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FANTASTIC

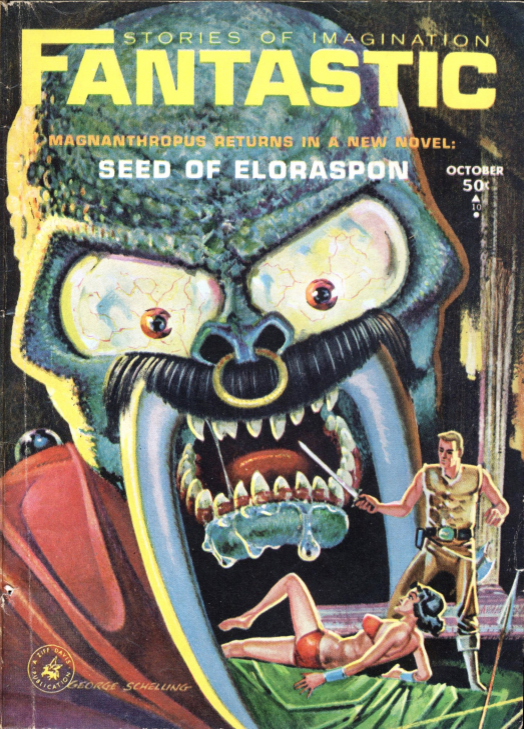
MAGNANTHROPUS RETURNS IN A NEW NOVEL:

SEED OF ELORASPON

OCTOBER

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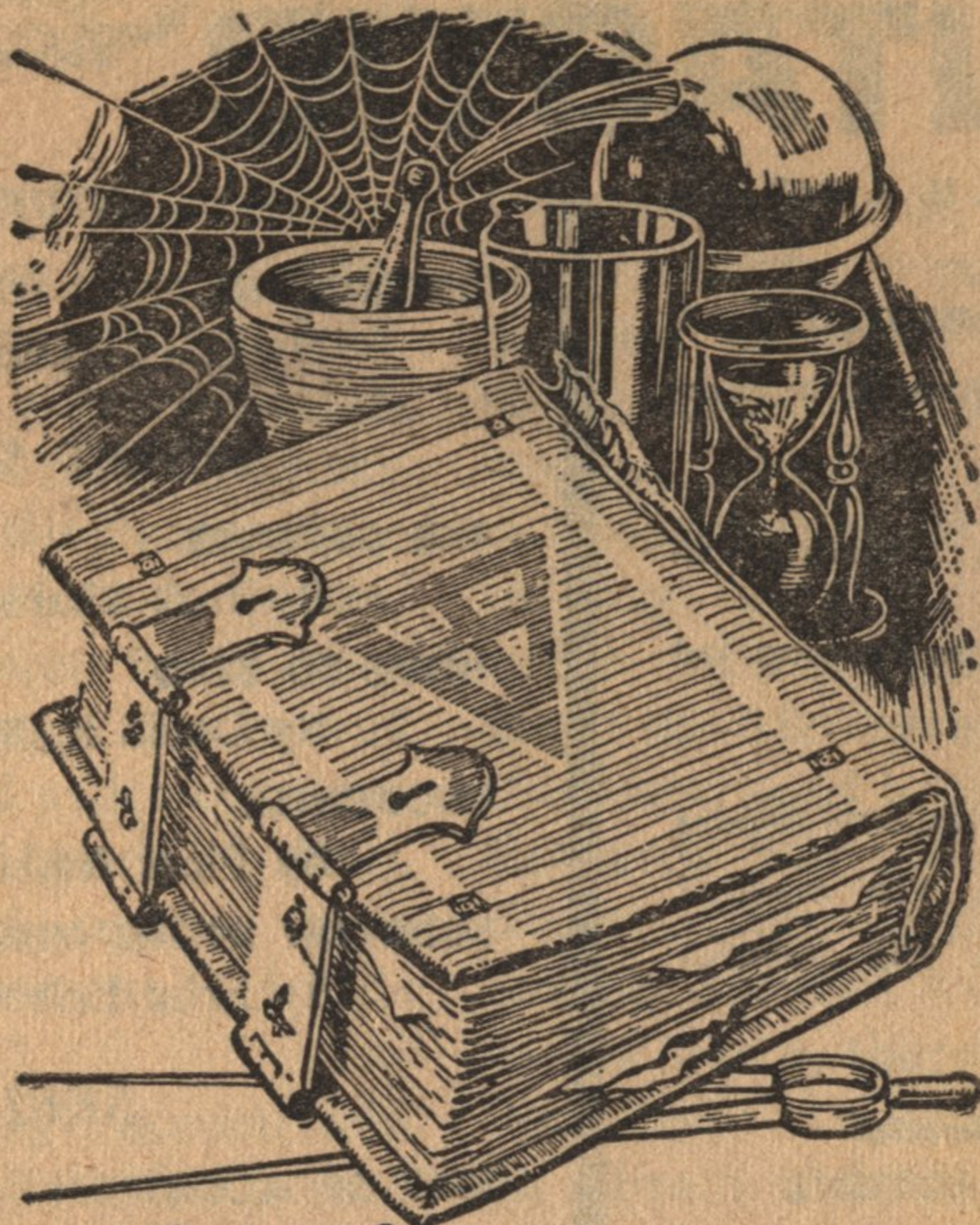
Sam Moskowitz profiles veteran science-fictioneer Jack Williamson.

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FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

OCTOBER

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EDITORIAL

THE premise—and promise—contained in one of science-fiction's most famous stories, *Donovan's Brain* by Curt Siodmak, seems about to be fulfilled in science fact. The Siodmak story, you will recall, had as its central character a human brain that existed independently in a bath of nutrient fluid, and which could receive stimuli and react to them. (There have, of course, been many other treatments of this theme since then.)

The breakthrough accomplishment of keeping alive a brain that was totally isolated from its original body housing was accomplished recently by neurosurgeons at a Cleveland hospital. The brains were those of rhesus monkeys. They were kept alive for varying lengths of time, the longest period being 18 hours. The brain gets a continuous blood supply, but all nerve circuits are cut. EEG tracings of the brains paralleled those of brains still inside the skulls of alive *and awake* monkeys. One brain that had had its auditory nerves left intact responded to sounds.

The potential practical results of the experiment lie largely, so far, in the field of medicine. For example, with a brain isolated from the bombardment of signals

from the body and from external environments, it may be feasible to study the brain's reactions to drugs, infections and other abnormal physical stimuli. By studying the blood that has been passing through the isolated brain, science may learn much about the life-needs of brain cells, the patterns of brain metabolism. Research has already indicated that the brain temperature can be sharply lowered without damage to the organ, thereby permitting "dry-field" (bloodless) surgery on a brain which is virtually in a state of suspended animation.

But there are bigger questions than mere physiological ones. There are broader speculations. A rhesus monkey is an intelligent animal. From a study of its isolated brain, we could probe the more basic mysteries of consciousness itself. Is such a brain conscious? If so, what *is* consciousness? What does it do to a conscious brain to exist in isolation from all stimuli? And what could a conscious, isolated brain do if it were to be linked to stimuli and enabled to communicate its reactions, its thoughts? Perhaps here is the answer to the man-linked computer. Perhaps here is the answer, ultimately, to the mystery of mind itself. —NL

*Magpies spoke conundrums in English . . . some men
wore strange marks upon their cheeks . . . time played
tricks . . . and all manner of oddness happened*

BEYOND THE EBON WALL

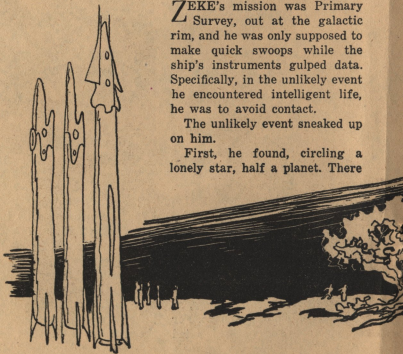
By C. C. MacAPP

Illustrator ARNDT

ZEKE's mission was Primary Survey, out at the galactic rim, and he was only supposed to make quick swoops while the ship's instruments gulped data. Specifically, in the unlikely event he encountered intelligent life, he was to avoid contact.

The unlikely event sneaked up on him.

First, he found, circling a lonely star, half a planet. There



was no other way to describe it. One hemisphere, including half of each polar cap, was there. The other was not. He could see past to the stars.

He'd hardly have been human if he hadn't gone in for a closer look, but first he went around, with the vague notion he might see the planet's cross-section. There was just a black disc. He spiraled in, watching the instruments. The diameter (assuming the other half were there) read eleven thousand miles; but den-

sity was lower than Earth's. There was a thick atmosphere with a cloud-band along the equator. The land was nearly all in a single belt, five or six hundred miles wide, that included both poles. It was hard not to think that it was artificial. Or had been—the bays and promontories, mountains, lakes and rivers, looked natural.

Now he was close enough to see the black wall that ended the world, as if the planet had been sliced in two and a paper disc of



slightly larger diameter slapped over the cut. It had no definite top, but faded out with the atmosphere. His hands hesitated on the controls, ready to send the ship hurtling through non-space. But the radio spouted ordinary English: "You're cleared to land at the Wall. We'll give you a flash to mark the spot."

Slowly, his mind began to work again. If they already spoke English, they certainly knew where Earth was, so there was no use fleeing. And if they were that far advanced, they could hold him or destroy him. He might as well land.

THE flash was a burst of green light, just at the Wall, a thousand miles below what his auto-sextant said was the North Pole. He dropped toward it, noting cultivated areas around the spot but nowhere else, and establishments but no casual cities. A military outpost, then. Could he have gotten lost in Time for a thousand years, while Earth sent tendrils clear out here?

The clearing he was guided to was merely a spot where pines had been removed. Two ships were there already. One was much like his own, but had fittings he didn't recognize and in general looked more advanced. The other was larger. He landed between them.

A glance at the instruments

showed him he'd need no helmet. He opened the hatch and stepped down. The air wasn't oppressively heavy, this far above sea-level. The gravity felt a little less than Earth's. He glanced at the four men who waited silently, then his eyes were drawn irresistibly to the Wall.

It was only yards away. It was blacker than he'd imagined anything could be, reflecting not a single ray of the sun that slanted over his shoulder. It began at the ground and went up until it seemed to hang over him. He thought of smooth ebony, but even that would have shown *some* reflection. Trees grew against it and were turned aside. Awed, he turned to the four men.

Two were about his own age, in uniform (unfamiliar), obviously spacemen. One was older and wore trimmings of rank. Those three stared at him with something like awe.

The fourth, in civilian clothes, was old; even ancient; but not senile. He stood very erect, his skin healthy for all its creases, his eyes alert and clear. The white hair was not thin. An old scar ran from the inner corner of his left eye down across his cheek. He studied Zeke for a moment with an odd expression, then half smiled and said, "Wait."

Zeke cudgeled his memory. Where had he known this man?

In childhood, perhaps? No; there is a specialness about those memories, however buried. He was about to say something when all four of the men suddenly stared past him. He turned.

Fifty yards down the Wall, partly hidden by undergrowth, two naked men faced each other like wrestlers. One was very tan and more heavily muscled, but had something awkward about his right arm and leg.

SUDDENLY the slighter one darted to the Wall and bent to pick up something. Zeke saw that it was a hand weapon. For an instant they faced each other, then the unarmed one threw himself toward the Wall and vanished. It seemed to Zeke the pale one had been oddly reluctant to fire; and now, throwing down the weapon, he too vanished into the Wall.

The three uniformed men stood unhappily, almost cringing. Only the old one was calm. He said, "They will not come through again. Not now."

One of the young men ran and seized the old one's arm. "When will we know?" he almost sobbed, "Damn it! When will we know?"

The old man smiled and glanced at Zeke. "It will be a while more, I think." Gently, he freed himself and came to Zeke. "You must go through. The calculators are certain on that,

and show very little probability of any immediate danger. I think you'd better not delay."

Zeke protested, "But my orders . . ."

"You can not possibly follow them, nor could we permit it if you could." He gave Zeke that odd look again, almost compassionate, and turned after the three who were already entering the big ship.

Zeke ran after him. "But, wait! I—"

"I dare not say more, or stay longer." He climbed the ladder. The hatch closed behind him and the ship lifted at once. Zeke gaped up after it.

The other small ship was apparently deserted. He took a step toward his own, then stopped. The two naked men had not feared the Wall. He decided on one look, at least.

He expected to grope through darkness, but a single step carried him through. He was in another pine forest, but there was the feel and smell of autumn and the sky, where he could see it, was different. He stepped on something— a pinecone—and gasped with pain. He was barefooted. Also naked.

He whirled in panic and bumped into the Wall. It was as unyielding as obsidian. He beat at it and ran along, looking for the place he'd come through. There was no opening. He turned

and crouched for a second. He jumped as a large bird swooped down and perched on a limb not far away. It looked like a magpie, but was twice-size. It chattered at him. Fright lanced through him. It was speaking English!

The chatter became a coherent croak; some bit of verse. The words burned themselves into his brain:

"A universe is lost or won

When he must 'gainst himself
contend,

In mortal fight to veiled end,
Who wears the scar and who
wears none."

MORE incoherent chatter, then a leap and a squawk of alarm. A brown shape shot from the tree-trunk and landed where the bird had been. Claws raked the air, inches short. The thing grabbed and scrambled, caught the limb and hauled itself on top. Except for the bushy tail and the gliding-membranes, like a flying squirrel's, it looked like a large tomcat. It spat at him and leaped to a farther tree.

Sanity fought back. Earth magpies could be taught simple phrases; why not these? He started down the wall, looking for signs of the two men who'd come through.

A familiar voice said, "You won't find them. There's a difference of some years."

The voice's owner leaned against a trunk. For a moment Zeke thought he was the old man from the other side. Voice and looks, he was a twin; he even had the same scar; but his twin had long hair, tied at the back; a hackle of beard. He wore only rough-spun knee-length breeches, held up by an intricately-braided leather belt which also supported a knife in a scabbard and several small leather pouches. He looked amused.

Zeke said, "I came from the other side of the Wall. I seem to be trapped."

"I know. It'll be a while yet. Did you see them on the other side?"

"Yes. He—the old man who looks like you—excuse me . . ."

"I *am* old, and he *would* look like me. Was he well?"

"I would say so."

"Did he have a scar like mine?"

"Yes."

The old man sighed. "It's beyond me. I didn't time my trip very well, either. I've been waiting eighteen or twenty days." He pushed himself upright. "Come on. I'll feed you and let you rest overnight, and put you on the right path."

"But I . . ."

"Do you have a better plan?"

Zeke went with him. "I would not mind knowing what this is all about."

"Neither would I. I can tell you a little. The Wall is some kind of a boundary between two continuums, or continua. Things aren't the same on this side. Until you learn what you must—I couldn't teach you, even if I dared—you'll have to depend on the logic you're used to, even though it doesn't necessarily hold here. Time and space aren't exactly what they seem, especially here. Wait a minute."

They'd reached the edge of an open, rocky slope. The old man scanned the sky, and pointed. Immensely high up, something with long tapered wings and a relatively small body moved away in overlapping circles. "They'll spot you if you cross open ground," the old man said, "If you're ever caught out in the open, don't move and they won't see you." Presently he said, "Okay, now."

THEY were moving away from the Wall at an angle, northwest by Zeke's reckoning, and downhill. West of them, hazy with distance, was a range of snowy peaks. The Wall still seemed to bend overhead, but the sun was on this side now (a different sun, Zeke was sure) so there was no shadow. They walked all afternoon, and Zeke's feet were in bad shape. Also, he was beginning to sunburn a little. They reached a valley where

oaks began to replace the pines, and took game-trails through thick underbrush. Before dusk they reached a jumble of huge rocks where the old man had his camp.

There was a small circle of fire-blackened rocks, where the old man immediately built a fire. "It doesn't get very cold here nights," he said, "but's best to have a fire." From hiding-places he brought out bread (stale but welcome), cheese, and a gourd of wine. "Relax," he said, pointing to a brush bed and himself reclining on another.

Zeke chewed a sandwich and said, "I suppose you taught the magpie that verse."

The old man sat up suddenly. "What magpie?"

"Why . . . When I first came through the Wall."

The man was on his feet and around the fire, gripping Zeke's shoulder with steely fingers. "What did it say? What was the verse? Can you remember it?"

"Why, I don't know . . ." Zeke found that he could. He recited it.

The hermit let go of him and straightened, with a sigh. "I guess I've really been expecting it. But it's the first concrete sign of meddling from *that* direction. I'll just have to re-calculate."

He squatted beside the fire and untied three of the pouches from his belt. From them he

poured three sets of pebbles; black, white and grey and apparently all of a size. He began putting various ones into two piles, muttering to himself meanwhile. Zeke got the impression he was using them like an abacus.

When the sorting was done, the old man arose and got from another hiding-place a prism-shaped stone and a straight stick about fifteen inches long, with a notch in the middle and a small groove around each end. He put the rock on one of the smooth fire-stones with its edge up and level. He dumped a pile of pebbles into each of two pouches and hung them on the ends of the stick. It was probably a very accurate balance. The stick tipped, not too violently, to the left. He sighed again and looked up at Zeke. "It's no clearer. All I can say is that you have about an even chance of surviving, and that it'll still depend on your own efforts. Partly, at least. In a way, I'm glad it's about even. If it weren't, God knows *what* would be meddling." He put the stick and fulcrum away and resorted his pebbles into their pouches. He took, from still another hiding-place, a pair of breeches like his own, a belt, knife and scabbard. "You'll need these for camouflage. Don't, if you can possibly avoid it, even mention the Wall or where you came from. You'd better rest now.

You'll have to start before sun-up."

"But I haven't the slightest idea where to go!"

"Downstream, of course. And don't dawdle."

ZEKE awoke lame and hungry and cold enough, with vague memories of nightmares. The fire was mere coals, and dark was creeping close. There was no sign of the old man.

He got the fire going again and looked around. The old man's bed was cold and his belongings were gone, except for a little of the bread and cheese. Zeke huddled in an angle of rock, unhappy at the night sounds he heard, but nothing came near the fire.

When the sky was light he went in the direction the creek should be, found it, drank, and started to walk. Tree-cats snarled at him and birds scolded, and there was one creature that scared him at first. It was rabbit-like but big as a collie, with short ears for a rabbit, and a broad intelligent face. He surprised several drinking at the creek. They all watched him sadly.

The sun came up and the valley was raucous with jays. He walked until his feet refused more, bathed them in the creek, ate, and went on. He spent the night in a tree, to the annoyance of the cats, and climbed down stiffly with first light.

The valley widened and flattened, and became a grove of oaks without much undergrowth. The air got heavier. He ate the last of his food and trudged on.

Toward the second evening a magpie fluttered around him and croaked, "The river! Ah, the river, men! Food; fire; the river!" It made him nervous, but if it was a sign of civilization it was welcome.

He heard the river ahead while the sun still gilded the treetops. He left the creek cautiously and approached the river above it. At the thicket's edge he stopped and listened. There was only the water and birds bedding down. The river smelled of mud and tules and fish.

A rope settled over his shoulders.

He grabbed at it as he spun, but it was already pulled tight. He got his feet tangled and fell. Four or five burly men jumped on him and trussed him like a hog. They growled at him in a strange language, then hauled him to his feet and prodded him on with spears.

Where the creek emptied into the river there were other men, a jetty and a vast barge. They hustled him aboard and thrust him onto a rough bench and chained him there by one ankle. A man who seemed to be in charge came and looked at him expressionlessly and tried to talk

to him. The language had some English words, oddly accented, and some others that sounded like Earth languages, plus a lot that didn't. Finally the man shrugged and turned away.

There were other captives, dozens of them, similarly chained. The oars that lay along the scuppers testified what they were for. Zeke's indignation took second place, though, for from up forward, where great cauldrons hung over fires, came the delicious smell of stew.

The captors ignored Zeke and the other slaves for about an hour, then another band arrived hustling along the biggest, broadest man (if he *were* a man) Zeke had ever seen. After a discussion, they shackled him beside Zeke, inboard. The giant, who didn't act much depressed at being a slave, grinned at Zeke and tried to talk to him. Failing, he pointed at himself and said, "Ganzo." Zeke nodded and gave his own name.

SCULLIONS were lugging the cauldrons down the line now. One thrust into Zeke's hands a pottery bowl he could have used for a helmet, and before he was ready, another dumped a huge ladleful of stew into it. It scalded where it slopped on him, but he ignored that and wolfed as others did, seizing chunks of meat or vegetable with his fin-

gers, raising the bowl to his lips to sup liquid. It was rich and well seasoned.

Afterward he washed his bowl over the side, and, when the giant beside him had finished seconds, washed the giant's bowl for him because the other's chains wouldn't reach far enough. After that the giant began pointing to things and naming them. Zeke found there was more English in the argot than he'd realized.

They slept where they were, as they could, and in the morning there was a new and different stew. The seeming owner stood on an inverted cauldron and read something inked on thin pale leather. Zeke gathered it was the Articles of War, or of Slavery, or some such. Then the document was brought down the line and everyone had to sign it. They eyed Zeke's signature curiously, talked about him some more, and consulted the giant, who nodded. Then they gave Zeke back his knife, and the giant his.

Later they were branded, by tying around their foreheads bands of leather which had been inked with a symbol. Zeke supposed the color would be imbibed by the skin.

They had mid-day stew before getting under way. Ganzo taught Zeke how to handle the oar, and called for a soft piece of leather to help protect Zeke's tender hands. It was crushing labor.

Zeke understood now why they'd paired the giant with him. Ganzo pulled most of the weight, and didn't mind it. Zeke, no weakling on Earth, was probably the frailtest and palest of the slaves.

Ganzo was cheerful, and except for his size seemed human. His skin was ruddy, his hair black and thick, growing even on the backs of his fingers. His teeth were big and even and not too unwhite. His eyes were gray. His nose was not broad, but high-bridged and well-shaped. There was nothing ponderous about him or about his wits. The only thing that bothered Zeke a little was that, when water was dumped over them as the day's bath, Ganzo developed an odor like a wet dog. Zeke got used to that. He didn't suppose he was completely odorless himself by now.

HE picked up the language fast, and with it information. The owner was named Tural, and not considered the worst of possible masters since he fed well, did not cheat on slaves' pay, and kept to the law about slavery; though he was not given to camaraderie.

Tural and his freemen were citizens of Rilb, and Zeke was now a subject of that nation. It lay in lower country, beyond a line of cliffs that seemed to be a formidable barrier. This upper

territory was not much settled except by savage tribes and renegades, both categories being sources of slaves. The other industries up here were furs and pine lumber; the barge having a deckload of the latter and some furs in the hold.

There was talk that Tural would take them into some other enterprise.

Some of the freemen were friendlier than Tural, more than one having served their own terms as slaves, and one named Lwar struck up a friendship with Zeke and Ganzo. He was tall and a little stooped, wiry rather than beefy, beginning to gray, with a gloomy face that went well with his general pessimism. He got them the freedom of the aft deck, unchained, during daylight hours when they weren't rowing. He wanted to take them ashore on one of the hunts that kept the cauldrons full. Tural forbid that, though he seemed to place much trust in Lwar.

* * *

The river ran north, between the Wall and the range of mountains. On its right side, at intervals, were stockaded outposts, some manned by Rilban rangers. The Wall was dim in the distance now, its base far below the horizon. The mountains were closer. Lwar said the river flowed into a

large lake, which emptied over the cliffs they'd have to descend. He eyed the slaves gloomily. "I don't look forward to taking this bunch down. Last year we lost five."

They reached the lake and worked their way along the eastern shore. Tural seemed in no hurry. Zeke was over the sunburn now, and his hands toughened. He was hardening and bulging under the labor. He let his hair grow but hacked off his whiskers as most others did. Most of the slaves, excepting a glowering group chained aft who had heavy prices on their heads, were allowed considerable freedom now. There was little temptation to run away. The penalty was death, and the wilderness hostile.

Every oar-stroke, though, was taking Zeke farther from the Wall.

BEFORE they could see the settlement at the end of the lake, they could hear the falls.

Lwar said, "We'll likely stop in town tonight and tomorrow night, while Tural sells the barge and lumber, then start down."

Ganzo said, "What of this hunt there's gossip about?"

"Pray you're not chosen for that." Lwar stood up. "I must see about those ruffians aft now. Perchance later I'll speak to Tural about taking you for an outing."

That night, when the pine logs were unloaded, Lwar came to them with the closest thing to a smile they'd seen on him yet. "We've until midnight." He handed them each a gold piece. "An advance on your pay. Perchance we'll find a scrap or two of entertainment before we're fleeced."

There were families in this town, which was the outlet for the whole upper territory. There were solid warehouses and public markets where scores of entrepreneurs like Tural were haggling. There was a residential section patrolled by spearmen. Farther down the waterfront was a separate stockade where they had to check in and out and sign a leather scroll. Inside was a bedlam of yells and laughter and women's shrieks.

Fully half the milling crowd were slaves, most of them staggering drunk. There was every diversion a world like this could offer. Women grabbed at their arms, hawkers shoved leather and iron ware before their faces. Barbecue tenders shouted.

They must have had sport, for Zeke's recollections were dim the next morning, and there was no money left.

There was little to do that day except unload the furs and bundle them into back-packs. The following morning they were rousted up and chained by fives,

left wrist to left wrist, and had packs of furs strapped on them. They marched out of town to the jeers of children.

The trail skirted the lake to the mountain cleft through which it emptied. At the end was a rocky shelf where rangers recorded their passing. They went to the edge to look down.

The first cataract fell a thousand feet, and its voice beat at the ears like fists and made the rock tremble. There were lower cascades, a series of them, until mist swallowed them. The sun, overhead now, made rainbows. Out beyond, a river wound silver-blue through wooded rolling land that went on and on until claimed by haze.

Parts of the trail down were hidden by overhanging cliffs. Parts were vertical, or worse, with long nets hung to climb on. There were sheer rock faces with steps hewed from them, wide ones so four or five men could go abreast. Where there were ledges they'd been made part of the trail, connected by the nets or by sagging rope bridges that a spider might have hung. Parts were dry and dusty. Where springs burst from cliffs, or where spray from the falls settled, moss covered the rock and grass or shrubs found precarious root. It looked impossible, but far down Zeke could see a party of men mounting one of

the nets, the sun glistening on their skins which were wet with spray. They were like a swarm of bronze ants on a lady's veil.

There was a mutter of fear and rebellion among the slaves. Ganzo, grinning, tapped Zeke's shoulder and made a pantomime they should jump.

GANZO was at the top of a chain of five, with Zeke next. The three men below had to be prodded over the edge. The first drop was easy, with handropes to cling to. The first hanging bridge was uncomfortable, and Zeke didn't help himself any by looking down. Ganzo seemed without nerves. Lwar, in charge of them and several other sections, watched everyone apprehensively. Only when he himself was on a dangerous stretch did his gloomy face relax to something near enjoyment.

They made the scheduled ledge for lunch. They passed the ascending party near dusk, and later could see their fires, a thousand feet above and to the side. The thunder of the falls kept invading Zeke's sleep.

The next day was more cheerful, men having overcome much of their fear. It wasn't until afternoon, when they were on the longest net, that trouble came.

Zeke's first warning was a scream just below him. A shadow fell on him. He half turned

his head, then ducked it as a wing like a leather blanket grazed his face. The flying reptile was incredibly huge. He could smell its oily smell, and the draft from its wings was strong. An awful jerk pulled his left hand from its grip, and he must have screamed with pain though the falls and the shouts of others drowned his voice. The chain pulled his left arm out at a strained angle. The pteranodon-like thing had the lowest man in line, and it was like a team of horses tugging. Zeke clung to the net with his right arm and both legs, as the net bellied far out from the rock. The two men between him and the one in the monster's clutch had lost their holds and hung kicking. The cuff on his left wrist moved, and he saw that Ganzo, though his own wrist must be tortured, was pulling in mightily. The giant had his right elbow hooked around a vertical strand so his right hand was free. He got his chain to where he could seize it, and held it so the pull was off Zeke, but Zeke's wrist still felt as if it had been put on a white-hot anvil and struck with a white-hot sledge. He was faint and sick. Spears and arrows rained on the monster. Finally, with a harsh cry that could be heard even over the falls, it let go and flapped away. It turned its head to glare hatred.

Lwar reached them, made sure the men below had grips on the net, and unlocked the cuffs. Somehow they made it down the net to the ledge at the bottom. Ganzo seemed little upset. He held his wrist alongside Zeke's so the blood mingled, and said, "This is a strong bond."

Zeke managed to say, "You saved me an arm, if—if not my life."

The giant shrugged. "And you mine. If you had not clung so strongly I could hardly have held all of you."

Lwar arrived with soft cloth and balsam for bandages. All five left wrists were bloody, and the man on the end had gotten badly clawed and had a broken arm. He'd have to be lowered on ropes.

They reached the talus at the bottom of the cliffs, and from there it was slow but not dangerous.

THE town below was much like the one above, and there was another lay-over while Tural did business. He bought a barge, not as big as the one he'd had above, and arranged for other barges to take part of his slaves and the furs downriver for sale, with a few freemen to look after them.

More than half the slaves were to be kept for the hunt. Zeke and Ganzo, being hurt, were

given the option. It was Lwar who put it to them. "Go, and you'll take your chances with new owners, but you'll be in a city or at least in settled country. I can't speak well for the worst food or labor you might encounter. Stay with us, and there's real danger, but the food will be good and the work little. Also, this pays double in gold and in credit against your terms. I've been with Tural on five hunts. But this time he's trying for a gervel, and I don't know why I'm fool enough to stay on."

Zeke, not wanting to admit he didn't know what a gervel was, stayed silent. Ganzo, as if he understood, made a point of saying, "They had one in the Prince's menagerie in my home province. Ten feet long, though still young, and fast as a tree-cat. They say he had still a half century to go to maturity."

Lwar nodded. "They live long. This one we're after will measure fifteen feet, and if we could take him, would bring as much gold as all our other cargo and the slaves beside." He eyed Ganzo. "You speak of your home province. You are Pelean, of course."

"From a northern province. I came with a company against some savages, and we blundered into an ambush. Being cut off we fled north, and by the time I'd lost pursuit I was in Rilb. I thought to meet soldiers, borrow

arms and perchance safe directions home. Instead, I met Tural's huskies."

"And many a bruise you gave before being taken," Lwar said. "And you, Zeke? Forgive me if I am too inquisitive, but there's been much speculation about you."

Zeke dared not hesitate too long. "I doubt you've heard the name Earth. A tribe far from here."

Lwar accepted the answer apparently more from politeness than belief. "Well, will you be fools like I and thrust your necks to danger?"

"I," said Ganzo, "will choose double pay and credit if you assure me of one thing. Does Tural hold to the law regarding risks?"

Lwar nodded. "He will not send you where he dares not go himself."

"I'd just as soon stay too," Zeke said. He was already too far from his ship.

FARTHER down the river, on the right bank, there were more towns and, where there was open land, a grazing industry. On the left side stretched an unbroken swamp, unsettled and little penetrated. That was where they were going to hunt.

At the last stop before crossing over, Ganzo found a chance to get Zeke alone. "It is time I

talked to you, friend Zeke. I will not inquire into your past, but I must warn you others will. Knowing so little about Rilb, you may answer wrongly and encounter trouble."

Zeke said, "I'll be grateful for any geography you can teach me. Also, your advice."

"Well," the Pelean said, "In the first place, your not knowing the language when you were taken was strange. Your story of a wild tribe will hardly answer, for your skin was as untanned as a baby's, and no savage is like that. At the same time, in your favor, your paleness might argue you did not come from south of the Truce. Still . . ."

"I don't even know what the Truce is."

The Pelean stared at him. "You're serious? Best not waste time, then; I have much to teach you. Several generations ago all Gatkun—that is the name of this part of the world—was torn by civil war between those who practiced thaumaturgy and those who hated it. Deaths were many on both sides. A truce was eventually made, and a line agreed—let me reckon; peroahs a thousand and a half miles south of here—the southern border of my own nation—south of which thaumaturgy was to be practiced. North of the line it is punished by death, whether it be

used for evil or for good. The line is called the Trucial Border, or the Truce for short. It is because the stoutest fighters were chosen to patrol it that my own people grow larger than any other. It was logical that thaumaturgy be confined in the south, since in that direction lies the Wilderness, beyond which—Oh, Fate! There is so much you will not know . . . All the land is less than a thousand miles wide, measuring from the Wall, but four thousand miles along it. Rilb runs a thousand and a half from the ice fields in the north; and south of Rilb is Pele, for a thousand miles; and south of Pele, Cisnaud, for another thousand and a half. Beyond, where the sun is almost straight overhead, there is the Wilderness of Naud, where men would die of heat or less simple things. And beyond, if our scraps of knowledge are right, in Transnaud, dwells the Caprice; which of course is the fountain of all thaumaturgy or at least its defender . . . I need not tell you much of the Caprice, for neither I nor anyone else *knows* much; or if some do they will not admit it. Now Rilb and Pele and Cisnaud all speak the tongue; and so do the races in Transnaud, though it is only once in several lifetimes we have any contact. In the north are tribes who cover their bodies against the cold,

and may therefore be untanned, though I can not speak firsthand about that. But they too have the tongue; so you see . . .”

ZEKE said, “You mean there are only the three nations, strung along the Wall? And only one language?”

“Three nations. And why not one language, since we were once all the same people? Only the savages have forgotten it, and speak their own gibberish. Of course there are the other quadrants of the world, if our philosophers are right. But there has never been . . .”

“Enough,” Zeke said. “If you are not my friend, no one is. You speak of quadrants. You know, then, that the world is shaped like a globe?”

Ganzo spread his hands apart. “That is the theory. From the way ships fall below the horizon, I think; and the world’s shadow upon the moon; and the shadow of the Wall . . .”

“Has anyone ever been beyond the Wall?”

Ganzo smiled. “Of course not.”

“I have. I come from there. And as far beyond as the stars.” He waited for Ganzo’s jaw to raise again. “You are right about your world. There are doubtless three other quadrants like this one you call Gatkun on this side of the Wall, and four beyond; though in some ways those

are like part of a different world. But I don't see why you . . . No; I guess the hot belt would stop you; and it's too far around to sail, even at the ice cap."

Ganzo stared at him for a while. Then he said, "You are clearly not joking. You *are* a warlock, then. To come through the Wall, or over it . . ."

"I am no warlock, nor anything of the sort. Forces which I do not understand at all made it possible for me to come through, but not to get back out. I was only a few minutes on the other side, so all I know is what I've seen of Gatkun and what I've heard."

Ganzo sighed. "Well, I'm not one to deny marvels, even if I *was* born north of the Truce. Let us think how to hide your secret, for some will claim you a warlock. Eh? Let us say there is an unknown tribe in the ice fields. They're vast enough. And that you were captured by savages; and you kept your body covered so they would not discover you were but a man like themselves, and perchance eat you . . . Though the discomfort was great, in these warmer lands . . . and they had brought you south, and you only escaped a few days before Tural took you." He chuckled. "I missed my calling. I should have been a storyteller!" He arose. "Some time when we have the chance, I will

demand in return that you tell me more of what is beyond the Wall, and distant as the stars."

THEY crossed the river and entered a tributary that led into the swamp. A mile or so up it there was a camp, owned by Tural, consisting of stockades, a wooden jetty, and four small barges. A few caretakers occupied it.

The party was distributed among huts and lean-to's. They spent the first few days making the place liveable and gathering food and wood, and repairing equipment. The first real rain of the season came, and they waited that out. Tural wasn't in much of a rush.

Zeke's and Ganzo's wrists were still in bandages, but they were well enough to go on the first hunts, which were only for swamp-lizards and turtles, taken with hand-nets and not dangerous. There were already cages at camp, extending into the water, for such animals.

It was a month until the first real hunt.

Two barges went up-river, rowing and poling all day, and moored at an island with wide channels on both sides. Actually, more than an island it was a tangle of immense trees on stilt-like roots, holding spots of silt in place. It was dark and dank and musty-smelling, but the ele-

vated tree-bases were a sort of shelter, with vines and mosses closing them in. The rare shafts of sunlight seemed harshly, blindingly alien here. Tree-cats swarmed and snarled, including a rare orange variety Lwar said they'd get some of before the season ended. Higher up were birds. Down here the only birds were large ducks, and they kept to the open water. But turtles and fish, caught with the bare hands, made good stew.

The next morning, very early, most of the group went on upstream for three or four miles and turned into a lagoon completely overhung with trees. They had to push aside hanging moss to get through. Before noon they moored the barges and waded on to where the lagoon widened into a lake, open, with sunlight glistening on fifteen-foot-wide floating lily-pads. Tural gave directions, which Lwar and the other leaders relayed. They separated and went by twos and threes among the tree-roots, out of sight of the lake, then approached it again very quietly. Lwar had ropes, which Zeke and Ganzo would man at the proper time.

From somewhere Tural tossed handfuls of what looked like shredded dried meat onto the lake, near shore. It floated. Insects swam to eat it. The men waited.

In perhaps half an hour there was a whisper of wings and some of the large ducks dropped into sight. They hovered a few feet up, heads swivelling for danger, then settled with scarcely a ripple to the water and began eating the bugs.

OUT among the lily-pads, two big eyes, set nearly a yard apart, surfaced and submerged again. A minute later the ducks squawked and exploded into the air. A head like that of a monstrous frog broke water and a tongue, thick as a man's thigh and ten feet long, whipped out. It knocked two birds out of the air. One beat its wings frantically and got into the air, but the tongue wrapped around the other and pulled it into a maw that could have taken a man's head and shoulders. A rope whirled out and dropped over the frog-head. A forepaw like a big webbed hand came up to dig at the rope, but it was pulled tight, and another rope caught the foreleg. Men jumped into the open. Lwar's ropes spun out and caught the other foreleg, then, as the beast thrashed, a hindleg. Zeke and Ganzo grabbed the ropes. Lwar ran to the creature and snubbed the last free limb. They got it on its back and Lwar snaked the rope free of its neck so it wouldn't strangle. He barely evaded the bludgeoning

tongue and threw Zeke and Ganzo a grin. He was chortling with delight, his gloom completely gone.

They were tossed around like dolls before they got the thing on its feet and headed down the lagoon, prodding it with spears. Suddenly it quit struggling and went where it was being led, in long splashing strides, as if it feared something. Tural was urging them to haste too. They got it on a barge and tied down, and poled away as fast as they could.

When they were half an hour away, and near the river, a deep roar vibrated the swamp. Tural, for once, grinned. "He's not happy he got there too late."

* * *

The batrachian was not vicious, and, in a big cage, became even friendly. Zeke, showing his fascination, was appointed a keeper. Later, they got five more of the big things, of mixed sexes. Lwar said three pairs would bring enough to make expenses even if they didn't get the gervel.

The next two months went by getting smaller creatures and sitting out downpours. Zeke's wrist was well enough to leave off the bandage, and so was Ganzo's. There were a few casualties. One slave was lost to a poisonous lizard, and another was killed when he went berserk and attacked his squad leader.

A freeman got crushed under the last batrachian they caught. There were broken bones and cuts; head colds and fevers. Fires of a certain root kept most of the insects away. Lwar said the season was very good so far.

The rains were getting too frequent, though, and finally Tural decided it was time to try for the real prize. He chose a drizzly day so their trail would not linger. Lwar, on the way upriver, came to Zeke and Ganzo with another proposition. "We won't be compelled, but I'm going to volunteer for the really perilous job," he said. "It will pay triple. It's been my experience that disaster can find you anywhere, in any case. How about you two?"

"What is it?"

"We act as bait."

ALL four small barges were along this trip. One of them was heaped with sections of net, thick rope strands braided around chain, and had special shackles on deck. They camped at the island again, then most of them crowded on the special barge and one other and started for the lagoon.

They tied up below the lake again and dragged the net, under water. It was to be hidden just at the outlet of the lake, under water, with the exposed parts buried in little trenches or

camouflaged among hanging vines and moss. Vertical ropes rose from the edges to posts in a circle of trees, where men would perch to leap off, holding the free ends, as ballast. There was in addition a system of ropes all around to pull the net closed, like a drawstring, when the sides should be raised.

There was a rehearsal, then the party retreated to the barges and spent a cold night. In the morning they went back and took positions. It was still raining, a little harder now, which was good.

Zeke, Ganzo and Lwar went with Tural to the far end of the lake where Tural had chosen a tree from which he could direct things by hand signals, but still be fairly well concealed. The other three waded on up the lagoon above the lake, for about an hour. Lwar already knew the path. They left the water and struck out south, along a low ridge where the trees were thinner.

The theory was that the ger-vel would have lain in his den for one rainy day, but now with a second in prospect hunger would bring him out even though tracking would be hard. It was necessary to provide him a fresh trail. Tural had spent two seasons studying the beast's habits and choosing the times and places. This rising ridge was

a natural pathway through the swamp.

After a while Lwar said, "I go alone from here. You two start back, and keep to the same path. I'll catch you ere long." He looked happy again.

They didn't argue, but as soon as he was out of sight Ganzo slowed down. "We'd best not go too far, in case he needs two extra spears."

They heard him give a loud strange cry which must be an imitation of something, and presently they heard his pounding feet. "Run!" he ordered as he reached them. They obeyed. There was a special hush about the swamp now, as if all its denizens were in hiding. They went as fast as they could without exhausting themselves at once, not worrying about the noise they made since it made no difference now. They ran out of clear space and had to dodge and leap over tree-roots and push through tangles. Zeke's legs felt so weak now he marveled that they kept going. Every breath was a fiery agony. His vision was dim. The other two didn't seem in any better shape.

THEY reached the lagoon and held to a walk for a short distance, to get a little wind back, then trotted on in the shallows. Tural had reckoned that the ger-vel, noting the direction of their

trail and having had some previous experience with this strange scent that invaded his range, would not follow directly but would take a cut-off and try to intercept them at the lake. What couldn't be reckoned precisely was how much time he'd gain that way. He must be very close to them at the lake, else they wouldn't be able to draw him to the net without giving him time to think.

It seemed to Zeke as if things moved in every shadow. Lwar must have felt nervous too, for he stepped up the pace. Finally Tural's tree came in sight. There was no signal, which meant either Tural hadn't spotted the gervel yet or else it was faced so he didn't dare signal. They ran on, unable to cross the lagoon for a little safety because they wouldn't be able to see Tural there. At a pre-arranged spot, where they did have a view of his tree, they stopped. All Zeke's instincts screamed against it. They didn't even dare to look up toward Tural, lest the gervel be watching them and sense the whole plan.

Finally, from the edge of his eye, Zeke saw Tural's hand come out of hiding and wave them on urgently. He needed no coaxing. Now they were wading the edge of the lake itself, having to slow down because submerged roots might trip them. Surely, the gervel was very close now. If one of

them fell, it might come in a rush. They also had to glance back for Tural's signs.

Tural's whole arm appeared and gestured vigorously. That meant the beast was past him, couldn't see. Which put it within yards of the three.

Lwar hesitated no longer. He led them as hard as he could go, out into knee-deep water, having to dodge the lily-pads or step through them. This was the way they must go. At least, there were no roots, to trip them.

Zeke heard the gervel plunge into the lake behind. It sounded very close. The net was only a short dash away. He risked one glance behind. Something huge was swimming, swiftly and smoothly as an otter, only its head showing.

He tripped over the first strands of the net, floundered for footing and plunged on, hip-deep now. Just before he cleared the far end of the net it jerked upward. His foot caught and he sank to his knees, only his head and shoulders above water. He sensed the great bulk plunging toward him and twisted his head, at the same time trying to bring his arms up for protection. The water slowed them. For an instant things seemed to stand still. Men were shouting, hanging from ropes that slid all too slowly over limbs. The sides of the net were lifting, but not evenly

enough. Both the gervel's forefeet had dropped through the net and it was struggling to free them and biting at the strands. It struck Zeke that the thing's head looked like a mule's—but three or four times as big, with a mouth that gaped like no grass-eater's and teeth made for seizing and rending. The rest of the net pulled up. All four of the beast's feet were entangled now, and someone ran and tossed a rope across the top. Someone else grabbed it. The beast went motionless for an instant. It knew it was trapped. But it could reach one of its enemies. Its eyes looked into Zeke's with a cold calculating hate. One foreleg came stretching out, straining, claws like extended poniards.

ZEKE had caught his balance but the mud was slippery and he'd only backed away one step. He saw that the claws were going to reach him, and let his knees go limp. As he fell one claw raked down across his face, like a hot spike. He put his hands to the bottom to shove himself away, and in that instant the gervel drew its foreleg in and freed it from the net. The drawropes had begun to close now, and there was no question it was caught. But it heaved one shoulder up and out and the forepaw came up to swing. Zeke knew he could neither move fast enough

nor get an arm up before him. The claws would lacerate him. Maybe they'd seize him, pull him in to that terrible mouth.

Suddenly there was a raucous screeching. A magpie came plummeting, straight for the gervel's eyes. The beast ducked its head, roared shatteringly and retracted its foreleg for a swing at the bird. That gave Zeke the instant he needed. He got his footing and threw himself backward, rolled and began to swim.

Ganzo and Lwar were reaching for him to pull him to safety. He saw the magpie break off its attack and flap back up toward the tree-tops. The gervel looked back at Zeke once then turned its hate to the men who were swarming around the net.

Ganzo hauled Zeke upright to look at his wound, and grinned with relief that it was minor. Lwar said, "Best we get to camp and put balsam on that."

Zeke went with them, wordlessly. A magpie had just saved his life, probably. And the doggerel the other magpie (or was it the same one?) had chattered at him now assumed personal meaning. He'd have his scar now, and he knew exactly how it would look. He'd seen it on the faces of the two old men. It amused him he hadn't recognized those faces; those voices. Allowing the longer part of a century, they were his own.

THE big barge became a floating menagerie. Below deck were various creatures that preferred dark. On deck, just forward of midships, the batrachians had a pen, shaded, with a pool in it. Forward of that were several cages of the orange tree-cats, then some odds and ends of things. In the bow was the gervel.

That cage was thirty feet square and half that high, of six-inch logs set into the deck, fastened there and at every joint with spikes and chains. Fresh foliage was kept over the top. There was a solid panel of planks that could be moved to cover the sunward side, and to protect whoever climbed up to slosh water on the foliage when there was no rain. Lwar said the gervel could stand sun, but would stay livelier without too much.

Zeke was chief animal caretaker now, and had some other slaves to help him. Ganzo worked with him too, when the giant wasn't needed on the steering sweeps. They kept the cages clean and the water fresh, and tried to prevent teasing of the animals. Zeke got into a fight with a freeman over that, and to his surprise handled the man easily with what Earth techniques he knew. The freeman was reprimanded for teasing the gervel, and Zeke got extra rowing and several days' short rations

for striking a freeman. After that incident he noticed a change in the gervel's attitude toward him. He wondered if the beast understood that Zeke, too, was a captive.

They were moving down the right bank now, and at every town people flocked to see the animals. Settlements were bigger and more frequent. The land was more and more open, and herds of bovines grazed here. They looked like large bison, but with horns like a longhorn steer. They were used not only as meat source, but for draft and riding animals too.

Nowhere was there anything more complex than a simple water-wheel for irrigating, or a bucket-windlass. The technology seemed to lag behind the social organization. Yet what blacksmithing there was met high standards. Plows, for instance, were well designed and well made.

Weeks dribbled by. Zeke was very fit now. The weather was comfortable, out here where the sun could quickly dry things off after the warm rains. The swamp was behind them, and the left bank too was settled here.

Then one day they rowed harder and, at dusk, reached the seaport.

THIS was a real city, with buildings of four or five sto-

ries, along waterfront, bustling noisy crowds busy at all kinds of work. Tural moored and made sure everything was in shape, then called them together and said, "Starboard side slaves will stay aboard tonight. The rest of you may go ashore until noon tomorrow. No more than five slaves to one freeman. I will issue up to one-tenth your pay. Be back on time, or you may as well drown yourselves."

Zeke went in with Ganzo and Lwar, and again they got thoroughly drunk. The next afternoon Tural sought him out and, after a disapproving stare, said, "I've sold the gervel and thirty-odd other beasts, and we're to deliver them at once. You are to take charge of the transfer. There'll be a few extra tid in it for you."

Zeke went in search of Ganzo, whom he found sleeping in the shade of the batrachians' cage. He jostled him awake. They were already under way.

The ship they pulled alongside was as big as any in sight; broader abeam than she might have been for fleetness, but sturdy; with five short masts lateen-rigged as well as two banks of oars. Her skipper was a chunky man, very brown, with face and scalp shaved smooth except for two strands of moustache that hung from the corners of his mouth. He was muscular but had

a queer little belly as if he'd swallowed a watermelon whole. He grinned unctuously at Tural, showing broken stained teeth. "Is this the beast? He does not appear over-active."

"If you wish to try him," Tural said, "we can let you into the cage."

The other—Sarn, his name was—spat brown liquid. "I'll stick to the price, though I doubt he'll bring as much as I'd counted on. Do these handlers go along with him?"

Tural said, "You'll clear twice your investment; and they do not."

THE smaller cages were hoisted up, but a new cage had been built near the ship's bow for the gervel. It was barely half as big as the old one, and not shaded. One side was partly open, and a net in the form of a tube, kept open by ropes from booms, was fastened there. The other end reached to the barge's deck.

The beast defied spear-prods until Zeke talked to it soothingly. Finally it allowed itself to be forced into the net and went up in a smooth surge of muscles and sleek black hide. It was not happy with the new cage, and Zeke felt like a traitor.

Sarn, standing next to him, said in a low voice, "Your friend down there; the Pelean. He knows animals too?"

"We've worked them lately."

"I see by your foreheads you are both slaves."

"Yes."

Sarn moved closer. "I sail for Cisnaud, where no one glances twice at ex-slaves. You'd be free there, and without question find desirable employment. I can use the two of you, and another good hand or two if you can persuade them."

Zeke did not dare offend the man. He said, "Do you have in mind buying us from Tural?"

Sarn grinned slyly. "I hoist sail at moon-rise. My sentries will expect you."

When Zeke repeated the conversation to Ganzo, the giant chewed thoughtfully on a bit of leather. Zeke said, "I do not trust the man."

"Of course not," Ganzo said. "Still, at worst, we'd be his property. No one starves nor badly injures valuable property. And I'd take my chances on outwitting him. I'll not see home as a slave of Tural."

"True," Zeke said, "But Tural has not been bad. I'd regret cheating him."

The Pelean shrugged. "Slaves come and go. Losing two won't impoverish him."

"No. But there's Lwar. He's responsible for us. He'd be blamed."

That's no problem, Ganzo said. "We'll take him along."

"You think he'd come? I doubt it. A freeman, and so well situated . . ."

The giant grinned. "I did not say we'd *ask* him. Once uprooted, he'll not pine away. You and I know how he delights in misfortune."

AN hour before moon-rise they slipped furtively through the shadows of the waterfront, Lwar slung across Ganzo's shoulder like a rabbit-skin. Sentries intercepted them. "Ho," called Sarn from the deck, "Those are the two." He inspected Lwar. "A freeman, eh? He looks hale enough, if what he's drunk can be drained from him. Best get below. The bosun will bunk you down. When we're clear of port, see to that beast. He's been so fierce I'm concerned he'll damage himself."

The bosun and several others of Sarn's regular crew—pirates was a generous description—were casting lots noisily in the forward end of the hold. The bosun scowled but arose and showed them a cubby-hole amid the cargo, then jerked a thumb toward the animals aft in the hold.

They deposited Lwar in the sleeping-spot, got torches and shovels and buckets of water, and worked for an hour cleaning the cages, then fed the beasts. By that time oars were splashing

and rigging creaked above deck. Ganzo said, "I'll wager we get a share of rowing, once beyond swimming distance. Well . . ."

The gervel was in a vicious mood. He quieted when he saw Zeke. Zeke got him to eat and talked to him a while, then went aft to where Ganzo was seeing to a pair of the large bovines penned there. "We'd best not leave Lwar alone too long. What if he wakes without us?"

"He won't wake yet," Ganzo said. "When he does, stick to the story."

"And what story, if I dare ask?"

"We all got drunk, but he the worst; and it was he who coaxed us to this adventure. I've already fixed it with Sarn. A man for intrigue, Sarn."

When Lwar did awake, his reaction was mild. He sat rubbing the back of his neck, his expression wavering between gloom and triumph. "I *knew* calamity was due," he said finally, "it had passed us by freakish long. Well, what can't be cured must be endured. Though I do not swallow your claim that I had aught to do with it." After a minute he said, "I have often wondered about Cisnaud."

THERE were turns at the oars when the winds were light, and Zeke was overworked with the animals, and again Ganzo was

put on the helm. Lwar, being a prime huntsman, went ashore every few days with some of Sarn's bullies to get meat. The ship hopped along the coast, or when possible, stopped at islands. Always, Sarn made the excuse it would be dangerous for Zeke and Ganzo to go ashore.

The food was sufficient, but indifferently prepared, and Zeke had to fight to get the right meat and greens for the animals. He'd gotten the gervel's cage shaded so it was passable. There were a few brushes with the crew, but nothing serious, since Zeke and Lwar acquitted themselves well. Then, too, they were Ganzo's friends.

Aside from the squabbling and the hard work and the mediocre food, and the thought that he was still getting farther from his ship, Zeke enjoyed the voyage. The sea and sky, when it didn't rain, were very blue. Huge seabirds sailed on unmoving wings at mast-top level and flying fish a yard long skimmed the whitecaps. There were giant mantas that broached and turned staring eyes toward the ship before plunging back into the water. Occasionally a flying reptile would dive down for a look, sending everyone to cover.

Weeks passed. Ganzo tolled off certain mountain-peaks which he said were in Pele. Finally he recognized no more, and said they

must be near Cisnaud. A warship of Pele, patrolling the Truce, flagged them and all stolen hands were compelled to hide in a tight moldy space beneath one of the oar-decks, but there were cracks to peer out. Most of the Peleans were near Ganzo's size.

Past the Truce, a Cisnaud galley appeared to escort them. Gossip was that Sarn was selling the gervel to the Cisnaud Government itself.

THE harbor was actually on the shoreward side of an island several miles off the coast. The man who'd contracted for the gervel came aboard to inspect it. He was as tall as Lwar, slender but not frail, olive-skinned, cloaked despite the heat in rich-looking maroon cloth so only his face, hands, and boots showed. The boots were superbly made and very shiny. The man was neat to the point of foppishness. There was even a scent of sandalwood about him. His black eyes took in everything on deck, and seemed to rest a moment on Zeke.

Sarn was giving his sales pitch. "—undoubtedly the finest specimen ever offered. Note the sleekness of the fur. Not a claw broken; not a tooth decayed. The weight is—"

"I see all that," the man said. His voice was a dry murmur, but

with something in it stronger than his meticulous grooming suggested. "What of its history? There must not be the slightest hint of art."

"My pledge, noble one! It is pristine from the swamp! The handler here—he was at the capture; he will swear under drugs or—that is, he can testify there's not been so much as a couplet spoken over it. The man himself is quite innocent of art. He is from a far tribe which—"

"Never mind." The cloaked man was amused at something. He glanced at Zeke again. "He goes with the beast?"

"Well, Eminence, you had asked me to bring a handler if possible. But this one came high."

The purchaser smiled so widely this time he showed his even white teeth. "You stole him, of course. One needs no augurs to discern that. Never mind; for your worry I'll add five extra pieces. The beast and the handler, then. I'll send a barge in the morning. Meanwhile, allow no one aboard.

"You may trust in that, My Lord." As the buyer left, Sarn avoided Zeke's eyes.

WHILE Zeke and Ganzo were discussing this new turn, Lwar joined them with gossip he'd picked up from the crew. The buyer was called Weckel,

and he was no less than the Next-In-Succession to the High Seer of Cisnaud. Ganzo looked at Zeke and chuckled. "So you are to enter the service of the Cisnaud Government. And you a non-believer! Well, I will miss you; but I'm happy you've found luck. Hold your tongue until you've learned east from west, and things should go well with you."

Lwar snorted.

Zeke said, "We were all three to escape together. I'd just as soon go over the side tonight."

"No," Ganzo said regretfully, "Sarn will not be that easy to evade. And though I might scatter his uglies if I'd a sword and shield, it's too long a swim to the mainland. They'd be waiting there. And the island swarms with soldiers. For us, I fear it must be another time and place."

"No," Zeke said. "I've been doing some thinking. Two of us can make a diversion while the other steals a boat. That one at the jetty will be in darkness. We can swim to an agreed spot and join. Then we can row as far along the coast as we wish, and with luck they'll waste time searching the island."

"Mm," said Ganzo, "and what sort of a diversion have you in mind?"

"Simple enough. Act as if we're working and I'll outline it. The ticklish thing will be the

timing. I'd say, when the midnight watch changes . . ."

ZEKE had spoken to Sarn once, and pretended to be delighted with the arrangement. Still, they were ordered to their sleeping-spot and watched.

At the right time Zeke got up and started casually for the ladder. To the guard who intercepted him he said, "A call of nature. And I want to look at that beast." The pirate hesitated, muttered "All right," and called out to a guard on deck.

Zeke climbed topside and went forward to the gervel's cage. It lay still, eyes reflecting torchlight. He went aft and began bucketing water to the bovines. The guard stopped watching him closely.

He slipped to the aft hatch and felt for the rope coiled beside the coaming. He let it down carefully, hoping the darkness in this end of the hold was deep enough. He slid down. The guards forward were seated beneath a torch, busy with their gambling.

He began uncaging animals, the gentlest at first so they wouldn't make a fuss. They held uneasily to the shadows. Then he got himself into a secure place and let out the boars. They grunted irritably and some of the smaller animals ran into the light. Zeke, crouched out of sight, made the most awful roar

he could and the animals, including the boars, stamped forward.

The guards were on their feet grabbing for spears. Ganzo and Lwar appeared, acting bewildered. Ganzo ran to grab a torch and herd one of the boars back. Guards adopted the idea. The rest of the crew was up now and scrambling for the ladder. The shouting and the noise of the animals made a bedlam of the hold. No one but Zeke noticed Ganzo and Lwar putting torches to bedding, so that an impressive fire started.

The two came along the side away from the ladder, in comparative darkness. Zeke was already up the rope and waiting. The deck aft was deserted as all the guards ran to the forward hatch. Sarn's voice, from somewhere, shouted for buckets.

Lwar went over the rail and down a rope and swam toward the boat they'd chosen. Ganzo was already working on the bovines' pen. Zeke went over the rail and worked his way along, hand over hand. It seemed to take forever to reach the bow. Sarn had his regulars rallied now, but a few of the others went over the side and swam toward the jetty. Soldiers ran to intercept them.

Zeke hauled himself up and crouched at the gervel's cage, getting his breath. He felt for

the iron bar he'd hidden earlier, found it and got it twisted in a chain. He heaved. The bar dug into his shoulder but the chain snapped. He felt for other chains, broke them. Now, if he could lift two of the poles from their recesses . . . He wrapped his arms around one and strained. It lifted, but not far enough. He went dizzy with effort.

THERE was a bellow aft and the thunder of hooves as the two bovines came up the deck. Sarn's bucket-line fell apart. He roared orders, got his men under control to catch the bovines. Zeke had little time now. Sarn would guess at once what was going on. He felt frantically for the other pole and heaved till his joints creaked.

Suddenly the gervel loomed over him. He cringed, expecting to be shredded. Instead, the beast got its forepaws around the pole and lifted. The pole came up. Wood splintered at the top of the cage. The gervel freed the other pole, pushed the two aside and was out in one swift glide. Its big head hung over Zeke an instant and he could feel and smell its hot meaty breath. Then it leaped over him and started aft, sinuous in the shadows, like a weasel on a scent. Sarn and his men were staring this way, horror on their faces as they realized what the splintering wood meant.



Zeke went over the rail and was swimming as soon as he hit water. For a while he could hear screams and the gervel's roars as it spent its pent-up hate. Then he heard it splash into the sea and presently it passed him, silent as a fish. The lights from shore danced on the ripples of its wake. Then it was gone.

When he thought he was at the right place he called, "Ganzo!" The giant's voice answered. They joined and floated until they heard oars. Lwar answered their cautious hail. When they were in the boat he said, "Sarn lives. I saw him climb onto the jetty."

Ganzo said, "Best let me take those oars. The quicker we land, and the farther from town, the better."

He rowed northward until no lights were visible. They found a small river and pulled up it and hid the boat in bushes. They brushed out their tracks and struck out across country, to the northeast. Lwar said, "Dare we try the border while you two still wear those brands?"

"No," Ganzo said, "Certainly, not near the sea. Inland, where it's less settled, I can likely find friends. But it's scarce time to think of that. By my reckoning, we're half a thousand miles from Pele."

They detoured some farms and kept going till dawn. Then they

found a place to hide and rest.

At mid-morning Zeke climbed a tree to look around. While he was looking, Lwar said softly, "Turn and observe that bird behind you."

Zeke twisted. It was another magpie. As he stared at it, it jumped into the air and sped away toward the coast. Lwar said, "I'll wager my breeches that bird brings pursuit. What think you, Pelean? Dare we continue the same way?"

"No. They'll send messages ahead. I'd say inland and a little to the south, to confuse them. Once in unsettled land, away from the coast, we'll stand better. Their art is not unlimited. Best start at once, and keep to cover."

THEY watched out for any birds that acted peculiar. They reached a hill from where they could study a rising valley which they might travel by night. They spent the rest of the day gathering fruit and nuts and making crude weapons to hunt with. They started on at dusk and travelled all night.

By dawn they found a place where they could look down over the way they'd come. They saw a few magpies that might or might not be under control. But toward mid-day, after they'd killed a big rabbit and eaten it raw, Ganzo suddenly tensed. "There! On that hill where we stopped!

Watch that burnt-out scar we crossed."

They sat, eyes fixed on the spot. A long shape glided into view, pausing to swing its big mule-head in a quick scrutiny. Then it moved on at a lope. Lwar said, "Are there swamps in this country?"

Ganzo shook his head. "None that I've heard of."

"Then that's *our* beast. The question is: does he track us out of loneliness, or affection for this Outworlder here—yes; I've guessed that—or for some reason less to our comfort?"

Ganzo was already up. "We'll change direction and find a way to lose him. You, Lwar. You'll have to plan, since you know the beast's habits best."

They trotted down a slope toward what might be a stream. A mappie found them and dodged Lwar's angry spear. They sought trees and tried to lose it. Instead, two more joined it.

They reached the stream and turned down it, hoping the gervel at least would continue inland. They'd gone possibly two miles when a voice said, "Hold!"

There was no use resisting. They were surrounded by spearmen and archers.

WECKEL, as immaculate as ever, stood smiling at them. Presently the gervel loped into

sight, not on their trail, but cross-country. It stared around for a few seconds, then writhed and snarled as if something hurt it, and lay down. A straggle of men in maroon boots and breeches, panting, arrived and formed a semi-circle around the gervel. It lifted its head, looking sleepy. It got up and walked to the water and lay down, half immersed.

Weckel, still smiling, said, "Your effort was expected, but the vigor and daring took us by surprise. You, who are called Zeke. I did not intend to keep you a slave. As you can see, we already have good animal handlers. There is more important work for you; in fact it was *you* I wanted, not the gervel. Will you accept employment with the Government of Cisnaud?"

Zeke realized he was still standing in water. Defiantly, he strode out and faced Weckel. "If it's employment you offer, why all the weapons?"

"Because we *must* have you. I'm sorry. We will make your circumstances as pleasant as we can. Your friends may stay with you, or take employment as they wish. Eventually, the situation may permit their return to their own lands. I can not promise you as much, because your future is peculiarly veiled; but believe me, we mean you anything but harm. Will you accept our proposition?"

Zeke shrugged. "I seem to have no choice. I hope I will at least not be denied a little curiosity."

"I will explain what I can. Shall we seek more comfortable surroundings?"

As they walked, Weckel said, "We know that you come from beyond the Wall, and we have been able to glimpse dimly some of the mechanical arts of your people. We want you to help us discover whether we can learn those arts. But there is a stronger reason we want you under the safest possible guard. You are in some way a pivot of events which deserve the greatest apprehension. You must understand we see things dimly and sometimes wrongly. Nevertheless, we hope to guard ourselves, and you, against disaster. Can you believe that?"

Zeke said unwillingly, "I can hardly avoid believing. And I suppose you directed the magpie that saved my life, and the one that quoted—" Weckel's expression stopped him. "Those weren't yours?"

The Cisnaud looked around to make sure no one was too close. "You had best tell me about those at once. And whatever else has happened that you thought strange."

"Well then, who—"

"No one this side of the Wilderness can control magpies as

far away as Pele, let alone Rilb."

"Then it must have been one of the two old men." Again, Weckel's expression stopped him. After a while he said, "I suppose I'd better just tell how things happened."

When he'd finished Weckel strode for a while in deep thought. Then he said, "It makes a sort of logic. We had assessed the divination of the two old men as hallucination. Imagination *does* get in the way, you know. But I doubt if they could control magpies, under the circumstances. Well, it proves Transnaud *is* involved, after all. We'd hoped it was nothing more than a natural paradox trying to straighten itself out. Let us hurry. There'll be a galley at the coast to take us to the Capitol."

THE Capitol of Cisnaud was a city of over two hundred thousand, laid out along both banks of a river. It was very clean, had canals instead of streets, buried sewers, pure water piped to each block though not into many individual houses. The technology was like Rilb's; with small shops and a few good-sized factories. Individual artisans offered almost anything simple tools could make. But there was one industry that didn't exist in Rilb. Seers and magicians of all sorts offered their services as matter-of-factly as barbers. They

claimed no infallibility and there was no air of the occult about it. There were spell-healers as well as ordinary doctors. The Government regulated the practices to prevent their use for evil, and, as Zeke already knew, was itself in the field of magic. The armies had their thaumaturgy. The Department of Divination, for which Weckel worked, had what amounted to cabinet status.

After he'd met the High Seer (nearly as neat as Weckel) and had a tour of the city, including a hospital that amazed him because it seemed to make the spells work, Zeke was installed in a laboratory with an adjoining apartment. There was a panel of seers to work with him.

Lwar, shamefacedly but eagerly, took up the study of haumaturgy and was allowed to attend the Department's training school. After a couple of weeks Weckel confided to Zeke that Lwar did indeed appear to have some talent, but that it pained the Rilban to predict anything but bad luck.

Ganzo was allowed to study thaumaturgy as applied to military tactics. Zeke thought that was very strange until he talked to Ganzo about it. The Pelean said, "Why? Since my own people would flee from me as from a plague—or more likely tie me with ropes and deliver me to the nearest Army post—if I but men-

tioned it, Cisnaud has naught to fear. I can only renounce all thaumaturgy, or remain an ally of Cisnaud. There is no enmity between our nations now. In fact, I will admit privately that there is even a small illegal traffic across the border."

ZEKE had a hard time deciding what kind of machine to build for Weckel. Finally he decided on a windmill, since the parts were not beyond local technology and it would be useful. Weckel listened to a description. "That sounds very suitable. What craftsmen will you need?"

"A carpenter or two—cabinet-makers, I *should* say—and a blacksmith. And, for delicate parts, a weaponeer."

The workmanship pleased Zeke. Without any urging, the craftsmen were precise. It was easier than he expected to make the pump cylinder (of wood of course, boiled in grease) but he spent much time on the valves to get them just right. Gears came out so close to specification he couldn't measure the difference.

The windmill, for secrecy, was to be erected at an army outpost a day's bovine-ride from town. The lift, from a trough at ground level to the top platform of an observation tower, was over twenty-five feet, but he thought his leather-fitted piston would force water that high.

Lwar and Ganzo were there to watch, and Weckel of course, with a squad of his seers.

Zeke added a last daub of grease to a bearing and released the catch. Slowly, the vanes began to turn. Weckel's seers seemed to be almost praying the machine along. Sucking noises came up from the pump below, then a trickle of water spilled from the discharge. There were mutters and exclamations.

Then something broke.

The trouble was only a pin that held an eccentric to its wheel, and was soon fixed. But after a few minutes more of pumping, a bearing froze.

The next day, with the bearing repaired, they got ten minutes' work, then a coupling broke. Zeke held the broken part in his hand, glaring at it. He'd watched it forged and honed, and if he knew anything at all about steel, it should not have broken. He looked at Weckel. "I'd say someone was hexing us."

The seers looked as if he'd accused them of treason. Weckel held up a hand to calm them, and said to Zeke, "They're all loyal. If any one of them weren't, the others would feel it. They simply don't have the art right. I don't understand your own attitude. You act as if you expected the contrivance to work without any attention."

Zeke suppressed his impa-

tiency. "Of course! The wind pushes against these vanes and turns the hub, which turns this gear; and this gear turns the long shaft. That wheel on the bottom of the shaft—"

It was Weckel's turn to look impatient. "Of course; of course! We all see that! But do you expect it to *keep* working, of its own virtue?"

"It should work for months. Years, even. On my own world —."

"There you have it. On your own world, your own art keeps your contrivances working. I gather you aren't a practitioner yourself, but you *must* know how it's done."

"Curse it!" Zeke said, "You don't have people sitting around staring at everything that's made out of iron! Does a knife suddenly lose its edge and refuse to cut? Does a plow plow one instant and not the next?"

"Of course not. Those are simple things." Weckel's eyebrows went up. "Ah. Is it possible that your own people practice the sustaining arts without knowing it? That must be it. You've been building these things so long you've forgotten."

"The contrivance that brought me here," Zeke said, "has many thousands of parts, many of them depending upon each other. They all worked perfectly, with no one around but me."

Weckel turned to the adepts. "What did you feel?"

The oldest said, "Only natural rejection, sir. It began before the parts started to move. We fought it back for a while, but it built up. At the last, we tried a different system. We chose each of us no more than three parts for special attention; though of course we also monitored the whole. We warded off two failures before one was too much for us."

Weckel said, "There was no malign influence?"

"No, sir. Nor any scrutiny beyond our own."

Weckel turned to Zeke. "This is as we would expect. I may ask you to try again with some simpler contrivance, but before then I must put some diviners on the questions this has raised. Don't be discouraged. The mere failure may yet teach us important new truths about the universe."

WITH nothing to do meanwhile, Zeke prowled the town and spent some time at the menagerie renewing acquaintances with the gervel, which was in a large comfortable cage and not under influence. It was friendly, but had a speculative eye, as if it hoped he'd help it escape again.

Later he had a talk with Ganzo and Lwar. "Did you see anything wrong with my water-lifting machine?"

They looked at each other. "Only that it had many parts," the Pelean said finally.

"Well, consider," he said, "On the barge, forty men pulled twenty oars at a time. Why was there no mischief then?"

Again, they looked at each other. Lwar said, "Possibly philosophers have pondered the question. I would guess that it's because oars are really a part of a barge. Or maybe that they only duplicate each other."

"Well, what about a wagon and a team of bovines? There you have wheels, and a yoke, and axles, and so on."

"Ah!" said Lwar, "There you have a fitter example! Perchance you do not know that a team of two is all right; while a team of four is considered unreliable and six are downright useless. One of them is bound to go berserk, if a wheel does not break or some such thing."

Zeke digested that in his mind. There'd been a time when anyone on Earth would have accepted such a statement, in the absence of contrary knowledge. Was it possible that the laws of nature, as he knew them, could vary?

He looked forward to building something simple. A grindstone, maybe, for grain. Turned by a single bovine.

That project took only a week, and most of that on the two stones. One was solidly placed on

the ground. The other was to stay atop it by the shape of the two. The beam was securely fastened across the top and had an integral yoke at the outer end. The bovine's path was within two low concentric fences.

It looked excellent. It ground for over an hour before the lower stone split, near the center. Zeke stood looking at the break. He could testify that the stone had been carefully chosen and shaped. There was no physical reason for it to break, in his estimation.

Weckel let some of the flour dribble through his fingers then wiped his hands on a cloth an aide handed him. "Your people are able to use such contrivances regularly, eh? You are very fortunate."

Zeke thought of an internal combustion engine, with its hundreds of parts, each cycling millions of times without a breakdown. He was beginning to wonder *how*.

THERE was great excitement the next day, because a creature called a Beakie had been captured, two days' ride south. It had been a generation since one had been seen this side of the Wilderness, let alone a thousand miles north of it. He went to the menagerie to see it, as usual trailed by two soldiers and a seer.

The Beakie sat on its haunches in a corner of its cage, silent and motionless. It was smaller than a man, but had a head of about human size. That head was the least humanoid thing about it. There was a broad spatulate duck's-bill, eight inches long. The eyes were lidless like a fish's. There were no visible ear-openings. The head grew to a point at the back, and from the point projected a straight sharp horn. Its limbs were short and spindly, with webbed hands and feet. The skin was pale green, thick and warty, dappled with dark spots.

A man next to Zeke said, "They guzzle in shallow water for food, you know, and if anything comes at them they rear up under it with that horn. Wicked-looking weapon, eh?"

"It certainly is."

The man went on, "They're a bewitched race, 'tis said. Once they were men, but for some offense they were made like this. A caution!"

"Definitely," Zeke said, and let the crowd separate them. He wasn't supposed to get chummy with strangers.

He looked at the Beakie from another angle, then started for the gervel's cage. He waited for his escort, but they did not appear. There was shouting from the other side of the menagerie, and some soldiers began to run that way.

He took a back exit from the menagerie and went toward the Department, through a residential district. It was dusk, and there were few torches. At the first canal a man was coming across the footbridge toward him. He looked at Zeke's maroon breeches and straps, and halted. "Your pardon, Seer. There is a matter I—."

The back of Zeke's head seemed to explode.

HE came to with a terrible headache and with pain in his shoulders, wrists and ankles. It was night. He was being carried hung from a pole. The jolting sent spears of agony through his head. He groaned.

"Hold!" said a familiar voice. Someone slashed at his bonds and he fell to the ground. They hobbled him and tied his hands, and hoisted him upright. Again he knew the prodding of spears. His ankles were so numb at first he could hardly keep balance, but it was better than hanging from the pole.

The familiar voice chuckled. "Play games with Sarn, will you?" The pirate cuffed him, sending new agony through his head. "You'll repent ere this trip ends. I'll not kill you, though. Dead, you would be worthless except for fish-bait. Half alive, you'll fetch more than you've cost me." He hit Zeke again.

Zeke fought nausea and said, "You'll never make it to your ship. They'll be after you."

"Who saiz aught of ships? We go to the Wilderness, or nigh it. And there'll be little pursuit, for your perfumed friend has his hands full." His voice took on awe. "The things we saw as we left the city! I know not what the Transnauds wish with you, but I count myself wise to be with them and not against."

They let him sleep on hard ground or soft; fed him what game was handy, half-raw and unseasoned. He was a mass of bruises and small cuts. These, though, were only surface hurts. His tough body was rallying.

They always spent the middle of the day in shade and on some eminence with a good view around them. Once they saw two hundred or more Government troops hastening toward the Capitol. A week later they flushed a band of armed Beakies from a creek. Sarn was cautious with them, allies of his or no. One morning a magpie circled them, acting controlled, but suddenly lost interest and went on about an ordinary bird's affairs. Sarn's caution and nervousness were proof he didn't feel as secure as he talked. Zeke began to delay all he could, feigning weakness. He could stand the extra cuffs and prods.

They were in hot country now,

some of it desert, though streams came through it. They were mounting inland as well as south, which alleviated the weather somewhat. The Wall was in sight now. They passed Cisnaud outposts, some of them abandoned, as were most of the scarce villages. Several times they saw flocks of the great winged reptiles passing high overhead. Once they saw a flock of them attacking an outpost, but didn't go near enough to assess the results.

There were short hot rains which the barren hills soaked up like sponges. Farther south, though, a rampart of clouds loomed almost constantly, and beneath them, according to the pirates, were the steaming rainforests of Naud. Another week would bring them close.

Then one midnight, as they approached a creek, the thicket seemed to explode.

THE first hint Zeke had was Ganzo's voice shouting, "It is they!" The giant burst into sight, shield before him, sword waving hungrily. Zeke rolled to his feet and plunged toward the thicket. A spear grazed his thigh like a hot iron. "Hist!" came Lwar's voice, and he threw himself toward it. The Rilban hacked at his bonds until he was free. He started to help Ganzo, but Lwar seized him, and in a second the

Pelean's bulk appeared, with several pirates in pursuit. There was an awful roar and a long black shape arrowed at the pursuers. Men screamed and ran, those who could. Ganzo and Lwar hustled Zeke away. He struggled with them, but Ganzo said, "The beast will care for himself. Hurry! There's more to worry about!"

The carnage behind them was brief, for the gervel broke away and came crashing after them. It shot ahead, apparently scouting the ground. They were running uphill. Suddenly the gervel roared again, and there were unhuman cries. The beast came back and stationed itself near them.

There was a growing whoosh, and before Zeke could even crouch, awful talons struck him stunningly and jerked him into the air. He could feel his own blood running down his arms. He fought like a cat, but he might as well have torn at thick steel bars. The immense wings beat over him and the creature mounted up and up. Far below he could hear the frustrated roars of his friends. There were campfires below him now, as if an army camped there.

He was borne up and southward, sick with the smell of his own blood and the reptile's rank stench, wondering if it were carrying him to some eyrie to eat him. Ahead, the Wall hid the

stars. They mounted still higher and barely cleared a crag, and he was dropped onto hard bare ground. There was a fire here, of sticks poked to the center as men might build. Spearpoints appeared around him, and behind them, dim in the firelight, were hairy faces.

These creatures advancing into the light were caricatures of men, but they were somehow familiar. Then it struck him. They were Neanderthals. He had no doubt of that, and he found time even now to stare at them curiously. The shapes and features were bestial, but the eyes were not. They looked and acted intelligent.

Now a contrasting figure stepped into sight. At first he thought this was Weckel, for the robes were similar. But this man was gaunter, and so dark his face was barely visible under the hood, except for the great aquiline nose. And he spoke English. "So here is the Man with the Scar." He motioned the spearmen away and advanced fearlessly. "You are quite ordinary-looking. I could not see clearly through magpies' eyes."

ZEKE climbed to his feet. "Who are you? How do you know English? What do you want with me?" He felt better. The sickness was going, and the talon-cuts had stopped bleeding.

"What a quiver-ful of questions! I am not a 'who'; this is just a manifestation I find convenient. I know English because I have had contacts with your world at various times. What I want with you is to make sure you meet the right destiny. I can add curiosity to that, since your destiny is peculiarly vague even to me. No more delay, now. Turn, and extend your right hand to the side."

Zeke said, "First, I demand to know—"

"I have not the slightest reluctance to use compulsion. Turn away from me and hold out your right hand. I am not going to hurt you."

After a stubborn second, Zeke did as he was ordered. A tingling struck his wrist. He saw a thin black band, as if a thread were tied around it. He turned again. The hooded man was not in sight, but from somewhere his voice said, "A hundred yards in the way you are facing now, you will find a trail down. Take a torch from the fire and go. You will meet your friends in less than an hour. Thereafter you will be compelled to the Wall. You will not be able to pass through it until you reach the spot where you entered. Your chance of survival lies there."

That was all. Presently Zeke chose a stick from the fire and went looking for the trail. He

saw no trace of the Neanderthals. He found the trail and started down.

The gervel met him first, its eyes reflecting the torch. Then he heard Ganzo's hail and answered it.

"Fate!" exclaimed the giant when they met, "What a charmed life you bear! When that devil-bird took you I wept and said a good spell for your soul!"

Zeke said, "It only took me to its master, who gave me an adornment." He displayed the band on his right wrist. It had no thickness, actually, but seemed a mere staining of the skin. Lwar muttered over it, and said, "There is a strong enchantment. I feel it."

As if the words were a cue, Zeke's arm jerked out painfully. He gasped and turned to relieve the strain. The pull was steady and strong enough to hurt if he stood still. He took a step and it stopped, then began again. "I must go to the Wall," he said, "Then north along it. I believe if you held me, my arm would tear itself out." He began to walk slowly uphill. "I will not ask you to share my danger."

Ganzo and Lwar fell in beside him and the gervel led the way. The Pelean said, "There seems to be no peril to us, but only to you. The Beakies had us surrounded, but did not attack once

you were hauled into the sky. And in any case, our way lies north too. Will you refuse our company?"

"All right," Zeke said. "What happened at the Capitol?"

"An attack of Beakies born by devil-birds, and an assortment of spells. It was aimed at you, of course, and Weckel had premonition, but failed to find you in time because Sarn waylaid you. He must have planned it on the moment's spur, as there was no divination of *that*. When the Beakies or whoever directs them found you already taken, they merely held back our armies, though the struggle was fierce enough, and weird. I went to Weckel with the notion of using the gervel, which will clearly follow you when it can, and he diverted enough art to spring the three of us free. Then it was only a matter of tracking. I credit the beast, though this thaumaturgist's apprentice here claims—." He broke off, grinning, at Lwar's scowl.

IT developed that the black band would allow necessary detours and stops for rest. They found ample game. They kept to the streams so the gervel could wet himself often, and arrived at the Wall. They went north along it, and as the weeks passed the climate grew cooler.

They had to skirt far west

around one large dense pine-forest infested by tribes whose poisoned darts and spears made them a terror even to Cisnaud. There were mountain ranges to be crossed or detoured. Nearing Pele they had to be wary for patrols which might seize them as sorcerers. Beyond the border they dodged savages and flying reptiles which roosted on the high peaks. While they were crossing above Pele, Ganzo stood often on some prominence looking down over his own land, but he would not leave Zeke.

They'd come through a thousand miles of Cisnaud and now it was another thousand across Pele. Often only the gervel saved them. Eventually, though, Ganzo began to recognize landmarks of his earlier flight through this territory, and they followed the same path. They crossed into Rilb without seeing any patrols.

The mountains Zeke had seen when he first came through the Wall were on their left now, and it was only necessary to find the headwaters of the river. They found them and followed down until signs of Rilb hunters began to appear. Then they angled away to the east and finally found the stream Zeke had come down. A day up it they found the old man's camp.

There were warm coals in the fire-place and the old man's belongings were back. The gervel

struck off into the thicket. Zeke suddenly feared for the old man and shouted, "Back!". But just then the old man stepped into sight, with the gervel nuzzling at his shoulder. "He won't hurt me," the patriarch grinned, "it may confuse him, but he recognizes me."

"Yes," Zeke said, "he would, wouldn't he? Even if *I* didn't."

Ganzo put a hand on Zeke's shoulder and said, "Who . . .?"

"Do you not recognize the scar?" Zeke could not understand the bitterness and sadness that invaded his mind. He must face death soon, but that was no novelty by now. What would be lost if the counterpart without the car won? Would both old men vanish, along with himself? If so, where in this mishmash of futures was the old man *without* a scar? What of Ganzo and Lwar? If Zeke vanished, would they remember him? Would the gervel too forget, and turn upon Zeke's friends?

He said, "I'd just as soon get it over with."

"All right," the old man said, "I'm a little impatient myself. Though my calculations were closer this time. I've only been here six days, and I could really have cut it to three."

They took the trail and Zeke found he remembered almost every step of it. A magpie joined them, and the gervel looked at it

with odd intensity, almost friendship, as if it somehow felt the interconnections. Maybe its own future lay in the balance, and the beast in some way knew it. They reached the Wall and Zeke halted. He stood for a few seconds, savoring the feel and smell of the air and looking at his companions. Then he took a breath and plunged in.

THERE was a sharp wrench at his right wrist and his whole side went numb. He gasped and staggered, then caught his balance. He stared around.

To his left, almost hidden by trees, where two small spaceships and one larger. The hatch of one—his own—was opening.

A suited figure stepped from behind a tree directly in front of him, and he stared into his own eyes. The other was not tanned, and looked comparatively frail. As Zeke had been. He felt a touch of amusement at how things had been arranged. He was partially crippled now, at least for a time, to even up the contest.

But the other was lifting a hand-weapon. Zeke knew what to do about that. He threw himself back through the wall and waited.

Presently the other staggered through, jaw agape at finding himself unarmed and naked. They stared at each other again.

A sadness such as he couldn't have imagined filled Zeke, but the months—or was it years?—in Gatkun had made him resolute. He hurled himself forward.

They broke through the Wall, and here was the moment Zeke had already seen. *Fool!* he told himself, *Why did I come through again? My advantage is on the other side!* But maybe it was because something in him insisted on the pattern. He did dart a glance toward the ships, and saw himself—his third self, maybe—standing with the other four men. And he was able to anticipate, of course, when his adversary darted for the gun. He got back through the Wall in time. Had he failed that, in some previous loop of cause-and-effect? He took pains to act more crippled than he was.

The other came through behind him, a few yards away, which was clever. They advanced slowly. Zeke's numbness was beginning to leave, and delay was on his side. He got between the other and the Wall. The opponent realized what was happening, and threw himself forward without any more hesitation.

Zeke could not tell how long they rolled there, hitting and clawing and even biting. He knew he was in a stranglehold once, and barely broke it. At times he gasped with pain or was dizzy from some blow. He found

grudging admiration for his other self's toughness, even out-muscled as he was.

Then his wind and strength began to tell. He overpowered the other's last desperate struggles and got him pinned in a hammerlock. He could break his arm now, then his back or his neck. He told himself he had to do it. He thought of the line the magpie had chattered at him:

"Who wears the scar, and who wears none."

Suddenly he laughed. Very carefully, with a fingernail horny from labor—very deliberately—he scratched a wound on the other's left cheek.

THERE was earthquake and blackness, lightning, the roar of great winds. Trees ripped, sod rained on him. His grasp skipped and the man beneath him wriggled away.

The earth stopped bucking and daylight returned. His two friends, both old men, and the three in uniform, lay sprawled in various places. The man he'd just scratched sat a few yards away, staring at him in half-comprehension. The magpie fluttered and shrieked its panic. The gervel crouched against the trunk of an uprooted tree. The Wall was gone without a trace and the pine forests were now identical.

The two old men approached

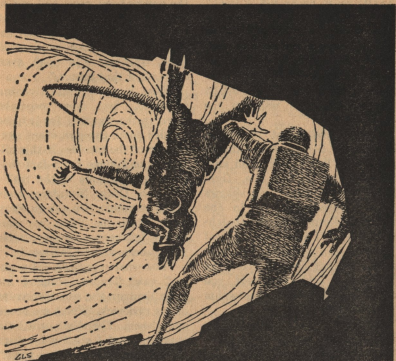
each other, in fascination. The one in uniform spoke. "Is it possible that . . . we both survive? There *was* the uncertainty in the calculators . . ."

"And in my pebbles," grinned the other.

Then both of them began to fade. There was no fear on their faces, no discomfort, only new interest. Zeke heard the near-naked one say, as from a distance, "This may mean yet a third . . ." The uniformed men were fading, too. Zeke noticed for the first time that there were only two spaceships. His newly-arrived self—or the arrival, at least—must have been cancelled out. The ships were growing unsubstantial along with the men. They became shimmers, then nothing. The man Zeke had scratched was gone too.

Ganzo and Lwar stared at him. The magpie took itself away somewhere, and the gervel got to his feet. "Fate, Zeke!" Ganzo said, standing up, "Tell me ever again you are coming to the Wall, and I will flee the opposite direction!"

And what was left, Zeke wondered as they gathered themselves to make a camp. Not Earth, he was sure. Not the Earth he had known; not in this continuum. For him, there were his friends, and Gatkun. And now there was at least another quadrant like Gatkun to explore.



THE GROOVES

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SCHELLING

Bandor feared neither man nor troll. But he began to fear when he saw the markings in the rock.

YOU must never kill a troll," said Gurbina, "because trolls have inverted souls." She hunched over the fire as she spoke, slowly stirring some sweet mushrooms into Bandor's porridge. "That's why," she added wisely, "they can walk on the ceiling."

Bandor fretted at the table, cracking his rough-skinned knuckles. "But I never said anything about *killing* one, Gurbina," he protested, his shaggy head lowered gloomily in the morning dimness of the thatch-roofed hut. "I just want to steal the gold. It's no use to the troll, living in that cave in the Gray Mountain. And you *said* you knew some devices of protection against trolls . . ."

"Which I do," nodded Gurbina, ladling steaming porridge into her grandson's bowl and placing it before him with a dull ceramic thump. "Which I do," she repeated, evidently pleased by the resonance of the phrase and its connotative implication of vast wisdoms and sly sagacities. "But you must kill the troll, or you cannot get the gold. And as I said, you must never kill a troll under any circumstances."

"Oh," muttered Bandor, then could follow his groan of exasperation with no coherent phrase, so fell to eating his porridge in large impatient spoonfuls. When it was gone, he shoved

the empty bowl away and got to his feet. "I think," he said, "That today I will go to the Gray Mountain. Even if trolls *have* inverted souls, Gurbina. You don't even know what that means."

"That is the truth," Gurbina admitted, "but there must be merit in the warning for it to be handed down through every generation of the families in this village. And I know for a fact that all who have gone to the troll's cave on Gray Mountain have failed to return. Do not go. Stay here, work the farm as your father before you, marry, raise your family, and die in peace."

"You waste my time, old woman," said Bandor, slipping his arms through the shoulderstraps of his rucksack. "Fetch me bread and cheese. The climb will be a long one, and I shall not return till long past the evening meal."

Gurbina sighed, but bowed her gray head and did as she was bidden. Then, after putting the food into his rucksack and fastening the strap, she took from about her throat a glittering circle of glass on a small silver chain. "Take this lens," she said. "And look upon the troll only through this, with your right eye, keeping the other well closed. He will be walking upon the ceiling of the cave, of course, but this will turn him rightside up, that you may better tell his smile from his frown."

Bandor snatched it from her and thrust it deep in the pocket of his blouse. "I fear no living creature," he said. "I am the strongest man in this village, and have proven it for many a year, wrestling and hurling the caber at the wine festivals of springtime. What rat-faced misshapen creature can stand against me."

"Fear not the troll, but thyself," said Gurbina, wringing her hands. "None have ever returned from the cave. *None*. Is my meaning not clear? Is your smile not one whit abated? Do you gaze so serenely mocking upon my wisdom?"

"I will go," laughed Bandor, touching her withered cheek for a moment, "and I will return. With the golden hoard of the troll, or at least so much of it as can be borne in my pack." He turned and strode out into the sunlit dewiness of a hill country morning, and went off swiftly down the path from the house, hands jammed jauntily in his pockets, whistling a merry air. Gurbina stepped back from the doorway, took his emptied bowl and cleaned it, then put it away on a high shelf, lest she look upon it again some day by mischance and be reminded to weep.

BANDOR's merry whistling had faltered, then been forgotten, long before he reached

the sought-after site whereat the cavernous entrance lay. It was near the very top of the Gray Mountain, on which no tree nor bush took root, whose rounded peak shone in the afternoon light like some vast, burnished gray pearl. On a rock just outside the entrance, then, Bandor relaxed his weary body and ate the bread and cheese, taking his time about it in order to muster his strength to the utmost for the contest to come. When his hunger was sated, and his limbs had ceased to ache from the long climb, Bandor drew a final deep breath of thin, cold mountain air, then stepped into the cave of the troll. At the very brink of the damp darkness, with the sunlight still playing warmly upon his back, Bandor halted, letting his eyes adjust themselves before venturing further within.

As the impenetrable darkness lessened and became dappled with grays and dull silver glitterings from random imbedded crystals, Bandor noticed, directly over his head upon the lip of the cavern entrance, two odd-looking indentations, side by side, like a rudimentary numeral 11 patiently scraped into the solid rock, the length of each groove about as long as a shinbone, the width a bit less than that of a man's hand. "Strange," said Bandor, then dismissed the marking from his mind, and

thought only of the gold that lay—guarded by the troll—within the cave.

His eyes were as adjusted to darkness as they would ever become, he realized finally. And the darkness would grow as sunset drew nigh, so he must make haste. He fumbled in his blouse until he found the lens which Gurbina had given him, and he looped its silver chain cautiously about his throat before starting forward. He had taken nine paces through a sort of cylindrical tunnel without event. Then on the tenth footfall, something shimmered brightly before him, and he whipped the lens to his right eye, clenching the left eyelid almost painfully closed. Through the lens, the cavern seemed to twirl, and then Bandor was looking directly into the troll's bat-eared, rat-toothed face.

"Why come you here?" thundered the troll, its green tongue flickering wetly over its wide, lipless mouth, while its multi-fingered hands closed and unclosed their long-taloned digits. Its eyes, Bandor noted uneasily, were faceted like an insects, and almost hidden, so far back in the deep sockets of the craggy brow did they lie. "Why come you here?!" the troll repeated, lashing its long thick tail.

"F-for the gold," said Bandor, in brave tones marred by his unwilling stammer. "Stand aside,

troll," he went on, praying that it was lusty rage and not craven fear which was setting his strong limbs to shivering. "Gold I want and gold I shall have."

"I know not what gold you mean," grumbled the troll, but for a fleeting moment Bandor had seen the twist of smile that tugged the mouth-corners of the thick-bodied monster. "Look for yourself. It is not here."

"I would not have you at my back, troll," said Bandor. "Move away, and I will enter. But remain always before me, lest I must needs destroy you for mere safeguard." The troll rocked its torso backward and roared with laughter, but did as he had commanded, and backed away into the darker depths of the cavern.

BANDOR, following with dread caution, found himself in an ovoid room, the floor curving downward, the ceiling upward, from the rim of the cylindrical tunnel. Its cramped smallness startled him. It would have held at most a dozen people—with a dozen trolls upon the ceiling above them—but certainly no more. There was no pallet, no refuse, no cold-embered campfire, nothing to show that the troll even dwelt there. The walls were smooth as black glass. And there was no gold.

"Now you have seen," said the troll. "Now you must leave."

"You are tricking me," said Bandor, scarcely containing his fury. "It is here, it *must* be here, or there could not—these many generations—be the talk of it throughout the village!" The troll's green tongue slithered briefly over its protruding teeth, but it said nothing, just stood with folded arms and the palest hint of a triumphant grin along its ugly mouth. "Tell me, or I shall slay you, just out of temper!" raged Bandor, brandishing his heavy fist. The troll yawned delicately, then gave a light shrug of its sloping shoulders and snickered.

Nothing more.

"I warn you—!" began Bandor, but the troll turned an insolent back. Abruptly crazed with frustration, feeling cruelly cheated, Bandor rushed about the small egg-shaped chamber, scrabbling at the smooth walls, kicking at the polished walls. He found nothing. No opening, no new tunnel, and not even a glint of gold. Behind him, he heard a muffled chuckle, and knew the troll was delighting in his discomfiture. "Will you, then, laugh at me?!" he said, whirling and letting the lens spin about his throat, no longer inverting the cavern to his eye. Bandor's voice hardened in his throat like a sharp-cornered cube of stone, and his lips formed a soundless scream.

The troll's head dangled inches from his own, its inverted smile now a terrible drooling gash with down-turned corners, and its mocking chuckle had become a ravenous roar of hunger, as though its very emotional makeup had revolved from what it had been through the lens. Sharp talons swung gropingly toward Bandor's throat, and white rat-teeth gaped wide with raging appetite while the hideous, thick tail swung back and forth behind the gross head like a grim pendulum of doom.

Bandor sprang backward from the troll's advance, until his spine curved like an archer's bow against the cold concavity of the wall at the rear of the cavern. He fumbled for the lens once more, but the slender silver chain had snapped upon the limpness of his sweat-soaked shirt collar and would not come around.

The troll reached out, howling with a deafening voice that echoed from the walls, its tail lashing with impatient fury . . .

Bandor grabbed that tail and wrapped it about the throat of the troll like an undulant garrote, drew it taut—and knotted it . . .

The troll gasped. Wheezed. Clawed at its constricted windpipe. Its face grew dull, deep green, and the flickering, faceted eyes lost their shimmer. For a moment, it twirled slowly in mid-air, fingers flexing mindlessly,

while Bandor fought for his own breath, braced his feet upon the rock to quiet the dizzy spinning of the room . . .

"The . . . gold . . ." gurgled the troll, its neck-cords standing out like rope, "Is yours . . ." For an instant, a trace of its illusory smile touched its mouth. "Because now— *You* are the troll!"

Like a flame flicking out, the troll went rigid, ceased spinning, then crumbled into noisome, gray-white dust in empty air and blew away. Then, in the bright red sunset light spilling through the cylindrical tunnel into the cavern, Bandor saw the gold. It was a fortune that even rich men would hope to dream about. He gasped with delight, reached out for his hard-won treasure, and then saw the extra fingers—the curving talons—the hairless flesh—of the creature he had become. For an instant, he nearly wept . . . But the sight of the riches before him was overpowering even his shaken emotions. He laughed. He grabbed at the gold, rolled in it, and flung handfuls over himself.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Ugly as I am, I can return to the village. I will tell them what has happened. They may loathe the sight of me, but they will love the jingle of my money!"

So deciding, he gathered up what he could safely bear in one

load, and started toward the cave-mouth up the tunnel, toward the warm glow of sunset over the Gray Mountain. The light grew more crimson, more dazzlingly warm as he advanced toward it. He stopped at the opening to the outside world. Stopped and stared as the terrible truth came to him.

Spread out below him, in resplendent majesty, lay the inverted bowl of the darkening evening sky. To step from the cave would be to step into a tumble ever upward through the emptiness of air. "That's why he grinned, at the very last . . ." moaned Bandor, trembling. "That's why Gurbina warned me not to kill him. For to kill is to become a troll, and to become a troll is to invert one's soul, and walk eternally head-downwards, bound forever by the limits of the hole in the rock!"

Then did Bandor weep, and fling the futile riches from himself, back into the depths of the cavern. Then did he shriek, and hate all mankind and monster-kind, and fill with rage for the coming of the next interloper. And his thick, clawed feet pawed in impotent fury upon the rocky arch of the cave-mouth—

Then at last did Bandor know the ancient source of those parallel grooves the last light of sunset revealed between his feet.

THE END

FANTASTIC

When the twin worlds of Earth and Eloraspon merged in space-time, Jefferson Jarvis, one of the new men known as *Magnanthropus*, crossed over. Now, in this sequel to Banister's already classic novel, Jarvis fights his way through Eloraspon's dangers to solve the secret of the immortal Bronze Men, and the ultimate meaning of the purpose of the Children of the Mighty. Pulses ready? Let them start pounding!

Seed of Eloraspon

By **MANLY BANISTER**

Illustrator **SHELLING**

First of Two Parts

OVERHEAD was the blue sky of Eloraspon; all around the tiny sloop heaved the glassy sea of that alien world. Jefferson Jarvis slept most of the time. The craft sailed itself with tiller lashed. When he was awake, Jarvis stared at the horizon, fished, kept shipboard house, and spread the sail to catch occasional rain. The sea of Eloraspon was as salt as those of that Earth he felt he should never see again and undrinkable.

He knew where he was going. He felt the call of that alien place in his inmost being and steered his course directly toward Surandanish, that city of the Mighty of old that was now the beacon of mankind. There lay the answer to what he sought, so Eamus Brock had assured him in those days before *Magnanthropus* had left this world, preventing a threatened nova-explosion of the sun and saving the remnant of mankind for a future destiny.





That destiny was now in his, Jarvis', hands. Eamus Brock had assured him this, for in Surandanish lay the heaped-up wealth of intellectual and scientific advancement that had once belonged to the vanished race of the Mighty.

And so Jarvis kept his inner being attuned to the beacon of Surandanish, knowing that so long as he followed that unheard call, he could not miss his goal.

The cloud-piled smudge of a coastline, appearing ahead in morning mists, made his heart leap with excitement. He climbed the rigging for a better view, his lean, sardonic face working, lithe muscles twisting under sun-gilded skin. Was this his goal? Would he find here the ancient city of Surandanish?

Observations of the stars which, on Eloraspon, were almost identical in their constellations to those of Earth, had let him know he sailed tropical waters. The land ahead might be only an island, but he steered directly for it with high hope, until he could make out capes and headlands and enormous trees a thousand feet in height similar to those he had left on that far northern shore, by the ruined city of Dilsaloranu. It must be a continent.

He would have beached his craft within an hour, except for the sudden appearance of another

er ship. Another ship, on a world he thought uninhabited? It was preposterous—impossible! Yet, there it was, bearing down on him with foam curling at its forefoot, its square, orange sail bellied in the wind, and a full score of oars dipping on either side. Creatures swarmed its deck, but of what form they might be, he could not make out at the distance separating them. That he had been sighted was certain, for the vessel bore straight toward him, and its bows were black with a seething crowd of—what?

Jarvis was undecided whether to steer toward the ship or to turn and flee. So startling and unexpected had been the appearance of the vessel that he was still numb with shock. The strangers made up his mind for him. A large object arced from the foredeck of the galley and hurtled with a thunderous splash into the sea between them. Whoever, or whatever, these Elorasponians were, they certainly were not friendly. By the time their stone-thrower had hurled another boulder into the sea, Jarvis had jibed the sloop into a course before the wind, run up a balloon jib, and was fleeing for his life.

THE Earthmen Jarvis had left on the northern continent had built the sloop well, with clean, graceful lines that spoke its potential of high speed and easy

maneuverability. Faint howls of rage came to Jarvis' ears as the distance between pursuer and pursued lengthened and the missiles splashed farther and farther astern. By nightfall, both enemy ship and land were out of sight; Jarvis had the sea to himself.

Feeling safe, Jarvis stowed his sails and threw out a sea anchor. Nearness to land tokened a storm which, by experience, he knew to be a nightly occurrence in the vicinity of a continent.

The moon rose as the sun went down; it was round and full, outshining its tiny, circling companion. Jarvis knew Eloraspon to be Earth's twin across hyperspace; hence the moons of both worlds were also twins. But the tiny companion of the Elorasponian moon puzzled him; its like was unknown to dwellers of Earth . . . dead Earth, he thought bitterly, destroyed in that cataclysm of merging worlds which had brought him and mankind's remnant to Eloraspon. One thing observation had established about the moonlet—it circled its primary twice in the course of a day, and by night could easily be conceived a celestial clock, telling the hours with unsurpassed accuracy.

Jarvis fell asleep contemplating the strangeness of it, only to awaken as the sea began to heave threateningly. Wind

moaned in the rigging and hissed from moonlit whitecap to whitecap. Ragged clouds streamed the misty sky, long streaks of mauve and dirty yellow against the blackness of space, gathered into vast masses that shut out the light; and with darkness came a new liveliness in the storm. The sea leaped; the sloop tossed like a cork. Rain lashed the whining sea. Jarvis tied himself to a thwart and clung to the tiller.

He had never seen so savage a clash of the elements, not even on the coast of the northern continent. The gale shrieked and the waters thundered. He fought the tiller for hours, running before the storm, blinded by lightning and rain, drenched by howling seas. There was a roar beneath the howl, a roar that swelled in intensity and menace before he recognized it for what it was—the crash of breakers upon a storm-lashed shore.

Even had Jarvis realized earlier his proximity to land, he could have done nothing to avoid the rocky fangs that now sprouted all around him from the tossing waters. He felt the stout bottom strike with a grinding, splintering jar that rattled the bones in his body. Then the sloop labored upward on the crest of a monster wave, heeled over on its beam and struck again. The rending of planks was like the death cry of a living thing. The

strutting mast broke off at the deck and pitched into the sea. Jarvis felt his lashings part and his body hurtle through a spume-fraught maelstrom; then his head struck and he knew nothing more.

JARVIS regained consciousness in bright morning sunlight, the soft susurrations of surf crooning a melody in his ears. He pulled jerkily to his feet on the sandy shingle and looked around with blurred eyes. He was in a deep cove between upreared headlands. Inland towered a giant forest, its topmost branches seeming to brush the smiling sky, its great-girthed trunks rooted firmly in the rocky soil. Nothing moved on this birdless shore save himself and the whispering surf. The sloop lay on its beam ends a short distance away, wedged between a pair of jagged rocks.

He inspected it bleakly. The sloop would never float again. And his stores were spoiled by sea water that had entered through the jagged gashes in the hull. But there was something there worth salvaging. His weapons. He dug them out with loving care. The sword he had forged from spring steel he girded at his hip. On the opposite side of his sword-belt he hung a short-handled, double-bitted axe which he had learned by arduous

practice to throw accurately and ferociously, and to retrieve by means of the braided rawhide rope tied to its handle. At the nape of his neck, under his leather shirt, he holstered his throwing knife and slipped his hunting boomerang through the waistband of his leather trousers. Long since, the colony of Earthmen on the northern continent had used up their store of ammunition; rifles, pistols and shotguns were useless. Jarvis' weapons replaced them remarkably well.

He killed a small, six-legged something with his throwing knife and braised its parts with a fire he had sparked from flint and steel. Filled and content, he felt recovered from his ordeal of the night, and set out through the forest in the direction of the imperious, beckoning call that strummed through his consciousness. He was once again on the trail of Surandanish.

Hordes of sextupedal creatures of the species that had provided his breakfast rustled and squealed in the dark aisles of the forest. The way was climbing and, thanks to the greedy creatures chomping every bit of green that dared show, free of underbrush.

Suddenly the hunger-squeals changed in note, intensity and volume. Instinctively Jarvis read fear and warning in the sounds.

He paused, alerting his Mag faculties. As a member of the mutant Magnanthropus race, Jarvis possessed powers that differentiated him sharply from his human companions of Earth. He could sense things no ordinary man could see. His mind would reach out and "read" an object by its subliminal tones, apprehended only by the subconscious. It was like the notes of music to him, the "soul-song" of all things living and dead, and was the same as that Song of Power flung forth by the mighty city Surandanish as a guide to his quest.

And now through his consciousness cascaded a rippling melody of rage and hate, a bounding diapason of coarse intensity that siezed his vitals in a grip of iron and writhed the flesh at the nape of his neck. He was aware that the squealing creatures were gone, fled into the forest, and all around him was quiet and threatening gloom.

He could not see in his mind the menace confronting him. It was something he had never seen before. He heard its song of rage, but no image evoked itself. Yet he knew that whatever it was lurked just around the fifty-foot diameter of the great tree bole against which he leaned. He knew that the creature sensed him as well as he sensed it. It was tremendous in size; he could not hope to outdistance it in

flight. He shot a glance around, seeking some vine or creeper that might have escaped the hungry tusks of the rooting swine-things.

THERE was a snuffling noise and a thunder of great weights striking the ground. The most malignant horror he had ever seen on a planet of malignant horrors, stalked into his view. It might have been an enormous crocodile, but was not, only giving that impression. Six scaly legs, each as big as a cask, supported the mailed body shoulder-high. Its crocodilian snout was tusked and armored with scale and grew neckless from the body. Leathery, rudimentary wings fluttered at its shoulders; an eight-foot tail tipped with a bouquet of spikes lashed the ground with a rending noise. The creature's belly was a sickening yellow green, fading to mottle on the legs and surging to scarlet on the scimitar-like claws on the three-toed feet.

The thing stared at Jarvis without blinking its single yellow eye, red-pupilled. Pale green globes, sense organs of some kind, writhed on twin stalks above that baleful orb. The dragon, as it seemed to Jarvis it must be, was stamping its feet and angling its body to lash him with its lethal tail.

Jarvis had spotted the vine he

wanted—fifty feet away. He felt a sinking sensation. He could never reach it unless . . . Carefully he removed the axe from his belt, hefting it and gauging the throw. The eye, of course, was the logical target. The axe glistened in the pale forest light as the monstrous, spiked tail swung back for the fatal blow. The blade struck with a gritty thud as Jarvis' moccasins spurned the humous. Green ichor spurted from the wound; Jarvis bounded to the vine of safety, yanking the cord of his axe.

He swarmed to the branch aloft, deafened by the agonized roars of the monster. He lay on his belly, hugging the rough bark of a limb ten feet through, panting and reeling in his axe. The dragon sensed the pain in its blinded eye as its enemy and made no move for the elusive Earthman. It plunged in earth-shaking circles, lashing itself with its dreadful tail, ripping its mailed hide to shreds with lethal spikes; and Jarvis watched enthralled the most astonishing battle he had ever witnessed as the bellowing thing plunged and literally fought itself to death.

What a strange world was Eloraspon, and how equally strange the seed it spawned—the weird creatures within it! In the three years of his exile upon this incredible world, Jarvis was

not yet able to understand it. And yet, he felt strangely comfortable in it. On Earth, he had been a rebel, strait-jacketed in the artificial culture of an effete civilization. He mourned the destruction of the world he had known but believed a better new world might be built upon the rubble of the old—Surandanish! There lay the secrets of the ancient Mighty, the primordial race of Magnanthropus. There lay the future of mankind.

The Brobdignagian forest spread a leafy canopy a thousand feet above him. The rays of the sun failed to penetrate the screen and his moccasined feet found sure but perilous passage in dim, eternal twilight. The beacon of Surandanish resounded in his soul, else he would have lost his way.

He was alert as he had not been before, Mag senses probing ahead in the greenish gloom. Things half seen whirred through the air—giant insects with pellucid, lavender wings. Many-footed things, grub-like, armored and scaled, crawled upon limbs and trunks. Jarvis advanced with long sword ready in his hand, ready for danger, half welcoming it.

When he could go no farther for weariness, he lay down in the crotch of a tree and rested, listening to the whir, crunch and stridulant calls of insects. He

must have slept without intending, for he awakened to a thrilling note in his Mag consciousness, warning of danger. Even as he struggled to his feet, sword in hand, the foremost of the enemy came clawing over the bulge of a limb.

It was an ant—or a monster similar to the lowly ant he had known on Earth. But this ant was proportioned to the forest in which it lived. It stood four feet high, its color a virulent green. Armor plate of chitin slithered and rasped as the creature advanced, working its mandibles and the terrible stinger at the tip of its pulsing abdomen.

Jarvis swung his sword in a glittering arc. The armored head parted from its thorax with sickening crunch and sailed into space. The thing contracted, legs threshing, and tumbled from the limb.

But the enemy had come not alone. A glance assured Jarvis that the fight had just begun. A score more of the clawed monsters climbed the trunk below in single file, ant fashion, while on the ground a horde of others milled and seethed around the twitching carcass of their fallen fellow, tearing him to pieces.

Jarvis darted a glance around, seeking an avenue of escape. As another of the stridently hued ants clawed its way to the limb, mandibles agape, he hewed

again, and the twitching parts plunged to the hungry horde below. They came on fast now, and he swung his blade with both hands, weaving a glittering cage of steel about himself. One after another his attackers plunged from the limb, leaving it slippery with the colorless ichor of their veins. Jarvis' sword dripped with the stuff and his arms wearied. He fought doggedly, and at every opportunity sought that means of escape he knew he must find soon or die. In a burst of furious energy, he cleared the limb of attackers and leaped to the limb above, scrambling up the roughly-fissured bark of the trunk. He stood erect, sheathing his sword, gauging the distance to the vine he had spotted from below. It was farther away than he had thought, but the relentless enemy gave him no chance to seek another. Armored claws rattled on the trunk just below his feet.

He sprang for the vine, his heart in his mouth. The rough, sinewy creeper whipped between his palms. For an awful, horrifying moment he felt himself falling as his grip slipped; then he clamped his fingers in a grip of steel and the swinging vine carried him over the horrid clack of the ant multitude to another limb.

For hours, it seemed, he fled thus, from vine to vine along the

creeped limbs, nostrils cloyed with the stench of rotting humous, muscles flayed with exertion. When the light in the forest began to dim with the fall of night, he halted, probing the twilight with his Mag senses. The enemy was nowhere. He had slept once, and that had almost proved his undoing. Now he must sleep again. He could, with the aid of his Mag senses, have pursued his way through the forest in the dark; but excitement and violence had taxed his energy. He would climb to the top of the forest and there be beyond scent of the dangers that foraged the wood by night.

To an ordinary man, that frightful ascent would have been unthinkable. A thousand feet straight up! His years upon Eloraspon and the hardships he had undergone had developed Jarvis in nerve and fiber. Though his face was thin and hawk-like, his body had an athlete's build. In college, he had excelled in running, broad jumping and fencing. These college-bred skills now meant to him the difference between life and death.

Up and up he climbed, finding hand- and foot-holds in the fissured bark. The sun sank lower in the west. When at last his head cleared the leafy crown of the great tree, he looked out over the forest. Whence he had come, the verdant roof of a hidden world

stretched unbroken to the horizon; but when he turned his glance toward the call of Surandani, his heart leaped with gladness. Only a few miles away lay scrub-covered hills and the misty evidence of altitudinous country beyond.

Then the dark came down with tropic suddenness. Stars twinkled. Jarvis relaxed with satisfaction, dropping into instant sleep.

II

THE perilous forest behind him, Jarvis walked the following morning among the hills he had seen the night before. High in the blue bowl of the sky fluttered glistening shards of color, a swarm of spinning, airborne creatures it delighted Jarvis to see. These were Eeima, tiny creatures a foot high in perfect human shape, darting in ecstasies of love upon resplendent butterfly wings of intermingled hues. Descendants of the ancient Mighty, the Eeima had evolved as a race into a concept—a pure concept of joy and carnal love.

These planed from sundrenched heights and circled above him, dipping, diving and calling out soundless greeting to his Mag senses.

“Welcome, Jarvis! Eluola sends greetings, bids Jarvis welcome. Hasten, Jarvis, to Surandani. But beware, beware! Danger is great!”

“Eluola!” he cried inwardly. *“Where is she?”*

“Eluola—Eluola is now Great Mother of the Eeima, Jarvis. Eluola flits no more in the sun . . . Layer of Eggs is Eluola. But she greets you through us. When the Old Mother died, Eluola we chose to take her place. It is a great honor, a great duty she performs. She commanded us to watch for you, to offer our help to the Son of the Mighty, to him whose soul-song is like to the Song of Power.”

The message did not come to him in words but in pictures shot with shards of incandescent color. Again he saw in his mind the phosphorescently lit cavern somewhere beneath the surface of Eloraspon, which the Eeima called the Mothering Pits, and grub-like things which were the larvae of the Eeima wriggling upon rock walls and floor, feeding upon glowing fungus. Throughout the vast nursery, Eeima flitted on gossamer wings, busily attending the young.

The picture faded as the Eeima fluttered away in a cloud of dazzling color, drifting with the wind. The last he saw of them from a low hilltop was a swirling mass of glitter and hue, darting above the distant forest.

Beyond the range of hills, the land developed a broken topography with a few stunted trees, sparse brush and large boulders



scattered in profusion. The beacon of Surandanish drew Jarvis directly across this terrain and he sought no easier route.

Debouching from a rocky defile upon a sandy plain, his Mag consciousness warned him of danger and he froze in his tracks. A strident, subliminal buzzing ripped through his being as if it had been sound.

At his left was a rugged buff with talus and towering boulders at its base. From behind the nearest came the blood-chilling apprehension that plucked his nerves like violin strings. He staggered and almost fell from the psychic force then shuttered his Mag mind against it and straightened.

The thing he saw as he peered from his rocky shelter was even worse than the frightening apprehension he had had of it. It was a many-legged, scarlet horror twenty feet in length. It rattled cruelly barbed, triple-jointed limbs as it lunged again and again at a dark opening low down in the face of the bluff. Even as Jarvis looked, it thrust a grasping claw into the cave-mouth. At once there came a flash of light against the dark of the cave and the repellent thing lunged backward, two feet of severed claw rattling on the rocks. It hissed thunderously with rage and pain.

That flash of light—it could

only have been a blade of steel, slashing in a desperate arc! Was it possible . . . ? No, he could not believe it. Men as he knew them did not exist native to Elooraspon. Yet he had to know. He braved again the horror of the monster's hideous soul-song and probed the cave quickly. There was a creature in there—a human creature—frightened and at bay.

HE wished himself at the top of the bluff, where he might hurl boulders down upon the scarlet monster. But that was out of the question. The quarry in the cave could not hold out that long. Something must be done soon and it was typical of Jarvis that his mind resorted to a method of direct attack.

He unsheathed his long sword and stepped cautiously from concealment. The thing's attention was fixed wholly upon the cave and he had a moment to consider his next move. In spite of its great length, the scarlet horror was fragilely constructed. Behind its large head armed with antennae and horny mandibles writhed a segmented body barely six inches through. Each segment was equipped with a pair of flailing, chitin-armored legs scarcely thicker than twigs.

The Earthman picked his target and set out on a run, swinging the blade over his head. The

writhing, wriggling thing danced in front of him and Jarvis danced too, like a boxer, on the balls of his feet. Then quick as a spurt of dust he leaped in and severed the creature in the middle with one clean blow.

A barbed claw raked him, ripping through his leather shirt and scalding his ribs with pain. He leaped back, but the thing did not fall in the throes of death. Instead, the rear half, the half without head or brain, rolled twisting on the sandy desert floor for thirty yards, kicking up a cloud of dust, then sprang to the clawed tips of its stick-like legs and fled away into the desert. The other half reared itself upright upon four of its remaining legs and whirled upon Jarvis, the great head towering above him, mandibles clashing, faceted eyes glittering, slashing at him with cruel, curved claws.

"The head, stranger! Strike at the head or we both are lost!"

The shout, seeming to come to him in English, galvanized the Earthman. He dropped his sword, fumbling at his belt for his axe as he leaped backward. The blade left his hand cleanly, glittering against the sky, and crashed against the hideous, scarlet head. Chitin plates shattered like eggshell; greenish ichor gushed. The monster toppled, kicking and writhing in the agony of death.

"Well fought, stranger! I owe my life to you!"

A warrior picked his way down the talus, a startling figure clad in breastplate and beehive helmet of glittering, silvery metal; a flowing blue cloak was shrugged over one shoulder; a sword filled one hand, a bow the other, and a quiver of feathered arrows joggled at his hip.

"My arm, fighting man!" cried the warrior, holding it out with forearm bent parallel to the breastplate.

Jarvis took the arm, gripped the other's bicep in warm response, then stepped back hastily, picking up his sword. He looked up at the warrior with a strange expression.

"You are no man!" he said.

"And if I am a woman," replied the warrior proudly, "what difference does that make, so long as I am a warrior too? I am Ilil, princess of Gipar, daughter of the Lugal Elmam. How are you called, stranger, and whence come you?"

"I am Jeff Jarvis of Earth," he replied, "which is another world than this. How is it that you speak my language? Are there other Earthmen here?"

She looked puzzled. "Your language, Jeff Jarvis? All upon Eloraspon speak the same language, so what is strange? Earth and Earthmen I have never heard of before. Rather should

you have asked me why I have been so stupid as to venture into the Desert of the Ultul!"

"Is *that* an ultul?" Jarvis nodded toward the still twitching carcass.

"Yes, and let us be gone. The part that escaped will bring back more of its kind."

THEY backtracked to the scrub-covered hills, walking side by side. Jarvis appraised his companion with covert glances. She appeared unshaken by her near-fatal encounter with the ultul and talked without reserve in what sounded to him like crisp, well-accented English. Her helmet covered her hair and most of her face, but what he saw he found well-proportioned, with wide-set eyes of brown and a pleasing expression.

"Five days ago, the Tharn attacked my ship off the coast of Dimgal," she said. "We had anchored in a cove to escape the storm that comes by night. I preferred to sleep ashore and had taken my royal guard and two of my women with me. I was awakened by shouts and the clash of arms. The beach swarmed with Tharn. The commander of my guard armed me and hastened me into the forest with my women, assuring me a quick and easy victory over the Tharn. Brave man! He knew better and died knowing it. Of all

my company, only I and my two women escaped."

"And where are they now?" Jarvis asked.

"Poor things! They could not climb quickly enough to escape the dristl of the Hashurgal—the dragons of the Great Forest."

There was distress in her tone and Jarvis dropped the subject.

"What *were* you doing on the Desert of the Ultul?" he asked.

She gave him a smiling, side-long glance. "I saw you on my trail this morning. I thought you a Tharn that had trailed me from the beach. I chose the desert for flight, as no Tharn will tread where the ultul roam."

"I was not following you," he said. "I am going to Surandanish and the way appears to lead across the desert. I came upon you by accident."

"Well for me that you did!" she replied. "But across the deadly desert is no route to Surandanish, which lies even more remote than my own land of Gipar. We travel now in Kullab, which is Tharn-land, and the Tharn are enemies of Gipar."

"Why are you traveling," he asked, "instead of remaining safe in your father's house in Gipar?"

At once he knew he had somehow managed to say the wrong thing, for her face clouded instantly with distrust and she fell silent.

"Why don't you answer?" he pressed.

She frowned at him and her right hand fondled the hilt of the sword at her waist. "You seek Surandanish," she said accusingly. "Are you a servant of the Dingir?"

"Who or what are the Dingir?"

"Which of the eight continents that float upon the Dimgal Abzu is that one you call Earth that you know not the Dingir?" she cried. "Or would you lie to a princess of Gipar?" Her sword rattled half from its scabbard.

"Put up your weapon," he returned sharply. "I do not fight women, neither do I lie. I am a stranger as I have said and I come from a world that is not of Eloraspon. Your people and your ways are as strange to me as I am to you."

Her answering silence was alert and still suspicious but she put up her sword. Strange thoughts roamed Jarvis' mind. Dimgal Abzu—where had he heard words like that before? And Kullab! Gipar! These names struck responsive notes that took his thoughts back and back . . . to where? This was no less mysterious than the fact that Ilil spoke in a tongue he could comprehend. He needed time to think it out.

III

HERBS gathered, crushed and mingled by Ilil healed Jar-

vis' utlul-inflicted wounds overnight.

"Wonderfully quick to heal, these herbs are known to every fighting man of Eloraspon," she had explained.

"We must skirt the desert to eastward," she told him as they traveled. "After many days, we shall come to the river the Tharn call Idnal. Beyond the hills that lie past the Idnal is Gipar. Every step of the way is full of danger, for the Tharn are ferocious and hate all who are not as ugly as they."

"It must have been Tharn who attacked me at sea," Jarvis said, and quickly described the encounter.

"It was Tharn," said Ilil, "though you did not see their faces. They are giants with blue skins and fangs for teeth! And their natures are as cruel as their looks!"

Jarvis had not known feminine company since his wife, Jo, had died in childbirth, and the presence of the maid at his side both comforted and exhilarated him. She strode in armored regalia, face half-hidden by the cheek-plates of her helmet, but none of it diminished the fact that she was a woman, and Jarvis knew a strange, long-unfelt tugging at his heart. Could it be love? Was he to find at last an answer to the bitterness and loneliness of his life in the person of this lithe,

sun-tanned warrior-maid?

In the days that followed, this feeling not only consolidated itself, but he also found the answer to the question of Ilil's speech. It came to him out of the blue, so to speak, and left him thunderstruck—more astonished than he had been when he had thought she spoke idiomatic English. Ilil was a Mag! She did not know it herself, but they were of the same race, he and she. He was a mutant of the future—she the descendant of a race long gone. There could be no other answer. When she spoke to him in Elorasponese, the contact of their Mag minds made her speech intelligible to him and his to her!

As time went on, he found himself as capable of conversing in her language as in his own, and so now he often found her unconsciously speaking in English, in words she had learned from him.

WHEN he told Ilil about this, it only confused her, for she could not understand. And how could she know if there were others like herself, when she had not known what it was to be this way? And the strange place names—he remembered those, too. They were one with Ilil's language—words in the ancient Sumerian tongue of Earth, which he had studied in a course

in archaeology. It had always been a mystery to archaeologists to explain the origin of the Sumerians. The Sumerian story of creation spoke of the Earth as floating upon a great sea called the Dimgal Abzu—the very sea surrounding this continent of Dimgal! How had the mountain-loving Sumerians got from the world of Eloraspon to the plains of Chaldea where flowed the Tigris and the Euphrates? If there was an answer anywhere, it was undoubtedly to be found in the city of Surandanish!

Legends, Ilil explained, told of a race of gods from whom the Lulu, or men of Eloraspon, were descended. Once there had been thriving commerce between the eight continents of Eloraspon. But this was so long ago that actual records had long since rotted away. She knew only that men were not as they had once been; that Eloraspon was today a world changed from its ancient glory, of which the only remaining remnant was the shining cities dotting the globe.

"The Dingir came and told the Lulu never more to inhabit the cities of the gods," she said soberly. "That, too, was long ago. And the Lulu went forth and built their own cities, and thus it is everywhere, save in Tharnland, where the Tharn still live in the ancient towers and do not worship their builders.

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"At first, Jeff Jarvis, I thought you in league with the Dingir as many are, but now I know you. You have told me the truth about yourself and your dead world of Earth. The Lulu once thought the Dingir gods and built staged towers upon the tops of which were offered worship and sacrifice. Now we know they are not gods, even though they are immortal." ^{STOP!}

"Stop, thieves!" yelled one of the Tharn. "Where do you think you go with the lur-boat of Karpf?"

Ilil dropped her pole and snatched up her bow. Jarvis stopped her.

"Save your arrows! The growth is thick and there are only two. You could miss. Let's argue this out with them."

"Argue with a dristl!" snorted Ilil. "The only argument they know is said with steel!"

The Tharn overtook them quickly, for both were huge men, giants in fact. And they were experts at propelling the coracle. Their blue hides were naked save for loin cloths and both were armed with clubs. But it was neither their size nor their armament that was frightening—it was their faces—the Tharn face, known and dreaded throughout the continent. Hairless, blue-shining scalps surmounted puffed, ridged features like masks of flesh molded in wax.

Round, staring eyes, like white saucers with tiny black pupils occupied the entire middle third of the face, practically noseless but with wide, gaping nostrils. From under black, thickly moustached upper lips protruded a pair of glistening tusks that curved like scimitars over the chin, almost to the breast-bone.

"Lulu! Here are Lulu!" shrieked the foremost Tharn. "Let us take them!"

From the corner of his eye, Jarvis noticed Ilil calmly drawing her sword, and a feeling of warm pride suffused him. She had no fear now, any more than she had displayed in the face of the ultul.

JARVIS assumed an easy stance in the coracle, cradling his pole across his body. The Tharn, confident of victory, came on swiftly, yelling insults in language of such filthy derivation it had been no part of Ilil's vocabulary, hence incomprehensible to Jarvis. And still the Earthman stood and waited.

Nor did he move until the leading Tharn swung his ten-foot pole in a whistling arc, and then he ducked. As he rose, he thrust with his own pole, into the middle of the monster's belly. The Tharn yelped and toppled backward upon his companion, taken completely by surprise. Then, as the two floundered in the bottom

of their bobbing coracle, Jarvis hooked his pole under the gunwale of the opposing craft, prying it upward. The sprawling Tharn rolled to the low side and helped the maneuver; Jarvis' muscles strained, and the coracle flipped over, dumping its occupants into the noisome froth of the swamp.

Dusk was coming on as they cleared the last of the swamp growth and came out upon the broad, placidly flowing breast of the Idnal. They dared not tarry for fear of pursuit from Tharn alerted by the two Jarvis had so ignominiously dumped but began the crossing at once. Dark came down before they had paddled half way across, but by the time they had reached the opposite shore, the twin moons had risen and they found a place among the rocks to hide until morning, foregoing fire lest it betray their presence.

In the morning they breakfasted on fruit which Jarvis found growing on the hillside, cast a last backward look at the Idnal flowing lazily below them, and set out through the hills. The call of Surandanish was strong now and Jarvis itched to be there. Having found a clue to some of the secrets of this strange planet, he was anxious to turn up more.

Descending a narrow draw between low hills, he felt Ilil's hand

suddenly on his arm, tightening a warning grip. He alerted his Mag senses and at the same moment a group of four Tharn stepped from behind a shrubby copse scarcely thirty yards away.

These were no more beautiful than the pair Jarvis had bested yesterday in the dim swamplight. If anything, the bright light of day made them seem huger and more hideous. Seven feet tall, massively thewed beneath bulging blue hides, they rolled their great white eyes, grimaced with bulging features and shook glittering long swords aloft in gestures of threat and challenge.

THERE was no retreat back up the slope and to either side the steep hills enclosing the draw offered little foothold for climbing.

"Ho, Lulu!" bellowed the foremost of the giants between glistering tusks. "Surrender to the might of the Lugal Zag-ab-Shab of Kullab!"

"A military patrol," Ilil murmured. "It is thus they offer challenge."

She had already notched an arrow to the string of her bow, but he knew the Tharn would be upon them before she could loose a second arrow. Nor would they, he knew, have mercy upon her sex in a fight.

He said, "Return up the draw to the cover of those boulders.

Your arrows will do more good from there. But if things come to the worst, I can hold them while you run back and find another way to Gipar."

Her chin set stubbornly. "Perhaps you are right in the first part," she agreed, "but you forget I am a princess of Gipar. I can die fighting as well as any man!"

"Let us not argue the point!" he barked. "Go! The Tharn get ready to attack."

He drew his boomerang and held it ready. "Stay, Tharn!" he shouted. "Who steps forward first, dies! Go in peace and let us go our way unmolested!" TO P. 74

"That is impossible," Jarvis retorted. "No living thing is immortal."

"Then the Dingir are not living things," she came back stubbornly, "for they certainly are immortal. Those of the Bronze Men, as they are also called, who walk today the length and breadth of Dimgal walked also in the days of our fathers and in the days of our fathers' fathers and were here also in that long gone age when the true gods from whom the Lulu are descended also lived and ruled."

"You hate the Dingir and fear them," Jarvis pointed out. "Why?"

She trembled. "From their windowless city of Surandanish they come at intervals and walk

among us and examine the newborn. Some they mark—" She tore the cloak from her right shoulder, showing a small red mark in the shape of a twisting serpent. "—and then they return to their city in ways as mysterious as those in which they came—by flying through the air or sinking into the ground."

"This mark—what does it mean?" Jarvis asked.

"It is thus they mark some of us for their own. When we are grown, they come for us, and we must go with them." Her dark glance searched his face. "That is why I am here in Kullab, Jeff Jarvis. I fled when they came to take me!"

THE Bronze Men of Surandanish! Jarvis was pensive. It was of these that Eamus Brock had spoken briefly to him and said no more. He began to sense that the intellectual leader of the Mag race had known all this but had failed to tell him. It had been Brock's plan that he, Jarvis, seek and find Surandanish. What more in the leader's thoughts had gone unspoken?

Something of Ilil's despondent mood touched him and he placed a comforting arm around her shoulders. The touch electrified him and he hastily withdrew his arm. Their camaraderie, up to now, had been gay and carefree. He could not spoil it.

"Do not fear the Dingir any more," he said gruffly. "I stand between you and them, or any Tharn that may confront us!"

A ghost of a smile flickered on her soft, full lips and her dark eyes shone with gratitude and friendship. Did love lurk there, too, in that warm light? He bit his underlip, afraid to interpret further.

The river Idnal proved unapproachable except through a mist-filled, rankly overgrown swamp lush with tropical growth.

"The haunt of the lur," said Ilil, "which the Tharn hunt for its priceless scent, used in perfumes. There should be a lur-boat nearby, hidden by a hunter."

Indeed, investigation of a nearby clump of reeds disclosed the needed lur-boat, a coracle, woven of reeds and round as a basket. Jarvis took a pole from the bottom but his effort to propel the craft was ludicrous; it spun in circles. Then it stopped spinning and began to forge ahead. He looked around and grinned. Ilil had taken the other pole and was counteracting the vessel's tendency to spin while he propelled it.

The fetid air of the swamp was alive with insects and progress through this dismal world was slow. They had hardly pushed out of sight of land than Jarvis' alert ears picked up the

sound of splashing behind them. He probed quickly with his Mag senses.

"Two men follow us," he said crisply. "Push harder on that pole!"

"Tharn!" breathed Ilil. She pointed a dripping pole at their wake. "We have left a plain enough trail for them to follow." The tarn-black water behind them bubbled with gas-emission from the mucky bottom stirred by their poles, and bits of torn-up swamp grass littered the surface.

The mist parted behind them, revealing their pursuers in a coracle smaller than their own and poling furiously.

Raucous laughter from the leading Tharn answered him. The fellow took a step forward, and Jarvis feinted as if to throw his club. The Tharn ducked and straightened, jeering with laughter. The powerful muscles of Jarvis' arm and body responded instantly. The boomerang whirled from his hand, not toward the Tharn's head, but to where he knew it would be as the creature instinctively ducked. Years of practice forced by hunger had made Jarvis skilled in use of this weapon. He could give it the correct amount of spin to make it hurtle straight for any given number of yards before it flattened on its side to rise and return.

The Tharn's first step was his last. The hurtling boomerang flattened in its trajectory at the precise moment the monster ducked and swept with whistling velocity across the middle of the Tharn's face, the whirling blades shattering flesh, gristle and bone and nearly tearing the head from the body. The giant toppled, his weapons clattering on the rocks.

Now he could breathe a little, Jarvis thought, while the others considered this. But it seemed as nothing to the Tharn. Their way of life was death; they were still three to his one, for Ilil had retreated up the draw and was now hidden somewhere out of sight among the rocks. They roared with rage and advanced, running.

At once a killing rage seized the Earthman, a rage of excitement and blood lust. He raced to meet the charging enemy, bounding down the slope, gleaming axe blade arcing in his grip. The blade shot from his hand and cleaved the skull of the second Tharn, and the third dropped an instant later with Jarvis' knife buried to the hilt in the blue flesh of his throat.

Engaging swords with the last of the Tharn, Jarvis came to a shocking realization. This was no ignorant brute he fought but a swordsman of skill and intelligence. He had been misled by the brutish appearance of these fellows. At close quarters, they

fought coolly and with precision.

Giant though he was, the Tharn was a trifle clumsier than the Earthman and just a bit slower. But he made up for these faults in the sheer weight of his attack and the skill of his blade. But if the Tharn could not penetrate the cage of steel Jarvis wove about himself with his blade, neither could the Earthman lay steel to the perspiring flesh of his opponent. They fought in silence save for the stamping of feet and the ring of their blades. Dust stung Jarvis' nostrils. Trickling sweat half blinded him. He knew he was fighting for his life, and for Ilil's life, and he knew no discomfort or fatigue. He maneuvered the Tharn to keep the advantage of sun always on his own side.

As they fought grimly, the sun climbed the sky. The Tharn was visibly tiring. Sweat glistened on distended, blue-skinned muscles and his guard was dropping. Jarvis pressed home the advantage, pursuing every trick of swordsmanship he had ever learned. Suddenly the Tharn leaped backward half a score of feet and cast his weapon at Jarvis' feet.

"I yield me!" he roared. "By the Dingir, you are a fighting man, Giparian!"

Jarvis paused, blade held ready.

"Pick up your sword, Tharn. Would you die empty handed?"

"Better to die than live a Tharn," growled the other. "Kill me then and be done with it, for I have no stomach for further fight with such a swordsman!"

Jarvis dropped his point. "Are the Tharn then so hateful," he marvelled, "that they hate even themselves?"

"This Tharn hates himself and all other Tharn," retorted the brute, "for I am no Tharn, save on the outside. I have Giparian inwards, warrior, and I must warn you now to look to your woman for I think that while we fought, Skal has taken her!"

Jarvis whirled toward the rocks in which Ilil had hidden and called out, but there was no answer. He turned stormy face and lifted blade to the Tharn.

"What has happened to her? Tell me before I . . ."

"Spare me and I am your life-slave," retorted the Tharn. "Thork can do you no good dead. Alive, I may be able to return your woman."

Jarvis hesitated, then slowly dropped his point to the dust.

"Make good your boast," he said in tones of cold finality.

IV

JARVIS retrieved his weapons while Thork callously stripped the Tharn carcasses of weapons and leather trappings.

"These devils need the stuff no

more," he said with a grin, "and it will fetch a good price in town. We shall need money to pursue Skal—he has a good start on us."

"Can't we overtake him quickly?" Jarvis suggested suspiciously.

"Do you ride a dil as well as you fight?"

Jarvis shook his head. "What's a dil?"

Thork grunted. "I guessed right. You are no Giparian, though I mistook you for one at first. If you must ask what is a dil, you cannot hope even to ride one without practice, much less to overtake Skal, who has undoubtedly taken the swiftest of the mounts and now rides like the wind!"

He went on with his methodical robbing of the dead while Jarvis waited impatiently. He noticed that the Tharn took first from each of his erstwhile comrades a small leather pouch which he tucked into his own waistband. Aware of Jarvis' interest, Thork bared fangs between his tusks and chortled with humor.

"The dead possess nothing and need less, Jeff Jarvis. So frown not with disapproval. It is an evil night of the slul that does not rid someone of an enemy!"

With this Elorasponian version of "It is an ill wind that blows no good", Thork gathered up his spoil and led Jarvis to the

copse where the dil had been tethered. He made a noise of approval.

"Good! I have always reckoned Skal for a fool. He failed to loose the remaining dil when he rode off—and with a Giparian woman, eh? Else she could not have ridden the other mount and he had been forced to load his own double. That leaves us three—two to ride and one to carry the gear and later sell for profit!"

At sight of the dil, Jarvis stepped back, taking a firmer grip on his sword. The beasts were preposterous looking—half saurian, half caricature of a barnyard fowl. The dil balanced a pear-shaped body on a pair of six-foot, lizard-like hind legs. In front of the saddle were two pairs of skinny shoulders having four powerfully taloned but wizened arms. Its long, sinuous neck was surmounted by a tiny, duck-billed head armed with needle-sharp teeth. A bright red comb stood erect upon the dil's head, just behind the single bulbous, amber eye and between the pale green, writhing stalks bearing knob-like olfactory organs. Down the neck and spine coursed a spate of iridescent feathers, continuing to the terminous of the long, fleshy tail, ending there in a fan of many hues. Aside from this the dil was naked, its flanks and thighs mailed with scales of a dull blue or olive green color,

blending into livid yellow on the throat, belly and lower thighs; its shanks were purple, the talons of both its locomotor extremities and its arms being scarlet.

Jarvis found the most difficult part of riding the beast was approaching it, for it stank with a musty, cloying fragrance like a well-decayed barnyard heap. In spite of determination and impatience to be on the trail of the thief who had stolen the woman he loved, he found it almost impossible to get the immediate hang of dil riding.

To be mounted, the dil must squat on its heels at a word of command which Thork taught Jarvis to pronounce. Once he had straddled the saddle, Thork uttered another word, "hu!", and the dil rose to the full height of its legs in a bone-jostling lurch that all but dismounted the Earthman.

The creature was restrained and guided by means of reins tied to eye-bolts surgically planted in the upper shoulder-blades. A mere tug, as on the bit of a horse, evoked sufficient pain to make the dil tractable.

At a slow pace, the dil hopped along almost erect; the faster it went, the more it leaned forward. At a top speed of around forty miles an hour, its body was horizontal, progressing in leaps and bounds, its fanned tail sweeping out behind, guiding it.

BY evening, Jarvis was sore in every muscle and bone of his body, but he could ride and they were twenty miles on their way. Jarvis killed a six-legged, deer-like creature with his boomerang and the Tharn dressed it and broiled steaks for their supper. As they ate, Jarvis saw Thork take from his trappings one of the bags he had lifted from the fallen Tharn and sprinkle from it a bluish powder upon his meat.

"Is that salt?" he asked. "Pass it here."

The Tharn hastily retied the bag and thrust it back into his waistband.

"You want none of this, Earthman! It is not salt."

"What is it, if not salt?"

"It is called tharn. Beyond that, I know not what it is. But it is the essence of life to the Tharn. If it is true, as you tell me, that you come from another world, you would not know what tharn is, nor what it is to be a Tharn. To ask tharn of a Tharn is the most terrible of insults, meriting instant death. To be granted tharn by a Tharn is the greatest favor he can render you." There was a note of bitterness in Thork's rumbling voice.

"Though I seem a Tharn, Jarvis, in my soul I am still a Giparian, as I was in my youth and young manhood. My physical appearance was not greatly different from yours. The fame of

Amush was great in those days, for I was a mighty warrior and ishak of Tukulta, the City of Weapons, which is in the land of Gipar. My knee bent only to the Lugal Elmam of Gipar. Hunting one day in the mountains with some companions, I was set upon by a band of marauding Tharn. My companions were killed and I was taken in slavery to the Tharn city called Drahubba and cast down before the Lugal Zagab-Shab of Kullab. Skal is taking your woman to him now, for such is the custom of Tharn-land. All loot must be taken first to the Lugal for him to take as his own for a payment of money, or to return to the warrior."

"What will happen to Ilil?" Jarvis put in quickly. "Will she be harmed?"

Thork shook his tusked head. "Not harmed, Jeff Jarvis. Nor molested in any way before the Day of Sharing, which comes around each month. If the Lugal wants her, he will pay Skal a small amount of money and keep her. If he wants her not, he will return her to Skal to do with as he sees fit—to keep or to sell."

"That cannot happen to the princess of Gipar!" Jarvis cried.

"Princess of Gipar!" Thork smote his forehead. "Ilil! I should have known as you spoke the name. Nay, it shall not happen to her, Earthman! Tharn though I have become, my alle-

giance is still to Gipar and my Lugal." He glanced up at the night sky, studying the twin moons.

"The Day of Sharing is the Day of the Full Moon, which precedes the Night of the Slul. We have seven days to avert a tragedy—for the Lugal of the Tharn will know the maid at once and use her to force drastic things upon Gipar! And Skal—" He spat venomously between his tusks. "—will be richly rewarded for his rotten trick!"

"We have eaten and rested," Jarvis said. "Let us go now."

Thork shook his head. "The maid is safe another seven days. You are in no condition to ride further tonight, and our mounts need rest as much as we. Morning will be soon enough. Let me finish telling you about myself and you will see that I am as earnest about the safety of the princess Ilil as you.

"Knowing my reputation and aware of my prowess as a warrior, the Lugal chose to demean me. He made me a palace slave. But I was wise—I thought. I kept my eyes open. One day I discovered where the Lugal stored the tharn-drug he doles out periodically to his people. You see, Jarvis, the Tharn are not born this appearance, a condition brought on by partaking of the tharn-drug. Male children, upon reaching the age of ten, are ex-

amined by their elders. Those they reject become household slaves. Those they choose are given tharn and develop this hideous shape. Even some captives, taken in battle, are honored by being offered tharn. Some refuse it, some accept it. I was not given that opportunity."

"Why in the world," Jarvis asked, "would they want voluntarily to—to assume the Tharn shape?"

"As a race, the Tharn are naturally bloodthirsty, cruel and licentious. Taking the tharn-drug enhances this quality. A fully developed Tharn takes not only pleasure but intense delight in killing." He shook his head. "For any but the congenitally depraved, it is a nightmare of a life to live! Their enjoyment of the vices and horrors they practice is trebled and quadrupled. That is why they continually maraud the surrounding lands—to quench their thirst for blood and procure fresh women on whom to slake their lust.

WITH me, I desired the Tharn body for purposes of disguise. In this shape, I could walk out of the palace and back to Gipar without suspicion, or so I thought. A short time of abstinence from the tharn-drug and I should resume my natural form—this I thought also. How cruelly I was deceived! I stole tharn

and overnight became as you see me now. I also had to steal trappings to fit my huger form—and therein I was trapped, for the owner recognized his gear as I was leaving the palace and I had to flee back to my place of concealment, where I had taken the drug.

"The Lugal sent a nishak to arrest me, and him I slew with my bare hands, taking his weapon. Then he sent seasoned warriors and I slew them with the nishak's sword. In the end, because of my bravery, my crime was forgiven, and I was commissioned to the army, enhancing, I still thought, my opportunity to escape.

"On my first day in the barracks, tharn was withheld from my food, and I was nauseated. On the second day of abstinence, I fell terribly ill. I thought I should die! Burning agony quivered my every nerve. Then my commanding officer visited me where I huddled in my sleeping robes. 'You have gone two days, Thork, without tharn,' he said. 'One more day without tharn and you die in frightful agony. Remember this lesson—heed it well. You are Tharn forever. Only in Kullab can you get tharn. Without it, you are dead in three days!'"

Thork shrugged massive, blue shoulders. "For ten long years I have been a Tharn," he finished

bitterly. "I shall be such until I die."

Nanna, the moon, shone bleakly upon the land, and around him circled ceaselessly Munus, the wife. Thork could tell Jarvis nothing about this phenomenon except that it served indeed as a celestial clock by which the watches of the night were told.

After they had left the margin of the hills and recrossed the Idnal, the way to Drahubba led through broad stretches of tilled fields, interspersed with farmsteads whose curiously domed buildings of stone piqued Jarvis' interest. They were built thus for protection from the slul, Thork said, but Jarvis could not draw him out further on the subject.

There were many of the elder cities of the Mighty along their route, each populated to overflowing with tusked Tharn, though nowhere did he see either women or children, the Tharn keeping them in seclusion for protection from the insensate passions of their fellows.

Unlike the cities Jarvis had seen on the northern continent, these were not in shards and ruins. Graceful towers spired into the sky, beautifully variegated in hue in the light of day and by night glowing with a light of their own, wondrously soft and lovely to see.

Most of the cities Thork insisted upon by-passing. They

were cities at war, for the Tharn warred interminably, if not with their neighbors, then with each other. Alliances were made or broken at the whim of the individual ishaks, or city rulers. A city boasting today of a powerful ally might find itself invaded tomorrow by that ally turned enemy. War fed the Tharn love of butchery and filled the victorious ishaks' coffers. The world of Eloraspon was not after all so different from the Earth he had known, Jarvis thought.

AS they came at last upon the approaches to the city of Drahubba, Jarvis sensed its soul-song deep in his being and knew that its name was Arolaneti in the language of the Mighty—Place of the Mountains' Beginning. Well named it was, for much of the city was built upon the foothills of a great mountain range in the snowy heights of which the Idnal was born. The remainder spilled out upon the alluvial plain. It was the largest of the ancient cities Jarvis had yet seen.

The claws of their dil rattled upon the hard-packed roadway which ran between fields heavy with grain. Jarvis was by now an accomplished rider and he could even handle the lance couched at his saddle bow as well as Thork. But he had no use for it as long as the Tharn rode by his side, for

Thork had allayed suspicion whenever it arose by declaring Jarvis his life-slave, a status which permitted him to bear arms for the protection of his master. This reversed the actual circumstances, but it was the only way they could safely travel in Kullab.

A score of mounted Tharn suddenly thundered around a curve ahead and drew rein abreast of them, calling out to halt.

Their leader, a hulking brute who loomed large even in the saddle of his dil, scowled at Jarvis' companion.

"Are you Thork, bejak in the Lugal's army?"

"I am," Thork replied.

"We had word you traveled this way. Is this Giparian your captive?"

"My life-slave. He fought honorably and well before yielding and I spared him."

"Why do you allow him to be armed?"

"A life-slave has that right, for the protection of his master."

The commander sneered. "Not where I command! Disarm him! Pass his weapons to the erlak!"

It was difficult for Jarvis to read any but the grossest passions on the disfigured visage of a Tharn, but he thought now that he saw startlement in Thork's look and hesitation in his response. He nodded finally to Jarvis and the Earthman reluctant-

ly passed his weapons to the erlak sidling up on his dil. It would have been folly to resist.

"Now your own!" barked the commander to Thork.

"By the Dingir . . ." Thork began.

At once, twenty blades rattled from their scabbards and a score of scowling visages augmented the command. Thork, too, shrugged and disarmed himself.

"May I ask why you are doing this?" he asked mildly.

The commander snarled. "A coward has no right to ask anything. You will hear what you already know from your accuser—and your fate from the Lugal!"

V

THE cell Jarvis shared with Thork was dirty and stank of generations of previous occupants. The walls and ceiling shone with the same, pellucid glare that characterized the exteriors of the buildings the Mighty had built. Was this to be the end of his search for Surandanih? Was there no more hope to save the princess Ilil? Jarvis paced the confines of their cell impatiently while Thork squatted impassively on the floor, leaning against the wall, his eyes fixed in a morbid stare.

"Help me think!" Jarvis railed at him. "Show courage, Thork!"

Thork grunted hollowly. "So you, too, think me a coward!"

"Come off it! You're no coward!"

"It was said by the commander of the Lugal's guard."

"Somebody made a mistake. Or you have been falsely accused."

"None would do such a thing . . ." Thork paused. ". . . except Skal!"

He jumped to his feet, roaring between his tusks. "That rotten slul! Of course he did! I shall kill him!"

Jarvis restrained him. "Let's get out of here first; then you can do as you please. What do you know of this prison?"

"Enough to know the hopelessness of escape. The old ones built well. Cold steel cannot even scratch these walls. The door is solid dingan wood, three fingers thick—three of mine, not yours. Moreover, we are in the bottom-most pits of the building many levels below the street."

"Probably the ground floor when the city was built," Jarvis noted. "A million years have filled the streets half way up the flanks of the towers."

"That is so, Jeff Jarvis. I was a guard here once myself, and I know there is no way out except by the way we entered, through corridors swarming with the Lugal's warriors. The prisoners are fed but once a day. Remember the cells we passed on our way down? You heard the raving of

the poor maniacs confined in them? They have been there for years, forgotten by everybody save the jailers."

Jarvis sat on the floor, slumping against the wall. The situation required thought, it was obvious. They had been imprisoned in the royal barracks, that much he knew, a high tower among many high towers in the heart of Drahubba. He tried attacking their predicament from the standpoint of its advantages. He was closer to Surandanish than he had been upon meeting Thork. There was something to be said for that. And Ilil was here in this very city, probably in the Lugal's palace, Thork had assured him. When he had passed his weapons to the erlak of the Lugal's guard, he had not given up his throwing knife, which nestled still at the nape of his neck, hidden under his leather shirt.

Among the disadvantages of their captivity, he had noted that the walls of their cell were impervious to his Mag senses. He could probe through the door of dingan wood, even receive a few faint perceptions from the other cells along the glowing corridor. But the psychic sensation he perceived of those poor, damned souls unnerved him. There *must* be a way out of here!

How about the Mighty of old—the builders of these ancient towers? He saw them as a gentle,

human folk, almost heard the whispering tread of their sandaled feet. The Mighty had been a powerful, civilized race on Eloraspon when the dinosaurs had roamed the swamps of Earth. Supermen they, the first of Magnanthropus, with fully developed mental powers. He, Jarvis, was still but a stumbling infant in that mutant realm. Still, they had been human and they had respected privacy . . . that was certain, for they had made the walls of their chambers impervious to probing minds. For some reason, Jarvis' mind paused in its reflection and clung to this point. Had it a bearing?

"Thork! I think I've got it!"

The giant Tharn rumbled disconsolately. "We'll both get it in a few hours when we are taken before the Lugal!"

JARVIS wriggled closer to his companion. "Listen! Something about these buildings has been puzzling me ever since I saw the first one. The windows and doors—they are badly designed and badly placed. Many of them are only roughly cut! Would a people that could build such towers as these make such lousy doors and windows?"

Thork shrugged. "A window is to see out of and a door is to walk through. Maybe they were just more careful where the walls are than where they aren't."

Jarvis' was mentally reviewing his stay in the City of Brock, which had been built by modern Magnanthropus in the mountains of the northern continent. There had been neither doors nor windows in those fabulous structures. The Mag environment created within that city had been deadly to ordinary men, but the breath of life to Magnanthropus. Thousands had lived there, before the threat of solar eruption and they had gone in and out of the doorless buildings and looked through non-existent windows.

He leaped to his feet, rubbing his palms together. He began to feel over the walls, searching for the key of exit. Whoever had pierced openings in this almost impenetrable substance had done so *after* the Mighty had left Elo-raspon forever. The way of the Mighty must still exist!

After a fruitless interval, Jarvis sat down wearily and dozed with his back against the wall. The door banging startled him awake. Thork was sitting up, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"They have brought us food and water," he growled. "Take your share."

Jarvis eyed the bowl of unsavory food askance.

"Don't worry," the Tharn reassured him. "It's probably rotten, but it has no tharn in it. They would not so honor you, and I have my own."

The food was awful but Jarvis choked it down. His body craved nourishment.

"Skal was once an ishak," Thork related while they ate. "He quarreled with a neighboring ishak and got beaten in the ensuing war. He abandoned his troops to be butchered by the enemy and fled to Drahubba for the protection of the Lugal. Considering Skal's noble rank, the Lugal forgave him his cowardice and conferred upon him rank in the army. The military hated and distrusted him, knowing him to be a coward. That is why he was left to watch the dil when we others went out to engage you. But even with all this against him, whom do you think the Lugal will believe—a ranking noble of his own army, or an erstwhile Giparian slave who stole tharn?"

"How much time do you think we have left?" Jarvis asked.

Thork ticked a tusk with a fingernail. "It is just after sunrise in the world above. The Sharing and Judging begin at midday. I should say we have about half a turn of Munus about Nanna."

About six hours. And it might be the last six hours of both their lives.

"How long does it take to do the Sharing and Judging?"

"Most of the afternoon. It is all figured out beforehand by the nishaks—they are court officials."

Rewards and punishments are dispensed one after the other to the Tharn who line up and pass before the Lugal's throne. Rewards are given in the form of chits, which the warriors cannot collect on before tomorrow."

Jarvis prowled the cell some more, searching for the elusive key. It was like being a modern Ali Baba seeking an "Open Sesame!". Even as the thought crossed his mind, the wall in front of him was no longer solid . . . more like a curtain of smoke. He could see dimly into the next cell and sense clearly with his Mag perception. That was it! It wasn't the words—it was the *will*. All he had to do was *will* the wall to open! He stepped through, feeling no resistance, and turned, feeling the wall with his palms. It was as hard and opaque as before.

"*Madre de dios!*" exclaimed a voice behind him. "*Que pasa?*"

Jarvis whirled. The prisoner slumped against the opposite wall was obviously an Earthman. His Earth-made boots and trousers were relatively new, but the beard upon his chin spelled weeks of neglect.

"You are from Earth!" The meeting was as startling as it was totally unexpected. "What are you doing here?"

"Aha! The angels speak English!" The prisoner spoke with a barely perceptible accent. "In a

land of devils, where the devils speak gibberish, it is to be expected. Do you come to take me to abide with you among the saints, *senor angel?*"

"No angel," said Jarvis tersely, "but an Earthman like yourself. Did you cross over at the time of the earthquakes or before?"

"*Por dios!*" muttered the prisoner. "No angel but a gringo! How do you like that, Jesus, Francisco de Valdez? It is because you spent so much time in the United States yourself you are more American than Peruvian." He stirred, shooting a troubled glance at Jarvis. "I had accustomed myself to the fact of being dead. You now raise doubts, *senor*. Do I live, or is this indeed Purgatory and Americans pass this way also?"

"Neither of us is dead . . . yet,"

"Then perhaps I shall some day again see my father's ranch in Peru," said Valdez.

Jarvis shook his head. "Earth is destroyed," he said brutally.

VALDEZ struggled to a sitting position. "Incomprehensible, *senor!* Did the earthquakes come again? I have been here a full month that I know of and have had no news . . ."

"Three years ago . . ." Jarvis began. "Valdez? Is that your name? What do you mean—a month that you know of?"

"A month ago," said Valdez, getting up, "I was rounding up horses on my father's ranch in Peru. My horse stumbled and I flew over his head. When I came to my senses, there was no Peru, no ranch, no horses. Just desert and blazing sun and I thought myself dead and in Hell! I was sure of it when blue devils came riding up on monsters, made me prisoner and brought me here to rot. If Earth is destroyed this time, as you say, where can this place be?"

Jarvis' brain was in a whirl. Could Valdez be right, or was he deranged? Quickly he explained his own presence, referring to the earthquakes three years ago when Eloraspon and Earth had merged through hyperspace and he and others had escaped death by crossing over to Eloraspon.

"Oh, yes," Valdez agreed. "It was bad then, Many parts of the Earth were badly damaged. But nothing was ever said about another world, or anything such as you say. It was just earthquakes, the experts said. Something to do with an eruption on the sun that quickly quieted itself."

"Sometimes," Jarvis said, "there are holes in hyperspace, through which it is possible to pass through, from one world to the other. If you could lead me back to the place where you entered Eloraspon, many other Earthmen, trapped now on a con-

tinental north of here, could return to Earth. Can you do it?"

Valdez shook his head. "Not even supposing I were out of here. It was a barren plain, where all parts look the same."

"Just lead me to the general area," Jarvis put in. "I could find the hole."

"I was carried face down, slung over the saddle of one of my captors, for many days," Valdez grimaced. "I would not know one direction from another."

Jarvis was disappointed, but hope was far from extinguished. Earth still lived! It was more imperative than ever now that he reach Surandanish! It was there Eamus Brock had found the secret of transporting himself at will between the worlds. He paused in his thoughts. Eamus Brock had made them all believe that Earth was destroyed. Had he really believed that himself . . . or had he had some reason, still hidden, for making them believe so? The answer was . . . Surandanish!

It was obvious now that Eloraspon had merged only briefly and incompletely with Earth. In theory, the atoms of Eloraspon, materializing in Earth space-time, had occupied the interatomic spaces of the Earth-body. Since Eloraspon was slightly larger than Earth, the terrestrial planet would have been completely enclosed within the crust of

Eloraspon, had the trans-spatial merging been complete. As it was, the earthquakes accompanying the phenomenon had provided a seeming cause for the destruction that had ensued in those places where merging had been complete. The people of Earth were still ignorant of what had really happened.

Jarvis returned to his own cell with Valdez, explaining to a surprised Thork what had happened. Valdez plucked at his sleeve.

"This is one of those blue devils! Can you trust him?"

Jarvis reassured him. "He is as much a prisoner as you and I. And he is my friend." He said to Thork. "Now that we can leave this place as we please, we can think about getting out of here. There is nothing but the corridor in front and cells on either side. What is behind the rear wall?"

Thork shrugged. "Stone. The old ones built around a central column of stone to give the building strength—so say the Tharn."

"Was a door ever cut anywhere in this wall?"

"Who would think of it? The building might fall!"

Jarvis did not believe the Tharn knew anything about it. The theory was evidence, however, that there could be anything but Tharn on the other side.

He opened the wall and probed through with his Mag senses. Not stone, but space lay on the other

side. Lighted space, and circular balconies that staged both upward and downward inside a cylinder at least a hundred feet across. He beckoned Valdez and had to push Thork through the wall, then followed quickly as keys rattled at the door of dingan wood, three fingers thick.

VI

THAT great shaft piercing the heart of the building was an awesome thing to see, and no man or Tharn had ever dreamed that such a thing existed. A thousand feet above them, it was topped by the roof of the building. An unguessable distance below, its very depths were hidden in a shimmer of golden light, and the stages, connected by ramps at intervals, went up and down in diminishing rings of uncountable number.

Above, thought Jarvis, the rooms and apartments swarmed with Tharn warriors. They had been in what Thork described as the bottom-most pits of the building. Descent might bring them to a way out unknown to the Tharn. He set off at a rapid trot down the nearest ramp, followed by Thork and Valdez.

A dozen levels down, the smooth, shimmering walls of the cylinder were broken by arched openings giving onto huge, echoing rooms filled with monumental

objects that might have been machines, stilled now in the silence of multimillenia. One of the chambers they traversed gave onto another, larger than any and circular, ringed with arched openings. What seemed to be a map of the city hung suspended from the ceiling, without supports, and it glowed with light of its own, delineating every street and causeway of Arolaneti, as that mighty workshop of the old ones had been when dinosaurs teemed the Earth.

"Can you locate the Lugal's palace from that?" Jarvis asked Thork.

The Tharn frowned. "It would seem as if it were Drahubba, all right, Jeff Jarvis. There is a red light at one of the places, and I think that is where we are now. If so, the palace should be . . . there . . ." Thork pointed.

Jarvis sharpened his Mag senses on the map, scanning the area. How to reach it? Into his mind crept the answer, softly, innocuously, as if he had known it always.

He swung off into one of the arched openings and found himself in a lighted tunnel. Small cars strewed the way, relics of a million years gone, a comment on the metallurgy of the ancients that they had not long since dissolved into mineral dust. But Jarvis had no time to give them so much as a second glance.

"Thork! You're familiar with the palace. Where does the Lugal keep weapons?"

"There is an armory at what is now the ground level," said the Tharn.

A few minutes rapid walking brought them to the central cylinder of the palace. From there it was a dogged climb, stage to stage, Jarvis "opening" wall after wall, probing for what he sought. He grunted at last with satisfaction.

"Weapons," he said, gesturing "but there is an armed Tharn on duty."

"Let me get them!" urged Valdez. "I ache to get at one of those blue devils!"

Jarvis shook his head and conferred swiftly with Thork. He turned to Valdez.

He said, "By now, almost everyone is gathered in the Lugal's main audience room for the Sharing and Judging. But I can't risk you or I being seen. Thork will get what we need."

He turned back to the wall, reaching for the nape of his neck. Jarvis' knife glinted silently and there was a dull thud from beyond the opened wall. Jarvis jerked a thumb at Thork, who darted through and a moment later shot the bolt on the heavy door. Jarvis and Valdez followed.

Jarvis' lean face lighted with pleasure as he discerned his own weapons hanging on the end of a

cabinet. Adjusting sword and axe to his hips, he thrust the boomerang through his waistband. Valdez was hefting a Tharn sword with a light dancing in his eyes.

"Can you handle that thing?" Jarvis asked.

"I led my college fencing team for four years, Jeff Jarvis! I can handle it well enough."

THORK dumped the body of the attendant in a large, empty chest and the trio returned to the inner stage. A few levels above, Jarvis again opened the wall, sensed for danger, then motioned the others to follow him.

The apartment was sumptuously furnished, rich with hangings and deep-piled rugs. There was a sound, like a slight gasp, and Jarvis whirled. A woman stood in the doorway, young, beautiful with the exotic, dark-eyed beauty of Elorasponian women, and dressed in gauzy trousers and a breast-length jacket of diaphanous material that revealed her every charm. She placed a finger to her lips and cautiously closed the door behind her, locking it.

"Why have you come here?" she whispered. "You cannot hope to escape! Guards throng every corridor."

"Is she friendly?" Valdez asked with more than modest interest.



Jarvis nodded, and to the girl, "Do you know who we are?"

"You must be Jarvis," she muttered. "My lady, the princess of Gipar, told me about you and described you well. Your companions are Thork, called a coward by Skal, and a mad Giparian who escaped this morning from his cell when you did." She looked at Valdez carefully. "Though I think him no Giparian, but an other-world man like yourself." She smiled. "The Tharn think him mad because he speaks only gibberish instead of the tongue common to all Eloraspon."

"I thought I heard the guard entering as we left our cell," Jarvis said. "I suppose the alarm has been sounded?"

"Indeed, Jeff Jarvis. Not a quarter of a twelfth of a turn of Munus about Nanna ago, the Lugal learned of your escape. Mounted warriors are scouring the city. They would not dream you would come here—from whence no escape is possible!"

Jarvis ignored her assertion. "Where is the princess of Gipar?"

"She was here—in this very chamber. Now she is in the great audience hall, awaiting her turn of Sharing."

Jarvis was aware that Thork nudged him. In an oddly distorted whisper, the Tharn muttered, "Ask the maid her name!"

"I am Rani, daughter of

Amush, ishak of Tukulta," she said proudly.

Thork groaned deep in his blue-skinned chest. "What do you here, maid of Tukulta?"

"A dealer in slaves took me from my father's garden, promising to reunite me with him. Instead he sold me to the Tharn. That is why I am here."

Thork muttered again in Jarvis' ear. "Say not that I am her father, but ask her of her mother."

"The Lady Kriah, is well," Rani replied to Jarvis' question. "She awaits still the return of my father, who was taken ten years ago by the Tharn. But I have sought him here in vain. None remember him."

"I remember him," Thork said. The girl's face lighted, but the Tharn quenched her joy. "He is dead," he said brutally. "I saw him die with my own eyes."

"You knew him, Tharn?"

"As well as I know myself." Thork turned his ugly face aside. "He died saving my life. Your father was a brave man. Remember that, girl."

Jarvis' stood quietly to one side, noting the tears in the great eyes of Thork. His heart wrenched with feeling for the Tharn.

He said to the maid, "We cannot stand here forever. You must come with us. We shall return you to Tukulta."

He saw Thork's look of gratitude and added, kindly, "Senor Valdez will be your guardian."

"But how shall we leave here?" she protested. "Armed warriors are everywhere!"

"Come." Jarvis took her arm and led her shrinking through the wall to the stage in the central cylinder, followed by Thork and the Peruvian. "You see," he smiled, "it is simple. Just as easily, we shall bear you off to Tulkulta, but first we must rescue the princess Ilil from the Lugal of Kullab."

MMOMENTS later, the girl and Valdez safely hidden in a lavish but deserted apartment off the great audience chamber, Jarvis and Thork joined the press of spectators before the throne of the Lugal Zag-ab-Shab. The hall thronged both with Tharn and male Giparian slaves and Jarvis depended on the concentration of attention holding the crowd to pass unnoticed, even though he went armed.

The Lugal Zag-ab-Shab, the most enormous and ugliest Tharn Jarvis had yet seen, sat, enthroned upon a dais at the far end of the hall, surrounded by rich hangings and gold emblems of royalty studded with jewels, a horde of nishaks and nobles, and the royal guard, standing ten deep in solid ranks in front of the dais. At the Lugal's left and far

from him, in the corner of the chamber, the captives stood upon a high platform, raised up where all could see them.

Jarvis' heart leaped. Foremost among the captives stood Ilil, clad in the revealing female attire common to Eloraspon and the breath stopped in his throat at the beauty of her. How much her warrior's garb had hidden from him!

Having worked his way to the platform, Jarvis lurked just below its level. Somewhere in the crowd, Thork had pushed his way to the front, to the area of the Lugal's throne. They had timed their action to coincide with the rewarding of Skal for the capture of the princess Ilil.

Only half visible to Jarvis, for the huge Tharn obstructed his view, the Lugal Zag-ab-Shab overlooked his audience from a throne on a level with the heads of the tallest. From his heavily muscled shoulders, green robes flowed over the golden throne studded with jewels. He towered in his seat like an obscene statue, huger, fatter and uglier than all his subjects. His bloated features were frozen in a grimace of boredom. The long, ivory tusks projecting from under the coarsely moustached upper lip made him look so much like a walrus that Jarvis almost snickered. The Lugal's white, saucer-like eyes scarcely blinked.

At his right, a seneschal in scarlet robe read off the names of warriors at a rapid clip. These passed singly before the Lugal, saluting smartly and receiving from the nishak on the Lugal's left their chits of entitlement. This each man pressed to his lips, bowing to his ruler, then turned and left the dais. Skal, whom Thork had pointed out to Jarvis, was approaching closer and closer to the head of the line of warriors awaiting their turn. Though Jarvis could not see Thork, he sensed him in the throng and knew that the giant Tharn was tensed and ready for action.

Ilil was not aware of Jarvis' presence, and he worked subtly upon her Mag receptiveness to let her know he was there. He could not be sure she had wholly received his message, but he had no time for further effort.

"The bejak Skal!" rang out the voice of the seneschal. "For capturing the princess of Gipar, Ilil, one full *na* of purest gold, straight from the refinery of Drahubba!"

A cheer went up as Skal stepped forward and received his chit of entitlement. And that was Thork's moment to act.

"Liar!" he roared. "Thief! I, Thork, contest Skal's right to the prize! It was I who fought for her while that coward stole her and fled!"

Dead and utter silence reigned.

Thork jostled his way up the line of warriors to the Lugal's throne.

Skal shrieked aloud. "Seize that fugitive! Arrest him!"

"The first to lay a hand upon Thork," bellowed the giant Tharn, "shall feel the edge of Thork's blade!" He drew his sword and held it threateningly. "O Lugal!" he cried. "I claim the right of a Tharn—to put this coward's accusations to the test of steel!"

The Lugal leaned forward interestedly in his throne, motioning his guard to stay their weapons.

"By the Dinigir, it really is Thork!" he boomed. "And you interest me. The Tharn admire audacity and you display it here in full measure." He turned to the fuming Skal. "Now which of you is the more audacious, Skal? Would you prove your accusation?"

"The stealer of tharn impugns my courage," Skal returned, outraged. "I am a noble Tharn, he but a thief and a liar!"

"I would know," said the Lugal, "which fought the Giparian company and which fled the field of combat. The proof seems to favor Skal, who brought back the prize!"

"And he says so, Skal lies between his tusks!" retorted Thork contemptuously. "You know me, O Lugal. You gave me my name for my courage. Only one man ac-

accompanied the princess, not a Giparian, but a foreigner to Eloraspon. He fought like one of the Dingir, slaying Klor, Skloos and Bojar in the twinkling of an eye before engaging me with his sword. We fought long, while the sun climbed the sky, and in that time miserable Skal stole the prize and ran!"

THE Lugal rose heavily to his feet, turning toward Jarvis.

"Is it true as he speaks, maid of Gipar?"

"Why ask her?" yelled Skal. "Out of hatred of me, she would lie!"

"Men of Gipar," boomed the Lugal, "are brave warriors and truthful men. Their women cannot be less. Least of all, their princess. Speak, maid!"

Ilil's pure voice rang out clearly. "He speaks truth!"

The Lugal sat down with a frown. "You should have approached me privately, Thork—"

He was interrupted by a squeal of rage from Skal, whose blade whistled in a cowardly blow that would have been fatal to Thork had not the Tharn anticipated just such a tactic. He leaped back, the tip of the glittering blade grazing his trappings, then his own weapon flashed and Skal wailed, blood flowing from his cheek, glistening crimson on his tusk.

Again Thork lifted his weapon.

Skal squeaked with hate mingled with fear and ran behind the Lugal's throne, the giant Thork hot on his heels. The audience hall was transformed into bedlam; the high ceiling rang with cheers and shouts of approval. Here was blood, and even the Lugal looked as if he enjoyed the sight of it. Nishaks and nobles scattered, clearing the dais.

Rounding the throne on a dead run, Skal, as a cornered rat suddenly turns and bares its fangs, skidded to a halt and faced his enemy with lifted blade. But he moved not quickly enough. Thork's blade flashed in a glittering arc, cleaving the scoundrel from shoulder to navel, so that Skal fell down in parted halves at the Lugal's feet. His blood gushed forth in a crimson flood, spoiling the precious carpet covering the dais.

With every glance riveted in the ecstasy of attention on the gory scene, it was the moment for Jarvis to act. He sprang at once to the captive-laden platform and lifted the princess Ilil into his arms.

A shout rang out from across the audience chamber charged with such a burden of authority that Jarvis instinctively froze in his tracks.

"Stay, Jeff Jarvis!"

Ilil moaned, burying her face against Jarvis' chest, her voice muffled.

"Too late, my love! *The Dingir have come!*"

VII

JARVIS' heart was singing, even as he stood immobile, holding Ilil in his arms. She had called him "my love"! From his elevated position, he saw the Dingir plainly, but he was not afraid.

There were three of them and they stood framed in the arched opening through which they had entered. They were three giant men, naked except for leather trappings, with hides of golden bronze.

Jarvis boomed a derisive meeting across the audience hall.

"I know you, Bronze Men of Surandanish! It is well that you know me, as you once knew Eamus Brock. I am like him, a Child of the Mighty, and I fear you not!"

The leader of the Dingir turned to the Lugal Zag-ab-Shab.

"Where the Dingir tread, order prevails. Clear out this mob!"

The order was scarcely necessary, for already the packed assemblage was thinning as those on the outskirts streamed out of the hall. Glad of the chance to get out themselves, the royal guard pressed upon the remainder, thrusting with the butts of spears and smacking with the flats of their blades. Terror at

their heels, the crowd vanished like moisture sucked up by the sun.

The Dingir returned his attention to Jarvis.

"Now you see who rules here, Jeff Jarvis! You know what we know—that the maid too is a Child of the Mighty. Bring her and come with us."

Jarvis set Ilil upon her feet, jumped to the floor below and took her down by his side. Signing her to stay where she was, he stalked toward the Dingir.

"What I know of you, Dingir, I know by hearsay. I do not like what I have heard. I do not like what I see. You can not intimidate the Mighty!"

The Dingir were armed all three with long swords. Other things hung also at their belts, unfamiliar things which Jarvis guessed were other weapons. The leader's hand reached for one of these. Quick as light, Jarvis' axe leaped into his hand, thence hurtled with a brilliant flash the space between them. The Dingir slammed to the floor, his skull split open. Jarvis retrieved the axe so swiftly it spun through the air and slammed into his hand like the Hammer of Thor.

The other two Bronze Men stooped and picked up their leader.

"You will have cause to regret this, Jeff Jarvis," said one accusingly. He turned to the Lugal.

"Let your guard take this man and this woman. Do not harm them. They are under protection of the Dingir. We shall be back!"

They carried their burden across the opposite corridor, to the wall bounding the central cylinder. The nearest to the wall drew a wand-like object from his belt, touched the wall with its tip, and they carried their burden through before the eyes of the Lugal and his nobles. Jarvis rushed to follow, but in the next moment he was surrounded by sword points. Elsewhere he heard the clashing of blades, strong oaths in the coarse voice of Thork and the ringing shout of Valdez, who had stormed out of hiding at the first show of force.

Slashing desperately, Jarvis fought his way to his friends and they stood together, ringed with steel, blade clanging upon blade in a furious effort to carve a pathway to freedom. But for every Tharn that fell, two more took his place. The Peruvian plied a good blade and Jarvis shot Valdez a glance of approval as he saw him shake an incautious Tharn from its bloody tip.

Such an unequal battle could not hope for success. All three were soon disarmed, dragged to the Lugal and cast down at the foot of the throne, where the leader of the Tharn stared down at them with great, baleful eyes.

"You who call yourself Jarvis,"

he growled, "have taught me something. I have seen you face the Dingir and defeat them. No longer do I fear them myself. I, Zag-ab-Shab, assert my rulership! You three shall be food for the slul—the maid I take for myself!" To his guard, "Take them to the tower!"

JARVIS felt the heavy hands of warriors. He was yanked to his feet and prodded with stinging sword tips toward the exit. He looked back over his shoulder. Thork and Valdez staggered under the same ignominious treatment, but it was not for them he had eyes. He saw the princess of Gipar, the great Lugal of the Tharn at her side, towering over her. Then Zag-ab-Shab picked her up as if she were thistledown and strode with her through the drapes at the back of the dais.

Then the Lugal's warriors crowded in behind and Jarvis was pushed, shoved and dragged up ramp after ramp until it seemed that the painful ascent would never end. At the topmost floor, a Tharn climbed a ladder and opened a trap door in the ceiling. The prisoners were lifted and thrust through and the trap door slammed shut.

Jarvis got up from where he had sprawled, wincing from bruises. Overhead was the sky of Eloraspon; the surface under-

foot was gritty with blown dust. There was a low wall or coping around the limited area on which he found himself and Jarvis went to it and looked over, straight down into the streets of Drahubba.

"We have surely reached the end," Thork said behind him. "No man could climb down that sheer wall, and none but the slul can approach this place from the air!"

"Rani!" Valdez called. "What about Rani?"

"She is still safe enough," Jarvis replied, "and no worse off than she was before. I wish I could say as much for us."

"We are as good as dead," said Thork.

Jarvis almost was inclined to agree with him, for the material of the roof resisted his best efforts to pierce it with his Mag senses. They were marooned in the sky of Kullab.

"Tell me about the slul." Jarvis spoke tersely to Thork.

"I have seen you walk through walls and strike down the Dingir themselves," Thork said bleakly, "but you cannot escape the slul. None of us can. Tonight, Nanna and Munus rise in their full raiment of light—it is the night of the full moon . . . the Night of the Slul! On this night each month the slul glide through the upper air and man and Tharn alike huddle indoors. The slul are

fierce, terrible, and invulnerable to weapons—and the worst punishment inflicted on the continent Dimgal is to condemn a man to the slul!"

"You are gabbling like an old woman," Jarvis put in. "Tell me something accurate about the slul."

Thork shrugged. "Who can say what the slul are like? Those who have seen them did not live to tell what they saw. They are shadows in the night, winged, beaked, clawed—what else can I tell you? They come from a land to the southeast, beyond the farthest mountains. The country is a high plateau where the Lulu used to believe their souls went after death to dwell underground, beneath pyramids of stone. The place is called Kurgal—the Great Mountain. It is inhabited by a race of troglodyte Lulu who live underground because the slul inhabit the surface and the air.

"The slul began their flight three nights ago—they fly over by night. By the time the moons are full, they shall have swarmed over the entire length and breadth of the land. Tonight they will sweep down the valley of the Idnal, attacking every living thing that walks abroad. They will ravage grain crops and slaughter cattle. By dawn, they will have returned to the snowy mountains behind Drahubba; thence by nightly stages they

will return to their cheerless homeland."

Jarvis interpreted for Valdez. The Peruvian shrugged, scratching his bearded chin.

"He paints a terrible picture, all right, but I don't know whether to believe it or not. I gave myself up for dead once. It is too soon to suffer the ordeal again."

"What does he say?" Thork wanted to know.

"He does not believe he is going to die," Jarvis said.

The Tharn grunted. "He talks like a warrior. But the slul are not like a battle. The advantage is all on one side—theirs."

Thork relapsed into silence and stared out over the thousand rooftops of Drahubba with arms folded. The expression on his twisted, blue features was resigned; his tusks glistened in the crimson glow of sunset, as if dipped in blood.

Already Nanna was a pale,

milky shield at rest upon the eastern horizon. Twilight seemed to linger forever upon the hills and peaks towering over the city. Slowly the light faded. Stars came out and blinked upon the Elorasponian scene. Nanna climbed the eastern sky with Munus, his woman, tagging behind. It was a scene of rare beauty, Jarvis thought, the empty streets and barren rooftops aglow, the sky milky with the light of twin moons. He should remember it forever if he escaped this impossible situation.

A few of the window openings below glowed with internal light, but these quickly blacked out as nervous Tharn hastily installed shutters of dingan wood. Down there, somewhere behind one of the blacked-out windows, Ilil was shut away. Jarvis thought of her as he had seen her last, helpless in the arms of Zag-ab-Shab. His hands clenched and he felt the

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pain of his nails biting into his palms.

Thus Jarvis brooded on the topmost stage of that ancient tower, shut away from his companions, occupied with thoughts of his own. He knew that responsibility for their lives was his; responsibility for the maid Rani, too. He had acted too precipitously, imperiled them all. A sadness gripped him but did not blot out the hammering questions that macerated his brain. Who were the Dingir? Why had they not slain him when he attacked their leader? He had no doubt they could do it. And why, if they were immortal as Ilil asserted, had that one died so quickly with the first blow of his axe? Why did they want him and Ilil alive? There was something strange and unfathomable about it all and something about his remembrance of the slain Dingir that somehow frightened him.

Suddenly he stiffened. Like the thunder of a wild Wagnerian opera, a mighty sensation swept through his being and he knew that within his soul he heard the approaching song of the slul. Distant through they still were, the music of their being burst upon him in a welling flood of indescribable hate and rage, a nerve-shaking, soul-battering hymn of power that wrenched him through and through. The slul! Horrid and ferocious their soul-song, frightful their look and actions! Yet awoke in the being of Jeff Jarvis a kinship with those shadows in the night. He threw back his shoulders and flung his face to the sky. From the well-springs of his being burst forth an answering song, a call as from deity to deity, that winged forth upon the stillness of the night to say to the slul that he waited.

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When there is no Final Rind on Space-Time, one must flee . . .

Home to Zero

By DAVID R. BUNCH

THERE is . . . there is not . . . I wait, I wait," Monatan was saying, sending a Think to Something which he could not see, transmitting into Big Cosmos a thought.

"Where-are-you-where-are-you, Monatan?" a clamor started up from somewhere toward Zosc-land, place where the Zeros lived. Some leader Zero, or perhaps merely a ranker, was sending out messages. "Come-in-come-in, Monatan."

"There is . . . there is not . . . I wait, I wait."

"Where-are-you-where-are-you, Monatan?"

"I'm in my Think. Don't you hear? Oh don't you hear? That little tik-tik or the tiny dry uck-uck sound—that is I—loud as a starbeam hitting an atmosphere, soft as the noise the Whirl-Whirls make spinning Space-Nothing out in all Time's Greater Turns. I come to you as the shell of the last Thought, all that is left. Long time ago, while you Zeros gaped and were aghast, I, chunk-faced and shining, became the

Great Mentoal; large were my possibilities; my head of finest metals seethed within its squares; all calculation boxed and gleaming I was; and I hungered for distances far past the simple stars, with my gases, my gears and all my electrode appetites whetted for glory. But alas —"

From far to the left of Zosc a little rainy sound came up now to seep into the Think. And Monatan knew the dread Not-nots, the Twices, were eavesdropping him from their dreary Twain-Nothingland. Better to join the simple Zeros and rest forever in their sunny cancel than to be snared by the clammy Twices, fixed in their image and made to try forever, two circles of cold nothing, turning, twisting constantly toward one nothing, trying to become, but never, never . . .

FOR awhile the Think was jammed and vibroveebas fought the rainy tangtongks, transmissions from Twain-Noth-

ingland. But at length the Notnots, the Twices, with a damp laugh that shook the Cosmos, resumed their role of eavesdroppers and surrendered Monatan to the Zeros. He continued, and in his recital there was a note that pleaded for understanding—even mercy, perhaps. “Before I was a Mentoal, chunk-faced and shining, I was a round-faced MAN; my body was soft, pulpy; my thought-box contained a strange inefficient machine that cluttered itself too much—with such things as were called Philosophy, Religion, YES! and LOVE, even. But still that pulp-in-the-box was the creator of my first great Thinks; I have ever remembered that. —Then something urged me. Part by part I replaced myself, coldly efficiently, with carefullest calculation, until nothing of softness and pulpiness remained. My Think I magnified, ballooned. And soon I was the Great Mentoal, the boxed thoughts, the metal-packaged magic. More startling I seemed than all the worlds of stars.

“But you know the story well after that. How I, raised tediously, impossibly almost, from naught-of-naught, conquered all the Big Cosmos far as the First and the Second Rinds while you Zeros and Notnots, the Twices, stared and stood astonished. You remember how one time—aye, recently! great spaceports

and long ships filled All-Everywhere far as the First Rind, and All-Everywhen far as the Second. More meaningful than all the worlds of stars I thought I was, staunch in my Gleam-Skins, with Space-Times rolling past the wonderful shapes of my rockets and my spaceboats challenging all distances and any stellar clocks. Courageously, aye, successfully! For awhile. Pursuing, pursuing—” Then his Think broke at thought of the baffled Wish; his voice sobbed tick-tick-tick . . .

“Come-in-come-in, Monatan,” a Zero insisted from Zoscland.

The dry tick-tick sound, the crying, ceased. There was a small slice of noise, no vaster than that made when one ray of light brushes against another. But what the Think-Wish really contained at that moment was defeat too vast for either all Here or There, all any Then or Now. “There was,” the thin Think wailed, “no final Rind on the Big Cosmos. When we got to a There, the There was not, ’twas neither a Place nor a When. We had been warned, of course.”

“Yes-you-had-you-had, you-had-been,” the Zero said. And there was a sniff or a snicker from far away. —“But speak to us, Monatan, again—from-time-to-time. And come when you will, for you must of course, to the Last Place. —Oh haughty Mona-

tan, inheritor of all the spaceport sites and all the ashes of all the spaceboats, scion of all the might and wrath and ill-directed know-how of the Mentoals, and all the petty flash and flaunt and greed and little prides of the laughable Round-Faces too. Tick!" The communications went dead. Then there was another sniff or a snicker, a thing that was almost a sound and almost no sound at all, like two long rays of light might whirl, or not whirl, hitting through one another. And that was all.

So Monatan whirled the space years for five more Greater Turns, tragic, alone, in the grays and blues and greens of the different realms of Space-Time in the Big Cosmos. He did not contact the Zeros in all that period, nor did he see one of them. But he saw the Notnots, the Twices, many times, ranging far, two sinuous coils of cold, twisting, revolving, searching—and he knew they looked for him. And he fled them.

AS Monatan eluded the Notnots successfully through the long fleeing of nearly five Greater Turns he began to know pride again. Even that miserable small success of eluding a final capture raised a damning vestige of boast. He began to dream, hoped to balloon his Think again, wished on old glories and pined

for another chance to wage for Ever-and-All. Until a time came when all he did was lounge the Space-Times and lie small-small in a corner of his Wish, reliving that glittering instant when he had stood so far into the Know, that awful cold cold almost nothing moment place that almost was all High and Deep and In and Out—all One, One star-speck point of light-in-dark and dark-in-light—just before the straining Think exploded and he shrank to almost the Last Place. He dreamed too much, or almost too much. For a Doomstime came when mid-dream he was awakened by a strange shadow cold and coiled at the Think-Wish door. He aroused to behold the final dread. They had ringed him while he slept. Far stretching that ring. The clammy Twices! And they laughed now their rainy laugh. And they closed, dancing upon their coils.

But just when there seemed no chance, when the negative of all his past glories seemed about to break upon him, when the ignominy, the mockery of being forever captured and held and made to be two always-whirling rings of twice-nothing seemed all but assured, something shook in the Cosmos and made a sound. It happened at that very moment Monatan wished humbly with all his remaining Think to be simply Nothing, Nothing-at-All. The

Notnots, the Twices, rainy cowards that they were, seethed and milled, baffled by that shaking sound that had clapped for an instant across all Place and Time. It was enough. Monatan broke from what had been their tight encirclement and ran for Zeroland, danced in on his Think-Wish toes across a blue Space-Time, with the Twices in futile pursuit. Far back from the periphery of Zosc, the Zeros' land, the cowardly Twices halted. And Monatan danced home leisurely.

"Welcome! oh Monatan, welcome! You are to remain one of us. It was doomed so from the Beginning." And there was the welcoming committee of things that had no look.

Monatan felt something strange him, but the strangler was soft. Like a rope made of smoke or mist might be. And when the embrace was over, a round blunt Nothing said, "Home you are, Monatan. And here are your eyes for Zoscland." And sudden-

ly, all over Zosc, Zeros were running and playing. Monatan could see them. And a little whirl of something doomed fell past, going away from a dying Think. "There goes your last Think-Wish, crazed and impossible," said a Zero, and it was plain that the Zero was amused by it all. "Tick-snicker-tick," the Zero said.

Monatan tried to wail one last word via a thought transference, even as his last Think-Wish fell. That Think-Wish sound was implicit in his rise and in his fall, and he longed to cry it once more. But he could not. For he was not. The spaceboats were not even ashes now.

And there was no Final Rind on Space-Time, the Bit Cosmos. There was not . . . Had not ever . . .

But the World of the Wish of the Round-Faces, the Mentoals and all that had spun out from the terrible pride of man was . . . fallen . . .

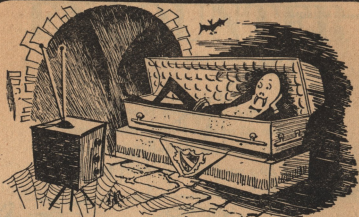
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ENCOUNTER

By PIERS ANTHONY

Generations of theological hair-splitters have pondered the question: Do animals have souls? Perhaps the only way to tell is to share an experience with one.

IN the evening of the twentieth day, Abe Sale came across the wall. On either hand a wide bare rift extended, north and south; behind him Omega Avenue retreated toward the dawn, all the way to the Atlantic. Ahead the blank concrete severed the right of way: he could not pass.

In the days of automation and leisure, it was Sale's habit to walk the endless city streets, venting in this asocial manner his seething urge for expression. His body was strong with many miles of foot labor, twenty in a day, questing through a metropolitan purgatory. Because there were half-crazed animals wandering in the plains of the empty parking acreages, he was armed; because it grew cold at night, he was clothed; because no normal person would open the ground-level apertures, he was self-reliant.

This was rough territory. The dogs were small, but the packs were large, and not everything fled at sight of a weapon. Even the great rats were restrained, here, keeping to the shadows; something was holding them back, and Sale doubted that it was fear of Man.

It took a resourceful stranger to survive in the open municipality. Sale survived. Armed with his heavy steel staff, he feared nothing on the streets so far; but there were times when retreat was expedient, and he was not a fool. Now, having traveled four hundred miles west on Omega, he had encountered a phenomenon that defied credibility: the end of it.

He studied the wall, and found that it was high: a sheer cliff of stone and steel and mortar, not to be scaled by naked hands. It was as tall as a building, travel-

ing as far as the eye could see; and the moat that the pavement formed beside it prevented access from any neighboring roof.

Sale could not tarry here; not far behind was a pack, lean and hungry. He had to have a place to sleep in relative safety.

He turned the corner, south, to pace the wall. A block away, another wanderer turned the corner north; thus they came upon each other by surprise. The other creature was a solitary feline of enormous size. Never as plentiful as the dogs, and always alone, these cats represented no threat to him. In fact, with their depredations upon the rodents, they were a greater friend to man than the hounds; more than once he had lent a helping blow on behalf of a cornered member. But this—surely this was the king of cats. It was tremendous.

It advanced, and so did Sale. If it was to be a challenge for the right of way, his staff would speak for him. Against a canine pack, Sale retreated; against a single animal he did not. Yet he wondered why the striped feline refused to give way. Why did it come at him in the center of the street, instead of lying in wait, in ambush? What was driving it?

HIS eyes were on the cat; but he noticed that all rats had vanished. One mystery had been

solved; rats were not fools either. This was no ordinary tabby.

They sparred, the cat moving sinuously, huge muscles rippling under the loose skin; he with his staff in two hands, an effective weapon. They closed; the cat made a feint, one paw batting at the pole, but Sale was on guard. Even now he was not afraid; there was an exhilaration about single combat that warmed his body, fired his imagination.

Ever alert for the danger behind, Sale suddenly tightened. He knew without turning that the trailing pack had arrived; he could hear the yips and growls as it massed. It had cut off his escape; he would have to kill at once and get away, before the canines fell upon him.

Behind the cat, more dogs turned the corner. This pack was unusually large, he thought, to cover two blocks. But no—the ones in front were of a different breed. Squat and hairy, with long snouts—not dogs at all, but pigs! Wart hogs, peccaries, or something of the sort. Strange indeed.

Sale had not forgotten for a moment the immediate antagonist; he identified both dogs and pigs while cautiously circling the big cat. Now two thoughts came together: the pigs were not a North American breed, and neither was the cat. He was dealing

with a literal tiger! How it came to be here he had no time to wonder; if he did not dispatch it soon, the dogs would tear them both to pieces.

"And the hogs were after you," he said to the cat, in momentary camaraderie. "You killed one of their number, and after that your life was forfeit. You *knew* there was no retreat!"

The clamor behind him grew. The dogs were about to charge. Simultaneously the pigs advanced, short legs and hoofs beating a staccato on the pavement. Either group was formidable; together they spelled doom. He had to escape.

His eye caught a manhole in the center of the street. He yelled at the cat, surprising it into a fleeting pause, and jumped away while it glared nervously at the converging packs. He jammed his pike into the edge of the recess, prying up the heavy cover. Grudgingly, it came; he heaved it aside and jumped into the blackness below, hand reaching out automatically for the rungs of the ladder that had to be there. He caught it, the wrench nearly breaking his wrist, and clung tightly; it was impossible to know how deep the hole went, or what might be below. An angry cascade of hoofbeats sounded above; the vicious beasts were all around, now fighting among themselves.

The ladder ended ten feet below the surface in a greasy platform. Sale braced his feet and looked around.

Glaring yellow eyes met his.

He froze against the ladder, waiting for his vision to adjust. He dared not make a motion, even in self defense, until he knew what he faced.

In moments he had the answer. It was the tiger.

Somehow it had followed him down the hole, while he was too preoccupied to notice. His staff was above, even if there had been room to use it here. He would have to depend on his knife.

Yet he waited, hesitating to trigger the attack. He doubted that he was a match for it; it weighed, as nearly as he could ascertain, as much as or more than himself, and its vision in this locale would be superior. He would have to keep one hand on the ladder, for leverage, and fight with the other. He did not want to kill it if he could.

MINUTES passed, and it did not attack. It watched him silently. As his eyes became fully acclimatized he saw that it was not hostile at all; it simply sat there, observing.

Of course! "You didn't come down here to attack me—you came to get away from the common enemy!" The cat made no motion; but Sale felt, perhaps il-

logically, that its lack of denial constituted assent. Any port in a storm; it had as much to fear from the implacable pigs as he had from the dogs. And, he was certain, either group above would gleefully destroy the refugees singly or in concert. Better to share a nest with a single enemy than face destruction by the pack. "Truce?" he inquired, and the tiger did not deny it.

Above, the tumult rose to a vicious level. Shadows hurtled by the hole; bits of fur fluttered down. Then a crash, and a heavy body dropped to land between the fugitives. It was a pig, its throat already torn open.

Sale realized that he was hungry. Moving carefully, and keeping one eye on the cat, he gripped the knife and approached the carcass. The tiger opened its jaws, but did not interfere. Sale hacked away, finally severing a leg; placing his foot on the remainder, he shoved it forcefully toward his companion. They ate.

It grew dark above, and quiet; but it would be foolhardy to attempt to leave now. They would have to spend the night where they were. Sale found that he could still see, vaguely; two feet to the side, his platform slid off into an open sewer, and phosphorescence coated the walls and lit the water. The air was close, but not fetid; they would get along.

Accepting the presence of the cat but never taking it for granted, Sale talked to keep himself awake. In the morning he might climb the ladder and emerge with impunity; but not yet.

"How did you get on the streets of Mid-Atlantic?" he asked the cat. "You're an Asian animal, Tiger. You don't mind if I call you Tiger? Good. And what about those pigs? Peccaries are South American, if I remember my Nature studies. Dogs and rats run wild; they're castoffs of one sort or another. But you—"

Tiger yawned and stretched out. "Don't do that!" Sale protested. "In another minute you'll have me doing it too; and while I don't mean to cast aspersions on your motives—"

Tiger ignored him, and Sale continued with some of his own history. "You see those blank buildings, Tiger; and you think the whole country has been deserted. But do you want to know something? The population of this subcontinent alone is over one billion. People, I mean; not tigers. They live in the buildings and they have a life of ease. They could go from one building to another if they wanted to, but they're simply not interested. You see, everything anybody needs or wants is delivered to his own apartment—anything. Nobody has to work. Even the few that do travel—robot repairmen,

for example—use the tubes; nobody walks the streets. The buildings all have stairs and doors—building codes, you know; obsolete, but still in force—but practically all of them are sealed shut.”

Tiger got up and faced the flowing water. “I wouldn’t drink that if I were you,” Sale cautioned. Then he saw it: the long angry snout of an alligator. It came close in the luminescence, gentle ripples hinting at its length: eight, nine feet of it. If the thing attacked—

THE alligator heaved itself onto the narrow platform, heading directly for the tiger. Its jaws were huge. Sale moved over, put one boot against the exposed reptilian hide, and shoved; with a splash, it slid helplessly into the water. Acting on inspiration, Sale next kicked the sodden remnant of the pig into the sewer after it; the alligator flashed in the water, taking the morsel in its teeth, and disappeared.

Sale found himself standing beside the big cat. He retreated to his own side hurriedly. Why had he done it? A fight between Tiger and the alligator could only have been to his advantage; why should he interfere?

“It was only after food, just like the rest of us,” he explained. “Some of the blood must have dripped into the water . . .” Ti-

ger lay down again, seemingly unperturbed.

“And what am I doing here, fighting with rats, when I have a soft apartment at home, you’ll be wanting to know,” he said, resuming his previous train of thought. Tiger managed to look singularly uncurious. “It was *because* it was soft that I had to leave my apartment. Man isn’t fitted for paradise; he grows flabby, loses self respect. A man with any guts at all has to fight; he has to overcome. And so I chose adventure; I pried open the ground level door, and saw the savage world before me. I prepared myself; I set out to find the western end of Omega.

“Now I’ve found it—and I’m not satisfied. I want to know what’s on the other side of that wall.”

Finally Sale slept. He woke, half surprised to find himself unharmed, to a dim light spreading from the hole above. It was morning. He gripped the ladder and hoisted himself up. Cautiously he poked his head from the manhole. Dead dogs and pigs were everywhere; but that was all. Near the wall the rats were out in strength, gnawing on the remains.

“All clear!” Sale called down to Tiger, wondering whether the animal could get up the ladder. But the tawny body emerged easily.



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Now that the mutual danger was over, he eyed the cat warily, not certain whether the truce still held.

He had recovered his staff and wiped it off, now holding it ready; but Tiger ignored it. A snarl to scatter the rats; then the cat was off, loping south along the wall.

South? Yet it had been going north to flee the pigs. Sale followed.

TWO miles down, the cat disappeared. Sale followed warily, to discover a rent in the wall. A stone had fallen from it, and there was a hole leading to the other side. Peering through, he could see Tiger waiting.

He climbed through himself and stopped, amazed. The city ended with the wall; here there was only a forest wasteland; trees and brush and tall grass growing profusely. There was animal life here too, he knew; droppings littered the ground. Somewhere he could hear the sound of a river, and the air was sweet and cool.

How had this come to be? The last natural forests had died long ago, taken while the government was still debating protective legislation.

There was no Wilderness any more; not in all of North America. Yet here—

"The zoo!" Now it came to

him. There was no wilderness; but there were parks, and artificial gardens for captive specimens. The tiger; the wild pigs: creatures of a zoo, now free and roaming in its neglect. And the shrubs, from all parts of the world, grown and spread. What had been an imitation of nature now was real.

Tiger brushed by him and scrambled back through the gap, into the city.

He stared after the great cat, confused.

"Surely this, for you, is paradise," he said after it. "Why do you want to leave?"

But as he said the words, he understood. Tigers were not made for paradise. Only in the gaunt streets, among inimical dogs and rats, was there real challenge for the creature of independent spirit.

He wondered whether Tiger also had a problem, foraging alone, finding places to sleep safely. No-man's-land could also be no-tiger's-land, at least at times. Individualism was a fine thing; but it could not deny the need for companionship.

Did Tiger also crave company in spirit?

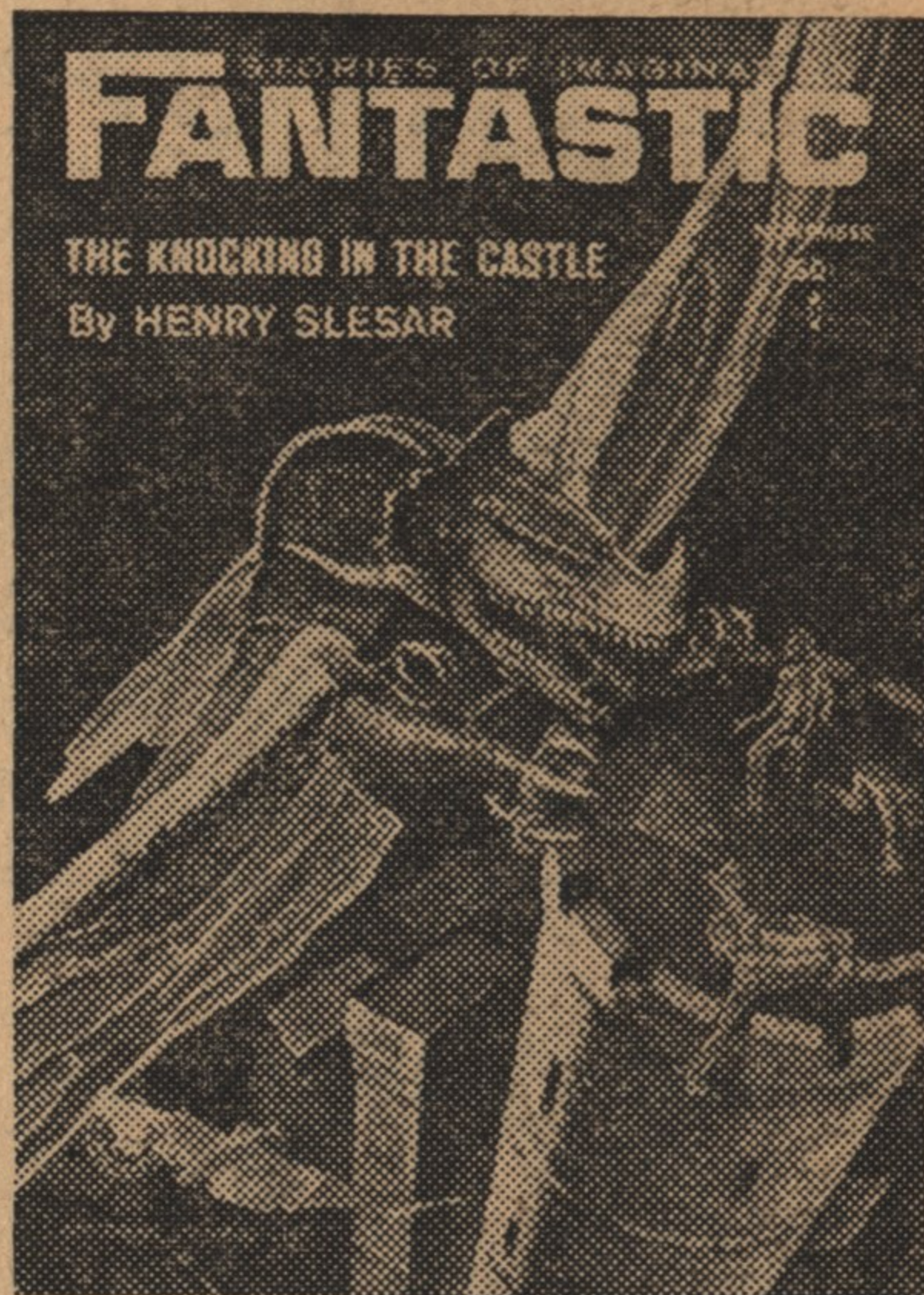
Sale climbed out of the zoo and stood once more on the street. The cat was there, waiting.

"Come," he said, heading north. The tiger came.

THE END

ENCOUNTER

COMING NEXT MONTH



Two special treats in the November issue of FANTASTIC Magazine: first, a magnificent up-dating of a Gothic novel by **Henry Slesar**, who takes us to a small Italian village to investigate The Knocking in the Castle; second, the concluding instalment of **Manly Banister's** picaresque novel, Seed of Elorapon. Plus other short stories and our regular features.

The November FANTASTIC will be on sale at your newsstand Sept. 24.

MIDNIGHT IN THE MIRROR WORLD

By FRITZ LEIBER

Illustrator FINLAY

Reflect on reflections. How one travels eleven and a half miles in order to cover sixteen feet. How a grimace of terror can, on closer look, change to—what?

AS the clock downstairs began to clang out midnight's twelve strokes, Giles Nefandor glanced into one of the two big mirrors between which he was passing on his nightly trip, regular as clockwork, from the telescopes on the roof to the pianos and chessboards in the living room.

What he saw there made him stop and blink and stare.

He was two steps above the mid-stair landing, where the great wrought-iron chandelier with its freight of live and dead electric bulbs swung in the chill fierce gusts of wind coming through the broken, lead-webbed, diamond-paned windows. It swung like a pendulum—a wilder yet more ponderous pendulum than that in the tall clock twanging relentlessly

downstairs. He stayed aware of its menace as he peered in the mirror.

Since there was a second mirror behind him, what he saw in the one he faced was not a single reflection of himself, but many, each smaller and dimmer than the one in front of it—a half-spread stack of reflections going off toward infinity. Each reflection, except the eighth, showed against a background of mirror-gloom only his dark lean aquiline face, or at least the edge of it—from bucket-size down to dime-size—peering back at him intently from under its sleek crown of black, silver-shot hair.

But in the eighth reflection his hair was wildly disordered and his face was leaden-green, gape-jawed, and bulging-eyed with horror.



Also, his eighth reflection was not alone. Beside it was a thin black figure from which a rib-bony black arm reached out and lay on his reflected shoulder. He could see only the edge of the black figure—most of it was hidden by the reflected gilt mirror frame—but he was sure it was thin.

The look of horror on his face in that reflection was so intense and so suggestive of strangulation that he clutched at his throat with both hands.

All his reflections, from the nearly life-size giants to the Lilliputians, copied this sudden gesture—except the eighth.

The eleventh stroke of midnight resounded brassily. An especially fierce gust of wind blew the chandelier closer to him so that one of its black hook-fingered arms approached his shoulder and he cringed away from it before he recognized it for the familiar object it was. It should have been hung higher, he was such a tall man, and he should have had the window repaired, but his head missed the chandelier except when the wind blew hard and after he'd been unable to find a craftsman who could work leaded glass, he had not bothered about either chore.

The twelfth stroke clanged.

strangeness was gone. His eighth reflection was like the rest. All his reflections were alike, even the dimmest most distant ones that melted into mirror smoke. And there was no sign of a black figure in any one of them, although he peered until his vision blurred.

He continued downstairs, choosing a moment when the chandelier was swinging away from him. He went immediately to his Steinway and played Scriabin preludes and sonatas until dawn, fighting the wind with them until it slunk away, then analyzed chess positions in the latest Russian tournament until the oppressive daylight had wearied him enough for sleep. From time to time he thought about what he had glimpsed in the mirror, and each time it seemed to him more likely that the disordered eighth reflection had been an optical illusion. His eyes had been strained and weary with star-gazing when it had happened. There had been those rushing shadows from the swinging chandelier, or even his narrow black necktie blown by the wind, while the thin black figure might have been simply a partial second reflection of his own black clothes—imperfections in the mirror could explain why these things had stood out only in the eighth reflection. For that matter the odd appearance

WHEN he looked into the mirror the next instant, all

of his face in that reflection might have been due to no more than a tarnished spot in the mirror's silvering. Like this whole vast house—and himself—the mirror was decaying.

He awoke when the first stars, winking on in the sky of deepening blue, signaled his personal dawn. He had almost forgotten the incident of the mirror by the time he went upstairs, donned stadium boots and a hooded long sheepskin coat in the cupola room, and went out on the widow's walk to uncap his telescopes and take up his star-gazing. He made, as he realized, a quite medieval figure, except that the intruders in his heavens were not comets mostly, but Earth satellites moving at their characteristic crawl of twenty-some minutes from zenith to horizon.

He resolved a difficult double in Canis Major and was almost certain he saw a pale gas front advancing across the blackness of the Horsehead Nebula.

Finally he capped and shrouded his instruments and went inside. Habit started him downstairs and put him between the mirrors above the landing at the same minute and second of the day as he had arrived at that spot last night. There was no wind and the black chandelier with its assymetric constellation of bulbs hung motionless on its black chain. No reeling shadows

tonight. Otherwise everything was exactly the same.

And while the clock struck twelve, he saw in the mirror exactly what he had seen last night: tiny pale horrorstruck Nefandor-face, black ribbon-arm touching its shoulder or neck, as if arresting him or summoning him to some doom. Tonight perhaps a little more of the black figure showed, as if it peered with one indistinguishable eye around the tinted gold frame.

Only this time it was not the eighth reflection that showed these abnormalities, but the seventh.

And this time when the glassy aberration vanished with the twelfth brassy stroke, he found it less easy to keep his thoughts from dwelling obsessively on the event. He also found himself groping for an explanation in terms of an hallucination rather than an optical illusion: an optical illusion that came so pat two nights running was hardly credible. And yet an hallucination that confined itself to only one in a stack of reflections was also most odd.

MOST of all, the elusive malignity of the thin black figure struck him much more forcibly than it had the previous night. An hallucination—or ghost or demon—that met you face to face was one thing. You could

strike out at it, hysterically claw at it, try to drive your fist through it. But a black ghost that lurked in a mirror, and not only that but in the deepest depths of a mirror, behind many panes of thick glass (somehow the reflected panes seemed as real as the actual ones), working its evil will on your powerless shrunken image there—that implied a craftiness and caution and horrid calculation which fitted very well with the figure's cat-and-mousing advance from the eighth reflection to the seventh. The implication was that here was a being who hated Giles Nefandor with demonic intensity.

This night and morning he avoided the eerie Skriabin and played only dancingly brisk pieces by Mozart, while the chess games he analyzed were frolicsome attacking ones by Anderssen, Kieseritzky, and the youthful Steinitz.

He had decided to wait another twenty-four hours and then if the figure appeared a third time, systematically analyze the matter and decide on what steps to take.

Yet meanwhile he could not wholly keep himself from searching his memory for people whom he had injured to the degree that they would bear him a bitter and enduring hatred. But although he searched quite

conscientiously, by snatches, through the five and a half decades over which his memory stretched, he found no very likely candidates for the position of Arch-Hater or Hater to the Death of Giles Nefandor. He was a gentle person and, cushioned by inherited wealth, had never had to commit a murder or steal a large sum of money. He had wived, begat, divorced—or rather, been divorced. His wife had remarried profitably, his children were successful in far places, he had enough money to maintain his long body and his tall house while both moldered and to indulge his mild passions for the most ethereal of the arts, the most coolly aloof of the sciences, and the most darkly profound of the games.

Professional rivals? He no longer played in chess tournaments, confining his activities in that direction to a few correspondence games. He gave no more piano recitals. While his contributions to astronomical journals were of the fewest and involved no disputes.

Women? At the time of his divorce, he had hoped it would free him to find new relationships, but his lonely habits had proved too comfortable and strong and he had never taken up the search. Perhaps in his vanity he had dreaded failure—or merely the effort.

At this point he became aware of a memory buried in his mind, like a dark seed, but it refused to come clear. Something about chess? . . . no . . .

Really, he had done nothing much to anyone, for good or ill, he decided. Why should anyone hate him for doing nothing?—hate him enough to chase his image through mirrors?—he asked himself fruitlessly as he watched Kieseritzky's black queen implacably pursue Anderssen's white king.

THE next night he carefully timed his descent of the stairs, using his precision clocks in the cupola—with the result that (precision machinery proving less reliable than habit) the downstairs clock had already struck five strokes when he thrust himself breathlessly between the mirrors above the landing. But his greenish horrorstruck face was there—in the sixth reflection this time, as he'd fatalistically assumed it would be—and the slender black figure was there too with outstretched arm; this time he seemed to detect that it was wearing a veil or stocking-mask: he could distinguish none of its features, but there was a faint shimmering in the face area, rather like the pale gas front he had once again detected crossing the Horse-head Nebula.

This night he completely altered his routine, neither opening a piano nor setting out any of the chessmen. Instead he lay for an hour with eyes shut, to rest them, and then spent the rest of the night and morning investigating reflections of reflections in the mirrors on the stairs and in two somewhat smaller ones which he set up in the living room and tilted by the fractional inch to get the best effects.

By the end of that time he had made a number of interesting discoveries. He'd noted reflections of reflections before, especially on the stairs, and been amused by their oddity, but he'd never thought about them systematically and certainly never experimented with them. They turned out to be a fascinating little field of study—vest-pocket optics—a science in miniature.

Vest-pocket wasn't such a bad designation, because you had to stick your vest and yourself between the two mirrors in order to observe the phenomena. Though come to think of it, you ought to be able to do the same thing with a periscope held sideways, by that means introducing your vision between the mirrors without introducing yourself. It might be worth trying.

But getting back to basics, when you stood between nearly parallel mirrors, looking at one,

you saw first the direct reflection of your face, next the reflection of the back of your head in the mirror behind you; then, barely visible around those two, you saw the second reflection of your face, really just an edge of hair and cheek and ear; then the second reflection of the back of your head, and so on. As the heads grew smaller, you saw more of each, until the entire face became visible, quite tiny and dim.

This meant, for one thing, that the eighth reflection he'd seen the first midnight had really been the fifteenth, since he'd only counted reflections of his face, as far as he could remember, and between every two of those there was a reflection of the back of his head. Oh, this mirror world, he decided, was fascinating! Or worlds, rather—a series of shells around him, like the crystal globes of Ptolemaic astronomy in which the stars and planets were set, going out in theory to infinity, and in each shell himself staring at himself in the next shell.

The way the heads got tinier intrigued him. He measured the distance between the two mirrors on the stairs—eight feet almost to the inch—and calculated that the eighth reflection of his face was therefore 116 feet away, as if it were peering back at him from a little attic window

down the street. He was almost tempted to go to the roof and scan with his binoculars for such windows.

But since it was himself he was seeing, the eighth reflection was sizewise 232 feet away. He would have to scan for dwarfs. Most interesting!

IT was delightful to think of all the different things his reflections could be doing, if each had the power to move around independently in the thin world of its crystal shell. Why, with all those shell-selves industriously occupied, Giles Nefandor could well become the world's most accomplished pianist, most knowledgeable field astronomer, and highest ranking of all chess grandmasters. The thought almost revived his dead ambitions—hadn't Lasker won the 1924 New York international tournament at 56!—while the charm of the speculation made him quite forget the menace of the black figure he'd now glimpsed three times.

Returning to reality somewhat reluctantly, he set himself to determine how many of his reflections he could see in practice rather than theory. He discovered that even with the best illumination, replacing all the dead bulbs in the wrought-iron chandelier, he could recognize at most only the ninth or

perhaps the tenth reflection of his face. After that, his visage became a tiny indistinguishable ash-gray blank in the glass.

In reaching this conclusion, he also found that it was very difficult to count the reflections accurately. One or more would tend to get lost, or he'd lose count somewhere along the line. It was easiest to count the gilt mirror frames, since these stood in a close-packed row, like golden numeral ones—even though, for the tenth reflection of his face, say, this involved counting nineteen gilt ones, ten belonging to the mirror in front of him and nine to the mirror behind.

He wondered how he could have been so sure the first midnight that it was his eighth reflection which had shown the unpleasant alterations, and the seventh and sixth reflections on the two subsequent midnights. He decided that his shocked mind must have made a stabbing guess and that it very likely had been inaccurate—despite the instant uncertainty he'd felt. Next night he'd watch more carefully—and the fifth reflection would be easier to count.

He also discovered that although he could at most count ten reflections of his face, he could distinguish thirteen and perhaps fourteen reflections of a bright point of light—a pencil flashlight or even a candle-flame

held close to his cheek. Those tinied candle-flames looked strangely like stars do in a cheap telescope. Odd.

He was eager to count more reflections than that—to break his record, as it were—and he even fetched his best pair of binoculars and stared into the mirror with them, using for light-point an inch of brightly flaming candle affixed to the top of the right-hand binocular tube. But as he'd feared, this was no help at all, magnification fading out the more distant light-points to nothing, like using too powerful an eyepiece on a small telescope.

HE thought of making and testing out a periscope—candle attachment—but that seemed a touch over-elaborate. And in any case it was high time he got to bed—almost noon. He felt in remarkably good spirits—for the first time in years he had discovered a new thing in which to be interested. Reflectology mightn't be quite up to astronomy, musicology, or chess, but it was an elegant little science all the same. And the Mirror World was fascinating!—he looked forward excitedly to what he'd next see in it. If only the phenomena didn't stop!

It was perhaps his eagerness which got him between the stairway mirrors next night several

seconds before the clock began to strike twelve. His early arrival, however, didn't inhibit the phenomena, as he suddenly feared might happen. They began on the clock's first twanging stroke and whatever may have happened on previous evenings, it was certainly the fifth reflection which was altered tonight. The figures were only about 70 feet away now, as he'd earlier calculated, and so considerably larger. His fifth reflected face was pale as ever, yet he fancied its expression was changing—but because it had gone more than halfway into eclipse behind the massed heads in front of it, he couldn't be sure.

And the black figure definitely was wearing a veil, although he still couldn't make out the features behind it. Yes, a veil . . . and long black gloves, one of which sleekly cased the slender arm outstretched to his shoulder—for he suddenly realized that despite its height almost equal to his own, the figure was feminine.

A gust of fear hard to understand went through him at that discovery. As on the second night he wanted to strike out at the figure to prove its insubstantiality—smash the glass! But could that effect a figure 70 feet away? Would smashing the single glass in front of him smash all the nine panes he calculated

still separated him from the figures in the Mirror World?

Perhaps it would—and then the black figure in the Mirror World could come straight out at him . . . now.

In any case the veiled figure, if she continued her approach, would be with him in five more nights.

Perhaps smashing the glass now would simply end the horrifying, fascinating phenomena—foil the figure for good. But did he want to do that?

As he asked himself that last question, the twelfth stroke came and the Black Lady in the fifth reflection vanished.

The rest of the night, while he played Tchaikovsky and studied the chess games of Vera Menchik, Lisa Lane, and Mrs. Piatigorsky, searching for hidden depths in them, he reviewed the Lives and Loves of Giles Nefandor. He discovered that the women in his life had been few, and those with whom he had become seriously entangled, or to whom he had done possible injury, fewer still. The half dozen candidates were all, so far as he knew, happily married and/or otherwise successful. This of course included his divorced wife, although she had often complained of him and his "hobbies."

On the whole, though romanticizing women, he had tended to

run away from them, he concluded wryly. Perhaps the Dark Lady was a generalized woman, emblematic of the entire sex, come to be revenged on him for his faint-heartedness. His smile grew wryer. Perhaps her funeral costume was, anticipatorily, for him.

He thought, oh the human infatuation with guilt and retribution! The dread of and perhaps the desire for punishment! How ready we are to think others hate us!

DURING this search of his memory, the dark seed stirred several times—he seemed to be forgetting some one woman. But the seed refused to come clear of its burial until the clock struck its twelfth stroke next midnight, when just as the now clearly feminine figure in the fourth reflection vanished, he spoke the name, "Nina Fasinera."

That brought the buried incident—or rather all of it but one crucial part—back to him at once. It came back with that tigerish rush with which memory-lost small incidents and encounters will—one moment nonexistent, the next recalled with almost dizzying suddenness.

It had happened all of ten years ago, six years at least before his divorce, and he had only once met Miss Fasinera—a tall

slender woman with black hair, bold hawklike features, slightly protruberant eyes, and rather narrow long mobile lips which the slim tip of her tongue was forever wetting. Her voice had been husky yet rapid and she had moved with a nervous pantherine grace, so that her heavy silk dress had hissed on her gaunt yet challenging figure.

Nina Fasinera had come to him, here at this house, on the pretext of asking his advice about starting a school of piano in a distant suburb across the city. She was an actress too, she had told him, but he had gathered she had not worked much in recent years—just as he had soon been guessing that her age was not much less than his own, the jet of her hair a dye, the taut smoothness of her facial skin astringents and an ivory foundation make-up, her youthful energy a product of will power—in short, that she was something of a fake (her knowledge of piano rudimentary, her acting a couple of seasons of summer stock and a few bit parts on Broadway), but a brave and gallant fake nonetheless.

Quite soon she had made it clear that she was somewhat more interested in himself than in his advice and that she was ready—alert, on guard, dangerous, yet responsive—for any encounter with him, whether at a

luncheon date a week in the future or here and now, on the instant.

It had been, he recalled, as if a duelist had lightly yet briskly brushed his cheek and lips with a thin leather glove. And yes, she *had* been wearing gloves, he remembered now of a sudden!—dark green one edged with yellow, the same colors as her heavy silken dress.

He had been mightily attracted to her—strange how he had forgotten that taut nervous hour!—but he had just become re-reconciled with his wife for perhaps the dozenth time and there was about Nina Fasinera an avidity and a recklessness and especially an almost psychotic-seeming desperation which had frightened him or at least put him very much on guard. He recalled wondering if she took drugs.

So he had courteously yet most coolly and with infinite stubbornness refused all her challenges, which in the end had grown quite mocking, and he had shown her to the door and closed it on her.

And then the next day he had read in the paper of her suicide.

THAT was why he had forgotten the incident, he decided now—he had felt sharply guilty about it. Not that he thought that he possessed any fatal

glamor, so that a woman would die at his rebuff, but that conceivably he had represented Nina Fasinera's last cast of the dice with destiny and he, not consciously knowing what was at stake, had coldly told her, "You lose."

But there was something else he was forgetting—something about her death which his mind had suppressed even more tightly—he was certain of that. Glancing about uneasily, he stepped down onto the landing beneath the low-dipping chandelier and hurried down the rest of the stairs. He had just recalled that he had torn out the story of her death from a cheap tabloid and now he spent the rest of the night hunting for it among his haphazardly-filed papers. Toward dawn he discovered it, a ragged-edged browning thing tucked inside one of his additional copies of the Chopin nocturnes.

FORMER BROADWAY ACTRESS DRESSES FOR OWN FUNERAL

Last night the glamorous Nina Fasinera, who was playing on Broadway as recently as three years ago, committed suicide by hanging, according to police Lieutenant Ben Davidow, in the room she rented at 1738 Waverly Place, Edgemont.

A purse with 87 cents in it lay on top of her dresser. She left no note or diary, however, though

police are still searching. Dependency was the probable cause of Miss Fasinera's act, according to her landlady Elvira Winters, who discovered the body at 3 A. M.

"She was a charming tenant, always the lady, and very beautiful," Mrs. Winters said, "but lately she'd seemed restless and unhappy. I'd let her get five weeks behind on her rent. Now who'll pay it?"

Before taking her life, the 39-year-old Miss Fasinera had dressed herself in a black silk cocktail gown with black accessories including a veil and long gloves. She had also pulled down the shades and turned on all the lights in the room. It was the glare of these lights through the transom which caused Mrs. Winters to enter the actress' small, high-ceilinged room by a duplicate key when there was no answer to her knocking.

There she saw Miss Fasinera's body hanging by a short length of clothesline from the ceiling light-fixture. A chair lay overturned nearby. In its plastic seat-cover Lieutenant Davidow later found impressions which matched the actress' spike heels. Dr. Leonard Belstrom estimated she had been dead for four hours when he examined the body at 4 A. M.

Mrs. Winters said, "She was hanging between the tall mirror

on the closet door and the wide one on her dresser. She could almost have reached out and kicked them, if she could have kicked. I could see her in both of them, over and over, when I tried to lift her up, before I felt how cold she was. And then all those bright lights. It was horrible, but like the theater."

WHEN Giles Nefandor finished reading the clipping, he nodded twice and stood frowning. Then he got out maps of the city and suburbs and measured the straight-line distance from the rooming house in Edgemont to his own place across the city, then used the scales on the maps to convert his measurements to miles.

Eleven and a half, it came out, as nearly as the limits of accuracy would make it.

Then he calculated the time that had elapsed since Nina Fasinera's death: ten years and one hundred and one days. From Mrs. Winters' statement, the distance between the mirrors between which she'd hanged herself had been about eight feet—the same distance as between the mirrors on his stairs. If she'd entered the Mirror World when she died and been advancing toward this house as she'd moved the last five nights—two reflections, or sixteen feet, each time—then in ten years

and one hundred and one days she'd have traveled 60,058 feet.

That figured out to eleven miles and 1,978 feet.

Eleven and a half miles, or close to it.

He puzzled, almost idly, as to why a person could travel only such a short distance in the Mirror World each twenty-four hours. It must depend on the distance between the two mirrors of your departure and also on the two mirrors of your arrival. Perhaps you traveled one reflection for each day and one for each night. Perhaps his theory of shells like the Ptolemaic ones was true and in any shell there was only one door and you had to search to find it, as if you were traversing a maze; to find the right two doors in the crystal maze in twenty-four hours could be a most difficult task. And there must be all sorts of interlocking dimensions in the Mirror World—slow paths and fast ones: if you traveled between mirrors set on different stars, you might travel faster than light.

He wondered, again almost idly, why he had been chosen for this visitation and why of all women it should have been Nina Fasinera who had had the strength and the will to thread purposefully the glassy labyrinth for ten years. He was not so much frightened as awed—

that an hour's meeting should lead to all these consequences. Could undying love grow in an hour? Or was it undying hate that had flowered? Had Nina Fasinera known about the Mirror World when she'd hanged herself?—he recalled now that one of the things she'd said lightly when she'd tried to storm his interest had been that she was a witch. And she would have known about the mirrors on his stairs matching those in her room—she'd seen them.

NEXT midnight when he saw the black figure in the third reflection, he instantly recognized Nina's pale gauntly lovely face behind the veil and wondered why he had not recognized it at least four nights before. Rather anxiously he glanced down toward her black-stockinged ankles, which were slender and unswollen, then quickly back to her face again. She was gazing at him gravely, perhaps with the ghost of a smile.

By now his own reflection was almost wholly eclipsed behind the ones in front of it. He could not even guess at his expression, nor did he want to. He had eyes only for Nina Fasinera. The impact of his years of unfeeling loneliness shook him. He realized how desperately he had been wishing someone would search him out. The clock twanged on,

swiftly marking time forever gone. Now he knew that he loved Nina Fasina, had loved her since the one only hour they'd met. That was why he'd never stirred from this rotting house, why he'd prepared his mind for the Mirror World with chess-squares and singing wires and the stars. Since the hour they'd met . . . Except for color and the veil, her costume was the same she'd worn that fateful sixty minutes. If she'd only move, he thought, he's faintly hear the hiss of the heavy silk through the five thick panes of glass remaining. If she'd only make that smile more certain . . .

The twelfth stroke twanged. This time he felt a terrible pang of loss as her figure vanished, but it was swiftly replaced with a feeling of surety and faith.

For the next three of his nocturnal days, Giles Nefandor was happy and light-hearted. He played the piano music he loved best: Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Skriabin, Domenico Scarlatti. He played over the classic chess games of Nimzowitch, Alekhine, Capablanca, Emanuel Lasker, and Steinitz. He lovingly scanned his favorite celestial objects: the Beehive in Cancer, the Pleiades and Hyades, the Great Nebula in Orion's sword; he noticed new telescopic constellations and thought he saw the faintest crystal paths . . .

Occasionally his thoughts strayed eagerly yet guiltily, as if to forbidden fruit, to the mazy crystal corridors of the Mirror World, that secret diamond universe, and to his thousand wonderings about it: endless rooms and halls ceilinged and floored by transparency, and all the curious mirror-lost folk who lived adrift in them; piercingly sweet music; games of glass; revels and routs at a thousand levels; the tinkling of a million glittering chandeliers; diamond pathways to the farthest stars—

But he would always check these thoughts. There would be time enough for them, he felt certain. Experienced reality is always more satisfactory than imagination and illusion.

And often he would think of Nina and of the strangeness of their relationship: two atoms marked by one encounter and now drawn together among all the trillions of trillions of like atoms in the universe. Did it take ten years for love to grow, or only ten seconds? Both. But he checked these thoughts too—and struck the keys, or moved the men, or re-focused the 'scope.

THERE were moments of doubt and fear. Nina might be the incarnation of hate, the jet-black spider in the crystal web. Certainly she was the un-

known, though he felt he knew her so well. There had been those early intimations of psychosis, of a pantherine restlessness. And there had been that first glimpse of his face, sick with horror . . . But they were moments only.

Before each of the three remaining midnights he dressed with unusual care: the black suit newly brushed, the white shirt fresh, the narrow black necktie carefully knotted. It pleased him to think that he had not had to change the color of his suit to match that of her dress.

The first of the three midnights he was almost certain of her smile.

The next midnight he was sure of it. Now both figures were in the first reflection and he could see his own face again, scarce four feet away. He too was smiling gravely—the horror was gone.

Nina's black-gloved hand resting on his shoulder, the black fingertips touching his white collar, now seemed a lover's gesture.

The night after that the wind came back at last, blowing with more and more violence, although there were no clouds, so that the stars flickered and streamed impossibly in his 'scopes. The gale seemed to fasten on and shake their beams like

crystal stalks. The sky was granular with wind. He could not remember such a blow. By eleven it had almost driven him from the roof, but he stuck it out although the wind increased in frenzy.

Instead of daunting, it filled him with a terrific excitement. He felt he could leap into the air and be blown light-swift anywhere he willed in the diamond-dazzling cosmos—except that he had another rendezvous.

When he finally went inside, shaking with the cold, and took off his fleece-lined coat, he became aware of a rhythmic crunching and crashing below, with rather long intervals between.

When he went down the stairs, they were dark and the crashes were louder. He realized that the great chandelier above the landing must be swinging so far that it was hitting the lead-webbed windows beyond, breaking their remaining panes—and had long since burst all the electric globes it carried.

He felt his way down by the wall, keeping close to it to avoid the chandelier's murderous swings. His fingers touched absolute smoothness—glass. Then the glass *rippled* for an instant, tingling his fingers, and he heard husky irregular breathing and the hissing of heavy silk. Then slender arms were around

him and a woman's slim body was pressed against his and hungry lips met his lips, first through a faintly astringent, dryish, tormenting tantalizing veil, then flesh to flesh. He could feel under his hands the ribbed smoothness of heavy silk and of pliant, lightly fleshed ribs under that.

All in utter darkness and pandemonium. Almost drowned in the latter, midnight's last strokes were twanging.

A hand moved up his back and suede-cased fingers lightly brushed his neck. As the last stroke twanged, one of the fingers turned hard and stiff and cruel and dug under his collar so that it caught him like a hook by the collar and the tightly-knotted tie the collar covered. It wrenched him into the air. A terrible pain stabbed at the base of his skull, then filled it to bursting.

IT was four days before the policeman who nightly patrolled beyond the gate discovered by a stab of his flashlight the body of Giles Nefandor—whom he knew by sight, though never a sight like this!—hanging from the wrought-iron chandelier above the landing strewn with glassy shards. It might have been long-

er than four days, except that a chessplayer across the city, contesting a correspondence game with the well-known recluse, spurred the police into action when the move on his last postcard had gone ten days unanswered. His first queries were ignored, but an evening phone call got action.

The policeman reported back the unpleasant condition of the body, the black, hooked, wrought-iron chandelier-finger thrust under the noose of collar and tie, and the glass shards, and several other matters.

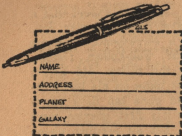
He never did report what he saw in one of the two mirrors on the stairs when he looked at it closely, his powerful flash beside his chest as his wristwatch signaled midnight. There was a stack of reflections of his own shocked, sharply shadowed face. But in the fourth reflection there were momentarily two figures, hand in hand, looking back toward him over their shoulders—and smiling impishly at him, he thought. The one figure was that of Giles Nefandor, though looking more youthful than he recalled seeing him in recent years. The other was that of a lady in black, the upper half of her face veiled.

THE END



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