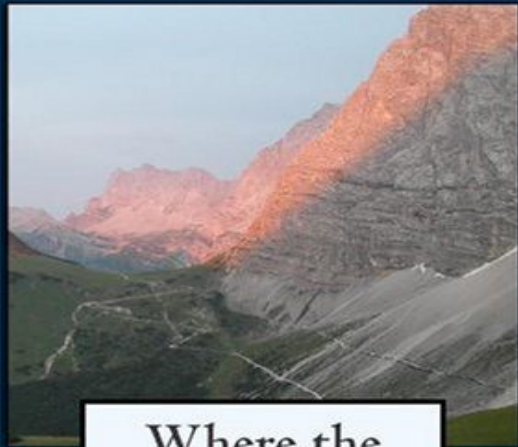




Where the World is Quiet

A TALE FROM
THE PULPS

HENRY KUTTNER

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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.

where the world is quiet

by ... C. H. Liddell

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, *Señor* 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, *Señor* 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, *Señor*. 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, *Señor* 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, *Señor*, 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. *Quien 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 first...."

"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 curtsayed 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 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 frigidity 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....

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