

THE MOUTHPIECE OF ZITU



BRUNNEN

THE MOUTHPIECE OF ZITU



The Mouthpiece of Zitu

1919

PROLOGUE

Elsewhere, I have told the full details of my meeting and acquaintanceship with that strangest of all men, Jason Croft. I am Dr. George Murray, in charge of the Mental Hospital in a Western State. It began when his housekeeper came to me one night, in great agitation, and induced me to come with her to Croft's house. I found him in a state of deep trance, and Mrs. Goss said he had been thus for a week.

My own private studies had been such as to give me some indication of what Croft's condition might be, and a glance over the esoteric contents of the bookshelves in this library confirmed my suspicions. It was a long, difficult task but I managed to bring him out of what he acknowledged to be a state of astral projection, that strange state, little understood by Western people but well known to the East, wherein a person's consciousness can separate itself from the physical body and wander afield at will. I knew of it from my studies, but had never encountered it before.

Croft told me that his "astral body" had been on a far world, Palos, a planet in the system of the Dog Star, Sirius, and that he must return there at once. He asked me to come and see him the next afternoon, when, he promised, he would tell me the full story and show how I could assist him in a most difficult situation. Realizing that he was in full control of his faculties, I agreed and left him, assuring his frightened housekeeper that all was well.

The next day, Croft told me of his life, his studies, his travels, his meetings with adepts where he learned the technique of astral projection--an art which we of the West unfortunately associate with superstition and delusion. He had carried it much farther than any of his teachers, for actually, there are no spatial limits to the extent one can travel in the entire universe once this technique is mastered. He said that, from childhood, he had felt himself drawn to Sirius.

There he found human beings and a civilization which was in some ways very similar to various ancient civilizations here on Earth. In his disembodied state, he became a watcher, and was drawn to the land of Aphur, on Palos. Aphur was a small, autonomous kingdom within the federation of states known as Tamarizia. Opposed to this federation was another one known as Zollaria, and between the two an uneasy truce had been in effect for many years, following a war wherein Zollaria's attempt to conquer Tamarizia had been frustrated.

A crisis was emerging, and Jadgor, king of Aphur hoped to avert it by a closer alliance with the neighboring state of Cathur, through marrying the daughter of Naia, daughter of Lakkon--a prince of Aphur--to Kyphallos, heir to the throne of Cathur. At first, this was little more than pageantry to Jason Croft; but when he saw Lakkon's daughter, Naia, who was to be sacrificed to the dissolute Kyphallos for the good of the state, Croft realized why he had been drawn to Palos. This was the woman who, it seemed, he had been destined to love.

He had found that he could understand the speech of Palos's peoples; he wandered all over Palos, attended classes in the various schools and learned the customs and conditions of Aphur and found an advanced religion in the worship of Zitu here, under the rule of Zud, the High Priest. He spied upon Cathur and learned that Kyphallos cared nothing for Naia, but was in love with one Kalamita

of Zollaria. For Kyphallos, this marriage would be a means through which Aphur, situated in a key position geographically, could be subverted and opened to invasion of all Tamarizia. Jadgor and Lakkon suspected none of this.

But Croft could do nothing in his disembodied state. There was one hope only, that of entering and taking over the body of a man who had just died. In his travels, he found one young man, Jasor of Nodhur, healthy but weak of spirit and slow of mind. Croft returned to his own body, as he must do every now and then, and plunged into intense study of the technique of possession of a body from which the spirit has departed. He returned to find Jasor dying; the young man was hardly sick, but no longer wanted to live.

It was a great struggle in that room where Jasor lay dying, attended only by a priest of Zitu, one Abbu; but when Jasor died, Croft was able to enter into and revive his body. It seemed to Abbu and the others that a miracle had occurred, for they were certain that Jasor had died but a few moments before.

He was not playing upon mere ignorance and superstition, Croft told me; everything indicated that the events had occurred under true providence, of which he was a willing instrument; and this is how the religious leaders of Aphur accepted the situation. It was obvious that the Jasor who had returned from death was a truly different person. Under these circumstances, Jason Croft, as a Jasor who had been returned to life touched by the finger of Zitu, was able to combine his knowledge of Palosian civilization and Earth's science to introduce motors and other technical inventions to Aphur. Jadgor accepted him gladly as one sent by Zitu and co-operated with him in every way; and Croft won the friendship of Jadgor's son, Robur, and the admiration of Lakkon and his daughter. Croft established that, at times, he would seem to go to sleep for long periods, communing with Zitu, wherein

he learned matters of urgent importance; and in his astral explorations, he learned of the plot whereby Aphur would be gulled into war. More immediately important was that Naia and her father would appear to have been lost in a shipwreck, but actually, Naia would have been kidnapped and made the slave of an ally of Kyphallos, who had never intended to marry her. Through the aid of Zud and Abbu, Croft and Lakkon were prepared. Rifles and hand grenades had been introduced to Aphur, and the ship on which Naia sailed was well armed. The accident that had been planned was averted and the Aphurians overcame the attack that followed.

But when this failed, Zollaria discarded all masks, and invaded Cathur; Kyphallos, as long agreed, made but token resistance, opening the way to Aphur. But Aphur was ready with the new weapons, which included crude tanks, and the invading armies were virtually annihilated. Helmor, Emperor of Zollaria, was forced to surrender; Kyphallos was tried for treason and exiled to Zollaria where, learning that he counted for nothing in Kalamita's eyes now that he was no longer useful, he committed suicide.

All this, Jason Croft told me; and now, he said, he was ready to leave Earth forever. The body of Jason Croft, here on Earth, would die; henceforth he would live in the body of Jasor, who had been created a Prince of Aphur and was legally qualified to marry the woman of his heart. I was not surprised, therefore, to learn soon after that Jason Croft had died. And that, I thought, was the end of this wonderful story so far as I would ever know.

I learned my mistake when I went to examine a new patient one night, at the State Hospital for the Insane. He was a physical wreck, but something about him gave me the oddest sensation I had ever known in my life. I sent the nurse away, hardly knowing why, and then the man spoke and asked me if I didn't know him.

Jason Croft had returned to Earth.

Chapter One

"I didn't expect to come back when I left, Murray, and I don't wonder it surprises you to find me speaking to you with the lips of this poor hunk of flesh. Oh, this is an incipient wreck that I'm holding together simply for my own use. It will suffice, even if it has a pair of lungs badly engorged because of a very shaky heart. Your laboratories will show the kidneys infected, too. I had to take it, because I wanted to get down here with you."

"With--me?" I faltered.

He smiled slightly. "Yes--you, of course. You were the only man on Earth who knew my story. So when I needed certain information which I couldn't gain save in the flesh, I knew you were the man to help me get it. But in order to reach you, I had to limit my choice of Earthly bodies. That's how I came to choose this thing at which you're looking.

"Murray, it's your job to keep me alive until I can gain what I came for--to help me, if you will. Earth possesses knowledge I need on Palos for my work--you can help me gain it just as well here as anywhere else. I want you to prescribe a certain course of study as a part of my treatment and discuss the things I'm after with me. Do you catch my plan?"

Oh, yes, I caught it. I made an effort to rally my staggering senses. "Just how is the Princess Naia?" I asked.

Croft nodded. He seemed to find acceptance of my part in my question. "The Princess Naia is very much all right."

And then I remembered what he had told me before he went to Palos for what I had thought a definite stay. "Or perhaps I should have asked for Mrs. Croft--you said that you expected to be married immediately upon your return to Palos."

Croft frowned. "What one expects and what one meets are not always one and the same, friend Murray," he rejoined. "I returned to Palos after my conversation with you, to encounter a situation of which I had never thought."

"You mean that it interfered with your marriage to the princess?" I exclaimed.

He made a grimace. "You remember Zud the high priest of Zitra, the imperial city of which I told you--who sponsored me with Tamhys before the Zollarian war. And you recall that I left the body of Jasor of Nodhur in Zud's apartments in the pyramid of Zitar when I came back here for the last time, and that Naia was quartered during my absence in the rooms set apart for the Gayana--the Vestals of Ga the Virgin in the pyramid, too. Murray, when I got back there, I found that Zud had proclaimed me the Mouthpiece of Zitu himself."

"The Mouthpiece of Zitu!" I drew a chair close to the bed and sat down.

I cast back in my mind for what Croft had told me concerning the religion of Tamarizia. Zitu was God in their belief. Ga was the woman--a virgin. Azil was her son--known as the Giver of Life. And if Croft had been proclaimed by the high priest of the central state of the empire, the head of the clerical college, as the Mouthpiece of Zitu, it was just about the same as naming him the representative of the Divinity in the flesh. From what Croft had told me of his claiming while in Tamarizia to do all that he did by the grace of Zitu--which

was, of course, no more than the truth in a sense--I could see how his very words might have laid the foundation for the high priest's act.

Yet, Croft had said that he had induced the Tamarizians to adopt a republican way of government rather than their system of allied principalities, and had declared that when he went back he expected to be elected president. "Rather changed your plans, I suppose," I said.

"Changed them?" he returned, with an almost whimsical expression. "Murray, it almost wrecked them at the start--the most important part of them, that is. Remember why I did what I did do really--that all I had done up until that time was in order to win the woman who meant more to me than anything else in life--and then picture if you can my mental condition when I found myself trapped, as it were, by my own acts."

"Your own?" I queried.

He nodded. "Oh, certainly yes--my failing to take into account what a terrible impression I had managed to make on the high priest. I--hand it all, Murray--I knew so entirely what I was up to that I didn't give proper consideration to the effect my words and acts must have on less well-informed minds. I failed to put myself in the place of Zud, and Magur, the head of the church in Aphur, whom I first enlisted in my aid at Himyra.

"At that time, I couldn't have been more absolute if I had been the Mouthpiece of Zitu indeed. Perhaps if I'd stayed there and rushed things through, everything would have been all right. But, as you know, I returned for a final visit to close up all matters pertaining to my Earthly life before I snapped the astral chord which until then had kept my original body alive. And there was where I made my mistake.

"As I've told you, I left my Palosian body in Zud's quarters, rather magnificently placed. Zud saw to that. I suppose now he was turning the elements of what he fancied the truth in his old brain. My form was stretched out on a golden couch, covered with a sheet of orange-colored silk, in the apartment set apart for my use. And I'd been planning, as you know, many things I wanted to do. I'd drawn plans--designs for things common enough on Earth, but never before dreamed of on Palos. And I left the drawings I had made in that room in a golden chest. You remember I told you gold was as plentiful on Palos as iron on earth and used as freely in the metal working arts.

"Night and day a guard was kept in the chamber where I lay in what they believed was my knowledge-gaining sleep. But--the guard was a priest. He would do anything Zud said, of course.

"So you see I fell into the error of not considering old Zud's thoughts or his interpretation of my claim that everything I did was by Zitu's grace. I should have taken Zud more fully into the truth of the facts.

"The high priest had opened that golden box. He had examined my working charts. He had dimly sensed them as designs for things I meant to make--and his wonder knew no bounds. I am convinced the old man only thought he was doing what was absolutely right, according to his lights."

"And Naia?" I asked. "How did she view your elevation to such a lofty state?"

Croft gave me a glance. "I told you Zud messed everything up," he replied. "But--it's a long story. Murray, this ramshackle carcass I've seized won't last out a great many days. The weakling soul who once possessed it broke it down by every sort of abuse, including drugs. But, I've got to learn certain things before I can abandon its use.

"Suppose you send me up the latest works you have on internal medicine and surgery and therapeutics, and drop in tonight. If you're willing to sacrifice a few hours' sleep, I'll spin you the whole yarn."

"All right," I agreed as I rose. "I don't think I was ever more startled in my life, but I'll send up the books, and I'll be right here after nine myself."

"Right," he accepted. "My physicians wouldn't let me have tobacco, though this body craves it. Bring some cigars when you come, and we'll have a good long talk."

Before, however, I enter upon Croft's actual story, I think it better perhaps to briefly describe, in some part at least, those details of the Paosian world with which he had put me in touch on the occasion of our former meeting.

And toward a fuller understanding of that world itself, I think it best to take up the geography of that part of Palos Croft visited first. Mainly that which has to do with the Tamarizian nation--a series of allied principalities surrounding the shores of a vast inland sea, with the exception of a central state--the seat of the imperial capital, embracing the island of Hiranur, located in the sea itself, and the kingdom of Nodhur to the west and south.

From the central sea a narrow strait led west toward an outer ocean beyond the continent on which the several principalities found place. To the north of this strait, known as the Gateway, was Cathur, a mountainous country and the seat of the national university at its capital city Scira. East of Cathur was Mazhur, known at the time of Croft's arrival as the Lost State, since in a former war it had been wrested from the original Tamarizian group by the Zollarians. *

[* East of Mazhur, and circling the central sea to the east, was Bithur,

and Milidhur joined Bithur on the south. West of Milidhur was Aphur, completing the circle about the sea and terminating at the Gateway on the south. Nodhur lay south of Aphur, gaining an outlet to the central sea by means of the River Na. This river had carried commercial craft driven by sail and oar until Croft revolutionized transportation with alcohol-driven motors.

North of Tamarizia lay Zollaria, inhabited by a far more warlike race. Its government was a despotism organized on militaristic lines. Controlling the gateway to the west, Tamarizia had remained the master, even after the fall of Mazhur, still collecting toll from the Zollarian craft on her rivers, despite the foothold gained by her foeman on the northern coast.

East of Zollaria and Tamarizia in the hinterland of the continent lay Mazzer, populated by an aboriginal people of a complexion distinctly blue. Due to an ancient conquest many of these people were now constituted as a working caste in Tamarizia.

Each of these states was governed by an hereditary king.]

And now a word as to the Tamarizians themselves. They were a white and well-formed race. In their social structure women held an equal place with men. They believed in the spirit and a future life and the resurrection of the dead. In the sciences and arts they had made considerable progress.

The clothing of the women consisted of a single garment, falling to the knees or just below them, cinctured about the body, caught over one shoulder by a metal or jeweled boss, and leaving the other shoulder and arm exposed. To this was added sandals of leather, metal, or wood, held to the foot by a toe-and-instep band and lacings running well up the calves. Men of wealth and caste and soldiers and nobles, instead of these sandals, generally wore metal casings,

which amounted to a sandal and leg piece jointed to allow the ankle full play and reaching nearly to the knees.

The men of caste also wore a soft shirt or chemise beneath a metal cuirass or an embroidered tunic, as the case might be. Save on formal occasions, the serving classes, men and women, wore either a narrow cincture about the loins, supporting a small phallary or apron, or went nude about their tasks.

Agriculture was highly developed, and as a people they had advanced far in architecture, painting, sculpture, and similar arts. They lavished much time and expense in beautifying their houses--making of each a small palace, if the owner were rich. The highways along which the sarpelca caravans and the gnuppa-drawn carriages and chariots passed were models of engineering.

[The gnuppa is a creature seemingly half deer and half horse. The sarpelca is not unlike some weird Silurian lizard, twice the size of an elephant, with a pointed tail, a scale-armored back, a long neck somewhat resembling that of a camel, and the head of a marine serpent having a series of fleshy tentacles about the mouth. They are driven by reins affixed to these latter appendages, and stream across the Palosian deserts bearing merchandise upon their enormous backs.]

All these things I knew from Croft's previous talks. He had told me he could go to Palos as quickly as I could think of it myself, and here I was anticipating a resumption that night of his story.

Meanwhile I sent him the books he had said he wanted, together with a box of good cigars. And along about eight forty-five, when I had finished my evening round of patients, I went up myself.

I lighted up a cigar and took a chair, tacitly preparing for a stay of

some considerable time, and then as Croft continued to smoke in an almost meditative silence, I opened the matter myself.

"Even supposing that Zud did get at your plans, I hardly see why he should have taken the step he did before your return."

Croft nodded. "It wasn't only the plans," he said. "You must recall Abbu, the priest of the pyramid at Scira--the one who was present when I entered Jasor's body and made it my own.

"I told you that to Abbu I had acknowledged that my spirit was not Jasor's, but that what I was about to do was for Tamarizia's good, thereby enlisting his aid in my undertakings. At the time I swore him to secrecy, of course, and I honestly believe that up until the time I left Jasor's body for the purpose of making a final trip to earth, he was the only man who knew that the spirit within it was not the same as the one it had held at birth.

"Abuu, after the war with Zollaria, had been brought to Zitra and raised to a higher rank, because of his part in first assisting me. Naturally Zud was acquainted with all such facts, and one can hardly blame him for wanting to know more in view of what I can well understand were the tremendous changes I had brought about in Tamarizia's affairs."

I began to understand what must have happened. "He pumped Abbu?"

"Exactly." Croft smiled dryly again. "He absolved him from his oath and learned all the facts with which Abbu was acquainted. You can easily understand the rest. Jasor of Nodhur dies. His body comes back to life. Its lips speak to Abbu, the priest. He hears that a new spirit inhabits Jasor's body. Immediately after strange things--but things aimed wholly for Tamarizia's good--begin to happen.

"Shall the dead live again, save by divine intervention? Shall un dreamed of things appear save by Zitu's grace? And if in addition the revived body shall fall into strange sleeps at times and upon waking seem possessed of a supernatural knowledge, what more natural to the priest--unendowed with a full understanding of what was taking place, unaware that the things that excited his unlimited amazement were but copies of things existing on another planet--than to consider that those things he witnessed were the result of divine ordination and to regard the individual who brought them about as the mouthpiece of his god in the flesh? Oh, frankly, Murray, I don't blame that puzzled old man in the least. As a matter of fact, I blame myself for not having foreseen the effect of all that had happened on his brain."

Croft put out a hand and selected a fresh cigar. He set it alight and got it to going nicely while, as it seemed to me, he marshaled his thoughts. And then--all at once he began speaking again, and this is the story he told.

Chapter Two

The Palosian day--or "sun"--is twenty-seven hours long. Dawn was on the verge of breaking when Croft, having severed the astral link with his Earthly body, opened Jasor of Nodhur's physical eyes in the room of the Zitran pyramid. A slightly unsteady radiance of a yellow color filled the room. It came from the blazing wicks in oil-filled sconces fixed about the walls.

His glance fell upon one of the lay brothers of the priesthood, clad in a brown robe, from which peeped his toe-splayed, naked feet. He sat on a stool of molded copper, with down bent head. He appeared to be asleep. But suddenly as though aroused by Croft's slight

movement, he jerked to attention and encountered the sleeper's eyes. Instantly he sprang erect, approaching with a soft, quick shuffle and pausing by the golden bed.

"My lord--my lord!" he stammered in little more than a husky whisper, and sank upon his knees. His back bent, his head inclined until its face was hidden. His arms rose, and as Croft watched he made the sign of the Tamarizian priesthood--a horizontal cross.

Croft lifted himself to a sitting posture on the couch, shoving the coverings back. "Come! What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Since you were placed to attend my awaking, why do you kneel?"

The man lifted his face--it was white, and his eyes were wide.

"Because," he said slowly, in almost timorous fashion, "all men bend the knee to the Mouthpiece of Zitu--even Zud himself."

The whole thing burst on Croft just like that. "Get up," he said to the priest.

"Yes, lord."

The brother rose.

"Give me my garments." Croft kicked the silken sheet completely off and stood upon his feet.

"At once." The brother shuffled toward a chest in a corner of the apartment, lifted the lid and produced a robe. Blue it was--the color of the highest order of the priesthood--embroidered on the breast in stones like drops of transparent gold. The brother brought it back, outspread across his forearms, and Croft caught sight of the design--the wings of Azil, flaring out from the stem of a cross, looped in its

upper segment--the cross ansata--the Palosian symbol of immortal life. Then the brother once more sank to his knees, holding the garment toward him.

"What is the meaning of this?"

When he had called for his garments he had expected his leg casings of gold, gem studded, his shirt of soft fiber, and his metal cuirass whereon blazed Aphur's sign of the sun, his sword with its jewel-incrusted hilt and belt, and his helmet with its orange plums.

But the kneeling brother answered, "It is as Zud hath decreed."

Zud--Zud--Zud. It seemed to Croft that Zud had, all unknown to him, been taking a very large part in his affairs. He took the robe from the brother's extended arms and slipped it on, fastening the shoulder boss, and seated himself while his companion laced a pair of blue-and-gold leather sandals on his feet.

"Go now," he directed, once the latter task was completed. "Say to Zud that with him I would have speech."

"I go. It was ordered that I report thy awakening, O Mouth--" the priest began as he backed toward the door.

Croft cut him short almost sharply. He lifted an arm in a sudden pointing gesture: "Go!"

The Mouthpiece of Zitu! Naia! He lifted his eyes toward the ceiling of the room. Up there--high above him--in the quarters of the Gayana, the vestals--where burned in the shrine of Ga the never-dying fire of life--up there she was waiting for him to come back--waiting to become his bride. What would be the effect of whatever it was Zud had done in his absence, on the maid herself?

It behooved him to master his startled nerves and get himself into a proper mind to dominate the coming interview with Zud. He relaxed the tension of his body and waited to Zud to appear, as he presently did.

He came in, an old man with graying hair, clad in an azure blue robe with the cross ansata embroidered in flame-colored jewels upon the breast. He advanced directly toward Croft as the latter rose, and some three paces before him sank slowly to his knees.

"Thou hast called, and thy servant appears, O Mouthpiece of Zitu," he said slowly in a tone of what might be reverence. "Long were we in recognizing the truth, yet was the fault not entirely our own, since only to Abbu of Scira had you voiced it, and not since Azil himself descended to teach the sons of mortals has such a thing occurred, nor in Zitu's wisdom was they coming revealed."

In a flash Croft began to understand. The mention of Abbu's name was enough to give him the clue.

"Thou thinkest me the Mouthpiece of Zitu, then, indeed?"

"Aye, by Zitu! the one source of life and knowledge," Zud replied. "Did not Abbu state that you told him they spirit was not that of Jasor of Nodhur, who was dead, yet whose body having died, became once more alive, and hast thou not said that all you did was by Zitu's grace? Didst not tell me that those things you commanded to be made for Tamarizia's good were shown to you in your sleeps? Canst the spirit of a mortal enter and leave the body at will--the spirit of one such as Jasor was--and"--seemingly Zud was forgetful of all discretion in this meeting--"have I not seen the paintings of the things you plan yet to bring to Tamarizia in yonder casket?"

Croft considered swiftly. Sincerity rang in the man's tones, and more

and more, as he ran on, Croft understood.

"You opened the casket?" he demanded in a louder, an accusatory voice. "You dared much, priest of Zitu. What things are to be will be in the time of Zitu's choosing. It is a brave man dares to know all things in advance."

Zud's expression changed. "My lord--my lord," he faltered, "I but sought to learn the truth. I swear by Zitu that my heart was clean in what I had done and--said."

There was an odd break in his utterance just before the final word. Croft noted his manner of speaking, and caught up that last word: "Said? You have said what, Zud?"

"That thou wert the Mouthpiece of Zitu--sent into the flesh for Tamarizia's good."

"To whom have these things been spoken?"

"To all Tamarizia have I, as high priest, proclaimed it," said Zud. "Zitra but waits your awakening that it may behold and proclaim you in the body you have chosen as your servant, and give ear to your words."

Chapter Three

The thing was cut and dried. Even a public appearance was, it would seem, arranged. The church of the nation had given him forth as a spirit divinely sent as a teacher, gaining physical expression through the body of Jasor of Nodhur. And--what was Croft to do? To disclaim--to compel Zud to retract--would strike, as he knew, not only at his own powers of future accomplishment, discredit him as it were, but

would aim a blow at the very foundation of the social structure.

For the political end of the matter he cared very little, to tell the truth, but even the thought of Naia sent a quiver throughout his body. He felt baffled, trapped, enraged. For a moment a wild impulse to seize the kneeling man at his feet, lift him up and shake him, hurl against him a scorching torrent of passion-urged words for his curious meddling, assailed him. But he choked it and stood as one who considers.

"Enough. What things Zitu wills, those things shall be done. Yet have I a body, as thou seest, that has lain unnourished full long. Rise, Zud of Zitra. Command me food. I would eat while we talk."

"Even now it waits." Zud rose and went backward toward the door. He set it open. As Croft seated himself once more on his couch there filed in a group of brothers, the foremost bearing a short-legged table of molded copper, the others dishes and flagons in their hands.

The dishes were of gold and silver. There were goblets of glass which the Tamarizians made of magnificent quality and design. One of the latter was placed before Croft and filled with a mid and blood-red wine. Their service ended the lay brothers bent in genuflexion and retired. Zud remained standing in watchful silence until Croft bad him be seated, when he drew up a stool and sat down.

While he ate Croft plunged into a series of questions concerning affairs in the Tamarizian states.

The reign of Tamhys will terminate in fourteen suns?"

"Aye."

"Thereafter we shall adopt the new government as it was decided, the elections being held as in the choice of the former assemblies in

each kingdom--each decktaron to elect a representative, by whose vote shall be the choice of the president?"

"Aye." Zud inclined his head. "So has it been proclaimed.

"What candidates have been selected?"

"Jadgor of Aphur, and Tammon, Tamhys's son."

Croft considered the names as he sipped his wine. Jadgor, he knew, had, before the Zollarian war, had an eye on the Zitran throne--had hoped to mount it, and strengthen the entire nation by a change of that policy of pacifism which, by its continuation for something like fifty years, made Tamarizia weak, despite the wonderful resources in wealth and men which were hers. Of course, Croft had expected to enter the field itself, but now he brushed the point aside.

"It is well." He gave his decision and set down his glass. "And the governors of the states?"

Zud mentioned a list of names covering each former kingdom. "In Aphur Robur, Jadgor's son alone. There is no other, because of his part with you in all that has been down. In Cathur, Mutlos, a man of the people, and Koryphon, Scythys's second son, who ascended the throne, as you know, after Kyphallos fled and destroyed himself in Berla before Kalamita's eyes. As your directions were understood before the time of your recent sleeping, in Hiranur the president controls also the state affairs."

"Aye," Croft agreed. His heart had warmed at the announcement that Robur stood for election in Aphur alone. Of all its people he had known, save Naia only, he had come to love Robur best, had found him a true friend, a man of broad and an intelligent mind, under each and every test. He had even discussed those periods when his body lay

unconscious with the Aphurian crown prince in so far as he could, and there had been a time when the only confidante of his love for Naia had been Gaya, Robur's wife.

"And where is Robur?" he asked.

"In Zitra, lord. He and Lakkon and Jadgor desire speech with thee so soon as thou shalt have waked."

A quiver of comprehension stirred in Croft's breast. He threw up his head and stared the high priest in the eyes, and found them a trifle uncertain, his whole expression more or less puzzled, even somewhat abashed.

"What troubles you, Zud?"

And for a moment Zud made no answer; for a moment he seemed to study Croft's face before he began in apologetic fashion. "What I have done I have done for the best, as I now call Zitu to witness. Yet are there some things I do not understand."

"You refer to the maiden Naia, who by your permission was taken into the quarters of the Gayana?"

"Aye," Zud said scarcely above a whisper at length and inclined his head.

"To whom ere I slept, by consent of her father and Jadgor, I was pledged?"

"Aye, lord. Jadgor and Lakkon also ask themselves--"

"Why the Mouthpiece of Zitu should seek a union in the flesh?"

Zud clasped his hands before him. He sat with eyes downcast. "Thou

hast spoken, lord," he said.

Croft held him with a level regard. "And what says Zud, the high priest?"

"That the ways of Zitu are beyond mortal understanding."

"Yes." Croft took him up sharply. "Zud, the high priest, endeavored to understand--toward which end, though Abbu of Scira had sworn by Zitu to keep silent, he induced him to talk."

"I--I--lord, I absolved him of the oath of silence," Zud faltered.

"And since when may even the high priest rescind that which Zitu has recorded?"

A tremor shook the priest. A twitching seized his face. He shrank back and sat staring, staring at the strange individual before him. One could no longer doubt that he had been sincere in what he had done, at least--what he had proclaimed of Croft, he himself believed.

"High priest of Zitu, in what words was your proclamation to Tamarizia concerning him until now known as the Hupor Jasor made?"

Zud wet his lips and made answer. "It was said that Zitu had sent us a teacher--one who should reveal to all men his will, through whom he revealed his pleasure--one who was his mouthpiece indeed."

"And this you believed?"

"Aye, lord." Zud moved. He would have knelt had not Croft stayed him.

"*Hilka!* Hold!"

"Aye, lord." Zud stood erect. His knees seemed knocking together and he swayed. Something like pity stirred in Croft's breast. "Think you that as Zitu's Mouthpiece I shall find it easy to take my place as heretofore in the Himyran or Ladhra shops, where the instruments designed for Tamarizia's use shall be brought forth? Do men work best with one such as you would name me, or with another man, O Zud?"

"Lord, lord!" Zud bowed his head.

"Or think you that were I the mouthpiece of Zitu, I would have pledged myself to this maid save by his will? Yet today even Zud bends the knee in my presence since his proclamation. Is this thing known to the Gayana as well as to the priests?"

"Yes, it is known," Zud told him slowly.

"The maid is still there?"

"Yes."

"She has heard the truth?"

"Yes." Zud flung up his head. Croft's last word seemed to give him courage. "She knows--the truth," he said. "She requested an audience after she had heard, and I went to her. I told her those things Abbu said."

"That my spirit was not Jasor's?"

"Yes."

"And what said she?" Croft forced himself to ask.

"She is a maiden of spirit," said Zud in the tone of one who palliates an offense. "She is unused to restraint. She refuses to give credence to Abbu's story or accept its truth save from your own lips."

Croft thrilled. Here was fidelity and trust--the absolute confidence which should exist between true mates. "She remains with the Gayana?"

"Aye--until such time as you awaken."

"I will see her. Send one to guide me to her at once."

"Lord! Zud's tone was aghast.

"Stop!" Croft cut short his incipient protest. "Would question my demands?"

"But the Gayana--" Zud began a faltering explanation.

"May be entered by him who wears the wings of the Angel of Life as well as the high priest."

For a long, breathless instant the glances of the two men met and crossed, engaging the one with the other. And then Zud was beaten down. He yielded.

"Permit that I show you," he said, "and led the way."

Chapter Four

They passed from the room and along a corridor in which the oil sconces had now been extinguished, faintly illuminated by the light of the new day. Before a massive door Zud paused and set his hand to a slender cord. His action was followed by the muffled clanging of a

brazen gong. He slid the door open and revealed the shadow-wrapped throat of a shaft, up which a platform presently trembled into view. It was a primitive form of elevator operated, as Croft knew, by a Mazzerian crew in the foundations of the pyramid itself, lifting and lowering it on signal, by winding its cable on and off a revolving drum.

With Zud, he stepped aboard. The platform mounted slowly up the shaft. The high priest, with a hand on an inner cord, observed its progress, and presently once more the gong far below clanged out. The platform stopped.

They stepped into a very short corridor between masonry walls of a cut and polished stone not unlike marble, save that it held a strange, translucent quality in its substance and was wholly white. The main staircase of the pyramid mounted before them and ran on toward the top, with its crowning Temple of Zitu, and just beyond it, at the far end of the corridor, was a door. Silver it was, the most precious of Palosian metals, tooled and carved into the design of a full-sized woman's figure, in whose hand was the looped cross of immortal life.

Croft stood with tight-set lips and flaring nostrils as Zud put up a hand and pressed against the left breast of the woman on the door.

There was a tiny click, and the door slid to one side, disappearing into a socket in the wall and flooding the corridor with light. No gloomy abode was that in which the vestals dwelt. High up on the pyramid, but one flight beneath the crowning temple on the truncated apex, it caught the first of Sirius's rays, and the last, through deep embrasures set with slanting glass in the structure's walls. As the door slipped aside a scene was presented to Croft's eyes, brilliant with light and life.

"Hold!" he said as Zud would have entered and stepped passt him on one side."

"Wait me below in your own apartments, man of Zitu. Consider meanwhile those words we have spoken before you brought me here. Peace be with you, priest of Zitu. Go!"

Then, as Zud turned to do his bidding and regained the platform in the shaft, he stepped through the aperture of the door to the other side and paused, a trifle abashed.

He had come at a stride to a region of youth and beauty. It surrounded him on every side. Feminine forms in diaphanous fabrics were grouped about the room. The chatter of their voices filled the place. Directly before him a group of maidens already at work about an immense basket of flowers, forming the garlands and sprays which at the noontide hour of prayer they would fling at the feet of the statue of Tamarizia's god, paused and stood staring as Croft appeared.

Their hair, unrestrained save for a metal filet or cincture, fell in masses down their graceful backs. The flesh of their shoulders and arms and sandalless feet, glowed warm and pinkly white. Their lips grew parted, and their eyes, unaccustomed to masculine presence, save possibly that of old Zud, grew wide.

So for a moment they stood staring until, as though her attention was arrested by the postures and the direction of their glances, an older woman appeared, coming directly toward where Croft stood, to pause before him and bend in a genuflection, and inquire, "What does my lord of Zitu seek?"

"Speech with the maiden Naia, priestess of Ga." Croft met her glance directly.

"So be it," said the woman. "Come with me."

He followed--across a hugely pillared room where others of the vestals sat on cushions or divans, engaged in simple tasks--toward a mighty figure of a woman, carved from the strangely beautiful translucent stone the Tamarizians used mainly in their sculpture--the figure of a woman seated, brooding with a face of divinely maternal affection above the form of a babe stretched prone across her knees.

And this he thought was Ga, to whom Naia of Aphur had prayed that she might be spared the unclean ordeal of a marriage with Cathur's prince. This was the madonna. This was the woman and--her child--woman the shrine of the fire eternal, watching it, guarding it, replenishing it against extinction through the eons of ages within and from herself.

A sudden passionate desire to do her and the members of her sex some form of honor seized him in an impulse which sent him without premeditation to his knees, bending before her majestic presence, forming the sign of the cross horizontal, beneath her brooding features; glancing up then, and then only, to meet the eyes of his guide--and find them less frigid, in a subtle manner pleased.

But she made no comment as Croft rose slowly and once more followed her lead toward the door of a room, which she unlatched and pushed aside.

Through the opening Croft's eyes leaped, to fall upon the figure of a woman, her hair as golden as the sunshine falling in a rippling, silken mass to the couch of wine-red wood on which she sat, her head bent above a frame in which her tapering fingers were embroidering a pattern in small, pierced jewels on a fabric of sheerest gauze.

All that in a flash. Then, as though attracted by the opening of the door, the woman glanced up, lifting a pair of pansy-purple eyes.

"Naia!" Croft's lips framed the word rather than spoke it. He stepped swiftly toward her through the door. It clicked shut behind him as the vestal closed it.

Naia, of Aphur, rose. The last vestige of color seemed drained from her face, leaving her eyes very dark in its pallor, their pupils stretched wondrously wide. And then while Croft waited, she moved and sank down on her slender, supple knees.

"Beloved!" Croft went one swift pace toward her. He stretched out his hands. "Naia--mine own--arise."

She glanced up. A quiver shook the perfect curve of her mouth. "How speaks the Mouthpiece of Zitu in a lover's guise?"

"Were I to answer your question, beloved, would any hear?"

She regarded him strangely. "No," she made answer slowly. "This is my own apartment--set aside for my use for such time as I remain with the Gayana. What things may be said within it shall remain unknown."

"Then--" In a single stride Croft approached her. He swept her into his arms. "Hark ye, beloved," he said. "Hark ye--mark well my answer. The Mouthpiece of Zitu is no supernatural being, but a man and a lover--thy lover in very truth."

And on the word the supple body of the woman went tense inside his arms. It struggled, it writhed. With an effort Naia tore herself free. Hot words poured from her mouth as she choked and gasped for breath.

"Then--in the name of Zitu--what do you here--with that--that"--she lifted a naked arm and pointed--"with the wings of Azil--the looped cross of Ga--upon your breast?"

"Is not Zud a man--and wears he not the cross at least--and comes he not among the Gayana at will?"

And as he paused she blazed out in a fashion of almost blazing contempt. "A man, yes, is Zud--one in whom the flame of life burns low, who comes thither only when the work of him he serves demands it. Zud speaks, when he comes, naught but what to him seems truth."

"What *seems* truth, aye," he rejoined, therefore quickly holding Naia's eyes, from which flashed what seemed a purple fire, with his own. "Yet what man shall know the mind of Zitu, save as by his own interpretation, or be free from error in his words at times, even though years should have taught him discretion in his tongue?"

Naia's lip curled. "At least," said she, "Zud makes no claim of being any other than he is."

"Nor do I." Croft drew himself up. "Have I claimed ever to be aught save a man who loved thee? Was it I or Zud who named me Mouthpiece of Zitu while I slept, or by whose orders, when I asked for clothing, was given me this priestly dress? Has Jasor of Nodhur ever in the past sought any greater exaltation in rank or fame or power than that alone which would bring him to your side?"

And now for the first time it seemed that the Princess Naia faltered. Some of the tension went out of her graceful figure. Doubt crept into her eyes. "You--you," she asked a broken question, "would have me believe the Mouthpiece of Zitu, a--man?"

"Yes--as he is--a man who loves you as none ever loved you before." Croft threw out his arms. "Seem I not a man to you, Naia of Aphur? Is a man any less a man because he wears the garments of a priest?"

"Hold, in Zitu's name!" Abruptly a tremor, a shudder shook the slender, half-veiled form he watched. "Man, though he be a priest, is sworn to chastity in zitu's sight. Yet you, whom Zud names the Mouthpiece of Zitu--"

"Am sworn to love you, beloved," Croft cut her protest short.

"Love?" Terror woke in Naia's face. She drew back. "Would seek to compel me with your newly acknowledged power? So long as Zud named you a spirit, I was ready to bend before you. But now that you name yourself a man, would seek to lead be into sin, even were I minded to give heed to your plea?"

"Nay," said Croft in a softer voice. "Nay, Naia, love such as mine is no sin, but the law of Zitu himself--the cause of all living--all life. Yet, save you yield yourself to me of your own will, those things my spirit cries for shall not be. And--can I not convince you that, despite the words of Zud, which were ill advised, I am no more than him to whom you gave your promise--than are you--free?"

He broke off and for the first time bowed his head. And as he stood there a change came over the girl who watched. For the first time in her knowledge of him Jasor of Nodhur bent his unflinching crest; for the first time a hopeless something weakened the lines of his strongly commanding face. She moved. Step by step she approached him where he stood. In an almost timid fashion she lifted a bared arm and laid her hand against his chest.

"But," she faltered, "Abbu said--"

"What?" Croft did not alter his position.

"Those things which sent my spirit down to the dark world of Zitemku, ruler of the lost souls, in surprised dismay--that the spirit which dwelt

in Jasor of Nodhur's body was not his own, but another's--sent by Zitu to possess it--when Jasor--died." The last was a quivering whisper, no more than a sibilant breath.

"And if what Abbu said were truth?" Croft lifted his somber visage and looked down into her darkly tragic eyes.

"If? Think you that, right or wrong in Zitu's sight, I myself could mate with you were it the truth--couldst give myself to the embrace of a body filled by another than that spirit Zitu breathed into it at birth; think you my flesh would not shrink in very horror from the contact, my spirit rebel, nor force my flesh to yield? And were Abbu's tale true, then, too, were the high priest right. For how might such a thing transpire save by the will of Zitu himself--how else the body of a man who had given up the spirit return to life?"

"I have told you," said Croft, "that those things I did were done by Zitu's grace. But I have not explained my full meaning. That I had reserved for another time, and for your ears alone. Yet I swear now by Zitu and Ga and Azil that I meant in my heart to tell you all things before I claimed you as my wife--make all things plain."

"Then--" Once more Naia's figure stiffened. One hand crept up and lay pressed in above her heart. "Abbu said truth--your spirit is not Jasor's, but another's?"

"Yes," said Croft, dully refusing further evasion, "Abbu said the truth. Yet not all the truth, and Zud overshot the mark in his interpretation."

"Zitu! Ga! Befriend me!"

All life went out of her glorious body. It sank down, seemed to shrink, to bend and sway before him like a tempest-riven reed.

Croft caught it as it fell and lifted it in his arms--held it and bent above it with sick despair in his heart. The sound of a muffled groan escaped his lips. "Ga befriend her. Zitu befriend me. Azil have compassion upon us both!" he cried before he laid her on the couch of wine-red blood.

For a long moment after he had straightened, he stood gazing down upon her. Naia of Aphur was his no longer. But--as Mouthpiece of Zitu--all men must obey his mandates; there would be no exception; not even the high priest himself, and--if he were to be cheated of the major object for which he had labored, to attain which he had finally broken the last bond between himself and Earth--then let all men beware. He turned away to go in search of Zud.

Chapter Five

And, now, despite all these things, Croft's future course became to him more clear.

Since the commanding part remained to him yet, it was his to command, not to question or advise. He stalked across the sunlighted vastness of the region of the Gayanas where the chatter of the maidens sank to silence as he passed, bade the vestal who had taken him to Naia send some of the women to attend her and passed through the silver door.

Stern of lip, utterly composed in outward seeming once more, giving no outward sign of the tempest of black despair, which raged with him, he made his way down three of the angling flights of the pyramid stairs and flung back into its masonry sockets the high priest's door.

Never perhaps in the history of the nation had so unceremonious an entrance of those chambers in the sacred structure been made. Yet

Croft had deliberately planned on the effect and a quiver of satisfaction filled him, as Zud, seated at a table of the wine-red wood so much used for furnishings in Tamarizia, refreshing himself with some cakes of beaten grain and wine, and fruit, glanced up sharply with an expression of surprised resentment and then started to his feet.

"Sit, man of Zitu," he directed brusksly, and watched the high priest comply as he himself advanced and occupied a richly upholstered couch close to where Zud sat. "It were well to consider the form of this proclamation concerning the Mouthpiece of Zitu, I think."

Zud eyed him. Plainly the high priest was ill at ease. "I--give ear, lord," he began, after a momentary pause. "What suggestions are there--"

"Suggestions? Think you that I shall offer suggestions, priest of Zitu? Does Zitu suggest when he speaks?"

"Nay." Zud's expression grew troubled. "Hold not my words against me, lord. I seek not thy displeasure. Yours is the speaking, mine it is to--obey."

"That is well," said Croft in a milder voice. "Listen then, Zud. It is my will that neither you, nor the brothers of the priesthood, nor any other man in Tamarizia, bend the knee to me again. Render unto Zitu that obeisance as heretofore--to Ga and Azil--not to me. Those things are of the spirit, Zud, not of the flesh. In Tamarizia after fourteen days men walk equal in Zitu's sight. Let thy word go forth to this effect."

A tremor shook the high priest's hand as he stretched it forth. "I hear and obey, O lord. Yet was it to thy spirit the knee was bent, not to Jasor of Nodhur's flesh."

"My spirit is what Zitu by his grace has made it," Croft returned. "What I am lies between me and Zitu himself."

"Yet how then shall the Mouthpiece of Zitu be proclaimed?" Zud quavered.

"It is of that I would give you counsel," Croft replied. "Were I minded I could forbid this proclamation altogether, Zud, and compel you to hang your head, admitting that you had meddled to bring about those things Zitu had not ordained. Think you he needs any man's assistance in working out his plan? Yet because I have watched closely since I awakened, and find your act inspired by no evil intent, but by lack of understanding, because to discredit your words were to strike not only thee, but at the very foundation itself of each man's belief, I am minded to let what you have decreed take place.

"You shall proclaim me thus. Not as a spirit, but as a man, a teacher, one to whom Zitu permits certain things to be known, one by whom the welfare of the nation is considered, through whom shall be given to Tamarizia's people much for their own good, through whom those things Zitu permits for them shall be transmitted to them, and in so much Zitu's mouthpiece still." Abruptly he broke off as a sudden conception seized him. For a time he considered a startlingly daring plan before he spoke again in a tone of musing. "Zud--Zud, if you only knew the truth."

"The truth, O lord! Have I not sought it all my life?"

Croft nodded. "Aye, priest of Zitu, I think you have. Wouldst hear the truth of those things Abbu told you from my mouth?"

Zud leaned forward somewhat quickly. "Lord!" he faltered, "lord!"

Croft told him the tale.

While he talked time dragged on, and by degrees Zud relaxed. His attitude now became that of an amazed and eager attention. By degrees his excitement increased, until he was gripping the arms of his chair and leaning toward Croft, in a posture which seemed no more than physical reflex of his mental determination to miss no single word.

"Thou--thou sayest a man may leave his body at will?" he stammered as Croft paused.

"Yes, if he knows the method of controlling his spirit to affect his object."

"May go to other places while his body remains where he leaves it--and see and know, and return again?"

"Yes," he repeated again.

"It is hard to believe," said Zud.

"Would you like to have proof?"

"Proof?" Zud queried."

"Yes. Would you like to leave this body of yours, Zud of Zittra, under my direction, learn I have spoken the truth?"

His words were followed by a widening of the high priest's eyes.

"Thou canst bring that about?"

"Yes, if you obey me wholly."

"My obedience is yours, O lord," he gasped.

"Then," said Croft, summoning all the powers of his trained will to his aid, "fasten thy eyes on me, O man of Zitu, and fix thy mind on sleep, for this leaving of the body begins indeed with a something approaching sleep in its nature. Think therefore of sleep, O Zud--of sleep, of only sleep!"

Fastening his gaze upon him in complete attention, until by degrees his lids, at first wide, began to droop above his eyes, Zud obeyed.

"So then," Croft droned on as he noted the change, "your eyes are closing, Zud, the lids grow heavy, sleep creeps now upon thee; sleep, a deep sleep. Zud, thou art asleep, yet sleeping thou canst hear my voice. Speak I not the truth?"

"Aye"--a muffled murmur from the high priest's mouth.

"And hearing me, Zud, even in your sleep you will render obedience to my words. Hence, listen closely and obey. Do you know where Lakkon and Jadgor and Robur lodge?"

"Aye," quavered the high priest.

"Then you shall go there, Zud, on my command. In the name of Zitu I command you to leave your body--now."

For a moment he gave over speaking and waited while the form of the high priest relaxed and sagged down in the chair of ruddy wood. Then abruptly he resumed. "Have obeyed me, Zud?"

"Aye," no more than a whisper from the lips of the body in the chair.

"What do you see?" Croft demanded.

"A strange sight, indeed. My own form, as in a reflecting water-pool, seated with downcast head, as wrapped in sleep."

"Tis well," Croft spoke in answer and direction. "Await my company, Zud." He threw himself prone upon the couch and freed his own astral shell from Jasor's body by the effort of his will. An instant later he floated midway between the floor and ceiling at Zud's side. Below them, sat and reclined each body. There stood the table, still bearing food for the material body midway between couch and chair. Croft turned to his companion. And now all communication was on the astral plane, without sound, yet by a none less evident diffusion of conscious vibration.

"Thou seest?" he queried with a smile.

"Aye," the answer came to him from Zud's wraith. "Aye, lord, I see, and am filled with amazement."

"Thou seest but the first step as yet," Croft told him. "Come!"

There was an open embrasure in the pyramid wall. Through it Croft willed himself, and seizing the thin arm of the weird form beside him, dragged it along. They shot out and up through a sun-filled air--out and up and up. The pyramid lay beneath them, the snow-white temple of Zitu glinting in dazzling fashion on its top. East, west, north and south Zitra lay spread to their sight, with its houses, its palaces and hovels, the ringing circumference of its might walls. Its harbor studded with sails was all asparkle in the sunlight, and beyond that the bosom of the central ocean rose and fell slowly like the breast of a woman asleep.

"Lord! Lord!" Croft sensed that the high priest gasped again in his emotions at least.

"Behold!" Croft returned and swept an arm in the gesture of a circle. "Priest of Zitu, behold! And, now, in which direction do the men I

mentioned lodge?"

"In the palace of Tamhys himself, as his guests," Zud replied, and pointed with a spectral arm.

"Will thyself to their presence, even as you were in the flesh. Think only that you desire immediate nearness to them. So shall you come upon them, Zud."

"Aye, lord," Zud knit his astral brows as though in mental effort.

The sunlight vanished in a flash. With it went out the far-flung view of the Tamarizian landscape--the city, the waves of the central sea. Suddenly vast walls appeared on every hand--a tessellated floor inlaid in white and gold and silver, stretched out beneath a roof of silver inlaid beams, supporting frames containing varicolored glass.

This was the interior court of the Zitran palace as Croft knew. It swept past quickly. He had the impression of the balcony surrounding it on all four sides in Tamarizian style, of the supporting arches, of the groups of statuary between them, of the ascending stairways, and then they vanished, too, and he found himself in a smaller apartment, its sliding doorway covered by a scarlet curtain, its floor in part concealed by gorgeous rugs, its windows draped with other scarlet tissues through which the outer light shone redly--a room equipped with couches and chairs and tables, adorned between the doors and windows with frescoes and groups of sculpture done in the customary translucent stone, and supported on pedestals of copper, silver and gold. So much he saw at a glance before he fastened his attention on the figures of three men grouped about a table in front of a scarlet-curtained window in the outer end of the room.

These men he knew, had met and known and conversed with before in the flesh. Jadgor, of Aphur, heavy set, dark of eyes and

complexion, grizzled of hair, his nose high and somewhat bent in the middle, his whole appearance that of a man of driving purpose, sat there now clad in leg cases, shirt and metal cuirass, with Aphur's rayed sun on his breast. And close beside him on the table reposed his helmet with its nodding scarlet plumes.

Opposite him sat Lakkon, noble of Aphur and adviser to the king, heavy set like his brother-in-law, strong of feature, with iron-gray poll, dressed like to Jadgor in every essential detail, though in a fashion less royal. By the end of the table stood Robur, Jadgor's son, clean-limbed, strong-featured, with well-formed jaw and mouth, about which lurked often a hint of humor, as Croft knew. In a fleeting glance he recognized its absence now. The face of the crown prince was set into almost stubborn lines, its cheeks a trifle flushed.

And even as Croft perceived the attitude and expression of the several occupants of the apartment, Jadgor hit the table with one fist a resounding crash, whose vibration eddied out and set Zud to drunkenly rocking in their whorl close by Croft's side.

"By Zitu, and by Zitu!" He swore a double oath. "I like not this delay in an understanding. Thrice in as many days have we visited the pyramid, and Zud has said he sleeps. Much has he done for Tamarizia, as I shall last deny, nor did he tell us to remain in Zitra at the last. Yet if Zud be right, as he should, being high priest, my brother, Lakkon, finds himself in difficult case."

Lakkon's visage darkened. "Yet was the pledge given of his seeking," he broke out in querulous fashion. "Jadgor knows that Jasor, be he spirit, as Zud saith, or man, sought it of me ere he entered the armored car to lead into the conflict wherein Helmor, of Zollaria, was overthrown. And Jadgor himself did sponsor my words wherein Naia, my daughter, was promised him to wife."

"Aye," said Jadgor, frowning. "Yet shall a spirit mate with the flesh? Continence is no less a vow of the priesthood than of the Gayana. Were a spirit sent by Zitu to do his work, even though to that end he employs the body of one whom Azil has recalled, is he to be considered as man or priest?"

"Think you Zitu wouldst choose a rebellious spirit for his mouthpiece?" Robur broke in with considerable heat. "Jadgor, my father, who are we to judge?"

"Robur seems minded to attempt it," Jadgor rejoined with a sarcasm he plainly did not wish to conceal.

"Aye." The color deepened in the crown prince's cheeks. "For by Jadgor's command I labored beside this Jasor, of Nodhur, as he then was known, for the better part of a cycle, toward the end of making Tamarizia safe against what Helmor did intend, and in nothing did I find him other save steadfast and just. Man he was in every seeming, save that his knowledge surpassed the knowledge of all other men, and for these sleeps such as holds him now. We became as brothers in our common purpose, whereby Jadgor now bids fair to attend his ends."

Croft's heart warmed swiftly to Robur's defense, though it was no more than from his knowledge of the crown prince he had felt he might expect.

And that Jadgor sensed the half-veiled rebuke, he saw at once, since the Aphurian's frown but deepened before he spoke. "Man in seeming is he, I admit, yet to Abbu he confessed that he was not Jasor but another. This thing I do not understand, nor doth Zud. Yet were he an agent of Zitu, then were the end of which you speak of Zitu's willing for Tamarizia's good, which, as my son knows, lies nearest Jadgor's heart. Zud, as you know also, I have questioned,

and he holds that that none save a mortal may know a woman, save only by Zitu's will, as Azil was conceived of Ga.

"Then why question Zitu's will, as expressed by Zitu's Mouthpiece?" said Robur quickly, and paused with a gasp.

"What mean you?" Jadgor half rose from his seat.

"Nay--" Suddenly Robur faltered, he seemed disturbed, abashed. He lowered his eyes. "Nay, my father, I spoke in haste. What says the maiden herself? Did not my uncle speak with her the prior sun?"

"She holds to her promise as she has held since the beginning," Jadgor replied. "She refuses to leave the Gayana until she has speech with the sleeper himself."

"Nor will she leave ever, should Abbu's words and Zud's judgment prove true," Lakkon said with a twitching face. "Virgin is she in all save the love she has given to him she knew as Jasor. Failing its consummation, she becomes Gayana herself."

"Nay, by Zitu!" Robur cried a savage protest. "My father and uncle, of this thing there lies some explanation. He who I, too, knew as Jasor, won not the full love of my cousin for any such sterile fate. Himself, he told me that all he did was by Zitu's grace, and of *all* that he did was not this too a part?"

Then as Jadgor made now immediate answer, and Lakkon sat with troubled countenance, Robur went on. "Wherefore, as said before, who are we to judge the Hupor Jasor or the Mouthpiece of Zitu, be he what he may, ere he awakes? Like to my cousin, Naia, I would ask him to speak for himself."

Jadgor gave him a glance. "For that waking we have waited many

suns."

"Yet, perhaps he wakes even now," Lakkon suggested quickly, his manner that of a man who grasps at straws.

"Aye," said Jadgor, "perhaps. And--since we are met for the purpose, rather than useless discussion, let us seek the pyramid at once." He rose, a commanding figure in his glistening cuirass and moved toward the curtained door.

"Back!" Croft commanded Zud. "Desire the return to thy body."

He suited his own act to the word, and an instant later opened his physical eyes to find Zud sitting tensely erect, regarding him out of staring, startled eyes.

He sat up. "You saw, O Zud," he questioned. "You heard?"

"Aye," said Zud a trifle hoarsely. "This passes understanding."

"Only until understood," Croft told him. "Art any less yourself for having left your flesh?"

Zud dropped his eyes. "Nay, not so," he said at last.

"And had you entered his body upon the couch, rather than that in the chair?" Croft pressed him closely. "Think you, Zud, you would have been any less yourself, and less Zud, the--priest of Zitu, and--a *man*?"

"Zitu!" Zud breathed sharply. Plainly he caught Croft's drift. "In such a fashion then you have visited other places, even to the stars, and seen strange things, and brought back what you deemed good?"

"Aye," said Croft with a smile. "I the spirit, Zud, you have seen your

body lie sleeping, even as in the flesh you have seen my body lie. Yet are you Zud in the spirit or in the flesh, for with each man it is the spirit commands the flesh, that acts, and the spirit, Zud of Zitra, is of Zitu, breathed from his nostrils, into the flesh, to give the body life."

"Man then is a spirit?" Zud began slowly.

"Aye, Zud, priest of Zitu. There were no man else."

A rap fell on the door of the apartment. It slid back, revealing a lay brother in bare feet and cord-belted robe. He advanced, bending before Zud from the waist, his arms extended in the sign of the horizontal cross.

"Jadgor of Aphur, and Lakkon, and Robur, son of Jadgor, await audience with Zud of Zitra," he announced.

"Admit them." Zud glanced at Croft as the brother withdrew. "Thou art as thou hast said, a teacher not only of all men, but of Zitu's priest. I would speak with thee more of this."

For the second time the door slide back. Jadgor, Lakkon, and Robur filed in.

Chapter Six

"Greeting, priest of Zitu," Jadgor began, catching sight of the other occupant of the room, and paused briefly before he went on:

"*Hai*, Hupor, so you are awake again at last."

"As Jadgor sees," said Croft without rising, while Lakkon stared and Robur took a quick step forward, flushed deeply and checked his instinctive motion, as one who hesitates in a decision.

Toward him Croft put out a hand, and as Robur caught it with a sudden gesture, he smiled. "Zud tells me you stand without opposition in Aphur, Rob," he resumed as he gripped the Tamarizian's fingers. "Of such things I am glad."

"It was to inquire of you, we have intruded upon the priest of Zitra," Jadgor spoke again before Robur could do more than return Croft's grip. "Concerning thee a proclamation has gone forth. Mouthpiece of Zitu, thou art acclaimed. How then shall we salute thee in the future?" His tone was haughty, harmonizing with the attitude of mind Croft had sensed in the room in Tamhys's palace. But he paid it the tribute of small notice.

"Salute me," he said almost coldly, "as Zud has ordained."

"Thou art from Zitu then?" Jadgor lost a modicum of his aplomb. Man of action, accustomed to command though he was, yet, like most of his nation, he stood in awe of his nation's good--and Croft's answer gave him pause.

"All men are of Zitu, Jadgor of Aphur," Croft replied, meaning in his response to do the presidential candidate small good.

But as he paused: "Truth is being spoken," Robur cut quickly in. "All men are of Zitu through Azil and Ga, until Zitu himself sends Zilla, with his sucking lips to take his life away."

Once more Croft smiled into the eyes of his friend. "Then gentle Gaya--she is happy at your popularity, Rob?" he inquired as Jadgor stood and stared.

"She waits me at Himyra," Robur returned, inclining his head. "But--there were reasons why I desired more to remain in Zitra until such

time as should find you awakened from your sleep."

"Oh, aye--such reasons as Jadgor's doubt, and Lakkon's questions concerning Zud's proclamation." Croft yawned as he spoke. "But Robur forgets not so quickly his friends."

"By Zitu! How say you?" Jadgor broke out in a roar. "Are you spirit or man?"

"A man--in the way you mean it, O Jadgor--a man as thou art."

"Hai!" In a fashion Jadgor seemed surprised. "Then how the Mouthpiece--"

Croft rose. His tone was that of a teacher to a child. "Jadgor of Aphur," he spoke with deliberation, each accent falling slowly, "the Mouthpiece is that which speaks from knowledge to him who has less--hence is the teacher a mouthpiece of knowledge to the student. Those things which are difficult to one of little knowledge may appear but simple to the mind of one who understands."

Color crept into Jadgor's dark face. "And, as Mouthpiece of Zitu, you claim the greater knowledge for yourself? Perchance it were but a short step in your belief between the greater knowledge and the greater power. But--Tamarizia is not yet within the full grasp of your hand, and Aphur still is Aphur, and with Nodhur and Milidhur, strong."

"My father!" Robur took a quick step in Jadgor's direction.

"Hold, Rob!" Croft lifted a restraining hand. He let an icy smile grow slowly on his lips. "Aye, Milidhur and Nodhur and Aphur are strong. Aphur's king, through me. Also, is Tamarizia yet an empire. Wherefore the change of government is by Tamhys' decree. Let Jadgor beware lest success and quick attainment of his wishes may

turn his head."

"*Hai!* You would threaten!"

"Hold!" commanded Zud, breaking in for the first time. "Jadgor of Himyra, you forget yourself, and the obedience all men owe to Zitu--and the victory granted Tamarizia by his grace. What is the strength of Aphur or Nodhur or Milidhur, to his designs? And think you that any or all of those states will follow you against the word of Zitu's priest?"

"Thy words approach treason, Jadgor, should they come to Tamhys's ears. As priest of Zitu I command you to yield obedience to the Mouthpiece of Zitu--to aid, not oppose his intent."

Jadgor was heated beyond all cool judgment. He flung back his head. "Mouthpiece of Zitu--or of Zitemku, the foul one--or man as he himself alleges, Jadgor yields authority to no one!"

"Nor hesitated to offer his sister's child to a profligate prince, turned traitor to his land in order to increase it," said Croft as the Aphurian paused.

"The point is well taken," Jadgor returned, "since the maid was almost asked by the Mouthpiece of Zitu himself as a price."

"No," Croft denied, "I asked but your consent and that of her father to win her for my wife if I could."

"He speaks truth, my father," Robur said. "And--I myself know that Naia, my cousin, loved Jasor of Nodhur."

"Jasor," Lakkon said, speaking for the first time. "But Naia herself has told me that Abbu of Scira said--"

"That Jasor's spirit was drawn from his lips by Zilla," Jadgor interrupted. "Do you think that Naia desires marriage with a body whose spirit has fled?"

"No," said Croft. "Naia of Aphur is free from any claim of mine, save as she herself desires when she learns the truth. I have seen her and told her the truth as I meant to tell her, save that Abbu spoke to Zud in the time of my sleep and Zud spoke to the maid without a full understanding of all the truth embraced."

He told them of his origin on Earth, his coming to Palos, and Zud told of his own spirit leaving his body under Croft's guidance. It was clear that they were impressed and shaken, particularly by the similarity between the names Jasor and Jason. Robur was the first to accept, but Lakkon and Jadgor were plainly uncertain as yet.

He turned to Croft and Zud. "These things I confess I do not understand, and in truth to me they pass all understanding. Man of Zitu, yet is it clear to my mind that an understanding lies between this other and yourself. Wherefore I must ponder there matter well, and seek to determine whether the palace or the pyramid of Zittra shall rule Tamarizia in the future. To thee for the present, Zud--peace. Be pleased to direct that the maiden Naia be brought to an audience chamber for speech with her father and her *king*."

"Jadgor's request is granted." Zud lifted a small hammer from the table and struck against a metal gong.

The door slid back and a lay brother appeared. Zud spoke to him, directing him to lead Jadgor and Lakkon to an apartment, and command Naia's presence there.

"Peace to you, Zud," Jadgor said again as he turned away.

"And to thee peace," responded Zitu's priest.

"Rob," Croft arrested Aphur's prince as he moved to follow his father, "are you party to this interview with your cousin?"

"No." Robur paused. "I return now to the palace."

Croft nodded. "Presently then. Come now. I would speak to you alone."

For all his controlled demeanor, Croft was none the less disturbed as, leaving Zud, he led Jadgor's son to the room in which for two weeks his body had lain entranced. But he said nothing of what was seething in his brain as he took out the plans and carried them back to spread them out before Robur's eyes on his couch.

One of them was for a dynamo, water-driven, and nothing else. There were many streams in Tamarizia's mountains, and he had planned to harness their power for the generation of electric force. This then he took up first.

"Look, Rob," he began as he held it before his companion's eyes. "Can you remember a night in Himyra when Jadgor named me Hupor, and I said the scene would have been more brilliant were light obtained from many lamps of glass inside which a luminous filament glowed?"

"Aye, I remember it well." Robur inclined his head. His face was serious and he seemed ill at ease, as well as somewhat surprised that Croft had turned to the plans rather than taking up a discussion of other things.

But Croft had a purpose in so doing; a hope that by showing Robur the things he planned to accomplish, he might reach Jadgor's ear in

a less direct, though no less effective fashion, since doubtless Robur would speak concerning them to the king. "This," he said when assured that the prince recalled his former remark, "is a device to provide such light, and many other things." For an hour thereafter he talked displaying plan after plan, each one of which he explained, until at the end, Robur's face was flushed with excitement, his eyes glowing in anticipation of beholding undreamed of things.

"Jasor or Jason," he exclaimed at length. "Mouthpiece of Zitu must you be indeed to devise such objects, to have knowledge of them--to draw their designs."

"No, Robur--these things are not mine own. Of Zitu they are--by him permitted for man's use--yet are they things known, and employed daily in the life of men on that star from which I come."

"Earth," said Robur quickly. "These things are known on Earth, and the motors, the rifles--"

"Yes," Croft nodded slightly. "And a thousand other things." He took up a final plan. "Rob, what do you think of a device which can lift a man into the air, as a bird rises on its wings?"

"Zitu! Would you fly, Jason of Earth!" Robur caught a slightly unsteady breath.

"Aye." Croft spread out the parchment. He had drawn it in a moment of daring impulse, and now he explained to Robur how it was driven by a "motur"--the name he had given to his engines, modified to fit Tamarizian speech, and the action of the planes.

"Jason, tell me the truth, in Zitu's name! Why came you from Earth to Palos--what strange force led you to seek life with us?"

"The strongest force in all the sum of Zitu's forces, Robur--that force which men call--love."

"Naia, by Zitu!" Robur sprang to his feet. "You have dared all for her?"

"All," said Croft. "Once have I saved Naia of Aphur from paying the score of Jadgor's ambitions, nor will I permit it again. If the maiden comes to me at all, Rob, it must be of her own choice--from her own wish, not as a price."

Robur nodded. "*Hai*, Jason!" he cried. "Now can I understand you, and find you the man I have felt you in my heart." He approached Croft, seized his hand and placed it on his shoulder, laid his own on that of his companion in the posture of greeting used by Tamarizian friends. So for a moment the two men stood eye to eye before Robur went on: "Thy love is a true love--of the heart as well as of the body. Claim me thy friend in this, O Jason--I and Gaya, the woman I won in similar fashion, though I journeyed no farther than to Milidhur to find her. You have seen the maid since your awakening. Tell me, said you to her so much?"

"Yes," Croft told him. "Save that she came to me willingly--herself she was free."

"And what said Naia my cousin?"

"'Tis the matter of Jasor's body and Jason's spirit, that disturbs her," he explained. "Concerning that I meant to tell her, as only I could tell it, so that she might understand. That would I have done at a time of my own selecting before she became my wife, save that Abbu of Scira to whom I confessed that my spirit was not Jasor's but one which meant to Tamarizia only good--Abbu, whom I swore to silence in Zitu's name, was by Zud absolved from his oath and spoke. And Zud

gaining part of the truth only, yet carried what he had learned to Naia's ears. Zud, startled by what he had learned, named me to her a spirit sent by Zitu. Naia looks upon herself as once deceived, well nigh betrayed."

"But," said Robur quickly, "when you told her of yourself--"

"Nay," Croft replied. "Naia of Aphur is not one to weep, nor ask for explanations."

"So that she knows not as yet of this love that drew you from another world to win her, even as with us a man might go from one kingdom to another. Yet to me it seems that a maid might marvel at a love so great."

Croft's eyes lighted at the suggestion. "As I had hoped she would when I told it in the way I meant to tell it, Rob. See you not that this title proclaimed by Zud is something thrust upon me, rather than sought by myself. For though I meant to be to Tamarizia a teacher in many things, and in so far a mouthpiece in very truth, showing to her people those things known to others, but drawn first from Zitu's mind as all things created must be, yet had I no intent, or wish to greatly exalt myself. In Himyra I sought the rank of Hupor merely because it raised me to her caste. And Zud himself will tell you that in proclaiming me to the people, I have forbidden him to name me other than a teacher--more than a man life themselves."

"*Hai!*" said Robur. "You have done this, Jason! Did Jadgor know, it would change his mind, I think. My father's attitude in this matter grieves me. Let me be *your* mouthpiece in this to bring understand to his mind."

Croft nodded. "Speak, Rob, if thereby we may turn Jadgor from what seems to me a draem of personal power, back to that wish for the

strength of *all* Tamarizia, which held place in his heart, when I knew him first."

Robur sighed. "Teacher you may well be called, Jason," he said in a tone of accord with Croft's remarks. "Jadgor's name on every lip has been to Jadgor's spirit like wine to a strong man's flesh--nor do I myself think Zud has any wish to interfere with the affairs of state through proclaiming you Mouthpiece of Zitu, even though my father appears to fear some such thing himself. Wherefore I shall tell him of what you have said, if I may. And of this other matter also I shall speak. In that Naia has yielded you her mouth, has felt your arms about her, who are not of her blood--to Jadgor's mind, there lies a disgrace."

Croft nodded again. Yet would he have given her to Kyphallos, the master of dancing girls, my friend."

"I know--I know," Robur replied. "But that would have been in marriage."

"There can be no marriage between Naia and myself until it is brought about by her as well as my wish."

"Failing which she will become Gayana," Robur said.

"Which you do not like yourself," Croft responded. "Which, should it happen would deprive me of all I have labored in sincere purpose to gain--that which I think Zitu himself is inclined to permit--since he has permitted also that I dwell in the spirit inside Jasor of Nodhur's flesh."

"Aye, by Zitu, I see it!" Robur exclaimed. "Were it said to her, by one to whom she would scarce fail to give ear--then--perhaps she would see it too. Jason--Gaya, my wife, has before this had a hand in this affair of your love. Could she prevail upon my cousin to listen--"

"Rob!" Croft rose and began a slow pacing of the floor. "At least," he said, "she returns by Jadgor's command to Himyra. Let Gaya speak with her, friend of my heart, to whom my heart is show, and prevail upon her to remain outside the pyramid until she has taken time to think. Myself, I told her I could explain if the chance were mine. Rob, you and Gaya your wife will do this?"

"Aye," Robur declared, rising also. "Be not cast down in your heart. Inside fourteen suns I shall be governor in Aphur--and I shall see to it that Jadgor understands much which now he does not understand--also, that Naia does not go to the pyramid in Himyra. I shall speak with Magur himself. Speak of this with Zud, Jason. Have him give tablets into my hands to Magur from himself, advising against an immediate action. Then once I am in the palace, Jason, my friend, we shall reopen the Himyra shops, and set the melting furnaces flaring, and make many things for Tamarizia's welfare--even to this machine which flies without moving its wings."

But the events of the third day following Croft's awaking from what he considered his final trip to Earth showed that Rob and Gaya would have no easy time. For that was the day of the great festival, the colorful ceremony during which he was proclaimed Mouthpiece of Zitu. He went over the exact wording of the proclamation in advance with Zud, and while he did not entirely like it, he could see the necessity. At the proper time in the ceremony, Zud would say to the vast assembly:

"Men and women of Zitra and of all Tamarizia, give ear to Zud, through whom it is given to announce to you one who comes among you as teacher, endowed with a wisdom passing the knowledge of Zud or any other among you, by Zitu's grace.

"Jason, as he is named, cometh to instruct the people on whom Zitu

smiles, as a sign that his pleasure shall remain while they are in obedience to his laws.

"Mouthpiece of Zitu is Jason, and shall be so known while he shall remain among us, and afterward, when the spirit within his body shall have been withdrawn. Exalted is he by the knowledge which Zitu has seen fit to instil into his mind. Worthy of honor is he from all true men. Yet is he man as thou art, and to him shall no knee bend. Obedience and respect alone are his due. I, Zud, the high priest, have said it. Let all men regard the Mouthpiece of Zitu as his brother as well as his friend."

When the proclamation was made, Croft sought out Jadgor's eyes; the king's glance was dark, and he caught a slight shake of the crown prince's head. Lakkon also looked somber.

Then the gayana approached the throne on which Croft was seated, each maiden carrying a wreath from which she plucked a long-stemmed scarlet flower and tossed it at him. Suddenly his eyes met the blue eyes of Naia among them, but she did not toss her flower--she threw it, with her lips curled in scorn. There was something concealed within the flower, and when Croft picked it up, he found it to be a silver medallion, bearing a raised figure of Azil, the angel of life, and surrounded by blood-red stones, such as Tamarizian men gave to the women to whom they were betrothed.

"Thy litter awaits thee." Zud's voice was in his ear. He saw that the blue men of Mazzer had indeed brought a great silver palanquin into position opposite the dais steps, and quickly he asked the high priest if Naia had become Gayana. She had not, Zud assured him with comprehension. But she had asked to be among them and now he realized why, for this medallion she had hurled back at him was the one he had ordered made, and given to her at the end of the Zollarian war. Like the maids of her nation, she had worn it on her girdle as a

sign that to one man, and one alone, Azil had set his seal upon her. And today she had flung it from her, against the wings of Azil himself, which Croft wore on his breast.

There was no mistaking the action. It was repudiation. Croft's lips writhed into a strange smile. He recalled how the thing had pained when it struck above his heart.

Chapter Seven

Jadgor was elected over Tammon by an overwhelming majority. Robur became governor of Aphur as a matter of course. In Cathur, Mutlos gained the lead largely because the populace still remembered the treason intended by Kyphallos of Scythys's house, and refused to vote for the dead king's younger son. This was the major result of the elections, so far as Croft was concerned.

Before it was held, however, several things had occurred. Naia and her father, Jadgor and his son, left Zitra the day of Jason's proclaiming, in a motor-driven galley. Robur contrived an interview with Croft before he left.

Croft in the meantime had seen Zud as soon as he returned to the pyramid, and showed him the jeweled medallion, and narrated to him the manner in which it had been returned. At the end he requested a letter to Magur asking the Himyra priest to advise delay, provided Naia sought admission to the vestal ranks.

The tablets of wax whereon Zud wrote his commands Croft gave to Robur, and the two friends gripped hands.

"Jadgor had turned his face from you," Robur said. "Always has he been of stubborn mind. But, by Zitu, once I am in Himyra's palace,

there will be a place for you, my friend, wherein we will work out your strange designs!"

"Yes," Croft replied. "Your cousin goes with you, Rob?"

"Aye," Robur declared. "She yields to Jadgor's command, saying one may forget herself no less in Himyra than in Zitra's pyramid. Yet in Himyra is Gaya, to whom, I believe, my cousin will open her heart. At present the maid is overwrought, and Jadgor's attitude toward you does not strengthen your case."

"You spoke with him concerning those things we discussed three suns ago?"

"Aye, and to small avail." Robur frowned. "His stand is, you should have told them to him, rather than to Zud, at first. You will remember how Zud swayed Tamhys before the Zollarian war in your favor. Jadgor refused to accept it other than that there is an understanding between the high priest and yourself."

"Then must our works convince him since our words fail," said Croft. "Robur, my friend, a safe and pleasant journey. May Kronhur, ruler of the oceans, provide you a peaceful path to Himyra's gate. Make my salutations to the gentle Gaya, whom I trust I may ere long greet. In her hands and yours, Robur, is carried Jason's fate."

For four days thereafter he remained in constant company with Zud. Two things occupied his time--the instruction of the high priest in the mysteries of astral control, at first compelling the projections by his own will. Later Zud gained a minor success for himself, a thing he accomplished quickly because of his great desire to learn, and Croft took up certain social reforms he had long had in mind.

A more general education was the first of these. At Scira in Cathur,

Tamarazia had maintained a national school. This, however, was for the patronage of the rich. Among the masses little education was known. Croft decided at once to alter this. To Zud he outlined a scheme for a general system of schools. Assisted by the high priest, he drafted a provisional alphabet, to which the hieroglyphic characters not unlike those of the Mayan inscriptions in Central America lent itself with little change. Already in Himyra he had constructed a form of printing press for large character work. Now he took up the subject of perfecting and elaborating this to the wonder of Zud, whose enthusiastic approbation he instantly gained. He thought the matter of the schools might be easily arranged. The national school was under the patronage of the church. Most of the priests were educated in it. Teachers could be drawn from their ranks; and if the matter were carefully broached, both Jason and Zud felt inclined to believe that the move would meet with little opposition from Jadgor at first--especially if the suggestion came from some such one as Mutlos, governor of Cathur, whom Zud would see was properly approached by the faculty of the national school, rather than by Zud or Croft.

Late on the afternoon of the fourth day, however, Croft went to his own quarters, loosened his clothing, and laid himself down on the golden couch. There had been time for Jadgor's galley to have reached Himyra, as he knew--time for Naia to have gone either to her own home or the palace, as Jadgor and her father had elected. Closing his eyes and fixing his mind on the red-walled city of Aphur, he brought all his will to bear upon his one desire, and projected his astral entity to the palace. He willed himself toward it, entered it through the main gates between the huge carved figures of the winged doglike creatures set up on either side, their front legs supporting webbed membranes from body to paw. He passed into a vast, red-paved court, where naked Mazzerian porters passed to and fro with metal sprinkling tanks strapped to their shoulders, and

gruppas, harnessed to flashing chariots, champed on their bits and pawed.

To Croft, it was all an old story. He had lived in it once. He fixed his mind on gaining the presence of Gaya, Robur's wife, for he felt Naia would seek the company and companionship of a woman rather than any one else.

In this his judgment proved right, as he found when he reached the wing of the palace in which he had formerly lived. Here, in the portion given over to Robur and his wife, was a court containing a private bath, set in the center, surrounded on all sides by growing shrubs and flowers, the tessellated pavements about it dotted with chairs and couched of the wine-red wood and silklike canopies to offer shade against the Palosian sun.

On two of the red couches he found the women he had come in search of. They reclined beneath a yellow awning supported by standards, with a low table between them, holding small cakes, fruit preserves such as the women of Tamarizia affected, and crystal glasses, scarcely larger than a thimble, filled with an amber-colored wine.

Naia lay pale, her eyes shadowed by darkened circles beneath their lids, her features weary. Her figure was draped in a robe of exquisite green, across the upper part of which a strand of her fair hair made a sheen of gold. Croft glanced at Gaya, and found her eyes fixed in an anxious inspection of her companion's face.

Abruptly Naia's breast swelled sharply and she spoke: "I shall become Gayana. There is nothing else."

"Nay! Nay, daughter of Lakkon—you are overwrought. Robur thinks not so, nor Jadgor, his father. To Lakkon there is none other, since

your mother died, save yourself. Would leave him to finish his life alone?"

Naia sat up upon the couch. "That was true," she returned in a tone gone bitter, "until this trouble came upon me. Now Lakkon holds me disgraced."

"Nay," Gaya replied, "say not that in any way were you to blame, Naia, fairest of Aphur's maids. For have you and I not spoken concerning your love ere this, and did you not first to me confess it, when you stood pledge to Cathur's heir, from whom this man of Zitu saved you?"

"Say you that he is a man--Gaya, my friend--or is the word but used as a means of expression since you know not what to call him save as he seems?"

"Nay, I mean man, child," Gaya returned. "Man he appears, and man he claims to be, and man he is. You know Robur for his friend. Much to Robur has he explained since he wakened from the last of his strange sleeps. Yet is he such a man as never was seen on Palos before, and though of mortal birth, as we are, yet was he not born on Palos, but of a woman on Earth."

"Earth?" Naia's eyes widened swiftly.

"Aye--a different star from ours," Gaya replied.

"Robur told you this?"

"Aye. He swore it by Zitu himself."

He told it to Robur--to your husband--to Jadgor's son! Why not to me?"

"To Robur he swore he had meant to tell you ere you became his mate," Gaya rejoined. "Save that Zud learned these things from Abbu of Scira and spoke to you during his sleep, I feel assured he had done it at a proper time."

She paused, and Naia turned her head. "Now I remember that he said to me after he awakened, when he came to me in the quarters of the Gayana, that he had somewhat to explain. What said he else?"

"Strange things--things to madden the heart of a woman, as it seems to me," Gaya returned. "To Robur he swore that to Palos he came because of you, because in you he knew the mate to whom his spirit cried out--that he remained on Palos to save you from Cathur and win you for himself, and to that end that he might claim you wholly, used Jasor's body when his spirit was drawn from his flesh."

"Zitu! Now you have touched on the part of the matter I may not tolerate or understand. Granting that he says truth--that a spirit may enter the body of another and possess it, and cause it to live and breathe, and move as its own--can a maid consider a lover in such guise, surrendering to his embrace?"

"Yet consider," said Gaya softly, "try to measure if you can, my princess, a love so vast that it draws its mate across the space between the stars. Consider that after he entered Jasor's form it changed--that even Sinon declared he no longer resembled Jasor greatly. Seems it not to you that Jason's spirit has altered the elements that were Jasor's until they are as his own?"

"Jason?" Naia faltered.

"Aye. That was his name on Earth. Also says he that it is the spirit within us which dwells in and makes us of the flesh. He says, and Zud supports him in saying that to the spirit the flesh is no more than to

man is a house--a something he inhabits, makes use of, and finally lays aside."

"Stop!" Naia stayed her. "Why--why were these things not said to me before--before--" She broke off, clasped her hands and crushed them together, struck them down against her sides. "Nay--it might have been," she went on, more to herself than to Gaya, "had I given the chance. He came to me, and I berated him with words. I was filled with pain, my spirit was blinded with horror and despair. I thought only that I had been led to my own undoing--I knew not the truth."

"Gaya, I am like one fallen into a pit from which there is no escape. Him I knew as Jasor--I loved with a glory of the spirit and a madness of the flesh. Save only Zitu, beyond him there was for me no god!"

Once more she paused. "Canst wonder, then," she went on after a moment, "with what gladness I have him my pledge; with what joy in my thoughts of the future I wore upon my girdle the badge of Azil he placed within my hands as a sign that I was his--that badge which, on the day of his proclaiming Mouthpiece of Zitu, I placed in a spray of flowers and hurled against his breast!"

"Naia! You did that--did he--understand?"

Naia nodded slightly. "I think so. He--from the dais he carried the flowers I flung against him to his litter in his hand. Oh, Gaya--my soul died within me at that sight--would Zitu--the rest of me had died. I am alone, Gaya--alone. Alone, alone--the word tunes my every breath. Jadgor opposes my seeking the Gayana. My father looks on his name as through me disgraced. And I am tired, Gaya--tired--so very tired. And there is no rest. If only Zilla would hear me when I call him--"

"Aye, you are tired, poor child." Gaya rose, crossed to the other couch, and took the girl's golden head inside her arms. "Come, talk

no more at present. I shall call Bela my own maid, who shall attend you. You shall bathe, and afterward she shall anoint your flesh with sweet-smelling oils, and you will sleep and awaken refreshed. She has a soothing touch beyond any I have ever found. She shall wait upon you." She reached out to the table and struck a small metal gong.

"Refreshed," said Naia slowly. Once more her eyes were fastened on the sun-kissed water. "Aye, I shall bathe, gentle Gaya. I shall find rest in your pool."

She rose slowly. Her eyes were wide; her face was very white. Turning, she walked to the edge of the sunken basin. For a moment she stood there in the attitude of one who listens.

Her lips moved. "Zilla," she whispered and smiled.

And then he voice raised, rang out sharply: "Zilla, I hear thy answer!"

Her arms lifted, stretched upward. She plunged face downward into the pool and sank without a struggle into its transparent depths.

And now began one of the most amazing parts of Croft's whole tale.

He saw Naia sink. He knew the meaning of her words, her act. And he was powerless, impotent, to do anything save watch what went on before his eyes.

Not so Gaya, however. Nor did Robur's wife lose her head. Gaya flung her own form into the pool in a cleanly executed dive. Bela followed her mistress a moment later, her blue figure cutting the liquid surface with hardly a splash. Both women were entirely at home in the water, and by the time Gaya had reached and seized Naia, who began instantly to struggle, Bela was at her side.

The fight below the surface was brief. Croft saw Naia open her mouth. Her bosom expanded as though she gasped. And then she relaxed, and Robur's wife and the Mazzerian maid bore her quickly upward, supporting her head between them, and swimming with her toward a submerged flight of steps by which the pool was customarily entered. Reaching it, they lifted the limp body in its trailing robe, which clung to trunk and rounded limb more like a shroud of vegetation, a crinkled kelp born of the water itself, than a garment, and staggered with it from the pool to lay it on the pavement of the court.

"Quickly!" Gaya cried as she knelt beside it. "Seek out Jadgor's physician and command his presence." She seized Naia's form and rolled her upon her face. Placing her hands on either side of the body close to where the ribs joined the spine, she threw her weight forward on extended arms, held so for the space of a long breath, and lifted herself once more upon her own flexed thighs.

It was a form of artificial respiration she was practising, and Croft uttered a prayer for her success in his heart. And then--he forgot temporarily her continued efforts in the wonder of something else.

Naia of Aphur was about to die. Croft knew it as certainly as he had ever known anything in his life. Because he saw her soul come forth as he had seen Zud's astral body after he had bidden it leave its fleshy habitation on the day he awakened from his sleep. Slowly, as Gaya lifted herself and sat back, it emerged from the figure on the ground. And as wonderful as was the form of Naia, so wonderful was its astral counterpart.

Toward the lovely floating shape he compelled his own astral form until he floated with it face to face. "Naia--Naia--thou other part of me," he thought rather than cried out to her. "Naia--my beloved--hold.

Return again to thy body. Go back."

And he knew that she received the potent vibration his own soul gave out. For slowly the head of the floating figure, the dream shape which swung and glowed like an iridescent mist in the sunlight, turned its head toward him--seemed to regard him strangely with wide open, startled eyes.

"Naia!" He sent his appeal to her again. "Naia, it is that Jason whom you knew as Jasor who commands that you return again to your flesh. In Zitu's name, beloved."

"Jason!" Croft felt the thought impinge against him.

"Jason, who loves you--who claims you--who shall claim you yet."

"What do you here?"

"You know of my sleeps. In them my spirit leaves the body. It visits many places. Now sleeps my body in the Zitrán pyramid, yet is my spirit present to watch over you and guard you. It was not Zilla called you into the pool, but your own troubled spirit, beloved. Go back into your body--in the name of the love you confessed to Gaya. Go back."

"But--why--am I not myself?"

"Yes, you are yourself always," he returned. "Yet this is the real you which speaks to the real me, beloved. Look beneath you, and tell me what you see."

For a moment nothing was said... as the form beside him turned down its eyes. And then a startled response: "Gay--she bends and works beside a form--to--to which I seem in some way connected. It--Zitu! Azil! It is the form of one like myself!"

"It is your own form, Naia, the body in which all your life you have dwelt--the beautiful habitation of your spirit--which you cast into the pool in an effort to gain rest."

"But--I--I--" The diaphanous soul form began once more to tremble.

"You are you--even as I am I," said Croft. "That body over which Gaya works is but the servant which has done your bidding, which, save you obey me, you condemn to death. Return to it before it is too late. I, Jason, who have met you midway between the body Azil gave you and Zilla's domain, command it. Between you and Zilla himself I stand as a barrier. Return to the form below you and give it breath."

"How--how shall I return?"

"Wish it," said Croft. "Wish it as I desire to hold it in my arms and claim its love and yours."

"I--I shall return."

Croft thrilled at the victory he had won. "Yet hold!" He stayed her as slowly she began to sink closer to the form beneath them. "Again shall you leave it if I call you--leave it as now--to meet me as now you meet me, and return. Now go, beloved. See with what a frenzy of hopeful endeavor Gaya works."

From beside him that figure as fair as the play of sunlight through the prism of a fine mist vanished.

Into his ears there stabbed the cry of a physical voice, upraised in triumph. It was Gaya speaking. "She lives! Thanks be to Zitu, she lives!"

She bent and lifted the body, which rewarded her efforts with a

gasping breath, and laid it on one of the red wood couches, caught up one of the tiny glasses of wine from the table, and forced its contents into Naia's mouth.

Naia gasped. Her throat contracted sharply. She swallowed. Some of the waxen pallor went out of throat and cheeks. Bela appeared running, with the physician behind her. He hurried to the couch and dropped his fingers to the patient's pulse.

And now came Robur across the court toward the group beneath the yellow awning. He reached it and slipped his arm about Gaya's shaking shoulders, placing himself at her side.

"She--she cried on Zilla and cast herself into the pool," she half spoke, half sobbed. "Beloved, she--she was dead to al seeming--but--I cried on Zitu, and worked above her, and now--she lives."

The physician bowed. "The Princess Gaya has in truth done a most admirable piece of work."

Naia's lips moved. "Jason," she whispered, "I--I have obeyed."

"Hai!" Robur started. "What said she?"

"She dreams, doubtless," the physician made answer.

Naia opened her eyes. They stared up blankly at the yellow canopy overhead.

Gaya bent above her.

"Gaya!" she cried. "Oh, Gaya, I--I dreamt that I--had died. I--"

And suddenly she broke--broke utterly--and clung fast to the form of the woman beside her, shaken by a storm of sobs.

From the blended group Robur turned to Bela and the physician. "This is forgotten as though it had not been, man of healing," his voice came thickly. "By you and by Bela, it is as if it were not. I myself shall see that it reaches Lakkon's ears." He reached into a purse at his belt and extracted some pieces of silver, extending them to the doctor. "Your fee. What needs she else?"

"Rest--quiet for perhaps a sun, no more." The physician accepted his payment with a second bow of respect.

"See to it." Robur turned to Bela. "Go--and return with women to bear her to her apartment without delay."

Then, as Bela ran once more from the court, he approached Naia and his wife.

"Peace, Naia, my cousin," he said gently, yet with a narrowing of the eyes. "Know you not that Robur is friend to you and--Jason?" He paused for the barest space before the final word. "You say that you dreamed, my cousin," Robur went on. "Praise be to Zitu, it was but a dream. Yet"--and now he watched her very closely--"in waking you spoke Jason's name."

"He--he sent me back," Naia of Aphur faltered. "In--in my dream I met him, and he showed me my body, with Gaya working beside it, and compelled me o return. It--was all--very strange."

"Zitu!" Robur started. "A--strange dream indeed, my cousin," he said. To Croft it appeared that without fully understanding, his friend half suspected the truth.

Bela and three other Mazzerian women now reappeared. They lifted the couch upon which Naia was lying, and bore it from the court into

the palace and to a sumptuous apartment on the second floor. A copper couch, studded with amber jewels, stood ready to receive the patient. Plainly, it was a room designed for women, since in the center of the floor was one of the mirrorlike pools of shallow water, close to which stood a pedestal of silver, bearing the figure of Azil with extended wings.

By a strange chance, as Naia was borne in, one of the Mazzerians struck against the beautifully carved figure. It tottered, swayed drunkenly on its standard, and fell into the pool.

Naia cried out at the sight, and covered her eyes.

Robur sprang forward and lifted the statue, setting it back on its base. "Fear not!" he exclaimed. "It is wholly uninjured and a good augury, my cousin. Life fell into the pool, and life comes forth unmarred."

Naia's eyes met his. "You are quick to read signs, my cousin. Perchance--you are right."

Robur had indeed seen to the heart of the episode, for when he and Gaya left the apartment he reminded her of how Jason's spirit had been there when this happened. And when he met Lakkon and told him of the entire episode, adding that Magur would not agree to Naia's becoming Gayana, the love that the elder man bore his daughter drove out all other feelings. They were reconciled and Robur and Gaya greeted Naia's assurance that it would be well with her now. Jason would find a way...

Chapter Eight

Followed now for Croft the weirdest wooing mortal ever dreamed, a

sort of astral courtship, wherein what might perhaps be best described as the sublimated essence of Naia's being--that astral shell containing her conscious spirit, met and communed with his.

To the man this period became a strange source of encouragement mixed with intervals of an ineffable delight. And the fact that to Naia herself, the hours so spent seemed as dreams rather than a thing of actual occurrence, disturbed him not in the least. He was content to let the truth develop in her soul by degrees, until it should at last be known as truth.

On the night following her arrival home, he visited her first, purposely choosing a late hour, since he wished her to be asleep and preferred to have his own action unknown just then, in the Zitran pyramid.

And as he hoped, when he stole into her apartments, making ingress through an open window, he found her indeed asleep. And then he let the cry of his spirit steal forth.

"Naia! It is Jason calling. Naia, my beloved--appear!"

"Jason--I hear!"

Like a wraith of dreams, it seemed that she stood before him--a form, a figure pure as a blade of silver, emitting a faint auric play of blue and gold.

"Beloved." Croft stretched forth a dim hand.

It floated toward him.

"Come," he said again, and caught her hand in his, and led her out through the window, where he had entered, under the moon and the stars.

Out, out he led her. They were free as the winds on which it seemed they rode. Like a sheet of molten silver the pool in the garden lay beneath them. About them and beyond them spread the wide panorama of the wooded mountains, marked here and there by the bone-white windings of the road. Beneath them swam the wide expanse of the desert. Far off to the east and south, in a ruddy glow, the fire urns of Himyra flared.

Croft turned his face to that of the shape beside him, and found it the face of a sleeper who sees visions, and knew that though the soul of Naia obeyed him, it was still asleep. "Art afraid?"

"Nay, Jason, I am not afraid."

"Thy father--would see him?"

"Aye." Naia smiled.

"Behold then!" said Croft, and willed himself toward Himyra, still keeping his companion's hand.

The city glowed beneath them, its fire urns burning up and down the Na in double ranks. The place was white before them. Then--Lakkon lay stretched in slumber on a couch.

"My father!" Naia left Croft's side and seemed to hover all blue and white and gold above him, until as though subconsciously he felt her presence, Lakkon's lips moved and he muttered: "Naia," in his sleep.

"Come," said Croft again, and led her back, since he did not deem it well to risk too long a first excursion.

"Return now to your body as before," he directed when they stood beside it. "Yet remember this when you wake."

"You--are--really Jason?"

"Aye."

"And--your body?"

"Lies in the Zitran pyramid as yours lies here before you. Return into yours, beloved, and I return to mine."

"Aye," she assented. "I return, but-*I shall remember--the moonlight--Himyra--my father--and you.*"

She ceased and suddenly Croft found himself alone. Yet Croft was satisfied if not content, and he felt assured as he willed himself back to Zitra that when she waked in the morning she would recall this first experience as a vivid dream at least.

Indeed as the days went by his major trouble was to curb his own impatience in setting her astral consciousness awake, in refraining from an attempt to progress too fast. Hence, as a sort of brake to his own desire to return too frequently to her, he took up the instruction of Zud, initiating the amazed old man more and more into the mysteries of what he, in his own experience, had proved to be the truth.

Once more, however, he visited Naia, before the elections were held, choosing an afternoon when Zud was engaged in temple duties. And that day they wandered far over valley and hill, flitting above wooded slopes, loitering sometimes in sun-filled hollows, where flowers of tropic brilliance nodded in the grasses or flaunted their beauty from swaying trailing vines. And from there to the higher places, up, up, hand in hand, to where the eternal snows lay gripped in the clutches of dark peaks and crags.

"It--was here I sent for snows to chill the wines for the banquet to Kyphallos, the time he came from Cathur, by Jadgor's plan," she said.

"That Kyphallos to whom Jadgor would have wed you?"

She nodded. "Except that I was saved from marriage to a profligate and traitor by"--she paused and appeared to hesitate and went on in a way less certain--"by Jasor of Nodhur."

"Jasor of Nodhur has gone to Zitu," Croft corrected quickly. "You were saved from that fate by me, after Jasor's body became the servant of my spirit, as is your body the servant of your spirit, and changed it to my purpose, made it mine, because your spirit had called me to you as today I called you to me."

"Yet I knew you not then as Jason, but as Jasor," Naia faltered. "How then could I call your spirit?"

"Nay," said Croft, "you knew me not, yet felt you never in those days a yearning for someone you had as yet seen never--felt you not yourself already to answer that someone's call, as a woman ripened must answer to her lover?"

"Aye," said his companion slowly. "Ga the eternal spoke to me more than once in such fashion, yet none came to sound the call I should answer until Jasor of Nodhur appeared. Were it your spirit in Jasor's body, you know how the call was answered afterward."

"Am I not like him?"

"Aye," she confessed. "And when I am with you, it seems that you

are he—that you call me to you in spirit, even as he called in the flesh. Yet when I return to the body beside which even now Maia stands watch, all is confusion when I wake."

"Were you to remember then that in or out of the flesh, it is the spirit calls to the spirit, it were perchance more plain."

"Love then is of the spirit only?" She looked into his eyes.

"Yes." Croft nodded. "Love is of the spirit—passion alone of the flesh. Know you not then that it was love called me to you from the Earth?"

"Earth?" she repeated. "Aye—Gaya told me somewhat concerning that."

"Come then," said Croft, determining of sudden impulse on a demonstration and seized her by the hand.

Up, up he carried her across the void. The landscape dwindled swiftly away beneath them. Its details faded, became but a sun-smeared blur until Palos whirled on its mighty ball, bedded in a mass of woolly cloud. Up, up. Croft glanced at his companion and found her face wide-eyed. Up, up, as she floated beside him, her slender shape in the void of darkness beyond the atmosphere of Palos beginning to flash and glow with its contained fire. For Croft had willed himself to that one of the moons on which he had first come down from his daring journey from the Earth. And now it swung above them. Together they swam toward it, and came to it finding its barren and lifeless crags and plains aglare in the light of Sirius, partly steeped in impenetrable gloom. Across the lighted region Croft led Naia swiftly. They passed from the light.

"Look!" he cried, and pointed to the void of the eternal heavens beyond them, where sparkled the pin-points of a million worlds. "Behold, Palos!" He directed her vision to where the planet rolled, its clouds now turned into what seemed golden fire. "We stand now on one of the moons that light your world at night, beloved. We gaze at your world from its moon, as from Earth we gaze at a star—as we gaze at Earth as a star from here. By the will of the spirit have we come. By the spirit's will shall we return."

And on his words it was as though Palos rose to meet them, and once more they were back on the crags beside the snows.

"Zitu, may this be permitted?"

"Much," said Croft in answer, "may be permitted to the spirit which seeks truth and dares."

And after that they wandered on, finding a good-sized stream leaping down the side of the mountain not far from Naia's home. Croft seized upon its presence with acclaim. A glance had told him that here was power he could harness to perfect his scheme for generating artificial light, and he sought to explain it to his companion, outlining how by the construction of a series of giant penstocks he would divert the plunging water against wheels to use its force in turning other wheels.

She listened closely and suddenly she laughed. "Now are you as Jasor!" she exclaimed. "It was so he talked concerning his devices before the Zollarian war against which he planned."

"Always have I been as I am now," Jason told her. "Even as Naia of Aphur has always been the same."

"Always?"

"Aye, always, and ever will be," he answered, "until Jason and Naia shall be one."

She quivered. Her astral body glowed. Its fires leaped and flamed before him, white and purple and gold. "Come," he said again, "come," and led her south along the western mountains, exploring them, pointing out their beauties as they passed along.

It was thus he found an outcropping barrier of coal. He spied it and sank upon it, and bent to assure himself that he was not mistaken, and straightened with a radiant face. He pointed to his find and explained to Naia that here was fuel.

"Zitu!" she cried in wondering half comprehension. "Would Jason burn a stone!"

"Nay," he said, and made plain the nature of the substance they discussed.

At the end she nodded. "I am convinced," she said. "Him I knew as Jasor was Jason indeed. Your words, your plans are the same. Thanks be to Ga and Azil, I am happy. You, Jason, are he whom I--"

"Love," Croft supplied as once more she faltered.

"Aye, love." For the second time her astral figure glowed with its auric fires. "With you I am happy--free thus and alone, with a strange newhappiness--such as I have never known. Canst not hold me thus beside you? Must I return again to the prison of the body? Canst not claim me now, and keep me wholly thine own?"

"No--not yet," Croft stammered, shaken as never before by her words and taking alarm at the mood which was upon her. "Yet, some time I shall claim you mine before all men. Come now, for the present we must return."

Chapter Nine

The end of the month following the election found Croft beginning to carry out his material plans. Robur coming to Zitru for the inauguration of Jadgor, bringing Gaya and Naia with him--the latter at Lakkon's request--found time to insist that Jason return to Himyra at once, and institute the work they had before discussed.

Nor to tell the truth was Croft in any way loath. Indeed work was what he craved. Then, too, he was thrilled by the thought of contriving a material meeting with Naia, even more than by anything else. That thought it was which set him to work on the development of electric power first.

Before that, however, he took Zud and journeyed to Scira in a galley, driven by a motor, rather than the oars which had formerly projected from its waist. And at Scira he interviewed Kryphu, the head of the university, regarding the establishment of schools. It was arranged that he should induce Mutlos to take the matter up with Jadgor, and Croft and the high priest sailed south to the mouth of the Na and up its yellow flood.

Then once more Himyra's forges flared as they had flared for the greater part of that strange year before. Robur, democratic despite his royal birth, went with Croft to the shops. In them was posted a notice printed from Jason's original alphabetic blocks, announcing that past the command of the Mouthpiece of Zitu there was no further word. In all things pertaining to the development of the things he had planned Croft found himself supreme. He directed and designed, while at the same time he cultivated the friendship of his superintending captains and their men.

One of his first steps was to set about developing the vein of coal he had discovered. He organized a band of miners and a motor transport train. It was a strange sight when the latter for the first time rolled forth. Robur and he went with it, and aw to the starting of the work. Save for his faith in Jason the new governor of Aphur would have doubted. Laughing, Croft gave him and the staring bands of miners and captains a demonstration, and allayed their doubts. On the second day, after the strippers were uncovering the vein and others of the men were erecting cabins to house the workers, Robur and he drove back.

Copper wire and rubber, or a substitute, were what he next required. The first was easily gained. For generations the Tamarizians had worked in metal; Croft set hundreds of the workers to the task of making wire. The second requirement was far less readily gained. But he did not despair. Aphur's climate was tropical in the main. He learned of a tree which exuded a milk-like sap, in the forests south along the Na. Thither he and Robur went straightway in a motor-driven galley, and the thing was done in theory at least, depending for its practical working out on the efforts of an army of local natives, whom the two set to gathering sap.

Back again in Himyra, save at night, Croft gave himself little rest. And even at night Robur and he discussed their plans, unless the governor was called by his duties somewhere else. Occasionally when this happened, Croft talked with Gaya instead.

Gaya questioned him frankly concerning the episode of Naia's attempted suicide in the pool. "Robur swore by Zitu, he believed you present, in the same guise in which you have told me, you move when your body sleeps."

"Yes, Robur was right," Croft told her and described what had occurred.

The princess nodded. "Now that Lakkon remains with Jadgor at Zitra, the maid grows lonely," she declared. "She has asked me to visit her. May I speak with her concerning those things if she mentioned to me her dreams?"

Croft smiled. On Palos, or on Earth woman he thought was the same. He nodded assent, but added a caution. "Yet speak not of it save as of a dream. For the growth of the soul must be as the growth of a flower, which the light of truth expands."

His wire being made, his rubber gathered, Croft turned next to the harnessing of the mountain stream. He chose copper for his penstocks instead of wood, furnishing specifications to the molders for the sections of the pipe and designing the model of the turbines to be mounted in the pits.

In all things Robur rendered him such assistance as he could, while he never ceased to marvel at the very things he planned. "Mouthpiece of Zitu you are indeed!" he exclaimed again and again, with flashing eyes as some new detail was unfolded to his mind. "Let Jadgor be president at his leisure. Thou and I, my Jason, shall take Tamarizia yet and make it a new world."

And with such a lieutenant Croft found his work advance. Wire was being made in miles, rubber was being delivered in enormous chunks from the commercial galleys down the Na, loaded onto trucks along the quays, drawn by the doglike creatures harnessed to them through the merchandise tunnels beneath the streets and stored in the huge warehouses against future use. Indeed all Himyra, all Aphur hummed at the end of the month, and the founders were beginning to turn out the sections of the giant penstock pipes.

Thereupon Croft collected another train of motors and, organizing a

party of road-builders and masons, made his way into the hills to select the site of his power station on the mountain stream.

At the camp he established beside the mountain torrent he lost no time. Long since he had cast aside Zud's choice of temple dress, for the metal leg-cases, the short-skirted tunic of a military captain, falling half-way down the thighs, and belted at the waist--a costume affording the utmost freedom of movement while he directed the beginning of each task. And so soon as he was satisfied that his subordinates understood the exact scope of their duties, he returned to set about the actual construction of the dynamo that, water driven, should light Himyra with a myriad of glowing lamps.

But that night, after he had received Robur's report of progress, and they had talked over the dynamo plans, he sought his own apartment and stretched himself upon his couch. And then he went seeking the two women who in all his life he had known the best, because he thought that it would be on this first night, with Gaya, that Naia would unburden herself.

Failing to find them in the palace, he sought and found them in the garden, seated on a carved bench of stone, inside the vine-grown walls of the pool. Naia's eyes were fixed upon its surface, silvered by the light of Palos's moons. Very wide and dark they seemed beneath the shadow of her hair. Her lips moved.

"Whether these be dreams, induced by those things of which you told me, or whether too much thinking has tired my mind until it makes of vain imaginings the seeming of other thought, I know not," she said in a musing voice. "Yet even as you said, he had told my cousin Robur that he left his body, so has it seemed to me that I left my flesh, when he called me to him--that hand in hand we wandered forth together, to Himyra--over the mountains, and once that we leaped all space, as he says his spirit leaped from Earth to Palos and stood upon the

larger of the moons up yonder, whose light sparkles here on the pool."

"Zitu!" Gaya's tones were a trifle unsteady--filled with a certain awe, as Croft waited her answer. "But--Naia, may not dreams embody truth?"

"If dreams they be, I think it may be so," her companion rejoined. "For on that time we went to Himyra as it seemed, I saw my father asleep, and he whispered by name, and the next time he came to me he spoke to me about it, said that he saw me standing beside him and had called me.

"And,"--abruptly her soft voice took on the speaking semblance of a child--"Gaya--the night was the same--on which I had my dream. And again on an afternoon when it seemed he called me, and we wandered over hill and valley, where flowers bloomed, and up to the everlasting snows. And when I woke, Maia and Mitlos stood beside me, in tears and terror, thinking my spirit flown. Gaya--how explain such things as these?"

"I may not tell you," Gaya faltered. "In these days since Zitu's mouthpiece came among us, Aphur and all Tamarizia have witnessed wondrous sights, have dreamed of undreamed truths."

"Mouthpiece of Zitu," Naia repeated, turning to face her companion. "I like not the name. Jason, he calls himself to me in my dreams, and as Jason I prefer to think of him--as Jason, a man, and--and--my lover. Ah, Gaya, should I blush for such a thought?"

"Nay--thou art a woman, ripe for loving," Gaya reassured her quickly. "And to women, be they fit, I think that Ga herself sends dreams."

"Dreams!" Abruptly Naia clenched a fist and struck the tapered

outline of her tight. "Dreams--aye, dreams they must be, Gaya--for to me he came no more again. Only when I thought not of his coming did it happen, and since, when I have called him, sought once more to sleep and find him, it is vain. Yet if I be shameless, let me speak the same. Greater happiness have I never known since I tore the seal of Azil from my girdle, than when in my sleep he called me to him, and I answered and saw him standing before me in my chamber, fair as Azil himself, with his form shot through by the soft light of the moon. Or, when I slept and Maia fanned me, and he came and led me into the outer world, where we wandered in far places, he and I alone."

"You saw him while he was in the mountains?" Gaya asked.

"Yes--what am I saying? Gaya, I forget myself, even as that day I forgot myself and bade him to my father's house." Suddenly she broke off to throw her arms about Gaya's neck and bury her face, gone white in the silver moonlight, against her breast.

"And--" The arms of the older woman crept about her.

"He replied he would enter it when Lakkon was within it," Naia told her in a smothered voiced.

"As he would were he careful of your honor." Gaya held her close.

"Child, when my visit is ended, you must return with me to Himyra, nor longer spend your time in dreams and thoughts."

"But--" Naia sat up abruptly. "Would he not think I sought his presence, were I to accompany you to the palace?"

"Are you not Robur's cousin?" Gaya answered. "Can he expect you to remain forever in your father's house?"

Chapter Ten

That Zitran, too, ran past. During it word came from Zitra that Jadgor had approved and recommended for acceptance by the national assembly that scheme for a chain of schools among the masses, Mutlos of Cathur had introduced. Thereupon Croft and Jadgor selected several expert metal molders and set them to work at making type, and Jason choosing some of the skilled workmen whom he had trained to exact methods in making the motors, months before, directed them now in the building of a rather simple set of presses in which the type should be used.

Also looking to the future he commanded others of the motor mechanics to begin the construction of a half dozen engines of a somewhat different design. Questioned by Robur as to his purpose, he explained that these were destined to finish the lifting power for the first Tamarizian airplanes.

"Zitu! Zitu!" exclaimed the governor of Aphur, flashing his perfect teeth. "I doubt you not, Jason, but my wonder does not cease. Recall you the morning when you drove the first motor through the streets of Himyra and well nigh frightened the civic guards to death?" He smiled, and Jason laughed. And then he sobered.

"Yes," he replied. "And I recall also how the same morning, Chythron, Lakkon's driver, lost control of the gnuppas and they bolted, and I spoke with Naia, thy fair cousin, first."

Robur nodded. "Fear not," he admonished. "Thought the maid repel you because of a lack of understanding, yet shall she come to you at length."

"Aye, once more shall I place Azil's sign upon Naia of Aphur's girdle."

Yet to all outward seeming he appeared immersed in his work, and

even as the dynamo and the turbines took shape, he sent men into the vast plain that stretched between Himyra and the mountains of Aphur, to a spot of his own selection, and bade them build there a huge shed to house his airplane fleet. Still others he set on the fashioning of ribs for the wings of the planes themselves, to building the fuselage bodies out of sheets of copper, and after a consultation with the local caste of weavers, he picked on a fabric for the wings.

And with all his ceaseless activities he still found time in a whimsical mood to inaugurate among his workmen a series of recreation and games. He introduced a sort of competitive spirit in the various shops, organizing from the members of each a separate club and matching them one against the other in their sports. And of all the games on which he might have picked, Jason Croft, Mouthpiece of Zitu, chose baseball! The balls were fashioned from well-turned gnuppa hide, about a rubber core, with a covering of string. The bats were of tough resilient wood, which the new devotees of the pastime swung with might and main.

Then for the first time on Palos were heard the crack of the batsman lining out a clean drive, and the cry of the umpire, Croft himself at first: "Ball four--take a free pass! Strike--one!"

Croft found he enjoyed the matches between teams immensely, while Robur entered with almost animal spirits into the rivalry of the games, and nearly pestered the life out of Jason, trying to master the intricacies and comprehend the casual principles involved in curves, in and outshoots, drops and breaks, after he had seen them first. Indeed Jason had more than one laugh after he discovered Robur in the bathing court of the palace one morning, hurling a ball against a backstop he had arranged, and trying to learn to throw it around a corner, as he somewhat naively explained.

But if Robur did not accomplish his purpose, several of the pitchers

eventually did to some extent, and Robur got a laugh of his own, when one of them whom he had secretly had Jason coach in the copper foundry team, was produced. The batter who happened to be up swung sharply at what looked like a slow and easy delivery, and Aphur's governor chuckled for days because the fellow very nearly broke his neck when his bat failed to find the ball where he thought it was.

Croft's main satisfaction, however, in the success of the innovation lay in the fact that from rivalry in the game it was but a step to rivalry between the various corps of laborers in the shops. He took that step and introduced a system of bonuses and holidays for increased production or extra-efficient work. And because the Tamarizians were a pleasure-loving people, then plan was a success from the first. Working three shifts, as he had before the Zollarian war, Croft found his plans progress. Five weeks--the length of a Zitran--after his return from the mountains, found his turbines finished, he dynamo ready to be transported and assembled in its appointed place.

That place was ready to receive it as Croft new from several trips he had taken to it, in one of his swiftest motors. A stone powerhouse had been erected, the penstocks were in place. Diverting gates were prepared to turn the stream into them at the proper moment, and send it roaring through the turbines in the pits. Telling Robur to send men into the mountains to cut poles, and giving him a model of insulators to be made of glass, Jason loaded the sections of his dynamo upon his fleet of transports and set forth again on his journey to the hills.

Thereafter for two weeks he toiled and sweated, thankful at least for the fact that in Tamarizia labor was plentiful, and regulated by government control in regard to wages, carefully estimated on a living scale, so that the dissatisfaction and continual strikes of Earth were

unknown. The condition enabled him to command what workmen needed, and rest assured of a steady advance in the projects he undertook.

More than once in that long, hot fourteen suns, Robur drove out to inspect the progress made and marvel, and report the insulators being turned out in satisfactory shape, and the poles coming down from the hills on creaking motor trucks. Croft gave him drawings to guide him in setting up a line of power poles across the desert from Himyra toward the mountains, and at night, when his weary workmen were sleeping, plunged into the task of devising Tamarizia's first electric lights. At first he confined his plans to small-sized arcs, intending to give public demonstration before he went on with the attempt to devise incandescents for inside use.

Coal was coming down from the vein he had discovered by now in quantity sufficient to use in the copper smelters, and he decided to gain his carbons, from this, converted into coke. After several nights of intensive working, he pushed aside his finished plans and drew a long breath of relief. The thing was done.

From Robur he learned that Gaya had returned to the palace, bringing Naia with her for an indefinite stay. That, indeed, was in accordance with his plans. For so soon as he had realized that Gaya meant to throw the girl and himself into a closer association, he had purposely meant to be absent from Himyra himself when the woman he loved arrived.

Deep as were his own emotions, strong as was his own impulse to indulge a desire for Naia's closer presence, yet in all he did at that time he followed a deliberately mapped-out course for the accomplishment of his purpose.

She had sought him that day in the mountains, as a sort of test--a

means of convincing herself if her visioning were false or real. She had admitted that, even despite her former reluctance to consider a possible mundane love between Croft in his present boy and herself, he had appealed to her that day in his physical form and strength. And she had complained that he had not kept the promise given by his astral form to hers, to return to her so again; had confessed that she had sought for a renewal of those two former meetings, had tried to repeat her "dreams."

Jason Croft, erecting his dynamo, harnessing it to his turbines with heavy beltings of gnuppa hide, felt that the very desire he had wakened in Naia's soul, would do its work better while it remained unsatisfied, would gain in strength as the days passed into weeks, would receive an added poignancy when she arrived at Himyra and found him gone again to the hills, engaged without any seeming distraction attributable to herself, on his work.

On the fourteenth day Robur came up from Himyra at Croft's request. Jason met him as he descended from his motor and led him into the newly constructed powerhouse. There, on a masonry and copper base, insulated by a heavy plate of glass, stood what was as yet Tamarizia's most wonderful device. Bolted and belted to the driving-gear of the turbine it stood, waiting but the driving force of the waters through a penstock to wake it to life.

Croft's eyes blazed with something of excitement as he gestured toward it. "Behold, Rob," he said, "with this shall we harness the lightnings and bid them do our will. With this shall we light the streets of Himyra and the fire-urns along the Na, and the palace, the houses of all men in Himyra first, in all Aphur at the last. With this shall we ere we are done, drive the wheels in many shops, which now are turned by men and beasts in treadmills or upon the windlass bars. So shall it come at last that by the mere pressure of a hand upon a lever those

wheels shall move. These things I promise you, Rob--behold." He waved a hand to a captain standing by the door of the house. And he in turn signaled to a workman not far off. And he, who had been waiting, lifted a trumpet to his lips and blew a blast. It was the sign on which Croft had agreed for the men high up on the mountain to open a penstock gate.

Yet for a moment there was nothing to mark the effect, until a whisper, rising to a roar, the huge pipe filled and discharged its plunging contents against the waiting wheel. Then, as the wheel turned and the belt of gnuppa hide revolved, there crept through the new rock house a strange and droning hum. Louder and louder it rose, as faster and faster the shining armature which Croft and Robur watched spun round. Faster and faster, louder and louder--blue sparks began to shine and quiver under the copper brushes. And suddenly, with a blinding scintillation, a hissing crash, a giant spark leaped the gap between the terminals of two wires Croft had arranged to test the ascending charge.

"Zitu!" Above the crackling discharge the captain in the door cried out: "Fly--we are undone, man of Zitu--fly!" He staggered back and paused and stood staring, vaguely reassured at the smile of triumph on Croft's face.

"Fear not," Jason told him quickly, as he struck up a lever, released the tension of the belt, and caused the first dynamo on Palos to sink from a dizzy whirling toward rest. "This moment speaks success for all our toil of weeks. Go tell the men on the pipes to close the gates."

Robur's face, too, was pale, well nigh as that of the captain's, though he had held his place. His lips were close pressed, however, and his nostrils slightly pinched. Then, as Croft so easily chained the fiery breathing of the monster he had produced, his eyes began to flash.

"By Zitu, and by Zitu!" he swore. "Jason, you have indeed harnessed His own lightning, as you have said. For a moment I feared that His wrath were excited by your daring, and He had sent a bolt of His fire to destroy us, with the house." He broke off with an almost shamefaced laugh.

"Yet now it gentles like a wild gnuppa under its master's hand," he went on again as the dynamo stopped and naught remained save the dwindling rush of the waters through the waste pipes from the turbine beneath their feet. "Zitu, my friend, but all men shall marvel yet as I do now at this! What plan you next?"

"Light!" said Croft. "Light, first, and after that to make use in all the ways I mentioned of this force--to turn the wheels in the shops, to run the presses I have made to print from type and so supply the schools Jadgor has favored with the means of broadening men's minds--to print for them and their children, and so to spread the truth."

"Thou wilt build a city here to do these things?"

"No," Jason told him. "This power shall flow from here to Himyra, Rob, across the line of poles your men are building, along the wires."

"Zitu!" The governor of Aphur stared.

Croft smiled. "Tomorrow," he went on, "I return to Himyra to arrange for the making of lights, and a demonstration of their working when the time is ripe." And suddenly his whole face lighted at an inward thought. "Naia--Rob. Tell me of her."

"Thou wilt see her," said Robur--"of course." It was as though he read Croft's thought. "And could you see her now as each sun I see her, perchance you would feel as do I, that she will be glad of your coming now at last. Like one without purpose she moves, Jason. There is the

look of one who waits for one who comes not in her eyes."

Croft nodded. "Today I place a guard and send the workmen back to Himyra. Tomorrow I shall come."

Chapter Eleven

Naia! He was now to meet her again in the flesh. The thought held Croft as he drove toward Himyra the next day. He was to meet her, as at Zitra, not as in the mountains beside the stream he had harnessed to his and Tamarizia's purpose, but in Robur's palace, where, like himself, she was a guest--under conditions where the conventions of social life, not so far unlike those of Earth, would compel a certain courtesy in their association at least.

Toward that meeting he went more like an ardent lover than anything else. He dressed in a costume he had ordered made when he returned from Zitra first, unlike old Zud's robes, and of his own designing--a costume of golden leg cases studded with sapphire-hued stones--an under-vest of gossamer tissue--a short skirt of a heavier material, white in color, with a silken sheen, and a cuirass of gold and silver, with the wings of Azil and the cross ansata, inlaid on the breast-plate in more of the sapphire-like gems. Of gold and silver was his helmet topped with a crest of azure plumes. Robur came in upon him, having barely returned from the shops, as he put it on.

"Zitu!" he exclaimed. "Jason, thou art a sight--"

"A sight, yes--" Croft laughed. "Rob--there are times when your tongue reminds me of speech on Earth. Were I there at this moment, they would name me a sight_ indeed."

A smile twitched Robur's lip as he caught the unaccustomed

meaning. "And at times I find a strange application of meaning in thy words, Jason," he replied. "It is so in the manner of speech you use concerning the games of baseball when the contest waxes warm. 'Tear its hide off! Lay on that pill! Lean on it! Lean on it!'--the word 'charley-horse' which you sometimes employ, and the naming of an arm a 'wing.' None the less thou art a sight to gladden a maiden's eye, my friend, and even now a maid and a matron await thee beside the bathing pool. So--get thee gone! Thou art beautiful enough."

With another laugh Croft took him at his word, descending to the court where the swimming pool sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight, where on couches beneath a shimmering awning, Gaya and Naia reclined.

"Hai, Jason!" Robur's wife exclaimed, extending a hand as she saw him. "Welcome, thou tamer of the lightning, as my lord has said thou art. Wilt pardon a matron's indolence, or should I greet thee on my feet?"

"Nay." Croft took her hand and bent above it. "I like thee less in the formal mood. Retain the charm of thy ease." Then deliberately he turned his eyes and met those of Naia. "Greeting to thee, maid of Aphur."

"And to thee, Mouthpiece of Zitu."

Croft noted the slight tensing of the lines about her mouth as he sat down. "As to the harnessing of Zitu's fire, 'tis no more than a following out of Zitu's law when understood," he turned to Gaya to explain. "The generation of 'elektricity,' as it is called, is no more in this case than the changing of one force into another, a transfer of energy from--"

"Ah, Ga, I am a woman, unversed in such matters!" Gaya exclaimed with a dancing in her eyes. "I fear I am too old to learn. Naia is of a

younger generation, her mind of softer substance. Grave thy meaning on its tablet with the stylus of thy tongue. I would see Robur before the evening meal. It were time he had returned."

"Aye," said Croft, smiling and rising to assist her to her feet. "Even now he is within the palace. We spoke before I came forth."

He watched while she hurried importantly away, then turned to where Lakkon's daughter still reclined, and resumed his seat. "You have heard from Zitra?"

"Aye," she said. "Lakkon, my father, and Jadgor are blessed by Zitu with good health. My cousin's wife informs me Jadgor has given sanction to thy plans for schools."

"My plans? Was not the matter presented by Mutlos of Cathur?"

"Aye." The pansy-purple eyes grew somewhat narrow. "Mutlos--a man of the people, who writes not his own name upon the tablets, suggests that the people be taught to read the character heretofore known to few save the nobles and the priests. And Koryphu of Scira joins hands with Mutlos to support the project. Thus inside a few Zitran after a thousand cycles in Tamarizia--" The ivory shoulder above her left breast twitched in something like a shrug. "Thus, on its face, the thing appears. Also, Robur last night came with a marvelous tale of your latest success. Zitu--one succeeds where another only dreams."

"Success," said Croft, looking directly at her, "consists very largely, Princess Naia, in refusing to be denied."

For a moment she endured his steady contemplation, and then her lids drooped. "And you succeed? You refuse to be--denied?"

"Yes, by Zitu! I refuse to question the possibility of aught which Zitu permits or ordains."

And suddenly Naia of Aphur threw up her head in an almost haughty gesture. "As were fitting, being Mouthpiece of Zitu," she made answer, "speak further. Tell me of your plans."

Croft blazoned forth. "Himyra shall see sights such as she has never witnessed. I shall make lights. Already for them the plans are drawn. Lamps they shall be of glass and metal, which, when the new force shall pass through them, shall glow yet without emitting any smoke or flame. These first I shall show at a public celebration, in small numbers. Later they shall flare from one end of Aphur to the other. Yet before I present them to the people, I shall have completed another device which shall be for a part of the celebration--a machine which like the motors across the desert, shall fly through the air."

It was then for the first time that Naia interrupted. And not as an interruption, but in their nature her words were surprising in a way. Gradually as Croft described the airplane he meant to build, her whole expression had changed, had grown wide-eyed.

"Thou wouldst be as a bird in they daring, and the birds I have often yearned to follow! I myself would delight to fly with these thy wings."

"Thou?" The spontaneous flare of daring her words mirrored forth, woke a quick admiration. But--the following consideration of her being exposed to the perils of the undertaking roused something like consternation in him.

"Nay," she said, "if it fills you such displeasure, forget my overquick speech. There shall be new light in Himyra, and Zitu's Mouthpiece shall ride above all men's heads, on the wings of his devising, that they may behold him and wonder at his wisdom. What else?"

Mentally, Croft winced at the subtle turn of her words. But, aside from an inward emotion, he gave no sign that he noted the personal bias of her rejoinder.

"In the afternoon there will be a ball game," he said. "Robur and I will select the teams."

"Base-ball?" Suddenly Naia laughed. "Robur tells me 'tis a game you brought with you from--Earth."

Abruptly Croft became aware of the scrutiny of her eyes, for the space of a heartbeat, then they were again inspecting her girdle's fringe.

"Yes," he answered, sensing that once more she was groping for some sign in his words or manner. "Have you witnessed a game?"

Naia nodded, without looking up. "Robur insisted, after he had contrived to throw a ball through my chamber window and drop it into the mirror pool with a most surprising splash, to say nothing of waking me with the water in my face."

Croft smiled. He suspected Rob had been continuing his experiments with the intricacies of curves.

"Since then," Naia went on, "I Have been seeking to aid him in the mornings with something he desires to learn. It seems that he declares a ball may be thrown so that it changes its direction in the air, and I confess that, watching one of the team pitchers whom he pointed out at a game, it appeared that it was done. We have risen and worked for several mornings together, but, besides breaking two windows and some flower urns, we have little to show for our pains. Gaya declares he will destroy the palace unless you teach him the

trick on your return."

"I shall join you in the morning," said Jason, laughing, as her red lips smiled.

"Then," said she, "shall I let you take the ball when he throws it. I confess it burns my hands. As to this new light--what does it burn, since it neither smokes nor flames?"

"A substance," said Croft, "made from koal." And now as he spoke he watched his companion in turn. And suddenly he met her eyes in a glance that thrilled--a glance that spoke of recollection.

"Koal--the strange, black stone you have set men to digging in the region to the west? Jason--how knew you where to find what, before your coming, in all Aphur was unknown?"

"I came upon its locality on a day when my body lay sleeping and my spirit wandered as you have heard that it does. Some might say Zitu showed it to me--in a dream."

Naia of Aphur went pale. "A dream, say you--a dream?"

Croft nodded. "Yes. Did you not speak to me yourself of one such, in which you had learned of my intent concerning the use of water to bring new light to Himyra? Said you not as much the afternoon of that sun on which you and Hupor came upon me by the stream?"

"Oh, aye--oh, aye, indeed." Naia's tone was listless, weary. "Yet am I not Mouthpiece of Zitu. Who am I to dream?"

"No, Mouthpiece of Zitu are you not called," he said. "Nor is there any mouthpiece of Zitu, save through the soul of man. Yet are you daughter of Ga, and a woman, through whom man's soul must pass

before man be man indeed. Thou art the door between man and Zitu, and in so much nearer than man to him."

Then for a moment he paused and sat with a fear beginning to stir within him lest he had dared too much. Her lips moved without sound. But Croft, reading their motion, knew that they framed two of his own words: "The Door."

"Yes--the door--above which Azil spreads his wings," Croft repeated softly.

Her eyes turned toward him. The introspective light was gone from their blue depths. They blazed with a purple fire. "Enough!" she panted as she faced him. "Friend thou art of my cousin, and friend art thou to his wife. Mouthpiece of Zitu art thou to my nation, and as such I yield you my respect. Yet speak not any more to me such words as these, and let us have understanding. Daughter of Ga am I, and a woman as thou knowest, but one for whom not--any more does Azil spread his wings."

She paused and stood before him, staring wide-eyed into his eyes, until abruptly she lifted a hand and struck herself sharply on the breast and turned from him, crossing the court to disappear from sight.

Beside the pool Croft remained more than a little disturbed by the feeling that he had risked too much. Nor was his mood lightened by the fact that Naia failed to appear at the evening meal, and the questioning expression in Gaya's glance, which she turned upon him from time to time.

And because of that he sought her out, safe once again in the undertaking, since should he call her to him in the astral body now, she might well think that she dreamed once more--a dream inspired by his presence in Robur's house.

He willed himself to her. Naia knelt, a slender white shape in the dusk of her apartment, before the figure of Azil, beside the mirror pool. Croft bent his head while she prayed:

"Oh, Azil, who carry life from Zitu to all the daughters of Ga, by his command--thou whose sign I have torn from my girdle and flung at the feet of him who gave it, have pity upon me. For truly am I a daughter of Ga. And though thy sign I hurled against him, even against the symbol of thy widespread wings, yet was my action prompted by an agony of spirit, rather than by any wish or intent to show disrespect to thee. And were I wrong, set me aright.

"Spread over me again they shadow wings--have pity, Azil; Zitu have a pity; have pity Ga, and teach me a new strength."

She rose. Her arms lifted. For a moment she stood so before the carved figure. Then her lips moved. "Jason," they faltered. Her breath caught in a sob. She turned and threw herself upon her couch.

"Beloved!" Croft let the cry of his thrilling soul steal forth. "Beloved you have called me. Beloved, I am here."

Naia of Aphur stiffened in every soft line and curve. She lifted her head as one who listens. She lifted her slender body on her rounded arms. Then slowly she sat up. "Jason," she whispered again at last.

"Beloved--come forth!"

The form of Naia swayed. It bent. Slowly it sagged down and lay relaxed upon the couch. And between it and Croft where he waited, there appeared the diaphanous, swaying, scintillating outline of her astral shape.

"Jason!" And now for the third time she cried it gladly with her

quivering, flaming lips. "Jason--Azil!" She stretched out yearning hands. "Thou hast come to me again."

"Yes," said Croft, opening his own embrace and drawing her inside its circle. "Yes, I have come--to tell you your prayer is answered--to tell you that of all laws of Zitu, the greatest of all is love. Wherefore for Azil himself I speak when I saw, as I have said before, that for me--for me, and for me alone, you guard the shrine of life--that some day, once more I shall place upon thy girdle that sign that in Zitra you flung against my breast."

"Thou hast it?" The contained fire of her substance glowed.

"Yes." Croft smiled. "And some day the fleshly hands of Jason shall pin it fast."

"I was mad, mad!" his companion panted. "Much thinking, the shock of learning thee other than I had thought, had made my heart sick, my mind unsettled. Ah, Jason, Jason--one time in Lakkon's palace we stood thus together in the body, and I--I yielded you--my mouth."

"As once more you yield it." Croft lowered his lips to the strange, lambent outline of hers beneath them. He kissed her in a strange kiss such as he had never dreamed of--a thing all inexpressible softness, seeming to hold in its contact a something that tingled like fire.

Croft tore away his mouth. Naia's hands clung to him. Her eyes were uplifted. "Go--go!" she panted. "Send me back to my body. Yet wait not so long to come to me again."

"In the morning I shall see you with Robur," said Croft as he released her. For now he felt assured that she was very, very close to conscious understanding.

Chapter Twelve

And that she stood very near indeed to the threshold of understanding, the weeks that followed their third astral meeting showed.

It showed in a changed demeanor of their meeting the next day. Croft waked with the sound of her voice in his ears, and lay for an instant startled in the half world between waking and slumber before he realized that it drifted from the bathing court of the palace.

Instantly he sprang up, recalling her words of the day before concerning Robur's daily practice at throwing curves with a baseball. He glanced out.

As he reached the window Robur threw the ball, and the princess ran to retrieve it. As he came forth five minutes later, she flung the ball with a truly feminine overhead gesture to where her cousin stood. "Zitu, my cousin!" she teased with a flash of milk-white teeth between the twin crimson portals of her mouth. "You throw wider of the mark, and still more wide. To me it seems that you lack that which you speak of in Jason's words as 'control.' Thy ambition to be a pit-cher stands in sorry case."

And then she caught sigh of Jason himself and broke off, while across her lovely face there stole a flush as soft as the dawning Sirian light. She turned toward him and held out a tapering hand. "Hai, Jason! It is morning--and--I see you again."

"And I thee," said Croft as he touched her fingers--"fairer, more beautiful and altogether lovelier than the dawn itself. Thy voice awaked me and told me I was late for our play with the ball."

But his blood was singing, his pulses pounding. For her words had

been but a paraphrase of that promise he had spoken to the soul of her he had held the past night in his arms. And more than any others she might have spoken, they told him that at last, as a waking woman, she began to understand.

Yet he gave no further sign, and Naia herself seemed contented with that one brief interchange. "Aye, teach him, instruct him, and thou canst. He is willing, but he accomplishes little with a vast amount of work to himself and my feet and hands."

And Jason laughed with a wonderful exultation coursing through him as he took the ball from Robur, who had approached.

Thereafter for a half-hour he instructed, and Naia retrieved the Aphurian's wild heaves and pitches, until by degrees Robur gained the partial mastery of a simple inward curve; and Naia, her face dewed with a fine moisture from her part of the practice, protested against any more that morning, declaring instead for a bath, and moving toward the pool, loosening her garment on the shoulder as she walked.

That first day Croft started work on the ovens to produce his coke. With Robur he talked over all his plans. He drove out to the site of his hangars and inspected the rising sheds. He returned to the shops of the carpenter caste, and set in motion the work of assembling the airplane wings. He inspected the body, found fault and made corrections, looked into the motor plant, and ordered the captains there to speed up their work. He drove to the glass plant from there, and gave orders for the making of his arc-lamp bodies. He seemed inspired with a ceaseless energy, which finally drove Robur into comment.

"Zitu--Jason, my friend, where is the need for such haste?"

"None, Rob, save that the fire of life burns high within me, and my spirit seeks action, not rest."

And, as so often, Robur seemed in a measure to catch his thought. "Is she not beautiful as a shaft of Zitu's own light?" he inquired, and looked into Jason's eyes. "Gaya is beautiful, too, and I love her, yet I think thy belief that she is the other half of thy soul is true. For Mouthpiece of Zitu are ye, and wiser than all other men of Palos, and Naia of Aphur, my cousin, is divine."

"Thou hast said it. Her beauty drives me as the whip against the gnuppa's flank. It quickens my endeavor, forces me to fresh effort--" Croft began, and broke off as a captain, followed by a servant from the palace, appeared in the door of the room wherein they stood.

"Hai, Robur!" the captain exclaimed, advancing with uplifted hand. "Here is one who seeks thee, as he says it, by command."

"Speak," said Robur, turning to the other--one of a number of Mazzerian runners who as messengers were kept always at hand.

The blue man saluted in formal fashion. "One from Zittra awaits thee at the palace. Even now others seek you from place to place."

"Go. Say that I come." Robur dismissed him and turned to Croft. A pucker of thought lay between his eyes. "This may be from my father. I know not the nature of his message, but--my friend, accompany me in this."

In the huge, red-paved court they left the motor and, passing between the portal guards, made their way swiftly, side by side, to the audience-hall where once Croft had seen Kyphallos of Cathur received by Jadgor, Aphur's king. A man with the circle and cross on his breast--Jadgor's emissary--was waiting there for their coming

now. As the two appeared, he rose.

"Greeting to Robur, governor of Aphur and son of Jadgor, who sends me to him," he began, producing a ring that Croft himself had often seen on Jadgor's finger and pressed it into Robur's hand.

Robur glanced at it and nodded. "Say on," he replied.

"On Bithur, Mazzer makes war."

"Zitu!" Robur started and turned his eyes to Croft.

Croft nodded. "Let us sit down and hear the rest of it," he advised.

Robur waved his father's emissary to a seat and found one of his own. "And now thy story, and quickly," he urged, while Croft found a place by his side.

"As thou knowest who led an army into Bithur when Zollaria made war," the Zitran resumed, "there was promised to Mazzer, for her help of the children of Zitemku to the north--whom Zilla take to himself--certain of the expected spoils. And as thou knowest, in all that was contemplated, both Zollaria and Mazzer failed. Yet was Mazzer promised a free highway down Bithur's principal river to the Central Sea. Mazzer, encouraged thereto as thy father thinks by Zollaria perchance, now presses this demand. Bithur, being not as Aphur and Nodhur and even Milidhur, supplied with the new weapons they used against Helmor's armies, is weak. Already have there been clashes between the blue men, better armed than ever before, and the men of Bithur along the border.

"Towns have been burned--fields laid waste--women carried into the forests, and men and children slain. Wherefore Jadgor commands you this. Send to Bithur the armored moturs, and a thousand men

with the new weapon that shoots metal and fire with the death-dealing bolts of metal they discharge. For since all Tamarizia is one nation, it is fitting and just that the weak should cry for aid in their need to the strong, and that the strong should hear. Jadgor, who sits on Hiranur's throne as head of Tamarizia, has spoken. Let Robur of Aphur give ear to his words and obey."

"Aphur hears." Robur inclined his head. "Say to Hiranur that Aphur obeys. The moturs, the men, and the weapons go to Bithur at once. Man of Zitra, you will refresh yourself ere your return."

"Nay." Already the other was on his feet. "This matter gives no rest. I return so soon as Aphur's obedience is assured. Zitu speed the fulfilment of your promise." As Croft and Robur rose he bowed and left the room.

Robur turned toward Croft. "Revenge," he said. "A war of revenge, my friend. Zollaria, cheated of her foul designs, would harass Bithur's borders. Hai!" His eyes flashed. "So be it. We shirk not what Zitu sends. Jason, go with me. Help me to send what is needed forth."

"Yes," Croft nodded, and for the rest of that long day the driver of energy within him found full vent. Runners were despatched to notify the captains of the civic guard, and a sufficient number of the veterans of Croft's riflemen in the Zollarian war. Cases of cartridges were loaded into the motor galleys along the quays. Six of the armored motors Croft had designed and used against Helmor's legions went roaring through the streets and snorted their ungainly way aboard the waiting ships. What Aphur had been called upon to furnish, she set about providing without delay.

That night, Croft willed himself to the palace at Zitra and listened to Jadgor's plans. Lakkon urged that they consult the Mouthpiece of Zitu; but Jadgor's comment that Zitu need not teach them their

lessons twice, even through his Mouthpiece, struck Croft as sound. Jadgor was a good general; he knew the art of war, and despite his regret at the personal animus Jadgor seemed to bear against him, Croft was glad that the all-important lessons were being learned. He did not want all Palos to be dependent upon him; he did not want to be a god-ruler.

Chapter Thirteen

In the weeks that followed, many things transpired. The line of poles stretched its length from the power station to Himyra, and men were stringing wires. Croft made coke, ground it into powder, mixed it with a cohesive substance, and molded it into carbon cores, to serve his growing arcs. Also, he began experimenting in the construction of batteries, both moist and dry cells. He succeeded with the former from the first. And for these experiments he demanded of Robur, and obtained, the use of an unused room in the palace, where he often worked at night.

Chemistry, an exact science, was unknown on Palos, but through consultations with the local caste of physicians Croft managed to collect a certain number of crudely refined salts which they commonly used as drugs. The room where Croft delved into the simpler mysteries of nature became an apartment of wonder to Robur, who came to it first himself, and later brought Gaya and Naia.

And on the night of their first coming, Croft explained the laws of chemical affinity as best he could to the three, comparing the force that drew the ions together with love, and caught a comprehending flash from Naia's blue eyes.

Thereafter she came as she willed when he worked, and watched while he struggled with his far from satisfactory equipment, and

asked a hundred questions, until he suggested that she assist him, whereupon she accepted with a readiness that filled him with surprise. Night after night thereafter she donned a coarse smock and labored at his side, finding a new world open before her with the wide-eyed interest of a child; beholding for the first time the deliberate manipulation of the hidden forces of nature, beginning at length to understand man's right and power to use them to his advantage, direct them and command, to look upon them not as some supernatural manifestation, but as a wholly natural thing.

Meanwhile in the motor shops, Croft's by now expert force were assembling the first two airplanes. And in the same place, since he could work there as well as anywhere else, and supervise their work at the same time, he and Robur spent a part of each day constructing a resistance coil and a temporary switch on a slab of the marble white stone so much in evidence on Palos, against the day when the new light should be shown to Himyra first.

At the end of two weeks, however, he moved the now finished wings and bodies in which the motors had been installed to the hangars and installed a force of men with them there to complete the work. Meanwhile at night he kept up his search for a satisfactory dry cell, telling Naia that the success of the flying machine depended upon it; so that when at last he succeeded, and she felt the current tingle through her fingers for the first time, she cried out in delight.

And in those two weeks, as Gaya had planned, as Croft had known must happen, constant association and education had its effect. As they played ball in the mornings, and bathed, and worked, and sought for strange, new results such as the woman had never dreamed in all her existence, they drew closer and closer together in their aims, their every interest, their understanding, than they had ever been. In his own way and by his own methods, Croft was rapidly raising the

woman, whom as a woman he worshiped, toward his own mental place. Thus in the end she came to a realization that those things which had once seemed as much a miracle to her as to any of her people, might very well be manifestation of natural law within the grasp of man.

His dry cells perfected, the success of his engine ignition assured--several arcs nearing the finished stage of their construction, Croft had a new thought. He decided that after his demonstration of the airplanes at Himyra, he might wish to exhibit them at Zitra, and altered his plans somewhat as a result, and equipped each plane with a set of buoyant pontoons, thereby converting them to the type of flying fish more nearly than anything else. He explained his reason for this to Naia, with whom he was now talking everything over fully, and she smiled.

"On the water they will run as well as through the air," she said, when he had finished. "Jason--you must teach me to fly as well as everything else."

"I like not the thought. There is danger in this flying."

"Danger?" Naia of Aphur arched her brows. "Think you I have any fear?"

"No," he hastened to assure her. "It is Jason who for thee would be afraid."

For an instant she colored and then went a trifle pale. "And what of Naia of Aphur, think you, when Jason dares this danger, my friend?"

"It is a matter of knowledge," Croft said quickly, thrilled by her hinted meaning. "I have driven them before."

"On Earth?"

"Yes, on Earth, where they use them also in the battles of their wars."

"Hai!" cried Naia sharply. "To rise and wheel and fight--to struggle like great birds in the air. This Earth of which you speak must be a wonderful place."

"Yes," said Croft, as he went on and told her many things, describing among others the aviator's dress.

"And what will Jason wear on Palos?"

Croft laughed. "I had not given it any attention. I must consider the matter. Perhaps a garment fashioned out of gnuppa hide."

Naia nodded. Suddenly her scarlet lips were smiling. "In my mind I see as in a painting these leather-clad men of Earth. Leave the matter of your apparel to Naia, and you will, O Jason," she replied.

And Croft assented, filled with both pleasure and surprise.

Then came a night to Aphur very much like that before the first motor was finished--a night when a very few hours would see the first pair of airplanes done. Under the flare of oil slushes burning about him, he looked into the face of the captain in charge of the hangar crew and found his bronzed skin pale.

"Thou wilt dare it, Mouthpiece of Zitu?" the fellow said in a tone of awed deference, meeting Croft's glance. "Thou wilt attempt in this device to mount the air? Brave men have there been in Tamarizia, aye and brave women, yet none like to thee before."

"Nonsense!" said Jason, and laughed.

Satisfied at length that everything was ready, he threw himself on a pallet, from which he rose at dawn. To his rousing cry came the captain and his men. The doors of the hangar were opened, and the first airplane on which Sirius had ever shown was trundled out, rolling on wheels affixed to the bottoms of each pontoon.

And even as it appeared, a motur flashed from the blurring shadow of Himyra's red walls and dashed toward it along the road. It was Robur coming to witness his friend's latest venture, not alone.

At first Croft noted the fact with wonder, and then with a leaping heart. Naia was with him. He caught a deep breath, and his own eyes flashed as the motur approached; he went toward it, and Robur sprang out.

"Hail, Jason, Tamarizia's first man-bird!" he exclaimed, glancing from Croft to the huge machine.

"Bird-man, not man-bird, Rob," said Croft, giving Naia a hand to assist her from the motur, and becoming aware that she carried a package across her knees.

"Thy garment," she explained, extending it to him. "Go into the cote where you house your bird and put it on."

"My thanks for it, and your presence," Croft accepted and helped her from the car. "Hai, Rob--don't fool with the engine, will you, while I don my new attire?" He turned away and disappeared through the hangar doors.

And there he opened the bundle with unsteady hands and lifted what it contained. Trousers, or rather breeches, they seemed of leather as soft as the finest earthly ooze grain--a tunic--a helmet--leg cases fashioned to strap on. And Naia of Aphur had designed them, had

planned them, directed their making, had brought them to him this morning. Croft's hand actually fumbled the buckles as he put them on. Yet in the end the thing was done, and he stepped forth clothed from toe to head in russet brown, save for the front of the helmet, through which shone his face.

"Zitu!" cried Rob, and Naia's eyes were shining as he advanced toward them followed by the hangar's crew, and mounted into his seat.

Over the fuselage edge he looked down directly into their blue depths. And suddenly they lost their glint of pleasure, grew dark and a trifle strained in the white oval of her face. "Take places!"

The hangar crew ran to the stations Croft had already assigned.

"Ready!" Two of the men laid hold of the propeller and sent it around.

With a roar the engine caught on. A cloud of back-driven dust have veiled the men who steadied the huge plane against the drag of the motur holding it, checking it as it strained and quivered like a hound against the leash.

"Let go!"

The men fell back. The plane quivered, moved slowly in advance. Out across that same desert where once Jason had driven the first motur in a mad, reckless dash to save Naia of Aphur's life, he now shot forward in the first quickening dash of Aphur's first airplane. Forward--faster and faster--faster and faster--then up. Obedient to his shifting of the controls, the huge machine tilted, seemed to rear on its haunches, lifting its nose, its wheels, rising, rising--free of the ground at last--free and rising, higher and higher, up! up!

Up, up! A spear-point of the rising sun caught it and set it aglisten as it rose. Up, up, smaller and smaller to them who watched it from beside the hangar. Then, as they watched, it turned. It turned and flew back above them, five hundred feet in the air. It began to spiral, ever rising higher above the ground. And suddenly, though Croft did not know it at the time, and Robur, lost in amazement, did not sense it, Naia of Aphur ran swiftly to the motor, and, carrying something crushed to her bosom, from their to the doors of the hanger, and disappeared.

Over the fuselage Croft looked down. The hangar was a little shed beneath him. The cluster of watchers were a group of ants. A vast elation filled his breast. Once more his efforts were crowned with complete success. With no more than some minor changes, he felt that his mastery of the Palosian atmosphere was assured. He altered the inclination of his vanes and began sliding swiftly down, gliding gracefully back to a rolling stop at the end.

"My friend!" cried Robur, running up. He caught Jason's hand as Croft climbed out, and stood clinging to it.

And though an hour before Croft would have been well satisfied with such recognition, he became aware now of hunger for something else. Naia—it was her praise, her congratulations, he wished. He turned his head, seeking her presence, and found it, and gasped.

For Naia of Aphur had changed since he left. No more was she a glowing girl in her fluttering garments; instead, she stood before him, habited like himself, in a smaller suit of brown, which clung to her graceful limbs and supple torso like a loosely fitted skin. Gone even were the masses of her golden hair, veiled under a helmet of brown.

But as he met them, her blue eyes were the same. And they were fired with a light of excited anticipation. "Again!" she cried. "Again--

and this time I shall go with you, Jason—I would fly!"

"Naia! My cousin!" Robur started forward a pace in instinctive protest.

"Nay." She wheeled upon him, stamping a small foot incased in the soft, brown leather. "Nay, Robur, I shall be the first woman in all Tamarizia to fly." She stretched out slender, appealing arms. "Jason—is there not place between your wings for me?"

"Yes." There was something, almost a veiled suggestion of wider meaning in her words, and Croft caught it as he gave her his hand. "Come," he said, as Robur fell back, and caught her under the arms, lifting her lightly up, until her foot gained a supporting hold and she climbed to her place in the pit of the fuselage.

And then, settling himself once more in position, Croft cried to his men, and once more the engine roared.

Once more the plane advanced, jolting, tipping a little, swaying to the slight irregularities of the ground it ran ahead. Croft moved a lever. The obedient monster answered. The desert fell away beneath. Up, up, Jason of earth and Naia of Aphur, daughter of Ga, and child of Palos, swam toward a brightening sky of pink and gold. Up and up. Once more he stole a sidelong glance at his companion's face. It was lifted, tilted a little back—its blue eyes closed.

"Naia!" Croft spoke to her above the motor's roar.

She lifted her lids, met his somewhat anxious regard, and smiled. And from him she let her gaze wander over the whole vast panorama of desert and mountain and the Central Ocean, blue and green and black and gold, with a froth on the nearer waves like a fringe of white to their shadowed flanks as it caught the light, and Himyra—the red

city beginning to glow as Sirius shot his shafts against its ruddy walls, and like a dull chain, supporting the red jewel of the city on the breast of Aphur, the yellow Na, outlined as far as the eye could reach by a band of shimmering green.

And suddenly her breast lifted, her lips parted, and she began to sing--to sing as she had once cried to Croft that the birds she envied sang as they rose against the morning--gladly--clearly--freely as a bird itself might sing.

So sang Naia of Aphur, between Himyra and the sun.

After that Croft taught her how to fly. Having once yielded, he could not well again refuse.

But the promise to teach her she exacted that same morning after they had returned to the palace. Robur ran off to tell Gaya concerning the success of the trial flight, and Naia dared Croft to bathe.

"You will surely teach me to fly?" she said almost as soon as they floated side-by-side.

"No. This morning I yielded because of your great desire to be the first woman of Palos to take to the air. In that I was not altogether wise. Again I would not dare."

"Yet and you yielded to my desire in the matter of this morning, your excuse should be the same in yielding to me again no less. Ah, Jason"--her hand crept out and lay upon his arm--"now I know the feeling of a bird when it rises and sings from pure joy, for the first time in my life, and the knowledge thrills me. I would know it again, because--" She broke off with a little, gasping breath.

"Because of what?" Croft turned his head and looked into her eyes.

"Because," said she very slowly, "it is to me as though I was no longer mortal--as though I had in some way left the body--cast off all the weight of the flesh."

"Naia! Thou knowest?"

"Aye--since the last time you called me to you. Come and I shall show you, Jason." She turned and dived.

Croft followed. Down, down, he followed her gleaming form through the clear water. And then lost, buried deep in its liquid embrace, screened from all observation by the play of the sun upon its surface, she turned still closer to him, and for the first time since old Zud's blunder had brought misunderstanding she offered him her scarlet mouth.

From that kiss man and woman came up gasping almost as to a new birth. "Ah, Acquor, Acquor," Naia panted, "thou has caught thy little fish at last."

"Fear not, little fish," said Croft in a voice which quivered, "I shall not eat you, but--this time I shall surely hold you fast."

"And you will teach me to fly?" There was witchery in Naia's words and in her smile.

"Yes," said Croft in open surrender. "And Zitu pity me if aught befall thee."

"Nay, I will be careful," Naia sobered. "And--and--"

"And what--is there something more, beloved?" Croft questioned softly.

"Nay." She lowered her eyes. "I must go fasten my girdle about me lest we be late for the morning's meal." She swam toward the sunken steps.

And suddenly Croft knew. In one swift stroke he overtook her. "Beloved, beloved," he whispered to her, "on the day the new light comes to Himyra I shall once more fasten thy girdle with Azil's seal."

"The new light--" The fires in her blue eyes quickened. "Aye, Jason, I would wear it in the new light," she said as, side-by-side, they clambered from the pool.

Half an hour later, Croft met Gaya, and she stopped him. "Wise man, and one of great wisdom, are you, Jason, as Robur, my husband, tells me, saying, accompanied by Naia, you have conquered the air." She put out her hand.

Croft took it. He bent toward her. "Hark you, Gaya, my sweet friend," he said, speaking softly. "The air is nothing. I have conquered something else."

"What mean you?" Gaya questioned.

"That Naia of Aphur, on the day the new light comes, will wear my seal," Croft told her.

"Zitu," she exclaimed, smiling, "you have spoken, then, at last. Wise man I have confessed you, yet to me you have seemed most blind in this as most men are with women. Glad though am I for you both. But now she was in my chamber, and radiant as Ga. She declared you would teach her to fly, and easily deceived as I was, I thought it that."

Chapter Fourteen

It was now over five weeks since the relief expedition had sailed to Bithur from Himyra, and no word had come from Zitra since. Croft willed himself to the scene, and soon learned why nothing had been heard. The expedition had met with disaster; Mazzer had loosed her whole horde upon Jadgor's forces, and the Mazzerians had been armed by Zollaria and led by Zollaria's men. Croft listened in to a conference between a slightly wounded and greatly chastened Jadgor and Medai of Bithur. Jadgor was now willing to turn to the Mouthpiece of Zitu for suggestions and aid--but more than that, this setback had restored his former first loyalty to Tamarizia.

Learning what supplies Jadgor would ask for, Croft immediately set about to install a crash program so that much would be ready before Jadgor's messengers arrived with their requests. Work proceeded at a dizzying pace.

Meanwhile, the day of the great carnival came--the carnival whose high point would be the bringing of light to Himyra. Although to Croft's mind a minor event at this moment, he demonstrated the plane, to the cheers of the watchers. Then came the first public baseball game on Palos, once to which all the watchers responded enthusiastically, as the team from the foundry clashed with the team from the airplane shop, ending with a three-to-one victory for the Founders. This brought the festivities to an intermission, since not until dusk would the lights be turned on.

Blue men of Mazzer with torches began moving about the vast circuit of the arena, lighting hundreds of oil flares. Blue girls with skins of tabur hide on their naked backs and shoulders, and metal cups in their hands, began threading the tiers of seats selling a mild, light wine. Venders of fruits and conserves for the women, and baked meats and wheaten cakes plied an active trade. In the rear of Robur's box was spread a table, and a meal was served. And before its

beginning Magur, high priest of Aphur, arrived. To him Croft and Naia rose side-by-side and bowed. Naia into her companion's face and flushed from throat to eyes. Magur's coming meant she was to pledge herself to Croft before all the assembled men and women of Aphur, once the new light came on.

And in such fashion was it done. Two heralds with silver trumpets appeared in scarlet livery, the color of Robur's house. From the front of Robur's box they blew a blast.

And on that signal the arena attendants began running to and fro extinguishing all lights. Over the arena night came down as one by one the oil flares died.

Croft gave a final glance to the woman at his side--to her face, her form, to her dress of purple and gold. He had asked her to put it on. It was the garment she had worn on the first formal occasion in which she had ever seen her take part. And its colors were the same as the auric colors of that astral form of hers which he had seen. Taking her hand he led her quite to the front of the box. There on either side had been placed one of Tamarizia's first two arcs. And in the back of the box was the controlling switch. And miles away in the mountains men were waiting for the signal of a flare on Himyra's walls to release the power. Already one had gone to see that the flare was lit. And a captain was without to carry word when it shone forth.

Now suddenly he appeared.

Croft closed the switch.

A click--a hiss--the crackling ignition of incandescent carbon--a rising glow in the darkness--then--light--clear, radiant light!

Light that flared up and wavered and steadied and shone on Naia of

Aphur, sheathed in purple and gold.

A babble of sound, a cheer of acclaim.

The trumpets of the heralds rang out.

Jason stepped forward and took his place close by Naia's side.

Magur, the high priest, arose, robed in his vestments of azure, accompanied by two temple boys. Each bore a silver goblet on a tray of the same metal that sparkled under the light.

Magur lifted a silver stave crowned with the cross ansata. "Who cries to Magur?" his voice rang out.

"A maid who would pledge herself and her life to the man of her choosing, O Prince of Zitu," Robur replied.

"The man is present?"

"Aye, he stands beside her," Robur declared.

"Who sponsors this woman?"

"I, Robur of Aphur, her cousin--child of the sister of her who gave her life."

"Come then in the name of Zitu," Magur said, and advanced to face the arena, back of Naia and Croft.

"Naia of Aphur--thou woman, and being woman, sister of Ga, and hence priestess of that shrine of life which is eternal, the guardian of the fire of life which is eternal--is it thine intent to pledge thyself to this man, who stands now at thy side?"

"Aye," said Naia of Aphur clearly.

"And thou, Jason, known as the Mouthpiece of Zitu, whom Zitu has inspired with his wisdom, even as no other man, do thou accept this pledge, and with it the woman herself, to make her in the fulness of time thy bride, to cherish her and cause her to live as a glory to the name of woman, to whom all men may justly give respect?"

"Aye, so I pledge, by Zitu, and Azil, giver of life," said Jason.

"Then take this, maid of Aphur." Magur drew from his robe a looped silver cross and placed it in her hands. "Hold it and guard it, look upon it as a symbol of that life eternal that you shall be kept eternal, and which, taken from the hands of Azil the angel, shall be transmuted within thee into the life of men."

Turning, he took the goblets from their bearers and poured wine from one to the other and back. One he extended to Naia and one to Croft.

"Drink," he said. "Let these symbolize thy two bodies, the life of which shall be united from this time in purpose. Drink and may Zitu bless thee in that union which comes into existence by his intent."

Jason raised his goblet. "I drink of thee deeply."

Naia set her goblet to her lips. "And I of thee."

Then, and then only, Croft took that medallion of silver ringed with red stones, which Zittra had burned against his breast. And lifting the golden girdle which cinctured Naia's body above the hips, he pinned it once more upon it, so that it flashed like a scarlet eye, beneath the newborn light.

Magur lifted his stave. "Azil's seal has he set upon her. Let it speak to

al men's sight."

"Hail! Hail! Mouthpiece of Zitu. Hail! Hail! Hail! Naia, maid of Aphur!" From the vast arena a roar of acknowledgment and approbation tore its way upward in the night.

So as it seemed ended Himyra's greatest holiday; so for Croft and Naia began a new phase of life. Yet though she had never seemed nearer, dearer to him, the Mouthpiece of Zitu was vaguely disturbed as they rode back to the palace through the still pleasure-making crowds. Everything seemed very peaceful, very auspicious. But he could not rid his mind of the picture which had troubled him for a week--the picture of a burning village--of blue men leaping in savage exultation of a beaten army's rout.

Hence it was with no pleasure that an hour after their return from the arena, while yet the city flared and rang with the carnival life of the people, a palace guard brought word to him from Robur, asking his presence at once.

Nor when he had followed to the audience chamber of the palace was he surprised to meet a man with drawn face, and eyes a trifle haggard--a man wearing Bithur's green and silver circle, who rose now and saluted him with flat palm forward, and burst into hurried, excited speech.

"Mouthpiece of Zitu, Bithur is sore assailed--her armies beaten, the aid Aphur sent her largely destroyed. In the name of Bithur and of Tamarizia, Jadgor, president of the nation, now at Atla, sends me to you and to Robur of Aphur, his son, to speak what is in his heart."

Chapter Fifteen

Jason went to Bithur. Naia remained behind. In the week before the celebration of their former betrothal they had so planned. Now, with the red and silver seal of Azil once more glowing in her girdle, Naia did not object.

Seven days later he entered Bithra, the capital of Bithur, and left it inside an hour, heading east along the Bith between banks where a tropic vegetation came down to the water's edge, and the mighty flood of waters swept in a turgid current between banks of trees.

Morning brought him close to Atla, as the pilot taken on at Bithra declared. Also it brought attack of a sort. From the banks as they advanced the galley was suddenly greeted by a flight of slithering shafts. Most of them, thanks to the range, fell into the water, but one or two reached the deck. Croft, who lined a company of riflemen he had hastily mobilized and brought with him on either side of the galley, replied with a crashing volley as the galley advanced. So after that, meeting flights of arrows with bullets, he progressed, reaching a bend from which the gates in the city wall spanned the river's flood and flinging the flag of Aphur into view before the sentries on the walls.

The gates swung open. The galley ran through. The gates were closed again. The galley tied to a quay below the brown palace Croft had visited in his astral presence, he marched off with his men. A procession was debouching from the palace gate. It came toward him quickly. He recognized Jadgor and Medai in the van. He halted his company and waited. The others came on. Five paces before him they halted.

"Hai! Mouthpiece of Zitu," Jadgor greeted him. "Thy coming is welcome. What word from Aphur and my son?"

"Aphur sends men and weapons to Bithur," Jason responded. "As for

Robur, son of Jadgor, he remains in Himyra to speed the departure for Bithur of all that may be required."

"It is well," said Jadgor. "Return with us to the palace where all things may be explained. Medai of Bithur greets you in Bithur's name."

Medai bowed deeply. The guards behind him and Jadgor turned. Followed by Croft's company they retraced their steps until the palace was gained.

And there in the room, Croft, Medai and Jadgor sat down. The latter eyed his former adviser and friend. "You are looking wondrous well," he said."

"Yes," Croft again inclined his head. "Thanks largely to Robur, Jadgor's son. But more of that later, Jadgor. Inform me how matters stand."

Jadgor shrugged. "It would appear to go not so well with the things in my hands as with your plans. From the first was the extent of this matter with Mazzer misjudged; and in addition there is a fault in these motors of yours, when not controlled by the builder's mind. Wherefore they failed when most needed at times, and were by sheer force of numbers overborne. As a result the blue flood of Mazzer laps even now against Atla's walls on all sides."

"Yet breaks against them," said Jason.

"Aye as yet," Jadgor replied.

"And shall break utterly," Croft went on. "Of this defect in the motors already I have learned, in the same way in which I have learned other things in the past, as Jadgor knows. Wherefore his messenger came not to Himyra as a surprise, and for seven suns before his coming,

Robur, Jadgor's son and I prepared." He broke off and watched the Aphurian closely.

But Jadgor merely nodded as he responded: "Say on."

"Among those things which have been completed since my return to Himyra," Croft resumed, "is one which flies in the air. Riding upon it a man may cast down such bombs as were used at the taking of Niera in the Zollarian war."

And now Jadgor started and narrowed his eyes, and Medai half rising from his seat exclaimed: "Zitu! Is this the truth?"

"Yes," said Croft. "One came with me aboard the galley. Between decks are the bombs. Today shall it be set up and tomorrow shall these blue men meet with a surprise. Also have I brought devices to make the performance of the motors more assured. From the ground and from the air shall we smite the Mazzerians at once."

"Hai!" Medai roared. "Jadgor—to fly above them and rain death on their heads. Never was such a thing heard of. You believe?"

"Aye." Jadgor of Tamarizia rose. "Zitu's Mouthpiece is a man who speaks not in idle fashion, O Medai. He speaks true words. One does well to give credence to his speaking." His hand snapped back and drew his short sword from its scabbard. He presented it hilt forward. "Man whom Zitu has sent to Tamarizia's strengthening, to thee I yield."

"No." Croft waved the sword aside. "Mouthpiece of Zitu have I been called, in that at times I have been given the power to direct or to advise. In Jadgor's heart and mine must Tamarizia find first place always. Let Jadgor wear the sword."

Jadgor sent the blade back into the sheath with a rasping clash. "You and I together for Tamarizia then," he said with abrupt decision, and thrust out his palm. "Accept Jadgor's hand at least."

The two men gripped and the Aphurian resumed: "Speak, Mouthpiece of Zitu, what do you advise?"

"What men have you at your disposal?"

Jadgor and Medai explained, and Croft decided upon a tour of the walls. The trio set forth. And as they went Jadgor explained further that three times within the past ten days had the Mazzerians attacked them.

Indeed, Croft gained evidence of that when the top of the wall was reached. It came to him first as an almost insufferable stench. Jadgor noted the twitching of his nostrils.

"Aye, by Zitu! they stink to the skies, these dead litter of an unclean birth. The trenches about Atla's defenses are filled with their corpses. By the thousands have we slain them, yet by the tens of thousands have their following spawn arrived. Their souls have we hurled to Zitemku and their bodies to the ditch." He swept his arm toward the outer parapet in a wide arc. "Behold!"

Croft looked out of an embrasure and down. An arrow rattled against the stones beside him, and he drew back. But the one glance had been enough. He began to think it would be no mean undertaking to defeat the men of an army who fought like that.

"Back!" he said. "Back to my galley, Jadgor! Let us put together the flying device I have brought. Tomorrow we shall give them new death from the skies."

And for the rest of that day Croft sweated and worked, assembling the airplane on Atla's broadest street, which, like Himyra's faced the river--a splendid concourse, above a terrace, offering him a spot for starting, two hundred feet in width. What of the armored motors remained he had also driven up, and under their metal bodies he installed his batteries, wiring them to the ignition system--explaining to their drivers, how should the former supply of power be thrown out of service, this auxiliary source might be employed.

Toward evening, however, he altered his plans. The more unseen the destruction which came upon them, the greater on superstitious minds the effect might be. And as he knew from his association with the Mazzerian serving-caste in the nation he had adopted, the Mazzerians were superstitious to a degree.

About twilight he loaded the plane with a good supply of bombs. Ascending from the broad thoroughfare, and returning to it, outlines as it would be by the fire-urns, which, as at Himyra, marked the banks of the Bith along the quays, would be no more than child's play. As a result, he decided to make his first bombing expedition beyond the walls so soon as night came down. This decision he reached after a conference with Jadgor, who announced that for a great distance before the walls the Mazzerian camps were nightly marked by the flares of many fires.

Jadgor, Medai, the major captains of their armies, and many of the citizens of Atla stood to witness Croft's start. Wearing his flying-suit, Jason climbed aboard. Then at his instruction two soldiers seized the blades of the propeller and turned the engine round. They let go and scampered well out of the way as it roared. The plane quivered, moved. It darted forward along the perfect pavement, tilted and took to the air. In a moment it soared high above the walls.

As far as he could see before him, and to either side, the night was

dotted with fires. In a wide semicircle they blinked and winked and flared. They outlined the main position of the Mazzerian army.

Then the walls were passed, and with the breath of a clean night in his nostrils, the roar of the engine in his ears, he swept toward the line of fires.

Far, far out he swung. It was his intention to circuit the back areas of the Mazzerian line--to come upon them not from in front, but from the rear--to make his coming appear that of some huge, undreamed monster of superstitious seeming, to traverse their main body from one end to the other, dropping bombs which, under the conditions, he felt could hardly fail of a telling effect.

Far, far out he swam on the new wings he had built for himself--and for Naia. Naia? He smiled. In Himyra she was perhaps flying by day even as he was flying now--flying as he had taught her to fly in body and soul. He passed the first line of the Mazzerian bivouac and darted above a wood and came above a great savanna--a tree-dotted plain, where the camp-fires were flashing again.

Then, and then only, for the first time he reached down and took up a bomb, and sailing high above that plain where the camp-fires looked like a myriad of fireflies far beneath him, he let it fall.

A flash, a ruddy, great mushroom of golden, raying light--a splash of rending destruction in the night. The explosion came up to him long after he saw it, on the lagging vibrations of sound. Again and again he hurled a second and third as he swam from left to right.

Faint, far away, oddly detached, he thought he heard a distant shouting, though it was hard to be sure above the motor's roar. But the light of other fires showed him the silhouette of many figures running, of arms uplifted, as though those who swarmed like a hill of

angry ants driven into panic were pointing into the air. Where that cluster of pointing forms seemed thickest he soared on swift, sure wings and let go another bomb. It fell beyond his vision. It burst. The blur of bodies into which it descended was no more.

A sputter, a cough from the motor. The engine was missing. Apprehension touched him with a breath-arresting recognition of the fact. And hardly had he taken it into account when the motor missed again. And having coughed for the second time, it died.

He was falling--falling! The bombs! Oddly enough he thought of them rather than of being dashed to death. He reached down and found the remaining four he had brought. He hurled them over the side of the fuselage, tossing them wide. Then he began a frantic effort to once more start the engine--in vain.

Below him four ruddy flashes told him the bombs had struck. In a rushing whirlwind the air of night was driving past the plane. Doomed as it seemed, still the will to live, to struggle, to overcome danger and death itself remained within him. He began an effort to straighten out the plane's course, to catch and use to his own advantage that wind that was whistling past him now.

So in the end he did straighten out at last and slid swiftly, where before he had eddied and whirled.

"Zitu!" he breathed a prayer of thanksgiving. Then--the fire-dotted plain was very close. And the airplane was shooting down toward it, even though no longer falling, and there was little chance to choose a course. With a crash the pontoons beneath it struck through the top of a tree, and the whole machine swerved. In mid air it staggered, checked, lunged ahead again like a restive living creature, tipped, slid off sideways, and crashed down on a crumpling wing.

Unable to maintain himself in his shaken condition, Croft gave vent to an inarticulate cry of anguish. The entire bulk of Palos seemed to rise and hit him, as catapulted from the fuselage by the ruinous landing, he struck and lay in a dark and senseless huddle on the ground.

Chapter Sixteen

Hours afterward, as it seemed, Croft opened his eyes, and blinked at a flare of light and closed his lids again, while he sought to collect his shaken senses.

He remembered by degrees.

The plane had fallen. There was nothing after that. But he had fallen upon a night-wrapped plain, studded with the fires of a camp. Now, instead of stars above him, there was what looked like the bellied top of a tent. Slowly he spread the fringes of his lashes and sought to verify the impression he had gained.

He was correct. He lay in a tent, seemingly of skins joined to form the sloping top and walls. The interior was lighted dimly by a couple of flaring torches. But the light was sufficient to show Croft piles of military gear, rugs of native skin, on one of the latter of which he seemed to be lying, and some crude stools scattered about.

He lay with head half turned as he had been thrown down, and now he became aware of other life in the tent as his senses more fully returned. There was a sound of voices. He opened his eyes widely and stared about. And inwardly at least he gasped.

This was the headquarters of the army he had sought to bomb, past any doubt. Blue men--a dozen, a score were clustered about a huge chair to one side, in which another blue man sat. And yet--in the latter

Croft detected something familiar in a flash, and immediately after he understood. He had heard it alleged that certain Zollarian captains had stained their bodies and shaved their heads and dyed the remaining scalp lock of their light hair to match the Mazzerian red.

And--and--this was Bandhor of Zollaria--brother of Kalamita--that tawny female magnet with which the northern nation had sought to bind the profligate Prince of Cathur to her cause. This was Bandhor, his massive body stained blue in its every ungainly line, seated upon this chair before which the other blue men stood. And inspecting the latter more closely, Croft decided that most of them were men of Zollaria tinted and shaved and dyed like Bandhor himself.

Here then was proof of Zollaria's hand in the Mazzerian invasion. Croft's head was splitting, but he sought to focus his attention on what was being said.

"Sayest thou that this man fell out of the skies?" Bandhor roared.

"Aye," said one of the captains, whom Jason felt positive was a Zollarian for all his naked blue strength. "Aye, Bandhor, he fell from a device like to a pair of wings. Before that had strange weapons fallen upon my men from the skies in a rain of death. Then suddenly came this man."

"Tamarizian devil," Bandhor swore with savage force. "This newest method of their fighting would seem to be like their last, when they struck Zollaria's army with a blast of fire. Go see if still he breathes."

Two of the men turned and approached Croft. They bent above him. He stared straight into their faces.

"Aye, Bandhor of Zollaria," reported one. "He has opened his eyes."

"Bring him here."

Croft rose. Without waiting the touch of a captor's hand he staggered up and faced Bandhor's chair. "Stand back," he hissed to the men beside him. "I would walk alone." He took a step forward, swaying; whereupon the others seized him and hurried him to Bandhor's place."

"Spawn of Tamarizia," Bandhor began, "what is thy name?"

"Thou hast said it, Bandhor."

"Came you from Atla?"

"Yes."

"How many men inside her wall can Jadgor and Medai claim?"

"Enough," said Croft. "Enough blue-dyed men of Zollaria to pile other thousands of your naked dupes before them. There are not men enough in all Mazzer to scale at Zollaria's command Atla of Bithur's walls."

"Hai! By Bel of Zollaria thy fall has not broken thy tongue at least!" Bandhor exclaimed. "But thy manmade wings are broken, and thy insolent spirit may be broken also. Hai--bring a brazier and a spear head. Since this Tamarizian fights with fire we shall give him a taste of it himself, and learn perchance what within Atla transpires."

"Hold!" Suddenly the wall of the tent behind Bandhor's chair swept back, revealing a small private tent beyond it, and a tawny woman appeared.

White she was in the murky light as a ray of moonlight in the dusk--white, and splendidly formed in every supple line of sensuous body

and limb. Jeweled cups covered her breasts, and a scarf of shimmering tissue was twisted about her sinuous loins and fell half down her thighs. With the grace of a stalking panther she advanced, accompanied by another blue-stained Zollarian captain, and took her stand beside her brother. In the flare of the torches she gleamed among those blue-tinted bodies like a silver wand.

"Bethink you my brother," she continued as Croft recognized her as Kalamita, "would destroy or even mar the weapon in your hand?"

"Hai, by Bel," began Bandhor.

"Aye," his sister went on. "Where are Bandhor's eyes? Know you not that before you stand the Mouthpiece of Zitu of whom Tamarizia boasts--him to whom Zollaria must mark the score of her defeat, he loss of Mazhur? Rather than for gaining information can Bandhor not think of a better way in which such a one may be used?"

"Hai--you mean a ransom, Kalamita my sister?"

"Aye. Much should Tamarizia be asked in payment for her Mouthpiece of Zitu, who tumbles from the skies."

And suddenly she smiled as she broke off her flippant taunt--smiled and looked steadily into Croft's staring eyes.

"By Bel!" once more Bandhor roared. "The words of Kalamita are of wisdom. Go--Mamai. Take portions of the device from which he fell. See they are carried to Atla. Say that this man fell among us with them. Demand a parley, at which terms for his return shall be named."

"Aye, Bandhor!" One of the captains saluted and left the tent.

Inwardly Croft writhed. Here was a pretty pickle, indeed, since by his blunder he had become to Tamarizia a weakness rather than a strength—since because of it, Tamarizia would seem to be confronted with the choice of leaving him to fate or paying Mazzer's and Zollaria's price. And—he had caught all the meaning in the tawny depths of the Zillarian courtesan's eyes. That price would indeed be large.

And now she bent and whispered into Bandhor's ear and he nodded. "Bind him," he said, and pointed to Croft. "Lift him and bear him into my sister's tent. Place a guard about us when it is finished. That is all, my captains. We wait for word from Atla. Go!"

To resist were useless. Croft did not try. He stood passively while his hands and feet were trussed. Then he was lifted and borne beyond the flapping door through which she had entered, and laid on a pallet of skins beside a copper couch.

The woman followed, remaining standing until his bearers had left, then approached and reclined on the couch from whence she could watch his eyes.

"Mouthpiece of Zitu," she began after a moment of contemplation, "Mouthpiece of Zitu, who tumbles from the skies."

Croft made no answer, and suddenly she left the couch and knelt beside him. "You are a handsome man, Mouthpiece of Zitu. Am I not beautiful myself?"

"Yes," said Croft, since in a purely physical way she was no less than a creature to drive most men mad, and he knew that she knew it, and because of the knowledge, left none of her charms concealed.

"And"—she bent above him, closer, until her reddened mouth seemed

about to touch him, until her breath played softly against his cheek--
"wisdom and beauty may accomplish much together, Mouthpiece of
Zitu, think you not?"

"What mean you, Kalamita of Zollaria, you magnet of the flesh?"

She laughed--laughed with a note of exultation in the sound. "Why think
you Kalamita saved you from the fire?"

"Said she not the reason in words?"

The woman frowned. "Think you Jadgor of Tamarizia will pay the
price for you that Mazzer will ask?"

Croft knew that his heart leaped. He had been afraid--afraid--yet now
he recalled Jadgor as he knew him--Jadgor who had bowed his
haughty crest on the day just passed for Tamarizia, but never for
himself. Turning the thought in his brain he forgot to answer.

"You know he will not." Almost Kalamita hissed. "And if not, is death
preferable to life, power--love? Would prefer to lie in the ground, wise
man of Tamarizia, or in Kalamita's arms? Wouldst prefer to give of
your strength to Zollaria and her, or to the worms?"

"Behold, we are alone. I can unbind you, and--Kalamita's couch is--
wide."

"Aye, too wide, by Zitu!" suddenly Croft roared. "The need was too
patent in its making to have foreseen the fact that width would be
required. Sister of Bandhor, beautiful as the dream of soul in the
realms of Zitemku you may be, but--Jason of Tamarizia barter not
the welfare of his nation!"

"So!" Kalamita rose and stood above him. "So, then, we know your

name at last. Hark ye, Jason--for Kalamita's favor prouder heads than thine have bended down in the dust. Nor is her favor a thing to be lightly brushed aside. Wherefore and Jadgor pays not the price we ask, then the Mouthpiece of Zitu dies."

A space of time dragged past and Croft had not replied.

Suddenly Kalamita was again beside him. "Or, perhaps," she said in a softer fashion, "it is because of that maid of Aphur, of whom one has told me--that Jason turns aside. If so, forget her--and remember only that Kalamita also is a woman."

"Nay--by Zitu, and Azil and Ga!"

"By Bel." Once more Kalamita rose. A tremor shook her tightened figure and quivered in her tones. "By Bel, who delights in slaughter, you shall die by torture. Tested by fire shall you be, and staked out for the insects to devour. The carrion birds of Mazzer shall pluck out your beauty-blinded eyes. The beasts of the forest shall tear thy entrails from thee for thy words to me." She turned and went swiftly toward the flaplike door and flung it open. "Bandhor, O Bandhor!" she cried.

Her blue-stained brother appeared. They conferred together. Bandhor turned away.

But only for a moment longer were Croft and the woman alone. Then came Mazzerian soldiers, and lifting the trussed figure, bore it swiftly into the night through Bandhor's tent and to another, smaller, unlighted as to its interior, with naught for a floor save the grass-grown ground. And there they flung him down.

But Jason smiled. He stretched out his limbs so far as his bonds would let him and breathed a sigh of relief.

And after a long time, as it seemed to his troubled senses, all his planning focused on Zud and Naia--dwindled down to those two words. Lying here, bound, practically doomed to die, he could yet communicate with them in the astral state. And swiftly as the thing was always accomplished when he so desired it, he was bending over the high priest's body, asleep in the Zitran pyramid.

"Zud," his spirit was calling. "The Mouthpiece of Zitu commands you. Come forth."

And Zud appeared. "Aye, Jason of Zitu," he quavered. "Zud is here."

"List he, Priest of Zitu," Croft replied, and told him what had occurred. "Wherefore give ear further to my words. Go to Lakkon, and bid him, in Zitu's name, to send to Jadgor at Atla, advising him to hold out and seek for delay until the aid from Himyra arrives. Let it be said to him that Zollaria inspires all things which Mazzer requires. Let him know that through the power of the spirit which is mine, I shall inspire Naia of Aphur to cause Robur, his son, to come swiftly to Atla in person, to direct the use of the weapons that together with myself he understands, and that through you and Naia of Aphur, I shall keep him informed of all that transpires while yet my body survives."

"And thou--thou?" Zud faltered in distraught fashion, clasping his shadowy hands.

"I? I know not," said Jason. "My fortune is in Zitu's hands. To you I give this mission. Say that you understand."

"Zud hears, and Zud obeys."

Croft left him. His work was finished. He sought Himyra and Robur's palace, and Naia--his other self. And this part of his plan he felt would be the hardest, since in order to make her comprehend fully he must

tell a painful truth--must confess that through his own daring was Jason at last undone--that his body lay prisoner to Mazzer, condemned if what he meant to attempt were accomplished, to what seemed inevitable death.

And suddenly, as he gained her chamber, Croft had the odd sensation that he stood before a tomb. He moved swiftly toward her couch. In the dusk her form lay stretched upon it. But--it was motionless, with no stirring of the coverlet stretched above it, no evidence of breath. Pale as a lovely image it lay before him, in the semblance of what might be death.

Fear--sheer, stark fear gripped Croft and held him through the span of a startled instant. And then he knew the truth. Because as he stood there it seemed to him that Naia of Aphur was calling--not from the form on the couch, but from somewhere else. "Jason--Jason--O Jason, my beloved!" that subtle cry rang out.

And it drew him. It compelled him. It made of his astral substance no more than a straw swept up and off and about in an eddy of compelling force. It was more like that ceaseless urge which had drawn him from the Dog Star always while yet he dwelt on earth.

It carried Croft out of the palace and across the Central Sea. It swept him across Bithur, with its plains and night-wrapped woods. It drew him above the camp of the Mazzerian army, and inside that tent where his body lay stretched out upon the ground.

And then Croft understood--that Naia had accomplished for herself, what heretofore had been by him induced. She had come to find him.

Then very softly, "Beloved," he let steal forth the soul call.

She heard. She lifted her head from where it had lain upon his breast.

She turned its wide eyes toward him, and saw him and rose swiftly toward him, and into his embrace.

"Jason--I cam to Atla, and could not find you. And I sought you--sought you. What is the meaning of this?"

"The plane fell. I told you always there was danger," he explained briefly. "I was taken prisoner by the Zollarian masters of the men of Mazzer. I am held to ransom for a price."

"Zitu!" Naia panted. "And what else?"

"I went in the spirit to converse with Zud, and send him on a mission to thy father. Through him I shall send word to Jadgor that the price must be refused."

"Refused?" Naia drew back slightly. "But Jason--thy body--which I found lying--here?"

"Belonds to thee, while yet it survives," Croft answered slowly, and went on before she could find a reply. "Then went I to Himyra, and finding your form stretched on its couch, seemed to hear you calling, and returned to find you here. Listen, Naia, my beloved, you must find Robur and speak to him for me. To Jadgor you must send him, explaining what has befallen, telling him from me as the one Lakkon sent will tell him, that when Robur shall arrive to take charge of the motors and the riflemen of Aphur, they must strike, strike, strike until Bithur shall be freed. Also to Robur you must say he shall call on Nodhur and Milidhur to arm so quickly as they may, and send their men to reenforce and support Aphur. So shall Tamarizia vanquish Mazzer and once more defeat those things Zollaria plans."

"And--you ask me--to do this?" Naia faltered.

"Aye--for Tamarizia I ask it," Croft replied.

"But--you--you?" She glance toward the tight-bound body.

Croft sought to stay her questions. "Look not there, beloved. I am here."

"But--unless this price of Mazzer you mentioned--be paid?" She would not be refused.

Croft drew her to him. His position was perhaps rather more peculiar than that of any living man. The answer to what she had asked was death, and he knew it. Once he had snapped the astral cord that bound him to a body, but only after control of another had been gained. And that second body, the one he had made his own on Palos when he forsook Earth because of the woman whose vital substance now glowed and paled against him, was the one which lay bound beside them on the ground. There was no other--the loss of it meant to him what the loss of physical life must mean to all men--nothing else. "If the price is not paid, it is easy enough to snap the cord that binds my life within it, at the proper time," he said at length.

"And," said Naia in a tone of horror, "you would ask me in taking your message to Robur, in sending him to Jadgor, to consign our love to death?"

"The price," said Croft in justification, "is very great. Much will Mazzer ask--more than by Tamarizia can be paid for one man's life."

Swiftly the auric fires leaped up in Naia's slender figure. "Is there no escape?"

"I know not," Croft made answer. "It is as Zitu wills. These Zollarians with the men of Mazzer have stained themselves blue. Yet whom

have I to stain my body, were the stain within my grasp, or shave my hair and dye it red in time to make the venture? This tent is under guard, and will be, and the hands of my body are bound."

Naia considered. "And the price Mazzer will ask," she spoke slowly after a time, "is large?"

"Aye, as large, I fear, as though the Zollarian war had been lost by Tamarizia and Mazhur not regained."

"And if not paid--your body--dies--and mine."

"Thine?" Croft tightened the grip of his arms upon her. "What mean you, maid of Aphur, by such words?"

"Aphur means what Aphur says," she returned. "Think you that when life has left your body, Naia of Aphur, too, shall not lie dead? Did you not swear to me by Zitu and Azil to return and claim me? And if that promise remains unfulfilled, think you that Naia of Aphur will live?"

"Yet," Croft stammered, "if the welfare of Tamarizia demands the failure of that promise--if not with honor can I return to Himyra in the body. If your words, beloved, make doubly hard my purpose, when you shall have left me and returned to carry my message to your cousin--"

"By Zitu--and by Zitu," Naia fired into desperate protest, "it shall not be. Azil, giver of life! Shall these foul spawn of Zitemku keep you from me? Nay, as I am a daughter of Ga, with your seal upon me, now Ga speaks to me!

"Hark you, Jason, whom I love more than my own soul. This tent is guarded as you have said, and a price is laid on Tamarizia for your returning. Yet am I not a woman whom you have wakened for nothing,

and my love is not in vain. What price for a man who is dead?"

"By Zitu!" Croft caught her meaning. His glance turned toward the body on the ground beside their feet.

And Naia nodded. "Aye--Gaya told me in speaking of those things you told to Robur and to Zud, and now I know for myself that when the spirit is without it, the body lies as dead. Wherefore were it possible for you to remain as now you are for a space sufficient to deceive these men of Mazzer into thinking that injured in your fall you perchance had died--think you they would keep your body under guard or even near them, lest it foul the air even like those rotting corpses which tainted it with horror as I passed this night by Atla's walls?"

"No by Zitu--they would cast it forth in some other place," Croft answered quickly. "Naia--Ga--priestess of life, you have said it. Together we shall beat them yet."

"Aye, we shall beat them. Listen further," Naia said. "For a few suns you shall appear to be alive, yet faint and not recovered from injury. To Himyra shall I return and carry your message to Rob. When seven suns beginning with the next are passed, then must you seem to die. Thus shall they carry you forth. But the seven days shall be to gain time for what you direct to be done. Hai, I am not daughter of Ga for nothing. Beloved--give me your mouth. I must be gone."

Life! Life and this woman! There was a chance. Her wits had found it where his had milled around. Croft took her once more closely into his arms.

"Seek not to leave your body for one moment between now and the end of the seventh sun," she cautioned, "lest one should note it and so at the proper time entertain a doubt of your real death."

"No," he gave his promise. "I shall be merely as one who from one sun to another fails."

Naia lifted her lips. And as once before in similar fashion, she yielded them to him. For an instant it was as though their two beings blended, intermingled, and then she had torn herself from him, divinely glowing "Zitu keep you, beloved," she whispered, and vanished from before his eyes.

For the succeeding seven days Croft endured--simply endured discomfort--the trussing up of his arms and feet at night in none too gently fashion, the scant irregularity of poorly furnished meals, the absence of aught save trampled grass to sleep upon, renewed attempts on the part of Bandhor to force from him some intimation of Tamarizia's plans, and the haughty, venomous hate that glared out of Kalamita's tawny eyes.

But on the seventh day, as he lay brooding in his tent, close by the huge skin headquarters tent of Bandhor, which reminded him more of some Tatar chieftain's domicile than anything else, the door of his own tent was drawn slightly to one side and a face appeared to send his heart leaping into his breast.

Maia, Naia's own maid, was looking shrewdly into his starting eyes. And as lost in a maze he lay staring at her, filled with a vast wonder at her presence here in the heart of the Mazzerian camp, yet afraid to speak--torn between a desire to learn the meaning of her presence and a fear lest any sign of recognition should destroy whatever purpose that presence might portend, she flung the flap entirely back and darted inside.

"Thou canor of Tamarizia!" she cried in the voice of a termagent--a shrew--and struck him with her right hand a smart blow. "Thou foul

offspring of Zitu fallen to the ground--thou devil who sent fire against my people, whose own people have cast him off, die--like the canor thou art!" And all the time she was shrieking she continued to buffet him with blows, striking him with her bare hand, kicking him with her feet. "Die, thou pale-faced fiend, whom Bel--greater than thy Zitu struck down and hurled among us--die--die now!"

But croft, under the storm of her words, her buffetings, made no movement of resistance, lay limp and unresisting on the grass. Because even as she struck him, as her one hand rose and fell above him, her other drew from the narrow apron about her blue loins a little looped silver cross, and showed it to him briefly and thrust it back, and between the anathema of her lips they moved in almost soundless speaking. "Hupor--give ear to my berating of thee closely. I come from one who loves thee greatly--to show you the cross."

The cross ansata--the looped symbol of life--the little sign Zud had placed in Naia's hands at their betrothal--the sign of immortal life which came to men through women--Naia of Aphur was sending it by this servant of hers, who loved her, to him! He closed his eyes and nodded slightly in understanding as Maia continued to rave.

"Die--thou canor--die as Bandhor has decreed thou must, since Jadgor has refused thy ransom! Die now--thou Tamarizian dog!"

She had told him to listen closely to her vituperations. Jadgor had done as he advised, and Bandhor's captive had lost value. Wherefore he kept his eyes closed, and seemingly died.

Footsteps! Croft's guard burst through the door. He seized Maia and flung her to one side and stooped above the body with a face of terror. And then he straightened and turned upon her. "By Bel, you have killed him!" he stammered. "He has been ailing ever since he fell among us. Fool that I was to listen to your plea to view him. May

Bel send you our commander's rage."

"That rage," Maia said, panting as it seemed from her exertions and emotions, "seeing that he is of value no longer, should not be so intense."

"Come!" The guard seized her by an arm and led her toward Bandhor's tent.

Croft went along, trailing the man and woman's steps. And once inside the huge shelter of skins, the guard saluted sharply and hurled Maia before the Zollarian noble, so that she sprawled her length on the ground.

"Behold, O Bandhor"—he made his report in a gruff bluster designed to cover his own face as well as he could—"this woman who made her way by stealth into Jason of Tamarizia's tent and struck him so that he died!"

"Hai!" Bandhor half rose, and sank back and narrowed his eyes. He regarded Maia, who groveled before him, her body caught and held, half raised, on stretching arms, her head lifted, gazing in to his startled face with watchful eyes.

"How are you called?" he inquired.

"Maia," stammered the woman. "Child am I of a father and mother who have lived among his people. All my life have I served them until Bel sent Bandhor and my father's people to bring liberation. Then I slipped away and made my way to thy army, with which I have stayed the past sun. Wherefore, hearing that Bandhor had condemned this one to death, I desired to see him and, seeing him, rage overcame me, and I threw myself upon him. Mercy, O Bandhor, mighty commander of my people, for this which I have done."

"Hai!" said Bandhor again, his lids contracting still further. "After all, it is a small matter, though my sister will be annoyed. She had planned a more lingering death for this insolent man. Yet to death was he condemned, and it is finished. Say you that from the bondage of his people you have come?"

"Aye, from Atla, lord."

"Atla! Now, by Bel!" Bandhor roared. "And what inside the penned-up city do these white spawn plan?"

"They speak of resistance," Maia made answer, "as Bandhor knows. But perchance he knows not that many men from Aphur have arrived, armed with the chariots they call moturs, which run by fire, and breathe it forth as death, and with the sticks that throw death unseen with noise and smoke, unlike the flight of an arrow or spear. Ten thousand have reached Bithra, and are advancing to the relief of Atla even now. More are said to be journeying from Aphur across the Central Sea, and yet others from Nodhur and Milidhur are to come."

"Hai!" For the third time Bandhor said it with a heavy frown. "This is of importance. For the information your words contain, I give you pardon--were those other of thy father's children in Tamarizia as loyal--much might be wrought of ill among them were their caste of servants to rise and kill and burn. Go!" He turned to the guard, whose face had lightened. "Take men and bear forth this body, and cast it beyond the camp. Or hold! I will view him myself." For the third time his eyelids narrowed, and he rose.

Followed by Maia and the guard, he entered Croft's tend and bent over the body on the ground. "Aye--his spirit has left him," he said as he straightened from the inspection and swung about on his heel.

"Might Bandhor," Maya stayed him. "I may remain for a time in the camp?"

Bandhor eyed her. "Oh, aye," he said in careless fashion. "You are a comely girl of your people. You should have small trouble in finding some man to take you to his tent."

He turned away, and a moment later a brazen trumpet began sounding a summoning blast. As Croft learned, this was a signal to Bandhor's captains and advisers to assemble for a council with their chief.

Maia stole out with the arm of the guard about her, walking coyly at his side. Quite plainly the fellow was inclined to take Bandhor's suggestion about her to himself. Croft watched them vanish, and remained beside his own body, still huddled on the grass.

And in the end he followed it--followed his own body when it was borne outside the limits of the encampment and cast into a thicket of bushes, where its disposition was watched by Maia, who accompanied the now openly amorous guard and lingered beside the thicket with him after the other soldiers had cast down their burden and gone.

"Let us remove its clothing," she suggested. "To waste it were a loss."

The guard assented.

Five minutes later, more than a little aghast, Croft found his material tenement stretched stark upon the ground. Maia and her lover were moving off. In her arms the girl bore his suit of soft, brown leather.

In a way now Croft became more and more disturbed. Vague fancies

filled his mind. Still--she had shown him the tiny cross from the apron about her waist, and she had told him to die, as Naia had advised he should. After all, she might have some definite reason beyond his present knowledge for divesting his body of clothes. And he could do nothing until nightfall. That being the case, and the night being several hours removed, there was nothing to do but wait. Dead it might be in seeming, yet Croft knew that lying thus in the open his body needed protection. In the middle of the thicket he settled down beside it. It was rather odd, he found himself thinking, to be sitting there keeping an invisible watch of his own form.

Now and then, as the afternoon passed, he stole a glance at the camp. There was bustle there, a moving and shifting of men. It came to him that Bandhor, after his council, was preparing for another attack of Atla, urged thereto by Maia's report concerning the approaching reinforcements of weapons and men.

Night came at last. Purposely Croft waited until late before making his venture at escape. And while he waited, there stole into the thicket a dim shape, which approached his body and sank beside it on the ground.

It was Maia. More than a little surprised, Croft watched her. She carried a bundle. She undid it. She moved higher beside his body and raised his head, supporting it on her thighs. Then swiftly she began to shave it, turning it to reach the back, and working rapidly on the sides. That done, while comprehension flashed into Croft's mind, and with it renewed confidence in this girl, as he recalled his words to Naia concerning some such thing as this, she took a small box from her bundle and began rubbing the scalp-lock she had left upon his poll with a substance it contained. After that she lifted a flask and removed a stopper. Working rapidly, she began smearing the body with some dark fluid, spreading it thinly upon the skin, rubbing it to as

even a coating as she might with rapid hands. And as she worked Croft's body lost its ivory whiteness and became a dark-hued thing like her own. At the end she took a small cloth from the articles she had brought with her and twisted it deftly about his loins.

And as she finished and straightened herself from her labors, Croft, sensing it time for his reviving, opened the eyes of the body over which she had worked and spoke.

"Hai," said Maia, without any particular evidence of consternation. "It is even so she said it would happen when I had finished. She said that when I had shaved you, lord, and reddened your hair, and stained your body, and put the loin-cloth upon it, you would reappear."

"She?" Croft questioned her quickly. "You mean Naia of Aphur, Maia?"

"Aye. Who else, Hupor Jason?" She rose and picked up her bundle. "Naia, my mistress. These are your garments. Come, Hupor, till I lead you to her. She lies near."

Chapter Seventeen

She lies near! "You mean?"

"That she lies hid some distance beyond the camp of thy enemies, Hupor. Come."

"But--"

Almost with impatience Maia interrupted. "Seven suns from now she waked from her slumber, Hupor, in a most strange mood. For the Hupor Robur she sent me, and for long they spoke together, and after that she spoke with me again. Bidding me place her in the garment

she wears when she dares to rise in the air, she took me with her to the great house where the thing she rides is kept, and compelled me to enter it with her, so that my spirit turned as weak as water when, with a great roaring, we leaped into space."

"Zitu--you she flew to Bithur?"

"Aye, Hupor--partly in the air like a bird, and partly on the water like a boat--which, praise to Zitu, was calm, and with wonderful speed."

"But fuel--what is burned in the motor?" Jason questioned.

Maia shrugged. "Her lips, not mine, should tell you how, like a bird to its mate, she came to seek thee, Hupor," she admonished. "Yet--were not the great galleys already seeking to reach Bithur with men and weapons by the Hupor's orders? And though he swore by Zitu and Azil she should not undertake this madness, he did not refuse to his cousin that which would spell her death. On the waves we rode beside the galleys when the thing that makes the motor turn was required."

"My God!" Croft spoke not as a man of Tamarizia, but of Earth.

"On the night of the sun before this we came down in an open place in the forest," Maia explained further. "There the great wings we rode on lie hid. And some distance farther in this direction she awaits thee, Hupor. Come."

"Aye," said Croft, and caught a great, a wondrous breath of realization. "Aye, come." He started out of the thicket at a pace that made Maia gasp.

"Walk not so quickly, Hupor, and permit that I walk at thy side. Seen we may be of many, and though thou are stained to the seeming of a

man of Mazzer, yet were it best that you seem also not as one in haste, but as a man who strolls through the camp with a woman at his side."

"Aye." Croft nodded in understanding and slackened his stride. "Aye--Maia--yet lead me to her as quickly as you can."

Their course led them after a time into the depths of the gloomy forest, where the moons were blotted out or their light filtered in streaming tatters through the trees. And there Croft spoke again to his companion.

"I failed to understand when you put it into the mind of the guard to make way with my clothes."

Maia made a clicking sound suggestive of an almost impish amusement as she answered. "But--since I was to paint your body, Hupor, it was easier for me to bring the pigments wrapped inside them, when I slipped away from him after he had drunk wine into which I had dropped a substance to induce heavy slumber I had brought with me inside my girdle band. Indeed, we three appear now no more than as other children of Mazzer. My mistress, when we come upon her, will seem no other than myself."

"You mean you have stained her?"

"Aye, lord, from the roots of her golden hair to her graceful heels. For two suns, as I have told you, has it been needful for her to lie in the open while I made my way to the camp and performed my mission, and had any come upon her--"

She turned aside and swept back a screen of branches. She plunged through and came into a break in the forest close to the banks of a tiny stream across a little glade. And there she pursed her lips and

sent quivering through the moonlight what seemed a nightbird's call.

It was answered. Maia repeated, and paused, and whistled again. Then touching Croft on the arm, she urged him forth from the shadow until he stood revealed in the rays of the Palosian moons.

And from the shadows beyond him another shape appeared. Croft saw, and advanced to meet it, and found it Naia, veiled as she stood before him from head to waist in the heavy cloud of her auburn-tinted hair.

And then she lay against him--her hands were clinging to him, her arms were holding him fast.

"Jason, beloved," she panted, "you are safe--uninjured, alive!"

"Yes--thanks to you, beloved, and to Maia," Croft replied, and kissed her.

"Thou"--Naia of Aphur flung up her head and turned to the girl of Mazzer--"thou who this night have brought me more than life or anything besides--thou shall never leave me--thou shall remain always with me--and with him. My children you shall cradle in your arms--and if love comes to you as to me and offspring, I swear it--to me they shall be as mine."

"My mistress," Maia faltered, bending her head before Naia.

"Nay--you are my sister," said Naia, smiling and took her by the hand. "Yet--I am forgetting. Not yet are we free from danger. Thrice today have men roamed through the forest while I hid me beneath the leaves. But thy huge bird waits to bear us high above them. Come, beloved, come."

For an hour after that, his arm about her, they hurried on. And then once more the moonlight filled all the bowl of a tree-ringed opening in the forest, and struck dull gleams from the copper body of the waiting airplane. Huge, impotent, in seeming, it squatted there, waiting their touch to wake it; its interlacing struts and trusses making a spider-webbed pattern in shadow on the ground.

Naia drew her ruddy tresses about her as they stepped into the forest meadow.

"Put on your flying garment now, beloved," she prompted, "while Maia and I find ours and put them on."

Five minutes later Croft lifted both women to their seats. Then as Maia took her place at the control, he seized the blades of the propeller and sent the engine round.

The plane swung with them like some monster bat beneath the skies. It turned. It rushed off under Naia's guiding, its vanes all silvered now like the top of the forest in the moonlight, bearing its burden of renewed life and love.

Far, far away on the plain where Croft had lain captive, still winked the light of fires. They came closer, closer, as the airplane ate through the trackless distance--were beneath it--were left behind.

Around, in a monster circle--a descending spiral. Once more around. Again and again in a vast, wide turning, sinking lower and lower down. The lights on the Bith were closer. Closer the fire-urns burned. Below was the wide-flung reach of the street along the river, and straight above it the airplane swung. The hum of the motor died, and the night wind sang in a sinking whisper past it. It slipped down a long hill of air and sped along the ground.

And as it stopped, as Croft lifted Naia from her seat, from the entrance of Atla's palace there dashed a chariot drawn by gnuppas, their plumes tossing, bearing down on the plane with flying feet. Straight as though driven in a race, it approached and paused, with the gnuppas on their haunches. Robur of Aphur flung aside its silklike curtains and sprung down.

"By Zitu--and by Zitu, my friend--my brother--and thou, Naia, my cousin, thou chosen of all Zitu's children!" he cried, all poise or thought of dignity vanishing as he caught them in his arms.

They entered the carriage and reclined upon the padded cushions, the princess commanding Maia to take a place at her side. They were driven to the palace, and there Croft was led to a room. And there attendants labored until the last of the blue pigment vanished, and his skin merged from beneath it a most surprising pink from the necessary force they used. As for the ruddy scalplock, he had it shaved off as the simplest way of settling the matter regarding his hair. He was glowing, both literally and with the thoughts induced by the manner of his escape and return when Robur appeared.

Bidding the servants fetch his customary garments, leg-cases, tunic, helmet, and metal cuirass, he dismissed them and proceeded to clothe himself.

"Hai!" Robur eyed him. "As once before I remarked, thou art 'a sight.' And a sight thou art for more than the eyes of a maid, Jason, my friend. In Zitu's name, what chanced to the airplane that thy plans went wrong? In Atla there was well-nigh a panic when you failed of your return."

Croft explained, and Robur nodded.

"Aye, it was the same with the motors when they 'stalled,' and they

knew not how to start them. And as you have explained to me, there is small time to work upon a motor in the air. My father, however, swore it was a judgment of Zitu against him for his stand of the past few Zitran toward thee. Then came Zud and Lakkon with your message, and word that fresh men and weapons were assured to lighten his cares."

"And the dynamo, Rob?"

"Lies on a galley even now beside the quays," Robur replied. "What of it, Jason? You have a plan?"

"Yes." Croft nodded as he laid a hand on his sword. "A plan to show that its wires as well as light, may build a cordon about Atla's walls, to touch which shall mean death. Then let Mazzer's Zollarian-commanded horde attack."

"Aye--say you so." Robur gained his feet. "Two thousand riflemen are with me. Four times their number come from Bithra, and should arrive tomorrow. Nodhur and Milidhur will send us others. Also, there are the motors--twelve, all numbered--and the remaining airplanes, with men who know how to fly them to some extent. Aye, let Mazzer and her Zollarian leaders attack. But if you are ready, come. I was sent to bid you to a feast."

"A feast?" Croft eyed him sharply.

And Robur smiled. "Aye, Naia of Aphur acts hostess tonight to her lord."

Yet even so, Croft did not understand as he followed his friend to a small apartment where a table was spread, and found Medai of Bithur, Jadgor, Lakkon, Zud, and Naia, already reclining on the couches ranged about the board. Nor did he consider greatly, after

he had gripped the hand of each man present and looked into old Zud's eyes with a glance of mutual understanding, and taken the place at Naia's side she indicated by a gesture of her hand.

She was in white--all save the golden fabric of her girdle where against the glistening background the seal of Azil blazed. Save only for that spot of color, white as the robe of a vestal, her garment showed. White even were the sandals and leg cases on her feet and tapering calves--of white leather as thin and soft as kid. White, too, were the stately plumes above her hair, once more a shimmer of gold. And her lips were scarlet as a poppy, and her eyes twin lakes of pansy purple, and softly pink, as the plush of innocence itself, her warm skin glowed.

Wherefore Croft was content to put by all consideration to eat; to drink of the wine before him with his lips, of Naia with his eyes; listen to the congratulations of the others stretched about the tables, while the harps of musicians hidden somewhere out of sight were softly played.

Nor did he dream that anything beyond the celebration of their safe return was toward, until old Zud, rising, signaled them to rise.

So that, all uncomprehending, he obeyed and rose, and giving Naia his hand, assisted her to her feet, and stood in silence waiting for the priest to speak; becoming aware as he did so that the others had also risen and were standing with their eyes on Naia and himself.

"Children of Zitu, I give ye to one another. May he send his blessings upon you, as I his priest give--mine."

So spake Zud of Zitra, high priest of all Tamarizia, than whose words was no higher priestly voice.

And Naia, reaching down, unpinned the seal of Azil, and placed the gleaming jewel in his palm.

"O Jason, Jason," she stayed his halting question, "think you not that in our case custom may be set aside? See you not that so I compelled Zud to promise--before I flew above Atla's walls to find you--that if we returned together, it should be so--tonight?"

And then Croft comprehended all the sweetness of her planning. And drew her into his arms and held her--held her until it seemed that all else faded away and there was naught in the world save their two selves.

"My bride," he said, "my--bride."

Chapter Eighteen

This is the story told me by the lips of the sorry wreck on the bed, the spirit that looked out of its eyes--Croft's spirit, as I have every reason to believe, since he so frankly admitted what he had done, and because every detail of the narrative itself showed complete familiarity with the events embraced in the story Croft in his own Earthly body had told me before.

"And that's all--or practically all--Murray," he said at last with a sigh and laid his cigar aside. "I've done a lot of things since then, and Tamarizia bids fair to develop into a very up-to-date nation. Only I needed information concerning a lot of things in regard to which I was lacking. It was to gain this information I reversed my first experiment in changing bodies. Will you help me to what I need?"

"I'll help you, of course," I told him, "but what about the Mazzerian invasion?"

He gave me a glance, and the light in his eye was quietly amused.

"Lord, man, I was forgetting. To me it seemed that the moment in which I knew Naia mine was the logical ending.

"Rob and I went to work the next day. We put about a thousand riflemen on the walls. And then we went outside and set up a lot of posts about twenty feet from the base of the walls. Ugh!--it was nasty work--with all those rotting corpses under foot. But we got them up while the riflemen kept the blue men back out of arrow range, and then we hitched one end of our wire to an armed motor and pulled it about the walls. In the meantime, however, we had to repulse an attack. On the second day Bandhor sent about ten thousand Mazzerians against our defenses, and we rolled them back considerably less in numbers than when they started, though I must say they fought like devils, and for a while it was pretty warm work.

"We had quite a time getting the wire strung, too, because they used to slip in and cut it down as night, so that finally, while I was rigging up a motor to run the dynamo and generate the current I meant to charge the wire, we gave it up. Then, when the motor was properly harnessed, we took a couple of cars and ran halfway around the walls each way between daylight and dark, and hooked the two ends up. And that night, you can take my word for it, the Mazzerians found trouble when they came up to undo our work. All you had to do was to stand on top of the wall and watch the flashes when those blue men hit the wire. Robur thought it was about the best piece of work I had accomplished yet.

"By that time, however, the eight thousand from Bithra had come up, and we began to get ready to stage our own attack. Murray, the present war was just started when I went to Palos first. But at the time I defeated Helmor, of Zollaria, these tanks I've been reading about in

the papers the past few days hadn't been thought of, let alone used, on Earth. That's one instance in which Tamarizia beat this more advanced planet."

"It was a man of Earth who did it," I pointed out.

"Well--possibly, yes." Croft laughed.

"We sortied from Atla, with the motors in advance. Under a screen of rifle fire from the walls, we moved them out of the gates and placed them back of the wire, and filled them with men and grenades. And I picked two men Naia had trained in flying better than I could have done it myself. My wife is a born aviatrix--nothing less. She'll do things with a plane I daren't attempt, and she'd licked two of the hangar crowd into mighty decent shape. I took them, and we used three planes and about a ton of bombs. Naia wanted to go along, but I wouldn't let her, but I know she went up on the walls with Lakkon and watched.

"Rob led the motor squadron and I the planes. We gave Bandhor's army everything at once. Jadgor had charge of the foot forces. And when everything was ready the sortie began.

"The motors advanced straight over the wire in which the power was turned off. I took my planes over the walls from the concourse along the Bith, and hit the blue army first with a shower of bombs. I honestly think the sight of the planes themselves shook them as much as anything else.

"And, of course, Robur made contact with his armored cars before they had steadied themselves. They fought--oh, yes, they fought, but they were beaten from the first. They tried to stall the motors and overturn them as they had when Jadgor used them against their army first. But this time they didn't stall, or not for long at a time--and what

of the enemy weren't shot by the men inside them either ran away or were crushed. One did get stuck in the timber, and was in a pretty bad way until Robur himself got to it and drove the Mazzerians about it off. On the whole, however, they did splendidly, and tore some awful gaps in Bandhor's line.

"The infantry, coming up to the attack behind them, finished the work. Inside thirty minutes there wasn't any real army before us so much as the fragments of an army fighting where they fought at all, in small, disorganized bands. Thousands ran away in bodies. Hundreds hid in the woods. The riflemen mopped them up in drives. In a surprisingly short time Rob broke clear through the line with three of the motors, and got out of the fringe of forest between Atla and that great plain where Bandhor had his tent. And as luck would have it, he was just in time. Bandhor was about the leave. Rob"--the eyes of the man on the bed twinkled--"suggested in a somewhat urgent fashion that he remain--and his sister with him. I mustn't forget Kalamita at the last. He stuck both of them into one of the motors under guard and sent them straight back inside Atla's walls, and after that, what with the planes above them and the two remaining motors--Rob's own and the other--the Mazzerian army met a warm reception when it streamed out of the forest upon that plain. The end came right there. Mazzer's organized force broke up. It quit cold and ran. For a week we were hazing them in small bands out of Bithur, but they never stiffened up enough to offer a real fight again."

"And what about Bandhor and his sister?" I inquired.

Croft smiled. "I have every reason to think they were surprised to find me alive. I know Bandhor swore when we met the first time, and Kalamita turned a bit whiter than I had ever seen her before. We held them, Murray. Zollaria found out two could play at the same ransom game. Only Zollaria paid--a million sesterons, which, you may

appreciate, is equivalent to about a million pounds. I hardly think she'll care to try conclusions with Tamarizia very soon again."

"And since then you've gone on introducing innovations, I suppose?" I said.

He nodded. "Yes. Naia and I went to Lakkon's mountain house. He gave it to us for our own. There were a lot of associations about it, and I was glad to accept it for a dwelling. As I told you, Tamarizia bids fair to come up to date. We're printing papers in Himyra and Zitra now, my friend. We've established a system of free schools. Now I'm after more rapid means of communications mainly--we've a sort of telephone--short-distance lines which I want to improve, and I want to establish telegraph and wireless. Astra communication may do between harmonized minds, but it's too much to expect to educate a people into anything like that.

"Also, I want to improve the medical caste. Oh, I've done a lot, but I want to do a million things yet. So I talked it over with Naia, and we decided that I should come back--reverse the experiment. We've been back in the astral condition, of course, more than once. I've brought her with me--shown her Earth. She understands--and she's waiting for my success in this matter even now, up there in the mountains where I told her I loved her first. And see here--it may be that some attendant will tell you I'm pretty sound asleep almost any night. If I take the notion I'm apt to slip up to tell her how things are going along. So--if that happens, don't let it fuss you--though, with your understanding, I don't suppose it would. Anyway, I'll promise you now to give you warning when the work I came back for is done."

"And you're happy?" I questioned.

"Happy?" He gave me a strange glance. "Man the word's inadequate."

I helped him. Of course I helped him. I did everything within my power to furnish him with the information he required. A month went by, and two, and nearly every night of that time we spent at least an hour in confidential talk.

And then, one night, he caught me by the hand and looked into my eyes and gripped my fingers hard. "I'm going, Murray," he said, smiling. "I've got what I came for, I fancy--so don't be surprised. And here--Naia knows all about you. I've told her, and when I speak to her first in the flesh on Palos, I'm going to tell her how much you've contributed to the success of this undertaking. And if ever you give us a thought, you can feel that there's a woman up here on another star whose heart holds a warm spot for you--the one man on Earth who knows our story--big enough--broad enough to refuse to balk at the truth."

I returned his gripping pressure, more than a little affected by his words. "Naia of Aphur is as real to me as I am myself," I replied. "And hand it, man--I--I wish I was up there with you. I'd like to be your physician."

"Man," he said, "Man, I could love you for that," and wrung my hand again.

It was midnight when the night superintendent called and told me No. 27 had died.

THE END