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Fantasy

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SCARLET DREAM

by C. L. MOORE

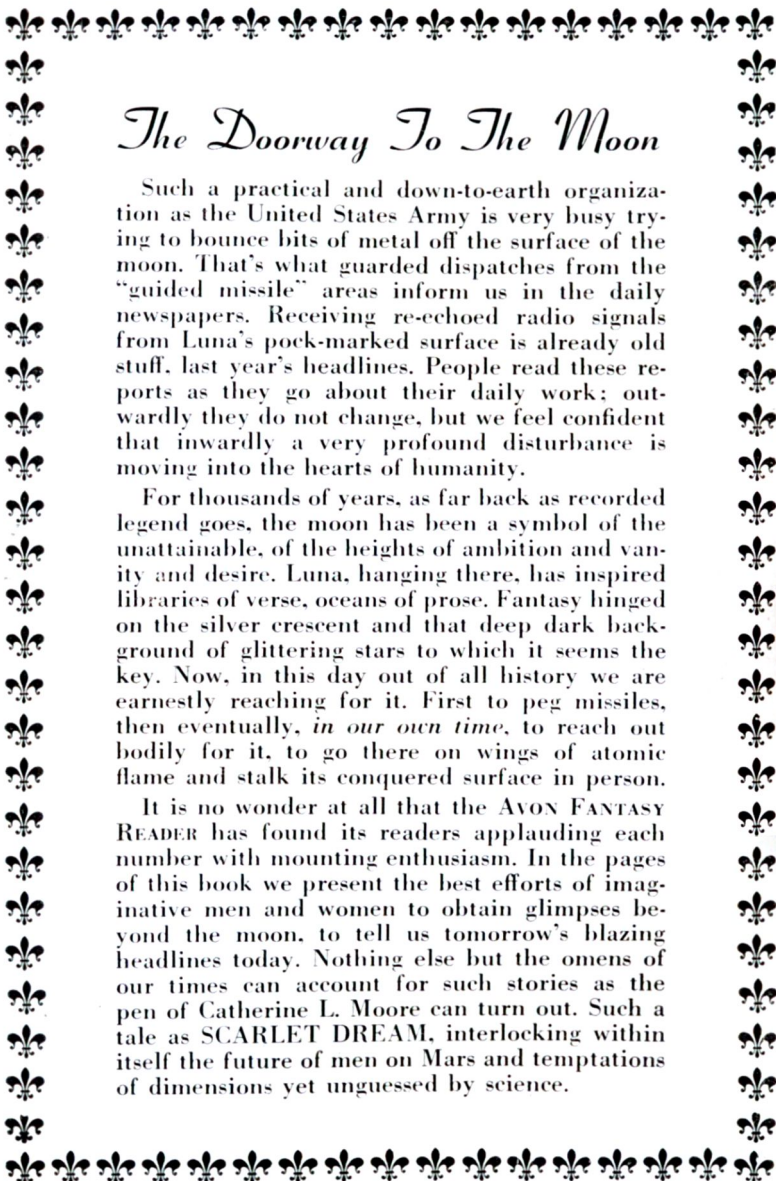
ROBERT BLOCH

FRANK OWEN

W. F. HARVEY

and others





The Doorway To The Moon

Such a practical and down-to-earth organization as the United States Army is very busy trying to bounce bits of metal off the surface of the moon. That's what guarded dispatches from the "guided missile" areas inform us in the daily newspapers. Receiving re-echoed radio signals from Luna's pock-marked surface is already old stuff, last year's headlines. People read these reports as they go about their daily work; outwardly they do not change, but we feel confident that inwardly a very profound disturbance is moving into the hearts of humanity.

For thousands of years, as far back as recorded legend goes, the moon has been a symbol of the unattainable, of the heights of ambition and vanity and desire. Luna, hanging there, has inspired libraries of verse, oceans of prose. Fantasy hinged on the silver crescent and that deep dark background of glittering stars to which it seems the key. Now, in this day out of all history we are earnestly reaching for it. First to peg missiles, then eventually, *in our own time*, to reach out bodily for it, to go there on wings of atomic flame and stalk its conquered surface in person.

It is no wonder at all that the AVON FANTASY READER has found its readers applauding each number with mounting enthusiasm. In the pages of this book we present the best efforts of imaginative men and women to obtain glimpses beyond the moon, to tell us tomorrow's blazing headlines today. Nothing else but the omens of our times can account for such stories as the pen of Catherine L. Moore can turn out. Such a tale as SCARLET DREAM, interlocking within itself the future of men on Mars and temptations of dimensions yet unguessed by science.

Another member of C. L. Moore's sex is Clare Winger Harris whose tale of THE MIRACLE OF THE LILY also tackles boldly a problem of communication between worlds (this time the planet Venus) and an even more desperate problem, the struggle of man against Nature. Nature includes many things besides the sciences we recognize. There are forces still to be guessed at, and Carl Jacobi has written a new story for us dealing intriguingly with the possibility of THE RANDOM QUANTITY.

Stephen Vincent Benét's story, THE GOLD DRESS, is a ghost story, told in the manner that has made Benét famous among American storytellers. And W. F. Harvey's SAMBO is a tale of a different type of weird force, manifesting itself through a dreadful African doll. Africa, that continent of dark marvels, called forth from the hand of Robert Bloch the eerie narrative, FANE OF THE BLACK PHARAOH, wherein the whole of the past, present, and future comes to a grim focus.

Frank Owen likewise knows how to tie in the past with the present as you will find in his enthralling modern legend of China, A STUDY IN AMBER. We cannot fail to see the doorways of power and terror that open up in the startling tales of C. M. Kornbluth and Robert W. Chambers.

You'll find this an all-around collection of really superior fantasy. Write us and tell us what you think of it and what you would like to see in the future numbers.

—DONALD A. WOLLHEIM



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AVON FANTASY READER

NO. 5

Edited By
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

C. L. MOORE • ROBERT BLOCH
FRANK OWEN • CARL JACOBI
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ROBERT W. CHAMBERS • C. M. KORNBLUTH

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

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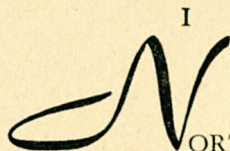
AVON FANTASY READER: No. 5

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Readers of fantasy rate C. L. Moore as very close to A. Merritt. Almost every letter we have received listing desired authors placed Miss Moore's name down somewhere. This opinion is shared by your editor who is pleased to present another of her interplanetary tales of the remarkable and rugged Northwest Smith. We do not know whether there are such things as extra-dimensional worlds; science can be curiously contradictory on such interpretations. But if there are, surely the imagination must rise to the thought of the extra-dimensional possibilities of other planets than ours. In "Scarlet Dream" Northwest Smith finds adventure and eldritch romance in an incredible place whose door is a shawl of stellar origin.

Scarlet Dream

by C. L. Moore



NORTHWEST SMITH bought the shawl in the Lakkmanda Markets of Mars. It was one of his chiefest joys to wander through the stalls and stands of that greatest of market-places whose wares are drawn from all the planets of the solar system, and beyond. So many songs have been sung and so many tales written of that fascinating chaos called the Lakkmanda Markets that there is little need to detail it here.

He shouldered his way through the colorful cosmopolitan throng, the speech of a thousand races beating in his ears, the mingled odors of perfume and sweat and spice and food and the thousand nameless smells of the place assailing his nostrils. Vendors cried their wares in the tongues of a score of worlds.

As he strolled through the thick of the crowd, savoring the confusion and the odors and the sights from lands beyond counting, his eye was caught by a flash of that peculiar geranium scarlet that seems to lift itself

bodily from its background and smite the eye with all but physical violence. It came from a shawl thrown carelessly across a carved chest, typically Martian drylander work by the exquisite detail of that carving, so oddly at variance with the characteristics of the harsh dryland race. He recognized the Venusian origin of the brass tray on the shawl, and knew the heap of carved ivory beasts that the tray held as the work of one of the least-known races on Jupiter's largest moon, but from all his wide experience he could draw no remembrance of any such woven work as that of the shawl. Idly curious, he paused at the booth and asked of its attendant,

"How much for the scarf?"

The man—he was a canal Martian—glanced over his shoulder and said carelessly, "Oh, that. You can have it for half a *cris*—gives me a headache to look at the thing."

Smith grinned and said, "I'll give you five dollars."

"Ten."

"Six and a half, and that's my last offer."

"Oh, take the thing." The Martian smiled and lifted the tray of ivory beasts from the chest.

Smith drew out the shawl. It clung to his hands like a live thing, softer and lighter than Martian "lamb's-wool." He felt sure it was woven from the hair of some beast rather than from vegetable fiber, for the electric clinging of it sparkled with life. And the crazy pattern dazzled him with its utter strangeness. Unlike any pattern he had seen in all the years of his far wanderings, the wild, leaping scarlet threaded its nameless design in one continuous, tangled line through the twilight blue of the background. That dim blue was clouded exquisitely with violet and green—sleepy evening colors against which the staring scarlet flamed like something more sinister and alive than color. He felt that he could almost put his hand between the color and the cloth, so vividly did it start up from its background.

"Where in the universe did this come from?" he demanded of the attendant.

The man shrugged.

"Who knows? It came in with a bale of scrap cloth from New York. I was a little curious about it myself, and called the market-master there to trace it. He says it was sold for scrap by a down-and-out Venusian who claimed he'd found it in a derelict ship floating around one of the

asteroids. He didn't know what nationality the ship had been—a very early model, he said, probably one of the first space-ships, made before the identification symbols were adopted. I've wondered why he sold the thing for scrap. He could have got double the price, anyhow, if he'd made any effort."

"Funny." Smith stared down at the dizzy pattern writhing through the cloth in his hands. "Well, it's warm and light enough. If it doesn't drive me crazy trying to follow the pattern, I'll sleep warm at night."

He crumpled it in one hand, the whole six-foot square of it folding easily into his palm, and stuffed the silky bundle into his pocket—and thereupon forgot it until after his return to his quarters that evening.

He had taken one of the cubicle steel rooms in the great steel lodging-houses the Martian government offers for a very nominal rent to transients. The original purpose was to house those motley hordes of spacemen that swarm every port city of the civilized planets, offering them accommodations cheap and satisfactory enough so that they will not seek the black byways of the town and there fall in with the denizens of the Martian underworld whose lawlessness is a byword among space sailors.

The great steel building that housed Smith and countless others was not entirely free from the influences of Martian byways, and if the police had actually searched the place with any degree of thoroughness a large percentage of its dwellers might have been transferred to the Emperor's prisons—Smith almost certainly among them, for his activities were rarely within the law and though he could not recall at the moment any particularly flagrant sins committed in Lakkdarol, a charge could certainly have been found against him by the most half-hearted searcher. However, the likelihood of a police raid was very remote, and Smith, as he went in under the steel portals of the great door, rubbed shoulders with smugglers and pirates and fugitives and sinners of all the sins that keep the spaceways thronged.

In his little cubicle he switched on the light and saw a dozen blurred replicas of himself, reflected dimly in the steel walls, spring into being with the sudden glow. In that curious company he moved forward to a chair and pulled out the crumpled shawl. Shaking it in the mirror-walled room produced a sudden wild writhing of scarlet patterns over walls and floor and ceiling, and for an instant the room whirled in an inexplicable kaleidoscope and he had the impression that the four-dimen-

sional walls had opened suddenly to undreamed-of vastnesses where living scarlet in wild, unruly patterns shivered through the void.

Then in a moment the walls closed in again and the dim reflections quieted and became only the images of a tall, brown man with pale eyes, holding a curious shawl in his hands. There was a strange, sensuous pleasure in the clinging of the silky wool to his fingers, the lightness of it, the warmth. He spread it out on the table and traced the screaming scarlet pattern with his finger, trying to follow that one writhing line through the intricacies of its path, and the more he stared the more irritatingly clear it became to him that there must be a purpose in that whirl of color, that if he stared long enough, surely he must trace it out. . . .

When he slept that night he spread the bright shawl across his bed, and the brilliance of it colored his dreams fantastically. . . .

That threading scarlet was a labyrinthine path down which he stumbled blindly, and at every turn he looked back and saw himself in myriad replicas, always wandering lost and alone through the pattern of the path. Sometimes it shook itself under his feet, and whenever he thought he saw the end it would writhe into fresh intricacies. . . .

The sky was a great shawl threaded with scarlet lightning that shivered and squirmed as he watched, then wound itself into the familiar, dizzy pattern that became one mighty Word in a nameless writing, whose meaning he shuddered on the verge of understanding, and woke in icy terror just before the significance of it broke upon his brain. . . .

He slept again, and saw the shawl hanging in a blue dusk the color of its background, stared and stared until the square of it melted imperceptibly into the dimness and the scarlet was a pattern incised lividly upon a gate . . . a gate of strange outline in a high wall, half seen through that curious, cloudy twilight blurred with exquisite patches of green and violet, so that it seemed no mortal twilight, but some strange and lovely evening in a land where the air was suffused with colored mists, and no winds blew. He felt himself moving forward without effort, and the gate opened before him. . . .

He was mounting a long flight of steps. In one of the metamorphoses of dreams it did not surprise him that the gate had vanished, or that he had no remembrance of having climbed the long flight stretching away behind him. The lovely colored twilight still veiled the air, so that he could see but dimly the steps rising before him and melting into the mist.

And now, suddenly, he was aware of a stirring in the dimness, and a

girl came flying down the stairs in a headlong, stumbling terror. He could see the shadow of it on her face, and her long, bright-colored hair streamed out behind her, and from head to foot she was dabbled with blood. In her blind flight she must not have seen him, for she came plunging downward three steps at a time and blundered full into him as he stood undecided, watching. The impact all but unbalanced him, but his arms closed instinctively about her and for a moment she hung in his embrace, utterly spent, gasping against his broad leather breast and too breathless even to wonder who had stopped her. The smell of fresh blood rose to his nostrils from her dreadfully spattered garments.

Finally she lifted her head and raised a flushed, creamy-brown face to him, gulping in air through lips the color of holly berries. Her dabbled hair, so fantastically golden that it might have been almost orange, shivered about her face as she clung to him with lifted, lovely face. In that dizzy moment he saw that her eyes were sherry-brown with tints of red, and the fantastic, colored beauty of her face had a wild tinge of something utterly at odds with anything he had ever known before. It might have been the look in her eyes. . . .

"Oh!" she gasped. "It—it has her! Let me go! . . . Let me——"

Smith shook her gently.

"What has her?" he demanded. "Who? Listen to me! You're covered with blood, do you know it? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head wildly.

"No—no—let me go! I must—not my blood—hers. . . ."

She sobbed on the last word, and suddenly collapsed in his arms, weeping with a violent intensity that shook her from head to foot. Smith gazed helplessly about over the orange head, then gathered the shaking girl in his arms and went on up the stairs through the violet gloaming.

He must have climbed for all of five minutes before the twilight thinned a little and he saw that the stairs ended at the head of a long hallway, high-arched like a cathedral aisle. A row of low doors ran down one side of the hall, and he turned aside at random into the nearest. It gave upon a gallery whose arches opened into blue space. A low bench ran along the wall under the gallery windows, and he crossed toward it, gently setting down the sobbing girl and supporting her against his shoulder.

"My sister," she wept. "It has her—oh, my sister!"

"Don't cry, don't cry," Smith heard his own voice saying, surprisingly.

"It's all a dream, you know. Don't cry—there never was any sister—you don't exist at all—don't cry so."

She jerked her head up at that, startled out of her sobs for a moment, and stared at him with sherry-brown eyes drowned in tears. Her lashes clung together in wet, starry points. She stared with searching eyes, taking in the leather-brownness of him, his spaceman's suit, his scarred dark face and eyes paler than steel. And then a look of infinite pity softened the strangeness of her face, and she said gently,

"Oh . . . you come from—from—you still believe that you dream!"

"I *know* I'm dreaming," persisted Smith childishly. "I'm lying asleep in Lakkdarol and dreaming of you, and all this, and when I wake——"

She shook her head sadly.

"You will never wake. You have come into a more deadly dream than you could ever guess. There is no waking from this land."

"What do you mean? Why not?" A little absurd panic was starting up in his mind at the sorrow and pity in her voice, the sureness of her words. Yet this was one of those rare dreams wherein he knew quite definitely that he dreamed. He could not be mistaken. . . .

"There are many dream countries," she said, "many nebulous, unreal half-lands where the souls of sleepers wander, places that have an actual, tenuous existence, if one knows the way. . . . But here—it has happened before, you see—one may not blunder without passing a door that opens one way only. And he who has the key to open it may come through, but he can never find the way into his own waking land again. Tell me—what key opened the door to you?"

"The shawl," Smith murmured. "The shawl . . . of course. That damnable red pattern, dizzy——"

He passed a hand across his eyes, for the memory of it, writhing, alive, searingly scarlet, burned behind his eyelids.

"What was it?" she demanded, breathlessly, he thought, as if a half-hopeless eagerness forced the question from her lips. "Can you remember?"

"A red pattern," he said slowly, "a thread of bright scarlet woven into a blue shawl—nightmare pattern—painted on the gate I came by . . . but it's only a dream, of course. In a few minutes I'll wake. . . ."

She clutched his knee excitedly.

"Can you remember?" she demanded. "The pattern—the red pattern? The Word?"

"Word?" he wondered stupidly. "Word—in the sky? No—no, I don't want to remember—crazy pattern, you know. Can't forget it—but no, I couldn't tell you what it was, or trace it for you. Never was anything like it—thank God. It was on that shawl. . . ."

"Woven on a shawl," she murmured to herself. "Yes, of course. But how you ever came by it, in your world—when it—when *it*—oh!"

Memory of whatever tragedy had sent her flying down the stairs swept back in a flood, and her face crumpled into tears again. "My sister!"

"Tell me what happened." Smith woke from his daze at the sound of her sob. "Can't I help? Please let me try—tell me about it."

"My sister," she said faintly. "It caught her in the hall—caught her before my eyes—splattered me with her blood. Oh! . . ."

"It?" puzzled Smith. "What? Is there danger?" and his hand moved instinctively toward his gun.

She caught the gesture and smiled a little scornfully through her tears.

"It," she said. "The—the Thing. No gun can harm it, no man can fight it—It came, and that was all."

"But what is it? What does it look like? Is it near?"

"It's everywhere. One never knows—until the mist begins to thicken and the pulse of red shows through—and then it's too late. We do not fight it, or think of it overmuch—life would be unbearable. For it hungers and must be fed, and we who feed it strive to live as happily as we may before the Thing comes for us. But one can never know."

"Where did it come from? What is it?"

"No one knows—it has always been here—always will be . . . too nebulous to die or be killed—a Thing out of some alien place we couldn't understand, I suppose—somewhere so long ago, or in some such unthinkable dimension that we will never have any knowledge of its origin. But as I say, we try not to think."

"If it eats flesh," said Smith stubbornly, "it must be vulnerable—and I have my gun."

"Try if you like," she shrugged. "Others have tried—and it still comes. It dwells here, we believe, if it dwells anywhere. We are—taken—more often in these halls than elsewhere. When you are weary of life you might bring your gun and wait under this roof. You may not have long to wait."

"I'm not ready to try the experiment just yet," Smith grinned. "If the Thing lives here, why do you come?"

She shrugged again, apathetically. "If we do not, it will come after us when it hungers. And we come here for—for our food." She shot him a curious glance from under lowered lids. "You wouldn't understand. But as you say, it's a dangerous place. We'd best go now—you will come with me, won't you? I shall be lonely, now." And her eyes brimmed again.

"Of course. I'm sorry, my dear. I'll do what I can for you—until I wake." He grinned at the fantastic sound of this.

"You will not wake," she said quietly. "Better not to hope, I think. You are trapped here with the rest of us and here you must stay until you die."

He rose and held out his hand.

"Let's go, then," he said. "Maybe you're right, but—well, come on."

She took his hand and jumped up. The orange hair, too fantastically colored for anything outside a dream, swung about her brilliantly. He saw now that she wore a single white garment, brief and belted, over the creamy brownness of her body. It was torn now, and hideously stained. She made a picture of strange and vivid loveliness, all white and gold and bloody, in the misted twilight of the gallery.

"Where are we going?" she asked Smith. "Out there?" And he nodded toward the blueness beyond the windows.

She drew her shoulders together in a little shudder of distaste.

"Oh, no," she said.

"What is it?"

"Listen." She took him by the arms and lifted a serious face to his. "If you must stay here—and you must, for there is only one way out save death, and that is a worse way even than dying—you must learn to ask no questions about the—the Temple. This is the Temple. Here it dwells. Here we—feed.

"There are halls we know, and we keep to them. It is wiser. You saved my life when you stopped me on those stairs—no one has ever gone down into that mist and darkness, and returned. I should have known, seeing you climb them, that you were not of us . . . for whatever lies beyond, wherever that stairway leads—it is better not to know. It is better not to look out the windows of this place. We have learned that, too. For from the outside the Temple looks strange enough, but from the inside, looking out, one is liable to see things it is better not to see. . . . What that blue space is, on which this gallery opens, I do not know—I have no wish to

know. There are windows here opening on stranger things than this—but we turn our eyes away when we pass them. You will learn. . . .”

She took his hand, smiling a little.

“Come with me, now.”

And in silence they left the gallery opening on space and went down the hall where the blue mist floated so beautifully with its clouds of violet and green confusing the eye, and a great stillness all about.

The hallway led straight, as nearly as he could see, for the floating clouds veiled it, toward the great portals of the Temple. In the form of a mighty triple arch it opened out of the clouded twilight up on a shining day like no day he had ever seen on any planet. The light came from no visible source, and there was a lucid quality about it, nebulous but unmistakable, as if one were looking through the depths of a crystal, or through clear water that trembled a little now and then. It was diffused through the translucent day from a sky as shining and unfamiliar as everything else in this amazing dreamland.

They stood under the great arch of the Temple, looking out over the shining land beyond. Afterward he could never quite remember what had made it so unutterably strange, so indefinably dreadful. There were trees, feathery masses of green and bronze above the bronze-green grass; the bright air shimmered, and through the leaves he caught the glimmer of water not far away. At first glance it seemed a perfectly normal scene—yet tiny details caught his eye that sent ripples of coldness down his back. The grass, for instance. . . .

When they stepped down upon it and began to cross the meadow toward the trees beyond which water gleamed, he saw that the blades were short and soft as fur, and they seemed to cling to his companion's bare feet as she walked. As he looked out over the meadow he saw that long waves of it, from every direction, were rippling toward them as if the wind blew from all sides at once toward the common center that was themselves. Yet no wind blew.

“It—it's alive,” he stammered, startled. “The grass!”

“Yes, of course,” she said indifferently.

And then he realized that though the feathery fronds of the trees waved now and then, gracefully together, there was no wind. And they did not sway in one direction only, but by twos and threes in many ways, dipping and rising with a secret, contained life of their own.

When they reached the belt of woodland he looked up curiously and heard the whisper and rustle of leaves above him, bending down as if in curiosity as the two passed beneath. They never bent far enough to touch them, but a sinister air of watchfulness, of aliveness, brooded over the whole uncannily alive landscape, and the ripples of the grass followed them wherever they went.

The lake, like that twilight in the Temple, was a sleepy blue clouded with violet and green, not like real water, for the colored blurs did not diffuse or change as it rippled.

On the shore, a little above the water line, stood a tiny, shrine-like building of some creamy stone, its walls no more than a series of arches open to the blue, translucent day. The girl led him to the doorway and gestured within negligently.

"I live here," she said.

Smith stared. It was quite empty save for two low couches with a blue coverlet thrown across each. Very classic it looked, with its whiteness and austerity, the arches opening on a vista of woodland and grass beyond.

"Doesn't it ever get cold?" he asked. "Where do you eat? Where are your books and food and clothes?"

"I have some spare tunics under my couch," she said. "That's all. No books, no other clothing, no food. We feed at the Temple. And it is never any colder or warmer than this."

"But what do you do?"

"Do? Oh, swim in the lake, sleep and rest and wander through the woods. Time passes very quickly."

"Idyllic," murmured Smith, "but rather tiresome, I should think."

"When one knows," she said, "that the next moment may be one's last, life is savored to the full. One stretches the hours out as long as possible. No, for us it is not tiresome."

"But have you no cities? Where are the other people?"

"It is best not to collect in crowds. Somehow they seem to draw—it. We live in twos and threes—sometimes alone. We have no cities. We do nothing—what purpose in beginning anything when we know we shall not live to end it? Why even think too long of one thing? Come down to the lake."

She took his hand and led him across the clinging grass to the sandy brink of the water, and they sank in silence on the narrow beach. Smith looked out over the lake where vague colors misted the blue, trying not to

think of the fantastic things that were happening to him. Indeed, it was hard to do much thinking, here, in the midst of the blueness and the silence, the very air dreamy about them . . . the cloudy water lapping the shore with tiny, soft sounds like the breathing of a sleeper. The place was heavy with the stillness and the dreamy colors, and Smith was never sure, afterward, whether in his dream he did not sleep for a while; for presently he heard a stir at his side and the girl reseated herself, clad in a fresh tunic, all the blood washed away. He could not remember her having left, but it did not trouble him.

The light had for some time been sinking and blurring, and imperceptibly a cloudy blue twilight closed about them, seeming somehow to rise from the blurring lake, for it partook of that same dreamy blueness clouded with vague colors. Smith thought that he would be content never to rise again from that cool sand, to sit here forever in the blurring twilight and the silence of his dream. How long he did sit there he never knew. The blue peace enfolded him utterly, until he was steeped in its misty evening colors and permeated through and through with the tranced quiet.

The darkness had deepened until he could no longer see any more than the nearest wavelets lapping the sand. Beyond, and all about, the dream-world melted into the violet-misted blueness of the twilight. He was not aware that he had turned his head, but presently he found himself looking down on the girl beside him. She was lying on the pale sand, her hair a fan of darkness to frame the pallor of her face. In the twilight her mouth was dark too, and from the darkness under her lashes he slowly became aware that she was watching him unwinkingly.

For a long while he sat there, gazing down, meeting the half-hooded eyes in silence. And presently, with the effortless detachment of one who moves in a dream, he bent down to meet her lifting arms. The sand was cool and sweet, and her mouth tasted faintly of blood.

II

There was no sunrise in that land. Lucid day brightened slowly over the breathing landscape, and grass and trees stirred with wakening awareness, rather horribly in the beauty of the morning. When Smith woke, he saw the girl coming up from the lake, shaking blue water from her orange

hair. Blue droplets clung to the creaminess of her skin, and she was laughing and flushed from head to foot in the glowing dawn.

Smith sat up on his couch and pushed back the blue coverlet.

"I'm hungry," he said. "When and what do we eat?"

The laughter vanished from her face in a breath. She gave her hair a troubled shake and said doubtfully,

"Hungry?"

"Yes, starved? Didn't you say you get your food at the Temple? Let's go up there."

She sent him a sidelong, enigmatic glance from under her lashes as she turned aside.

"Very well," she said.

"Anything wrong?" He reached out as she passed and pulled her to his knee, kissing the troubled mouth lightly. And again he tasted blood.

"Oh, no." She ruffled his hair and rose. "I'll be ready in a moment, and then we'll go."

And so again they passed the belt of woods where the trees bent down to watch, and crossed the rippling grassland. From all directions long waves of it came blowing toward them as before, and the fur-like blades clung to their feet. Smith tried not to notice. Everywhere, he was seeing this morning, an undercurrent of nameless unpleasantness ran beneath the surface of this lovely land.

As they crossed the live grass a memory suddenly returned to him, and he said, "What did you mean, yesterday, when you said that there was a way—out—other than death?"

She did not meet his eyes as she answered, in that troubled voice, "Worse than dying, I said. A way out we do not speak of here."

"But if there's any way at all, I must know of it," he persisted. "Tell me."

She swept the orange hair like a veil between them, bending her head and saying indistinctly, "A way out you could not take. A way too costly. And—and I do not wish you to go, now. . . ."

"I must know," said Smith relentlessly.

She paused then, and stood looking up at him, her sherry-colored eyes disturbed.

"By the way you came," she said at last. "By virtue of the Word. But that gate is impassable."

"Why?"

"It is death to pronounce the Word. Literally. I do not know it now, could not speak it if I would. But in the Temple there is one room where the Word is graven in scarlet on the wall, and its power is so great that the echoes of it ring forever round and round that room. If one stands before the graven symbol and lets the force of it beat upon his brain he will hear, and know—and shriek the awful syllables aloud—and so die. It is a word from some tongue so alien to all our being that the spoken sound of it, echoing in the throat of a living man, is disrupting enough to rip the very fibers of the human body apart—to blast its atoms asunder, to destroy body and mind as utterly as if they had never been. And because the sound is so disruptive it somehow blasts open for an instant the door between your world and mine. But the danger is dreadful, for it may open the door to other worlds too, and let things through more terrible than we can dream of. Some say it was thus that the Thing gained access to our land eons ago. And if you are not standing exactly where the door opens, on the one spot in the room that is protected, as the center of a whirlwind is quiet, and if you do not pass instantly out of the sound of the Word, it will blast you asunder as it does the one who has pronounced it for you. So you see how impos—" Here she broke off with a little scream and glanced down in half-laughing annoyance, then took two or three little running steps and turned.

"The grass," she explained ruefully, pointing to her feet. The brown bareness of them was dotted with scores of tiny blood-spots. "If one stands too long in one place, barefoot, it will pierce the skin and drink—stupid of me to forget. But come."

Smith went on at her side, looking round with new eyes upon the lovely pellucid land, too beautiful and frightening for anything outside a dream. All about them the hungry grass came hurrying in long, converging waves as they advanced. Were the trees, then, flesh-eating too? Cannibal trees and vampire grass—he shuddered a little and looked ahead.

The Temple stood tall before them, a building of some nameless material as mistily blue as far-off mountains on the Earth. The mistiness did not condense or clarify as they approached, and the outlines of the place were mysteriously hard to fix in mind—he could never understand, afterward, just why. When he tried too hard to concentrate on one particular corner or tower or window it blurred before his eyes as if the focus

were at fault—as if the whole strange, veiled building stood just on the borderland of another dimension.

From the immense triple arch of the doorway, as they approached—a triple arch like nothing he had ever seen before, so irritatingly hard to focus upon that he could not be sure just wherein its difference lay—a pale blue mist issued smokily. And when they stepped within they walked into that twilight dimness he was coming to know so well.

The great hall lay straight and veiled before them, but after a few steps the girl drew him aside and under another archway, into a long gallery through whose drifting haze he could see rows of men and women kneeling against the wall with bowed heads, as if in prayer. She led him down the line to the end, and he saw then that they knelt before small spigots curving up from the wall at regular intervals. She dropped to her knees before one and, motioning him to follow, bent her head and laid her lips to the up-curved spout. Dubiously he followed her example.

Instantly with the touch of his mouth on the nameless substance of the spigot something hot and, strangely, at once salty and sweet flowed into his mouth. There was an acidity about it that gave a curious tang, and the more he drank the more avid he became. Hauntingly delicious it was, and warmth flowed through him more strongly with every draft. Yet somewhere deep within him memory stirred unpleasantly . . . somewhere, somehow, he had known this hot, acrid, salty taste before, and—suddenly suspicions struck him like a bludgeon, and he perked his lips from the spout as if burnt. A tiny thread of scarlet trickled from the wall. He passed the back of one hand across his lips and brought it away red. He knew that odor, then.

The girl knelt beside him with closed eyes, rapt avidity in every line of her. When he seized her shoulder she twitched away and opened protesting eyes, but did not lift her lips from the spigot. Smith gestured violently, and with one last long draft she rose and turned a half-angry face to his, but he laid a finger on her reddened lips.

He followed her in silence past the kneeling lines again. When they reached the hall outside he swung upon her and gripped her shoulders angrily.

“What was that?” he demanded.

Her eyes slid away. She shrugged.

“What were you expecting? We feed as we must, here. You’ll learn to drink without a qualm—if it does not come for you too soon.”

A moment longer he stared angrily down into her evasive, strangely lovely face. Then he turned without a word and strode down the hallway through the drifting mists toward the door. He heard her bare feet pattering along behind hurriedly, but he did not look back. Not until he had come out into the glowing day and half crossed the grasslands did he relent enough to glance around. She paced at his heels with bowed head, the orange hair swinging about her face and unhappiness eloquent in every motion. The submission of her touched him suddenly, and he paused for her to catch up, smiling down half reluctantly on the bent orange head.

She lifted a tragic face to his, and there were tears in the sherry eyes. So he had no choice but to laugh and lift her up against his leather-clad breast and kiss the drooping mouth into smiles again. But he understood, now, the faintly acrid bitterness of her kisses.

"Still," he said, when they had reached the little white shrine among the trees, "there must be some other food than—that. Does no grain grow? Isn't there any wild life in the woods? Haven't the trees fruit?"

She gave him another sidelong look from under dropped lashes, warily.

"No," she said. "Nothing but the grass grows here. No living thing dwells in this land but man—and it. And as for the fruit of the trees—give thanks that they bloom but once in a lifetime."

"Why?"

"Better not to speak of it," she said.

The phrase, the constant evasion, was beginning to wear on Smith's nerves. He said nothing of it then, but he turned from her and went down to the beach, dropping to the sand and striving to recapture last night's languor and peace. His hunger was curiously satisfied, even from the few swallows he had taken, and gradually the drowsy content of the day before began to flow over him in deepening waves. After all, it was a lovely land. . . .

That day drew dreamily to a close, and darkness rose in a mist from the misty lake, and he came to find in kisses that tasted of blood a certain tang that but pointed their sweetness. And in the morning he woke to the slowly brightening day, swam with the girl in the blue, tingling waters of the lake—and reluctantly went up through the woods and across the ravenous grass to the Temple, driven by a hunger greater than his repugnance. He went up with a slight nausea rising within him, and yet strangely eager. . . .

Once more the Temple rose veiled and indefinite under the glowing sky, and once more he plunged into the eternal twilight of its corridors, turned aside as one who knows the way, knelt of his own accord in the line of drinkers along the wall. . . .

With the first draft that nausea rose within him almost overwhelmingly, but when the warmth of the drink had spread through him the nausea died and nothing was left but hunger and eagerness, and he drank blindly until the girl's hand on his shoulder roused him.

A sort of intoxication had wakened within him with the burning of that hot, salt drink in his veins, and he went back across the hurrying grass in a half-daze. Through most of the pellucid day it lasted, and the slow dark was rising from the lake before clearness returned to him.

III

And so life resolved itself into a very simple thing. The days glowed by and the blurred darknesses came and went. Life held little any more but the bright clarity of the day and the dimness of the dark, morning journeys to drink at the Temple fountain and the bitter kisses of the girl with the orange hair. Time had ceased for him. Slow day followed slow day, and the same round of living circled over and over, and the only change—perhaps he did not see it then—was the deepening look in the girl's eyes when they rested upon him, her growing silences.

One evening just as the first faint dimness was clouding the air, and the lake smoked hazily, he happened to glance off across its surface and thought he saw through the rising mists the outline of very far mountains, and he asked curiously,

"What lies beyond the lake? Aren't those mountains over there?"

The girl turned her head quickly and her sherry-brown eyes darkened with something like dread.

"I don't know," she said. "We believe it best not to wonder what lies—beyond."

And suddenly Smith's irritation with the old evasions woke and he said violently,

"Damn your beliefs! I'm sick of that answer to every question I ask! Don't you ever wonder about anything? Are you all so thoroughly cowed by this dread of something unseen that every spark of your spirit is dead?"

She turned the sorrowful, sherry gaze upon him.

"We learn by experience," she said. "Those who wonder—those who investigate—die. We live in a land alive with danger, incomprehensible, intangible, terrible. Life is bearable only if we do not look too closely—only if we accept conditions and make the most of them. You must not ask questions if you would live.

"As for the mountains beyond, and all the unknown country that lies over the horizons—they are as unreachable as a mirage. For in a land where no food grows, where we must visit the Temple daily or starve, how could an explorer provision himself for a journey? No, we are bound here by unbreakable bonds, and we must live here until we die."

Smith shrugged. The languor of the evening was coming upon him, and the brief flare of irritation had died as swiftly as it rose.

Yet from that outburst dated the beginning of his discontent. Somehow, despite the lovely languor of the place, despite the sweet bitterness of the Temple fountains and the sweeter bitterness of the kisses that were his for the asking, he could not drive from his mind the vision of those far mountains veiled in rising haze. Unrest had wakened within him, and like some sleeper arising from a lotus-dream his mind turned more and more frequently to the desire for action, adventure, some other use for his danger-hardened body than the exigencies of sleep and food and love.

On all sides stretched the moving, restless woods, farther than the eye could reach. The grasslands rippled, and over the dim horizon the far mountains beckoned him. Even the mystery of the Temple and its endless twilight began to torment his waking moments. He dallied with the idea of exploring those hallways which the dwellers in this lotus-land avoided, of gazing from the strange windows that opened upon inexplicable blue. Surely life, even here, must hold some more fervent meaning than that he followed now. What lay beyond the wood and grasslands? What mysterious country did those mountains wall?

He began to harry his companion with questions that woke more and more often the look of dread behind her eyes, but he gained little satisfaction. She belonged to a people without history, without ambition, their lives bent wholly toward wringing from each moment its full sweetness in anticipation of the terror to come. Evasion was the keynote of their existence, perhaps with reason. Perhaps all the adventurous spirits among them had followed their curiosity into danger and death, and the only ones left were the submissive souls who led their bucolically voluptuous lives in this Elysium so shadowed with horror.

In this colored lotus-land, memories of the world he had left grew upon him more and more vividly: he remembered the hurrying crowds of the planets' capitals, the lights, the noise, the laughter. He saw space-ships cleaving the night sky with flame, flashing from world to world through the star-flecked darkness. He remembered sudden brawls in saloons and space-sailor dives when the air was alive with shouts and tumult, and heat-guns slashed their blue-hot flame and the smell of burnt flesh hung heavy. Life marched in pageant past his remembering eyes, violent, vivid, shoulder to shoulder with death. And nostalgia wrenched at him for the lovely, terribly, brawling worlds he had left behind.

Daily the unrest grew upon him. The girl made pathetic little attempts to find some sort of entertainment that would occupy his ranging mind. She led him on timid excursions into the living woods, even conquered her horror of the Temple enough to follow him on timorous tiptoe as he explored a little way down the corridors which did not arouse in her too anguished a terror. But she must have known from the first that it was hopeless.

One day as they lay on the sand watching the lake ripple bluey under a crystal sky, Smith's eyes, dwelling on the faint shadow of the mountains, half unseeingly, suddenly narrowed into a hardness as bright and pale as steel. Muscle ridged his abruptly set jaw and he sat upright with a jerk, pushing away the girl who had been leaning on his shoulder.

"I'm through," he said harshly, and rose.

"What—what is it?" The girl stumbled to her feet.

"I'm going away—anywhere. To those mountains, I think. I'm leaving now!"

"But—you wish to die, then?"

"Better the real thing than a living death like this," he said. "At least I'll have a little more excitement first."

"But, what of your food? There's nothing to keep you alive, even if you escape the greater dangers. Why, you'll dare not even lie down on the grass at night—it would eat you alive! You have no chance at all to live if you leave this grove—and me."

"If I must die, I shall," he said. "I've been thinking it over, and I've made up my mind. I could explore the Temple and so come on *it* and die. But do *something* I must, and it seems to me my best chance is in

trying to reach some country where food grows before I starve. It's worth trying. I can't go on like this."

She looked at him miserably, tears brimming her sherry eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word her eyes strayed beyond his shoulder and suddenly she smiled, a dreadful frozen little smile.

"You will not go," she said. "Death has come for us now."

She said it so calmly, so unafraid that he did not understand until she pointed beyond him. He turned.

The air between them and the shrine was curiously agitated. As he watched, it began to resolve itself into a nebulous blue mist that thickened and darkened . . . blurry tinges of violet and green began to blow through it vaguely, and then by imperceptible degrees a flush of rose appeared in the mist—deepened, thickened, contracted into burning scarlet that seared his eyes, pulsed alively—and he knew that it had come.

An aura of menace seemed to radiate from it, strengthening as the mist strengthened, reaching out in hunger toward his mind. He felt it as tangibly as he saw it—cloudy danger reaching out avidly for them both.

The girl was not afraid. Somehow he knew this, though he dared not turn, dared not wrench his eyes from that hypnotically pulsing scarlet. . . . She whispered very softly from behind him,

"So I die with you, I am content." And the sound of her voice freed him from the snare of the crimson pulse.

He barked a wolfish laugh, abruptly—welcoming even this diversion from the eternal idyl he had been living—and the gun leaping to his hand spurted a long blue flame so instantly that the girl behind him caught her breath. The steel-blue dazzle illumined the gathering mist lividly, passed through it without obstruction and charred the ground beyond. Smith set his teeth and swung a figure-eight pattern of flame through and through the mist, lacing it with blue heat. And when that finger of fire crossed the scarlet pulse the impact jarred the whole nebulous cloud violently, so that its outlines wavered and shrank, and the pulse of crimson sizzled under the heat—shriveled—began to fade in desperate haste.

Smith swept the ray back and forth along the redness, tracing its pattern with destruction, but it faded too swiftly for him. In little more than an instant it had paled and disembodied and vanished save for a fading flush of rose, and the blue-hot blade of his flame sizzled harmlessly

through the disappearing mist to sear the ground beyond. He switched off the heat, then, and stood breathing a little unevenly as the death-cloud thinned and paled and vanished before his eyes, until no trace of it was left and the air glowed lucid and transparent once more.

The unmistakable odor of burning flesh caught at his nostrils, and he wondered for a moment if the Thing had indeed materialized a nucleus of matter, and then he saw that the smell came from the seared grass his flame had struck. The tiny, furry blades were all writhing away from the burnt spot, straining at their roots as if a wind blew them back, and from the blackened area a thick smoke rose, reeking with the odor of burnt meat. Smith, remembering their vampire habits, turned away, half nauseated.

The girl had sunk to the sand behind him, trembling now that the danger was gone.

"Is—it dead?" she breathed, when she could master her quivering mouth.

"I don't know. No way of telling. Probably not."

"What will—will you do now?"

He slid the heat-gun back into its holster and settled the belt purposefully.

"What I started out to do."

The girl scrambled up in desperate haste.

"Wait!" she gasped, "wait!" and clutched at his arm to steady herself. And he waited until the trembling had passed. Then she went on, "Come up to the Temple once more before you go."

"All right. Not a bad idea. It may be a long time before my next—meal."

And so again they crossed the fur-soft grass that bore down upon them in long ripples from every part of the meadow.

The Temple rose dim and unreal before them, and as they entered blue twilight folded them dreamily about. Smith turned by habit toward the gallery of drinkers, but the girl laid upon his arm a hand that shook a little, and murmured,

"Come this way."

He followed in growing surprise down the hallway through the drifting mists and away from the gallery he knew so well. It seemed to him that the mist thickened as they advanced, and in the uncertain light he

could never be sure that the walls did not waver as nebulously as the blurring air. He felt a curious impulse to step through their intangible barriers and out of the hall into—what?

Presently steps rose under his feet, almost imperceptibly, and after a while the pressure on his arm drew him aside. They went in under a low, heavy arch of stone and entered the strangest room he had ever seen. It appeared to be seven-sided, as nearly as he could judge through the drifting mist, and curious, converging lines were graven deep in the floor.

It seemed to him that forces outside his comprehension were beating violently against the seven walls, circling like hurricanes through the dimness until the whole room was a maelstrom of invisible tumult.

When he lifted his eyes to the wall, he knew where he was. Blazoned on the dim stone, burning through the twilight like some other-dimensional fire, the scarlet pattern writhed across the wall.

The sight of it, somehow, set up a commotion in his brain, and it was with whirling head and stumbling feet that he answered to the pressure on his arm. Dimly he realized that he stood at the very center of those strange, converging lines, feeling forces beyond reason coursing through him along paths outside any knowledge he possessed.

Then for one moment arms clasped his neck and a warm, fragrant body pressed against him, and a voice sobbed in his ear.

"If you must leave me, then go back through the Door, beloved—life without you—more dreadful even than a death like this. . . ." A kiss that stung of blood clung to his lips for an instant; then the clasp loosened and he stood alone.

Through the twilight he saw her dimly outlined against the Word. And he thought as she stood there that it was as if the invisible currents beat bodily against her, so that she swayed and wavered before him, her outlines blurring and forming again as the forces from which he was so mystically protected buffeted her mercilessly.

And he saw knowledge dawning terribly upon her face, as the meaning of the Word seeped slowly into her mind. The sweet brown face twisted hideously, the blood-red lips writhed apart to shriek a Word—in a moment of clarity he actually saw her tongue twisting incredibly to form the syllables of the unspeakable thing never meant for human lips to frame. Her mouth opened into an impossible shape . . . she gasped in the blurry mist and shrieked aloud. . . .

IV

Smith was walking along a twisting path so scarlet that he could not bear to look down, a path that wound and unwound and shook itself under his feet so that he stumbled at every step. He was groping through a blinding mist clouded with violet and green, and in his ears a dreadful whisper rang—the first syllable of an unutterable Word. . . . Whenever he neared the end of the path, it shook itself under him and doubled back, and weariness like a drug was sinking into his brain, and the sleepy twilight colors of the mist lulled him, and—

“He’s waking up!” said an exultant voice in his ear.

Smith lifted heavy eyelids upon a room without walls—a room wherein multiple figures extending into infinity moved to and fro in countless hosts. . . .

“Smith! N. W.! Wake up!” urged that familiar voice from somewhere near.

He blinked. The myriad diminishing figures resolved themselves into the reflections of two men in a steel-walled room, bending over him. The friendly, anxious face of his partner, Yarol the Venusian, leaned above the bed.

“By Pharol, N. W.,” said the well-remembered, ribald voice, “you’ve been asleep for a week! We thought you’d never come out of it—must have been an awful brand of whiskey!”

Smith managed a feeble grin—amazing how weak he felt—and turned an inquiring gaze upon the other figure.

“I’m a doctor,” said that individual meeting the questing stare. “Your friend called me in three days ago and I’ve been working on you ever since. It must have been all of five or six days since you fell into this coma—have you any idea what caused it?”

Smith’s pale eyes roved the room. He did not find what he sought, and though his weak murmur answered the doctor’s question, the man was never to know it.

“Shawl?”

“I threw the damned thing away,” confessed Yarol. “Stood it for three days and then gave up. That red pattern gave me the worst headache I’ve had since we found that case of black wine on the asteroid. Remember?”

“Where—?”

"Gave it to a space-rat checking out for Venus. Sorry. Did you really want it? I'll buy you another."

Smith did not answer. The weakness was rushing up about him in gray waves. He closed his eyes, hearing the echoes of that first dreadful syllable whispering through his head . . . whisper from a dream. . . . Yarol heard him murmur softly,

"And—I never even knew—her name. . . ."

It is too little to call man a little world: except God, man is a diminutive to nothing. Man consists of more pieces, more parts, than the world; than the world doth, nay, than the world is. And if those pieces were extended and stretched out in man, as they are in the world, man would be the giant, and the world the dwarf, the world but the map, and the man the world. If all the veins in our bodies were extended to rivers, and all the sinews to veins of mines, and all the muscles, that lie upon one another, to hills, and all the bones to quarries of stones, and all the other pieces to the proportion of those which correspond to them in the world, the air would be too little for this orb of man to move in, the firmament would be but enough for this star; for, as the whole world has nothing, to which something in man doth not answer, so hath man many pieces, of which the whole world has no representation. Enlarge this meditation upon this great world, man, so far, as to consider the immensity of the creatures this world produces: our creatures are our thoughts, creatures that are born giants; that reach from east to west, from earth to heaven, that do not only stride the all the sea and land, but span the sun and firmament at once; my thoughts reach all, comprehend all. Inexplicable mystery . . .

—JOHN DONNE

Anyone who has ever read more than one high-priced anthology of ghost stories must surely have encountered the name of W. F. Harvey—generally attached to a tale called "The Beast With Five Fingers." Now Dr. Harvey has written a good many more stories than that one. From these stories we have selected "Sambo" as a curious account of the utterly odd result of mistaking one kind of doll for another.

Sambo

by William Fryer Harvey

ONE THING is certain: Arthur ought never to have sent Janey the doll.

It came about like this.

He wrote us one of his absurd letters from a place in Africa, where he had been helping to put down a native rising. It was embellished as usual with lively pen-and-ink sketches of his black soldiers (who seemed to bear an extraordinary likeness to Christy Minstrels), and in a postscript contained the information that he was sending Janey a little black doll he had discovered in a deserted hut.

The doll appeared a fortnight later, wrapped up in a year-old engineering supplement of *The Times*, tied together with three knotted pieces of string. The stamps I put by for my three-year-old nephew, until the time arrived when he would be able to appreciate their value.

Janey was disappointed, and I do not wonder at it. She had been looking forward to the arrival of this new member of her family, all the more eagerly because Cicely White had been unbearably conceited about a doll her godmother had sent from Paris. The little African, instead of having a neatly painted trunk containing an elaborate wardrobe, appeared on the removal of his paper covering in a state of absolute nudity. I think Janey

could have forgiven his lack of clothes if he had been less ugly. Without doubt he was hideous. His nose was a shapeless, protruding lump; his lips were thick, and his hair was represented by a collection of knobs. The one redeeming feature was his size; he measured just two feet and a half, and could stand unsupported in the bath of Condyl's fluid to which he was subjected. But I thought my sister wrong in punishing Janey for her tears; the contrast between Sambo and Cicely White's gay Parisienne was too great.

For three whole days Sambo remained unnoticed and uncared for, in the engineering supplement. During that period Mary in her leisure moments made a few alterations in a scarlet petticoat she had originally intended for a youthful inhabitant of Uganda.

Clothed in this garment, Sambo looked uglier than before. Janey would not come near him. She hated him. He was not a nice doll. She even asked Mary to take him away. But my sister had never spoiled her nephews and nieces. She drew a graphic if inaccurate picture of Arthur's surprise and resentment if he knew the manner in which his gift had been received.

Her authority, but not her arguments, prevailed. After an altogether unreasonable amount of crying, even in so sensitive a child as Janey, Sambo's rights were acknowledged.

Sambo was a name for which Janey was not responsible. If she had been left to herself she would have called the doll IT, and nothing more. But Mary is one of those people who believe that all dogs should be called Rover and all canaries Dick. When Sambo arrived there was never any doubt in my mind as to the name; my diffident suggestion of Lobengula was contemptuously dismissed on the ground that that individual came from an altogether different part of Africa.

The doll, at the period of his adoption, had fourteen brothers and sisters of different nationalities. As was natural, he took his place at the bottom of the class, was the last to be washed, the first to be put to bed, and if the plates and cups gave out at tea time, he was the one to suffer.

Sambo arrived at the beginning of October; by the end of the month a change had set in. One day I surprised Janey at tea. Sambo was sitting in the fourteenth place with the last cup and saucer before him, and Gulielma Maria, a plain but well-meaning doll, was going supperless to bed.

Needless to say, I accused my niece of injustice and favouritism. She

was very pale, and tears were in her eyes. She told me that she was sorry for Guly, but she could not help it. It was Sambo's fault, and she hated him for it.

I thought the explanation a trifle lame, and offered to take Guly to tea downstairs; my proposal was promptly and joyfully accepted.

A week later Sambo was ninth on the list, Nelson, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, a golliwog, and Gulielma Maria being below him, and on his plate, in the manner of Benjamin of old, was a double portion.

In vain I remonstrated. It seemed that Sambo had insisted. Janey was exceedingly sorry for the others, but she could not help it.

On 1st November, Sambo had risen to the fourth place. He wore, in addition to his scarlet petticoat, a pair of stockings which belonged to the Salvation Army lass sitting next to him, and whose feet seemed to have suffered from the exposure that the absence of their usual covering involved. I asked Janey if she had offered the stockings to him of her own free will. No, the Salvation Army lass had almost broken her heart. It was Sambo's fault. He wanted them, and Janey had pulled them off when Susan was asleep.

On the eve of Guy Fawkes day, I had my annual debate with Mary as to the feasibility of a small bonfire. One by one I abolished the same old objections, the danger to the house, the waste of good fuel when there were millions in London alone with no fires to warm them, the perpetuation of religious animosity, and the danger of contracting colds in the head. I went to bed, weary but triumphant. Next morning at breakfast I propounded my plans, and Mary gave official sanction for Janey and four dolls to watch the performance from the bathroom window. The greater part of the day was spent by my niece in settling the claims of rival dolls.

My surprise was great when, in the red glare of the bonfire, I recognized, propped up against the glass of the bath-room window, the expressionless faces of Rose, Eric (how I disliked that boy who, in his Eton jacket, was the very essence of priggishness), Alatheia, and Sambo.

When I got to the stage of green Bengal lights I noticed that he was clad in a Japanese kimono he had certainly never had before, and wore a cocked hat, which I had a shrewd suspicion belonged to Nelson.

The next fortnight saw deliberate war between Sambo and Eric. The immediate object was the possession of the Eton jacket, the ulterior

the privilege of sitting between Rose and Alatheia, and dominating the rest of the family.

Janey's sympathies were all for Eric, who was for her the embodiment of English manhood; mine were on the side of his opponent, who came out as usual successful.

Eric jacketless, was left to face the rigour of our English winter in his shirt-sleeves.

Now that all his male rivals had been defeated, I expected that we should see an end to Sambo's ambition.

No such thing occurred. In an altogether unchivalrous manner, he began to wage war on Rose, the oldest and most beautiful of Janey's dolls, who was the only possessor of that much prized accomplishment of falling into a trancelike sleep whenever she lay down.

When Christmas came, Sambo was the first to be served, the first to be dressed, and the last to be put to bed.

And Janey hated him.

For the next three months nothing noteworthy took place with regard to Janey and her dolls. For a large part of the time I was away from home and saw little of my niece.

On my return, Mary called my attention to a new development. "I really believe that Janey is growing out of her childishness at last," she said. "She is putting away some of her dolls: she really ought to be content with fewer."

Six weeks later, the numbers were reduced to one.

It was Sambo who remained.

Though Janey had carried out the change on her own initiative, she became low-spirited, and I have no doubt shed many tears in private. So much I had expected. What surprised me was the fact that she showed no signs of transferring her affection to the one remaining member of her family.

It was true that Sambo was always with her, in the house and out of doors. He had meals by her side and slept at the bottom of her bed at night. But it was not because she cared for him; I began to think she was actuated by fear.

One afternoon I wanted Janey, and she was not to be found in nursery or garden; I searched the house in vain and was beginning to despair, when I remembered the attics. The attics were out of bounds owing to an unrailed stair that led up to them, but I was none the less successful.

There, in a stockade composed of trunks and portmanteaux, sat Janey surrounded by her dolls.

Her face was wreathed in smiles. On her lap sat Eric, at her feet lay Rose in the well-known state of trance.

"So this is the way you spend your afternoons!" I said. "I wonder what your aunt would say if she knew." "Oh, please don't tell her, uncle!" Janey replied. "And whatever happens, don't tell Sambo!"

Until she spoke, I had not noticed the absence of that individual. On inquiry it seemed that Sambo had been left fast asleep in the garden. I raised the heavy attic window and looked out. Yes, there he was sitting propped up on the garden seat looking up at us with eyes that seemed to me very wide awake.

"I'm afraid he knows where we are!" said Janey, "he is so very clever."

Of course I said nothing to Mary of what went on upstairs. There was less need to, as Janey's visits to her banished family very soon ceased. It was my belief that Sambo had put a stop to them. Of what happened behind the raspberry canes I very seldom speak. I never told Mary, who being entirely without imagination would have believed that I was either lying or Janey mad.

The afternoon had been more than usually close. Mary was cross, Janey was listless, and I sleepy. I had as usual ensconced myself in the shady corner of the kitchen garden where the maid never thinks of looking when she comes to announce callers, and where I not infrequently surprise school children in search of our blackbirds' nests. I was awakened from my nap by the accustomed sound of someone in the raspberry canes.

In among the brown sticks, I caught sight of a white dress. I bent low and followed. Janey was some fifteen yards ahead of me. In her arms she was clasping a doll. She was sobbing bitterly.

Through the raspberry canes I followed her—along a little track that had not been there a fortnight before, over an open space which in autumn was trenched for celery, past the deserted graveyard where generations of cats and dogs had been laid to rest, to the very end of the long garden.

It was a deserted place given over to rubbish, broken flower pots, piles of old pea-sticks, and mounds of yellow rotting grass cut from the lawns last summer. I hid myself behind a turf stack and watched.

On a chair that Arthur had given Janey three birthdays ago sat Sambo, wearing his usual expression of utter vacuity. About a yard in front of him was a pile of straw and dried twigs; within reach was the silver matchbox

I had spent hours in hunting for the previous two days. There was also a little saw from my tool chest.

I ground my teeth as I noticed the rusty blade. Janey placed her doll on the ground, cried over it and kissed it. Then before I realized what she was doing she had sawn off its legs and arms, and placed its dismembered trunk upon the wooden pyre. From the tennis lawn came Mary's voice calling "Janey! Janey!"

It is no easy matter to strike matches on an old silver matchbox from which the roughness has long since departed. She was successful at last, and in a moment there was a blaze. The dried wood crackled with the heat. Then again came Mary's voice louder and more persistent, and Janey was gone.

I lit a cigarette, and watched the fire die down, controlling with difficulty an impulse to add more fuel to it in the person of Sambo. Before I left the place I found the charred remains of eight dolls. One which I took to be Eric was hideous to behold, his head was featureless, one glass eye protruding from a lump of wax.

I made my way back to the house as stealthily as I had come. Under my coat I carried Sambo.

I had to go up to town that evening on business, and I wrapped up the doll in a paper parcel (my kit bag was already full), with the intention of consulting a friend at the British Museum as to its nature and origin.

Mary had apparently taken Janey with her to call on the vicar's wife. I saw neither of them before I left.

I did not carry out my plan; for as I was walking down Paternoster Row the following day, with my parcel under my arm, Sambo was stolen.

I had stopped opposite a stationer's shop in whose window was exhibited a large map of Africa, flanked by Bibles. I was wondering why such an immense area had been covered black instead of the more customary scarlet, and had come to the conclusion that it probably referred to unexploited coal, when I received a push in the back. After apologizing to the clergyman with whom I came into somewhat violent contact, I became aware that my parcel had disappeared. Of the thief there was no sign. Yards away I saw the imposing dark blue mass of a constable. I took two steps towards him with the intention of notifying my loss. Then I turned and walked in the opposite direction. Sambo after all had been no friend of ours.

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Ten months later I went with Mary to the Agricultural Hall to see the "Orient in London." She had promised after my visit to spend a day with me at the Franco-British Exhibition, a bargain which to my mind was never fully ratified, as she resolutely declined free seats in the Scenic Railway and Flip-Flap.

I was glad I had gone as I met two acquaintances I should not otherwise have seen, Captain Carter, of my old regiment, who had taken orders and was going out to China as a missionary, and Sambo. The latter seemed to be superintending operations in an African village, and was very much at home. There was a label tied to his arm. On it I read:

"This undoubtedly genuine African idol was found in a compartment in the Bakerloo tube. Nothing is known as to the circumstances in which it was placed there, but it was probably stolen from some museum. This idol affords an interesting example of the gods that were worshipped in the childhood of our race."

The childhood of our race appeared to me a particularly appropriate phrase as I thought of Janey.

The abbot of Ursperg, in his Chronicle, year 1123, says that in the territory of Worms they saw during many days a multitude of armed men, on foot and on horseback, going and coming with great noise, like people who are going to a solemn assembly. Every day they marched, towards the hour of noon, to a mountain, which appeared to be their place of rendezvous. Someone in the neighbourhood, bolder than the rest, having guarded himself with the sign of the cross, approached one of these armed men, conjuring him in the name of God, to declare the meaning of this army, and their design. The soldier or phantom replied, "We are not what you imagine; we are neither vain phantoms nor true soldiers, we are spirits of those who were killed on this spot a long time ago. The arms and horses which you behold are the instruments of our punishment, as they were of our sins. We are all on fire, though you can see nothing about us which appear inflamed." It is said that they remarked in this company the Count Emico, who had been killed a few years before, and who declared that he might be extricated from that state by alms and prayers.

Egypt has gained just fame as the land of ancient mysteries and age-old marvels. About the person of the Egyptologist has arisen a whole aura of legend, tales of the curses that hang over violated tombs, of the awesome results of pyramid measurements, and of the strangeness that accompanies mummies. Robert Bloch, whose first volume of collected stories, "The Haunter of the Dark," has won fan applause, brings us here an Egyptian story that stands out among the rest, for the strange tale of the Black Pharaoh ties ancient Egypt to modern Englishman in a way gripping and frightening to behold.

Fane of the Black Pharaoh

by Robert Bloch

"LIAR!" said Captain Cartaret.

The dark man did not move, but beneath the shadows of his burnoose a scowl slithered across a contorted countenance. But when he stepped forward into the lamplight, he smiled.

"That is a harsh epithet, *effendi*," purred the dark man.

Captain Cartaret stared at his midnight visitor with quizzical appraisal.

"A deserved one, I think," he observed. "Consider the facts. You come to my door at midnight, uninvited and unknown. You tell me some long rigmarole about secret vaults below Cairo, and then voluntarily offer to lead me there."

"That is correct," assented the Arab, blandly. He met the glance of the scholarly captain calmly.

"Why should you do this?" pursued Cartaret. "If your story is true, and you do possess so manifestly absurd a secret, why should you come to me? Why not claim the glory of discovery yourself?"

"I told you, *effendi*," said the Arab. "That is against the law of our brotherhood. It is not written that I should do so. And knowing of your interest in these things, I came to offer you the privilege."

"You came to pump me for my information; no doubt that's what you mean," retorted the captain, acidly. "You beggars have some devilishly clever ways of getting underground information, don't you? So far as I know, you're here to find out how much I've already learned so that you and your fanatic thugs can knife me if I know too much."

"Ah!" The dark stranger suddenly leaned forward and peered into the white man's face. "Then you admit that what I tell you is not wholly strange—you do know something of this place already?"

"Suppose I do," said the captain, unflinching. "That doesn't prove that you're a philanthropic guide to what I'm seeking. More likely you want to pump me as I said, then dispose of me and get the goods for yourself. No, your story is too thin. Why, you haven't even told me your name."

"My name?" The Arab smiled. "That does not matter. What does matter is your distrust of me. But, since you have admitted at last that you do know about the crypt of Nephren-Ka, perhaps I can show you something that may prove my own knowledge."

He thrust a lean hand under his robe and drew forth a curious object of dull, black metal. This he flung casually on the table, so that it lay in a fan of lamplight.

Captain Cartaret bent forward and peered at the queer, metallic thing. His thin, usually pale face now glowed with unconcealed excitement. He grasped the black object with twitching fingers.

"The Seal of Nephren-Ka!" he whispered. When he raised his eyes to the inscrutable Arab's once more, they shone with mingled incredulity and belief.

"It's true, then—what you say," the captain breathed. "You could obtain this only from the Secret Place; the Place of the Blind Apes where——"

"Nephren-Ka bindeth up the threads of truth." The smiling Arab finished the quotation for him.

"You, too, have read the *Necronomicon* then." Cartaret looked stunned. "But there are only six complete versions, and I thought the nearest was in the British Museum."

The Arab's smile broadened. "My fellow-countryman, Alhazred, left

many legacies among his own people," he said, softly. "There is wisdom available to all who know where to seek it."

For a moment there was silence in the room. Cartaret gazed at the black Seal, and the Arab scrutinized him in turn. The thoughts of both were far away. At last the thin, elderly white man looked up with a quick grimace of determination.

"I believe your story," he said. "Lead me."

The Arab, with a satisfied shrug, took a chair, unbidden, at the side of his host. From that moment he assumed complete psychic mastery of the situation.

"First, you must tell me what you know," he commanded. "Then I shall reveal the rest."

Cartaret, unconscious of the other's dominance, complied. He told the stranger his story in an abstracted manner, while his eyes never swerved from the cryptic black amulet on the table. It was almost as though he were hypnotized by the queer talisman. The Arab said nothing, though there was a gay gloating in his fanatical eyes.

Cartaret spoke of his youth; of his wartime service in Egypt and subsequent station in Mesopotamia. It was here that the captain had first become interested in archeology and the shadowy realms of the occult which surround it. From the vast desert of Arabia had come intriguing tales as old as time; furtive fables of mystic Irem, city of ancient dread, and the lost legends of vanished empires. He had spoken to the dreaming dervishes whose hashish visions revealed secrets of forgotten days, and had explored certain reputedly ghoulish tombs and burrows in the ruins of an older Damascus than recorded history knows.

In time, his retirement had brought him to Egypt. Here in Cairo there was access to still more secret lore. Egypt, land of lurid curses and lost kings, has ever harbored mad myths in its age-old shadows. Cartaret had learned of priests and pharaohs; of olden oracles, forgotten sphinxes, fabulous pyramids, titanic tombs. Civilization was but a cobweb surface upon the sleeping face of Eternal Mystery. Here, beneath the inscrutable shadows of the pyramids, the old gods still stalked in the old ways. The ghosts of Set, Ra, Osiris, and Bubastis lurked in desert ways; Horus, Isis, and Sebek yet dwelt in the ruins of Thebes and Memphis, or bided in the crumbling tombs below the Valley of Kings.

Nowhere had the past survived as it did in ageless Egypt. With every

mummy, the Egyptologists uncovered a curse; the solving of each ancient secret merely uncovered a deeper, more perplexing riddle. Who built the pylons of the temples? Why did the old kings rear the pyramids? How did they work such marvels? Were their curses potent still? Where vanished the priests of Egypt?

These and a thousand other unanswered questions intrigued the mind of Captain Cartaret. In his new-found leisure he read and studied, talked with scientists and savants. Ever the quest of primal knowledge beckoned him on to blacker brinks; he could slake his thirsty soul only in stranger secrets, more dangerous discoveries.

Many of the reputable authorities he knew were open in their confessed opinion that it was not well for meddlers to pry too deeply beneath the surface. Curses had come true with puzzling promptness, and warning prophecies had been fulfilled with a vengeance. It was not good to profane the shrines of the old dark gods who still dwelt within the land.

But the terrible lure of the forgotten and the forbidden was a pulsing virus in Cartaret's blood. When he heard the legend of Nephren-Ka, he naturally investigated.

Nephren-Ka, according to authoritative knowledge, was merely a mythical figure. He was purported to have been a Pharaoh of no known dynasty, a priestly usurper of the throne. The most common fables placed his reign in almost biblical times. He was said to have been the last and greatest of that Egyptian cult of priest-sorcerers who for a time transformed the recognized religion into a dark and terrible thing. This cult, led by the arch-hierophants of Bubastis, Anubis, and Sebek, viewed their gods as the representatives of actual Hidden Beings—monstrous beast-men who shambled on Earth in primal days. They accorded worship to the Elder One, who is known to myth as Nyarlathotep, the "Mighty Messenger." This abominable deity was said to confer wizard's power upon receiving human sacrifices; and while the evil priests reigned supreme they temporarily transformed the religion of Egypt into a bloody shambles. With anthropomancy and necrophilism they sought terrible boons from their demons.

The tale goes that Nephren-Ka, on the throne, renounced all religion save that of Nyarlathotep. He sought the power of prophecy, and built temples to the Blind Ape of Truth. His utterly atrocious sacrifices at length provoked a revolt, and it is said that the infamous Pharaoh was at last dethroned. According to this account, the new ruler and his people

immediately destroyed all vestiges of the former reign, demolished all temples and idols of Nyarlathotep, and drove out the wicked priests who prostituted their faith to the carnivorous Bubastis, Anubis, and Sebek. *The Book of the Dead* was then amended so that all references to the Pharaoh Nephren-Ka and his accursed cults were deleted.

Thus, argues the legend, the furtive faith was lost to reputable history. As to Nephren-Ka himself, a strange account is given of his end.

The story ran that the dethroned Pharaoh fled to a spot adjacent to what is now the modern city of Cairo. Here it was his intention to embark with his remaining followers for a "westward isle." Historians believe that this "isle" was Britain, where some of the fleeing priests of Bubastis actually settled.

But the Pharaoh was attacked and surrounded, his escape blocked. It was then that he had constructed a secret underground tomb, in which he caused himself and his followers to be interred alive. With him, in this vivisepture, he took all his treasure and magical secrets, so that nothing would remain for his enemies to profit by. So cleverly did his remaining devotees contrive this secret crypt that the attackers were never able to discover the resting-place of the Black Pharaoh.

Thus the legend rests. According to common currency, the fable was handed down by the few remaining priests who actually stayed on the surface to seal the secret place; they and their descendants were believed to have perpetuated the story and the old faith of evil.

Following up this exceedingly unusual story, Cartaret delved into the old tomes of the time. During a trip to London he was fortunate enough to be allowed an inspection of the unhallowed and archaic *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred. In it were further emendations. One of his influential friends in the Home Office, hearing of his interest, managed to obtain for him a portion of Ludvig Prinn's evil and blasphemous *De Vermis Mysteriis*, known more familiarly to students of recondite arcana as *Mysteries of the Worm*. Here, in that greatly disputed chapter on oriental myth entitled *Saracenic Rituals*, Cartaret found still more concrete elaborations of the Nephren-Ka tale.

Prinn, who consorted with the mediæval seers and prophets of Saracen times in Egypt, gave a good deal of prominence to the whispered hints of Alexandrian necromancers and adepts. They knew the story of Nephren-Ka, and alluded to him as the Black Pharaoh.

Prinn's account of the Pharaoh's death was much more elaborate. He claimed that the secret tomb lay directly beneath Cairo itself, and professed to believe that it had been opened and reached. He hinted at the cult-survival mentioned in the popular tales; spoke of a renegade group of descendants whose priestly ancestors had interred the rest alive. They were said to perpetuate the evil faith and to act as guardians of the dead Nephren-Ka and his buried brethren, lest some interloper discover and violate his resting-place in the crypt. After the regular cycle of seven thousand years, the Black Pharaoh and his band would then arise once more, and restore the dark glory of the ancient faith.

The crypt itself, if Prinn is to be believed, was a most unusual place. Nephren-Ka's servants and slaves had builded him a mighty sepulcher, and the burrows were filled with the rich treasure of his reign. All of the sacred images were there, and the jeweled books of esoteric wisdom reposed within.

Most peculiarly did the account dwell on Nephren-Ka's search for the Truth and the Power of Prophecy. It was said that before he died down in the darkness, he conjured up the earthly image of Nyarlathotep in a final gigantic sacrifice; and that the god granted him his desires. Nephren-Ka had stood before the images of the Blind Ape of Truth and received the gift of divination over the gory bodies of a hundred willing victims. Then, in nightmare manner, Prinn recounts that the entombed Pharaoh wandered among his dead companions and inscribed on the twisted walls of his tomb the secrets of the future. In pictures and ideographs he wrote the history of days to come, revelling in omniscient knowledge till the end. He scrawled the destinies of kings to come; painted the triumphs and the dooms of unborn empires. Then, as the blackness of death shrouded his sight, and palsy wrenched the brush from his fingers, he betook himself in peace to his sarcophagus, and there died.

So said Ludvig Prinn, he that consorted with ancient seers. Nephren-Ka lay in his buried burrows, guarded by the priestly cult that still survived on Earth, and further protected by enchantments in his tomb below. He had fulfilled his desires at the end—he had known Truth, and written the lore of the future on the nighted walls of his own catacomb.

Cartaret had read all this with conflicting emotions. How he would like to find that tomb, if it existed! What a sensation—he would revolutionize anthropology, ethnology!

Of course the legend had its absurd points. Cartaret, for all his research,

was not superstitious. He didn't believe the bogus balderdash about Nyarlathotep, the Blind Ape of Truth, or the priestly cult. That part about the gift of prophecy was sheer drivel.

Such things were commonplace. There were many savants who had attempted to prove that the pyramids, in their geometrical construction, were archeological and architectural prophecies of days to come. With elaborate and convincing skill, they attempted to show that, symbolically interpreted, the great tombs held the key to history, that they allegorically foretold the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Great War.

This, Cartaret believed, was rubbish. And the utterly absurd notion that a dying fanatic had been gifted with prophetic power and scrawled the future history of the world on his tomb as a last gesture before death—that was impossible to swallow.

Nevertheless, despite his skeptical attitude, Captain Cartaret wanted to find the tomb, if it existed. He had returned to Egypt with that intention, and immediately set to work. So far he had a number of clues and hints. If the machinery of his investigation did not collapse, it was now only a matter of days before he would discover the actual entrance to the spot itself. Then he intended to enlist proper Governmental aid and make his discovery public to all.

This much he now told the silent Arab who had come out of the night with a strange proposal and a weird credential: the seal of the Black Pharaoh, Nephren-Ka.

When Cartaret finished his summary, he glanced at the dark stranger in interrogation.

"What next?" he asked.

"Follow me," said the other, urbanely. "I shall lead you to the spot you seek."

"Now?" gasped Cartaret. The other nodded.

"But—it's too sudden! I mean, the whole thing is like a dream. You come out of the night, unbidden and unknown, show me the Seal, and graciously offer to grant me my desires. Why? It doesn't make sense."

"This makes sense." The grave Arab indicated the black Seal.

"Yes," admitted Cartaret. "But—how can I trust you? Why must I go now? Wouldn't it be wiser to wait, and get the proper authorities behind us? Won't there be need of excavation; aren't there necessary instruments to take?"

"No." The other spread his palms upward. "Just come."

"Look here." Cartaret's suspicion crystallized in his sharp tones. "How do I know this isn't a trap? Why should you come to me this way? Who the devil are you?"

"Patience." The dark man smiled. "I shall explain all. I have listened to your accounts of the 'legend' with great interest, and while your facts are clear, your own view of them is mistaken. The 'legend' you have learned of is true—all of it. Nephren-Ka *did* write the future on the walls of his tomb when he died; he *did* possess the power of divination, and the priests who buried him formed a cult which *did* survive."

"Yes?" Cartaret was impressed, despite himself.

"I am one of those priests." The words stabbed like swords in the white man's brain.

"Do not look so shocked. It is the truth. I am a descendant of the original cult of Nephren-Ka, one of those inner initiates who have kept the legend alive. I worship the Power which the Black Pharaoh received, and I worship the god Nyarlathotep who accorded that Power to him. To us believers, the most sacred truth lies in the hieroglyphs inscribed by the divinely gifted Pharaoh before he died. Throughout the ages, we guardian priests have watched history unfold, and always it has agreed with the ideographs on those tunneled walls. We believe.

"It is because of our belief that I have sought you out. For within the secret crypt of the Black Pharaoh it is written upon the walls of the future that you shall descend there."

Stunning silence.

"Do you mean to say," Cartaret gasped, "that those pictures *show* me discovering the spot?"

"They do," assented the dark man, slowly. "That is why I came to you unbidden. You shall come with me and fulfill the prophecy tonight, as it is written."

"Suppose I don't come?" flashed Captain Cartaret, suddenly. "What about your prophecy then?"

The Arab smiled. "You'll come," he said. "You know that."

Cartaret realized that it was so. Nothing could keep him away from this amazing discovery. A thought struck him.

"If this wall really records the details of the future," he began, "perhaps you can tell me a little about my own coming history. Will this discovery

make me famous? Will I return again to the spot? Is it written that I am to bring the secret of Nephren-Ka to light?"

The dark man looked grave. "That I do not know," he admitted. "I neglected to tell you something about the Walls of Truth. My ancestor—he who first descended into the secret spot after it had been sealed, he who first looked upon the work of prophecy—did a needful thing. Deeming that such wisdom was not for lesser mortals, he piously covered the walls with concealing tapestry. Thus none might look upon the future too far. As time passed, the tapestry was drawn back to keep pace with the actual events of history, and always they have coincided with the hieroglyphs. Through the ages, it has always been the duty of one priest to descend to the secret tomb each day and draw back the tapestry so as to reveal the events of the day that follows. Now, during my life, that is my mission. My fellows devote their time to the needful rites of worship in hidden places. I alone descend the concealed passage daily and draw back the curtain on the Walls of Truth. When I die, another will take my place. Understand me—the writing does not minutely concern every single event; merely those which affect the history and destiny of Egypt itself. Today, my friend, it was revealed that you should descend and enter into the place of your desire. What the morrow holds in store for you I cannot say, until the curtain is drawn once more."

Cartaret sighed. "I suppose that there is nothing else left but for me to go, then." His eagerness was ill dissembled. The dark man observed this at once, and smiled cynically, while he strode to the door.

"Follow me," he commanded.

To Captain Cartaret that walk through the moonlit streets of Cairo was blurred in chaotic dream. His guide led him into labyrinths of looming shadows; they wandered through the twisted native quarters and passed through a maze of unfamiliar alleys and thoroughfares. Cartaret strode mechanically at the dark stranger's heels, his thoughts avid for the great triumph to come.

He hardly noticed their passage through a dingy courtyard; when his companion drew up before an ancient well and pressed a niche revealing the passage beneath, he followed him as a matter of course. From somewhere the Arab had produced a flashlight. Its faint beam almost rebounded from the murk of the inky tunnel.

Together they descended a thousand stairs, into the ageless and eternal

darkness that broods beneath. Like a blind man, Cartaret stumbled down—down into the depths of three thousand vanished years.

The temple was entered—the subterranean temple-tomb of Nephren-Ka. Through silver gates the priest passed, his dazed companion following behind.

Cartaret stood in a vast chamber, the niched walls of which were lined with sarcophagi.

"They hold the mummies of the interred priests and servants," explained his guide.

Strange were the mummy-cases of Nephren-Ka's followers, not like those known to Egyptology. The carved covers bore no recognized, conventional features as was the usual custom; instead they presented the strange, grinning countenances of demons and creatures of fable. Jeweled eyes stared mockingly from the black visages of gargoyles spawned in a sculptor's nightmare. From every side of the room those eyes shone through the shadows; unwinking, unchanging, omniscient in this little world of the dead.

Cartaret stirred uneasily. Emerald eyes of death, ruby eyes of malevolence, yellow orbs of mockery; everywhere they confronted him. He was glad when his guide led him forward at last, so that the incongruous rays of the flashlight shone on the entrance beyond. A moment later his relief was dissipated by the sight of a new horror confronting him at the inner doorway.

Two gigantic figures shambled there, guarding either side of the opening—two monstrous, troglodytic figures. Great gorillas they were; enormous apes, carved in simian semblance from black stone. They faced the doorway, squatting on mighty haunches, their huge, hairy arms upraised in menace. Their glittering faces were brutally alive; they grinned, bare-fanged, with idiotic glee. And they were blind—eyeless and blind.

There was a terrible allegory in these figures which Cartaret knew only too well. The blind apes were Destiny personified; a hulking, mindless Destiny whose sightless, stupid gropings trampled on the dreams of men and altered their lives by aimless flailings of purposeless paws. Thus did they control reality.

These were the Blind Apes of Truth, according to the ancient legend; the symbols of the old gods worshipped by Nephren-Ka.

Cartaret thought of the myths once more, and trembled. If tales were

true, Nephren-Ka had offered up that final mighty sacrifice upon the obscene laps of these evil idols; offered them up to Nyarlathotep, and buried the dead in the mummy-cases set here in the niches. Then he had gone on to his own sepulcher within.

The guide proceeded stolidly past the looming figures. Cartaret, dissembling his dismay, started to follow. For a moment his feet refused to cross that gruesomely guarded threshold into the room beyond. He stared upward to the eyeless ogreish faces that leered down from dizzying heights, with the feeling that he walked in realms of sheer nightmare. But the huge arms beckoned him on; the unseeing faces were convulsed in a smile of mocking invitation.

The legends were true. The tomb existed. Would it not be better to turn back now, seek sane aid, and return again to this spot? Besides, what unguessed terror might not lurk in the realms beyond; what horror spawn in the sable shadows of Nephren-Ka's inner, secret sepulcher? All reason urged him to call out to the strange priest and retreat to safety.

But the voice of reason was but a hushed and awe-stricken whisper here in the brooding burrows of the past. This was a realm of ancient shadow, where antique evil ruled. Here the incredible was real, and there was a potent fascination in fear itself.

Cartaret knew that he must go on; curiosity, cupidity, the lust for concealed knowledge—all impelled him. And the Blind Apes grinned their challenge, or command.

The priest entered the third chamber, and Cartaret followed. Crossing the threshold, he plunged into an abyss of unreality.

The room was lighted by braziers set in a thousand stations; their glow bathed the enormous burrow with fiery luminance. Captain Cartaret, his head reeling from the heat and mephitic miasma of the place, was thus able to see the entire extent of this incredible cavern.

Seemingly endless, a vast corridor stretched on a downward slant into the earth beyond—a vast corridor, utterly barren, save for the winking red braziers along the walls. Their flaming reflections cast grotesque shadows that glimmered with unnatural life. Cartaret felt as though he were gazing on the entrance to Karneter—the mythical underworld of Egyptian lore.

"Here we are," said his guide, softly.

The unexpected sound of a human voice was startling. For some reason,

it frightened Cartaret more than he cared to admit; he had fallen into a vague acceptance of these scenes as being part of a fantastic dream. Now, the concrete clarity of a spoken word only confirmed an eerie reality.

Yes, here they were, in the spot of legend, the place known to Alhazred, Prinn, and all the dark delvers into unhallowed history. The tale of Nephren-Ka was true, and if so, what about the rest of this strange priest's statements? What about the Walls of Truth, on which the Black Pharaoh had recorded the future, had foretold Cartaret's own advent on the secret spot?

As if in answer to these inner whispers, the guide smiled.

"Come, Captain Cartaret; do you not wish to examine the walls more closely?"

The captain did not wish to examine the walls; desperately, he did not. For they, if in existence, would confirm the ghastly horror that gave them being. If they existed, it meant that the whole evil legend was real; that Nephren-Ka, Black Pharaoh of Egypt, had indeed sacrificed to the dread dark gods, and that they had answered his prayer. Captain Cartaret did not greatly wish to believe in such utterly blasphemous abominations as Nyarlathotep.

He sparred for time.

"Where is the tomb of Nephren-Ka himself?" he asked. "Where are the treasure and the ancient books?"

The guide extended a lean forefinger.

"At the end of this hall," he exclaimed.

Peering down the infinity of lighted walls, Cartaret indeed fancied that his eyes could detect a dark blur of objects in the dim distance.

"Let us go there," he said.

The guide shrugged. He turned, and his feet moved over the velvet dust.

Cartaret followed, as if drugged.

"The walls," he thought. "I must not look at the walls. The Walls of Truth. The Black Pharaoh sold his soul to Nyarlathotep and received the gift of prophecy. Before he died here he wrote the future of Egypt on the walls. I must not look, lest I believe. I must not know."

Red lights glittered on either side. Step after step, light after light. Glare, gloom, glare, gloom, glare.

The lights beckoned, enticed, attracted. "Look at us," they commanded. "See, dare to see all."

Cartaret followed his silent conductor.

"Look!" flashed the lights.

Cartaret's eyes grew glassy. His head throbbed. The gleaming of the lights was mesmeric; they hypnotized with their allure.

"Look!"

Would this great hall never end? No; there were thousands of feet to go.

"Look!" challenged the leaping lights.

Red serpent eyes in the underground dark; eyes of tempters, bringers of black knowledge.

"Look! Wisdom! Know!" winked the lights.

They flamed in Cartaret's brain. Why not look—it was so easy? Why fear? Why? His dazed mind repeated the question. Each following flare of fire weakened the question.

At last, Cartaret looked.

Mad minutes passed before he was able to speak. Then he mumbled in a voice audible only to himself.

"True," he whispered. "All true."

He stared at the towering wall to his left, limned in red radiance. It was an interminable *Bayeux tapestry* carved in stone. The drawing was crude, in black and white, but it *frightened*. This was no ordinary Egyptian picture-writing; it was not in the fantastic, symbolical style of ordinary hieroglyphics. That was the terrible part: Nephren-Ka was a realist. His men looked like men, his buildings were buildings. There was nothing here but a representation of stark reality, and it was dreadful to see.

For at the point where Cartaret first summoned sufficient courage to gaze he stared at an unmistakable tableau involving the Crusaders and Saracens.

Crusaders of the Thirteenth Century—yet Nephren-Ka had then been dust for nearly two thousand years!

The pictures were small, yet vivid and distinct; they seemed to flow along quite effortlessly on the wall, one scene blending into another as though they had been drawn in unbroken continuity. It was as though the artist had not stopped once during his work; as though he had untiringly proceeded to cover this gigantic hall in a single supernatural effort.

That was it—a single *supernatural* effort!

Cartaret could not doubt. Rationalize all he would, it was impossible to believe that these drawings were trumped up by any group of artists. It was one man's work. And the unerring horrid consistency of it; the calculated picturization of the most vital and important phases of Egyptian history could have been set down in such accurate order only by a historical authority or a prophet. Nephren-Ka had been given the gift of prophecy. And so . . .

As he ruminated in growing dread, Cartaret and his guide proceeded. Now that he had looked, a Medusian fascination held the man's eyes to the wall. He walked with history tonight; history and red nightmare. Flaming figures leered from every side.

He saw the rise of the Mameluke Empire, looked on the despots and the tyrants of the East. Not all of what he saw was familiar to Cartaret, for history has its forgotten pages. Besides, the scenes changed and varied at almost every step, and it was quite confusing. There was one picture interspersed with an Alexandrian court motif which depicted a catacomb evidently in some vaults beneath the city. Here were gathered a number of men in robes which bore a curious similarity to those of Cartaret's present guide. They were conversing with a tall, white-bearded man whose crudely drawn figure seemed to exude an uncanny aura of black and baleful power.

"Ludvig Prinn," said the guide, softly, noting Cartaret's stare. "He mingled with our priests, you know."

For some reason the depiction of this almost legendary seer stirred Cartaret more deeply than any other hitherto revealed terror. The casual inclusion of the infamous sorcerer in the procession of actual history hinted at dire things; it was as though Cartaret had read a prosaic biography of Satan in *Who's Who*.

Nevertheless, with a sort of heartsick craving his eyes continued to search the walls as they walked onward to the still indeterminate end of the long red-illuminated chamber in which Nephren-Ka was interred. The guide—priest, now, for Cartaret no longer doubted—proceeded softly, but stole covert glances at the white man as he led the way.

Captain Cartaret walked through a dream. Only the walls were real now: the Walls of Truth. He saw the Othmans rise and flourish, looked on forgotten battles and unremembered kings. Often there recurred in the sequence a scene depicting the priests of Nephren-Ka's own furtive cult. They were shown amidst the disquieting surroundings of catacombs

and tombs, engaged in unsavory occupations and revolting pleasures. The camera-film of time rolled on; Captain Cartaret and his companion walked on. Still the walls told their story.

There was one small division of the wall which portrayed the priests conducting a man in Elizabethan costume through what seemed to be a pyramid. It was eery to see the gallant in his finery pictured amidst the ruins of ancient Egypt, and it was very dreadful indeed to almost watch, like an unseen observer, when a stealthy priest knifed the Englishman in the back as he bent over a mummy-case.

What now impressed Cartaret was the infinitude of detail in each pictured fragment. The features of all the men were almost photographically exact; the drawing, while crude, was life-like and realistic. Even the furniture and background of every scene were correct. There was no doubting the authenticity of it all, and no doubting of the veracity thereby implied. But—what was worse—there was no doubting that this work could not have been done by any normal artist, however learned, unless he had seen it all.

Nephren-Ka had seen it all in prophetic vision, after his sacrifice to Nyarlathotep.

Cartaret was looking at truths inspired by a demon. . . .

On and on, to the flaming fane of worship and death at the end of the hall. History progressed as he walked. Now he was looking at a period of Egyptian lore that was almost contemporary. The figure of Napoleon appeared.

The battle of Aboukir . . . the massacre of the pyramids . . . the downfall of the Mameluke horsemen . . . the entrance to Cairo. . . .

Once again, a catacomb with priests. And three figures, white men, in French military regalia of the period. The priests were leading them into a red room. The Frenchmen were surprised, overcome, slaughtered.

It was vaguely familiar. Cartaret was recalling what he knew of Napoleon's commission; he had appointed savants and scientists to investigate the tombs and pyramids of the land. The Rosetta stone had been discovered, and other things. Quite likely the three men shown had blundered onto a mystery the priests of Nephren-Ka had not wanted to have unveiled. Hence they had been lured to death as the walls showed. It was quite familiar—but there was *another* familiarity which Cartaret could not place.

They moved on as the years rushed by in panorama. The Turks, the

English, Gordon, the plundering of the pyramids, the World War. And ever so often, a picture of the priests of Nephren-Ka and a strange white man in some catacomb or vault. Always the white man died. It was all *familiar*.

Cartaret looked up, and saw that he and the priest were very near to the blackness at the end of the great fiery hall. Only a hundred steps or so, in fact. The priest, face hidden in his burnoose, was beckoning him on.

Cartaret looked at the wall. The pictures were almost ended. But no—just ahead was a great curtain of crimson velvet on a ceiling rack which ran off into the blackness and reappeared from shadows on the opposite side of the room to cover that wall.

"The future," explained his guide. And Captain Cartaret remembered that the priest had told how each day he drew back the curtain a bit so that the future was always revealed just one day ahead. He remembered something else, and hastily glanced at the last visible section of the Wall of Truth next to the curtain. He gasped.

It was true! Almost as though gazing into a miniature mirror he found himself staring *into his own face!*

Line for line, feature for feature, posture for posture, he and the priest of Nephren-Ka were shown standing together in this red chamber just as they were now.

The red chamber . . . familiarity. The Elizabethan man with the priests of Nephren-Ka were in a catacomb when the man was murdered. The French scientists were in a red chamber when they died. Other later Egyptologists had been shown in a red chamber with the priests, and they too had been slain. The red chamber! Not familiarity but *similarity!* They had been in *this chamber!* And now he stood here, with a priest of Nephren-Ka. The others had died because they had known too much. Too much about what—Nephren-Ka?

A terrible suspicion began to formulate in hideous reality. The priests of Nephren-Ka protected their own. This tomb of their dead leaders was also their fane, their temple. When intruders stumbled onto the secret, they lured them down here and killed them lest others learn too much.

Had he not come in the same way?

The priest stood silent as he gazed at the Wall of Truth.

"Midnight," he said softly. "I must draw back the curtain to reveal yet another day before we go on. You expressed a wish, Captain Cartaret, to

see what the future holds in store for you. Now that wish shall be granted."

With a sweeping gesture he flung the curtain back along the wall for a foot. Then he moved, swiftly.

One hand leapt from the burnoose. A gleaming knife flashed through the air, drawing red fire from the lamps, then sank into Cartaret's back, drawing redder blood.

With a single groan, the white man fell. In his eyes there was a look of supreme horror, not born of death alone. For as he fell, Captain Cartaret read his future in the Walls of Truth, and it confirmed a madness that could not be.

As Captain Cartaret died he looked at the picture of his next hours of existence *and saw himself being knifed by the priests of Nephren-Ka.*

The priest vanished from the silent tomb, just as the last flicker of dying eyes showed to Cartaret the picture of a still white body—*his body*—lying in death before the Wall of Truth.

Faustus: *Divinity, adieu!*
These metaphysics of magicians,
And necromantic books are heavenly:
Lines, circles, scenes, letters and characters;
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, and omnipotence,
Is promis'd to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces;
But his dominion that exceeds in this,
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man;
A sound magician is a demigod:
Here tire, my brains, to gain a deity.
—CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (*Dr. Faustus*)

Without attempting to deny in any way the achievements of science, it remains true that the records of experiments are full of little sidetracked notations and inexplicable little developments that do not quite fit accepted theories. Because scientists are limited in number and overburdened with work, they cannot possibly pay attention to all such seeming deviations from their immediate objectives. Nonetheless there exists the very reasonable foundation for the opinion that all manner of forces and reactions may lie under our noses undiscovered, simply for lack of time. Carl Jacobi's story of "The Random Quantity," presented here for the first time anywhere, makes use of these loose ends of experiment to achieve a result that should be grounds for thought.

The Random Quantity

by Carl Jacobi



IELDING AND I worked it out afterward, and we came to the conclusion that the entire Bedford Hall affair was the result of a Mowbilay print, the tilt of the laboratory floor, and a stray shot from the pistol range in the armory. At least, that is what we wanted to believe. The actual facts were something else again.

It was the fourth of March when the affair first began. I remember the date because it marked the third anniversary of my instructorship at Merivale College. The day was unusually warm for so early in the year, and my class in Physics 1. Lab. (no prerequisite) was not paying all the attention it should have. There were, however, a minimum number of absentees, and those students I had called on to recite had done so with replies that showed a creditable amount of home preparation.

"The next problem is the one having to do with inertia," I said. "You may explain it, please, Mr. . . . Ah, I don't believe I have your name. You, sir, in the third seat, back row."

He was a tall, well-built youth with dark hair and dark eyes, and unmistakably handsome features. Although his clothes were entirely modern and his hair clipped short, there was something indefinably old-fashioned about him. I noticed this as he outlined the problem in clear and concise statements and gave its correct answer. When the class was over, I asked him to wait a moment.

"I don't believe I've seen you before," I said then. "Have you registered recently?"

He replied that he had entered school in the spring term and that his name was Jules Renard. And then as I started to enter his name on my records, he asked a question. Was a freshman ever permitted to do experimental work of his own in the school laboratories?

I looked at him with new interest. "I admire your ambition, Renard; but don't you think your regular scholastic work will keep you occupied for the present?"

"Yes, I suppose so," he admitted. "But you see, while I intend of course to keep up my studies, I'm more interested in other angles of experiment."

"What other angles?"

He took a cigarette out of his pocket but did not light it. "That's hard to explain, Professor Denby. If I said the random quantity, the matter of chance, it wouldn't mean much, would it?"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't," I smiled.

"But you will say a good word in my behalf at some time in the near future, won't you?" he persisted.

To this general request I casually assented, never dreaming to what lengths it would lead. Promptly after that I forgot Renard until mid-term examinations. When I checked over his paper, written boldly in a large flowing hand, I began to look upon this student with new regard. He had scored 98.2 on the test, which considering the amount of memory work it entailed, showed definite brilliance. But it was the manner in which he answered the questions that interested me. In the objective part of the test his answers were clear and concise. In the subjective part he seemed to enter each problem blindly as if he were on uncertain ground. For several sentences he apparently groped his way, using terminology that was strange to him. Then abruptly his meandering ceased, and he came to the point with a rush. When I mentioned this fact, he looked at me a little queerly.

"It's the random quantity I'm interested in, sir."

I gave him permission to use a small storeroom opening off the laboratory for his experiments. Professor Fielding of the Psychology Department advised this move after I had told him about the boy. Fielding was writing a new textbook and was on the lookout for any subjects among the student body.

But in those early spring months at Merivale College, Jules Renard definitely was not a problem child. In all respects he was a normal underclassman. He went to the sunlight dances. He smoked too many cigarettes, and he had a habit of wearing loud hand-painted neckties. He did, however, spend a great deal of time in the little laboratory storeroom. Several times, long after school hours, I interrupted him there at his work. He always seemed a trifle embarrassed, but answered me politely as he tinkered with his tools.

He was building some sort of a wheel. The thing was mounted on a spindle so that it would revolve and consisted of a concave surface about two feet in diameter. There was a little oblong box mounted on the table beside it, coverless and containing a few cogs, odds and ends of wire, and a couple of Micro-Wellman tubes. As I stood there, watching him, he would spin the wheel and then watch a little dial on the side of the box. Several curious books lay on the table, which at the time I thought odd he should be reading: Richard Verstegan's *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, Bentley's *Beyond the Mundane*, and a little red morocco-bound volume entitled *Twenty Experiments in the Occult*.

The spring term ended, and the campus depleted itself to the emptiness of the summer quarter. Renard had no summer classes, but he continued to haunt the laboratory. At length one night in July I came upon him there at an even later hour than usual. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was begrimed, but he sprang up and grinned broadly when I entered.

"Well, have you finished it yet?" I asked him.

He looked puzzled. "Finished? What do you mean, sir?"

"The wheel. You've been working on it for months now. What the devil is it?"

He lighted a cigarette and shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"You don't know?"

He sat down in a chair and faced me. "No, I don't know," he said, speaking very quietly. "Does that sound queer? It isn't meant to be. You see, I told you before I was interested in the random quantity. I might add to that, the random quantity tempered by the occult." He inhaled a

lungful of smoke. "I'm working on the postulation that the subconscious brain can behave just as—shall I say deliberately?—as the conscious, especially when influenced by some power from without. I believe in other words that there is no such thing as a haphazard action."

I eyed him a bit coldly. "Perhaps you'd better explain."

"Take this wheel." He waved his cigarette toward it. "It has been constructed with no set outline, plan or rule. Yet you see it as a many-segmented unit with definite signs of accomplishment. It has grown as it has seen fit to grow . . ."

"Just one moment," I said. "Are you trying to tell me you've just been adding wires and gadgets wherever the spirit prompted you?"

He shrugged, got up and crossed to the window. "I was afraid you wouldn't understand," he said.

Looking back, I must emphasize that aside from his "wheel" and his conversation of that night, Renard continued to act the normal student. He had interested himself in the hobby of gathering old prints, and without my permission began to tack copies on the laboratory storeroom walls. There were a number of Currier & Ives that I had never seen before. There were several garish Albitons and even a Godey or two. But the one which aroused my interest was a large two-by-three foot Mowbilay framed in gold leaf, now heavily tarnished. Renard had undoubtedly found it in some second-hand shop.

It was a typical Mowbilay, stiff, ornate, and horribly lacking in artistic quality, and with exaggerated attention to the minutest detail. The scene pictured the interior of a gambling casino. In the center was the roulette table, with the wheel in the middle, a croupier at each end and an official on a high chair behind each croupier. Gathered about the table were a group of men and women in dress of a bygone age.

In the center of this group one blonde woman dressed in white was in the act of turning from the roulette wheel. Her hand held a small derringer pistol which she leveled at the croupier in the foreground. A curl of smoke was issuing from the derringer barrel, and the croupier was slumped across the table.

At the bottom of this dramatic scene was the simple caption: "*Mes-sieurs, faites votre jeu!*"

Renard saw me studying this print and nodded. "They paid a lot of attention to detail on those days, didn't they?" he said. "Look, you can

even see where the ivory ball stopped on the roulette wheel, on the twelve, and the woman—judging by her left hand—has placed her money on impair eleven. There's a story behind that print all right."

I couldn't help but stare at the woman in white. Crude, the picture might be, yet the expression of hatred in her eyes was startling. Long after I had returned to my room that night the memory of her remained with me. And all throughout the following day as I gave my lectures and held my recitations I thought about her. There was something about the woman in that print that seemed to draw me to her and yet at the same time warned me away. I went into the storeroom, turned on the ceiling lights and examined the picture with great care. For a moment I thought the roulette wheel ball had stopped on the thirteen, whereas I was positive that on the night before Renard had called my attention to its being on twelve. And then when I looked again I saw with relief that I was mistaken. It *was* the twelve.

One of Renard's books lay open on the table, the volume, *Twenty Experiments in the Occult*, and to an academic man it appeared to be the worst sort of balderdash. All the superstitions and ignorance of the ages seemed to be incorporated in it. And yet as I riffled its pages and read a passage here and there, I was forced to admit the writing was done in a scholarly and restrained manner. Under the chapter heading, *Numerals*, several paragraphs caught my eye:

While numerology with its simple tabulation of the vowels and consonants in a person's name is of little consequence to these pages, there is no doubt that the use of numbers has a definite psychic value when skillfully applied. Eric Zeldt, Vienna, 1911, has recorded the numeral 6 appearing a number of times in connection with the mysterious disappearance of Ludwig Blueker, diamond merchant, who in his sixty-sixth year purchased steamship ticket 66D for stateroom 6b on the *Hellendoorn*, leaving Rotterdam on the sixth day of the sixth month. And again:

It is obvious, of course, that most experiments with numerals have failed because they were based on the laws of chance. A man draws a 3 from a deck of cards. He shuffles and repeats, drawing 6, 5, and 9 in succession. The chances of his drawing four 3's would be thousands to one against him. And yet who is to say that that thousandth chance could not be controlled to repeat itself time and time again.

I smiled at this, but I sobered when I read the next passage:

In 1846 Spachinni (first name not known), living in Altamura, designed a wheel constructed of cypress wood with a hollow core in which he placed a bit of camphor and a drop of quicksilver. By arranging numbers in triads and doubling the first digit every turn of the wheel he attempted to produce a system which would explain the random quantity.

Deep in thought, I closed the book and left the room. What sort of dual personality was this Jules Renard who could be as sane and down-to-earth as any of his fellow students one moment and a pseudo-mystic the next? As I opened the door leading to the outer corridor of Bedford Hall, I stopped a moment.

Was it imagination or had a sound come to my ears from the storeroom? A sound as of Renard's wheel spinning alone in the darkness.

For three days after that I punctuated the closing of each laboratory class with a quick trip to the storeroom and another look at the Mowbilay print. I could offer no reason as to the fascination of the woman in the print of the gambling casino. Yet fascination there was. I studied every detail of her dress, every contour of her face. With each visit the obsession grew more intense. There was something evil, something incredibly diabolic in the painted woman's eyes, and that evil seemed to pervade the entire room. I scribbled the following note and left it on the table:

Sorry, but I must ask you to remove your pictures. College regulations.

On the morrow I saw that Renard had in part complied. The Currier & Ives and the Godeys were all gone, but the Mowbilay still remained. About to take it down myself, I stopped. I was giving in to a whim, and the whole thing was absurd. I returned to my desk.

Renard came in a quarter of an hour later. He passed me without speaking and hurried into the storeroom. A moment later I heard his wheel spinning. Until nine p.m. I labored over my papers then locked my desk and prepared to leave.

"Good night, Renard," I called. "Better go home early and get some sleep."

There was no reply from the storeroom. I left Bedford Hall and made my way across the campus to my rooms. But all the way down the

darkened lane I moved with a picture of that woman in the print in my mind. That and a growing feeling of unease.

Undressing, I went to bed immediately. Sleep would not come. Across the room the clock ticked away the passing minutes and announced the half hours, one after another. Eleven o'clock came and passed, and still I lay there, wide awake. No matter how strenuously I tried to guide my thoughts, I could think of nothing but the woman in the print. There was something wrong with that picture. I could feel it with every fibre of my body.

I must have dozed off at length, but I was abruptly awakened by the ringing of my phone.

"Yes?" I answered drowsily. "Who is it?"

Renard's voice came over the wire, pitched in excitement.

"Can you come over here right away, sir?" he said breathlessly. "I've made an astounding discovery."

"Where are you?" Something was wrong with the connection. A grating, grinding sound muffled his voice.

"I've found it . . . the numbers' system!" Renard said. "Please hurry."

There was a click and the phone went dead. Not until then did I remember that my laboratory, like most of the rooms in Bedford Hall, was equipped with an outside telephone. I hurried into my clothes and made my way across the black campus. Anxiety accompanied me like a storm cloud.

The door to Bedford hall was locked as it well should be at this hour. I opened it with my key, climbed the stairs to the second floor and headed down the dark corridor.

In the laboratory as I switched on the lights all was silent. The store-room door was closed. It was also locked as I found a moment later when I tried the latch.

"Renard!" I called. "Are you there?"

There was utterly no sound from beyond that door. And then as I stood there listening, I heard it. The sound of the wheel spinning.

"Renard!"

Hollow and muffled, yet above the whirring of the wheel Renard's voice reached me: "Nine . . . sixteen . . . twenty-two . . . twelve. Six . . . thirteen . . . twenty-seven . . . *twelve*. Five . . . seventeen . . . twenty-nine *twelve!*"

"Renard!" I hammered my fists on the door.

There was a silence then, and for a moment I thought he was about to let me in. Then the wheel and the voice began again:

"Two . . . four . . . nineteen . . . eight . . . TWELVE!"

When it came, it turned me to stone. Dull and resounding, the thunder of a pistol shot filled the storeroom. It was followed by a sharp cry, the sound of a falling body, and—I am almost positive of this—a low, feminine laugh.

The spell broke then. I threw my shoulders against the door and burst it open. Two feet across the threshold I drew up short, staring in horror.

Jules Renard lay sprawled full length upon his work-table. There was a small bullet hole in his temple from which blood poured viscously.

He was dead, and his "wheel" lay on the floor, broken in a hundred fragments.

As I said, Fielding of the Psychology Department and I worked it out together, and the police, after much hesitation, were forced to accept what we told them: That the storeroom window was open; that the armory building and particularly the pistol range of the armory lay but a scant few yards away; that on that particular night a group of Sigma Nu boys were practising late on the range, preparing for the Intra-Mural Target Meet scheduled for the following week; that one of the students was a collector of antique firearms and in a spirit of fun was trying his weapons out for the first time: derringers, flint-locks, wheel locks, and modern automatics; that no spent bullet could be found in the room, the slug having passed through Renard's head and then, apparently, out the far window. And finally that the floor of the laboratory storeroom was almost an inch out of plumb, sufficient angle to make the wheel revolve, assuming the slightest vibration such as the closing of a door had started it.

But those facts do not explain the Mowbilay print on the wall. It is true that I looked at this print so many times the details were somewhat confused in my mind. Yet smoke was no longer issuing from the pistol of the woman in white, whereas I was positive it had been clearly in evidence before. And the figure of the falling croupier—had he really been falling? He was standing upright now.

Also—and to this I offer no explanation at all—the shattered dial of Renard's wheel had stopped on the twelve, the same number clearly visible on the roulette in the Mowbilay print.

If there is anyone who has not read, seen, or heard Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster," he must be an isolated and lonely person indeed. Benét's death a few years ago removed from the American scene one of our most talented poets and authors, a man whose feeling for the native scene was extraordinary. In addition, his sense of fantasy resulted in a number of very fine tales, many of which appreciative anthologists have used repeatedly. "The Gold Dress" is one of Benét's later works, a poignant ghost story with a New England accent, a story which will prove new to almost all our readers.

The Gold Dress

by Stephen Vincent Benét



RIGHT FROM THE FIRST we had trouble with Louella Weedon. Trouble was, she wouldn't stay put.

What I say is, if you're going to be a ghost, you ought to act like a ghost. That's reasonable. If you want to—well, haunt a place and feel upset enough about the troubles you've had to do it—that's to be expected. But Louella Weedon was different.

They were always strong-minded, the Weedons—especially the women. And Louella, being the last of them, was a kind of institution with us. We'd seen her grow up from a child—plain child she was, but stubborn; we'd seen her take care of her father and her mother and her Aunt Minnie. As long as they lived, she did her duty by them, as New England women will. And when she was left alone, she kept on doing it.

She did only one really peculiar thing that I recollect. Once a year she'd spend two weeks in New York City, and, though there were plenty of women she could have asked to go with her, she always went alone. We

thought that was pretty bold of her at first, but after a while it just got to be a custom, and part of Louella.

She never married. I don't mean that she didn't have offers—she did. But while they lived, her family always persuaded her that the suitors weren't good enough. And afterwards it was too late. Of course, there were some who said it drove Sam Owlett to drink—her turning him down—but you never had to drive Sam in that direction. He went on his own two feet. And if the town laughed a little about her and Monroe Taylor, we didn't mean any harm.

Monroe was teller in the bank, but he came from Northport, and nobody knew much about his folks. Well, Louella took him up, as you might say, and he called on her every week or so, that last year. It says a good deal for Louella that even that didn't give rise to any particular gossip. After all, she was a leading citizen, and the boy didn't know many folks in town when he first came. I call him a boy, but of course he was older than that—middle twenties and more. But he seemed young to me, and it's hard to refuse a kindness when you're young and lonely. He advised Louella about some things in the house and checked on some of her investments for her, but that seemed to be all it was. All it could be, too, for it seemed sort of written in the book that Miss Louella was bound to be the last of the Weedons. I know it surprised me a bit when I read her death notice. I'd been thinking of her as an old maid for as long as I could remember. And yet she was only forty when she died.

After that, we got used to the Weedon house being shut up and empty except for the caretaker who came in once a week to dust and wind the clocks. Louella had directed in her will that things were to be that way till the house was sold or disposed of. So there it was, and the first time in a hundred years that there hadn't been a Weedon in the house.

Only, coming back from the funeral, Ettie Rodgers made a curious remark to me. She'd lived next door to the Weedons all her life, and she knew Louella better than most.

"Well, Louella's gone," she said, with her black eyes snapping, "but I wonder if she'll stay put."

"Now, Ettie," I said, kind of soothing.

But she looked square at me. "No, I'm not crazy, Cy Marshall," she said, and sniffed in her handkerchief. "I'm just wondering. Louella was stubborn enough, but she never got much of what she wanted. She should

have had marriage and a family—yes, even if she'd had to marry that Taylor boy. But she was a Weedon, and nobody ever let her forget it."

I didn't think much of it at the time, because Ettie always had notions. But I thought of it later, when the talk about Monroe Taylor began.

He'd acted very proper at the funeral—everybody said that. And everybody felt kind of sorry for him. But when he started taking Jean Moffat home from the library, evenings, people started talking. I couldn't see anything wrong in it myself—seemed suitable to me. She wasn't one of your horn-rimmed-spectacles librarians; she was pretty as you could ask for, and with lots of gumption, too. But the way people talked, you'd have thought Louella was the love of his life and he was bound to spend the rest of it mourning over her memory. That's the way towns are.

I stood up for him all I could—I don't hold with gossip. I liked Monroe—always had—and I liked Jean Moffat. I'd seen her stand up to her Board of Trustees on one or two things, and I'd seen how she handled the children and the young folks in the library. And she certainly did wonders for Monroe. He'd always been the serious kind; but now he began to smarten up and take an interest in the kind of neckties he bought. And Jean began to look sort of happy and proprietary. I was expecting their engagement to be announced and was all ready to have a little talk with Ed Parsons about raising his salary—I'm a director of the bank—when the thing happened.

I'd been down with influenza that April—got it one of those raw, sunshiny days that fool you. Took me almost a month to get on my feet again, and when I did manage to get downtown and set eyes on Monroe Taylor, I was shocked.

I thought at first he must have had the influenza too. Then I saw it wasn't that. He looked just the way he always had, sober and overworked—but there was something more. Now and then he'd have a look you don't want to see on anybody's face—the look of someone who's being pushed to the wall and knows it and can't help it. I tried to jolly him along and told him to come around and see us—and bring Jean, too, if he felt like it. And he thanked me very politely, but you could see he wasn't listening. It wasn't till a couple of weeks afterward that he came.

Meanwhile I'd seen Jean Moffat, and there was something wrong there. She looked cool and fresh, as she always did, but the warmth had gone out of her smile. Well, that wasn't the way it should be, and I felt sorry. But I put it down to an ordinary kind of lover's quarrel. I did for a fact.

I work nights at the office sometimes; it's quieter then. And this was one of the first fine May nights—kind of night when you think you can smell lilacs even though you don't. I had the window open, and it was after nine o'clock. Then I heard the steps coming up the stairs. You can tell when it's a person in trouble when you've lived as long as I have. It was Monroe Taylor, and I knew the minute I saw him that the trouble was a deep one. He sat down when I told him to, but he had his hat in his hands, and he kept twisting it.

"Judge," he said finally, "might I consult you about a personal matter—very personal?"

"That's what I'm here for, Monroe," I said. "Though I'd better say first that if it's anything about the bank—"

"It isn't," he said wearily. "Though I don't blame you for thinking it. Oh, God, if only it were the bank!" he said. "If I'd only stolen money and could go to jail for it—why, I'd be as happy as a clam."

Well, I thought that was just one of those high-flown speeches that younger folks make, and I'd better straighten him out.

"Now, Monroe," I said, "if it's this town talk that's worrying you—well, I was born here, and I've lived here all my life. And it's a good town. But there's a few ladies that would gossip in the New Jerusalem—yes, even with wings on. It oughtn't to worry you, and it oughtn't to worry Jean Moffat. If you've had a quarrel, make it up. And let them go hang."

"Don't you suppose I want to?" he said, and his voice was hoarse. "But I can't, Judge Marshall. I just can't. I don't dare to—not for Jean's sake. You don't understand. It's Louella."

"Louella?" I said, kind of taken aback.

"Yes," he said. "You see, I've seen her. Since. I—I see her about every week now, just the way I used to. I go up to the house and call, and she's there. Sometimes she's sewing. Sometimes. . . . Oh, well, you wouldn't believe me, and what's the use?" He stood up. "I guess I'll be going, Judge, and thank you for listening. But it's no use telling me to go and see Doc Robinson. I know what he'd think about it, and I don't care to do that. If I have to go to State Asylum, I'll go on my own feet."

"Sit down, Monroe," I said. "Sit down."

And I got the bottle out from behind the Statutes of the Commonwealth and poured him a hooker. I made it a stiff one, too, for I thought the case justified it. But even so he was jumpy as a scared horse, and it took time to get him settled and the story out of him.

Well, of course I didn't believe him, even at that. But there was something about the way he told it, sitting there in my office, with his gray hat twisted in his fingers and the warm May air floating in. You see, he wasn't the kind of person a thing like that ought to happen to. Just a nice, steady, likeable citizen—in his bank teller's clothes, talking about something that couldn't possibly have happened, with the sweat pouring down his face.

It had started that same day that I got the influenza—late afternoon of that day, with that queer false spring in the air. He was going to have supper with the Moffats and take Jean to the movies. But as he went past the Weedon house he thought of Louella Weedon, which was only natural. She'd given him his start in the town, in a way, and, now he was in love with Jean, he felt grateful to her. He remembered little things she'd done and little things she'd said. Now I'm not excusing him at all. It would flatter almost any man to have a woman like that take an interest in him. And he'd say the pleasant little things that a man would be apt to say under such circumstances. Especially a stranger. He wouldn't even think of Louella as an old maid, necessarily—he'd treat her like a human being. I told you I wasn't excusing him. But you see the way it could be.

All the same, when he thought of Louella, he thought of her with sadness but with a sort of relief. For he had a suspicion that it mightn't have been so easy, bringing Jean around to call on her. And yet he'd have had to do it. It was just about then that he noticed the Weedon gate wasn't shut.

Well, he thought the caretaker must have forgotten, so he stopped for a minute to latch it. And as he did so, he saw a curtain move inside the house. He said he was sure of that. He said it gave him a queer feeling—that and the smell of false spring you could feel in the dusk. He said that's why he went in. But he said the queerest thing was that he knew the door would open the minute he put his hand on the knob.

He used to call on Louella in the back parlor—nobody ever sat in the front one. He said, once he was inside the house, he felt he had to go there. And he went, and there she was.

He said it wasn't till he left the house that he began to realize what had happened to him. And then he groaned aloud.

He was late at the Moffats', and Jean didn't like that very well. Then they went to the pictures together, and it was a good picture—but he just couldn't keep track of it. He'd keep seeing Louella, the way she'd been

in the back parlor, and hearing her voice instead of the voices on the screen. She'd had her sewing basket on the little table in front of her, just as usual, but she'd been different. And he knew what the difference was. He knew it now that he was in love with Jean.

Well, Jean practically had to nudge him when the picture was over and the lights came on; he was still looking straight ahead and wondering if he was damned or crazy or both. Oh, he explained to her, of course. About having a headache and working late at the bank. You know how well most men explain when they're put to it. It left a sort of coolness between them. And when he went back to where he boarded, there wasn't a more miserable young man in the state. He didn't go back past the Weedon house—he went the long way. But he knew he'd have to go back there, at his regular time. Louella had let him know that, and she'd be expecting him. Well, ever since then it had been going on.

I tried to get him to explain why, granting it was true, he couldn't break loose, and then he got sort of incoherent. He kept saying nobody could understand who hadn't been through it; or know what it was like to be tormented by two women at the same time, and one of them not of this earth. Well, I guess that would be hard to explain—but I knew the Weedon stubbornness. When they reached for anything, they closed all five fingers down on it. I'm not saying whether I believe the boy or not, but when I finally got him quieted, I felt sorry for him. I really did.

Next morning I went around to see Ettie Rodgers. I've know her a long time; and if she's got notions, she's got sharp eyes, too. We talked along for a while, and finally I asked her if she'd noticed anything queer at the Weedon house.

"Nothing except Louella Weedon," she said, with a snap of her handbag. She looked at me straight. "I told you at the cemetery she mightn't stay put," she said. "Well, she hain't."

I laughed, of course.

"Laugh all you like," she said. "I'm her next-door neighbor, and I know what my eyes see and my ears hear. And I've seen Louella Weedon, just as bold as brass, walking up and down in her garden in the cool of the evening. She's got a new hairdo, too, and a bare-necked dress. Bare-necked and bare-armed," she said with a sniff. "Heathen, I call it. Well, I believe in keeping yourself to yourself. But if she ever comes over here, I mean to give her a piece of my mind." She looked at me sharper than

ever. "Monroe Taylor ought to have more sense," she said. "Or somebody ought to."

Well, I knew by that the fat was in the fire; for, in spite of what Ettie said, she'd keep a thing to herself only so long. I didn't want a lot of smart city reporters in town making wisecracks about a ghost hunt and telephoning fool stories all over the Union. It isn't fitting or respectable. And from the way Monroe Taylor looked, he was just about on the ragged edge. So I got the key of the house—I'm executor under the will—and I went around.

Of course I didn't need the key, for when I turned the knob, the door was unlocked, just as Monroe had said. I held it in my hand for a minute, making a mental note to blow up the caretaker about leaving it that way. Then I opened the door and went in.

There's always something creaky and strange about a house that's been shut up, no matter how you dust it. The light isn't quite the same, and the rooms are dim. Yes, even if it's your own house, that's true. I knew the Weedon house almost as well as my own. And the minute I got inside the door I began wishing I'd come in the morning instead of late afternoon.

I wasn't afraid of Louella—naturally not. I went straight to the back parlor and looked around. And, if the back of my neck prickled, that might happen to anybody.

There wasn't anything peculiar in the back parlor. The vases that Captain Abijah brought back from China stood on the mantelpiece just where they'd always stood. And there was the high china cupboard, built in the wall. It all looked the way I remembered it. There was the sewing basket on the table with some half-finished work in it—but naturally that would be there. Everything had been left the way it was when Louella died. I was going to look at the sewing, and then I decided not to. If I had, I'd have started wondering if any of the stitches were new, and that would have bothered me.

There weren't any flowers around, but there was a smell like strawberry shrub. Louella had always been very fond of that scent. I tried to remember when we first got strawberry shrub—I thought it was early for it. But I couldn't remember.

Then I did a pretty foolish thing; I don't like to think of it yet. I stood there in the tidy back parlor of that empty house, and said, "Louella—

Louella Weedon." As if I was calling her. I said it low at first, then I said it quite loud.

There wasn't any answer right away; just the scuttlings and creakings of an empty house. But after a while I got an answer.

It wasn't what I expected; it wasn't words or sorrow, it was just a laugh. I knew Louella's laugh—it was dry and sharp. This one wasn't. It was full and rich, the deep laugh of an exultant woman. But it was Louella's all the same. You can't mistake a person's voice when you've known it. And this was mocking past description—mocking and exultant. But it was Louella's still.

I stood hearing it, while the hairs at the back of my neck prickled. And then I got out. Yes, I even locked the door behind me, though I knew that wasn't any use. If there'd been any sense in staying, I'd have stayed. But there wasn't, and I knew what I'd better do.

You don't take that kind of thing to a brand-new minister—I don't care how many degrees from Union Theological he's got. But Minister Henderson was still living up at North Center. He'd been with us forty years before he retired, and I felt he was the right man.

Well, I felt like a fool on my way up there, but when I did explain it to him, he took it very calm. Come to think of it, there can't be much you could surprise a minister with when he's been forty years in a town. And of course there was plenty of authority for similar cases. He showed me one out of *Wonders of the Invisible World*. That was in Cotton Mather's time, but New England's still New England.

Then we got on to the more practical side of the matter. There were various things you could do and wear and say, according to tradition. But he said this was a neighborhood matter, and he meant to treat it as such. And if there was a spirit to be dealt with and exorcised, he was still a minister of God, and he'd do his part. I wouldn't have felt right if he'd said anything else.

He agreed that Monroe Taylor would have to be there. But it was me that insisted on Ed Parsons, too. I knew he was bound to hear about it sooner or later, being president of the bank, and I didn't want what he heard to work against Monroe. Ed's a hard-headed man, and what he doesn't see himself he doesn't believe in. So I wanted him to see.

All the same, I felt queer when I let them into the Weedon house that particular night. There was Monroe Taylor, white as a candle, and Ed Parsons, grumpy and grumbling, and Minister Henderson, old and

white-haired and calm. I took them into the back parlor and lit the lamp. The curtains were drawn—I'd attended to that—and you couldn't see a thing from outside. Everything was just as I'd seen it, and the smell of the strawberry shrub was very sweet and piercing. I could see Ed Parsons notice that and not admit it. Well, we had a little prayer. And then I felt queerer than ever. For we sat there quite a while, listening to the rustlings and the creakings, and nothing happened at all.

Finally Monroe Taylor broke the silence. "It's no use," he said in a low, strained voice. "It's only for me, you know. If you'll all go away, she'll come. And I guess that's right. She'll come, and we'll talk the way we used to. I didn't know she counted so much on it. Oh, God, my punishment is more than I can bear!"

I saw Ed Parsons slue his eyes on him at that, and I wouldn't have given much for Monroe's chances at the bank. But just then we heard the laugh.

It came, low and rich, low and mocking—the laugh of an exultant woman. You couldn't tell just where it came from—that was the queer part. But it pulled Monroe Taylor out of his chair as if he'd been drawn by cords.

"She's calling," he said. "I'd better go to her." And his eyes were like a sleepwalker's.

But Minister Henderson laid a hand on his arm. "No, my son," he said. He raised his voice only a little, but it seemed to fill the house. "Louella Weedon," he said, "I am speaking to you. Why do you torment this young man?"

"Monkeyshines," grumbled Ed Parsons; but he grumbled it under his breath, for the minister was going on.

"I am speaking to you as a minister of God," he said. "And if you are evil, I bid you begone to your own place. But if you are otherwise, I bid you manifest yourself and say why you torment us."

"Monkeyshines," said Ed Parsons again, but louder, as if he wanted to hear the sound of his own voice. And then he jumped and sat still.

For there was another laugh, and after it a voice, very clear and distinct and recognizable. And the voice said: "Monkeyshines, Ed Parsons? That's all you know."

No, I don't expect you to believe it. Looking back, I hardly believe it myself. I remember staring at the glass lampshade—it had a kind of pat-

tern of leaves and flowers on it—and wishing that anything would happen to make the voice go away. But it was Ed Parsons who spoke.

"That's Louella Weedon's voice," he said. "And she's dead, so it can't be. And whatever she wants, 'tain't my business. So I guess I'll go home."

He made a motion to move, but he didn't, for the laugh came again, low and vibrant, and we all sat as still as mice. I'd never thought Ed Parsons was a coward and I don't think I'm one. But, when the laugh came the third time, I saw his hand begin to shake, till he stuck it in his pocket. The smell of the strawberry shrub was very strong now—stronger than I'd ever smelt it.

"Louella Weedon," said the minister, patiently, "I charge you by the dreadful day when all secrets shall be unlocked—"

But, right then, I put my oar in. I didn't want to, but it came over me, all of a sudden, that things weren't to be done that way—at least not yet.

"Excuse me, Minister Henderson," I said. "But—well, I'm an old friend of the family's and maybe if I said a word." I didn't raise my head any—I just kept looking at the lampshade, but all the same, I knew there was something in the room.

"You see, it's this way, Louella," I said. "We aim to be reasonable and we don't mean to interfere in what's not our business. But, all the same—well, to put it plainly, can't you let the boy go?"

There wasn't any answer to that, just the echo of my own voice, so I tried again.

"All right," I said. "I won't even mention Monroe here. But, as I figure it, these things happen when a spirit wants something done that hasn't been done on earth. Or so they say. So, if you'd just tell us, Louella, what you want and how we could fix it—well, after all, we're your neighbors—" and I stopped, for I thought I'd made my point.

Then the laugh began and, with the laugh, the voice.

"Want?" it said. "Why, what more could I want? I'm back in my house where I always lived—I walk in my garden, evenings—I don't even have to go to the post office to know the town gossip. And I've a fine handsome young man to call on me once a week and hand me my sewing basket. What more could I want—and me a New England woman? What more could Louella Weedon want out of life and death?"

I didn't dare look around but I heard Ed Parsons give a sort of reproving "Tch-tch" between his teeth. And the voice went on, very still and clear.

"Don't cross me, Ed Parsons," it said. "Do you want me to tell them what you keep in the second drawer of your desk at the bank—the one with the special lock?"

"Oh God, no!" said Ed Parsons, quite loud, and the red came up to his ears.

"Then don't cross me," said the voice. "And you, Robert Henderson, minister of God. Shall I go back fifty years in the past and tell these men, who sat under you, what was in that past?"

"My child," said the minister, tranquilly, "if there was sin in my youth, it is between my God and me, now. You cannot make it bitterer in the mouth nor the repentance more anguished. So speak if you will."

"No," said the voice. "I've heard tales enough in this village—tales enough. And, as for you, Cy Marshall, well, you always were a meddling old busybody and you ain't changed a mite," said the voice, with venom. "So you know what I think of you all."

I kept on looking at the lampshade, but I heard the sob in Monroe Taylor's throat. Then the minister spoke.

"If you are an unclean spirit," he said steadily, "I charge you, by the words of the Gospel, to begone to your own place. But, if you are otherwise—"

He had risen now, and his hand was lifted. They talk about the spirit of God being in a man. I guess it was in him, then. For after a long moment, the voice came again, and it wasn't rich or mocking but low and sort of pitiful.

"I am not an unclean spirit," it said. "But I am perplexed and bound. I wanted so much. I wanted so much to be gay—and I never could be. I bought the clothes to be gay—and I never wore them. I wanted love and warm things. Is it wrong to have wanted them?"

"No, my child," said the minister, gently. "And you must forgive us all, for we did not know. But now you must have rest."

"There were so many tongues," said the voice. "All gossiping. They made an old maid out of me while I was still young. It happens a lot, I guess. It was my fault, too. I used to cut pictures out of the papers—pictures of ladies in fine dresses. I always wanted a gold dress—I always wanted gold slippers. Well, folks would have thought I was crazy. But I got them all the same and hid them in the closet. Because they meant everything I'd missed. If I'd worn them, once, I'd feel different. But nobody knows about them. So what's a woman to do?"

"My child," said the minister and hesitated, "my child—"

And then there was another voice in the room. We hadn't heard the door open—we hadn't heard anyone come in. But Jean Moffat was there and her eyes were blazing. She must have been there for longer than we knew.

"Oh, you big, stupid lumps of men!" she said. "Can't you see what's keeping her restless—can't you see what she wants? As if any woman wouldn't mind! Where's the key to that closet, Judge Marshall?"

"Jean!" said Monroe Taylor, hoarsely, but she didn't hear him. She was listening for a moment to a whisper we couldn't hear—the whisper of a woman, talking to another woman, about things man can't understand.

I didn't know there was a key in the potpourri bowl, any more than I knew that high china cupboard was just a false front and there was a closet behind it. But Jean Moffat seemed to know. I always said she had gumption.

I don't know what the rest of us expected to see when she opened that closet. Most anything, I guess. But it was just dresses. All kinds of them, hung on hangers. And some were the latest style and some went back twenty years. But there was one thing about them all. They came from New York and Paris—places like that. And each one would have done for a duchess and not one had ever been worn.

Jean Moffat was sort of murmuring over them and talking to them—not cool and efficient, now, but a woman, sharing another woman's trouble.

"Oh, so pretty—" she said. "So pretty— Of course you couldn't leave them behind, dear—of course you had to come back and wear them. Because you never had in your lifetime. So that's all right. But now we know about it and you can rest."

"Rest," said another voice that was like an echo and, just for a minute, there seemed to be another woman in the room, standing right beside Jean Moffat and smiling at her. Of course, it was a trick of the light. But I'd have sworn that I saw Louella Weedon—only not the one I knew, not the one that was bound to be an old maid. This one was gay and splendid, black-haired and bare-armed, in a dress that glittered in the lamplight. There were sparkling things on her shoes and a sparkling thing in her hair.

Then she wasn't there any more, and there was just Jean Moffat, crying queer tears as she smoothed the dresses with her hands.

Well, that was all there was to it, as far as I know. Though we had a little discussion about the dresses, afterwards. Ed Parsons was all for burning them, but Jean Moffat knew better and she got her way. Some of them went to folks that could use them—young concert-singers and such that have to make an appearance without much money. And others went to the museum. Jean Moffat figured Louella would be satisfied with that, and she seems to have been. At least the summer people who bought the house haven't complained. They think the china closet's quaint. Well, I'm not telling.

Yes, I guess Louella must be satisfied. That was quite a while ago, of course—the Taylor children must be five and three. They're nice children and their father's fleshed up a bit—lost his looks, some folks think, but Jean doesn't seem to mind. Just a decent small-town couple—you'd never know what they'd been through, to look at them. Well, I'd be liable to doubt it myself. Except for one thing.

You see, there was a kind of little notebook in the closet with the dresses. Where Louella put down where she got them and what she paid—she would, of course, and, I must say, some of the prices turned my hair. But there was one dress we couldn't find—the gold one. Well, I think I know where that is—and so does Jean Taylor. But I say, let the departed rest. After all, Louella bought it and paid for it. And, if she wants it with her, that's her business.

OF ELUTROPIA

Elutropia is a Gemme, in colour greene, or grassie, in part coloured and bespotted with Purple speckes and bloud coloured vaines. This is a marvellous Jugler, for it wil cause things object to be presented to our eies as it listeth. It being put into a Basan of water chaungeth to a mans eiesight the Sunne his beames, and giveth them a contrarie colour. Being also mooved and beaten in the ayre, maketh to appeare a bloudie Sunne, and darkeneth the ayre in maner of an Eclipse: and thefore it is called Elutropia as you would say, the Sunne his enimie. There is of this name also a certain Herbe which Enchaunters and Witches have oftentimes used, and doe use, as also that above said, whereby they have mocked and deluded many, which by meanes and working of enchauntment, have so dazeled the beholders eies, that they have gone by them invisibly.

—JOHN MAPLET

The insects, some pessimists tell us, are destined to rule the world. Lots of farmers and most amateur gardeners would tend to agree. For ever since the earliest savage turned from hunting to scratching the soil with a stick the voracity and omnipresence of bugs has been manifest. Mrs. Harris foresees the day when insects will force the attention of mankind upon themselves as the last implacable enemy left in Nature's ranks.

The Miracle of the Lily

by Clare Winger Harris

S I

INCE THE comparatively recent résumé of the ancient order of agriculture I, Nathano, have been asked to set down the extraordinary events of the past two thousand years, at the beginning of which time the supremacy of man, chief of the mammals, threatened to come to an untimely end.

Ever since the dawn of life upon this globe, life which it seemed had crept from the slime of the sea, only two great types had been the rulers; the reptiles and the mammals. The former held undisputed sway for eons, but gave way eventually before the smaller, but intellectually superior mammals. Man himself, the supreme example of the ability of life to govern and control inanimate matter, was master of the world with apparently none to dispute his right. Yet, so blinded was he with pride over the continued exercise of his power on earth over other lower types of mammals and the nearly extinct reptiles, that he failed to notice the slow but steady rise of another branch of life, different from his own; smaller, it is true, but no smaller than he had been in comparison with the mighty reptilian monsters that roamed the swamps in Mesozoic times.

These new enemies of man, though seldom attacking him personally, threatened his downfall by destroying his chief means of sustenance, so

that by the close of the twentieth century, strange and daring projects were laid before the various governments of the world with an idea of fighting man's insect enemies to the finish. These pests were growing in size, multiplying so rapidly and destroying so much vegetation, that eventually no plants would be left to sustain human life. Humanity suddenly woke to the realization that it might suffer the fate of the nearly extinct reptiles. Would mankind be able to prevent the encroachment of the insects? And at last man *knew* that unless drastic measures were taken *at once*, a third great class of life was on the brink of terrestrial sovereignty.

Of course no great changes in development come suddenly. Slow evolutionary progress had brought us up to the point, where, with the application of outside pressure, we were ready to handle a situation that, a century before, would have overwhelmed us.

I reproduce here in part a lecture delivered by a great American scientist, a talk which, sent by radio throughout the world, changed the destiny of mankind: but whether for good or for evil I will leave you to judge at the conclusion of this story.

"Only in comparatively recent times has man succeeded in conquering natural enemies; flood, storm, inclemency of climate, distance, and now we face an encroaching menace to the whole of humanity. Have we learned more and more of truth and of the laws that control matter only to succumb to the first real danger that threatens us with extermination? Surely, no matter what the cost, you will rally to the solution of our problem, and I believe, friends, that I have discovered the answer to the enigma.

"I know that many of you, like my friend Professor Fair, will believe my ideas too extreme, but I am convinced that unless you are willing to put behind you those notions which are old and not utilitarian, you cannot hope to cope with the present situation.

"Already, in the past few decades, you have realized the utter futility of encumbering yourselves with superfluous possessions that had no useful virtue, but which, for various sentimental reasons, you continue to hoard, thus lessening the degree of your life's efficiency by using for it time and attention that should have been applied to the practical work of life's accomplishments. You have given these things up slowly, but I am now going to ask you to relinquish the rest of them *quickly*; every-

thing that interferes in any way with the immediate disposal of our enemies, the insects."

At this point, it seems that my worthy ancestor, Professor Fair, objected to the scientist's words, asserting that efficiency at the expense of some of the sentimental virtues was undesirable and not conducive to happiness, the real goal of man. The scientist, in his turn, argued that happiness was available only through a perfect adaptability to one's environment, and that efficiency *sans* love, mercy and the softer sentiments was the short cut to human bliss.

It took a number of years for the scientist to put over his scheme of salvation, but in the end he succeeded, not so much from the persuasiveness of his words, as because prompt action of some sort was necessary. There was not enough food to feed the people of the earth. Fruit and vegetables were becoming a thing of the past. Too much protein food in the form of meat and fish was injuring the race, and at last the people realized that, for fruits and vegetables, or their nutritive equivalent, they must turn from the field to the laboratory; from the farmer to the chemist. Synthetic food was the solution to the problem. There was no longer any use in planting and caring for food stuffs destined to become the nourishment of man's most deadly enemy.

The last planting took place in 2900, but there was no harvest, the voracious insects took every green shoot as soon as it appeared, and even trees, that had previously withstood the attacks of the huge insects, were by this time, stripped of every vestige of greenery.

The vegetable world suddenly ceased to exist. Over the barren plains, which had been gradually filling with vast cities, man-made fires brought devastation to every living bit of greenery, so that in all the world there was no food for the insect pests.

II

Extract from the diary of Delfair, a descendant of Professor Fair, who had opposed the daring scientist.

From the borders of the great state-city of Iowa, I was witness to the passing of one of the great kingdoms of earth—the vegetable, and I can not find words to express the grief that overwhelms me as I write of its demise, for I loved all growing things. Many of us realized that Earth

was no longer beautiful; but if beauty meant death; better life in the sterility of the metropolis.

The viciousness of the thwarted insects was a menace that we had foreseen and yet failed to take into adequate account. On the city-state borderland, life is constantly imperiled by the attacks of well organized bodies of our dreaded foe.

(Note: The organization that now exists among the ants, bees and other insects, testifies to the possibility of the development of military tactics among them in the centuries to come.)

Robbed of their source of food, they have become emboldened to such an extent that they will take any risks to carry human beings away for food, and after one of their well organized raids, the toll of human life is appalling.

But the great chemical laboratories where our synthetic food is made, and our oxygen plants, we thought were impregnable to their attacks. In that we were mistaken.

Let me say briefly that since the destruction of all vegetation which furnished a part of the oxygen essential to human life, it became necessary to manufacture this gas artificially for general diffusion through the atmosphere.

I was flying to my work, which is in Oxygen Plant No. 21, when I noticed a peculiar thing on upper speedway near Food Plant No. 3,439. Although it was night, the various levels of the state-city were illuminated as brightly as by day. A pleasure vehicle was going with prodigious speed westward. I looked after it in amazement. It was unquestionably the car of Eric, my co-worker at Oxygen Plant No. 21. I recognized the gay color of its body, but to verify my suspicion beyond the question of a doubt, I turned my volplane in pursuit and made out the familiar license number. What was Eric doing away from the plant before I had arrived to relieve him from duty?

In hot pursuit, I sped above the car to the very border of the state-city, wondering what unheard of errand took him to the land of the enemy, for the car came to a sudden stop at the edge of what had once been an agricultural area. Miles ahead of me stretched an enormous expanse of black sterility; at my back was the teeming metropolis, five levels high—if one counted the hangar-level, which did not cover the residence sections.

I had not long to wait, for almost immediately my friend appeared.

What a sight he presented to my incredulous gaze! He was literally covered from head to foot with the two-inch ants, that next to the beetles, had proved the greatest menace in their attacks upon humanity. With wild incoherent cries he fled over the rock and stubble-burned earth.

As soon as my stunned senses permitted, I swooped down toward him to effect a rescue, but even as my plane touched the barren earth, I saw that I was too late, for he fell, borne down by the vicious attacks of his myriad foes. I knew it was useless for me to set foot upon the ground, for my fate would be that of Eric. I rose ten feet and seizing my poison-gas weapon, let its contents out upon the tiny black evil things that swarmed below. I did not bother with my mask, for I planned to rise immediately, and it was not a moment too soon. From across the wasteland, a dark cloud eclipsed the stars and I saw coming toward me a horde of flying ants interspersed with larger flying insects, all bent upon my annihilation. I now took my mask and prepared to turn more gas upon my pursuers, but alas, I had used every atom of it in my attack upon the non-flying ants! I had no recourse but flight, and to this I immediately resorted, knowing that I could outdistance my pursuers.

When I could no longer see them, I removed my gas mask. A suffocating sensation seized me. I could not breathe! How high had I flown in my endeavor to escape the flying ants? I leaned over the side of my plane expecting to see the city far, far below me. What was my utter amazement when I discovered that I was scarcely a thousand feet high! It was not altitude that was depriving me of the life-giving oxygen.

A drop of three hundred feet showed me inert specks of humanity lying about the streets. Then I knew; *the oxygen plant was not in operation!* In another minute I had on my oxygen mask, which was attached to a small portable tank for emergency use, and I rushed for the vicinity of the plant. There I witnessed the first signs of life. Men equipped with oxygen masks, were trying to force entrance into the locked building. Being an employee, I possessed knowledge of the combination of the great lock, and I opened the door, only to be greeted by a swarm of ants that commenced a concerted attack upon us.

The floor seemed to be covered with a moving black rug, the corner nearest the door appearing to unravel as we entered, and it was but a few seconds before we were covered with the clinging, biting creatures, who fought with a supernatural energy born of despair. Two very active ants succeeded in getting under my helmet. The bite of their sharp

mandibles and the effect of their poisonous formic acid became intolerable. Did I dare remove my mask while the air about me was foul with the gas discharged from the weapons of my allies? While I felt the attacks elsewhere upon my body gradually diminishing as the insects succumbed to the deadly fumes, the two upon my face waxed more vicious under the protection of my mask. One at each eye, they were trying to blind me. The pain was unbearable. Better the suffocating death-gas than the torture of lacerated eyes! Frantically I removed the head-gear and tore at the shiny black fiends. Strange to tell, I discovered that I could breathe near the vicinity of the great oxygen tanks, where enough oxygen lingered to support life at least temporarily. The two vicious insects, no longer protected by my gas-mask, scurried from me like rats from a sinking ship and disappeared behind the oxygen tanks.

This attack of our enemies, though unsuccessful on their part, was dire in its significance, for it had shown more cunning and ingenuity than anything that had ever preceded it. Heretofore, their onslaughts had been confined to direct attacks upon us personally or upon the synthetic-food laboratories, but in this last raid they had shown an amazing cleverness that portended future disaster, unless they were checked at once. It was obvious they had ingeniously planned to smother us by the suspension of work at the oxygen plant, knowing that they themselves could exist in an atmosphere containing a greater percentage of carbon-dioxide. Their scheme, then, was to raid our laboratories for food.

III

A Continuation of Delfair's Account

Although it was evident that the cessation of all plant-life spelled inevitable doom for the insect inhabitants of Earth, their extermination did not follow as rapidly as one might have supposed. There were years of internecine warfare. The insects continued to thrive, though in decreasing numbers, upon stolen laboratory foods, bodies of human beings and finally upon each other; at first capturing enemy species and at last even resorting to cannibalistic procedure. Their rapacity grew in inverse proportion to their waning numbers, until the meeting of even an isolated insect might mean death, unless one were equipped with poison gas and prepared to use it upon a second's notice.

I am an old man now, though I have not yet lived quite two centuries,

but I am happy in the knowledge that I have lived to see the last living insect which was held in captivity. It was an excellent specimen of the stag-beetle (*Lucanus*) and the years have testified that it was the sole survivor of a form of life that might have succeeded man upon this planet. This beetle was caught weeks after we had previously seen what was supposed to be the last living thing upon the globe, barring man and the sea-life. Untiring search for years has failed to reveal any more insects, so that at last man rests secure in the knowledge that he is monarch of all he surveys.

I have heard that long, long ago man used to gaze with a fearful fascination upon the reptilian creatures which he displaced, and just so did he view this lone specimen of a type of life that might have covered the face of the earth, but for man's ingenuity.

It was this unholy lure that drew me one day to view the captive beetle in his cage in district 404 at Universapolis. I was amazed at the size of the creature, for it looked larger than when I had seen it by television, but I reasoned that upon that occasion there had been no object near with which to compare its size. True, the broadcaster had announced its dimensions, but the statistics concretely given had failed to register a perfect realization of its prodigious proportions.

As I approached the cage, the creature was lying with its dorsal covering toward me and I judged it measured fourteen inches from one extremity to the other. Its smooth horny sheath gleamed in the bright artificial light. (It was confined on the third level.) As I stood there, mentally conjuring a picture of a world overrun with billions of such creatures as the one before me, the keeper approached the cage with a meal-portion of synthetic food. Although the food has no odor, the beetle sensed the man's approach, for it rose on its jointed legs and came toward us, its horn-like prongs moving threateningly; then apparently remembering its confinement, and the impotency of an attack, it subsided and quickly ate the food which had been placed within its prison.

The food consumed, it lifted itself to its hind legs, partially supported by a box, and turned its great eyes upon me. I have never been regarded with such utter malevolence before. The detestation was almost tangible and I shuddered involuntarily. As plainly as if he spoke, I knew that *Lucanus* was perfectly cognizant of the situation and in his gaze I read the concentrated hate of an entire defeated race.

I had no desire to gloat over his misfortune, rather a great pity toward

him welled up within me. I pictured myself alone, the last of my kind, held up for ridicule before the swarming hordes of insects who had conquered my people, and I knew that life would no longer be worth the living.

Whether he sensed my pity or not I do not know, but he continued to survey me with unmitigated rage, as if he would convey to me the information that his was an implacable hatred that would outlast eternity.

Not long after this he died, and a world long since intolerant of ceremony, surprised itself by interring the beetle's remains in a golden casket, accompanied by much pomp and splendor.

I have lived many long years since that memorable event, and undoubtedly my days here are numbered, but I can pass on happily, convinced that in this sphere man's conquest of his environment is supreme.

IV

In a direct line of descent from Professor Fair and Delfair, the author of the preceding chapter, comes Thanor whose journal is given in this chapter.

Am I a true product of the year 2928? Sometimes I am convinced that I am hopelessly old-fashioned, an anachronism, that should have existed a thousand years ago. In no other way can I account for the dissatisfaction I feel in a world where efficiency has at last reached a maximum.

I am told that I spring from a line of ancestors who were not readily acclimated to changing conditions. I love beauty, yet I see none of it here. There are many who think our lofty buildings that tower two and three thousand feet into the air are beautiful, but while they are architectural splendors, they do not represent the kind of loveliness I crave. Only when I visit the sea do I feel any satisfaction for a certain yearning in my soul. The ocean alone shows the handiwork of God. The land bears evidence only of man.

As I read back through the diaries of my sentimental ancestors I find occasional glowing descriptions of the world that was; the world before the insects menaced human existence. Trees, plants and flowers brought delight into the lives of people as they wandered among them in vast open spaces, I am told, where the earth was soft beneath the feet, and flying creatures, called birds, sang among the greenery. True, I learn that many people had not enough to eat, and that uncontrollable passions

governed them, but I do believe it must have been more interesting than this methodical, unemotional existence. I can not understand why many people were poor, for I am told that Nature as manifested in the vegetable kingdom was very prolific; so much so that year after year quantities of food rotted on the ground. The fault, I find by my reading, was not with Nature but with man's economic system which is now perfect, though this perfection really brings few of us happiness, I think.

Now there is no waste, all is converted into food. Long ago man learned how to reduce all matter to its constituent elements, of which there are nearly a hundred in number, and from them to rebuild compounds for food. The old axiom that nothing is created or destroyed, but merely changed from one form to another, has stood the test of ages. Man, as the agent of God, has simply performed the miracle of transmutation himself instead of waiting for natural forces to accomplish it as in the old days.

At first humanity was horrified when it was decreed that it must relinquish its dead to the laboratory. For too many eons had man closely associated the soul and body, failing to comprehend the body as merely a material agent, through which the spirit functioned. When man knew at last of the eternal qualities of spirit, he ceased to regard the discarded body with reverential awe, and saw in it only the same molecular constituents which comprised all matter about him. He recognized only material basically the same as that of stone or metal; material to be reduced to its atomic elements and rebuilt into matter that would render service to living humanity; that portion of matter wherein spirit functions.

The drab monotony of life is appalling. Is it possible that man had reached his height a thousand years ago and should have been willing to resign Earth's sovereignty to a coming order of creatures destined to be man's worthy successor in the eons to come? It seems that life is interesting only when there is a struggle, a goal to be reached through an evolutionary process. Once the goal is attained, all progress ceases. The huge reptiles of preglacial ages rose to supremacy by virtue of their great size, and yet was it not the excessive bulk of those creatures that finally wiped them out of existence? Nature, it seems, avoids extremes. She allows the fantastic to develop for awhile and then wipes the slate clean for a new order of development. Is it not conceivable that man could destroy himself through excessive development of his nervous system, and give place for the future evolution of a comparatively simple

form of life, such as the insects were at man's height of development? This, it seems to me, was the great plan; a scheme with which man dared to interfere and for which he is now paying by the boredom of existence.

The earth's population is decreasing so rapidly, that I fear another thousand years will see a lifeless planet hurtling through space. It seems to me that only a miracle will save us now.

V

The Original Writer, Nathano, Resumes the Narrative

My ancestor, Thanor, of ten centuries ago, according to the records he gave to my great-grandfather, seems to voice the general despair of humanity which, bad enough in his times, has reached the *nth* power in my day. A soulless world is gradually dying from self-inflicted boredom.

As I have ascertained from the perusal of the journals of my forebears, even antedating the extermination of the insects, I come of a stock that clings with sentimental tenacity to the things that made life worth while in the old days. If the world at large knew of my emotional musings concerning past ages, it would scarcely tolerate me, but surrounded by my thought-insulator, I often indulge in what fancies I will, and such meditation, coupled with a love for a few ancient relics from the past, have led me to a most amazing discovery.

Several months ago I found among my family relics a golden receptacle two feet long, one and a half in width and one in depth, which I found, upon opening, to contain many tiny square compartments, each filled with minute objects of slightly varying size, texture and color.

"Not sand!" I exclaimed as I closely examined the little particles of matter.

Food? After eating some, I was convinced that their nutritive value was small in comparison with a similar quantity of the products of our laboratories. What were the mysterious objects?

Just as I was about to close the lid again, convinced that I had one over-sentimental ancestor, whose gift to posterity was absolutely useless, my pocket-radio buzzed and the voice of my friend, Stentor, the inter-planetary broadcaster, issued from the tiny instrument.

"If you're going to be home this afternoon," said Stentor, "I'll skate over. I have some interesting news."

I consented, for I thought I would share my "find" with this friend

whom I loved above all others, but before he arrived I had again hidden my golden chest, for I had decided to await the development of events before sharing its mysterious secret with another. It was well that I did this for Stentor was so filled with the importance of his own news that he could have given me little attention at first.

"Well, what is your interesting news?" I asked after he was comfortably seated in my adjustable chair.

"You'd never guess," he replied with irritating leisureliness.

"Does it pertain to Mars or Venus?" I queried. "What news of our neighbor planets?"

"You may know it has nothing to do with the self-satisfied Martians," answered the broadcaster, "but the Venusians have a very serious problem confronting them. It is in connection with the same old difficulty they have had ever since interplanetary radio was developed forty years ago. You remember, that, in their second communication with us, they told us of their continual warfare on insect pests that were destroying all vegetable food? Well, last night after general broadcasting had ceased, I was surprised to hear the voice of the Venusian broadcaster. He is suggesting that we get up a scientific expedition to Venus to help the natives of his unfortunate planet solve their insect problem as we did ours. He says the Martians turn a deaf ear to their plea for help, but he expects sympathy and assistance from Earth who has so recently solved these problems for herself."

I was dumbfounded at Stentor's news.

"But the Venusians are farther advanced mechanically than we," I objected, "though they are behind us in the natural sciences. They could much more easily solve the difficulties of space-flying than we could."

"That is true," agreed Stentor, "but if we are to render them material aid in freeing their world from devastating insects, we must get to Venus. The past four decades have proved that we can not help them merely by verbal instructions."

"Now, last night," Stentor continued, with warming enthusiasm, "Wanyana, the Venusian broadcaster, informed me that scientists on Venus are developing interplanetary television. This, if successful, will prove highly beneficial in facilitating communication, and it may even do away with the necessity of interplanetary travel, which I think is centuries ahead of us yet."

"Television, though so common here on Earth and on Venus, has

seemed an impossibility across the ethereal void," I said, "but if it becomes a reality, I believe it will be the Venusians who will take the initiative, though of course they will be helpless without our friendly cooperation. In return for the mechanical instructions they have given us from time to time, I think it no more than right that we should try to give them all the help possible in freeing their world, as ours has been freed, of the insects that threaten their very existence. Personally, therefore, I hope it can be done through radio and television rather than by personal excursions."

"I believe you are right," he admitted, but I hope we can be of service to them soon. Ever since I have served in the capacity of official interplanetary broadcaster, I have liked the spirit of goodfellowship shown by the Venusians through their spokesman, Wanyana. The impression is favorable in contrast to the superciliousness of the inhabitants of Mars."

We conversed for some time, but at length he rose to take his leave. It was then I ventured to broach the subject that was uppermost in my thoughts.

"I want to show you something, Stentor," I said, going into an adjoining room for my precious box and returning shortly with it. "A relic from the days of an ancestor named Delfair, who lived at the time the last insect, a beetle, was kept in captivity. Judging from his personal account, Delfair was fully aware of the significance of the changing times in which he lived, and contrary to the majority of his contemporaries, possessed a sentimentality of soul that has proved an historical asset to future generations. Look, my friend, these he left to posterity!"

I deposited the heavy casket on a table between us and lifted the lid, revealing to Stentor the mystifying particles.

The face of Stentor was eloquent of astonishment. Not unnaturally his mind took somewhat the same route as mine had followed previously, though he added atomic-power-units to the list of possibilities. He shook his head in perplexity.

"Whatever they are, there must have been a real purpose behind their preservation," he said at last. "You say this old fellow Delfair witnessed the passing of the insects? What sort of a fellow was he? Likely to be up to any tricks?"

"Not at all," I asserted rather indignantly, "he seemed a very serious minded chap; worked in an oxygen-plant and took an active part in the last warfare between men and insects."

Suddenly Stentor stooped over and scooped up some of the minute particles into the palm of his hand—and then he uttered a maniacal shriek and flung them into the air.

"Great God, man, do you know what they are?" he screamed, shaking violently.

"No, I do not," I replied quietly, with an attempt at dignity I did not feel.

"Insect eggs!" he cried, and shuddering with terror, he made for the door.

I caught him on the threshold and pulled him forcibly back into the room.

"Now see here," I said sternly, "not a word of this to anyone. Do you understand? I will test out your theory in every possible way but I want no public interference."

At first he was obstinate, but finally yielded to threats when supplications were impotent.

"I will test them," I said, "and will endeavor to keep hatchings under absolute control, should they prove to be what you suspect."

It was time for the evening broadcasting, so he left, promising to keep our secret and leaving me regretting that I had taken another into my confidence.

VI

For days following my unfortunate experience with Stentor, I experimented upon the tiny objects that had so terrified him. I subjected them to various tests for the purpose of ascertaining whether or not they bore evidence of life, whether in egg, pupa or larva stages of development. And to all my experiments, there was but one answer. No life was manifest. Yet I was not satisfied, for chemical tests showed that they were composed of organic matter. Here was an inexplicable enigma! Many times I was on the verge of consigning the entire contents of the chest to the flames. I seemed to see in my mind's eye the world again over-ridden with insects, and that calamity due to the indiscretions of one man! My next impulse was to turn over my problem to scientists, when a suspicion of the truth dawned on me. These were seeds, the germs of plant-life, and they might grow. But alas, where? Over all the earth man has spread his artificial dominion. The state-city has been succeeded by what

could be termed the nation-city, for one great floor of concrete or rock covers the country.

I resolved to try an experiment, the far-reaching influence of which I did not at that time suspect. Beneath the lowest level of the community edifice in which I dwell, I removed, by means of a small atomic excavator, a slab of concrete large enough to admit my body. I let myself down into the hole and felt my feet resting on a soft dark substance that I knew to be dirt. I hastily filled a box of this, and after replacing the concrete slab, returned to my room, where I proceeded to plant a variety of the seeds.

Being a product of an age when practically to wish for a thing in a material sense is to have it, I experienced the greatest impatience, while waiting for any evidences of plant-life to become manifest. Daily, yes hourly, I watched the soil for signs of a type of life long since departed from the earth, and was about convinced that the germ of life could not have survived the centuries, when a tiny blade of green proved to me that a miracle, more wonderful to me than the works of man through the ages, was taking place before my eyes. This was an enigma so complex and yet so simple, that one recognized in it a direct revelation of Nature.

Daily and weekly I watched in secret the botanical miracle. It was my one obsession. I was amazed at the fascination it held for me—a man who viewed the marvels of the thirty-fourth century with unemotional complacency. It showed me that Nature is manifest in the simple things which mankind has chosen to ignore.

Then one morning, when I awoke, a white blossom displayed its immaculate beauty and sent forth its delicate fragrance into the air. The lily, a symbol of new life, resurrection! I felt within me the stirring of strange emotions I had long believed dead in the bosom of man. But the message must not be for me alone. As of old, the lily would be the symbol of life for all!

With trembling hands, I carried my precious burden to a front window where it might be witnessed by all who passed by. The first day there were few who saw it, for only rarely do men and women walk; they usually ride in speeding vehicles of one kind or another, or employ electric skates, a delightful means of locomotion, which gives the body some exercise. The fourth city level, which is reserved for skaters and pedestrians, is kept in a smooth glass-like condition. And so it was only the occasional pedestrian, walking on the outer border of the fourth level, upon which my window faced, who first carried the news of the growing

plant to the world, and it was not long before it was necessary for civic authorities to disperse the crowds that thronged to my window for a glimpse of a miracle in green and white.

When I showed my beautiful plant to Stentor, he was most profuse in his apology and came to my rooms every day to watch it unfold and develop, but the majority of people, long used to business-like efficiency, were intolerant of the sentimental emotions that swayed a small minority, and I was commanded to dispose of the lily. But a figurative seed had been planted in the human heart, a seed that could not be disposed of so readily, and this seed ripened and grew until it finally bore fruit.

VII

It is a very different picture of humanity that I paint ten years after the last entry in my diary. My new vocation is farming, but it is farming on a far more intensive scale than had been done two thousand years ago. Our crops never fail, for temperature and rainfall are regulated artificially. But we attribute our success principally to the total absence of insect pests. Our small agricultural areas dot the country like the parks of ancient days and supply us with a type of food, no more nourishing, but more appetizing than that produced in the laboratories. Truly we are living in a marvelous age! If the earth is ours completely, why may we not turn our thoughts toward the other planets in our solar-system? For the past ten or eleven years the Venusians have repeatedly urged us to come and assist them in their battle for life. I believe it is our duty to help them.

Tomorrow will be a great day for us and especially for Stentor, as the new interplanetary television is to be tested, and it is possible that for the first time in history, we shall see our neighbors in the infinity of space. Although the people of Venus were about a thousand years behind us in many respects, they have made wonderful progress with radio and television. We have been in radio communication with them for the last half century and they shared with us the joy of the establishment of our Eden. They have always been greatly interested in hearing Stentor tell the story of our subjugation of the insects that threatened to wipe us out of existence, for they have exactly that problem to solve now; judging from their reports, we fear that theirs is a losing battle. To-morrow we shall converse face to face with the Venusians! It will be an event second

in importance only to the first radio communications interchanged fifty years ago. Stentor's excitement exceeds that displayed at the time of the discovery of the seeds.

Well it is over and the experiment was a success, but alas for the revelation!

The great assembly halls all over the continent were packed with humanity eager to catch a first glimpse of the Venusians. Prior to the test, we sent our message of friendship and good will by radio, and received a reciprocal one from our inter-planetary neighbors. Alas, we were ignorant at that time! Then the television receiving apparatus was put into operation, and we sat with breathless interest, our eyes intent upon the crystal screen before us. I sat near Stentor and noted the feverish ardor with which he watched for the first glimpse of Wanyana.

At first hazy mist-like spectres seemed to glide across the screen. We knew these figures were not in correct perspective. Finally, one object gradually became more opaque, its outlines could be seen clearly. Then across that vast assemblage, as well as thousands of others throughout the world, there swept a wave of speechless horror, as its full significance burst upon mankind.

The figure that stood facing us was a huge six-legged beetle, not identical in every detail with our earthly enemies of past years, but unmistakably an insect of gigantic proportions! Of course it could not see us, for our broadcaster was not to appear until afterward, but it spoke, and we had to close our eyes to convince ourselves that it was the familiar voice of Wanyana, the leading Venusian radio broadcaster. Stentor grabbed my arm, uttered an inarticulate cry and would have fallen but for my timely support.

"Friends of Earth, as you call your world," began the object of horror, "this is a momentous occasion in the annals of the twin planets, and we are looking forward to seeing one of you, and preferably Stentor, for the first time, as you are now viewing one of us. We have listened many times, with interest, to your story of the insect pests which threatened to follow you as lords of your planet. As you have often heard us tell, we are likewise molested with insects. Our fight is a losing one, unless we can soon exterminate them."

Suddenly, the Venusian was joined by another being, a colossal ant, who bore in his fore-legs a tiny light-colored object which he handed to the beetle-announcer, who took it and held it forward for our closer

inspection. It seemed to be a tiny ape, but was so small we could not ascertain for a certainty. We were convinced, however, that it was a mammalian creature, and "insect" pest of Venus. Yet in it we recognized rudimentary man as we know him on earth!

There was no question as to the direction in which sympathies instinctively turned, yet reason told us that our pity should be given to the intelligent reigning race who had risen to its present mental attainment through eons of time. By some quirk or freak of nature, way back in the beginning, life had developed in the form of insects instead of mammals. Or (the thought was repellent) had insects in the past succeeded in displacing mammals, as they might have done here on earth?

There was no more television that night. Stentor would not appear, so disturbed was he by the sight of the Venusians, but in the morning, he talked to them by radio and explained the very natural antipathy we experienced in seeing them or in having them see us.

Now they no longer urge us to construct etherships and go to help them dispose of their "insects." I think they are afraid of us, and their very fear has aroused in mankind an unholy desire to conquer them.

I am against it. Have we not had enough of war in the past? We have subdued our own world and should be content with that, instead of seeking new worlds to conquer. But life is too easy here. I can plainly see that. Much as he may seem to dislike it, man is not happy, unless he has some enemy to overcome, some difficulty to surmount.

Alas my greatest fears for man were groundless!

A short time ago, when I went out into my field to see how my crops were faring, I found a six-pronged beetle voraciously eating. No—man will not need to go to Venus to fight "insects."

H. P. Lovecraft freely admitted that much of the inspiration for the creation of the Elder Gods mythology upon which he based his best horror tales came from the precedent set by Robert W. Chambers in that rare volume, "The King in Yellow." Here is a little known tale from that book, replete with hints of powers of evil beyond all mortal suspicion.

In the Court of the Dragon

by Robert W. Chambers

"Oh Thou who burn'st in heart for those who burn
In Hell, whose fires thyself shall feed in turn;
How long be crying,—'Mercy on them, God!'
Why, who art thou to teach and He to learn?"

IN THE Church of St. Barnabé
vespers were over; the clergy left the altar; the little choir-boys flocked across the chancel and settled in the stalls. A Suisse in rich uniform marched down the south aisle, sounding his staff at every fourth step on the stone pavement; behind him came that eloquent preacher and good man, Monseigneur C—.

My chair was near the chancel rail. I now turned toward the west end of the church. The other people between the altar and the pulpit turned too. There was a little scraping and rustling while the congregation seated itself again; the preacher mounted the pulpit stairs, and the organ voluntary ceased.

I had always found the organ playing at St. Barnabé highly interesting. Learned and scientific it was, too much so for my small knowledge, but expressing a vivid if cold intelligence. Moreover, it possessed the French quality of taste; taste reigned supreme, self-controlled, dignified and reticent.

To-day, however, from the first chord I had felt a change for the worse, a sinister change. During vespers it had been chiefly the chancel organ which supported the beautiful choir, but now and again, quite wantonly as it seemed, from the west gallery where the great organ stands, a heavy hand had struck across the church, at the serene peace of those clear voices.

It was something more than harsh and dissonant, and it betrayed no lack of skill. As it recurred again and again, it set me thinking of what my architect's books say about the custom in early times to consecrate the choir as soon as it was built, and that the nave, being finished sometimes half a century later, often did not get any blessing at all: I wondered idly if that had been the case at St. Barnabé, and whether something not usually supposed to be at home in a Christian church might have entered undetected, and taken possession of the west gallery. I had read of such things happening too, but not in works on architecture.

Then I remembered that St. Barnabé was not much more than a hundred years old, and smiled at the incongruous association of mediæval superstitions with that cheerful little piece of eighteenth century rococo.

But now vespers were over, and there should have followed a few quiet chords, fit to accompany meditation, while we waited for the sermon. Instead of that, the discord at the lower end of the church broke out with the departure of the clergy, as if now nothing could control it.

I belong to those children of an older and simpler generation, who do not love to seek for psychological subtleties in art; and I have ever refused to find in music anything more than melody and harmony, but I felt that in the labyrinth of sounds now issuing from that instrument there was something being hunted. Up and down the pedals chased him, while the manuals blared approval. Poor devil! whoever he was, there seemed small hope of escape!

My nervous annoyance changed to anger. Who was doing this? How dare he play like that in the midst of divine service? I glanced at the people near me: not one appeared to be in the least disturbed. The placid brows of the kneeling nuns, still turned toward the altar, lost none of their devout abstraction, under the pale shadow of their white head-dress. The fashionable lady beside me was looking expectantly at Monseigneur C—. For all her face betrayed, the organ might have been singing an Ave Maria.

But now, at last, the preacher had made the sign of the cross, and commanded silence. I turned to him gladly. Thus far I had not found the rest I had counted on, when I entered St. Barnabé that afternoon.

I was worn out by three nights of physical suffering and mental trouble: the last had been the worst, and it was an exhausted body, and a mind benumbed and yet acutely sensitive, which I had brought to my

favorite church for healing. For I had been reading "The King in Yellow."

"The sun ariseth; they gather themselves together and lay them down in their dens." Monseigneur C——, delivered his text in a calm voice, glancing quietly over the congregation. My eyes turned, I knew not why, toward the lower end of the church. The organist was coming from behind his pipes, and passing along the gallery on his way out, I saw him disappear by a small door that leads to some stairs which descend directly to the street. He was a slender man, and his face was as white as his coat was black. "Good riddance!" I thought, "with your wicked music! I hope your assistant will play the closing voluntary."

With a feeling of relief, with a deep, calm feeling of relief, I turned back to the mild face in the pulpit, and settled myself to listen. Here, at last, was the ease of mind I longed for.

"My children," said the preacher, "one truth the human soul finds hardest of all to learn; that it has nothing to fear. It can never be made to see that nothing can really harm it."

"Curious doctrine!" I thought, "for a Catholic priest. Let us see how he will reconcile that with the Fathers."

"Nothing can really harm the soul," he went on, in his coolest, clearest tones, "because——"

But I never heard the rest; my eye left his face, I knew not for what reason, and sought the lower end of the church. The same man was coming out from behind the organ, and was passing along the gallery *the same way*. But there had not been time for him to return, and if he had returned, I must have seen him. I felt a faint chill, and my heart sank; and yet his going and coming were no affair of mine. I looked at him: I could not look away from his black figure and his white face. When he was exactly opposite to me, he turned and sent across the church, straight into my eyes, a look of hate, intense and deadly: I had never seen any other like it; would to God I might never see it again! Then he disappeared by the same door through which I had watched him depart less than sixty seconds before.

I sat and tried to collect my thoughts. My first sensation was like that of a very young child badly hurt, when it catches its breath before crying out.

To suddenly find myself the object of such hatred was exquisitely painful: and this man was an utter stranger. Why should he hate me so?

Me, whom he had never seen before? For the moment all other sensation was merged in this one pang: even fear was subordinate to grief, and for that moment I never doubted; but in the next I began to reason, and a sense of the incongruous came to my aid.

As I have said, St. Barnabé is a modern church. It is small and well lighted; one sees all over it almost at a glance. The organ gallery gets a strong white light from a row of long windows in the clere-story, which have not even colored glass.

The pulpit being in the middle of the church, it followed that, when I was turned toward it, whatever moved at the west end could not fail to attract my eye. When the organist passed it was no wonder that I saw him: I had simply miscalculated the interval between his first and his second passing. He had come in that last time by the other side-door. As for the look which had so upset me, there had been no such thing, and I was a nervous fool.

I looked about. This was a likely place to harbor supernatural horrors! That clear-cut, reasonable face of Monseigneur C——, his collected manner, and easy, graceful gestures, were they not just a little discouraging to the notion of a gruesome mystery? I glanced above his head, and almost laughed. That flyaway lady, supporting one corner of the pulpit canopy, which looked like a fringed damask table-cloth in a high wind, at the first attempt of a basilisk to pose up there in the organ loft, she would point her gold trumpet at him, and puff him out of existence! I laughed to myself over this conceit, which, at the time, I thought very amusing, and sat and chaffed myself and everything else, from the old harpy outside the railing, who had made me pay ten centimes for my chair, before she would let me in (she was more like a basilisk, I told myself, than was my organist with the anæmic complexion): from that grim old dame, to, yes, alas! to Monseigneur C——, himself. For all devoutness had fled. I had never yet done such a thing in my life, but now I felt a desire to mock.

It was no use to sit there any longer: I must get out of doors and shake myself free from this hateful mood. I knew the rudeness I was committing, but still I rose and left the church.

A spring sun was shining on the rue St. Honoré, as I ran down the church steps. On one corner stood a barrow full of yellow jonquils, pale violets from the Riviera, dark Russian violets, and white Roman hyacinths in a golden cloud of mimosa. The street was full of Sunday pleasure

seekers. I swung my cane and laughed with the rest. Some one overtook and passed me. He never turned, but there was the same deadly malignity in his white profile that there had been in his eyes. I watched him as long as I could see him. His lithe back expressed the same menace; every step that carried him away from me seemed to bear him on some errand connected with my destruction.

I was creeping along, my feet almost refusing to move. There began to dawn in me a sense of responsibility for something long forgotten. It began to seem as if I deserved that which he threatened: it reached a long way back—a long, long way back. It had lain dormant all these years: it was there though, and presently it would rise and confront me. But I would try to escape; and I stumbled as best I could into the rue de Rivoli, across the Place de la Concorde and on to the Quai. I looked with sick eyes upon the sun, shining through the white foam of the fountain, pouring over the backs of the dusty bronze river-gods, on the far-away Arc, a structure of amethyst mist, on the countless vistas of gray stems and bare branches faintly green. Then I saw him again coming down one of the chestnut alleys of the Cours la Reine.

I left the river side, plunged blindly across to the Champs Elysées and turned toward the Arc. The setting sun was sending its rays along the green sward of the Rond-point: in the full glow he sat on a bench, children and young mothers all about him. He was nothing but a Sunday loungeur, like the others, like myself. I said the words almost aloud, and all the while I gazed on the malignant hatred of his face. But he was not looking at me. I crept past and dragged my leaden feet up the Avenue. I knew that every time I met him brought him nearer to the accomplishment of his purpose and my fate. And still I tried to save myself.

The last rays of sunset were pouring through the great Arc. I passed under it, and met him face to face. I had left him far down the Champs Elysées, and yet he came in with a stream of people who were returning from the Bois de Boulogne. He came so close that he brushed me. His slender frame felt like iron inside its loose black covering. He showed no signs of haste, nor of fatigue, nor of any human feeling. His whole being expressed but one thing: the will, and the power to work me evil.

In anguish I watched him, where he went down the broad crowded Avenue, that was all flashing with wheels and the trappings of horses, and the helmets of the Garde Republicaine.

He was soon lost to sight; then I turned and fled. Into the Bois, and far

out beyond it—I know not where I went, but after a long while as it seemed to me, night had fallen, and I found myself sitting at a table before a small café. I had wandered back into the Bois. It was hours now since I had seen him. Physical fatigue, and mental suffering had left me no more power to think or feel. I was tired, so tired! I longed to hide away in my own den. I resolved to go home. But that was a long way off.

I live in the Court of the Dragon, a narrow passage that leads from the rue de Rennes to the rue du Dragon.

It is an "Impasse"; traversable only for foot passengers. Over the entrance on the rue de Rennes is a balcony, supported by an iron dragon. Within the court tall old houses rise on either side, and close the ends that give on the two streets. Huge gates, swung back during the day into the walls of the deep archways, close this court, after midnight, and one must enter then by ringing at certain small doors on the side. The sunken pavement collects unsavory pools. Steep stairways pitch down to doors that open on the court. The ground floors are occupied by shops of second-hand dealers, and by iron workers. All day long the place rings with the clink of hammers, and the clang of metal bars.

Unsavory as it is below, there is cheerfulness, and comfort, and hard, honest work above.

Five flights up are the ateliers of architects and painters, and the hiding-places of middle-aged students like myself who want to live alone. When I first came here to live I was young, and not alone.

I had to walk awhile before any conveyance appeared, but at last, when I had almost reached the Arc de Triomphe again, an empty cab came along and I took it.

From the Arc to the rue de Rennes is a drive of more than half an hour, especially when one is conveyed by a tired cab horse that has been at the mercy of Sunday fête makers.

There had been time before I passed under the Dragon's wings, to meet my enemy over and over again, but I never saw him once, and now refuge was close at hand.

Before the wide gateway a small mob of children were playing. Our concierge and his wife walked about among them with their black poodle, keeping order; some couples were waltzing on the sidewalk. I returned their greetings and hurried in.

All the inhabitants of the court had trooped out into the street. The

place was quite deserted, lighted by a few lanterns hung high up, in which the gas burned dimly.

My apartment was at the top of a house, half way down the court, reached by a staircase that descended almost into the street, with only a bit of passageway intervening. I set my foot on the threshold of the open door, the friendly, old ruinous stairs rose before me, leading up to rest and shelter. Looking back over my right shoulder, I saw *him*, ten paces off. He must have entered the court with me.

He was coming straight on, neither slowly, nor swiftly, but straight on to me. And now he was looking at me. For the first time since our eyes encountered across the church they met now again, and I knew that the time had come.

Retreating backward, down the court, I faced him. I meant to escape by the entrance on the rue du Dragon. His eyes told me that I never should escape.

It seemed ages while we were going, I retreating, he advancing, down the court in perfect silence; but at last I felt the shadow of the archway, and the next step brought me within it. I had meant to turn here and spring through into the street. But the shadow was not that of an archway; it was that of a vault. The great doors on the rue du Dragon were closed. I felt this by the blackness which surrounded me, and at the same instant I read it in his face. How his face gleamed in the darkness, drawing swiftly nearer! The deep vaults, the huge closed doors their cold iron clamps were all on his side. The thing which he had threatened had arrived: it gathered and bore down on me from the fathomless shadows; the point from which it would strike was his infernal eyes. Hopeless I set my back against the barred doors and defied him.

There was a scraping of stairs on the stone floor, and a rustling as the congregation rose. I could hear the Suisse's staff in the south aisle, preceding Monseigneur C—— to the sacristy.

The kneeling nuns, roused from their devout abstraction, made their reverence and went away. The fashionable lady, my neighbor, rose also, with graceful reserve. As she departed, her glance just flitted over my face in disapproval.

Half dead, or so it seemed to me, yet intensely alive to every trifle, I sat among the leisurely moving crowd, then rose too and went toward the door.

I had slept through the sermon. Had I slept through the sermon? I looked up and saw him passing along the gallery to his place. Only his side I saw; the thin bent arm in its black covering looked like one of those devilish, nameless instruments which lie in the disused torture chambers of mediæval castles.

But I had escaped him, though his eyes had said I should not. *Had* I escaped him? That which gave him the power over me came back out of oblivion, where I had hoped to keep it. For I knew him now. Death and the awful abode of lost souls, whither my weakness long ago had sent him—they had changed him for every other eye, but not for mine. I had recognized him almost from the first; I had never doubted what he was come to do; and now I knew that while my body sat safe in the cheerful little church, he had been hunting my soul in the Court of the Dragon.

I crept to the door; the organ broke out overhead with a blare. A dazzling light filled the church, blotting the altar from my eyes. The people faded away, the arches, the vaulted roof vanished. I raised my seared eyes to the fathomless glare, and I saw the black stars hanging in the heavens: and the wet winds from the Lake of Hali chilled my face.

And now, far away, over leagues of tossing cloud-waves, I saw the moon dripping with spray; and beyond, the towers of Carcosa rose behind the moon.

Death and the awful abode of lost souls, whither my weakness long ago had sent him, had changed him for every other eye but mine. And now I heard *his voice*, rising, swelling, thundering through the flaring light, and as I fell, the radiance increasing, increasing, poured over me in waves of flame. Then I sank into the depths, and I heard the King in Yellow whispering to my soul: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"

An American war flier, shot down somewhere over the innermost regions of ancient China, provides the opening for one of Frank Owen's enthralling fantasies. A combination of legend and adventure, of romance and mystery, inscribed in Oriental colors as only this writer's master hand knows how.

A Study in Amber

by Frank Owen

THE THING PLUNGED downward like a dark star falling to earth. A moment before it had been Richard Trent, a Yank flying for China. Then in the space of the trembling of a leaf, machine-gun bullets had shattered the night's still blackness. His gasoline caught fire and the "Tomahawk" was enveloped in flames. In a split second he had jumped clear of the plane, striking his head sharply as he did so. He was unconscious before he could pull the rip-cord of his parachute. And so he dropped through space, unaware that his body was hurtling toward the dust of a parched earth. His plane had been flying at eighteen thousand feet.

The air was biting cold and it served as a stimulant to revive him. He opened his eyes. Down, down, down he plunged. It was difficult for him to pull his thoughts together. His brain was in chaos. Memory eluded him. His hand went mechanically to the rip-cord and the parachute opened up like a white cloud above him. Against the sky it had a luminous quality, the reflection of starlight. There was no moon.

A strong wind was blowing, stalling his descent. Often he drifted many miles though he was in no condition to calculate direction. Nevertheless he was aware that he was drifting but he was not alarmed. He had been flying at approximately three hundred miles per hour, when his plane

was attacked. Before leaping into space he had cut down the speed. His head ached viciously, and blood was trickling down his face from a gash in his forehead. The wound gave him no pain. Otherwise he was uninjured. Only that sharp headache annoyed him. It nauseated him but the cold air felt good against his forehead. Occasionally, the descent of the parachute would be arrested by a sudden vicious upswing of a wind channel, as though Quan Yu, the God of War, were striking out with his fists, flaying the very air itself even as the entire earth was being churned by his huge iron heels. Once the parachute collapsed and billowed around his head, for he was falling upward, but as it enshrouded him like folds of white cloud, he abruptly plunged downward again at a terrifying speed. Once more the parachute mushroomed and his descent was gentle and reasonably calm. But now he noticed a strange phenomenon. Silently one by one, stars were disappearing into a terrifying void of blackness. There was little dampness in the air despite its coldness so no storm was approaching. Yet the stars continued to be blotted out as though they were white flowers and the gentle, smiling God of Longevity was walking about the blue meadows of the sky and gathering them as he walked.

Soon all color and brilliance was gone from the night, and only bleak, desolate blackness remained. Man drinks light with the atmosphere, so it was that Richard Trent's mouth felt parched, dry. Fear drove the moisture from his throat, until he could not have needed drink more if he had been in a Gobi sandstorm. But one single star visible in the dark would have slaked his thirst.

Meanwhile the descent had become more rapid. The cold grew less penetrating but the peril seemed to increase. For months Richard Trent had been a Flying Tiger. His exploits were world news. He had faced death in its cruelest forms without flinching. He had laughed in face of danger, yet now he was afraid when there was nothing to fear; afraid of blackness when he had crept about Chinese villages feeling his way along, not even a candle visible, and had never given it a thought. Now, without reason, horror, biting, incredible was eating into the very marrow of his bones.

How long he could have stood the suspense of an unknown terror, as though he were falling into a deep pit and the earth was closing in, is problematical, had his descent not abruptly ceased. He struck with a jolt and the parachute dragged him along a few feet. Even in the blackness,

he found no difficulty disentangling himself. Thereafter he lay prone, endeavoring to draw his scattered wits together, and as he lay there gradually the panic abated. Even the air was calm, devoid of evil spirits. Fool, that he was! Flying Tiger! Bah! No Flying Tiger could have nerves like that. Yet the unknown has ever been fearsome since the first man trod gingerly upon a strange new world. Nearby he could hear the sound of a river splashing and gurgling along, a swift current that had little of the eerie about it. He was lying so close to it that occasionally a few drops splashed upon his face. For a moment he had the intense desire to rise and leap into it, to end this farce of terror, but for some unknown reason he refrained. However, he could not move far because of the danger of falling into the subterranean river or a rock crevice. With a start, he uttered a cry that echoed and danced over the rocks as it sped into distance. What if he had fallen into an extinct volcano? He would not be discovered in a thousand years. Then reason reasserted itself. Wherever this spot may be, it was not within an extinct volcano for the air was delightfully fresh and cool. Besides, a volcano is never extinct, it merely accidentally gets corked up by the force of its own spew.

He rolled over and lay on his back to wait for daylight or whatever might come. And now above him he could see the stars through a narrow ribbon of light, and they cleansed his mind of the last vestige of fear. Whatever it was, he'd face it. He was curious too. Adventure always has a pleasing expression. Since the air was so clear he was in no danger of suffocation. The water of the river was probably fresh, so he was in no danger of thirst. Before hunger could overtake him, he'd be able perhaps to climb back into the world of men once more. Without doubt, he had fallen into a mighty crevice in the rocks, though why the air was so sweet to breathe was an enigma. Why was it not fetid and vile if the walls were narrow, and filled slightly with the sweepings of the wind? He felt about him. The rock was as smooth as a marble road that was kept in good repair. There was no vestige of sand, neither were there dead leaves. Evidently nearby there must be an entrance to this cavern with the skylight window. He had the feeling that people were in the vicinity. He was not alone. His courage returned to him, gone were the stupid fears that had momentarily gripped him. He stretched out and yawned. He longed for a cigarette, and even though he had a pack with him, he made no attempt to light one. Better to wait till daylight before doing so. It was never wise to attract attention. Even though he felt that he was

not in hostile territory, his natural caution exerted itself. A cigarette attracts enemy fire. Why make a target of oneself? The sweetest morsel of life is that which a man tastes when he is in danger.

Somehow, he had no regrets. This was adventure. Perhaps he had run across, or rather fallen into a natural air raid shelter that nature had kindly equipped for just such an emergency as China was facing. Why it even had clear, fresh, running water.

He smiled ruefully. What a pity if it should prove to have no exit. Still the thought brought him no dismay. He could see the stars above. If there was no other means of egress, he'd journey to the stars.

The solitude was friendly. Perhaps the belief that all was well was only an illusion, but illusion has a sweet-tongued voice. It lulled him to sleep without his knowing. And in his sleep, he dreamed that a voice kept whispering to him over and over again, "This is the hour of mist-feeding."

He awakened much refreshed. Curiously he gazed about him. Perhaps this, too, was a dream, for he was lying in a comfortable bed in a luxuriously silken-draped yellow room in which a single lantern burned with a cheerful, subdued glow. It was a room in which one might give himself over to the enjoyment of solitude. On the air floated a faint suggestion of sandalwood and musk. He gazed down at the coverlet, rich yellow silk embroidered with the dragon emblem. In the days when China was an Empire such a covering was reserved only for the Emperor. He smiled ruefully. Perhaps it was fitting, for in this shadowy hour of mist-feeding, somehow he had become a Lord of Dust, an Emperor of Dreams. Some echo of doubt, brought him up shortly. He was undoubtedly in delirium, feasting on beauty as his life ebbed away. But this was ridiculous, too, for he had not been injured in any way. He grasped at logic, but it failed him. This was the stuff that dreams are made of, there was no place for reality in this enchanting room. Nevertheless, he refused to be disturbed. If this was the fringe of death it was indeed a beautiful adventure. But that was all rot, for he was hungry. Does the spirit detached from the body yearn for food? If such a state exists, would it not be beyond hunger, beyond thirst, beyond desire? Those were mighty comforting questions to have about in this strange hour, for of one thing he was sure, his hunger was real though all else be but wraiths and visions.

With a start, he became aware that in a shadowy corner, an old man

sat as though waiting—for what he dared not guess. And as he peered intently at the ancient figure every detail of his face became clear to him—like old parchment, as lined and wrinkled as a dried fig. But his eyes were as sharp as sword's points. The most surprising thing of all was that the ancient one did not look Chinese. Perhaps he was a native of those forgotten lands where men and women live and die magnificently and mysterious strangers knock at moonlit doors.

And then, accidentally, the eyes of Richard Trent met those of the stranger, and remained as though bound by a spell—an instant only—then the ancient one turned his eyes away and the spell was broken.

Trent's interest had been fired to fever pitch. In that glance there had been no hostility, only the reflection of a strong personality. Bah! It was only a hypnotic trick. Trent's eyes were already large with wonder, ready to be swayed by anything. Another time he must be on guard, exert his own influence. He must live up to the reputation of the Flying Tigers.

When the stranger spoke his voice was soft and gentle. He spoke English with little trace of accent.

"My name is Mu Lin, I bid you welcome to my humble home."

"I am Richard Trent, an American volunteer, flying for China. I don't know how I came here, nor why I am here, but I am gratified anyway. However, if this is a humble home my eyes would not be able to stand the brilliance of a palace."

"A house is humble when its occupants understand and appreciate the value of humility. He is rich who is well satisfied. I think of Su Wu, the Shepherd. In the market, Su Wu sold bean curd. He sold it for nineteen years and saved three dollars. He married a young wife and passed the New Year happily. He was a very rich man. . . . But come, arise, you must be hungry. You will need much food to make you strong for the dangers that lie ahead."

"Dangers, I know of no dangers."

"That is regrettable, for death stares you in the face."

"Fine, that proves at least that I'm not dead, or dying or tossing about in delirium."

"No, I can assure you you are in perfect health. I found you lying by the Black Dragon River, so I brought you to my house."

"So there is an exit from this cave."

"Several and death is one of them. I will show you the way. However,

for your guidance, be it known that my house is within the cavern. How you came unto my people I have no way of knowing."

"The explanation is simple. I came down by parachute when my plane was destroyed, and, since your house is near the Black Dragon River, it wouldn't be exaggerating to say I fell through your skylight."

"Your words are not without a substance of humor but the incident is regrettable nonetheless."

"I prefer to call it fortunate and I am grateful."

"Is a condemned man grateful for the rope that hangs him?"

"What's that to do with me?"

"Perhaps much."

"What fantastic stuff is this? Are you threatening me? I don't scare easily. My squadron of flyers were and still are known as Flying Tigers."

"And you have done great work for China. For that we shall honor you."

"Thanks."

"Unfortunately, soon thereafter you must die."

"I assure you I intend to keep on living. I've wiggled out of worse spots than this. But what have I done? What law have I broken?"

"You've invaded our solitude. For ages we have been people of legend. Come, let us go into my library for a moment and I will read you a short passage from one of the endless stream of books on China written by your people. Odd how you Americans can write so much about us when you know so little. I spend many a droll half-hour reading over these merrie tales. So many of your people are patronizing about the Chinese. We only taught you the Golden Rule, gave you the first printed book, the first paper, the first ink, the first silk, the first tea—"

"But alas," broke in Trent ruefully, "what good are all these great gifts if I cannot live to enjoy them."

"I am amazed that you are so opposed to dying, when you can die for a great principle—in order that our solitude will not be violated."

"Sounds a bit selfish if you ask me."

"Not at all. There was once an Indian philosopher who spoke for all men when he said, 'Ah, brother, you will never know the blessing of doing nothing and thinking nothing; and yet, next to sleep, that is most delicious. Thus we were before our birth, thus we shall be after death!'"

As he spoke, Mu Lin drew aside a curtain and they entered a library,

large in extent but very homelike. Beside comfortable chairs scattered about the room were convenient tables piled with books while yellow lanterns burned above in the best position to give proper light. Mu Lin went to a bookshelf and took down the volume he wanted.

"This book," he said, "was published about a hundred years ago but it will serve its purpose. It gives only a few lines about us, but enough. Let me read to you, 'In the mountainous districts of China there are magic streams and wonderful caves, which are the scenes of mythical and legendary tales without number; many of these have great interest for the student of folklore. In one of these curious caves there are many chambers and exquisite formations of colored rock produced by the action of water in past ages. The people tell of a strange race having white faces and red hair, who came down the rapids in ancient times and took possession of these caves and pillaged all the neighborhood land. From whence they came and to what race they belonged was never known, but when they were satisfied with their booty they vanished into the land of mystery.'"

Mu Lin finished reading, closed the book, placed it back on the shelf. "That will give you some idea what I mean. Others have told the story in somewhat different fashion but all agree we are only a myth. Are we at fault if we desire to remain apart from the world in a Utopian Elysium of our own choosing. Among my people hatred, greed, and modern civilization cluttered up with motor cars, yachts and such worries are unknown. But we love nature in all her exquisite forms and caprices. Our women are beautiful. Life is calm. There is no envy. Such an ideal state has been menaced by your accidental plunging down into our midst. You must die gently and without pain. We'll grant you a perfumed death if you prefer."

"The death I prefer is from old age."

"That isn't quick enough."

"I'm in no hurry."

"We are not so patient. You must cease to exist within a fortnight. Why are you so stubborn? Why a man should protest about dying when it is the supreme adventure in life is an enigma. But enough of this playing around with words. Let us not waste time while the lentils burn. A small repast is ready for us. You will join me at rice."

"At anything as long as it is food. Don't forget I'm a guest. No poison."

"Did I not say you would be honored ere you were destroyed?"

"Yes, you did say something about that, but save your medals. I might escape."

"I doubt it. The Black Dragon River flows only under the earth. It never emerges."

"No matter. I can't swim."

"That is well."

They walked through a series of rooms, each more gorgeous than the last, filled with fragile porcelains, carved jades, fine brocades, lanterns shaped like unto the loveliest flowers, splendid bronzes, lacquers and lapis lazuli. Trent longed to linger, but Mu Lin urged him forward.

There were no doors to any of the rooms, only embroidered silk and tapestry curtains. And always there was a fragrance in the air, ever changing—wistaria and musk, jasmine and nutmeg.

In one room a table had been set for them.

"Be seated," said Mu Lin, "and may you enjoy abundant health."

"I hope you do nothing to disturb my digestion."

"In this hour of rice, you are in no danger."

Trent seated himself at the table. Before joining him, Mu Lin put on a gorgeous coat, embroidered medallions of yellow and red on a field of darkest blue. Along the skirt of the coat was a conventional wave design. There was no border or collar. The brilliant yellow sleeves were colorfully embroidered—flowers, birds, deer and the heavenly Dog of Foh. The blue cap had a pearl button.

"I never drink tea," explained Mu Lin, "unless attired in ritual robes." He seated himself at the table. "Tea is liquid jade, the medicine that has saved Chinese civilization. Where are the Greeks, the Romans, the early Egyptians? They were not tea-drinkers. And they have perished. All those who would prepare tea should heed the Ch'a-ching (Tea Classic): 'The bubbles should reach the size of lobster's eyes but on no account should they be permitted to grow to resemble those of large fish. To do so would be to boil the water until it lost its original freshness of life.'"

A servant entered and placed a tea service before each of them. The fragile cups were transparent green in order that the light, shining through them, might reveal the delicate coloring of the tea.

Trent said nothing as Mu Lin poured the liquid into the cups.

"Let us drink," he said and his voice seemed far away.

Trent sipped the golden beverage. It coursed through his veins like rarest wine but with a far better taste. It was a soul-satisfying moment.

Somehow he felt that he could trust Mu Lin anywhere despite the doleful sentence he had pronounced. Tea makes all men brothers. As Mu Lin filled the cups once more, the world narrowed down. They two alone remained. Could this be "The hour of mist-feeding" of which the voice in his sleep had spoken?

Not till long afterward did he realize that neither of them ate anything. Nevertheless, hunger left him. He longed for excitement, a new thrill, the bright face of danger, as though drunk with the wine of living.

As they returned to the library Mu Lin said, "The fact you are a Flying Tiger complicates things."

"Set me free and I'll bother you no more."

Mu Lin ignored the interruption as he continued, "For amber is made of the souls of tigers. When a brave tiger dies, his spirit enters the earth and becomes transmuted into that which is known as hu-p'o or tiger's soul."

"Mere folklore," said Trent. "It is common knowledge that when amber was being formed, none of the present races of mankind existed. Forests of the Tertiary Period were submerged and the resin became petrified. I mean the resin produced by certain kinds of coniferous trees, now extinct, which were embedded in blue clay. In the Ice Age, changes in the earth's surface released much amber from its former bed. Today it is found in various quarters of the earth, but practically none in China proper despite the fact that since long before the Han Dynasty it has been prized because it is symbolic of courage."

"Courage, yes," agreed Mu Lin, "because it has tiger qualities. As to the rest of your remarks, I fail to agree with them. Alas, you have been reading books again. And reading without knowledge is a dangerous thing. Books have a quality of being wrong. It is believed by your countrymen that Gutenberg printed the first book from movable type. A nice fallacy but given almost universal credence. It is almost as ridiculous as the belief that the Americans invented air-conditioning, when these caves were air-conditioned before I was born, while Ming Huang, the illustrious Emperor who died in 762 A.D., had one of his summer palaces air-conditioned. Again you claim that Columbus discovered America. As a matter of fact he rediscovered it, for certain Chinese Buddhist Priests landed on your West Coast in the vicinity of Lower California and called it Fusang, 'The Country of Women,' probably because the Indians wore their hair

long and the Chinese did not at that particular time. My people have never worn long hair, that is, we Red-Haired People. Nevertheless, it is well that you have devoted some small time to the study of amber, for it is with amber that you are to be fittingly honored for your exploits as a Flying Tiger. Thereafter, you must be put to death but in no spirit of anger."

"I'll be just as dead as though you hated me," said Trent curtly. "I spurn your gifts. First you give me a bit of amber, a trinket of little importance, then you kill me and take it back again."

"No," said Mu Lin slowly; he seemed somewhat offended. "I shall give you no tangible gift. What I will bestow upon you is something of far greater value, something that you will remember always, in this world and in all the worlds that are to come."

"I'm still unimpressed and unappreciative."

"All things change, so will your opinion." Mu Lin walked across the room, Trent could not help thinking, "With what grace he walks, despite his years. But then it is an attribute of the Chinese. The smile of a Chinese girl is infinitely charming. Speaking to the eye, the Chinese language is the richest in the world."

How far his thoughts might have flown is problematical had Mu Lin not spoken again. "If there be no use in our words, of what use are they?"

He took a small object from a wall cabinet. Then he returned and stood by the chair in which Trent was sitting and held up the small yellow object for his gaze. "Here is a fragment of amber," he mused and now his voice sounded far away as though his thoughts had retreated to the inner recesses of his heart. "Amber may easily be tested as to its genuineness by a simple device. Only that which is rubbed and thereafter attracts mustard seeds is true. The belief that amber goes back to what your countrymen call the Age of Bronze is fantastic in the opinion of Chinese scholars who have meditated over this problem for centuries and they have long since set down that the 'resin of fir trees sinks into the earth and becomes amber after a thousand years.' I have proven this to be correct in an astounding manner. But behold, this amber is transparent and if you hold it close to the light you will see that it encloses the body of a fly."

Trent examined the trinket with keen interest. "I have heard of oddities like this many times," he said, "and when I was in college, how long ago that seems, I studied the poems of Robert Herrick, one in particular I have never forgotten:

'I saw a fly within a bead
Of amber cleanly buried.
The urn was little, but the room
More rich than Cleopatra's tomb.'

"A poem that fits the occasion," observed Mu Lin. "But see, this little fly is perfectly preserved. Its legs and wings are undamaged. Why did it not struggle to get away when first it became entangled in the liquid resin long ages ago? Perhaps it knew that it was to be immortal and was satisfied. Scientists by years of study have discovered one hundred and sixty-three different types of insects incased in amber, many unknown to us. But in no case are there signs of struggle or panic. All are perfect specimens. Perhaps they submitted serenely because they knew that this was not death but suspended animation. If one had the fantastic impulse one could release specimens of all these different insects upon mankind. Perhaps some are poisonous. A single sting might bring death. Of these things no man may tell, for no living man knows. It would be interesting to trifle with such an experiment but I am concerned with a higher ambition. After all one plague more or less in this Axis infested world would scarcely matter. I'd do it at once if I thought that the insects would only feed on Japanese. However, I doubt if they'd touch such poisonous meat. But of idle speculation enough. What lies before us is on a loftier plane. It would be fitting if it could take place along the Milky Way or upon the Blue Highroads of the Sky. Alas, that we must be content for this great adventure to take place near Black Dragon River."

"Are you then planning for me a perfumed death, or am I to have my throat cut with a golden sword?" asked Trent dryly. "I'd be far more enthusiastic about this thing if I knew what lay in the inner recesses of your mind."

"I assure you that at this moment you are in no immediate danger," said Mu Lin gently. "Right now you are being feted for the marvelous deeds you have performed for China. Let me assure you that the exploits of the Flying Tigers are scrupulously set forth in our gazette, a newspaper that is not published daily or weekly but whenever there is news worth recording that is of uncommon interest. You Tigers have been responsible for many editions. For even though we have red hair and our faces are white, we deem it a privilege to walk side by side with the brave Chinese whose brothers we are."

"From your eulogies I gather that I will not be stabbed in the back."

"Your mind may be at rest on that score. I would be a party to nothing so ungenerous."

"Good. Having faced death a hundred times, I'd hate to turn my back on it at the end."

"You make my position very difficult."

"Then let me live and we will both be cheered."

"If I did I'd be a traitor to my people. Our sanctuary must be preserved."

"By murder?"

"The need for it is upon us."

"Thereafter it will no longer be a sanctuary, for whenever you hear the roar of the tiger that drives the wind, this evil deed will be driven into your mind."

Mu Lin sighed. "The hour of grandeur is upon us. Let us put aside such distressing thoughts. The vision that you will witness will purify the eyes of your heart."

As Mu Lin spoke, he drew aside a curtain and Trent followed him into a room of subdued lights. The carpet was as soft as grass in the green spring. Though there was sufficient illumination it was difficult to see with any degree of clarity. Nevertheless it was not gloomy. A great beauty was in the air, hard to define. If it were perfume it was elusive and unlike any he had ever encountered. He walked gently as though the rug on which he trod was a carpet of dreams that might vanish at any moment.

Far down the room a yellow disc was glowing like the round moon of autumn. Was it a disc of jade? Yellow jade is one of the rarest of gems. Not till he was quite close did he realize that it was amber, amber as clear as polished crystal.

Mu Lin clutched his arm so tightly his fingers felt like steel claws. Nevertheless Trent made no objection to the pain. It was odd that a man so old should have such strength in his fingers.

"See, I keep her in a Golden Room," Mu Lin whispered. "A red embroidered cloth is spread before the shrine of her beauty. Above, the curtains are of silk as green as jade. Her fragrant mouth is small. Tell me did your eyes ever behold a girl more beautiful?"

"What girl is this of which you speak?" said Trent, "I see no girl."

"Within the amber, gaze and you will see. My dear one, for a thousand years, has waited to be released."

Trent took a step forward. He gazed at the amber, glowing with a soft golden light, and as he gazed he saw that the amber was transparent. Within was the body of a slender girl. She seemed to be sleeping. Her beauty was breath-taking, peach bloom cheeks, eyebrows like willow leaves. A knot of hair lay low upon her neck. She wore a gown of green silk, though it may have been blue with yellow amber tints upon it. In her hair was a flower, a small red rose bursting into bloom. It was hard to believe that rose had bloomed a thousand years ago. He was now willing to believe that all amber did not go back to the Stone Age for this slender girl must have lived in comparatively recent times as years are reckoned in the great age of the universe.

"Do you wonder that night after night I kept for her the half of my quilt?"

Was it only his imagination, Trent wondered or did her eyelids move as though she were sighing in sleep. Never in his life did he realize the importance of the flickering of an eyelid until that moment. He held his breath, afraid to breathe, lest he disturb the magic of this immortal moment.

This was the woman that the magic hours of all the world had given unto him. And she belonged to Mu Lin, Mu Lin the ancient one whose face was as wrinkled as a dried fig. Why it was sacrilege to even think of such a union. In that moment he forgot that his life was in danger, forgot that he was a Flying Tiger, forgot his intense yearning to get away from those caverns; for a new desire, terrible in its intensity had blotted everything from his thoughts but his craving for this glorious woman. What matter that she was the oldest woman in the world? Her face glowed with youth eternal. Music was mingled with her form.

"She is as lovely as a nutmeg bursting into bloom," murmured Mu Lin. "Below her amber palace I have built a mound of dried fir and pine chips. A touch of flame would start a fire that would burn away the amber, restore heat to her numb body until her heart began beating once more. I await that day when she will come to me like a goddess of the morn with stardust in her eyes. I will kneel as she comes to me, and in the warmth of her young arms I will become young once more."

"Are you setting nets to catch the moon?" asked Trent bitterly.

"That is why I hesitate," sighed Mu Lin. "I speak of spring and yet the autumn gale blows wildly through the grass. Her body has the eloquence of jade. I gaze upon her face with the eyes of my heart, and I pray

to the God of Longevity that he will help me in this supreme hour. She stands there waiting and I hesitate. The flower of yesteryear will bloom again, but not the flower of man's youth. So sang the poet, but need I believe him? Is a verse true because it is set down in grass characters? For thirty years I have waited for my face to grow young, my remaining hope is in the fire that warms my dear one, perhaps it will bring its blessing unto me. Still I hesitate. The words of Wang Wei chant in my ears even though no man sings:

“Out of the dusk comes the autumn
The fragrance of spring sighs and expires.”

“Yes,” said Trent slowly, “you are old but I envy you. To own the golden room that encloses a girl so beautiful makes you the richest of men. Are you not afraid I will snatch your great treasure from you?”

“No, for you will be dead ere that opportunity comes.”

“But you said I would be honored!”

“You have been honored.”

“What use a feast of beauty without the time to digest it?”

“You must die within the week. When the week fades you must die.”

“But during that week I may remain in your house?”

“Yes, as an honored guest.”

“I am humbled before your words. Seven days will be enough. If then death steps in, I'll meet it smiling. If it should pass me by, for even you have no power over death itself, I shall be gratified.”

“Death will halt, I promise you that. In the meantime, I shall muse over an old precept, ‘Never lightly esteem a friend or an enemy.’”

Hours later Trent was alone in the sleeping room that had been assigned to him. He paid no attention to the embroidered rugs and draperies. The flowers were so lifelike they seemed to give forth perfume. In one corner of the room there was a silken bamboo thicket that seemed to sway in the breeze like slender girls dancing. Above them was a verse embroidered in exquisite characters: “The bamboos are admirable when fresh with rain. In the hills we love the time of sunset.” Trent had always enjoyed this mixing of art with written characters that is so typically Chinese. He had several landscapes in his apartment in New York, dating back to middle Ching upon which there were numerous verses, one written by the original painter, others by poets who had enjoyed viewing

the picture and had set down their thoughts as one might scribble marginal notes on the pages of a beloved book. There were also a couple of seals that attested to its authenticity. One had the simplest of lines, "Oh, these Mountains, Oh, these Great Mountains—" as though the artist, overcome by their grandeur had been unable to go on. But now Trent gazed at the inscriptions of the tapestries with unseeing eyes. In the bamboo grove he imagined he could see the amber girl dancing to the rhythm of the swaying bamboos. His eyes were glazed with the wonder of her, nor did he see her with his eyes alone. He saw her with his heart and his flesh. His whole body longed for her, his mouth was dry with the dryness of a thirst nothing could quench. He cast off his clothes and put on the Chinese lounging garments that were spread on a chair beside the bed. They were cooler than his own clothes but still that amber fire burned within him, the fire of love without reason and without regard. He must have the girl, hold her for one immortal moment in his arms though he die for it the next moment. Death would mean nothing to him then, for he would be like unto a man who had drunk the stars and walked through the highroads of the sky. There was madness in his thoughts, divine madness.

He threw himself upon the bed and tried to rest. Sleep dug at his eyes but it would not enter. The silken coverlets were warm to his touch as though a fire had been kindled underneath the kong as is customary in China during four-coat weather. But it was mid-summer, though he was not sure of the season. Time in China is very elastic and one never cares about the day of the week or the weeks of the months. The earth turns without man's effort. Why toil? The heat intensified, the fever of longing which he could not endure. He did not even know the name of the girl enclosed in the amber, yet her image had come to live in his heart. His body was in torment, and then out of the whispering night a daring plan took root in his thoughts. He was a man of action. The war had made him so. He rose from the bed, put on his felt-soled slippers, and slipped through the curtains of his room. He was thankful that there was no door to creak an alarm.

It was not difficult for him to find the way. The lanterns in the various rooms were still lighted, since within the caverns daylight never penetrated. His padded slippers made no sound, nor did he meet anyone. Within the mountain all were sleeping or enjoying inactivity. It took but a moment for him to reach the amber shrine of his beloved. A gentle

smile seemed to hover about the corners of her lips, as though she sensed his purpose and somehow knew that her hour of deliverance was at hand. The beating of his heart was like sledge-hammer blows. He was surprised that it made no echo. His forehead was moist, his hands shook as he struck a match. He would like to have delayed for an instant, to catch his breath, but this was no time for waiting. Unless he acted quickly the opportunity might be gone forever.

He did not know that Mu Lin was standing but a few yards in back of him, a picture of profound inertia. He made no outcry; his face was expressionless, as tranquil as that of Lao Tzu Riding on an Ox in the painting by the Sung artist, Ch'ao Pu-chih. Nevertheless his eyes were as keen as sharp swords.

With shaking hand Trent applied the lighted match to the chips of fir and pine. They flared up joyously. Had they not been aged and dried for many years by Mu Lin for the moment that would be for him the culmination of his dreams, perhaps bringing him youth once more? But always Mu Lin had hesitated. Suppose his experiment failed, suppose his golden girl was devoured by the flames that consumed the amber. Suppose youth should always remain beyond his fingertips even though success crowned his efforts. And so his hands had remained leaden. He lacked the strength of will to apply the spark. The amber burned quickly with a bright yellow flame. It gave off an agreeable perfume, like unto the scent of pine as it was consumed. The amber melted away into ashes. Now and then they both could catch a glimpse of the golden girl. Her cheeks seemed flushed, her eyes about to open. She remained smiling as if her ordeal was without pain. So quickly did the amber burn away, her flesh was not even scorched. A slight flush had come into her cheeks as though the blood was once more flowing after a thousand years of suspended animation. Trent took a step closer and now for the first time he noticed in her hair a golden hairpin delicately inlaid with kingfisher feathers. Her gentle breast seemed to rise and fall slightly as though the breath of life had indeed been restored to her. Or was it only the fruits of his own imagination? He brushed aside his momentary doubt. Is it not a fact that it is only the imagined that is ever real? Or is it true that nothing exists except the moment one is living, and in this moment this one woman encompassed all. Perhaps he too was only made of the stuff that dreams are made of. Was he not in the caverns inhabited by the legend-

ary Red-Haired People? Was he not a guest of Mu Lin who certainly existed on the borderland of reality?

For long he stood gazing enraptured at the golden girl, while the ashes at her feet grew lifeless as the last spark flickered out. Then abruptly he reached up and drew her down to him, her body all warm and yielding. Reverently he held her close and kissed her lips. Was it only imagination or was there a response?

With a harsh cry Mu Lin, aroused from his lethargy, flung himself at his tormentor, his hands like talons yearning to tear his prey to shreds. Spellbound he had watched the experiment, the experiment which he lacked the courage to complete because it might bring destruction to his dear one. But now the woman of a thousand years had been released. Trent, the madman, had dared to take her into his arms. He had violated every code of hospitality. To invade a man's home and steal his beloved was the most heinous of crimes. That he had released the girl from the amber prison in which for so many ages she had been enclosed, Mu Lin saw fit to overlook. Trent had attempted to captivate her. Therefore, he must die, not only because he had inadvertently invaded the sanctuary of the Red-Haired People but also for his preposterous impudence. Truly no man was ever more deserving of death. And so Mu Lin clawed at Trent's throat, his face convulsed with hatred, but Trent was a trained athlete and easily eluded him. To have delivered a crushing blow to Mu Lin's chin would have been an easy matter. But Trent had no wish to injure his aged host even though Mu Lin was intent on killing him. As a Flying Tiger, Trent had seen death in a hundred cruel forms and so close had he lived to it, he was without fear. Besides there was no slightest tinge of enmity in his heart for Mu Lin. All that he cared about was this new wonder that had come to him with a woman's kiss. And now for the first time he noticed that her eyes were open, black brilliant eyes that contained all the mystery of the ages. Mu Lin, too, had beheld and in that moment all anger was drained from him. One could not be angry in the presence of this fair woman. Strangely enough she seemed startled, frightened, like a forest creature before the avalanche of man's wrath. Then, without warning, she turned and fled with both Trent and Mu Lin in pursuit. Trent, by far the younger, was fleetest of foot. Even so, Mu Lin exhibited enormous stamina as he followed them. But the girl easily outdistanced both of them. Through the rooms she sped, nor did any servant block her way, and on to the level paths of the cavern. Once

away from the house, her pace quickened. She sped along with Trent close in pursuit, until she reached the edge of the Black Dragon River. On the brink, she hesitated for a moment only looking back at her pursuers, but now she was smiling and her teeth were as white as camomile flowers. Then she plunged into the water; nor did Trent hesitate to dive in after her. The river was deep but he came to the surface quickly. Was it only imagination or could he hear the ripple of laughter? He could see the flash of her white body just ahead of him. With bold strokes he drove forward, urged along by the fast-flowing river. And now the lights were growing dimmer, the lights of lanterns that were lighted along the road near the house, but he could see that he was gaining on her, as though she had lessened her speed for him to come abreast. As he did so she snuggled against him, and from that moment they swam together in perfect unison. It was like swimming through the waters of the Milky Way, that milky river that flows through the cold night sky. They were on a journey to the sun, to meet the sun at dawn with all its crimson purple splendor.

In his ecstasy he did not notice that the rock roof was closing in above them. In a few moments it was so close to the water, they were forced to swim submerged. Not once did he worry over the fact that they were swimming in an underground river, a black cold river that might wind like the coils of a serpent into the depths of the earth. Only when he was in need of air did the horror of his predicament enter into his consciousness. Even then he shrugged it aside. If this was to be a journey into death, it would be rapture to die with his dear one in his arms. And so he ceased to swim. His arms fell limply, consciousness left him. In this last glad moment, he was beyond life, beyond despair and pain.

When Trent awakened the night had ended. Morning swept in golden splendor from the mountains of the sky. A lark graceful of wing dropped down from heaven, sprinkling its song in the air. He gazed dully about him. So it had all been a dream, beautiful hallucinations while he lay unconscious after striking his head when he landed by parachute.

He sighed, how sad that such loveliness should have less texture than dust of moonrise. He sat up and gazed about him. A few feet from him a river flowed tranquilly but nowhere in sight was there the slightest vestige of a parachute. Someone must have made off with it. But the Chinese are by nature honest.

"Those damn Japs," he muttered.

However, he was dripping wet and even his enemies could not be blamed for that. Perhaps he had fallen into the river. He could not remember crawling to safety. He must have been in a half-stupor before he passed out. That would account for the missing parachute. It had merely drifted down river.

So the dream ended.

He rose to his feet. An old man driving an ox-cart was approaching along the river road.

Trent called to him. The old man seemed pleased to stop and talk as is the custom of people who dwell in lonely places.

"I am a Flying Tiger," explained Trent in Chinese.

"May heaven protect you, Noble Tiger," said the old man.

"Came down by parachute. Haven't the slightest idea where I am," Trent explained.

"We are not far from a town, seven li. Yonder is the Black Dragon River. It rises in the Daourian Mountains and has a course of two thousand miles to the sea. Come, get into my humble cart and save your felt soles from wear."

"The Black Dragon River!" Trent repeated in an awed tone.

"Yes, is there ought that is strange about that?"

But Trent did not hear the question. He had stooped reverently and picked up a glistening object from the sand. It was a golden hairpin delicately inlaid with kingfisher feathers.

A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour, or a nothing: they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing and mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all. The painter of this work asserts that all his imaginations appear to him infinitely more perfect and more minutely organized than any thing seen by his mortal eye.

—WILLIAM BLAKE

C. M. Kornbluth first made his literary debut under a variety of pen names, among which were Cecil Corwin, S. D. Gottesman, and Kenneth Falconer. It was under the last cognomen that this story originally appeared in the pages of a magazine called "Stirring Science Stories," a short-lived venture of the immediate pre-war period. The story is a striking example of the young writer at his most forceful. The tight-lipped, hard-boiled style of presentation carries the tale along relentlessly to a jolting conclusion that may leave you gasping.

The Words of Guru

by C. M. Kornbluth

Y

ESTERDAY, when I was going to meet Guru in the woods a man stopped me and said: "Child, what are you doing out at one in the morning? Does your mother know where you are? How old are you, walking around this late?"

I looked at him, and saw that he was white-haired, so I laughed. Old men never see; in fact men hardly see at all. Sometimes young women see part, but men rarely ever see at all. "I'm twelve on my next birthday," I said. And then, because I would not let him live to tell people, I said, "and I'm out this late to see Guru."

"Guru?" he asked. "Who is Guru? Some foreigner, I suppose? Bad business mixing with foreigners, young fellow. Who is Guru?"

So I told him who Guru was, and just as he began talking about cheap magazines and fairy-tales I said one of the words that Guru taught me and he stopped talking. Because he was an old man and his joints were stiff he didn't crumple up but fell in one piece, hitting his head on the stone. Then I went on.

Even though I'm going to be only twelve on my next birthday I know many things that old people don't. And I remember things that other boys can't. I remember being born out of darkness, and I remember the noises that people made about me. Then when I was two months old I began to understand that the noises meant things like the things that were going on inside my head. I found out that I could make the noises too, and everybody was very much surprised. "Talking!" they said, again and again. "And so very young! Clara, what do you make of it?" Clara was my mother.

And Clara would say: "I'm sure I don't know. There never was any genius in my family, and I'm sure there was none in Joe's." Joe was my father.

Once Clara showed me a man I had never seen before, and told me that he was a reporter—that he wrote things in newspapers. The reporter tried to talk to me as if I were an ordinary baby, I didn't even answer him, but just kept looking at him until his eyes fell and he went away. Later Clara scolded me and read me a little piece in the reporter's newspaper that was supposed to be funny—about the reporter asking me very complicated questions and me answering with baby-noises. It was not true, of course. I didn't say a word to the reporter, and he didn't ask me even one of the questions.

I heard her read the little piece, but while I listened I was watching the slug crawling on the wall. When Clara was finished I asked her: "What is that grey thing?"

She looked where I pointed, but couldn't see it. "What grey thing, Peter?" she asked. I had her call me by my whole name, Peter, instead of anything silly like Petey. "What grey thing?"

"It's as big as your hand, Clara, but soft. I don't think it has any bones at all. It's crawling up, but I don't see any face on the topwards side. And there aren't any legs."

I think she was worried, but she tried to baby me by putting her hand on the wall and trying to find out where it was. I called out whether she was right or left of the thing. Finally she put her hand right through the slug. And then I realized that she really couldn't see it, and didn't believe it was there. I stopped talking about it then and only asked her a few days later: "Clara, what do you call a thing which one person can see and another person can't?"

"An illusion, Peter," she said. "If that's what you mean." I said noth-

ing, but let her put me to bed as usual, but when she turned out the light and went away I waited a little while and then called out softly. "Illusion! Illusion!"

At once Guru came for the first time. He bowed, the way he always has since, and said: "I have been waiting."

"I didn't know that was the way to call you," I said.

"Whenever you want me I will be ready. I will teach you, Peter—if you want to learn. Do you know what I will teach you?"

"If you will teach me about the grey thing on the wall," I said, "I will listen. And if you will teach me about real things and unreal things I will listen."

"These things," he said thoughtfully, "very few wish to learn. And there are some things that nobody ever wished to learn. And there are some things that I will not teach."

Then I said: "The things nobody has ever wished to learn I will learn. And I will even learn the things you do not wish to teach."

He smiled mockingly. "A master has come," he said, half-laughing. "A master of Guru."

That was how I learned his name. And that night he taught me a word which would do little things, like spoiling food.

From that day, to the time I saw him last night he has not changed at all, though now I am as tall as he is. His skin is still as dry and shiny as ever it was, and his face is still bony, crowned by a head of very coarse, black hair.

When I was ten years old I went to bed one night only long enough to make Joe and Clara suppose I was fast asleep. I left in my place something which appears when you say one of the words of Guru and went down the drainpipe outside my window. It always was easy to climb down and up, ever since I was eight years old.

I met Guru in Inwood Hill Park. "You're late," he said.

"Not too late," I answered. "I know it's never too late for one of these things."

"How do you know?" he asked sharply. "This is your first."

"And maybe my last," I replied. "I don't like the idea of it. If I have nothing more to learn from my second than my first I shan't go to another."

"You don't know," he said. "You don't know what it's like—the voices,

and the bodies slick with unguent, leaping flames, mind-filling ritual! You can have no idea at all until you've taken part."

"We'll see," I said. "Can we leave from here?"

"Yes," he said. Then he taught me the word I would need to know, and we both said it together.

The place we were in next was lit with red lights, and I think that the walls were of rock. Though of course there was no real seeing there, and so the lights only seemed to be red, and it was not real rock.

As we were going to the fire one of them stopped us. "Who's with you?" she asked, calling Guru by another name. I did not know that he was also the person bearing that name, for it was a very powerful one.

He cast a hasty, sidewise glance at me and then said: "This is Peter of whom I have often told you."

She looked at me then and smiled, stretching out her oily arms. "Ah," she said, softly, like the cats when they talk at night to me. "Ah, this is Peter. Will you come to me when I call you, Peter? And sometimes call for me—in the dark—when you are alone?"

"Don't do that!" said Guru, angrily pushing past her. He's very young—you might spoil him for his work."

She screeched at our backs: "Guru and his pupil—fine pair! Boy, he's no more real than I am—you're the only real thing here!"

"Don't listen to her," said Guru. "She's wild and raving. They're always tight-strung when this time comes around."

We came near the fires then, and sat down on rocks. They were killing animals and birds and doing things with their bodies. The blood was being collected in a basin of stone, which passed through the crowd. The one to my left handed it to me. "Drink," she said, grinning to show me her fine, white teeth. I swallowed twice from it and passed it to Guru.

When the bowl had passed all around we took off our clothes. Some, like Guru, did not wear them, but many did. The one to my left sat closer to me, breathing heavily at my face. I moved away. "Tell her to stop, Guru," I said. "This isn't part of it, I know."

Guru spoke to her sharply in their own language, and she changed her seat, snarling.

Then we all began to chant, clapping our hands and beating our thighs. One of them rose slowly and circled about the fires in a slow pace, her eyes rolling wildly. She worked her jaws and flung her arms about so sharply that I could hear the elbows crack. Still shuffling her feet against

the rock floor she bent her body backwards down to her feet. Her belly-muscles were bands standing out from her skin, nearly, and the oil rolled down her body and legs. As the palms of her hands touched the ground she collapsed in a twitching heap and began to set up a thin wailing noise against the steady chant and hand-beat that the rest of us were keeping up.

Another of them did the same as the first, and we chanted louder for her and still louder for the third. Then, while we still beat our hands and thighs, one of them took up the third, laid her across the altar and made her ready with a stone knife. The fire's light gleamed off the chipped edge of obsidian. As her blood drained down the groove cut as a gutter into the rock of the altar, we stopped our chant and the fires were snuffed out.

But still we could see what was going on, for these things were, of course, not happening at all—only seeming to happen, really, just as all the people and things there only seemed to be what they were. Only I was real. That must be why they desired me so.

As the last of the fires died Guru excitedly whispered: "The Presence!" He was very deeply moved.

From the pool of blood from the third dancer's body there issued the Presence. It was the tallest one there, and when it spoke its voice was deeper, and when it commanded its commands were obeyed.

"Let blood!" it commanded, and we gashed ourselves with flints. It smiled and showed teeth bigger and sharper and whiter than any of the others.

"Make water!" it commanded, and we all spat on each other. It flapped its wings and rolled its eyes, that were bigger and redder than any of the others.

"Pass flame!" it commanded, and we breathed smoke and fire on our limbs. It stamped its feet, let blue flames roar from its mouth, and they were bigger and wilder than any of the others.

Then it returned to the pool of blood and we lit the fires again. Guru was staring straight before him; I tugged his arm. He bowed as though we were meeting for the first time that night.

"What are you thinking of?" I asked. "We shall go now."

"Yes," he said heavily. "Now we shall go. Then we said the word that had brought us there."

The first man I killed was Brother Paul, at the school where I went to learn the things that Guru did not teach me.

It was less than a year ago, but it seems like a very long time. I have killed so many times since then.

"You're a very bright boy, Peter," said the brother.

"Thank you, brother."

"But there are things about you that I don't understand. Normally I'd ask your parents but—I feel that they don't understand either. You were an infant prodigy, weren't you?"

"Yes, brother."

"There's nothing very unusual about that—glands, I'm told. You know what glands are?"

Then I was alarmed. I had heard of them, but I was not certain whether they were the short, thick green men who wear only metal or the things with many legs with whom I talked in the woods.

"How did you find out?" I asked him.

"But Peter! You look positively frightened, lad! I don't know a thing about them myself, but Father Frederick does. He has whole books about them, though I sometimes doubt whether he believes them himself."

"They aren't good books, brother," I said. "They ought to be burned."

"That's a savage thought, my son. But to return to your own problem—"

I could not let him go any further knowing what he did about me. I said one of the words Guru taught me and he looked at first very surprised and then seemed to be in great pain. He dropped across his desk and I felt his wrist to make sure, for I had not used that word before. But he was dead.

There was a heavy step outside and I made myself invisible. Stout Father Frederick entered, and I nearly killed him too with the word, but I knew that that would be very curious. I decided to wait, and went through the door as Father Frederick bent over the dead monk. He thought he was asleep.

I went down the corridor to the book-lined office of the stout priest and, working quickly, piled all his books in the center of the room and lit them with my breath. Then I went down to the school-yard and made myself visible again when there was nobody looking. It was very easy. I killed a man I passed on the street the next day.

There was a girl named Mary who lived near us. She was fourteen then, and I desired her as those in the Cavern out of Time and Space had desired me.

So when I saw Guru and he had bowed, I told him of it, and he looked at me in great surprise. "You are growing older, Peter," he said.

"I am, Guru. And there will come a time when your words will not be strong enough for me."

He laughed. "Come, Peter," he said. "Follow me if you wish. There is something that is going to be done—" He licked his thin, purple lips and said: "I have told you what it will be like."

"I shall come," I said. "Teach me the word." So he taught me the word and we said it together.

The place we were in next was not like any of the other places I had been to before with Guru. It was No-place. Always before there had been the seeming passage of time and matter, but here there was not even that. Here Guru and the others cast off their forms and were what they were, and No-place was the only place where they could do this.

It was not like the Cavern, for the Cavern had been out of time and space, and this place was not enough of a place even for that. It was No-place.

What happened there does not bear telling, but I was made known to certain ones who never departed from there. All came to them as they existed. They had not color or the seeming of color, or any seeming of shape.

There I learned that eventually I would join with them; that I had been selected as the one of my planet who was to dwell without being forever in that No-place.

Guru and I left, having said the word.

"Well?" demanded Guru, staring me in the eye.

"I am willing," I said. "But teach me one word now—"

"Ah," he said grinning. "The girl?"

"Yes," I said. "The word that will mean much to her."

Still grinning, he taught me the word.

Mary, who had been fourteen, is now fifteen and what they call incurably mad.

Last night I saw Guru again and for the last time. He bowed as I approached him. "Peter," he said warmly.

"Teach me the word," said I.

"It is not too late."

"Teach me the word."

"You can withdraw—with what you master you can master also this world. Gold without reckoning; sardonyx and gems, Peter! Rich crushed velvet—stiff, scraping, embroidered tapestries!"

"Teach me the word."

"Think, Peter, of the house you could build. It could be of white marble, and every slab centered by a winking ruby. Its gate could be of beaten gold within and without and it could be built about one slender tower of carven ivory, rising mile after mile into the turquoise sky. You could see the clouds float underneath your eyes."

"Teach me the word."

"Your tongue could crush the grapes that taste like melted silver. You could hear always the song of the bulbul and the lark that sounds like the dawnstar made musical. Spikenard that will bloom a thousand thousand years could be ever in your nostrils. Your hands could feel the down of purple Himalayan swans that is softer than a sunset cloud."

"Teach me the word."

"You could have women whose skin would be from the black of ebony to the white of snow. You could have women who would be as hard as flints or as soft as a sunset cloud."

"Teach me the word."

Guru grinned and said the word.

Now, I do not know whether I will say that word, which was the last that Guru taught me, today or tomorrow or until a year has passed.

It is a word that will explode this planet like a stick of dynamite in a rotten apple.

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