
AVON
Fantasy
READER No. 6
35¢
The CRAWLING HORROR
by THORP McCLUSKY
Also.. JACK WILLIAMSON
H. P. LOVECRAFT
A. MERRITT

Outstanding Fantasy Classics

Selecting the contents of collections of the best fantastic stories such as make up this unique AVON FANTASY READER series is a pleasurable but responsible problem. The editor's duty is clearly to choose only those stories he feels certain the readers will enjoy, will get a lift out of, and will look forward to rereading again someday. Coupled with this problem is the duty that devolves on the editor to search out primarily those stories which are out of the reach of the average reader—either because the original publication may be lost in obscurity, or because the story in question may be available only in some very expensive or hard-to-get volume, or simply because the average reader has not the time to devote to hunting down the elusive titles of which he has heard and cannot easily locate.

It is the aim of AVON FANTASY READER to combine both these services to the fantasy-reading public. In this number, as in past numbers of this series, we are sure that we have succeeded in accomplishing these purposes. The AVON FANTASY READER remains the only anthology series reprinting classic fantasies which is published at a price within the reach of every pocket.

For instance perhaps the most highly sought-after masters of American fantastic storytelling are A. Merritt and H. P. Lovecraft. In this number we bring rare but excellent tales by both these legendary men. THE DRONE is perhaps Merritt's scarcest short story—a delicate tale of bodily transference that deserves to rank among

the masterpieces of the type. Lovecraft's BEYOND THE WALL OF SLEEP combines in itself virtually all the factors which made "the recluse of Providence" great.

Thorp McClusky's THE CRAWLING HORROR is something different in the realm of fright. A really unique scare concept that will make you rank its basic idea with the pioneering ghoulishness of Dracula and Frankenstein. David H. Keller's THE THING IN THE CELLAR is possibly that well-liked writer's most celebrated tale. Notwithstanding, it has been out of print for very many years.

A. Merritt influenced two choices in this collection. His style and imagery touched off the literary spark in Jack Williamson, whose first short story THE METAL MAN is now made available for the first time since its original publication. During his lifetime, A. Merritt had several times urged Edmond Hamilton, author of THE STAR-STEALERS, to get his wonderful tales of the Interstellar Patrol reprinted. Merritt regarded them, and rightly we think, as outstanding pioneers of the space-flight tale.

Henry S. Whitehead, Joseph E. Kelleam, and Frank R. Stockton also help to round out this selection, each with a story chosen for those special fantasy qualities which would contribute fundamentally to the harmonic integration of the whole book. In the AVON FANTASY READER you are getting the quality and quantity of the best three-dollar anthologies for a price every friend of the unshackled imagination can gladly afford.

—DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

AVON
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NO. 6

Edited By
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

A. MERRITT • H. P. LOVECRAFT

JACK WILLIAMSON • HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

EDMOND HAMILTON • FRANK R. STOCKTON

THORP McCLUSKY • JOSEPH E. KELLEAM

DAVID H. KELLER

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119 West 57th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

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AVON FANTASY READER: No. 6

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Contents

Although it is possible that the basic idea of The Crawling Horror *may have appeared originally in the pages of forgotten Gothic novels or esoteric spook lore, its appearance in Thorp McClusky's chiller is the first to come to our attention. Certainly the antagonist in this tale has never been allocated a name in any of the standard compilations of demonology, being neither vampire, ghoul, ghost, goblin, werewolf, succubus, or anything else out of a satanic thesaurus. It is still quite new to occult records. The idea has appeared since on only a few occasions (most widely known being Don A. Stuart's* Who Goes There?), *and has still not found a permanent name for itself. Several of the collectors of this fearful legendry have affixed a name of their own for this being; they call it a "vombis." From this they have derived an adjective "vombic" which has come to mean in fan circles something like "weirdly sinister." Well, there is no question that the thing in Thorp McClusky's tale is weirdly sinister. But just how thoroughly "vombic" it is, you must see for yourself.*

The Crawling Horror

by Thorp McClusky

I AM ABOUT to set down on paper a sequence of indisputable happenings. At some of the incidents I was personally present, and the story of the others has come to me through the testimony of unimpeachable and trustworthy witnesses.

I am a country physician, having practiced in this single village all my life, as, indeed, my father did before me. The people here are farmers, mostly of Dutch or German descent, with a few Poles and Lithuanians.

About two miles beyond the village Hans Ludwig Brubaker had his farm. The farm is still there, and it is worked by relatives, but Hans has gone. No one definitely knows where, or *what,* he is. We can only guess.

Hans lived there alone. His mother, who outlived Brubaker, senior, died

in 1929 or 1930, and Hans was left by himself. The village naturally assumed that he would presently marry. But, for some obscure reason, he did not, although he showed a decided preference for one young woman.

Now there is no way of definitely knowing just when the strange progression of events, at first of seeming unimportance, began. But, with the whole story complete, although I cannot say *when* it began, I can tell *how* it began. I know that, during the first months, Hans did not suspect anything out of the ordinary. Obviously he misunderstood, and so ignored, the small beginnings which led slowly, step by step, toward horror. He told me, possibly three months ago, how it had begun.

"I thought the rats were fighting, at first," he explained, with the uneasy, deprecatory laugh of the person who does not expect to be believed. "There was a powerful lot of rats about the place; the cats kept them down somewhat, but there always seemed to be more growing up, scratching and squeaking in the walls.

"But the idea of their *fighting;* I remember thinking that there must be one awful big fellow in there somewhere. I could hear him scuffle, and then —*plop!*—down he'd come off a crossbeam between the walls, soft and heavy-like.

"And the cats heard him, too. I watched them for a few weeks, snooping around, excited-like, heard that big fellow go *plop* every once in a while, listened to the squeaking and running in the walls that seemed, somehow, scared. The idea got into my head that the big one was a killer. He was, too, there's not a doubt of it. Whenever he was in one place the rest were elsewhere; the mice began to desert the house for the barn. My cats got quite a number of them that way.

"Along about then a strange thing happened. One day I noticed a strange cat hanging around; white, she was, and pretty. She stayed around the porch while I was feeding my own cats, and I tried to pet her and feed her, but she wouldn't come near me and she wouldn't eat—seemed interested only in Peter, a big tiger-cat of mine.

"Well, that was natural, even if it did seem funny that she wouldn't eat. Peter watched her some, and that night he stayed out.

"He never came back. And I never heard the big rat, from that night on, in the walls again.

"You know how cats are around a farm—they earn their keep, and they're good company. I always had seven or eight, sometimes as many as

a dozen of them. And my cats began to disappear, one by one. In two weeks there were only a couple left.

"I couldn't understand it; I remember that I began to think somebody was poisoning them. The two that were left looked sick and scared, too, as if they knew something was wrong, and then, one day, they went away, and never came back.

"Even then I didn't have any suspicions that came near the truth, and for quite a while after that I didn't notice anything.

"But it began again. This night was colder, I remember. It must have been around the first of November. I had a chunk fire going. It was evening, and I was sitting with my feet in the oven. My shoes were on the floor on the left side of the chair, a big Morris chair that's in the kitchen—the fire was nice and warm, the doors were all shut, and I was smoking my pipe.

"The house was still as death; one of my two collie dogs was outside somewhere, and the other one, Nan, was lying close to the stove at my right, a foot or so from my chair, soaking in the warmth, sleeping. It must have been about half past nine; it certainly wasn't later than that.

"I enjoy that last hour or so before I get into bed; everything is done for the day and I can lie back and rest and think. I had everything arranged for solid comfort, the chair-back was set just right, and my pipe was going good.

"Looking back, now, and trying to remember, I must have dozed off for a few minutes. I forget whether I put my pipe out or not—maybe it just hung loose in my left hand and went out of itself; anyway, I found it on the floor beside the stove, afterward. Yes, I was probably just sleeping, with the pipe dangling in my hand.

"My right arm was hanging from the chair arm, limp-like, and as I began to come out of that little snooze I reached down to stroke the dog. But as I came wide awake I realized that there was something queer about that thing under my hand, beside my chair.

"It didn't *feel* like a dog's back. It was the right distance from the floor, but it was slippery, and there wasn't any hair on it. My hand kept moving, but right off I knew that, whatever I was petting, it wasn't any dog. I had the idea that if I pressed my hand down I could push my fingers right into it.

"All this took a lot less time than in the telling—maybe three or four seconds. I began to be scared. I turned to look, and God knows what I expected to see—certainly nothing like what was there.

"It was a slimy sort of stuff, transparent-looking, without any shape to it. It looked as though if you picked it up it would drip right through your fingers. And it was alive—I don't know how I knew that, but I was sure of it even before I looked. It was alive, and a sort of shapeless arm of it lay across the dog's back and covered her head. She didn't move.

"I guess I yelled then, Doctor Kurt, and I jumped out of the chair and reached for the poker. That slimy thing hadn't moved, but I knew that if it wanted to it could move like lightning. It was heavy-looking, too; I remember thinking that it must have weighed about fifty pounds.

"I hit at the thing with a poker, and quick as thought the whole mess started sliding across the floor, stretching out as worms do, oozing under the crack beneath the door that leads onto the porch. Before I knew it the thing was gone.

"I looked at Nan. She hadn't moved, and she seemed asleep. I shook her until she opened her eyes. And her eyes looked *dead*. . . .

"Well, Doctor Kurt, you'll believe me when I tell you that I didn't sleep that night. I caught myself listening for noises, not that I knew what to listen for, except the sound of that thing sliding back into the house again; for I remembered that it could go through a crack! If I looked once around that kitchen, everywhere, I looked a hundred times.

"Peg didn't come back all night. That was strange, because she usually stayed right around close. It was just as though she was afraid.

"As it was just getting light Peg came up on the porch. I was glad to hear her, and I let her in quick. Then she saw Nan.

"She made a funny sort of howling noise, and her ears dropped flat against her head. Then she went for Nan. Froth was beginning to run from her mouth—it was just as though, although she was trying to kill Nan, she was deathly afraid. It wasn't pretty to see.

"Nan didn't fight back. She just lay there, as though she didn't see what it was, as though she didn't know enough to try to fight, or run. If I hadn't dragged Peg off, Nan would have been dead in another minute. And even after I had put Peg outdoors Nan didn't move much; she just shuddered a little, and she didn't even lick at the places where the blood was running down.

"I had to shoot her, then. It made me sick to do it. Then I dragged her out off the back porch and went to the barn to do the milking. I didn't eat any breakfast. I felt sick to the stomach.

"After I had finished the chores around the barn I got a shovel and went back to the house.

"*Nan's body was gone.* There wasn't a sign of her—not a bone or a patch of hair—nothing but a clean scuffed place in the grass. At first I thought I might have made a mistake; maybe I had left her around the other side of the house. But I went around to the front porch, and Nan was nowhere.

"The funny thing, Doctor Kurt, is that somehow I knew that it would happen just like it did.

"I didn't say anything to anybody, then. I just watched, and waited. And a few weeks later I saw the dog that looked like Nan, Doctor Kurt. It was Nan, yet it wasn't. I saw her hanging around the barnyard, and I whistled to her, absent-minded, and then I remembered that Nan was dead. But it looked like Nan, and I knew that it was waiting for Peg to come out.

"I knew that it wasn't Nan, Doctor Kurt, because it didn't come when I whistled.

"Two or three times that week I saw that dog that looked like Nan and that wasn't Nan hanging around, and each time she looked thinner and weaker. And then, after a few days, I didn't see her any more. She had just gone away.

"For two weeks nothing happened. Then, one day, I spotted a strange dog, a big dog, hanging around. And that night Peg vanished. She never came back.

"You can see how it was, Doctor Kurt? I began to see a sort of pattern to it. First the mice, then the cats, then the dogs. I got to wondering if it would get the cattle next, or maybe the people."

Abruptly, Hans paused. I think that, then, I carried it off perfectly. I did not utter a word, but merely waited impassively. Whatever I did, or omitted to do, it gave Hans confidence, for after a moment he went on.

"Doctor Kurt, as sure as I'm sitting here, it's gone from animals to humans!"

"Humans?" I asked.

Hans nodded. "It's happened," he said softly. "One afternoon, three weeks ago, I was standing in the yard—you know that along about then we were having stiff frosts every morning and night? I saw this strange boy coming down the road.

"He wasn't more than twelve or thirteen years old, and he was wearing odds and ends of clothes that looked as though he had picked them up any-

where. I looked at him, and right away I knew that he was a runaway.

"The kid as he walked along kept looking at the house as if he had half a mind to stop. But he didn't stop, just went on past, slowly, looking back from time to time. I went down the driveway, and I almost called out to him, but I didn't. It was as if something inside me said, 'Don't call—that thing you see there isn't a boy, it's Death in the shape of a boy.' That's what I seemed to think, Doctor Kurt; I was scared, and ashamed, too. I was so ashamed that I went right down to the road with the idea of yelling at the boy. Then I happened to look down at my feet.

"You know I told you that there had been a frost, Doctor Kurt? It was cold enough all night to form good solid ice. And there had been a thaw for a couple of days beforehand. Well, that slushy stuff in the road had frozen, not hard enough to hold a horse or a cow, but plenty hard enough to hold a fairly heavy man, because when I walked on it it didn't crack or break except once in every five or six steps. But where that kid had walked, the ice was broken at every step—and he looked to weigh not more than half what I do!

"I looked at those tracks in the frozen slush, Doctor Kurt, and then I turned around and walked to the house. I knew then that the thing had come back. Maybe my house is home to it; maybe, because it began in my house, it likes to come back.

"I wanted to tell, then. But I didn't dare; I was afraid people would laugh. But I'm going to tell now, because two days ago the Peterson kid disappeared, and he hasn't come back. And what's more, he'll never come back! He's part of that thing that began in my walls, with the rats."

Hans stopped speaking. I knew that there was nothing more for him to tell. The room was oddly silent. Presently he asked, "What can be done about it?"

I didn't know what to say. But I felt that I should say something, should try, at least, to quiet the man's nerves.

"Go home," I advised at last, gently. "Get a good night's sleep, and come back tomorrow. I'll have thought it over by then."

II

That night I sat up late, pondering the story Hans had told me. Perhaps, at that time, I almost believed him. And in the morning, as I had expected, he returned.

It all looked much more impossible in the bright light of mid-morning than it had looked the evening before. I grasped at the idea that, although something extremely strange might be going on, yet the explanation might come, presently, of itself, in a purely matter-of-fact manner. In effect, that is what I told Brubaker.

Hans went away disappointed, almost angry. And not more than twenty minutes after he left my office, Hilda Lang came in. She seemed extraordinarily perturbed.

"Doctor Kurt," she began abruptly, "do you think that Hans is crazy?"

"Why do you ask?" I returned. Talking with her was different from talking with Hans. She was a beautiful young woman, tall, long-waisted, slender-limbed, with fair blue eyes and yellow hair and a gloriously clear skin. There was something imperiously demanding about her that disturbed me.

She looked at me. Then she made a curious, impatient gesture. "Oh, don't pretend. You know that Hans came to you yesterday with a story. He has told me the same things that he told you. Doctor Kurt—you know about —all this. Do you think he is crazy?"

I shook my head. "Don't worry on that account, Hilda. Hans is not crazy. He may be fooled, he may even be fooling himself; but he is sane."

Hilda sighed in relief. "Thank God for that. I was worried." Then, as a sudden, new thought struck her, she leaned forward tensely. "But if he is sane his story is true!"

She paused. I said nothing.

"I'm going to marry him," she said abruptly. "He's been afraid of this thing long enough. If there's nothing to it, it shouldn't keep us apart. And if he's in danger, two people in that lonely house are better than one."

I waited a long time, while the room hung silent, before I replied. "You believe in this danger, then?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe in it. As I believe in Hans, I believe in it."

And, in a little while, she went away....

For the rest of the week I went about my usual routine. Hans, of course, did not come back. But I learned that he suddenly married Hilda, and that they were living at the Brubaker farm. A day or two later I drove out to see them.

Hans was working about the back of the house as I drove into the yard. He straightened slowly, put down the tools from his hands, and walked over to the car. He looked tired, as though he had not been sleeping well.

Shutting off the motor, I climbed from the car. Then, while I was close to him, Hans whispered hoarsely, "There is danger here, Doctor Kurt—I can feel it. I watch every night, Doctor. I have seen things that I haven't told *her* about. I can't tell her. I want to sell the place and go away, where it's safe. But Hilda laughs—she hasn't seen the things I've seen."

"Just what have you seen?" I asked.

He looked at me eagerly. "Come to the house, tonight, after Hilda has gone to bed," he whispered.

I nodded. Then we were at the kitchen door and there was Hilda, smiling, beautiful in her tall, strong fairness, welcoming me to her home. . . .

That night, at eleven o'clock, I returned down the rutted road that led to the Brubaker farm. It was abysmally dark, but it was not cold. I remember thinking that it might snow before morning. Long before I reached the Brubakers' I could see two tiny yellow lights at the back of the house, the kitchen and the back bedroom. I drove past the house a hundred yards, parked the car alongside the road, and returned to the house on foot.

I did not look at my watch; so I do not know how long I stood outside in the driveway. Waiting like that seems interminable, I know. And, obviously, I could not come in until Hilda was asleep.

At last both lights were put out, almost simultaneously, and in a few minutes, as I had expected, the light in the kitchen flared up again. I walked softly to the rear door and knocked.

Hans let me in immediately. I stepped into the kitchen, my eyes slightly dazzled by the brilliance within, and it was not until I had been comfortably seated beside the table that I noticed, with a start, what Hans was doing.

He was sealing the bedroom door off from the kitchen with wax, making the passageway between the two rooms hermetically tight! He worked with the rapidity of one who does a task he has performed before. Presently he had sealed the doorway in its entirety. Then he put the remaining mass of wax in a piece of brown paper and carefully hid it way behind the woodbox in the corner. He came across the room and sat down close beside me. We talked in whispers.

"I'm learning, all the time, what the thing can do," he told me. "It came back three days ago. But I'm tired, tired to death. I haven't slept."

I looked at him, at the reddish, bloodshot color of his eyes, at his sunken cheeks.

"Why don't you sleep now?" I suggested. "I'll watch."

He looked at me eagerly. "You're safe. It can't come in unless you're asleep, or unless you invite it in. I've learned that. But if anything happens, wake me!"

I nodded. "It'll be all right. Don't worry."

Exhausted, he lay back and closed his eyes. He fell asleep almost at once.

Outside it had begun to snow, and the soft, heavy flakes made a steady rustling against the window. I looked out curiously; I noticed that the window had been nailed shut and the crevices stuffed with putty and painted over. I went outside impulsively and looked at the bedroom windows. They too were nailed and puttied tight, and I saw that the whole back end of the house had been freshly painted.

"He's got those two rooms airtight and watertight, all right," I thought.

Back in the kitchen again, I remembered, uneasily, that I was supposed to be on watch. But nothing had happened. Hans still slept, the fire still burned softly, the snow drifted and fell away from the black window-pane.

And then, abruptly as a flash of lightning striking into the room, the whole calmness with which I had surrounded myself, my whole sense of security, vanished as though it had never been. Not that there was any physical happening. There was nothing, in that sense. But there was a sudden, sweeping realization that some mighty, malignant force had turned its whole attention upon the house....

I sat up sharply and walked to the door, where I stood listening. There was no sound from outside, and the snow, I could see out of the corner of my eye as I half glanced at the window, was still falling steadily. I waited, perhaps five minutes. And still that terrible awareness of some horrible force overhanging, impending, persisted. Then I threw the door wide, and stepped out upon the back porch. But nothing was there.

I turned back into the kitchen. And then I saw, fleetingly, something move at the kitchen window.

The window was beyond the table, beyond the light, beyond Hans' sleeping figure. It was grayish with the constant touching of fingers of snow. And it seemed to me that, for a second, I saw something slipping down the window-pane, something that clung to the pane like a colorless jelly, almost like a wave of watery foam, almost like a nothingness that moved heavily down the window-pane and disappeared below the sill.

The glimpse, or vision, whatever it was, was fragmentary. I remember that I thought, even as I crossed the floor toward the window to look out,

that it might well be illusion. But when I reached the window I paused stock-still, pondering.

The snow had been wiped cleanly from the sill, better than it could have been done with a broom. And I realized that here at last was evidence, physical evidence, that something had been pressed down upon the sill, a few moments ago, for I could yet count the flakes as they fell thickly upon the still bare wood.

My lips moving unconsciously while I uttered soundless words, I stood there, watching the snow fall rustling upon the sill until the wood was again unbrokenly sheathed with white. *Something* had swept that snow away!

I went outdoors again, and stood again outside the window in the snow. I looked down, and at my feet the snow had been packed down. And, leading away from the house for a short distance, I saw a sharply marked track, like the trail that might be made by rolling a large ball. And beyond the rectangle of light that the window loosed into the snow-ridden gloom, that track became a trail of human footprints!

Then my courage deserted me. Only one thought remained in my mind, to get back into that house as fast as I could. I got back into the kitchen at once.

Hans was awake. The cold air from the open door had roused him. He looked at me, at first uncomprehendingly, then alertly, and I saw that he knew, pretty well, what had happened. He sat up, stretching muscles stiff from sleeping half erect in a chair.

"Did someone come to the door?" he asked.

I shook my head, pointing to the window. "There was a sort of gray fog against the window. It lasted only a moment. I went outside. There are tracks in the snow."

Hans looked at me queerly. "Tracks like nothing on earth, or human tracks?"

My voice was harsh and high-pitched as I answered, "Tracks like—both!"

As the day slowly lightened, Hans stripped the molding of wax from the bedroom door, shaped it between his hands, and affixed it to the lump behind the woodbox. I left the house before Hilda awoke, and returned to the village.

At twilight I drove my car again into the Brubaker yard, and walked to

the house, grayish, apprehensive-seeming in the falling darkness. Entering the house I realized at once that Hans had told Hilda everything. Stamped on the faces and engraved in the speech of both man and wife was a determination to fight the thing that threatened their home.

Hilda—brave girl!—brought out a pinochle deck. But before we could sit down to play there came an interruption.

A car turned into the driveway, pulled up beside the house, and a farmer came in, a man named Brandt, who lived near by. He shook his head when Hans asked him to sit down.

"My Bertha!" he stammered eagerly; "have you seen anything of her?"

I felt a tingle of fear.

"She's gone! She's run away—she's been going around too much with that Irish Catholic, Fagan. I put my foot down. 'I'll run away, papa!' she told me. And now she's done it. She's gone. Did she walk to town? Two miles?"

"It's a bad night out," Hilda said doubtfully.

"I think that if you inquire at the houses along the road you'll probably find her," I said.

Presently the man went out. "Do you think it was—that?" Hans asked, when he had gone.

I shook my head. It was perfectly plain what had happened.

We began to play pinochle. And nothing out of the ordinary occurred. The malignant influence seemed to have departed the vicinity, the house seemed more than usually cozy and peaceful, and from time to time I caught myself wondering if, after all, I might not be acting like a fool.

III

The next night, also, nothing happened. Hans, with his first-hand knowledge of the thing, suggested that it had "fed" elsewhere, and that there would be a quiescent period. And, feeling that I was neglecting my practice, I stayed away from the farm for a few days. But, late Saturday afternoon, I found a note from Hans.

"It has come back," he had written.

After supper I took my car and drove out to the Brubaker Farm. There had been a heavy thaw which had held on for several days; the roads were mere ribbons of mud and dirty ice.

Both husband and wife looked inhumanly tired. I noticed that Hans had not shaved for two or three days.

"We didn't want to trouble you," he told me. "We've slept a little, in the daytime, taking turns. But even in the day we can feel the thing near the house. And we're deathly tired."

"Sit quietly and don't speak," Hilda said softly, "and you will feel it."

I sat as she had asked, and, striking inward at me, I could sense the same crawling horror that I had known before. I looked at the others.

"Yes, I can feel it. But Hans—Hilda—you're utterly exhausted. Lie down now and rest. I'll watch."

Hans nodded eagerly toward Hilda.

"Lie down and try to sleep, darling. Doctor Kurt will sit up with me. It will be safe."

Hilda stood up uncertainly and went into the bedroom. I poured out half a tumblerful of brandy, diluted it with water, and made Hans drain the glass. The liquor seemed to strengthen him, and I talked.

"We can beat this thing in two ways, Hans. We know that it is a mass of dead-alive cells controlled by a deathless malign entity. The Slavic peoples had the right idea when they, as they thought, trapped vampires in their coffins, drove stakes through their hearts, and sealed the coffins. What they did not truly realize was the nature of the being they combated. Because the thing is half physical it has, to an extent, physical limitations. It must sleep. And what, in effect, those old-timers did was to catch their vampire asleep and seal it in a box which, fortunately, happened to be strong enough to resist its physical strength. The stake through the heart meant nothing. It was the airtight, solid coffin that did the business, restrained the thing until, as its physical substance slowly died, so was its spirit rendered homeless.

"Now we know that this entity is strongly attracted to this particular vicinity. In the course of time it will find a permanent place where it can sleep, a barrel, perhaps, or a cistern, or an old trunk, or even a casket, if there's such a thing available. And, if we can find that hiding-place and, while the thing is within, seal its receptacle hermetically tight, we will have beaten it.

"There is yet another way to beat the thing, Hans. That way is for someone to invite it to absorb him, if it can. The entity will try, Hans, for it knows nothing of fear. Then, if the man's will is greater, the man will win.

Otherwise the thing will absorb him, continue to grow, and he will cease to exist."

Hans' eyes were closed. But when I stopped speaking he roused himself enough to mutter, "I'm—falling—asleep." Then his head drooped forward heavily.

Leisurely, I opened a book, and began to read. A night of wakefulness lay ahead.

The hours slipped slowly by. I could hear Hilda, through the half-opened bedroom door, breathing slowly and deeply. Hans, beside me, snored irregularly.

It was close to three when I heard footsteps sloshing up the driveway, passing around behind the house, hesitating, slowly ascending the steps. Then a knock.

Looking back now I think that, at that moment, I was horribly afraid, even though a revolver lay on the table and I certainly had no lurking fear that the thing would walk up to the house like that.

My body chilled with fear, I opened the door. And then I exclaimed with relief, for, outside on the porch, bedraggled with mud and slush, stood eighteen-year-old Bertha Brandt. She wore a shapeless, dirty, unpressed coat. When she saw me she shrank back away from the door.

"Bertha, you poor kid! Come in, and dry out those wringing wet clothes and tell me what's wrong."

I noticed that she looked curiously at Hans.

"There's been sickness," I explained, hurriedly. "Nothing serious—Hans has been up two or three nights." I looked at her squarely. "So you're back!"

She glanced at me timidly. "You know, then, that I ran away?"

"Yes, I knew—but here, sit down by the fire. There, take off your coat."

Suddenly, for some unaccountable reason, I remembered *why* I was at Brubaker's at three o'clock in the morning; I remembered all that Hans had told me about the strange white cat, about the dog that looked like Nan, about the boy who had wandered down the road. . . . I laughed, then, at the silliness of it.

"This is Bertha, all right," I told myself. "She's the same girl she always was, right as rain, except that she's a little tired."

And, almost aping my thought, Bertha said, "Could I lie down beside Hilda? I daren't go home tonight . . . I daren't!"

I was pottering around the stove with my back turned toward the girl,

trying to warm over some coffee. "Lie down beside Hilda?" I said absently. "In a minute . . . in a minute."

I went to the corner cupboard and found a cup and saucer. Then I poured out the coffee, doctored it plentifully with milk and sugar, and turned back to Bertha. She was not in the room.

"Bertha?" I called softly.

The crawling, cold sensation had begun again at the base of my spine. To my inexpressible relief her voice answered from the bedroom. "Here, Doctor Kurt. I'm *so* tired!"

"Come and get your coffee. Then you can lie down and rest. What you need now is food."

"I know," she answered slowly. "But I'm *so* tired. And you said that 'in a minute' I could lie down with Hilda. It's been a minute."

Just like a child! But I was impatient. "You mustn't lie on Hilda's bed while you're all dirty. You'll have to wash first."

There was a little pause. Then the voice answered, still softly, "Hilda won't mind. Hilda's asleep. Hilda's *sound* asleep."

I went to the doorway and stood there uncertainly, half in gloom, half in brightness. I could see the figures of the two women lying on the bed, close against each other—almost, my imagination told me, melting together.

"Come, Bertha," I said mildly. "You're dirtying Hilda's bed."

There was no answer. As my eyes became more accustomed to the dimness I could see that, there on the bed, there were no longer two women. The two bodies were pressing together like ghastly Siamese twins, dissolving together into one.

My heart, in that instant, froze like a lump of ice. Somehow, my whole body trembling horribly, I leaped across the half-darkened room, knelt on the bed and dug frenzied fingers into the thing that had looked like Bertha and that was now *eating* the sleeping woman, dissolving her as might a powerful acid.

My fingers, beneath the muddy, tattered garments, sank deep, not into the firm flesh of a living girl, but into a yielding mass of protoplasmic slime!

Then I screamed. And, as I fought and tore at the flaccid, jelly-like mess I screamed again and again without pause, like a madman, without hearing my own voice, knowing only, from the tautness of my throat and the beating of my breath, that I shrieked.

It was like trying to grasp something that would not be grasped. The stuff, beneath the garments, ran like water in a bag. And I saw that the thing was slowly giving up pretense of human shape. The face was changing—the hands and arms and the contours of the body were dissolving. And, in the last second before it melted into shapeless slime, from that vanishing mouth came Bertha Brandt's voice, crying, *"I* didn't do it, Doctor Kurt! I didn't!"

Then the thing was only a mass of jelly, still clinging like some loathsome, colorless leech to Hilda's back and shoulders. My body shrinking, I crawled over it and through it, seized Hilda's arms, and pulled her off the bed onto the floor.

And then I screamed again, for of Hilda there was left only a half a body; her spine lay bare, her ribs curved nakedly, her skull gaped, her entrails drooped across the dingy carpet; it was like a slaughterhouse in hell.

Suddenly the light streaming through the doorway dimmed, and I saw Hans standing there, the gun in his hand. I saw the spurting, red flames, and heard the crash of firing. I saw the pulpy mass on the bed jerk and shiver as each slug tore through it. Then there was silence, yet through the haze of smoke I saw the mess of protoplasmic slime drip slowly off the bed and slide across the floor toward the horrible ruin that had once been a woman. And on my hands and knees I tried to push it back, scooping at it as, unconcernedly, the thing flowed across the floor, between my fingers, and again fastened upon Hilda.

Hans was kneeling beside me. But we couldn't keep the thing away from the dead woman—it wasn't possible.

Then, abruptly, Hans stood up. His face was ghastly white, like the face of a dead man. Without a backward glance he left the corpse with that awful thing still crawling over it, and went out of the room into the kitchen. And there I saw him take a pat of wax from the woodbox, heat it over the stove, and methodically seal the crevices in the kitchen door, leading out onto the porch.

When he had finished he nodded grimly at me, made a wide gesture that included kitchen and bedroom.

"A coffin, Doctor Kurt," he said slowly. "I have made a coffin of these rooms, and sealed the thing in it. When it is slime it cannot escape. And when it is in the shape of a human being we can fight it, so that it cannot unlock the door."

Then he went back into the bedroom. And, slowly, I followed.

We had been in the kitchen only a few minutes, but in those minutes the horror had finished its ghastly work. Nothing remained of Hilda; only a bag of clothes lay there, limply. And, nestling in them, glistened a great mound of watery, jelly-like stuff, faintly quivering, alertly alive.

Then I saw that Hans had brought matches and strips of newspaper. As I watched, he twisted the paper into spills, lit one, and plunged the flaming mass against the globule of colorless life on the floor!

The mound of stuff quivered and writhed, and slid swiftly across the floor. As it sought to escape, Hans, his eyes intent, his stubbled jaws grim, followed it about the room, always keeping the blazing paper torches pressed against the shrinking, unholy thing. The air was becoming thick with rancid smoke, and the odor of burning flesh filled the room.

Stumbling, sobbing, together we attacked the horror. Here and there on the floor and carpet showed brown, charred smears. The thing's silent, sliding atttempts to escape were, somehow, more terrible than if it had cried out in agony. The smoke in the room had become a thick haze.

And then the thing seemed to gather purpose. It rolled swiftly across the bedroom floor, stopped upon the disheveled pile of clothes that Hilda had worn and, as we paused to light fresh spills, it changed.

It reared erect as a fountain might gush up. It put forth arms, developed breasts, overspread itself with color. In the time that it might take to draw a long breath the thing had vanished and a something that we knew to be that same ghastly entity, but that looked as Hilda had looked in life, stood naked there amid the jumbled clothes. Swiftly the entity—for I cannot call it by Hilda's name—stooped and drew about itself the skirt and blouse. Then, barefooted and stockingless, it walked into the kitchen.

Like a man awakening from drugged slumber, Hans leaped before the door, held up a blazing spill.

The thing spoke, and the voice was the voice of Hilda. "I want to go out, Hans." It moved forward slightly.

Hans, his features racked, almost unrecognizable, thrust the blazing paper before him menacingly. "You'll never leave this house. We're going to burn you!"

The thing that looked and spoke like Hilda shook its head, and I gasped to see the wavy, fine blond tresses undulate and shimmer with the gesture. And it smiled.

"You'll never burn me, Hans. I'm a prisoner, Hans. You want to destroy the thing that holds me, but you don't want to burn me to death, Hans. For as yet I haven't suffered, except from your fire. I'm Hilda, Hans!"

Then Hans asked hoarsely, and I saw that the fire was burning his fingers, "How can I know?"

The thing smiled. "You can't know, Hans. But if you destroy me, Hilda suffers. Let me go!"

Then Hans shook his head. "No. We will stay here until you starve, until you rot into nothingness."

Came the inexorable reply, "As I suffer, Hilda suffers. As I starve, she starves."

Hans looked at me, and I could see that he was nerving himself toward an incredibility. "Then, by heaven, Doctor Kurt, I will try *the other way!*"

He looked at the entity, at the thing that looked like Hilda.

"Come, Hilda," he said simply. "If you are a prisoner in that thing before me, hear me. I want to join you. I want to join you, and Bertha, and Nan, and God only knows what other unfortunate creatures with souls who have been overcome. But I do not surrender, and I cannot be beaten by guile. Let the thing come and attempt to subdue me. And help me, Hilda and Bertha and all the rest, help me."

He stood there before the door, his arms extended, his body rigid. And then the horror that looked like Hilda slowly moved forward, a smile on its lips, came closer and closer to him, touched him, was enfolded in his arms, lips touching lips. And Hans' strong arms flexed, and in turn it embraced him, a smile on its sweetly beautiful face. And as they stood there, the man and being whose very nature remains an unanswerable question, I prayed that the good overcome the evil....

For minutes that seemed hours they stood there, motionless. Treading softly, I moved a step forward, and I caught a glimpse of the thing's eyes. And I was comforted, for I seemed to read in them something of humanity that could not have come to them through guile; I sensed that in truth those others who had been engulfed were fighting on the side of the man.

And, as I watched, the horror seemed to become frailer and weaker, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, as, before my eyes, the semblance of Hilda faded into nothingness and only Hans remained, holding tightly clasped in his arms a crumpled skirt and blouse. And even yet for long minutes Hans did not move, and I sensed that still some metamorphosis went

on, some change invisible to human eyes.

But at last Hans moved, and, looking at the bundle of clothes in his arms as might an awakened sleeper, he stroked them tenderly and put them gently down on the table.

At last he spoke to me, and his voice was the voice of the man I had known, but immeasurably more beautiful, immeasurably more strong.

"We worked together, we fought together, Hilda and Bertha and those unfortunate boys and Nan—and you, Doctor Kurt, too. And we have won."

He walked across the floor to the center of the room, and I watched the stout boards give beneath his weight. "And yet I can feel the thing inside me, like a devilish flame that would eat me if it could. It is in me, and I think that it cannot escape. I pray that it never overcome me and escape."

Then he looked at me thoughtfully. "In the eyes of the town, Doctor Kurt, there is a mystery here. Hilda is gone, and Bertha Brandt, and the Peterson boy. So you must go to your home, and you must say that you have been visiting me, and that I am insane. As for me, I will leave a note and go away. And the people will believe that I am a murderer, and that I have run away."

I bowed my head silently. He spoke the truth. He must go away. And the world would believe him a butchering maniac.

For a long time he did not speak, but stood there silently, his head sunk upon his breast, as he thought. Then, "I will walk to your car with you. I thank you—we all thank you—for what you have done. Probably I shall never see you again."

He led me from the house. Then I was sitting in the car, the motor running softly, while Hans stood there before me in the damp snow. He extended his hand.

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," I said inanely.

And, while yet he stood there in the snow beside the house I drove away.

Thus it is that our village believes that Hans murdered with bloodthirsty abandon and then, fearing detction, mysteriously escaped.

I alone know the truth, and the truth weighs heavily upon me. And so I have begun to prepare a record of the true happenings in the Brubaker case, and presently I shall see that this record is brought before the proper authorities.

Meanwhile I wonder: where, and *what,* is Hans?

If you never saw the title and author's name attached to this story, yet were possessed of even a smattering of knowledge of the great horror writers of our day, then you would have no difficulty in realizing that only one man could have written Beyond the Wall of Sleep *and that man would have had to be H. P. Lovecraft. For what other author could combine psychology, local American anthropology, and astronomy with a taste for Dunsanian color-hints, witchcraft forces and demoniacal possession in such a fashion? Who but the late Recluse of Providence with his amazing store of knowledge, his omniscient curiosity about all things, and his passion for cosmic mysteries. It is not mere accident that the second great omnibus collection of Lovecraft's works carried the title of this short story as its banner. For in* Beyond the Wall of Sleep *there is combined all the basic ingredients that have made Lovecraft famed.*

Beyond the Wall of Sleep

by H. P. Lovecraft

I HAVE OFTEN wondered if the majority of mankind ever pause to reflect upon the occasionally titanic significance of dreams, and of the obscure world to which they belong. Whilst the greater number of our nocturnal visions are perhaps no more than faint and fantastic reflections of our waking experiences—Freud to the contrary with his puerile symbolism—there are still a certain remainder whose immundane and ethereal character permits of no ordinary interpretation, and whose vaguely exciting and disquieting effect suggests possible minute glimpses into a sphere of mental existence no less important than physical life, yet separated from that life by an all but impassable barrier. From my experience I cannot doubt but that man, when lost to terrestrial consciousness, is indeed sojourning in another and uncorporeal life of far different nature from the life we know, and of which only the slightest and most indistinct memories linger

after waking. From those blurred and fragmentary memories we may infer much, yet prove little. We may guess that in dreams life, matter, and vitality, as the earth knows such things, are not necessarily constant; and that time and space do not exist as our waking selves comprehend them. Sometimes I believe that this less material life is our truer life, and that our vain presence on the terraqueous globe is itself the secondary or merely virtual phenomenon.

It was from a youthful revery filled with speculations of this sort that I arose one afternoon in the winter of 1900-01, when to the state psychopathic institution in which I served as an interne was brought the man whose case has ever since haunted me so unceasingly. His name, as given on the records, was Joe Slater, or Slaader, and his appearance was that of the typical denizen of the Catskill Mountain region; one of those strange, repellent scions of a primitive Colonial peasant stock whose isolation for nearly three centuries in the hilly fastnesses of a little-traveled countryside has caused them to sink to a kind of barbaric degeneracy, rather than advance with their more fortunately placed brethren of the thickly settled districts. Among these odd folk, who correspond exactly to the decadent element of "white trash" in the South, law and morals are non-existent; and their general mental status is probably below that of any other section of the native American people.

Joe Slater, who came to the institution in the vigilant custody of four state policemen, and who was described as a highly dangerous character, certainly presented no evidence of his perilous disposition when I first beheld him. Though well above the middle stature, and of somewhat brawny frame, he was given an absurd appearance of harmless stupidity by the pale, sleepy blueness of his small watery eyes, the scantiness of his neglected and never-shaven growth of yellow beard, and the listless drooping of his heavy nether lip. His age was unknown, since among his kind neither family records nor permanent family ties exist; but from the baldness of his head in front, and from the decayed condition of his teeth, the head surgeon wrote him down as a man of about forty.

From the medical and court documents we learned all that could be gathered of his case: This man, a vagabond, hunter and trapper, had always been strange in the eyes of his primitive associates. He had habitually slept at night beyond the ordinary time, and upon waking would often talk of unknown things in a manner so bizarre as to inspire fear even in the hearts of an unimaginative populace. Not that his form of language was at all unusual, for he never spoke save in the debased patois of his environment; but the

tone and tenor of his utterances were of such mysterious wildness, that none might listen without apprehension. He himself was generally as terrified and baffled as his auditors, and within an hour after awakening would forget all that he had said, or at least all that had caused him to say what he did; relapsing into a bovine, half-amiable normality like that of the other hill-dwellers.

As Slater grew older, it appeared, his matutinal aberrations had gradually increased in frequency and violence; till about a month before his arrival at the institution had occurred the shocking tragedy which caused his arrest by the authorities. One day near noon, after a profound sleep begun in a whisky debauch at about five of the previous afternoon, the man had roused himself most suddenly, with ululations so horrible and unearthly that they brought several neighbors to his cabin—a filthy sty where he dwelt with a family as indescribable as himself. Rushing out into the snow, he had flung his arms aloft and commenced a series of leaps directly upward in the air; the while shouting his determination to reach some "big, big cabin with brightness in the roof and walls and floor and the loud queer music far away." As two men of moderate size sought to restrain him, he had struggled with maniacal force and fury, screaming of his desire and need to find and kill a certain "thing that shines and shakes and laughs." At length, after temporarily felling one of his detainers with a sudden blow, he had flung himself upon the other in a demoniac ecstasy of blood-thirstiness, shrieking fiendishly that he would "jump high in the air and burn his way through anything that stopped him."

Family and neighbors had now fled in a panic, and when the more courageous of them returned, Slater was gone, leaving behind an unrecognizable pulp-like thing that had been a living man but an hour before. None of the mountaineers had dared to pursue him, and it is likely that they would have welcomed his death from the cold; but when several mornings later they heard his screams from a distant ravine they realized that he had somehow managed to survive, and that his removal in one way or another would be necessary. Then had followed an armed searching-party, whose purpose (whatever it may have been originally) became that of a sheriff's posse after one of the seldom popular state troopers had by accident observed, then questioned and finally joined the seekers. . . .

On the third day Slater was found unconscious in the hollow of a tree, and taken to the nearest jail, where alienists from Albany examined him as soon as his senses returned. To them he told a simple story. He had, he said,

gone to sleep one afternoon about sundown after drinking much liquor. He had awaked to find himself standing bloody-handed in the snow beside his cabin, the mangled corpse of his neighbor Peter Slader at his feet. Horrified, he had taken to the woods in a vague effort to escape from the scene of what must have been his crime. Beyond these things he seemed to know nothing, nor could the expert questioning of his interrogators bring out a single additional fact.

That night Slater slept quietly, and the next morning he awakened with no singular feature save a certain alteration of expression. Doctor Barnard, who had been watching the patient, thought he noticed in the pale blue eyes a certain gleam of peculiar quality, and in the flaccid lips an all but imperceptible tightening, as if of intelligent determination. But when questioned, Slater relapsed into the habitual vacancy of the mountaineer, and only reiterated what he had said on the preceding day.

On the third morning occurred the first of the man's mental attacks. After some show of uneasiness in sleep, he burst forth in a frenzy so powerful that the combined efforts of four men were needed to bind him in a straitjacket. The alienists listened with keen attention to his words, since their curiosity had been aroused to a high pitch by the suggestive yet mostly conflicting and incoherent stories of his family and neighbors. Slater raved for upward of fifteen minutes, babbling in his backwoods dialect of green edifices of light, oceans of space, strange music, and shadowy mountains and valleys. But most of all did he dwell upon some mysterious blazing entity that shook and laughed and mocked at him. This vast, vague personality seemed to have done him a terrible wrong, and to kill it in triumphant revenge was his paramount desire. In order to reach it, he said, he would soar through abysses of emptiness, *burning* every obstacle that stood in his way. Thus ran his discourse, until with the greatest suddenness he ceased. The fire of madness died from his eyes, and in dull wonder he looked at his questioners and asked why he was bound. Dr. Barnard unbuckled the leather harness and did not restore it till night, when he succeeded in persuading Slater to don it of his own volition, for his own good. The man had now admitted that he sometimes talked queerly, though he knew not why.

Within a week or two more attacks appeared, but from them the doctors learned little. On the *source* of Slater's visions they speculated at length, for since he could neither read nor write, and had apparently never heard a legend or fairy-tale, his gorgeous imagery was quite inexplicable. That it

could not come from any known myth or romance was made especially clear by the fact that the unfortunate lunatic expressed himself only in his own simple manner. He raved of things he did not understand and could not interpret; things which he claimed to have experienced, but which he could not have learned through any normal or connected narration. The alienists soon agreed that abnormal dreams were the foundation of the trouble; dreams whose vividness could for a time completely dominate the waking mind of this basically inferior man. With due formality Slater was tried for murder, acquitted on the ground of insanity, and committed to the institution wherein I held so humble a post.

I have said that I am a constant speculator concerning dream-life, and from this you may judge of the eagerness with which I applied myself to the study of the new patient as soon as I had fully ascertained the facts of his case. He seemed to sense a certain friendliness in me, born no doubt of the interest I could not conceal, and the gentle manner in which I questioned him. Not that he ever recognized me during his attacks, when I hung breathlessly upon his chaotic but cosmic word-pictures; but he knew me in his quiet hours, when he would sit by his barred window weaving baskets of straw and willow, and perhaps pining for the mountain freedom he could never again enjoy. His family never called to see him; probably it had found another temporary head, after the manner of decadent mountain folk.

By degrees I commenced to feel an overwhelming wonder at the mad and fantastic conceptions of Joe Slater. The man himself was pitiably inferior in mentality and language alike; but his glowing, titanic visions, though described in a barbarous disjointed jargon, were assuredly things which only a superior or even exceptional brain could conceive. How, I often asked myself, could the stolid imagination of a Catskill degenerate conjure up sights whose very possession argued a lurking spark of genius? How could any backwoods dullard have gained so much as an idea of those glittering realms of supernal radiance and space about which Slater ranted in his furious delirium? More and more I inclined to the belief that in the pitiful personality who cringed before me lay the disordered nucleus of something beyond my comprehension; something infinitely beyond the comprehension of my more experienced, but less imaginative medical and scientific colleagues.

And yet I could extract nothing definite from the man. The sum of all my investigation was, that in a kind of semi-corporeal dream-life Slater wan-

dered or floated through resplendent and prodigious valleys, meadows, gardens, cities, and palaces of light, in a region unbounded and unknown to man; that there he was no peasant or degenerate, but a creature of importance and vivid life, moving proudly and dominantly, and checked only by a certain, deadly enemy, who seemed to be a being of visible yet ethereal structure, and who did not appear to be of human shape, since Slater never referred to it as a *man,* or as aught save a *thing.* This *thing* had done Slater some hideous but unnamed wrong, which the maniac (if maniac he were) yearned to avenge.

From the manner in which Slater alluded to their dwellings, I judged that he and the luminous *thing* had met on equal terms; that in his dream existence the man was himself a luminous *thing* of the same race as his enemy. This impression was sustained by his frequent references to *flying through space* and *burning* all that impeded his progress. Yet these conceptions were formulated in rustic words wholly inadequate to convey them, a circumstance which drove me to the conclusion that if a true dream world indeed existed, oral language was not its medium for the transmission of thought. Could it be that the dream soul inhabiting this inferior body was desperately struggling to speak things which the simple and halting tongue of dullness could not utter? Could it be that I was face to face with intellectual emanations which would explain the mystery if I could but learn to discover and read them? I did not tell the older physicians of these things, for middle age is skeptical, cynical, and disinclined to accept new ideas. Besides, the head of the institution had but lately warned me in his paternal way that I was overworking; that my mind needed a rest.

It had long been my belief that human thought consists basically of atomic or molecular motion, convertible into ether waves of radiant energy like heat, light and electricity. This belief had early led me to contemplate the possibility of telepathy or mental communication by means of suitable apparatus, and I had in my college days prepared a set of transmitting and receiving instruments somewhat similar to the cumbrous devices employed in wireless telegraphy at that crude, pre-radio period. These I had tested with a fellow-student, but achieving no result, had soon packed them away with other scientific odds and ends for possible future use.

Now, in my intense desire to probe into the dream-life of Joe Slater, I sought these instruments again, and spent several days in repairing them for action. When they were complete once more I missed no opportunity for

their trial. At each outburst of Slater's violence, I would fit the transmitter to his forehead and the receiver to my own, constantly making delicate adjustments for various hypothetical wave-lengths of intellectual energy. I had but little notion of how the thought-impressions would, if successfully conveyed, arouse an intelligent response in my brain, but I felt certain that I could detect and interpret them. Accordingly I continued my experiments, though informing no one of their nature. . . .

It was on the twenty-first of February, 1901, that the thing occurred. As I look back across the years I realize how unreal it seems, and sometimes half wonder if old Doctor Fenton was not right when he charged it all to my excited imagination. I recall that he listened with great kindness and patience when I told him, but afterward gave me a nerve-powder and arranged for the half-year's vacation on which I departed the next week.

That fateful night I was wildly agitated and perturbed, for despite the excellent care he had received, Joe Slater was unmistakably dying. Perhaps it was his mountain freedom that he missed, or perhaps the turmoil in his brain had grown too acute for his rather sluggish physique; but at all events the flame of vitality flickered low in the decadent body. He was drowsy near the end, and as darkness fell he dropped off into a troubled sleep.

I did not strap on the straitjacket as was customary when he slept, since I saw that he was too feeble to be dangerous, even if he woke in mental disorder once more before passing away. But I did place upon his head and mine the two ends of my cosmic "radio," hoping against hope for a first and last message from the dream world in the brief time remaining. In the cell with us was one nurse, a mediocre fellow who did not understand the purpose of the apparatus, or think to inquire into my course. As the hours wore on I saw his head droop awkwardly in sleep, but I did not disturb him. I myself, lulled by the rhythmical breathing of the healthy and the dying man, must have nodded a little later.

The sound of weird lyric melody was what aroused me. Chords, vibrations, and harmonic ecstasies echoed passionately on every hand, while on my ravished sight burst the stupendous spectacle of ultimate beauty. Walls, columns, and architraves of living fire blazed effulgently around the spot where I seemed to float in air, extending upward to an infinitely high vaulted dome of indescribable splendor. Blending with this display of palatial magnificence, or rather, supplanting it at times in kaleidoscopic rotation, were glimpses of wide plains and graceful valleys, high mountains and inviting grottoes, cov-

ered with every lovely attribute of scenery which my delighted eyes could conceive of, yet formed wholly of some glowing, ethereal plastic entity, which in consistency partook as much of spirit as of matter. As I gazed, I perceived that my own brain held the key to these enchanting metamorphoses; for each vista which appeared to me was the one my changing mind most wished to behold. Amidst this elysian realm I dwelt not as a stranger, for each sight and sound was familiar to me; just as it had been for uncounted eons of eternity before, and would be for like eternities to come.

Then the resplendent aura of my brother of light drew near and held colloquy with me, soul to soul, with silent and perfect interchange of thought. The hour was one of approaching triumph, for was not my fellow-being escaping at last from a degrading periodic bondage; escaping for ever, and preparing to follow the accursed oppressor even unto the uttermost fields of ether, that upon it might be wrought a flaming cosmic vengeance which would shake the spheres? We floated thus for a little time, when I perceived a slight blurring and fading of the objects around us, as though some force were recalling me to earth—where I least wished to go. The form near me seemed to feel a change also, for it gradually brought its discourse toward a conclusion, and itself prepared to quit the scene, fading from my sight at a rate somewhat less rapid than that of the other objects. A few more thoughts were exchanged, and I knew that the luminous one and I were being recalled to bondage, though for my brother of light it would be the last time. The sorry planet shell being well-nigh spent, in less than an hour my fellow would be free to pursue the oppressor along the Milky Way and past the hither stars to the very confines of infinity.

A well-defined shock separates my final impression of the fading scene of light from my sudden and somewhat shamefaced awakening and straightening up in my chair as I saw the dying figure on the couch move hesitantly. Joe Slater was indeed awaking, though probably for the last time. As I looked more closely, I saw that in the sallow cheeks shone spots of color which had never before been present. The lips, too, seemed unusual, being tightly compressed, as if by the force of a stronger character than had been Slater's. The whole face finally began to grow tense, and the head turned restlessly with closed eyes.

I did not rouse the sleeping nurse, but readjusted the slightly disarranged headbands of my telepathic "radio," intent to catch any parting message the

dreamer might have to deliver. All at once the head turned sharply in my direction and the eyes fell open, causing me to stare in blank amazement at what I beheld. The man who had been Joe Slater, the Catskill decadent, was now gazing at me with a pair of luminous, expanding eyes whose blue seemed subtly to have deepened. Neither mania nor degeneracy was visible in that gaze, and I felt beyond a doubt that I was viewing a face behind which lay an active mind of high order.

At this juncture my brain became aware of a steady external influence operating upon it. I closed my eyes to concentrate my thoughts more profoundly, and was rewarded by the positive knowledge that *my long-sought mental message had come at last.* Each transmitted idea formed rapidly in my mind, and though no actual language was employed, my habitual association of conception and expression was so great that I seemed to be receiving the message in ordinary English.

"*Joe Slater is dead,*" came the soul-petrifying voice of an agency from beyond the wall of sleep. My opened eyes sought the couch of pain in curious horror, but the blue eyes were still calmly gazing, and the countenance was still intelligently animated. "He is better dead, for he was unfit to bear the active intellect of cosmic entity. His gross body could not undergo the needed adjustments between ethereal life and planet life. He was too much an animal, too little a man; yet it is through his deficiency that you have come to discover me, for the cosmic and planet souls rightly should never meet. He has been in my torment and diurnal prison for forty-two of your terrestrial years.

"I am an entity like that which you yourself become in the freedom of dreamless sleep. I am your brother of light, and have floated with you in the effulgent valleys. It is not permitted me to tell your waking earth-self of your real self, but we are all roamers of vast spaces and travelers in many ages. Next year I may be dwelling in the Egypt which you call ancient, or in the cruel empire of Tsan Chan which is to come three thousand years hence. You and I have drifted to the worlds that reel about the red Arcturus, and dwelt in the bodies of the insect-philosophers that crawl proudly over the fourth moon of Jupiter. How little does the earth self know life and its extent! How little, indeed, ought it to know for its own tranquillity!

"Of the oppressor I cannot speak. You on earth have unwittingly felt its distant presence—you who without knowing idly gave the blinking beacon the name of *Algol, the Demon-Star.* It is to meet and conquer the op-

pressor that I have vainly striven for eons, held back by bodily encumbrances. Tonight I go as a Nemesis bearing just and blazingly cataclysmic vengeance. *Watch me in the sky close by the Demon-Star.*

"I cannot speak longer, for the body of Joe Slater grows cold and rigid, and the coarse brains are ceasing to vibrate as I wish. You have been my only friend on this planet—the only soul to sense and seek for me within the repellent form which lies on this couch. We shall meet again—perhaps in the shining mists of Orion's Sword, perhaps on a bleak plateau in prehistoric Asia, perhaps in unremembered dreams tonight, perhaps in some other form an eon hence, when the solar system shall have been swept away."

At this point the thought-waves abruptly ceased, and the pale eyes of the dreamer—or can I say dead man?—commenced to glaze fishily. In a half-stupor I crossed over to the couch and felt of his wrist, but found it cold, stiff, and pulseless. The sallow cheeks paled again, and the thick lips fell open, disclosing the repulsively rotten fangs of the degenerate Joe Slater. I shivered, pulled a blanket over the hideous face, and awakened the nurse. Then I left the cell and went silently to my room. I had an instant and unaccountable craving for a sleep whose dreams I should not remember.

The climax? What plain tale of science can boast of such a rhetorical effect? I have merely set down certain things appealing to me as facts, allowing you to construe them as you will. As I have already admitted, my superior, old Doctor Fenton, denies the reality of everything I have related. He vows that I was broken down with nervous strain, and badly in need of the long vacation on full pay which he so generously gave me. He assures me on his professional honor that Joe Slater was but a low-grade paranoiac, whose fantastic notions must have come from the crude hereditary folk-tales which circulated in even the most decadent of communities. All this he tells me—yet I cannot forget what I saw in the sky on the night after Slater died. Lest you think me a biased witness, another pen must add this final testimony, which may perhaps supply the climax you expect. I will quote the following account of the star *Nova Persei* verbatim from the pages of that eminent astronomical authority, Professor Garrett P. Serviss:

"On February 22, 1901, a marvelous new star was discovered by Doctor Anderson of Edinburgh, *not very far from Algol.* No star had been visible at that point before. Within twenty-four hours the stranger had become so bright that it outshone Capella. In a week or two it had visibly faded, and in the course of a few months it was hardly discernible with the naked eye."

Many a writer owes his initial impetus to the inspiration given him by the work of some older author whose writings have stirred an irresistible desire for emulation. Reading over The Metal Man, *which was the first story to be sold by its author, we can immediately recognize the source of inspiration as the immortal A. Merritt. Unquestionably Jack Williamson must have been moved to authorship by the impact of Merritt's remarkable novel,* The Metal Monster. *Yet this short tale is not just a weak imitation, but original enough and striking enough to have called forth such acclaim for the youthful writer as to launch him on what has become a highly successful career—rising to the top in fantasy reader estimation. A couple of decades after* The Metal Man, *Williamson's first hard-cover book novel has appeared,* The Legion of Space *(Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa.), and soon will be followed with a collection of his best short stories—of which the leader and title-story will be* The Metal Man.

The Metal Man

by Jack Williamson

THE METAL MAN stands in a dark, dusty corner of the Tyburn College Museum. Just who is responsible for the figure being moved there, or why it was done, I do not know. To the casual eye it looks to be merely an ordinary life-size statue. The visitor who gives it a closer view marvels at the minute perfection of the detail of hair and skin; at the silent tragedy in the set, determined expression and poise; and at the remarkable greenish cast of the metal of which it is composed, but, most of all, at the peculiar mark upon the chest. It is a six-sided blot, of a deep crimson hue, with the surface oddly granular and strange wavering lines radiating from it—lines of a lighter shade of red.

Of course it is generally known that the Metal Man was once Professor Thomas Kelvin of the Geology Department. There are current many garbled

and inaccurate accounts of the weird disaster that befell him. I believe I am the only one to whom he entrusted his story. It is to put these fantastic tales at rest that I have decided to publish the narrative that Kelvin sent me.

For some years he had been spending his summer vacations along the Pacific coast of Mexico, prospecting for radium. It was three months since he had returned from his last expedition. Evidently he had been successful beyond his wildest dreams. He did not come to Tyburn, but we heard stories of his selling millions of dollars worth of salts of radium, and giving as much more to institutions employing radium treatment. And it was said that he was sick of a strange disorder that defied the world's best specialists, and that he was pouring out his millions in the establishment of scholarships and endowments as if he expected to die soon.

One cold, stormy day, when the sea was running high on the unprotected coast which the cottage overlooks, I saw a sail out to the north. It rapidly drew nearer until I could tell that it was a small sailing schooner with auxiliary power. She was running with the wind, but a half mile offshore she came up into it and the sails were lowered. Soon a boat had put off in the direction of the shore. The sea was not so rough as to make the landing hazardous, but the proceeding was rather unusual, and, as I had nothing better to do, I went out in the yard before my modest house, which stands perhaps two hundred yards above the beach, in order to have a better view.

When the boat touched, four men sprang out and rushed it up higher on the sand. As a fifth tall man arose in the stern, the four picked up a great chest and started up in my direction. The fifth person followed leisurely. Silently, and without invitation, the men brought the chest up the beach, and into my yard, and set it down in front of the door.

The fifth man, whom I now knew to be a hard-faced Yankee skipper, walked up to me and said gruffly,

"I am Captain McAndrews."

"I'm glad to meet you, Captain," I said, wondering. "There must be some mistake. I was not expecting—"

"Not at all," he said abruptly. "The man in that chest was transferred to my ship from the liner *Plutonia* three days ago. He has paid me for my services, and I believe his instructions have been carried out. Good day, sir."

He turned on his heel and started away.

"A man in the chest!" I exclaimed.

He walked on unheeding, and the seamen followed. I stood and watched

them as they walked down to the boat, and rowed back to the schooner. I gazed at its sails until they were lost against the dull blue of the clouds. Frankly, I feared to open the chest.

At last I nerved myself to do it. It was unlocked. I threw back the lid. With a shock of uncontrollable horror that left me half sick for hours, I saw in it, stark naked, with the strange crimson mark standing lividly out from the pale green of the breast, the Metal Man, just as you may see him in the Museum.

Of course, I knew at once that it was Kelvin. For a long time I bent, trembling and staring at him. Then I saw an old canteen, purple-stained, lying by the head of the figure, and under it, a sheaf of manuscript. I got the latter out, walked with shaken steps to the easy chair in the house, and read the story that follows:

"Dear Russell,

"You are my best—my only—intimate friend. I have arranged to have my body and this story brought to you. I just drank the last of the wonderful purple liquid that has kept me alive since I came back, and I have scant time to finish this necessarily brief account of my adventure. But my affairs are in order and I die in peace. I had myself transferred to the schooner today, in order to reach you as soon as could be and to avoid possible complications. I trust Captain McAndrews. When I left France, I hoped to see you before the end. But Fate ruled otherwise.

"You know that the goal of my expedition was the headwaters of El Rio de la Sangre, 'The River of Blood.' It is a small stream whose strangely red waters flow into the Pacific. On my trip last year I had discovered that its waters were powerfully radioactive. Water has the power of absorbing radium emanations and emitting them in turn, and I hoped to find radium-bearing minerals in the bed of the upper river. Twenty-five miles above the mouth the river emerges from the Cordilleras. There are a few miles of rapids and back of them the river plunges down a magnificent waterfall. No exploring party had ever been back of the falls. I had hired an Indian guide and made a mule-back journey to their foot. At once I saw the futility of attempting to climb the precipitous escarpment. But the water there was even more powerfully radioactive than at the mouth. There was nothing to do but return.

"This summer I bought a small monoplane. Though it was comparatively slow in speed and able to spend only six hours aloft, its light weight and

the small area needed for landing, made it the only machine suitable for use in so rough a country. The steamer left me again on the dock at the little town of Vaca Morena, with my stack of crates and gasoline tins. After a visit to the Alcalde I secured the use of an abandoned shed for a hangar. I set about assembling the plane and in a fortnight I had completed the task. It was a beautiful little machine, with a wing spread of only twenty-five feet.

"Then, one morning, I started the engine and made a trial flight. It flew smoothly and in the afternoon I refilled the tanks and set off for the Rio de la Sangre. The stream looked like a red snake crawling out to the sea—there was something serpentine in its aspect. Flying high, I followed it, above the falls and into a region of towering mountain peaks. The river disappeared beneath a mountain. For a moment I thought of landing, and then it occurred to me that it flowed subterraneously for only a few miles, and would reappear farther inland.

"I soared over the cliffs and came over the crater.

"A great pool of green fire it was, fully ten miles across to the black ramparts at the farther side. The surface of the green was so smooth that at first I thought it was a lake, and then I knew that it must be a pool of heavy gas. In the glory of the evening sun the snow-capped summits about were brilliant argent crowns, dyed with crimson, tinged with purple and gold, tinted with strange and incredibly beautiful hues. Amid this wild scenery, nature had placed her greatest treasure. I knew that in the crater I would find the radium I sought.

"I circled about the place, rapt in wonder. As the sun sank lower, a light silver mist gathered on the peaks, half veiling their wonders, and flowed toward the crater. It seemed drawn with a strange attraction. And then the center of the green lake rose up in a shining peak. It flowed up into a great hill of emerald fire. Something was rising in the green—carrying it up! Then the vapor flowed back, revealing a strange object, still veiled faintly by the green and silver clouds. It was a gigantic sphere of deep red, marked with four huge oval spots of dull black. Its surface was smooth, metallic, and thickly studded with great spikes that seemed of yellow fire. It was a machine, inconceivably great in size. It spun slowly as it rose, on a vertical axis, moving with a deliberate, purposeful motion.

"It came up to my own level, paused and seemed to spin faster. And the silver mist was drawn to the yellow points, condensing, curdling, until the

whole globe was a ball of lambent argent. For a moment it hung, unbelievably glorious in the light of the setting sun, and then it sank—ever faster—until it dropped like a plummet into the sea of green.

"And with its fall a sinister darkness descended upon the desolate wilderness of the peaks, and I was seized by a fear that had been deadened by amazement, and realized that I had scant time to reach Vaca Morena before complete darkness fell. Immediately I put the plane about in the direction of the town. According to my recollections, I had, at the time, no very definite idea of what it was I had seen, or whether the weird exhibition had been caused by human or natural agencies. I remember thinking that in such enormous quantities as undoubtedly the crater contained it, radium might possess qualities unnoticed in small amounts, or, again, that there might be present radioactive minerals at present unknown. It occurred to me also that perhaps some other scientists had already discovered the deposits and that what I had witnessed had been the trial of an airship in which radium was utilized as a propellent. I was considerably shaken, but not much alarmed. What happened later would have seemed incredible to me then.

"And then I noticed that a pale bluish luminosity was gathering about the cowl of the cockpit, and in a moment I saw that the whole machine, and even my own person, was covered with it. It was somewhat like St. Elmo's Fire, except that it covered all surfaces indiscriminately, instead of being restricted to sharp points. All at once I connected the phenomenon with the thing I had seen. I felt no physical discomfort, and the motor continued to run, but as the blue radiance continued to increase, I observed that my body felt heavier, and that the machine was being drawn downward! My mind was flooded with wonder and terror. I fought to retain sufficient self-possession to fly the ship. My arms were soon so heavy that I could hold them upon the controls only with difficulty, and I felt a slight dizziness, due, no doubt, to the blood's being drawn from my head. When I recovered, I was already almost upon the green. Somehow, my gravitation had been increased and I was being drawn into the pit! It was possible to keep the plane under control only by diving and keeping at a high speed.

"I plunged into the green pool. The gas was not suffocating, as I had anticipated. In fact, I noticed no change in the atmosphere, save that my vision was limited to a few yards around. The wings of the plane were still distinctly discernible. Suddenly a smooth, sandy plain was murkily revealed below, and I was able to level the ship off enough for a safe landing. As I

came to a stop I saw that the sand was slightly luminous, as the green mist seemed to be, and red. For a time I was confined to the ship by my own weight, but I noticed that the blue was slowly dissipating, and with it, its effect.

"As soon as I was able, I clambered over the side of the cockpit, carrying my canteen and automatic, which were themselves immensely heavy. I was unable to stand erect, but I crawled off over the coarse, shining, red sand, stopping at frequent intervals to lie flat and rest. I was in deathly fear of the force that had brought me down. I was sure it had been directed by intelligence. The floor was so smooth and level that I supposed it to be the bottom of an ancient lake.

"Sometimes I looked fearfully back, and when I was a hundred yards away I saw a score of lights floating through the green toward the airplane. In the luminous murk each bright point was surrounded by a disc of paler blue. I made no movement, but lay and watched them. They floated to the plane and wheeled about it with a slow, heavy motion. Closer and lower they came until they reached the ground about it. The mist was so thick as to obscure the details of the scene.

"When I went to resume my flight, I found my excess of gravity almost entirely gone, though I went on hands and knees for another hundred yards to escape possible observation. When I got to my feet, the plane was lost to view. I walked on for perhaps a quarter of a mile and suddenly realized that my sense of direction was altogether gone. I was completely lost in a strange world, inhabited by beings whose nature and disposition I could not even guess! And then I realized that it was the height of folly to walk about when any step might precipitate me into a danger of which I could know nothing. I had a peculiarly unpleasant feeling of helpless fear.

"The luminous red sand and the shining green of the air lay about in all directions, unbroken by a single solid object. There was no life, no sound, no motion. The air hung heavy and stagnant. The flat sand was like the surface of a dead and desolate sea. I felt the panic of utter isolation from humanity. The mist seemed to come closer; the strange evil in it seemed to grow more alert. . . .

"Suddenly a darting light passed meteor-like through the green above and in my alarm I ran a few blundering steps. My foot struck a light object that rang like metal. The sharpness of the concussion filled me with fear, but in an instant the light was gone. I bent down to see what I had kicked.

"It was a metal bird—an eagle formed of metal—with the wings outspread, the talons gripping, the fierce beak set open. The color was white, tinged with green. It weighed no more than the living bird. At first I thought it was a cast model, and then I saw that each feather was complete and flexible. Somehow, a real eagle had been turned to metal! It seemed incredible, yet here was the concrete proof. I wondered if the radium deposits, which I had already used to explain so much, might account for this too. I knew that science held transmutation of elements to be possible—had even accomplished it in a limited way, and that radium itself was the product of the disintegration of ionium; and ionium that of uranium.

"I was struck with fright for my own safety. Might I be changed to metal? I looked to see if there were other metal things about. And I found them in abundance. Half-buried in the glowing sands were metal birds of every kind—birds that had flown over the surrounding cliffs. And, at the climax of my search, I found a pterosant—a flying reptile that had invaded the pit in ages past—changed to ageless metal. Its wing spread was fully fifteen feet—it would be a treasure in any museum.

"I made a fearful examination of myself, and to my unutterable horror, I perceived that the tips of my finger nails, and the fine hairs upon my hands, *were already changed to light green metal!* The shock unnerved me completely. You cannot conceive my horror. I screamed aloud in agony of soul, careless of the terrible foes that the sound might attract. I ran off wildly. I was blind, unreasoning. I felt no fatigue as I ran, only stark terror.

"Bright, swift-moving lights passed above in the green, but I heeded them not. Suddenly I came upon the great sphere that I had seen above. It rested motionless in a cradle of black metal. The yellow fire was gone from the spikes, but the red surface shone with a metallic luster. Lights floated about it. They made little bright spots in the green, like lanterns swinging in a fog. I turned and ran again, desperately. I took no note of direction, nor of the passage of time.

"Then I came upon a bank of violet vegetation. Waist-deep it was, grass-like, with thick narrow leaves, dotted with clusters of small pink blooms, and little purple berries. And a score of yards beyond I saw a sluggish red stream—El Rio de la Sangre. Here was cover at last. I threw myself down in the violet growth and lay sobbing with fatigue and terror. For a long time I was unable to stir or think. When I looked again at my finger nails, the tips of metal had doubled in width.

"I tried to control my agitation, and to think. Possibly the lights, whatever they were, would sleep by day. If I could find the plane, or scale the walls, I might escape the fearful action of the radioactive minerals before it was too late. I realized that I was hungry. I plucked off a few of the purple berries and tasted them. They had a salty, metallic taste, and I thought they would be valueless for food. But in pulling them I had inadvertently squeezed the juice from one upon my fingers, and when I wiped it off I saw, to my amazement and my inexpressible joy, that the rim of metal was gone from the finger nails it had touched. I had discovered a means of safety! I suppose that the plants were able to exist there only because they had been so developed that they produced compounds counteracting the metal-forming emanations. Probably their evolution began when the action was far weaker than now, and only those able to withstand the more intense radiations had survived. I lost no time in eating a cluster of the berries, and then I poured the water from my canteen and filled it with their juice. I have analyzed the fluid and it corresponds in some ways with the standard formulas for the neutralization of radium burns and doubtless it saved me from the terrible burns caused by the action of ordinary radium.

"I lay there until dawn, dozing a little at times, only to start into wakefulness without cause. It seemed that some daylight filtered through the green, for at dawn it grew paler, and even the red sand appeared less luminous. After eating a few more of the berries, I ascertained the direction in which the stagnant red water was moving, and set off down-stream, toward the west. In order to get an idea of where I was going, I counted my paces. I had walked about two and a half miles, along by the violet plants, when I came to an abrupt cliff. It towered up until it was lost in the green gloom. It seemed to be mostly of black pitchblende. The barrier seemed absolutely unscalable. The red river plunged out of sight by the cliff in a racing whirlpool.

"I walked off north around the rim. I had no very definite plan, except to try to find a way out over the cliffs. If I failed in that, it would be time to hunt the plane. I had a mortal fear of going near it, or of encountering the strange lights I had seen floating about it. As I went I saw none of them. I suppose they slept when it was day.

"I went on until it must have been noon, though my watch had stopped. Occasionally I passed metal trees that had fallen from above, and once, the

metallic body of a bear that had slipped off a path above, some time in past ages. And there were metal birds without number. They must have been accumulating through geological ages. All along up to this, the cliff had risen perpendicularly to the limit of my vision, but now I saw a wide ledge, with a sloping wall beyond it, dimly visible above. But the sheer wall rose a full hundred feet to the shelf, and I cursed at my inability to surmount it. For a time I stood there, devising impractical means for climbing it, driven almost to tears by my impotence. I was ravenously hungry, and thirsty as well.

"At last I went on.

"In an hour I came upon it. A slender cylinder of black metal, that towered a hundred feet into the greenish mist, and carried at the top, a great mushroom-shaped orange flame. It was a strange thing. The fire was as big as a balloon, bright and steady. It looked much like a great jet of combustible gas, burning as it streamed from the cylinder. I stood petrified in amazement, wondering vaguely at the what and why of the thing.

"And then I saw more of them back of it, dimly—scores of them—a whole forest of flames.

"I crouched back against the cliff, while I considered. Here I supposed, was the city of the lights. They were sleeping now, but still I had not the courage to enter. According to my calculations I had gone about fifteen miles. Then I must be, I thought, almost diametrically opposite the place where the crimson river flowed under the wall, with half of the rim unexplored. If I wished to continue my journey, I must go around the city, if I may call it that.

"So I left the wall. Soon it was lost to view. I tried to keep in view of the orange flames, but abruptly they were gone in the mist. I walked more to the left, but I came upon nothing but the wastes of red sand, with the green murk above. On and on I wandered. Then the sand and the air grew slowly brighter and I knew that night had fallen. The lights were soon passing to and fro. I had seen lights the night before, but they traveled high and fast. These, on the other hand, sailed low, and I felt that they were searching.

"I knew that they were hunting for me. I lay down in a little hollow in the sand. Vague, mist-veiled points of light came near and passed. And then one stopped directly overhead. It descended and the circle of radiance grew about it. I knew that it was useless to run, and I could not have done so, for my terror. Down and down it came.

"And then I saw its form. The thing was of a glittering, blazing crystal. A great-six-sided, upright prism of red, a dozen feet in length, it was, with

a six-pointed structure like a snowflake about the center, deep blue, with pointed blue flanges running from the points of the star to angles of the prism! Soft scarlet fire flowed from the points. And on each face of the prism, above and below the star, was a purple cone that must have been an eye. Strange pulsating lights flickered in the crystal. It was alive with light.

"It fell straight toward me!

"It was a terribly, utterly alien form of life. It was not human, not animal—not even life as we know it at all. And yet it had intelligence. But it was strange and foreign and devoid of feeling. It is curious to say that even then, as I lay beneath it, the thought came to me, that the thing and its fellows must have crystallized when the waters of the ancient sea dried out of the crater. Crystallizing salts take intricate forms.

"I drew my automatic and fired three times, but the bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the polished facets.

"It dropped until the gleaming lower point of the prism was not a yard above me. Then the scarlet fire reached out caressingly—flowed over my body. My weight grew less. I was lifted, held against the point. You may see its mark upon my chest. The thing floated into the air, carrying me. Soon others were drifting about. I was overcome with nausea. The scene grew black and I knew no more.

"I awoke floating free in a brilliant orange light. I touched no solid object. I writhed, kicked about—at nothingless. I could not move or turn over, because I could get a hold on nothing. My memory of the last two days seemed a nightmare. My clothing was still upon me. My canteen still hung, or rather floated, by my shoulder. And my automatic was in my pocket. I had the sensation that a great space of time had passed. There was a curious stiffness in my side. I examined it and found a red scar. I believe those crystal things had cut into me. And I found, with a horror you cannot understand, the mark upon my chest. Presently it dawned upon me that I was floating, devoid of gravity and free as an object in space, in the orange flame at the top of one of the black cylinders. The crystals knew the secret of gravity. It was vital to them. And peering about, I discerned, with infinite repulsion, a great flashing body, a few yards away. But its inner lights were dead, so I knew that it was day, and that the strange beings were sleeping. . . .

"If I was ever to escape, this was the opportunity. I kicked, clawed desperately at the air, all in vain. I did not move an inch. If they had chained me, I could not have been more secure. I drew my automatic, resolved on a

desperate measure. They would not find me again, alive. And as I had it in my hand, an idea came into my mind. I pointed the gun to the side, and fired six rapid shots. And the recoil of each explosion sent me drifting faster, rocket-wise, toward the edge.

"I shot out into the green. Had my gravity been suddenly restored, I might have been killed by the fall, but I descended slowly, and felt a curious lightness for several minutes. And to my surprise, when I struck the ground, the airplane was right before me! They had drawn it up by the base of the tower. It seemed to be intact. I started the engine with nervous haste, and sprang into the cockpit. As I started, another black tower loomed up abruptly before me, but I veered around it, and took off in safety.

"In a few moments I was above the green. I half expected the gravitational wave to be turned on me again, but higher and higher I rose unhindered until the accursed black walls were about me no longer. The sun blazed high in the heavens. Soon I had landed again at Vaca Morena.

"I had had enough of radium hunting. On the beach, where I landed, I sold the plane to a rancher at his own price, and told him to reserve a place for me on the next streamer, which was due in three days. Then I went to the town's single inn, ate, and went to bed. At noon the next day, when I got up, I found that my shoes and the pockets of my clothes contained a good bit of the red sand from the crater that had been collected as I crawled about in flight from the crystal lights. I saved some of it for curiosity alone, but when I analyzed it I found it a radium compound so rich that the little handful was worth millions of dollars.

"But the fortune was of little value, for, despite frequent doses of the fluid from my canteen, and the best medical aid, I have suffered continually, and now that my canteen is empty, I am doomed.

Your friend, Thomas Kelvin"

Thus the manuscript ends. If the reader doubts the truth of the letter, he may see the Metal Man in the Tyburn Museum.

This year, we are told, is going to be a "Keller Year." For after many years of modest but steady magazine acceptance of Dr. Keller's unique tales, there is now to be a blossoming out of hard-cover book collections. Three or four of them are already in the works, from as many different publishers. Enthusiasm for the quality of the doctor's work is developing everywhere. We suspect that a part of this boom is due to the efforts of old Doc Keller himself, who, at the age of 68, has retired from his medical and army activities (he holds a lieutenant-colonel's commission) to devote himself to renewing literary aspirations. That he has had such surprising success is really not to be marveled at. For when you get to studying his great record of short stories and novels, you cannot but be amazed at the variety and originality of his ideas and style. The Thing in the Cellar *is considered by some to be among his best—at least we are told that it will be in one or two of the new collections, and it has been included in British anthologies (now out of print). In publishing it here, we are bringing this little classic back to the public eye for the first time in recent years.*

The Thing in the Cellar

by David H. Keller

IT WAS A large cellar, entirely out of proportion to the house above it. The owner admitted that it was probably built for a distinctly different kind of structure from the one which rose above it. Probably the first house had been burned, and poverty had caused a diminution of the dwelling erected to take its place.

A winding stone stairway connected the cellar with the kitchen. Around the base of this series of steps successive owners of the house had placed their firewood, winter vegetables and junk. The junk had gradually been pushed back till it rose, head high, in a barricade of uselessness. What was back of that barricade no one knew and no one cared. For some hundreds

of years no one had crossed it to penetrate to the black reaches of the cellar behind it.

At the top of the steps, separating the kitchen from the cellar, was a stout oaken door. This door was, in a way, as peculiar and out of relation to the rest of the house as the cellar. It was a strange kind of door to find in a modern house, and certainly a most unusual door to find in the inside of the house—thick, stoutly built, dexterously rabbeted together, with huge wrought-iron hinges, and a lock that looked as though it came from Castle Despair. Separating a house from the outside world, such a door would be excusable; swinging between kitchen and cellar it seemed peculiarly inappropriate.

From the earliest months of his life Tommy Tucker seemed unhappy in the kitchen. In the front parlor, in the formal dining-room, and especially on the second floor of the house he acted like a normal, healthy child; but carry him to the kitchen, he at once began to cry. His parents, being plain people, ate in the kitchen save when they had company. Being poor, Mrs. Tucker did most of her work, though occasionally she had a charwoman in to do the extra Saturday cleaning, and thus much of her time was spent in the kitchen. And Tommy stayed with her, at least as long as he was unable to walk. Much of the time he was decidedly unhappy.

When Tommy learned to creep, he lost no time in leaving the kitchen. No sooner was his mother's back turned than the little fellow crawled as fast as he could for the doorway opening into the front of the house, the dining-room and the front parlor. Once away from the kitchen, he seemed happy; at least, he ceased to cry. On being returned to the kitchen his howls so thoroughly convinced the neighbors that he had colic that more than one bowl of catnip and sage tea was brought to his assistance.

It was not until the boy learned to talk that the Tuckers had any idea as to what made the boy cry so hard when he was in the kitchen. In other words, the baby had to suffer for many months till he obtained at least a little relief, and even when he told his parents what was the matter, they were absolutely unable to comprehend. This is not to be wondered at, because they were both hard-working, rather simple-minded persons.

What they finally learned from their little son was this: that if the cellar door was shut and securely fastened with the heavy iron lock, Tommy could at least eat a meal in peace; if the door was simply closed and not locked, he shivered with fear, but kept quiet; but if the door was open, if even the

slightest streak of black showed that it was not tightly shut, then the little three-year-old would scream himself to the point of exhaustion, especially if his tired father would refuse him permission to leave the kitchen.

Playing in the kitchen, the child developed two interesting habits. Rags, scraps of paper and splinters of wood were continually being shoved under the thick oak door to fill the space between the door and the sill. Whenever Mrs. Tucker opened the door there was always some trash there, placed by her son. It annoyed her, and more than once the little fellow was thrashed for this conduct, but punishment acted in no way as a deterrent. The other habit was as singular. Once the door was closed and locked, he would rather boldly walk over to it and caress the old lock. Even when he was so small that he had to stand on tiptoe to touch it with the tips of his fingers he would touch it with slow, caressing strokes; later on, as he grew, he used to kiss it.

His father, who only saw the boy at the end of the day, decided that there was no sense in such conduct, and in his masculine way tried to break the lad of his foolishness. There was, of necessity, no effort on the part of the hard-working man to understand the psychology back of his son's conduct. All that the man knew was that his little son was acting in a way that was decidedly queer.

Tommy loved his mother and was willing to do anything he could to help her in the household chores, but one thing he would not do, and never did do, and that was to fetch and carry between the house and the cellar. If his mother opened the door, he would run screaming from the room, and he never returned voluntarily till he was assured that the door was closed.

He never explained just why he acted as he did. In fact, he refused to talk about it, at least to his parents, and that was just as well, because had he done so, they would simply have been more positive than ever that there was something wrong with their only child. They tried in their own ways, to break the child of his unusual habits; failing to change him at all, they decided to ignore his peculiarities.

That is, they ignored them till he became six years old and the time came for him to go to school. He was a sturdy little chap by that time, and more intelligent than the usual boys beginning in the primer class. Mr. Tucker was, at times, proud of him; the child's attitude toward the cellar door was the one thing most disturbing to the father's pride. Finally nothing would do but that the Tucker family call on the neighborhood physician. It was

an important even in the life of the Tuckers, so important that it demanded the wearing of Sunday clothes, and all that sort of thing.

"The matter is just this, Doctor Hawthorn," said Mr. Tucker, in a somewhat embarrassed manner. "Our little Tommy is old enough to start to school, but he behaves childish in regard to our cellar, and the missus and I thought you could tell us how to do about it. It must be his nerves."

"Ever since he was a baby," continued Mrs. Tucker, taking up the thread of conversation where her husband had paused, "Tommy has had a great fear of the cellar. Even now, big boy that he is, he does not love me enough to fetch and carry for me through that door and down those steps. It is not natural for a child to act like he does, and what with chinking the cracks with rags and kissing the lock, he drives me to the point where I fear he may become daft-like as he grows older."

The doctor, eager to satisfy new customers, and dimly remembering some lectures on the nervous system received when he was a medical student, asked some general questions, listened to the boy's heart, examined his lungs and looked at his eyes and fingernails. At last he commented:

"Looks like a fine, healthy boy to me."

"Yes, all except the cellar door," replied the father.

"Has he ever been sick?"

"Naught but fits once or twice when he cried himself blue in the face," answered the mother.

"Frightened?"

"Perhaps. It was always in the kitchen."

"Suppose you go out and let me talk to Tommy by myself?"

And there sat the doctor very much at his ease and the little six-year-old boy was uneasy.

"Tommy, what is there in the cellar you are afraid of?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever seen it?"

"No, sir."

"Ever heard it? smelt it?"

"No, sir."

"Then how do you know there is something there?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Because there is."

That was as far as Tommy would go, and at last his seeming obstinacy annoyed the physician even as it had for several years annoyed Mr. Tucker. He went to the door and called the parents into the office.

"He thinks there is something down in the cellar," he stated.

The Tuckers simply looked at each other.

"That's foolish," commented Mr. Tucker.

" 'Tis just a plain cellar with junk and firewood and cider barrels in it," added Mrs. Tucker. "Since we moved into that house, I have not missed a day without going down those stone steps and I know there is nothing there. But the lad has always screamed when the door was open. I recall now that since he was a child in arms he has always screamed when the door was open."

"He thinks there is something there," said the doctor.

"That is why we brought him to you," replied the father. "It's the child's nerves. Perhaps fœtida, or something, will calm him."

"I tell you what to do," advised the doctor. "He thinks there is something there. Just as soon as he finds that he is wrong and that there is nothing there, he will forget about it. He has been humored too much. What you want to do is to open the cellar door and make him stay by himself in the kitchen. Nail the door open so he can not close it. Leave him alone there for an hour and then go and laugh at him and show him how silly it was for him to be afraid of an empty cellar. I will give you some nerve and blood tonic and that will help, but the big thing is to show him that there is nothing to be afraid of."

On the way back to the Tucker home Tommy broke away from his parents. They caught him after an exciting chase and kept him between them the rest of the way home. Once in the house he disappeared and was found in the guest room under the bed. The afternoon being already spoiled for Mr. Tucker, he determined to keep the child under observation for the rest of the day. Tommy ate no supper, in spite of the urgings of the unhappy mother. The dishes were washed, the evening paper read, the evening pipe smoked; and then, and only then, did Mr. Tucker take down his tool box and get out a hammer and some long nails.

"And I am going to nail the door open, Tommy, so you can not close it, as that was what the doctor said, Tommy, and you are to be a man and stay here in the kitchen alone for an hour, and we will leave the lamp

a-burning, and then when you find there is naught to be afraid of, you will be well and a real man and not something for a man to be ashamed of being the father of."

But at the last Mrs. Tucker kissed Tommy and cried and whispered to her husband not to do it, and to wait till the boy was larger; but nothing was to do except to nail the thick door open so it could not be shut and leave the boy there alone with the lamp burning and the dark open space of the doorway to look at with eyes that grew as hot and burning as the flame of the lamp.

That same day Doctor Hawthorn took supper with a classmate of his, a man who specialized in psychiatry and who was particularly interested in children. Hawthorn told Johnson about his newest case, the little Tucker boy, and asked him for his opinion. Johnson frowned.

"Children are odd, Hawthorn. Perhaps they are like dogs. It may be their nervous system is more acute than in the adult. We know that our eyesight is limited, also our hearing and smell. I firmly believe that there are forms of life which exist in such a form that we can neither see, hear nor smell them. Fondly we delude ourselves into the fallacy of believing that they do not exist because we can not prove their existence. This Tucker lad may have a nervous system that is peculiarly acute. He may dimly appreciate the existence of something in the cellar which is unappreciable to his parents. Evidently there is some basis to this fear of his. Now, I am not saying that there is anything in the cellar. In fact, I suppose that it is just an ordinary cellar, but this boy, since he was a baby, has thought that there was something there, and that is just as bad as though there actually were. What I would like to know is what makes him think so. Give me the address, and I will call tomorrow and have a talk with the little fellow."

"What do you think of my advice?"

"Sorry, old man, but I think it was perfectly rotten. If I were you, I would stop around there on my way home and prevent them from following it. The little fellow may be badly frightened. You see, he evidently thinks there is something there."

"But there isn't."

"Perhaps not. No doubt, he is wrong, but he thinks so."

It all worried Doctor Hawthorn so much that he decided to take his friend's advice. It was a cold night, a foggy night, and the physician felt

cold as he tramped along the London streets. At last he came to the Tucker house. He remembered now that he had been there once before, long ago, when little Tommy Tucker came into the world. There was a light in the front window, and in no time at all Mr. Tucker came to the door.

"I have come to see Tommy," said the doctor.

"He is back in the kitchen," replied the father.

"He gave one cry, but since then he has been quiet," sobbed the wife.

"If I had let her have her way, she would have opened the door, but I said to her, 'Mother, now is the time to make a man out of our Tommy.' And I guess he knows by now that there was naught to be afraid of. Well, the hour is up. Suppose we go and get him and put him to bed?"

"It has been a hard time for the little child," whispered the wife.

Carrying the candle, the man walked ahead of the woman and the doctor, and at last opened the kitchen door. The room was dark.

"Lamp has gone out," said the man. "Wait till I light it."

"Tommy! Tommy!" called Mrs. Tucker.

But the doctor ran to where a white form was stretched on the floor. Sharply he called for more light. Trembling, he examined all that was left of little Tommy. Twitching, he looked into the open space down into the cellar. At last he looked at Tucker and Tucker's wife.

"Tommy—Tommy has been hurt—I guess he is dead!" he stammered.

The mother threw herself on the floor and picked up the torn, mutilated thing that had been, only a little while ago, her little Tommy.

The man took his hammer and drew out the nails and closed the door and locked it and then drove in a long spike to reinforce the lock. Then he took hold of the doctor's shoulders and shook him.

"What killed him, Doctor? What killed him?" he shouted into Hawthorn's ear.

The doctor looked at him bravely in spite of the fear in his throat.

"How do I know, Tucker?" he replied. "How do I know? Didn't you tell me that there was nothing there? Nothing down there? In the cellar?"

The werewolf theme, that of the supernatural change of man into beast, has been made the subject of a recent collection of stories published by one of the bigger hard-cover book companies. The price of the collection, if we remember aright, was something like $3.75 and it contained a bare handful of stories, primarily consisting of the most obvious and oft-reprinted "classics" of the type, by the most standard of writers, heavily European. Such a list could be very nearly completely compiled by any scholar at a half-hour's session with the index file of any good reference library. The book did not, of course, contain The Drone *by A. Merritt. A. Merritt is known only to those hundreds of thousands of people who really enjoy good fantasies, but apparently unknown to the exclusive cult of "litterateurs" who seem to so infest the more stratified tea-party type of book circles. Of course, perhaps we are being a bit unfair to the anthologist for he may not have heard of* The Drone *(though we do think that even a very elementary knowledge of the real sources of fantasy fiction in America would have uncovered dozens of fresher man-into-beast tales than the ones he used) which is a rather scarce Merritt at that. Written originally for the anniversary issue of a leading fan magazine, it remains a very neat example of the pure Merritt style, perfect in itself and a gem of the type.*

The Drone

by A. Merritt

FOUR MEN sat at a table of the Explorers' Club—Hewitt, just in from two years botanical research in Abyssinia; Caranac, the ethnologist; MacLeod, poet first, and second the learned curator of the Asiatic Museum; Winston, the archeologist, who, with Kosloff the Russian, had worked over the ruins of Khara-Kora, the City of the Black Stones in the northern Gobi, once capital of the Empire of Genghis Khan.

The talk had veered to werewolves, vampires, fox-women, and similar

superstitions. Directed thence by a cabled report of measures to be taken against the Leopard Society, the murderous fanatics who drew on the skins of leopards, crouched like them on the boughs of trees, then launched themselves down upon their victims tearing their throats with talons of steel. That, and another report of a 'hex-murder' in Pennsylvania where a woman had been beaten to death because it was thought she could assume the shape of a cat and cast evil spells upon those into whose houses, as cat, she crept.

Caranac said: 'It is a deep rooted belief, and immeasurably ancient, that a man or woman may assume the shape of an animal, a serpent, a bird, even an insect. It was believed of old everywhere, and everywhere, it is still believed by some—fox-men and fox-women of China and Japan, wolf-people, the badger and bird people of our own Indians. Always there has been the idea that there is a borderland between the worlds of consciousness of man and of beast—a borderland where shapes can be changed and man merge into beast or beast into man."

MacLeod said: "The Egyptians had some good reason for equipping their deities with the heads of birds and beasts and insects. Why did they portray Khepher the Oldest God with the head of a beetle? Why give Anubis, the Psychopomp, Guide of the Dead, the head of a jackal? Or Thoth, the God of Wisdom, the head of an ibis; and Horus, the Divine son of Isis and Osiris, the head of a hawk? Set, God of Evil, a crocodile's and the Goddess Bast a cat's? There was a reason for all of that. But about it one can only guess."

Caranac said: "I think there's something in that borderland, or borderline, idea. There's more or less of the beast, the reptile, the bird, the insect in everybody. I've known men who looked like rats and had the souls of rats. I've known women who belonged to the horse family, and showed it in face and voice. Distinctly there are bird people—hawk-faced, eagle-faced—predatory. The owl people seem to be mostly men and the wren people women. There are quite as distinct wolf and serpent types. Suppose some of these have their animal element so strongly developed that they can cross this borderline—become at times the animal? There you have the explanation of the werewolf, the snake-woman, and all the others. What could be more simple?"

Winston asked: "But you're not serious, Caranac?"

Caranac laughed. "At least half serious. Once I had a friend with an uncannily acute perception of these animal qualities in the human. He saw

people less in terms of humanity as in terms of beast or bird. Animal consciousness that either shared the throne of human consciousness or sat above it or below it in varying degrees. It was an uncomfortable gift. He was like a doctor who has the faculty of visual diagnosis so highly developed that he constantly sees men and women and children not as they are but as diseases. Ordinarily he could control the faculty. But sometimes, as he would describe it, when he was in the Subway, or on a bus, or in the theatre—or even sitting tête-à-tête with a pretty woman, there would be a swift haze and when it had cleared he was among rats and foxes, wolves and serpents, cats and tigers and birds, all dressed in human garb but with nothing else at all human about them. The clear-cut picture lasted only for a moment—but it was a highly disconcerting moment."

Winston said, incredulously: "Do you mean to suggest that in an instant the musculature and skeleton of a man can become the musculature and skeleton of a wolf? The skin sprout fur? Or in the matter of your bird people, feathers? In an instant grow wings and the specialized muscles to use them? Sprout fangs . . . noses become snouts. . . ."

Caranac grinned. "No, I don't mean anything of the sort. What I do suggest is that under certain conditions the animal part of this dual nature of man may submerge the human part to such a degree that a sensitive observer will think he sees the very creature which is its type. Just as in the case of the friend whose similar sensitivity I have described."

Winston raised his hands in mock admiration. "Ah, at last modern science explains the legend of Circe! Circe the enchantress who gave men a drink that changed them into beasts. Her potion intensified whatever animal or what-not soul that was within them so that the human form no longer registered upon the eyes and brains of those who looked upon them. I agree with you, Caranac—what *could* be more simple? But I do not use the word simple in the same sense you did."

Caranac answered, amused: "Yet, why not? Potions of one sort or another, rites of one sort or another, usually accompany such transformations in the stories. I've seen drinks and drugs that did pretty nearly the same thing and with no magic or sorcery about them—did it almost to the line of the visual illusion."

Winston began, heatedly: "But—"

Hewitt interrupted him: "Will the opposing counsel kindly shut up and listen to expert testimony. Caranac, I'm grateful to you. You've given me

courage to tell of something which never in God's world would I have told if it were not for what you've been saying. I don't know whether you're right or not, but man—you've knocked a hag off my shoulders who's been riding them for months! The thing happened about four months before I left Abyssinia. I was returning to Addis Ababa. With my bearers I was in the western jungles. We came to a village and camped. That night my headman came to me. He was in a state of nerves. He begged that we would go from there at dawn. I wanted to rest for a day or two, and asked why. He said the village had a priest who was a great wizard. On the nights of the full moon the priest turned himself into a hyena and went hunting. For human food, the headman whispered. The villagers were safe, because he protected them. But others weren't. And the next night was the first of the full moon. The men were frightened. Would I depart at dawn?

"I didn't laugh at him. Ridiculing the beliefs of the bush gets you less than nowhere. I listened gravely, and then assured him that my magic was greater than the wizard's. He wasn't satisfied, but he shut up. Next day I went looking for the priest. When I found him I thought I knew how he'd been able to get that fine story started and keep the natives believing it. If any man ever looked like a hyena he did. Also, he wore over his shoulders the skin of one of the biggest of the beasts I'd ever seen, its head grinning at you over his head. You could hardly tell its teeth and his apart. I suspected he had filed his teeth to make 'em match. And he smelled like a hyena. It makes my stomach turn even now. It was the hide of course—or so I thought then.

"Well, I squatted down in front of him and we looked at each other for quite a while. He said nothing, and the more I looked at him the less he was like a man and more like the beast around his shoulders. I didn't like it—I'm frank to say I didn't. It sort of got under my skin. I was the first to weaken. I stood up and tapped my rifle. I said, 'I do not like hyenas. You understand me.' And I tapped my rifle again. If he was thinking of putting over some similar kind of hocus-pocus that would frighten my men still more, I wanted to nip it in the bud. He made no answer, only kept looking at me. I walked away.

"The men were pretty jittery all day, and they got worse when night began to fall. I noted there was not the usual cheerful twilight bustle that characterizes the native village. The people went into their huts early. Half an hour after dark, it was as though deserted. My camp was in a clearing just within the stockade. My bearers gathered close together around their fire. I

sat on a pile of boxes where I could look over the whole clearing. I had one rifle on my knee and another beside me. Whether it was the fear that crept out from the men around the fire like an exhalation, or whether it had been that queer suggestion of shift of shape from man to beast while I was squatting in front of the priest I don't know—but the fact remained that I felt mighty uneasy. The headman crouched beside me, long knife in hand.

"After awhile the moon rose up from behind the trees and shone down on the clearing. Then, abruptly, at its edge, not a hundred feet away I saw the priest. There was something disconcerting about the abruptness with which he had appeared. One moment there had been nothing, then—there he was. The moon gleamed on the teeth of the hyena's head and upon his. Except for that skin he was stark naked and his teeth glistened as though oiled. I felt the headman shivering against me like a frightened dog and I heard his teeth chattering.

"And then there was a swift haze—that was what struck me so forcibly in what you told of your sensitive friend, Caranac. It cleared as swiftly and there wasn't any priest. No. But there was a big hyena standing where he had been —standing on its hind feet like a man and looking at me. I could see its hairy body. It held its forelegs over its shaggy chest as though crossed. And the reek of it came to me—thick. I didn't reach for my gun—I never thought of it, my mind in the grip of some incredulous fascination.

"The beast opened its jaws. It *grinned* at me. Then it walked—*walked* is exactly the word—six paces, dropped upon all fours, trotted leisurely into the bush, and vanished there.

"I managed to shake off the spell that had held me, took my flash and gun and went over to where the brute had been. The ground was soft and wet. There were prints of a man's feet and hands. As though the man had crawled from the bush on all fours. There were the prints of two feet close together, as though he had stood there erect. And then—there were the prints of the paws of a hyena.

"Six of them, evenly spaced, as though the beast had walked six paces upon its hind legs. And after that only the spoor of the hyena trotting with its unmistakable sidewise slinking gait upon all four legs. There were no further marks of man's feet—nor were marks of human feet going back from where the priest had stood."

Hewitt stopped. Winston asked: "And is that all?"

Hewitt said, as though he had not heard him: "Now, Caranac, would

you say that the animal soul in this wizard *was* a hyena? And that I had seen that animal soul? Or that when I had sat with him that afternoon he had implanted in my mind the suggestion that at such a time and such a place I would see him as a hyena? And that I did?"

Caranac answered: "Either is an explanation. I rather hold to the first."

Hewitt asked: "Then how do you explain the change of the human foot marks into those of the beast?"

Winston asked: "Did anyone but you see those prints?"

Hewitt said: "No. For obvious reasons I did not show them to the headman."

Winston said: "I hold then to the hypnotism theory. The foot marks were a part of the same illusion."

Hewitt said: "You asked if that was all. Well, it wasn't. When dawn came and there was a muster of men, one was missing. We found him—what was left of him—a quarter mile away in the bush. Some animal had crept into the camp, neatly crushed his throat and dragged him away without awakening anybody. Without even me knowing it—and I had not slept. Around his body were the tracks of an unusually big hyena. Without doubt that was what had killed and partly eaten him."

"Coincidence," muttered Winston.

"We followed the tracks of the brute," went on Hewitt. "We found a pool at which it had drunk. We traced the tracks to the edge of the pool. But—"

He hesitated. Winston asked, impatiently: "But?"

"But we didn't find them going back. There were the marks of a naked human foot going back. But there were no marks of human feet pointing *toward* the pool. Also, the prints of the human feet were exactly those which had ended in the spoor of the hyena at the edge of the clearing. I know that because the left big toe was off."

Caranac asked: "And then what did you do?"

"Nothing. Took up our packs and beat it. The headman and the others had seen the footprints. There was no holding them after that. So your idea of hypnotism hardly holds here, Winston. I doubt whether a half dozen or less had seen the priest. But they all saw the tracks."

"Mass hallucination. Faulty observation. A dozen rational explanations," said Winston.

MacLeod spoke, the precise diction of the distinguished curator sub-

merged under the Gaelic burr and idioms that came to the surface always when he was deeply moved:

"And is it so, Martin Hewitt? Well, now I will be telling you a story. A thing that I saw with my own eyes. I hold with you, Alan Caranac, but I go further. You say that man's consciousness may share the brain with other consciousnesses—beast or bird or what not. I say it may be that all life is one. A single force, but a thinking and conscious force of which the trees, the beasts, the flowers, germs and man and everything living are parts, just as the billions of living cells in a man are parts of him. And that under certain conditions the parts may be interchangeable. And that this may be the source of the ancient tales of the dryads and the nymphs, the harpies and the werewolves and their kind as well.

"Now, listen. My people came from the Hebrides where they know more of some things than books can teach. When I was eighteen I entered a little mid-west college. My roommate was a lad named—well, I'll just be calling him Ferguson. There was a professor with ideas you would not expect to find out there.

" 'Tell me how a fox feels that is being hunted by the hounds,' he would say. 'Or the rabbit that is stalked by the fox. Or give me a worm's eye view of a garden. Get out of yourselves. Imagination is the greatest gift of the Gods,' he said, 'and it is also their greatest curse. But blessing or curse it is good to have. Stretch your consciousness and write for me what you see and feel.'

"Ferguson took to that job like a fly to sugar. What he wrote was not a man telling of a fox or hare or hawk—it was fox and hare and hawk speaking through a man's hand. It was not only the emotions of the creatures he described. It was what they saw and heard and smelt and how they saw and heard and smelt it. And what they—thought.

"The class would laugh, or be spellbound. But the professor didn't laugh. No. After a while he began to look worried and he would have long talks in private with Ferguson. And I would say to him: 'In God's name how do you do it, Ferg? You make it all seem so damned real.'

" 'It is real,' he told me. 'I chase with the hounds and I run with the hare. I set my mind on some animal and after a bit I am one with it. Inside it. Literally. As though I had slipped outside myself. And when I slip back inside myself—I remember.'

"Don't tell me you think you change into one of these beasts!' I said. He

hesitated. 'Not my body,' he answered at last. 'But I know my mind . . . soul . . . spirit . . . whatever you choose to call it—must.'

"He wouldn't argue the matter. And I know he didn't tell me all he knew. And suddenly the professor stopped those peculiar activities, without explanation. A few weeks later I left the college.

"That was over thirty years ago. About ten years ago, I was sitting in my office when my secretary told me that a man named Ferguson who said he was an old schoolmate was asking to see me. I remembered him at once and had him in. I blinked at him when he entered. The Ferguson I'd known had been a lean, wiry, dark, square-chinned, and clean-cut chap. This man wasn't like that at all. His hair was a curious golden, and extremely fine—almost a fuzz. His face was oval and flattish with receding chin. He wore oversized dark glasses and they gave the suggestion of a pair of fly's eyes seen under a microscope. Or rather—I thought suddenly—of a bee's. But I felt a real shock when I grasped his hand. It felt less like a man's hand than the foot of some insect, and as I looked down at it I saw that it also was covered with the fine yellow fuzz of hair. He said:

" 'Hello, MacLeod, I was afraid you wouldn't remember me.'

"It was Ferguson's voice as I remembered it, and yet it wasn't. There was a queer, muffled humming and buzzing running through it.

"But it was Ferguson all right. He soon proved that. He did more talking than I, because that odd inhuman quality of the voice in some way distressed me, and I couldn't take my eyes off his hands with their yellow fuzz, nor the spectacled eyes and the fine yellow hair. It appeared that he had bought a farm over in New Jersey. Not so much for farming as for a place for his apiary. He had gone in for bee keeping. He said: 'I've tried all sorts of animals. In fact I've tried more than animals. You see, Mac—there's nothing in being human: Nothing but sorrow. And the animals aren't so happy. So I'm concentrating on the bee. A drone, Mac. A short life but an exceedingly merry one.'

"I said: 'What in the hell are you talking about?'

"He laughed, a buzzing, droning laugh. 'You know damned well. You were always interested in my little excursions, Mac. Intelligently interested. I never told you a hundredth of the truth about them. But come and see next Wednesday and maybe your curiosity will be satisfied. I think you'll find it worth while.'

"Well, there was a bit more talk and he went out. He'd given me minute

directions how to get to his place. As he walked to the door I had the utterly incredulous idea that around him was a droning and humming like an enormous bagpipe, muted.

"My curiosity, or something deeper, was tremendously aroused. That Wednesday I drove to his place. A lovely spot—all flowers and blossom-trees. There were a couple of hundred skips of bees set out in a broad orchard. Ferguson met me. He looked fuzzier and yellower than before. Also, the drone and hum of his voice seemed stronger. He took me into his house. It was an odd enough place. All one high room, and what windows there were had been shuttered—all except one. There was a dim golden-white light suffusing it. Nor was its door the ordinary door. It was low and broad. All at once it came to me that it was like the inside of a hive. The unshuttered window looked out upon the hives. It was screened.

"He brought me food and drink—honey and honeymead, cakes sweet with honey, and fruit. He said: 'I do not eat meat.'

"He began to talk. About the life of the bee. Of the utter happiness of the drone, darting through the sun, sipping at what flowers it would, fed by its sisters, drinking of the honey cups in the hive . . . free and careless and its nights and days only a smooth clicking of rapturous seconds . . .

"'What if they do kill you at the end?' he said. 'You have lived—every fraction of a second of time. And then the rapture of the nuptial flight. Drone upon drone winging through the air on the track of the virgin! Life pouring stronger and stronger into you with each stroke of the wing! And at last . . . the flaming ecstasy . . . the flaming ecstasy of the fiery inner core of life . . . cheating death. True, death strikes when you are at the tip of the flame . . . but he strikes too late. You die—but what of that? You have cheated death. You do not know it is death that strikes. You die in the heart of the ecstasy . . .'

"He stopped. From outside came a faint sustained roaring that steadily grew stronger. The beating of thousands upon thousands of bee wings . . . the roaring of hundreds of thousands of tiny planes . . .

"Ferguson leaped to the window.

"'The swarms! The swarms!" he cried. A tremor shook him, another and another—more and more rapidly . . . became a rhythm pulsing faster and faster. His arms, outstretched, quivered . . . began to beat up and down, ever more rapidly until they were like the blur of the humming bird's wings . . . like the blur of a bee's wings. His voice came to me . . . buzzing, hum-

ming . . . 'And tomorrow the virgins fly . . . the nuptial flight . . . I must be there . . . must . . . mzzz . . . mzzzb . . . bzzz . . . bzzzzzzz . . . zzzzmmmm . . ."

"For an instant there was no man there at the window. No. There was only a great drone buzzing and humming . . . striving to break through the screen . . . go free . . .

"And then Ferguson toppled backward. Fell. The thick glasses were torn away by his fall. Two immense black eyes, not human eyes but the multiple eyes of the bee stared up at me.

"I bent down closer, closer, I listened for his heart beat. There was none. He was dead.

"Then slowly, slowly the dead mouth opened. Through the lips came the questing head of a drone . . . antennae wavering . . . eyes regarding me. It crawled out from between the lips. A handsome drone . . . a strong drone. It rested for a breath on the lips, then its wings began to vibrate . . . faster, faster . . .

"It flew from the lips of Ferguson and circled my head once and twice and thrice. It flashed to the window and clung to the screen, buzzing, crawling, beating its wings against it . . .

"There was a knife on the table. I took it and ripped the screen. The drone darted out—and was gone—

"I turned and looked down at Ferguson. His eyes stared up at me. Dead eyes. But no longer black . . . blue as I had known them of old. And human. His hair was no longer the fine golden fuzz of the bee—it was black as it had been when I had first known him. And his hands were white and sinewy and—hairless."

Joseph E. Kelleam has not appeared often enough in the pages of pulps to have his name acquire the familiarity of a favored author. We are sure that had his output been three times its quantity and yet of the same quality as the handful that have been published, he would be among the top lists. For each of his tales has gained applause and the deep appreciation of the most sensitive readers. There is about his tales a feeling for a mood of time and the impermanence of mortality that is never quite touched by other writers. We are very pleased to secure a new story for the Avon Fantasy Reader, *a short page from the dust of ancient empires, a tale of the crumbling of a crown and of the unearthly thing that laughed in the Dog Star's light.*

From the Dark Waters

by Joseph E. Kelleam

NOW I, CARIUS, in the reign of Caracalla, son of Septimius Severus, come to write that which befell me and my master Quintus on the river Nile of a night when the moon was full.

We were, supposedly, dealers in the dried flesh of mummies which is used by apothecaries for their potions, and is also used by the witch-women of Thrace for other purposes. Supposedly, I say, but we were not reluctant to take anything else of value that we found in the tombs.

So it was that a full moon caught us in a flat-bottomed boat, poling our way along through the reeds and viscous water of the river some two-hundred miles southeast of Alexandria. Our informant, an old crone of the city, had for a price told us of a tomb hidden at the river bank which could be identified only at the lowest ebb of the water when a single step of stone thrust itself up from the Nile.

"By Mercury, the god of thieves," swore my master Quintus, "we are on an errand of fools, Carius. It was not the way of the ancients to bury their dead so close to the water."

"But the crone swore that her words were true, Quintus. And, after all, the gold we paid her is back in your purse."

He laughed. Quintus was a big man with a bare chest like a wine barrel, and his laughter echoed through the darkness like huge beats of thunder.

"Aye, it cost us nothing. I caught the crone in an alley and broke her neck—so!" He made a quick, popping noise with his tongue—a cracking as of old bones breaking.

Now the moon rose higher, full and round, and two odd rays that were somehow reflected from thin clouds gave it the semblance of a horned head, the sign of Isis. And though I knew the Egyptians and their gods to be dead and harmless, yet was I afraid.

So we poled on, and a low mist came up from the waters and settled upon us and brushed against us like the cold, fingering hands of dead men. And we poled on.

"Ho," cried Quintus. "Hold." I thrust my pole into the deep ooze of the river bottom and brought the slow-moving boat to a stop.

Quintus struck a spark and lit a pitch-soaked faggot. It flamed and sputtered and then burned brightly, setting the shadows to dancing. Ah, they fled from us, those shadows, and then stopped and waited to rush back upon us. I shivered.

"Here it is," said Quintus, holding the blazing faggot over his broad shoulders. "The step, just as the crone said."

I poled the boat around and could see the one stone step, black and venous and wet and slimy, thrust up from the low waters to the muddy bank. I felt with my pole. There were other steps down there in the water, steps going down. I felt with my pole and counted—one, two, three, four. And then my pole brushed against something that was solid but soft. Like an old log that has been under water for a long time. I fancied that a dank sigh came up from the foetid waters. . . .

I poled the boat into the mud at the water's edge and the seared reeds sighed and crackled as we stepped from the craft. From the boat Quintus took a short-handled spade, and began to dig into the mud above the moss-slimed step. Each spadeful of wet, noisome mud that he moved away made a sucking, slobbery sound.

At length he uncovered a stone slab about four feet square. It was old—old and damp and slimy. The characters upon it were nearly obliterated but

one I could make out by the flaring light of the faggot. This was the figure of the jerboa, Seth, who some say was the oldest of all gods—since terror was born from the hot slime of earth long and long ago. And this was strange because the jerboa has been removed from most of the tombs.

There was a bronze ring set into the stone. As we seized upon it I was filled with a great dread, and even Quintus' broad face wore a troubled frown. We had opened these graves of the ancients before. We did not fear their dead; neither did we fear their gods—save Isis, who, as all men know, is revered by many Romans.

But this was no tomb dear to mother Isis. Its owner had loved more terrible gods.

We heaved upon the bronze ring. The door had been there for ages agone. The river had flowed over it time after time. Quintus' broad, naked shoulders strained. At last, gasping for breath, we ceased our labors and Quintus went over the edges of the stone with the spade, gouging, prying. Then having rested we seized upon the bronze ring again and heaved until my blood was pounding in my ears.

"It moves," whispered Quintus, his huge muscles standing out on his back and shoulders like coiled snakes. "Pull."

I heaved.

With a sad sighing the pivoted block swung upward. We felt a rush of air as the mist whirled downward into the long-empty crypt. Then a foul odor of decay and death came pouring out so that we had to turn our faces away from the opening.

Quintus thrust his torch into the tunnel. Some dank steps led down. How many steps there were I do not know. There were many and they rounded several curves but always they led downward; at times as I looked at them it seemed that they were of an opaque blackness and that things were beneath them looking upward at us with cold, ophidian eyes.

There was writing upon the walls, as upon other tombs, but this writing was not the pictures of feasting and dancing and hunting that the old Egyptians had loved. It was of tortures and flayings and abominations.

I stayed close to Quintus.

"Eh, Carius," he grunted. "I have never seen a tomb such as this one."

"The others were old," I answered. "But this is older, much older, as old as the world, it seems."

He laughed. "You are afraid of shadows, Carius. Think of the gold ahead—"

And suddenly we rounded another bend in the down-sweeping corridor, and before us was the tomb. It was not locked. A gold-flecked door swung open, as though awaiting us, and beyond it was a throne of chryselephantine and more gold than a man could desire.

But there were other things in that tomb. At first I thought that the seated figure upon the throne was a statue, but it was not. It was the shrunken, though well-preserved form of a man, bedecked with jewelled trappings. It was not wrapped in linen but the body was better preserved than many I have seen. And the eyes! Had some priest learned to preserve them too, or were those cunningly fashioned lobes of glass that peered coldly at us?

About the floor were bones of men. It was the ancients' practice to bury slaves with their dead. But the owners of these bones had died horribly. The skeletons were shattered, crushed, twisted. And then I found myself thinking: Did these men die before the tomb was sealed, or were they interred alive to give sport to something or someone? Or did they come later, even as we have come?

But Quintus and I did not think for long of the crushed bones. There was much gold there, ornaments and jewelled daggers and tiny statues. We began to gather up these things.

"Listen, Quintus." I stopped. From far away, up the dark stairway that had brought us there, came a sound. It was the sound of something being drawn out of deep muck.

He stopped and listened, his bare chest heaving with excitement, his eyes burning at the sight of so much gold. "Only the splash of waters against the step," he told me scornfully.

We went back to work but I was fearful. I stayed close to the rear of the tomb, near that undraped figure on the throne. Quintus worked close to the doorway.

"Hurry," he cautioned, "our torch will not last much longer."

Then it seemed to me that I heard another step. I looked up from my labors.

Quintus was squatted on the floor, his back to the doorway, sorting out a heap of treasures before him. But in the black square of the doorway was a shape that was even blacker than the darkness. It was not the shape of man

or beast. I had only time to stare at it, I could not cry out. And then it was upon Quintus' back like an obsidian shadow. Two black twisted talons clutched at his throat.

Quintus was a strong man but he did not struggle. He did not cry out. He looked at me with the eyes of a dead man, and his huge muscles stood out like heavy vines upon his chest and arms and shoulders. But he did not move.

I fell back against the chryselephantine throne. I could not help.

And as I watched a change came over Quintus. His eyes lit up, suddenly, with a baleful green glow. His face seemed to dissolve and reform. It was still the face of Quintus, but it had an unholy strength to it and the mouth and the lines upon his face seemed to waver and change into markings of age-old cruelty and hate. His arms and chest became mottled, and scales grew over them like a green mold. And the black shadow that clutched him with the twisted talons seemed to dissolve and flow into the straining body of Quintus.

Then the black shadow was gone and Quintus leaped at me like a wild beast, foam slavering from his curled lips.

I was without strength. I cowered back against the throne. My hand clutched at the long-dead flesh of the mummy.

Quintus stopped. Two strong wills seemed to clash there in the tomb, and with a snarl Quintus turned and fled up the dark stairway.

And our sputtering torch burned low and flickered out.

They say I was stumbling through the streets of Alexandria muttering these words: "When Seth of Tanis, the lord of evil and abominations, shall conquer Hapi of the Nile, then Keb and Sothis shall be his slaves."

The words meant nothing to me. I was feared and shunned. The days passed like a dream and, in some fashion, I came back to Rome. I am not a learned man, but I remember that someone, somewhere, told me that Sothis was a goddess—Sirius the Dog Star was her Seal.

And of nights when the Dog Star is shining I seem to go a-wandering—but not alone. My companion is the one who sat on the chryselephantine throne—the one who should have been dead and mummified long and long ago. I dream of huge caverns in the earth and high colonnades and dark green rivers filled with lotus blossoms. But all seem to be crumbling, and a strange blight seizes upon the lotus blossoms as I watch, and they wither. And the one who wanders with me of nights laughs softly and evilly.

I have seen Quintus once since that awful night. It was when our ruler Caracalla came back to Rome with all his legions. And men told me that he had a new adviser, a priest out of Egypt.

So I stood near his beautiful new archway when the legions passed. And someone beside me seemed to be laughing in my ear. They passed, and I saw Caracalla. And I saw his counselor, this Egyptian. No Egyptian at all, but Quintus, or the thing that took the form of Quintus that night in the tomb. You must believe me. Why does he wear that tight-fitting cloak? Strip it off and you will see the scales upon his arms and chest, as did I.

The Empire is falling apart. Caracalla is mad. He destroys his own cities and his own people. And who or what is this Egyptian who is his counsellor?

I cannot think straight. I have helped to unleash something ancient and terrible upon the world. The Roman legions are going, dispersed and slain. And something walks by my side of nights when the Dog Star is shining, and laughs and laughs and laughs.

Nowadays, the seasoned reader of science-fiction has come to take his stories of interplanetary travel with an almost blasé air, an attitude of "I-have-been-here-before," noting only the funny character or the new technical twist introduced into the yarn, seeing nothing of the essential eerieness and multi-faceted complexity of space and its worlds. Therefore it is something of an experience to encounter again Edmond Hamilton's famous stories of the Federation of Stars, with their hints of multiple worlds and myriads of oddly shaped yet allied inhabitants. Written some twenty years ago, when science-fiction had not yet straitjacketed itself with a routine set of backgrounds and accepted pseudo-scientific spaceship fixtures, Hamilton's Interstellar Patrol stories have a coloring and aura of fantasy about them now almost entirely lost in modern space-flight tales. Though "literatteurs" could find fault with the plots and characterizations of these stories from science-fiction's pioneering days, the wonder and awe of the infinite stellar universe seems actually enhanced by Hamilton's fast-moving style.

The Star-Stealers

by Edmond Hamilton

AS I STEPPED into the narrow bridge-room, the pilot at the controls there turned toward me, saluting.

"Alpha Centauri dead ahead, sir," he reported.

"Turn thirty degrees outward," I told him, "and throttle down to eighty light-speeds until we've passed the star."

Instantly the shining levers flicked back under his hands, and as I stepped over to his side I saw the arrows of the speed-dials creeping backward with the slowing of our flight. Then, gazing through the broad windows which formed the room's front side, I watched the interstellar panorama ahead shifting sidewise with the turning of our course.

The narrow bridge-room lay across the very top of our ship's long, cigar-

like hull, and through its windows all the brilliance of the heavens around us lay revealed. Ahead flamed the great double star of Alpha Centauri, two mighty, blazing suns which dimmed all else in the heavens, and which crept slowly sidewise as we veered away from them. Toward our right there stretched along the inky skies the far-flung powdered fires of the Galaxy's thronging suns, gemmed with the crimson splendor of Betelgeuse and the clear brilliance of Canopus and the hot white light of Rigel. And straight ahead, now, gleaming out beyond the twin suns we were passing shone the clear yellow star that was the sun of our own system.

It was the yellow star that I was watching, now, as our ship fled on toward it at eighty times the speed of light; for more than two years had passed since our cruiser had left it, to become a part of that great navy of the Federation of Stars which maintained peace over all the Galaxy. We had gone far with the fleet, in those two years, cruising with it the length and breadth of the Milky Way, patrolling the space-lanes of the Galaxy and helping to crush the occasional pirate ships which appeared to levy toll on the interstellar commerce. And now that an order flashed from the authorities of our own solar system had recalled us home, it was with an unalloyed eagerness that we looked forward to the moment of our return. The stars we had touched at, the peoples of their worlds, these had been friendly enough toward us, as fellow-members of the great Federation, yet for all their hospitality we had been glad enough to leave them. For though we had long ago become accustomed to the alien and unhuman forms of the different stellar races, from the strange brain-men of Algol to the birdlike people of Sirius, their worlds were not human worlds, not the familiar nine little planets which swung around our own sun, and toward which we were speeding homeward now.

While I mused thus at the window the two circling suns of Alpha Centauri had dropped behind us, and now, with a swift clicking of switches, the pilot beside me turned on our full speed. Within a few minutes our ship was hurtling on at almost a thousand light-speeds, flung forward by the power of our newly invented de-transforming generators, which could produce propulsion-vibrations of almost a thousand times the frequency of the light-vibrations. At this immense velocity, matched by few other craft in the Galaxy, we were leaping through millions of miles of space each second, yet the gleaming yellow star ahead seemed quite unchanged in size.

Abruptly the door behind me clicked open to admit young Dal Nara, the

ship's second-officer, descended from a long line of famous interstellar pilots, who grinned at me openly as she saluted.

"Twelve more hours, sir, and we'll be there," she said.

I smiled at her eagerness. "You'll not be sorry to get back to our little sun, will you?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"Not I. It may be just a pinhead beside Canopus and the rest, but there's no place like it in the Galaxy. I'm wondering, though, what made them call us back to the fleet so suddenly."

My own face clouded, at that. "I don't know," I said slowly. "It's almost unprecedented for any star to call one of its ships back from the Federation fleet, but there must have been some reason——"

"Well," she said cheerfully, turning toward the door, "it doesn't matter what the reason is, so long as it means a trip home. The crew is worse than I am—they're scrapping the generators down in the engine-room to get another light-speed out of them."

I laughed as the door clicked shut behind her, but as I turned back to the window the question she had voiced rose again in my mind, and I gazed thoughtfully toward the yellow star ahead. For as I had told Dal Nara, it was a well-nigh unheard-of thing for any star to recall one of its cruisers from the great fleet of the Federation. Including as it did every peopled star in the Galaxy, the Federation relied entirely upon the fleet to police the interstellar spaces, and to that fleet each star contributed its quota of cruisers. Only a last extremity, I knew, would ever induce any star to recall one of its ships, yet the message flashed to our ship had ordered us to return to the solar system at full speed and report at the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge, on Neptune. Whatever was behind the order, I thought, I would learn soon enough, for we were now speeding over the last lap of our homeward journey; so I strove to put the matter from my mind for the time being.

With an odd persistence, though, the question continued to trouble my thoughts in the hours that followed, and when we finally swept in toward the solar system twelve hours later, it was with a certain abstractedness that I watched the slow largening of the yellow star that was our sun. Our velocity had slackened steadily as we approached that star, and we were moving at a bare one light-speed when we finally swept down toward Neptune, the solar system's point of arrival and departure for all interstellar commerce. Even this speed we reduced still further as we sped past Nep-

tune's single circling moon and down through the crowded shipping-lanes toward the surface of the planet itself.

Fifty miles above its surface all sight of the planet beneath was shut off by the thousands of great ships which hung in dense masses above it —that vast tangle of interstellar traffic which makes the great planet the terror of all inexperienced pilots. From horizon to horizon, it seemed, the ships crowded upon each other, drawn from every quarter of the Galaxy. Huge grain-boats from Betelgeuse, vast, palatial liners from Arcturus and Vega, shiploads of radium ores from the worlds that circle giant Antares, long, swift mailboats from distant Deneb — all these and myriad others swirled and circled in one great mass above the planet, dropping down one by one as the official traffic-directors flashed from their own boats the brilliant signals which allowed a lucky one to descend. And through occasional rifts in the crowded mass of ships could be glimpsed the interplanetary traffic of the lower levels, a swarm of swift little boats which darted ceaselessly back and forth on their comparatively short journeys, ferrying crowds of passengers to Jupiter and Venus and Earth, seeming like little toy-boats beside the mighty bulks of the great interstellar ships above them.

As our own cruiser drove down toward the mass of traffic, though, it cleared away from before us instantly; for the symbol of the Federation on our bows was known from Canopus to Fomalhaut, and the cruisers of its fleet were respected by all the traffic of the Galaxy. Arrowing down through this suddenly opened lane we sped smoothly down toward the planet's surface, hovering for a moment above its perplexing maze of white buildings and green gardens, and then slanting down toward the mighty flat-roofed building which housed the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge. As we sped down toward its roof I could not but contrast the warm, sunny green panorama beneath with the icy desert which the planet had been until two hundred thousand years before, when the scientists of the solar system had devised the great heat-transmitters which catch the sun's heat near its blazing surface and fling it out as high-frequency vibrations to the receiving-apparatus on Neptune, to be transformed back into the heat which warms this world. In a moment, though, we were landing gently upon the broad roof, upon which rested scores of other shining cruisers whose crews stood outside them watching our arrival.

Five minutes later I was whirling downward through the building's interior in one of the automatic little cone-elevators, out of which I stepped

into a long white corridor. An attendant was awaiting me there, and I followed him down the corridor's length to a high black door at its end, which he threw open for me, closing it behind me as I stepped inside.

It was an ivory-walled, high-ceilinged room in which I found myself, its whole farther side open to the sunlight and breezes of the green gardens beyond. At a desk across the room was sitting a short-set man with gray-streaked hair and keen, inquiring eyes, and as I entered he sprang up and came toward me.

"Ran Rarak!" he exclaimed. "You've come! For two days, now, we've been expecting you."

"We were delayed off Aldebaran, sir, by generator trouble," I replied, bowing, for I had recognized the speaker as Hurus Hol, chief of the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge. Now, at a motion from him, I took a chair beside the desk while he resumed his own seat.

A moment he regarded me in silence, and then slowly spoke. "Ran Rarak," he said, "you must have wondered why your ship was ordered back here to the solar system. Well, it was ordered back for a reason which we dared not state in an open message, a reason which, if made public, would plunge the solar system instantly into panic."

He was silent again for a moment, his eyes on mine, and then went on, "You know, Ran Rarak, that the universe itself is composed of infinite depths of space in which float great clusters of suns, star-clusters which are separated from each other by billions of light-years of space. You know, too, that our own cluster of suns, which we call the Galaxy, is roughly disklike in shape, and that our own particular sun is situated at the very edge of this disk. Beyond lie only those inconceivable leagues of space which separate us from the neighboring star-clusters, or island-universes, depths of space never yet crossed by our own cruisers or by anything else of which we have record.

"But now, at last, something has crossed those abysses, is crossing them; since over three weeks ago our astronomers discovered that a gigantic dark star is approaching our Galaxy from the depths of infinite space—a titanic, dead sun which their instruments showed to be of a size incredible, since, dark and dead as it is, it is larger than the mightiest blazing suns in our own Galaxy, larger than Canopus or Antares or Betelgeuse—a dark, dead star millions of times larger than our own fiery sun—a gigantic wanderer

out of some far realm of infinite space, racing toward our Galaxy at great velocity.

"The calculations of our scientists showed that his speeding dark star would not race into our Galaxy but would speed past its edge, and out into infinite space again, passing no closer to our own sun, at that edge, than some fifteen billion miles. There was no possibility of collision or danger from it, therefore; and so though the approach of the dark star is known to all in the solar system, there is no idea of any peril connected with it. But there is something else which has been kept quite secret from the peoples of the solar system, something known only to a few astronomers and officials. And that is that during the last few weeks the path of this speeding dark star has changed from a straight path to a curving one, that it is curving inward toward the edge of our Galaxy and will now pass our own sun, in less than twelve weeks, at a distance of less than three billion miles, instead of fifteen. And when this titanic dead sun passes that close to our own sun there can be but one result. Inevitably our own sun will be caught by the powerful gravitational grip of the giant dark star and carried out with all its planets into the depths of space, never to return."

Hurus Hol paused, his face white and set, gazing past me with wide, unseeing eyes. My brain whirling, I sat rigid, silent, and in a moment he went on.

"If this thing were known to all," he said slowly, "there would be panic over the solar system, and for that reason only a handful have been told. Flight is impossible, for there are not enough ships in the Galaxy to transport the trillions of the solar system's population to another star in the four weeks that are left to us. There is but one chance—one blind, slender chance—and that is to turn aside this onward-thundering dark star from its present inward-curving path, to cause it to pass our sun and the Galaxy's edge far enough away to be harmless. And it is for this reason that we ordered your return.

"For it is my plan to speed out of the Galaxy into the depths of outer space to meet this approaching dark star, taking all of the scientific apparatus and equipment which might be used to swerve it aside from this curving path it is following. During the last week I have assembled the equipment for the expedition and have gathered together a force of fifty star-cruisers which are even now resting on the roof of this building, manned and ready for the trip. These are only swift mail-cruisers, though, specially equipped

for the trip, and it was advisable to have at least one battle-cruiser for flagship of the force, and so your own was recalled from the Federation fleet. And although I shall go with the expedition, of course, it was my plan to have you yourself as its captain."

Hurus Hol ceased, intently scanning my face. A moment I sat silent, then rose and stepped to the great open window at the room's far side. Outside stretched the greenery of gardens, and beyond them the white roofs of buildings, gleaming beneath the faint sunlight. Instinctively my eyes went up to the source of that light, the tiny sun, small and faint and far, here, but still—the sun. A long moment I gazed up toward it, and then turned back to Hurus Hol.

"I accept, sir," I said.

He came to his feet, his eyes shining. "I knew that you would," he said, simply, and then: "All has been ready for days, Ran Rarak. We start at once."

Ten minutes later we were on the broad roof, and the crews of our fifty ships were rushing to their posts in answer to the sharp alarm of a signal-bell. Another five minutes and Hurus Hol, Dal Nara and I stood in the bridge-room of my own cruiser, watching the white roof drop behind and beneath as we slanted up from it. In a moment the half-hundred cruisers on that roof had risen and were racing up behind us, arrowing with us toward the zenith, massed in a close, wedge-shaped formation.

Above, the brilliant signals of the traffic-boats flashed swiftly, clearing a wide lane for us, and then we had passed through the jam of traffic and were driving out past the incoming lines of interstellar ships at swiftly mounting speed, still holding the same formation with the massed cruisers behind us.

Behind and around us, now, flamed the great panorama of the Galaxy's blazing stars, but before us lay only darkness—darkness inconceivable, into which our ships were flashing out at greater and greater speed. Neptune had vanished, and far behind lay the single yellow spark that was all visible of our solar system as we fled out from it.

II

Twenty-four hours after our start I stood again in the bridge-room, alone except for the silent, imperturbable figure of my ever-watchful wheelman,

Nal Jak, staring out with him into the black gulf that lay before us. Many an hour we had stood side by side thus, scanning the interstellar spaces from our cruiser's bridge-room, but never yet had my eyes been confronted by such a lightless void as lay before me now.

Our ship, indeed, seemed to be racing through a region where light was all but non-existent, a darkness inconceivable to anyone who had never experienced it. Behind lay the Galaxy we had left, a great swarm of shining points of light, contracting slowly as we sped away from it. Toward our right, too, several misty little patches of light glowed faintly in the darkness, hardly to be seen; though these, I knew, were other galaxies or star-clusters like our own—titanic conglomerations of thronging suns dimmed to those tiny flickers of light by the inconceivable depths of space which separated them from ourselves.

Except for these, though, we fled on through a cosmic gloom that was soul-shaking in its deepness and extent, an infinite darkness and stillness in which our ship seemed the only moving thing. Behind us, I knew, the formation of our fifty ships was following close on our track, each ship separated from the next by a five hundred mile interval and each flashing on at exactly the same speed as ourselves. But though we knew they followed, our fifty cruisers were naturally quite invisible to us, and as I gazed now into the tenebrous void ahead the loneliness of our position was overpowering.

Abruptly the door behind me snapped open, and I half turned toward it as Hurus Hol entered. He glanced at our speed-dials, and his brows arched in surprise.

"Good enough," he commented, "If the rest of our ships can hold this pace it will bring us to the dark star in six days."

I nodded, gazing thoughtfully ahead. "Perhaps sooner," I estimated. "The dark star is coming toward us at a tremendous velocity, remember. You will notice on the telechart——"

Together we stepped over to the big telechart, a great rectangular plate of smoothly burnished silvery metal which hung at the bridge-room's end-wall, the one indispensable aid to interstellar navigation. Upon it were accurately reproduced, by means of projected and reflected rays, the positions and progress of all heavenly bodies near the ship. Intently we contemplated it now. At the rectangle's lower edge there gleamed on the smooth metal a score or more of little circles of glowing light, of varying sizes, represent-

ing the suns at the edge of the Galaxy behind us. Outermost of these glowed the light-disk that was our own sun, and around this Hurus Hol had drawn a shining line or circle lying more than four billion miles from our sun, on the chart. He had computed that if the approaching dark star came closer than that to our sun its mighty gravitational attraction would inevitably draw the latter out with it into space; so the shining line represented, for us, the danger-line. And creeping down toward that line and toward our sun, farther up on the blank metal of the great chart, there moved a single giant circle of deepest black, an ebon disk a hundred times the diameter of our glowing little sun-circle, which was sweeping down toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve.

Hurus Hol gazed thoughtfully at the sinister dark disk, and then shook his head. "There's something very strange about that dark star," he said, slowly. "That curving path it's moving in is contrary to all the laws of celestial mechanics. I wonder if——"

Before he could finish, the words were broken off in his mouth. For at that moment there came a terrific shock, our ship dipped and reeled crazily, and then was whirling blindly about as though caught and shaken by a giant hand. Dal Nara, the pilot, Hurus Hol and I were slammed violently down toward the bridge-room's end with the first crash, and then I clung desperately to the edge of a switch-board as we spun dizzily about. I had a flashing glimpse, through the windows, of our fifty cruisers whirling blindly about like wind-tossed straws, and in another glimpse saw two of them caught and slammed together, both ships smashing like egg-shells beneath the terrific impact, their crews instantly annihilated. Then, as our own ship dipped crazily downward again, I saw Hurus Hol creeping across the floor toward the controls, and in a moment I had slid down beside him. Another instant and we had our hands on the levers, and were slowly pulling them back into position.

Caught and buffeted still by the terrific forces outside, our cruiser slowly steadied to an even keel and then leapt suddenly forward again, the forces that held us seeming to lessen swiftly as we flashed on. There came a harsh, grating sound that brought my heart to my throat as one of the cruisers was hurled past us, grazing us, and then abruptly the mighty grip that held us had suddenly disappeared and we were humming on through the same stillness and silence as before.

I slowed our flight, then, until we hung motionless, and then we gazed

wildly at each other, bruised and panting. Before we could give utterance to the exclamations on our lips, though, the door snapped open and Dal Nara burst into the bridge-room, bleeding from a cut on her forehead.

"What was that?" she cried, raising a trembling hand to her head. "It caught us there like toys—and the other ships——"

Before any of us could answer her a bell beside me rang sharply and from the diaphragm beneath it came the voice of our message-operator.

"Ships 37, 12, 19 and 44 reported destroyed by collisions, sir," he announced, his own voice tremulous. "The others report that they are again taking up formation behind us."

"Very well," I replied. "Order them to start again in three minutes, on Number One speed-scale."

As I turned back from the instrument I drew a deep breath. "Four ships destroyed in less than a minute," I said. "And by *what?*"

"By a whirlpool of ether-currents, undoubtedly," said Hurus Hol. We stared at him blankly, and he threw out a hand in quick explanation. "You know that there are currents in the ether—that was discovered ages ago —and that those currents are responsible for light-drift and similar phenomena. All such currents in the Galaxy have always been found to be comparatively slow and sluggish, but out here in empty space there must be currents of gigantic size and speed, and apparently we stumbled directly into a great whirlpool or maelstrom of them. We were fortunate to lose but four ships," he added soberly.

The strangeness of our experience had unnerved me, for even after we had tended to our bruises and were again racing on through the void, it was with a new fearfulness that I gazed ahead. At any moment, I knew, we might plunge directly into some similar or even larger maelstrom of ether-currents, yet there was no way by which we could avoid the danger. We must drive blindly ahead at full speed and trust to luck to bring us through, and now I began to understand what perils lay between us and our destination.

As hour followed hour, though, my fearfulness gradually lessened, for we encountered no more of the dread maelstroms in our onward flight. Yet as we hummed on and on and on, a new anxiety came to trouble me, for with the passing of each day we were putting behind us billions of miles of space, and were flashing nearer and nearer toward the mighty dark star that was our goal. And even as we fled on we could see, on the great tele-

chart, the dark disk creeping down to meet us, thundering on toward the Galaxy from which, unless we succeeded, it would steal a star.

Unless we succeeded! But could we succeed? Was there any force in the universe that could turn aside this oncoming dark giant in time to prevent the theft of our sun? More and more, as we sped on, there grew in my mind doubt as to our chance of success. We had gone forth on a blind, desperate venture, on a last slender chance, and now at last I began to see how slender indeed was that chance. Dal Nara felt it, too, and even Hurus Hol, I think, but we spoke no word to each other of our thoughts, standing for hours on end in the bridge-room together, and gazing silently and broodingly out into the darkness where lay our goal.

On the sixth day of our flight we computed, by means of our telechart and flight-log, that we were within less than a billion miles of the great dark star ahead, and had slackened our speed until we were barely creeping forward, attempting to locate our goal in the dense, unchanged darkness ahead.

Straining against the windows, we three gazed eagerly forward, while beside me Nal Jak, the wheelman, silently regulated the ship's speed to my orders.

At first I could see nothing, and then slowly became aware of a feeble glow of light in the heavens ahead, an area of strange, subdued light which stretched across the whole sky, it seemed, yet which was so dim as to be hardly visible to our straining eyes. But swiftly, as we watched it, it intensified, strengthened, taking shape as a mighty circle of pale luminescence which filled almost all the heavens ahead. I gave a low-voiced order to the pilot which reduced our speed still further, but even so the light grew visibly stronger as we sped on.

"Light!" whispered Hurus Hol. "Light on a dark star! It's impossible—and yet——"

And now, in obedience to another order, our ship began to slant sharply up toward the mighty circle's upper limb, followed by the half-hundred ships behind us. And as we lifted higher and higher the circle changed before our eyes into a sphere—a tremendous, faintly glowing sphere of size inconceivable, filling the heavens with its vast bulk, feebly luminous like the ghost of some mighty sun, rushing through space to meet us as we sped up and over it. And now at last we were over it, sweeping above it with our

little fleet at a height of a half-million miles, contemplating in awed silence the titanic dimensions of the faint-glowing sphere beneath us.

For in spite of our great height above it, the vast globe stretched from horizon to horizon beneath us, a single smooth, vastly curving surface, shining with the dim, unfamiliar light whose source we could not guess. It was not the light of fire, or glowing gases, for the sun below was truly a dead one, vast in size as it was. It was a *cold* light, a faint but steady phosphorescence like no other light I had ever seen, a feeble white glow which stretched from horizon to horizon of the mighty world beneath. Dumfoundedly we stared down toward it, and then, at a signal to the pilot, our ship began to drop smoothly downward, trailed by our forty-odd followers behind. Down, down, we sped, slower and slower, until we suddenly started as there came from outside the ship a high-pitched hissing shriek.

"Air!" I cried. "This dark star has an atmosphere! And that light upon it—see!" And I flung a pointing hand toward the surface of the giant world below. For as we dropped swiftly down toward that world we saw at last that the faint light which illuminated it was not artificial light, or reflected light, but light inherent in itself, since all the surface of the mighty sphere glowed with the same phosphorescent light, its plains and hills and valleys alike feebly luminous, with the soft, dim luminosity of radio-active minerals. A shining world, a world glowing eternally with cold white light, a luminous, titanic sphere that rushed through the darkness of infinite space like some pale, gigantic moon. And upon the surface of the glowing plains beneath us rose dense and twisted masses of dark, leafless vegetation, distorted tree-growths and tangles of low shrubs that were all of deepest black in color, springing out of that glowing soil and twisting blackly and grotesquely above its feeble light, stretching away over plain and hill and valley like the monstrous landscape of some undreamed-of hell!

And now, as our ship slanted down across the surface of the glowing sphere, there gleamed ahead a deepening of that glow, a concentration of that feeble light which grew stronger as we raced on toward it. And it was a city! A city whose mighty buildings were each a truncated pyramid in shape, towering into the air for thousands upon thousands of feet, a city whose every building and street and square glowed with the same faint white light as the ground upon which they stood, a metropolis out of nightmare, the darkness of which was dispelled only by the light of its own great glowing structures and streets. Far away stretched the mass of those

structures, a luminous mass which covered square mile upon square mile of the surface of this glowing world, and far beyond them there lifted into the dusky air the shining towers and pyramids of still other cities.

We straightened, trembling, turning toward each other with white faces. And then, before any could speak, Dal Nara had whirled to the window and uttered a hoarse shout. "Look!" she cried, and pointed down and outward toward the titanic, glowing buildings of the city ahead; for from their truncated summits were rising suddenly a swarm of long black shapes, a horde of long black cones which were racing straight up toward us.

I shouted an order to the pilot, and instantly our ship was turning and slanting sharply upward, while around us our cruisers sped up with us. Then, from beneath, there sped up toward us a shining little cylinder of metal which struck a cruiser racing beside our own. It exploded instantly into a great flare of blinding light, enveloping the cruiser it had struck, and then the light had vanished, while with it had vanished the ship it had enveloped. And from the cones beneath and beyond there leapt toward us other of the metal cylinders, striking our ships now by the dozens, flaring and vanishing with them in great, silent explosions of light.

"Etheric bombs!" I cried. "And our ship is the only battle-cruiser—the rest have no weapons!"

I turned, cried another order, and in obedience to it our own cruiser halted suddenly and then dipped downward, racing straight into the ascending swarm of attacking cones. Down we flashed, down down, and toward us sprang a score of the metal cylinders, grazing along our sides. And then, from the sides of our own downward-swooping ship there sprang out brilliant shafts of green light, the deadly de-cohesion ray of the ships of the Federation Fleet. It struck a score of the cones beneath and they flamed with green light for an instant and then flew into pieces, spilling downward in a great shower of tiny fragments as the cohesion of their particles was destroyed by the deadly ray. And now our cruiser had crashed down through the swarm of them and was driving down toward the luminous plain below, then turning and racing sharply upward again while from all the air around us the black cones swarmed to the attack.

Up, up, we sped, and now I saw that our blow had been struck in vain, for the last of our ships above were vanishing beneath the flares of the etheric bombs. One only of our cruisers remained, racing up toward the zenith in headlong flight with a score of the great cones in hot pursuit. A

moment only I glimpsed this, and then we had turned once more and were again diving down upon the attacking cones, while all around us the etheric bombs filled the air with the silent, exploding flares. Again as we swooped downward our green rays cut paths of annihilation across the swarming cones beneath; and then I heard a cry from Hurus Hol, whirled to the window and glimpsed above us a single great cone that was diving headlong down toward us in a resistless, ramming swoop. I shouted to the pilot, sprang to the controls, but was too late to ward off that deadly blow. There was a great crash at the rear of our cruiser; it spun dizzily for a moment in midair, and then was tumbling crazily downward like a falling stone toward the glowing plain a score of miles below.

III

I think now that our cruiser's mad downward plunge must have lasted for minutes, at least, yet at the time it seemed over in a single instant. I have a confused memory of the bridge-room spinning about us as we whirled down, of myself throwing back the controls with a last, instinctive action, and then there came a ripping, rending crash, a violent shock, and I was flung into a corner of the room with terrific force.

Dazed by the swift action of the last few minutes I lay there motionless for a space of seconds, then scrambled to my feet. Hurus Hol and Dal Nara were staggering up likewise, the latter hastening at once down into the cruiser's hull, but Nal Jak, the wheelman, lay motionless against the wall, stunned by the shock. Our first act was to bring him back to consciousness by a few rough first-aid measures, and then we straightened and gazed about us.

Apparently our cruiser's keel was resting upon the ground, but was tilted over at a sharp angle, as the slant of the room's floor attested. Through the broad windows we could see that around our prostrate ship lay a thick, screening grove of black tree-growths which we had glimpsed from above, and into which we had crashed in our mad plunge downward. As I was later to learn, it was only the shock-absorbing qualities of the vegetation into which we had fallen, and my own last-minute rush to the controls, which had slowed our fall enough to save us from annihilation.

There was a buzz of excited voices from the crew in the hull beneath us, and then I turned at a sudden exclamation from Hurus Hol, to find him

pointing up through the observation windows in the bridge-room's ceiling. I glanced up, then shrank back. For high above were circling a score or more of the long black cones which had attacked us, and which were apparently surveying the landscape for some clue to our fate. I gave a sharp catch of indrawn breath as they dropped lower toward us, and we crouched with pounding hearts while they dropped nearer. Then we uttered simultaneous sighs of relief as the long shapes above suddenly drove back up toward the zenith, apparently certain of our annihilation, massing and wheeling and then speeding back toward the glowing city from which they had risen to attack us.

We rose to our feet again, and as we did so the door clicked open to admit Dal Nara. She was a bruised, disheveled figure, like the rest of us, but there was something like a grin on her face.

"That cone that rammed us shattered two of our rear vibration-projectors," she announced, "but that was all the damage. And outside of one man with a broken shoulder the crew is all right."

I considered for a moment. "None of our other cruisers escaped, did they?" I asked.

Dal Nara slowly shook her head. "I don't think so," she said. "Nearly all of them were destroyed in the first few minutes. I saw Ship 16 racing up in an effort to escape, heading back toward the Galaxy, but there were cones hot after it and it couldn't have got away."

The quiet voice of Hurus Hol broke in upon us. "Then we alone can take back word to the Federation of what is happening here," he said. His eyes suddenly flamed. "Two things we know," he exclaimed. "We know that this dark star's curving path through space, which will bring it so fatally near to our own sun in passing, is a path contrary to all the laws of astronomical science. And we know now, too, that upon this dark-star world, in those glowing cities yonder, live beings of some sort who possess, apparently, immense intelligence and power."

My eyes met his. "You mean——" I began, but he interrupted swiftly. "I mean that in my belief the answer to this riddle lies in that glowing city yonder, and that it is there we must go to find that answer."

"But how?" I asked. "If we take the cruiser near it they'll sight us and annihilate us."

"There is another way," said Hurus Hol. "We can leave the cruiser and

its crew hidden here, and approach the city on foot—get as near to it as possible—learn what we can about it."

I think that we all gasped at that suggestion, but as I quickly revolved it in my mind I saw that it was, in reality, our only chance to secure any information of value to take back to the Federation. So we adopted the idea without further discussion and swiftly laid our plans for the venture. At first it was our plan for only us three to go, but at Dal Nara's insistence we included the pilot in our party, the more quickly because I knew her to be resourceful and quick-witted.

Two hours we spent in sleep, at the suggestion of Hurus Hol, then ate a hasty meal and looked to our weapons, small projectors of the de-cohesion ray similar to the great ray-tubes of the cruiser. Already the ship's two shattered vibration-projectors had been replaced by spares, and our last order was for the crew and under-officers to await our return without moving beyond the ship in any event. Then the cruiser's hull-door snapped open and we four stepped outside, ready for our venture.

The sandy ground upon which we stood glowed with the feeble white light which seemed to emanate from all rock and soil on this strange world, a weird light which beat upward upon us instead of down. And in this light the twisted, alien forms of the leafless trees around us writhed upward into the dusky air, their smooth black branches tangling and intertwining far above our heads. As we paused there Hurus Hol reached down for a glowing pebble, which he examined intently for a moment.

"Radio-active," he commented. "All this glowing rock and soil." Then he straightened, glanced around, and led the way through the thickest of black forest into which our ship had fallen.

Silently we followed him, in single file, across the shining soil and beneath the distorted arches of the twisted trees, until at last we emerged from the thicket and found ourselves upon the open expanse of the glowing plain. It was a weird landscape which met our eyes, a landscape of glowing plains and shallow valleys patched here and there with the sprawling thickets of black forest, a pale, luminous world whose faint light beat feebly upward into the dusky, twilight skies above. In the distance, perhaps two miles ahead, a glow of deeper light flung up against the hovering dusk from the massed buildings of the luminous city, and toward this we tramped steadily onward, over the shining plains and gullies and once over a swift little brook whose waters glowed as they raced like torrents of rushing light.

Within an hour we had drawn to within a distance of five hundred feet from the outermost of the city's pyramidal buildings, and crouched in a little clump of dark tree-growths, gazing fascinatedly toward it.

The scene before us was one of unequaled interest and activity. Over the masses of huge, shining buildings were flitting great swarms of the long black cones, moving from roof to roof, while in the shining streets below them moved other hordes of active figures, the people of the city. And as our eyes took in these latter I think that we all felt something of horror, in spite of all the alien forms which we were familiar with in the thronging worlds of the Galaxy.

For in these creatures was no single point of resemblance to anything human, nothing which the appalled intelligence could seize upon as familiar. Imagine an upright cone of black flesh several feet in diameter and three or more in height, supported by a dozen or more smooth long tentacles which branched from its lower end—supple, boneless octopus-arms which held the cone-body upright and which served both as arms and legs. And near the top of that cone trunk were the only features, the twin tiny orifices which were the ears and a single round and red-rimmed white eye, set between them. Thus were these beings in appearance, black tentacle-creatures, moving in unending swirling throngs through streets and squares and buildings of their glowing city.

Helplessly we stared upon them, from our place of concealment. To venture into sight, I knew, would be to court swift death. I turned to Hurus Hol, then started as there came from the city ahead a low, waxing sound-note, a deep, powerful tone of immense volume which sounded out over the city like the blast of a deep-pitched horn. Another note joined it, and another, until it seemed that a score of mighty horns were calling across the city, and then they died away. But as we looked now we saw that the shining streets were emptying, suddenly, that the moving swarms of black tentacle-creatures were passing into the pyramidal buildings, that the cones above were slanting down toward the roofs and coming to rest. Within a space of minutes the streets seemed entirely empty and deserted, and the only sign of activity over all the city was the hovering of a few cones that still moved restlessly above it. Astounded, we watched, and then the explanation came suddenly to me.

"It's their sleep-period!" I cried. "Their night! These things must rest, must sleep, like any living thing, and as there's no night on this glowing

world those horn-notes must signal the beginning of their sleep-period."

Hurus Hol was on his feet, his eyes suddenly kindling. "It's a chance in a thousand to get inside the city!" he exclaimed.

The next moment we were out of the shelter of our concealing trees and were racing across the stretch of ground which separated us from the city. And five minutes later we were standing in the empty, glowing streets, hugging closely the mighty sloping walls of the huge buildings along it.

At once Hurus Hol led the way directly down the street toward the heart of the city, and as we hastened on beside him he answered to my question, "We must get to the city's center. There's something there which I glimpsed from our ship, and if it's what I think——"

He had broken into a run, now, and as we raced together down the bare length of the great, shining avenue, I, for one, had an unreassuring presentiment of what would happen should the huge buildings around us disgorge their occupants before we could get out of the city. Then Hurus Hol had suddenly stopped short, and at a motion from him we shrank swiftly behind the corner of a pyramid's slanting walls. Across the street ahead of us were passing a half-dozen of the tentacle-creatures, gliding smoothly toward the open door of one of the great pyramids. A moment we crouched, holding our breath, and then the things had passed inside the building and the door had slid shut behind them. At once we leapt out and hastened on.

We were approaching the heart of the city, I judged, and ahead the broad, shining street we followed seemed to end in a great open space of some sort. As we sped toward it, between the towering luminous lines of buildings, a faint droning sound came to our ears from ahead, waxing louder as we hastened on. The clear space ahead was looming larger, nearer, now, and then as we raced past the last great building on the street's length we burst suddenly into view of the opening ahead and stopped, staring dumfoundedly toward it.

It was no open plaza or square, but a pit—a shallow, circular pit not more than a hundred feet in depth but all of a mile in diameter, and we stood at the rim or edge of it. The floor was smooth and flat, and upon that floor there lay a grouped mass of hundreds of half-globes or hemispheres, each fifty feet in diameter, which were resting upon their flat bases with their curving sides uppermost. Each of these hemispheres was shining with light, but it was very different light from the feeble glow of the buildings and streets around us, an intensely brilliant blue radiance which was all but

blinding to our eyes. From these massed, radiant hemispheres came the loud droning we had heard, and now we saw, at the pit's farther edge, a cylindrical little room or structure of metal which was supported several hundred feet above the pit's floor by a single slender shaft of smooth round metal, like a great bird-cage. And toward this cage-structure Hurus Hol was pointing now, his eyes flashing.

"It's the switch-board of the thing!" he cried. These brilliant hemispheres—the unheard-of space-path of this dark star—it's all clear now. All——"

He broke off, suddenly, as Nal Jak sprang back, uttering a cry and pointing upward. For the moment we had forgotten the hovering cones above the city, and now one of them was slanting swiftly downward, straight toward us.

We turned, ran back, and the next moment an etheric bomb crashed down upon the spot where we had stood, exploding silently in a great flare of light. Another bomb fell and flared, nearer, and then I turned with sudden fierce anger and aimed the little ray-projector in my hand at the hovering cone above. The brilliant little beam cut across the dark shape; the black cone hovered still for a moment, then crashed down into the street to destruction. But now, from above and beyond, other cones were slanting swiftly down toward us, while from the pyramidal buildings beside us hordes of the black tentacle-creatures were pouring out in answer to the alarm.

In a solid, resistless swarm they rushed upon us. I heard a yell of defiance from Dal Nara, beside me, the hiss of our rays as they clove through the black masses in terrible destruction, and then they were upon us. A single moment we whirled about in a wild mêlée of men and cone-creatures, of striking human arms and coiling tentacles; then there was a shout of warning from one of my friends, something hard descended upon my head with crushing force, and all went black before me.

IV

Faint light was filtering through my eyelids when I came back to consciousness. As I opened them I sat weakly up, then fell back. Dazedly I gazed about me. I was lying in a small, square room lit only by its own glowing walls and floor and ceiling, a room whose one side slanted steeply

upward and inward, pierced by a small barred window that was the only opening. Opposite me I discerned a low door of metal bars, or grating, beyond which lay a long, glowing-walled corridor. Then all these things were suddenly blotted out by the anxious face of Hurus Hol, bending down toward me.

"You're awake!" he exclaimed, his face alight.

I struggled to a sitting position, aided by the arm of Dal Nara, who had appeared beside me. I felt strangely weak, exhausted, my head throbbing with racing fires.

"Where are we?" I asked, at last. "The fight in the city—I remember that—but where are we now? And where's Nal Jak?"

The eyes of my two friends met and glanced away, while I looked anxiously toward them. Then Hurus Hol spoke slowly.

"We are imprisoned in this little room in one of the great pyramids of the city," he said. "And in this room you have lain for weeks, Ran Rarak."

"Weeks?" I gasped, and he nodded. "It's been almost ten weeks since we were captured there in the city outside," he said, "and for all that time you've lain here out of your head from that blow you received, sometimes delirious and raving, sometimes completely unconscious. And in all that time this dark star, this world, has been plunging on through space toward our Galaxy, and our sun, and the theft and doom of that sun. Ten more days and it passes our sun, stealing it from the Galaxy. And I, who have learned at last what forces are behind it all, lie prisoned here.

"It was after we four were brought to this cell, after our capture, that I was summoned before our captors, before a council of those tentacle-creatures which was made up, I think, of their own scientists. They examined me, my clothing, all about me, then sought to communicate with me. They do not speak—communicating with each other by telepathy—but they strove to enter into communication with me by a projection of pictures on a smooth wall, pictures of their dark star world, pictures of our own Galaxy, our own sun—picture after picture, until at last I began to understand the drift of them, the history and the purpose of these strange beings and their stranger world.

"For ages, I learned, for countless eons, their mighty sun had flashed through the infinities of space, alone except for its numerous planets upon which had risen these races of tentacle-creatures. Their sun was flaming with life, then, and on their circling planets they had attained to immense

science, immense power, as their system rolled on, a single wandering star, through the depths of uncharted space. But as the slow eons passed, the mighty sun began to cool, and their planets to grow colder and colder. At last it had cooled so far that to revive its dying fires they dislodged one of their own planets from its orbit and sent it crashing into their sun, feeding its waning flames. And when more centuries had passed and it was again cooling they followed the same course, sending another planet into it, and so on through the ages, staving off the death of their sun by sacrificing their worlds, until at last but one planet was left to them. And still their sun was cooling, darkening, dying.

"For further ages, though, they managed to preserve a precarious existence on their single planet by means of artificial heat-production, until at last their great sun had cooled and solidified to such a point that life was possible upon its dark, dead surface. That surface, because of the solidified radio-active elements in it, shone always with pale light, and to it the races of the tentacle-creatures now moved. By means of great air-current projectors they transferred the atmosphere of their planet to the dark star itself and then cast loose their planet to wander off into space by itself, for its orbit had become erratic and they feared that it would crash into their own great dark star world, about which it had revolved. But on the warm, shining surface of the great dark star they now spread out and multiplied, raising their cities from its glowing rock and clinging to its surface as it hurtled on and on and on through the dark infinities of trackless space.

"But at last, after further ages of such existence, the tentacle-races saw that again they were menaced with extinction, since in obedience to the inexorable laws of nature their dark star was cooling still further, the molten fires at its center which warmed its surface gradually dying down, while that surface became colder and colder. In a little while, they knew, the fires at its center would be completely dead, and their great world would be a bitter, frozen waste, unless they devised some plan by which to keep warm its surface.

"At this moment their astronomers came forward with the announcement that their dark-star world, plunging on through empty space, would soon pass a great star-cluster or Galaxy of suns at a distance of some fifteen billion miles. They could not invade the worlds of this Galaxy, they knew, for they had discovered that upon those worlds lived countless trillions of intelligent inhabitants who would be able to repel their own invasion, if they attempted

it. There was but one expedient left, therefore, and that was to attempt to jerk a sun out of this Galaxy as they passed by it, to steal a star from it to take out with them into space, which would revolve around their own mighty dark world and supply it with the heat they needed.

"The sun which they fixed on to steal was one at the Galaxy's very edge, our own sun. If they passed this at fifteen billion miles, as their course then would cause them to do, they could do nothing. But if they could change their dark star's course, could curve inward to pass this sun at some three billion miles instead of fifteen, then the powerful gravitational grip of their own gigantic world would grasp this sun and carry it out with it into space. The sun's planets, too, would be carried out, but these they planned to crash into the fires of the sun itself, to increase its size and splendor. All that was needed, therefore, was some method of curving their world's course inward, and for this they had recourse to the great gravity-condensers which they had already used to shift their own planets.

"You know that it is gravitational force alone which keeps the suns and planets to their courses, and you know that the gravitational force of any body, sun or planet, is radiated out from it in all directions, tending to pull all things toward that body. In the same way there is radiated outward perpetually from the Galaxy the combined attractive gravitational force of all its swarming sun, and a tiny fraction of this outward-radiating force, of course, struck the dark star, pulling it weakly toward the Galaxy. If more of that outward-radiating force could strike the dark star, it would be pulled toward the Galaxy with more power, would be pulled nearer toward the Galaxy's edge, as it passed.

"It was just that which their gravity-condenser accomplished. In a low pit at the heart of one of their cities—this city, in fact—they placed the condenser, a mass of brilliant hemispherical ray-attracters which caused more of the Galaxy's outward-shooting attractive force to fall upon the dark star, which condensed and concentrated that radiating force upon the dark star, thereby pulling the dark star inward toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve. When they reached a distance of three billion miles from the Galaxy's edge they planned to turn off the great condenser, and their dark star would then shoot past the Galaxy's edge, jerking out our sun with it, from that edge, by its own terrific gravitational grip. If the condenser were turned off before they came that close, however, they would pass the sun at a distance too far to pull it out with them, and would then speed on out into space

alone, toward the freezing of their world and their own extinction. For that reason the condenser, and the great cage-switch of the condenser, were guarded always by hovering cones, to prevent its being turned off before the right moment.

"Since then they have kept the great gravity-condenser in unceasing operation, and their dark star has swept in toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve. And in those weeks since we were captured, while you have lain here unconscious and raving, this dark star has been plunging nearer and nearer toward our Galaxy and toward our sun. Ten more days and it passes that sun, carrying it out with it into the darkness of boundless space, unless the great condenser is turned off before then. Ten more days, and we lie here, powerless."

There was a long silence when Hurus Hol's voice had ceased—a whispering, brain-crushing silence which I broke at last with a single question.

"But Nal Jak—?" I asked, and the faces of my two companions became suddenly strange, while Dal Nara turned away. At last Hurus Hol spoke.

"It was after the tentacle-scientists had examined me," he said gently, "that they brought Nal Jak down to examine. I think that they spared me for the time being because of my apparently greater knowledge, but Nal Jak they—vivisected."

There was a longer hush than before, one in which the brave, quiet figure of the wheelman, a companion in all my service with the fleet, seemed to rise before my suddenly blurring eyes. Then abruptly I swung down from the narrow bunk on which I lay, clutched dizzily at my companions for support, and walked unsteadily to the square, barred little window. Outside and beneath me lay the city of the dark-star people, a mighty mass of pyramidal, glowing buildings, streets thronged with their dark, gliding figures, above them the swarms of the racing cones. From our little window the glowing wall of the great pyramid which held us slanted steeply down for fully five hundred feet, and upward above us for twice that distance. And as I raised my eyes upward I saw, clear and bright above, a great, far-flung field of stars—the stars of our own Galaxy toward which this world was plunging. And burning out clearest among these the star that was nearest of all, the shining yellow star that was our own sun.

I think now that it was the sight of that yellow star, largening steadily as our dark star swept on toward it, which filled us with such utter despair in the hours, the days, that followed. Out beyond the city our cruiser lay

hidden in the black forest, we knew, and could we escape we might yet carry word back to the Federation of what was at hand, but escape was impossible. And so, through the long days, days measurable only by our own time-dials, we waxed deeper into an apathy of dull despair.

Rapidly my strength came back to me, though the strange food supplied us once a day by our captors was almost uneatable. But as the days fled by, my spirits sank lower and lower, and less and less we spoke to each other as the doom of our sun approached, the only change in any thing around us being the moment each twenty-four hours when the signal-horns called across the city, summoning the hordes in its streets to their four-hour sleep-period. At last, though, we woke suddenly to realization of the fact that nine days had passed since my awakening, and that upon the next day the dark star would be plunging past the burning yellow star above us and jerking it into its grip. Then, at last, all our apathy dropped from us, and we raged against the walls of our cells with insensate fury. And then, with startling abruptness, came the means of our deliverance. . . .

For hours there had been a busy clanging of tools and machines somewhere in the great building above us, and numbers of the tentacle-creatures had been passing our barred door carrying tools and instruments toward some work being carried out overhead. We had come to pay but little attention to them, in time, but as one passed there came a sudden rattle and clang from outside, and turning to the door we saw that one of the passing creatures had dropped a thick coil of slender metal chain upon the floor and had passed on without noticing his loss.

In an instant we were at the door and reaching through its bars toward the coil, but though we each strained our arms in turn toward it the thing lay a few tantalizing inches beyond our grasp. A moment we surveyed it, baffled, fearing the return at any moment of the creature who had dropped it, and then Dal Nara, with a sudden inspiration, lay flat upon the floor, thrusting her leg out through the grating. In a moment she had caught the coil with her foot, and in another moment we had it inside, examining it.

We found that though it was as slender as my smallest finger the chain was of incredible strength, and when we roughly estimated the extent of its thick-coiled length we discovered that it would be more than long enough to reach from our window to the street below. At once, therefore, we secreted the thing in a corner of the room and impatiently awaited the sleep-period, when we could work without fear of interruption.

At last, after what seemed measureless hours of waiting, the great horns blared forth across the city outside, and swiftly its streets emptied, the sounds in our building quieting until all was silence, except for the humming of a few watchful cones above the great condenser, and the deep droning of the condenser itself in the distance. At once we set to work at the bars of our window.

Frantically we chipped at the rock at the base of one of the metal bars, using the few odd bits of metal at our command, but at the end of two hours had done no more than scratch away a bare inch of the glowing stone. Another hour and we had laid bare from the rock the lower end of the bar, but now we knew that within minutes the sleep-period of the city outside would be ending, and into its street would be swarming its gliding throngs, making impossible all attempts at escape. Furiously we worked, dripping now with sweat, until at last when our time-dials showed that less than half an hour remained to us I gave over the chipping at the rock and wrapped our chain firmly around the lower end of the bar we had loosened. Then stepping back into the cell and bracing ourselves against the wall below the window, we pulled backward with all our strength.

A tense moment we strained thus, the thick bar holding fast, and then abruptly it gave and fell from its socket in the wall to the floor, with a loud, ringing clang. We lay in a heap on the floor, panting and listening for any sound of alarm, then rose and swiftly fastened the chain's end to one of the remaining bars. The chain itself we dropped out of the window, watching it uncoil its length down the mighty building's glowing side until its end trailed on the empty glowing street far below. At once I motioned Hurus Hol to the window, and in a moment he had squeezed through its bars and was sliding slowly down the chain, hand under hand. Before he was ten feet down Dal Nara was out and creeping downward likewise, and then I too squeezed through the window and followed them, downward, the three of us crawling down the chain along the huge building's steeply sloping side like three flies.

I was ten feet down from the window, now, twenty feet, and glanced down toward the glowing, empty street, five hundred feet below, and seeming five thousand. Then, at a sudden sound from above me, I looked sharply up, and as I did so the most sickening sensation of fear I had ever experienced swept over me. For at the window we had just left, twenty feet above me, one of the tentacle-creatures was leaning out, brought to our cell, I

doubted not, by the metal bar's ringing fall, his white, red-rimmed eye turned full upon me.

I heard sighs of horror from my two companions beneath me, and for a single moment we hung motionless along the chain's length, swinging along the huge pyramid's glowing side at a height of hundreds of feet above the shining streets below. Then the creature raised one of its tentacles, a metal tool in its grasp, which he brought down in a sharp blow on the chain at the window's edge. Again he repeated the blow, and again.

He was cutting the chain!

V

For a space of seconds I hung motionless there, and then as the tool in the grasp of the creature above came down on the chain in another sharp blow the sound galvanized me into sudden action.

"Slide on down!" I cried. They didn't, however, but followed me up the chain, though Dal Nara and I alone came to grips with the horrible dead-star creature. I gripped the links with frantic hands, pulling myself upward toward the window and the creature at the window, twenty feet above me.

Three times the tool in his hand came down upon the chain while I struggled up toward him, and each time I expected the strand to sever and send us down to death, but the hard metal withstood the blows for the moment, and before he could strike at it again I was up to the level of the window and reaching up toward him.

As I did so, swift black tentacles thrust out and gripped Dal Nara and me, while another of the snaky arms swept up with the tool in its grasp for a blow on my head. Before it could fall, though, I had reached out with my right hand, holding to the chain with my left, and had grasped the body of the thing inside the window, pulling him outside before he had time to resist. As I did so my own hold slipped a little, so that we hung a few feet below the window, both clinging to the slender chain and both striking futilely at each other, he with the metal tool and I with my clenched fist.

A moment we hung there, swaying hundreds of feet above the luminous stone street, and then the creature's tentacles coiled swiftly around my neck, tightening, choking me. Hanging precariously to our slender strand with one hand I struck out blindly with the other, but felt consciousness leaving me as that remorseless grip tightened. Then with a last effort I gripped the

chain firmly with both hands, doubled my feet under me, and kicked out with all my strength. The kick caught the cone-body of my opponent squarely, tearing him loose from his own hold on the chain, and then there was a sudden wrench at my neck and I was free of him, while beneath Dal Nara and I glimpsed his dark body whirling down toward the street below, twisting and turning in its fall along the building's slanting side and then crashing finally down upon the smooth, shining street below, where it lay a black little huddled mass.

Hanging there I looked down, panting, and saw that Hurus Hol had reached the chain's bottom and was standing in the empty street, awaiting us. Glancing up I saw that the blows of the creature I had fought had half severed one of the links above me, but there was no time to readjust it; so with a prayer that it might hold a few moments longer Dal Nara and I began our slipping, sliding progress downward.

The sharp links tore our hands cruelly as we slid downward and once it seemed to me that the chain gave a little beneath our weight. Apprehensively I looked upward, then down to where Hurus Hol was waving encouragement. Down, down we slid, not daring to look beneath again, not knowing how near we might be to the bottom. Then there was another slight give in the chain, a sudden grating catch, and abruptly the weakened link above snapped and we dropped headlong downward—ten feet into the arms of Hurus Hol.

A moment we sprawled in a little heap there on the glowing street and then staggered to our feet. "Out of the city!" cried Hurus Hol. "We could never get to the condenser-switch on foot—but in the cruiser there's a chance. We have but a few minutes now before the sleep-period ends."

Down the broad street we ran, through squares and avenues of glowing, mighty pyramids, crouching down once as the ever-hovering cones swept by above, and then racing on. At any moment, I knew, the great horns might blare across the city, bringing its swarming thousands into its streets, and our only chance was to win free of it before that happened. At last we were speeding down the street by which we had entered the city, and before us lay that street's end, with beyond it the vista of black forest and glowing plain over which we had come. And now we were racing over that glowing plain, a quarter-mile, a half, a mile. . . .

Abruptly from far behind came the calling, crescendo notes of the mighty horns, marking the sleep-period's end, bringing back into the streets the

city's tentacle-people. It could be but moments now, we knew, before our escape was discovered, and as we panted on at our highest speed we listened for the sounding of the alarm behind us.

When we had drawn to within a half-mile of the black forest where our cruiser lay hidden, another great tumult of horn-notes burst out over the glowing city behind, high and shrill and raging. And glancing back we saw swarms of the black cones rising from the pyramidal buildings' summits, circling, searching, speeding out over the glowing plains around the city, a compact mass of them racing straight toward us.

Staggering, stumbling, with the last of our strength we sped on, over the glowing soil and rocks, toward the rim of the black forest which lay now a scant quarter-mile ahead. Then suddenly Hurus Hol stumbled, tripped and fell. I halted, turned toward him, then turned again as Dal Nara shouted thickly and pointed upward. We had been sighted by the speeding cones above and two of them were driving straight down toward us.

A moment we stood there, rigid, while the great cones dipped toward us, waiting for the death that would crash down upon us from them. Then suddenly a great dark shape loomed in the air above and behind us, from which sprang out swift shafts of brilliant green light, the dazzling de-cohesion ray, striking the two swooping cones and sending them down in twin torrents of shattered wreckage. And now the mighty bulk behind us swept swiftly down upon us, and we saw that it was our cruiser.

Smoothly it shot down to the ground, and we stumbled to its side, through the waiting open door. As I staggered up to the bridge-room the third officer was shouting in my ear. "We sighted you from the forest," he was crying. "Came out in the cruiser to get you—"

But now I was in the bridge-room, brushing the wheelman from the controls, sending our ship slanting sharply up toward the zenith. Hurus Hol was at my side, now, pointing toward the great telechart and shouting something in my ear. I glanced over, and my heart stood still. For the great dark disk on the chart had swept down to within an inch of the shining line around our sun-circle, the danger-line.

"The condenser!" I shouted. "We must get to that switch—turn it off! It's our only chance!"

We were racing through the air toward the luminous city, now, and ahead a mighty swarm of the cones was gathering and forming to meet us, while

from behind and from each side came other swarms, driving on toward us. Then the door clicked open and Dal Nara burst into the bridge-room.

"The ship's ray-tubes are useless!" she cried. "They've used the last charge in the ray-tanks!"

At that cry the controls quivered under my hands, the ship slowed, stopped. Silence filled the bridge-room, filled all the cruiser, the last silence of despair. We had failed. Weaponless our ship hung there, motionless, while toward it from all directions leaped the swift and swarming cones, in dozens, in scores, in hundreds, leaping toward us, long black messengers of death, while on the great telechart the mighty dark star leapt closer toward the shining circle that was our sun, toward the fateful line around it. We had failed, and death was upon us.

And now the black swarms of the cones were very near us, and were slowing a little, as though fearing some ruse on our part, were slowing but moving closer, closer, while we awaited them in a last utter stupor of despair. Closer they came, closer, closer. . . .

A ringing, exultant cry suddenly sounded from somewhere in the cruiser beneath me, taken up by a sudden babel of voices, and then Dal Nara cried out hoarsely, beside me, and pointed up through our upper observation-windows toward a long, shining, slender shape that was driving down toward us out of the upper air, while behind it drove a vast swarm of other and larger shapes, long and black and mighty.

"It's our own ship!" Dal Nara was shouting, insanely. "It's Ship 16! They escaped, got back to the Galaxy—and look there—behind them—it's the fleet, the Federation fleet!"

There was a wild singing of blood in my ears as I looked up, saw the mighty swarm of black shapes that were speeding down upon us behind the shining cruiser, the five thousand mighty battle-cruisers of the Federation fleet.

The fleet! The massed fighting-ships of the Galaxy, cruisers from Antares and Sirius and Regulus and Spica, the keepers of the Milky Way patrol, the picked fighters of a universe! Ships with which I had cruised from Arcturus to Deneb, beside which I had battled in many an interstellar fight. The fleet! They were straightening, wheeling, hovering, high above us, and then they were driving down upon the massed swarms of cones around us in one titanic, simultaneous swoop.

Then around us the air flashed brilliant with green ray and bursting

flares, as de-cohesion rays and etheric bombs crashed and burst from ship to ship. Weaponless our cruiser hung there, at the center of that gigantic battle, while around us the mighty cruisers of the Galaxy and the long black cones of the tentacle-people crashed and whirled and flared, swooping and dipping and racing upon each other, whirling down to the glowing world below in scores of shattered wrecks, vanishing in silent flares of blinding light. From far away across the surface of the luminous world beneath, the great swarms of cones drove on toward the battle, from the shining towers of cities far away, racing fearlessly to the attack, sinking and falling and crumbling beneath the terrible rays of the leaping ships above, ramming and crashing with them to the ground in sacrificial plunges. But swiftly, now, the cones were vanishing beneath the brilliant rays.

Then Hurus Hol was at my side, shouting and pointing down toward the glowing city below. "The condenser!" he cried, pointing to where its blue radiance still flared on. "The dark star—look!" He flung a hand toward the telechart, where the dark star disk was but a scant half-inch from the shining line around our sun-circle, a tiny gap that was swiftly closing. I glanced toward the battle that raged around us, where the Federation cruisers were sending the cones down to destruction by swarms, now, but unheeding of the condenser below. A bare half-mile beneath us lay that condenser, and its cage-pillar switch, which a single shaft of the green ray would have destroyed instantly. And our ray-tubes were useless!

Then wild resolve flared up in my brain and I slammed down the levers in my hands, sent our ship racing down toward the condenser and its upheld cage like a released thunderbolt of hurtling metal. *"Hold tight!"* I screamed as we thundered down. *"I'm going to ram the switch!"*

Now up toward us were rushing the brilliant blue hemispheres of the pit, the great pillar and upheld cage beside them, toward which we flashed with the speed of lightning. A tremendous shock shook the cruiser from stem to stern as its prow tore through the upheld metal cage, ripping it from its supporting pillar and sending it crashing to the ground. Our cruiser spun, hovered for a moment as though to whirl down to destruction, then steadied, while we at the window gazed downward, shouting.

For beneath us the blinding radiance of the massed hemispheres had suddenly snapped out. Around and above us the great battle had died, the last of the cones tumbling to the ground beneath the rays of the mighty fleet, and now we turned swiftly to the telechart. Tensely we scanned it.

Upon it the great dark-star disk was creeping still toward the line around our sun-circle, creeping slower and slower toward it but still moving on, on, on. . . . Had we lost, at the last moment? Now the black disk, hardly moving, was all but touching the shining line, separated from it by only a hair's-breadth gap. A single moment we watched while it hovered thus, a moment in which was settled the destiny of a sun. And then a babel of incoherent cries came from our lips. For the tiny gap was *widening!*

The black disk was moving back, was curving outward again from our sun and from the Galaxy's edge, curving out once more into the blank depths of space whence it had come, without the star it had planned to steal. Out, out, out—and we knew, at last, that we had won.

And the mighty fleet of ships around us knew, from their own telecharts. They were massing around us and hanging motionless while beneath us the palely glowing gigantic dark star swept on, out into the darkness of trackless space until it hung like a titanic feeble moon in the heavens before us, retreating farther and farther from the shining stars of our Galaxy, carrying with it the glowing cities and the hordes of the tentacle-peoples, never to return. There in the bridge-room, with our massed ships around us, we three watched it go, then turned back toward our own yellow star, serene and far and benignant, that yellow star around which swung our own eight little worlds. And then Dal Nara flung out a hand toward it, half weeping now.

"The sun!" she cried. "The sun! The good old sun, that we fought for and saved! *Our* sun, till the end of time!"

We would not dream of depriving Professor Einstein of the honor of having discovered his Theory of Relativity. He certainly did—mathematically. But can you say that Frank R. Stockton did not, at least a little bit, suspect something of it back in the Nineteenth Century when his strange little story was penned? For reading The Philosophy of Relative Existences *we were struck by the modernity of its style and idea; it might have been written for any of today's quality magazines. This does not usually hold true for authors of Stockton's generation—including most of Stockton's stories themselves. But this clever piece—that ghostly city—will stick to your mind quite a while, we think.*

"The Philosophy of Relative Existences"

by Frank R. Stockton

IN A CERTAIN summer, not long gone, my friend Bentley and I found ourselves in a little hamlet which overlooked a placid valley, through which a river gently moved, winding its way through green stretches until it turned the end of a line of low hills and was lost to view. Beyond this river, far away, but visible from the door of the cottage where we dwelt, there lay a city. Through the mists which floated over the valley we could see the outlines of steeples and tall roofs; and buildings of a character which indicated thrift and business stretched themselves down to the opposite edge of the river. The more distant parts of the city, evidently a small one, lost themselves in the hazy summer atmosphere.

Bentley was young, fair-haired, and a poet; I was a philosopher, or trying to be one. We were good friends, and had come down into this peaceful region to work together. Although we had fled from the bustle and distractions of the town, the appearance in this rural region of a city, which, so far as we could observe, exerted no influence on the quiet character of the

valley in which it lay, aroused our interest. No craft plied up and down the river; there were no bridges from shore to shore; there were none of those scattered and half-squalid habitations which generally are found on the outskirts of a city; there came to us no distant sound of bells; and not the smallest wreath of smoke rose from any of the buildings.

In answer to our inquiries our landlord told us that the city over the river had been built by one man, who was a visionary, and who had a great deal more money than common sense. "It is not as big a town as you would think, sirs," he said, "because the general mistiness of things in this valley makes them look larger than they are. Those hills, for instance, when you get to them are not as high as they look to be from here. But the town is big enough, and a good deal too big; for it ruined its builder and owner, who when he came to die had not money enough left to put up a decent tombstone at the head of his grave. He had a queer idea that he would like to have his town all finished before anybody lived in it, and so he kept on working and spending money year after year and year after year until the city was done and he had not a cent left. During all the time that the place was building hundreds of people came to him to buy houses, or to hire them, but he would not listen to anything of the kind. No one must live in his town until it was all done. Even his workmen were obliged to go away at night to lodge. It is a town, sirs, I am told, in which nobody has slept for even a night. There are streets there, and places of business, and churches, and public halls, and everything that a town full of inhabitants could need; but it is all empty and deserted, and has been so as far back as I can remember, and I came to this region when I was a little boy."

"And is there no one to guard the place?" we asked; "no one to protect it from wandering vagrants who might choose to take possession of the buildings?"

"There are not many vagrants in this part of the country," he said, "and if there were they would not go over to that city. It is haunted."

"By what?" we asked.

"Well, sirs, I scarcely can tell you; queer beings that are not flesh and blood, and that is all I know about it. A good many people living hereabouts have visited that place once in their lives, but I know of no one who has gone there a second time."

"And travellers," I said, "are they not excited by curiosity to explore that strange uninhabited city?"

"Oh yes," our host replied; "almost all visitors to the valley go over to that queer city—generally in small parties, for it is not a place in which one wishes to walk about alone. Sometimes they see things and sometimes they don't. But I never knew any man or woman to show a fancy for living there, although it is a very good town."

This was said at supper-time, and, as it was the period of full moon, Bentley and I decided that we would visit the haunted city that evening. Our host endeavored to dissuade us, saying that no one ever went over there at night; but as we were not to be deterred he told us where we would find his small boat tied to a stake on the river-bank. We soon crossed the river, and landed at a broad but low stone pier, at the land end of which a line of tall grasses waved in the gentle night wind as if they were sentinels warning us from entering the silent city. We pushed through these, and walked up a street fairly wide, and so well paved that we noticed none of the weeds and other growths which generally denote desertion or little use. By the bright light of the moon we could see that the architecture was simple, and of a character highly gratifying to the eye. All the buildings were of stone, and of good size. We were greatly excited and interested, and proposed to continue our walks until the moon should set, and to return on the following morning—"to live here, perhaps," said Bentley. "What could be so romantic and yet so real? What could conduce better to the marriage of verse and philosophy?" But as he said this we saw around the corner of a cross-street some forms as of people hurrying away.

"The spectres," said my companion, laying his hand on my arm.

"Vagrants, more likely," I answered, "who have taken advantage of the superstition of the region to appropriate this comfort and beauty to themselves."

"If that be so," said Bentley, "we must have a care for our lives."

We proceeded cautiously, and soon saw other forms fleeing before us and disappearing, as we supposed, around corners and into houses. And now suddenly finding ourselves upon the edge of a wide, open public square, we saw in the dim light—for a tall steeple obscured the moon—the forms of vehicles, horses, and men moving here and there. But before, in our astonishment, we could say a word one to the other, the moon moved past the steeple, and in its bright light we could see none of the signs of life and traffic which had just astonished us.

Timidly, with hearts beating fast, but with not one thought of turning

back, nor any fear of vagrants—for we were now sure that what we had seen was not flesh and blood, and therefore harmless—we crossed the open space and entered a street down which the moon shone clearly. Here and there we saw dim figures, which quickly disappeared; but, approaching a low stone balcony in front of one of the houses, we were surprised to see, sitting thereon and leaning over a book which lay open upon the top of the carved parapet, the figure of a woman who did not appear to notice us.

"That is a real person," whispered Bentley, "and she does not see us."

"No," I replied; "it is like the others. Let us go near it."

We drew near to the balcony and stood before it. At this the figure raised its head and looked at us. It was beautiful, it was young; but its substance seemed to be of an ethereal quality which we had never seen or known of. With its full, soft eyes fixed upon us, it spoke.

"Why are you here?" it asked. "I have said to myself that the next time I saw any of you I would ask you why you come to trouble us. Cannot you live content in your own realms and spheres, knowing, as you must know, how timid we are, and how you frighten us and make us unhappy? In all this city there is, I believe, not one of us except myself who does not flee and hide from you whenever you cruelly come here. Even I would do that, had not I declared to myself that I would see you and speak to you, and endeavor to prevail upon you to leave us in peace."

The clear, frank tones of the speaker gave me courage. "We are two men," I answered, "strangers in this region, and living for the time in the beautiful country on the other side of the river. Having heard of this quiet city, we have come to see it for ourselves. We had supposed it to be uninhabited, but now that we find that this is not the case, we would assure you from our hearts that we do not wish to disturb or annoy any one who lives here. We simply came as honest travellers to view the city."

The figure now seated herself again, and as her countenance was nearer to us, we could see that it was filled with pensive thought. For a moment she looked at us without speaking. "Men!" she said. "And so I have been right. For a long time I have believed that the beings who sometimes come here, filling us with dread and awe, are men."

"And you," I exclaimed—"who are you, and who are these forms that we have seen, these strange inhabitants of this city?"

She gently smiled as she answered, "We are the ghosts of the future. We are the people who are to live in this city generations hence. But all of us

do not know that, principally because we do not think about it and study about it enough to know it. And it is generally believed that the men and women who sometimes come here are ghosts who haunt the place."

"And that is why you are terrified and flee from us?" I exclaimed. "You think we are ghosts from another world?"

"Yes," she replied; "that is what is thought, and what I used to think."

"And you," I asked, "are spirits of human beings yet to be?"

"Yes," she answered; "but not for a long time. Generations of men—I know not how many—must pass away before we are men and women."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Bentley, clasping his hands and raising his eyes to the sky, "I shall be a spirit before you are a woman."

"Perhaps," she said again, with a sweet smile upon her face, "you may live to be very, very old."

But Bentley shook his head. This did not console him. For some minutes I stood in contemplation, gazing upon the stone pavement beneath my feet. "And this," I ejaculated, "is a city inhabited by the ghosts of the future, who believe men and women to be phantoms and spectres?"

She bowed her head.

"But how is it," I asked, "that you discovered that you are spirits and we mortal men?"

"There are so few of us who think of such things," she answered, "so few who study, ponder, and reflect. I am fond of study, and I love philosophy; and from the reading of many books I have learned much. From the book which I have here I have learned most; and from its teachings I have gradually come to the belief, which you tell me is the true one, that we are spirits and you men."

"And what book is that?" I asked.

"It is 'The Philosophy of Relative Existences,' by Rupert Vance."

"Ye gods!" I exclaimed, springing upon the balcony, "that is my book, and I am Rupert Vance." I stepped toward the volume to seize it, but she raised her hand.

"You cannot touch it," she said. "It is the ghost of a book. And did you write it?"

"Write it? No," I said; "I am writing it. It is not yet finished."

"But here it is," she said, turning over the last pages. "As a spirit book it is finished. It is very successful; it is held in high estimation by intelligent thinkers; it is a standard work."

I stood trembling with emotion. "High estimation!" I said. "A standard work!"

"Oh yes," she replied, with animation; "and it well deserves its great success, especially in its conclusion. I have read it twice."

"But let me see these concluding pages," I exclaimed. "Let me look upon what I am to write."

She smiled, and shook her head, and closed the book. "I would like to do that," she said, "but if you are really a man you must not know what you are going to do."

"Oh tell me, tell me," cried Bentley from below, "do you know a book called 'Stellar Studies,' by Arthur Bentley? It is a book of poems."

The figure gazed at him. "No," it said, presently, "I never heard of it."

I stood trembling. Had the youthful figure before me been flesh and blood, had the book been a real one, I would have torn it from her.

"O wise and lovely being!" I exclaimed, falling on my knees before her, "be also benign and generous. Let me but see the last page of my book. If I have been of benefit to your world; more than all, if I have been of benefit to you, let me see, I implore you—let me see how it is that I have done it."

She rose with the book in her hand. "You have only to wait until you have done it," she said, "and then you will know all that you could see here." I started to my feet and stood alone upon the balcony.

"I am sorry," said Bentley, as we walked toward the pier where we had left our boat, "that we talked only to that ghost girl, and that the other spirits were all afraid of us. Persons whose souls are choked up with philosophy are not apt to care much for poetry; and even if my book is to be widely known, it is easy to see that she may not have heard of it."

I walked triumphant. The moon, almost touching the horizon, beamed like red gold. "My dear friend," said I, "I have always told you that you should put more philosophy into your poetry. That would make it live."

"And I have always told you," said he, "that you should not put so much poetry into your philosophy. It misleads people."

"It didn't mislead that ghost girl," said I.

"How do you know?" said Bentley. "Perhaps she is wrong, and the other inhabitants of the city are right, and we may be the ghosts after all. Such things, you know, are only relative. Anyway," he continued, after a little pause, "I wish I knew that those ghosts were now reading the poem which I am going to begin to-morrow."

Ever since Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass, *the back-of-the-mirror story has been with us, though fortunately never becoming so prolific as to become formularized. We bring to mind several interesting examples such as Valeri Brussov's* In the Mirror, *Algernon Blackwood's* The Land of Green Ginger, *and Nelson Bond's* The Man Who Walked Through Glass. *Yet we find that Henry S. Whitehead's* The Trap *with its touch of old Danish seemed to be the first one to set off that subconscious signal in our editorial mind that signifies the urge to reprint. This may have been one of the last stories written by Reverend Henry S. Whitehead (he was a minister of the Episcopal Church), for he died in 1932, the year in which this story first appeared. Like many clergymen who have turned to fantasy writing, he appears to have that extra touch of compassion for past centuries, which may be the secret that enhances* The Trap *above others of its theme.*

The Trap

by Henry S. Whitehea

IT WAS ON a certain Thursday morning in December that the whole thing began with that unaccountable motion I thought I saw in my antique Copenhagen mirror. Something, it seemed to me, stirred—something reflected in the glass, though I was alone in my quarters. I paused and looked intently, then, deciding that the effect must be a pure illusion, resumed the interrupted brushing of my hair.

I had discovered the old mirror, covered with dust and cobwebs, in an outbuilding of an abandoned estate-house in Santa Cruz's sparsely settled Northside territory, and had brought it to the United States from the Virgin Islands. The venerable glass was dim from more than two hundred years' exposure to a tropical climate, and the graceful ornamentation along the top of the gilt frame had been badly smashed. I had had the detached pieces

set back into the frame before placing it in storage with my other belongings.

Now, several years later, I was staying half as a guest and half as a tutor at the private school of my old friend Browne on a windy Connecticut hillside—occupying an unused wing in one of the dormitories, where I had two rooms and a hallway to myself. The old mirror, stowed securely in mattresses, was the first of my possessions to be unpacked on my arrival; and I had set it up majestically in the living-room, on top of an old rosewood console which had belonged to my great-grandmother.

The door of my bedroom was just opposite that of the living-room, with a hallway between; and I had noticed that by looking into my chiffonier glass I could see the larger mirror through the two doorways—which was exactly like glancing down an endless, though diminishing, corridor. On this Thursday morning I thought I saw a curious suggestion of motion down that normally empty corridor—but, as I have said, soon dismissed the notion.

When I reached the dining-room I found everyone complaining of the cold, and learned that the school's heating-plant was temporarily out of order. Being especially sensitive to low temperatures, I was myself an acute sufferer; and at once decided not to brave any freezing schoolroom that day. Accordingly I invited my class to come over to my living-room for an informal session around my grate-fire—a suggestion which the boys received enthusiastically.

After the session one of the boys, Robert Grandison, asked if he might remain; since he had no appointment for the second morning period. I told him to stay, and welcome. He sat down to study in front of the fireplace in a comfortable chair.

It was not long, however, before Robert moved to another chair somewhat farther away from the freshly replenished blaze, this change bringing him directly opposite the old mirror. From my own chair in another part of the room I noticed how fixedly he began to look at the dim, cloudy glass, and, wondering what so greatly interested him, was reminded of my own experience earlier that morning. As time passed he continued to gaze, a slight frown knitting his brows.

At last I quietly asked him what had attracted his attention. Slowly, and still wearing the puzzled frown, he looked over and replied rather cautiously:

"It's the corrugations in the glass—or whatever they are, Mr. Canevin. I was noticing how they all seem to run from a certain point. Look—I'll show you what I mean."

The boy jumped up, went over to the mirror, and placed his finger on a point near its lower left-hand corner.

"It's right here, sir," he explained, turning to look toward me and keeping his finger on the chosen spot.

His muscular action in turning may have pressed his finger against the glass. Suddenly he withdrew his hand as though with some slight effort, and with a faintly muttered "Ouch." Then he looked at the glass in obvious mystification.

"What happened?" I asked, rising and approaching.

"Why—it—" He seemed embarrassed. "It—I—felt—well, as though it were pulling my finger into it. Seems—er—perfectly foolish, sir, but—well—it was a most peculiar sensation." Robert had an unusual vocabulary for his fifteen years.

I came over and had him show me the exact spot he meant.

"You'll think I'm rather a fool sir," he said shamefacedly, "but—well, from right here I can't be absolutely sure. From the chair it seemed to be clear enough."

Now thoroughly interested, I sat down in the chair Robert had occupied and looked at the spot he selected on the mirror. Instantly the thing "jumped out at me." Unmistakably, from that particular angle, all the many whorls in the ancient glass appeared to converge like a large number of spread strings held in one hand and radiating out in streams.

Getting up and crossing to the mirror, I could no longer see the curious spot. Only from certain angles, apparently, was it visible. Directly viewed, that portion of the mirror did not even give back a normal reflection—for I could not see my face in it. Manifestly I had a minor puzzle on my hands.

Presently the school gong sounded, and the fascinated Robert Grandison departed hurriedly, leaving me alone with my odd little problem in optics. I raised several window-shades, crossed the hallway, and sought for the spot in the chiffonier mirror's reflection. Finding it readily, I looked very intently and thought I again detected something of the "motion." I craned my neck, and at last, at a certain angle of vision, the thing again "jumped out at me."

The vague "motion" was now positive and definite—an appearance of torsional movement, or of whirling; much like a minute yet intense whirlwind or waterspout, or a huddle of autumn leaves dancing circularly in an eddy of wind along a level lawn. It was, like the earth's a double motion—around and around, and at the same time *inward,* as if the whorls poured themselves

endlessly toward some point inside the glass. Fascinated, yet realizing that the thing must be an illusion, I grasped an impression of quite distinct *suction*, and thought of Robert's embarrassed explanation: *"I felt as though it were pulling my finger into it."*

A kind of slight chill ran suddenly up and down my backbone. There was something here distinctly worth looking into. And as the idea of investigation came to me, I recalled the rather wistful expression of Robert Grandison when the gong called him to class. I remembered how he had looked back over his shoulder as he walked obediently out into the hallway, and resolved that he should be included in whatever analysis I might make of this little mystery.

Exciting events connected with that same Robert, however, were soon to chase all thoughts of the mirror from my consciousness for a time. I was away all that afternoon, and did not return to the school until the five-fifteen "Call-over"—a general assembly at which the boys' attendance was compulsory. Dropping in at this function with the idea of picking Robert up for a session with the mirror, I was astonished and pained to find him absent—a very unusual and unaccountable thing in his case. That evening Browne told me that the boy had actually disappeared, a search in his room, in the gymnasium, and in all other accustomed places being unavailing, though all his belongings—including his outdoor clothing—were in their proper places.

He had not been encountered on the ice or with any of the hiking groups that afternoon, and telephone calls to all the school-catering merchants of the neighborhood were in vain. There was, in short, no record of his having been seen since the end of the lesson periods at two-fifteen; when he had turned up the stairs toward his room in Dormitory Number Three.

When the disappearance was fully realized, the resulting sensation was tremendous throughout the school. Browne, as headmaster, had to bear the brunt of it; and such an unprecedented occurrence in his well-regulated, highly-organized institution left him quite bewildered. It was learned that Robert had not run away to his home in western Pennsylvania, nor did any of the searching-parties of boys and masters find any trace of him in the snowy countryside around the school. So far as could be seen, he had simply vanished.

Robert's parents arrived on the afternoon of the second day after his disappearance. They took their trouble quietly, though, of course they were staggered by this unexpected disaster. Browne looked ten years older for it,

but there was absolutely nothing that could be done. By the fourth day the case had settled down in the opinion of the school as an insoluble mystery. Mr. and Mrs. Grandison went reluctantly back to their home, and on the following morning the ten days' Christmas vacation began.

Boys and masters departed in anything but the usual holiday spirit; and Browne and his wife were left, along with the servants, as my only fellow-occupants of the big place. Without the masters and boys it seemed a very hollow shell indeed.

That afternoon I sat in front of my grate-fire thinking about Robert's disappearance and evolving all sorts of fantastic theories to account for it. By evening I had acquired a bad headache, and ate a light supper accordingly. Then, after a brisk walk around the massed buildings, I returned to my living-room and took up the burden of thought once more.

A little after ten o'clock I awakened in my armchair, stiff and chilled, from a doze during which I had let the fire go out. I was physically uncomfortable, yet mentally aroused by a peculiar sensation of expectancy and possible hope. Of course it had to do with the problem that was harassing me. For I had started from that inadvertent nap with a curious, persistent idea—the odd idea that a tenuous, hardly recognizable Robert Grandison had been trying desperately to communicate with me. I finally went to bed with one conviction unreasoningly strong in my mind. Somehow I was sure that young Robert Grandison was still alive.

That I should be receptive of such a notion will not seem strange to those who know my long residence in the West Indies and my close contact with unexplained happenings there. It will not seem strange, either, that I fell asleep with an urgent desire to establish some sort of mental communication with the missing boy. Even the most prosaic scientists affirm, with Freud, Jung, and Adler, that the subconscious mind is most open to external impression in sleep; though such impressions are seldom carried over intact into the waking state.

Going a step further and granting the existence of telepathic forces, it follows that such forces must act most strongly on a sleeper; so that if I were ever to get a definite message from Robert, it would be during a period of profoundest slumber. Of course, I might lose the message in waking; but my aptitude for retaining such things has been sharpened by types of mental discipline picked up in various obscure corners of the globe.

I must have dropped asleep instantaneously, and from the vividness of

my dreams and the absence of wakeful intervals I judge that my sleep was a very deep one. It was six-forty-five when I awakened, and there still lingered with me certain impressions which I knew were carried over from the world of somnolent cerebration. Filling my mind was the vision of Robert Grandison strangely transformed to a boy of a dull greenish dark-blue color; Robert desperately endeavoring to communicate with me by means of speech, yet finding some almost insuperable difficulty in so doing. A wall of curious spatial separation seemed to stand between him and me—a mysterious, invisible wall which completely baffled us both.

I had seen Robert as though at some distance, yet queerly enough he seemed at the same time to be just beside me. He was both larger and smaller than in real life, his apparent size varying *directly,* instead of *inversely,* with the distance as he advanced and retreated in the course of conversation. That is, he grew larger instead of smaller to my eye when he stepped away or backwards, and vice versa; as if the laws of perspective in his case had been wholly reversed. His aspect was misty and uncertain—as if he lacked sharp or permanent outlines; and the anomalies of his coloring and clothing baffled me utterly at first.

At some point in my dream Robert's vocal efforts had finally crystallized into audible speech—albeit speech of an abnormal thickness and dullness. I could not for a time understand anything he said, and even in the dream racked my brain for a clue to where he was, what he wanted to tell, and why his utterance was so clumsy and unintelligible. Then little by little I began to distinguish words and phrases, the very first of which sufficed to throw my dreaming self into the wildest excitement and to establish a certain mental connection which had previously refused to take conscious form because of the utter incredibility of what it implied.

I do not know how long I listened to those halting words amidst my deep slumber, but hours must have passed while the strangely remote speaker struggled on with his tale. There was revealed to me such a circumstance as I cannot hope to make others believe without the strongest corroborative evidence, yet which I was quite ready to accept as truth—both in the dream and after waking—because of my former contacts with uncanny things. The boy was obviously watching my face—mobile in receptive sleep—as he choked along; for about the time I began to comprehend him, his own expression brightened and gave signs of gratitude and hope.

Any attempt to hint at Robert's message, as it lingered in my ears after

a sudden awakening in the cold, brings this narrative to a point where I must choose my words with the greatest care. Everything involved is so difficult to record that one tends to flounder helplessly. I have said that the revelation established in my mind a certain connection which reason had not allowed me to formulate consciously before. This connection, I need no longer hesitate to hint, had to do with the old Copenhagen mirror whose suggestions of motion had so impressed me on the morning of the disappearance, and whose whorl-like contours and apparent illusions of suction had later exerted such a disquieting fascination on both Robert and me.

Resolutely, though my outer consciousness had previously rejected what my intuition would have liked to imply, it could reject that stupendous conception no longer. What was fantasy in the tale of "Alice" now came to me as a grave and immediate reality. That looking-glass had indeed possessed a malign, abnormal suction; and the struggling speaker in my dream made clear the extent to which it violated all the known precedents of human experience and all the age-old laws of our three sane dimensions. It was more than a mirror—it was a gate; a trap; a link with spatial recesses not meant for the denizens of our visible universe, and realizable only in terms of the most intricate non-Euclidean mathematics. *And in some outrageous fashion Robert Grandison had passed out of our ken into the glass and was there immured, waiting for release.*

It is significant that upon awakening I harbored no genuine doubt of the reality of the revelation. That I had actually held conversation with a trans-dimensional Robert, rather than evoked the whole episode from my broodings about his disappearance and about the old illusions of the mirror, was as certain to my utmost instincts as any of the instinctive certainties commonly recognized as valid.

The tale thus unfolded to me was of the most incredibly bizarre character. As had been clear on the morning of his disappearance, Robert was intensely fascinated by the ancient mirror. All through the hours of school, he had it in mind to come back to my living-room and examine it further. When he did arrive, after the close of the school day, it was somewhat later than two-twenty, and I was absent in town. Finding me out and knowing that I would not mind, he had come into my living-room and gone straight to the mirror; standing before it and studying the place where, as we had noted, the whorls appeared to converge.

Then, quite suddenly, there had come to him an overpowering urge to place his hand upon this whorl-center. Almost reluctantly, against his better judgment, he had done so; and upon making the contact had felt at once the strange, almost painful suction which had perplexed him that morning. Immediately thereafter—quite without warning, but with a wrench which seemed to twist and tear every bone and muscle in his body and to bulge and press and cut at every nerve—he had been abruptly *drawn through* and found himself *inside.*

Once through, the excruciatingly painful stress upon his entire system was suddenly released. He felt, he said, as though he had just been born—a feeling that made itself evident every time he tried to do anything; walk, stoop, turn his head, or utter speech. Everything about his body seemed a misfit.

These sensations wore off after a long while, Robert's body becoming an organized whole rather than a number of protesting parts. Of all the forms of expression, speech remained the most difficult; doubtless because it is complicated, bringing into play a number of different organs, muscles, and tendons. Robert's feet, on the other hand, were the first members to adjust themselves to the new conditions within the glass.

During the morning hours I rehearsed the whole reason-defying problem; correlating everything I had seen and heard, dismissing the natural scepticism of a man of sense, and scheming to devise possible plans for Robert's release from his incredible prison. As I did so a number of originally perplexing points became clear—or at least, clearer—to me.

There was, for example, the matter of Robert's coloring. His face and hands, as I have indicated, were a kind of dull greenish dark-blue; and I may add that his familiar blue Norfolk jacket had turned to a pale lemon-yellow while his trousers remained a neutral gray as before. Reflecting on this after waking, I found the circumstance closely allied to the reversal of perspective which made Robert seem to grow larger when receding and smaller when approaching. Here, too, was a physical *reversal*—for every detail of his coloring in the unknown dimension was the exact reverse or complement of the corresponding color detail in normal life. In physics the typical complementary colors are blue and yellow, and red and green. These pairs are opposites, and when mixed yield gray. Robert's natural color was a pinkish-buff, the opposite of which is the greenish-blue I saw. His blue coat had become yellow, while the gray trousers remained gray. This latter point

baffled me until I remembered that gray is itself a mixture of opposites. There is no opposite for gray—or rather, it is its own opposite.

Another clarified point was that pertaining to Robert's curiously dulled and thickened speech—as well as to the general awkwardness and sense of misfit bodily parts of which he complained. This, at the outset, was a puzzle indeed; though after long thought the clue occurred to me. Here again was the same *reversal* which affected perspective and coloration. Anyone in the fourth dimension must necessarily be reversed in just this way—hands and feet, as well as colors and perspectives, being changed about. It would be the same with all the other dual organs, such as nostrils, ears, and eyes. Thus Robert had been talking with a reversed tongue, teeth, vocal cords, and kindred speech-apparatus; so that his difficulties in utterance were little to be wondered at.

As the morning wore on, my sense of the stark reality and maddening urgency of the dream-disclosed situation increased rather than decreased. More and more I felt that something must be done, yet realized that I could not seek advice or aid. Such a story as mine—a conviction based upon mere dreaming—could not conceivably bring me anything but ridicule or suspicions as to my mental state. And what, indeed, could I do, aided or unaided, with as little working data as my nocturnal impressions had provided? I must, I finally recognized, have more information before I could even think of a possible plan for releasing Robert. This could come only through the receptive conditions of sleep, and it heartened me to reflect that according to every probability my telepathic contact would be resumed the moment I fell into deep slumber again.

I accomplished sleeping that afternoon, after a midday dinner at which, through rigid self-control, I succeeded in concealing from Browne and his wife the tumultuous thoughts that crashed through my mind. Hardly had my eyes closed when a dim telepathic image began to appear; and I soon realized to my infinite excitement that it was identical with what I had seen before. If anything, it was more distinct; and when it began to speak I seemed able to grasp a greater proportion of the words.

During this sleep I found most of the morning's deductions confirmed, though the interview was mysteriously cut off long prior to my awakening. Robert had seemed apprehensive just before communication ceased, but had already told me that in his strange fourth-dimensional prison, colors and

spatial relationships were indeed reversed—black being white, distance increasing apparent size, and so on.

He had also intimated that, notwithstanding his possession of full physical form and sensations, most human vital properties seemed curiously suspended. Nutriment, for example, was quite unnecessary—a phenomenon really more singular than the omnipresent reversal of objects and attributes, since the latter was a reasonable and mathematically indicated state of things. Another significant piece of information was that the only exit from the glass to the world was the entrance-way, and that this was permanently barred and impenetrably sealed, so far as egress was concerned.

That night I had another visitation from Robert; nor did such impressions, received at odd intervals while I slept receptively-minded, cease during the entire period of his incarceration. His efforts to communicate were desperate and often pitiful; for at times the telepathic bond would weaken, while at other times fatigue, excitement, or fear of interruption would hamper and thicken his speech.

I may as well narrate as a continuous whole all that Robert told me throughout the whole series of transient mental contacts—perhaps supplementing it at certain points with facts directly related after his release. The telepathic information was fragmentary and often nearly inarticulate, but I studied it over and over during the waking intervals of three intense days; classifying and cogitating with feverish diligence, since it was all that I had to go upon if the boy were to be brought back into our world.

The fourth-dimensional region in which Robert found himself was not, as in scientific romance, an unknown and infinite realm of strange sights and fantastic denizens; but was rather a projection of certain limited parts of our own terrestrial sphere within an alien and normally inaccessible aspect or direction of space. It was a curiously fragmentary, intangible, and heterogeneous world—a series of apparently dissociated scenes merging indistinctly one into the other; their constituent details having an obviously different status from that of an object drawn into the ancient mirror as Robert had been drawn. These scenes were like dream-vistas or magic lantern images—elusive visual impressions of which the boy was not really a part, but which formed a sort of panoramic background or ethereal environment against which or amidst which he moved.

He could not touch any of the parts of these scenes—walls, trees, furniture, and the like—but whether this was because they were truly non-mate-

rial, or because they always receded at his approach, he was singularly unable to determine. Everything seemed fluid, mutable, and unreal. When he walked, it appeared to be on whatever lower surface the visible scene might have—floor, path, greensward, or such; but upon analysis he always found that the contact was an illusion. There was never any difference in the resisting force met by his feet—and by his hands when he would stoop experimentally—no matter what changes of apparent surface might be involved. He could not describe this foundation or limiting plane on which he walked as anything more definite than a virtually abstract pressure balancing his gravity. Of definite tactile distinctiveness it had none, and supplementing it there seemed to be a kind of restricted levitational force which accomplished transfers of altitude. He could never actually climb stairs, yet would gradually walk up from a lower level to a higher.

Passage from one definite scene to another involved a sort of gliding through a region of shadow or blurred focus where the details of each scene mingled curiously. All the vistas were distinguished by the absence of transient objects, and the indefinite or ambiguous appearance of such semi-transient objects as furniture or details of vegetation. The lighting of every scene was diffuse and perplexing, and of course the scheme of reversed colors—bright red grass, yellow sky with confused black and gray cloud-forms, white tree-trunks, and green brick walls—gave to everything an air of unbelievable grotesquerie. There was an alteration of day and night, which turned out to be a reversal of the normal hours of light and darkness at whatever point on the earth the mirror might be hanging.

This seemingly irrelevant diversity of the scenes puzzled Robert until he realized that they comprised merely such places as had been reflected for long continuous periods in the ancient glass. This also explained the odd absence of transient objects, the generally arbitrary boundaries of vision, and the fact that all exteriors were framed by the outlines of doorways or windows. The glass, it appeared, had power to store up these intangible scenes through long exposure; though it could never absorb anything corporeally, as Robert had been absorbed, except by a very different and particular process.

But—to me at least—the most incredible aspect of the mad phenomenon was the monstrous subversion of our known laws of space involved in the relation of various illusory scenes to the actual terrestrial regions represented. I have spoken of the glass as storing up the images of these regions, but this is really an inexact definition. In truth, each of the mirror scenes formed a

true and quasi-permanent fourth-dimensional projection of the corresponding mundane region; so that whenever Robert moved to a certain part of a certain scene, as he moved into the image of my room when sending his telepathic messages, *he was actually in that place itself, on earth*—though under spatial conditions which cut off all sensory communication, in either direction, between him and the present tri-dimensional aspect of the place.

Theoretically speaking, a prisoner in the glass could in a few moments go anywhere on our planet—into any place, that is, which had ever been reflected in the mirror's surface. This probably applied even to places where the mirror had not hung long enough to produce a clear illusory scene; the terrestrial region being then represented by a zone of more or less formless shadow. Outside the definite scenes was a seemingly limitless waste of neutral gray shadow about which Robert could never be certain, and into which he never dared stray far lest he become hopelessly lost to the real and mirror worlds alike.

Among the earliest particulars which Robert gave, was the fact that he was not alone in his confinement. Various others, all in antique garb, were in there with him—a corpulent middle-aged gentleman with tied queue and velvet knee-breeches who spoke English fluently though with a marked Scandinavian accent; a rather beautiful small girl with very blonde hair which appeared as glossy dark blue; two apparently mute Negroes whose features contrasted grotesquely with the pallor of their reversed-colored skins; three young men; one young woman; a very small child, almost an infant; and a lean, elderly Dane of extremely distinctive aspect and a kind of half-malign intellectuality of countenance.

This last named individual—Axel Holm, who wore the satin small-clothes, flare-skirted coat, and voluminous full-bottomed periwig of an age more than two centuries in the past—was notable among the little band as being the one responsible for the presence of them all. He it was who, skilled equally in the arts of magic and glass working, had long ago fashioned this strange dimensional prison in which himself, his slaves, and those whom he chose to invite or allure thither were immured unchangingly for as long as the mirror might endure.

Holm was born early in the seventeenth century, and had followed with tremendous competence and success the trade of a glass-blower and molder in Copenhagen. His glass, especially in the form of large drawing-room mirrors, was always at a premium. But the same bold mind which had made him

the first glazier of Europe also served to carry his interests and ambitions far beyond the sphere of mere material craftsmanship. He had studied the world around him, and chafed at the limitations of human knowledge and capability. Eventually he sought for dark ways to overcome those limitations, and gained more success than is good for any mortal.

He had aspired to enjoy something like eternity, the mirror being his provision to secure this end. Serious study of the fourth dimension was far from beginning with Einstein in our own era; and Holm, more than erudite in all the methods of his day, knew that a bodily entrance into that hidden phase of space would prevent him from dying in the ordinary physical sense. Research showed him that the principle of reflection undoubtedly forms the chief gate to all dimensions beyond our familiar three; and chance placed in his hands a small and very ancient glass whose cryptic properties he believed he could turn to advantage. Once "inside" this mirror according to the method he had envisaged, he felt that "life" in the sense of form and consciousness would go on virtually forever, provided the mirror could be preserved indefinitely from breakage or deterioration.

Holm made a magnificent mirror, such as would be prized and carefully preserved; and in it deftly fused the strange whorl-configured relic he had acquired. Having thus prepared his refuge and his trap, he began to plan his mode of entrance and conditions of tenancy. He would have with him both servitors and companions; and as an experimental beginning he sent before him into the glass two dependable Negro slaves brought from the West Indies. What his sensations must have been upon beholding this first concrete demonstration of his theories, only imagination can conceive.

Undoubtedly a man of his knowledge realized that absence from the outside world if deferred beyond the natural span of life of those within must mean instant dissolution at the first attempt to return to that world. But, barring that misfortune or accidental breakage, those within would remain forever as they were at the time of entrance. They would never grow old, and would need neither food nor drink.

To make his prison tolerable he sent ahead of him certain books and writing materials, a chair and table of stoutest workmanship, and a few other accessories. He knew that the images which the glass would reflect or absorb would not be tangible, but would merely extend around him like a background of dream. His own transition in 1687 was a momentous experience; and must have been attended by mixed sensations of triumph and

terror. Had anything gone wrong, there were frightful possibilities of being lost in dark and inconceivable multiple dimensions.

For over fifty years he had been unable to secure any additions to the little company of himself and slaves, but later on he had perfected his telepathic method of visualizing small sections of the outside world close to the glass, and attracting certain individuals in those areas through the mirror's strange entrance. Thus Robert, influenced into a desire to press upon the "door," had been lured within. Such visualizations depended wholly on telepathy, since no one inside the mirror could see out into the world of men.

It was, in truth, a strange life that Holm and his company had lived inside the glass. Since the mirror had stood for fully a century with its face to the dusty stone wall of the shed where I found it, Robert was the first being to enter this limbo after all that interval. His arrival was a gala event, for he brought news of the outside world which must have been of the most startling impressiveness to the more thoughtful of those within. He, in his turn—young though he was—felt overwhelmingly the weirdness of meeting and talking with persons who had been alive in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The deadly monotony of life for the prisoners can only be vaguely conjectured. As mentioned, its extensive spatial variety was limited to localities which had been reflected in the mirror for long periods; and many of these had become dim and strange as tropical climates had made inroads on the surface. Certain localities were bright and beautiful, and in these the company usually gathered. But no scene could be fully satisfying; since the visible objects were all unreal and intangible, and often of perplexingly indefinite outline. When the tedious periods of darkness came, the general custom was to indulge in memories, reflections, or conversations. Each one of that strange, pathetic group had retained his or her personality unchanged and unchangeable, since becoming immune to the time effects of outside space.

The number of inanimate objects within the glass, aside from the clothing of the prisoners, was very small; being largely limited to the accessories Holm had provided for himself. The rest did without even furniture, since sleep and fatigue had vanished along with most other vital attributes. Such inorganic things as were present seemed as exempt from decay as the living beings. The lower forms of animal life were wholly absent.

Robert derived most of his information from Herr Thiele, the gentleman who spoke English with a Scandinavian accent. This portly Dane had taken

a fancy to him, and talked at considerable length. The others, too, had received him with courtesy and good-will; Holm himself, seeming well-disposed, had told him about various matters including the door of the trap.

The boy, as he told me later, was sensible enough never to attempt communication with me when Holm was nearby. Twice, while thus engaged, he had seen Holm appear; and had accordingly ceased at once. At no time could I see the world behind the mirror's surface. Robert's visual image, which included his bodily form and the clothing connected with it, was—like the aural image of his halting voice and like his own visualization of myself—a case of purely telepathic transmission; and did not involve true interdimensional sight. However, had Robert been as trained a telepathist as Holm, he might have transmitted a few strong images apart from his immediate person.

Throughout this period of revelation I had, of course, been desperately trying to devise a method for Robert's release. On the fourth day—the ninth after the disappearance—I hit on a solution. Everything considered, my laboriously formulated process was not a very complicated one; though I could not tell beforehand how it would work, while the possibility of ruinous consequences in case of a slip was appalling. This process depended, basically, on the fact that there was no possible exit from inside the glass. If Holm and his prisoners were permanently sealed in, then release must come wholly from outside. Other considerations included the disposal of the other prisoners, if any survived, and especially of Axel Holm. What Robert had told me of him was anything but reassuring; and I certainly did not wish him loose in my apartment, free once more to work his evil will upon the world. The telepathic messages had not made fully clear the effect of liberation on those who had entered the glass so long ago.

There was, too, a final though minor problem in case of success—that of getting Robert back into the routine of school life without having to explain the incredible. In case of failure, it was highly inadvisable to have witnesses present at the release operations—and lacking these, I simply could not attempt to relate the actual facts if I should succeed. Even to me the reality seemed a mad one whenever I let my mind turn from the data so compellingly presented in that tense series of dreams.

When I had thought these problems through as far as possible, I procured a large magnifying-glass from the school laboratory and studied minutely every square millimeter of that whorl-center which presumably

marked the extent of the original ancient mirror used by Holm. Even with this aid I could not quite trace the exact boundary between the old area and the surface added by the Danish wizard; but after a long study decided on a conjectural oval boundary which I outlined very precisely with a soft blue pencil. I then made a trip to Stamford, where I procured a heavy glass-cutting tool; for my primary idea was to remove the ancient and magically potent mirror from its later setting.

My next step was to figure out the best time of day to make the crucial experiment. I finally settled on two-thirty A.M.—both because it was a good season for uninterrupted work, and because it was the "opposite" of two-thirty P.M., the probable moment at which Robert had entered the mirror. This form of "oppositeness" may or may not have been relevant, but I knew at least that the chosen hour was as good as any—and perhaps better than most.

I finally set to work in the early morning of the eleventh day after the disappearance, having drawn all the shades of my living-room and closed and locked the door into the hallway. Following with breathless care the elliptical line I had traced, I worked around the whorl-section with my steel-wheeled cutting tool. The ancient glass, half an inch thick, crackled crisply under the firm, uniform pressure; and upon completing the circuit I cut around it a second time, crunching the roller more deeply into the glass.

Then, very carefully indeed, I lifted the heavy mirror down from its console and leaned it face-inward against the wall; prying off two of the thin, narrow boards nailed to the back. With equal caution I smartly tapped the cut-around space with the heavy wooden handle of the glass-cutter.

At the very first tap the whorl-containing section of glass dropped out on the Bokhara rug beneath. I did not know what might happen, but was keyed up for anything, and took a deep involuntary breath. I was on my knees for convenience at the moment, with my face quite near the newly made aperture; and as I breathed there poured into my nostrils a powerful *dusty* odor—a smell not comparable to any other I have ever encountered. Then everything within my range of vision suddenly turned to a dull gray before my failing eyesight as I felt myself overpowered by an invisible force which robbed my muscles of their power to function.

I remember grasping weakly and futilely at the edge of the nearest window drapery and feeling it rip loose from its fastening. Then I sank slowly to the floor as the darkness of oblivion passed over me.

When I regained consciousness I was lying on the Bokhara rug with my legs held inaccountably up in the air. The room was full of that hideous and inexplicable dusty smell—and as my eyes began to take in definite images I saw that Robert Grandison stood in front of me. It was he—fully in the flesh and with his coloring normal—who was holding my legs aloft to bring the blood back to my head as the school's first-aid course had taught him to do with persons who had fainted. For a moment I was struck mute by the stifling odor and by a bewilderment which quickly merged into a sense of triumph. Then I found myself able to move and speak collectedly.

I raised a tentative hand and waved feebly at Robert.

"All right, old man," I murmured, "you can let my legs down now. Many thanks. I'm all right again, I think. It was the smell—I imagine—that got me. Open that farthest window, please—wide—from the bottom. That's it—thanks. No—leave the shade down the way it was."

I struggled to my feet, my disturbed circulation adjusting itself in waves, and stood upright hanging to the back of a big chair. I was still "groggy," but a blast of fresh, bitterly cold air from the window revived me rapidly. I sat down in the big chair and looked at Robert, now walking toward me.

"First," I said hurriedly, "tell me, Robert—those others—Holm? What happened to *them,* when I—opened the exit?"

Robert paused half-way across the room and looked at me very gravely.

"I saw them fade away—into nothingness—Mr. Canevin," he said with solemnity; "and with them—everything. There isn't any more 'inside,' sir—thank God, and you, sir!"

And young Robert, at last yielding to the sustained strain which he had borne through all those terrible eleven days, suddenly broke down like a little child and began to weep hysterically in great, stifling, dry sobs.

I picked him up and placed him gently on my davenport, threw a rug over him, sat down by his side, and put a calming hand on his forehead.

"Take it easy, old fellow," I said soothingly.

The boy's sudden and very natural hysteria passed as quickly as it had come on as I talked to him reassuringly about my plans for his quiet restoration to the school. The interest of the situation and the need of concealing the incredible truth beneath a rational explanation took hold of his imagination as I had expected; and at last he sat up eagerly, telling the details of his release and listening to the instructions I had thought out. He had, it seems, been in the "projected area" of my bedroom when I opened the way

back, and had emerged in that actual room—hardly realizing that he was "out." Upon hearing a fall in the living-room he had hastened thither, finding me on the rug in my fainting spell.

I need mention only briefly my method of restoring Robert in a seemingly normal way—how I smuggled him out of the window in an old hat and sweater of mine, took him down the road in my quietly started car, coached him carefully in a tale I had devised, and returned to arouse Browne with the news of his discovery. He had, I explained, been walking alone on the afternoon of his disappearance; and had been offered a motor ride by two young men who, as a joke and over his protest that he could go no farther than Stamford and back, had begun to carry him past that town. Jumping from the car during a traffic stop with the intention of hitch-hiking back before Call-Over, he had been hit by another car just as the traffic was released—awakening ten days later in the Greenwich home of the people who had hit him. On learning the date, I added, he had immediately telephoned the school; and I, being the only one awake, had answered the call and hurried after him in my car without stopping to notify anyone.

Browne, who at once telephoned to Robert's parents, accepted my story without question; and forbore to interrogate the boy because of the latter's manifest exhaustion. It was arranged that he should remain at the school for a rest, under the expert care of Mrs. Browne, a former trained nurse. I naturally saw a good deal of him during the remainder of the Christmas vacation, and was thus enabled to fill in certain gaps in his fragmentary dream-story.

Now and then we would almost doubt the actuality of what had occurred; wondering whether we had not both shared some monstrous delusion born of the mirror's glittering hypnotism, and whether the tale of the ride and accident were not after all the real truth. But whenever we did so we would be brought back to belief by some monstrous and haunting memory; with me, of Robert's dream-figure and its thick voice and inverted colors; with him, of the whole fantastic pageantry of ancient people and dead scenes that he had witnessed. And then there was that joint recollection of that damnable dusty odor. . . . We knew what it meant: the instant dissolution of those who had entered an alien dimension a century and more ago.

There are, in addition, at least two lines of rather more positive evidence; one of which comes through my researches in Danish annals concerning the sorcerer, Axel Holm. Such a person, indeed, left many traces in folklore and

written records; and diligent library sessions, plus conferences with various learned Danes, have shed much more light on his evil fame. At present I need say only that the Copenhagen glass-blower—born in 1612—was a notorious Luciferian whose pursuits and final vanishing formed a matter of awed debate over two centuries ago. He had burned with a desire to know all things and to conquer every limitation of mankind—to which end he had delved deeply into occult and forbidden fields ever since he was a child.

He was commonly held to have joined a coven of the dreaded witch-cult, and the vast lore of ancient Scandinavian myth—with its Loki the Sly One and the accursed Fenris-Wolf—was soon an open book to him. He had strange interests and objectives, few of which were definitely known, but some of which were recognized as intolerably evil. It is recorded that his two Negro helpers, originally slaves from the Danish West Indies, had become mute soon after their acquisition by him; and that they had disappeared not long before his own disappearance from the ken of mankind.

Near the close of an already long life the idea of a glass of immortality appears to have entered his mind. That he had acquired an enchanted mirror of inconceivable antiquity was a matter of common whispering; it being alleged that he had purloined it from a fellow-sorcerer who had entrusted it to him for polishing.

This mirror—according to popular tales a trophy as potent in its way as the better-known Aegis of Minerva or Hammer of Thor—was a small oval object called "Loki's Glass," made of some polished fusible mineral and having magical properties which included the divination of the immediate future and the power to show the possessor his enemies. That it had deeper potential properties, realizable in the hands of an erudite magician, none of the common people doubted; and even educated persons attached much fearful importance to Holm's rumored attempts to incorporate it in a larger glass of immortality. Then had come the wizard's disappearance in 1687, and the final sale and dispersal of his goods amidst a growing cloud of fantastic legendry. It was, altogether, just such a story as one would laugh at if possessed of no particular key; yet to me, remembering those dream messages and having Robert Grandison's corroboration before me, it formed a positive confirmation of all the bewildering marvels that had been unfolded.

But as I have said, there is still another line of rather positive evidence—of a very different character—at my disposal. Two days after his release, as Robert, greatly improved in strength and appearance, was placing a log on

my living-room fire, I noticed a certain awkwardness in his motions and was struck by a persistent idea. Summoning him to my desk I suddenly asked him to pick up an ink-stand—and was scarcely surprised to note that, despite lifelong right-handedness, he obeyed unconsciously with his left hand. Without alarming him, I then asked that he unbutton his coat and let me listen to his cardiac action. What I found upon placing my ear to his chest—and what I did not tell him for some time afterward—was that *his heart was beating on his right side.*

He had gone into the glass right-handed and with all organs in their normal positions. Now he was left-handed and with organs reversed, and would doubtless continue so for the rest of his life. Clearly, the dimensional transition had been no illusion—for this physical change was tangible and unmistakable. Had there been a natural exit from the glass, Robert would probably have undergone a thorough re-reversal and emerged in perfect normality—as indeed the color-scheme of his body and clothing did emerge. The forcible nature of his release, however, undoubtedly set something awry; so that dimensions no longer had a chance to right themselves as chromatic wave-frequencies still did.

I had not merely *opened* Holm's trap; I had *destroyed* it; and at the particular stage of destruction marked by Robert's escape some of the reversing properties had perished. It is significant that in escaping Robert had felt no pain comparable to that experienced in entering. Had the destruction been still more sudden, I shiver to think of the monstrosities of color the boy would always have been forced to bear. I may add that after discovering Robert's reversal I examined the rumpled and discarded clothing he had worn in the glass, and found, as I had expected, a complete reversal of pockets, buttons, and all other corresponding details.

At this moment Loki's Glass, just as it fell on my Bokhara rug from the now patched and harmless mirror, weighs down a sheaf of papers on my writing-table here in St. Thomas, venerable capital of the Danish West Indies—now the American Virgin Islands. Various collectors of old Sandwich glass have mistaken it for an odd bit of that early American product—but I privately realize that my paper-weight is an antique of far subtler and more paleologean craftsmanship. Still, I do not disillusion such enthusiasts.

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