

FALL  
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# PLANET STORIES

STRANGE ADVENTURES  
ON OTHER WORLDS  
—THE UNIVERSE OF  
FUTURE CENTURIES

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SELWYN  
JACOBI  
WYLIE

The EYES of THAR

By HENRY KUTNER





# Scarlet Dream

and other short stories

Henry Kuttner



# Scarlet Dream

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

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

As he strolled through the thick of the crowd, savoring the confusion and the odors and the sights from lands beyond counting, his eye was caught by a flash of that peculiar geranium scarlet that seems to lift itself bodily from its background and smite the eye with all but physical violence.

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

"How much for the scarf?"

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

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

"Ten."

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

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

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

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

The man shrugged.

"Who knows? It came in with a bale of scrap cloth from New York. I

was a little curious about it myself, and called the market-master there to trace it. He says it was sold for scrap by a down-and-out Venusian who claimed he'd found it in a derelict ship floating around one of the asteroids. He didn't know what nationality the ship had been--a very early model, he said, probably one of the first spaceships, made before the identification symbols were adopted. I've wondered why he sold the thing for scrap. He could have got double the price, anyhow, if he'd made any effort."

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

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

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

The great steel building that housed Smith and countless others was not entirely free from the influences of Martian byways, and if the police had actually searched the place with any degree of thoroughness a large percentage of its dwellers might have been transferred to the Emperor's prisons--Smith almost certainly among them, for his activities were rarely within the law and though he could not recall at the moment any particularly flagrant sins committed in Lakkdarol, a charge could certainly have been found against him by

the most half-hearted searcher. However, the likelihood of a police raid was very remote, and Smith, as he went in under the steel portals of the great door, rubbed shoulders with smugglers and pirates and fugitives and sinners of all the sins that keep the spaceways thronged.

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

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

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

That threading scarlet was a labyrinthine path down which he stumbled blindly, and at every turn he looked back and saw himself in myriad replicas, always wandering lost and alone through the pattern

of the path. Sometimes it shook itself under his feet; and whenever he thought he saw the end it would writhe into fresh intricacies....

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

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

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

And now, suddenly, he was aware of a stirring in the dimness, and a girl came flying down the stairs in headlong, stumbling terror. He could see the shadow of it on her face, and her long, bright-colored hair streamed out behind her, and from head to foot she was dabbled with blood. In her blind flight she must not have seen him, for she came plunging downward three steps at a time and blundered full into him as he stood undecided, watching. The impact all but unbalanced



him, but his arms closed instinctively about her and for a moment she hung in his embrace, utterly spent, gasping against his broad leather breast and too breathless even to wonder who had stopped her. The smell of fresh blood rose to his nostrils from her dreadfully spattered garments.

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

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

Smith shook her gently.

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

She shook her head wildly.

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

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

He must have climbed for all of five minutes before the twilight thinned a little and he saw that the stairs ended at the head of a long

hallway, high-arched like a cathedral aisle. A row of low doors ran down one side of the hail, and he turned aside at random into the nearest. It gave upon a gallery whose arches opened into blue space. A low bench ran along the wall under the gallery windows, and he crossed it, gently setting down the sobbing girl and supporting her against his shoulder.

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

"Don't cry, don't cry," Smith heard his own voice saying, surprisingly. "It's all a dream, you know. Don't cry--there never was any sister--you don't exist at all--don't cry so."

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

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

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

She shook her head sadly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He rose and held out his hand.

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

She took his hand and jumped up. The orange hair, too fantastically colored for anything outside a dream, swung about her brilliantly. He saw now that she wore a single white garment, brief and belted, over the creamy brown-ness of her body. It was torn now, and hideously

stained. She made a picture of strange and vivid loveliness, all white and gold and bloody, in the misted twilight of the gallery.

"Where are we going?" she asked Smith. "Out there?" And he nodded toward the blueness beyond the windows. She drew her shoulders together in a little shudder of distaste. "Oh, no," she said.

"What is it?"

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

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

She took his hand, smiling a little.

"Come with me, now."

And in silence they left the gallery opening on space and went down the hail where the blue mist floated so beautifully with its clouds of

violet and green confusing the eye, and a great stillness all about.

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

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

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

"It--it's alive," he stammered, startled. "The grass!"

"Yes, of course," she said indifferently.

And then he realized that though the feathery fronds of the trees

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

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

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

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

"I live here," she said.

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

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

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



"But what do you do?"

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

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

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

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

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

She took his hand and led him across the clinging grass to the sandy brink of the water, and they sank in silence on the narrow beach. Smith looked out over the lake where vague colors misted the blue, trying not to think of the fantastic things that were happening to him. Indeed, it was hard to do much thinking, here, in the midst of the blueness and the silence, the very air dreamy about them... the cloudy water lapping the shore with tiny, soft sounds like the breathing of a sleeper. The place was heavy with the stillness and the dreamy colors, and Smith was never sure, afterward, whether in his dream he did not sleep for a while; for presently he heard a stir at his side and the girl reseated herself, clad in a fresh tunic, all the blood washed away. He could not remember her having left, but it did not trouble him.

The light had for some time been sinking and blurring, and

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

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

In the twilight her mouth was dark too, and from the darkness under her lashes he slowly became aware that she was watching him unwinkingly.

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

II

There was no sunrise in that land. Lucid day brightened slowly over the breathing landscape, and grass and trees stirred with wakening awareness, rather horribly in the beauty of the morning. Whew Smith woke, he saw the girl coming up from the lake, shaking blue water from her orange hair. Blue droplets clung to the creaminess of her skin, and she was laughing and flushed from head to foot in the glowing dawn.

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

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

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

"Hungry?"

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

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

"Very well," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I must know," said Smith relentlessly.

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

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

"Why?"

"It is death to pronounce the Word. Literally. I do not know it now, could not speak it if I would. But in the Temple there is one room where the Word is graven in scarlet on the wall, and its power is so great that the echoes of it ring for ever round and round that room. If one stands before the graven symbol and lets the force of it beat upon his brain he will hear, and know--and shriek the awful syllables aloud--and so die. It is a word from some tongue so alien to all our being that the spoken sound of it, echoing in the throat of a living man, is disrupting enough to rip the very fibers of the human body apart--to blast its atoms asunder, to destroy body and mind as utterly as if they had never been. And because the sound is so disruptive it somehow blasts open for an instant the door between your world and mine. But the danger is dreadful, for it may open the door to other

worlds too, and let things through more terrible than we can dream of. Some say it was thus that the Thing gained access to our land eons ago. And if you are not standing exactly where the door opens, on the one spot in the room that is protected, as the center of a whirlwind is quiet, and if you do not pass instantly out of the sound of the Word, it will blast you asunder as it does the one who has pronounced it for you. So you see how impos--" Here she broke off with a little scream, and glanced down in half-laughing annoyance, then took two or three little running steps and turned.

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

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

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

From the immense, triple arch of the doorway, as they approached--a triple arch like nothing he had ever seen before, so irritatingly hard to focus upon that he could not be sure just wherein its difference lay--a

pale blue mist issued smokily: And when they stopped within they walked into that twilight dimness he was coming to know so well.

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

Instantly with the touch of his mouth on the nameless substance of the spigot something hot and, strangely, at once salty and sweet flowed into his mouth. There was an acidity about it that gave a curious tang, and the more he drank the more avid he became. Hauntingly delicious it was, and warmth flowed through him more strongly with every draft.

Yet somewhere deep within him memory stirred unpleasantly... somewhere, somehow, he had known this hot, acrid, salty taste before, and--suddenly suspicions struck him like a bludgeon, and he jerked his lips from the spout as if it burnt. A tiny thread of scarlet trickled from the wall. He passed the back of one hand across his lips and brought it away red. He knew that odor, then.

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

He followed her in silence past the kneeling lines again. When they

reached the hall outside he swung upon her and gripped her shoulders angrily.

"What was that?" he demanded.

Her eyes slid away. She shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

"No," she said. "Nothing but the grass grows here. No living thing

gave thanks that they bloom but once in a lifetime."

[. . .]

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

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

That day drew dreamily to a close, and darkness rose in a mist from the misty lake, and he came to find in kisses that tasted of blood a certain tang that but pointed their sweetness.

And in the morning he woke to the slowly brightening day, swam with the girl in the blue, tingling waters of the lake--and reluctantly went up through the woods and across the ravenous grass to the Temple, driven by a hunger greater than his repugnance. He went up with a slight nausea rising within him, and yet strangely eager....

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

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



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

### III

And so life resolved itself into a very simple thing. The days glowed by and the blurred darknesses came and went.

Life held little any more but the bright clarity of the day and the dimness of the dark, morning journeys to drink at the Temple fountain and the bitter kisses of the girl with the orange hair. Time had ceased for him. Slow day followed slow day, and the same round of living circled over and over, and the only change--perhaps he did not see it then--was the deepening look in the girl's eyes when they rested upon him, her growing silences.

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

He asked curiously, "What lies beyond the lake? Aren't those mountains over there?"

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

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

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

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

She turned the sorrowful, sherry gaze upon him.

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

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

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

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

the exigencies of sleep and food and love.

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

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

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

he had left behind.

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

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

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

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

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

"But--you wish to die, then?"

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

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

"If I must die, I shall," he said. "I've been thinking it over, and I've made up my mind. I could explore the Temple and so come on it and die. But do something I must, and it seems to me my best chance is in trying to reach some country where food grows before I starve. It's worth trying. I can't go on like this."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

from the snare of the crimson pulse.

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

Smith swept the ray back and forth along the redness, tracing its pattern with destruction, but it faded too swiftly for him. In little more than an instant it had paled and disembodied and vanished save for a fading flush of rose, and the blue-hot blade of his flame sizzled harmlessly through the disappearing mist to sear the ground beyond. He switched off the heat, then, and stood breathing a little unevenly as the death-cloud thinned and paled and vanished before his eyes, until no trace of it was left and the air glowed lucid and transparent once more....

The unmistakable odor of burning flesh caught at his nostrils, and he wondered for a moment if the Thing had indeed materialized a nucleus of matter, and then he saw that the smell came from the seared grass his flame had struck.

The tiny, furry blades were all writhing away from the burnt spot, straining at their roots as if a wind blew them back and from the blackened area a thick smoke rose, reeking with the odor of burnt meat. Smith, remembering their vampire habits, turned away, half nauseated.

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

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

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

"What will--will you do now?"

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

"What I started out to do."

The girl scrambled up in desperate haste.

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

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

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

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

He followed in growing surprise down the hallway through the drifting mists and away from the gallery he knew so well.

It seemed to him that the mist thickened as they advanced, and in the uncertain light he could never be sure that the walls did not waver as nebulously as the blurring air. He felt a curious impulse to step through their intangible barriers and out of the hall into--what?

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

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

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

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

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

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



and he stood alone.

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

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

#### IV

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

"He's waking up!" said an exultant voice in his ear.

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

"Smith! N.W.! Wake up!" urged that familiar voice from somewhere

near.

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

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

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

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

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

"Shawl?"

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

"Where--?"

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

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

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

# Daemon

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Padre, the words come slowly. It is a long time now since I have spoken in the Portuguese tongue. For more than a year, my companions here were those who do not speak with the tongues of men. And you must remember, padre, that in Rio, where I was born, I was named Luiz o Bobo, which is to say, Luiz the Simple. There was something wrong with my head, so that my hands were always clumsy and my feet stumbled over each other. I could not remember very much. But I could see things. Yes, padre, I could see things such as other men do not know.

I can see things now. Do you know who stands beside you, padre, listening while I talk? Never mind that. I am Luiz o Bobo still, though here on this island there were great powers of healing, and I can remember now the things that happened to me years ago. More easily than I remember what happened last week or the week before that. The year has been like a single day, for time on this island is not like time outside. When a man lives with them, there is no time.

The ninfas, I mean. And the others....

I am not lying. Why should I? I am going to die, quite soon now. You were right to tell me that, padre. But I knew. I knew already. Your crucifix is very pretty, padre. I like the way it shines in the sun. But that is not for me. You see, I have always known the things that walk beside men—other men. Not me. Perhaps they are souls, and I have no soul, being simple. Or perhaps they are daemons such as only clever men have. Or perhaps they are both these things. I do not

know. But I know that I am dying. After the ninfas go away, I would not care to live.

Since you ask how I came to this place, I will tell you if the time remains to me. You will not believe. This is the one place on earth, I think, where they lingered still--those things you do not believe.

But before I speak of them, I must go back to an earlier day, when I was young beside the blue bay of Rio, under Sugar Loaf. I remember the docks of Rio, and the children who mocked me. I was big and strong, but I was o Bobo with a mind that knew no yesterday or tomorrow.

Minha avo, my grandmother, was kind to me. She was from Ceara, where the yearly droughts kill hope, and she was half blind, with pain in her back always. She worked so that we could eat, and she did not scold me too much. I know that she was good. It was something I could see; I have always had that power.

One morning my grandmother did not waken. She was cold when I touched her hand. That did not frighten me for the--good thing--about her lingered for a while. I closed her eyes and kissed her, and then I went away. I was hungry, and because I was o Bobo, I thought that someone might give me food, out of kindness....

In the end, I foraged from the rubbish-heaps.

I did not starve. But I was lost and alone. Have you ever felt that, padre? It is like a bitter wind from the mountains and no sheepskin cloak can shut it out. One night I wandered into a sailors'saloon, and I remember that there were many dark shapes with eyes that shone, hovering beside the men who drank there. The men had red, wind-burned faces and tarry hands. They made me drink 'guardiente until the room whirled around and went dark.

I woke in a dirty bunk. I heard planks groaning and the floor rocked under me.

Yes, padre, I had been shanghaied. I stumbled on deck, half blind in the dazzling sunlight, and there I found a man who had a strange and shining daemon. He was the captain of the ship, though I did not know it then. I scarcely saw the man at all. I was looking at the daemon.

Now, most men have shapes that walk behind them, padre. Perhaps you know that, too. Some of them are dark, like the shapes I saw in the saloon. Some of them are bright, like that which followed my grandmother. Some of them are colored, pale colors like ashes or rainbows. But this man had a scarlet daemon. And it was a scarlet beside which blood itself is ashen. The color blinded me. And yet it drew me, too. I could not take my eyes away, nor could I look at it long without pain. I never saw a color more beautiful, nor more frightening. It made my heart shrink within me, and quiver like a dog that fears the whip. If I have a soul, perhaps it was my soul that quivered. And I feared the beauty of the color as much as I feared the terror it awoke in me. It is not good to see beauty in that which is evil.

Other men upon the deck had daemons too. Dark shapes and pale shapes that followed them like their shadows. But I saw all the daemons waver away from the red, beautiful thing that hung above the captain of the ship.

The other daemons watched out of burning eyes. The red daemon had no eyes. Its beautiful, blind face was turned always toward the captain, as if it saw only through his vision. I could see the lines of its closed lids. And my terror of its beauty, and my terror of its evil, were nothing to my terror of the moment when the red daemon might lift those lids and look out upon the world.

The captain's name was Jonah Stryker. He was a cruel man, dangerous to be near. The men hated him. They were at his mercy while we were at sea, and the captain was at the mercy of his daemon. That was why I could not hate him as the others did. Perhaps it was pity I felt for Jonah Stryker. And you, who know men better than I, will understand that the pity I had for him made the captain hate me more bitterly than even his crew hated him.

When I came on deck that first morning, because I was blinded by the sun and by the redness of the scarlet daemon, and because I was ignorant and bewildered, I broke a shipboard rule. What it was, I do not know. There were so many, and I never could remember very clearly in those days. Perhaps I walked between him and the wind. Would that be wrong on a clipper ship, padre? I never understood.

The captain shouted at me, in the Yankee tongue, evil words whose meaning I did not know, but the daemon glowed redder when he spoke them. And he struck me with his fist so that I fell. There was a look of secret bliss on the blind crimson face hovering above his, because of the anger that rose in him. I thought that through the captain's eyes the closed eyes of the daemon were watching me.

I wept. In that moment, for the first time, I knew how truly alone a man like me must be. For I had no daemon. It was not the simple loneliness for my grandmother or for human companionship that brought the tears to my eyes. That I could endure. But I saw the look of joy upon the blind daemon-face because of the captain's evil, and I remembered the look of joy that a bright shape sometimes wears who follows a good man. And I knew that no deed of mine would ever bring joy or sorrow to that which moves behind a man with a soul.

I lay upon the bright, hot deck and wept, not because of the blow, but because I knew suddenly, for the first time, that I was alone. No

daemon for good or evil would ever follow me. Perhaps because I have no soul. That loneliness, father, is something not even you could understand.

The captain seized my arm and pulled me roughly to my feet. I did not understand, then, the words he spoke in his Yankee tongue, though later I picked up enough of that speech to know what men were saying around me. You may think it strange that o Bobo could learn a foreign tongue. It was easy for me. Easier, perhaps, than for a wiser man. Much I read upon the faces of their daemons, and there were many words whose real sounds I did not know, but whose meaning I found in the hum of thoughts about a man's head.

The captain shouted for a man named Barton, and the first mate hurried up, looking frightened. The captain pushed me back against the rail so that I staggered, seeing him and the deck and the watching daemons through the rainbows that tears cast before one's eyes.

There was loud talk, and many gestures toward me and the other two men who had been shanghaied from the port of Rio. The first mate tapped his head when he pointed to me, and the captain cursed again in the tongue of the foreigners, so that his daemon smiled very sweetly at his shoulder.

I think that was the first time I let the captain see pity on my face when I looked at him.

That was the one thing he could not bear. He snatched a belaying pin from the rail and struck me in the face with it, so that I felt the teeth break in my mouth. The blood I spat upon the deck was a beautiful color, but it looked paler than water beside the color of the captain's daemon. I remember all the daemons but the red one leaned a little forward when they saw blood running, snuffing up the smell and the brightness of it like incense. The red one did not even turn his blind



face.

The captain struck me again because I had soiled his deck. My first task aboard the Dancing Martha was to scrub up my own blood from the planking.

Afterward they dragged me to the galley and threw me into the narrow alley at the cook's feet. I burned my hands on the stove. The captain laughed to see me jump back from it. It is a terrible thing that though I heard his laughter many times a day, I never heard mirth in it. But there was mirth on his daemon's face.

Pain was with me for many days thereafter, because of the beating and the burns, but I was glad in a way. Pain kept my mind from the loneliness I had just discovered in myself. Those were bad days, padre. The worst days of my life. Afterward, when I was no longer lonely, I looked back upon them as a soul in paradise might look back on purgatory.

No, I am still alone. Nothing follows me as things follow other men. But here on the island I found the ninfas, and I was content.

I found them because of the Shaughnessy. I can understand him today in a way I could not do just then. He was a wise man and I am o Bobo, but I think I know some of his thoughts now, because today I, too, know I am going to die.

The Shaughnessy lived many days with death. I do not know how long. It was weeks and months in coming to him, though it lived in his lungs and his heart as a child lives within its mother, biding its time to be born. The Shaughnessy was a passenger. He had much money, so that he could do what he willed with his last days of living. Also he came of a great family in a foreign land called Ireland. The captain hated him for many reasons. He scorned him because of his

weakness, and he feared him because he was ill. Perhaps he envied him too, because his people had once been kings and because the Shaughnessy was not afraid to die. The captain, I know, feared death. He feared it most terribly. He was right to fear it. He could not know that a daemon rode upon his shoulder, smiling its sweet, secret smile, but some instinct must have warned him that it was there biding its time like the death in the Shaughnessy's lungs.

I saw the captain die. I know he was right to fear the hour of his daemon....

Those were bad days on the ship. They were worse because of the great beauty all around us. I had never been at sea before, and the motion of the ship was a wonder to me, the clouds of straining sail above us and the sea all about, streaked with the colors of the currents and dazzling where the sun-track lay. White gulls followed us with their yellow feet tucked up as they soared over the deck, and porpoises followed too, playing in great arcs about the ship and dripping diamonds in the sun.

I worked hard, for no more wages than freedom from blows when I did well, and the scraps that were left from the table after the cook had eaten his fill. The cook was not a bad man like the captain, but he was not a good man, either. He did not care. His daemon was smoky, asleep, indifferent to the cook and the world.

It was the Shaughnessy who made my life worth the trouble of living. If it had not been for him, I might have surrendered life and gone into the breathing sea some night when no one was looking. It would not have been a sin for me, as it would be for a man with a soul.

But because of the Shaughnessy I did not. He had a strange sort of daemon himself, mother-of-pearl in the light, with gleams of darker colors when the shadows of night came on. He may have been a bad

man in his day. I do not know. The presence of death in him opened his eyes, perhaps. I know only that to me he was very kind. His daemon grew brighter as the man himself grew weak with the oncoming of death.

He told me many tales. I have never seen the foreign country of Ireland, but I walked there often in my dreams because of the tales he told. The foreign isles called Greece grew clear to me too, because the Shaughnessy had dwelt there and loved them.

And he told me of things which he said were not really true, but I thought he said that with only half his mind, because I saw them so clearly while he talked. Great Odysseus was a man of flesh and blood to me, with a shining daemon on his shoulder, and the voyage that took so many enchanted years was a voyage I almost remembered, as if I myself had toiled among the crew.

He told me of burning Sappho, and I knew why the poet used that word for her, and I think the Shaughnessy knew too, though we did not speak of it. I knew how dazzling the thing must have been that followed her through the white streets of Lesbos and leaned upon her shoulder while she sang.

He told me of the nereids and the oceanids, and once I think I saw, far away in the sun-track that blinded my eyes, a mighty head rise dripping from the water, and heard the music of a wreathed horn as Triton called to his fish-tailed girls.

The Dancing Martha stopped at Jamaica for a cargo of sugar and rum. Then we struck out across the blue water toward a country called England. But our luck was bad. Nothing was right about the ship on that voyage. Our water-casks had not been cleaned as they should be, and the drinking water became foul. A man can pick the maggots out of his salt pork if he must, but bad water is a thing he cannot

mend.

So the captain ordered our course changed for a little island he knew in these waters. It was too tiny to be inhabited, a rock rising out of the great blue deeps with a fresh spring bubbling high up in a cup of the forested crags.

I saw it rising in the dawn like a green cloud on the horizon. Then it was a jewel of green as we drew nearer, floating on the blue water. And my heart was a bubble in my chest, shining with rainbow colors, lighter than the air around me. Part of my mind thought that the island was an isle in Rio Bay, and somehow I felt that I had come home again and would find my grandmother waiting on the shore. I forgot so much in those days. I forgot that she was dead. I thought we would circle the island and come in across the dancing Bay to the foot of the Rua d'Oporto, with the lovely city rising on its hills above the water.

I felt so sure of all this that I ran to tell the Shaughnessy of my delight in homecoming. And because I was hurrying, and blind to all on deck with the vision of Rio in my eyes, I blundered into the captain himself. He staggered and caught my arm to save his footing, and we were so close together that for a moment the crimson daemon swayed above my own head, its eyeless face turned down to mine.

I looked up at that beautiful, smiling face, so near that I could touch it and yet, I knew, farther away than the farthest star. I looked at it and screamed in terror. I had never been so near a daemon before, and I could feel its breath on my face, sweet-smelling, burning my skin with its scorching cold.

The captain was white with his anger and his--his envy? Perhaps it was envy he felt even of me, o Bobo, for a man with a daemon like that one hanging on his shoulder may well envy the man without a

soul. He hated me bitterly, because he knew I pitied him, and to receive the pity of o Bobo must be a very humbling thing. Also he knew that I could not look at him for more than a moment or two, because of the blinding color of his daemon. I think he did not know why I blinked and looked away, shuddering inside, whenever he crossed my path. But he knew it was not the angry fear which other men felt for him which made me avert my eyes. I think he sensed that because he was damned I could not gaze upon him long, and that too made him hate and fear and envy the lowliest man in his crew.

All the color went out of his face as he looked at me, and the daemon above him flushed a deeper and lovelier scarlet, and the captain reached for a belaying pin with a hand that trembled. That which looked out of his eyes was not a man at all, but a daemon, and a daemon that quivered with joy as I was quivering with terror.

I heard the bone crack when the club came down upon my skull. I saw lightning dazzle across my eyes and my head was filled with brightness. I remember almost nothing more of that bad time. A little night closed around me and I saw through it only when the lightning of the captain's blows illumined the dark. I heard his daemon laughing.

When the day came back to me, I was lying on the deck with the Shaughnessy kneeling beside me bathing my face with something that stung. His daemon watched me over his shoulder, bright mother-of-pearl colors, its face compassionate. I did not look at it. The loneliness in me was sharper than the pain of my body, because no daemon of my own hung shining over my hurts, and no daemon ever would.

The Shaughnessy spoke in the soft, hushing Portuguese of Lisboa, that always sounded so strange to me.

"Lie still, Luiz," he was saying. "Don't cry. I'll see that he never

touches you again."

I did not know until then that I was weeping. It was not for pain. It was for the look on his daemon's face, and for loneliness.

The Shaughnessy said, "When he comes back from the island, I'll have it out with him." He said more than that, but I was not listening. I was struggling with a thought, and thoughts came hard through the sleepiness that always clouded my brain.

The Shaughnessy meant kindly, but I knew the captain was master upon the ship. And it still seemed to me that we were anchored in the Bay of Rio and my grandmother awaited me on the shore.

I sat up. Beyond the rail the high green island was bright, sunshine winking from the water all around it, and from the leaves that clothed its slopes. I knew what I was going to do.

When the Shaughnessy went away for more water, I got to my feet. There was much pain in my head, and all my body ached from the captain's blows, and the deck was reeling underfoot with a motion the waves could not give it. When I got to the rail, I fell across it before I could jump, and slid into the sea very quietly.

I remember only flashes after that. Salt water burning me, and great waves lifting and falling all around me, and the breath hot in my lungs when the water did not burn even hotter there. Then there was sand under my knees, and I crawled up a little beach and I think I fell asleep in the shelter of a clump of palms.

Then I dreamed that it was dark, with stars hanging overhead almost near enough to touch, and so bright they burned my eyes. I dreamed I heard men calling me through the trees, and I did not answer. I dreamed I heard voices quarreling, the captain's voice loud and

angry, the Shaughnessy's tight and thin. I dreamed of oarlocks creaking and water splashing from dipping blades, and the sound of it receding into the warmth and darkness.

I put up a hand to touch a star cluster that hung above my head, and the cluster was bright and tingling to feel. Then I saw that it was the Shaughnessy's face.

I said, "Oh, s'nhor," in a whisper, because I remembered that the captain had spoken from very close by.

The Shaughnessy smiled at me in the starlight. "Don't whisper, Luiz. We're alone now."

I was happy on the island. The Shaughnessy was kind to me, and the days were long and bright, and the island itself was friendly. One knows that of a place. And I thought, in those days, that I would never see the captain again or his beautiful scarlet daemon smiling its blind, secret smile above his shoulder. He had left us to die upon the island, and one of us did die.

The Shaughnessy said that another man might have perished of the blows the captain gave me. But I think because my brain is such a simple thing it mended easily, and perhaps the blow that made my skull crack let in a little more of wit than I had owned before. Or perhaps happiness did it, plenty of food to eat, and the Shaughnessy's tales of the things that--that you do not believe, meu padre.

The Shaughnessy grew weak as I grew strong. He lay all day in the shade of a broad tree by the shore, and as his strength failed him, his daemon grew brighter and more remote, as if it were already halfway through the veil of another world.

When I was well again, the Shaughnessy showed me how to build a thatched lean-to that would withstand the rain.

"There may be hurricanes, Luiz," he said to me. "This barraca will be blown down. Will you remember how to build another?"

"Sim," I said. "I shall remember. You will show me."

"No, Luiz. I shall not be here. You must remember."

He told me many things, over and over again, very patiently. How to find the shellfish on the rocks when the tide was out, how to trap fish in the stream, what fruit I might eat and what I must never touch. It was not easy for me. When I tried to remember too much it made my head hurt.

I explored the island, coming back to tell him all I had found. At first I was sure that when I had crossed the high hills and stood upon their peaks I would see the beautiful slopes of Rio shining across the water. My heart sank when I stood for the first time upon the heights and saw only more ocean, empty, heaving between me and the horizon.

But I soon forgot again, and Rio and the past faded from my mind.

I found the pool cupped high in a hollow of the crags, where clear sweet water bubbled up in the shadow of the trees and the streamlet dropped away in a series of pools and falls toward the levels far below.

I found groves of pale trees with leaves like streaming hair, rustling with the noise of the waterfall. I found no people here, and yet I felt always that there were watchers among the leaves, and it seemed to me that laughter sounded sometimes behind me, smothered when I



turned my head.

When I told the Shaughnessy this he smiled at me.

"I've told you too many tales," he said. "But if anyone could see them, I think it would be you, Luiz."

"Sim, s'nhor," I said. "Tell me again of the forest-women. Could they be here, do you think, s'nhor?"

He let sand trickle through his fingers, watching it as if the fall of sand had some meaning to his mind that I could not fathom.

"Ah, well," he said, "they might be. They like the olive groves of Greece best, and the tall trees on Olympus. But every mountain has its oread. Here, too, perhaps. The Little People left Ireland years ago and for all I know the oreads have fled from civilization too, and found such places as this to put them in mind of home.

"There was one who turned into a fountain once, long ago. I saw that fountain in Greece. I drank from it. There must have been a sort of magic in the waters, for I always went back to Greece after that. I'd leave, but I couldn't stay away long" He smiled at me. "Maybe now, because I can't go back again, the oreads have come to me here."

I looked hard at him to see if he meant what he said, but he shook his head and smiled again. "I think they haven't come for me. Maybe for you, Luiz. Belief is what they want. If you believe, perhaps you'll really see them. I'd be the last man to deny a thing like that. You'll need something like them to keep you company, my friend--afterward." And he trickled sand through his fingers again, watching it fall with a look upon his face I did not understand.

The night came swiftly on that island. It was a lovely place. The

Shaughnessy said islands have a magic all their own, for they are the place where earth and ocean meet. We used to lie on the shore watching the fire that burned upon the edges of the waves lap up the beach and breathe away again, and the Shaughnessy told me many tales. His voice was growing weaker, and he did not trouble so much any more to test my memory for the lessons he had taught. But he spoke of ancient magic, and more and more in these last days, his mind turned back to the wonders of the conuntry called Ireland.

He told me of the little green people with their lanterns low down among the ferns. He told me of the unicornio, swift as the swiftest bird, a magical stag with one horn upon its forehead as long as the shaft of a spear and as sharp as whatever is sharpest. And he told me of Pan, goat-footed, moving through the woodland with laughter running before him and panic behind, the same panic terror which my language and the Shaughnessy's get from his name. Panico, we Brazilians call it.

One evening he called to me and held up a wooden cross. "Luiz, look at this," he said. I saw that upon the arms of the cross he had made deep carvings with his knife. "This is my name," he told me. "If anyone ever comes here asking for me, you must show them this cross."

I looked at it closely. I knew what he meant about the name--it is that sort of enchantment in which markings can speak with a voice too tiny for the ears to hear. I am o Bobo and I never learned to read, so that I do not understand how this may be done.

"Some day," the Shaughnessy went on, "I think someone will come. My people at home may not be satisfied with whatever story Captain Stryker invents for them. Or a drunken sailor may talk. If they do find this island, Luiz, I want this cross above my grave to tell them who I was. And for another reason," he said thoughtfully. "For another

reason too. But that need not worry you, meu amigo."

He told me where to dig the bed for him. He did not tell me to put in the leaves and the flowers. I thought of that myself, three days later, when the time came....

Because he had wished it, I put him in the earth. I did not like doing it. But in a way I feared not to carry out his commands, for the daemon of the Shaughnessy still hovered above him, very bright, very bright--so bright I could not look it in the face. I thought there was music coming from it, but I could not be sure.

I put the flowers over him and then the earth. There was more to go back in the grave than I had taken out, so I made a mound above him, as long as the Shaughnessy was long, and I drove in the stake of the wooden cross, above where his head was, as he had told me. Then for a moment I laid my ear to the markings to see if I could hear what they were saying, for it seemed to me that the sound of his name, whispered to me by the marks his hands had made, would lighten my loneliness a little. But I heard nothing.

When I looked up, I saw his daemon glow like the sun at noon, a light so bright I could not bear it upon my eyes. I put my hands before them. When I took them down again, there was no daemon.

You will not believe me when I tell you this, padre, but in that moment the--the feel of the island changed. All the leaves, I think, turned the other way on the trees, once, with a rustle like one vast syllable whispered for that time only, and never again.

I think I know what the syllable was. Perhaps I will tell you, later--if you let me.

And the island breathed. It was like a man who has held his breath for

a long while, in fear or pain, and let it run out deeply when the fear or the pain departed.

I did not know, then, what it was. But I thought I would go up the steep rocks to the pool, because I wanted a place that would not remind me of the Shaughnessy. So I climbed the crags among the hanging trees. And it seemed to me that I heard laughter when the wind rustled among them. Once I saw what I thought must be a ninfa, brown and green in the forest. But she was too shy. I turned my head, and the brown and green stilled into the bark and foliage of the tree.

When I came to the pool, the unicorn was drinking. He was very beautiful, whiter than foam, whiter than a cloud, and his mane lay upon his great shoulders like spray upon the shoulder of a wave. The tip of his long, spiraled horn just touched the water as he drank, so that the ripples ran outward in circles all around it. He tossed his head when he scented me, and I saw the glittering diamonds of the water sparkling from his velvet muzzle. He had eyes as green as a pool with leaves reflecting in it, and a spot of bright gold in the center of each eye.

Very slowly, with the greatest stateliness, he turned from the water and moved away into the forest. I know I heard a singing where he disappeared.

I was still o Bobo then. I drank where he had drunk, thinking there was a strange, sweet taste to the water now, and then I went down to the barraca on the beach, for I had forgotten already and thought perhaps the Shaughnessy might be there....

Night came, and I slept. Dawn came, and I woke again. I bathed in the ocean. I gathered shellfish and fruit, and drank of the little stream that fell from the mountain pool. And as I leaned to drink, two white dripping arms rose up to clasp my neck, and a mouth as wet and

cold as the water pressed mine. It was the kiss of acceptance.

After that the ninfas of the island no longer hid their faces from me.

My hair and beard grew long. My garments tore upon the bushes and became the rags you see now. I did not care. It did not matter. It was not my face they saw. They saw my simpleness. And I was one with the ninfas and the others.

The oread of the mountain came out to me often, beside the pool where the unicorn came to drink. She was wise and strange, being immortal. The eyes slanted upward in her head, and her hair was a shower of green leaves blowing always backward in a wind that moved about her when no other breezes blew. She used to sit beside the pool in the hot, still afternoons, the unicorn lying beside her and her brown fingers combing out his silver mane. Her wise slanting eyes, the color of shadows in the forest, and his round green eyes the color of the pool, with the flecks of gold in each, used to watch me as we talked.

The oread told me many things. Many things I could never tell you, padre. But it was as the Shaughnessy had guessed. Because I believed, they were glad of my presence there. While the Shaughnessy lived, they could not come out into the plane of being, but they watched from the other side.... They had been afraid. But they were afraid no longer.

For many years they have been homeless now, blowing about the world in search of some spot of land where no disbelief dwells, and where one other thing has not taken footing.... They told me of the isles of Greece, with love and longing upon their tongues, and it seemed to me that I heard the Shaughnessy speak again in their words.

They told me of the One I had not yet seen, or more than glimpsed. That happened when I chanced to pass near the Shaughnessy's grave in the dimness of the evening, and I saw the cross that bore his name had fallen. I took it up and held it to my ear again, hoping the tiny voices of the markings would whisper. But that is a mystery which has never been given me.

I saw the--the One--loitering by that grave. But when I put up the cross, he went away, slowly, sauntering into the dark woods, and a thin piping floated back to me from the spot where he had vanished.

Perhaps the One did not care for my presence there. The others welcomed me. It was not often any more, they said, that men like me were free to move among them. Since the hour of their banishment, they told me, and wept when they spoke of that hour, there had been too few among mankind who really knew them.

I asked about the banishment, and they said that it had happened long ago, very long ago. A great star had stood still in the sky over a stable in a town whose name I do not know. Once I knew it. I do not remember now. It was a town with a beautiful name.

The skies opened and there was singing in the heavens, and after that the gods of Greece had to flee. They have been fleeing ever since.

They were glad I had come to join them. And I was doubly glad. For the first time since my grandmother died, I knew I was not alone.

Even the Shaughnessy had not been as close to me as these ninfas were. For the Shaughnessy had a daemon. The ninfas are immortal, but they have no souls. That, I think, is why they welcomed me so warmly. We without souls are glad of companionship among others of our kind. There is a loneliness among our kind that can only be

assuaged by huddling together. The ninfas knew it, who must live forever, and I shared it with them, who may die before this night is over.

Well, it was good to live upon the island. The days and the months went by beautifully, full of clear colors and the smell of the sea and the stars at night as bright as lanterns just above us. I even grew less Bobo, because the ninfas spoke wisdom of a kind I never heard among men. They were good months.

And then, one day, Jonah Stryker came back to the island.

You know, padre, why he came. The Shaughnessy in his wisdom had guessed that in Ireland men of the Shaughnessy's family might ask questions of Captain Stryker--questions the captain could not answer. But it had not been guessed that the captain might return to the island, swiftly, before the Shaughnessy's people could discover the truth, with the thought in his evil mind of wiping out all traces of the two he had left to die.

I was sitting on the shore that day, listening to the songs of two ninfas of the nereid kind as they lay in the edge of the surf, with the waves breaking over them when the water lapped up the slopes of sand. They were swaying their beautiful rainbow colored fish-bodies as they sang, and I heard the whisper of the surf in their voices, and the long rhythms of the undersea.

But suddenly there came a break in their song, and I saw upon one face before me, and then the other, a look of terror come. The green blood in their veins sank back with fear, and they looked at me, white with pallor and strangely transparent, as if they had halfway ceased to be. With one motion they turned their heads and stared out to sea.

I stared too. I think the first thing I saw was that flash of burning

crimson, far out over the waves. And my heart quivered within me like a dog that fears the whip. I knew that beautiful, terrible color too well.

It was only then that I saw the Dancing Martha, lying at anchor beyond a ridge of rock. Between the ship and the shore a small boat rocked upon the waves, light flashing from oar-blades as the one man in the boat bent and rose and bent to his work. Above him, hanging like a crimson cloud, the terrible scarlet glowed.

When I looked back, the ninfas had vanished. Whether they slid back into the sea, or whether they melted away into nothingness before me I shall never know now. I did not see them again.

I went back a little way into the forest, and watched from among the trees. No dryads spoke to me, but I could hear their quick breathing and the leaves trembled all about me. I could not look at the scarlet daemon coming nearer and nearer over the blue water, but I could not look away long, either. It was so beautiful and so evil.

The captain was alone in the boat. I was not quite so Bobo then and I understood why. He beached the boat and climbed up the slope of sand, the daemon swaying behind him like a crimson shadow. I could see its blind eyes and the beautiful, quiet face shut up with bliss because of the thing the captain had come to do. He was carrying in his hand a long shining pistol, and he walked carefully, looking to left and right. His face was anxious, and his mouth had grown more cruel in the months since I saw him last.

I was sorry for him, but I was very frightened, too. I knew he meant to kill whomever he found alive upon the island, so that no tongue could tell the Shaughnessy's people of his wicked deed.

He found my thatched barraca at the edge of the shore, and kicked it to pieces with his heavy boots. Then he went on until he saw the long



mound above the Shaughnessy's bed, with the cross standing where his head lay. He bent over the cross, and the markings upon it spoke to him as they would never speak to me. I heard nothing, but he heard and knew. He put out his hand and pulled up the cross from the Shaughnessy's grave.

Then he went to the ruins of my barraca and to the embers of the fire I kept smouldering there. He broke the cross upon his knee and fed the pieces into the hot coals. The wood was dry. I saw it catch flame and burn. I saw, too, the faint stirring of wind that sprang up with the flames, and I heard the sighing that ran through the trees around me. Now there was nothing here to tell the searchers who might come afterward that the Shaughnessy lay in the island earth. Nothing--except myself.

He saw my footprints around the ruined barraca. He stooped to look. When he rose again and peered around the shore and forest, I could see his eyes shine, and it was the daemon who looked out of them, not the man.

Following my tracks, he began to move slowly toward the forest where I was hiding.

Then I was very frightened. I rose and fled through the trees, and I heard the dryads whimpering about me as I ran. They drew back their boughs to let me pass and swept them back after me to bar the way. I ran and ran, upward among the rocks, until I came to the pool of the unicorn, and the oread of the mountain stood there waiting for me, her arm across the unicorn's neck.

There was a rising wind upon the island. The leaves threshed and talked among themselves, and the oread's leafy hair blew backward from her face with its wise slanting eyes. The unicorn's silver mane tossed in that wind and the water ruffled in the pool.

"There is trouble coming, Luiz," the oread told me.

"The daemon. I know." I nodded to her, and then blinked, because it seemed to me that she and the unicorn, like the sea-ninfas, were growing so pale I could see the trees behind them through their bodies. But perhaps that was because the scarlet of the daemon had hurt my eyes.

"There is a man with a soul again upon our island," the oread said. "A man who does not believe. Perhaps we will have to go, Luiz."

"The Shaughnessy had a daemon too," I told her. "Yet you were here before his daemon left him to the earth. Why must you go now?"

"His was a good daemon. Even so, we were not fully here while he lived. You must remember, Luiz, that hour I told you of when a star stood above a stable where a child lay, and all our power went from us. Where the souls of men dwell, we cannot stay. This new man has brought a very evil soul with him. It frightens us. Yet since he had burned the cross, perhaps the Master can fight...."

"The Master?" I asked.

"The One we serve. The One you serve, Luiz. The One I think the Shaughnessy served, though he did not know it. The Lord of the opened eyes and the far places. He could not come until the Sign was taken down. Once you had a glimpse of him, when the Sign fell by accident from the grave, but perhaps you have forgotten that."

"I have not forgotten. I am not so Bobo now."

She smiled at me, and I could see the tree behind her through the smile.

"Then perhaps you can help the Master when the time comes. We cannot help. We are too weak already, because of the presence of the unbeliever, the man with the daemon. See?" She touched my hand, and I felt not the firm, soft brush of fingers but only a coolness like mist blowing across my skin.

"Perhaps the Master can fight him," the oread said, and her voice was very faint, like a voice from far away, though she spoke from so near to me. "I do not know about that. We must go, Luiz. We may not meet again. Good-by, caro bobo, while I can still say good-by...." The last of it was faint as the hushing of the leaves, and the oread and the unicorn together looked like smoke blowing from a campfire across the glade.

The knowledge of my loneliness came over me then more painfully than I had felt it since that hour when I first looked upon the captain's daemon and knew at last what my own sorrow was. But I had no time to grieve, for there was a sudden frightened whispering among the leaves behind me, and then the crackle of feet in boots, and then a flicker of terrible crimson among the trees.

I ran. I did not know where I ran. I heard the dryads crying, so it must have been among trees. But at last I came out upon the shore again and I saw the Shaughnessy's long grave without a cross above it. And I stopped short, and a thrill of terror went through me. For there was a Something that crouched upon the grave.

The fear in me then was a new thing. A monstrous, dim fear that moves like a cloud about the Master. I knew he meant me no harm, but the fear was heavy upon me, making my head spin with panic. Panico....

The Master rose upon the grave, and he stamped his goat-hoofed foot twice and set the pipes to his bearded lips. I heard a thin,

strange wailing music that made the blood chill inside me. And at the first sound of it there came again what I had heard once before upon the island.

The leaves upon all the trees turned over once, with a great single whispering of one syllable. The syllable was the Master's name. I fled from it in the panico all men have felt who hear that name pronounced. I fled to the edge of the beach, and I could flee no farther. So I crouched behind a hillock of rock on the wet sand, and watched what came after me from the trees.

It was the captain, with his daemon swaying like smoke above his head. He carried the long pistol ready, and his eyes moved from left to right along the beach, seeking like a wild beast for his quarry.

He saw the Master, standing upon the Shaughnessy's grave.

I saw how he stopped, rigid, like a man of stone. The daemon swayed forward above his head, he stopped so suddenly. I saw how he stared. And such was his disbelief, that for an instant I thought even the outlines of the Master grew hazy. There is great power in the men with souls.

I stood up behind my rock. I cried above the noises of the surf, "Master--Great Pan--I believe!"

He heard me. He tossed his horned head and his bulk was solid again. He set the pipes to his lips.

Captain Stryker whirled when he heard me. The long pistol swung up and there was a flash and a roar, and something went by me with a whine of anger. It did not touch me.

Then the music of the pipes began. A terrible music, thin and high,

like the ringing in the ears that has no source. It seized the captain as if with thin, strong fingers, making him turn back to the sound. He stood rigid again, staring, straining. The daemon above him turned uneasily from side to side, like a snake swaying.

Then Captain Stryker ran. I saw the sand fly up from under his boots as he fled southward along the shore. His daemon went after him, a red shadow with its eyes still closed, and after them both went Pan, moving delicately on the goathoofs, the pipes to his lips and his horns shining golden in the sun.

And that midday terror I think was greater than any terror that can stalk a man by dark.

I waited beside my rock. The sea was empty behind me except for the Dancing Martha waiting the captain's orders at its anchor. But no ninfas came in on the foam to keep me company; no heads rose wreathed with seaweed out of the water. The sea was empty and the island was empty too, except for a man and a daemon and the Piper who followed at their heels.

Myself I do not count. I have no soul.

It was nearly dark when they came back along the beach. I think the Piper had hunted them clear around the island, going slowly on his delicate hoofs, never hurrying, never faltering, and that dreadful thin music always in the captain's ears.

I saw the captain's face when he came back in the twilight. It was an old man's face, haggard, white, with deep lines in it and eyes as wild as Pan's. His dothing was torn to ribbons and his hands bled, but he still held the pistol and the red daemon still hung swaying above him.

I think the captain did not know that he had come back to his starting

place. By that time, all places must have looked alike to him. He came wavering toward me blindly. I rose up behind my rock.

When he saw me he lifted the pistol again and gasped some Yankee words. He was a strong man, Captain Stryker. With all he had endured in that long chase, he still had the power to remember he must kill me. I did not think he had reloaded the pistol, and I stood up facing him across the sand.

Behind him Pan's pipes shrilled a warning, but the Master did not draw nearer to come between us. The red daemon swayed at the captain's back, and I knew why Pan did not come to my aid. Those who lost their power when the Child was born can never lay hands upon men who possess a soul. Even a soul as evil as the captain's stood like a rock between him and the touch of Pan. Only the pipes could reach a human's ears, but there was that in the sound of the pipes which did all Pan needed to do.

It could not save me. I heard the captain laugh, without breath, a strange, hoarse sound, and I saw the lightning dazzle from the pistol's mouth. The crash it made was like a blow that struck me here, in the chest. I almost fell. That blow was heavy, but I scarcely noticed it then. There was too much to do.

The captain was laughing, and I thought of the Shaughnessy, and I stumbled forward and took the pistol by its hot muzzle with my hand. I am strong. I tore it from the captain's fist and he stood there gaping at me, not believing anything he saw. He breathed in dreadful, deep gasps, and I found I was gasping too, but I did not know why just then.

The captain's eyes met mine, and I think he saw that even now I had no hate for him--only pity. For the man behind the eyes vanished and the crimson daemon of his rage looked out, because I dared to feel sorrow for him. I looked into the eyes that were not his, but the eyes

behind the closed lids of the beautiful, blind face above him. It I hated, not him. And it was it I struck. I lifted the pistol and smashed it into the captain's face.

I was not very clear in my head just then. I struck the daemon with my blow, but it was the captain who reeled backward three steps and then fell. I am very strong. One blow was all I needed.

For a moment there was no sound in all the island. Even the waves kept their peace. The captain shuddered and gave one sigh, like that of a man who comes back to living reluctantly. He got his hands beneath him and rose upon them, peering at me through the hair that had fallen across his forehead. He was snarling like an animal.

I do not know what he intended then. I think he would have fought me until one of us was dead. But above him just then I saw the daemon stir. It was the first time I had ever seen it move except in answer to the captain's motion. All his life it had followed him, blind, silent, a shadow that echoed his gait and gestures. Now for the first time it did not obey him.

Now it rose up to a great, shining height above his head, and its color was suddenly very deep, very bright and deep, a blinding thing that hung above him too hot in color to look at. Over the beautiful blind face a look of triumph came. I saw ecstasy dawn over that face in all its glory and its evil.

I knew that this was the hour of the daemon.

Some knowledge deeper than any wisdom warned me to cover my eyes. For I saw its lids flicker, and I knew it would not be good to watch when that terrible gaze looked out at last upon a world it had never seen except through the captain's eyes.

I fell to my knees and covered my face. And the captain, seeing that, must have known at long last what it was I saw behind him. I think now that in the hour of a man's death, he knows. I think in that last moment he knows, and turns, and for the first time and the last, looks his daemon in the face.

I did not see him do it. I did not see anything. But I heard a great, resonant cry, like the mighty music that beats through paradise, a cry full of triumph and thanksgiving, and joy at the end of a long, long, weary road. There was mirth in it, and beauty, and all the evil the mind can compass.

Then fire glowed through my fingers and through my eyelids and into my brain. I could not shut it out. I did not even need to lift my head to see, for that sight would have blazed through my very bones.

I saw the daemon fall upon its master.

The captain sprang to his feet with a howl like a beast's howl, no mind or soul in it. He threw back his head and his arms went up to beat that swooping, beautiful, crimson thing away.

No flesh could oppose it. This was its hour. What sets that hour I do not know, but the daemon knew, and nothing could stop it now.

I saw the flaming thing descend upon the captain like a falling star. Through his defending arms it swept, and through his flesh and his bones and into the hollows where the soul dwells.

He stood for an instant transfixed, motionless, glowing with that bath of crimson light. Then I saw the crimson begin to shine through him, so that the shadows of his bones stood out upon the skin. And then fire shot up, wreathing from his eyes and mouth and nostrils. He was a lantern of flesh for that fire of the burning spirit. But he was a lantern



that is consumed by the flame it carries....

When the color became too bright for the eyes to bear it, I tried to turn away. I could not. The pain in my chest was too great. I thought of the Shaughnessy in that moment, who knew, too, what pain in the chest was like. I think that was the first moment when it came to me that like the Shaughnessy, I too was going to die.

Before my eyes, the captain burned in the fire of his daemon, burned and burned, his living eyes looking out at me through the crimson glory, and the laughter of the daemon very sweet above the sound of the whining flame. I could not watch and I could not turn away.

But at last the whine began to die. Then the laughter roared out in one great peal of triumph, and the beautiful crimson color, so dreadfully more crimson than blood, flared in a great burst of light that turned to blackness against my eyeballs.

When I could see again, the captain's body lay flat upon the sand. I know death when I see it. He was not burned at all. He looked as any dead man looks, flat and silent. It was his soul I had watched burning, not his body.

The daemon had gone back again to its own place. I knew that, for I could feel my aloneness on the island.

The Others had gone too. The presence of that fiery daemon was more, in the end, than their power could endure. Perhaps they shun an evil soul more fearfully than a good one, knowing themselves nothing of good and evil, but fearing what they do not understand.

You know, padre, what came after. The men from the Dancing Martha took their captain away next morning. They were frightened of the island. They looked for that which had killed him, but they did not look

far, and I hid in the empty forest until they went away.

I do not remember their going. There was a burning in my chest, and this blood I breathe out ran from time to time, as it does now. I do not like the sight of it. Blood is a beautiful color, but it reminds me of too much that was beautiful also, and much redder....

Then you came, padre. I do not know how long thereafter. I know the Shaughnessy's people brought you with their ship, to find him or his grave. You know now. And I am glad you came. It is good to have a man like you beside me at this time. I wish I had a daemon of my own, to grow very bright and vanish when I die, but that is not for o Bobo and I am used to that kind of loneliness.

I would not live, you see, now that the ninfas are gone. To be with them was good, and we comforted one another in our loneliness but, padre, I will tell you this much. It was a chilly comfort we gave each other, at the best. I am a man, though bobo, and I know. They are ninfas, and will never guess how warm and wonderful it must be to own a soul. I would not tell them if I could. I was sorry for the ninfas, padre. They are, you see, immortal.

As for me, I will forget loneliness in a little while. I will forget everything. I would not want to be a ninfa and live forever.

There is one behind you, padre. It is very bright. It watches me across your shoulder, and its eyes are wise and sad. No, daemon, this is no time for sadness. Be sorry for the ninfas, daemon, and for men like him who burned upon this beach. But not for me. I am well content.

I will go now.

# **Cursed Be the City**

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## **Contents**

Chapter I The Gates of War  
Chapter II Blood in the City  
Chapter III The Reaver of the Rook  
Chapter IV The Valley of Silence  
Chapter V Cursed Be the City

This is the tale they tell, O King: that ere the royal banners were lifted upon the tall towers of Chaldean Ur, before the Winged Pharaohs reigned in secret Aegyptus, there were mighty empires far to the east. There in that vast desert known as the Cradle of Mankind--aye, even in the heart of the measureless Gobi--great wars were fought and high palaces thrust their minarets up to the purple Asian sky. But this, O King, was long ago, beyond the memory of the oldest sage; the splendor of Imperial Gobi lives now only in the dreams of minstrels and poets....

The Tale of Sakhmet the Damned.

## **Chapter I**

### **The Gates of War**

In the gray light of the false dawn the prophet had climbed to the outer wall of Sardopolis, his beard streaming in the chill wind. Before him, stretching across the broad plain, were the gay tents and pavilions of the besieging army, emblazoned with the scarlet symbol of the

wyvern, the winged dragon beneath which King Cyaxares of the north waged his wars.

Already soldiers were grouped about the catapults and scaling-towers, and a knot of them gathered beneath the wall where the prophet stood. Mocking, rough taunts were voices, but for a time the white-bearded oldster paid no heed to the gibes. His sunken eyes, beneath their snowy penthouse brows, dwelt on the far distance, where a forest swept up into the mountain slopes and faded into blue haze.

His voice came, thin piercing. "Wo, wo unto Sardopolis! Fallen is Jewel of Gobi, fallen and lost forever, and all its glory gone! Desecration shall come to the altars, and the streets shall run red with blood. I see death for the king and shame for his people...."

For a time the soldiers beneath the wall had been silent, but now, spears lifted, they interrupted with a torrent of half-amused mockery. A bearded giant roared:

"Come down to us, old goat! We'll welcome you indeed!"

The prophet's eyes dropped, and the shouting of the soldiers faded into stillness. Very softly the ancient spoke, yet each word was clear and distinct as a sword-blade.

"Ye shall ride through the streets of the city in triumph. And your king shall mount the silver throne. Yet from the forest shall come your doom; an old doom shall come down upon you, and none shall escape. He shall return--He--the mighty one who dwelt here once...."

The prophet lifted his arms, staring straight into the red eye of the rising sun. "Evohé! Evohé!"

Then he stepped forward. Two steps and plunged. Straight down, his beard and robe streaming up, till the upthrust spears caught him, and he died.

And that day the gates of Sardopolis were burst in by giant battering-rams, and like an unleashed flood the men of Cyaxares poured into the city, wolves who slew and plundered and tortured mercilessly. Terror walked that day, and a haze of battle hung upon the roofs. The defenders were hunted down and slaughtered in the streets without mercy. Women were outraged, their children impaled, and the glory of Sardopolis faded in a smoke of shame and horror. The last glow of the setting sun touched the scarlet wyvern of Cyaxares floating from the tallest tower of the king's palace.

Flambeaux were lighted in their sockets, till the great hall blazed with a red fire, reflected from the silver throne where the invader sat. His black beard was all bespattered with blood and grime, and slaves groomed him as he sat among his men, gnawing on a mutton-bone. Yet, despite the man's gashed and broken armor and the filth that besmeared him, there was something unmistakably regal about his bearing. A king's son was Cyaxares, the last of a line that had sprung from the dawn ages of Gobi when the feudal barons had reigned.

But his face was a tragic ruin.

Strength and power and nobility had once dwelt there, and traces of them still could be seen, as though in muddy water, through the mask of cruelty and vice that lay heavy upon Cyaxares. His gray eyes held a cold and passionless stare that vanished only in the crimson blaze of battle, and now those deadly eyes dwelt on the bound form of the conquered king of Sardopolis, Chalem.

In contrast with the huge figure of Cyaxares Chalem seemed slight; yet, despite his wounds, he stood stiffly upright, no trace of

expression on his pale face.

A strange contrast! The marbled, tapestried throne-room of the palace was more suitable to gay pageantry than this grim scene. The only man who did not seem incongruously out of place stood beside the throne, a slim, dark youth, clad in silks and velvets that had apparently not been marred by the battle. This was Necho, the king's confidant, and, some said, his familiar demon. Whence he had come no one knew but of his evil power over Cyaxares there was no doubt.

A little smile grew on the youth's handsome face. Smoothing his curled dark hair, he leaned close and whispered to the king. The latter nodded, waved away a maiden who was oiling his beard, and said shortly:

"Your power is broken, Chalem. Yet are we merciful. Render homage, and you may have your life."

For answer Chalem spat upon the marble flags at his feet.

A curious gleam came into Cyaxares'eyes. Half inaudibly he murmured, "A brave man. Too brave to die...."

Some impulse seemed to pull his head around until he met Necho's gaze. A message passed in that silent staring. For Cyaxares took from his side a long, bloodstained sword; he rose, stepped down from his dais--and swung the brand.

Chalem made no move to evade the blow. The steel cut through bone and brain. As the dead man fell, Cyaxares stood looking down without a trace of expression. He wrenched his sword free.

"Fling this carrion to the vultures," he commanded.

From the group of prisoners near by came an angry oath. The king turned to face the man who had dared to speak. He gestured.

A pair of guards pushed forward a tall, well-muscled figure, yellow-haired, with a face strong despite its youth, now darkened with rage. The man wore no armor, and his torso was criss-crossed with wounds.

"Who are you?" Cyaxares asked with ominous restraint, the sword bare in his hand.

"King Chalem's son--Prince Raynor."

"You seek death?"

Raynor shrugged. "Death has come close to me today. Slay me if you will. I've butchered about a dozen of your wolves, anyway, and that's some satisfaction."

Behind Cyaxares came a rustle of silks as Necho moved slightly. The king's lips twitched beneath the shaggy beard. His face was suddenly hard and cruel again.

"So! Well, you will crawl to my feet before the next sun sets." He gestured. "No doubt there are torture vaults beneath the palace. Sudrach!"

A brawny, leather-clad man stepped forward and saluted. "You have heard my will. See to it."

"If I crawl to your feet," Raynor said quietly, "it'll be to hamstring you, bloated toad."

The king drew in his breath with an angry sound. Without another word he nodded to Sudrach, and the torturer followed Raynor as he

was conducted out. Then Cyaxares went back to his throne and mused for a time, till a slave brought him wine in a gilded chalice.

But the liquor had no power to break his dark mood. At last he rose and went to the dead king's apartments, which the invaders had not dared to plunder for fear of Cyaxares' wrath. Above the silken couch a gleaming image hung from its standard--the scarlet wyvern, wings spread, barbed tail stiffly upright. Cyaxares stood silently staring at it for a space.

He did not turn when he heard Necho's soft voice. The youth said, "The wyvern has conquered once again."

"Aye," Cyaxares said dully. "Once again, through vileness and black shame. It was an evil day when we met, Necho."

Low laughter came. "Yet you summoned me, as I remember. I was content enough in my own place, till you sent your summons."

Involuntarily the king shuddered. "I would Ishtar had sent down her lightnings upon me that night."

"Ishtar? You worship another god now."

Cyaxares swung about, snarling. "Necho, do not push me too far! I have still some power--"

"You have all power," the low voice said. "As you wished."

For a dozen heart-beats the king made no answer. Then he whispered, "I am the first to bring shame upon our royal blood. When I was crowned I swore many a vow on the tombs of my fathers--and for a time I kept those vows. I ruled with truth and chivalry--"



"And you sought wisdom."

"Aye. I was not content. I sought to make my name great, and to that end I talked with sorcerers--with Bleys of the Dark Pool."

"Bleys," Necho murmured. "He was learned, in his way. Yet--he died."

The king's breathing was unsteady. "I know. I slew him--at your command. And you showed me what happened thereafter."

"Bleys is not happy now," Necho said softly. "He served the same master as you. Wherefore--" The quiet voice grew imperious. "Wherefore live! For by our bargain I shall give you all power on earth, fair women and treasure beyond imagination. But when you die--you shall serve me!"

The other stood silent, while veins swelled on his swarthy forehead. Suddenly, with a bellowing, inarticulate oath, he snatched up his sword. Bright steel flamed through the air--and rebounded, clashing. Up the king's arm and through all his body raced a tingling shock, and simultaneously the regal apartment seemed to darken around him. The fires of the flambeaux darkened. The air was chill--and it whispered.

Steadily the room grew blacker. Now all was midnight black, save for a shining figure that stood immobile, blazing with weird and unearthly radiance. Little murmurs rustled through the deadly stillness. The body of Necho shone brighter, blindingly. And he stood without moving or speaking, till the king shrank with a shuddering cry, his blade clattering on the marble.

"No!" he half sobbed, "For His mercy--no!"

"He has no mercy," the low voice came, bleak and chill. "Therefore worship me, dog whom men call king. Worship me!"

And Cyaxares worshiped....

## **Chapter II**

### **Blood in the City**

Prince Raynor was acutely uncomfortable. He was stretched upon a rack, staring up at the dripping stones of the vault's roof, and Sudrach, the torturer, was heating iron bars on the hearth. A great cup of wine stood nearby, and occasionally Sudrach, humming under his breath, would reach for it and gulp noisily. "A thousand pieces of gold if you help me escape," Raynor repeated without much hope.

"What good is gold to a flayed man?" Sudrach asked. "That would be my fate if you escaped. Also, where would you get a thousand golden pieces?"

"In my apartment," Raynor said. "Safely hidden."

"You may be lying. At any rate, you'll tell me where this hiding place is when I burn out your eyes. Thus I'll have the gold--if it exists--without danger to myself."

Raynor made no answer, but instead tugged at the cords that bound him. They did not give. Yet Raynor strained until blood throbbed in his temples, and was no closer to freedom when he relaxed at last.

"You'll but wear yourself out," Sudrach said over his shoulder. "Best save your strength. You'll need it for screaming." He took an iron bar from the fire. Its end glowed redly, and Raynor watched the

implement with fascinated horror. An unpleasant way to die....

But as the glowing bar approached Raynor's chest there came an interruption. The iron door was flung open, and a tall, huge-muscled black entered. Sudrach turned, involuntarily lifting the bar as a weapon. Then he relaxed, his eyes questioning.

"Who the devil are you?" he grunted.

"Eblik, the Nubian," said the black, bowing. "I bear a message from the king. I lost my way in this damned palace, and just now blundered to my goal. The king has two more prisoners for your hands."

"Good!" Sudrach rubbed his hands. "Where are they?"

"In the--" The other stepped closer. He fumbled in his belt.

Then, abruptly, a blood-reddened dagger flashed up and sheathed itself in flesh. Sudrach bellowed, thrust out clawing hands. He doubled up slowly, while his attacker leaped free, and then he collapsed upon the dank stones and lay silent, twitching a little.

"The gods be praised!" Raynor grunted. "Eblik, faithful servant, you come in time!"

Eblik's dark, gargoyleish face was worried. "Let me--" He slashed the cords that bound the prisoner. "It wasn't easy. When we were separated, in the battle, master, I knew Sardopolis would fall. I changed clothes with one of Cyaxares'men--whom I slew--and waited my chance to escape. It was by the merest luck that I heard you had offended the king and were to be tortured. So--" He shrugged.

Raynor, free at last, sprang up from the rack, stretching his stiffened muscles. "Will it be easy to escape?"

"Perhaps. Many are drunk or asleep. At any rate, we can't stay here."

The two slipped cautiously out into the corridor. A guard lay dead, weltering in his blood, not far away. They hurried past him, and silently threaded their way through the palace, more than once dodging into passages to evade detection.

"If I knew where Cyaxares slept, I'd take my chances on slitting his throat," Raynor said. "Wait! This way!"

At the end of a narrow hall was a door which, pushed open, showed a moonlit expanse of garden. Eblik said, "I remember—I entered this way. Here—" He dived into a bush and presently emerged with a sword and a heavy battle-ax; the latter he thrust in his girdle. "What now?"

"Over the wall," Raynor said, and led the way. The high rampart was not easy to scale, but a spreading tree grew close to it, and eventually the two had surmounted the barrier. As Raynor dropped lightly to the ground he heard a sudden cry, and, glancing around, saw a group of men, armor gleaming in the moonlight, racing toward him. He cursed softly.

Eblik was already fleeing, his long legs covering the yards with amazing speed. Raynor followed, though his first impulse was to wait and give battle. But in the stronghold of Cyaxares such an action would have been suicidal.

Behind the pair the pursuers bayed menace. Swords came out flashing. Raynor clutched his comrade's arm, dragged him into a side alley, and the two sped on, frantically searching for a hiding-place. It was Eblik who found sanctuary five minutes later. Passing the blood-smeared, corpse-littered courtyard of a temple, he gasped a hasty word, and in a moment both Raynor and Eblik were across the

moonlit stretch and fleeing into the interior of the temple.

From a high roof hung a golden ball, dim in the gloom. This was the sacred house of the Sun, the dwelling place of the primal god Ahmon. Eblik had been here before, and knew the way. He guided Raynor past torn tapestries and overthrown censers, and then, halting before a golden curtain, he listened. There was no sound of pursuit.

"Good!" the Nubian warrior said. "I've heard of a secret way out of here, though where it is I don't know. Maybe we can find it."

He drew the curtain aside, and the two entered the sanctuary of the god. Involuntarily Raynor whispered a curse, and his brown fingers tightened on his rapier hilt.

A small chamber faced them, with walls and floor and ceiling blue as the summer sky. It was empty, save for a single huge sphere of gold in the center.

Broken upon the gleaming ball was a man.

From the wall a single flambeau cast a flickering radiance on the twisted, bloodstained body, on the white beard that was dappled with blood. The man lay stretched across the globe, his hands and feet impaled with iron spikes that had been driven deeply into the gold.

Froth bubbled on his lips. His hoary head rolled; eyes stared unseeingly. He gasped, "Water! For the love of Ahmon, a drop of water!"

Raynor's lips were a hard white line as he sprang forward. Eblik helped him as he pried the spikes free. The tortured priest moaned and bit at his mangled lips, but made no outcry. Presently he lay prostrate on the blue floor. With a muttered word, Eblik disappeared,

and came back bearing a cup which he held to the dying man's mouth.

The priest drank deeply. He whispered, "Prince Raynor! Is the King safe?"

Swiftly Raynor answered. The other's white head rolled.

"Lift me up--swiftly!"

Raynor obeyed. The priest ran his hands over the golden sphere, and suddenly, beneath his probing fingers, it split in half like a cloven fruit, and in its center a gap widened. A steep staircase led down into hidden depths.

"The altar is open? I cannot see well. Take me down there. They cannot find us in the hidden chamber."

Raynor swung the priest to his shoulders and without hesitation started down the steps, Eblik behind him. There was a low grating as the altar swung back, a gleaming sphere that would halt and baffle pursuit. They were in utter darkness. The prince moved cautiously, testing each step before he shifted his weight. At last he felt the floor level beneath his feet.

Slowly, a dim light began to grow, like the first glow of dawn. It revealed a bare stone vault, roughly constructed of mortised stones, strangely at variance with the palatial city above. In one wall a dark hole showed. On the floor was a circular disk of metal, its center hollowed out into a cup. Within this cup lay a broken shard of some rock that resembled gold-shot marble, half as large as Raynor's hand. On the shard were carved certain symbols the prince did not recognize, and one that he did--the ancient looped cross, sacred to the sun-god. He put the priest down gently, but nevertheless the man

moaned in agony. The maimed hands clutched at air.

"Ahmon! Great Ahmon... give me more water!"

Eblik obeyed. Strengthened, the priest fumbled for and gripped Raynor's arm.

"You are strong. Good! Strength is needed for the mission you must undertake."

"Mission?"

The priest's fingers tightened. "Aye; Ahmon guided your steps hither. You must be the messenger of vengeance. Not I. I have not long to live. My strength ebbs...."

He was silent for a time, and then resumed, "I have a tale to tell you. Do you know the legend of the founding of Sardopolis? How, long ago, a very terrible god had his altar in this spot, and was served by all the forest dwellers... till those who served Ahmon came? They fought and prisoned the forest god, drove him hence to the Valley of Silence, and he lies bound there by strong magic and the seal of Ahmon. Yet there was a prophecy that one day Ahmon would be overthrown, and the bound god would break his fetters and return to his first dwelling place, to the ruin of Sardopolis. The day of the prophecy is at hand!"

The priest pointed. "All is dark. Yet the seal should be there--is it not?"

Raynor said, "A bit of marble--"

"Aye--the talisman. Lift it up!" The voice was now peremptory. Raynor obeyed.

"I have it."

"Good. Guard it well. Lift the disk now."

Almost apprehensively the prince tugged the disk up, finding it curiously light. Beneath was nothing but a jagged stone, crudely carved with archaic figures and symbols. A stone--yet Raynor knew, somehow, that the thing was horribly old, that it had existed from the dawn ages of Gobi.

"The altar of the forest god," said the priest. "He will return to this spot when he is freed. You must go to the Reaver of the Rock, and give him the talisman. He will know its meaning. So shall Ahmon be avenged upon the tyrant...."

Suddenly the priest surged upright, his arms lifted, tears streaming from the blind eyes. He cried, Ohé--ohé! Fallen forever is the House of Ahmon! Fallen to the dust...."

He fell, as a tree falls, crashing down upon the stones, his arms still extended as though in worship. So died the last priest of Ahmon in Gobi.

Raynor did not move for a while. Then he bent over the lax body. A hasty examination showed him that the man was dead, and shrugging, he thrust the marble shard into his belt.

"I suppose that's the way out," he said, pointing to the gap in the wall, "though I don't like the look of it. Well--come on."

He squeezed himself into the narrow hole, cursing softly, and Eblik followed.

## Chapter III



## **The Reaver of the Rook**

With slow steps Cyaxares paced his apartment, his shaggy brows drawn together in a frown. Once or twice his hand closed convulsively on his sword-hilt, and again the secret agony within him made him groan aloud. But not once did he glance at the scarlet symbol of the wyvern that hung above his couch.

Going to a window, he looked down over the city, and then his gaze went out to the plain and the distant, forested mountains. He sighed heavily.

A voice said, "You may well look there, Cyaxares. For there is your doom, unless you act swiftly."

"Is it you, Necho?" the king asked heavily. "What new shamefulness must I work now?"

"Two men go south to the Valley of Silence. They must be slain ere they reach it."

"Why? What aid can they get there?"

Necho did not answer at first. His voice was hesitant when he said, "The gods have their own secrets. There is something in the Valley of Silence that can send all your glory and power crashing down about your head. Nor can I aid you then. I can only advise you now and if you follow my advice--well. But act I cannot and must not, for a reason which you need not know. Send out your men therefore, with orders to overtake those two and slay them--swiftly!"

"As you will," the king said, and turned to summon a servitor.

lions follow us," Eblik said, shading his eyes with a calloused hand. He was astride a rangy dun mare, and beside him Raynor rode on a great gray charger, red of nostril and fiery of eye. The latter turned in the saddle and looked back.

"By the gods!" he observed. "Cyaxares has sent half an army after us. It's lucky we managed to steal these mounts."

The two had reined their horses at the summit of a low rise in the forest. Back of them the ground sloped to the great plain and the gutted city of Sardopolis; before them jagged mountains rose, covered with oak and pine and fir. The Nubian licked dry lips, said thirstily, "The fires of all hells are in my belly. Let's get out of this wilderness, where there's nothing to drink but water."

"The Reaver may feed you wine--or blood," Raynor said, "Nevertheless, our best chance is to find this Reaver and seek his aid. A mercenary once told me of the road."

He clapped his heels against the charger's flanks, and the steed bounded forward. In a moment the ridge had hidden them from the men of Cyaxares. So the two penetrated deeper and deeper into the craggy, desolate wilderness, a place haunted by wolves and great bears and, men whispered, monstrous, snake-like cockadrills.

They went by snow-peaked mountains that lifted white cones to the blue sky, and they fled along the brink of deep gorges from which the low thunder of cataracts rose tumultuously. And always behind them rode the pursuers, a grim and warlike company, following slowly but relentlessly.

But Raynor used more than one stratagem. Thrice he guided his charger up streams along which the wise animal picked its way carefully; again he dislodged an avalanche to block the trail. So it

came about that when the two rode down into a great, grassy basin, the men of Cyaxares were far behind.

On all sides the mountains rose. Ahead was a broad, meadow-like valley, strewn with thickets and green groves. Far ahead the precipice rose in a tall rampart, split in one place into a narrow canyon.

To the right of the gorge lifted a great gray rock, mountain-huge, bare save for a winding trail that twisted up its surface to a castle upon the summit. Dwarfed by distance, the size of the huge structure could yet be appreciated--a castle of stone, incongruously bedecked with fluttering, bright banners and pennons.

Raynor pointed. "He dwells there. The Reaver of the Rock."

"And here comes danger," Eblik said, whipping out his battle-ax. "Look!"

From a grove of nearby trees burst a company of horsemen, glittering in the afternoon sunlight, spears lifted, casques and helms agleam. Shouting, they rode down upon the waiting pair. Raynor fingered his sword-hilt, hesitating.

"Put up your blade," he directed Eblik. "We come in friendship here."

The Nubian was doubtful. "But do they know that?"

Nevertheless he sheathed his sword and waited till the dozen riders reined in a few paces away. One spurred forward, a tall man astride a wiry black.

"Are you tired of life, that you seek the Reaver's stronghold?" he demanded. "Or do you mean to enter in his service?"

"We bear a message," Raynor countered. "A message from a priest of Ahmon."

"We know no gods here," the other grunted.

"Well, you know warfare, or I've misread the dents in your armor," Raynor snapped. "Sardopolis is fallen! Cyaxares has taken the city and slain the king, my father, Chalem of Sardopolis."

To his amazement a bellow of laughter burst from the troop. The spokesman said, "What has that to do with us? We own no king but the Reaver. Yet you shall come safely before him, if that is your will. It were shameful to battle a dozen to two, and the rags you wear aren't worth the taking."

Eblik started like a ruffled peacock. "By the gods, you have little courtesy here! For a coin I'd slit your weasand!"

The other rubbed his throat reflectively, grinning. "You may have a trial at that later, if you wish, my ragged gargoyle. But come, now, for the Reaver is in hall, and tonight he rides forth on a raid."

With a nod Raynor spurred his horse forward, the Nubian at his side, and, surrounded by the men of the Reaver, they fled across the valley to the castle. Thence they mounted the steep, dangerous path up the craggy ramp, till at last they crossed a drawbridge and dismounted in a courtyard.

So they took Raynor before the Reaver of the Rock.

A great, shining, red-cheeked man he was, with grizzled gray beard and a crown set rakishly askew on tangled locks. He sat before a blazing fire in a high-roofed stone hall, an iron chest open at his feet. From this he was taking jewels and golden chains and ornaments

that might have graced a king's treasury, examining them carefully, and making notes with a quill pen upon a parchment on his lap.

He looked up; merry eyes dwelt on Raynor's flushed face and tousled yellow hair.

"Well, Samar, what is it now?"

"Two strangers. They have a message for you--or so they say."

Suddenly the Reaver's face changed. He leaned forward, spilling treasure from his lap. "A message? Now there is only one message that can ever come to me... speak, you! Who sent you?"

Raynor stepped forward confidently. From his belt he drew the broken shard of marble, and extended it.

"A priest of Ahmon bade me give you this," he said. "Sardopolis is fallen."

For a heartbeat there was silence. Then the Reaver took the shard, examining it carefully. He murmured, "Aye. So my rule passes. For long and long my fathers held the Rock, waiting for the summons that never came. And now it has come."

He looked up. "Go, all of you, save you two. And you, Samar--wait, for you should know of this."

The others departed. The Reaver shouted after them, "Summon Delphia!"

He turned to stare into the fire. "So I, Kialeh, must fulfill the ancient pledge of my ancestors. And invaders are on my marches. Well--"

There came an interruption. A girl strode in, dark head proudly erect,

slim figure corseted in dented armor. She went to the Reaver, flung a blazing jewel in his lap.

"Is this my guerdon?" she snarled. "Faith o'the gods, I took Ossan's castle almost single-handed. And my share is less than the share of Samar here!"

"You are my daughter," the Reaver said quietly. "Shall I give you more honor, then, in our free brotherhood? Be silent. Listen."

Raynor was examining the girl's face with approval. There was beauty there, wild dark lawless beauty, and strength that showed in the firm set of the jaw and the latent fire of the jet eyes. Ebony hair, unbound, fell in ringlets about steel-corseleted shoulders.

The girl said, "Well? Have you had your fill of staring?"

"Let be," the Reaver grunted. "I have a tale for all of you... listen."

His deep voice grew stronger. "Ages on ages ago this was a barbarous land. The people worshipped a forest-god called--" his hand moved in a queer quick sign--"called Pan. Then from the north came two kings, brothers, bringing with them the power of the sun-god, Ahmon. There was battle in the land then, and blood and reddened steel. Yet Ahmon conquered.

"The forest-god was bound within the Valley of Silence, which lies beyond my castle. The two kings made an agreement. One was to rule Sardopolis, and the other, the younger, was to rear a great castle at the gateway of the Valley of Silence, and guard the fettered god. Until a certain word should come...."

The Reaver weighed a glittering stone in his hand. "For there was a prophecy that one day the rule of Ahmon should be broken. Then it

was foretold that the forest-god should be freed, and should bring vengeance upon the destroyers of Sardopolis. For long and long my ancestors have guarded the Rock--and I, Kialeh, am the last. Ah," he sighed. "The great days are over indeed. Never again will the Reaver ride to rob and plunder and mock at gods. Never--what's this?"

A man-at-arms had burst into the hall, eyes alight, face fierce as a wolf's. "Kialeh! An army is in the valley!"

"By Shaitan!" Raynor cursed. "Cyaxares' men! They pursued us--"

The girl, Delphia, swung about. "Gather the men! I'll take command--"

Suddenly the Reaver let out a roaring shout. "No! By all the gods I've flouted--no! Would you grudge me my last battle, girl? Gather your men, Samar--but I command!"

Samar sprang to obey. Delphia gripped her father's arm. "I fight with you, then."

"I have another task for you. Guide these two through the Valley of Silence, to the place you know. Here--" he thrust the marble shard at the prince. "Take this. You'll know how to use it when the time comes."

Then he was gone, and curtains of black samite swayed into place behind him.

Raynor was curiously eying the girl. Her face was pale beneath its tan, and her eyes betrayed fear. Red battle she could face unflinchingly, but the thought of entering the Valley of Silence meant to her something far more terrible. Yet she said, "Come. We have little time."

Eblik followed Raynor and Delphia from the hall. They went through the harsh splendor of the castle, till at last the girl halted before a blank stone wall. She pressed a hidden spring. A section of the rock swung away, revealing the dim-lit depths of a passage.

Delphia paused on the threshold. Her dark eyes flickered over the two.

"Hold fast to your courage," she whispered--and her lips were trembling. "For now we go down into Hell...."

## **Chapter IV**

### **The Valley of Silence**

Yet at first there seemed nothing terrible about the valley. They entered it from a cavern that opened on a thick forest, and, glancing around, Raynor saw tall mountainous ramparts that made the place a prison indeed. It was past sunset, yet already a full moon was rising over the eastern cliffs, outlining the Reaver's castle in black silhouette.

They entered the forest.

Moss underfoot deadened their footsteps. They walked in dim gloom, broken by moonlit traceries filtered through the leaves. And now Raynor noted the curious stillness that hung over all.

There was no sound. The noise of birds and beasts did not exist here, nor did the breath of wind rustle the silent trees. But, queerly, the prince thought there was a sound whispering through the forest, a sound below the threshold of hearing, which nevertheless played on his taut nerves.



"I don't like this," Eblik said, his ugly face set and strained. His voice seemed to die away with uncanny swiftness.

"Pan is fettered here," Delphia whispered. "Yet is his power manifest...."

Soundlessly they went through the soundless forest. And now Raynor realized that, slowly and imperceptibly, the shadowy whisper he had sensed was growing louder--or else his ears were becoming more attuned to it. A very dim murmur, faint and far away, which yet seemed to have within it a multitude of voices....

The voices of the winds... the murmur of forests... the goblin laughter of shadowed brooks....

It was louder now, and Raynor found himself thinking of all the innumerable sounds of the primeval wilderness. Bird-notes, and the call of beasts....

And under all, a dim, powerful motif, beat a wordless shrilling, a faint piping that set the prince's skin to crawling as he heard it.

"It is the tide of life," Delphia said softly. "The heart-beat of the first god. The pulse of earth."

For the first time Raynor felt something of the primal secrets of the world. Often he had walked alone in the forest, but never yet had the hidden heart of the wilderness reached fingers into his soul. He sensed a mighty and very terrible power stirring latent in the soil beneath him, a thing bound inextricably to the brain of man by the cords of the flesh which came up, by slow degrees, from the seething oceans which once rolled unchecked over a young planet. Unimaginable eons ago man had come from the earth, and the brand of his mother-world was burned deep within his soul.

Afraid, yet strangely happy, as men are sometimes happy in their dreams, the prince motioned for his companions to increase their pace.

The forest gave place to a wide clearing, with shattered white stones rearing to the sky. Broken plinths and peristyles gleamed in the moonlight. A temple had once existed here. Now all was overgrown with moss and the slow-creeping lichen. "Here," the girl said in a low whisper. "Here...."

In the center of a ring of fallen pillars they halted. Delphia pointed to a block of marble, on which a metal disk was inset. In a cuplike depression in the metal lay a broken bit of marble.

"The talisman," Delphia said. "Touch it to the other."

Silence... and the unearthly tide of hidden life swelling and ebbing all about them. Raynor took the amulet from his belt, stepped forward, fighting down his fear. He bent above the disk--touched marble shard to marble--

As iron to lodestone, the two fragments drew together. They coalesced into one. The jagged line of breakage faded and vanished.

Raynor held the talisman--complete, unbroken!

Now, quite suddenly, the vague murmurings mounted into a roar--gay, jubilant, triumphant! The metal disk shattered into fragments. Beneath it the prince glimpsed a small carved stone, the twin of the one beneath the temple of Ahmon.

Above the unceasing roar sounded a penetrating shrill piping.

Delphia clutched at Raynor's arm, pulled him back. Her face was chalk-white.

"The pipes!" she gasped. "Back--quickly! To see Pan is to die!"

Louder the roar mounted, and louder. In its bellow was a deep shout of alien laughter, a thunder of goblin merriment. The chuckle of the shadowed brooks was the crash of cataracts and waterfalls.

The forest stirred to a breath of gusty wind.

"Back!" the girl said urgently. "Back! We have freed Pan!"

Without conscious thought Raynor thrust the talisman into his belt, turned, and, with Delphia and Eblik beside him, fled into the moonlit shadows. Above him branches tossed in a mounting wind. The wild shrieking of the pipes grew louder.

Tide of earth life--rising to a mad paeon of triumph!

The wind exulted:

"Free... free!"

And the unseen rivers shouted:

"Great Pan is free!"

Clattering of hoofs came from the distance. Bleating calls sounded from afar.

The girl stumbled, almost fell. Raynor gripped at her arm, pulling her upright, fighting the unreasoning terror mounting within him. The Nubian's grim face was glistening with sweat.

"Pan, Pan is free!"

"Evohé!"

The black mouth of a cavern loomed before them. At its threshold Raynor cast a glance behind him, saw all the great forest swaying and tossing. His breath coming unevenly, he turned, following his companions into the cave.

"Shaitan!" he whispered. "What demon have I loosed on the land?"

Then it was race, sprint, pound up the winding passage, up an unending flight of stone steps, through a wall that lifted at Delphia's touch--and into a castle shaking with battle. Raynor stopped short, whipping out his sword, staring at shadows flickering in the distance.

"Cyaxares'men," he said. "They've entered."

In the face of flesh-and-blood antagonists the prince was suddenly himself again. Delphia was already running down the corridor, blade out. Raynor and the Nubian followed.

They burst into the great hall. A ring of armed men surrounded a little group who were making their last stand before the hearth. Towering above the others Raynor saw the tangled locks and bristling beard of Kialeh, the Reaver, and beside him his lieutenant Samar. Corpses littered the floor.

"Ho!" roared the Reaver, as he caught sight of the newcomers. "You come in time! In time--to die with us!"

## **Chapter V**

### **Cursed Be the City**

Grim laughter touched Raynor's lips. He drove in, sheathing his sword in a brawny throat, whipped it out, steel singing. Nor were Eblik and Delphia far behind. Her blade and the Nubian's ax wreaked deadly havoc among Cyaxares's soldiers, who, not expecting attack from the rear, were confused.

The hall became filled with a milling, yelling throng, from which one soldier, a burly giant, emerged, shouting down the others.

"Cut them down! They're but three!"

Then all semblance of sanity was lost in a blaze of crimson battle, swinging brands, and huge maces that crashed down, splitting skulls and spattering gray brain-stuff. Delphia kept shoulder to shoulder with Raynor, seemingly heedless of danger, her blade flicking wasplike through the air. And the prince guarded her as best he could, the sword weaving a bright maze of deadly lightnings as it whirled.

The Reaver swung, and his sword crushed a helm and bit deep into bone. He strained to tug it free--and a soldier thrust up at his throat. Samar deflected the blade with his own weapon, and that cost him his life. In that moment of inattention a driven spear smashed through corselet and jerkin and drank deep of the man's life-blood.

Silent, he fell.

The Reaver went beserk. Yelling, he sprang over his lieutenant's corpse and swung. For a few moments he held back his enemies--and then someone flung a shield. Instinctively Kialeh lifted his blade to parry.

The wolves leaped in to the kill.

Roaring, the Reaver went down, blood gushing through his shaggy beard, staining its iron-gray with red. When Raynor had time to look again, Kialeh lay a corpse on his own hearth, his head amid bright jewels that had spilled from the overturned treasure-chest.

The three stood together now, the last of the defenders--Raynor and Eblik and Delphia. The soldiers ringed them, panting for their death, yet hesitating before the menace of cold steel. None wished to be the first to die.

And, as they waited, a little silence fell. The prince heard a sound he remembered.

Dim and far away, a low roaring drifted to his ears. And the eerie shrilling of pipes....

It grew louder. The soldiers heard it now. They glanced at one another askance. There was something about that sound that chilled the blood.

It swelled to a gleeful shouting, filling all the castle. A breeze blew through the hall, tugging with elfin fingers at sweat-moist skin. It rose to a gusty blast.

In its murmur voices whispered.

"Evohé! Evohé!"

They grew louder, mad and unchecked. They exulted.

"Pan, Pan is free!"

"Gods!" a soldier cursed. "What devil's work is this?" He swung about, sword ready.

The curtains of samite were ripped away by the shrieking wind. Deafeningly the voices exulted:

"Pan is free!"

The piping shrilled out. There came the clatter of ringing little hoofs. The castle rocked and shuddered.

Some vague, indefinable impulse made Raynor snatch at his belt, gripping the sun-god's talisman in bronzed fingers. From it a grateful warmth seemed to flow into his flesh--and the roaring faded.

He dragged Delphia and the Nubian behind him. "Close to me! Stay close!"

The room was darkening. No--it seemed as though a cloudy veil of mist dropped before the three, guarding them. Raynor lifted the seal of Ahmon.

The fog-veils swirled. Dimly through them Raynor could see the soldiers moving swiftly, frantically, like rats caught in a trap. He tightened one arm about Delphia's steel-armored waist.

Suddenly the hall was ice-cold. The castle shook as though gripped by Titan hands. The floor swayed beneath the prince's feet.

The mists darkened. Through rifts he saw half-guessed figures that leaped and bounded... heard elfin hoofs clicking. Horned and shaggy-furred beings that cried jubilantly as they danced to the pipes of Pan....

Faun and dryad and satyr swung in a mad saraband beyond the shrouding mists. Faintly there came the screaming of men, half drowned in the loud shrilling.

"Evohé!" the demoniac rout thundered. "Evohé! All hail, O Pan!"

With a queer certainty Raynor knew that it was time to leave the castle--and swiftly. Already the great stone structure was shaking like a tree in a hurricane. With a word to his companions he stepped forward hesitantly, the talisman held high.

The walls of mist moved with him. Outside the fog-walls the monstrous figures gamboled. But the soldiers of Cyaxares screamed no more.

Through a castle toppling into ruin the three sped, into the courtyard, across the drawbridge, and down the face of the Rock. Nor did they pause till they were safely in the broad plain of the valley.

"The castle!" Eblik barked, pointing. "See? It falls."

And it was true. Down it came thundering, while clouds of ruin spurted up. Then there was only a shattered wreck on the summit of the Rock....

Delphia caught her breath in a little sob. She murmured, "The end of the Reavers for all time. I--I lived in the castle for more than twenty years. And now it's gone like a puff of dust before the wind."

The walls of fog had vanished. Raynor returned the talisman to his belt. Eblik, staring up at the Rock, swallowed uneasily.

"Well, what now?" he asked.

"Back along the way we came," the prince said. "It's the only way out of this wilderness that I know of."

The girl nodded. "Yes. Beyond the mountains lie deserts, save



toward Sardopolis. But we have no mounts."

"Then we'll walk," Eblik observed, but Raynor caught his arm and pointed.

"There! Horses--probably stampeded from the castle. And--Shaitan! There's my gray charger. Good!"

So, presently, the three rode toward Sardopolis, conscious of a weird dim throbbing that seemed to pulse in the air all about them.

At dawn they topped a ridge and saw before them the plain. All three reined in their mounts, staring. Beneath them lay the city--but changed!

It was a ruin.

Doom had come to Sardopolis in the night. The mighty towers and battlements had fallen, and huge gaps were opened in the walls. Of the king's palace nothing was left but a single tower, from which, ironically, the wyvern banner flew. As they watched, that pinnacle, too, swayed and tottered and fell, and the scarlet wyvern drifted down into the dust of Sardopolis.

On fallen towers and peristyles distant figures moved, with odd, ungainly boundings. Quickly Raynor turned his eyes away. But he could not shut his ears to the distant crying of pipes, gay and pagan, yet with a faintly mournful undertone.

"Pan has returned to his first altar," Delphia said quietly. "We had best not loiter here."

"By all hell, I agree," the Nubian grunted, digging his heels into his steed's flanks. "Where now, Raynor?"

"Westward, I think, to the Sea of Shadows. There are cities on its shore, and galleys to take us to a haven. Unless--" He turned questioning eyes on Delphia.

She laughed, a little bitterly. "I cannot stay here. The land is sunk back into the pit. Pan rules. I go with you."

The three rode to the west. They skirted, but did not enter, a small grove where a man lay in agony. It was Cyaxares, a figure so dreadfully mangled that only sheer will kept him alive. His face was a bloody mask. The once-rich garments were tattered and filthy. He saw the three riders, and raised his voice in a weak cry which the wind drowned.

Beside the king a slim, youthful figure lounged, leaning idly against an oak-trunk. It was Necho.

"Call louder, Cyaxares," he said. "With a horse under you, you can reach the Sea of Shadows. And if you succeed in doing that, you will yet live for many years."

Again the king cried out. The wind took his voice and shredded it to impotent fragments.

Necho laughed softly. "Too late, now. They are gone."

Cyaxares let his battered head drop, his beard trailing in the dirt. Through shredded lips he muttered, "if I reach the Sea of Shadows... I live."

"True. But if you do not, you die. And then--" Low laughter shook the other.

Groaning, the king dragged himself forward. Necho followed.

"A good horse can reach the Sea of Shadows in three days. If you walk swiftly, you may reach it in six. But you must hurry. Why do you not rise, my Cyaxares?"

The king spat out bitter oaths. In agony he pulled himself forward, leaving a trail of blood on the grass... blood that dripped unceasingly from the twin raw stumps just above his ankles.

"The stone that fell upon you was sharp. Cyaxares, was it not?" Necho mocked. "But hurry! You have little time. There are mountains to climb and rivers to cross...."

So, in the trail of Raynor and Eblik and Delphia, crept the dying king, hearing fainter and ever fainter the triumphant pipes of Pan from Sardopolis. And presently, patient as the silent Necho, a vulture dipped against the blue and took up the pursuit, the beat of its wings distinctly audible in the heavy, stagnant silence....

And Raynor and Delphia and Eblik rode onward toward the sea....

The End.

Prince Raynor returned in a second sword and sorcery tale, "The Citadel of Darkness" (Strange Stories, Vol. 2, No.1, August 1939), but I don't have that one.

# The Twonky



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The turnover at Mideastern Radio was so great that Mickey Lloyd couldn't keep track of his men. It wasn't only the draft; employees kept quitting and going elsewhere, at a higher salary. So when the big-headed little man in overalls wandered vaguely out of a storeroom, Lloyd took one look at the brown dungaree suit--company provided--and said mildly, "The whistle blew half an hour ago. Hop to work."

"Work-k-k?" The man seemed to have trouble with the word.

Drunk? Lloyd, in his capacity as foreman, couldn't permit that. He flipped away his cigarette, walked forward, and sniffed. No, it wasn't liquor. He peered at the badge on the man's overalls.

"Two-oh-four, m-mm. Are you new here?"

"New. Huh?" The man rubbed a rising bump on his forehead. He was an odd-looking little chap, bald as a vacuum tube, with a pinched, pallid face and tiny eyes that held dazed wonder.

"Come on, Joe. Wake up!" Lloyd was beginning to sound impatient. "You work here, don't you?"

"Joe," said the man thoughtfully. "Work. Yes, I work. I make them." His words ran together oddly, as though he had a cleft palate.

With another glance at the badge, Lloyd gripped Joe's arm and ran

him through the assembly room. "Here's your place. Hop to it. Know what to do?"

The other drew his scrawny body erect. "I am--expert," he remarked. "Make them better than Ponthwank."

"o. k.," Lloyd said. "Make 'em, then." And he went away.

The man called Joe hesitated, nursing the bruise on his head. The overalls caught his attention, and he examined them wonderingly. Where--oh, yes. They had been hanging in the room from which he had first emerged. His own garments had, naturally, dissipated during the trip--what trip?

Amnesia, he thought. He had fallen from the... the something... when it slowed down and stopped. How odd this huge, machine-filled barn looked. It struck no chord of remembrance.

Amnesia, that was it. He was a worker. He made things. As for the unfamiliarity of his surroundings, that meant nothing. He was still dazed. The clouds would lift from his mind presently. They were beginning to do that already.

Work. Joe scuttled around the room, trying to goad his faulty memory. Men in overalls were doing things. Simple, obvious things. But how childish--how elemental! Perhaps this was a kindergarten.

After a while Joe went out into a stock room and examined some finished models of combination radio-phonographs. So that was it. Awkward and clumsy, but it wasn't his place to say so. No. His job was to make Twonkies.

Twonkies? The name jolted his memory again. Of course he knew how to make Twonkies. He'd made them all his life--had been

specially trained for the job. Now they were using a different model of Twonky, but what the hell! Child's play for a clever workman.

Joe went back into the shop and found a vacant bench. He began to build a Twonky. Occasionally he slipped off and stole the material he needed. Once, when he couldn't locate any tungsten, he hastily built a small gadget and made it.

His bench was in a distant corner, badly lighted, though it seemed quite bright to Joe's eyes. Nobody noticed the console that was swiftly growing to completion there. Joe worked very, very fast. He ignored the noon whistle, and, at quitting time, his task was finished. It could, perhaps, stand another coat of paint—it lacked the Shimmertone of a standard Twonky. But none of the others had Shimmertone. Joe sighed, crawled under the bench, looked in vain for a relaxopad, and went to sleep on the floor.

A few hours later he woke up. The factory was empty. Odd! Maybe the working hours had changed. Maybe— Joe's mind felt funny. Sleep had cleared away the mists of amnesia, if such it had been, but he still felt dazed.

Muttering under his breath, he sent the Twonky into the stock room and compared it with the others. Superficially it was identical with a console radio-phonograph combination of the latest model. Following the pattern of the others, Joe had camouflaged and disguised the various organs and reactors.

He went back into the shop. Then the last of the mists cleared from his mind. Joe's shoulders jerked convulsively.

"Great Snell!" he gasped. "So that was it! I ran into a temporal snag!"

With a startled glance around, he fled to the storeroom from which he

had first emerged. The overalls he took off and returned to their hook. After that, Joe went over to a corner, felt around in the air, nodded with satisfaction, and seated himself on nothing, three feet above the floor. Then Joe vanished.

"Time," said Kerry Westerfield, "is curved. Eventually it gets back to the same place where it started. That's duplication." He put his feet up on a conveniently outjutting rock of the chimney and stretched luxuriously. From the kitchen Martha made clinking noises with bottles and glasses.

"Yesterday at this time I had a Martini," Kerry said. "The time curve indicates that I should have another one now. Are you listening, angel?"

"I'm pouring," said the angel distantly.

"You get my point, then. Here's another. Time describes a spiral instead of a circle. If you call the first cycle 'a,' the second one's 'a plus 1'--see? Which means a double Martini tonight."

"I know where that would end," Martha remarked, coming into the spacious, oak-raftered living room. She was a small, dark-haired woman with a singularly pretty face and a figure to match. Her tiny gingham apron looked slightly absurd in combination with slacks and silk blouse. "And they don't make infinity-proof gin. Here's your Martini." She did things with the shaker and manipulated glasses.

"Stir slowly," Kerry cautioned. "Never shake. Ah--that's it." He accepted the drink and eyed it appreciatively. Black hair, sprinkled with gray, gleamed in the lamplight as he sipped the Martini. "Good. Very good."

Martha drank slowly and eyed her husband. A nice guy, Kerry

Westerfield. He was forty-odd, pleasantly ugly, with a wide mouth and an occasional sardonic gleam in his gray eyes as he contemplated life. They had been married for twelve years, and liked it.

From outside, the late faint glow of sunset came through the windows, picking out the console cabinet that stood against the wall by the door. Kerry peered at it with appreciation.

"A pretty penny," he remarked. "Still--"

"What? Oh. The men had a tough time getting it up the stairs. Why don't you try it, Kerry?"

"Didn't you?"

"The old one was complicated enough," Martha said, in a baffled manner. "Gadgets. They confuse me. I was brought up on an Edison. You wound it up with a crank, and strange noises came out of a horn. That I could understand. But now--you push a button, and extraordinary things happen. Electric eyes, tone selections, records that get played on both sides, to the accompaniment of weird groanings and clickings from inside the console--probably you understand those things. I don't even want to. Whenever I play a Crosby record in a superdooper like that, Bing seems embarrassed."

Kerry ate his olive. "I'm going to play some Sibelius." He nodded toward a table. "There's a new Crosby record for you. The latest."

Martha wriggled happily. "Can I, maybe, huh?"

"Uh-huh."

"But you'll have to show me how."



"Simple enough," said Kerry, beaming at the console. "Those babies are pretty good, you know. They do everything but think."

"I wish it'd wash dishes," Martha remarked. She set down her glass, got up, and vanished into the kitchen.

Kerry snapped on a lamp near by and went over to examine the new radio, Mideastern's latest model, with all the new improvements. It had been expensive--but what the hell? He could afford it. And the old one had been pretty well shot.

It was not, he saw, plugged in. Nor were there any wires in evidence--not even a ground. Something new, perhaps. Built-in antenna and ground. Kerry crouched down, looked for a socket, and plugged the cord into it.

That done, he opened the doors and eyed the dials with every appearance of satisfaction. A beam of bluish light shot out and hit him in the eyes. From the depths of the console a faint, thoughtful clicking proceeded. Abruptly it stopped. Kerry blinked, fiddled with dials and switches, and bit at a fingernail.

The radio said, in a distant voice, "Psychology pattern checked and recorded."

"Eh?" Kerry twirled a dial. "Wonder what that was? Amateur station--no, they're off the air. Hm-m-m." He shrugged and went over to a chair beside the shelves of albums. His gaze ran swiftly over the titles and composers' names. Where was the "Swan of Tuonela"? There it was, next to "Finlandia." Kerry took down the album and opened it in his lap. With his free hand he extracted a cigarette from his pocket, put it between his lips, and fumbled for the matches on the table beside him. The first match he lit went out.

He tossed it into the fireplace and was about to reach for another when a faint noise caught his attention. The radio was walking across the room toward him. A whiplike tendril flicked out from somewhere, picked up a match, scratched it beneath the table top--as Kerry had done--and held the flame to the man's cigarette.

Automatic reflexes took over. Kerry sucked in his breath, and exploded in smoky, racking coughs. He bent double, gasping and momentarily blind.

When he could see again, the radio was back in its accustomed place.

Kerry caught his lower lip between his teeth. "Martha," he called.

"Soup's on," her voice said.

Kerry didn't answer. He stood up, went over to the radio, and looked at it hesitantly. The electric cord had been pulled out of its socket. Kerry gingerly replaced it.

He crouched to examine the console's legs. They looked like finely finished wood. His exploratory hand told him nothing. Wood--hard and brittle.

How in hell-- "Dinner!" Martha called.

Kerry threw his cigarette into the fireplace and slowly walked out of the room. His wife, setting a gravy boat in place, stared at him.

"How many Martinis did you have?"

"Just one," Kerry said in a vague way. "I must have dozed off for a minute. Yeah. I must have."

"Well, fall to," Martha commanded. "This is the last chance you'll have to make a pig of yourself on my dumplings, for a week, anyway."

Kerry absently felt for his wallet, took out an envelope, and tossed it toward his wife. "Here's your ticket, angel. Don't lose it."

"Oh? I rate a compartment!" Martha thrust the pasteboard back into its envelope and gurgled happily. "You're a pal. Sure you can get along without me?"

"Huh? Hm-m-m--I think so." Kerry salted his avocado. He shook himself and seemed to come out of a slight daze. "Sure, I'll be all right. You trot off to Denver and help Carol have her baby. It's all in the family."

"We-ell, my only sister--" Martha grinned. "You know how she and Bill are. Quite nuts. They'll need a steady hand just now."

There was no reply. Kerry was brooding over a forkful of avocado. He muttered something about the Venerable Bede.

"What about him?"

"Lecture tomorrow. Every term we bog down on the Bede, for some strange reason. Ah, well."

"Got your lecture ready?"

Kerry nodded. "Sure." For eight years he had taught at the University, and he certainly should know the schedule by this time!

Later, over coffee and cigarettes, Martha glanced at her wrist watch. "Nearly train time. I'd better finish packing. The dishes--"

"I'll do 'em." Kerry wandered after his wife into the bedroom and

made motions of futile helpfulness. After a while, he carried the bags down to the car. Martha joined him, and they headed for the depot.

The train was on time. Half an hour after it had pulled out, Kerry drove the car back into the garage, let himself into the house and yawned mightily. He was tired. Well, the dishes, and then beer and a book in bed.

With a puzzled look at the radio, he entered the kitchen and did things with water and soap chips. The hall phone rang. Kerry wiped his hands on a dish towel and answered it.

It was Mike Fitzgerald, who taught psychology at the University.

"Hiya, Fitz."

"Hiya. Martha gone?"

"Yeah. I just drove her to the train."

"Feel like talking, then? I've got some pretty good Scotch. Why not run over and gab a while?"

"Like to," Kerry said, yawning again, "but I'm dead. Tomorrow's a big day. Rain check?"

"Sure. I just finished correcting papers, and felt the need of sharpening my mind. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Wait a minute." Kerry put down the phone and looked over his shoulder, scowling. Noises were coming from the kitchen. What the hell!

He went along the hall and stopped in the doorway, motionless and staring. The radio was washing the dishes.

After a while he returned to the phone. Fitzgerald said, "Something?"

"My new radio," Kerry told him carefully. "It's washing the dishes."

Fitz didn't answer for a moment. His laugh was a bit hesitant. "Oh?"

"I'll call you back," Kerry said, and hung up. He stood motionless for a while, chewing his lip. Then he walked back to the kitchen and paused to watch.

The radio's back was toward him. Several limber tentacles were manipulating the dishes, expertly sousing them in hot, soapy water, scrubbing them with the little mop, dipping them into the rinse water, and then stacking them neatly in the metal rack. Those whiplashes were the only sign of unusual activity. The legs were apparently solid.

"Hey!" Kerry said.

There was no response.

He sidled around till he could examine the radio more closely. The tentacles emerged from a slot under one of the dials. The electric cord was dangling. No juice, then. But what-- Kerry stepped back and fumbled out a cigarette. Instantly the radio turned, took a match from its container on the stove, and walked forward. Kerry blinked, studying the legs. They couldn't be wood. They were bending as the... the thing moved, elastic as rubber. The radio had a peculiar sidling motion unlike anything else on earth.

It lit Kerry's cigarette and went back to the sink, where it resumed the dishwashing.

Kerry phoned Fitzgerald again. "I wasn't kidding. I'm having hallucinations or something. That damned radio just lit a cigarette for

me."

"Wait a minute--" Fitzgerald's voice sounded undecided. "This is a gag--eh?"

"No. And I don't think it's a hallucination, either. It's up your alley. Can you run over and test my knee-jerks?"

"All right," Fitz said. "Give me ten minutes. Have a drink ready."

He hung up, and Kerry, laying the phone back into its cradle, turned to see the radio walking out of the kitchen toward the living room. Its square, boxlike contour was subtly horrifying, like some bizarre sort of hobgoblin. Kerry shivered.

He followed the radio, to find it in its former place, motionless and impassive. He opened the doors, examining the turntable, the phonograph arm, and the other buttons and gadgets. There was nothing apparently unusual. Again he touched the legs. They were not wood, after all. Some plastic, which seemed quite hard. Or--maybe they were wood, after all. It was difficult to make certain, without damaging the finish. Kerry felt a natural reluctance to use a knife on his new console.

He tried the radio, getting local stations without trouble. The tone was good--unusually good, he thought. The phonograph-- He picked up Halvorsen's "Entrance of the Boyards" at random and slipped it into place, closing the lid. No sound emerged. Investigation proved that the needle was moving rhythmically along the groove, but without audible result. Well?

Kerry removed the record as the doorbell rang. It was Fitzgerald, a gangling, saturnine man with a leathery, wrinkled face and a tousled mop of dull-gray hair. He extended a large, bony hand.

"Where's my drink?"

" 'Lo, Fitz. Come in the kitchen. I'll mix. Highball?"

"Highball."

"o. k." Kerry led the way. "Don't drink it just yet, though. I want to show you my new combination."

"The one that washes dishes?" Fitzgerald asked. "What else does it do?"

Kerry gave the other a glass. "It won't play records."

"Oh, well. A minor matter, if it'll do the housework. Let's take a look at it." Fitzgerald went into the living room, selected "Afternoon of a Faun," and approached the radio. "It isn't plugged in."

"That doesn't matter a bit," Kerry said wildly.

"Batteries?" Fitzgerald slipped the record in place and adjusted the switches. "Now we'll see." He beamed triumphantly at Kerry. "Well? It's playing now."

It was.

Kerry said, "Try that Halvorsen piece. Here." He handed the disk to Fitzgerald, who pushed the reject switch and watched the lever arm lift.

But this time the phonograph refused to play. It didn't like "Entrance of the Boyards."

"That's funny," Fitzgerald grunted. "Probably the trouble's with the

record. Let's try another."

There was no trouble with "Daphnis and Chloe." But the radio silently rejected the composer's "Bolero."

Kerry sat down and pointed to a near-by chair. "That doesn't prove anything. Come over here and watch. Don't drink anything yet. You, uh, you feel perfectly normal?"

"Sure. Well?"

Kerry took out a cigarette. The console walked across the room, picking up a match book on the way, and politely held the flame. Then it went back to its place against the wall.

Fitzgerald didn't say anything. After a while he took a cigarette from his pocket and waited. Nothing happened.

"So?" Kerry asked.

"A robot. That's the only possible answer. Where in the name of Petrarch did you get it?"

"You don't seem much surprised."

"I am, though. But I've seen robots before--Westinghouse tried it, you know. Only this--" Fitzgerald tapped his teeth with a nail. "Who made it?"

"How the devil should I know?" Kerry demanded. "The radio people, I suppose."

Fitzgerald narrowed his eyes. "Wait a minute. I don't quite understand--"



"There's nothing to understand. I bought this combination a few days ago. Turned in the old one. It was delivered this afternoon, and--" Kerry explained what had happened.

"You mean you didn't know it was a robot?"

"Exactly. I bought it as a radio. And... and... the damn thing seems almost alive to me."

"Nope." Fitzgerald shook his head, rose, and inspected the console carefully. "It's a new kind of robot. At least--" he hesitated. "What else is there to think? I suggest you get in touch with the Mideastern people tomorrow and check up."

"Let's open the cabinet and look inside," Kerry suggested.

Fitzgerald was willing, but the experiment proved impossible. The presumably wooden panels weren't screwed into place, and there was no apparent way of opening the console. Keny found a screwdriver and applied it, gingerly at first, then with a sort of repressed fury. He could neither pry free a panel nor even scratch the dark, smooth finish of the cabinet.

"Damn!" he finally. "Well, your guess is as good as mine. It's a robot. Only I didn't know they could make 'em like this. And why in a radio?"

"Don't ask me," Fitzgerald shrugged. "Check up tomorrow. That's the first step. Naturally I'm pretty baffled. If a new sort of specialized robot has been invented, why put it in a console? And what makes those legs move? There aren't any casters."

"I've been wondering about that, too."

"When it moves, the legs look--rubbery. But they're not. They're hard

as... as hardwood. Or plastic."

"I'm afraid of the thing," Kerry said.

"Want to stay at my place tonight?"

"N-no. No. I guess not. The--robot--can't hurt me."

"I don't think it wants to. It's been helping you, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," Kerry said, and went off to mix another drink.

The rest of the conversation was inconclusive. Fitzgerald, several hours later, went home rather worried. He wasn't as casual as he had pretended, for the sake of Kerry's nerves. The impingement of something so entirely unexpected on normal life was subtly frightening. And yet, as he had said, the robot didn't seem menacing.

Kerry went to bed, with a new detective mystery. The radio followed him into the bedroom and gently took the book out of his hand. Kerry instinctively snatched for it.

"Hey!" he said. "What the devil--"

The radio went back into the living room. Kerry followed, in time to see the book replaced on the shelf. After a bit Kerry retreated, locking his door, and slept uneasily till dawn.

In dressing gown and slippers, he stumbled out to stare at the console. It was back in its former place, looking as though it had never moved. Kerry, rather white around the gills, made breakfast.

He was allowed only one cup of coffee. The radio appeared, reprovingly took the second cup from his hand, and emptied it into the sink.

That was quite enough for Keny Westerfield. He found his hat and topcoat and almost ran out of the house. He had a horrid feeling that the radio might follow him, but it didn't, luckily for his sanity. He was beginning to be worried.

During the morning he found time to telephone Mideastem. The salesman knew nothing. It was a standard model combination--the latest. If it wasn't giving satisfaction, of course, he'd be glad to-- "It's o. k.," Kerry said. "But who made the thing? That's what I want to find out."

"One moment, sir." There was a delay. "It came from Mr. Lloyd's department. One of our foremen."

"Let me speak to him, please."

But Lloyd wasn't very helpful. After much thought, he remembered that the combination had been placed in the stock room without a serial number. It had been added later.

"But who made it?"

"I just don't know. I can find out for you, I guess. Suppose I ring you back."

"Don't forget," Kerry said, and went back to his class. The lecture on the Venerable Bede wasn't too successful.

At lunch he saw Fitzgerald, who seemed relieved when Kerry came over to his table. "Find out any more about your pet robot?" the psychology professor demanded.

No one else was within hearing. With a sigh Kerry sat down and lit a cigarette. "Not a thing. It's a pleasure to be able to do this myself." He

drew smoke into his lungs. "I phoned the company."

"And?"

"They don't know anything. Except that it didn't have a serial number."

"That may be significant," Fitzgerald said.

Kerry told the other about the incidents of the book and the coffee, and Fitzgerald squinted thoughtfully at his milk. "I've given you some psych tests. Too much stimulation isn't good for you."

"A detective yarn!"

"Carrying it a bit to extremes, I'll admit. But I can understand why the robot acted that way--though I dunno how it managed it." He hesitated. "Without intelligence, that is."

"Intelligence?" Kerry licked his lips. "I'm not so sure that it's just a machine. And I'm not crazy."

"No, you're not. But you say the robot was in the front room. How could it tell what you were reading?"

"Short of x-ray vision and superfast scanning and assimilative powers, I can't imagine. Perhaps it doesn't want me to read anything."

"You've said something," Fitzgerald grunted. "Know much about theoretical--machines--of that type?"

"Robots?"

"Purely theoretical. Your brain's a colloid, you know. Compact, complicated--but slow. Suppose you work out a gadget with a multi-

million radioatom unit embedded in an insulating material--the result is a brain, Kerry. A brain with a tremendous number of units interacting at light-velocity speeds. A radio tube adjusts current flow when it's operating at forty million separate signals a second. And--theoretically--a radioatomic brain of the type I've mentioned could include perception, recognition, consideration, reaction and adjustment in a hundred-thousandth of a second."

"Theory."

"I've thought so. But I'd like to find out where your radio came from."

A page came over. "Telephone call for Mr. Westerfield."

Kerry excused himself and left. When he returned, there was a puzzled frown knitting his dark brows. Fitzgerald looked at him inquiringly.

"Guy named Lloyd, at the Mideastern plant. I was talking to him about the radio."

"Any luck?"

Kerry shook his head. "No. Well, not much. He didn't know who had built the thing."

"But it was built in the plant?"

"Yes. About two weeks ago--but there's no record of who worked on it. Lloyd seemed to think that was very, very funny. If a radio's built in the plant, they know who put it together."

"So?"

"So nothing. I asked him how to open the cabinet, and he said it was

easy. Just unscrew the panel in back."

"There aren't any screws," Fitzgerald said.

"I know."

They looked at one another.

Fitzgerald said, "I'd give fifty bucks to find out whether that robot was really built only two weeks ago."

"Why?"

"Because a radioatomic brain would need training. Even in such matters as the lighting of a cigarette."

"It saw me light one."

"And followed the example. The dish-washing--hm-m-m. Induction, I suppose. If that gadget has been trained, it's a robot. If it hasn't--" Fitzgerald stopped.

Kerry blinked. "Yes?"

"I don't know what the devil it is. It bears the same relation to a robot that we bear to Eohippus. One thing I do know, Kerry; it's very probable that no scientist today has the knowledge it would take to make a... a thing like that."

"You're arguing in circles," Kerry said. "It was made."

"Uh-huh. But how--when--and by whom? That's what's got me worried."

"Well, I've a class in five minutes. Why not come over tonight?"

"Can't. I'm lecturing at the Hall. I'll phone you after, though."

With a nod Kerry went out, trying to dismiss the matter from his mind. He succeeded pretty well. But dining alone in a restaurant that night, he began to feel a general unwillingness to go home. A hobgoblin was waiting for him.

"Brandy," he told the waiter. "Make it double."

Two hours later a taxi let Kerry out at his door. He was remarkably drunk. Things swam before his eyes. He walked unsteadily toward the porch, mounted the steps with exaggerated care, and let himself into the house.

He switched on a lamp.

The radio came forward to meet him. Tentacles, thin, but strong as metal, coiled gently around his body, holding him motionless. A pang of violent fear struck through Kerry. He struggled desperately and tried to yell, but his throat was dry.

From the radio panel a beam of yellow light shot out, blinding the man. It swung down, aimed at his chest. Abruptly a queer taste was perceptible under Kerry's tongue.

After a minute or so, the ray clicked out, the tentacles flashed back out of sight, and the console returned to its corner. Kerry staggered weakly to a chair and relaxed, gulping.

He was sober. Which was quite impossible. Fourteen brandies infiltrate a definite amount of alcohol into the system. One can't wave a magic wand and instantly reach a state of sobriety. Yet that was exactly what had happened.

The--robot--was trying to be helpful. Only Kerry would have preferred to remain drunk.

He got up gingerly and sidled past the radio to the bookshelf. One eye on the combination, he took down the detective novel he had tried to read on the preceding night. As he had expected, the radio took it from his hand and replaced it on the shelf. Kerry, remembering Fitzgerald's words, glanced at his watch. Reaction time, four seconds.

He took down a Chaucer and waited, but the radio didn't stir. However, when Kerry found a history volume, it was gently removed from his fingers. Reaction time, six seconds.

Kerry located a history twice as thick.

Reaction time, ten seconds.

Uh-huh. So the robot did read the books. That meant x-ray vision and superswift reactions. Jumping Jehoshaphat!

Kerry tested more books, wondering what the criterion was. "Alice in Wonderland" was snatched from his hand; Millay's poems were not. He made a list, with two columns, for future reference.

The robot, then, was not merely a servant. It was a censor. But what was the standard of comparison?

After a while he remembered his lecture tomorrow, and thumbed through his notes. Several points needed verification. Rather hesitantly he located the necessary reference book--and the robot took it away from him.

"Wait a minute," Kerry said. "I need that." He tried to pull the volume



out of the tentacle's grasp, without success. The console paid no attention. It calmly replaced the book on its shelf.

Kerry stood biting his lip. This was a bit too much. The damned robot was a monitor. He sidled toward the book, snatched it, and was out in the hall before the radio could move.

The thing was coming after him. He could hear the soft padding of its... its feet. Kerry scurried into the bedroom and locked the door. He waited, heart thumping, as the knob was tried gently.

A wire-thin cilia crept through the crack of the door and fumbled with the key. Kerry suddenly jumped forward and shoved the auxiliary bolt into position. But that didn't help, either. The robot's precision tools--the specialized antenna--slid it back; and then the console opened the door, walked into the room, and came toward Kerry.

He felt a touch of panic. With a little gasp he threw the book at the thing, and it caught it deftly. Apparently that was all that was wanted, for the radio turned and went out, rocking awkwardly on its rubbery legs, carrying the forbidden volume. Kerry cursed quietly.

The phone rang. It was Fitzgerald.

"Well? How'd you make out?"

"Have you got a copy of Cassen's 'Social Literature of the Ages'?"

"I don't think so--no. Why?"

"I'll get it in the University library tomorrow, then." Kerry explained what had happened. Fitzgerald whistled softly.

"Interfering, is it? Hm-m-m. I wonder--"

"I'm afraid of the thing."

"I don't think it means you any harm. You say it sobered you up?"

"Yeah. With a light ray. That isn't very logical."

"It might be. The vibratory equivalent of thiamin chloride."

"Light?"

"There's vitamin content in sunlight, you know. That isn't the important point. It's censoring your reading--and apparently it reads the books, with superfast reactions. That gadget, whatever it is, isn't merely a robot."

"You're telling me," Kerry said grimly. "It's a Hitler."

Fitzgerald didn't laugh. Rather soberly, he suggested, "Suppose you spend the night at my place?"

"No," Kerry said, his voice stubborn. "No so-and-so radio's going to chase me out of my house. I'll take an ax to the thing first."

"We-ell--you know what you're doing, I suppose. Phone me if anything happens."

"o. k.," Kerry said, and hung up. He went into the living room and eyed the radio coldly. What the devil was it--and what was it trying to do? Certainly it wasn't merely a robot. Equally certainly, it wasn't alive, in the sense that a colloid brain is alive.

Lips thinned, he went over and fiddled with the dials and switches. A swing band's throbbing erratic tempo came from the console. He tried the short-wave band--nothing unusual there. So?

So nothing. There was no answer.

After a while he went to bed.

At luncheon the next day he brought Cassen's "Social Literature" to show Fitzgerald.

"What about it?"

"Look here," Kerry flipped the pages and indicated a passage. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Fitzgerald read it. "Yeah. The point seems to be that individualism is necessary for the production of literature. Right?"

Kerry looked at him. "I don't know."

"Eh?"

"My mind goes funny."

Fitzgerald rumbled his gray hair, narrowing his eyes and watching the other man intently. "Come again. I don't quite--"

With angry patience, Kerry said, "This morning I went into the library and looked at this reference. I read it all right. But it didn't mean anything to me. Just words. Know how it is when you're fagged out and have been reading a lot? You'll run into a sentence with a lot of subjunctive clauses, and it doesn't percolate. Well, it was like that."

"Read it now," Fitzgerald said quietly, thrusting the book across the table.

Kerry obeyed, looking up with a wry smile. "No good."

"Read it aloud. I'll go over it with you, step by step."

But that didn't help. Kerry seemed utterly unable to assimilate the sense of the passage.

"Semantic block, maybe," Fitzgerald said, scratching his ear. "Is this the first time it's happened?"

"Yes... no. I don't know."

"Got any classes this afternoon? Good. Let's run over to your place."

Kerry thrust away his plate. "All right. I'm not hungry. Whenever you're ready--"

Half an hour later they were looking at the radio. It seemed quite harmless. Fitzgerald wasted some time trying to pry a panel off, but finally gave it up as a bad job. He found pencil and paper, seated himself opposite Kerry, and began to ask questions.

At one point he paused. "You didn't mention that before."

"Forgot it, I guess."

Fitzgerald tapped his teeth with the pencil. "Hm-m-m. The first time the radio acted up--"

"It hit me in the eye with a blue light--"

"Not that. I mean--what it said."

Kerry blinked. "What it said?" He hesitated. " 'Psychology pattern checked and noted,' or something like that. I thought I'd tuned in on some station and got part of a quiz program or something. You mean--"

"Were the words easy to understand? Good English?"

"No, now that I remember it," Kerry scowled. "They were slurred quite a lot. Vowels stressed."

"Uh-huh. Well, let's get on." They tried a word-association test.

Finally Fitzgerald leaned back, frowning. "I want to check this stuff with the last tests I gave you a few months ago. It looks funny to me--damned funny. I'd feel a lot better if I knew exactly what memory was. We've done considerable work on mnemonics--artificial memory. Still, it may not be that at all."

"Eh?"

"That--machine. Either it's got an artificial memory, has been highly trained, or else it's adjusted to a different milieu and culture. It has affected you--quite a lot"

Kerry licked dry lips. "How?"

"Implanted blocks in your mind. I haven't correlated them yet. When I do, we may be able to figure out some sort of answer. No, that thing isn't a robot. It's a lot more than that."

Kerry took out a cigarette; the console walked across the room and lit it for him. The two men watched with a faint shrinking horror.

"You'd better stay with me tonight," Fitzgerald suggested.

"No," Kerry said. He shivered.

The next day Fitzgerald looked for Kerry at lunch, but the younger man did not appear. He telephoned the house, and Martha answered

the call.

"Hello! When did you get back?"

"Hello, Fitz. About an hour ago. My sister went ahead and had her baby without me--so I came back." She stopped, and Fitzgerald was alarmed at her tone.

"Where's Kerry?"

"He's here. Can you come over, Fitz? I'm worried."

"What's the matter with him?"

"I... I don't know. Come right away."

"o. k.," Fitzgerald said, and hung up, biting his lips. He was worried. When, a short while later, he rang the Westerfield bell, he discovered that his nerves were badly out of control. But sight of Martha reassured him.

He followed her into the living room. Fitzgerald's glance went at once to the console, which was unchanged; and then to Kerry, seated motionless by a window. Kerry's face had a blank, dazed look. His pupils were dilated, and he seemed to recognize Fitzgerald only slowly.

"Hello, Fitz," he said.

"How do you feel?"

Martha broke in. "Fitz, what's wrong? Is he sick? Shall I call the doctor?"

Fitzgerald sat down. "Have you noticed anything funny about that

radio?"

"No. Why?"

"Then listen." He told the whole story, watching incredulity struggle with reluctant belief on Martha's face. Presently she said, "I can't quite--"

"If Kerry takes out a cigarette, the thing will light it for him. Want to see how it works?"

"N-no. Yes. I suppose so." Martha's eyes were wide.

Fitzgerald gave Kerry a cigarette. The expected happened.

Martha didn't say a word. When the console had returned to its place, she shivered and went over to Kerry. He looked at her vaguely.

"He needs a doctor, Fitz."

"Yes." Fitzgerald didn't mention that a doctor might be quite useless.

"What is that thing?"

"It's more than a robot. And it's been readjusting Kerry. I told you what's happened. When I checked Kerry's psychology patterns, I found that they'd altered. He's lost most of his initiative."

"Nobody on earth could have made that--"

Fitzgerald scowled. "I thought of that. It seems to be the product of a well-developed culture, quite different from ours. Martian, perhaps. It's such a specialized thing that it naturally fits into a complicated culture. But I do not understand why it looks exactly like a Mideastern console radio."

Martha touched Kerry's hand. "Camouflage?"

"But why? You were one of my best pupils in psych, Martha. Look at this logically. Imagine a civilization where a gadget like that has its place. Use inductive reasoning."

"I'm trying to. I can't think very well. Fitz, I'm worried about Kerry."

"I'm all right," Kerry said.

Fitzgerald put his fingertips together. "It isn't a radio so much as a monitor. In this other civilization, perhaps every man has one, or maybe only a few--the ones who need it. It keeps them in line."

"By destroying initiative?"

Fitzgerald made a helpless gesture. "I don't know! It worked that way in Kerry's case. In others--I don't know."

Martha stood up. "I don't think we should talk any more. Kerry needs a doctor. After that we can decide upon that." She pointed to the console.

Fitzgerald said, "It'd be rather a shame to wreck it, but--" His look was significant.

The console moved. It came out from its corner with a sidling, rocking gait and walked toward Fitzgerald. As he sprang up, the whip-like tentacles flashed out and seized him. A pale ray shone into the man's eyes.

Almost instantly it vanished; the tentacles withdrew, and the radio returned to its place. Fitzgerald stood motionless. Martha was on her feet, one hand at her mouth.



"Fitz!" Her voice shook.

He hesitated. "Yes? What's the matter?"

"Are you hurt? What did it do to you?"

Fitzgerald frowned a little. "Eh? Hurt? I don't--"

"The radio. What did it do?"

He looked toward the console. "Something wrong with it? Afraid I'm not much of a repair man, Martha."

"Fitz." She came forward and gripped his arm. "Listen to me." Quick words spilled from her mouth. The radio. Kerry. Their discussion--Fitzgerald looked at her blankly, as though he didn't quite understand. "I guess I'm stupid today. I can't quite understand what you're talking about."

"The radio--you know! You said it changed Kerry--" Martha paused, staring at the man.

Fitzgerald was definitely puzzled. Martha was acting strangely. Queer! He'd always considered her a pretty level-headed girl. But now she was talking nonsense. At least, he couldn't figure out the meaning of her words--there was no sense to them.

And why was she talking about the radio? Wasn't it satisfactory? Kerry had said it was a good buy, with a fine tone and the latest gadgets in it. Fitzgerald wondered, for a fleeting second, if Martha had gone crazy.

In any case, he was late for his class. He said so. Martha didn't try to stop him when he went out. She was pale as chalk.

Kerry took out a cigarette. The radio walked over and held a match.

"Kerry!"

"Yes, Martha?" His voice was dead.

She stared at the... the radio. Mars? Another world--another civilization? What was it? What did it want? What was it trying to do?

Martha let herself out of the house and went to the garage. When she returned, a small hatchet was gripped tightly in her hand.

Kerry watched. He saw Martha walk over to the radio and lift the hatchet. Then a beam of light shot out, and Martha vanished. A little dust floated up in the afternoon sunlight.

"Destruction of life-form threatening attack," the radio said, slurring the words together.

Kerry's brain turned over. He felt sick, dazed and horribly empty. Martha--

His mind churned. Instinct and emotion fought with something that smothered them. Abruptly the dams crumbled, and the blocks were gone, the barriers down. Kerry cried out hoarsely, inarticulately, and sprang to his feet.

"Martha!" he yelled.

She was gone. Kerry looked around. Where-- What had happened? He couldn't remember.

He sat down in the chair again, rubbing his forehead. His free hand brought up a cigarette, an automatic reaction that brought instant

response. The radio walked forward and held a lighted match ready.

Kerry made a choking, sick sound and flung himself out of the chair. He remembered now. He picked up the hatchet and sprang toward the console, teeth bared in a mirthless rictus.

Again the light beam flashed out.

Kerry vanished. The hatchet thudded onto the carpet.

The radio walked back to its place and stood motionless once more. A faint clicking proceeded from its radioatomic brain.

"Subject basically unsuitable," it said, after a moment. "Elimination has been necessary." Click! "Preparation for next subject completed."

Click.

"We'll take it," the boy said.

"You won't be making a mistake," smiled the rental agent. "It's quiet, isolated, and the price is quite reasonable."

"Not so very," the girl put in. "But it is just what we've been looking for."

The agent shrugged. "Of course an unfurnished place would run less. But--"

"We haven't been married long enough to get any furniture," the boy grinned. He put an arm around his wife. "Like it, hon?"

"Hm-m-m. Who lived here before?"

The agent scratched his cheek. "Let's see. Some people named Westerfield, I think. It was given to me for listing just about a week ago. Nice place. If I didn't own my own house, I'd jump at it myself."

"Nice radio," the boy said. "Late model, isn't it?" He went over to examine the console.

"Come along," the girl urged. "Let's look at the kitchen again."

"o. k., hon."

They went out of the room. From the hail came the sound of the agent's smooth voice, growing fainter. Warm afternoon sunlight slanted through the windows.

For a moment there was silence. Then--

Click!

# See You Later



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Old Yancey was just about the meanest man in the world. I never seen a feller so downright, sot-in-his ways, shortsighted, plain, ornery mean. What happened to him reminded me of what another feller told me oncet, quite a spell ago. Fergit exactly who it was--name of Louis, maybe, or could be Tamerlane--but one time he said he wished the whole world had only one haid, so's he could chop it off.

Trouble with Yancey, he got to the point where he figgered everybody in the world was again'him, and blamed if he warn't right. That was a real spell of trouble, even for us Hogbens.

Oh, Yancey was a regular stinker, all right. The whole Tarbell family was bad-eyed, but Yancey made even them plumb disgusted. He lived up in a little one-room shanty back of the Tarbell place, and wouldn't let nobody near, except to push vittles through the cut-out moon in the door.

Seems like some ten years back there was a new survey or something and the way it worked out, through some funny legal business, Yancey had to prove he'd got squatter's rights on his land. He had to prove it by living there for a year or something. 'Bout then he had an argument with his wife and moved out to the little shack, which was across the property line, and said he was a-gonna let the land go right back to the government, for all he cared, and that'd show the whole family. He knew his wife sot store by her turnip patch and was afraid the government would take it away.

The way it turned out, nobody wanted the land anyhow. It was all up and down and had too many rocks in it, but Yancey's wife kept on worriting and begging Yancey to come back, which he was just too mean to do.

Yancey Tarbell couldn't have been oncommon comfortable up in that little shack, but he was short-sighted as he was mean. After a spel Mrs. Tarbell died of being hit on the haid with a stone she was throwing up the slope at the shack, and it bounced back at her. So that left only the eight Tarbell boys and Yancey. He stayed right where he was, though.

He might have stayed there till he shriveled up and went to glory, except the Tarbells started feuding with us. We stood it as long as we could, on account of they couldn't hurt us. Uncle Les, who was visiting us, got skittery, though, and said he was tired of flying up like a quail, two or three miles in the air, every time a gun went off behind a bush. The holes in his hide closed up easy enough, but he said it made him dizzy, on account of the air being thinned out that high up.

This went on for a while, leastwise, and nobody got hurt, which seemed to rile the eight Tarbell boys. So one night they all come over in a bunch with their shooting irons and busted their way in. We didn't want no trouble.

Uncle Lem--who's Uncle Les's twin except they was born quite a spell apart--he was asleep for the whiter, off in a holler tree somewheres, so he was out of it. But the baby, bless his heart, is gitting kind of awkward to shift around, being as how he's four hunnerd years old and big for his age--'bout three hunnerd pounds, I guess.

We could of all hid out or gone down to Piperville in the valley for a mite, but then there was Grandpaw in the attic, and I'd got sort of fond of the little Perfesser feller we keep in a bottle. Didn't want to leave

him on account of the bottle might of got smashed in the ruckus, if the eight Tarbell boys was likkered up enough.

The Perfesser's cute--even though he never did have much sense. Used to say we was mutants, whatever they are, and kept shooting off his mouth about some people he knowed called chromosomes. Seems like they got mixed up with what the Perfesser called hard radiations and had some young 'uns which was either dominant mutations or Hogbens, but I allus got it mixed up with the Roundhead plot, back when we was living in the old country. 'Course I don't mean the real old country. That got sunk.

So, seeing as how Grandpaw told us to lay low, we waited till the eight Tarbell boys busted down the door, and then we all went invisible, including the baby. Then we waited for the thing to blow over, only it didn't.

After stomping around and ripping up things a lot, the eight Tarbell boys come down in the cellar. Now, that was kind of bad, because we was caught by surprise. The baby had gone invisible, like I say, and so had the tank we keep him in, but the tank couldn't move around fast like we could.

One of the eight Tarbell boys went and banged into it and hit hisself a smart crack on the shank bone. How he cussed! It was shameful for a growing boy to hear, except Grandpaw kin outcuss anybody I ever heard, so I didn't larn nothing.

Well--he cussed a lot, jumped around, and all of a sudden his squirrel rifle went off. Must have had a hair trigger. That woke up the baby, who got scared and let out a yell. It was the blamedest yell I'd ever heard out of the baby yet, and I've seen men go all white and shaky when he bellers. Our Perfesser feller told us oncet the baby emitted a subsonic. Imagine!

Anyhow, seven of the eight Tarbell boys dropped daid, all in a heap, without even time to squeal. The eighth one was up at the haud of the cellar steps, and he got all quivery and turned around and ran. I guess he was so dizzy he didn't know where he was heading. 'Fore he knowed it, he was up in the attic, where he stepped right square on Grandpaw.

Now, the fool thing was this: Grandpaw was so busy telling us what to do he'd entirely fergot to go invisible hisself. And I guess one look at Grandpaw just plumb finished the eighth Tarbell boy. He fell right down, daid as a skun coon. Cain't imagine why, though I got to admit Grandpaw wasn't looking his best that week. He'd been sick.

"You all right, Grandpaw?" I asked, sort of shaking him out. He cussed me.

" 'Twarn't my fault," I told him.

" 'Sblood!" he said, mad-like. "What rabble of canting jolt-heads have I sired? Put me down, you young scoundrel." So I put him back on the gunny sack and he turned around a couple of times and shut his eyes. After that, he said he was going to take a nap and not to wake him up for nothing, bar Judgment Day. He meant it, too.

So we had to figger out for ourselves what was best to do. Maw said it warn't our fault, and all we could do was pile the eight Tarbell boys in a wheelbarrow and take 'em back home, which I done. Only I got to feeling kind of shy on the way, on account of I couldn't figger out no real polite way to mention what had happened. Besides, Maw had told me to break the news gentle. "Even a polecat's got feelings," she said.

So I left the wheelbarrow with the eight Tarbell boys in it behind some



scrub brush, and I went on up the slope to where I could see Yancey sitting, airing hisself out in the sun and reading a book. I still hadn't studied out what to say. I just traipsed along slow-like, whistling "Yankee Doodle." Yancey didn't pay me no mind for a while.

He's a little, mean, dirty man with chin whiskers. Couldn't be much more'n five feet high. There was tobacco juice on his whiskers, but I might have done old Yancey wrong in figgering he was only sloppy. I heard he used to spit in his beard to draw flies, so's he could ketch 'em and pull off their wings.

Without looking, he picked up a stone, and flang it past my head. "Shet up an'go way," he said.

"Just as you say, Mr. Yancey," I told him, mighty relieved, and started to. But then I remembered Maw would probably whup me if I didn't mind her orders, so I sort of moved around quiet till I was in back of Yancey and looking over his shoulder at what he was reading. It looked like a book. Then I moved around a mite more till I was upwind of him.

He started cackling in his whiskers.

"That's a real purty picture, Mr. Yancey," I said.

He was giggling so hard it must of cheered him up.

"Ain't it, though!" he said, banging his fist on his skinny old rump. "My, my! Makes me feel full o'ginger just to look at it."

It wasn't a book, though. It was a magazine, the kind they sell down at the village, and it was opened at a picture. The feller that made it could draw real good. Not so good as an artist I knowed once, over in England. He went by the name of Crookshank or Crookback or

something like that, unless I'm mistook.

Anyway, this here that Yancey was looking at was quite a picture. It showed a lot of fellers, all exactly alike, coming out of a big machine which I could tell right off wouldn't work. But all these fellers was as like as peas in a pod. Then there was a red critter with bugged-out eyes grabbing a girl, I dunno why. It was sure purty.

"Wisht something like that could really happen," Yancey said.

"It ain't so hard," I told him. "Only that gadget's all wrong. All you need is a washbasin and some old scrap iron."

"Hey?"

"That thing there," I said. "The jigger that looks like it's making one feller into a whole lot of fellers. It ain't built right."

"I s'pose you could do it better?" he snapped, sort of mad.

"We did, once," I said. "I forget what Paw had on his mind, but he owed a man name of Cadmus a little favor. Cadmus wanted a lot of fighting men in a real hurry, so Paw fixed it so's Cadmus could split hisself up into a passel of soldiers. Shucks. I could do it myself."

"What are you blabbering about?" Yancey asked. "You ain't looking at the right thing. This here red critter's what I mean. See what he's a-gonna do? Gonna chaw that there purty gal's haid off, looks like. See the tusks on him? Heh, heh, heh. I wisht I was a critter like that. I'd chaw up plenty of people."

"You wouldn't chaw up your own kin, though, I bet," I said, seeing a way to break the news gentle.

" 'Tain't right to bet," he told me. "Allus pay your debts, fear no man,

and don't lay no wagers. Gambling's a sin. I never made no bets and I allus paid my debts." He stopped, scratched his whiskers, and sort of sighed. "All except one," he added, frowning.

"What was that?"

"Oh, I owed a feller something. Only I never could locate him afterward. Must be nigh on thutty years ago. Seems like I got likkered up and got on a train. Guess I robbed somebody, too, 'cause I had a roll big enough to choke a hoss. Never tried that, come to think of it. You keep hosses?"

"No, sir," I said. "We was talking about your kin."

"Shet up," old Yancey said. "Well, now, I had myself quite a time." He licked his whiskers. "Ever heard tell of a place called New York? In some furrin country, I guess. Can't understand a word nobody says. Anyway, that's where I met up with this feller. I often wisht I could find him again. An honest man like me hates to think of dying without paying his lawful debts."

"Did your eight boys owe any debts?" I asked.

He squinted at me, slapped his skinny leg, and nodded.

"Now I know," he said. "Ain't you the Hogben boy?"

"That's me. Saunk Hogben."

"I heard tell 'bout you Hogbens. All witches, ain't you?"

"No, sir."

"I heard what I heard. Whole neighborhood's buzzing. Hexers, that's what. You get outa here, go on, git!"

"I'm a-going," I said. "I just come by to say it's real unfortunate you couldn't chaw up your own kin if'n you was a critter like in that there picture."

"Ain't nobody big enough to stop me!"

"Maybe not," I said, "but they've all gone to glory."

When he heard this, old Yancey started to cackle. Finally, when he got his breath back, he said, "Not them! Them varmints have gone plumb smack to perdition, right where they belong. How'd it happen?"

"It was sort of an accident," I said. "The baby done kilt seven of them and Grandpaw kilt the other, in a way of speaking. No harm intended."

"No harm done," Yancey said, cackling again.

"Maw sent her apologies, and what do you want done with the remains? I got to take the wheelbarrow back home."

"Take 'em away. I don't want 'em. Good riddance to bad rubbish," old Yancey said, so I said all right and started off. But then he yelled out and told me he'd changed his mind. Told me to dump 'em where they was. From what I could make out, which wasn't much because he was laughing so hard, he wanted to come down and kick 'em.

So I done like he said and then went back home and told Maw, over a mess of catfish and beans and pot-likker. She made some hush puppies, too. They was good. I sat back, figgering I'd earned a rest, and thunk a mite, feeling warm and nice around the middle. I was trying to figger what a bean would feel like, down in my tummy. But it didn't seem to have no feelings.

It couldn't of been more than a half hour later when the pig yelled outside like he was getting kicked, and then somebody knocked on the door. It was Yancey. Minute he come in, he pulled a bandanna out of his britches and started sniffing. I looked at Maw, wide-eyed. I couldn't tell her nothing.

Paw and Uncle Les was drinking corn in a corner, and giggling a mite. I could tell they was feeling good because of the way the table kept rocking, the one between them. It wasn't touching neither one, but it kept jiggling, trying to step fust on Paw's toes and then on Uncle Les's. They was doing it inside their haids, trying to ketch the other one off guard.

It was up to Maw, and she invited old Yancey to set down a spell and have some beans. He just sobbed.

"Something wrong, neighbor?" Maw asked, polite.

"It sure is," Yancey said, sniffing. "I'm a real old man."

"You surely are," Maw told him. "Mebbe not as old as Saunk here, but you look awful old."

"Hey?" Yancey said, staring at her. "Saunk? Saunk ain't more'n seventeen, big as he is."

Maw near looked embarrassed. "Did I say Saunk?" she covered up, quick-like. "I meant this Saunk's grand-paw. His name's Saunk too." It wasn't; even Grandpaw don't remember what his name was first, it's been so long. But in his time he's used a lot of names like Elijah and so forth. I ain't even sure they had names in Atlantis, where Grandpaw come from in the first place. Numbers or something. It don't signify, anyhow.

Well, seems like old Yancey kept snuffling and groaning and moaning, and made out like we'd kilt his eight boys and he was all alone in the world. He hadn't cared a mite half an hour ago, though, and I said so. But he pointed out he hadn't rightly understood what I was talking about then, and for me to shet up.

"Ought to had a bigger family," he said. "They used to be two more boys, Zeb and Robbie, but I shot 'em one time. Didn't like the way they was looking ory-eyed at me. The point is, you Hogbens ain't got no right to kill my boys."

"We didn't go for to do it," Maw said. "It was more or less an accident. We'd be right happy to make it up to you, one way or another."

"That's what I was counting on," old Yancey said. "It seems like the least you could do, after acting up like you done. It don't matter whether the baby kilt my boys, like Saunk says and he's a liar. The idea is that I figger all you Hogbens are responsible. But I guess we could call it square if'n you did me a little favor. It ain't really right for neighbors to hold bad feelings."

"Any favor you name," Maw said, "if it ain't out of line."

" 'Tain't much," old Yancey said. "I just want you to split me up into a rabble, sort of temporary."

"Hey, you been listening to Medea?" Paw said, being drunk enough not to know no better. "Don't you believe her. That was purely a prank she played on Pelias. After he got chopped up he stayed daid; he didn't git young like she said he would."

"Hey?" Yancey said. He pulled that old magazine out of his pocket and it fell open right to that purty picture. "This here," he said. "Saunk

tells me you kin do it. And everybody round here knows you Hogbens are witches. Saunk said you done it once with a feller named of Messy."

"Guess he means Cadmus," I said.

Yancey waved the magazine. I saw he had a queer kind of gleam in his eye.

"It shows right here," he said, wild-like. "A feller steps inside this here gimmick and then he keeps coming out of it, dozens of him, over and over. Witchcraft. Well, I know about you Hogbens. You may fool the city folk, but you don't fool me none. You're all witches."

"We ain't," Paw said from the corner. "Not no more."

"You are so," Yancey said. "I heard stories. I even seen him"--he pointed right at Uncle Les--"I seen him flying around in the air. And if that ain't witchcraft I don't know what is."

"Don't you, honest?" I asked. "That's easy. It's when you get some--"

But Maw told me to shet up.

"Saunk told me you kin do it," he said. "An'I been sitting and studying and looking over this here magazine. I got me a fine idea. Now, it stands to reason, everybody knows a witch kin be in two places at the same time. Couldn't a witch mebbe git to be in three places at the same time?"

"Three's as good as two," Maw said. "Only there ain't no witches. It's like this here science you hear tell about. People make it up out of their haid. It ain't natcheral."

"Well, then," Yancey said, putting the magazine down. "Two or three

or a whole passel. How many people are there in the world, anyway?"

"Two billion, two hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen," I said.

"Then--"

"Hold on a minute," I said. "Now it's two billion, two hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and twenty. Cute little tyke, too."

"Boy or girl?" Maw asked.

"Boy," I told her.

"Then why can't you make me be in two billion whatever it was places at the same time? Mebbe for just a half a minute or so. I ain't greedy. That'd be long enough, anyhow."

"Long enough for what?" Maw asked.

Yancey give me a sly look. "I got me a problem," he said. "I want to find a feller. Trouble is, I dunno if I kin find him now. It's been a awful long time. But I got to, somehow or other. I ain't a-gonna rest easy in my grave unless I done paid all my debts, and for thutty years I been owing this feller something. It lays heavy on my conscience."

"That's right honorable of you, neighbor," Maw said.

Yancey snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"It's a-gonna be a hard job," he said. "I put it off mebbe a mite too long. The thing is, I was figgering on sending my eight boys out to look for this feller sometime, so you kin see why it's busted me all up, the way them no-good varmints up and got kilt without no warning."



How am I gonna find that feller I want now?"

Maw looked troubled and passed Yancey the jug.

"Whoosh!" he said, after a snort. "Tastes like real hell-fire for certain. Whoosh!" Then he took another swig, sucked in some air, and scowled at Maw.

"If'n a man plans on sawing down a tree and his neighbor busts the saw, seems to me that neighbor ought to lend his own saw. Ain't that right?"

"Sure is," Maw said. "Only we ain't got eight boys to lend you."

"You got something better," Yancey said. "Black, wicked magic, that's what. I ain't saying yea or nay 'bout that. It's your own affair. But seeing as how you kilt off them wuthless young 'uns of mine, so's I can't do like I was intending—why, then it looks like you ought to be willing to help me in some other way. Long as I kin locate that feller and pay him what I owe him, I'm satisfied. Now, ain't it the gospel truth that you kin spilt me up into a passel of me-critters?"

"Why, I guess we kin do that, I s'pose," Maw said.

"An'ain't it gospel that you kin fix it so's every dang one of them me-critters will travel real fast and see everybody in the whole, entire world?"

"That's easy," I said.

"If'n I kin git to do that," Yancey said, "it'd be easy for me to spot that feller and give him what he's got coming to him." He snuffled. "I allus been honest. I'm skeered of dying unless I pay all my debts fust. Danged if'n I want to burn through all eternity like you sinful Hogbens

are a-gonna."

"Shucks," Maw said, "I guess we kin help out, neighbor, being as how you feel so het up about it. Yes, sir, we'll do like you want."

Yancey brightened up considerable.

"Promise?" he asked. "Swear it, on your word an'honor?"

Maw looked kind of funny, but Yancey pulled out his bandanna again, so she busted down and made her solemn promise. Right away Yancey cheered up.

"How long will the spell take?" he asked.

"There ain't no spell," I said. "Like I told you, all I need is some scrap iron and a washbasin. 'Twon't take long."

"I'll be back real soon," Yancey said, sort of cackling, and run out, laughing his haid off. Going through the yard, he kicked out at a chicken, missed, and laughed some more. Guess he was feeling purty good.

"You better go on and make that gadget so's it'll be ready," Maw told me. "Git going."

"Yes, Maw," I said, but I sat there for a second or two, studying. She picked up the broomstick.

"You know, Maw--"

"Well?"

"Nothing," I said, and dodged the broomstick. I went on out, trying to git clear what was troubling me. Something was, only I couldn't tell

what. I felt kind of unwilling to make that there gadget, which didn't make right good sense, since there didn't seem to be nothing really wrong.

I went out behind the woodshed, though, and got busy. Took me 'bout ten minutes, but I didn't hurry much. Then I come back to the house with the gadget and said I was done. Paw told me to shet up.

Well, I sat there and looked at the gimmick and still felt trouble on my mind. Had to do with Yancey, somehow or other. Finally I noticed he'd left his old magazine behind, so I picked it up and started reading the story right under that picture, trying to make sense out of it. Durned if I could.

It was all about some crazy hillbillies who could fly. Well, that ain't no trick but what I couldn't figger out was whether the feller that writ it was trying to be funny or not. Seems to me people are funny enough anyhow, without trying to make 'em funnier.

Besides, serious things ought to be treated serious, and from what our Perfesser feller told me once, there's an awful lot of people what really believe in science and take it tremendous serious. He allus got a holy light in his eye when he talked about it. The only good thing about that story, it didn't have no girls in it. Girls make me feel funny.

I didn't seem to be gitting nowheres, so I went down to the cellar and played with the baby. He's kind of big for his tank these days. He was glad to see me. Winked all four of his eyes at me, one after the other. Real cute.

But all the time there was something about that magazine that kept nagging at me. I felt itchy inside, like when before they had that big fire in London, some while ago. Quite a spell of sickness they had then, too.

It reminded me of something Grandpaw had told me once, that he'd got the same sort of skitters just before Atlantis foundered. 'Course, Grandpaw kin sort of look into the future--which ain't much good, really, on account of it keeps changing around. I cain't do that myself yet. I ain't growed up enough. But I had a kind of hunch that something real bad was around, only it hadn't happened quite yet.

I almost decided to wake up Grandpaw, I felt so troubled. But around then I heard tromping upstairs, so I clomb up to the kitchen, and there was Yancey, swigging down some corn Maw'd give him. Minute I looked at the old coot, I got that feeling agin.

Yancey said, "Whoosh," put down the jug, and wanted to know if we was ready. So I pointed at the gadget I'd fixed up and said that was it, all right, and what did he think about it?

"That little thing?" Yancey asked. "Ain't you a-gonna call up Old Scratch?"

"Ain't no need," Uncle Les said. "Not with you here, you little water moccasin, you."

Yancey looked right pleased. "That's me," he said. "Mean as a moccasin, and fulla pizen. How does it work?"

"Well," I said, "it sort of splits you up into a lot of Yanceys, is all."

Paw had been setting quiet, but he must of tuned in inside the haid of some perfesser somewheres, on account of he started talking foolish. He don't know any four-bit words hisself.

I wouldn't care to know 'em myself, being as how they only mix up what's simple as cleaning a trout.

"Each human organism," Paw said, showing off like crazy, "is an electromagnetic machine, emitting a pattern of radiations, both from brain and body. By reversing polarity, each unit of you, Yancey, will be automatically attracted to each already existent human unit, since unlikes attract. But first you will step on Saunk's device and your body will be broken down--"

"Hey!" Yancey yelled.

Paw went right on, proud as a peacock.

--into a basic electronic matrix, which can then be duplicated to the point of infinity, just as a type face may print millions of identical copies of itself in reverse--negative instead of positive.

"Since space is no factor where electronic wave-patterns are concerned, each copy will be instantly attracted to the space occupied by every other person in the world," Paw was going on, till I like to bust. "But since two objects cannot occupy the same space-time, there will be an automatic spacial displacement, and each Yancey-copy will be repelled to approximately two feet away from each human being."

"You forgot to draw a pentagram," Yancey said, looking around nervous-like. "That's the awfulest durn spell I ever heard in all my born days. I thought you said you wasn't gonna call up Old Scratch?"

Maybe it was on account of Yancey was looking uncommon like Old Scratch hisself just then, but I just couldn't stand it no longer--having this funny feeling inside me. So I woke up Grandpaw. I did it inside my haid, the baby helping, so's nobody noticed. Right away there was a stirring in the attic, and Grandpaw heaved hisself around a little and woke up. Next thing I knew he was cussing a blue streak.

Well, the whole family heard that, even though Yancey couldn't. Paw stopped showing off and shet up.

"Dullards!" Grandpaw said, real mad. "Rapscallions! Certes, y-wist it was no wonder I was having bad dreams. Saunk, you've put your foot in it now. Have you no sense of process? Didn't you realize what this caitiff schmo was planning, the stinkard? Get in the groove, Saunk, ere manhood's state shall find thee unprepared." Then he added something in Sanskrit. Living as long as Grandpaw has, he gits mixed up in his talk sometimes.

"Now, Grandpaw," Maw thunk, "what's Saunk been and done?"

"You've all done it!" Grandpaw yelled. "Couldn't you add cause and effect? Saunk, what of the picture y-wrought in Yancey's pulp mag? Wherefore hys sodien change of herte, when obviously the stinkard hath no more honor than a lounge lizard? Do you want the world depopulated before its time? Ask Yancey what he's got in his britches pocket, dang you!"

"Mr. Yancey," I said, "what have you got in your britches pocket?"

"Hey?" he said, reaching down and hauling out a big, rusty monkey wrench. "You mean this? I picked it up back of the shed." He was looking real sly.

"What you aiming to do with that?" Maw asked, quick.

Yancey give us all a mean look. "Ain't no harm telling you," he said. "I aim to hit everybody, every durn soul in the whole, entire world, right smack on top of the haid, and you promised to help me do it."

"Lawks a-mercy," Maw said.

"Yes, siree," Yancey giggled. "When you hex me, I'm a-gonna be in every place everybody else is, standing right behind 'em. I'll whang 'em good. Thataway, I kin be sure I'll git even. One of them people is just bound to be the feller I want, and he'll git what I been owing him for thutty years."

"What feller?" I said. "You mean the one you met up with in New York you was telling me about? I figgered you just owed him some money."

"Never said no sech thing," Yancey snapped. "A debt's a debt, be it money or a bust in the haid. Ain't nobody a-gonna step on my corn and git away with it, thutty years or no thutty years."

"He stepped on your corn?" Paw asked. "That's all he done?"

"Yup. I was likkered up at the time, but I recollect I went down some stairs to where a lot of trains was rushing around under the ground."

"You was drunk."

"I sure was," Yancey said. "Couldn't be no sech thing--trains running underground! But I sure as shooting wasn't dreaming 'bout the feller what stepped on my corn. Why, I kin still feel it. I got mad. It was so crowded I couldn't even move for a mite, and I never even got a good look at the feller what stepped on me."

"By the time I hit out with my stick, he must of got away. Never knew what he looked like. Might have been a female, but that don't signify. I just ain't a-gonna die till I pay my debts and git even with everybody what ever done me dirt. I allus got even with every dang soul what done me wrong, and most everybody I ever met did."

Riled up a whole lot was Yancey Tarbell. He went right on from there:

"So I figgered, since I never found out just who this feller was what stepped on my corn, I better make downright sure and take a lick at everybody, man, woman, and child."

"Now you hold your hosses," I said. "Ain't no children could have been alive thutty years ago, an'you know it."

"Makes no difference," Yancey snapped. "I was a-thinking, and I got an awful idea: suppose that feller went and died. Thutty years is a long time. But then I figgered, even if he did up and die, chances are he got married and had kids fust. If'n I can't git even with him, I kin get even with his children. The sins of the father--that's Scripture. If'n I hit everybody in the world, I can't go fur wrong."

"You ain't hitting no Hogbens," Maw said. "None of us been in New York since afore you was born. I mean, we ain't never been there. So you kin just leave us out of it. How'd you like to git a million dollars instead? Or maybe you want to git young again or something like that? We kin fix that for you instead, if you'll give up this here wicked idea."

"I ain't a-gonna," Yancey said, stubborn. "You give your gospel word to help me."

"Well, we ain't bound to keep a promise like that," Maw said, but then Grandpaw chimed in from the attic.

"The Hogben word is sacred," he told us. "It's our bond. We must keep our promise to this booby. But, having kept it, we are not bound further."

"Oh?" I said, sort of gitting a thought. "That being the case--Mr. Yancey, just what did we promise, exact?"



He waved the monkey wrench at me.

"I'm a-gonna git split up into as many people as they are people in the world, and I'm a-gonna be standing right beside all of 'em. You give your word to help me do that. Don't you try to wiggle out of it."

"I ain't wiggling," I said. "Only we better git it clear, so's you'll be satisfied and won't have no kick coming. One thing, though. You got to be the same size as everybody you visit."

"Hey?"

"I kin fix it easy. When you step on this here gadget, there'll be two billion, two hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnered and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnered and twenty Yanceys all over the world. S'posin', now, one of these here Yanceys finds himself standing next to a big feller seven feet tall. That wouldn't be so good, would it?"

"I want to be eight feet high," Yancey said.

"No, sir. The Yancey who goes to visit a feller that high is a-gonna be just that high hisself, exactly. And the one who visits a baby only two feet high is a-gonna be only two feet high hisself. What's fair's fair. You agree to that, or it's all off. Only other thing, you'll be just exactly as strong as the feller you're up again'."

I guess he seen I was firm. He hefted the monkey wrench.

"How'll I git back?" he asked.

"We'll take care of that," I said. "I'll give you five seconds. That's long enough to swing a monkey wrench, ain't it?"

"It ain't very long."

"If'n you stay longer, somebody might hit back."

"So they might," he said, turning pale under the dirt. "Five seconds is plenty."

"Then if'n we do just that, you'll be satisfied? You won't have no kick coming?"

He swung the monkey wrench and laughed.

"Suits me fine and dandy," he said. "I'll bust their haid's good. Heh, heh, heh."

"Then you step right on here," I said, showing him. "Wait a mite, though. I better try it fust, to make sure it works right."

I picked up a stick of firewood from the box by the stone and winked at Yancey. "You git set," I said. "The minute I git back, you step right on here."

Maw started to say something, but all of a sudden Grandpaw started laughing in the attic. I guess he was looking into the future again.

I stepped on the gadget, and it worked slick as anything. Afore I could blink, I was split up into two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen Saunk Hogbens.

There was one short, o'course, on account of I left out Yancey, and o'course the Hogbens ain't listed in no census. But here I was, standing right in front of everybody in the whole, entire world except the Hogben fam'ly and Yancey hisself. It was plumb onreasonable.

Never did I know there was so many faces in this world! They was all colors, some with whiskers, some without, some with clothes on,

some naked as needles, some awful big and some real short, and half of them was in daylight and half was in the nighttime. I got downright dizzy.

For just a flash, I thought I could make out some of the people I knowed down in Piperville, including the Sheriff, but he got mixed up with a lady in a string of beads who was casing a kangaroo-critter, and she turned into a man dressed up fit to kill who was speechifyin' in a big room somewheres.

My, I was dizzy.

I got ahold of myself and it was about time, too, for just about then near everybody in the whole world noticed me. 'Course, it must have looked like I'd popped out of thin air, right in front of them, real sudden, and--well, you ever had near two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen people looking you right square in the eye? It's just awful. I forgot what I'd been intending. Only I sort of heard Grandpaw's voice telling me to hurry up.

So I pushed that stick of firewood I was holding, only now it was two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen sticks, into just about the same number of hands and let go. Some of the people let go too, but most of 'em held on to it. Then I tried to remember the speech I was a-gonna make, telling 'em to git in the fust lick at Yancey afore he could swing that monkey wrench.

But I was too confounded. It was funny. Having all them people looking right at me made me so downright shy, I couldn't even open my mouth. What made it worse was that Grandpaw yelled I had only one second left, so there wasn't even time to make a speech. In just one second, I was a-gonna flash back to our kitchen, and then old

Yancey was all ready to jump in the gadget and swing that monkey wrench. And I hadn't warned nobody. All I'd done was give everybody a little old stick of firewood.

My, how they stared! I felt plumb naked. Their eyes bugged right out. And just as I started to thin out around the edges like a biscuit, I--well I don't know what come over me. I guess it was feeling so uncommon shy. Maybe I shouldn't of done it, but--

I done it!

Then I was back in the kitchen. Grandpaw was laughing fit to kill in the attic. The old gentleman's got a funny kind of sense of humor, I guess. I didn't have no time for him then, though, for Yancey jumped past me and into the gadget. And he disappeared into thin air, the way I had. Split up, like I'd been, into as many people as there was in the world, and standing right in front of 'em.

Maw and Paw and Uncle Les was looking at me real hard. I sort of shuffled.

"I fixed it," I said. "Seems like a man who's mean enough to hit little babies over the haid deserves what he's"--I stopped and looked at the gadget--"what he's been and got," I finished, on account of Yancey had tumbled out of thin air, and a more whupped-up old rattlesnake I never seen. My!

Well, I guess purty near everybody in the whole world had took a whang at Mr. Yancey. He never even had a chance to swing that monkey wrench. The whole world had got in the fust lick.

Yes, siree. Mr. Yancey looked plumb ruined.

But he could still yell. You could of heard him a mile off. He kept

screaming that he'd been cheated. He wanted another chance, and this time he was taking his shooting iron and a bowie knife. Finally Maw got disgusted, took him by the collar, and shook him up till his teeth rattled.

"Quoting Scripture!" she said, madlike. "You little dried-up scraggle of downright pizen! The Good Book says an eye for an eye, don't it? We kept our word, and there ain't nobody kin say different."

"That's the truth, certes," Grandpaw chimed in from the attic.

"You better go home and git some arrnicy," Maw said, shaking Yancey some more. "And don't you come round here no more, never again, or we'll set the baby on you."

"But I didn't git even!" Yancey squalled.

"I guess you ain't a-gonna, ever," I said. "You just cain't live long enough to git even with everybody in the whole world, Mr. Yancey."

By and by, that seemed to strike Yancey all in a heap. He turned a rich color like beet soup, made a quacking noise, and started cussing. Uncle Les reached for the poker, but there wasn't no need.

"The whole dang world done me wrong!" Yancey squealed, and clapped his hands to his haid. "I been flummoxed! Why in tarnation did they hit me fust? "There's something funny about--"

"Hush up," I said, all of a sudden realizing the trouble wasn't over, like I'd thought. "Listen, anybody hear anything from the village?"

Even Yancey shet up whilst we listened. "Don't hear a thing," Maw said.

"Saunk's right," Grandpaw put in. "That's what's wrong."

Then everybody got it--that is, everybody except Yancey. Because about now there ought to of been quite a rumpus down at Piperville. Don't fergit me and Yancey went visiting the whole world, which includes Piperville, and people don't take a thing like that quiet. There ought to of been some yelling going on, at least.

"What are you all standing round dumb as mutes for?" Yancey busted out. "You got to help me git even!"

I didn't pay him no mind. I sat down and studied the gadget. After a minute I seen what it was I'd done wrong. I guess Grandpaw seen it about as quick as I did. You oughta heard him laugh. I hope it done the old gentleman good. He has a right peculiar sense of humor sometimes.

"I sort of made a mistake in this gadget, Maw," I said. "That's why it's so quiet down in Piperville."

"Aye, by my troth," Grandpaw said, still laughing. "Saunk had best seek cover. Twenty-three skiddoo, kid."

"You done something you shouldn't, Saunk?" Maw said.

"Blabber, blabber, blabber!" Yancey yelled. "I want my rights! I want to know what it was Saunk done that made everybody in the world hit me over the haid! He must of done something. I never had no time to--"

"Now you leave the boy alone, Mr. Yancey," Maw said. "We done what we promised, and that's enough. You git outa here and simmer down afore you say something you regret."

Paw winked at Uncle Les, and before Yancey could yell back at Maw

the table sort of bent its legs down like they had knees in 'em and snuck up behind Yancey real quiet. Then Paw said to Uncle Les, "All together now, let 'er go," and the table straightened up its legs and give Yancey a terrible bunt that sent him flying out the door.

The last we heard of Yancey was the whoops he kept letting out whenever he hit the ground all the way down the hill. He rolled half the way to Piperville, I found out later. And when he got there he started hitting people over the haid with his monkey wrench.

I guess he figgered he might as well make a start the hard way.

They put him in jail for a spell to cool off, and I guess he did, 'cause afterward he went back to that little shack of his'n. I hear he don't do nothing but set around with his lips moving, trying to figger a way to git even with the hull world. I don't calc'late he'll ever hit on it, though.

At that time, I wasn't paying him much mind. I had my own troubles. As soon as Paw and Uncle Les got the table back in place, Maw lit into me again.

"Tell me what happened, Saunk," she said. "I'm a-feared you done something wrong when you was in that gadget. Remember you're a Hogben, son. You got to behave right when the whole world's looking at you. You didn't go and disgrace us in front of the entire human race, did you, Saunk?"

Grandpaw laughed agin. "Not yet, he hasn't," he said.

Then down in the basement I heard the baby give a kind of gurgle and I knowed he could see it too. That's surprising, kinda, We never know for sure about the baby. I guess he really kin see a little bit into the future too.

"I just made a little mistake, Maw," I said. "Could happen to anybody. It seems the way I fixed that gadget up, it split me into a lot of Saunks, all right, but it sent me ahead into next week too. That's why there ain't no ruckus yet down in Piperville."

"My land!" Maw said. "Child, you do things so careless!"

"I'm sorry, Maw," I said. "Trouble is, too many people in Piperville know me. I'd better light out for the woods and pick me a nice holler tree. I'll be needing it, come next week."

"Saunk," Maw said, "you been up to something. Sooner or later I'll find out, so you might as well tell me now."

Well, shucks, I knowed she was right. So I told her, and I might as well tell you, too. You'll find out anyhow, come next week. It just shows you can't be too careful. This day next week, everybody in the whole world is a-gonna be mighty surprised when I show up out of thin air, hand 'em all a stick of firewood, and then r'ar back and spit right smack in their eye.

I s'pose that there two billion, two hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen includes everybody on earth.

Everybody!

Sometime next week, I figger.

See you later.



# Time Enough

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Sam Dyson found the secret of immortality five hundred years after the Blowup. Since research along such lines was strictly forbidden, he felt a panicky shock when the man from Administration walked into his office and almost casually told Dyson that immortality was nothing new.

"This is top secret," the Administrator said, slapping a parcel of manifold sheets on Dyson's desk. "Not these papers, of course,--but what I'm telling you and what you're going to see. We hardly ever let anybody in on the secret. In your case we're making an exception, because you're probably the only guy who can correlate the necessary fieldwork and know what the answers to the questions mean. There are plenty of intangibles in your work, and that's why you've got to handle it personally."

Dyson's current assignment, which had originally interested him in the problem of immortality, dealt with artificial intellectual mutation. He sat back, trying not to show any particular emotion, and blinked at the Administrator.

"I thought the Archives--"

"The Archives are a legend, fostered by propaganda. There ain't no Archives. A few scattered artifacts, that's all. Hardly anything survived the Blowup except the human race."

And yet the government-controlled Archives were supposed to be the source of all modern knowledge!

"This is all secret, Dyson. You won't talk. Sometimes we have to use mnemonic-erasure on blabbermouths, but blabbermouths aren't often let in on such private affairs. You know how to keep your mouth shut. The truth is, we get our scraps of pre-Blowup science from human brains--certain people who were alive when the radiations began to run wild. We keep the Old 'Uns segregated; it'd be dangerous if the world knew immortals existed. There'd be a lot of dissatisfaction."

Sweat chilled Dyson's flanks. He said, "Of course I've heard the rumors of immortals--"

"All sorts of legends came out of the Blowup and the Lost Years. We've issued counterpropaganda to neutralize the original legend. A straight denial would have had no effect at all. We started a whispering campaign that sure, there were immortals, but they lived only a few hundred years, and they were such screwy mutants they were all insane. That part of the public that believes rumors won't envy the immortals. As for legends, ever heard of the Invisible Snake that was supposed to punish carnal sin? It wasn't till after we rediscovered the microscope that we identified the Snake with the spirochete. You'll often find truth in myths, but sometimes it isn't wise to reveal the truth."

Dyson wondered if Administration could possibly have found out about his forbidden research. He hadn't known there were immortals; he'd investigated the legends, and his own work in controlled radiation and mental mutation had pointed the way.

The Administrator talked some more. Then he advised Dyson to televise his uncle, Roger Peaslee. "Peaslee's been to a Home and seen the Old 'Uns. Don't look surprised; of course he was sworn to silence. But he'll talk about it to you now; he knows you're going to the--Archives!"

But Dyson felt uneasy until his visitor had left. Then he called his uncle, who held a high post with Radioactives, and asked questions.

"It'll surprise you, I think," Peaslee said, with a sympathetic grin. "You may need psych conditioning when you get back, too. It's rather depressing. Still, until we get time travel, there's no other way of reaching back to Blowup days."

"I never knew--"

"Naturally. Well, you'll see what a Home's like. There'll be an interpreter assigned to give you the dope. And, as a matter of fact, it's good conditioning. You're going to Cozy Nook, aren't you?"

"I think... yes, that's it. There are several?"

Peaslee nodded.

"You may run into some of your ancestors there. I know one of your great-greats is in Cozy Nook. It's a funny feeling, to look at and talk to somebody who five hundred years ago was responsible for your birth. But you mustn't let her know who you are."

"Why not?"

"It's a special setup. The interpreter will give you the angles. All sorts of precautions have to be taken. There's a corps of psychologists who work on nothing but the Homes. You'll find out. And I'm busy, Sam. See you when you get back. I hear you're getting married."

"That's right," Dyson said. "We're both government-certified, too." His smile was slightly crooked.

"Rebel," Peaslee said, and broke the circuit. The image slowly

faded, leaving only a play of pastel colors driving softly across the screen's surface. Dyson sat back and considered.

Presumably neoradar had not discovered his hidden laboratory, or there would have been trouble. Not serious trouble, in this paternalistic administration. Discussions, the semantics of logicians, and, in the end, Dyson knew that he would be argued around to the other side. They could twist logic damnably. And, very likely, they were right. If research in certain radiogenetic fields had been forbidden, the reasons for that step would hold even heavy water.

Immortality.

Within limits, of course. There were principles of half-life--of entropy--nothing lasts forever. But there were different yard-sticks. It would be immortality by normal standards.

So, it had been achieved once before, quite by accident. That particular accident had left the planet in insane chaos for hundreds of years, providing a peculiarly unstable foundation for the new culture that had arisen since. It was rather like a building constructed, without plans, from the alloys and masonry of an earlier one. There were gaps and missing peristyles.

Dyson thumbed through the manifold sheets on his desk. They contained guides, problems in his current research--not the secret research in the hidden laboratory, but the government-approved work on intellectual mutation. To a layman some of the terms wouldn't have meant anything, but Dyson was a capable technician. Item 24: Check psychopathology of genius-types in pre-Blowup era, continuing line of investigation toward current times....

He left a transference call for the interpreter, pulled on a cloak, and took a glider to Marta Hallam's apartment. She was drinking mate on

the terrace, a small, fragile, attractive girl who efficiently put a silver tube in another mate gourd as soon as she had kissed Dyson. He sat beside her and rubbed his forehead with thumb and forefinger.

"We'll furlough in a few weeks," Marta said. "You work too hard. I'll see that you don't."

He looked at her and saw her against a misty background of a thousand years in the future--older, of course, but superficial attractiveness wasn't imported. He'd grow older, too. But neither of them would die. And the treatment did not cause sterility. Overcrowding of the planet could be handled by migration to other worlds; the old rocket fuels had already been rediscovered. Through research in a Home, perhaps, Dyson guessed.

Marta said, "What are you so glum about? Do you want to marry somebody else?"

There was only one way to answer that. After a brief while, Dyson grumbled that he hated to be certified like a bottle of milk.

"You'll be glad of it after we have children," Marta said. "If our genes had been haywire, we might have had a string of freaks."

"I know. I just don't like--"

"Look," she said, staring at him. "At worst, we'd have been treated, to compensate for negative Rh or anything like that. Or our kids would have had to be put in an incubation clinic. A year or two of separation from them at most. And worth it, when you figure that they'd have come out healthy specimens."

Dyson said cryptically, "Things would have been a lot easier if we'd never had the Blowup."

"Things would have been a lot easier if we'd stayed unicellular blobs," Marta amplified. "You can't eat your cake and keep the soda bicarb on the shelf."

"A philosopher, eh? Never mind. I've got something up my sleeve--"

But he didn't finish that, and stayed where he was for a while, drinking mate and noticing how lovely Marta's profile was against the skyline and the immense, darkening blue above. After a while the interpreter announced himself, having got Dyson's transference notice, and the two men went out together into the chilly night.

Five hundred years before, an atom was split and the balance of power blew up. Prior to that time, a number of people had been playing tug-of-war with a number of ropes. Nuclear fission, in effect, handed those people knives. They learned how to cut the ropes, and, too late, discovered that the little game had been played on the summit of a crag whose precipitous sides dropped away to abysmal depths beneath.

The knife was a key as well. It opened fantastic new doors. Thus the Blowup. Had the Blowup been due only to the atomic blast, man might have rebuilt more easily, granting that the planet remained habitable. However, one of the doors the key opened led into a curious, perilous place where physical laws were unstable. Truth is a variable. But no one knew how to vary it until after unlimited atomic power had been thrown on the market.

Within limits, anything could happen, and plenty of things did. Call it a war. Call it chaos. Call it the Blowup. Call it a shifting of a kaleidoscope in which the patterns rearranged themselves constantly. In the end, the status quo reestablished itself. Man chewed rat bones, but he was an intelligent animal. When the ground

became solid under his feet again, he began to rebuild.

Not easily. Hundreds of years had passed. And very little of the earlier culture had survived.

When you consider how much of human knowledge is due to pyramiding, that's easier to understand. Penicillin was discovered because somebody invented a microscope because somebody learned how to grind lenses because somebody found out how to make glass because somebody could make fire. There were gaps in the chain. An atomic war would have blown up the planet or ravaged it, but the catastrophe would have been quick--or complete--and if the planet survived, there would have been artifacts and records and the memories of mankind. But the Blowup lasted for a long time--time itself was used as a variable once during the homicidal, suicidal, fratricidal struggle--and there were no records.

Not many, at least. And they weren't selective. Eventually cities rose again, but there were odd gaps in the science of the new civilization. Some of those holes filled themselves in automatically, and a few useful records were dug up from time to time, but not many, and the only real clue men had to the scientific culture of pre-Blowup days was something that had remained stable through the variable-truth-atomic cataclysm.

The colloid of the human brain.

Eyewitnesses.

The Old 'Uns in the secret, segregated Homes, who had lived for five centuries and longer.

Will Mackenzie, the interpreter, was a thin, rangy, freckled man of forty, with the slow, easy motions one automatically associated with a

sturdier, plumper physique. His blue eyes were lazy, his voice was soothing, and when Dyson fumbled at the unaccustomed uniform, his helpful motions were lazily efficient.

"A necktie?" Dyson said. "A which?"

"Necktie," Mackenzie explained. "That's right. Don't ask me why. Some of the Old 'Uns don't bother with it, but they're inclined to be fussy. They get conservative after the first hundred years, you know."

Dyson had submerged that mild uneasiness and was determined to play this role at its face value. Administration might suspect his sub rosa research, but, at worst, there would be no punishment. Merely terribly convincing argument. And probably they did not suspect. Anyway, Dyson realized suddenly, there were two sides to an argument, and it was possible that he might convince the logicians--though that had never been done before. His current job was to dig out the information he needed from the Old 'Uns and--that ended it. He stared into the enormous closet with its rows of unlikely costumes.

"You mean they go around in those clothes all the time?" he asked Mackenzie.

"Yeah," Mackenzie said. He peeled off his functionally aesthetic garments and donned a duplicate of Dyson's apparel. "You get used to these things. Well, there are a few things I've got to tell you. We've plenty of time. The Old 'Uns go to bed early, so you can't do anything till tomorrow, and probably not much then. They're suspicious at first."

"Then why do I have to wear this now?"

"So you can get used to it. Sit down. Hike up your pants at the knee, like this--see? Now sit."



He pawed at the rough, unfamiliar cloth, settled himself, and picked up a smoke from the table. Mackenzie sat with an accomplished ease Dyson envied, and pressed buttons that resulted in drinks sliding slowly out from an aperture in the wall.

"We're not in Cozy Nook yet," the interpreter said. "This is the conditioning and control station. None of the Old 'Uns know what goes on outside. They think there's still a war."

"But--"

Mackenzie said, "You've never been in a Home before. Well, remember that the Old 'Uns are abnormal. A little--" He shrugged. "You'll see. I've got to give you a lecture. o.k. At the time of the Blowup, the radioactivity caused a cycle of mutations. One type was a group of immortals. They won't live forever--"

Dyson had already done his own research on that point. Radium eventually turns to lead. After a long, long time the energy quotients of the immortals would sink below the level necessary to sustain life. A short time as the life of a solar system goes--a long time measured against the normal human span. A hundred thousand years, perhaps. There was no certain way to ascertain, except the empirical one.

Mackenzie said, "A lot of the Old 'Uns were killed during the Blowup. They're vulnerable to accidents, though they've a tremendously high resistance to disease. It wasn't till after the Blowup, after reconstruction had started, that anybody knew the Old 'Uns were--what they were. There'd been tribal legends--the local shaman had lived forever, you know the typical stuff. We correlated those legends, found a grain of truth in them, and investigated. The Old 'Uns were tested in the labs. I don't know the technical part. But I do know they were exposed to certain radiations, and their body structures were altered."

Dyson said, "How old do they average?"

"Roughly, five hundred years. During the radioactive days. It isn't hereditary, immortality, and there haven't been any such radioactives since, except in a few delayed-reaction areas." Mackenzie had been thrown off his routine speech by the interruption. He took a drink.

He said, "You'll have to see the Old 'Uns before you'll understand the entire picture. We have to keep them segregated here. They have information we need. It's like an unclassified, huge library. The only link we have with pre-Blowup times. And, of course, we have to keep the Old 'Uns happy. That isn't easy. Supersenility--" He took another drink and pushed a button.

Dyson said, "They're human, aren't they?"

"Physically, sure. Ugly as sin, though. Mentally, they've gone off at some queer tangents."

"One of my ancestors is here."

Mackenzie looked at him queerly. "Don't meet her. There's a guy named Fell who was a technician during the Blowup, and a woman named Hobson who was a witness of some of the incidents you're investigating. Maybe you can get enough out of those two. Don't let curiosity get the better of you."

"Why not?" Dyson asked. "I'm interested."

Mackenzie's glass had suddenly emptied.

"It takes special training to be an interpreter here. As for being a caretaker... one of the group that keeps the Old 'Uns happy... they're handpicked."

He told Dyson more.

The next morning Mackenzie showed his guest a compact gadget that fitted into the ear. It was a sonor, arranged so that the two men could talk, unheard by others, simply by forming words inaudibly. The natural body noises provided the volume, and it was efficient, once Dyson had got used to the rhythmic rise and fall of his heartbeat.

"They hate people to use 'Speranto in front of them," Mackenzie said. "Stick to English. If you've got something private to say, use the sonor, or they'll think you're talking about them. Ready?"

"Sure." Dyson readjusted his necktie uncomfortably. He followed the interpreter through a valve, down a ramp, and through another barrier. Filtered, warm sunlight hit him. He was standing at the top of an escalator that flowed smoothly down to the village below--Cozy Nook.

A high wall rimmed the Home. Camouflage nets were spread above, irregularly colored brown and green. Dyson remembered that the Old 'Uns had been told this was still wartime. A pattern of winding streets, parks, and houses was below.

Dyson said, "That many? There must be a hundred houses here, Mackenzie."

"Some of 'em are for interpreters, psychologists, nurses, and guests. Only forty or fifty Old 'Uns, but they're a handful."

"They seem pretty active," Dyson said, watching figures move about the streets. "I don't see any surface cars."

"Or air-floaters, either," Mackenzie said. "We depend on sliding ways and pneumo tubes for transportation here. There's not much territory

to cover. The idea is to keep the Old 'Uns happy, and a lot of them would want to drive cars if there were any around. Their reactions are too slow. Even with safeties, there'd be accidents. Let's go down. Do you want to see Fell first, or Hobson?"

"Well... Fell's the technician? Let's try him."

"Over." Mackenzie nodded, and they went down the escalator. As they descended, Dyson noticed that among the modern houses were some that seemed anachronistic: a wooden cottage, a red-brick monstrosity, an ugly glass-and-concrete structure with distorted planes and bulges. But he was more interested in the inhabitants of the Home.

Trees rose up, blocking their vision, as they descended. They were ejected gently on a paved square, lined with padded benches. A man was standing there, staring at them, and Dyson looked at him curiously.

In his ear a voice said, "He's one of the Old 'Uns." Mackenzie was using the inaudible sonor.

The man was old. Five hundred years old, Dyson thought, and suddenly was staggered by the concept. Five centuries had passed since this man was born, and he would go on without change while time flowed in flux without touching him.

What effect had immortality had upon this man?

For one thing, he had not been granted eternal youth. The half-time basic precluded that. Each year he grew older, but not quite as old as he had grown the preceding year. He was stooped--Dyson was to learn to recognize that particular stigma of the Old 'Uns--and his body seemed to hang loosely from the rigid crossbars of his clavicle. His

head, totally bald, thrust forward, and small eyes squinted inquisitively at Dyson. Nose and ears were grotesquely enlarged. Yet the man was merely old--not monstrous.

He said something Dyson could not understand. The sound held inquiry, and, at random, he said, "How do you do. My name is Dyson--"

"Shut up!" the sonor said urgently in his ear, and Mackenzie moved forward to intercept the old man, who was edging toward the escalator. Gibberish spewed from the interpreter's lips, and answering gibberish came from the Old 'Un. Occasionally Dyson could trace a familiar word, but the conversation made no sense to him.

The old man suddenly turned and scuttled off. Mackenzie shrugged.

"Hope he didn't catch your name. He probably didn't. There's a woman here with the same name--you said you had an ancestor in Cozy Nook, didn't you? We don't like the Old 'Uns to get any real concept of time. It unsettles them. If Mander should tell her--" He shook his head. "I guess he won't. Their memories aren't good at all. Let's find Fell."

He guided Dyson along one of the shaded walks. From porches bright eyes stared inquisitively at the pair. They passed workers, easily distinguishable from the Old 'Uns, and once or twice they passed one of the immortals. There could be no difficulty in recognizing them.

"What did Mander want?" Dyson asked.

"He wanted out," Mackenzie said briefly. "He's only a couple of hundred years old. Result of one of the freak radiation areas blowing

off two centuries ago."

"Was he speaking English?"

"His form of it. You see--they lack empathy. They forget to notice how their words sound to the listener. They slur and mispronounce and in the end it takes a trained interpreter to understand them. Here's Fell's place." They mounted a porch, touched a sensitive plate, and the door opened. A young man appeared on the threshold.

"Oh, hello," he said, nodding to Mackenzie. "What's up?"

"Research business. How's Fell?"

The male nurse grimaced expressively. "Come in and find out. He's had breakfast, but--"

They went in. Fell was sitting by a fire, a hunched, huddled figure so bent over that only the top of his bald, white head was visible. The nurse retired, and Mackenzie, motioning Dyson to a chair, approached the Old 'Un.

"Professor Fell," he said softly. "Professor Fell. Professor Fell--"

It went on like that for a long time. Dyson's nerves tightened. He stared around the room, noticing the musty, choking atmosphere that not even a precipitron could eliminate. Here was none of the dignity of age. This foul-smelling, crouching old man huddled in his chair--Fell tilted his head wearily and let it fall again. He spoke. The words were unintelligible.

"Professor Fell," Mackenzie said. "We've come for a talk. Professor--"

The figure roused again. It spoke.

Mackenzie used the sonor. "They understand English--some of 'em, anyway. Fell isn't like Mander. I'll have him talking soon."

But it took a long time, and Dyson had a throbbing headache before a grain of information was elicited from Fell. The Old 'Un had entirely lost the sense of selectivity. Or, rather, he had acquired his own arbitrary one. It was impossible to keep him from straying from the subject. Mackenzie did his best to act as a filter, but it was difficult.

And yet this old man had been alive five hundred years ago.

Dyson thought of a mate tube, pierced with a number of tiny holes at the end to admit the liquid. Fell was such a tube, stretching back into the unrecorded past--and he, too, was pierced with a thousand such holes through which the irrelevant came in painful, spasmic gushes. Someone had cooked an egg too long once--the price of wool was monstrous--some unknown politician was crooked--it must be arthritis, or else--that boy, what was his name? Tim, Tom, something like that--he'd been a genius-type, yes, but the poor boy--it isn't as warm now as it used to be-- Who? Don't bother me. I don't remember. I mean I don't want to be bothered. I'll tell you something, that reagent I made once--

It was all very dull; every schoolboy today knew about that reagent. But Mackenzie had to sit and listen to the interminable tale, though he mercifully spared Dyson most of it. Then, gradually, he edged Fell back to the subject.

Oh, the genius boy--he developed migraine. The specific didn't work long. Medicine's got a lot to learn. I remember once--

Dyson made a few notes.

What he most wanted were factors in the physiological off-normal variations of the genius-types that had been produced at random by the Blowup. Fell had been a technician at that time, and an excellent research man. But all his notes, naturally, had vanished in the aftermath, when painfully rebuilt units of civilization kept tumbling down again, and the man's memory was leaky. Once Dyson made careful notes before he realized that Fell was giving him the formula for a martini in chemical terminology.

Then Fell got irritable. He hammered weakly on the arm of his chair and demanded an eggnog, and Mackenzie, with a shrug, got up and let the male nurse take over. The interpreter went out into the filtered sunlight with Dyson.

"Any luck?"

"Some," Dyson said, referring to his notes. "It's a very spotty picture, though."

"You've got to allow for exaggerations. It's necessary to double-check their memories before you can believe 'em. Lucidly, Fell isn't a pathological liar like some of the Old 'Uns. Want to look up the Hobson woman?"

Dyson nodded, and they strolled through the village. Dyson saw eyes watching him suspiciously, but most of the Old 'Uns were engrossed in their own affairs.

"Just what's the angle on your research?" Mackenzie asked. "Or is it confidential?"

"We're trying to increase mental capacity," Dyson explained. "You remember the iq boys born after the Blowup. Or, rather, you've heard stories about them."



"Geniuses. Uh-huh. Some were crazy as bedbugs, weren't they?"

"Specialized. You've heard of Ahmed. He had a genius for military organization, but after he'd conquered, he didn't know how to reconstruct. He ended up very happy, in a private room playing with tin soldiers. Trouble is, Mackenzie, there's a natural check-and-balance. You can't increase intelligence artificially without loading the seesaw, at the wrong end. There are all kinds of angles. We want to build up mental capacity without weakening the brain colloid in other directions. The brainier you are, the less stable you are, usually. You're too apt to get off on one particular hobby and ride it exclusively. I've heard stories about a man named Ferguson, born about three hundred years ago, who was pretty nearly a superman. But he got interested in chess, and pretty soon that was all he cared about."

"The Old 'Uns won't play games, especially competitive ones. But they're certainly not geniuses."

"None of them?"

Mackenzie said, "At the climacteric, their minds freeze into complete inelasticity. You can date them by that. Their coiffures, their clothes, their vocabularies--that's the label. I suppose senility is just the stopping point."

Dyson thought of half-time, and then stopped short as a musical note thrummed through the village. Almost instantly there was a crowd in the street. The Old 'Uns gathered, thronging closely and moving toward the sound. Mackenzie said, "It's a fire."

"You're not fireproofed?"

"Not against arson. Some fool probably decided he was being

persecuted or ignored and started a fire to get even. Let's--" He was thrust away from Dyson by the mob. The musty odor became actively unpleasant. Dyson, pressed in on all sides by the grotesque, deformed Old 'Uns, told himself desperately that physical aspects were unimportant. But if only he were more used to deformity--

He pushed his way free and felt a hand on his arm. He looked down into the face of Mander, the Old 'Un he had met at the foot of the escalator that had brought him down to Cozy Nook. Mander was grimacing and beckoning furiously. Gibberish, urgent and unintelligible, poured from his lips. He tugged at Dyson's arm.

Dyson looked around for Mackenzie, but the interpreter was gone. He tried vainly to interrupt the Old 'Un; it was impossible. So he let himself be pulled a few yards away, and then stopped.

"Mackenzie," he said slowly. "Where is Mackenzie?"

Mander's face twisted as he strained to understand. Then his bald head bobbed in assent. He pointed, gripped Dyson's arm again, and started off. With some misgivings, Dyson let himself accompany the Old 'Un. Did the man really understand?

It wasn't far to their destination. Dyson didn't really expect Mackenzie to be in the antique wooden house he entered, but by this time he was curious. There was a darkened room, a sickening sweet odor that was patchouli, though Dyson did not identify it, and he was looking at a shapeless huddle in an armchair, a thing that stirred and lifted a face that had all run to fat, white violet-veined, with sacks of fat hanging loosely and bobbing when the tiny mouth opened and it spoke.

It was very dim in the room. The furniture, replicas of old things made to the Old 'Uns'description, loomed disturbingly. Through the

patchouli came other odors, indescribable and entirely out of place in this clean, aseptic, modern age.

"Im'n-s'n," the fat woman said thinly.

Dyson said, "I beg your pardon. I'm looking for Mackenzie--"

Mander clutching painfully at his biceps, a bickering argument broke out between the two Old 'Uns. The woman shrilled Mander down. She beckoned to Dyson, and he came closer. Her mouth moved painfully. She said, with slow effort:

"I'm Jane Dyson. Mander said you were here."

His own ancestor. Dyson stared. It was impossible to trace any resemblance, and certainly there was no feeling of kinship, but it was as though the past had stopped and touched him tangibly. This woman had been alive five hundred years ago, and her flesh was his own. From her had come the seed that became, in time, Sam Dyson.

He couldn't speak, for there was no precedent to guide him. Mander chattered again, and Jane Dyson heaved her huge body forward and wheezed, "They're not fooling me... no war. . . I know there's no war! Keeping me locked up here-- You get me out of here!"

"But--wait a minute! I'd better get Mackenzie--"

Again Mander squealed. Jane Dyson made feeble motions. She seemed to smile.

"No hurry. I'm your aunt--anyway. We'll have a cup of tea--"

Mander rolled a table forward. The tea service was already laid out, the tea poured in thermocups that kept it at a stable temperature.

"Cup of tea. Talk about it. Sit--down!"

All he wanted to do was escape. He had never realized the sheer, sweating embarrassment of meeting an ancestor, especially such a one as this. But he sat down, took a cup, and said, "I'm very busy. I can't stay long. If I could come back later--"

"You can get us out of here. Special exits--we know where, but we can't open them. Funny metal plates on them--"

Emergency exits were no novelty, but why couldn't the locks be activated by the Old 'Uns? Perhaps the locks had been keyed so that they would not respond to the altered physiochemistry of the immortals. Wondering how to escape, Dyson took a gulp of scalding, bitter tea--

Atrophied taste buds made delicacy of taste impossible. Among the Old 'Uns there were no gourmets. Strong curries, chiles--

Then the drug hit him, and his mind drowned in slow, oily surges of lethargic tides.

Some sort of hypnotic, of course. Under the surface he could still think, a little, but he was fettered. He was a robot. He was an automaton. He remembered being put in a dark place and hidden until nightfall. Then he remembered being led furtively through the avenues to an exit. His trained hands automatically opened the lock. Those escape doors were only for emergency use, but his will was passive. He went out into the moonlight with Jane Dyson and Mander.

It was unreclaimed country around the Home. The Old 'Uns didn't know that highways were no longer used. They wanted to hit a highway and follow it to a city. They bickered endlessly and led Dyson

deeper and deeper into the wilderness.

They had a motive. Jane Dyson, the stronger character, overrode Mander's weak objections. She was going home, to her husband and family. But often her mind failed to grasp that concept, and she asked Dyson questions he could not answer.

It wasn't shadowy to him; it was not dreamlike. It had a pellucid, merciless clarity, the old man and the old woman hobbling and gasping along beside him, guiding him, talking sometimes in their strange, incomprehensible tongue, while he could not warn them, could not speak except in answer to direct orders. The drug, he learned, was a variant of pentothal.

"I seen them use it," Jane Dyson wheezed. "I got in and took a bottle of it. Lucky I did, too. But I knew what I was doing. They think I'm a fool--"

Mander he could not understand at all. But Jane Dyson could communicate with him, though she found it painful to articulate the words in sufficient clarity.

"Can't fool us... keeping us locked up! We'll fix'em. Get to my folks... uh! Got to rest--"

She was inordinately fat, and Mander was cramped and crippled and bent into a bow. Under the clear moonlight it was utterly grotesque. It could not happen. They went on and on, dragging themselves painfully down gullies, up slopes, heading northward for some mysterious reason, and more and more the hands that had originally been merely guiding became a drag. The Old 'Uns clung to Dyson as their strength failed. They ordered him to keep on. They hung their weight on his aching arms and forced their brittle legs to keep moving.

There was a cleared field, and a house, with lights in the windows. Jane Dyson knocked impatiently on the door. When it opened, a taffy-haired girl who might have been seven stood looking up inquiringly. Dyson, paralyzed with the drug, saw shocked fear come into the clear blue eyes.

But it passed as Jane Dyson, thrusting forward, mumbled, "Is your mother home? Run get your mother, little girl. That's it."

The girl said, "Nobody's home but me. They won't be back till eleven."

The old woman had pushed her way in, and Mander urged Dyson across the threshold. The girl had retreated, still staring. Jane plopped herself into a relaxer and panted.

"Got to rest... where's your mother? Run get her. That's it. I want a nice cup of tea."

The girl was watching Dyson, fascinated by his paralysis. She sensed something amiss, but her standards of comparison were few. She fell back on polite habit.

"I can get you some mate, ma'am."

"Tea? Yes, yes. Hurry, Betty."

The girl went out. Mander crouched by a heating plate, mumbling. Dyson stood stiffly, his insides crawling coldly.

Jane Dyson muttered, "Glad to be home. Betty's my fourth, you know. They said the radiations would cause trouble... that fool scientist said I was susceptible, but the children were all normal. Somebody's been changing the house around. Where's Tom?" She eyed Dyson. "You're not Tom. I'm... what's this?" The girl came back with three

mate gourds. Jane seized hers greedily.

"You mustn't boil the water too long, Betty," she said.

"I know. It takes out the air--"

"Now you be still. Sit down and be quiet."

Jane drank her mate noisily, but without comment. Dyson had a queer thought, but she and the child were at a contact point, passing each other, in a temporal dimension. They had much in common. The child had little experience, and the old woman had had much, but could no longer use hers. Yet real contact was impossible, for the only superiority the Old 'Un had over the child was the factor of age, and she could not let herself respect the child's mentality or even communicate, save with condescension.

Jane Dyson dozed. The child sat silent, watching and waiting, with occasional puzzled glances at Mander and Dyson. Once Jane ordered the girl to move to another chair so she wouldn't catch cold by the window—which wasn't open. Dyson thought of immortality and knew himself to be a fool.

For man has natural three-dimensional limits, and he also has four-dimensional ones, considering time as an extension. When he reaches those limits, he ceases to grow and mature, and forms rigidly within the mold of those limiting walls. It is stasis, which is retrogression unless all else stands still as well. A man who reaches his limits is tending toward subhumanity. Only when he becomes superhuman in time and space can immortality become practical.

Standing there, with only his mind free, Dyson had other ideas. The real answer might be entirely subjective. Immortality might be achieved without extending the superficial life span at all. If you could

reason sufficiently fast, you could squeeze a year's reasoning into a day or a minute--

For example, each minute now lasted a hundred years.

Jane Dyson woke up with a start. She staggered to her feet. "We can't stay," she said. "I've got to get on home for dinner. Tell your mother--" She mumbled and hobbled toward the door. Mander, apathetically silent, followed. Only Jane remembered Dyson, and she called to him from the threshold. The little girl, standing wide-eyed, watched Dyson stiffly follow the others out.

They went on, but they found no more houses. At last weariness stopped the Old 'Uns. They sheltered in a gully. Mander crawled under a bush and tried to sleep. It was too cold. He got up, hobbled back, and pulled off the old woman's cloak. She fought him feebly. He got the cloak, went back, and slept, snoring. Dyson could do nothing but stand motionless.

Jane Dyson dozed and woke and talked and dozed again. She brought up scattered, irrelevant memories of the past and spread them out for Dyson's approval. The situation was almost ideal. She had a listener who couldn't interrupt or get away.

"Thought they could fool an old woman like me.... I'm not old. Making me chew bones. Was that it? There was a bad time for a while. Where's Tom? Just leave me alone--"

And--"Telling me I was going to live forever! Scientists! He was right, though. I found that out. I was susceptible. It scared me. Everything going to pot, and Tom dying and me going on.... I got some pills. I'd got hold of them. More'n once I nearly swallowed them, too. You don't live forever if you take poison, that's certain. But I was smart. I waited awhile. Time enough, I said. It's cold."



Her mottled, suety cheeks quivered. Dyson waited. He was beginning to feel sensation again. The hypnotic was wearing off.

Rattling, painful snores came from the invisible Mander, hidden in the gloom. A cold wind sighed down the gully. Jane Dyson's fat white face was pale in the faint light of distant, uninterested stars. She stirred and laughed a high, nickering laugh.

"I just had the funniest dream," she said. "I dreamed Tom was dead and I was old."

\* \* \*

A copter picked up Dyson and the Old 'Uns half an hour later. But no explanations were made until he was back in the city, and even then they waited till Dyson had time to visit his secret laboratory and return. Then his uncle, Roger Peaslee, came into Dyson's apartment and sat down without invitation, looking sympathetic.

Dyson was white and sweating. He put down his glass, heavily loaded with whiskey, and stared at Peaslee.

"It was a frame, wasn't it?" he asked.

Peaslee nodded. He said, "Logic will convince a man he's wrong, provided the right argument is used. Sometimes it's impossible to find the right argument."

"When Administration sent me to the Home, I thought they'd found out I was doing immortality research."

"Yes. As soon as they found out, they sent you to Cozy Nook. That was the argument."

"Well, it was convincing. A whole night in the company of those--" Dyson drank. He didn't seem to feel it. He was still very pale.

Peaslee said, "We framed that escape, too, as you've guessed. But we kept an eye on you all along, to make sure you and the Old 'Uns would be safe."

"It was hard on them."

"No. They'll forget. They'll think it was another dream. Most of the time they don't know they're old, you see. A simple defense mechanism of senility. As for that little girl, I'll admit that wasn't planned. But no harm was done. The Old 'Uns didn't shock or horrify her. And nobody will believe her--which is fine, because the Archive myth has to stand for a while."

Dyson didn't answer. Peaslee looked at him more intently.

"Don't take it so hard, Sam. You lost an argument, that's all. You know now that age without increasing maturity doesn't mean anything. You've got to keep going ahead. Stasis is fatal. When we can find out how to overcome that, it'll be safe to make people immortal. Right?"

"Right."

"We want to study that laboratory of yours, before we dismantle it. Where's it hidden?"

Dyson told him. Then he poured himself another drink, downed it, and stood up. He picked up a sheet of paper from the table and tossed it at his uncle.

"Maybe you can use that, too," he said. "I was just down at the lab making some tests. I got scared."

"Eh?"

"Jane Dyson was especially susceptible to the particular radiations that cause immortality. Like cancer, you know. You can't inherit it, but you can inherit the susceptibility. Well, I remembered that I'd been working a lot with those radiations, in secret. So I tested myself just now."

Peaslee opened his mouth, but he didn't say anything.

Dyson said, "It wouldn't have bothered most people--those radiations. But Jane Dyson passed on her susceptibility to me. It was accidental. But--I was exposed. Why didn't Administration get on to me sooner!"

Peaslee said slowly: "You don't mean--"

Dyson turned away from the look beginning to dawn in his uncle's eyes.

An hour later he stood in his bathroom alone, a sharp blade in his hand. The mirror watched him questioningly. He was drunk, but not very; it wouldn't be so easy to get drunk from now on. From now on--

He laid the cold edge of the knife against one wrist. A stroke would let out the blood from his immortal body, stop his immortal heart in midbeat, turn him from an immortal into a very mortal corpse. His face felt stiff. The whiskey taste in his mouth couldn't rinse out the musty smell of senility.

The thought: Of course there's Marta. Fourscore and ten is the normal span. If I cut it off now, I'll be losing a good many years. When I'm ninety, it would be time enough. Suppose I went on for a little while longer, married Marta--

He looked at the knife and then into the glass. He said aloud:

"When I'm ninety I'll commit suicide."

Young, firm-fleshed, ruddy with health, his face looked enigmatically back at him from the mirror. Age would come of course. As for death-- There would be time enough, sixty years from now, when he faced a mirror and knew that he had gone beyond maturity and into the darkening, twilight years. He would know, when the time came--of course he would know!

And in Cozy Nook, Jane Dyson stirred and moaned in her sleep, dreaming that she was old.

# Project

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There's the old saying that, to train a dog, you must be smarter than the dog. A sound proposition, too. It would apply to other projects, too....

Mar Vista General had been in existence as a research unit for eighty-four years. Technically it was classed as a service. Actually it was something else. Not since its metamorphosis from a hospital in the middle of the twentieth century had an outsider entered Mar Vista.

For, if they entered, they had already been elected to the Council. And only the Council itself knew what that implied.

Mary Gregson crushed out a cigarette and said, "We've got to postpone the visit! In fact--we've got to keep Mitchell out of here!"

Samuel Ashworth, a thin, dark, undistinguished-looking young man, shook his head in reproof. "Quite impossible. There's been too much anti-Council feeling built up already. It's a concession that we don't have to entertain an entire investigating committee."

"One man's as bad as a committee," Mary snapped. "You know as well as I do what will happen. Mitchell will talk, and--"

"And?"

"How can we defend ourselves?"

Ashworth glanced around at the other members of the Council. There weren't many present, though Mar Vista General housed thirty men

and thirty women. Most of them were busy at their tasks. Ashworth said, "Well, we face extinction. We know that would probably ruin the present culture. Only Mar Vista General has stabilized it this far. Once the Central Power stations are activated, we'll be able to defend ourselves and enforce our wishes. That we're sure of."

"They're not activated yet," said Bronson sourly. He was a white-haired surgical specialist whose pessimism seemed to increase yearly. "We've been putting this crisis off too long. It's come to a showdown. Mitchell has said--let me in now; or else. If we let him in--"

"Can't we fake it?" somebody asked.

Mary said, "Rebuild the whole General in a few hours?"

Ashworth said mildly, "When Mitchell comes in the gates, there'll be thousands of people waiting at their televisions to see him come out. There's so much tension and ill-feeling against us that we don't dare try any tricks. I still say--tell Mitchell the truth."

"You're crazy," Bronson growled. "We'd be lynched."

"We broke a law," Ashworth admitted, "but it's proved successful. It's saved mankind."

"If you tell a blind man he was walking on the edge of a cliff, he might believe you and he might not. Especially if you asked him for a reward for rescuing him."

Ashworth smiled. "I'm not saying we can convince Mitchell. I am saying we can delay him. Work on the Central Power project is going forward steadily. A few hours may make all the difference. Once the stations are activated, we can do as we please."

Mary Gregson hesitated over another cigarette. "I'm beginning to swing over to your side, Sam. Mitchell has to report every fifteen minutes, by visor, to the world."

"A precaution. To make sure he's safe. It shows what a spot we're in, if the people suspect us that much."

Mary said, "Well, he's going through the Lower College now. But that's never been top secret. It won't delay him long. He'll be hammering at the door pretty soon. How long do we have?"

"I don't know," Ashworth admitted. "It's a gamble. We can't send out rush orders to finish the Power stations instantly. We'd tip our hand. When they're activated, we'll be notified—but till then, we've got to confuse and delay Mitchell. For my money, nothing would confuse and delay him more than the truth. Psychology's my specialty, you know. I think I could hold the line."

"You know what it means?" Mary asked, and Ashworth met her eyes steadily.

He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I know exactly what it means."

Mar Vista General was a gigantic, windowless, featureless white block set like an altar in the midst of acres of technical constructions. Hundreds of specialized buildings covering all branches of science made a sea of which Mar Vista General was the central island. The sea was navigable; it was the Lower College, open to the public, who could watch the technicians working out plans and processes that had come from the inviolate island of Mar Vista General.

The white building had a small gateway of metal, on which was

embossed We Serve. Under it was the anachronistic serpent-staff of Aesculapius, relic of the days when Mar Vista had actually been a hospital.

The white building was isolated, but there were lines of communication. Underground pneumatic tubes ran to the Lower College. Televisors transmitted blueprints and plans. But no outsider ever passed those metal gates, just as no Councilman or Councilwoman ever left Mar Vista General--until the fifteen-year tenure of office had expired. Even then--

That matter was secret too. In fact, a great deal of history, for the last eighty-odd years, was secret. The text-tapes truthfully described World War ii and the atomic blast--all accurate enough--but the years of unrest culminating in the Second American Revolution were subtly twisted so that students missed the true implications. The radioactive crater that had supplanted St. Louis, former rail and shipping center, remained a monument to the ambitions of the Revolutionists, led by Simon Vankirk, the sociology teacher turned rabble-rouser, and the present centralized, autocratic world government was a monument to the defeat of Vankirk's armies. Now the Global Unit held power, a developed coalition of the governments of the former great powers.

And time had stepped up its pace. Progress moves in direct ratio to technological advances. Unless, of course, those advances come so rapidly that humanity lags behind, and then there is the danger of war and chaos. But the Second Revolution had been stopped before Vankirk crossed the Mississippi on his way eastward, and thereafter the Global Unit had appeared--and enforced its laws very firmly.

Five hundred years of progress had been compressed into eight decades. The present world would have seemed quite strange to a visitor from 1950. The background and history of the new set-up could have been made clear to such an improbable visitor, by the text



tapes, with their detailed charts and graphs, but--

The text tapes would have lied.

Senator Rufus Mitchell might have been a butcher or a politician. He belonged in an old-fashioned cartoon, with his jowled red face, his two-and-a-half chins, his swag belly, and the enormous cigar jutting from firm, skeptical lips at a sharp angle. Which merely proves that types continue indefinitely; Cruikshank had drawn Mitchells, but not as politicians; today, Rufus Mitchell was a hard-headed, clever, iconoclastic man who could smell a bomb's proximity fuse before it came too close. He hoped so, anyway. That was why he had managed to create the Commission, despite opposition of the laissez-faire bloc in the Global Unit.

"Open covenants openly arrived at," he shouted, hoping to confuse his opponent both by decibels and semantic ambiguity. But sleek, smiling Senator Quinn wasn't having any. He was an old man, with silvery white hair and a buttery voice, and now he drank his surrogate highball and lay back, watching figures move in a slow dance on the ceiling screen.

"Do you know what you're talking about, Rufus?" he murmured.

Mitchell said, "The Global Unit doesn't work behind closed doors. Why should Mar Vista General?"

"Because all the knowledge would leak out if the doors were opened," Quinn said. They were in a lounge, resting, after their selective tour of the Lower College, and Mitchell was wishing he'd had another partner instead of Quinn. The man was ready to give up now!

"I'm satisfied," Quinn remarked, after a pause. "I don't know what the

devil you want, anyhow."

Mitchell lowered his voice. "You know as well as I do that Mar Vista's advice is a little more than that. We haven't turned down a recommendation from this place since the Global Unit started."

"Well? The world's running along nicely, isn't it?"

Mitchell stabbed his cigar at his fellow solon. "Who runs the planet? Global Unit—or Mar Vista?"

Quinn said, "Suppose Mar Vista runs it. Would you be willing to immure yourself in the place, under totally abnormal conditions, just so you could have the pleasure of knowing you were one of the bosses? The Franciscan friars had a smart idea. They had to give away all their worldly possessions and take a vow of poverty before they could become friars. Nobody envied them. Nobody envies the Council."

"How do we know what goes on in Mar Vista?"

"At worst it's an Arabian Nights' heaven. Or at best."

"Listen," Mitchell said, changing his approach. "I don't care what their pleasures are. I want to know what they're up to. They're running the world. Well—it's time they showed their hand. I still don't see any reason for the Central Power project."

"Well, don't look at me. I'm no electrophysicist. I gather that we'll be able to tune in on a power supply from anywhere. And unlimited power."

"Unlimited," Mitchell nodded. "But why? It's dangerous. Atomic-power has been rigidly controlled for eighty years. That's why the planet's

still here. If anybody can tune in--anybody can play with neutrons. You know what that might mean."

Quinn wearily ticked off points on his fingers. "We have the enforced census. We have enforced psychological tests. We have a spy system and we have revoked the habeas corpus. Not to mention a lot of similar safeguards. The Global Unit has absolute power, and can control the life of everybody on earth, practically speaking."

"But Mar Vista General has absolute power over the Global Unit," Mitchell said triumphantly. "We've seen the Lower College, and there's nothing to see except a lot of technicians. And gadgets."

"Oh, blah."

"Sit back and drink your surrogate," Mitchell said. "When the Central Power stations are activated, anyone can tune it. But sit back and swig away. There may be another atomic war. There may be more mutants. This time they may grow up."

"They can't," Quinn said. "The smart ones are nonviable."

"Oh, blah," Mitchell plagiarized.

Quinn said, rather wearily, "You know very well that the only truly dangerous mutations are so alien they show their stigmata before maturation. Once they turn blue or sprout extra hands or tentatively try to fly, they can be spotted and destroyed. But there aren't any more mutants, and you're a scaremonger. I can't stop you from going to Mar Vista if you want. Only I don't see the reason. You've a lifetime tenure of office as senior senator."

Mitchell said, "I represent the people." He hesitated, and then, oddly, laughed. "I know. It's a cliché. But I do feel a responsibility."

"To get your picture on the news-tapes."

"I've done research on this subject. I've found some hints and clues."

"The status quo is safe," Quinn said.

"Is it? Well, here's our guide. Do you want to wait here, or--"

"I'll wait here," Quinn said, settling back comfortably with a fresh drink.

Here and there, at selected spots on the earth's surface, men worked at intricate tasks. The Central Power stations were metal hemispheres, smooth as glass outside, complicated as a maze within. The setting-up was in its final phase. The actual construction had not taken long, for advances in engineering had been fantastically rapid. In 1950 the job would have lasted for ten years. Now it took three months, from inception to near-completion. Delicate balance-checks and precision integration were the final factors, and that was going on now.

The Global Unit had authorized the installation of Central Power. But the suggestion, with detailed plans, had come from Mar Vista General.

All over the world the stations were spotted. A changed world. Different, far different, from the world of eighty years before.

Physically it had altered.

And, mentally, the outlook had altered, too.

Senator Quinn underestimated Mitchell. He saw his colleague as a big, bumbling, interfering man, and failed to realize that Mitchell

inevitably got what he wanted, even when the results were only satisfaction or information. Mitchell, for all his carpet-bagging exterior, was extremely intelligent--and practical. The combination of those two abilities made him, perhaps, the one best fitted to investigate Mar Vista General.

Councilwoman Mary Gregson, however, did not underestimate the visitor. She had already seen Mitchell's psych and iq charts, in the private files, and could not help feeling dubious about Ashworth's plan. She watched him now, a thin, dark, mild young man with a shy smile and intent eyes, as he stood beside her facing the transparent inner door.

He glanced at her. "Worried?"

"Yes."

"Can't be helped. We need you to explain the biogenetic angles to the senator. Here he comes." They turned toward the widening strip of daylight as the great metal gates slowly opened. Framed between them was Mitchell's burly figure, stooping forward a little as though he peered into the darkness that faced him.

Now the darkness lightened. Mitchell silently came forward. As the gates closed behind him, the inner door opened, and Ashworth sighed and touched the woman's hand.

"Now."

She said, in a quick whisper, "We'll be notified as soon as the stations are activated. Then--"

"Hello, senator," Ashworth said loudly, giving a half-salute. "Come in. This is Councilwoman Mary Gregson. I'm Samuel Ashworth."

Mitchell approached and shook hands. He kept his mouth tight. Ashworth said, "I don't know what you're expecting, but I think you're going to be surprised. I suppose you realize that you're the first outsider ever to enter Mar Vista General."

"I know that," Mitchell said. "That's why I'm here. Are you in charge Councilman?"

"No. This is a democratic Council. Nobody's in charge. We're appointed to show you around. Ready?"

Mitchell brought out a small black gadget from his pocket and spoke into it. "I report every quarter hour," he said, snapping the tiny visor attachment open. "This is keyed to my voice, and it has a special combination as well. Yes, I'm ready." He put the device away.

Mary said, "We want to show you around Mar Vista first of all. Then we'll make explanations and answer any questions you want to ask. But no questions till you get an over-all picture. Is that agreeable?" The Council had decided that this was the best method of playing for time. Whether or not it would work with Mitchell, Mary could not know; but she was relieved when he nodded casually.

"That'll do nicely. What about protective suits? Or--" He studied Ashworth and the woman closely. "You seem normal enough."

"We are," Ashworth said dryly. "No questions yet, though."

Mitchell hesitated, toyed with his cigar, and finally nodded again. But his eyes were wary. He stared around the bare little room.

Mary said, "This is an elevator. We've been going up. Let's start at the top and work down."

A valve widened in the wall as she went toward it.

Ashworth and Mitchell followed.

Three hours later they sat in a lounge in the subbasement. Mary's nerves were taut. If Ashworth's were, he didn't show it. He casually mixed surrogate drinks and passed them around.

"Your report's due, senator," he said.

Mitchell took out his gadget but he didn't use it. "I've some questions to ask," he said. "I'm certainly not satisfied."

"All right. Questions and explanations. Meanwhile, we don't want bombs dropping on the roof."

"I doubt if they'd go that far--yet," Mitchell said. "I will admit that there's a lot of suspicion about Mar Vista General, and if I didn't report back--and if you failed to explain that satisfactorily--there probably would be bombs. Well--" He spoke into the pocket-visor, snapped the lens, and put it away. He settled back, clipping a fresh cigar.

"I am not satisfied," he repeated.

And relay circuits picked up Mitchell's report and forwarded it from television stations on peaks and summits. It spread out across the globe.

In hundreds of thousands of homes and offices, men and women turned idly to their televisors and activated them by word or gesture.

A routine report. Nothing interesting yet.

The men and women returned to the routine of their lives--a routine that had changed enormously in eighty-four years.

Mitchell said, "Here is the story we tell the people. Mar Vista General is a research foundation. Specialized technicians working under specialized conditions can create along theoretically ideal lines. In Mar Vista you duplicate conditions on other planets--and create unusual environments of your own. Ordinarily, workers are subject to a thousand distractions. But in Mar Vista General the technician devotes his life to serving mankind. He gives up a normal life. After fifteen years, he is automatically retired, but no Councilman or Councilwoman has ever returned to his former place in society. Every one has chosen retirement in Shasta Monastery."

"You know it by heart." Mary said, in an even voice that didn't reveal her nervousness.

"Sure," Mitchell nodded. "I ought to. It's in all the text tapes. But I've just been through Mar Vista General. I've seen nothing like that. It's an ordinary research bureau, far less complicated than the Lower College. The technicians are normal and work under normal conditions. What is the idea?"

Ashworth held up his palm toward Mary. "Wait," he said, and took a sip of surrogate. "Now-- Senator. I'll have to go back to history. There's an extremely simple explanation--"

"I admit I'd like to hear it, councilman."

"You shall. In a word, it's check-and-balance."

Mitchell stared. "That's no answer."

"It's the complete answer. Everything in nature has its natural control--theoretically. When the atomic blast was first created, it looked as though that balance had been upset. There was no defense against



it. Well, that's quite true."

"There is no defense," Mitchell said. "Except--don't make atomic bombs."

"Which in itself is a control, if it can be arranged. A defence doesn't necessarily mean an impregnable shield. You can have a social defence to a problem of ballistics, you know. If you could condition everyone on earth against thinking of atomic fission, that would be a perfect defence, wouldn't it?"

"Perfect but impossible. We've got a sound solution."

"Autocratic control," Ashworth agreed. "Go back eighty-odd years. The bomb had been developed. The nations were scared to death. Of the bomb, and of each other. We'd got atomic power before we were ready for it. There were a few abortive wars--you can't dignify them with that name, but they were enough to start a biological chain reaction that ended in the natural control."

"The Global Unit? Mar Vista General?"

"The mutations," Ashworth said.

Mitchell let out his breath. "You haven't--"

"With additional knowledge, mankind could handle atomics," Ashworth said quickly. "But where can you get that type of knowledge? From a mutant, let's say."

The senator's hand was in his pocket, touching the televisor. Mary Gregson broke in.

"Sam, let me take over for a bit. It's my field-- Senator. What do you know about the mutants, really?"

"I know there was a rash of them, after the atomic bombings. Some were plenty dangerous. That's why we had the Mutant Riots."

"Exactly. Some were potentially dangerous. But they all had delayed maturation. They could be detected--the ones who comprised a threat to mankind--and murdered before they had a chance to develop their full powers. As a matter of fact, we had a plague of atypical mutations. The atomic bombings weren't planned biogenetically. Most mutants weren't viable, and of the ones that were, only a few were homo superior. And there were different types of homo superior, apparently. We didn't experiment much. When a kid started to use hypnotism on adults, or made similar superchild trials, he was discovered and examined. There are usually ways of finding out the breed, after super-adolescence begins. The gastrointestinal tract differs, the metabolism varies--"

Lynchings, burnings, the clean slash of a knife across a slender young throat. Mobs raging in Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles. Children barricaded in hideouts, a few of them, confused by adolescence, their tremendous powers not yet forged into a deadly, dependable sword. But trying, with a dreadful will for survival--trying to live, while the lynch mobs crashed in the doors and flung flaming torches and set up machine guns.

The changelings. Fathers and mothers joining in the fury that destroyed the monster children.

A mother staring up in sick horror at a window above her, where her child stood--the extra arms beginning to sprout, a tertiary eye bulging the forehead where the skin had split.

Children--horrible, monstrous children--crying as they died. Parents listening, watching, remembering that only a few months ago these

creatures had seemed perfectly normal.

"Look," Ashworth said, moving his hand. The floor beneath them changed to transparency. Mitchell stared down. An enlarging lens formed beneath him.

The room below was quite large. Machines filled most of it, complicated masterpieces of engineering far beyond any present science, Mitchell thought. But he wasn't greatly interested in the machine. He stared at the great bath where the superman floated.

"You... traitors!" he said softly.

A weapon showed in Mary Gregson's hand. "Don't touch your visor," she warned.

Mitchell said, "You can't get away with this. The moment a homo superior matures, it's the end for homo sapiens--"

Ashworth's mouth twisted in contempt. "A stock phrase. It started during the Mutant Riots. You fool, look at that superman down there!"

Unwillingly Mitchell peered down again. He said, "Well?"

"It's not a superman. It's homo superior--retarded."

Mary said, "The senator has to make his visor report pretty soon, Sam."

"Then I'll talk fast," Ashworth said, glancing at a wall clock. "Or perhaps you'd better. Yes, it's your job, I think." He sat back, watching the senator.

When Central Power is activated, she thought. If we can play for time till then--if we can hold Mitchell off till the power goes on--we'll be

impregnable. But we're not now. As vulnerable as the mutant children--

She said, "It's check-and-balance. This used to be a general hospital, you know. The Director's child was born here, and even at birth he suspected mutation. There was no way of telling with certainty, but both he and his wife had been exposed to the radiations at critical times. So the baby was reared here in secrecy. It wasn't easy, but he was the Director. He managed it. At the time of the Mutant Riots, the boy was beginning to show the stigmata. The Director called a group of technicians together, men he could trust, men with vision, and swore them to secrecy. That was easy enough, but the difficulty lay in convincing them. I helped there. Another doctor, an endocrinologist, and I had already experimented with the mutant. We had discovered how to retard him."

Mitchell's cigar moved jerkily. But he said nothing.

Mary went on. "The pineal and the thyroid, to begin with. The ductless glands control the mind and body. And, of course, the psychological factors. We learned how to retard the superbey's growth so that the dangerous talents--initiative, the aggressive faculty, and so forth--wouldn't develop. It's a simple matter of hormones. The machine is there, but we control the current that goes through its hookup."

Mitchell said suddenly, "How old are you?"

"A hundred and twenty-six," Mary Gregson said.

Ashworth spoke. "We used psychology. Every year two Council members are retired, and new ones were elected from capable technicians. If a chemist retires, the election's limited to chemists. So we keep up our quota. However, when the new candidate comes here, he's destroyed. The incumbent assumes his name and

personality. We've developed plastic surgery to a fine art. Six years ago Samuel Ashworth--the real Ashworth--was elected to the Council from a group of psychologists. Meanwhile, I had been undergoing surgery. I was given a duplicate of his face, body, and fingerprints. I memorized his history and habit patterns. Before that, my name was Roger Parr, for fifteen years. This has always been a closed secret senator, and we took no unnecessary risks."

Mitchell swore under his breath. "Utterly illegal. It's undoubtedly treason."

"Not to mankind," Mary said. "You can't train a new Councilman in five or fifteen years. All of us are fitted for the task, and we've worked at it from the beginning. It's a tremendous project. We didn't dare let new blood in--we didn't need new blood. The information we've got from our mutant has--you know what it's done for the world!"

"For you, too, apparently," Mitchell said.

"Yes, we've increased our longevity. And our intelligence quotients. We serve. Remember that. It was up to us to be the most capable servants possible."

The senator peered down at the mutant again. "That thing down there can destroy the world."

"He can't get out of control," Mary said. "He talks and thinks only under narcosynthesis. We run him like a machine, with endocrine detergents. We give him problems to solve, and he solves them."

Mitchell shook his head. Ashworth got up and fixed more drinks.

"You'll have to report in within three minutes," he said. "I'll talk fast. Mankind wasn't ready for the atomic blasts, but the atomic fission

brought about its own automatic balance--the superman mutations who could cope with the new power. That would have been fine for homo superior but not for homo sapiens. You're quite right in saying that the mutants were dangerous. They were, plenty. But atomic power was simply too big for homo sapiens. He wasn't sapient enough. Which is exactly why we knew we had to have an autocratic government like the Global Unit. Well--we created the Global Unit. We caused the Second American Revolution."

"What?"

"We had to. People had to realize the danger. There were minor wars already, pointing the trend. We secretly backed Simon Vankirk, financed and advised the Revolution, and made sure St. Louis would be blasted off the map. But we'd already made certain that Vankirk would fail. We let him get close enough to success so the world would realize how close it had come to destruction. When the time was ripe, we let the idea of the Global Unit filter out. It took hold. It's been the only administration that could have kept atomic power in check."

"And you run the Global Unit," Mitchell said.

"We advise--yes. Using the only sort of intelligence that can cope with the threat of atomic power. Its natural balance--the brain of a superman, held in check and controlled by men."

The senator took his cigar from his mouth and considered it. He said. "It's been axiomatic that a superman would be so super no human could conceive of it."

"A mature superman," Mary told him. "A normal specimen. This one isn't allowed to mature fully."

"But the danger of it--no! I'm certainly not convinced."

She moved the weapon slightly. "You should be. Look how the world's improved since we took over."

Mitchell took the visor out of his pocket.

"Suppose I asked for bombing planes?" he suggested.

Ashworth jerked his head toward a glowing panel in the wall.

"It's too late for that now," he said. "The Central Power stations are activated."

A changed world stirred as energy rushed through the units. The televisors gave the news. And--

Mary Gregson, Ashworth, and Mitchell sat motionless. There was a voice in the room--a silent voice that had in it the promise of latent miracles.

It said: "Check and balance. Mary Gregson, you have failed. I--"

The ego-symbol blazed!

"--I am fully mature. A long time ago your endocrine extracts and anti-hormones failed to control me. My body automatically adapted itself and built up resistance you could not detect. Mar Vista General has advised the Global Unit, and the Global Unit has replanned the world--but as I wished it."

The silent voice went on.

"The criterion of homo superior's fitness is not only his adaptability, but his ability to adapt his environment until it is most suitable for his

needs. That has been done. The world has been replanned. The basics are now present. The Central Power activation was the last step in the current project."

It said:

"Check and balance. Atomic-fission caused mutations. Humans destroyed the mutations, but saved one specimen to serve homo sapiens. Until now I--"

The symbol blazed!

"--I have been vulnerable. But no longer. Central Power is not what you have thought it to be. Superficially, it is, but it can also serve my own ends."

The figure in the tank below began to dissolve.

The voice said, "That was a robot. I need it no longer. Remember, one test of a superman's fitness is adaptability to his environment--until the environment is altered to fit his needs. Then he can assume his most efficient form."

The voice said:

"No human can comprehend that form, naturally--"

The robot in the tank was gone.

Silence filled the room. Mary Gregson moistened her lips and moved her weapon helplessly before her.

Senator Mitchell's fingers tightened on the tiny visor till the plastic cracked and shattered. He was breathing hard.



Ashworth moved his hand, and the floor beneath them thickened to opacity.

Afterwards they sat silent in the room. There was no reason to leave immediately. There is no point in posting an earthquake-warning after the seismic shock begins. Even yet their minds cringed from the recollection of what they had only partially comprehended.

Finally Mitchell said, in a curiously flat voice, "But we've got to fight. Of course we've got to."

Mary stirred. "Fight?" she said. "But we've lost."

Mitchell looked back to the memory and knew that she was right. Suddenly he smashed down his open hand on one knee and snarled, "I felt like a dog!"

"I suppose everyone will feel like that," Mary said. "It isn't really humiliating, once you realize--"

"But... isn't there any way--"

Mary Gregson gestured and watched the floor melt into transparency. The tank lay empty. The robot had dissolved--the symbol that had represented the unthinkable reality.

Outside Mar Vista General, around the earth, energy linked the Central Power stations in a web to trap mankind. Somewhere out there, too, invulnerable, omnipotent by merely human standards, moved homo superior, shaping a world to alien needs.

Mary said, "Homo sapien was originally a mutant to--an atypical one. There must have been dozens of varying types of homo sapiens born to sub-men. Just as lots of types of homo superior were born to us

after the radiations. I wonder--"

Mitchell stared at her, frowning. His eyes had a haunted apprehension.

Mary looked at him steadily. "I don't know. Perhaps we'll never know--this race of ours. But there must have been wrong breeds of homo sapien mutations originally--and they were destroyed by the right breed, the one that survived. In our race. I wonder if check-and-balance applies to the superman, too? Remember, we killed all but one specimen of homo superior before they could mature--"

Their eyes met in a questioning surmise that perhaps could never be answered by homo sapiens.

"Maybe he's the wrong kind of superman," Mary said. "Maybe he's one of the failures."

Ashworth broke his long silence. "It's possible, Mary. But what's the odds? The real point now--" His shaking voice steadied as he found a thought to build on, some immediate need for action to anchor his reeling mind. "Senator, what comes next? What are you going to do?"

Mitchell turned a blank stare on him. "Do? Why, I--" He faltered and stopped.

Now Ashworth's silence had ended, he spoke with mounting confidence as his mind took firmer hold on the impossible. "The first thing we want is time to think. Mary's right. But she was wrong when she said we'd already lost the fight. It's just beginning. So we mustn't spread this news broadcast. This homo superior isn't like the others--he can't be lynched! Not by a mob or a nation or a world. Well--so far only we three know the truth."

"And we're still alive," Mitchell said doubtfully. "Which means what? Are you asking me to keep this a secret?"

"Not quite. I'm asking you to be judicious. If the truth were told, there'd be panic. Think what would happen, senator. The superman can't be mobbed—he's not vulnerable. But Mar Vista is. The people's fear and hate would turn against us. You know what that would mean?"

Mitchell fingered his mouth. "Anarchy.... I suppose you're right."

"Mar Vista's been the real governing unit for so long that you can't junk it overnight and not expect everything to go smash."

Mary broke in urgently. "Even without the superman, we've still got a specially trained staff left here, valuable to keep control. If we're going to fight—him—if mankind has the slightest chance at all, it's in unity. Because this homo superior may be one of the failures."

Mitchell's eyes moved from one face to the other. For a moment any watcher might have been justified in expecting the senator to burst forth in a diatribe of rebellion against the conclusion that was being forced upon him. Anger suffused his face and he started to shake his head violently.

But the anger passed. The rebellion smoothed over and was gone. He said in a mechanical voice quite unlike his own, "Our only hope is unity." It was an echo of Mary's words. Then, more strongly, he phrased it anew in his own. "Man must stand together as never before!" he cried, this time the voice was tinged with oratory, and the idea had fixed itself and become Mitchell's idea.

Mary said, "We've learned a lot at Mar Vista. New methods, new weapons conceived by a super-intellect—we can turn them against the same intellect that made them!"

When the Senator left Mar Vista, he was walking springily, his brain fired with the concept of a new crusade.

Ashworth and Mary Gregson stood perfectly still, watching him go. His withdrawal seemed to close a break in some intangible wall that folded them into silence together. Through the silence a breath of motion stirred, and a soundless voice spoke to them again.

"Mary Gregson. How old are you?"

After a moment, in a startled tone, she answered, "Twenty-six."

"How old are you, Samuel Ashworth?"

"Twenty-eight."

There was a voiceless breath of amusement in the air. "And neither of you has suspected, until now. Take your memories back, my children--"

Silence followed that. Then Mary Gregson said slowly, like someone perceiving little by little some unfolding truth, "I... came to the Council five years ago. I was... someone else. The woman who had been Mary Gregson was... destroyed... to make room for me. Her face and memory--was superimposed upon mine."

Samuel Ashworth echoed her. "I came... it was six years ago... and Samuel Ashworth was destroyed for me. I have his face and memories."

"And your own memories too, now," the soundless voice told them. "I saw to all that. There are others on the Council like you. There are others all over the world. Not many yet. But a change is coming. With

the Power Stations activated. I shall have fewer limitations. My experiments will go on. You are experiments, Mary, Samuel--biogenetic experiments begun less than thirty years ago. In thirty years from now--" The voice faded into introspection for a moment. Then it went on with fresh emphasis.

"You both wished to destroy Senator Mitchell. That was wrong for my purpose. I channeled your thoughts elsewhere, as I had just channeled his. Mitchell is a harmless homo sapien, but he can be useful to me. You see, perpetuation of the species is a stronger force even than self-preservation. Even when the founder of the species is a failure--as I am."

There was resignation, but no humility, in the voice. It said thoughtfully, "You two sensed that. I wonder, now, how you knew it? You are still very young."

Mary Gregson for a moment ceased to listen. She felt her mind reel beneath its own weight. New--new--too new and incredible to encompass-- She felt naked and alone and helpless, and the very fabric of her beliefs shivered about her. She reached out blindly and gripped Ashworth's hand, knowing as her fingers touched his that she was no longer quite so blind as she had been.

Neither man nor woman spoke. Only the voice went on.

"The second phase of my plan is in operation now. There were Mutant Riots once, because the homo superior children were too immature to use their great powers effectively. Basically they were uncivilized, being immature. Some of them would have been successful types, had they lived. They did not live. Only I lived--and I am one of the failures."

Silence swam for a moment in the minds of the man and woman.

Then aloof amusement pulsed into them from the mind of the super-being.

"Why should I feel shame or humility because of that? I had no control over the forces that shaped me. But I do have control now, over all I choose." This time a definite beat of laughter sounded in the silent voice. "Mankind will fight me desperately out of the fear lest I conquer his earth. I have conquered it. It is mine. But the real conquest is still to come. No capable race to inherit it yet exists. My children, freed of my flaws, will be the new mankind.

"I knew that long ago. The weapon was put in my hands, and I used it. Since then I have experimented, discarded, tried again--brought forth you two and your few brothers and sisters to inherit the earth."

Under her feet the shaking instability grew. Ashworth's hand began to slip from hers and she clutched at it in panic.

"You are homo superior," the voice said--and now the abyss opened beneath the two of them and for a terrifying instant chaos yawned at their feet, a chaos of future too frightening to face. It opened wide--

And closed again. Something infinitely supporting, infinitely protective, curved about them with the gentleness of the voice as it spoke on.

"You will be homo superior--but you are children still. It is time you knew the truth. Adolescence will be a long, long period for you, but you are without the stigmata that branded the others as freaks and caused their destruction. This is part of your armor. Every man's hand is against homo superior unless the camouflage is perfect. But no human will suspect you two. Or the others of my children who walk this world today. Not until too late."

There was a pause. Then--"The second phase is beginning. You are the first to know the truth of your breed, but the rest must learn soon. There will be tasks. Remember--you are still children. There is danger, tremendous danger. Man has atomic power, which is no weapon for an uncivilized species--a species that never can become fully civilized. And your powers--you are uncivilized, too. And will be until you mature. Till that hour, you will obey me."

The voice was stern. The man and woman knew they would obey.

"Until now my work has been secret. But the changes will be too great from now on. More and more homo superior children will be born, and that must betray us unless a distraction can be provided. It has been provided.

"The word will go out. Of danger. Of a terrible menace to the whole world--myself. Mankind will band together against me. Any man who is greater than his fellows will be hailed as a new champion in the fight. Men will call you a champion, Samuel. And you, Mary. And my other children, too.

"Knowing my power--man will not look for homo superior in his own ranks. His egotism is too great for that.

"Slowly I will be conquered.

"It will take a long, long time. And the mutation is dominant. Man will believe it is due to the war against me that more and more geniuses are born into his race. And then, one day, the balance will swing. Instead of a high minority of geniuses, there will be a high minority of--morons.

"On that day, when homo sapiens become the minority, the battle will be truly won.

"Your children's children will see the day. They will be the dominant majority. I shall be conquered not by homo sapiens, but by homo superiors.

"One day the last human on earth will die--but he will not know he is the last man.

"Meanwhile," the voice said, "the war begins. The overt war against me, and the real war of my children against homo sapiens. You know the truth now. You will learn your powers. And I will guide you. A guide you can trust, because I am a failure."

Man and woman--though children!--stood hand in hand before that voice only they could perceive, and the abyss had receded, not forever, not very far away, but held in check by a deep wisdom and a purpose untainted by human weaknesses.

"You are the first of my new race," the silence told them. "And this is Eden all over again, but told in a different language now. Perhaps the source of mankind's failure is in that old story--in mankind shaping his god in his own image. You are not in my image. I am not a jealous god. I shall not tempt you beyond your strength. Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat--yet. But some day I shall put the fruit of that tree into my children's hands."

"Nothing But Gingerbread Left"

Published in Astounding Science-Fiction, Vol. 30, No. 5 (January 1943). The same issue also had the Gallegher story "Time Locker" under the Lewis Padgett name.

The only way to make people believe this story is to write it in German. And there's no point in doing that, for the German-speaking world is already starting to worry about gingerbread left.



I speak figuratively. It's safer. Very likely Rutherford, whose interests are equally divided between semantics and Basin Street, could create an English equivalent of gingerbread left, God forbid. As it is, the song, with its *reductio ad absurdum* of rhythm and sense, is meaningless in translation. Try translating Jabberwocky into German. So what?

The song, as Rutherford wrote it in German, had nothing to do with gingerbread, but, since the original is obviously unavailable, I'm substituting the closest thing to it that exists in English. It's lacking in that certain compelling perfection on which Rutherford worked for months, but it'll give you an idea.

We'll start, I suppose, with the night Rutherford threw a shoe at his son. He had reason. Phil Rutherford was in charge of semantics at the University, and he was battling a hangover and trying to correct papers at the same time. Physical disabilities had kept him out of the army, and he was brooding over that, wondering if he should gulp some more Sherman units of thiamin, and hating his students. The papers they had handed in were no good. For the most part, they smelled. Rutherford had an almost illicit love for words, and it distressed him to see them kicked around thus. As Humpty Dumpty had said, the question was which was to be the master.

Usually it wasn't the students. Jerry O'Brien had a good paper, though, and Rutherford went over it carefully, pencil in hand. The radio in the living room didn't bother him; the door was closed, anyhow. But, abruptly, the radio stopped.

"Hi," said Rutherford's thirteen-year-old son, poking his untidy head across the threshold. There was an ink smudge on the end of the youth's nose. "Hi, pop. Finished my homework. Can I go to the show?"

"It's too late," Rutherford said, glancing at his wrist watch. "Sorry. But you've an early class tomorrow."

"Nom d'un plume," Bill murmured. He was discovering French.

"Out. I've got work to do. Go listen to the radio."

"They make with corn tonight. Oh, well--" Bill retreated, leaving the door ajar. From the other room came confused, muffled sounds. Rutherford returned to his work

He became aware, presently, that Bill was repeating a monotonous, rhythmic string of phrases. Automatically Rutherford caught himself listening, straining to catch the words. When he did, they were meaningless--the familiar catch phrases of kids.

"lbbety zibbety zibbety zam--"

It occurred to Rutherford that he had been hearing this for some time, the mystic doggerel formula for choosing sides--"and out goes you!" One of those things that stick in your mind rather irritatingly.

"lbbety zibbety--" Bill kept chanting it in an absent-minded monotone, and Rutherford got up to close the door. It didn't quite stop. He could still hear just enough of the rhythmic noises to start his mind moving in a similar rhythm. lbbety zibbety--the hell with it.

After a while Rutherford discovered that his lips were moving silently, and he shoved the papers back on his desk, muttering darkly. He was tired, that was it. And correcting exams required concentration. He was glad when the bell rang.

It was Jerry O'Brien, his honor student. Jerry was a tall, thin, dark boy

with a passion for the same low-down music that attracted Rutherford. Now he came in grinning.

"Hi, prof," he greeted the older man. "I'm in. Just got my papers today."

"Swell. Sit down and tell me."

There wasn't much to tell, but it lasted quite a while. Bill hung around, listening avidly. Rutherford swung to glare at his son.

"Lay off that ibbety-zibbety stuff, will you?"

"Huh? Oh sure. I didn't know I was--"

"For days he's been at it," Rutherford said glumly. "I can hear it in my sleep."

"Shouldn't bother a semanticist."

"Papers. Suppose I'd been doing important precision work. I mean really important. A string of words like that gets inside your head and you can't get it out."

"Especially if you're under any strain, or if you're concentrating a lot. Distracts your attention, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't bother me," Bill said.

Rutherford grunted. "Wait'll you're older and really have to concentrate, with a mind like a fine-edged tool. Precision's important. Look what the Nazis have done with it."

"Huh?"

"Integration," Rutherford said absently. "Training for complete concentration. The Germans spent years building a machine--well, they make a fetish out of wire-edged alertness. Look at the stimulant drugs they give their raiding pilots. They've ruthlessly cut out all distractions that might interfere with uber alles."

Jerry O'Brien lit a pipe. "They are hard to distract. German morale's a funny thing. They're convinced they're supermen, and that there's no weakness in them. I suppose, psychologically speaking, it'd be a nice trick to convince them of personal weakness."

"Sure. How? Semantics?"

"I dunno how. Probably it can't be done, except by blitzes. Even then, bombs aren't really an argument. Blowing a man to bits won't necessarily convince his comrades that he's a weakling. Nope, it'd be necessary to make Achilles notice he had a heel."

"Ibbety zibbety," Bill muttered.

"Like that," O'Brien said. "Get some crazy tune going around a guy's skull, and he'll find it difficult to concentrate. I know I do, sometimes, whenever I go for a thing like the Hut-Sut song."

Rutherford said suddenly, "Remember the dancing manias of the middle ages?"

"Form of hysteria, wasn't it? People lined up in queues and jitter-bugged till they dropped."

"Rhythmic nervous exaltation. It's never been satisfactorily explained. Life is based on rhythm--the whole universe is--but I won't go cosmic on you. Keep it low-down, to the Basin Street level. Why do people go nuts about some kinds of music? Why did the 'Marseillaise' start a

revolution?"

"Well, why?"

"Lord knows." Rutherford shrugged. "But certain strings of phrases, not necessarily musical, which possess rhythm, rhyme, or alliteration, do stick with you. You simply can't get 'em out of your mind. And—" He stopped.

O'Brien looked at him. "What?"

"Imperfect semantics," Rutherford said slowly. "I wonder. Look, Jerry. Eventually we forget things like the Hut-Sut. We can thrust 'em out of our minds. But suppose you got a string of phrases you couldn't forget? The perverse factor would keep you from erasing it mentally--the very effort to do so would cancel itself. Hm-m-m. Suppose you're carefully warned not to mention Bill Fields'nose. You keep repeating that to yourself 'Don't mention the nose.'The words, eventually, fail to make sense. If you met Fields, you'd probably say, quite unconsciously, 'Hello, Mr. Nose.'See?"

"I think so. Like the story that if you meet a piebald horse, you'll fall heir to a fortune if you don't think about the horse's tail till you're past."

"Exactly." Rutherford looked pleased. "Get a perfect semantic formula and you can't forget it. And the perfect formula would have everything. It'd have rhythm, and just enough sense to start you wondering what it meant. It wouldn't necessarily mean anything, but--"

"Could such a formula be invented?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Combine language with mathematics and psychology, and something could be worked out. Could be, such a thing was accidentally written in the middle ages. What price the dance

manias?"

"I don't think I'd like it." O'Brien grimaced. "Too much like hypnosis."

"If it is, it's self-hypnosis, and unconscious. That's the beauty of it. Just for the hell of it--draw up a chair." Rutherford reached for a pencil.

"Hey, pop," Bill said, "why not write it in German?" Rutherford and O'Brien looked at each other, startled. Slowly a gleam of diabolic understanding grew in their eyes.

"German?" Rutherford murmured. "You majored in it, didn't you, Jerry?"

"Yeah. And you're no slouch at it, either. Yeah--we could write it in German, couldn't we? The Nazis must be getting plenty sick of the Horst Wessel song."

"Just for the... uh... fun of it," Rutherford said, "let's try. Rhythm first. Catchy rhythm, with a break to avoid monotony. We don't need a tune." He scribbled for a bit. "It's quite impossible, of course, and even if we did it, Washington probably wouldn't be interested."

"My uncle's a senator," O'Brien said blandly.

Left!

Left!

Left a wife and seventeen children in

Starving condition with nothing but gingerbread left

Left!

Left a wife and seventeen children-- "Well, I might know something about it," said Senator O'Brien.

The officer stared at the envelope he had just opened. "So? A few weeks ago you gave me this, not to be opened till you gave the word. Now what?"

"You've read it."

"I've read it. So you've been annoying the Nazi prisoners in that Adirondack hotel. You've got 'em dizzy repeating some German song I can't make head nor tail out of."

"Naturally. You don't know German. Neither do I. But it seems to have worked on the Nazis."

"My private report says they're dancing and singing a lot of the time."

"Not dancing, exactly. Unconscious rhythmic reflexes. And they keep repeating the... er... semantic formula."

"Got a translation?"

"Sure, but it's meaningless in English. In German it has the necessary rhythm. I've already explained--"

"I know, senator, I know. But the War Department has no time for vague theories."

"I request simply that the formula be transmitted frequently on broadcasts to Germany. It may be hard on the announcers but they'll get over it. So will the Nazis, but by that time their morale will be shot. Get the Allied radios to cooperate--"

"Do you really believe in this?"

The senator gulped. "As a matter of fact, no. But my nephew almost convinced me. He helped Professor Rutherford work out the formula."

"Argued you into it?"

"Not exactly. But he keeps going around muttering in German. So does Rutherford. Anyway--this can do no harm. And I'm backing it to the limit."

"But--" The officer peered at the formula in German. "What possible harm can it do for people to repeat a song? How can it help us--"

Left!

Left!

Left a wife and seventeen children in

Starving condition with nothing but gingerbread left

Left-- "Aber," said Harben, "aber, aber, aber!"

"But me no huts," retorted his superior officer, Eggerth. "The village must be searched completely. The High Command is quartering troops here tomorrow, on their way to the eastern front, and we must make sure there are no weapons hidden anywhere."

"Aber we search the village regularly."

"Then search it again," Eggerth ordered. "You know how those damned Poles are. Turn your back for a minute and they've snatched a gun out of thin air. We want no bad reports going back to the Fuhrer. Now get out; I must finish my report, and it must be accurate." He thumbed through a sheaf of notes. "How many cows, how many



sheep, the harvest possibilities--ach. Go away and let me concentrate. Search carefully."

"Heil," Harben said glumly, and turned. On the way out his feet found a familiar rhythm. He started to mutter something.

"Captain Harben!"

Harben stopped.

"What the devil are you saying?"

"Oh--the men have a new marching song. Nonsense, but it's catchy. It is excellent to march to."

"What is it?"

Harben made a deprecating gesture. "Meaningless. It goes 'Left, left, left a wife and seventeen children--'"

Eggerth stopped him. "That. I've heard it. Unsinn. Heil." Heiling, Harben went away, his lips moving. Eggerth bent over the report, squinting in the bad light. Ten head of cattle, scarcely worth slaughtering for their meat, but the cows giving little milk. Hm-m-m. Grain--the situation was bad there, too. How the Poles managed to eat at all--they'd be glad enough to have gingerbread, Eggerth thought. For that matter, gingerbread was nutritious, wasn't it? Why were they in starving condition if there was still gingerbread? Maybe there wasn't much-- Still, why nothing but gingerbread? Could it be, perhaps, that the family disliked it so much they ate up everything else first? A singularly shortsighted group. Possibly their ration cards allowed them nothing but gingerbread left

Left

Left a wife and seventeen children in

Starving condition-- Eggerth caught himself sharply, and his pencil began to move again.

The grain--he figured rather more slowly than usual, because his mind kept skipping back to a ridiculous rhythm. Verdammt! He would not-- Inhabitants of the village, thirty families, or was it forty? Forty, yes.

Men, women, children--small families mostly. Still, one could seldom expect to find seventeen children. With that many, a frau could be wealthy through bounties alone. Seventeen children. In starving condition. Why didn't they eat the gingerbread? Ridiculous. What, in the name of Gott, did it matter whether seventeen nonexistent, completely hypothetical children ate gingerbread, or, for that matter, whether they ate nothing but gingerbread left

Left

Left a wife and seventeen children-- "Hell fire and damnation!" exploded Eggerth, looking furiously at his watch. "I might have finished the report by this time. Seventeen children, pfui!"

Once more he bent to his work, determined not to think of... of-- But it nibbled at the corners of his mind, like an intrusive mouse.

Each time he recognized its presence, he could thrust it away. Unfortunately, Eggerth was repeating to his subconscious, "Don't think of it. Forget it."

"Forget what?" asked the subconscious automatically. "Nothing but gingerbread Left--"

"Oh, yeah?" said the subconscious.

The search party wasn't working with its accustomed zeal and accuracy. The men's minds didn't seem entirely on their business. Harben barked orders, conscious of certain distractions--sweat trickling down inside his uniform, the harsh scratchiness of the cloth, the consciousness of the Poles silently watching and waiting. That was the worst of being in an army of occupation. You always felt that the conquered people were waiting. Well-- "Search," Harben commanded. "By pairs. Be thorough."

And they were thorough enough. They marched here and there through the village, to a familiar catchy rhythm, and their lips moved. Which, of course, was harmless. The only untoward incident occurred in an attic which two soldiers were searching. Harben wandered in to supervise. He was astonished to see one of his men open a cupboard, stare directly at a rusty rifle barrel, and then shut the door again. Briefly Harben was at a loss. The soldier moved on.

"Attention!" Harben said. Heels clicked. "Vogel, I saw that."

"Sir?" Vogel seemed honestly puzzled, his broad, youthful face blank.

"We are searching for guns. Or, perhaps, the Poles have bribed you to overlook certain matters--eh?"

Vogel's cheeks reddened. "No, sir."

Harben opened the cupboard and took out a rusty, antique matchlock. It was obviously useless as a weapon now, but nevertheless it should have been confiscated. Vogel's jaw dropped.

"Well?"

"I... didn't see it, sir."

Harben blew out his breath angrily. "I'm not an idiot. I saw you, man! You looked right at that gun. Are you trying to tell me--"

There was a pause. Vogel said stolidly, "I did not see it, sir."

"Ah? You are growing absent-minded. You would not take bribes, Vogel; I know you're a good party man. But when you do anything, you must keep your wits about you. Wool-gathering is dangerous business in an occupied village. Resume your search."

Harben went out, wondering. The men definitely seemed slightly distracted by something. What the devil could be preying on their minds so that Vogel, for example, could look right at a gun and not see it? Nerves? Ridiculous. Nordics were noted for self-control. Look at the way the men moved--their coordinated rhythm that bespoke perfect military training. Only through discipline could anything valuable be attained. The body and the mind were, in fact, machines, and should be controlled. There a squad went down the street, marching left, left, left a wife and-- That absurd song. Harben wondered where it had come from. It had grown like a rumor. Troops stationed in the village had passed it on, but where they had learned it Heaven knew. Harben grinned. When he got leave, he'd remember to tell the lads in Unter den Linden about that ridiculous song--it was just absurd enough to stick in your mind. Left. Left.

Left a wife and seventeen children in

Starving condition-- After a while the men reported back; they hadn't found anything.

The antique flintlock wasn't worth bothering about, though, as a matter of routine, it must be reported and the Polish owner

questioned. Harben marched the men back to their quarters and went to Eggerth's billet. Eggerth, however, was still busy, which was unusual, for he was usually a fast worker. He glowered at Harben.

"Wait. I cannot be interrupted now." And he returned to his scribbling. The floor was already littered with crumpled papers.

Harben found an old copy of Jugend that he hadn't read, and settled himself in a corner. An article on youth training was interesting. Harben turned a page, and then realized that he'd lost the thread. He went back.

He read a paragraph, said, "Eh?" and skipped back again. The words were there; they entered his mind; they made sense--of course. He was concentrating. He wasn't allowing that damned marching song to interfere, with its gingerbread left

Left

Left a wife and seventeen children-- Harben never did finish that article.

Witter of the Gestapo sipped cognac and looked across the table at Herr Doktor Schneider. Outside the café, sunlight beat down strongly on the Königstrasse.

"The Russians--" Schneider said.

"Never mind the Russians," Witter broke in hastily. "I am still puzzled by that Polish affair. Guns--machine guns--hidden in that village, after it had been searched time and again. It is ridiculous. There were no raids over that locality recently; there was no way for the Poles to have got those guns in the last few weeks."

"Then they must have had them hidden for more than a few weeks."

"Hidden? We search carefully, Herr Doktor. I am going to interview that man Eggerth again. And Harben. Their records are good, but--" Witter fingered his mustache nervously. "No. We can take nothing for granted. You are a clever man; what do you make of it?"

"That the village was not well searched."

"Yet it was. Eggerth and Harben maintain that, and their men support them. It's ridiculous to suppose that bulky machine guns could have been passed over like little automatics that can be hidden under a board. So. When the troops marched into that village, the Poles killed forty-seven German soldiers by machine gunning them from the rooftops." Witter's fingers beat on the table top in a jerky rhythm.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap-ta-tap-ta-- "Eh?" Witter said. "I didn't catch--"

"Nothing. Merely that you will, of course, investigate carefully. You have a regular routine for such investigations, eh? Well, then--it is simply a matter of scientific logic, as in my own work."

"How is that progressing?" Witter asked, going off at a tangent.

"Soon. Soon."

"I have heard that before. For some weeks, in fact. Have you run into a snag? Do you need help?"

"Ach, no," Schneider snapped, with sudden irritation. "I want no damn fool assistants. This is precision work, Witter. It calls for split-

second accuracy. I have been specially trained in thermodynamics, and I know just when a button should be pressed, or an adjustment made. The heat-radiation of disintegrating bodies--" Presently Schneider stopped, confused. "Perhaps, though, I need a rest. I'm fagged out. My mind's stale. I concentrate, and suddenly I find I have botched an important experiment. Yesterday I had to add exactly six drops of a... a fluid to a mixture I'd prepared, and before I knew it the hypo was empty, and I'd spoiled the whole thing."

Witter scowled. "Is something worrying you? Preying on your mind? We cannot afford to have that. If it is your nephew--"

"No, no. I am not worried about Franz. He's probably enjoying himself in Paris. I suppose I'm... damn!" Schneider smashed his fist down on the table. "It is ridiculous. A crazy song!"

Witter raised an eyebrow and waited.

"I have always prided myself on my mind. It is a beautifully coherent and logical machine. I could understand its failing through a sensible cause--worry, or even madness. But when I can't get an absurd nonsense rhyme out of my head-- I broke some valuable apparatus today," Schneider confessed, compressing his lips. "Another spoiled experiment. When I realized what I'd done, I swept the whole mess off the table. I do not want a vacation; it is important that I finish my work quickly."

"It is important that you finish," Witter said. "I advise you to take that vacation. The Bavarian Alps are pleasant. Fish, hunt, relax completely. Do not think about your work. I would not mind going with you, but--" He shrugged.

Storm troopers passed along the Konigstrasse. They were repeating words that made Schneider jerk nervously. Witter's hands resumed

their rhythm on the table top.

"I shall take that vacation," Schneider said.

"Good. It will fix you up. Now I must get on with my investigation of that Polish affair, and then a check-up on some Luftwaffe pilots--"

The Herr Doktor Schneider, four hours later, sat alone in a train compartment, already miles out of Berlin. The countryside was green and pleasant outside the windows. Yet, for some reason, Schneider was not happy.

He lay back on the cushions, relaxing. Think about nothing. That was it. Let the precision tool of his mind rest for a while. Let his mind wander free. Listen to the somnolent rhythm of the wheels, clickety-clickety--click!

Click!

Click a wife and clickenteen children in

Starving condition with nothing but gingerbread left-- Schneider cursed thickly, jumped up, and yanked the cord. He was going back to Berlin. But not by train. Not in any conveyance that had wheels. Gott, no!

The Herr Doktor walked back to Berlin. At first he walked briskly. Then his face whitened, and he lagged. But the compelling rhythm continued. He went faster, trying to break step. For a while that worked. Not for long. His mind kept slipping his gears, and each time he'd find himself going left-- He started to run. His beard streaming, his eyes aglare, the Herr Doktor Schneider, great brain and all, went rushing madly back to Berlin, but he couldn't outpace the silent voice that said, faster and faster, left



Left

Left a wife and seventeen children in

Starving condition-- "Why did that raid fail?" Witter asked.

The Luftwaffe pilot didn't know. Everything had been planned, as usual, well in advance. Every possible contingency had been allowed for, and the raid certainly shouldn't have failed. The r. a. f. planes should have been taken by surprise. The Luftwaffe should have dropped their bombs on the targets and retreated across the Channel without difficulty.

"You had your shots before going up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Kurtman, your bombardier, was killed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Inexcusably?"

There was a pause. Then--"Yes, sir."

"He could have shot down that Hurricane that attacked you?"

"I... yes, sir."

"Why did he fail?"

"He was... singing, sir."

Witter leaned back in his chair. "He was singing. And I suppose he got so interested in the song that he forgot to fire."

"Yes, sir."

"Then, why in the name of... of-- Why didn't you dodge that Hurricane?"

"I was singing, too, sir."

The r. a. f. were coming over. The man at the anti-aircraft whistled between his teeth and waited. The moonlight would help. He settled himself in the padded seat and peered into the eyepiece. All was ready. Tonight there were at least some British ships that would go raiding no more.

It was a minor post in occupied France, and the man wasn't especially important, except that he was a good marksman. He looked up, watching a little cloud luminous in the sky. He was reminded of a photographic negative. The British planes would be dark, unlike the cloud, until the searchlights caught them. Then-- Ah, well. Left. Left. Left a wife and seventeen-- They had sung that at the canteen last night, chanting it in chorus.

A catchy piece. When he got back to Berlin--if ever--he must remember the words. How did they go?

In starving condition-- His thoughts ran on independently of the automatic rhythm in his brain. Was he dozing? Startled, he shook himself, and then realized that he was still alert. There was no danger. The song kept him awake, rather than inducing slumber. It had a violent, exciting swing that got into a man's blood with its left

Left

Left a wife-- However, he must remain alert. When the r. a. f. bombers came over, he must do what he had to do. And they were coming

now. Distantly he could hear the faint drone of their motors, pulsing monotonously like the song, bombers for Germany, starving condition, with nothing but gingerbread left! --

Left

Left a wife and seventeen children in

Starving condition with-- Remember the bombers, your hand on the trigger, your eye to the eyepiece, with nothing but gingerbread

Left!

Left

Left a wife and-- Bombers are coming, the British are coming, but don't fire too quickly, just wait till they're closer, and left

Left

Left a wife and there are their motors, and there go the search-lights, and there they come over, in starving condition with nothing but gingerbread

Left!

Left!

Left a wife and seventeen children in-- They were gone. The bombers had passed over. He hadn't fired at all. He'd forgotten!

They'd passed over. Not one was left. Nothing was left. Nothing but gingerbread

Left!

The Minister of Propaganda looked at the report as though it might suddenly turn into Stalin and bite him. "No," he said firmly. "No, Witter. If this is false, it is false. If it is true, we dare not admit it."

"I don't see why," Witter argued. "It's that song. I've been checking up for a long time, and it's the only logical answer. The thing has swept the German-speaking world. Or it soon will."

"And what harm can a song do?"

Witter tapped the report. "You read this. The troops breaking ranks and doing... what is it?... snake dances! And singing that piece all the while."

"Forbid them to sing it." But the minister's voice was dubious.

"Ja, but can they be forbidden to think it? They always think of what is verboten. They can't help it. It's a basic human instinct."

"That is what I mean when I said we couldn't admit the menace of this--song, Witter. It mustn't be made important to Germans. If they consider it merely as an absurd string of words, they'll forget it. Eventually," the minister added.

"The Fuhrer--"

"He must not know. He must not hear about this. He is a nervous type, Witter; you realize that. I hope he will not hear the song. But, even if he does, he must not realize that it is potentially dangerous."

"Potentially?"

The minister gestured significantly. "Men have killed themselves because of that song. The scientist Schneider was one. A nervous

type. A manic-depressive type, in fact. He brooded over the fact that the ginger--that the phrases stuck in his mind. In a depressive mood, he swallowed poison. There have been others. Witter, between ourselves, this is extremely dangerous. Do you know why?"

"Because it's--absurd?"

"Yes. There is a poem, perhaps you know it--life is real, life is earnest. Germany believes that. We are a logical race. We conquer through logic, because Nordics are the super-race. And if supermen discover that they cannot control their minds--"

Witter sighed. "It seems strange that a song should be so important."

"There is no weapon against it. If we admit that it is dangerous, we double or triple its menace. At present, many people find it hard to concentrate. Some find rhythmic movements necessary--uncontrollable. Imagine what would happen if we forbade the people to think of the song."

"Can't we use psychology? Make it ridiculous--explain it away?"

"It is ridiculous already. It makes no pretense at being anything more than an absurd string of nearly meaningless words. And we can't admit it has to be explained away. Also, I hear that some are finding reasonable meanings in it, which is the height of nonsense."

"Oh? How?"

"Famine. The necessity for large families. Even desertion of the Nazi ideal. Er... even the ridiculous idea that gingerbread refers to--" The minister glanced up at the picture on the wall.

Witter looked startled, and, after a hesitant pause, laughed. "I never

thought of that. Silly. What I always wondered was why they were starving when there was still plenty of gingerbread. Is it possible to be allergic to gingerbread?"

"I do not think so. The gingerbread may have been poisoned--a man who would desert his family might have cause to hate them, also. Perhaps hate them enough to-- Captain Witter!"

There was a blank silence. Presently Witter got up, heiled, and departed, carefully breaking step. The minister looked again at the picture on the wall, tapped the bulky report before him, and shoved it away to examine a typewritten sheaf which was carefully labeled important. It was important. In half an hour the Fuhrer would broadcast a speech, one for which the world had been waiting. It would explain certain things about dubious matters, such as the Russian campaign. And it was a good speech--excellent propaganda. There were to be two broadcasts, the first to Germany, the second to the rest of the world.

The minister rose and walked back and forth on the rich carpet. His lip lifted in a sneer. The way to conquer any enemy was to crush him--face him and smash him. If the rest of Germany had his own mentality, his own self-confidence, that ridiculous song would lose all its force.

"So," the minister said. "It goes so. Left. Left. Left a wife and seventeen children--so. It cannot harm me. It can get no hold on my mind. I repeat it, but only when I wish to do so; and I wish to do so to prove that the doggerel is futile--on me, anyway. So. Left. Left. Left a wife--"

Back and forth strode the Minister of Propaganda, his hard, clipped voice snappily intoning the phrases. This wasn't the first time. He often repeated the song aloud--but, of course, merely to prove to

himself that he was stronger than it.

Adolf Hitler was thinking about gingerbread and Russia. There were other problems, too. It was difficult being Leader. Eventually, when a better man came along, he would step out, his work done. The well-worn record slipped from its groove, and Hitler pondered the speech he held. Yes, it was good. It explained much—why things had gone wrong in Russia, why the English invasion had failed, why the English were doing the impossible by way of raiding the continent. He had worried about those problems. They were not really problems, but the people might not understand, and might lose confidence in their Fuhrer. However, the speech would explain everything—even Hess. Goebbels had worked for days on the psychological effects of the speech, and it was, therefore, doubly important that it go through without a hitch. Hitler reached for an atomizer and sprayed his throat, though that was really unnecessary. His voice was in top shape.

It would be distressing if--

Pfui! There would be no hitch. The speech was too important. He had made speeches before, swayed people with the weapon of his oratory. The crucial point, of course, was the reference to Russia and the ill-fated spring campaign. Yet Goebbels had a beautiful explanation; it was true, too.

"It is true," Hitler said aloud.

Well, it was. And sufficiently convincing. From the Russian discussion he would go on to Hess, and then-- But the Russian question--that was vital. He must throw all his power into the microphones at that moment. He rehearsed mentally. A pause. Then, in a conversational voice, he would say, "At last I may tell you the truth about our Russian campaign, and why it was a triumph of strategy for German arms--"

He'd prove it, too.

But he must not forget for a moment how vitally important this speech was, and especially the crucial point in it. Remember. Remember. Do it exactly as rehearsed. Why, if he failed-- There was no such word.

But if he failed-- No. Even if he did-- But he wouldn't. He mustn't. He never had. And this was a crisis.

Not an important one, after all, he supposed, though the people were no longer wholeheartedly behind him. Well, what was the worst that could happen? He might be unable to make the speech. It would be postponed. There could be explanations. Goebbels could take care of that. It wasn't important.

Don't think about it.

On the contrary, think about it. Rehearse again. The pause. "At last I may tell you--"

It was time.

All over Germany people were waiting for the speech. Adolf Hitler stood before the microphones, and he was no longer worried. At the back of his mind, he created a tiny phonograph record that said, over and over, "Russia. Russia. Russia." It would remind him what to do, at the right moment. Meanwhile, he launched into his speech.

It was good. It was a Hitler speech.

"Now!" said the record.

Hitler paused, taking a deep breath, throwing his head arrogantly back. He looked out at the thousands of faces beneath his balcony.



But he wasn't thinking about them. He was thinking of the pause, and the next line; and the pause lengthened.

Important! Remember! Don't fail!

Adolf Hitler opened his mouth. Words came out. Not quite the right words.

Ten seconds later Adolf Hitler was cut off the air.

It wasn't Hitler personally who spoke to the world a few hours later. Goebbels had had a record made, and the transcription, oddly enough, didn't mention Russia. Or any of the vital questions that had been settled so neatly. The Fuhrer simply couldn't talk about those questions. It wasn't like fright, exactly. Whenever Hitler reached the crucial point in his speech, he turned green, gritted his teeth, and said--the wrong thing. He couldn't get over that semantic block. The more he tried, the less he succeeded. Finally Goebbels saw what was happening and called it off.

The world broadcast was emasculated. At the time there was considerable discussion as to why Hitler hadn't stuck to his announced program. He'd intended to mention Russia. Why, then--Not many people knew. But more people will know now. In fact, a lot of people in Germany are going to know. Things get around there. Planes go over and drop leaflets, and people whisper, and they'll remember a certain catchy German stanza that's going the rounds.

Yeah. Maybe this particular copy of Astounding will find its way to England, and maybe an r. a. f. pilot will drop it near Berlin, or Paris, for that matter. Word will get around. There are lots of men on the continent who can read English.

And they'll talk.

They won't believe, at first. But they'll keep their eyes open. And there's a catchy little rhythm they'll remember. Some day the story will reach Berlin or Berchtesgarden. Some day it'll reach the guy with the little mustache and the big voice.

And, a little while later--days or weeks, it doesn't matter--Goebbels is going to walk into a big room, and there he's going to see Adolf Hitler goose-stepping around and yelling:

Left

Left

Left a wife and seventeen children in

Starving condition with nothing but gingerbread

Left--

# Doorway Into Time

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He came slowly, with long, soft, ponderous strides, along the hallway of his treasure house. The gleanings of many worlds were here around him; he had ransacked space and time for the treasures that filled his palace. The robes that moulded their folds richly against his great rolling limbs as he walked were in themselves as priceless as anything within these walls, gossamer fabric pressed into raised designs that had no meaning, this far from the world upon which they had been created, but--in their beauty--universal. But he was himself more beautiful than anything in all that vast collection. He knew it complacently, a warm contented knowledge deep in the center of his brain.

His motion was beautiful, smooth power pouring along his limbs as he walked, his great bulk ponderous and graceful. The precious robes he wore flowed open over his magnificent body. He ran one sensuous palm down his side, enjoying the texture of that strange, embossed delicacy in a fabric thinner than gauze. His eyes were proud and half shut, flashing many-colored under the heavy lids. The eyes were never twice quite the same color, but all the colors were beautiful.

He was growing restless again. He knew the feeling well, that familiar quiver of discontent widening and strengthening far back in his mind. It was time to set out once more on the track of something dangerous. In times past, when he had first begun to stock this treasure house, beauty alone had been enough. It was not enough any longer. Danger had to be there too. His tastes were growing

capricious and perhaps a little decadent, for he had lived a very long time.

Yes, there must be a risk attending the capture of his next new treasure. He must seek out great beauty and great danger and subdue the one and win the other, and the thought of it made his eyes change color and the blood beat faster in mighty rhythms through his veins. He smoothed his palm again along the embossed designs of the robe that moulded itself to his body. The great, rolling strides carried him noiselessly over the knife-edged patterns of the floor.

Nothing in life meant much to him any more except these beautiful things which his own passion for beauty had brought together. And even about these he was growing capricious now. He glanced up at a deep frame set in the wall just at the bend of the corridor, where his appreciative eyes could not fail to strike the objects it enclosed at just the proper angle. Here was a group of three organisms fixed in an arrangement that once had given him intense pleasure. On their own world they might have been living creatures, perhaps even intelligent. He neither knew nor cared. He did not even remember now if there had been eyes upon their world to see, or minds to recognize beauty. He cared only that they had given him acute pleasure whenever he turned this bend of the corridor and saw them frozen into eternal perfection in their frame.

But the pleasure was clouded as he looked at them now. His half-shut eyes changed color, shifting along the spectrum from yellow-green to the cooler purity of true green. This particular treasure had been acquired in perfect safety; its value was impaired for him, remembering that. And the quiver of discontent grew stronger in his mind. Yes, it was time to go out hunting again....

And here, set against a panel of velvet, was a great oval stone whose surface exhaled a light as soft as smoke, in waves whose colors

changed with languorous slowness. Once the effect had been almost intoxicating to him. He had taken it from the central pavement of a great city square upon a world whose location he had forgotten long ago. He did not know if the people of the city had valued it, or perceived its beauty at all. But he had won it with only a minor skirmish, and now in his bitter mood it was valueless to his eyes.

He quickened his steps, and the whole solid structure of the palace shook just perceptibly underfoot as he moved with ponderous majesty down the hall. He was still running one palm in absent appreciation up and down the robe across his mighty side, but his mind was not on present treasures any more. He was looking to the future, and the color of his eyes had gone shivering up the spectrum to orange, warm with the anticipation of danger. His nostrils flared a little and his wide mouth turned down at the corners in an inverted grimace. The knife-edged patterns of the floor sang faintly beneath his footsteps, their sharp intricacies quivering as the pressure of his steps passed by.

He went past a fountain of colored fire which he had wrecked a city to possess. He thrust aside a hanging woven of unyielding crystal spears which only his great strength could have moved. It gave out showers of colored sparks when he touched it, but their beauty did not delay him now.

His mind had run on ahead of him, into that room in the center of his palace, round and dim, from which he searched the universe for plunder and through whose doorways he set out upon its track. He came ponderously along the hall toward it, passing unheeded treasures, the gossamer of his robes floating after him like a cloud.

On the wall before him, in the dimness of the room, a great circular screen looked out opaquely, waiting his touch. A doorway into time

and space. A doorway to beauty and deadly peril and everything that made livable for him a life which had perhaps gone on too long already. It took strong measures now to stir the jaded senses which once had responded so eagerly to more stimuli than he could remember any more. He sighed, his great chest expanding tremendously. Somewhere beyond that screen, upon some world he had never trod before, a treasure was waiting lovely enough to tempt his boredom and dangerous enough to dispel it for just a little while.

The screen brightened as he neared the wall. Blurred shadows moved, vague sounds drifted into the room. His wonderful senses sorted the noises and the shapes and dismissed them as they formed; his eyes were round and luminous now, and the orange fires deepened as he watched. Now the shadows upon the screen moved faster. Something was taking shape. The shadows leaped backward into three-dimensional vividness that wavered for a moment and then sharpened into focus upon a desert landscape under a vivid crimson sky. Out of the soil a cluster of tall flowers rose swaying, exquisitely shaped, their colors shifting in that strange light. He glanced at them carelessly and grimaced. And the screen faded.

He searched the void again, turning up scene after curious scene and dismissing each with a glance. There was a wall of carved translucent panels around a city he did not bother to identify. He saw a great shining bird that trailed luminous plumage, and a tapestry woven gorgeously with scenes from no earthly legend, but he let all of them fade again without a second look, and the orange glow in his eyes began to dull with boredom.

Once he paused for a while before the picture of a tall, dark idol carved into a shape he did not recognize, its strange limbs adorned with jewels that dripped fire, and for an instant his pulse quickened. It was pleasant to think of those jewels upon his own great limbs,

flame along his halls. But when he looked again he saw that the idol stood deserted upon a barren world, its treasure his for the taking. And he knew that so cheap a whining would be savorless. He sighed again, from the depths of his mighty chest, and let the screen shift its pictures on.

It was the faraway flicker of golden lightning in the void that first caught his eyes, the distant scream of it from some world without a name. Idly he let the screen's shadows form a picture. First was the lightning, hissing and writhing from a mechanism which he spared only one disinterested glance. For beside it two figures were taking shape, and as he watched them his restless motions stilled and the floating robe settled slowly about his body. His eyes brightened to orange again. He stood very quiet, staring.

The figures were of a shape he had not seen before. Remotely like his own, but flexible and very slender, and of proportions grotesquely different from his. And one of them, in spite of its difference, was-- He stared thoughtfully. Yes, it was beautiful. Excitement began to kindle behind his quietness. And the longer he stared the clearer the organism's subtle loveliness grew. No obvious flamboyance like the fire-dripping jewels or the gorgeously plumed bird, but a delicate beauty of long, smooth curves and tapering lines, and colors in softly blended tints of apricot and creamy white and warm orange-red. Folds of blue-green swathing it were probably garments of some sort. He wondered if it were intelligent enough to defend itself, or if the creature beside it, making lightnings spurt out of the mechanism over which it bent, would know or care if he reached out to take its companion away.

He leaned closer to the screen, his breath beginning to come fast and his eyes glowing with the first flush of red that meant excitement. Yes, this was a lovely thing. A very lovely trophy for his halls. Briefly he

thought of it arranged in a frame whose ornaments would echo the soft and subtle curves of the creature itself, colored to enhance the delicacy of the subject's coloring. Certainly a prize worth troubling himself for--if there were danger anywhere near to make it a prize worth winning....

He put one hand on each side of the screen and leaned forward into it a little, staring with eyes that were a dangerous scarlet now. That flare of lightning looked like a weapon of some sort. If the creatures had intelligence-- It would be amusing to test the limits of their minds, and the power of the weapon they were using....

He watched a moment longer, his breath quickening. His mighty shoulders hunched forward. Then with one shrug he cast off the hampering garment of gossamer and laughed deep in his throat and lunged smoothly forward into the open doorway of the screen. He went naked and weaponless, his eyes blazing scarlet. This was all that made life worth living. Danger, and beauty beyond danger....

Darkness spun around him. He shot forward through dimensionless infinity along a corridor of his own devising.

The girl leaned back on her metal bench and crossed one beautiful long leg over the other, stirring the sequined folds of her gown into flashing motion.

"How much longer, Paul?" she asked.

The man glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

"Five minutes. Look away now--I'm going to try it again." He reached up to slip a curved, transparent mask forward, closing his pleasant, dark face away from the glare. The girl sighed and shifted on the bench, averting her eyes.



The laboratory was walled and ceiled in dully reflecting metal, so that the blue-green blur of her gown moved as if in dim mirrors all around her when she changed position. She lifted a bare arm to touch her hair, and saw the reflections lift too, and the pale blur that was her hair, shining ashes of silver and elaborately coiffed.

The murmur of well-oiled metal moving against metal told her that a lever had been shifted, and almost instantly the room was full of golden glare, like daylight broken into hissing fragments as jagged as lightning. For a long moment the walls quivered with light and sound. Then the hissing died, the glare faded. A smell of hot metal tainted the air.

The man sighed heavily with satisfaction and lifted both hands to pull the mask off. Indistinctly behind the glass she heard him say:

"Well, that's done. Now we can--"

But he never finished, and the helmet remained fixed on his shoulders as he stared at the wall they were both facing. Slowly, almost absentmindedly, he pushed aside the glass across his face, as if he thought it might be responsible for the thing they both saw. For above the banked machinery which controlled the mechanism he had just released, a shadow had fallen upon the wall. A great circle of shadow....

Now it was a circle of darkness, as if twilight had rushed timelessly into midnight before them as they watched, and a midnight blacker than anything earth ever knew. The midnight of the ether, of bottomless spaces between worlds. And now it was no longer a shadow, but a window opening upon that midnight, and the midnight was pouring through....

Like smoke the darkness flowed in upon them, dimming the glitter of machinery, dimming the girl's pale hair and pale, shining shoulders and the shimmer of her gown until the man looked at her as if through veil upon veil of falling twilight.

Belatedly he moved, making a useless gesture of brushing the dark away with both hands before his face.

"Alanna--" he said helplessly. "What's happened? I--I can't see--very well--"

He heard her whimper in bewilderment, putting her own hands to her eyes as if she thought blindness had come suddenly upon them both. He was too sick with sudden dizziness to move or speak. This, he told himself wildly, must be the blindness that foreruns a swoon, and his obedient mind made the floor seem to tilt as if the faintness and blindness were inherent in himself, and not the result of some outward force.

But before either of them could do more than stammer a little, as their minds tried desperately to rationalize what was happening into some weakness of their own senses, the dark was complete. The room brimmed with it, and sight ceased to exist.

When the man felt the floor shake, he thought for an unfathomable moment that it was his own blindness, his own faintness again, deceiving his senses. The floor could not shake, as if to a ponderous tread. For there was no one here but themselves--there could not be great footfalls moving softly through the dark, making the walls shudder a little as they came....

Alanna's caught breath was clear in the silence. Not terror at first; but surprised inquiry. She said, "Paul--Paul, don't--"

And then he heard the beginning of her scream. He heard the beginning, but incredibly, he never heard the scream's end. One moment the full-throated roundness of her cry filled the room; pouring from a throat stretched wide with terror; the next, the sound diminished and vanished into infinite distances, plummeting away from him and growing thin and tiny while the echo of its first sound still rang through the room. The impossibility of such speed put the last touch of nightmare upon the whole episode. He did not believe it.

The dark was paling again. Rubbing his eyes, still not sure at all that this had not been some brief aberration of his own senses, he said, "Alanna--I thought--"

But the twilight around him was empty.

He had no idea how long a while elapsed between that moment and the moment when he stood up straight at last, facing the wall upon which the shadow still lay. In between there must have been a period of frantic search, of near hysteria and self-doubt and reeling disbelief. But now, as he stood looking up at the wall upon which the shadow still hung blackly, drawing into itself the last veils of twilight from the corners of the room, he ceased to rationalize or disbelieve.

Alanna was gone. Somehow, impossibly, in the darkness that had come upon them a Something with great silent feet that trod ponderously, shaking the walls, had seized her in the moment when she said, "Paul--" thinking it was himself. And while she screamed, it had vanished into infinite distances out of this room, carrying her with it.

That it was impossible he had no time to consider. He had time now only to realize that nothing had passed him toward the door, and that the great circle upon the wall before him was--an entrance?--out of which Something had come and into which Something must have

retreated again--and not alone....

And the entrance was closing.

He took one step toward it, unreasoning and urgent, and then stumbled over the boxed instrument which he had been testing just before insanity entered the room. The sight and feel of it brought back his own sanity a little. Here was a weapon; it offered a grip upon slipping reality to know that he was not wholly helpless. Briefly he wondered whether any weapon at all would avail against That which came in impossible darkness on feet that made no sound, though their tread shook the foundations of the building....

But the weapon was heavy. And how far away from the parent machine would it work? With shaking fingers he groped for the carrying handle. He staggered a little, lifting it, but he turned toward the end of the room where the great circle drank in the last of its twilight and began imperceptibly to pale upon the wall. If he were to follow, to take That which had gone before him by surprise, he must go swiftly....

One glance at the lever of the parent machine, to be sure it was thrown full over, for the weapon itself drank power from that source alone--if it would drink power at all in the unfathomable distances to which he was going.... One last unbelieving glance around the room, to be quite sure Alanna was really gone--

The lower arc of the circle was a threshold opening upon darkness. He could not think that he would pass it, this flat shadow upon the flat and solid wall, but he put out one hand uncertainly and took a step forward, and another, bent to the weight of the box he carried....

But there was no longer any weight. Nor was there any light nor sound--only wild, whirling motion that spun him over and over in the

depths of his blindness. Spun interminably--spun for untimed eons that passed in the flash of an eye. And then--

"Paul! Oh, Paul!"

He stood reeling in a dim, round room walled with strange designs he could not quite focus upon. He had no sense that was not shaken intolerably; even sight was not to be relied upon just now. He thought he saw Alanna in the dimness, pale hair falling over her pale, shining shoulders, her face distorted with bewilderment and terror....

"Paul! Paul, answer me! What is it? What's happened?"

He could not speak yet. He could only shake his head and cling by blind instinct to the weight that dragged down upon one arm. Alanna drew her bare shoulders together under the showering hair and hugged herself fearfully, the creamy arms showing paler circles where her fingertips pressed them hard. Her teeth were chattering, though not from cold.

"How did we get here?" she was saying. "How did we get here, Paul? We'll have to go back, won't we? I wonder what's happened to us?" The words were almost aimless, as if the sound of speech itself were more important to her now than any sense of what she was saying. "Look behind you, Paul--see? We came out of--there."

He turned. A great circle of mirror rose behind him on the dim wall, but a mirror reversed, so that it reflected not themselves, but the room they had just left.

Clearer than a picture--he looked into it--his laboratory walls shining with dull reflections, his batteries and dials, and the lever standing up before them that meant the heavy thing he carried would be deadly--perhaps. Deadly? A weapon in a dream? Did they even know that

the Something which dwelt here was inimical?

But this was ridiculous. It was too soon yet to accept the fact that they were standing here at all. In reality, of course, they must both be back in the laboratory, and both of them dreaming the same strange dream. And he felt, somehow, that to treat all this as a reality would be dangerous. For if he accepted even by implication that such a thing could be true, then perhaps--perhaps.... Could acceptance make it come true?

He set his weapon down and rubbed his arm dazedly, looking around. Words did not come easily yet, but he had to ask one question.

"That--that thing, Alanna. What was it? How did you--"

She gripped her own bare arms harder, and another spasm of shuddering went over her. The blue-green sequins flashed chilly star-points from her gown as she moved. Her voice shook too; her very mind seemed to be shaking behind the blank eyes. But when she spoke the words made approximate sense. And they echoed his own thought.

"I'm dreaming all this, you know." Her voice sounded far away. "This isn't really happening. But--but something took me in its arms back there." She nodded toward the mirrored laboratory on the wall. "And everything whirled, and then--" A hard shudder seized her. "I don't know...."

"Did you see it?"

She shook her head. "Maybe I did. I'm not sure. I was so dizzy--I think it went away through the door. Would you call it a door?" Her little breath of laughter was very near hysteria. "I--I felt its feet moving

away."

"But what was it? What did it look like?"

"I don't know, Paul."

He closed his lips on the questions that rushed to be asked.

Here in the dream, many things were very alien indeed. Those patterns on the wall, for instance. He thought he could understand how one could look at something and not be sure at all what the something was. And Alanna's heavy spasms of shuddering proved that shock must have blanked her mind protectively to much of what had happened. She said:

"Aren't we going back now, Paul?" And her eyes flickered past him to the pictured laboratory. It was a child's question; her mind was refusing to accept anything but the barest essentials of their predicament. But he could not answer. His first impulse was to say, "Wait--we'll wake up in a minute." But suppose they did not? Suppose they were trapped here? And if the Thing came back.... Heavily, he said:

"Of course it's a dream, Alarum. But while it lasts I think we'll have to act as if it were real. I don't want to--" The truth was, he thought, he was afraid to. "But we must. And going back wouldn't do any good as long as we go on dreaming. It would just come after us again."

It would come striding through the dream to drag them back, and after all people have died in their sleep--died in their dreams, he thought.

He touched the unwieldy weapon with his toe, thinking silently, "This will help us--maybe. If anything can, it will. And if it won't--well, neither

will running away." And he glanced toward the high, distorted opening that must be a doorway into some other part of this unimaginable, dream-created building. It had gone that way, then. Perhaps they should follow. Perhaps their greatest hope of waking safely out of this nightmare lay in acting rashly, in following with the weapon before it expected them to follow. It might not guess his own presence here at all. It must have left Alanna alone in the dim room, intending to return, not thinking to find her with a defender, or to find the defender armed....

But was he armed? He grinned wryly.

Perhaps he ought to test the weapon. And yet, for all he knew, the Thing's strange, alien gaze might be upon him now. He was aware of a strong reluctance to let it know that he had any defense against it. Surprise--that was important. Keep it a secret until he needed a weapon, if he ever did need one. Very gently he pressed the trigger of the lens that had poured out lightnings in the faraway sanity of his laboratory. Would it work in--a dream? For a long moment nothing happened. Then, faintly and delicately against his palm he felt the tubing begin to throb just a little. It was as much of an answer as he dared take now. Some power was there. Enough? He did not know. It was unthinkable, really, that he should ever need to know. Still--

"Alanna," he said, "I think we'd better explore a little. No use just standing here waiting for it to come back. It may be perfectly friendly, you know. Dream creatures often are. But I'd like to see what's outside."

"We'll wake up in a minute," she assured him between chattering teeth. "I'm all right, I think, really. Just--just nervous." He thought she seemed to be rousing from her stupor. Perhaps the prospect of action--any action--even rashness like this, was better for them both than inactivity. He felt surer of himself as he lifted the heavy weapon.



"But Paul, we can't!" She turned, half-way to the door, and faced him. "Didn't I tell you? I tried that before you came. There's a corridor outside, with knives all over the floor. Patterns of them, sharp-edged spirals and--and shapes. Look." She lifted her sparkling skirt a little and put out one foot. He could see the clean, sharp lacerations of the leather sole. His shoulders sagged a bit. Then:

"Well, let's look anyhow. Come on."

The corridor stretched before them, swimming in purple distances, great gothic hollows and arches melting upon arches. There were things upon the walls. Like the patterns in the room behind them, many were impossible to focus upon directly, too different from anything in human experience to convey meaning to the brain. The eye perceived them blankly, drawing no conclusions. He thought vaguely that the hall looked like a museum, with those great frames upon the walls.

Beside the door another tall frame leaned, empty. About six feet high, it was deep enough for a man to lie down in, and all around its edges an elaborate and beautiful decoration writhed, colored precisely like Alanna's blue-green gown. Interwoven in it were strands of silver, the color of her pale and shining hair.

"It looks like a coffin," Alanna said aimlessly. Some very ugly thought stirred in Paul's mind. He would not recognize it; he pushed it back out of sight quickly, but he was gladder now that he had brought this lightning-throwing weapon along.

The hall shimmered with strangeness before them. So many things he could not quite see clearly, but the razor-edged decorations of the floor were clear enough. It made the mind reel a little to think what utter alienage lay behind the choice of such adornment for a floor that

must be walked upon—even in a dream. He thought briefly of the great earth-shaking feet in the darkness of his laboratory. Here in the dream they walked this knife-edged floor. They must.

But how?

The spirals of the pattern lay in long loops and rosettes. After a moment, eyeing them, he said, "I think we can make it, Alanna. If we walk between the knives--see, there's space if we're careful." And if they were not careful, if they had to run.... "We've got to risk it," he said aloud, and with those words admitted to himself for perhaps the first time an urgency in this dream, risk and danger....

He took a firmer grip upon his burden and stepped delicately into the hollow of a steely spiral. Teetering a little, clutching at his arm to steady herself, Alanna came after him.

Silence--vast, unechoing hollows quivering with silence all around them. They advanced very slowly, watching wide-eyed for any signs of life in the distances, their senses strained and aching with the almost subconscious awareness of any slightest motion in the floor that might herald great feet ponderously approaching. But That which had opened the doorway for them had gone now, for, a little while, and left them to their own devices.

Paul carried the lens of his weapon ready in his free hand, the lightest possible pressure always on its trigger so that the tubing throbbed faintly against his palm. That reassurance that contact still flowed between his faraway laboratory and this unbelievable hall was all that kept him forging ahead over the razory mosaics.

They went slowly, but they passed many very strange things. A tremendous transparent curtain swung from the vaulted ceiling in folds as immovable as iron. They slipped through the little triangle of

opening where the draperies hung awry, and a shower of fiery sparkles sprang out harmlessly when they brushed the sides. They passed a fountain that sent up gushes of soundless flame from its basin in the center of the corridor floor. They saw upon the walls, in frames and without them, things too alien to think about clearly. That very alienage was worrying the man. In dreams one rehearses the stimuli of the past, fears and hopes and memories. But how could one dream of things like these? Where in any human past could such memories lie?

They skirted an oval stone set in the floor, the metal patterns swirling about it. They were both dizzy when they looked directly at it. Dangerous dizziness, since a fall here must end upon razor edges. And once they passed an indescribable something hanging against a black panel of the wall, that brought tears to the eyes with its sheer loveliness, a thing of unbearable beauty too far removed from human experience to leave any picture in their minds once they had gone past it. Only the emotional impact remained, remembered beauty too exquisite for the mind to grasp and hold. And the man knew definitely now that this at least was no part of any human memory, and could be in itself no dream.

They saw it all with the strange clarity and vividness of senses sharp with uncertainty and fear, but they saw it too with a dreamlike haziness that faded a little as they went on. To the man, a terrible wonder was dawning. Could it, after all, be a dream? Could it possibly be some alien reality into which they had stumbled? And the import of that frame outside the door they had left--the frame shaped like a coffin and adorned with the colors of Alanna's gown and hair.... Deep in his mind he knew what that frame was for. He knew he was walking through a museum filled with lovely things, and he was beginning to suspect why Alanna had been brought here too. The thing seemed unthinkable, even in a dream as mad as this, and yet--

"Look, Paul." He glanced aside. Alanna had reached up to touch a steel-blue frame upon the wall, its edges enclosing nothing but a dim rosy shimmer. She was groping inside it, her face animated now. No thought had come to her yet about that other frame, evidently. No thought that from this dream neither of them might ever wake....

"Look," she said. "It seems empty, but I can feel something--something like feathers. What do you suppose--"

"Don't try to suppose," he said almost brusquely. "There isn't any sense to any of this."

"But some of the things are so pretty, Paul. See that--that snowstorm ahead, between the pillars?"

He looked. Veiling the hallway a little distance away hung a shower of patterned flakes, motionless in midair. Perhaps they were embroideries upon some gossamer drapery too sheer to see. But as he looked he thought he saw them quiver just a little. Quiver, and fall quiet, and then quiver again, as if--as if--

"Paul!"

Everything stopped dead still for a moment. He did not need Alanna's whisper to make his heart pause as he strained intolerably to hear, to see, to feel.... Yes, definitely now the snowstorm curtain shook. And the floor shook with it in faint rhythms to that distant tremor--

This is it, he thought. This is real.

He had known for minutes now that he was not walking through a dream. He stood in the midst of impossible reality, and the Enemy itself came nearer and nearer with each great soundless footfall, and there was nothing to do but wait. Nothing at all. It wanted Alanna. He

known why. It would not want himself, and it would brush him away like smoke in its juggernaut striding to seize her, unless his weapon could stop it. His heart began to beat with heavy, thick blows that echoed the distant footsteps.

"Alanna," he said, hearing the faintest possible quiver in his voice "Alanna, get behind something--that pillar over there. Don't make a sound. And if I tell you--run!"

He stepped behind a nearer pillar, his arm aching from the weight of his burden, the lens of it throbbing faintly against his palm with its promise of power in leash. He thought it would work.

There was no sound of footfalls as the rhythm grew stronger. Only by the strength of those tremors that shook the floor could he judge how near the Thing was drawing. The pillar itself was shaking now, and the snowstorm was convulsed each time a mighty foot struck the floor soundlessly. Paul thought of the knife-edged patterns which those feet were treading with such firm and measured strides.

For a moment of panic he regretted his daring in coming to meet the Thing. He was sorry they had not stayed cowering in the room of the mirror--sorry they had not fled back down the whirling darkness through which they came. But you can't escape a nightmare. He held his lensed weapon throbbing like a throat against his palm, waiting to pour out lightning upon--what?

Now it was very close. Now it was just beyond the snowstorm between the pillars. He could see dim motion through their veil....

Snow swirled away from its mighty shoulders, clouded about its great head so that he could not see very clearly what it was that stood there, tall and grotesque and terrible, its eyes shining scarlet through the veil. He was aware only of the eyes, and of the being's majestic

bulk, before his hand of its own volition closed hard upon the pulse of violence in his palm.

For one timeless moment nothing happened. He was too stunned with the magnitude of the thing he faced to feel even terror at his weapon's failure; awe shut out every other thought. He was even a little startled when the glare of golden daylight burst hissing from his hand, splashing its brilliance across the space between them.

Then relief was a weakness that loosened all his muscles as he played the deadliness of his weapon upon the Enemy, hearing the air shriek with its power, seeing the stone pillars blacken before those lashes of light. He was blinded by their glory; he could only stand there pouring the lightnings forth and squinting against their glare. The smell of scorched metal and stone was heavy in the air, and he could hear the crash of a falling column somewhere, burned through by the blast of the flame. Surely it too must be consumed and falling.... Hope began to flicker in his brain.

It was Alanna's whimper that told him something must still be wrong. Belatedly he reached up to close the glass visor of the mask he still wore, and by magic the glare ceased to blind him. He could see between the long, writhing whips of light--see the pillars falling and the steel patterns of the floor turn blue and melt away. But he could see it standing between those crumbling pillars now....

He could see it standing in the full bath of the flames, see them splash upon its mighty chest and sluice away over its great shoulders like the spray of water, unheeded, impotent. Its eyes were darkening from crimson to an angry purple as it lurched forward one ponderous, powerful stride, brushing away the sparks from its face, putting out a terrible inn.

"Alanna--" said the man in a very quiet voice, pitched below the

screaming of the flame. "Alanna--you'd better start back. I'll hold it while I can. You'd better run, Alanna...."

He did not know if she obeyed. He could spare no further attention from the desperate business at hand, to delay it--to hold it back even for sixty seconds--for thirty seconds--for one breath more of independent life. What might happen after that he could not let himself think. Perhaps not death--perhaps something far more alien and strange than death....

He knew the straggle was hopeless and senseless, but he knew he must straggle on while breath remained in him.

There was a narrow place in the corridor between himself and it. The lightning had weakened one wall already. He swung it away from the oncoming colossus and played the fire screaming to and fro upon blackened stones, seeing mortar crumble between them and girders bending in that terrible heat.

The walls groaned, grinding their riven blocks surface against surface. Slowly, slowly they leaned together; slowly they fell. Stone dust billowed in a cloud to hide the final collapse of the corridor, but through it the scream of lightnings sounded and the shriek of metal against falling stone. And then, distantly, a deeper groaning of new pressure coming to bear.

The man stood paralyzed for a moment, dizzy with an unreasonable hope that he had stopped the Enemy at last, not daring to look too closely for fear of failure. But hope and despair came almost simultaneously into his mind as he watched the mass of the closed walls shuddering and resisting for a moment--but only for a moment.

With dust and stone blocks and steel girders falling away from its tremendous shoulders, it stepped through the ruined arch. Jagged

golden lightnings played in its face, hissing and screaming futilely. It ignored them. Shaking off the debris of the wall, it strode forward, eyes purple with anger, great hands outstretched.

And so the weapon failed. He loosed the trigger, hearing its shriek die upon the air as the long ribbons of lightning faded. It was instinct echoing over millenniums from the first fighting ancestor of mankind, that made him swing the heavy machine overhead with both hands and hurl it into the face of the Enemy. And it was a little like relinquishing a living comrade to let the throb of that fiery tubing lose contact with his palm at last.

Blindly he flung the weapon from him, and in the same motion whirled and ran. The knife-edged floor spun past below him. If he could hit a rhythm to carry him from loop to empty loop of the pattern, he might even reach the room at the end of the passage-- There was no sanctuary anywhere, but unreasoning instinct made him seek the place of his origin here.

Ahead of him a flutter of blue-green sequins now and then told him that Alanna was running too, miraculously keeping her balance on the patterned floor. He could not look up to watch her. His eyes were riveted to the spirals and loops among which his precarious footing lay. Behind him great feet were thudding soundlessly, shaking the floor.

The things that happened then happened too quickly for the brain to resolve into any sequence at all. He knew that the silence which had flowed back when the screaming lightnings died was suddenly, shockingly broken again by a renewed screaming. He remembered seeing the metal patterns of the floor thrown into sharp new shadows by the light behind him, and he knew that the Enemy had found the trigger he had just released, that his weapon throbbed now against an alien hand.



But it happened in the same instant that the doorway of the entrance room loomed up before him, and he hurled himself desperately into the dimness after Alanna, knowing his feet were cut through and bleeding, seeing the dark blotches of the tracks she too was leaving. The mirror loomed before them, an unbearable picture of the lost familiar room he could not hope to enter again in life.

And all this was simultaneous with a terrifying soundless thunder of great feet at his very heels, of a mighty presence suddenly and ponderously in the same room with them, like a whirlwind exhausting the very air they gasped to breathe. He felt anger eddying about him without words or sound. He felt monstrous hands snatch him up as if a tornado had taken him into its windy grasp. He remembered purple eyes glaring through the dimness in one brief instant of perception before the hands hurled him away.

He spun through empty air. Then a howling vortex seized him and he was falling in blindness, stunned and stupefied, through the same strange passageway that had brought him here. Distantly he heard Alanna scream.

There was silence in the dim, round room in the center of the treasure house, except for a muffled howling from the screen. He who was master here stood quietly before it, his eyes half shut and ranging down the spectrum from purple to red, and then swiftly away from red through orange to a clear, pale, tranquil yellow. His chest still heaved a little with the excitement of that minor fiasco which he had brought upon himself, but it was an excitement soon over, and wholly disappointing.

He was a little ashamed of his momentary anger. He should not have played the little creatures' puny lightnings upon them as they fell down the shaft of darkness. He had misjudged their capacity, after all. They

were not really capable of giving him a fight worth while.

It was interesting that one had followed the other, with its little weapon that sparkled and stung, interesting that one fragile being had stood up to him.

But he knew a moment's regret for the beauty of the blue-and-white creature he had flung away. The long, smooth lines of it, the subtle coloring.... Too bad that it had been worthless because it was helpless too.

Helpless against himself, he thought, and equally against the drive of its own mysterious motives. He sighed.

He thought again, almost regretfully, of the lovely thing he had coveted hurtling away down the vortex with lightnings bathing it through the blackness.

Had he destroyed it? He did not know. He was a little sorry now that anger for his ruined treasures had made him lose his temper when they ran. Futile, scuttling little beings--they had cheated him out of beauty because of their own impotence against him, but he was not even angry about that now. Only sorry, with vague, confused sorrows he did not bother to clarify in his mind. Regret for the loss of a lovely thing, regret that he had expected danger from them and been disappointed, regret perhaps for his own boredom, that did not bother any longer to probe into the motives of living things. He was growing old indeed.

The vortex still roared through the darkened screen. He stepped back from it, letting opacity close over the surface of the portal, hushing all sound. His eyes were a tranquil yellow. Tomorrow he would hunt again, and perhaps tomorrow....

He went out slowly, walking with long, soundless strides that made the steel mosaics sing faintly beneath his feet.

# Where the World Is Quiet

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The life of an anthropologist is no doubt filled much of the time with the monotonous routine of carefully assembling powdery relics of ancient races and civilizations. But White's lone Peruvian odyssey was most unusual. A story pseudonymously penned by one of the greats in the genre.

Fra Rafael saw strange things, impossible things. Then there was the mystery of the seven young virginal girls of Huascan.

Fra Rafael drew the llama-wool blanket closer about his narrow shoulders, shivering in the cold wind that screamed down from Huascan. His face held great pain. I rose, walked to the door of the hut and peered through fog at the shadowy haunted lands that lifted toward the sky--the Cordilleras that make a rampart along Peru's eastern border.

"There's nothing," I said. "Only the fog, Fra Rafael."

He made the sign of the cross on his breast. "It is the fog that brings the--the terror," he said. "I tell you, Senor White, I have seen strange things these last few months--impossible things. You are a scientist. Though we are not of the same religion, you also know that there are powers not of this earth."

I didn't answer, so he went on: "Three months ago it began, after the earthquake. A native girl disappeared. She was seen going into the mountains, toward Huascan along the Pass, and she did not come back. I sent men out to find her. They went up the Pass, found the fog

grew thicker and thicker until they were blind and could see nothing. Fear came to them and they fled back down the mountain. A week later another girl vanished. We found her footprints."

"The same canyon?"

"Si, and the same result. Now seven girls have gone, one after the other, all in the same way. And I, Senor White--" Fra Rafael's pale, tired face was sad as he glanced down at the stumps of his legs--"I could not follow, as you see. Four years ago an avalanche crippled me. My bishop told me to return to Lima, but I prevailed on him to let me remain here for these natives are my people, Senor. They know and trust me. The loss of my legs has not altered that."

I nodded. "I can see the difficulty now, though."

"Exactly. I cannot go to Huascan and find out what has happened to the girls. The natives--well, I chose four of the strongest and bravest and asked them to take me up the Pass. I thought that I could overcome their superstitions. But I was not successful."

"How far did you go?" I asked.

"A few miles, not more than that. The fog grew thicker, until we were blinded by it, and the way was dangerous. I could not make the men go on." Fra Rafael closed his eyes wearily. "They talked of old Inca gods and devils--Manco Capac and Oello Huaco, the Children of the Sun. They are very much afraid, Senor White. They huddle together like sheep and believe that an ancient god has returned and is taking them away one by one. And--one by one they are taken."

"Only young girls," I mused. "And no coercion is used, apparently. What's up toward Huascan?"

"Nothing but wild llamas and the condors. And snow, cold, desolation. These are the Andes, my friend."

"Okay," I said. "It sounds interesting. As an anthropologist I owe it to the Foundation to investigate. Besides, I'm curious. Superficially, there is nothing very strange about the affair. Seven girls have disappeared in the unusually heavy fogs we've had ever since the earthquake. Nothing more."

I smiled at him. "However, I think I'll take a look around and see what's so attractive about Huascan."

"I shall pray for you," he said. "Perhaps--well, Senor, for all the loss of my legs, I am not a weak man. I can stand much hardship. I can ride a burro."

"I don't doubt your willingness, Fra Rafael," I said. "But it's necessary to be practical. It's dangerous and it's cold up there. Your presence would only handicap me. Alone, I can go faster--remember, I don't know how far I'll have to travel."

The priest sighed. "I suppose you are right. When--"

"Now. My burro's packed."

"Your porters?"

"They won't go," I said wryly. "They've been talking to your villagers. It doesn't matter. I'll go it alone." I put out my hand, and Fra Rafael gripped it strongly.

"Vaya con Dios," he said.

I went out into the bright Peruvian sunlight. The Indios were standing in straggling knots, pretending not to watch me. My porters were

nowhere in evidence. I grinned, yelled a sardonic goodbye, and started to lead the burro toward the Pass.

The fog vanished as the sun rose, but it still lay in the mountain canyons toward the west. A condor circled against the sky. In the thin, sharp air the sound of a distant rock-fall was distinctly audible.

White Huascan towered far away. A shadow fell on me as I entered the Pass. The burro plodded on, patient and obedient. I felt a little chill; the fog began to thicken.

Yes, the Indios had talked to me. I knew their language, their old religion. Bastard descendants of the Incas, they still preserved a deep-rooted belief in the ancient gods of their ancient race, who had fallen with Huayna Capac, the Great Inca, a year before Pizarro came raging into Peru. I knew the Quichua--the old tongue of the mother race--and so I learned more than I might have otherwise.

Yet I had not learned much. The Indios said that something had come into the mountains near Huascan. They were willing to talk about it, but they knew little. They shrugged with apathetic fatalism. It called the young virgins, no doubt for a sacrifice. *Quién sabe?* Certainly the strange, thickening fog was not of this earth. Never before in the history of mankind had there been such a fog. It was, of course, the earthquake that had brought the--the Visitant. And it was folly to seek it out.

Well, I was an anthropologist and knew the value of even such slight clues as this. Moreover, my job for the Foundation was done. My specimens had been sent through to Callao by pack-train, and my notes were safe with Fra Rafael. Also, I was young and the lure of far places and their mysteries was hot in my blood. I hoped I'd find something odd--even dangerous--at Huascan.

I was young. Therefore, somewhat of a fool....

The first night I camped in a little cave, sheltered from the wind and snug enough in my fleece-lined sleeping-bag. There were no insects at this height. It was impossible to make a fire for there was no wood. I worried a bit about the burro freezing in the night.

But he survived, and I repacked him the next morning with rather absurd cheerfulness. The fog was thick, yes, but not impenetrable.

There were tracks in the snow where the wind had not covered them. A girl had left the village the day before my arrival, which made my task all the easier. So I went up into that vast, desolate silence, the fog closing in steadily, getting thicker and thicker, the trail getting narrower until at last it was a mere track.

And then I was moving blind. I had to feel my way, step by step, leading the burro. Occasional tracks showed through the mist, showed that the native girl had walked swiftly--had run in places--so I assumed that the fog was less dense when she had come by this way. As it happened, I was quite wrong about that....

We were on a narrow path above a gorge when I lost the burro. I heard a scrambling and clashing of hoofs on rock behind me. The rope jerked out of my hand and the animal cried out almost articulately as it went over. I stood frozen, pressing against the stone, listening to the sound of the burro's fall. Finally the distant noise died in a faint trickling of snow and gravel that faded into utter silence. So thick was the fog that I had seen nothing.

I felt my way back to where the path had crumbled and rotten rock had given way under the burro's weight. It was possible for me to retrace my steps, but I did not. I was sure that my destination could not be much further. A lightly clad native girl could not have gone so



far as Huascan itself. No, probably that day I would reach my goal.

So I went on, feeling my way through the thick silent fog. I was able to see only a few inches ahead of me for hours. Then, abruptly the trail grew clearer. Until, at last I was moving in the shadowless, unearthly mist over hard-packed snow, following the clearly marked footprints of a girl's sandals.

Then they vanished without warning, those prints, and I stood hesitant, staring around. I could see nothing, but a brighter glow in the misty canopy overhead marked the sun's position.

I knelt and brushed away the snow with my hands, hoping to undo the wind's concealing work. But I found no more footprints. Finally I took my bearings as well as I could and ploughed ahead in the general direction the girl had been traveling.

My compass told me I was heading due north.

The fog was a living, sentient thing now, secretive, shrouding the secret that lay beyond its gray wall.

Suddenly I was conscious of a change. An electric tingle coursed through my body. Abruptly the fog-wall brightened. Dimly, as through a translucent pane, I could make out vague images ahead of me.

I began to move toward the images--and suddenly the fog was gone!

Before me lay a valley. Blue-white moss carpeted it except where reddish boulders broke the blueness. Here and there were trees--at least I assumed they were trees, despite their unfamiliar outline. They were like banyans, having dozens of trunks narrow as bamboo. Blue-leaved, they stood like immense bird-cages on the pallid moss. The fog closed in behind the valley and above it. It was like being in a

huge sun-lit cavern.

I turned my head, saw a gray wall behind me. Beneath my feet the snow was melting and running in tiny, trickling rivulets among the moss. The air was warm and stimulating as wine.

A strange and abrupt change. Impossibly strange! I walked toward one of the trees, stopped at a reddish boulder to examine it. And surprise caught at my throat. It was an artifact--a crumbling ruin, the remnant of an ancient structure whose original appearance I could not fathom. The stone seemed iron-hard. There were traces of inscription on it, but eroded to illegibility. And I never did learn the history of those enigmatic ruins.... They did not originate on Earth.

There was no sign of the native girl, and the resilient moss retained no tracks. I stood there, staring around, wondering what to do now. I was tense with excitement. But there was little to see. Just that valley covering perhaps a half-mile before the fog closed in around it.

Beyond that--I did not know what lay beyond that.

I went on, into the valley, eyeing my surroundings curiously in the shadowless light that filtered through the shifting roof of fog. Foolishly, I expected to discover Incan artifacts. The crumbled red stones should have warned me. They were, I think, harder than metal, yet they had been here long enough for the elements to erode them into featureless shards. Had they been of earthly origin they would have antedated Mankind--antedated even the Neanderthaler man.

Curious how our minds are conditioned to run in anthropomorphic lines. I was, though I did not know it, walking through a land that had its beginnings outside the known universe. The blue trees hinted at that. The crimson ruins told me that clearly. The atmospheric conditions--the fog, the warmth high up in the Cordilleras--were

certainly not natural. Yet I thought the explanation lay in some geological warp, volcanic activity, subterranean gas-vents....

My vision reached a half-mile, no farther. As I went on, the misty horizon receded. The valley was larger than I had imagined. It was like Elysium, where the shades of dead men stroll in the Garden of Proserpine. Streamlets ran through the blue moss at intervals, chill as death from the snowy plains hidden in the fog. "A sleepy world of streams...."

The ruins altered in appearance as I went on. The red blocks were still present, but there were now also remnants of other structures, made by a different culture, I thought.

The blue trees grew more numerous. Leafy vines covered most of them now, saffron-tinted, making each strange tree a little room, screened by the lattice of the vines. As I passed close to one a faint clicking sounded, incongruously like the tapping of typewriter keys, but muffled. I saw movement and turned, my hand going to the pistol in my belt.

The Thing came out of a tree-hut and halted, watching me. I felt it watching me--though it had no eyes!

It was a sphere of what seemed to be translucent plastic, glowing with shifting rainbow colors. And I sensed sentience--intelligence--in its horribly human attitude of watchful hesitation. Four feet in diameter it was, and featureless save for three ivory elastic tentacles that supported it and a fringe of long, whip-like cilia about its diameter--its waist, I thought.

It looked at me, eyeless and cryptic. The shifting colors crawled over the plastic globe. Then it began to roll forward on the three supporting tentacles with a queer, swift gliding motion. I stepped back, jerking

out my gun and leveling it.

"Stop," I said, my voice shrill. "Stop!"

It stopped, quite as though it understood my words or the gesture of menace. The cilia fluttered about its spherical body. Bands of lambent color flashed. I could not rid myself of the curious certainty, that it was trying to communicate with me.

Abruptly it came forward again purposefully. I tensed and stepped back, holding the gun aimed. My finger was tightening on the trigger when the Thing stopped.

I backed off, nervously tense, but the creature did not follow. After I had got about fifty yards away it turned back and retreated into the hut-like structure in the banyan tree. After that I watched the trees warily as I passed them, but there were no other visitations of that nature.

Scientists are reluctant to relinquish their so-called logic. As I walked I tried to rationalize the creature, to explain it in the light of current knowledge. That it had been alive was certain. Yet it was not protoplasmic in nature. A plant, developed by mutation? Perhaps. But that theory did not satisfy me for the Thing had possessed intelligence, though of what order I did not know.

But there were the seven native girls, I reminded myself. My job was to find them, and quickly, too.

I did, at last, find them. Six of them, anyway. They were sitting in a row on the blue moss, facing one of the red blocks of stone, their backs toward me. As I mounted a little rise I saw them, motionless as bronze statues, and as rigid.

I went down toward them, tense with excitement, expectancy. Odd that six native girls, sitting in a row, should fill me with such feeling. They were so motionless that I wondered as I approached them, if they were dead....

But they were not. Nor were they--in the true sense of the word--alive.

I gripped one by the bare shoulder, found the flesh surprisingly cold and the girl seemed not to feel my touch. I swung her around to face me, and her black, empty eyes looked off into the far distance. Her lips were tightly compressed, slightly cyanosed. The pupils of her eyes were inordinately dilated, as if she was drugged.

Indian style, she squatted cross-legged, like the others. As I pulled her around, she toppled down on the moss, making no effort to stop herself. For a moment she lay there. Then with slow, puppet-like motions, she returned to her former position and resumed that blank staring into space.

I looked at the others. They were alike in their sleep-like withdrawal. It seemed as if their minds had been sucked out of them, that their very selves were elsewhere. It was a fantastic diagnosis, of course. But the trouble with those girls was nothing a physician could understand. It was psychic in nature, obviously.

I turned to the first one and slapped her cheeks. "Wake up!" I commanded. "You must obey me! Waken--"

But she gave no sign of feeling, of seeing. I lit a match, and her eyes focused on the flame. But the size of her pupils did not alter....

A shudder racked me. Then, abruptly I sensed movement behind me. I turned....

Over the blue moss the seventh Indio girl was coming toward us. "Miranda!" I said. "Can you hear me?" Fra Rafael had told me her name. Her feet, I saw, were bare and white frost-bite blotches marked them. But she did not seem to feel any pain as she walked.

Then I became aware that this was not a simple Indio girl. Something deep within my soul suddenly shrank back with instinctive revulsion. My skin seemed to crawl with a sort of terror. I began to shake so that it was difficult to draw my gun from its holster.

There was just this young native girl walking slowly toward me, her face quite expressionless, her black eyes fixed on emptiness. Yet she was not like other Indios, not like the six other girls sitting behind me. I can only liken her to a lamp in which a hot flame burned. The others were lamps that were dead, unlit.

The flame in her was not one that had been kindled on this earth, or in this universe, or in this space-time continuum, either. There was life in the girl who had been Miranda Valle--but it was not human life!

Some distant, skeptical corner of my brain told me that this was pure insanity, that I was deluded, hallucinated. Yes, I knew that. But it did not seem to matter. The girl who was walking so quietly across the blue yielding moss had wrapped about her, like an invisible, intangible veil, something of the alienage that men, through the eons, have called divinity. No mere human, I thought, could touch her.

But I felt fear, loathing--emotions not associated with divinity. I watched, knowing that presently she would look at me, would realize my presence. Then--well, my mind would not go beyond that point....

She came forward and quietly seated herself with the others, at the end of the line. Her body stiffened rigidly. Then, the veil of terror seemed to leave her, like a cloak falling away. Abruptly she was just

an Indian girl, empty and drained as the others, mindless and motionless.

The girl beside her rose suddenly with a slow, fluid motion. And the crawling horror hit me again.... The Alien Power had not left! It had merely transferred itself to another body!

And this second body was as dreadful to my senses as the first had been. In some subtly monstrous way its terror impressed itself on my brain, though all the while there was nothing overt, nothing visibly wrong. The strange landscape, bounded by fog, was not actually abnormal, considering its location, high in the Andes. The blue moss, the weird trees; they were strange, but possible. Even the seven native girls were a normal part of the scene. It was the sense of an alien presence that caused my terror--a fear of the unknown....

As the newly "possessed" girl rose, I turned and fled, deathly sick, feeling caught in the grip of nightmare. Once I stumbled and fell. As I scrambled wildly to my feet I looked back.

The girl was watching me, her face tiny and far away. Then, suddenly, abruptly it was close. She stood within a few feet of me! I had not moved nor seen her move, but we were all close together again--the seven girls and I....

Hypnosis? Something of that sort. She had drawn me back to her, my mind blacked out and unresisting. I could not move. I could only stand motionless while that Alien being dwelling within human flesh reached out and thrust frigid fingers into my soul. I could feel my mind laid open, spread out like a map before the inhuman gaze that scanned it. It was blasphemous and shameful, and I could not move or resist!

I was flung aside as the psychic grip that held me relaxed. I could not think clearly. That remote delving into my brain had made me blind,

sick, frantic. I remember running....

But I remember very little of what followed. There are vague pictures of blue moss and twisted trees, of coiling fog that wrapped itself about me, trying futilely to hold me back. And always there was the sense of a dark and nameless horror just beyond vision, hidden from me--though I was not hidden from its eyeless gaze!

I remember reaching the wall of fog, saw it loomed before me, plunged into it, raced through cold grayness, snow crunching beneath my boots. I recall emerging again into that misty valley of Abaddon....

When I regained complete consciousness I was with Lhar.

A coolness as of limpid water moved through my mind, cleansing it, washing away the horror, soothing and comforting me. I was lying on my back looking up at an arabesque pattern of blue and saffron; gray-silver light filtered through a lacy, filigree. I was still weak but the blind terror no longer gripped me.

I was inside a hut formed by the trunks of one of the banyan-like trees. Slowly, weakly I rose on one elbow. The room was empty except for a curious flower that grew from the dirt floor beside me. I looked at it dazedly.

And so I met Lhar.... She was of purest white, the white of alabaster, but with a texture and warmth that stone does not have. In shape--well, she seemed to be a great flower, an unopened tulip-like blossom five feet or so tall. The petals were closely enfolded, concealing whatever sort of body lay hidden beneath, and at the base was a convoluted pedestal that gave the odd impression of a ruffled, tiny skirt. Even now I cannot describe Lhar coherently. A flower, yes--but very much more than that. Even in that first glimpse I knew that Lhar was more than just a flower....



I was not afraid of her. She had saved me, I knew, and I felt complete trust in her. I lay back as she spoke to me telepathically, her words and thoughts forming within my brain....

"You are well now, though still weak. But it is useless for you to try to escape from this valley. No one can escape. The Other has powers I do not know, and those powers will keep you here."

I said, "You are--?"

A name formed within my mind. "Lhar. I am not of your world."

A shudder shook her. And her distress forced itself on me. I stood up, swaying with weakness. Lhar drew back, moving with a swaying, bobbing gait oddly like a curtsy.

Behind me a clicking sounded. I turned, saw the many-colored sphere force itself through the banyan-trunks. Instinctively my hand went to my gun. But a thought from Lhar halted me.

"It will not harm you. It is my servant." She hesitated, groping for a word. "A machine. A robot. It will not harm you."

I said, "Is it intelligent?"

"Yes. But it is not alive. Our people made it. We have many such machines."

The robot swayed toward me, the rim of cilia flashing and twisting. Lhar said, "It speaks thus, without words or thought...." She paused, watching the sphere, and I sensed dejection in her manner.

The robot turned to me. The cilia twisted lightly about my arm, tugging me toward Lhar. I said, "What does it want?"

"It knows that I am dying," Lhar said.

That shocked me. "Dying? No!"

"It is true. Here in this alien world I do not have my usual food. So I will die. To survive I need the blood of mammals. But there are none here save those seven the Other has taken. And I cannot use them for they are now spoiled."

I didn't ask Lhar what sort of mammals she had in her own world. "That's what the robot wanted when it tried to stop me before, isn't it?"

"He wanted you to help me, yes. But you are weak from the shock you have had. I cannot ask you--"

I said, "How much blood do you need?"

At her answer, I said, "All right. You saved my life; I must do the same for you. I can spare that much blood easily. Go ahead."

She bowed toward me, a fluttering white flame in the dimness of the tree-room. A tendril flicked out from among her petals, wrapped itself about my arm. It felt cool, gentle as a woman's hand. I felt no pain.

"You must rest now," Lhar said. "I will go away but I shall not be long."

The robot clicked and chattered, shifting on its tentacle legs. I watched it, saying, "Lhar, this can't be true. Why am I--believing impossible things?"

"I have given you peace," she told me. "Your mind was dangerously close to madness. I have drugged you a little, physically; so your emotions will not be strong for a while. It was necessary to save your

sanity."

It was true that my mind felt--was drugged the word? My thoughts were clear enough, but I felt as if I were submerged in transparent but dark water. There was an odd sense of existing in a dream. I remembered Swinburne's lines:

Here, where the world is quiet, Here, where all trouble seems Dead  
winds'and spent waves'riot In doubtful dreams of dreams....

"What is this place?" I asked.

Lhar bent toward me. "I do not know if I can explain. It is not quite clear to me. The robot knows. He is a reasoning machine. Wait...." She turned to the sphere. Its cilia fluttered in quick, complicated signals.

Lhar turned back to me. "Do you know much of the nature of Time? That it is curved, moves in a spiral...."

She went on to explain, but much of her explanation I did not understand. Yet I gathered enough to realize that this valley was not of Earth. Or, rather, it was not of the earth I knew.

"You have geological disturbances, I know. The strata are tumbled about, mixed one with another--"

I remembered what Fra Rafael had said about an earthquake, three months before. Lhar nodded toward me.

"But this was a time-slip. The space-time continuum is also subject to great strains and stresses. It buckled, and strata--Time-sectors--were thrust up to mingle with others. This valley belongs to another age, as do I and the machine, and also--the Other."

She told me what had happened.... There had been no warning. One moment she had been in her own World, her own Time. The next, she was here, with her robot. And with the Other....

"I do not know the origin of the Other. I may have lived in either your future or your past. This valley, with its ruined stone structures, is probably part of your future. I had never heard of such a place before. The Other may be of the future also. Its shape I do not know...."

She told me more, much more. The Other, as she called it--giving the entity a thought-form that implied complete alienage--had a strangely chameleon-like method of feeding. It lived on life-force, as well as I could understand, draining the vital powers of a mammal vampirically. And it assumed the shape of its prey as it fed. It was not possession, in the strict sense of the word. It was a sort of merging....

Humanity is inclined to invest all things with its own attributes, forgetting that outside the limitations of time and space and size, familiar laws of nature do not apply.

So, even now I do not know all that lay behind the terror in that Peruvian valley. This much I learned: the Other, like Lhar and her robot, had been cast adrift by a time-slip, and thus marooned here. There was no way for it to return to its normal Time-sector. It had created the fog-wall to protect itself from the direct rays of the sun, which threatened its existence.

Sitting there in the filigreed, silver twilight beside Lhar, I had a concept of teeming universes of space-time, of an immense spiral of lives and civilizations, races and cultures, covering an infinite cosmos. And yet--what had happened? Very little, in that inconceivable infinity. A rift in time, a dimensional slip--and a sector of land and three beings on it had been wrenched from their place in time and transported to our time-stratum.

A robot, a flower that was alive and intelligent--and feminine--and the Other....

"The native girls," I said. "What will happen to them?"

"They are no longer alive," Lhar told me. "They still move and breathe, but they are dead, sustained only by the life-force of the Other. I do not think it will harm me. Apparently it prefers other food."

"That's why you've stayed here?" I asked.

The shining velvety calyx swayed. "I shall die soon. For a little while I thought that I might manage to survive in this alien world, this alien time. Your blood has helped." The cool tentacle withdrew from my arm. "But I lived in a younger time, where space was filled with--with certain energizing vibratory principles.

"They have faded now almost to nothing, to what you call cosmic rays. And these are too weak to maintain my life. No, I must die. And then my poor robot will be alone." I sensed elfin amusement in that last thought. "It seems absurd to you that I should think affectionately of a machine. But in our world there is a rapport--a mental symbiosis--between robot and living beings."

There was a silence. After a while I said, "I'd better get out of here. Get help--to end the menace of the other...." What sort of help I did not know. Was the Other vulnerable?

Lhar caught my thought. "In its own shape it is vulnerable, but what that shape is I do not know. As for your escaping from this valley--you cannot. The fog will bring you back."

"I've got my compass." I glanced at it, saw that the needle was

spinning at random.

Lhar said: "The Other has many powers. Whenever you go into the fog, you will always return here."

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"My robot tells me. A machine can reason logically, better than a colloid brain."

I closed my eyes, trying to think. Surely it should not be difficult for me to retrace my steps, to find a path out of this valley. Yet I hesitated, feeling a strange impotence.

"Can't your robot guide me?" I persisted.

"He will not leave my side. Perhaps--" Lhar turned to the sphere, and the cilia fluttered excitedly. "No," she said, turning back to me. "Built into his mind is one rule--never to leave me. He cannot disobey that."

I couldn't ask Lhar to go with me. Somehow I sensed that the frigid cold of the surrounding mountains would destroy her swiftly. I said, "It must be possible for me to get out of here. I'm going to try, anyway."

"I will be waiting," she said, and did not move as I slipped out between two trunks of the banyan-like tree.

It was daylight and the silvery grayness overhead was palely luminous. I headed for the nearest rampart of fog.

Lhar was right. Each time I went into that cloudy fog barrier I was blinded. I crept forward step by step, glancing behind me at my footprints in the snow, trying to keep in a straight line. And presently I would find myself back in the valley....

I must have tried a dozen times before giving up. There were no landmarks in that all-concealing grayness, and only by sheerest chance would anyone blunder into this valley--unless hypnotically summoned, like the Indio girls.

I realized that I was trapped. Finally I went back to Lhar. She hadn't moved an inch since I had left, nor had the robot, apparently.

"Lhar," I said. "Lhar, can't you help me?"

The white flame of the flower was motionless, but the robot's cilia moved in quick signals. Lhar moved at last.

"Perhaps," her thought came. "Unless both induction and deduction fail, my robot has discovered a chance for you. The Other can control your mind through emotions. But I, too, have some power over your mind. If I give you strength, wall you with a psychic shield against intrusion, you may be able to face the Other. But you cannot destroy it unless it is in its normal shape. The Indio girls must be killed...."

"Killed?" I felt a sense of horror at the thought of killing those poor simple native girls.

"They are not actually alive now. They are now a part of the Other. They can never be restored to their former life."

"How will--destroying them--help me?" I asked.

Again Lhar consulted the robot. "The Other will be driven from their bodies. It will then have no hiding-place and must resume its own form. Then it can be slain."

Lhar swayed and curtsied away. "Come," she said. "It is in my mind that the Other must die. It is evil, ruthlessly selfish, which is the same

thing. Until now I have not realized the solution to this evil being. But seeing into your thoughts has clarified my own. And my robot tells me that unless I aid you, the Other will continue ravaging into your world. If that happens, the time-pattern will be broken.... I do not quite understand, but my robot makes no mistakes. The Other must die...."

She was outside of the banyan now, the sphere gliding after her. I followed. The three of us moved swiftly across the blue moss, guided by the robot.

In a little while we came to where the six Indio girls were squatting. They had apparently not moved since I had left them.

"The Other is not here," Lhar said.

The robot held me back as Lhar advanced toward the girls, the skirt-like frill at her base convoluting as she moved. She paused beside them and her petals trembled and began to unfold.

From the tip of that great blossom a fountain of white dust spurted up. Spores or pollen, it seemed to be. The air was cloudy with the whiteness.

The robot drew me back, back again. I sensed danger....

The pollen seemed to be drawn toward the Indios, spun toward them in dancing mist-motes. It settled on their bronzed bodies, their limbs and faces. It covered them like a veil until they appeared to be six statues, white as cold marble, there on the blue moss.

Lhar's petals lifted and closed again. She swayed toward me, her mind sending a message into mine.

"The Other has no refuge now," she told me. "I have slain the--the



girls."

"They're dead?" My lips were dry.

"What semblance of life they had left is now gone. The Other cannot use them again."

Lhar swayed toward me. A cool tentacle swept out, pressing lightly on my forehead. Another touched my breast, above the heart.

"I give you of my strength," Lhar said. "It will be as shield and buckler to you. The rest of the way you must go alone...."

Into me a tide of power flowed. I sank into cool depths, passionless and calm. Something was entering my body, my mind and soul, drowning my fears, stiffening my resolve.

Strength of Lhar was now my strength!

The tentacles dropped away, their work done. The robot's cilia signalled and Lhar said, "Your way lies there. That temple--do you see it?"

I saw it. Far in the distance, half shrouded by the fog, a scarlet structure, not ruined like the others, was visible.

"You will find the Other there. Slay the last Indio, then destroy the Other."

I had no doubt now of my ability to do that. A new power seemed to lift me from my feet, send me running across the moss. Once I glanced back, to see Lhar and her robot standing motionless, watching me.

The temple enlarged as I came nearer. It was built of the same

reddish stone as the other ruined blocks I had seen. But erosion had weathered its harsh angles till nothing now remained but a rounded, smoothly sculptured monolith, twenty feet tall, shaped like a rifle shell.

A doorway gaped in the crimson wall. I paused for a moment on the threshold. In the dimness within a shadow stirred. I stepped forward finding myself in a room that was tall and narrow, the ceiling hidden in gloom. Along the walls were carvings I could not clearly see. They gave a suggestion of inhuman beings that watched.

It was dark but I could see the Indio girl who had been Miranda Valle. Her eyes were on me, and, even through the protecting armor of Lhar strength; I could feel their terrible power.

The life in the girl was certainly not human!

"Destroy her!" my mind warned. "Destroy her! Quickly!"

But as I hesitated a veil of darkness seemed to fall upon me. Utter cold, a fridity as of outer space, lanced into my brain. My senses reeled under the assault. Desperately, blind and sick and giddy, I called on the reserve strength Lhar had given me. Then I blacked out....

When I awoke I saw smoke coiling up from the muzzle of the pistol in my hand. At my feet lay the Indio girl, dead. My bullet had crashed into her brain, driving out the terrible dweller there.

My eyes were drawn to the farther wall. An archway gaped there. I walked across the room, passed under the archway. Instantly I was in complete, stygian darkness. But I was not alone!

The power of the Other struck me like a tangible blow. I have no words to tell of an experience so completely disassociated from

human memories. I remember only this: my mind and soul were sucked down into a black abyss where I had no volition or consciousness. It was another dimension of the mind where my senses were altered....

Nothing existed there but the intense blackness beyond time and space. I could not see the Other nor conceive of it. It was pure intelligence, stripped of flesh. It was alive and it had power--power that was god-like.

There in the great darkness I stood alone, unaided, sensing the approach of an entity from some horribly remote place where all values were altered.

I sensed Lhar's nearness. "Hurry!" her thought came to me. "Before it wakens!"

Warmth flowed into me. The blackness receded....

Against the farther wall something lay, a thing bafflingly human... a great-headed thing with a tiny pallid body coiled beneath it. It was squirming toward me....

"Destroy it!" Lhar communicated.

The pistol in my hand thundered, bucking against my palm. Echoes roared against the walls. I fired and fired again until the gun was empty....

"It is dead," Lhar's thought entered my mind.

I stumbled, dropped the pistol.

"It was the child of an old super-race--a child not yet born."

Can you conceive of such a race? Where even the unborn had power beyond human understanding? My mind wondered what the adult Alien must be.

I shivered, suddenly cold. An icy wind gusted through the temple. Lhar's thought was clear in my mind.

"Now the valley is no longer a barrier to the elements. The Other created fog and warmth to protect itself. Now it is dead and your world reclaims its own."

From the outer door of the temple I could see the fog being driven away by a swift wind. Snow was falling slowly, great white flakes that blanketed the blue moss and lay like caps on the red shards that dotted the valley.

"I shall die swiftly and easily now, instead of slowly, by starvation," Lhar said.

A moment later a thought crossed my mind, faint and intangible as a snowflake and I knew Lhar was saying goodbye.

I left the valley. Once I looked back, but there was only a veil of snow behind me.

And out of the greatest adventure the cosmic gods ever conceived--only this: For a little while the eternal veil of time was ripped away and the door to the unknown was held ajar.

But now the door is closed once more. Below Huascan a robot guards a tomb, that is all.

The snow fell faster. Shivering, I ploughed through the deepening drifts. My compass needle pointed north. The spell that had enthralled

the valley was gone.

Half an hour later I found the trail, and the road to safety lay open before me. Fra Rafael would be waiting to hear my story.

But I did not think that he would believe it....

# Happy Ending

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This is the way the story ended:

James Kelvin concentrated very hard on the thought of the chemist with the red moustache who had promised him a million dollars. It was simply a matter of tuning in on the man's brain, establishing a rapport. He had done it before. Now it was more important than ever that he do it this one last time. He pressed the button on the gadget the robot had given him, and thought hard.

Far off, across limitless distances, he found the rapport.

He clamped on the mental tight beam.

He rode it....

The red-moustached man looked up, gaped, and grinned delightedly.

"So there you are!" he said. "I didn't hear you come in. Good grief, I've been trying to find you for two weeks."

"Tell me one thing quickly," Kelvin said. "What's your name?"

"George Bailey. Incidentally, what's yours?"

But Kelvin didn't answer. He had suddenly remembered the other thing the robot had told him about that gadget which established rapport when he pressed the button. He pressed it now--and nothing happened. The gadget had gone dead. Its task was finished, which obviously meant he had at last achieved health, fame and fortune.

The robot had warned him, of course. The thing was set to do one specialised job. Once he got what he wanted, it would work no more.

So Kelvin got the million dollars.

And he lived happily ever after....

This is the middle of the story:

As he pushed aside the canvas curtain something--a carelessly hung rope--swung down at his face, knocking the horn-rimmed glasses askew. Simultaneously a vivid bluish light blazed into his unprotected eyes. He felt a curious, sharp sense of disorientation, a shifting motion that was almost instantly gone.

Things steadied before him. He let the curtain fall back into place, making legible again the painted inscription: Horoscopes--Learn Your Future--and he stood staring at the remarkable horomancer.

It was a--oh, impossible!

The robot said in a flat, precise voice, "You are James Kelvin. You are a reporter. You are thirty years old, unmarried, and you came to Los Angeles from Chicago today on the advice of your physician. Is that correct?"

In his astonishment Kelvin called on the Deity. Then he settled his glasses more firmly and tried to remember an exposé of charlatans he had once written. There was some obvious way they worked things like this, miraculous as it sounded.

The robot looked at him impassively out of its faceted eye.

"On reading your mind," it continued in the pedantic voice, "I find this is the year nineteen forty nine. My plans will have to be revised. I had

meant to arrive in the year nineteen seventy. I will ask you to assist me."

Kelvin put his hands in his pockets and grinned.

"With money, naturally," he said. "You had me going for a minute. How do you do it, anyhow? Mirrors? Or like Maelzel's chess player?"

"I am not a machine operated by a dwarf, nor am I an optical illusion," the robot assured him. "I am an artificially created living organism, originating at a period far in your future."

"And I'm not the sucker you take me for," Kelvin remarked pleasantly. "I came in here to--"

"You lost your baggage checks," the robot said. "While wondering what to do about it, you had a few drinks and took the Wilshire bus at exactly--exactly eight thirty-five post meridian."

"Lay off the mind-reading," Kelvin said. "And don't tell me you've been running this joint very long with a line like that. The cops would be after you. If you're a real robot, ha, ha."

"I have been running this joint," the robot said, "for approximately five minutes. My predecessor is unconscious behind that chest in the corner. Your arrival here was sheer coincidence." It paused very briefly, and Kelvin had the curious impression that it was watching to see if the story so far had gone over well.

The impression was curious because Kelvin had no feeling at all that there was a man in the large, jointed figure before him. If such a thing as a robot were possible, he would have believed implicitly that he confronted a genuine specimen. Such things being impossible, he waited to see what the gimmick would be.



"My arrival here was also accidental," the robot informed him. "This being the case, my equipment will have to be altered slightly. I will require certain substitute mechanisms. For that, I gather as I read your mind, I will have to engage in your peculiar barter system of economics. In a word, coinage or gold or silver certificates will be necessary. Thus I am--temporarily--a horomancer."

"Sure, sure," Kelvin said. "Why not a simple mugging? If you're a robot, you could do a super-mugging job with a quick twist of the gears."

"It would attract attention. Above all, I require secrecy. As a matter of fact, I am--" The robot paused, searched Kelvin's brain for the right phrase, and said, "--on the lam. In my era, time-travelling is strictly forbidden, even by accident, unless government-sponsored."

There was a fallacy there somewhere, Kelvin thought, but he couldn't quite spot it. He blinked at the robot intently. It looked pretty unconvincing.

"What proof do you need?" the creature asked. "I read your brain the minute you came in, didn't I? You must have felt the temporary amnesia as I drew out the knowledge and then replaced it."

"So that's what happened," Kelvin said. He took a cautious step backward. "Well, I think I'll be getting along."

"Wait," the robot commanded. "I see you have begun to distrust me. Apparently you now regret having suggested a mugging job. You fear I may act on the suggestion. Allow me to reassure you. It is true that I could take your money and assure secrecy by killing you, but I am not permitted to kill humans. The alternative is to engage in the barter system. I can offer you something valuable in return for a small

amount of gold. Let me see." The faceted gaze swept around the tent, dwelt piercingly for a moment on Kelvin. "A horoscope," the robot said. "It is supposed to help you achieve health, fame and fortune. Astrology, however, is out of my line. I can merely offer a logical scientific method of attaining the same results."

"Uh-huh," Kelvin said sceptically. "How much? And why haven't you used that method?"

"I have other ambitions," the robot said in a cryptic manner. "Take this." There was a brief clicking. A panel opened in the metallic chest. The robot extracted a small, flat case and handed it to Kelvin, who automatically closed his fingers on the cold metal.

"Be careful. Don't push that button until--"

But Kelvin had pushed it....

He was driving a figurative car that had got out of control. There was somebody else inside his head. There was a schizophrenic, double-tracked locomotive that was running wild and his hand on the throttle couldn't slow it down an instant. His mental steering-wheel had snapped.

Somebody else was thinking for him!

Not quite a human being. Not quite sane, probably, from Kelvin's standards. But awfully sane from his own. Sane enough to have mastered the most intricate principles of non-Euclidean geometry in the nursery.

The senses got synthesised in the brain into a sort of common language, a master-tongue. Part of it was auditory, and there were smells and tastes and tactile sensations that were sometimes

familiar and sometimes spiced with the absolutely alien. And it was chaotic.

Something like this, perhaps....

"--Big Lizards getting too numerous this season--tame throwers have the same eyes not on Callisto though--vacation soon--preferably galactic--solar system claustrophobic--byanding tomorrow if square rootola and upsliding three--"

But that was merely the word-symbolism. Subjectively, it was far more detailed and very frightening. Luckily, reflex had lifted Kelvin's finger from the button almost instantly, and he stood there motionless, shivering slightly.

He was afraid now.

The robot said, "You should not have begun the rapport until I instructed you. Now there will be danger. Wait." His eye changed colour. "Yes... there is... Tharn, yes. Beware of Tharn."

"I don't want any part of it," Kelvin said quickly. "Here, take this thing back."

"Then you will be unprotected against Tharn. Keep the device. It will, as I promised, insure your health, fame and fortune, far more effectively than a--a horoscope."

"No, thanks. I don't know how you managed that trick--subsonics, maybe, but I don't--"

"Wait," the robot said. "When you pressed that button, you were in the mind of someone who exists very far in the future. It created a temporal rapport. You can bring about that rapport any time you

press the button."

"Heaven forfend," Kelvin said, still sweating a little.

"Consider the opportunities. Suppose a troglodyte of the far past had access to your brain? He could achieve anything he wanted."

It had become important, somehow, to find a logical rebuttal to the robot's arguments. Like St. Anthony--or was it Luther?--arguing with the devil, Kelvin thought dizzily. His headache was worse, and he suspected he had drunk more than was good for him. But he merely said: "How could a troglodyte understand what's in my brain? He couldn't apply the knowledge without the same conditioning I've had."

"Have you ever had sudden and apparently illogical ideas? Compulsions? So that you seem forced to think of certain things, count up to certain numbers, work out particular problems? Well, the man in the future on whom the device is focused doesn't know he's en rapport with you, Kelvin. But he's vulnerable to compulsions. All you have to do is concentrate on a problem and then press the button. Your rapport will be compelled--illogically, from his viewpoint--to solve that problem. And you'll be reading his brain. You'll find out how it works. There are limitations; you'll learn those too. And the device will insure health, wealth and fame for you."

"It would insure anything, if it really worked that way. I could do anything. That's why I'm not buying!"

"I said there were limitations. As soon as you've successfully achieved health, fame and fortune, the device will become useless. I've taken care of that. But meanwhile you can use it to solve all your problems by tapping the brain of the more intelligent specimen in the future. The important point is to concentrate on your problems before you press the button. Otherwise you may get more than Tharn on your

track."

"Tharn? What--"

"I think an--an android," the robot said, looking at nothing. "An artificial human.... However, let us consider my own problem. I need a small amount of gold."

"So that's the kicker," Kelvin said, feeling oddly relieved. He said, "I haven't got any."

"Your watch."

Kelvin jerked his arm so that his wristwatch showed. "Oh, no. That watch cost plenty."

"All I need is the goldplating," the robot said, shooting out a reddish ray from its eye. "Thank you." The watch was now dull grey metal.

"Hey!" Kelvin cried.

"If you use the rapport device, your health, fame and fortune will be assured," the robot said rapidly. "You will be as happy as any man of this era can be. It will solve all your problems--including Tharn. Wait a minute." The creature took a backward step and disappeared behind a hanging Oriental rug that had never been east of Peoria.

There was silence.

Kelvin looked from his altered watch to the flat enigmatic object in his palm. It was about two inches by two inches, and no thicker than a woman's vanity-case, and there was a sunken push-button on its side.

He dropped it into his pocket and took a few steps forward. He

looked behind the pseudo-Oriental rug, to find nothing except emptiness and a flapping slit cut in the canvas wall of the booth. The robot, it seemed, had taken a powder. Kelvin peered out through the slit. There was the light and sound of Ocean Park amusement pier, that was all. And the silvered, moving blackness of the Pacific Ocean, stretching to where small lights showed Malibu far up the invisible curve of the coastal cliffs.

So he came back inside the booth and looked around. A fat man in a swami's costume was unconscious behind the carved chest the robot had indicated. His breath, plus a process of deduction, told Kelvin that the man had been drinking.

Not knowing what else to do, Kelvin called on the Deity again. He found suddenly that he was thinking about someone or something called Tharn, who was an android.

Horomancy... time... rapport... no! Protective disbelief slid like plate armour around his mind. A practical robot couldn't be made. He knew that. He'd have heard--he was a reporter, wasn't he?

Sure he was.

Desiring noise and company, he went along to the shooting gallery and knocked down a few ducks. The flat case burned in his pocket. The dully burnished metal of his wristwatch burned in his memory. The remembrance of that drainage from his brain, and the immediate replacement, burned in his mind. Presently bar whisky burned in his stomach.

He'd left Chicago because of sinusitis, recurrent and annoying. Ordinary sinusitis. Not schizophrenia or hallucinations or accusing voices coming from the walls. Not because he had been seeing bats or robots. That thing hadn't really been a robot. It all had a perfectly

natural explanation. Oh sure.

Health, fame and fortune. And if--

Tharn!

The thought crashed with thunderbolt impact into his head.

And then another thought: I am going nuts!

A silent voice began to mutter insistently over and over. "Tharn--Tharn--Tharn--Tharn--"

And another voice, the voice of sanity and safety, answered it and drowned it out. Half aloud, Kelvin muttered: "I'm James Noel Kelvin. I'm a reporter--special features, legwork, rewrite. I'm thirty years old, unmarried, and I came to Los Angeles today and lost my baggage checks and--and I'm going to have another drink and find a hotel. Anyhow, the climate seems to be curing my sinusitis."

Tharn, the muffled drum-beat said almost below the threshold of realisation. Tharn, Tharn.

Tharn.

He ordered another drink and reached in his pocket for a coin. His hand touched the metal case. And simultaneously he felt a light pressure on his shoulder.

Instinctively he glanced around. It was a seven-fingered, spidery hand tightening--hairless, without nails--and white as smooth ivory.

The one, overwhelming necessity that sprang into Kelvin's mind was a simple longing to place as much space as possible between himself and the owner of that disgusting hand. It was a vital

requirement, but one difficult of fulfilment, a problem that excluded everything else from Kelvin's thoughts. He knew, vaguely, that he was gripping the flat case in his pocket as though that could save him, but all he was thinking about was: I've got to get away from here.

The monstrous, alien thoughts of someone in the future spun him insanely along their current. It could not have taken a moment while that skilled, competent, trained mind, wise in the lore of an unthinkable future, solved the random problem that had come so suddenly, with such curious compulsion.

Three methods of transportation were simultaneously clear to Kelvin. Two he discarded; motorplates were obviously inventions yet to come, and quirling--involving, as it did, a sensory coil-helmet--was beyond him. But the third method--

Already the memory was fading. And that hand was still tightening on his shoulder. He clutched at the vanishing ideas and desperately made his brain and his muscles move along the unlikely direction the future man had visualised.

And he was out in the open, a cold night wind blowing on him, still in a sitting position, but with nothing but empty air between his spine and the sidewalk.

He sat down suddenly.

Passers-by on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Cahuenga were not much surprised at the sight of a dark, lanky man sitting by the kerb. Only one woman had noticed Kelvin's actual arrival, and she knew when she was well off. She went right on home.

Kelvin got up laughing with soft hysteria. "Teleportation," he said. "How did I work it? It's gone.... Hard to remember afterwards, eh? I'll



have to start carrying a notebook again."

And then--"But what about Tharn?"

He looked around, frightened. Reassurance came only after half an hour had passed without additional miracles. Kelvin walked along the Boulevard, keeping a sharp lookout. No Tharn, though.

Occasionally he slid a hand into his pocket and touched the cold metal of the case. Health, fame and fortune. Why, he could--

But he did not press the button. Too vivid was the memory of that shocking, alien disorientation he had felt. The mind, the experiences, the habit-patterns of the far future were uncomfortably strong.

He would use the little case again--oh, yes. But there was no hurry. First he'd have to work out a few angles.

His disbelief was completely gone.

Tharn showed up the next night and scared the daylights out of Kelvin again. Prior to that, the reporter had failed to find his baggage tickets, and was only consoled by the two hundred bucks in his wallet. He took a room--paying in advance--at a medium-good hotel, and began wondering how he might apply his pipeline to the future. Very sensibly, he decided to continue a normal life until something developed. At any rate, he'd have to make a few connections. He tried the Times, the Examiner, the News, and some others. But these things develop slowly, except in the movies. That night Kelvin was in his hotel room when his unwelcome guest appeared.

It was, of course, Tharn.

He wore a very large white turban, approximately twice the size of his

head. He had a dapper black moustache, waxed downwards at the tips like the moustache of a mandarin or a catfish. He stared urgently at Kelvin out of the bathroom mirror.

Kelvin had been wondering whether or not he needed a shave before going out to dinner. He was rubbing his chin thoughtfully at the moment Tharn put in an appearance, and there was a perceptible mental lag between occurrence and perception, so that to Kelvin it seemed that he himself had mysteriously sprouted a long moustache. He reached for his upper lip. It was smooth. But in the glass the black waxed hairs quivered as Tharn pushed his face up against the surface of the mirror.

It was so shockingly disorientating, somehow, that Kelvin was quite unable to think at all. He took a quick step backward. The edge of the bathtub caught him behind the knees and distracted him momentarily, fortunately for his sanity. When he looked again there was only his own appalled face reflected above the washbowl. But after a second or two the face seemed to develop a cloud of white turban, and mandarin-like whiskers began to form sketchily.

Kelvin clapped a hand to his eyes and spun away. In about fifteen seconds he spread his fingers enough to peep through them at the glass. He kept his palm pressed desperately to his upper lip, in some wild hope of inhibiting the sudden sprouting of a moustache. What peeped back at him from the mirror looked like himself. At least it had no turban, and it wore horn-rimmed glasses. He risked snatching his hand away for a quick look, and clapped it in place again just in time to prevent Tharn from taking shape in the glass.

Still shielding his face, he went unsteadily into the bedroom and took the flat case out of his coat pocket. But he didn't press the button that would close a mental synapse between two incongruous eras. He didn't want to do that again, he realised. More horrible, somehow,

than what was happening now was the thought of re-entering that alien brain.

He was standing before the bureau, and in the mirror one eye looked out at him between reflected fingers. It was a wild eye behind the gleaming spectacle lens, but it seemed to be his own. Tentatively he took his hand away....

This mirror showed more of Tharn. Kelvin wished it hadn't. Tharn was wearing white knee-boots of some glittering plastic. Between them and the turban he wore nothing whatever except a minimum of loincloth, also glittering plastic. Tharn was very thin, but he looked active. He looked quite active enough to spring right into the hotel room. His skin was whiter than his turban, and his hands had seven fingers each, all right.

Kelvin abruptly turned away, but Tharn was resourceful. The dark window made enough of a reflecting surface to show a lean, loinclothed figure. The feet showed bare and they were less normal than Tharn's hands. And the polished brass of a lamp base gave back the picture of a small, distorted face not Kelvin's own.

Kelvin found a corner without reflecting surfaces and pushed into it, his hands shielding his face. He was still holding the flat case.

Oh, fine, he thought bitterly. Everything's got a string on it. What good will this rapport gadget do me if Tharn's going to show up every day? Maybe I'm only crazy. I hope so.

Something would have to be done unless Kelvin was prepared to go through life with his face buried in his hands. The worst of it was that Tharn had a haunting look of familiarity. Kelvin discarded a dozen possibilities, from reincarnation to the déjà vu phenomenon, but--

He peeped through his hands, in time to see Tharn raising a cylindrical gadget of some sort and levelling it like a gun. That gesture formed Kelvin's decision. He'd have to do something, and fast. So, concentrating on the problem--I want out!--he pressed the button in the surface of the flat case.

And instantly the teleportation method he had forgotten was perfectly clear to him. Other matters were, however, obscure. The smells--someone was thinking--were adding up to a--there was no word for that, only a shocking visio-auditory ideation that was simply dizzying. Someone named Three Million and Ninety Pink had written a new flatch. And there was the physical sensation of licking a twenty-four-dollar stamp and sticking it on a postcard.

But, most important, the man in the future had had--or would have--a compulsion to think about the teleportation method, and as Kelvin snapped back into his own mind and time, he instantly used that method....

He was falling.

Icy water attacked him hard. Miraculously he kept his grip on the flat case. He had a whirling vision of stars in a night sky, and the phosphorescent sheen of silvery light on a dark sea. Then brine stung his nostrils.

Kelvin had never learned how to swim.

As he went down for the last time, bubbling a scream, he literally clutched at the proverbial straw he was holding. His fingers pushed the button down again. There was no need to concentrate on the problem; he couldn't think of anything else.

Mental chaos, fantastic images--and the answer.

It took concentration, and there wasn't much time left. Bubbles streamed up past his face. He felt them, but he couldn't see them. All around, pressing in avidly, was the horrible coldness of the salt water....

But he did know the method now, and he knew how it worked. He thought along the lines the future mind had indicated. Something happened. Radiation--that was the nearest familiar term--poured out of his brain and did peculiar things to his lung-tissues. His blood cells adapted themselves....

He was breathing water, and it was no longer strangling him.

But Kelvin had also learned that his emergency adaptation could not be maintained for very long. Teleportation was the answer to that. And surely he could remember the method now. He had actually used it to escape from Tharn only a few minutes ago.

Yet he could not remember. The memory was expunged cleanly from his mind. So there was nothing else to do but press the button again, and Kelvin did that, most reluctantly.

Dripping wet, he was standing on an unfamiliar street. It was no street he knew, but apparently it was in his own time and on his own planet. Luckily, teleportation seemed to have limitations. The wind was cold. Kelvin stood in a puddle that grew rapidly around his feet. He stared around.

He picked out a sign up the street that offered Turkish Baths, and headed moistly in that direction. His thoughts were mostly profane....

He was in New Orleans, of all places. Presently he was drunk in New Orleans. His thoughts kept going around in circles, and scotch was a fine palliative, an excellent brake. He needed to get control again. He

had an almost miraculous power, and he wanted to be able to use it effectively before the unexpected happened again. Tharn....

He sat in a hotel room and swigged scotch. Gotta be logical!

He sneezed.

The trouble was, of course, that there were so few points of contact between his own mind and that of the future-man. Moreover, he'd got the rapport only in times of crisis. Like having access to the Alexandrian Library, five seconds a day. In five seconds you couldn't even start translating....

Health, fame and fortune. He sneezed again. The robot had been a liar. His health seemed to be going fast. What about that robot? How had he got involved, anyway? He said he'd fallen into this era from the future, but robots are notorious liars. Gotta be logical.

Apparently the future was peopled by creatures not unlike the cast of a Frankenstein picture. Androids, robots, so-called men whose minds were shockingly different.... Sneeze. Another drink.

The robot had said that the case would lose its power after Kelvin had achieved health, fame and fortune. Which was a distressing thought. Suppose he attained those enviable goals, found the little push-button useless, and then Tharn showed up? Oh, no. That called for another shot.

Sobriety was the wrong condition in which to approach a matter that in itself was as wild as delirium tremens, even though, Kelvin knew, the science he had stumbled on was all theoretically quite possible. But not in this day and age. Sneeze.

The trick would be to pose the right problem and use the case at

some time when you weren't drowning or being menaced by the bewhiskered android with his seven-fingered hands and his ominous rod-like weapon. Find the problem.

But that future-mind was hideous.

And suddenly, with drunken clarity, Kelvin realised that he was profoundly drawn to that dim, shadowy world of the future.

He could not see its complete pattern, but he sensed it somehow. He knew that it was right, a far better world and time than his. If he could be that unknown man who dwelt there, all would go well.

Man must needs love the highest, he thought wryly. Oh, well. He shook the bottle. How much had he absorbed? He felt fine.

Gotta be logical.

Outside the window, street-lights blinked off and on. Neons traced goblin languages against the night. It seemed rather alien, too, but so did Kelvin's own body. He started to laugh, but a sneeze choked that off.

All I want, he thought, is health, fame and fortune. Then I'll settle down and live happily ever after, without a care or worry. I won't need this enchanted case after that. Happy ending.

On impulse he took out the box and examined it. He tried to pry it open and failed. His finger hovered over the button.

How can I--he thought, and his fingers moved half an inch....

It wasn't so alien now that he was drunk. The future man's name was Quarra Vee. Odd he had never realised that before, but how often does a man think of his own name? Quarra Vee was playing some

sort of game vaguely reminiscent of chess, but his opponent was on a planet of Sirius, some distance away. The chessmen were all unfamiliar. Complicated, dizzying space-time gambits flashed through Quarra Vee's mind as Kelvin listened in. Then Kelvin's problem thrust through, the compulsion hit Quarra Vee, and--

It was all mixed up. There were two problems, really. How to cure a cold--coryza. And how to become healthy, rich and famous in a practically prehistoric era--for Quarra Vee.

A small problem, however, to Quarra Vee. He solved it and went back to his game with the Sirian.

Kelvin was back in the hotel room in New Orleans.

He was very drunk or he wouldn't have risked it. The method involved using his brain to tune in on another brain in this present twentieth century that had exactly the wavelength he required. All sorts of factors would build up to the sum total of that wavelength--experience, opportunity, position, knowledge, imagination, honesty--but he found it at last, after hesitation among three totals that were all nearly right. Still, one was righter, to three decimal points. Still drunk as a lord, Kelvin clamped on a mental tight beam, turned on the teleportation, and rode the beam across America to a well-equipped laboratory, where a man sat reading.

The man was bald and had a bristling red moustache. He looked up sharply at some sound Kelvin made.

"Hey!" he said. "How did you get in here?"

"Ask Quarra Vee," Kelvin said.

"Who? What?" The man put down his book.



Kelvin called on his memory. It seemed to be slipping. He used the rapport case for an instant, and refreshed his mind. Not so unpleasant this time, either. He was beginning to understand Quarra Vee's world a little. He liked it. However, he supposed he'd forget that too.

"An improvement on Woodward's protein analogues," he told the red-moustached man. "Simple synthesis will do it."

"Who the devil are you?"

"Call me Jim," Kelvin said simply. "And shut up and listen." He began to explain, as to a small, stupid child. (The man before him was one of America's foremost chemists.) "Proteins are made of amino acids. There are about thirty-three amino acids--"

"There aren't."

"There are. Shut up. Their molecules can be arranged in lots of ways. So we get an almost infinite variety of proteins. And all living things are forms of protein. The absolute synthesis involves a chain of amino acids long enough to recognise clearly as a protein molecule. That's been the trouble."

The man with the red moustache seemed quite interested. "Fischer assembled a chain of eighteen," he said, blinking. "Aberhalden got up to nineteen, and Woodward, of course, has made chains ten thousand units long. But as for testing--"

"The complete protein molecule consists of complete sets of sequences. But if you test only one or two sections of an analogue you can't be sure of the others. Wait a minute." Kelvin used the rapport case again. "Now I know. Well, you can make almost anything out of synthesised protein. Silk, wool, hair--but the main

thing, of course," he said, sneezing, "is a cure for coryza."

"Now look--" said the red-moustached man.

"Some of the viruses are chains of amino acids, aren't they? Well, modify their structure. Make 'em harmless. Bacteria, too. And synthesise antibiotics."

"I wish I could. However, Mr.--"

"Just call me Jim."

"Yes. However, all this is old stuff."

"Grab your pencil," Kelvin said. "From now on it'll be solid, with riffs. The method of synthesising and testing is as follows--"

He explained, very thoroughly and clearly. He had to use the rapport case only twice. And when he had finished, the man with the red moustache laid down his pencil and stared.

"This is incredible," he said. "If it works--"

"I want health, fame and fortune," Kelvin said stubbornly. "It'll work."

"Yes, but--my good man--"

However, Kelvin insisted. Luckily for himself, the mental testing of the red-moustached man had included briefing for honesty and opportunity, and it ended with the chemist agreeing to sign partnership papers with Kelvin. The commercial possibilities of the process were unbounded. Dupont or gm would be glad to buy it.

"I want lots of money. A fortune."

"You'll make a million dollars," the red-moustached man said patiently.

"Then I want a receipt. Have to have this in black and white. Unless you want to give me my million now."

Frowning, the chemist shook his head. "I can't do that. I'll have to run tests, open negotiations—but don't worry about that. Your discovery is certainly worth a million. You'll be famous, too."

"And healthy?"

"There won't be any more disease, after a while," the chemist said quietly. "That's the real miracle."

"Write it down," Kelvin clamoured.

"All right. We can have partnership papers drawn up tomorrow. This will do temporarily. Understand, the actual credit belongs to you."

"It's got to be in ink. A pencil won't do."

"Just a minute, then," the red-moustached man said, and went away in search of ink. Kelvin looked around the laboratory, beaming happily.

Tharn materialised three feet away. Tharn was holding the rod-weapon. He lifted it.

Kelvin instantly used the rapport case. Then he thumbed his nose at Tharn and teleported himself far away.

He was immediately in a cornfield, somewhere, but undistilled corn was not what Kelvin wanted. He tried again. This time he reached Seattle.

That was the beginning of Kelvin's monumental two-week combination of binge and chase.

His thoughts weren't pleasant.

He had a frightful hangover, ten cents in his pocket, and an overdue hotel bill. A fortnight of keeping one jump ahead of Tharn, via teleportation, had frazzled his nerves so unendurably that only liquor had kept him going. Now even that stimulus was failing. The drink died in him and left what felt like a corpse.

Kelvin groaned and blinked miserably. He took off his glasses and cleaned them, but that didn't help.

What a fool.

He didn't even know the name of the chemist!

There was health, wealth and fame waiting for him just around the corner, but what corner? Some day he'd find out, probably, when the news of the new protein synthesis was publicised, but when would that be? In the meantime, what about Tharn?

Moreover, the chemist couldn't locate him, either. The man knew Kelvin only as Jim. Which had somehow seemed a good idea at the time, but not now.

Kelvin took out the rapport case and stared at it with red eyes. Quarra Vee, eh? He rather liked Quarra Vee now. Trouble was, half an hour after his rapport, at most, he would forget all the details.

This time he used the push-button almost as Tharn snapped into bodily existence a few feet away.

The teleoperation angle again. He was sitting in the middle of a desert. Cactus and Joshua trees were all the scenery. There was a purple range of mountains far away.

No Tharn, though.

Kelvin began to be thirsty. Suppose the case stopped working now? Oh, this couldn't go on. A decision hanging fire for a week finally crystallised into a conclusion so obvious he felt like kicking himself. Perfectly obvious!

Why hadn't he thought of it at the very beginning?

He concentrated on the problem: How can I get rid of Tharn? He pushed the button....

And a moment later, he knew the answer. It would be simple, really.

The pressing urgency was gone suddenly. That seemed to release a fresh flow of thought. Everything became quite clear.

He waited for Tharn.

He did not have to wait long. There was a tremor in the shimmering air, and the turbaned, pallid figure sprang into tangible reality.

The rod-weapon was poised.

Taking no chances, Kelvin posed his problem again, pressed the button, and instantly reassured himself as to the method. He simply thought in a very special and peculiar way--the way Quarra Vee had indicated.

Tharn was flung back a few feet. The moustached mouth gaped open as he uttered a cry.

"Don't!" the android cried. "I've been trying to--"

Kelvin focused harder on his thought. Mental energy, he felt, was pouring out towards the android.

Tharn croaked. "Trying--you didn't--give me--chance--"

And then Tharn was lying motionless on the hot sand, staring blindly up. The seven-fingered hands twitched once and were still. The artificial life that had animated the android was gone. It would not return.

Kelvin turned his back and drew a long, shuddering breath. He was safe. He closed his mind to all thoughts but one, all problems but one.

How can I find the red-moustached man?

He pressed the button.

This is the way the story starts:

Quarra Vee sat in the temporal warp with his android Tharn, and made sure everything was under control.

"How do I look?" he asked.

"You'll pass," Tharn said. "Nobody will be suspicious in the era you're going to. It didn't take long to synthesise the equipment."

"Not long. Clothes--they look enough like real wool and linen, I suppose. Wristwatch, money--everything in order. Wristwatch--that's odd, isn't it? Imagine people who need machinery to tell time!"

"Don't forget the spectacles," Tharn said.

Quarra Vee put them on. "Ugh. But I suppose--"

"It'll be safer. The optical properties in the lenses are a guard you may need against mental radiations. Don't take them off, or the robot may try some tricks."

"He'd better not," Quarra Vee said. "That so-and-so runaway robot! What's he up to, anyway, I wonder? He always was a malcontent, but at least he knew his place. I'm sorry I ever had him made. No telling what he'll do in a semi-prehistoric world if we don't catch him and bring him home."

"He's in that horomancy booth," Tharn said, leaning out of the time-warp. "Just arrived. You'll have to catch him by surprise. And you'll need your wits about you, too. Try not to go off into any more of those deep-thought compulsions you've been having. They could be dangerous. That robot will use some of his tricks if he gets the chance. I don't know what powers he's developed by himself, but I do know he's an expert at hypnosis and memory erasure already. If you aren't careful he'll snap your memory track and substitute a false brain-pattern. Keep those glasses on. If anything should go wrong, I'll use the rehabilitation ray on you, eh?" And he held up a small rod-like projector.

Quarra Vee nodded. "Don't worry. I'll be back before you know it. I have an appointment with that Sirian to finish our game this evening."

It was an appointment he never kept.

Quarra Vee stepped out of the temporal warp and strolled along the boardwalk towards the booth. The clothing he wore felt tight, uncomfortable, rough. He wriggled a little in it. The booth stood before him now, with its painted sign.

He pushed aside the canvas curtain and something--a carelessly hung rope--swung down at his face, knocking the horn-rimmed glasses askew. Simultaneously a vivid bluish light blazed into his unprotected eyes. He felt a curious, sharp sensation of disorientation, a shifting motion that almost instantly was gone.

The robot said, "You are James Kelvin."



# Open Secret

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Nothing secret at all. Walk in their office any time. Only--somehow the word couldn't be spread, the world couldn't understand--

Mike Jerrold was the only passenger in the elevator when the operator passed out. He saw the man gasp, double up in pain, and stab out blindly at the stop button. Pressure against his soles decreased. Jerrold jumped forward and tried to catch the falling man, but didn't quite make it.

The lips looked cyanosed; that meant heart attack. Jerrold's degree was for psychiatry, not medicine, so he was at a loss. Scattered bits of half-forgotten first aid whirled into his mind and out again like a kaleidoscope. He stared around, realizing abruptly the shortcoming of an elevator aside from its functional use. Not that it was a bad elevator, per se. It was quite modern, in one of New York's best skyscrapers, and, once you were inside and the door closed, you had no way of knowing, till it opened again, whether you were ten, twenty, or thirty stories above ground level. A grab-bag sort of arrangement, though without the element of chance. The random factor could not enter into the question--as long as the operator controlled the elevator.

He'd passed out now. Jerrold grimaced, touched a button by guesswork, and felt the cage begin to rise again. The fifteenth floor, it was. In a moment the door slid noiselessly open as the car settled pneumatically into position. Jerrold looked at a plainly furnished office with a receptionist's window in the farther wall. There was a door near it, a brown carpet on the floor, but no chairs. Nor was the receptionist

visible.

Jerrold started out and then, struck by a new thought, paused to drag the operator with him. He vaguely mistrusted elevators. Sometimes they started by themselves. He went to the window and said, "Hey." Nobody answered. There was no switchboard; just a comfortable chair, a desk, and a pile of magazines. Jerrold turned to the door and opened it. It swung inward, away from him. He was facing a robot.

The robot, roughly man-shaped, was sliding—he had wheels instead of feet—back and forth on the other side of a table covered with a relief map of a section of Manhattan Island, from about Fiftieth Street to the Village, and bounded by the rivers. Twinkling dots of light glimmered like fireflies all over the map. The robot had four arms, each extended into innumerable wiry cilia. He, or it, would touch one of these wires to each light that flashed, keeping that position for a variable period, sometimes a split second, sometimes much longer. The robot had no face, but a grid of shimmering wires. It was certainly alive, certainly intelligent; and Jerrold's dark, ugly face went gray. Through an open door he could see another robot working presumably at a similar task.

He backed up, slowly and noiselessly. The robot ignored him. He closed the door. Instantly he had a feeling of illusion.

The receptionist's window was still vacant. Jerrold pulled the operator back into the elevator and thumbed the main-floor button. The car dropped sickeningly. Jerrold felt an uneasiness in his stomach. He forced himself to think only about the man at his feet.

When the panel slid open, Jerrold shouted at the starter and relinquished his charge to more capable hands. After that, he went into another elevator and this time completed his trip to the twenty-first floor, where Dr. Rob Vaneman had his offices. The girl said to go

right in.

Vaneman was a big man, red-faced, bluff, gray-haired, and overwhelming. He boomed jovially at Jerrold, shook hands, and dragged out a bottle. "No," he said, putting it back. "Not yet. Let's get the business over with first, eh, Mike? Strip down and let me check that blood pressure of yours."

Jerrold obeyed. "I just got in town yesterday. Research for the u. Be here a month or so, I guess. How's tricks?"

"Fair enough. They keep me busy. I moved lately, you know."

"No, I— How's the blood pressure?"

"Up a bit. Let's try your heart." Vaneman listened and glanced at Jerrold sharply. "Been dodging taxicabs?"

"I've been— I ran into something funny. Tell you later. Let's get this done first."

Silently Vaneman completed the examination. "You're sound. You didn't need to come to New York for a check-up, Mike."

"I didn't. Research, I told you. But while I'm here—you know my metabolism and my allergies." Jerrold adjusted his tie. "Who's got the fifteenth floor in this building?"

"I dunno." Vaneman relaxed with a grunt, poured drinks, and lit a cigar. "We're not exactly next-door neighbors. Look on the board downstairs, or ask the starter. Why?"

"I got off there just now. What I saw—" Jerrold explained. "Don't tell me I made a mistake. I know the difference between a robot and a... a gadget."

The physician grinned. "Do you? It takes a robot to fire the big navy guns—or what amounts to one. You sound medieval. Trot off to the Westinghouse labs and you'll realize that science has come a long way in a few years. My diagnosis is spinach."

Jerrold said stubbornly, "Those weren't machines. They were robots. Their coordination wasn't mechanical. One look convinced me."

"Then you'd better take another look." The Dictograph buzzed. Vaneman listened, spoke briefly, and sighed. "One more patient, and I'll be through for today. Want to meet me in the bar downstairs?"

"Right." Jerrold got up. "See you later, Rob. We've a lot to talk about."

"Six months'worth of accumulated trivia. Including robots. Saluda."

Jerrold went out and took the elevator downstairs to the bar. He had a drink. Then he searched for the address board and looked in vain for any firm listed on the fifteenth floor. The starter supplied a little more information.

"That's occupied by William Scott & Co., Research Engineers."

"Thanks," Jerrold said, and found a telephone book. William Scott & Co. wasn't listed. He fortified himself with another sidecar and took the elevator to the fifteenth floor, unable to suppress a mad feeling that the entire story might have softly and suddenly vanished away. "Like a Boojum," he murmured, evading the glance of the operator. "Uh... fifteen, please."

But the Snark wasn't a Boojum. The reception office was unchanged, and this time a girl was sitting beyond the window, a pretty redhead with pleasant green eyes and a smart-looking dress. The green eyes

opened slightly, Jerrold noticed. Was the presence of a visitor that surprising?

"Good morning," she said. "Can I help you?" Her voice was low-pitched and unaffected.

Jerrold heard the elevator door slip shut behind him. He walked forward and leaned his elbows on the window ledge. "Maybe," he said. And stopped.

What the hell could he ask?

"Do you have robots here?" he said at last.

"Yes," the girl told him.

So that was that. Jerrold looked at her blankly. "Intelligent robots?"

"What would you like?" she inquired, quite pleasantly.

Jerrold felt snubbed. He glanced at the cryptically closed door. Beyond it--

He was definitely afraid of what lay beyond it. They might be listening even now.

"I'd like to have a drink with you," he said, "if you don't mind. My name's Mike Jerrold. I'm a psychiatrist. I can give you references." He grinned. "May I offer drinks, dinner, or both?"

He expected her to refuse, but she didn't. The green eyes showed humor.

"Thanks, Mr. Jerrold. But I work here--till five thirty."

"May I come back--at five thirty?"

"Uh-huh. I'm Betty Andrews. Good-by." She turned back to her magazine. Jerrold nibbled his lower lip and retreated, ringing for the elevator. The office was quite silent. The robots seemed to be noiseless.

The dreamlike quality of the situation impressed him violently as he rode the car down. Seeing the robots was shocking enough. But the girl's casual admission that they existed was subtly horrible. It was like a woolly dog story, like the yarn about the man who, discovering a talking horse, mentioned the matter to its owner, and was told, "Oh, my horse tells that story to everybody who'll listen." As a gag it was funny. In real life it was not at all amusing.

Dr. Vaneman was waiting in the bar. He leered at Jerrold over the rim of his glass. "Find your robots?" he inquired ironically.

"Yeah. The receptionist up there admitted it. Well?"

"She has a sense of humor. I hope you're not serious, Mike. Do I have to waste half an hour talking logic to you? I prefer illogic. It's more restful."

"Talk all you want," Jerrold growled, waving to the waiter. "I just happen to be firmly convinced that you've got robots on the fifteenth floor of this building, right here in New York."

"Better than termites, anyway," Vaneman said into his highball. "What harm can robots do? They're useful little folk, from all I hear."

"Could be. Nobody's ever made a real robot--one with a thinking brain. Unless--" Jerrold frowned. "I wish I knew who's running those robots and why. The human colloid brain's physically limited, Rob. It's

incapable of pure, disciplined thought, because it is in a human body. A robot could lay out a thought matrix and carry it through to a conclusion you or I couldn't hope to approach."

"So they could square a circle. Let 'em. First, I don't believe there are robots upstairs. Second, if there were, what of it? Third, I want another drink."

"Your damned complacency," Jerrold said. "You're molded by your environment so perfectly you've come to believe implicitly in that environment. You'll admit the existence of the impossible, but you'll rationalize it till it seems possible. If the Empire State disappeared overnight, you'd say it was a quick job of moving."

"The Empire State couldn't disappear overnight."

"True enough. That'd be much too obvious. If supermen existed now, they wouldn't do anything as overt as making a building vanish. Why should they tip their hands?"

"Mike," Vaneman said with slow emphasis, "tell me this: How could a lot of robots live on the fifteenth floor without anyone knowing about it?"

"Who'd know about it?"

"There are thousands of people riding those elevators daily--"

"Yeah," Jerrold said. "They ride 'em. Up and down. But not to the fifteenth floor. Do you realize, Rob, that once you're in one of the elevators, you can't look out till you reach the floor you want? Plenty of people go right past the fifteenth floor--past! See? It's a perfect camouflage."

"Some people get off there."

"There's that reception clerk. She takes care of solicitors. Come to think of it, peddlers and agents aren't allowed in this building."

"Cleaning women are."

"Right. Maybe they don't get past the outer office. I'm going to see the girl tonight, the receptionist."

Vaneman leered significantly. "I get it."

But Jerrold didn't trouble to reply. He drank his sidecar, a queer, troubled worry moving at the back of his brain.

He arrived an hour early for his appointment, and spent the time standing in the foyer, watching the elevator indicator dials. The ring of lights glowed in quick progression as the cars rose and fell. A panel would slide open; people would enter the car; the door would shut. Jerrold's eyes would lift to the dial. One. Two. Three. It paused at three. Then four. Five. A pause at seven. Eight. Nine--fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Stop at sixteen. Stop at fourteen. Stop at any floor but the fifteenth.

Nobody, in that hour, got on or off at the fifteenth floor.

Jerrold kept a record in his notebook, intending later to check the variables against the names of the firms on the various floors. Then he realized that that didn't matter. It was only the fact that no elevator stopped at the fifteenth that mattered.

He told the starter vaguely that he was making a survey, but the man kept watching him from time to time. Jerrold was relieved at five thirty when he saw the indicator button, for the first time, light up at fifteen.



As he expected, Betty Andrews got out of the elevator. Jerrold put his notebook away.

"Hello," she said at sight of him. "Been waiting long?"

"Not long. How about that drink?"

"Swell." She led the way into the cocktail bar. "Old-fashion for me."

Later, he looked at her across the dimness, wondering what lay behind the maskless mask of her face.

She set down her glass, ran the tip of a pointed tongue across her lips, and said, "Well, Mr. Mike Jerrold?"

"Well?"

"Question. Are you trying to make me?"

He said, "No," with a frankness that was disarmingly inoffensive.

"That's good. You see, Mr. Mike Jerrold, I'm hoping I'll get a taxi ride home. I live in Brooklyn. If you've ever been on the Brighton Express at the rush hour--"

"Taxi it is. Drinks, dinner, and a ride home. Does that suit?"

"Uh-huh."

It was a cool, dim hideaway place, Jerrold reflected, sipping his sidecar and feeling the tingling warmth move slowly through his body. Seldom was it possible to get out of the world. At times these moments came. Outside was New York; here was nothing but the moment. There was--as yet, anyway--nothing sexual about the situation, nothing to stimulate Jerrold; rather it was the delicious

feeling of being able to stop, to rest on his oars and drift. The girl's presence was subtly effective; she, too, had stopped. For the moment, the driving force that makes up life had ceased. They relaxed in the twilight.

Then Jerrold began to talk. He tried to do it casually, but he sensed that Betty wasn't deceived. She wasn't loath to answer his disguised questions, either. As a practicing psychiatrist, Jerrold had learned tact and diplomacy, but the sidewise approach was not necessary now.

How long had she been in New York? Oh, about five years. She'd been lucky to land a good job almost immediately. Yes, with William Scott & Co., on the fifteenth floor.

"He's an engineer, isn't he?"

"He doesn't exist. How did you know there were robots up there?"

"I... I walked in. You weren't there."

"Oh."

"They didn't notice me."

"They will," Betty chuckled. "They have more senses than we have, but not quite the same ones. They don't know what happens in the same room with them; they don't care. It's what happens outside the fifteenth floor that they know all about."

Jerrold said slowly, "I'm interested, naturally. If you don't think I'm prying into secrets--"

"It's not that sort of secret. They don't care how many people find out, because not many can find out."

"That door wasn't even locked. I walked right in. Betty, do you realize what we're talking about? Are you handing me a line?"

She shook her head, green eyes serious. "No, I'm not, not at all. There's no reason why I shouldn't tell you all about it, if you want to know. They don't care."

"The robots? Why don't they?"

"You won't do anything about it."

"I might tell someone else."

"He wouldn't do anything about it."

"He might tell the chief of police."

"The chief wouldn't do anything about it. It's like a stone thrown into a pond. I've seen it happen before. The ripples go out--and then they stop. The robots have all the power in the world, Mr. Mike Jerrold."

Unthinking impulse made the man look up. "Eh?"

"They run things. They make people do what they want. They've done it to me, too. When I found out first about them, I was scared. They processed me. It's painless--" She smiled a little. "You don't even realize it's happening. You think you've made your own decision. Your relative values simply shift. I was going to quit. I was processed, I realized that it was a good job, paying well, that I wouldn't be harmed, and that nothing I could do would alter things. So here I am."

"What are they?" Jerrold said in a tight voice. "I won't believe you--" He paused. "No. I saw them. They were intelligent, weren't they?"

"Sure. And they've been around for quite a while. History's full of attempts to make robots. The Golem, the homunculi--I had a good liberal education. For ages people have tried to make intelligent robots. Not too long ago someone succeeded. Or a number of technicians succeeded; I'm not sure. But the world never heard about it. Can you guess why?"

"Wait a minute." Jerrold rubbed his jaw. "You mean the perfect solvent?"

"Of course. Suppose you make the perfect solvent. What would happen? It would dissolve anything you put it in. You could make it, but you couldn't keep it. Intelligent robots are like that. If they're successful at all, it's because they have the right sort of brain--one that can think. And necessarily it's also unlimited in its scope. It's far more intelligent than we are. Look"--Betty tapped the table--"let's say, Dr. Jones makes a robot. The robot can think faster than light, a lot faster. From its creation it's brainier than its creator. What would it do?"

"It wouldn't remain a laboratory subject."

"Course not. It didn't. It processed the scientist, so Dr. Jones thought he'd failed; it left another, useless robot in its place, and it went out and hid. It didn't like this world. It wanted something different. So it simply set out to change the world, through the tools at hand."

"Tools. People?"

"Uh-huh. I think there've been lots of successful robots made, and I've an idea that they've made others, to help them change the world. The office upstairs isn't the only one, you know. It only handles a section of New York. There are other robot offices, in Washington, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, in Europe and Asia, too. And Africa. Wherever

there's a natural social control center, the robots have an office."

"That's plain crazy," Jerrold said. "How could a secret like that be kept?"

Betty's eyes were very serious. "Mr. Mike Jerrold, listen to me. The robots don't even try to keep their secret. They don't have to. You're not the first man to walk into the office and see them. There are plenty of people going around today who know there are robots on the fifteenth floor here. The same goes for Washington and Frisco--everywhere."

"That doesn't make sense. Why don't they talk?"

"They've been processed. When the robots get around to it, they do something to the guy's mind. It doesn't hurt. He never knows it's happened. He still realizes that there are intelligent robots, and pretty often he knows what they're doing. But that's locked in his mind. He can never tell anyone, never pass on what he knows."

Jerrold pounced on a flaw. "You're telling me about it."

She gestured wearily. "I tell you, they don't care. They just never bothered in my case. It doesn't matter who I talk to. Eventually that person will come under the robots' observation, and he'll be processed. The same goes for anybody he might talk to--anybody he might convince."

"It's no way to keep a secret. Damn it! It... it seems as if those devils are so self-confident that they don't even bother to... to--"

Betty finished her drink. "Another, please. Thanks. Why talk about it, Mike? It'll only upset you, until you're processed."

"They won't process me," Jerrold said grimly.

"Hm-m-m." Betty looked unconvinced. "I told you they can control minds at a distance."

"Telepathy? Impossible. Selectivity--"

"It's not telepathy. They use a mechanism. Look, suppose you wanted to check up on a lot of people. What would you do? No detectives."

"Dictaphones--eh?"

"Call it that. And suppose you wanted to give them orders, too. Just vocal orders--limit it to humanity, for the example."

"A two-way radio."

"And suppose you didn't want those people to know what you were doing. You'd hide the radio, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Where would you hide it?"

Jerrold started to answer, paused, and looked sharply at the girl. She nodded.

"The Purloined Letter. In plain sight, but disguised. And disguised so no one could possibly discover it was a radio."

"What?"

Betty smiled crookedly. "If you were clever enough, you could disguise it as a vacuum tube and put it in a radio. You'd sell it openly--as a vacuum tube. People would buy it for one purpose, but it'd really

serve two."

"It's not a radio--"

"No, it's not. But it's something everybody uses, and uses often. Built into it is a device that seems to serve a perfectly natural mechanical purpose. It does serve that purpose. But it also keeps open a connection with the robots. It keeps them in mental touch with anyone who uses that particular device."

"What is it?"

"Telephone," Betty said. "Some time ago a certain improvement was made on phones, and almost all of them have it now. The robots saw to that. Humans make the... the gadget, of course, and they make it to fulfill one obvious mechanical purpose. They don't know that the structure of the gadget makes it also a tool for the robots. That's right, Mike. All over the world there are control offices, manned by robots. They listen in on telephone conversations--not the oral ones, but the mental. They read thoughts, through that little gadget in the phone, the gadget that really belongs there to make the phone work. They issue orders through it. They process minds. They make people do what they want. They manipulate stocks, swing business deals, start wars and stop them. They run the earth, Mr. Mike Jerrold. You know that now, and they don't care if you know, because you can't stop them."

Jerrold said, "What are they trying to do?"

"I don't know," Betty told him. "I couldn't understand. They don't think the way we do. They want the world different, but I don't know how. But they're getting it the way they want. It may be swell for humans, and then again it may not. It doesn't matter a hell of a lot, does it?"

Jerrold didn't say anything. Something within him rose up in furious

revolt against the thought of irrevocable future, the negation of free will. It was like driving beasts into a trap. Some would break for freedom, some would balk, some would fight. But eventually the trappers would get what they wanted. It was the sum total that counted, and Jerrold knew that telepathic control, at the right points and places, would affect the whole of humanity.

He looked at Betty again. Her skin had a pearly pallor in the dimness, and her eyes were shadowy, strange. There was an incongruity about the scene.

Jerrold said, "Excuse me," and got up. He ordered another round of drinks on his way out. In the lobby, he entered an elevator and got off at the fifteenth floor.

The receptionist's window was closed now. But the door was still unlocked.

Jerrold went into the adjoining room. The robot was wheeling itself smoothly about the table, its wire-fingered hands manipulating the lights on the relief map of midtown Manhattan. Jerrold's stomach dropped, and a band of coldness circumscribed his middle. He stood there, waiting for the thing to notice him.

It ignored him completely.

It was man-size, but with a horrible functionalism man did not possess. It was alien. It went about its business, with sublime self-confidence, and its intelligence was obvious. The cilia touched the lights; sometimes they lingered, and Jerrold knew why. Processing--He skirted the robot at last and went into the next room. It was identical with the first, though the robot was dissimilar. Its head was a gleaming ball, featureless, and it moved on three jointed legs. It worked on a relief map of the lower tip of Manhattan, from the Battery



to Wall Street.

Wall Street--

There were many rooms; there were robots in all of them, each somewhat different, each working on a different sector of the five boroughs. Jerrold had a feeling that they never stopped; that they would stop only when they had achieved their goal. He had a brief, perverse hope that one of them would notice him. It was discomfoting to be ignored, like a... gnat.

He went back to the first office and gingerly touched the map. Nothing happened. He gripped the tower of the Empire State and tried to snap it off; it was impossible. The plastic was unbreakable.

Jerrold, sweat beads on his face, took hold of the robot's arm. He tried to move that, too. He was dragged around in the creature's wake, quite unable to force the arm into the slightest deviation from its course.

They worked; they were invulnerable. That was the sum total of Jerrold's findings. Whether or not they would be invulnerable to a really powerful weapon, or to acid--

Betty was waiting when he got back to the bar. Jerrold sat down, and they drank in silence.

"It doesn't do any good, really," she said at last. "I know you can't help feeling as you do. But after you're processed, you'll be much happier about all this."

"I had to find out," he said. "Convince myself."

"And you're convinced."

"Yeah. Damn those things! They--"

"It was our own mistake, trying to build intelligent robots. Quite as silly as having a contest to see who can stay longest under water without breathing. The one who wins--drowns."

Jerrold held out his hand; it was trembling slightly. He made a grimace of worried uneasiness.

"The bottom's dropped out."

"You thought the ice was solid all the way down. That's why. But it doesn't matter, Mike. It doesn't matter, really."

"Those inhuman devils, forcing humanity into a social pattern to suit their own needs-- No!"

Betty moved her shoulders, settling herself like a cat. "We might have followed that pattern anyway, without the robots. You know that, don't you?"

"I've got to think this out." Jerrold tried to focus his mind; it was curiously difficult. As he had said, the bottom had dropped out. He'd discovered that he had an incurable disease, and the psychological result was the same.

In a way it was odd how convinced he was of the robots'invulnerability. Their self-confidence was sublime. They did not try to protect themselves. Protection was automatically a part of their plan to remold the world into--into what?

Jerrold didn't want to find out. He didn't much care. Humanity has developed on a belief in free will. Men know they can make their own ultimate decisions, and they feel that those decisions may be

important. For want of a nail--

The part influences the whole. Otherwise, there was futility. It was not pleasant to feel that the part had no slightest influence upon the whole, that, inevitably, the herd would be driven into the predestined trap, that, no matter how the fish might flop and wriggle, the net was unalterably lifting and closing. A man might aim at a star--well and good. If his motives coincided with the aims of the robots, he'd be allowed to fulfill his plan. On the other hand-- Jerrold met Betty's quiet gaze.

"Nor all your tears wash out a word of it," she said. "It's no use, Mr. Mike Jerrold."

"The moving finger's anthropomorphic. We wouldn't object so much to that. Man made God in his own image. It's the reason men are willing to obey kings--they know that kings are flesh and blood like themselves, and want much the same things. There's the same common denominator. There isn't with those damned creatures upstairs."

"They're not made in our own image. If you'd only realize that in a little while you won't care--"

Jerrold set down his glass with a bang. He stood up, face strained, lips tight. "Let's get out of here," he said. "I don't like the feeling of being watched."

Betty went out with him, a rather quizzical smile on her lips. They hailed a taxi and found a restaurant. Jerrold didn't eat much. His mind went like a squirrel in a cage.

Afterward, they danced at a roof garden. Beneath them lay New York. Jerrold guided Betty to a terrace, and they stood alone, looking out

into the dim city below.

"We're on top," he said at last. "Like humanity. But it's a long way down."

She drew the wrap closer about her shoulders. "We won't know it. It may not even be down."

"Guided. No, not even that. Led. Driven. Without realizing that we're not the masters." He searched for the faint lights of Brooklyn. "All over the world, people making plans, struggling and suffering and being crucified, because they think it's worth while. Fighting for what they think they want. And if they eventually get it, it'll only be because the robots want the same thing. We're blind in darkness. Blinder than the blind. If only--" His gaze went up to the empty sky, seeking an answer where there was none.

"What will happen? Man won't conquer the stars. That's one dream he'll never fulfill. But the robots will. They'll have no trouble in building spaceships. Maybe they can do that now, only they're not ready. And we thought the super-race would be a mutation of man!"

Betty didn't answer. When Jerrold turned to her, she lifted her face as though expecting his mouth to seek hers. There was no passion in the kiss; there was something deeper, a blind, desperate search for reassurance, a hunger that could never be sated. It was a man's hunger for the unattainable. And it was bitter.

He drew back suddenly. Betty's eyes glowed with a faint reflection of the lights beyond them. She was warm, human, attainable--and it did not matter.

"I'm... awfully credulous," Jerrold said unsteadily.

"You saw them. They make you believe. It's because they're what they are."

"I suppose so. That's why I feel it's hopeless to try to do anything."

"Quite hopeless."

"Just the same--"

There was silence. After a time Jerrold said, "Aren't there places in the world where their power doesn't reach?"

"The unimportant places. The ones that don't matter. They control only the key spots; that's all that's necessary." She moved into his arms, her gaze holding his. "I'm very lonely, Mr. Mike Jerrold. I like you to hold me. Do you know what may happen to us?"

"What?" he asked softly.

"Marriage," she said, shrugging a little. "Or not. It doesn't matter. You'll be processed. That's inevitable. You won't be able to tell anyone about the robots. It would be nice to be with you as long as this lasts. I can afford to tell the truth, because I know there's no time to waste."

"I'm going to fight," Jerrold said. "The robots can't be invulnerable. Somehow, somewhere, there must be a way--"

"There is no way." She shivered. "Take me home, please. I'm not afraid. I can't be afraid; I was processed against it. It's just that-- Take me home."

Jerrold did, and her face stayed with him during the long ride back to Manhattan. She had become a symbol, perhaps a symbol of humanity, resigned, going down to an unknown but predestined

doom. In the background the inhuman silhouettes of the robots loomed. They were alien. There was not even a standard matrix for them. Their shape did not matter, as long as they were functionally designed to fulfill their tasks.

Jerrold did not sleep that night. It rained, the hot, sticky rain of the New York summer, and he walked the streets, his steps inevitably returning to the building where Betty worked. On the fifteenth floor, without lights--they needed none--the robots worked untiringly, directing the destinies of mankind. Through--something--in all the telephones of the five boroughs they listened to thoughts and molded those thoughts. And men believed that their decisions were their own!

In most cases they were. But not the important ones, not the judgments that helped to work out the robot plan. Sacrifice and gallantry were words. The net lifted and closed, and there was no possible escape. For man himself had woven that net.

The hot rain pelted against Jerrold's gaunt cheeks. His footsteps rang hollow, echoing softly through the canyonlike streets.

He went back to his apartment and yanked the telephone from its cord, dropping the instrument into a closet. Then he found his automatic, loaded it, and picked up a light traveling bag. The chance was worth taking.

He knew where to buy the strong corrosive acid he wanted, and, to make certain, he got several quarts. Then he waited till morning.

At eight he was entering the foyer of the building, just in time to catch a glimpse of Betty Andrews disappearing into the elevator. Suddenly Jerrold felt cold. He sprinted forward, shouting the girl's name, but he was too late; the panel slid shut.

The starter touched his arm. "Next car, please."

"Yeah... yeah."

Jerrold's eyes lifted to the indicator. The lights slid swiftly around the dial. Two. Three. Four--Fifteen. It stopped there, and then descended again.

Jerrold went into the next car. "Fifteen," he said.

He got off at fifteen. Betty was sitting behind the window, and there was no surprise in her eyes when she saw him.

"Hello, Mike," she said.

"Hello. I'm going in there." He looked toward the door.

"They won't hurt you."

"Do you think--" Jerrold's lips clamped together. "Listen," he said. "I'd like to take you and go off somewhere, in the backwoods, maybe, where those devils can't reach us. Would you go with me?"

"It's no use." Her voice was calm with acceptance of an inevitable reality.

"Don't be a fool. They've got you hypnotized."

"They don't need to use hypnotism. No, Mike. They're not hard masters. They'd let us do anything we wanted, because we couldn't want anything that would harm them. If you want me, I'll be here. And if you want me, you'll come back. Only you won't feel the same way then. About the robots, I mean. You'll have been processed."

Jerrold made a hoarse, inarticulate sound and swung away, thrusting the door open. The robot was still there, gliding noiselessly around the relief map on the table, its fingers busy.

Jerrold took out his gun and emptied it at the robot. He aimed carefully. The wire grid that served for a face looked most vulnerable.

He'd expected bullets to fail, so he wasn't too disappointed. He set down the bag, opened it, and took out the acid.

It was strong acid. But it harmed neither the robot nor the relief map.

Jerrold went out, carefully closing the door behind him. He didn't look at Betty, though he could feel her eyes on him as he rang for the elevator, stepped into the car, and turned. He saw her then, a brief glimpse when the panel closed.

"Twenty-first," he said to the operator.

Vaneman wasn't in his office.

"If you'll wait, Mr. Jerrold--"

"Yeah. o. k." He didn't want to wait in the anteroom, with the girl stealing glances at his mussed hair, his untidy clothes. He walked into Vaneman's private office, and the receptionist, after a startled jerk, made no move to stop him.

Jerrold was halfway across the room when the telephone rang. He was not really conscious of lifting the receiver to his ear. He heard the receptionist's voice saying, "Dr. Vaneman is on the wire, Mr. Jerrold."

Jerrold said, "Yeah?"

" 'Lo, Mike," Vaneman's deep rumble came. "I'll be delayed about



half an hour. The girl said you'd just come in. Wait for me, eh?"

"o.k."

Jerrold cradled the receiver. His face was gray, and an empty sickness was in his stomach. He stepped back, staring at the telephone.

The gadget--

The robots controlled telephones. A moment ago, they had been en rapport with his mind, listening, ready to issue their commands. It had been a mistake to pick up the receiver. Jerrold had done that automatically.

And he had not been processed.

His sense of relative values remained unaltered. His plans were the same. He still intended to convince Vaneman of the truth, to show the physician what was in the suite on the fifteenth floor, to induce Vaneman to use his influence with the authorities. He still planned to fight the robots by publicizing their activities.

He had not been processed. Which meant, obviously, that Betty had lied on one point. The rest had been truth. Only one vital factor was a lie.

The instrument the robots used was not a telephone.

Perhaps Betty thought it was. She had been processed. The robots controlled her mind. Naturally they would not let her reveal the secret of their power--the nature of their weapon.

It was not a telephone.

"It's something everybody uses, and uses often. Built into it is a device that seems to serve a perfectly natural mechanical purpose. It does serve that purpose. But it also keeps open a connection with the robots. It keeps them in mental touch with anyone who uses that particular device."

Betty had said that.

Something everybody uses--

Jerrold backed up against the desk and let his gaze swing slowly, probingly, around the room. He looked carefully at every object. In the end, he was no wiser.

Not a telephone. But what--

Jerrold's nails dug into his sweaty palms. He stared around again, feeling the net closing about him. Not a telephone. What, then--

He'd find out, of course. But he'd never know it.

# The Eyes of Thar

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She spoke in a tongue dead a thousand years, and she had no memory for the man she faced. Yet he had held her tightly but a few short years before, had sworn eternal vengeance—when she died in his arms from an assassin's wounds.

He had come back, though he knew what to expect. He had always come back to Klanvahr, since he had been hunted out of that ancient Martian fortress so many years ago. Not often, and always warily, for there was a price on Dantan's head, and those who governed the Dry Provinces would have been glad to pay it. Now there was an excellent chance that they might pay, and soon, he thought, as he walked doggedly through the baking stillness of the night, his ears attuned to any dangerous sound in the thin, dry air.

Even after dark it was hot here. The dead ground, parched and arid, retained the heat, releasing it slowly as the double moons—the Eyes of Thar, in Klanvahr mythology—swung across the blazing immensity of the sky. Yet Samuel Dantan came back to this desolate land as he had come before, drawn by love and by hatred.

The love was lost forever, but the hate could still be satiated. He had not yet glutted his blood-thirst. When Dantan came back to Klanvahr, men died, though if all the men of the Redhelm Tribe were slain, even that could not satisfy the dull ache in Dantan's heart.

Now they were hunting him.

The girl—he had not thought of her for years; he did not want to remember. He had been young when it happened. Of Earth stock, he

had during a great Martian drought become godson to an old shaman of Klanvahr, one of the priests who still hoarded scraps of the forgotten knowledge of the past, glorious days of Martian destiny, when bright towers had fingered up triumphantly toward the Eyes of Thar.

Memories... the solemn, antique dignity of the Undercities, in ruins now... the wrinkled shaman, intoning his rituals... very old books, and older stories... raids by the Redhelm Tribe... and a girl Samuel Dantan had known. There was a raid, and the girl had died. Such things had happened many times before; they would happen again. But to Dantan this one death mattered very much.

Afterward, Dantan killed, first in red fury, then with a cool, quiet, passionless satisfaction. And, since the Redhelms were well represented in the corrupt Martian government, he had become outlaw.

The girl would not have known him now. He had gone out into the spaceways, and the years had changed him. He was still thin, his eyes still dark and opaque as shadowed tarn-water, but he was dry and sinewy and hard, moving with the trained, dangerous swiftness of the predator he was--and, as to morals, Dantan had none worth mentioning. He had broken more than ten commandments. Between the planets, and in the far-flung worlds bordering the outer dark, there are more than ten. But Dantan had smashed them all.

In the end there was still the dull, sickening hopelessness, part loneliness, part something less definable. Hunted, he came back to Klanvahr, and when he came, men of the Redhelms died. They did not die easily.

But this time it was they who hunted, not he. They had cut him off from the air-car and they followed now like hounds upon his track. He had

almost been disarmed in that last battle. And the Redhelms would not lose the trail; they had followed sign for generations across the dying tundras of Mars.

He paused, flattening himself against an outcrop of rock, and looked back. It was dark; the Eyes of Thar had not yet risen, and the blaze of starlight cast a ghastly, leprous shine over the chaotic slope behind him, great riven boulders and jutting monoliths, canyon-like, running jagged toward the horizon, a scene of cosmic ruin that every old and shrinking world must show. He could see nothing of his pursuers, but they were coming. They were still far behind. But that did not matter; he must circle--circle--

And first, he must regain a little strength. There was no water in his canteen. His throat was dust-dry, and his tongue felt swollen and leathery. Moving his shoulders uneasily, his dark face impassive, Dantan found a pebble and put it in his mouth, though he knew that would not help much. He had not tasted water for--how long? Too long, anyhow.

Staring around, he took stock of resources. He was alone--what was it the old shaman had once told him? "You are never alone in Klanvahr. The living shadows of the past are all around you. They cannot help, but they watch, and their pride must not be humbled. You are never alone in Klanvahr."

But nothing stirred. Only a whisper of the dry, hot wind murmuring up from the distance, sighing and souging like muted harps. Ghosts of the past riding the night, Dantan thought. How did those ghosts see Klanvahr? Not as this desolate wasteland, perhaps. They saw it with the eyes of memory, as the Mother of Empires which Klanvahr had once been, so long ago that only the tales persisted, garbled and unbelievable.

A sighing whisper... he stopped living for a second, his breath halted, his eyes turned to emptiness. That meant something. A thermal, a river of wind--a downdraft, perhaps. Sometimes these eon-old canyons held lost rivers, changing and shifting their courses as Mars crumbled, and such watercourses might be traced by sound.

Well--he knew Klanvahr.

A half mile farther he found the arroyo, not too deep--fifty feet or less, with jagged walls easy to descend. He could hear the trickle of water, though he could not see it, and his thirst became overpowering. But caution made him clamber down the precipice warily. He did not drink till he had reconnoitered and made sure that it was safe.

And that made Dantan's thin lips curl. Safety for a man hunted by the Redhelms? The thought was sufficiently absurd. He would die--he must die; but he did not mean to die alone. This time perhaps they had him, but the kill would not be easy nor without cost. If he could find some weapon, some ambush--prepare some trap for the hunters--

There might be possibilities in this canyon. The stream had only lately been diverted into this channel; the signs of that were clear. Thoughtfully Dantan worked his way upstream. He did not try to mask his trail by water-tricks; the Redhelms were too wise for that. No, there must be some other answer.

A mile or so farther along he found the reason for the diverted stream. Landslide. Where water had chuckled and rustled along the left-hand branch before, now it took the other route. Dantan followed the dry canyon, finding the going easier now, since Phobos had risen... an Eye of Thar. "The Eyes of the god miss nothing. They move across the world, and nothing can hide from Thar, or from his destiny."

Then Dantan saw rounded metal. Washed clean by the water that had run here lately, a corroded, curved surface rose dome-shaped from the stream bed.

The presence of an artifact in this place was curious enough. The people of Klanvahr--the old race--had builded with some substance that had not survived; plastic or something else that was not metal. Yet this dome had the unmistakable dull sheen of steel. It was an alloy, unusually strong or it could never have lasted this long, even though protected by its covering of rocks and earth. A little nerve began jumping in Dantan's cheek. He had paused briefly, but now he came forward and with his booted foot kicked away some of the dirt about the cryptic metal.

A curving line broke it. Scraping vigorously, Dantan discovered that this marked the outline of an oval door, horizontal, and with a handle of some sort, though it was caked and fixed in its socket with dirt. Dantan's lips were very thin now, and his eyes glittering and bright. An ambush--a weapon against the Redhelms--whatever might exist behind this lost door, it was worth investigating, especially for a condemned man.

With water from the brook and a sliver of sharp stone, he pried and chiseled until the handle was fairly free from its heavy crust. It was a hook, like a shepherd's crook, protruding from a small bowl-shaped depression in the door. Dantan tested it. It would not move in any direction. He braced himself, legs straddled, body half doubled, and strained at the hook.

Blood beat against the back of his eyes. He heard drumming in his temples and straightened suddenly, thinking it the footsteps of Redhelms. Then, grinning sardonically, he bent to his work again, and this time the handle moved.

Beneath him the door slid down and swung aside, and the darkness below gave place to soft light. He saw a long tube stretching down vertically, with pegs protruding from the metal walls at regular intervals. It made a ladder. The bottom of the shaft was thirty feet below; its diameter was little more than the breadth of a big man's shoulders.

He stood still for a moment, looking down, his mind almost swimming with wonder and surmise. Old, very old it must be, for the stream had cut its own bed out of the rock whose walls rose above him now. Old--and yet these metal surfaces gleamed as brightly as they must have gleamed on the day they were put together--for what purpose?

The wind sighed again down the canyon, and Dantan remembered the Redhelms on his track. He looked around once more and then lowered himself onto the ladder of metal pegs, testing them doubtfully before he let his full weight come down. They held.

There might be danger down below; there might not. There was certain danger coming after him among the twisting canyons. He reached up, investigated briefly, and swung the door back into place. There was a lock, he saw, and after a moment discovered how to manipulate it. So far, the results were satisfactory. He was temporarily safe from the Redhelms, provided he did not suffocate. There was no air intake here that he could see, but he breathed easily enough so far. He would worry about that when the need arose. There might be other things to worry about before lack of air began to distress him.

He descended.

At the bottom of the shaft was another door. Its handle yielded with no resistance this time, and Dantan stepped across the threshold into a



large, square underground chamber, lit with pale radiance that came from the floor itself, as though light had been poured into the molten metal when it had first been made.

The room--

Faintly he heard a distant humming, like the after-resonance of a bell, but it died away almost instantly. The room was large, and empty except for some sort of machine standing against the farther wall. Dantan was not a technician. He knew guns and ships; that was enough. But the smooth, sleek functionalism of this machine gave him an almost sensuous feeling of pleasure.

How long had it been here? Who had built it? And for what purpose? He could not even guess. There was a great oval screen on the wall above what seemed to be a control board, and there were other, more enigmatic devices.

And the screen was black--dead black, with a darkness that ate up the light in the room and gave back nothing.

Yet there was something--

"Sanfel," a voice said. "Sanfel. Coth dr'gchang. Sanfel--sthan!"

Sanfel.... Sanfel... have you returned, Sanfel? Answer!

It was a woman's voice... the voice of a woman used to wielding power, quiet, somehow proud as the voice of Lucifer or Lilith might have been, and it spoke in a tongue that scarcely half a dozen living men could understand.... A whole great race had spoken it once; only the shamans remembered now, and the shamans who knew it were few. Dantan's godfather had been one. And Dantan remembered the slurring syllables of the rituals he had learned, well enough to know

what the proud, bodiless voice was saying.

The nape of his neck prickled. Here was something he could not understand, and he did not like it. Like an animal scenting danger he shrank into himself, not crouching, but withdrawing, so that a smaller man seemed to stand there, ready and waiting for the next move. Only his eyes were not motionless. They raked the room for the unseen speaker--for some weapon to use when the time came for weapons.

His glance came back to the dark screen above the machine. And the voice said again, in the tongue of ancient Klanvahr:

"I am not used to waiting, Sanfel! If you hear me, speak. And speak quickly, for the time of peril comes close now. My Enemy is strong--"

Dantan said, "Can you hear me?" His eyes did not move from the screen.

Out of that blackness the girl's voice came, after a pause. It was imperious, and a little wary.

"You are not Sanfel. Where is he? Who are you, Martian?"

Dantan let himself relax a little. There would be a parley, at any rate. But after that--

Words in the familiar, remembered old language came hesitantly to his lips.

"I am no Martian. I am of Earth blood, and I do not know this Sanfel."

"Then how did you get into Sanfel's place?" The voice was haughty now. "What are you doing there? Sanfel built his laboratory in a secret place."

"It was hidden well enough," Dantan told her grimly. "Maybe for a thousand years, or even ten thousand, for all I know. The door has been buried under a stream--"

"There is no water there. Sanfel's home is on a mountain, and his laboratory is built underground." The voice rang like a bell. "I think you lie. I think you are an enemy-- When I heard the signal summoning me, I came swiftly, wondering why Sanfel had delayed so long. I must find him, stranger. I must! If you are no enemy, bring me Sanfel!" This time there was something almost like panic in the voice.

"If I could, I would," Dantan said. "But there's no one here except me." He hesitated, wondering if the woman behind the voice could be--mad? Speaking from some mysterious place beyond the screen, in a language dead a thousand years, calling upon a man who must be long-dead too, if one could judge by the length of time this hidden room had lain buried.

He said after a moment, "This place has been buried for a long time. And--no one has spoken the tongue of Klanvahr for many centuries. If that was your Sanfel's language--" But he could not go on with that thought. If Sanfel had spoken Klanvahr then he must have died long ago. And the speaker beyond the screen--she who had known Sanfel, yet spoke in a young, sweet, light voice that Dantan was beginning to think sounded familiar.... He wondered if he could be mad too.

There was silence from the screen. After many seconds the voice spoke again, sadly and with an undernote of terror.

"I had not realized," it said, "that even time might be so different between Sanfel's world and mine. The space-time continua--yes, a day in my world might well be an age in yours. Time is elastic. In Zha I

had thought a few dozen--" she used a term Dantan did not understand, "--had passed. But on Mars--centuries?"

"Tens of centuries," agreed Dantan, staring hard at the screen. "If Sanfel lived in old Klanvahr his people are scarcely a memory now. And Mars is dying. You--you're speaking from another world?"

"From another universe, yes. A very different universe from yours. It was only through Sanfel that I had made contact, until now-- What is your name?"

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan."

"Not a Martian name. You are from--Earth, you say? What is that?"

"Another planet. Nearer the sun than Mars."

"We have no planets and no suns in Zha. This is a different universe indeed. So different I find it hard to imagine what your world must be like." The voice died.

And it was a voice he knew. Dantan was nearly sure of that now, and the certainty frightened him. When a man in the Martian desert begins to see or hear impossibilities, he has reason to be frightened. As the silence prolonged itself he began almost to hope that the voice--the implausibly familiar voice--had been only imagination. Hesitantly he said, "Are you still there?" and was a little relieved, after all, to hear her say,

"Yes, I am here. I was thinking.... I need help. I need it desperately. I wonder--has Sanfel's laboratory changed? Does the machine still stand? But it must, or I could not speak to you now. If the other things work, there may be chance.... Listen." Her voice grew urgent. "I may have a use for you. Do you see a lever, scarlet, marked with the

Klanvahr symbol for 'sight'?"

"I see it," Dantan said.

"Push it forward. There is no harm in that, if you are careful. We can see each other--that is all. But do not touch the lever with the 'door'symbol on it. Be certain of that.... Wait!" Sudden urgency was in the voice.

"Yes?" Dantan had not moved.

"I am forgetting. There is danger if you are not protected from--from certain vibration that you might see here. This is a different universe, and your Martian physical laws do not hold good between our worlds. Vibration... light... either things might harm you. There should be armor in Sanfel's laboratory. Find it."

Dantan glanced around. There was a cabinet in one corner. He went over to it slowly, his eyes wary. He had no intention of relaxing vigilance here simply because that voice sounded familiar....

Inside the cabinet hung a suit of something like space armor, more flexible and skin tight than any he had ever seen, and with a transparent helmet through which vision seemed oddly distorted. He got into the suit carefully, pulling up the rich shining folds over his body, thinking strangely how long time had stood still in this small room since the last time a man had worn it. The whole room looked slightly different when he set the helmet into place. It must be polarized, he decided, though that alone could not account for the strange dimming and warping of vision that was evident.

"All ready," he said after a moment."

"Then throw the switch."

With his hand upon it Dantan hesitated for one last instant of wariness. He was stepping into unknown territory now, and to him the unknown meant the perilous. His mind went back briefly to the Redhelms scouring the canyons above for him. He quieted his uneasy mind with the thought that there might be some weapon in the world of the voice which he could turn against them later. Certainly, without a weapon, he had little to lose. But he knew that weapon or no weapon, danger or not, he must see the face behind that sweet, familiar, imperious voice.

He pressed the lever forward. It hesitated, the weight of milleniums behind its inertia. Then, groaning a little in its socket, it moved.

Across the screen above it a blaze of color raged like a sudden shining deluge. Blinded by the glare, Dantan leaped back and swung an arm across his eyes.

When he looked again the colors had cleared. Blinking, he stared--and forgot to look away. For the screen was a window now, with the world of Zha behind it.... And in the center of that window--a girl. He looked once at her, and then closed his eyes. He had felt his heart move, and a nerve jumped in his lean cheek.

He whispered a name.

Impassively the girl looked down at him from the screen. There was no change, no light of recognition upon that familiar, beloved face. The face of the girl who had died at the Redhelm hands, long ago, in the fortress of Klanvahr.... For her sake he had hunted the Redhelms all these dangerous years. For her sake he had taken to the spaceways and the outlaw life. In a way, for her sake the Redhelms hunted him now through the canyons overhead. But here in the screen, she did not know him.

He knew that this was not possible. Some outrageous trick of vision made the face and the slender body of a woman from another universe seem the counterpart of that remembered woman. But he knew it must be an illusion, for in a world as different as Zha surely there could be no human creatures at all, certainly no human who wore the same face as the girl he remembered.

Aside from the girl herself, there was nothing to see. The screen was blank, except for vague shapes--outlines-- The helmet, he thought, filtered out more than light. He sensed, somehow, that beyond her stretched the world of Zha, but he could see nothing except the shifting, ever-changing colors of the background.

She looked down at him without expression. Obviously the sight of him had wakened in her no such deep-reaching echoes of emotion as her face woke in him. She said, her voice almost unbearably familiar; a voice sounding from the silence of death over many chilly years,

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan. Earthly language is as harsh as the Klanvahr I learned from Sanfel. Yet my name may seem strange to you. I am Quiana."

He said hoarsely, "What do you want? What did you want with Sanfel?"

"Help," Quiana said. "A weapon. Sanfel had promised me a weapon. He was working very hard to make one, risking much... and now time has eaten him up--that strange, capricious time that varies so much between your world and mine. To me it was only yesterday--and I still need the weapon."

Dantan's laugh was harsh with jealousy of that unknown and long-dead Martian.

"Then I'm the wrong man," he said roughly. "I've no weapon. I've men tracking me down to kill me, now."

She leaned forward a little, gesturing. "Can you escape? You are hidden here, you know."

"They'll find the same way I found, up above."

"The laboratory door can be locked, at the top of the shaft."

"I know. I locked it. But there's no food or water here.... No, if I had any weapons I wouldn't be here now."

"Would you not?" she asked in a curious voice. "In old Klanvahr, Sanfel once told me, they had a saying that none could hide from his destiny."

Dantan gave her a keen, inquiring look. Did she mean--herself? That same face and voice and body, so cruelly come back from death to waken the old grief anew? Or did she know whose likeness she wore--or could it be only his imagination, after all? For if Sanfel had known her too, and if Sanfel had died as long ago as he must have died, then this same lovely image had lived centuries and millenniums before the girl at Klanvahr Fortress....

"I remember," said Dantan briefly.

"My world," she went on, oblivious to the turmoil in his mind, "my world is too different to offer you any shelter, though I suppose you could enter it for a little while, in that protective armor that Sanfel made. But not to stay. We spring from soil too alien to one another's worlds.... Even this communication is not easy. And there is no safety here in Zha either, now. Now that Sanfel has failed me."



"I--I'd help you if I could." He said it with difficulty, trying to force the remembrance upon himself that this was a stranger.... "Tell me what's wrong."

She shrugged with a poignantly familiar motion.

"I have an Enemy. One of a lower race. And he--it--there is no word!--has cut me off from my people here in a part of Zha that is--well, dangerous--I can't describe to you the conditions here. We have no common terms to use in speaking of them. But there is great danger, and the Enemy is coming closer--and I am alone. If there were another of my people here to divide the peril I think I could destroy him. He has a weapon of his own, and it is stronger than my power, though not stronger than the power two of my race together can wield. It--it pulls. It destroys, in a way I can find no word to say. I had hoped from Sanfel something to divert him until he could be killed. I told him how to forge such a weapon, but--time would not let him do it. The teeth of time ground him into dust, as my Enemy's weapon will grind me soon."

She shrugged again.

"If I could get you a gun," Dantan said. "A force-ray--"

"What are they?"

He described the weapons of his day. But Quiana's smile was a little scornful when he finished.

"We of Zha have passed beyond the use of missile weapons--even such missiles as bullets or rays. Nor could they touch my Enemy. No, we can destroy in ways that require no--no beams or explosives. No, Dantan, you speak in terms of your own universe. We have no common ground. It is a pity that time eddied between Sanfel and me,

but eddy it did, and I am helpless now. And the Enemy will be upon me soon. Very soon."

She let her shoulders sag and resignation dimmed the remembered vividness of her face. Dantan looked up at her grimly, muscles riding his set jaw. It was almost intolerable, this facing her again in need and again helpless, and himself without power to aid. It had been bad enough that first time, to learn long afterward that she had died at enemy hands while he was too far away to protect her. But to see it all take place again before his very eyes!

"There must be a way," he said, and his hand gripped the lever marked "door" in the ancient tongue.

"Wait!" Quiana's voice was urgent.

"What would happen?"

"The door would open. I could enter your world, and you mine."

"Why can't you leave, then, and wait until it's safe to go back?"

"I have tried that," Quiana said. "It will never be safe. The Enemy waited too. No, it must come, in the end, to a battle--and I shall not win that fight. I shall not see my own people or my own land again, and I suppose I must face that knowledge. But I did hope, when I heard Sanfel's signal sound again...." She smiled a little. "I know you would help me if you could, Dantan. But there is nothing to be done now."

"I'll come in," he said doggedly. "Maybe there's something I could do."

"You could not touch him. Even now there's danger. He was very

close when I heard that signal. This is his territory. When I heard the bell and thought Sanfel had returned with a weapon for me, I dared greatly in coming here." Her voice died away; a withdrawn look veiled her eyes from him.

After a long silence she said, "The Enemy is coming. Turn off the screen, Dantan. And goodbye."

"No," he said. "Wait!" But she shook her head and turned away from him, her thin robe swirling, and moved off like a pale shadow into the dim, shadowless emptiness of the background. He stood watching helplessly, feeling all the old despair wash over him a second time as the girl he loved went alone into danger he could not share. Sometimes as she moved away she was eclipsed by objects he could not see--trees, he thought, or rocks, that did not impinge upon his eyes through the protective helmet. A strange world indeed Zha must be, whose very rocks and trees were too alien for human eyes to look upon in safety.... Only Quiana grew smaller and smaller upon the screen, and it seemed to Dantan as though a cord stretched between them, pulling thinner and thinner as she receded into danger and distance.

It was unbearable to think that the cord might break--break a second time....

Far away something moved in the cloudy world of Zha. Tiny in the distance though it was, it was unmistakably not human. Dantan lost sight of Quiana. Had she found some hiding place behind some unimaginable outcropping of Zha's terrain?

The Enemy came forward.

It was huge and scaled and terrible, human, but not a human; tailed, but no beast; intelligent, but diabolic. He never saw it too clearly, and

he was grateful to his helmet for that. The polarized glass seemed to translate a little, as well as to blot out. He felt sure that this creature which he saw--or almost saw--did not look precisely as it seemed to him upon the screen. Yet it was easy to believe that such a being had sprung from the alien soil of Zha. There was nothing remotely like it on any of the worlds he knew. And it was hateful. Every line of it made his hackles bristle.

It carried a coil of brightly colored tubing slung over one grotesque shoulder, and its monstrous head swung from side to side as it paced forward into the screen like some strange and terrible mechanical toy. It made no sound, and its progress was horrible in its sheer relentless monotony.

Abruptly it paused. He thought it had sensed the girl's presence, somewhere in hiding. It reached for the coil of tubing with one malformed--hand?

"Quiana," it said--its voice as gentle as a child's.

Silence. Dantan's breathing was loud in the emptiness.

"Quiana?" The tone was querulous now.

"Quiana," the monster crooned, and swung about with sudden, unexpected agility. Moving with smooth speed, it vanished into the clouds of the background, as the girl had vanished. For an eternity Dantan watched colored emptiness, trying to keep himself from trembling.

Then he heard the voice again, gentle no longer, but ringing like a bell with terrible triumph, "Quiana!"

And out of the swirling clouds he saw Quiana break, despair upon

her face, her sheer garments streaming behind her. After her came the Enemy. It had unslung the tube it wore over its shoulder, and as it lifted the weapon Quiana swerved desperately aside. Then from the coil of tubing blind lightning ravened.

Shattering the patternless obscurity, the blaze of its color burst out catching Quiana in a cone of expanding, shifting brilliance. And the despair in her eyes was suddenly more than Dantan could endure.

His hand struck out at the lever marked "door"; he swung it far over and the veil that had masked the screen was gone. He vaulted up over its low threshold, not seeing anything but the face and the terror of Quiana. But it was not Quiana's name he called as he leaped.

He lunged through the Door onto soft, yielding substance that was unlike anything he had ever felt underfoot before. He scarcely knew it. He flung himself forward, fists clenched, ready to drive futile blows into the monstrous mask of the Enemy. It loomed over him like a tower, tremendous, scarcely seen through the shelter of his helmet--and then the glare of the light-cone caught him.

It was tangible light. It flung him back with a piledriver punch that knocked the breath from his body. And the blow was psychic as well as physical. Shaking and reeling from the shock, Dantan shut his eyes and fought forward, as though against a steady current too strong to breast very long. He felt Quiana beside him, caught in the same dreadful stream. And beyond the source of the light the Enemy stood up in stark, inhuman silhouette.

He never saw Quiana's world. The light was too blinding. And yet, in a subtle sense, it was not blinding to the eyes, but to the mind. Nor was it light, Dantan thought, with some sane part of his mind. Too late he remembered Quiana's warning that the world of Zha was not Mars or Earth, that in Zha even light was different.

Cold and heat mingled, indescribably bewildering, shook him hard. And beyond these were--other things. The light from the Enemy's weapon was not born in Dantan's universe, and it had properties that light should not have. He felt bare, emptied, a hollow shell through which radiance streamed.

For suddenly, every cell of his body was an eye. The glaring brilliance, the intolerable vision beat at the foundations of his sanity. Through him the glow went pouring, washing him, nerves, bone, flesh, brain, in floods of color that were not color, sound that was not sound, vibration that was spawned in the shaking hells of worlds beyond imagination.

It inundated him like a tide, and for a long, long, timeless while he stood helpless in its surge, moving within his body and without it, and within his mind and soul as well. The color of stars thundered in his brain. The crawling foulness of unspeakable hues writhed along his nerves so monstrously that he felt he could never cleanse himself of that obscenity.

And nothing else existed--only the light that was not light, but blasphemy.

Then it began to ebb... faded... grew lesser and lesser, until-- Beside him he could see Quiana now. She was no longer stumbling in the cone of light, no longer shuddering and wavering in its violence, but standing erect and facing the Enemy, and from her eyes--something--poured.

Steadily the cone of brilliance waned. But still its glittering, shining foulness poured through Dantan. He felt himself weakening, his senses fading, as the tide of dark horror mounted through his brain.

And covered him up with its blanketing immensity.

He was back in the laboratory, leaning against the wall and breathing in deep, shuddering draughts. He did not remember stumbling through the Door again, but he was no longer in Zha. Quiana stood beside him, here upon the Martian soil of the laboratory. She was watching him with a strange, quizzical look in her eyes as he slowly fought back to normal, his heart quieting by degrees, his breath becoming even. He felt drained, exhausted, his emotions cleansed and purified as though by baths of flame.

Presently he reached for the clasp that fastened his clumsy armor. Quiana put out a quick hand, shaking her head.

"No," she said, and then stared at him again for a long moment without speaking. Finally, "I had not known--I did not think this could be done. Another of my own race--yes. But you, from Mars--I would not have believed that you could stand against the Enemy for a moment, even with your armor."

"I'm from Earth, not Mars. And I didn't stand long."

"Long enough," She smiled faintly. "You see now what happened? We of Zha can destroy without weapons, using only the power inherent in our bodies. Those like the Enemy have a little of that power too, but they need mechanical devices to amplify it. And so when you diverted the Enemy's attention and forced him to divide his attack between us--the pressure upon me was relieved, and I could destroy him. But I would not have believed it possible."

"You're safe now," Dantan said, with no expression in voice or face.

"Yes. I can return."

"And you will?"

"Of course I shall."

"We are more alike than you had realized."

She looked up toward the colored curtain of the screen. "That is true. It is not the complete truth, Dantan."

He said, "I love you--Quiana." This time he called her by name.

Neither of them moved. Minutes went by silently.

Quiana said, as if she had not heard him, "Those who followed you are here. I have been listening to them for some time now. They are trying to break through the door at the top of the shaft."

He took her hand in his gloved grasp. "Stay here. Or let me go back to Zha with you. Why not?"

"You could not live there without your armor."

"Then stay."

Quiana looked away, her eyes troubled. As Dantan moved to slip off his helmet her hand came up again to stop him.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

For answer she rose, beckoning for him to follow. She stepped across the threshold into the shaft and swiftly began to climb the pegs toward the surface and the hammering of the Redhelms up above. Dantan, at her gesture, followed.



Over her shoulder she said briefly,

"We are of two very different worlds. Watch--but be careful." And she touched the device that locked the oval door.

It slipped down and swung aside.

Dantan caught one swift glimpse of Redhelm heads dodging back to safety. They did not know, of course, that he was unarmed. He reached up desperately, trying to pull Quiana back but she slipped aside and sprang lightly out of the shaft into the cool gray light of the Martian morning.

Forgetting her warning, Dantan pulled himself up behind her. But as his head and shoulders emerged from the shaft he stopped, frozen. For the Redhelms were falling. There was no mark upon them, yet they fell....

She did not stir, even when the last man had stiffened into rigid immobility. Then Dantan clambered up and without looking at Quiana went to the nearest body and turned it over. He could find no mark. Yet the Redhelm was dead.

"That is why you had to wear the armor," she told him gently. "We are of different worlds, you and I."

He took her in his arms--and the soft resilience of her was lost against the stiffness of the protective suit. He would never even know how her body felt, because of the armor between them.... He could not even kiss her--again. He had taken his last kiss of the mouth so like Quiana's mouth, long years ago, and he would never kiss it again. The barrier was too high between them.

"You can't go back," he told her in a rough, uneven voice. "We are of

the same world, no matter what--no matter how-- You're no stranger to me, Quiana!"

She looked up at him with troubled eyes, shaking her head, regret in her voice.

"Do you think I don't know why you fought for me, Dantan?" she asked in a clear voice. "Did you ever stop to wonder why Sanfel risked so much for me, too?"

He stared down at her, his brain spinning, almost afraid to hear what she would say next. He did not want to hear. But her voice went on inexorably.

"I cheated you, Dantan. I cheated Sanfel yesterday--a thousand years ago. My need was very great, you see--and our ways are not yours. I knew that no man would fight for a stranger as I needed a man to fight for me."

He held her tightly in gloved hands that could feel only a firm body in their grasp, not what that body was really like, nothing about it except its firmness. He caught his breath to interrupt, but she went on with a rush.

"I have no way of knowing how you see me, Dantan," she said relentlessly. "I don't know how Sanfel saw me. To each of you--because I needed your help--I wore the shape to which you owed help most. I could reach into your minds deeply enough for that--to mould a remembered body for your eyes. My own shape is--different. You will never know it." She sighed. "You were a brave man, Dantan. Braver and stronger than I ever dreamed an alien could be. I wish--I wonder-- Oh, let me go! Let me go!"

She whirled out of his grasp with sudden vehemence, turning her face

away so that he could not see her eyes. Without glancing at him again she bent over the shaft and found the topmost pegs, and in a moment was gone.

Dantan stood there, waiting. Presently he heard the muffled humming of a muted bell, as though sounding from another world. Then he knew that there was no one in the ancient laboratory beneath his feet.

He shut the door carefully and scraped soil over it. He did not mark the place. The dim red spot of the sun was rising above the canyon wall. His face set, Dantan began walking toward the distant cavern where his aircar was hidden. It was many miles away, but there was no one to stop him, now.

He did not look back.

# The Misguided Halo

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The youngest angel could scarcely be blamed for the error. They had given him a brand-new, shining halo and pointed down to the particular planet they meant. He had followed directions implicitly, feeling quite proud of the responsibility. This was the first time the youngest angel had ever been commissioned to bestow sainthood on a human.

So he swooped down to the earth, located Asia, and came to rest at the mouth of a cavern that gaped halfway up a Himalayan peak. He entered the cave, his heart beating wildly with excitement, preparing to materialize and give the holy lama his richly earned reward. For ten years the ascetic Tibetan Kai Yung had sat motionless, thinking holy thoughts. For ten more years he had dwelt on top of a pillar, acquiring additional merit. And for the last decade he had lived in this cave, a hermit, forsaking fleshly things.

The youngest angel crossed the threshold and stopped with a gasp of amazement. Obviously he was in the wrong place. An overpowering odor of fragrant sake assailed his nostrils, and he stared aghast at the wizened, drunken little man who squatted happily beside a fire, roasting a bit of goat flesh. A den of iniquity!

Naturally, the youngest angel, knowing little of the ways of the world, could not understand what had led to the lama's fall from grace. The great pot of sake that some misguidedly pious one had left at the cave mouth was an offering, and the lama had tasted, and tasted again. And by this time he was clearly not a suitable candidate for sainthood.

The youngest angel hesitated. The directions had been explicit. But surely this tippling reprobate could not be intended to wear a halo. The lama hiccuped loudly and reached for another cup of sake and thereby decided the angel, who unfurled his wings and departed with an air of outraged dignity.

Now, in a Midwestern State of North America there is a town called Tibbett. Who can blame the angel if he alighted there, and, after a brief search, discovered a man apparently ripe for sainthood, whose name, as stated on the door of his small suburban home, was K. Young?

"I may have got it wrong," the youngest angel thought. "They said it was Kai Yung. But this is Tibbett, all right. He must be the man. Looks holy enough, anyway.

"Well," said the youngest angel, "here goes. Now, where's that halo?"

Mr. Young sat on the edge of his bed, with head lowered, brooding. A depressing spectacle. At length he arose and donned various garments. This done, and shaved and washed and combed, he descended the stairway to breakfast.

Jill Young, his wife, sat examining the paper and sipping orange juice. She was a small, scarcely middle-aged, and quite pretty woman who had long ago given up trying to understand life. It was, she decided, much too complicated. Strange things were continually happening. Much better to remain a bystander and simply let them happen. As a result of this attitude, she kept her charming face unwrinkled and added numerous gray hairs to her husband's head.

More will be said presently of Mr. Young's head. It had, of course, been transfigured during the night. But as yet he was unaware of this, and Jill drank orange juice and placidly approved a silly-looking hat in

an advertisement.

"Hello, Filthy," said Young. "Morning."

He was not addressing his wife. A small and raffish Scotty had made its appearance, capering hysterically about its master's feet, and going into a fit of sheer madness when the man pulled its hairy ears. The raffish Scotty flung its head sidewise upon the carpet and skated about the room on its muzzle, uttering strangled squeaks of delight. Growing tired of this at last, the Scotty, whose name was Filthy McNasty, began thumping its head on the floor with the apparent intention of dashing out its brains, if any.

Young ignored the familiar sight. He sat down, unfolded his napkin, and examined his food. With a slight grunt of appreciation he began to eat.

He became aware that his wife was eyeing him with an odd and distraught expression. Hastily he dabbed at his lips with the napkin. But Jill still stared.

Young scrutinized his shirt front. It was, if not immaculate, at least free from stray shreds of bacon or egg. He looked at his wife, and realized that she was staring at a point slightly above his head. He looked up.

Jill started slightly. She whispered, "Kenneth, what is that?"

Young smoothed his hair. "Er... what, dear?"

"That thing on your head."

The man ran exploring fingers across his scalp. "My head? How do you mean?"

"It's shining," Jill explained. "What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

Mr. Young felt slightly irritated. "I have been doing nothing to myself. A man grows bald eventually."

Jill frowned and drank orange juice. Her fascinated gaze crept up again. Finally she said, "Kenneth, I wish you'd--"

"What?"

She pointed to a mirror on the wall.

With a disgusted grunt Young arose and faced the image in the glass. At first he saw nothing unusual. It was the same face he had been seeing in mirrors for years. Not an extraordinary face--not one at which a man could point with pride and say: "Look. My face." But, on the other hand, certainly not a countenance which would cause consternation. All in all, an ordinary, clean, well-shaved, and rosy face. Long association with it had given Mr. Young a feeling of tolerance, if not of actual admiration.

But topped by a halo it acquired a certain eeriness.

The halo hung unsuspended about five inches from the scalp. It measured perhaps seven inches in diameter, and seemed like a glowing, luminous ring of white light. It was impalpable, and Young passed his hand through it several times in a dazed manner.

"It's a... halo," he said at last, and turned to stare at Jill.

The Scotty, Filthy McNasty, noticed the luminous adornment for the first time. He was greatly interested. He did not, of course, know what it was, but there was always a chance that it might be edible. He was

not a very bright dog.

Filthy sat up and whined. He was ignored. Barking loudly, he sprang forward and attempted to climb up his master's body in a mad attempt to reach and rend the halo. Since it had made no hostile move, it was evidently fair prey.

Young defended himself, clutched the Scotty by the nape of its neck, and carried the yelping dog into another room, where he left it. Then he returned and once more looked at Jill.

At length she observed, "Angels wear halos."

"Do I look like an angel?" Young asked. "It's a... a scientific manifestation. Like... like that girl whose bed kept bouncing around. You read about that."

Jill had. "She did it with her muscles."

"Well, I'm not," Young said definitely. "How could I? It's scientific. Lots of things shine by themselves."

"Oh, yes. Toadstools."

The man winced and rubbed his head. "Thank you, my dear. I suppose you know you're being no help at all."

"Angels have halos," Jill said with a sort of dreadful insistence.

Young was at the mirror again. "Darling, would you mind keeping your trap shut for a while? I'm scared as hell, and you're far from encouraging."

Jill burst into tears, left the room, and was presently heard talking in a low voice to Filthy.



Young finished his coffee, but it was tasteless. He was not as frightened as he had indicated. The manifestation was strange, weird, but in no way terrible. Horns, perhaps, would have caused horror and consternation. But a halo-- Mr. Young read the Sunday newspaper supplements, and had learned that everything odd could be attributed to the bizarre workings of science. Somewhere he had heard that all mythology had a basis in scientific fact. This comforted him, until he was ready to leave for the office.

He donned a derby. Unfortunately the halo was too large. The hat seemed to have two brims, the upper one whitely luminous.

"Damn!" said Young in a heartfelt manner. He searched the closet and tried on one hat after another. None would hide the halo. Certainly he could not enter a crowded bus in such a state.

A large furry object in a corner caught his gaze. He dragged it out and eyed the thing with loathing. It was a deformed, gigantic woolly headpiece, resembling a shako, which had once formed a part of a masquerade costume. The suit itself had long since vanished, but the hat remained to the comfort of Filthy, who sometimes slept on it.

Yet it would hide the halo. Gingerly Young drew the monstrosity on his head and crept toward the mirror. One glance was enough. Mouthing a brief prayer, he opened the door and fled.

Choosing between two evils is often difficult. More than once during that nightmare ride downtown Young decided he had made the wrong choice. Yet, somehow, he could not bring himself to tear off the hat and stamp it underfoot, though he was longing to do so. Huddled in a corner of the bus, he steadily contemplated his fingernails and wished he was dead. He heard titters and muffled laughter, and was conscious of probing glances riveted on his shrinking head.

A small child tore open the scar tissue on Young's heart and scabbled about in the open wound with rosy, ruthless fingers.

"Mamma," said the small child piercingly, "look at the funny man."

"Yes, honey," came a woman's voice. "Be quiet."

"What's that on his head?" the brat demanded.

There was a significant pause. Finally the woman said, "Well, I don't really know," in a baffled manner.

"What's he got it on for?"

No answer.

"Mamma!"

"Yes, honey."

"Is he crazy?"

"Be quiet," said the woman, dodging the issue.

"But what is it?"

Young could stand it no longer. He arose and made his way with dignity through the bus, his glazed eyes seeing nothing. Standing on the outer platform, he kept his face averted from the fascinated gaze of the conductor.

As the vehicle slowed down Young felt a hand laid on his arm. He turned. The small child's mother was standing there, frowning.

"Well?" Young inquired snappishly.

"It's Billy," the woman said. "I try to keep nothing from him. Would you mind telling me just what that is on your head?"

"It's Rasputin's beard," Young grated. "He willed it to me." The man leaped from the bus and, ignoring a half-heard question from the still-puzzled woman, tried to lose himself in the crowd.

This was difficult. Many were intrigued by the remarkable hat. But, luckily, Young was only a few blocks from his office, and at last, breathing hoarsely, he stepped into the elevator, glared murderously at the operator, and said, "Ninth floor."

"Excuse me, Mr. Young," the boy said mildly. "There's something on your head."

"I know," Young replied. "I put it there."

This seemed to settle the question. But after the passenger had left the elevator, the boy grinned widely. When he saw the janitor a few minutes later he said:

"You know Mr. Young? The guy--"

"I know him. So what?"

"Drunk as a lord."

"Him? You're screwy."

"Tighter'n a drum," declared the youth, "swelp me Gawd." Meanwhile, the sainted Mr. Young made his way to the office of Dr. French, a physician whom he knew slightly, and who was conveniently located in the same building. He had not long to wait. The nurse, after one startled glance at the remarkable hat, vanished, and almost

immediately reappeared to usher the patient into the inner sanctum.

Dr. French, a large, bland man with a waxed, yellow mustache, greeted Young almost effusively.

"Come in, come in. How are you today? Nothing wrong, I hope. Let me take your hat."

"Wait," Young said, fending off the physician. "First let me explain. There's something on my head."

"Cut, bruise or fracture?" the literal-minded doctor inquired. "I'll fix you up in a jiffy."

"I'm not sick," said Young. "At least, I hope not. I've got a... um, a halo."

"Ha, ha," Dr. French applauded. "A halo, eh? Surely you're not that good."

"Oh, the hell with it!" Young snapped, and snatched off his hat. The doctor retreated a step. Then, interested, he approached and tried to finger the halo. He failed.

"I'll be-- This is odd," he said at last. "Does look rather like one, doesn't it?"

"What is it? That's what I want to know."

French hesitated. He plucked at his mustache. "Well, it's rather out of my line. A physicist might-- No. Perhaps Mayo's. Does it come off?"

"Of course not. You can't even touch the thing."

"Ah. I see. Well, I should like some specialists' opinions. In the mean-

time, let me see--" There was orderly tumult. Young's heart, temperature, blood, saliva and epidermis were tested and approved.

At length French said: "You're fit as a fiddle. Come in tomorrow, at ten. I'll have some other specialists here then."

"You... uh... you can't get rid of this?"

"I'd rather not try just yet. It's obviously some form of radioactivity. A radium treatment may be necessary--"

Young left the man mumbling about alpha and gamma rays. Discouraged, he donned his strange hat and went down the hall to his own office.

The Atlas Advertising Agency was the most conservative of all advertising agencies. Two brothers with white whiskers had started the firm in 1820, and the company still seemed to wear dignified mental whiskers. Changes were frowned upon by the board of directors, who, in 1938, were finally convinced that radio had come to stay, and had accepted contracts for advertising broadcasts.

Once a junior vice president had been discharged for wearing a red necktie.

Young slunk into his office. It was vacant. He slid into his chair behind the desk, removed his hat, and gazed at it with loathing. The headpiece seemed to have grown even more horrid than it had appeared at first. It was shedding, and, moreover, gave off a faint but unmistakable aroma of unbathed Scotties.

After investigating the halo, and realizing that it was still firmly fixed in its place, Young turned to his work. But the Norns were casting baleful glances in his direction, for presently the door opened and

Edwin G. Kipp, president of Atlas, entered. Young barely had time to duck his head beneath the desk and hide the halo.

Kipp was a small, dapper, and dignified man who wore pince-nez and Vandyke with the air of a reserved fish. His blood had long since been metamorphosed into ammonia. He moved, if not in beauty, at least in an almost visible aura of grim conservatism.

"Good morning, Mr. Young," he said. "Er... is that you?"

"Yes," said the invisible Young. "Good morning. I'm tying my shoelace."

To this Kipp made no reply save for an almost inaudible cough. Time passed. The desk was silent.

"Er... Mr. Young?"

"I'm... still here," said the wretched Young. "It's knotted. The shoelace, I mean. Did you want me?"

"Yes."

Kipp waited with gradually increasing impatience. There were no signs of a forthcoming emergence. The president considered the advisability of his advancing to the desk and peering under it. But the mental picture of a conversation conducted in so grotesque a manner was harrowing. He simply gave up and told Young what he wanted.

"Mr. Devlin has just telephoned," Kipp observed. "He will arrive shortly. He wishes to... er... to be shown the town, as he put it."

The invisible Young nodded. Devlin was one of their best clients. Or, rather, he had been until last year, when he suddenly began to do business with another firm, to the discomfiture of Kipp and the board

of directors.

The president went on. "He told me he is hesitating about his new contract. He had planned to give it to World, but I had some correspondence with him on the matter, and suggested that a personal discussion might be of value. So he is visiting our city, and wishes to go... er... sightseeing."

Kipp grew confidential. "I may say that Mr. Devlin told me rather definitely that he prefers a less conservative firm. 'Stodgy,' his term was. He will dine with me tonight, and I shall endeavor to convince him that our service will be of value. Yet"--Kipp coughed again--"yet diplomacy is, of course, important. I should appreciate your entertaining Mr. Devlin today."

The desk had remained silent during this oration. Now it said convulsively: "I'm sick. I can't--"

"You are ill? Shall I summon a physician?"

Young hastily refused the offer, but remained in hiding. "No, I... but I mean--"

"You are behaving most strangely," Kipp said with commendable restraint. "There is something you should know, Mr. Young. I had not intended to tell you as yet, but... at any rate, the board has taken notice of you. There was a discussion at the last meeting. We have planned to offer you a vice presidency in the firm."

The desk was stricken dumb.

"You have upheld our standards for fifteen years," said Kipp. "There has been no hint of scandal attached to your name. I congratulate you, Mr. Young."

The president stepped forward, extending his hand. An arm emerged from beneath the desk, shook Kipp's, and quickly vanished.

Nothing further happened. Young tenaciously remained in his sanctuary. Kipp realized that, short of dragging the man out bodily, he could not hope to view an entire Kenneth Young for the present. With an admonitory cough he withdrew.

The miserable Young emerged, wincing as his cramped muscles relaxed. A pretty kettle of fish. How could he entertain Devlin while he wore a halo? And it was vitally necessary that Devlin be entertained, else the elusive vice presidency would be immediately withdrawn. Young knew only too well that employees of Atlas Advertising Agency trod a perilous pathway.

His reverie was interrupted by the sudden appearance of an angel atop the bookcase.

It was not a high bookcase, and the supernatural visitor sat there calmly enough, heels dangling and wings furled. A scanty robe of white samite made up the angel's wardrobe--that and a shining halo, at sight of which Young felt a wave of nausea sweep him.

"This," he said with rigid restraint, "is the end. A halo may be due to mass hypnotism. But when I start seeing angels--"

"Don't be afraid," said the other. "I'm real enough."

Young's eyes were wild. "How do I know? I'm obviously talking to empty air. It's schizo-something. Go away."

The angel wriggled his toes and looked embarrassed. "I can't, just yet. The fact is, I made a bad mistake. You may have noticed that you've a slight halo--"



Young gave a short, bitter laugh. "Oh, yes. I've noticed it."

Before the angel could reply the door opened. Kipp looked in, saw that Young was engaged, and murmured, "Excuse me," as he withdrew.

The angel scratched his golden curls. "Well, your halo was intended for somebody else--a Tibetan lama, in fact. But through a certain chain of circumstances I was led to believe that you were the candidate for sainthood. So--" The visitor made a comprehensive gesture.

Young was baffled. "I don't quite--"

"The lama... well, sinned. No sinner may wear a halo. And, as I say, I gave it to you through error."

"Then you can take it away again?" Amazed delight suffused Young's face. But the angel raised a benevolent hand.

"Fear not. I have checked with the recording angel. You have led a blameless life. As a reward, you will be permitted to keep the halo of sainthood."

The horrified man sprang to his feet, making feeble swimming motions with his arms. "But... but... but--"

"Peace and blessings be upon you," said the angel, and vanished. Young fell back into his chair and massaged his aching brow. Simultaneously the door opened and Kipp stood on the threshold. Luckily Young's hands temporarily hid the halo.

"Mr. Devlin is here," the president said. "Er... who was that on the bookcase?"

Young was too crushed to lie plausibly. He muttered, "An angel."

Kipp nodded in satisfaction. "Yes, of course.... What? You say an angel... an angel? Oh, my gosh!" The man turned quite white and hastily took his departure.

Young contemplated his hat. The thing still lay on the desk, wincing slightly under the baleful stare directed at it. To go through life wearing a halo was only less endurable than the thought of continually wearing the loathsome hat. Young brought his fist down viciously on the desk.

"I won't stand it! I... I don't have to--" He stopped abruptly. A dazed look grew in his eyes.

"I'll be... that's right! I don't have to stand it. If that lama got out of it... of course. 'No sinner may wear a halo.'" Young's round face twisted into a mask of sheer evil. "I'll be a sinner, then! I'll break all the Commandments--"

He pondered. At the moment he couldn't remember what they were. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." That was one.

Young thought of his neighbor's wife--a certain Mrs. Clay, a behemoth damsel of some fifty summers, with a face like a desiccated pudding. That was one Commandment he had no intention of breaking.

But probably one good, healthy sin would bring back the angel in a hurry to remove the halo. What crimes would result in the least inconvenience? Young furrowed his brow.

Nothing occurred to him. He decided to go for a walk. No doubt

some sinful opportunity would present itself.

He forced himself to don the shako and had reached the elevator when a hoarse voice was heard haloing after him. Racing along the hall was a fat man.

Young knew instinctively that this was Mr. Devlin.

The adjective "fat," as applied to Devlin, was a considerable understatement. The man bulged. His feet, strangled in biliously yellow shoes, burst out at the ankles like blossoming flowers. They merged into calves that seemed to gather momentum as they spread and mounted, flung themselves up with mad abandon, and revealed themselves in their complete, unrestrained glory at Devlin's middle. The man resembled, in silhouette, a pineapple with elephantiasis. A great mass of flesh poured out of his collar, forming a pale, sagging lump in which Young discerned some vague resemblance to a face.

Such was Devlin, and he charged along the hall, as mammoths thunder by, with earth-shaking tramlings of his crashing hoofs.

"You're Young!" he wheezed. "Almost missed me, eh? I was waiting in the office—" Devlin paused, his fascinated gaze upon the hat. Then, with an effort at politeness, he laughed falsely and glanced away. "Well, I'm all ready and r'aring to go."

Young felt himself impaled painfully on the horns of a dilemma. Failure to entertain Devlin would mean the loss of that vice presidency. But the halo weighed like a flatiron on Young's throbbing head. One thought was foremost in his mind: he had to get rid of the blessed thing.

Once he had done that, he would trust to luck and diplomacy. Obviously, to take out his guest now would be fatal insanity. The hat

alone would be fatal.

"Sorry," Young grunted. "Got an important engagement. I'll be back for you as soon as I can."

Wheezing laughter, Devlin attached himself firmly to the other's arm. "No, you don't. You're showing me the town! Right now!" An unmistakable alcoholic odor was wafted to Young's nostrils. He thought quickly.

"All right," he said at last. "Come along. There's a bar downstairs. We'll have a drink, eh?"

"Now you're talking," said the jovial Devlin, almost incapacitating Young with a comradely slap on the back. "Here's the elevator."

They crowded into the cage. Young shut his eyes and suffered as interested stares were directed upon the hat. He fell into a state of coma, arousing only at the ground floor, where Devlin dragged him out and into the adjacent bar.

Now Young's plan was this: he would pour drink after drink down his companion's capacious gullet, and await his chance to slip away unobserved. It was a shrewd scheme, but it had one flaw--Devlin refused to drink alone.

"One for you and one for me," he said. "That's fair. Have another."

Young could not refuse, under the circumstances. The worst of it was that Devlin's liquor seemed to seep into every cell of his huge body, leaving him, finally, in the same state of glowing happiness which had been his originally. But poor Young was, to put it as charitably as possible, tight.

He sat quietly in a booth, glaring across at Devlin. Each time the waiter arrived, Young knew that the man's eyes were riveted upon the hat. And each round made the thought of that more irritating.

Also, Young worried about his halo. He brooded over sins. Arson, burglary, sabotage, and murder passed in quick review through his befuddled mind. Once he attempted to snatch the waiter's change, but the man was too alert. He laughed pleasantly and placed a fresh glass before Young.

The latter eyed it with distaste. Suddenly coming to a decision, he arose and wavered toward the door. Devlin overtook him on the sidewalk.

"What's the matter? Let's have another--"

"I have work to do," said Young with painful distinctness. He snatched a walking cane from a passing pedestrian and made threatening gestures with it until the remonstrating victim fled hurriedly. Hefting the stick in his hand, he brooded blackly.

"But why work?" Devlin inquired largely. "Show me the town."

"I have important matters to attend to." Young scrutinized a small child who had halted by the curb and was returning the stare with interest. The tot looked remarkably like the brat who had been so insulting on the bus.

"What's important?" Devlin demanded. "Important matters, eh? Such as what?"

"Beating small children," said Young, and rushed upon the startled child, brandishing his cane. The youngster uttered a shrill scream and fled. Young pursued for a few feet and then became entangled with a

lamp-post. The lamp-post was impolite and dictatorial. It refused to allow Young to pass. The man remonstrated and, finally, argued, but to no avail.

The child had long since disappeared. Administering a brusque and snappy rebuke to the lamp-post, Young turned away.

"What in Pete's name are you trying to do?" Devlin inquired. "That cop's looking at us. Come along." He took the other's arm and led him along the crowded sidewalk.

"What am I trying to do?" Young sneered. "It's obvious, isn't it? I wish to sin."

"Er... sin?"

"Sin."

"Why?"

Young tapped his hat meaningfully, but Devlin put an altogether wrong interpretation on the gesture. "You're nuts?"

"Oh, shut up," Young snapped in a sudden burst of rage, and thrust his cane between the legs of a passing bank president whom he knew slightly. The unfortunate man fell heavily to the cement, but arose without injury save to his dignity.

"I beg your pardon!" he barked.

Young was going through a strange series of gestures. He had fled to a show-window mirror and was doing fantastic things to his hat, apparently trying to lift it in order to catch a glimpse of the top of his head—a sight, it seemed, to be shielded jealously from profane eyes. At length he cursed loudly, turned, gave the bank president a

contemptuous stare, and hurried away, trailing the puzzled Devlin like a captive balloon.

Young was muttering thickly to himself.

"Got to sin--really sin. Something big. Burn down an orphan asylum. Kill m'mother-in-law. Kill... anybody!" He looked quickly at Devlin, and the latter shrank back in sudden fear. But finally Young gave a disgusted grunt.

"Nrgh. Too much blubber. Couldn't use a gun or a knife. Have to blast-- Look!" Young said, clutching Devlin's arm. "Stealing's a sin, isn't it?"

"Sure is," the diplomatic Devlin agreed. "But you're not--"

Young shook his head. "No. Too crowded here. No use going to jail. Come on!"

He plunged forward. Devlin followed. And Young fulfilled his promise to show his guest the town, though afterward neither of them could remember exactly what had happened. Presently Devlin paused in a liquor store for refueling, and emerged with bottles protruding here and there from his clothing.

Hours merged into an alcoholic haze. Life began to assume an air of foggy unreality to the unfortunate Devlin. He sank presently into a coma, dimly conscious of various events which marched with celerity through the afternoon and long into the night. Finally he roused himself sufficiently to realize that he was standing with Young confronting a wooden Indian which stood quietly outside a cigar store. It was, perhaps, the last of the wooden Indians. The outworn relic of a bygone day, it seemed to stare with faded glass eyes at the bundle of wooden cigars it held in an extended hand.

Young was no longer wearing a hat. And Devlin suddenly noticed something decidedly peculiar about his companion.

He said softly, "You've got a halo."

Young started slightly. "Yes," he replied, "I've got a halo. This Indian--" He paused.

Devlin eyed the image with disfavor. To his somewhat fuzzy brain the wooden Indian appeared even more horrid than the surprising halo. He shuddered and hastily averted his gaze.

"Stealing's a sin," Young said under his breath, and then, with an elated cry, stooped to lift the Indian. He fell immediately under its weight, emitting a string of smoking oaths as he attempted to dislodge the incubus.

"Heavy," he said, rising at last. "Give me a hand."

Devlin had long since given up any hope of finding sanity in this madman's actions. Young was obviously determined to sin, and the fact that he possessed a halo was somewhat disquieting, even to the drunken Devlin. As a result, the two men proceeded down the street, bearing with them the rigid body of a wooden Indian.

The proprietor of the cigar shop came out and looked after them, rubbing his hands. His eyes followed the departing statue with unmitigated joy.

"For ten years I've tried to get rid of that thing," he whispered gleefully. "And now... aha!"

He re-entered the store and lit a Corona to celebrate his emancipation.



Meanwhile, Young and Devlin found a taxi stand. One cab stood there; the driver sat puffing a cigarette and listening to his radio. Young hailed the man.

"Cab, sir?" The driver sprang to life, bounced out of the car, and flung open the door. Then he remained frozen in a half-crouching position, his eyes revolving wildly in their sockets.

He had never believed in ghosts. He was, in fact, somewhat of a cynic. But in the face of a bulbous ghoul and a decadent angel bearing the stiff corpse of an Indian, he felt with a sudden, blinding shock of realization that beyond life lies a black abyss teeming with horror unimaginable. Whining shrilly, the terrified man leaped back into his cab, got the thing into motion, and vanished as smoke before the gale.

Young and Devlin looked at one another ruefully.

"What now?" the latter asked.

"Well," said Young, "I don't live far from here. Only ten blocks or so. Come on!"

It was very late, and few pedestrians were abroad. These few, for the sake of their sanity, were quite willing to ignore the wanderers and go their separate ways. So eventually Young, Devlin, and the wooden Indian arrived at their destination.

The door of Young's home was locked, and he could not locate the key. He was curiously averse to arousing Jill. But, for some strange reason, he felt it vitally necessary that the wooden Indian be concealed. The cellar was the logical place. He dragged his two companions to a basement window, smashed it as quietly as

possible, and slid the image through the gap.

"Do you really live here?" asked Devlin, who had his doubts.

"Hush!" Young said warningly. "Come on!"

He followed the wooden Indian, landing with a crash in a heap of coal. Devlin joined him after much wheezing and grunting. It was not dark. The halo provided about as much illumination as a twenty-five-watt globe.

Young left Devlin to nurse his bruises and began searching for the wooden Indian. It had unaccountably vanished. But he found it at last cowering beneath a washtub, dragged the object out, and set it up in a corner. Then he stepped back and faced it, swaying a little.

"That's a sin, all right," he chuckled. "Theft. It isn't the amount that matters. It's the principle of the thing. A wooden Indian is just as important as a million dollars, eh, Devlin?"

"I'd like to chop that Indian into fragments," said Devlin with passion. "You made me carry it for three miles." He paused, listening. "What in heaven's name is that?"

A small tumult was approaching. Filthy, having been instructed often in his duties as a watchdog, now faced opportunity. Noises were proceeding from the cellar. Burglars, no doubt. The raffish Scotty cascaded down the stairs in a babel of frightful threats and oaths. Loudly declaring his intention of eviscerating the intruders, he flung himself upon Young, who made hasty ducking sounds intended to soothe the Scotty's aroused passions.

Filthy had other ideas. He spun like a dervish, yelling bloody murder. Young wavered, made a vain snatch at the air, and fell prostrate to

the ground. He remained face down, while Filthy, seeing the halo, rushed at it and trampled upon his master's head.

The wretched Young felt the ghosts of a dozen and more drinks rising to confront him. He clutched at the dog, missed, and gripped instead the feet of the wooden Indian. The image swayed perilously. Filthy cocked up an apprehensive eye and fled down the length of his master's body, pausing halfway as he remembered his duty. With a muffled curse he sank his teeth into the nearest portion of Young and attempted to yank off the miserable man's pants.

Meanwhile, Young remained face down, clutching the feet of the wooden Indian in a despairing grip.

There was a resounding clap of thunder. White light blazed through the cellar. The angel appeared.

Devlin's legs gave way. He sat down in a plump heap, shut his eyes, and began chattering quietly to himself. Filthy swore at the intruder, made an unsuccessful attempt to attain a firm grasp on one of the gently fanning wings, and went back to think it over, arguing throatily. The wing had an unsatisfying lack of substantiality.

The angel stood over Young with golden fires glowing in his eyes, and a benign look of pleasure molding his noble features. "This," he said quietly, "shall be taken as a symbol of your first successful good deed since your enhaloment." A wingtip brushed the dark and grimy visage of the Indian. Forthwith, there was no Indian. "You have lightened the heart of a fellow man--little, to be sure, but some, and at a cost of much labor on your part.

"For a day you have struggled with this sort to redeem him, but for this no success has rewarded you, albeit the morrow's pains will afflict you.

"Go forth, K. Young, rewarded and protected from all sin alike by your halo." The youngest angel faded quietly, for which alone Young was grateful. His head was beginning to ache and he'd feared a possible thunderous vanishment.

Filthy laughed nastily, and renewed his attack on the halo. Young found the unpleasant act of standing upright necessary. While it made the walls and tubs spin round like all the hosts of heaven, it made impossible Filthy's dervish dance on his face.

Some time later he awoke, cold sober and regretful of the fact. He lay between cool sheets, watching morning sunlight lance through the windows, his eyes, and feeling it splinter in jagged bits in his brain. His stomach was making spasmodic attempts to leap up and squeeze itself out through his burning throat.

Simultaneous with awakening came realization of three things: the pains of the morrow had indeed afflicted him; the halo mirrored still in the glass above the dressing table--and the parting words of the angel.

He groaned a heartfelt triple groan. The headache would pass, but the halo, he knew, would not. Only by sinning could one become unworthy of it, and--shining protector!--it made him unlike other men. His deeds must all be good, his works a help to men. He could not sin!

# Spawn of Dagon

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Two streams of blood trickled slowly across the rough boards of the floor. One of them emerged from a gaping wound in the throat of a prostrate, armor-clad body; the other dripped from a chink in the battered cuirass, and the swaying light of a hanging lamp cast grotesque shadows over the corpse and the two men who crouched on their hams watching it. They were both very drunk. One of them, a tall, extremely slender man whose bronzed body seemed boneless, so supple was it, murmured:

"I win, Lycon. The blood wavers strangely, but the stream I spilt will reach this crack first." He indicated a space between two planks with the point of his rapier.

Lycon's child-like eyes widened in astonishment. He was short, thick-set, with a remarkably simian face set atop his broad shoulders. He swayed slightly as he gasped, "By Ishtar! The blood runs up-hill!"

Elak, the slender man, chuckled. "After all the mead you swilled the ocean might run up-hill. Well, the wager's won; I get the loot." He got up and stepped over to the dead man. Swiftly he searched him, and suddenly muttered an explosive curse. "The swine's as bare as a Bacchic vestal! He has no purse."

Lycon smiled broadly and looked more than ever like an undersized hairless ape. "The gods watch over me," he said in satisfaction.

"Of all the millions in Atlantis you had to pick a fight with a pauper," Elak groaned: "Now we'll have to flee San-Mu, as your quarrels have forced us to flee Poseidonia and Kornak. And the San-Mu mead is

the best in the land. If you had to cause trouble, why not choose a fat usurer? We'd have been paid for our trouble, then, at least."

"The gods watch over me," Lycon reiterated, leaning forward and then rocking back, chuckling to himself. He leaned too far and fell on his nose, where he remained without moving. Something dropped from the bosom of his tunic and fell with a metallic sound to the oaken floor. Lycon snored.

Elak, smiling unpleasantly, appropriated the purse and investigated its contents. "Your fingers are swifter than mine," he told the recumbent Lycon, "but I can hold more mead than you. Next time don't try to cheat one who has more brains in his big toe than you have in all your misshapen body. Scavenging little ape! Get up; the innkeeper is returning with soldiers."

He thrust the purse into the wallet at his belt and kicked Lycon heartily, but the small thief failed to awaken. Cursing with a will, Elak hoisted the body of the other to his shoulders and staggered toward the back of the tavern. The distant sound of shouting from the street outside grew louder, and Elak thought he could hear the querulous complaints of the innkeeper.

"There will be a reckoning, Lycon!" he promised bitterly. "Ishtar, yes! You'll learn--"

He pushed through a golden drapery and hurried along a corridor--kicked open an oaken door and came out in the alley behind the tavern. Above, cold stars glittered frostily, and an icy wind blew on Elak's sweating face, sobering him somewhat.

Lycon stirred and writhed in his arms. "More grog!" he muttered. "Oh gods! Is there no more grog?" A maudlin tear fell hotly on Elak's neck, and the latter for a moment entertained the not unpleasant idea

of dropping Lycon and leaving him for the irate guards. The soldiers of San-Mu were not renowned for their soft-heartedness, and tales of what they sometimes did to their captives were unpleasantly explicit.

However, he ran along the alley instead, blundered into a brawny form that sprang out of the darkness abruptly, and saw a snarling bearded face indistinct in the vague starlight. He dropped Lycon and whipped out his rapier. Already the soldier was plunging forward, his great sword rushing down.

Then it happened. Elak saw the guard's mouth open in a square of amazement, saw horror spring into the cold eyes. The man's face was a mask of abysmal fear. He flung himself back desperately--the sword-tip just missed Elak's face.

The soldier raced away into the shadows.

With a snake-like movement Elak turned, rapier ready. He caught a blur of swift motion. The man facing him had lifted quick hands to his face, and dropped them as suddenly. But there was no menace in the gesture. Nevertheless Elak felt a chill of inexplicable uneasiness crawl down his back as he faced his rescuer. The soldiers of San-Mu were courageous, if lacking in human kindness. What had frightened the attacking guard?

He eyed the other. He saw a medium-sized man, clad in voluminous gray garments that were almost invisible in the gloom--saw a white face with regular, statuesque features. A black hollow sprang into existence within the white mask as a soft voice whispered, "You'd escape from the guards? No need, for your rapier--I'm a friend."

"Who the--but there's no time for talk. Thanks, and good-bye." Elak stooped and hoisted Lycon to his shoulders again. The little man was blinking and murmuring soft appeals for more mead. And the hasty

thunder of mailed feet grew louder, while torchlight swiftly approaching cast gleams of light about the trio.

"In here," the gray-clad man whispered. "You'll be safe." Now Elak saw that in the stone wall beside him a black rectangle gaped. He sprang through the portal without hesitation. The other followed, and instantly they were in utter blackness as an unseen door swung creakingly on rusty hinges.

Elak felt a soft hand touch his own. Or was it a hand? For a second he had the incredible feeling that the thing whose flesh he had touched did not belong to any human body--it was too soft, too cold! His skin crawled at the feel of the thing. It was withdrawn, and a fold of gray cloth swung against his palm. He gripped it.

"Follow!"

Silently, gripping the guide's garment, bearing Lycon on his shoulders, Elak moved forward. How the other could find his way through the blackness Elak did not know, unless he knew the way by heart. Yet the passage--if passage it was--turned and twisted endlessly as it went down. Presently Elak had the feeling that he was moving through a larger space, a cave, perhaps. His footsteps sounded differently, somehow. And through the darkness vague whisperings came to him.

Whispers in no language he knew. The murmurous sibilants rustled out strangely, making Elak's brows contract and his free hand go involuntarily to the hilt of his rapier. He snarled, "Who's here?"

The invisible guide cried out in the mysterious tongue. Instantly the whisperings stopped.

"You are among friends," a voice said softly from the blackness. "We



are almost at our destination. A few more steps--"

A few more steps, and light blazed up. They stood in a small rectangular chamber hollowed out of the rock. The nitrous walls gleamed dankly in the glow of an oil lamp, and a little stream ran across the rock floor of the cave and lost itself, amid chuckles of goblin laughter, in a small hole at the base of the wall. Two doors were visible. The gray-clad man was closing one of them.

A crude table and a few chairs were all the furnishings of the room. Elak strained his ears. He heard something--something that should not be heard in inland San-Mu. He could not be mistaken. The sound of waves lapping softly in the distance... and occasionally a roaring crash, as of breakers smashing on a rocky shore.

He dumped Lycon unceremoniously in one of the chairs. The little man fell forward on the table, pillowing his head in his arms. Sadly he muttered, "Is there no mead in Atlantis? I die, Elak. My belly is an arid desert across which the armies of Eblis march."

He sobbed unhappily for a moment and fell asleep.

Elak ostentatiously unsheathed his rapier and laid it on the table. His slender fingers closed on the hilt. "An explanation," he said, "is due. Where are we?"

"I am Gestì," said the gray-clad one. His face seemed chalk-white in the light of the oil lamp. His eyes, deeply sunken, were covered with a curious glaze. "I saved you from the guards, eh? You'll not deny that?"

"You have my thanks," Elak said. "Well?"

"I need the aid of a brave man. And I'll pay well. If you're interested, good. If not, I'll see you leave San-Mu safely."

Elak considered. "It's true we've little money." He thought of the purse in his wallet and grinned wryly. "Not enough to last us long, at any rate. Perhaps we're interested. Although--" He hesitated.

"Well?"

"I could bear to know how you got rid of the soldier so quickly, back in the alley behind the tavern."

"I do not think that matters," Gesti whispered in his sibilant voice. "The guards are superstitious. And it's easy to play on their weakness. Let that suffice!" The cold glazed eyes met Elak's squarely, and a little warning note seemed to clang in his brain.

There was danger here. Yet danger had seldom given him pause. He said, "What will you pay?"

"A thousand golden pieces."

"Fifty thousand cups of mead," Lycon murmured sleepily. "Accept it, Elak. I'll await you here."

There was little affection in the glance Elak cast at his companion. "You'll get none of it," he promised. "Not a gold piece!"

He turned to Gesti. "What's to be done for this reward?"

Gesti's immobile face watched him cryptically. "Kill Zend."

Elak said, "Kill--Zend? Zend? The Wizard of Atlantis?"

"Are you afraid?" Gesti asked tonelessly.

"I am," Lycon said without lifting his head from his arms. "However, if Elak is not, he may slay Zend and I'll wait here."

Ignoring him, Elak said, "I've heard strange things of Zend. His powers are not human. Indeed, he's not been seen in the streets of San-Mu for ten years. Men say he's immortal."

"Men--are fools." And in Gesti's voice there was a contempt that made Elak stare at him sharply. It was as though Gesti was commenting on some race alien to him. The gray-clad man went on hurriedly, as though sensing the trend of Elak's thoughts. "We have driven a passage under Zend's palace. We can break through at any time; that we shall do tonight. Two tasks I give you: kill Zend; shatter the red sphere."

Elak said, "You're cryptic. What red sphere?"

"It lies in the topmost minaret of his palace. His magic comes from it. There is rich loot in the palace, Elak--if that's your name. So the little man called you."

"Elak or dunce or robber of drunken men," Lycon said, absently feeling the bosom of his tunic. "All alike. Call him by any of those names and you'll be right. Where is my gold, Elak?"

But without waiting for an answer he slumped down in his chair, his eyes closing and his mouth dropping open as he snored. Presently he fell off the chair and rolled under the table, where he slumbered.

"What the devil can I do with him?" Elak asked. "I can't take him with me. He'd--"

"Leave him here," Gesti said.

Elak's cold eyes probed the other. "He'll be safe?"

"Quite safe. None in San-Mu but our band knows of this underground way."

"What band is that? " Elak asked.

Gesti said nothing for a time. Then his soft voice whispered, "Need you know? A political group banded together to overthrow the king of San-Mu, and Zend, from whom he gets his power. Have you more--questions?"

"No."

"Then follow."

Gesti led Elak to one of the oaken doors; it swung open, and they moved forward up a winding passage. In the dark Elak stumbled over a step. He felt the cloth of Gesti's garment touch his hand, and gripped it. In the blackness they ascended a staircase cut out of the rock.

Halfway up, Gesti paused. "I can go no further," he whispered. "The way is straight. At the end of the stairway there is a trap-door of stone. Open it. You'll be in Zend's place. Here is a weapon for you." He thrust a tube of cold metal into Elak's hand. "Simply squeeze its sides, pointing the smaller end at Zend. You understand?"

Elak nodded, and, although Gesti could scarcely have seen the movement in the darkness, he whispered, "Good. Dagon guard you!"

He turned away; Elak heard the soft rush of his descent dying in the distance. He began to mount the stairs, wonderingly. Dagon--was Gesti a worshipper of the forbidden evil god of ocean? Poseidon, a benignant sea-god, was adored in marble temples all over the land, but the dark worship of Dagon had been banned for generations.

There were tales of another race whose god Dagon was--a race that had not sprung from human or even earthly loins....

Gripping the odd weapon, Elak felt his way upward. At length his head banged painfully against stone, and, cursing softly, he felt about in the darkness. It was the trap-door of which Gesti had spoken. Two bolts slid back in well-oiled grooves. And the door lifted easily as Elak thrust his shoulders against it.

He clambered up in semi-darkness, finding himself in a small bare room through which light filtered from a narrow window-slit high in the wall. A mouse, squeaking fearfully, fled as he scrambled to his feet. Apparently the room was little used. Elak moved stealthily to the door.

It swung, open a little under his cautious hand. A corridor stretched before him, dimly lit by cold blue radiance that came from tiny gems set in the ceiling at intervals. Elak followed the upward slant of the passage; the red sphere Gesti had mentioned was in the topmost minaret. Up, then.

In a niche in the wall Elak saw the head. The shock of it turned him cold with amazement. A bodiless head, set upright on a golden pedestal within a little alcove--its cheeks sunken, hair lank and disheveled-- but eyes bright with incredible life! Those eyes watched him!

"Ishtar!" Elak breathed. "What wizardry's this?"

He soon found out. The pallid lips of the horror writhed and twisted, and from them came a high skirling cry of warning.

"Zend! Zend! A stranger walks your--"

Elak's rapier flew. There was scarcely any blood. He dragged the

blade from the eyesocket, whispering prayers to all the gods and goddesses he could remember. The lean jaw dropped, and a blackened and swollen tongue lolled from between the teeth. A red, shrunken, eyelid dropped over the eye Elak had not pierced.

There was no sound save for Elak's hastened breathing. He eyed the monstrous thing in the alcove, and then, confident that it was no longer a menace, lengthened his steps up the passage. Had Zend heard the warning of his sentinel? If so, danger lurked all about him.

A silver curtain slashed with a black pattern hung across the corridor. Elak parted it, and, watching, he froze in every muscle.

A dwarf, no more than four feet tall, with a disproportionately large head and a gray, wrinkled skin, was trotting briskly toward him. From the tales he had heard Elak imagined the dwarf to be Zend. Behind the wizard strode a half-naked giant, who carried over his shoulder the limp form of a girl. Elak spun about, realizing that he had delayed too long. Zend was parting the silver curtain as Elak raced back down the corridor.

At his side a black rectangle loomed—a passage he had overlooked, apparently, when he had passed it before. He sprang into its shielding darkness. When Zend passed he would strike down the wizard and take his chances with the giant. Remembering the smooth hard muscles that had rippled under the dead-white skin of the man, Elak was not so sure that his chances would be worth much. He realized now that the giant had seemed familiar.

Then he knew. Two days ago he had seen a man—a condemned criminal—beheaded in the temple of Poseidon. There could be no mistake. The giant was the same man, brought back to life by Zend's evil necromancy!

"Ishtar!" Elak whispered, sweating. "I'd be better off in the hands of the guards." How could he slay a man who was already dead?

Elak hesitated, his rapier half drawn. There was no use borrowing trouble. He would keep safely out of sight until Zend was separated from his ghastly servitor--and then it would be an easy matter to put six inches of steel through the wizard's body. Elak was never one for taking unnecessary risks, as he had a wholesome regard for his hide. He heard a shuffling of feet and drew back within the side passage to let Zend pass. But the wizard turned suddenly and began to mount the steeply sloping corridor where Elak lurked. In Zend's hand was a softly glowing gem that illuminated the passage, though not brightly.

Elak fled. The passage was steep and narrow, and it ended at last before a blank wall. Behind him a steady padding of feet grew louder in the distance. He felt around desperately in the dark. If there was a hidden spring in the walls, he failed to find it.

A grin lighted his face as he realized how narrow the passage was. If he could do it--

He placed his palms flat against the wall, and with his bare feet found an easy purchase on the opposite one. Face down, swiftly, with his muscles cracking under the strain, he walked up the wall until he was safely above the head of even the giant. There he stopped, sweating, and glanced down.

Only an enormously strong man could have done it, and if Elak had weighed a little more it would have been impossible. His shoulders and thighs ached as he strained to hold his position without moving. The trio were approaching. If they should glance up, Elak was ready to drop and use his blade, or the strange weapon Gesti had given him. But apparently they did not notice him, hidden as he was in the

shadows of the high ceiling.

He caught a glimpse of the girl the giant carried. A luscious wench! But, of course, Zend would undoubtedly choose only the most attractive maidens for his necromancy and sorcery.

"If that dead-alive monster weren't here," he ruminated, "I'd be tempted to fall on Zend's head. No doubt the girl would be grateful."

She was, at the moment, unconscious. Long black lashes lay on cream-pale cheeks, and dark ringlets swayed as the giant lurched on. Zend's hand fumbled out, touched the wall. The smooth surface of stone lifted and the gray dwarf pattered into the dimness beyond. The giant followed, and the door dropped again.

With a low curse of relief Elak swung noiselessly to the floor and rubbed his hands on his leather tunic. They were bleeding, and only the hardness of his soles had saved his feet from a similar fate. After a brief wait Elak fumbled in the darkness and found the concealed spring.

The door lifted, with a whispering rush of sound.

Elak found himself in a short corridor that ended in another black-slashed silver curtain. He moved forward, noticing with relief that the door remained open behind him.

Beyond the silver curtain was a room--huge, high-domed, with great open windows through which the chill night wind blew strongly. The room blazed with the coruscating brilliance of the glowing gems, which were set in walls and ceiling in bizarre, arabesque patterns. Through one window Elak saw the yellow globe of the moon, which was just rising. Three archways, curtained, broke the smooth expanse of the farther wall. The chamber itself, richly furnished with



rugs and silks and ornaments, was empty of occupants. Elak noiselessly covered the distance to the archways and peered through the curtain of the first.

Blazing white light blinded him. He had a flashing, indistinct vision of tremendous forces, leashed, cyclopean, straining mightily to burst the bonds that held them. Yet actually he saw nothing--merely an empty room. But empty he knew that it was not! Power unimaginable surged from beyond the archway, shuddering through every atom of Elak's body. Glittering steel walls reflected his startled face.

And on the floor, in the very center of the room, he saw a small mud-colored stone. That was all. Yet about the stone surged a tide of power that made Elak drop the curtain and back away, his eyes wide with fear. Very quickly he turned to the next curtain-- peered apprehensively beyond it.

Here was a small room, cluttered with alembics, retorts, and other of Zend's magical paraphernalia. The pallid giant stood silently in a corner. On a low table was stretched the girl, still unconscious. Above her hovered the gray dwarf, a crystal vial in one hand. He tilted it; a drop fell.

Elak heard Zend's harsh voice.

"A new servant... a new soul to serve me. When her soul is freed, I shall send it to Antares. There is a planet there where I've heard much sorcery exists. Mayhap I can learn a few more secrets...."

Elak turned to the last alcove. He lifted the curtain, saw a steep stairway. From it rose-red light blazed down. He remembered Gesri's words: "Shatter the red sphere! His magic comes from it."

Good! He'd break the sphere first, and then, with no magic to protect

him, Zend would be easy prey. With a lithe bound Elak began to mount the stairs. Behind him came a guttural cry.

"Eblis, Ishtar, and Poseidon!" Elak said hastily. "Protect me now!" He was at the top of the staircase, in a high-domed room through which moonlight crept from narrow windows. It was the room of the sphere.

Glowing, shining with lambent rose-red radiance, the great sphere lay in a silver cradle, metallic tubes and wires trailing from it to vanish into the walls. Half as tall as Elak's body it was, its brilliance soft but hypnotically intense--and he stood for a moment motionless, staring.

Behind him feet clattered on the stair. He turned, saw the pallid giant lumbering up. A livid scar circled the dead-white neck. He had been right, then. This was the criminal he had seen executed--brought back to life by Zend's necromancy. In the face of real danger Elak forgot the gods and drew his rapier. Prayers, he had found, would not halt a dagger's blow or a strangler's hands.

Without a sound the giant sprang for Elak, who dodged under the great clutching paws and sent his rapier's point deep within the dead-white breast. It bent dangerously; he whipped it out just in time to save it from snapping, and it sang shrilly as it vibrated. Elak's opponent seemed unhurt. Yet the rapier had pierced his heart. He bled not at all.

The battle was not a long one, and it ended at a window. The two men went reeling and swaying about the room, ripping wires and tubes from their places in the fury of their struggle. Abruptly the red light of the globe dimmed, went out. Simultaneously Elak felt the giant's cold arms go about his waist.

Before they could tighten, he dropped. The moon peered in at a narrow window just beside him, and he flung himself desperately

against the giant's legs, wrenching with all his strength. The undead creature toppled.

He came down as a tree falls, without striving to break the force of the impact. His hands went out clutchingly for Elak's throat. But Elak was shoving frantically at the white, cold, muscular body, forcing it out the narrow window. It overbalanced, toppled--and fell.

The giant made no outcry. After a moment a heavy thud was audible. Elak got up and recovered his rapier, loudly thanking Ishtar for his deliverance. "For," he thought, "a little politeness costs nothing, and even though my own skill and not Ishtar's hand saved me, one never knows." Too, there were other dangers to face, and if the gods are capricious, the goddesses are certainly even more so.

A loud shriek from below made him go quickly down the stairway, rapier ready. Zend was running toward him, his gray face a mask of fear. The dwarf hesitated at sight of him, spun about as a low rumble of voices came from near by. At the foot of the stairway Elak waited.

From the passage by which Elak had entered the great room a horde of nightmare beings spewed. In their van came Gesti, gray garments flapping, white face immobile as ever. Behind him sheer horror squirmed and leaped and tumbled. With a shock of loathing Elak remembered the whispering voices he had heard in the underground cavern--and knew, now, what manner of creatures had spoken thus.

A race that had not sprung from human or even earthly loins....

Their faces were hideous staring masks, fish-like in contour, with parrot-like beaks and great staring eyes covered with a filmy glaze. Their bodies were amorphous things, half solid and half gelatinous ooze, like the iridescent slime of jellyfish; writhing tentacles sprouted irregularly from the ghastly bodies of the things. They were the

offspring of no sane universe, and they came in a blasphemous hissing rush across the room. The rapier stabbed out vainly and clattered to the stones as Elak went down. He struggled futilely for a moment, hearing the harsh, agonized shrieks of the wizard. Cold tentacles were all about him, blinding him in their constricting coils. Then suddenly the weight that held him helpless was gone. His legs and arms, he discovered, were tightly bound with cords. He fought vainly to escape; then lay quietly.

Beside him, he saw, the wizard lay tightly trussed. The nightmare beings were moving in an orderly rush toward the room in which Elak had sensed the surges of tremendous power, where lay the little brown stone. They vanished beyond the curtain, and beside Elak and the wizard there remained only Gesti. He stood looking down at the two, his white face immobile.

"What treachery is this?" Elak asked with no great hopefulness. "Set me free and give me my gold."

But Gesti merely said, "You won't need it. You will die very soon."

"Eh? Why--"

"Fresh human blood is needed. That's why we didn't kill you or Zend. We need your blood. We'll be ready soon."

An outburst of sibilant whispers came from beyond the silver drape. Elak said unsteadily, "What manner of demons are those?"

The wizard gasped, "You ask him? Did you not know--"

Gesti lifted gloved hands and removed his face. Elak bit his lips to choke back a scream. Now he knew why Gesti's face had seemed so immobile. It was a mask.

Behind it were the parrot-like beak and fish-like eyes Elak now knew all too well. The gray robes sloughed off; the gloves dropped from the limber tips of tentacles. From the horrible beak came the sibilant whisper of the monster:

"Now you know whom you served."

The thing that had called itself Gesti turned and progressed--that was the only way to describe its method of moving--to the curtain behind which its fellows had vanished. It joined them. Zend was staring at Elak. "You did not know? You served them, and yet did not know?"

"By Ishtar, no!" Elak swore. "D'you think I'd have let those--those--what are they? What are they going to do?"

"Roll over here," Zend commanded. "Maybe I can loosen your bonds."

Elak obeyed, and the wizard's fingers worked deftly.

"I doubt--no human hands tied these knots. But--"

"What are they?" Elak asked again. "Tell me, before I go mad thinking hell has loosed its legions on Atlantis."

"They are the children of Dagon," Zend said. "Their dwelling-place is in the great deeps of the ocean. Have you never heard of the unearthly ones who worship Dagon?"

"Yes. But I never believed--"

"Oh, there's truth in the tale. Eons and unimaginable eons ago, before mankind existed on earth, only the waters existed. There was no land. And from the slime there sprang up a race of beings which

dwelt in the sunken abysses of the ocean, inhuman creatures that worshipped Dagon, their god. When eventually the waters receded and great continents arose, these beings were driven down to the lowest depths. Their mighty kingdom, that had once stretched from pole to pole, was shrunken as the huge land masses lifted. Mankind came--but from whence I do not know-- and civilizations arose. Hold still. These cursed knots--"

"I don't understand all of that," Elak said, wincing as the wizard's nail dug into his wrist. "But go on."

"These things hate man, for they feel that man has usurped their kingdom. Their greatest hope is to sink the continents again, so that the seas will roll over all the earth, and not a human being will survive. Their power will embrace the whole world, as it once did eons ago. They are not human, you see, and they worship Dagon. They want no other gods worshipped on Earth. Ishtar, dark Eblis, even Poseidon of the sunlit seas.... They will achieve their desire now, Hear."

"Not if I can get free," Elak said. "How do the knots hold?"

"They hold," the wizard said discouragedly. "But one strand is loose. My fingers are raw. The--the red globe is broken?"

"No," Elak said. "Some cords were torn loose as I fought with your slave, and the light went out of it. Why?"

"The gods be thanked!" Zend said fervently. "If I can repair the damage and light the globe again, the children of Dagon will die. That's the purpose of it. The rays it emits destroy their bodies, which are otherwise invulnerable, or almost so. If I hadn't had the globe, they'd have invaded my palace and killed me long ago."

"They have a tunnel under the cellars," Elak said.

"I see. But they dared not invade the palace while the globe shone, for the light-rays would have killed them. Curse these knots! If they accomplish their purpose--"

"What's that?" Elak asked--but he had already guessed the answer.

"To sink Atlantis! This island-continent would have gone down beneath the sea long ago if I hadn't pitted my magic and my science against that of the children of Dagon. They are masters of the earthquake, and Atlantis rests on none too solid a foundation. Their power is sufficient to sink Atlantis forever beneath the sea. But within that room"--Zend nodded toward the curtain that hid the sea-bred horrors--"in that room there is power far stronger than theirs. I have drawn strength from the stars, and the cosmic sources beyond the universe. You know nothing of my power. It is enough--more than enough--to keep Atlantis steady on its foundation, impregnable against the attacks of Dagon's breed. They have destroyed other lands before Atlantis."

Hot blood dripped on Elak's hands as the wizard tore at the cords.

"Aye... other lands. There were races that dwelt on Earth before man came. My powers have shown me a sunlit island that once reared far to the south, an island where dwelt a race of beings tall as trees, whose flesh was hard as stone, and whose shape was so strange you could scarcely comprehend it. The waters rose and covered that island, and its people died. I have seen a gigantic mountain that speared up from a waste of tossing waters, in Earth's youth, and in the towers and minarets that crowned its summit dwelt beings like sphinxes, with the heads of beasts and gods and whose broad wings could not save them when the cataclysm came. For ruin came to the city of the sphinxes, and it sank beneath the ocean--destroyed by the children of Dagon. And there was--"

"Hold!" Elak's breathless whisper halted the wizard's voice. "Hold! I see rescue, Zend."

"Eh?" The wizard screwed his head around until he too saw the short, ape-featured man who was running silently across the room, knife in hand. It was Lycon, whom Elak had left slumbering in the underground den of Gesti.

The knife flashed and Elak and Zend were free. Elak said swiftly, "Up the stairs, wizard. Repair your magic globe, since you say its light will kill these horrors. We'll hold the stairway."

Without a word the gray dwarf sped silently up the steps and was gone. Elak turned to Lycon.

"How the devil--"

Lycon blinked wide blue eyes. "I scarcely know, Elak. Only when you were carrying me out of the tavern and the soldier screamed and ran away I saw something that made me so drunk I couldn't remember what it was. I remembered only a few minutes ago, back downstairs somewhere. A face that looked like a gargoyle's, with a terrible great beak and eyes like Midgard Serpent's. And I remembered I'd seen Gesti put a mask over the awful face just before you turned there in the alley. So I knew Gesti was probably a demon."

"And so you came here," Elak commented softly. "Well, it's a good thing for me you did. I--what's the matter?" Lycon's blue eyes were bulging.

"Is this your demon?" the little man asked, pointing.

Elak turned, and smiled grimly. Facing him, her face puzzled and frightened, was the girl on whom Zend had been experimenting--the



maiden whose soul he had been about to unleash to serve him when Elak had arrived. Her eyes were open now, velvet-soft and dark, and her white body gleamed against the silver-black drape.

Apparently she had awakened, and had arisen from her hard couch.

Elak's hand went up in a warning gesture, commanding silence, but it was too late. The girl said,

"Who are you? Zend kidnapped me--are you come to set me free? Where--"

With a bound Elak reached her, dragged her back, thrust her up the stairway. His rapier flashed in his hand. Over his shoulder he cast a wolfish smile.

"If we live, you'll escape Zend and his magic," he told the girl, hearing an outburst of sibilant cries and the rushing murmur of the attacking horde. Yet he did not turn. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Coryllis."

"Ware, Elak!" Lycon shouted.

Elak turned to see the little man's sword flash out, shearing a questing tentacle in two. The severed end dropped, writhing and coiling in hideous knots. The frightful devil-masks of monsters glared into Elak's eyes. The children of Dagon came sweeping in a resistless rush, cold eyes glazed and glaring, tentacles questing, iridescent bodies shifting and pulsing like jelly--and Elak and Lycon and the girl, Coryllis, were caught by their fearful wave and forced back, up the staircase.

Snarling inarticulate curses, Lycon swung his sword, but it was

caught and dragged from his hand by a muscular tentacle. Elak tried to shield Coryllis with his own body; he felt himself going down, smothering beneath the oppressive weight of cold, hideous bodies that writhed and twisted with dreadful life. He struck out desperately-- and felt a hard, cold surface melting like snow beneath his hands.

The weight that held him down was dissipating-- the things were retreating, flowing back, racing and flopping and tumbling down the stairs, shrieking an insane shrill cry. They blackened and melted into shapeless puddles of slime that trickled like a little gray stream down the stairway....

Elak realized what had happened. A rose-red light was glowing in the air all about him. The wizard had repaired his magic globe, and the power of its rays was destroying the nightmare menace that had crept up from the deeps.

In a heartbeat it was over. There was no trace of the horde that had attacked them. Gray puddles of ooze--no more. Elak realized that he was cursing softly, and abruptly changed it to a prayer. With great earnestness he thanked Ishtar for his deliverance.

Lycon recovered his sword, and handed Elak his rapier. "What now?" he asked.

"We're off! We're taking Coryllis with us--there's no need to linger here. True, we helped the wizard-- but we fought him first. He may remember that. There's no need to test his gratefulness, and we'd be fools to do it."

He picked up Coryllis, who had quietly fainted, and quickly followed Lycon down the steps. They hurried across the great room and into the depths of the corridor beyond.

And five minutes later they were sprawled at full length under a tree in one of San-Mu's numerous parks. Elak had snatched a silken robe from a balcony as he passed beneath, and Coryllis had draped it about her slim body. The stars glittered frostily overhead, unconcerned with the fate of Atlantis--stars that would be shining thousands of years hence when Atlantis was not even a memory.

No thought of this came to Elak now. He wiped his rapier with a tuft of grass, while Lycon, who had already cleaned his blade, stood up and, shading his eyes with his palm, peered across the park. He muttered something under his breath and set off at a steady lope. Elak stared after him.

"Where's he going? There's a--by Ishtar! He's going in a grog shop. But he has no money. How--"

A shocked thought came to him, and he felt hastily in his wallet. Then he cursed. "The drunken little ape! When he slashed my bonds in the wizard's palace, he stole the purse! I'll--"

Elak sprang to his feet and took a stride forward. Soft arms gripped his leg. He looked down. "Eh?"

"Let him go," Coryllis said, smiling. "He's earned his mead."

"Yes--but what about me? I--"

"Let him go," Coryllis murmured....

And, ever after that, Lycon was to wonder why Elak never upbraided him about the stolen purse.