdles, worn by the virgins vowed to the moon god Leniqua, whose temple had stood from immemorial time in the suburbs of Uzuldaroum, capital of Hyperborea. The virgins were always thirty-nine in number. They were chosen for their youth and beauty, and retired from service to the god at the age of thirty-one.

The girdles were padlocked with the toughest bronze and their keys retained by the high-priest who, on certain nights, rented them at a high price to the richer gallants of the city. It will thus be seen that the virginity of the priestesses was nominal; but its frequent and repated sale was regarded as a meritorious act of sacrifice to the god.

Vixeela herself had at one time been numbered among the virgins but had fled from the temple and from Uzuldaroum several years before the sacerdotal age of release from her bondage. She would tell me little of her life in the temple; I surmised that she had found small pleasure in the religious prostitution and had chafed at the confinement entailed by it. After her flight she had suffered many hardships in the cities of the south. Of these too, she spoke but sparingly, as one who dreads the reviving of painful recollections.

She had returned to Uzuldaroum a few months prior to our first meeting. Being now a little over age, and having dyed her russet-blond hair to a raven black, she had no great fear of recognition by Leniqua's priests. As was their custom, they had promptly replaced her loss with another and younger virgin, and would have small interest now in one so long delinquent.

At the time of our foregathering, Vixeela had already committed various petty larcenies. But, being unskilled, she had failed

to finish any but the easier and simpler ones, and had grown quite thin from starvation. She was still attractive and her keenness of wit and quickness in learning soon endeared her to me. She was small and agile and could climb like a lemur. I soon found her help invaluable, since she could climb through windows and other apertures impassable to my greater bulk.

We had consummated several lucrative burglaries, when the idea of entering Leniqua's temple and making away with the costly girdles occurred to me. The problems offered, and the difficulties to be overcome, appeared at first sight little less than fantastic. But such obstacles have always challenged my acumen and have never daunted me.

Firstly, there was the problem of entrance without detection and serious mayhem at the hands of the sickle-armed priests who guarded Leniqua's fane with baleful and incorruptible vigilance. Luckily, during her term of temple service, Vixeela had learned of a subterranean adit, long disused but, she believed, still passable. This entrance was through a tunnel, the continuation of a natural cavern located somewhere in the woods behind Uzuldaroum. It had been used almost universally by the virgins' visitors in former ages. But the visitors now entered openly by the temple's main doors or by posterns little less public; a sign, perhaps that religious sentiment had deepened or that modesty had declined.

Vixeela had never seen the cavern herself but she knew its approximate location. The temple's inner adit was closed only by a flagstone, easily levitated from below or above, behind the image of Leniqua in the great nave.

Secondly, there was the selection of a proper time, when the women's girdles had been unlocked and laid aside. Here again Vixeela was invaluable, since she knew the nights on which the rented keys were most in demand. These were known as nights of

sacrifice, greater or lesser, the chief one being at the moon's full. All the women were then in repeated request.

Since, however, the fane on such occasions would be crowded with people, the priests, the virgins and their clients, a seemingly insurmountable difficulty remained. How were we to collect and make away with the girdles in the presence of so many persons? This, I must admit, baffled me.

Plainly, we must find some way in which the temple could be evacuated, or its occupants rendered unconscious or otherwise incapable during the period needed for our operations.

I thought of a certain soporific drug, easily and quickly vaporized, which I had used on more than one occasion to put the inmates of a house asleep. Unfortunately the drug was limited in its range and would not penetrate to all the chambers and alcoves of a large edifice like the temple. Moreover it was necessary to wait for a full half hour, with doors or windows opened, till the fumes were dissipated; otherwise the robbers would be overcome together with their victims.

There was also the pollen of a rare jungle lily, which, if cast in a man's face, would induce a temporary paralysis. This too I rejected. There were too many persons to be dealt with, and the pollen could hardly be obtained in sufficient quantities.

At last I decided to consult the magician and alchemist, Veezi Phenquor, who, possessing furnaces and melting-pots, had often served me by converting stolen gold and silver into ingots or other safely unrecognizable forms. Though skeptical of his powers as a magician, I regarded Veezi Phenquor as a skilled pharmacist and toxicologist. Having always on hand a supply of strange and deadly medicaments, he might well be able to provide something that would facilitate our project.

We found Veezi Phenquor decanting one of his more noisome concoctions from a still bubbling and steaming kettle into vials of

stout stoneware. By the smell I judged that it must be something of special potency; the exudations of a polecat would have been innocuous in comparison. In his absorption he did not notice our presence until the entire contents of the kettle had been decanted and the vials tightly stoppered and sealed with a blackish gum.

"That," he observed with unctuous complacency, "is a love-philter that would inflame a nursing infant or resurrect the powers of a dying nonagenarian. Do you—"

"No," I said emphatically. "We require nothing of the sort. What we need at the moment is something quite different." In a few terse words I went on to outline the problem, adding:

"If you can help us, I am sure you will find the melting down of the golden girdles a congenial task. As usual, you will receive a third of the profits."

Veezi Phenquor creased his bearded face into a half-lubricious, half-sardonic smile.

"The proposition is a pleasant one from all angles. We will free the temple-girls from incumbrances which they must find uncomfortable, not to say burdensome; and will turn the irksome gems and metal to a worthier purpose—notably, our own enrichment." As if by way of afterthought, he added:

"It happens that I can supply you with a most unusual preparation, warranted to empty the temple of all its occupants in a very short time."

Going to a cobwebbed corner, he took down from a high shelf an abdominous jar of uncolored glass filled with a fine grey powder and brought it to the light.

"I will now," he said, "explain to you the singular properties of this powder and the way in which it must be used. It is truly a triumph of chemistry, and more devasting than a plague."

We were astounded by what he told us. Then we began to laugh.

"It is to be hoped," I said, "that none of your spells and cantrips are involved."

Veezi Phenquor assumed the expression of one whose feelings have been deeply injured. "I assure you," he protested, "that the effects of the powder, though extraordinary, are not beyond nature."

After a moment's meditation he continued: "I believe that I can further your plan in other ways. After the abstraction of the girdles, there will be the problem of transporting undetected such heavy merchandise across a city which, by that time, may well have been aroused by the horrendous crime and busily patrolled by constabulary. I have a plan. . . ."

We hailed with approval the ingenious scheme outlined by Veezi Phenquor. After we had discussed and settled to our satisfaction the various details, the alchemist brought out certain liquors that proved more palatable than anything of his we had yet sampled. We then returned to our lodgings, I carrying in my cloak the jar of powder, for which Veezi Phenquor generously refused to accept payment. We were filled with rosiest anticipations of success, together with a modicum of distilled palm-wine.

Discreetly, we refrained from our usual activities during the nights that intervened before the next full moon. We kept closely to our lodgings, hoping that the police, who had long suspected us of numerous peccadilloes, would believe that we had either quitted the city or retired from burglary.

A little before midnight, on the evening of the full moon, Veezi Phenquor knocked discreetly at our door—a triple knock as had been agreed. Like ourselves, he was heavily cloaked in peasant's homespun.

"I have procured the cart of a vegetable seller from the country," he said. "It is loaded with seasonable produce and drawn by two small asses. I have concealed it in the woods, as near to the cave-adit of Leniqua's temple as the overgrown road will permit. Also, I have reconnoitered the cave itself.

"Our success will depend on the utter confusion created. If we

are not seen to enter or depart by the rear adit, in all likelihood no one will remember its existence. The priests will be searching elsewhere.

"Having removed the girdles and concealed them under our load of farm produce, we will then wait till the hour before dawn when, with other vegetable and fruit dealers, we will enter the city."

Keeping as far as we could from the public places, where most of the police were gathered around taverns and the cheaper lupanars, we circled across Uzuldaroum and found, at some distance from Leniqua's fane, a road that ran country-ward. The jungle soon grew denser and the houses fewer. No one saw us when we turned into a side road overhung with leaning palms and closed in by thickening brush. After many devious turnings, we came to the ass-drawn cart, so cleverly screened from view that even I could detect its presence only by the pungent aroma of certain root-vegetables. Those asses were well-trained for the use of thieves: there was no braying to betray their presence.

We groped on, over hunching roots and between clustered boles that made the rest of the way impassable for a cart. I should have missed the cave; but Veezi Phenquor, pausing, stooped before a low hillock to part the matted creepers, showing a black and bouldered aperture large enough to admit a man on hands and knees.

Lighting the torches we had brought along, we crawled into the cave, Veezi going first. Luckily, due to the rainless season, the cave was dry and our clothing suffered only earth-stains such as would be proper to agricultural workers.

The cave narrowed where piles of debris had fallen from the roof. I, with my width and girth, was hard put to squeeze through in places. We had gone an undetermined distance when Veezi

stopped and stood erect before a wall of smooth masonry in which shadowy steps mounted.

Vixeela slipped past him and went up the steps. I followed. The fingers of her free hand were gliding over a large flat flagstone that filled the stairhead. The stone began to tilt noiselessly upward. Vixeela blew out her torch and laid it on the top step while the gap widened, permitting a dim, flickering light to pour down from beyond. She peered cautiously over the top of the flag, which became fully uptilted by its hidden mechanism and then climbed through motioning us to follow.

We stood in the shadow of a broad pillar at one side of the back part of Leniqua's temple. No priest, woman or visitor was in sight but we heard a confused humming of voices at some vague remove. Leniqua's image, presenting its reverend rear, sat on a high dais in the center of the nave. Altar fires, golden, blue and green, flamed spasmodically before the god, making his shadow writhe on the floor and against the rear wall like a delirious giant in a dance of copulation with an unseen partner.

Vixeela found and manipulated the spring that caused the flagstone to sink back as part of a level floor. Then the three of us stole forward, keeping in the god's wavering shadow. The nave was still vacant but noise came more audibly from open doorways at one side, resolving itself into gay cries and hysterical laughters.

"Now," whispered Veezi Phenquor.

I drew from a side-pocket the vial he had given us and pried away the wax with a sharp knife. The cork, half-rotten with age, was easily removed. I poured the vial's contents on the back bottom step of Leniqua's dais—a pale stream that quivered and undulated with uncanny life and luster as it fell in the god's shadow. When the vial was empty I ignited the heap of powder.

It burned instantly with a clear, high-leaping flame. Immedi-

ately, it seemed, the air was full of surging phantoms—a soundless, multitudinous explosion, beating upon us, blasting our nostrils with charnel fetors till we reeled before it, choking and strangling. There was however no sense of material impact from the hideous forms that seemed to melt over and through us, rushing in all directions, as if every atom of the burning powder released a separate ghost.

Hastily we covered our noses with squares of thick cloth that Veezi had warned us to bring for this purpose. Something of our usual aplomb returned and we moved forward through the seething rout. Lascivious blue cadavers intertwined around us. Miscegenations of women and tigers arched over us. Monsters double-headed and triple-tailed, goblins and ghouls rose obliquely to the far ceiling or rolled and melted to other and more nameless apparitions in lower air. Green sea-things, like unions of drowned men and octopi coiled and dribbled with dank slime along the floor.

Then we heard the cries of fright from the temple's inmates and visitors and began to meet naked men and women who rushed frantically through that army of beleaguering phantoms toward the exits. Those who encountered us face to face recoiled as if we too were shapes of intolerable horror.

The naked men were mostly young. After them came middle-aged merchants and aldermen, bald and pot-bellied, some clad in undergarments, some in snatched-up cloaks too short to cover them below the hips. Women, lean, fat or buxom, tumbled screaming for the outer doors. None of them, we saw with approbation, had retained her chastity girdle.

Lastly came the priests, with mouths like gaping squares of terror, emitting shrill cries. All of them had dropped their sickles. They passed us, blindly disregarding our presence, and ran after

the rest. The host of powder-born specters soon shrouded them from view.

Satisfied that the temple was now empty of its inmates and clients, we turned our attention to the first corridor. The doors of the separate rooms were all open. We divided our labors, taking each a room, and removing from disordered beds and garment-littered floors the cast-off girdles of gold and gems. We met at the corridor's end, where our collected loot was thrust into the strong thin sack I had carried under my cloak. Many of the phantoms still lingered, achieving new and ghastlier fusions, dropping their members upon us as they began to diswreathe.

Soon we had searched all the rooms apportioned to the women. My sack was full, and I had counted thirty-eight girdles at the end of the third corridor. One girdle was still missing; but Vixeela's sharp eyes caught the gleam of an emerald-studded buckle protruding from under the dissolving legs of a hairy satyr-like ghost on a pile of male garments in the corner. She snatched up the girdle and carried it in her hand henceforward.

We hurried back to Leniqua's nave, believing it to be vacant of all human occupants by now. To our disconcertion the High Priest, whose name Vixeela knew as Marquanos, was standing before the altar, striking blows with a long phallic rod of bronze, his insignia of office, at certain apparitions that remained floating in the air.

Marquanos rushed toward us with a harsh cry as we neared him, dealing a blow at Vixeela that would have brained her if she had not slipped agilely to one side. The High Priest staggered, nearly losing his balance. Before he could turn upon her against. Vixeela brought down on his tonsured head the heavy chastity girdle she bore in her right hand. Marquanos toppled like a slaughtered ox beneath the pole-ax of the butcher, and lay prostrate, writhing a

little. Blood ran in rills from the serrated imprint of the great jewels on his scalp. Whether he was dead or still living, we did not pause to ascertain.

We made our exit without delay. After the fright they had received, there was small likelihood that any of the temple's denizens would venture to return for some hours. The movable slab fell smoothly back into place behind us. We hurried along the underground passage, I carrying the sack and the others preceding me in order to drag it through straitened places and over piles of rubble when I was forced to set it down. We reached the creeper-hung entrance without incident. There we paused awhile before emerging into the moon-streaked woods, and listened cautiously to cries that diminished with distance. Apparently no one had thought of the rear adit or had even realized that there was any such human motive as robbery behind the invasion of terrifying specters.

Reassured, we came forth from the cavern and found our way back to the hidden cart and its drowsing asses. We threw enough of the fruits and vegetables into the brush to make a deep cavity in the cart's center in which our sackful of loot was then deposited and covered over from sight. Then, settling ourselves on the grassy ground, we waited for the hour before dawn. Around us after while, we heard the furtive slithering and scampering of small animals that devoured the comestibles we had cast away.

If any of us slept, it was, so to speak, with one eye and one ear. We rose in the horizontal sifting of the last moonbeams and long eastward-running shadows of early twilight.

Leading our asses, we approached the highway and stopped behind the brush while an early cart creaked by. Silence ensued, and we broke from the wood and resumed our journey cityward before other carts came in sight.

In our return through outlying streets we met only a few early

passers, who gave us no second glance. Reaching the neighborhood of Veezi Phenquor's house, we consigned the cart to his care and watched him turn into the courtyard unchallenged and seemingly unobserved by others than ourselves. He was, I reflected, well supplied with roots and fruits.

We kept closely to our lodgings for two days. It seemed unwise to remind the police of our presence in Uzuldaroum by any public appearance. On the evening of the second day our food supply ran short and we sallied out in our rural costumes to a nearby market which we had never before patronized.

Returning, we found evidence that Veezi Phenquor had paid us a visit during our absence, in spite of the fact that all the doors and windows had been, and still were, carefully locked. A small cube of gold reposed on the table, serving as paper-weight for a scribbled note.

The note read:

"My esteemed friends and companions: After removing the various gems, I have melted down all the gold into ingots, and am leaving one of them as a token of my great regard. Unfortunately, I have learned that I am being watched by the police and am leaving Uzuldaroum under circumstances of haste and secrecy, taking the other ingots and all the jewels in the ass-drawn cart, covered up by the vegetables I have providentially kept, even though they are slightly stale by now. I expect to make a long journey, in a direction which I cannot specify—a journey well beyond the jurisdiction of our local police, and one on which I trust you will not be perspicacious enough to follow me. I shall need the remainder of our loot for my expenses, et cetera. Good luck in all your future ventures. Respectfully, Veezi Phenquor

"POSTSCRIPT: You too are being watched, and I advise you to quite the city with all feasible expedition. Marquanos, in spite of a well-cracked mazard from Vixeela's blow, recovered full con-

sciousness late yesterday. He recognized in Vixeela a former temple-girl through the trained dexterity of her movements. He has not been able to identify her; but a thorough and secret search is being made, and other girls have already been put to the thumb-screw and toe-screw by Leniqua's priests.

"You and I, my dear Satampra, have already been listed, though not yet identified, as possible accomplices of the girl. A man of your conspicuous height and bulk is being sought. The Powder of the Fetid Apparitions, some traces of which were found on Leniqua's dais, has already been analyzed. Unluckily it has been used before by both myself and other alchemists.

"I hope you will escape . . . on other paths than the one I am planning to follow."

Morthylla

In Umbri, City of the Delta, the lights blazed with a garish brilliance after the setting of that sun which was now a coal-red decadent star, grown old beyond chronicle, beyond legend. Most brilliant, most garish of all were the lights that illumed the house of the aging poet Famurza, whose Anacreontic songs had brought him the riches that he disbursed in orgies for his friends and sycophants. Here, in porticoes, halls and chambers the cressets were thick as stars in a cloudless fault. It seemed that Famurza wished to dissipate all shadows, except those in arrased alcoves set apart for the fitful amours of his guests.

For the kindling of such amours there were wines, cordials, aphrodisiacs. There were meats and fruits that swelled the flaccid pulses. There were strange exotic drugs that aroused and prolonged pleasure. There were curious statuettes in half-veiled niches; and wall-panels painted with bestial loves, or loves human or superhuman. There were hired singers of all sexes, who sang ditties diversely erotic; and dancers whose contortions were calculated to restore the outworn sense when all else had failed.

But to all such incitants Valzain, pupil of Famurza, and renowned both as poet and voluptuary, was insensible.

With indifference turning toward disgust, a half-emptied cup in his hand, he watched from a corner the gala throng that ed-

died past him, and averted his eyes involuntarily from certain couples who were too shameless or drunken to seek the shadows of privacy for their dalliance. A sudden satiety had claimed him. He felt himself strangely withdrawn from the morass of wine and flesh into which, not long before, he had still plunged with delight. He seemed as one who stands on an alien shore, beyond waters of deepening separation.

"What ails you, Valzain? Has a vampire sucked your blood?" It was Famurza, flushed, gray-haired, slightly corpulent, who stood at his elbow. Laying an affectionate hand on Valzain's shoulder, he hoisted aloft with the other that fescenninely graven quart goblet from which he was wont to drink only wine, eschewing the drugged and violent liquors often preferred by the sybarites of Umbri.

"Is it biliousness? Or unrequited love? We have cures here for both. You have only to name your medicine."

"There is no medicine for what ails me," countered Valzain. "As for love, I have ceased to care whether it be requited or unrequited. I can taste only the dregs in every cup. And tedium lurks at the middle of all kisses."

"Truly, yours is a melancholy case." There was concern in Famurza's voice. "I have been reading some of your late verses. You write only of tombs and yew-trees, of maggots and phantoms and disembodied loves. Such stuff gives me the colic. I need at least a half-gallon of honest vine-juice after each poem."

"Though I did not know it till lately," admitted Valzain, "there is in me a curiosity toward the unseen, a longing for things beyond the material world."

Famurza shook his head commiserately. "Though I have attained to more than twice your years, I am still content with what I see and hear and touch. Good juicy meats, women, wine, the songs of full-throated singers, are enough for me."

"In the dreams of slumber," mused Valzain. "I have clasped succubi who were more than flesh, have known delights too keen for the waking body to sustain. Do such dreams have any source, outside the earth-born brain itself? I would give much to find that source, if it exists. In the meanwhile there is nothing for me but despair."

"So young—and yet so exhausted! Well, if you're tired of women, and want phantoms instead, I might venture a suggestion. Do you know the old necropolis, lying midway between Umbri and Psiom—a matter of perhaps three miles from here? The goatherds say that a lamia haunts it—the spirit of the princess Morthylla, who died several centuries ago and was interred in a mausoleum that still stands, overtowering the lesser tombs. Why not go forth tonight and visit the necropolis? It should suit your mood better than my house. And perhaps Morthylla will appear to you. But don't blame me if you don't return at all. After all those years the lamia is still avid for human lovers; and she might well take a fancy to you."

"Of course, I know the place," said Valzain. . . . "But I think you are jesting."

Famurza shrugged his shoulders and moved on amid the revelers. A laughing dancer, blonde-limbed and lissom, came up to Valzain and threw a noose of plaited flowers about his neck, claiming him as her captive. He broke the noose gently, and gave the girl a tepid kiss that caused her to make wry faces. Unobtrusively but quickly, before others of the merry-makers could try to entice him, he left the house of Famurza.

Without impulses, other than that of an urgent desire for solitude, he turned his steps toward the suburbs, avoiding the neighborhood of taverns and lupanars, where the populace thronged. Music, laughter, snatches of songs, followed him from lighted mansions where symposia were held nightly by the city's richer

denizens. But he met few roisterers on the streets: it was too late for the gathering, too early for the dispersal, of guests at such symposia.

Now the lights thinned out, with ever-widening intervals between, and the streets grew shadowy with that ancient night which pressed about Umbri, and would wholly quench its defiant galaxies of lamp-bright windows with the darkening of Zothique's senescent sun. Of such things, and of death's encircling mystery, were the musings of Valzain as he plunged into the outer darkness that he found grateful to his glare-wearied eyes.

Grateful too was the silence of the field-bordered road that he pursued for awhile without realizing its direction. Then, at some landmark familiar despite the gloom, it came to him that the road was the one which ran from Umbri to Psiom, that sister city of the Delta; the road beside whose middle meanderings was situated the long-disused necropolis to which Famurza had ironically directed him.

Truly, he thought, the earthy-minded Famurza had somehow plumbed the need that lay at the bottom of his disenchantment with all sensory pleasures. It would be good to visit, to sojourn for an hour or so, in that city whose people had long passed beyond the lusts of mortality, beyond satiety and disillusion.

A moon, swelling from the crescent toward the half, arose behind him as he reached the foot of the low-mounded hill on which the cemetery lay. He left the paved road, and began to ascend the slope, half-covered with stunted gorse, at whose summit the glimmering marbles were discernible. It was without path, other than the broken trails made by goats and their herders. Dim, lengthened and attenuate, his shadow went before him like a ghostly guide. In his fantasy it seemed to him that he climbed the gently sloping bosom of a giantess, studded afar with pale gems that were tomb-

stones and mausoleums. He caught himself wondering, amid this poetic whimsy, whether the giantess was dead, or merely slept.

Gaining the flat expansive ground of the summit, where dwarfish dying yews disputed with leafless briars the intervals of slabs blotched with lichen, he recalled the tale that Famurza had mentioned, anent the lamia who was said to hunt the necropolis. Famurza, he knew well, was no believer in such legendry, and had meant only to mock his funereal mood. Yet, as a poet will, he began to play with the fancy of some presence, immortal, lovely and evil, that dwelt amid the antique marbles and would respond to the evocation of one who, without positive belief, had longed vainly for visions from beyond mortality.

Through headstone aisles of moon-touched solitude, he came to a lofty mausoleum, still standing with few signs of ruin at the cemetery's center. Beneath it, he had been told, were extensive vaults housing the mummies of an extinct royal family that had ruled over the twin cities Umbri and Psiom in former centuries. The princess Morthylla had belonged to this family.

To his startlement a woman, or what appeared to be such, was sitting on a fallen shaft beside the mausoleum. He could not see her distinctly; the tomb's shadow still enveloped her from the shoulders downward. The face alone, glimmering wanly, was lifted to the rising moon. Its profile was such as he had seen on antique coins.

"Who are you?" he asked, with a curiosity that overpowered his courtesy.

"I am the lamia Morthylla," she replied, in a voice that left behind it a faint and elusive vibration like that of some briefly sounded harp. "Beware me—for my kisses are forbidden to those who would remain numbered among the living."

Valzain was startled by this answer that echoed his fantasies.

Yet reason told him that the apparition was no spirit of the tombs but a living woman who knew the legend of Morthylla and wished to amuse herself by teasing him. And yet what woman would venture alone and at night to a place so desolate and eerie?

Most credibly, she was a wanton who had come out to keep a rendezvous amid the tombs. There were, he knew, certain perverse debauchees who required sepulchral surroundings and furnishings for the titillation of their desires.

"Perhaps you are waiting for some one," he suggested. "I do not wish to intrude, if such is the case."

"I wait only for him who is destined to come. And I have waited long, having had no lover for two hundred years. Remain, if you wish: there is no one to fear but me."

Despite the rational surmises he had formed, there crept along Valzain's spine the thrill of one who, without fully believing, suspects the presence of a thing beyond nature . . . Yet surely it was all a game—a game that he too could play for the beguilement of his ennui.

"I came here hoping to meet you," he declared. "I am weary of mortal women, tired of every pleasure—tired even of poetry."

"I, too, am bored," she said, simply.

The moon had climbed higher, shining on the dress of antique mode that the woman wore. It was cut closely at waist and hips and bosom, with voluminous downward folds. Valzain had seen such costumes only in old drawings. The princess Morthylla, dead for three centuries, might well have worn a similar dress.

Whoever she might be, he thought, the woman was strangely beautiful, with a touch of quaintness in the heavily coiled hair whose color he could not decide in the moonlight. There was a sweetness about her mouth, a shadow of fatigue or sadness beneath her eyes. At the right corner of her lips he discerned a small mole.

Valzain's meeting with the self-named Morthylla was repeated nightly while the moon swelled like the rounding breast of a titaness and fell away once more to hollowness and senescence. Always she awaited him by the same mausoleum—which, she declared, was her dwelling-place. And always she dismissed him when the east turned ashen with dawn, saying that she was a creature of the night.

Skeptical at first, he thought of her as a person with macabre leanings and fantasies akin to his own, with whom he was carrying on a flirtation of singular charm. Yet about her he could find no hint of the worldliness that he suspected: no seeming knowledge of present things, but a weird familiarity with the past and the lamia's legend. More and more she seemed a nocturnal being, intimate only with shadow and solitude.

Her eyes, her lips, appeared to withhold secrets forgotten and forbidden. In her vague, ambiguous answers to his questions, he read meanings that thrilled him with hope and fear.

"I have dreamed of life," she told him cryptically. "And I have dreamed also of death. Now, perhaps there is another dream—into which you have entered."

"I, too, would dream," said Valzain.

Night after night his disgust and weariness sloughed away from him, in a fascination fed by the spectral milieu, the environing silence of the dead, his withdrawal and separation from the carnal, garish city. By degrees, by alternations of unbelief and belief, he came to accept her as the actual lamia. The hunger that he sensed in her could be only the lamia's hunger; her beauty that of a being no longer human. It was like a dreamer's acceptance of things fantastic elsewhere than in sleep.

Together with his belief, there grew his love for her. The desires he had thought dead revived within him, wilder, more importunate.

She seemed to love him in return. Yet she betrayed no sign of the lamia's legendary nature, eluding his embrace, refusing him the kisses for which he begged.

"Sometime, perhaps," she conceded. "But first you must know me for what I am, must love me without illusion."

"Kill me with your lips, devour me as you are said to have devoured other lovers," beseeched Valzain.

"Can you not wait?" Her smile was sweet—and tantalizing. "I do not wish your death so soon, for I love you too well. Is it not sweet to keep our tryst among the sepulchres? Have I not beguiled you from your boredom? Must you end it all?"

The next night he besought her again, imploring with all his ardor and eloquence the denied consummation.

She mocked him: "Perhaps I am merely a bodiless phantom, a spirit without substance. Perhaps you have dreamed me. Would you risk an awakening from the dream?"

Valzain stepped toward her, stretching out his arms in a passionate gesture. She drew back, saying:

"What if I should turn to ashes and moonlight at your touch? You would regret then your rash insistence."

"You are the immortal lamia," avowed Valzain. "My senses tell me that you are no phantom, no disembodied spirit. But for me you have turned all else to shadow."

"Yes, I am real enough in my fashion," she granted, laughing softly. Then suddenly she leaned toward him and her lips touched his throat. He felt their moist warmth a moment—and felt the sharp sting of her teeth that barely pierced his skin, withdrawing instantly. Before he could clasp her she eluded him again.

"It is the only kiss permitted to us at present," she cried, and fled swiftly with soundless footfalls among the gleams and shadows of the sepulchres.

On the following afternoon a matter of urgent and unwelcome

business called Valzain to the neighboring city of Psiom: a brief journey, but one that he seldom took.

He passed the ancient necropolis, longing for that nocturnal hour when he could hasten once more to a meeting with Morthylla. Her poignant kiss, which had drawn a few drops of blood, had left him greatly fevered and distraught. He, like that place of tombs, was haunted; and the haunting went with him into Psiom.

He had finished his business, the borrowing of a sum of money from a usurer. Standing at the usurer's door, with that slightly obnoxious but necessary person beside him, he saw a woman passing on the street.

Her features, though not her dress, were those of Morthylla; and there was even the same tiny mole at one corner of her mouth. No phantom of the cemetery could have startled or dismayed him more profoundly.

"Who is that woman?" he asked the money-lender. "Do you know her?"

"Her name is Beldith. She is well-known in Psiom, being rich in her own right and having had numerous lovers. I've had a little business with her, though she owes me nothing at present. Should you care to meet her? I can easily introduce you."

"Yes, I should like to meet her," agreed Valzain. "She looks strangely like someone that I knew a long time ago."

The usurer peered slyly at the poet. "She might not make too easy a conquest. It is said of late that she has withdrawn herself from the pleasures of the city. Some have seen her going out at night toward the old necropolis, or returning from it in the early dawn. Strange tastes, I'd say, for one who is little more than a harlot. But perhaps she goes out to meet some eccentric lover."

"Direct me to her house," Valzain requested. "I shall not need you to introduce me."

"As you like." The money-lender shrugged, looking a little disappointed. "It's not far, anyway."

Valzain found the house quickly. The woman Beldith was alone. She met him with a wistful and troubled smile that left no doubt of her identity.

"I perceive that you have learned the truth," she said. "I had meant to tell you soon, for the deception could not have gone on much longer. Will you not forgive me?"

"I forgive you," returned Valzain sadly. "But why did you deceive me?"

"Because you desired it. A woman tries to please the man whom she loves; and in all love there is more or less deception.

"Like you, Valzain, I had grown tired of pleasure. And I sought the solitude of the necropolis, so remote from carnal things. You too came, seeking solitude and peace—or some unearthly spectre. I recognized you at once. And I had read your poems. Knowing Morthylla's legend, I thought to play a game with you. Playing it, I grew to love you . . . Valzain, you loved me as the lamia. Can you not now love me for myself?"

"It cannot be," averred the poet. "I fear to repeat the disappointment I have found in other women. Yet at least I am grateful for the hours you gave me. They were the best I have known—even though I have loved something that did not, and could not, exist. Farewell, Morthylla. Farewell, Beldith."

When he had gone, Beldith stretched herself face downward among the cushions of her couch. She wept a little; and the tears made a dampness that quickly dried. Later she arose briskly enough and went about her household business.

After a time she returned to the loves and revelries of Psiom. Perhaps, in the end, she found such peace as may be given to those who have grown too old for pleasure.

But for Valzain there was no peace, no balm for this last and most bitter of disillusionments. Nor could he return to the carnalities of his former life. So it was that he finally slew himself, stabbing his throat to its deepest vein with a keen knife in the same spot which the false lamia's teeth had bitten, drawing a little blood.

After his death, he forgot that he had died; forgot the immediate past with all its happenings and circumstances.

Following his talk with Famurza, he had gone forth from Famurza's house and from the city of Umbri and had taken the road that passed the abandoned cemetery. Seized by an impulse to visit it, he had climbed the slope toward the marbles under a swelling moon that rose behind him.

Gaining the flat, expansive ground of the summit, where dwarfish dying yews disputed with leafless briars the intervals of slabs blotched with lichen, he recalled the tale that Famurza had mentioned, anent the lamia who was said to haunt the cemetery. Famurza, he knew well, was no believer in such legendry, and had meant only to mock his funereal mood. Yet, as a poet will, he began to play with the thought of some presence, immortal, lovely and evil, that dwelt amid the antique marbles and would respond to the evocation of one who, without positive belief, had longed vainly for visions from beyond mortality.

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TALES OF SCIENCE AND SORCERY

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

This fifth collection of the macabre fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith was assembled for publication before his untimely death in 1961. The fourteen tales in this volume are equally divided between Smith's early vintage science-fiction and weird stories, with some of his last fiction, and the book thus represents a cross-section of Smith's work in a domain which he made peculiarly his own.

"None strikes the note of cosmic horror as well as Clark Ashton Smith," wrote the late H. P. Lovecraft. "In sheer daemonic strangeness and fertility of conception, Smith is perhaps unexcelled by any other writer, dead or living." Once again these stories, which alternately enchant and horrify, offer proof of the soundness of Lovecraft's judgment.

In a prose style that remains second to none, Smith delves into the lore of the planets and into the lore of mankind as well, even to a brief but effective satire, *The Great God Awto.* Here is a tale of Averoigne, *The Maker of Gargoyles,* and here are such highly imaginative flights of fancy as *Master of the Asteroid, The Immortals of Mercury* and *Seedling of Mars.* Few readers are likely to forget such a memorable tale of horror as *The Seed from the Sepulcher.*

Among other tales collected here are *The Root of Ampoi, The Theft of Thirty-Nine Girdles, Morthylla, Symposium of the Gorgon, The Tomb-Spawn, Mother of Toads, Schizoid Creator,* and *Murder in the Fourth Dimension.* To preface this collection, E. Hoffmann Price has contributed a memoir of Smith the man, offering a view of the poet-author-sculptor-painter new to most readers.

Smith must be, wrote Dr. Edward Wagenknecht not long ago, "at the very least the premiere American master in his particular genre." A devoted following will add this book to the small but distinguished shelf of Clark Ashton Smith's work.

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The jacket is the work of Frank Utpatel.

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961) spent all his life in his native California. He was born in mining country, at Auburn, east of Sacramento, and lived there for most of his life previous to his marriage to Carol Dorman, when he moved to Pacific Grove, where he died. Smith was widely known as a lyric poet of great distinction before most of his contemporary fantasistes had begun to make their reputations, though he came into his own as a writer of memorable macabre short stories and freshly imaginative science fiction in the 1920's and 1930's. In addition to writing, Smith painted and created unique and fantastic sculptures, now much sought after by collectors.

Though almost entirely self-educated, Smith was widely published during his lifetime. His markets included *The London Mercury, The Yale Review, Munsey's, Strange Tales, Smart Set, The Black Cat, Poetry, Weird Tales, The Arkham Sampler, Wonder Stories, Amazing Stories, Comet Stories, La Paree,* and many other magazines. During his lifetime he published seven collections of poems—*The Star-Treader and Other Poems, Ebony and Crystal, Sandalwood, Odes and Sonnets, Nero and Other Poems, The Dark Chateau, Spells and Philtres*—and four of short stories—*Out of Space and Time, Lost Worlds, Genius Loci and Other Tales,* and *The Abominations of Yondo.*

Forthcoming are *Poems in Prose*—with startling illustrations by Frank Utpatel, the *Selected Poems,* and a final volume of short stories, *Other Dimensions,* rounding out complete book publication of all Smith's fantastic fiction.

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