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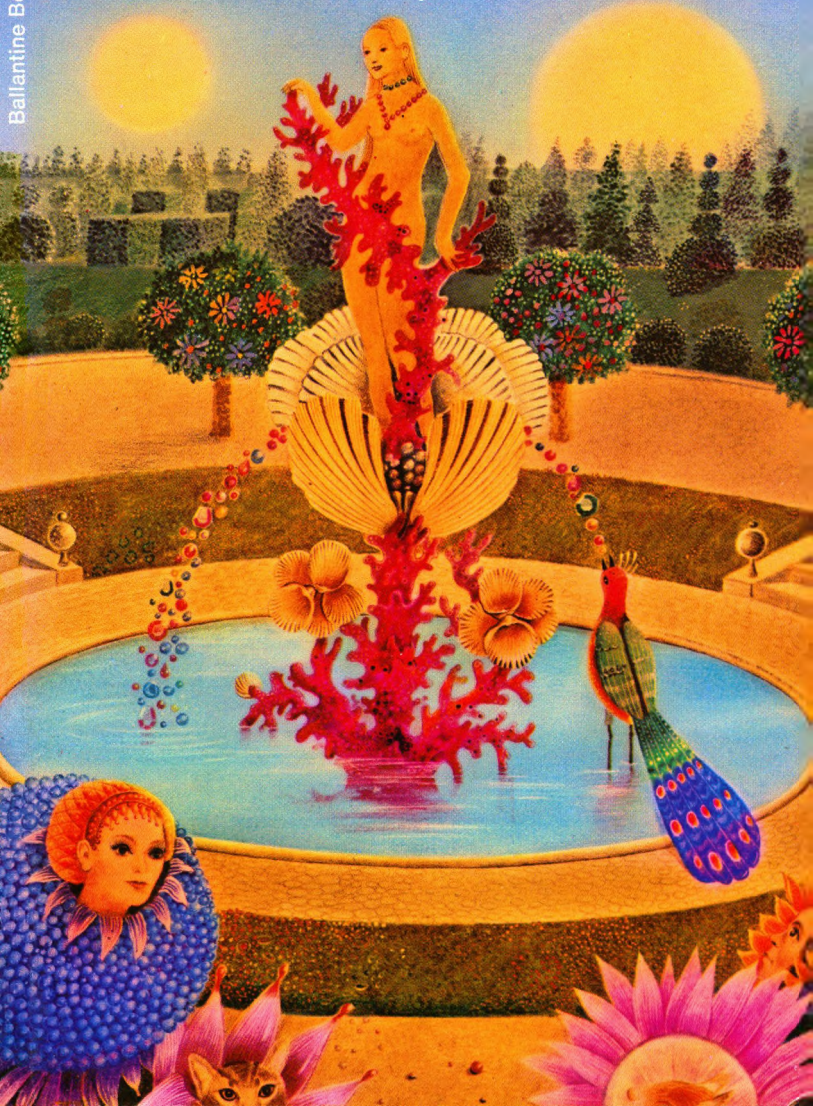
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XICCARPH

Clark Ashton Smith

Introduction by Lin Carter



"A universe of remote and paralyzing fright—jungles of poisonous and iridescent blossoms on the moons of Saturn, evil and grotesque temples in forgotten elder worlds, and dark morasses of spotted death-fungi in spectral countries beyond earth's rim. His stories deal powerfully with other galaxies, worlds, and dimensions. Who else has seen such gorgeous, luxuriant, and feverishly distorted visions of infinite spheres and multiple dimensions and lived to tell the tale?"

—*H. P. Lovecraft*

Other books by Clark Ashton Smith
edited and with introductions and
notes by Lin Carter

ZOTHIQUE

HYPERBOREA

XICCARPH

Clark Ashton Smith

Edited,
with an Introduction and Notes, by
Lin Carter

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I dedicate this collection
of Clark Ashton Smith's tales to
ROY SQUIRES
who has done as much as anyone
to keep alive the memory of
Klarkash-Ton.

Contents

<i>Other Stars and Skies</i>	3
An Introduction by Lin Carter	
<i>To the Daemon</i>	9
An Invocation by Clark Ashton Smith	
XICCARPH	
<i>The Maze of Maal Dweb</i>	15
<i>The Flower-Women</i>	37
AIHAI	
<i>Vulthoom</i>	58
<i>The Dweller in the Gulf</i>	94
<i>The Vaults of Yob-Vombis</i>	121
PHANDIOM	
<i>The Doom of Antarion</i>	147
LOPHAI	
<i>The Demon of the Flower</i>	168
SATABBOR	
<i>The Monster of the Prophecy</i>	185
BEYOND THE STARS	
<i>Sadastor</i>	239
<i>From the Crypts of Memory</i>	244

Xiccarph

*About XICCARPH and
Clark Ashton Smith:*

Other Stars and Skies

Few writers really get a chance to do something entirely new and original in the genre they have chosen for their own. Clark Ashton Smith was one of the lucky ones.

The phenomenon of Clark Ashton Smith is a curious one, and much of it cannot be explained and may never be fully understood. He won his first reputation as a poet, but about September 1929 he suddenly began producing short stories of a type seldom seen in American letters. Macabre tales, written in a lapidary prose, jeweled and studded with exotic words, ornamented with obscure mythological allusions—stories piquant and even witty, written with a mordant humor.

The majority of his tales, and there are approximately one hundred and twelve known to have been completed, are set against backgrounds of ancient times; either in fabulous prehistoric civilizations like Atlantis

and Hyperborea, semilegendary Eastern lands, or in a mythical province of medieval France. But much of his superior work in the genre of macabre fantasy borders upon what any purist would call science fiction—such as his story cycle laid in the far future supercontinent of Zothique toward the end of terrene history.

The present book illustrates the second phase of his work, and more nearly approximates genuine science fiction than even the Zothique tales do. But Smith's prime market was not the science fiction pulp magazines, although he did in fact sell stories to them, but Farnsworth Wright's great *Weird Tales*, for which Smith wrote in its golden age. And since *Weird Tales* quite logically had a right to prefer tales that were weird, Smith conformed.

In so doing he invented a miniscule sub-genre all his own.

To see precisely what I mean, turn to the story called "The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis," which is included in this book. The tale, you will see, is set on the planet Aihai, or Mars, and it takes place in the near future. These facts alone qualify it as belonging quite firmly to the province of science fiction. But now read the tale and savor the prose style: this rich, bejeweled, exotic kind of writing is the sort we most often think of as being natural to the heroic fantasy tale of magic kingdoms and fabulous eras of the mysterious past. Finally, read the story straight through and notice the actual plot. As you will find, it is precisely the sort of thing we call weird or horror fiction.

In composing a horror story set in the future or another world and told in the luxuriant, "gorgeous"

prose traditional to heroic fantasy, Smith did something quite new and different and exciting, something all his own.

It must have been rather difficult to write this kind of story, for few writers have followed Smith into this new area of fantasy fiction. In fact about the only one I can think of who did it at least as well as Clark Ashton Smith was C. L. Moore, who in her celebrated "Northwest Smith" cycle of tales worked the identical vein of ore.

I must admit that I find this kind of fantasy delicious fare. And it seems to me that in creating this minor sub-genre, Smith rose above his own limitations as a prose writer and suggested for the first time his real importance as a fantasy writer. For—these extraplanetary weird fantasies set aside—the remainder of his prose work, while certainly delightful to read, lacks originality to some extent. That is, his tales of Hyperborea or Poseidonis, the "last isle of foundering Atlantis," are not really very different from the sort of thing Robert E. Howard wrote in his tales of Conan of Cimmeria or Kull of High Atlantis. And several of Smith's *Averoigne* tales, and certain out-of-series stories, simply draw upon the Cthulhu Mythos yarns H. P. Lovecraft was writing at the time. But with such tales as "The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis," or "Vulthoom," or "The Doom of Antarion," or many of the other stories in this latest of our three Klarkash-Tonian collections, Smith was doing something that had not really been done before him to any great extent, and it is this that sets him apart from his colleagues.

I mentioned earlier the curious phenomenon of Clark

Ashton Smith. I refer to the amazing brevity of his prose period. Fundamentally a poet, Smith, as I have noted, suddenly began turning out his jeweled short stories about September 1929; between that date and sometime in 1933, Smith composed nearly one hundred of his one hundred and twelve recorded stories; and after 1933 he wrote hardly anything. Why this sudden spurt of stories, which tapered off with equal suddenness? No one seems to know. No one seems to even have an idea.

Of course, Smith wrote for money just like everyone else. But he really needed only the smallest income to get along, as he owned his own home and his wants and needs were few. It has been suggested that during the Depression, with two aged and dependent parents to care for, Smith needed an augmented income to pay for medical aid. This may have been the case: but Smith's mother did not die until September 9, 1935, and his father lived until December 26, 1937, according to Donald Fryer, and Smith had virtually ceased writing short stories even before the demise of his mother. I suspect the secret will never be known for certain; it may be that Smith simply wearied of the short story form and stopped working therein at some period before 1935. If so, we have lost much, for Smith himself lived until 1961. Think of all the stories he might have written!

The two Smith collections I have edited thus far for the Adult Fantasy Series, *Zothique* and *Hyperborea*, preserved in paperback for the first time his two major story cycles. Those cycles were each about book length.

The present book, however, consists of cycles too

brief to make individual volumes. Smith wrote only two stories laid on the planet Xiccarph, and only three tales laid on Mars are known to me; why Smith did not produce more tales in these interesting settings is yet another small mystery. The other tales I have gathered together for this book, those of Phandiom and Satabor and Lophai, are individual stories he might perhaps have followed with sequels, developing them into cycles comparable to those of Zothique and Hyperborea, had it not been for his sudden and inexplicable cessation of activity in the field of the short story. At any rate, these tales all seem most compatible to me, in style and tone and setting, and they go well together.

Most of these stories have never appeared in a paperback before, and at least one of them, "The Monster of the Prophecy," has not been published anywhere in more than thirty years. When you read the tale I think you will agree with me that thirty years is far too long for such a good story to be unavailable.

It is sad that Clark Ashton Smith so abruptly stopped writing such marvelous tales. That he intended more is obvious, for among his papers were found the notes for some thirty unwritten stories (in some cases only a few phrases describing the plot; in others, a page or two of prose). Beyond this was a list of more than seventy-five titles, including those for which notes exist. He also is believed to have planned two short novels, and to have performed some work on them. One, *The Scarlet Succubus*, was to have been a weird erotic short novel laid in Zothique; the other, for which about ten thousand words were written, was to have been a science fiction story, perhaps, *The Infernal Star*.

But there is little point in bemoaning the seventy-five stories he left unwritten. Let us be very grateful for the glorious tales he *did* write. Such as those in this book.

—LIN CARTER
Editorial Consultant:
The Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series

Hollis, Long Island, New York

To The Daemon: an Invocation

Tell me many tales, O benign maleficent daemon, but tell me none that I have ever heard or have even dreamt of otherwise than obscurely or infrequently. Nay, tell me not of anything that lies between the bourns of time or the limits of space; for I am a little weary of all recorded years and chartered lands; and the isles that are westward of Cathay, and the sunset realms of Ind, are not remote enough to be made the abiding-place of my conceptions; and Atlantis is over-new for my thought to sojourn there, and Mu itself has gazed upon the sun in aeons that are too recent.

Tell me many tales, but let them be of things that are past the lore of legend, and of which there are no myths in our world or any world adjoining. Tell me, if you will, of the years when the moon was young, with siren-rippled seas and mountains that were zoned with flowers from base to summit; tell me of the planets gray with eld, of the worlds whereon no mortal astronomer has ever looked, and whose mystic heavens and horizons have given pause to visionaries. Tell me of the vaster blossoms within whose cradling chalices a woman could sleep; of the seas of fire that beat on strands of ever-during ice; of perfumes that can give eternal slum-

ber in a breath; of eyeless titans that dwell in Uranus, and beings that wander in the green light of the twin suns of azure and orange. Tell me tales of inconceivable fear and unimaginable love, in orbs whereto our sun is a nameless star, or unto which its rays have never reached.

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Xiccarph



In 1969 I edited an anthology for Ballantine called *The Young Magicians*. That was back in the first year of the Adult Fantasy Series, and I used the opportunities afforded me by that keynote anthology to introduce my readers to many of the fantasy writers we would be using in the Series.

Among them was Clark Ashton Smith. For inclusion in that book I chose what has always seemed to me one of his most superb weird fantasies, "The Maze of Maal Dweb." As that book appeared four years ago and is out of print by this time, I trust no one will object if I repeat the story again here.

Smith wrote only two stories set on the planet Xiccarph, the tale alluded to above and its sequel, "The Flower-Women," which appears here for the first time in paperback to my knowledge. At the time I reprinted the first Xiccarph story, I wrote of it:

The tale belongs to the least developed of his cycles, that of the invented planet Xiccarph. Smith wrote very few tales of Xiccarph, and I, for one, find this regrettable, because, in a tale laid in Atlantis or Hyperborea, he was bound by the preconceptions of his readers, but in this cycle he was able to give his imagination fullest rein.

Previously unknown background information on the invention of Xiccarph has come to light since I wrote those words. We now know that Smith wrote "The Maze of Maal Dweb" sometime in 1932, toward the close of his story-writing career. It first appeared in a slender, privately printed volume of his stories, *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies*, which was published at Smith's own expense in 1933. According to his own notes, it was the seventy-seventh story he com-

pleted. In a rather different version, it appeared in *Weird Tales* during 1938. In this present printing, I have restored the text to its original form.

As for "The Flower-Women," it was his eighty-sixth story and was written sometime between February and August of 1933. So far as I have been able to discover, this is the only other story about Xiccarph that Smith ever completed.

Concerning both tales, I cannot improve on what I had to say in *The Young Magicians*:

[The stories are] exemplary of the best features of Smith's prose—darkling and mordant, lit with flashes of jewelled description, studded with exotic names and rare words, pervaded by the lillied languor and dreamlike splendor of a hashish vision. Yet even in such tales, style does not dominate story. Smith had the poet's ear for unusual words and singing rhythms and the artist's eye for color, but he had a strong sense of the storyteller's art as well.

The Maze of Maal Dweb

With no other light than that of the four diminutive moons of Xiccarph, each in a different phase but all decrescent, Tiglari had crossed the bottomless swamp of Soorm, wherein no reptile dwelt and no dragon descended—but where the pitch-black ooze was alive with continual heavings and writhings. He had carefully avoided the high causey of white corundum that spanned the fen, and had threaded his way with infinite peril from isle to sedgy isle that shuddered gelatinously beneath him. When he reached the solid shore and the shelter of the palm-tall rushes, he was equally careful to avoid the pale porphyry stairs that wound heavenward through dizzy, nadir-cleaving chasms and along glassy scarps to the ever-mysterious and terrible house of Maal Dweb. The causey and the stairs were guarded by those that he did not wish to meet: the silent, colossal iron servitors of Maal Dweb, whose arms ended in long crescent blades of tempered steel which were raised in implacable scything against any who came thither without their master's permission.

Tiglari's naked body was smeared from crown to heel with the juice of a jungle plant repugnant to all the fauna of Xiccarph. By virtue of this he hoped to

pass unharmed the ferocious ape-like creatures that roamed at will through the cliff-hung gardens and halls of the Tyrant. He carried a coil of woven root-fiber, wonderfully strong and light, and weighted with a brazen ball at one end, for use in climbing the mountain. At his side, in a sheath of chimera-skin, he wore a needle-sharp knife that had been dipt in the mortal poison of winged vipers.

Many, before Tiglari, with the same noble dream of tyrannicide, had attempted to cross the pitchy fen and scale the forbidding scarps. But none had returned; and the fate of such as had actually won to the mountain palace of Maal Dweb was a much-disputed problem; since no man had ever again beheld them, living or dead. But Tiglari, the jungle hunter, skilled in the slaying of fierce and crafty beasts, was undeterred by the more than hideous probabilities before him.

The escalade of the mountain would have been a highly dangerous feat by the full light of the three suns of Xiccarph. With eyes that were keen as those of some night-flying pterodactyl, Tiglari hurled his weighted coil about projecting coigns and fang-like salients. Hand over hand, he went up with simian ease from foothold to precarious foothold; and at length he attained a narrow buttress beneath the final cliff. From this vantage, it was an easy matter to fling his rope around the crooked bole of a tree that leaned gulfward with scimitar-like foliage from the gardens of Maal Dweb.

Evading the sharp and semi-metallic leaves that seemed to slash downward as the tree bent limberly with his dangling weight, he stood, stooping warily, on the fearsome and widely fabled mesa. Here, is was

rumored, with no human aid, the half-demoniac sorcerer and scientist had carved the more lofty pinnacles of the old mountain into walls, cupolas and turrets, and had levelled a great space about them. This space he had covered immediately with loamy soil, produced by magic; and therein he had planted curious baneful trees from outlying worlds beyond the suns of Xiccarph, together with flowers that might have been those of some teeming and exuberant hell.

Little enough was actually known of these gardens: but the flora that grew on the northern, southern and western sides of the palace was popularly believed to be less deadly than that which faced the dawning of the triple suns. Much of this latter vegetation, according to myth, had been trained and topiarized in the form of an almost infinite labyrinth, balefully ingenious, from which egress was impossible: a maze that concealed in its windings the most fatal and atrocious traps, the most unpredictable dooms, invented by the malign Daedalus. Mindful of this labyrinth, Tigliari had approached the place on the side that fronted the threefold sunset.

Breathless, with arms that ached from the long, arduous climb, he crouched in the garden shadows. About him he saw the heavy-hooded blossoms that leaned from a winy gloom in venomous languour, or fawned toward him with open corollas that exhaled a narcotic perfume or diffused a pollen of madness. Anomalous, multiform, with silhouettes that curdled the blood or touched the brain with nightmare, the trees of Maal Dweb appeared to gather and conspire against him beyond the flowers. Some arose with the sinuous towering of plumed pythons, of aigretted dragons. Others

crouched with radiating limbs that were like the hairy members of colossal arachnidans. They seemed to close in upon Tiglari with a stealthy motion. They waved their frightful darts of thorn, their scythe-like leaves. They blotted the four moons with webs of arabesque menace. They reared from interminably coiling roots behind mammoth foliages that resembled an array of interlocking shields.

With endless caution and calculation, the hunter made his way forward, seeking a rift in the armed phalanx of vegetable monstrosities. His faculties, ever alert, were abnormally quickened by a grievous fear, intensified by a mighty hatred. The fear was not for himself, but for the girl Athlé, his beloved and the fairest of his tribe, who had gone up alone that very evening by the causeway of corundum and the porphyry stairs at the summons of Maal Dweb. His hatred was that of a brave man and an outraged lover for the all-powerful, all-dreaded tyrant whom no man had ever seen, and from whose abode no woman came back; who spoke with an iron voice that was audible at will in the far cities or the outmost jungles; who punished the rebellious and the disobedient with a doom of falling fire that was swifter than the thunderstone.

Maal Dweb had taken ever the fairest from among the maidens of the planet Xiccarph; and no palace of the walled towns, or savage outland cave, was exempt from his unknown scrutiny. He had chosen no less than fifty girls during the three decades of his tyranny; and these, forsaking their lovers and kinsfolk voluntarily, lest the wrath of Maal Dweb should descend upon them, had gone one by one to the mountain citadel and

were lost behind its cryptic walls. There, as the odalisques of the aging sorcerer, they were supposed to dwell in halls that multiplied their beauty with a thousand mirrors; and were said to have for servants women of brass and men of iron that mimicked in all ways the motion and speech of living people.

Tiglari had poured before Athlé the uncouth adoration of his heart and the barbaric spoils of the chase, but having many rivals, was still unsure of her favor. Cool as a river-lily, and no less impartial, she had accepted his worship and that of the others, among whom the warrior Mocair was perhaps the most formidable. Returning at eve from the hunt, Tiglari had found the tribe in lamentation; and, learning that Athlé had departed to the harem of Maal Dweb, was swift to follow. He had not announced his intention to his fellow tribesmen, since the ears of Maal Dweb were everywhere; and he did not know whether Mocair or any of the others had preceded him in his desperate errantry. Mocair, however, had been absent; and it was not unlikely that he had already dared the obscure and hideous perils of the mountain.

The thought of this was enough to drive Tiglari forward with a rash disregard of the poisonous, reptile flowers and clutching foliations. He came anon to a gap in the horrible grove, and saw the saffron lights from the lower windows of Maal Dweb, and a dark thronging of domes and turrets that assailed the constellations above. The lights were vigilant as the eyes of sleepless dragons, and appeared to regard him with an evil, unblinking awareness. But Tiglari leapt toward them,

across the gap, and heard the clash of sabered leaves that met behind him.

Before him was an open lawn, covered with a queer grass that squirmed like innumerable worms beneath his bare feet. He did not care to linger upon that lawn, but ran onward with light, skimming paces. There were no footmarks in the grass; but nearing the portico of the palace, he saw a coil of thin rope that someone had flung aside, and knew that Mocair had preceded him.

There were paths of mottled marble about the palace, and fountains and waterfalls that played with a gurgling as of blood from the throats of carven monsters. The open portals were unguarded, and the whole building was still as a mausoleum lit by windless lamps. No shadows moved behind the brilliant yellow windows; and darkness slept unbroken among the high towers and cupolas. Tiglari, however, mistrusted sorely the appearance of quietude and slumber, and followed the bordering paths for some distance before daring to approach nearer to the palace.

Certain large and shadowy animals, which he took for the apish monsters of Maal Dweb, went by him in the gloom. They were hairy and uncouth, with sloping heads. Some of them ran in four-footed fashion, while others maintained the half-erect posture of anthropoids. They did not offer to molest Tiglari; but, whining dismally like dogs, they slunk away as if to avoid him. By this token, he knew that they were veritable beasts, and could not abide the odor with which he had smeared his limbs and torso.

At length, he came to a lampless portico with crowded columns. Here, with the silent gliding of a

jungle snake, he entered the mysterious and ever-dreadful house of Maal Dweb. Behind the dark pillars, a door stood open; and beyond the door were the dim and seemingly endless reaches of an empty hall.

Tiglari went in with redoubled caution, and began to follow the arras'd wall. The place was full of unknown perfumes, languorous and somnolent: a subtle reek as of censers in hidden alcoves of love. He did not like the perfumes; and the silence troubled him more and more as he went deeper into the palace. It seemed to him that the darkness was thick with unheard breathings, was alive with invisible and sinister movements.

Slowly, like the opening of great yellow eyes, the yellow flames arose in mighty lamps of copper that hung along the hall. Tiglari hid himself behind a heavy-figured arras; but peeping out with eerie trepidation, he saw that the hall was still deserted. Finally he dared to resume his progress. All about him the imperial hangings, broidered with purple men and azure women on a field of bright blood, appeared to stir with uneasy life in a wind that he could not feel; and the lamps regarded him with unwavering splendid eyes. But there was no sign of the presence of Maal Dweb; and the metal servitors and human odalisques of the tyrant were nowhere to be seen.

The doors on either side of the hall, with cunningly mated valves of ebony and ivory, were all closed. At the far end, Tiglari saw a rift of flaming light in a somber double arras. Parting the arras very softly, he peered into a huge, brilliantly illumined chamber that seemed at first sight to be the harem of Maal Dweb, peopled with all the girls that the enchanter had summoned to

his mountain dwelling over a course of decades. In fact, it seemed that there were many hundreds, leaning or recumbent on ornate couches, or standing in attitudes of languor or terror. Tiglari discerned in the throng the women of Ommu-Zain, whose flesh is whiter than desert salt; the slim girls of Uthmai, who are moulded from breathing, palpitating jet; the queenly amber girls of equatorial Xala; and the small women of Ilap, who have the tones of newly greening bronze. But among them all, he could not find the lillied beauty of Athlé.

Greatly did he marvel at the number of the women and the utter stillness with which they maintained their various postures. There was no lifting nor falling of eyelids, no dropping of hands, no curving nor opening of lips. They were like images of living, subtly painted marble, or goddesses that slept in some enchanted hall of eternity.

Tiglari, the intrepid hunter, was awed and frightened. Here, surely, was proof of the fabled sorceries of Maal Dweb. These women—if indeed they were women and not mere statues—had been made the thralls of a death-like spell of immortal slumber. It was as if some invisible medium of adamantine silence had filled the room, had formed about its occupants: a silence wherein, it seemed, no mortal being could draw breath.

However, if Tiglari were to continue his search for Maal Dweb and Athlé, it was necessary for him to traverse the enchanted chamber. Feeling that a marble sleep might descend upon him at the very crossing of the sill, he went in with holden breath and furtive pard-like paces. About him the women preserved their eternal stillness, their various airs and attitudes. Each, it

appeared, had been overcome by the spell at the instant of some particular emotion, whether of fear, wonder, curiosity, vanity, weariness, anger or voluptuousness. Their number was fewer than he had supposed, and the room itself was smaller; but metal mirrors, panelling the walls, had created an illusion of multitude and immensity.

At the further end, he came to a second double arras, slightly parted, and revealing only shadow beyond. Peering through, he beheld a twilight chamber, illuminated dimly by two censers that gave forth a parti-colored glow and a red fume as of vapping blood. The censers were set on lofty tripods in the far corners, facing each other. Between them, beneath a canopy of some dark and smouldering stuff with fringes braided like women's hair, was a couch of nocturnal purples with a valance of silver birds that fought against golden snakes. On the couch, in sober garments, a man reclined as if weary or asleep. The face of the man was a pale mask of mystery lying amid ambiguous shadows; but it did not occur to Tiglari that this being was any other than the redoubtable and tyrannic sorcerer whom he had come to slay. He knew that this was Maal Dweb, whom no man had seen in the flesh, but whose power was manifest to all; the occult, omniscient ruler of Xiccarph; the overlord of kings; the suzerain of the three suns and of all their moons and planets.

Like ghostly sentinels, the symbols of the grandeur of Maal Dweb, the images of his frightful empire, rose up to confront Tiglari. But the thought of Athlé was a red mist that blotted all. He forgot his eerie terrors, his awe of that ensorcelled palace. The rage of the

bereaved lover, the bloodthirst of the cunning hunter, awoke within him to guide his agile, stealthy paces, to make firm his powerful thews. The chamber was empty, except for the still and languid figure on the couch. Tiglari neared the unconscious sorcerer; and his hand grew tight on the hilt of the needle-like knife that was dipt in viper-venom.

The man before him lay with closed eyes and a cryptic weariness on his mouth and eyelids. He seemed to meditate rather than sleep, like one who wanders in a maze of distant memories or profound reveries. About him the walls were draped with funereal hangings, darkly and vaguely figured. Above him the twin censers wrought a cloudy glow, and diffused throughout the room their drowsy myrrh, which made the senses of Tiglari swim with a strange dimness.

Crouching tiger-wise beside the valance of birds and serpents, he made ready for the stroke. Then, mastering the subtle vertigo of the perfumes, he rose up; and his arm, with the darting movement of some heavy but supple adder, struck fiercely at the tyrant's heart.

It was as if he had tried to pierce a wall of adamant. In mid-air, before and above the recumbent enchanter, the knife clashed on some impenetrable substance that Tiglari could not see; and the point broke off and tinkled on the floor at his feet. Uncomprehending, baffled, he peered at the being whom he had sought to slay. Maal Dweb had not stirred nor opened his eyes. There was neither frown nor smile on his features; but their look of enigmatic weariness was somehow touched with a faint and cruel amusement.

Hesitantly, Tiglari put out his hand to verify a cer-

tain curious notion that had occurred to him. Even as he had suspected, there was no couch or canopy between the fuming censers—only a vertical, unbroken, highly-polished surface, in which the whole scene was apparently reflected. He had tried to kill a mirrored image. But, to his further mystification, he himself was not visible in the mirror.

He whirled about, thinking that Maal Dweb must be somewhere in the room. Even as he turned, the funereal draperies rushed back with an evil, silken whispering from the walls, as if drawn by unseen hands. The chamber leapt into sudden glaring light, the walls appeared to recede illimitably; and naked giants, whose umber-brown limbs and torsos glistened as if smeared with ointment, stood in menacing postures on every side. Their eyes glowered like those of jungle creatures; and each of them held an enormous knife, from which the point had been broken.

This, thought Tiglari, was a fearsome thaumaturgy; and he crouched down between the tripods, wary as a trapped animal, to await the assault of the giants. But these beings, crouching simultaneously, mimicked his every movement. By degrees it came to him that what he saw was his own reflection, multiplied and monstrously amplified in the mirrors of Maal Dweb.

He turned again. The tasseled canopy, the couch of night-dark purples with its figured valance, the reclining dreamer in plain vestments, all had vanished. Of that which he had beheld, only the smoking censers remained, rearing before a glassy wall that gave back like the others the reflection of Tiglari himself.

Bafflement and terror united now in the savage brain

of the hunter. He felt that Maal Dweb, the all-seeing, all-potent magician, was playing a game and was deluding him with elaborate mockeries. Rashly indeed had Tiglari pitted his simple brawn and forest craft against a being of such supernatural power and demoniac artifice. He dared not stir; he scarcely ventured to breathe. The monstrous reflections appeared to watch him like ogres who guard a captive pygmy. The light, which emanated as if from hidden lamps in the mirrors, took on a more pitiless and alarming luster, and centered itself upon him with a silent horror. The vast, illusive reaches of the room appeared to deepen; and far away in their shadows, he saw the gathering of vapors with human faces that melted and re-formed incessantly and were never twice the same.

Ever the eerie radiance brightened; ever the mist of faces, like a hell-born fume, dissolved and re-limned itself behind the immobile giants, in the lengthening vistas. An unheard laughter, malevolent, scornful, seemed to lurk beyond the stillness. How long Tiglari waited, he could not tell; the bright and frozen horror of that room was a thing apart from time.

Now, in the litten air, a voice began to speak: a voice that was toneless, deliberate—and disembodied. It was faintly contemptuous; a little weary; slightly cruel. It was impossible to align or locate: near as the beating of Tiglari's heart, and yet infinitely far.

"What do you seek, Tiglari?" said the voice. "Do you think to enter with impunity the palace of Maal Dweb? Others—many others, with the same intentions—have come before you: but all have paid a certain price for their temerity."

"I seek the maiden Athlé," said Tiglari. "What have you done with her?" The words were strange to him, their very sound was remote, as if another than himself had spoken.

"Athlé is very beautiful," replied the voice. "It is the will of Maal Dweb to make a certain use of her loveliness. The use is not one that should concern a hunter of wild beasts . . . You are unwise, Tiglari."

"Where is Athlé?" persisted the hunter.

"Athlé has gone to find her fate in the labyrinth of Maal Dweb. Not long ago, the warrior Mocair, who had followed her to my palace, went out at my suggestion to pursue his search amid the threadless windings of that never to be exhausted maze. Go now, Tiglari, and seek her also . . . There are many mysteries in my labyrinth; and among them all, mayhap, there is one which you are destined to solve."

The hunter saw that a door had opened in the mirror-panelled wall. In the depth of the mirrors, two of the metal slaves of Maal Dweb had appeared. Taller than living men, and gleaming from head to foot with implacable lusters as of burnished swords, they came forward upon Tiglari. The right arm of each was handed with a crescent sickle. Hastily, with no backward glance, the hunter went out through the open door. Behind him he heard the surly clash of its meeting valves.

The short night of the planet Xiccarph was not yet over; and the four moons had all gone down. But before him he saw the beginning of the fabled maze, illuminated clearly by glowing globular fruits that hung lantern-wise from baroque arches and arcades of foli-

age. Guided by their still, uncanny luminescence, he entered the labyrinth.

At first, it was a place of elfin fantasies and whims. There were quaintly turned estrades, pillared with slim and antic trees, latticed with the drolly peering faces of extravagant orchids, that led the seeker to hidden, surprising bowers of goblinry. It was as if those outer meanderings had been planned merely to entice and bemuse and beguile.

Then, by vague degrees, as the hunter went on, it seemed that the designer's mood had darkened, had become more ominous and baleful. The trees that lined the path, with twisted, intertwining boles, were Laocoöns of struggle and torture, lit by enormous fungi that seemed to lift unholy tapers. The path itself ran downward, or climbed with evilly tilted steps through caverns of imbricated leafage that shone with the brazen glistening of dragon-scales. At every turning the way divided before Tiglari; the devious branchings multiplied; and skillful though he was in jungle-craft, it would have been wholly impossible for him to retrace his wanderings. He kept on, hoping that chance would somehow lead him to Athlé; and many times he called her name aloud, but was answered only by remote, derisive echoes, or by the dolorous howling of some unseen beast that had become lost in the maze of Maal Dweb.

He came to eerie pools, alight with coiling and wreathing witch-fires, in dim arboreal grottoes. Greenish, bloated hands as of dead men appeared to lift from the changing films of phosphorescence; and once he thought that he beheld the drowning face of Athlé. He

plunged into the shallow pool—but found only fetid slime, and a swollen, nauseous thing that squirmed slowly beneath his touch.

Now he was mounting through arbors of malignant hydra growths that coiled and uncoiled about him tumultuously. The way lightened more and more; the night-shining fruits and blossoms were pale and sickly as the dying tapers of a witches' revel. The earliest of the three suns had risen; and its gamboge-yellow beams were filtering in through the plaited horrors of frilled and venomous vines.

Far off, and seeming to fall from some hidden height in the labyrinth before him, he heard a chorus of brazen voices that were like articulate bells or gongs. He could not distinguish the words; but the accents were those of a solemn and portentous announcement. They were fraught with mystic finality, with hieratic doom. They ceased; and there was no sound other than the hiss and rustle of swaying plants.

Tiglari went on. The tortuous maze became wilder and more anomalous. There were tiered growths, like obscene sculptures or architectural forms, that seemed to be of stone and metal. Others were like carnal nightmares of rooted flesh, that wallowed and fought and coupled in noisome ooze. Foul things with chancrous blossoms flaunted themselves on infernal obelisks. Living parasitic mosses of crimson crawled on vegetable monsters that swelled and bloated behind the columns of accursed pavilions.

It seemed now that the hunter's every step was predestined and dictated. He was no longer free to choose his way; for many of the paths were overgrown by

things that he did not care to face; and others were blocked by horrid portcullises of cacti, or ended in pools whose waters teemed with leeches larger than tunnies. The second and third suns of Xiccarph arose; but their beams of emerald and carmine served but to heighten the terrors of the web that had closed in about Tiglari.

By stairs where floral serpents crept, and gradients lined with tossing, clashing aloes, he climbed slowly on. Rarely could he see the labyrinthine reaches below, or the levels toward which he was tending. Somewhere on the blind path, he met one of the ape-like animals of Maal Dweb: a dark, savage creature, sleek and glistening like a wet otter, as if it had bathed in one of the hidden pools. It passed him with a hoarse growl, recoiling as the others had done from his repulsively smeared body . . . But nowhere could he find the maiden Athlé or the warrior Mocair, who had preceded him into the maze.

Now he had reached a curious little pavement of somber onyx, oblong, and wholly surrounded, except on the side of his approach, by enormous flowers with fluted bronze-like stems and great leaning balls that seemed to be the mottled heads of bestial chimeras, yawning to disclose their carmine throats. Through the gap in this singular hedge, he stepped forward on the pavement and stood staring irresolutely at the serried blooms: for here the way seemed to end.

The onyx beneath his feet was wet with some unknown, sticky fluid. He was dazed with the wonder, strangeness, and intricate, coiling horror through which he had passed; but a dim warning of peril stirred within him. He turned toward the gap through which he had

entered, but his impulse of retreat was all too late. From the base of each of the tall flower stems, a long tendril like a wire of bronze uncoiled with lightning rapidity, and closed about his ankles. He stood trapped and helpless at the center of a taut net. Then, while he struggled ineffectually, the huge stems began to lean and tilt toward him, till the carmine mouths of the blossoms were close about his knees like a circle of fawning monsters.

Nearer they came, almost touching him. From their thick lips a clear, hueless liquid, dripping slowly at first, and then running in little rills, descended on his feet and ankles and shanks. Indescribably, his flesh crawled beneath it; then there was a peculiar, passing numbness; then a furious stinging like the bites of innumerable insects. Between the crowding heads of the flowers he saw that his legs had undergone a mysterious and horrifying change: their natural hairiness had thickened, had assumed a dark and shaggy pile like the fur of apes; the shanks themselves had somehow shortened; and the feet had grown longer, with uncouth finger-like toes such as were possessed by the animals of Maal Dweb!

In a frenzy of nameless alarm and fear, he drew his broken-tipped knife and began to slash at the flowers. It was as if he had struck at monstrous bells of ringing iron, had assailed the armored heads of dragons. The blade snapped at the hilt. Then the blossoms, lifting hideously, were leaning about his waist, were laving his hips and thighs in their thin, evil slaver.

Across the bizarre nightmare in which his brain and body were drowning impotently, he heard the startled cry of a woman. Through the open gap in the hedge, he

beheld a strange scene which the hitherto impenetrable maze, parting as if by magic, had revealed. Fifty feet away, on the same level as the onyx pavement, there stood an elliptic dais or low altar of moonwhite stone at whose center the maiden Athlé, emerging from the labyrinth on a raised walk of porphyry, had paused in an attitude of wonder. Before her, in the claws of an immense marble lizard that reared above the dais, a great circular mirror of steely metal was held upright, with the monster's head hidden from view behind it. Athlé, as if fascinated by some celestial vision, was peering into the steely disk. She presented her wide-eyed profile to Tiglari; and the mirror itself was seen obliquely, with the foreshortened body of the lizard reaching away at a sharp angle and mingling obscenely with the half-reptilian maze. Midway between the onyx pavement and the ellipse of pale stone, a row of six slender brazen columns, topped with graven heads like demoniac Termini, rose at broad intervals and faced alternately toward the hunter and the girl.

Tiglari would have called out to Athlé; but at that moment she took a single step toward the mirror, as if drawn by something that she saw in its depths; and the dull disk seemed to brighten with some internal, incandescent flame. The eyes of the hunter were temporarily blinded by the spiky rays that leapt forth from it for an instant, enveloping and transfixing the maiden. When the dimness cleared away in swirling blots of sultry color, he saw that Athlé, in a pose of statuesque rigidity, was still regarding the mirror with startled eyes. She had not moved; the wonder was frozen on her face: and it came to Tiglari that she was like the

women who slept an enchanted slumber in the palace of Maal Dweb. Even as this thought occurred to him, he heard a ringing chorus of metallic voices, that seemed to emanate from the graven demon heads upon the columns.

"The maiden Athlé," announced the voices in solemn and portentous tones, "has beheld herself in the mirror of Eternity, and has passed forever beyond the changes and corruptions of Time."

Tiglari felt that he was sinking into some enormous, obscurely terrible fen of dreams. He could comprehend nothing of what had befallen Athlé; and his own fate was an equally dark and dread enigma beyond the solution of a simple hunter.

Now the leaning blossoms had lifted about his shoulders, were laving his arms, his body. Beneath their abhorrent alchemy the transformation continued. A long fur sprang up on the thickening torso; the arms lengthened; they became simian; the hands took on a likeness to the feet. From the neck downward, Tiglari differed in no wise from the apes of the garden.

In helpless abject terror, he waited for the completion of the metamorphosis. Then, slowly, he became aware that a man in sober garments, with eyes and mouth replete with the weariness of strange things, was standing before him. Behind the man, as if attending him, were two of the sickle-handed automatons of iron.

In a somewhat languid voice, the man uttered an unknown word that vibrated in the air with prolonged, mysterious aftertones. The circle of craning flowers drew back from Tiglari, resuming their former upright positions in a weird hedge; and the wiry tendrils were

withdrawn from his ankles, leaving him free. Hardly able to comprehend his release, he heard a sound of brazen voices, and knew dimly that the demon heads of the columns had spoken, saying:

"The hunter Tiglari has been laved in the nectar of the blossoms of primordial life, and has become in all ways, from the neck downward, even as the beasts that he hunted."

When the solemn chorus ceased, the weary man in sober raiment came nearer and addressed him:

"I, Maal Dweb, had intended to deal with you precisely as I dealt with Mocair and many others. Mocair was the beast that you met in the labyrinth, with new-made fur that was still sleek and wet from the liquor of the flowers; and you saw some of his predecessors about the palace. However, I find that my whims are not always the same. You, Tiglari, unlike the others, shall at least remain a man from the neck upward; and you are free to resume your wanderings in the labyrinth, and escape from it if you can. I do not wish to see you again, and my clemency arises from another reason than esteem for your kind. Go now: the maze has many windings which you are yet to traverse."

A dreadful awe was upon Tiglari; his native fierceness, his savage volition, were tamed by the enchanter's languid will. With one backward look of fearful concern and wonder at the frozen shape of Athlé, he withdrew obediently, slouching like a huge ape. His fur glistening wetly to the three suns, he vanished amid the meanderings of the labyrinth.

Maal Dweb, attended by his metal slaves, went over

to the figure of Athlé, which still regarded the steely mirror with astonished eyes.

"Mong Lut," he said, addressing by name the nearer of the two automatons that followed at his heels, "it has been, as you know, my caprice to eternalize the frail beauty of women. Athlé, like the others whom I have summoned to the mountain and have sent out to explore the ingenious secrets of my maze, has looked into that mirror whose sudden radiance turns the flesh to a stone that is fairer than marble and no less eternal . . . Also, as you know, it has been my whim to turn men into beasts with the copious fluid of certain artificial flowers, so that their outer semblance should conform strictly to their inner nature. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should have done these things? Am I not Maal Dweb, in whom all knowledge and all power reside?"

"Yes, master," echoed the automaton in an iron voice, "you are Maal Dweb, the all-wide, the all-powerful, and it is well that you should have done these things."

"However," continued Maal Dweb, "the repetition of even the most remarkable thaumaturgies can grow monotonous after a certain number of times. I do not think that I shall deal again in this fashion with any woman, nor deal thus with any man. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should vary my sorceries in future? Am I not Maal Dweb, the all-resourceful?"

"Indeed, you are Maal Dweb," agreed the automaton, "and it would be well for you to diversify your enchantments."

Maal Dweb, in his manner, was not ill pleased with the answers that the automaton had given. He cared

little for converse, other than the iron echoing of his metal servitors, who assented always to all that he said, and who spared him the tedium of arguments. And it may have been that there were times when he wearied a little even of this, and preferred the silence of the petrified women, or the muteness of the beasts that could no longer call themselves men.

The Flower-Women

"Athlé," said Maal Dweb, "I suffer from the frightful curse of omnipotence. In all Xiccarph, and in the five outer planets of the triple suns, there is no one, there is nothing, to dispute my dominion. Therefore my ennui has become intolerable."

The girlish eyes of Athlé regarded the enchanter with a gaze of undying astonishment, which, however, was not due to his strange avowal. She was the last of the fifty-one women that Maal Dweb had turned into statues in order to preserve their frail, corruptible beauty from the worm-like gnawing of time. Since, through a laudable desire to avoid monotony, he had resolved never to repeat again this particular sorcery, the magician had cherished Athlé with the affection which an artist feels for the final masterpiece of a series. He had placed her on a little dais, beside the ivory chair in his chamber of meditation. Often he addressed to her his queries or monologues; and the fact that she did not reply or even hear was to him a signal and unfailing recommendation.

"There is but one remedy for this boredom of mine," he went on—"the abnegation, at least for a while, of that all too certain tower from which it springs. There-

fore, I, Maal Dweb, the ruler of six worlds and all their moons, shall go forth alone, unheralded, and without other equipment than that which any fledgling sorcerer might possess. In this way, perhaps I shall recover the lost charm of incertitude, the foregone enchantment of peril. Adventures that I have not foreseen will be mine, and the future will wear the alluring veil of the mysterious. It remains, however, to select the field of my adventurings."

Maal Dweb arose from his curiously carved chair and waved back the four automatons of iron, having the likeness of armed men, that sprang to attend him. He passed along the halls of his palace, where painted hangings told in vermilion and purple the dread legends of his power. Through ebon valves that opened noiselessly at the uttering of a high-pitched word, he entered the chamber in which was his planetarium.

The room was walled, floored and vaulted with a dark crystal, full of tiny, numberless fires, that gave the illusion of unbounded space with all its stars. In midair, without chains or other palpable support, there hung an array of various globes that represented the three suns, the six planets and thirteen moons of the system ruled by Maal Dweb. The miniature suns, amber, emerald and carmine, bathed their intricately circling worlds with an illumination that reproduced at all times the diurnal conditions of the system itself; and the pigmy satellites maintained always their corresponding orbits and relative positions.

The sorcerer went forward, walking as if on some unfathomable gulf of night, with stars and galaxies beneath him. The poising worlds were level with his

shoulders as he passed among them. Disregarding the globes that corresponded to Mornoth, Xiccarph, Ulassa, Nough and Rhul, he came to Votalp, the outermost, which was then in aphelion on the farther side of the room.

Votalp, a large and moonless world, revolved imperceptibly as he studied it. For one hemisphere, he saw, the yellow sun was at that time in total eclipse behind the sun of carmine; but in spite of this, and its greater distance from the solar triad, Votalp was lit with sufficient clearness. It was mottled with strange hues like a great cloudy opal; and the mottlings were microcosmic oceans, isles, mountains, jungles and deserts. Fantastic sceneries leapt into momentary salience, taking on the definitude and perspective of actual landscapes, and then faded back amid the iridescent blur. Glimpses of teeming, multifarious life, incredible tableaux, monstrous happenings, were beheld by Maal Dweb as he looked down like some celestial spy.

It seemed, however, that he found little to divert or inveigle him in these outré doings and exotic wonders. Vision after vision rose before him, summoned and dismissed at will, as if he were turning the pages of a familiar volume. The wars of gigantic wyverns, the matings of half-vegetable monsters, the queer algae that had filled a certain ocean with their living and moving labyrinths, the remarkable spawn of certain polar glaciers: all these elicited no gleam or sparkle in his dulled eyes of blackish emerald.

At length, on that portion of the planet which was turning slowly into the double dawn from its moonless night, he perceived an occurrence that drew and held

his attention. For the first time, he began to calculate the precise latitude and longitude of the surrounding milieu.

"There," he said to himself, "is a situation not without interest. In fact, the whole affair is quaint and curious enough to warrant my intervention. I shall visit Votalp."

He withdrew from the planetarium and made a few preparations for his meditated journey. Having changed his robe of magisterial sable and scarlet for a hodden mantle, and having removed from his person every charm and talisman, with the exception of two phylacteries acquired during his novitiate, he went forth into the garden of his mountain-built palace. He left no instructions with the many retainers who served him: for these retainers were automatons of iron and brass, who would fulfill their various duties without injunction till he returned.

Traversing the curious labyrinth which he alone could solve, he came to the verge of the sheer mesa, where python-like lianas drooped into space, and metallic palms deployed their armaments of foliage against the far-flung horizons of the world Xiccarph. Empires and cities, lying supine beneath his magical dominion, were unrolled before him; but, giving them hardly a glance, he walked along the estrade of black marble at the very brink, till he reached a narrow promontory around which there hung at all times a deep and hueless cloud, obscuring the prospect of the lands below and beyond.

The secret of this cloud, affording access to multiple dimensions and deeply folded realms of space contermi-

nous with far worlds, was known only to Maal Dweb. He had built a silver drawbridge on the promontory; and by lowering its airy span into the cloud, he could pass at will to the farther zones of Xiccarph, or could cross the very void between the planets.

Now, after making certain highly recondite calculations, he manipulated the machinery of the light drawbridge so that its other end would fall upon the particular terrain that he desired to visit in Votalp. Then, assuring himself that his calculations and adjustments were flawless, he followed the silver span into the dim, bewildering chaos of the cloud. Here, as he groped in a gray blindness, it seemed that his body and members were drawn out over infinite gulfs, and were bent through impossible angles. A single misstep would have plunged him into spatial regions from which all his cunning sorcery could have contrived no manner of return or release; but he had often trod these hidden ways, and he did not lose his equilibrium. The transit appeared to involve whole centuries of time; but finally he emerged from the cloud and came to the farther end of the drawbridge.

Before him was the scene that had lured his interest in Votalp. It was a semi-tropic valley, level and open in the foreground, and rising steeply at the other extreme, with all its multiform fantasies of vegetation, toward the cliffs and chasms of sable mountains horned with blood-red stone. The time was still early dawn; but the amber sun, freeing itself slowly from the occultation of the sun of carmine, had begun to lighten the hues and shadows of the valley with strange copper and orange. The emerald sun was still below the horizon.

The terminus of the bridge had fallen on a mossy knoll, behind which the hueless cloud had gathered, even as about the promontory in Xiccarph. Maal Dweb descended the knoll, feeling no concern whatever for the bridge. It would remain as he had left it, till the time of his return; and if, in the interim, any creatures from Votalp should cross the gulf and invade his mountain citadel, they would meet a fearful doom in the snares and windings of the labyrinth; or, failing this, would be exterminated by his iron servitors.

As he went down the knoll into the valley, the enchanter heard an eery, plaintive singing, like that of sirens who bewail some irremediable misfortune. The singing came from a sisterhood of unusual creatures, half woman and half flower, that grew on the valley bottom beside a sleepy stream of purple water. There were several scores of these lovely and charming monsters, whose feminine bodies of pink and pearl reclined amid the vermilion velvet couches of billowing petals to which they were attached. These petals were borne on mattress-like leaves and heavy, short, well-rooted stems. The flowers were disposed in irregular circles, clustering thickly toward the center, and with open intervals in the outer rows.

Maal Dweb approached the flower-women with a certain caution; for he knew that they were vampires. Their arms ended in long tendrils, pale as ivory, swifter and more supple than the coils of daring serpents, with which they were wont to secure the unwary victims drawn by their singing. Of course, knowing in his wisdom the inexorable laws of nature, he felt no disapprov-

al of such vampirism; but, on the other hand, he did not care to be its object.

He circled about the strange family at a little distance, his movements hidden from their observation by boulders overgrown with tall, luxuriant lichens of red and yellow. Soon he neared the straggling outer line of plants that were upstream from the knoll on which he had landed; and here, in confirmation of the vision beheld on the mimic world in his planetarium, he found that the turf was upheaved and broken where five of the blossoms, growing apart from their companions, had been disrooted and removed bodily. He had seen in his vision the rape of the fifth flower, and he knew that the others were now lamenting her.

Suddenly, as if they had forgotten their sorrow, the wailing of the flower-women turned to a wild and sweet and voluptuous singing, like that of the Lorelei. By this token, the enchanter knew that his presence had been detected. Inured though he was to such bewitchments, he found himself far from insensible to the perilous luring of the voices. Contrary to his intention, forgetful of the danger, he emerged from the lee of the lichen-crested rocks. By insidious degrees, the melody fired his blood with a strange intoxication, it sang in his brain like some bewildering wine. Step by step, with a temporary loss of prudence for which, later, he was quite unable to account, he approached the blossoms.

Now, pausing at an interval that he deemed safe in his bemusement, he beheld plainly the half-human features of the vampires, leaning toward him with fantastic invitation. Their weirdly slanted eyes, like oblong opals of dew and venom, the snaky coiling of their

bronze-green hair, the bright, baneful scarlet of their lips, that thirsted subtly even as they sang, awoke within him the knowledge of his peril. Too late, he sought to defy the captiously woven spell. Unwinding with a movement swift as light, the long pale tendrils of one of the creatures wrapped him round, and he was drawn, resisting vainly, toward her couch.

At the moment of his capture, the whole sisterhood had ceased their singing. They began to utter little cries of triumph, shrill and sibilant. Murmurs of expectation, like the purrings of hungry flame, arose from the nearest, who hoped to share in the good fortune of the sorcerer's captress.

Maal Dweb, however, was now able to utilize his faculties. Without alarm or fear, he contemplated the lovely monster, who had drawn him to the verge of her velvet bed, and was fawning upon him with sinisterly parted lips.

Using a somewhat primary power of divination, he apprised himself of certain matters concerning the vampire. Having learnt the true, occult name which this creature shared with all others of her kind, he then spoke the name aloud in a firm but gentle tone; and winning thus, by an elemental law of magic, the power of mastery over his captress and her sisters, he felt the instant relaxation of the tendrils. The flower-woman, with fear and wonder in her strange eyes, drew back like a startled lamia; but Maal Dweb, employing the half-articulate sounds of her own language, began to soothe and reassure her. In a little while he was on friendly terms with the whole sisterhood. These simple and naïve beings forgot their vampiric intentions, their

surprize and wonderment, and seemed to accept the magician very much as they accepted the three suns and the meteoric conditions of the planet Votalp.

Conversing with them, he soon verified the information obtained through the mimic globe. As a rule their emotions and memories were short-lived, their nature being closer to that of plants or animals than of human-kind; but the loss of five sisters, occurring on successive mornings, had filled them with grief and terror that they could not forget. The missing flowers had been carried away bodily. The depredators were certain reptilian beings, colossal in size and winged like pterodactyls, who came down from their new-built citadel among the mountains at the valley's upper extreme. These beings, known as the Ispazars, seven in number, had become formidable sorcerers and had developed an intellection beyond that of their kind, together with many esoteric faculties. Preserving the cold and evilly cryptic nature of reptiles, they had made themselves the masters of an abhuman science. But, until the present, Maal Dweb had ignored them and had not thought it worth while to interfere with their evolution.

Now, through an errant whim, in his search for adventure, he had decided to pit himself against the Ispazars, employing no other weapons of sorcery than his own wit and will, his remembered learning, his clairvoyance, and the two simple amulets that he wore on his person.

"Be comforted," he said to the flower-women, "for verily I shall deal with these miscreants in a fitting manner."

At this, they broke into a shrill babble, repeating

tales that the bird-people of the valley had told them regarding the fortress of the Ispazars, whose walls rose sheerly from a hidden peak unscaled by man, and were void of portal or window save in the highmost ramparts, where the flying reptiles went in and out. And they told him other tales, concerning the ferocity and cruelty of the Ispazars. . . .

Smiling as if at the chatter of children, he diverted their thoughts to other matters, and told them many stories of odd and curious marvels, and queer happenings in alien worlds. In the meanwhile he perfected his plan for obtaining entrance to the citadel of the reptilian wizards.

The day went by in such divertissements; and one by one the three suns of the system fell beyond the valley's rim. The flower-women grew inattentive, they began to nod and drowse in the richly darkening twilight; and Maal Dweb proceeded with certain preparations that formed an essential part of his scheme.

Through his power of second sight, he had determined the identity of the victim whom the reptiles would carry away in their next raid on the morrow. This creature, as it happened, was the one who had sought to ensnare him. Like the others, she was now preparing to fold herself for the night in her voluminous couch of petals. Confiding part of his plan to her, Maal Dweb manipulated in a singular fashion one of the amulets which he wore, and by virtue of this manipulation, reduced himself to the proportions of a pigmy. In this state, with the assistance of the drowsy siren, he was able to conceal himself in a hollow space among the petals; and thus embowered, like a bee in a rose he

slept securely through the short, moonless night of Votalp.

The dawn awakened him, glowing as if through lucent curtains of ruby and purple. He heard the flower-women murmuring sleepily to one another as they opened their blossoms to the early suns. Their murmurs, however, soon changed into shrill cries of agitation and fear; and above the cries, there came a vibrant drumming as of great dragon-wings. He peered from his hiding-place and saw in the double dawn the descent of the Ispazars, from whose webbed vans a darkness fell on the valley. Nearer they drew, and he saw their cold and scarlet eyes beneath scaly brows, their long, undulant bodies, their lizard limbs and prehensile claws; and he heard the deep, articulate hissing of their voices. Then the petals closed about him blindly, shuddering and constrictive, as the flower-woman recoiled from the swooping monsters. All was confusion, terror, tumult; but he knew, from his observation of the previous rape, that two of the Ispazars had encircled the flower's stem with their python-like tails, and were pulling it from the ground as a human sorcerer might pull a mandrake plant.

He felt the convulsive agony of the disrooted blossom, he heard the lamentable shrieking of her sisters. Then there came a heavier beating of the drum-loud wings, and the feeling of giddy ascension and flight.

Through all this, Maal Dweb maintained the utmost presence of mind; and he did not betray himself to the Ispazars. After many minutes, there was a slackening of the headlong flight, and he knew that the reptiles were nearing their citadel. A moment more, and the ruddy

gloom of the shut petals darkened and purpled about him, as if they had passed from the sunlight into a place of deep shadow. The thrumming of wings ceased abruptly, the living flower was dropped from a height on some hard surface and Maal Dweb was nearly hurled from his hiding-place by the violence of her fall. Moaning faintly, twitching a little, she lay where her captors had flung her. The enchanter heard the hissing voices of the reptile wizards, the rough, sharp slithering of their tails on a stone floor, as they withdrew.

Whispering words of comfort to the dying blossom, he felt the petals relax about him. He crept forth very cautiously, and found himself in an immense, gloomily vaulted hall, whose windows were like the mouths of a deep cavern. The place was a sort of alchemy, a den of alien sorceries and abhorrent pharmaceuticals. Everywhere, in the gloom, there were vats, cupels, furnaces, alembics and matrasses of unhuman form, bulking and towering colossally to the pigmy eyes of Maal Dweb. Close at hand, a monstrous cauldron fumed like a crater of black metal, its curving sides ascending far above the magician's head. None of the Ispazars was in sight; but, knowing that they might return at any moment, he hastened to make ready against them, feeling, for the first time in many years, the thrill of peril and expectation.

Manipulating the second amulet, he regained his normal proportions. The room, though still spacious, was no longer a hall of giants, and the cauldron beside him sank and lessened till its rim rose only to his shoulder. He saw now that the cauldron was filled with an unholy mixture of ingredients, among which were finely

shredded portions of the missing flower-women, together with the gall of chimeras and the ambergris of leviathans. Heated by unseen fires, it boiled tumultuously, foaming with black, pitchy bubbles, and putting forth a nauseous vapor.

With the shrewd eye of a past master of all chemic lore, Maal Dweb proceeded to estimate the cauldron's various contents, and was then able to divine the purpose for which the brewage was intended. The conclusion to which he was driven appalled him slightly, and served to heighten his respect for the power and science of the reptile sorcerers. He saw, indeed, that it would be highly advisable to arrest their evolution.

After brief reflection, it occurred to him that, in accordance with chemical laws, the adding of certain simple components to the brewage would bring about an eventuation neither desired nor anticipated by the Ispazars. On high tables about the walls of the alchemy, there were jars, flasks and vials containing subtle drugs and powerful elements, some of which were drawn from the more arcanic kingdoms of nature. Disregarding the moon-powder, the coals of star-fire, the jellies made from the brains of gorgons, the ichor of salamanders, the dust of lethal fungi, the marrow of sphinxes, and other equally quaint and pernicious matters, the magician soon found the essences that he required. It was the work of an instant to pour them into the seething cauldron; and having done this, he awaited with composure the return of the reptiles.

The flower-woman, in the meanwhile, had ceased to moan and twitch. Maal Dweb knew that she was dead, since beings of this genus were unable to survive when

uprooted with such violence from their natal soil. She had folded herself to the face in her straitened petals, as if in a red and blackening shroud. He regarded her briefly, not without commiseration; and at that moment he heard the voices of the seven Ispazars, who had now re-entered the alchemy.

They came toward him among the crowded vessels, walking erect in the fashion of men on their short lizard legs, their ribbed and sabled wings retracted behind them, and their eyes glaring redly in the gloom. Two of them were armed with long, sinuous-bladed knives; and others were equipped with enormous adamantine pestles, to be employed, do doubt, in bruising the flesh of the floral vampire.

When they saw the enchanter, they were both startled and angered. Their necks and torsos began to swell like the hoods of cobras, and a great hissing rose among them, like the noise of jetted steam. Their aspect would have struck terror to the heart of any common man; but Maal Dweb confronted them calmly, repeating aloud, in low, even tones, a word of sovereign protective power.

The Ispazars hurled themselves toward him, some running along the floor with an undulant slithering motion, and others rising on rapid-beating vans to attack him from above. All, however, dashed themselves vainly on the sphere of unseen force he had drawn about him through the utterance of the word of power. It was a strange thing to see them clawing vengefully at the void air, or striking futile blows with their weapons, which rang as if on a brazen wall.

Now, perceiving that the man before them was a

sorcerer, the reptile magicians began to make use of their own abhuman sorcery. They called from the air great bolts of livid flame, python-shapen, which leaped and writhed incessantly, warring with the sphere of protective power, driving it back as a shield is driven by press of numbers in battle, but never breaking it down entirely. Also, they chanted evil, sibilant runes that were designed to charm away the magician's memory, and cause him to forget his magic. Sore was the travail of Maal Dweb as he fought the serpent fires and runes; and blood mingled with the sweat of his brow from that endeavor. But still, as the bolts struck nearer and the singing loudened, he kept uttering the unforgotten word; and the word still protected him.

Now, above the snaky chanting, he heard the deep hiss of the cauldron, boiling more turbulently than before because of those matters which he had added to its contents. And he saw, between the ever-writhing bolts, that a more voluminous vapor, dark as the steam of a primal fen, was mounting from the cauldron and spreading throughout the alchemy.

Soon the Ispazars were immersed in the fumes, as in a cloud of darkness; and dimly they began to coil and twist, convulsed with a strange agony. The python flames died out on the air, and the hissings of the Ispazars became inarticulate as those of common serpents. Then, falling to the floor, while the black mist gathered and thickened above them, they crawled to and fro on their bellies in the fashion of true reptiles; and, emerging at times from the vapor, they shrank and dwindled as if hell-fire had consumed them.

All this was even as Maal Dweb had planned. He

knew that the Ispazars had forgotten their sorcery and science; and a swift devolution, flinging them back to the lowest state of serpenthood, had come upon them through the action of the vapor. But, before the completion of the change, he admitted one of the seven Ispazars to the sphere that now served to protect him from the fumes. The creature fawned at his feet like a tame dragon, acknowledging him for its master. Then, presently, the cloud of vapor began to lift, and he saw the other Ispazars, who were now little larger than fen-snakes. Their wings had withered into useless frills, and they crept and hissed on the floor, amid the alembics and crucibles and athanors of their lost science.

Maal Dweb regarded them for a little, not without pride in his own sorcery. The struggle had been difficult, even dangerous; and he reflected that his boredom had been thoroughly overcome, at least for the nonce. From a practical standpoint, he had done well; for, in ridding the flower-women of their persecutors, he had also eradicated a possible future menace to his own dominion over the worlds of the three suns.

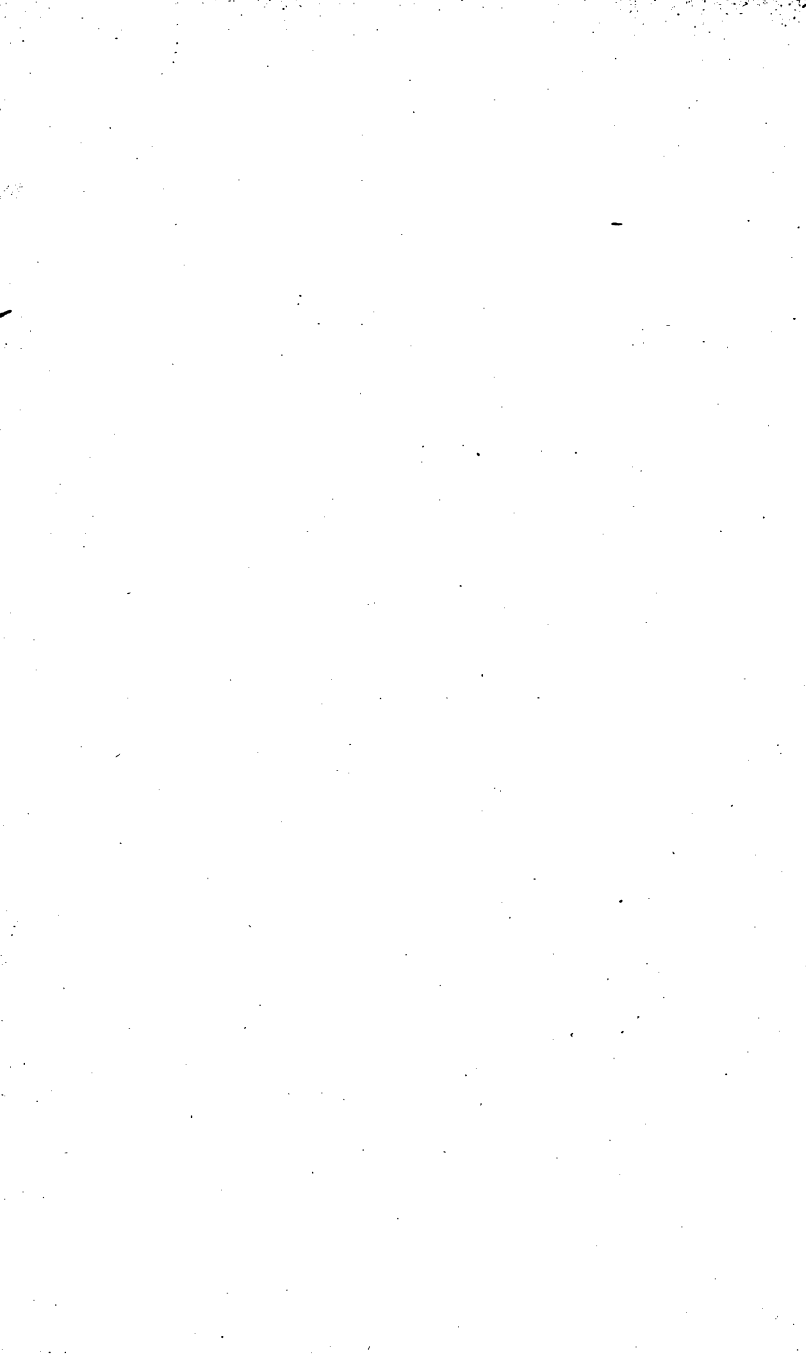
Turning to that Ispazar which he had spared for a necessary purpose, he seated himself firmly astride its back, behind the thick jointing of the vans. He spoke a magic word that was understood by the monster. Bearing him between its wings, it rose and flew obediently through one of the high windows; and, leaving behind it for ever the citadel that was not to be scaled by man, nor by any wingless creature, it carried the magician over the red horns of the sable mountains, across the valley where dwelt the sisterhood of floral vampires, and descended on the mossy knoll at the end of that

silver drawbridge whereby he had entered Votalp. There Maal Dweb dismounted; and, followed by the crawling Ispazar, he began his return journey to Xiccarph through the hueless cloud, above the multidimensional deeps.

Midway in that peculiar transit, he heard a sharp, sudden clapping of wings. It ceased with remarkable abruptness, and was not repeated. Looking back, he found that the Ispazar had fallen from the bridge, and was vanishing brokenly amid irreconcilable angles, in the gulf from which there was no return.



Aihai



It seems likely to me that the two Xiccarph stories represent an aborted story cycle; if so, the Aihai tales which follow next came to much the same fate.

Smith wrote only three tales about Aihai (his name for Mars) proper, although another tale, "The Planet-Entity," is concerned with the same world, but has no connection with the stories which follow.

As best I can, from a study of internal textual evidence, I have arranged the three Aihaiian tales in some sort of logical order. "Vulthoom," which follows as the first, is one of Smith's best and most famous stories. His notes record that he wrote the tale on February 14, 1933, or perhaps completed it on that date. It was the eighty-second story he finished, and it appeared in *Weird Tales* three years later.

"The Dweller in the Gulf" was written a trifle earlier, and seems to have been rejected by Farnsworth Wright; anyway, it was published in *Wonder Stories* in 1933.

"The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis," one of Smith's most celebrated tales, was completed on August 12, 1931, and was revised a month later. *Weird Tales* printed it in early 1932, and it has been reprinted two or three times since then.

I can give you no reason why Smith abandoned this very promising story cycle, but perhaps it may simply be that his magazine markets preferred him to write in other veins than that of Martian fantasy. If so, they were very wrong, for here follow three of the most perfect and unique tales that ever came from his pen.

Vulthoom

To a cursory observer, it might have seemed that Bob Haines and Paul Septimus Chanler had little enough in common, other than the predicament of being stranded without funds on an alien world.

Haines, the third assistant pilot of an ether-liner, had been charged with insubordination by his superiors, and had been left behind in Ignarh, the commercial metropolis of Mars, and the port of all space-traffic. The charge against him was wholly a matter of personal spite; but so far, Haines had not succeeded in finding a new berth; and the month's salary paid to him at parting had been devoured with appalling swiftness by the piratic rates of the *Tellurian Hotel*.

Chanler, a professional writer of interplanetary fiction, had made a voyage to Mars to fortify his imaginative talent by a solid groundwork of observation and experience. His money had given out after a few weeks; and fresh supplies, expected from his publisher, had not yet arrived.

The two men, apart from their misfortunes, shared an illimitable curiosity concerning all things Martian. Their thirst for the exotic, their proclivity for wandering into places usually avoided by terrestrials, had drawn

them together in spite of obvious differences of temperament, and had made them fast friends.

Trying to forget their worries, they had spent the past day in the queerly piled and huddled maze of old Ignarh, called by the Martians Ignar-Vath, on the eastern side of the great Yahan Canal. Returning at the sunset hour, and following the estrade of purple marble beside the water, they had nearly reached the mile-long bridge that would take them back to the modern city, Ignar-Luth, in which were the terrestrial consulates and shipping-offices and hotels.

It was the Martian hour of worship, when the Aihais gather in their roofless temples to implore the return of the passing sun. Like the throbbing of feverish metal pulses, a sound of ceaseless and innumerable gongs punctured the thin air. The incredibly crooked streets were almost empty; and only a few barges, with immense rhomboidal sails of mauve and scarlet, crawled to and fro on the somber green waters.

The light waned with visible swiftness behind the top-heavy towers and pagoda-angled pyramids of Ignar-Luth. The chill of the coming night began to pervade the shadows of the huge solar gnomons that lined the canal at frequent intervals. The querulous clangors of the gongs died suddenly in Ignar-Vath, and left a weirdly whispering silence. The buildings of the immemorial city bulked enormous upon a sky of blackish emerald that was already thronged with icy stars.

A medley of untraceable exotic odors was wafted through the twilight. The perfume was redolent of alien mystery, and it thrilled and troubled the Earthmen, who became silent as they approached the bridge, feeling

the oppression of eery strangeness that gathered from all sides in the thickening gloom. More deeply than in daylight, they apprehended the muffled breathings and hidden, tortuous movements of a life forever inscrutable to the children of other planets. The void between Earth and Mars had been traversed; but who could cross the evolutionary gulf between Earthman and Martian?

The people were friendly enough in their taciturn way: they had tolerated the intrusion of terrestrials, had permitted commerce between the worlds. Their languages had been mastered, their history studied, by terrene savants. But it seemed that there could be no real interchange of ideas. Their civilization had grown old in diverse complexity before the foundering of Lemuria; its sciences, arts, religions, were hoary with inconceivable age; and even the simplest customs were the fruit of alien forces and conditions.

At that moment, faced with the precariousness of their situation, Haines and Chanler felt an actual terror of the unknown world that surrounded them with its measureless antiquity.

They quickened their paces. The wide pavement that bordered the canal was seemingly deserted; and the light, railless bridge itself was guarded only by the ten colossal statues of Martian heroes that loomed in warlike attitudes before the beginning of the first aerial span.

The Earthmen were somewhat startled when a living figure, little less gigantic than the carven images, detached itself from their deepening shadows and came forward with mighty strides.

The figure, nearly ten feet in height, was taller by a full yard than the average Aihai, but presented the familiar conformation of massively bulging chest and bony, many-angled limbs. The head was featured with high-flaring ears and pit-like nostrils that narrowed and expanded visibly in the twilight. The eyes were sunken in profound orbits, and were wholly invisible, save for tiny reddish sparks that appeared to burn suspended in the sockets of a skull. According to native customs, this bizarre personage was altogether nude; but a kind of circlet around the neck—a flat wire of curiously beaten silver—indicated that he was the servant of some noble lord.

Haines and Chanler were astounded, for they had never before seen a Martian of such prodigious stature. The apparition, it was plain, desired to intercept them. He paused before them on the pavement of blockless marble. They were even more amazed by the weirdly booming voice, reverberant as that of some enormous frog, with which he began to address them. In spite of the interminably guttural tones, the heavy slurring of certain vowels and consonants, they realized that the words were those of human language.

"My master summons you," bellowed the colossus. "Your plight is known to him. He will help you liberally, in return for a certain assistance which you can render him. Come with me."

"This sounds peremptory," murmured Haines. "Shall we go? Probably it's some charitable Aihai prince, who has gotten wind of our reduced circumstances. Wonder what the game is?"

"I suggest that we follow the guide," said Chanler,

eagerly. "His proposition sounds like the first chapter of a thriller."

"All right," said Haines, to the towering giant. "Lead us to your master."

With strides that were moderated to match those of the Earthmen, the colossus led them away from the hero-guarded bridge and into the greenish-purple gloom that had inundated Ignar-Vath. Beyond the pavement, an alley yawned like a high-mouthed cavern between lightless mansions and warehouses whose broad balconies and jutting roofs were almost conterminous in midair. The alley was deserted; and the Aihai moved like an overgrown shadow through the dusk and paused shadow-like in a deep and lofty doorway. Halting at his heels, Chanler and Haines were aware of a shrill metallic stridor, made by the opening of the door, which, like all Martian doors, was drawn upward in the manner of a mediaeval portcullis. Their guide was silhouetted on the saffron light that poured from bosses of radio-active mineral set in the walls and roof of a circular antechamber. He preceded them, according to custom; and following, they saw that the room was unoccupied. The door descended behind them without apparent agency or manipulation.

To Chanler, gazing about the windowless chamber, there came the indefinable alarm that is sometimes felt in a closed space. Under the circumstances, there seemed to be no reason to apprehend danger or treachery; but all at once he was filled with a wild longing to escape.

Haines, on his part, was wondering rather perplexedly why the inner door was closed and why the master of the house had not already appeared to receive them.

Somehow, the house impressed him as being uninhabited; there was something empty and desolate in the silence that surrounded them.

The Aihai, standing in the center of the bare, unfurnished room, had faced about as if to address the Earthmen. His eyes glowered inscrutably from their deep orbits; his mouth opened, showing double rows of snaggy teeth. But no sound appeared to issue from his moving lips; and the notes that he emitted must have belonged to that scale of overtones, beyond human audition, of which the Martian voice is capable. No doubt the mechanism of the door had been actuated by similar overtones; and now, as if in response, the entire floor of the chamber, wrought of dark, seamless metal, began to descend slowly, as if dropping into a great pit. Haines and Chanler, startled, saw the saffron lights receding above them. They, together with the giant, were going down into shadow and darkness, in a broad circular shaft. There was a ceaseless grating and shrieking of metal, setting their teeth on edge with its insupportable pitch.

Like a narrowing cluster of yellow stars, the lights grew dim and small above them. Still their descent continued; and they could no longer discern each other's faces, or the face of the Aihai, in the ebon blackness through which they fell. Haines and Chanler were beset with a thousand doubts and suspicions, and they began to wonder if they had been somewhat rash in accepting the Aihai's invitation.

"Where are you taking us?" said Haines bluntly. "Does your master live underground?"

"We go to my master," replied the Martian with cryptic finality. "He awaits you."

The cluster of lights had become a single star, had dwindled and faded as if in the night of infinity. There was a sense of irredeemable depth, as if they had gone down to the very core of that alien world. The strangeness of their situation filled the Earthmen with increasing disquiet. They had committed themselves to a clueless mystery that began to savor of menace and peril. Nothing was to be learned from their conductor. No retreat was possible—and they were both weaponless.

The strident shrieking of metal slowed and sank to a sullen whine. The Earthmen were dazzled by the ruddy brilliance that broke upon them through a circle of slender pillars that had replaced the walls of the shaft. An instant more, while they went down through the flooding light, and then the floor beneath them became stationary. They saw that it was now part of the floor of a great cavern lit by crimson hemispheres embedded in the roof. The cavern was circular, with passages that ramified from it in every direction, like the spokes of a wheel from the hub. Many Martians, no less gigantic than the guide, were passing swiftly to and fro, as if intent on enigmatic errands. The strange, muted clangors and thunder-like rumblings of hidden machinery throbbed in the air, vibrated in the shaken floor.

"What do you suppose we've gotten into?" murmured Chanler. "We must be many miles below the surface. I've never heard of anything like this, except in some of the old Aihai myths. This place might be Ravormos, the Martian underworld, where Vulthoom, the

evil god, is supposed to lie asleep for a thousand years amid his worshippers."

The guide had overheard him. "You have come to Ravormos," he boomed portentously. "Vulthoom is awake, and will not sleep again for another thousand years. It is he that has summoned you; and I take you now to the chamber of audience."

Haines and Chanler, dumbfounded beyond measure, followed the Martian from the strange elevator toward one of the ramifying passages.

"There must be some sort of foolery on foot," muttered Haines. "I've heard of Vulthoom, too, but he's a mere superstition, like Satan. The up-to-date Martians don't believe in him nowadays; though I have heard that there is still a sort of devil-cult among the pariahs and low-castes. I'll wager that some noble is trying to stage a revolution against the reigning emperor, Cykor, and has established his quarters underground."

"That sounds reasonable," Chanler agreed. "A revolutionist might call himself Vulthoom: the trick would be true to the Aihai psychology. They have a taste for high-sounding metaphors and fantastic titles."

Both became silent, feeling a sort of awe before the vastness of the cavern-world whose litten corridors reached away on every hand. The surmises they had voiced began to appear inadequate: the improbable was verified, the fabulous had become the factual, and was engulfing them more and more. The far, mysterious clangors, it seemed, were of preternormal origin; the hurrying giants who passed athwart the chamber with unknown burdens conveyed a sense of supernatural activity and enterprise. Haines and Chanler were both

tall and stalwart, but the Martians about them were all nine or ten feet in height. Some were closer to eleven feet, and all were muscled in proportion. Their faces bore a look of immense, mummy-like age, incongruous with their agility and vigor.

Haines and Chanler were led along a corridor from whose arched roof the red hemispheres, doubtless formed of artificially radio-active metal, glared down at intervals like imprisoned suns. Leaping from step to step, they descended a flight of giant stairs, with the Martian striding easily before them. He paused at the open portals of a chamber hewn in the dark and basic adamantine stone.

"Enter," he said, and withdrew his bulk to let them pass.

The chamber was small but lofty, its roof rising like the interior of a spire. Its floor and walls were stained by the bloody violet beams of a single hemisphere far up in the narrowing dome. The place was vacant, and furnished only with a curious tripod of black metal, fixed in the center of the floor. The tripod bore an oval block of crystal, and from this block, as if from a frozen pool, a frozen flower lifted, opening petals of smooth, heavy ivory that received a rosy tinge from the strange light. Block, flower, tripod, it seemed, were the parts of a piece of sculpture.

Crossing the threshold, the Earthmen became instantly aware that the throbbing thunders and cave-reverberant clangors had ebbed away in profound silence. It was as if they had entered a sanctuary from which all sound was excluded by a mystic barrier. The portals remained open behind them. Their guide, appar-

ently, had withdrawn. But, somehow, they felt that they were not alone, and it seemed that hidden eyes were peering upon them from the blank walls.

Perturbed and puzzled, they stared at the pale flower, noting the seven tongue-like petals that curled softly outward from a perforated heart like a small censer. Chanler began to wonder if it were really a carving, or an actual flower that had been mineralized through Martian chemistry. Then, startlingly, a voice appeared to issue from the blossom: a voice incredibly sweet, clear and sonorous, whose tones, perfectly articulate, were neither those of Aihai nor Earthman.

"I, who speak, am the entity known as Vulthoom," said the voice. "Be not surprised, or frightened: it is my desire to befriend you in return for a consideration which, I hope, you will not find impossible. First of all, however, I must explain certain matters that perplex you.

"No doubt you have heard the popular legends concerning me, and have dismissed them as mere superstitions. Like all myths, they are partly true and partly false. I am neither god nor demon, but a being who came to Mars from another universe in former cycles. Though I am not immortal, my span of life is far longer than that of any creature evolved by the worlds of your solar system. I am governed by alien biologic laws, with periods of alternate slumber and wakefulness that involve centuries. It is virtually true, as the Aihais believe, that I sleep for a thousand years and remain conscious continually for another thousand.

"At a time when your ancestors were still the blood-brothers of the ape, I fled from my own world to this

intercosmic exile, banished by implacable foes. The Martians say that I fell from heaven like a fiery meteor; and the myth interprets the descent of my ether-ship. I found a matured civilization, immensely inferior, however, to that from which I came.

"The kings and hierarchs of the planet would have driven me away; but I gathered a few adherents, arming them with weapons superior to those of Martian science; and after a great war, I established myself firmly and gained other followers. I did not care to conquer Mars, but withdrew to this cavern-world in which I have dwelt ever since with my adherents. On these, for their faithfulness, I conferred a longevity that is almost equal to my own. To ensure this longevity, I have also given them the gift of a slumber corresponding to mine. They sleep and wake with me.

"We have maintained this order of existence for many ages. Seldom have I meddled in the doings of the surface-dwellers. They, however, have converted me into an evil god or spirit; though evil, to me, is a word without meaning.

"I am the possessor of many senses and faculties unknown to you or to the Martians. My perceptions, at will, can be extended over large areas of space, or even time. Thus I learned your predicament; and I have called you here with the hope of obtaining your consent to a certain plan. To be brief, I have grown weary of Mars, a senile world that draws near to death; and I wish to establish myself in a younger planet. The Earth would serve my purpose well. Even now, my followers are building the new ether-ship in which I propose to make the voyage.

"I do not wish to repeat the experience of my arrival in Mars by landing among a people ignorant of me and perhaps universally hostile. You, being Earthmen, could prepare many of your fellows for my coming, could gather proselytes to serve me. Your reward—and theirs—would be the elixir of longevity. And I have many other gifts . . . the precious gems and metals that you prize so highly. Also, there are the flowers, whose perfume is more seductive and persuasive than all else. Inhaling that perfume, you will deem that even gold is worthless in comparison . . . and having breathed it, you, and all others of your kind, will serve me gladly."

The voice ended, leaving a vibration that thrilled the nerves of the listeners for some moments. It was like the cessation of a sweet, bewitching music with overtones of evil scarcely to be detected above the subtle melody. It bemused the senses of Haines and Chanler, lulling their astonishment into a sort of dreamy acceptance of the voice and its declarations.

Chanler made an effort to throw off the enchantment.

"Where are you?" he said. "And how are we to know that you have told us the truth?"

"I am near you," said the voice, "but I do not choose, at this time, to reveal myself. The proof of all that I have stated, however, will be revealed to you in due course. Before you is one of the flowers of which I have spoken. It is not, as you have perhaps surmised, a work of sculpture, but it is an antholite, or fossil blossom, brought, with others of the same kind, from the world to which I am native. Though scentless at ordinary temperatures, it yields a perfume under the application of

heat. As to the perfume ... you must judge for yourselves."

The air of the chamber had been neither warm nor cold. Now, the Earthmen were conscious of a change, as if hidden fires had been ignited. The warmth seemed to issue from the metal tripod and the block of crystal, beating upon Haines and Chanler like the radiation of some invisible tropic sun. It became ardent but not insupportable. At the same time, insidiously, the terrestrials began to perceive the perfume, which was like nothing they had ever inhaled. An elusive thread of other-world sweetness, it curled about their nostrils, deepening slowly but acceleratively to a spicy flood, and seeming to mix a pleasant coolness as of foliage-shaded air with the fervent heat.

Chanler was more vividly affected than Haines by the curious hallucinations that followed; though, apart from this differing degree of verisimilitude, their impressions were oddly alike. It seemed to Chanler, all at once, that the perfume was no longer wholly alien to him, but was something that he had remembered from other times and places. He tried to recall the circumstances of this prior familiarity, and his recollections, drawn up as if from the sealed reservoirs of an old existence, took the form of an actual scene that replaced the cavern-chamber about him. Haines was no part of this scene, but had disappeared from his ken, and the roof and walls had vanished, giving place to an open forest of fern-like trees. Their slim, pearly boles and tender frondage swarmed in a luminous glory, like an Eden filled with the primal daybreak. The trees were tall, but taller still than they were the flowers that

poured down from waving censers of carnal white an overwhelming and voluptuous perfume.

Chanler felt an indescribable ecstasy. It seemed that he had gone back to the fountains of time in the first world, and had drawn into himself inexhaustible life, youth and vigor from the glorious light and fragrance that had steeped his senses to their last nerve.

The ecstasy heightened, and he heard a singing that appeared to emanate from the mouths of the blossoms: a singing as of houris, that turned his blood to a golden philtre-brew. In the delirium of his faculties, the sound was identified with the blossoms' odor. It rose in giddy-rapture insuppressible; and he thought that the very flowers soared like flames, and the trees aspired toward them, and he himself was a blown fire that towered with the singing to attain some ultimate pinnacle of delight. The whole world swept upward in a tide of exaltation, and it seemed that the singing turned to articulate sound, and Chanler heard the words, "I am Vulthoom, and thou art mine from the beginning of worlds, and shalt be mine until the end. . . ."

He awoke under circumstances that might almost have been a continuation of the visionary imagery he had beheld under the influence of the perfume. He lay on a bed of short, curling grass the color of verd-antique, with enormous tiger-hued blossoms leaning about him, and a soft brilliance as of amber sunset filling his eyes between the trailing boughs of strange, crimson-fruited trees. Tardily, as he grew cognizant of his surroundings, he realized that the voice of Haines had awakened him, and saw that Haines was sitting near at hand on the curious sward.

"Say, aren't you ever coming out of it?" Chanler heard the crisp query as if through a film of dreams. His thoughts were bewildered, and his memories were oddly mixed with the pseudo-recollections, drawn as if from other lives, that had risen before him in his delirium. It was hard to disentangle the false from the real; but sanity returned to him by degrees; and with it came a feeling of profound exhaustion and nerve-weariness, which warned him that he had sojourned in the spurious paradise of a potent drug.

"Where are we now? and how did we get here?" he asked.

"As far as I can tell," returned Haines, "we're in a sort of underground garden. Some of those big Aihais must have brought us here after we succumbed to the perfume. I resisted the influence longer than you did; and I remember hearing the voice of Vulthoom as I went under. The voice said that he would give us forty-eight hours, terrestrial time, in which to think over his proposition. If we accept, he'll send us back to Ignarh with a fabulous sum of money—and a supply of those narcotic flowers."

Chanler was now fully awake. He and Haines proceeded to discuss their situation, but were unable to arrive at any definite conclusion. The whole affair was no less baffling than extraordinary. An unknown entity, naming himself after the Martian Devil, had invited them to become his terrestrial agents or emissaries. Apart from the spreading of a propaganda designed to facilitate his advent on Earth, they were to introduce an alien drug that was no less powerful than morphine,

cocain, or marihuana—and, in all likelihood, no less pernicious.

"What if we refuse?" said Chanler.

"Vulthoom said that it would be impossible to let us return, in that case. But he didn't specify our fate—merely hinted that it would be unpleasant."

"Well, Haines, we've got to think our way out of this, if we can."

"I'm afraid that thinking won't help us much. We must be many miles below the surface of Mars—and the mechanism of the elevators, in all probability, is something that no Earthman could ever learn."

Before Chanler could offer any comment, one of the giant Aihais appeared among the trees, carrying two of the curious Martian utensils known as *kulpai*. These were large platters of semi-metallic earthenware, fitted with removable cups and rotatory carafes, in which an entire meal of liquids and solids could be served. The Aihai set the platters on the ground before Haines and Chanler, and then waited, immobile and inscrutable. The Earthmen, conscious of a ravening hunger, addressed themselves to the foodstuffs, which had been molded or cut into various geometric forms. Though possibly of synthetic origin, the foods were delicious, and the Earthmen consumed them to the last cone and lozenge, and washed them down with a vinous garnet-colored liquor from the carafes.

When they had finished, their attendant spoke for the first time.

"It is the will of Vulthoom that you should wander throughout Ravormos and behold the wonders of the caverns. You are at liberty to roam alone and unattend-

ed; or, if you prefer, I shall serve you as a guide. My name is Ta-Vho-Shai, and I am ready to answer any questions that you ask. Also, you may dismiss me at will."

Haines and Chanler, after a brief discussion, decided to accept this offer of ciceronage. They followed the Aihai through the garden, whose extent was hard to determine because of the misty amber luminance that filled it as if with radiant atoms, giving the impression of unbounded space. The light, they learned from Ta-Vho-Shai, was emitted by the lofty roof and walls beneath the action of an electro-magnet force of wavelength shorter even than the cosmic rays; and it possessed all the essential qualities of sunlight.

The garden was composed of weird plants and blossoms, many of which were exotic to Mars, and had perhaps been imported from the alien solar system to which Vulthoom was native. Some of the flowers were enormous mats of petals, like a hundred orchids joined into one. There were cruciform trees, hung with fantastically long and variegated leaves that resembled heraldic pennons or scrolls of cryptic writing; and others were branched and fruited in outlandish ways.

Beyond the garden, they entered a world of open passages and chambered caverns, some of which were filled with machinery or with storage-vats and urns. In others, immense ingots of precious and semi-precious metals were piled, and gigantic coffers spilled their flashing gems as if to tempt the Earthmen.

Most of the machines were in action, though untended, and Haines and Chanler were told that they could run in this manner for centuries or millenaries. Their

operation was inexplicable even to Haines with his expert knowledge of mechanics. Vulthoom and his people had gone beyond the spectrum, and beyond the audible vibrations of sound, and had compelled the hidden forces of the universe to appear and obey them.

Everywhere there was a loud beating as of metal pulses, a mutter as of prisoned Afrits and servile iron titans. Valves opened and shut with a harsh clangor. There were rooms pillared with strident dynamos; and others where groups of mysteriously levitated spheres were spinning silently, like suns and planets in the void of space.

They climbed a flight of stairs, colossal as the steps of the pyramid of Cheops, to a higher level. Haines, in a dream-like fashion, seemed to remember descending these stairs, and thought they were now nearing the chamber in which he and Chanler had been interviewed by the hidden entity, Vulthoom. He was not sure, however; and Ta-Vho-Shai led them through a series of vast rooms that appeared to serve the purpose of laboratories. In most of these, there were age-old colossi, bending like alchemists over furnaces that burned with cold fire, and retorts that fumed with queer threads and ropes of vapor. One room was untenanted, and was furnished with no apparatus, other than three great bottles of clear, uncolored glass, taller than a tall man, and having somewhat the form of Roman amphoras. To all appearances the bottles were empty; but they were closed with double-handed stoppers that a human being could scarcely have lifted.

"What are these bottles?" Chanler asked the guide.

"They are the Bottles of Sleep," said the Aihai, with

the solemn and sententious air of a lecturer. "Each of them is filled with a rare, invisible gas. When the time comes for the thousand-year slumber of Vulthoom, the gases are released; and mingling, they pervade the atmosphere of Ravormos, even to the lowest cavern, inducing sleep for a similar period in us who serve Vulthoom. Time no longer exists; and eons are no more than instants for the sleepers; and they awaken only at the hour of Vulthoom's awakening."

Haines and Chanler, filled with curiosity, were prompted to ask many questions, but most of these were answered vaguely and ambiguously by Ta-Vho-Shai, who seemed eager to continue his ciceronage through other and ulterior parts of Ravormos. He could tell them nothing about the chemical nature of the gases; and Vulthoom himself, if the veracity of Ta-Vho-Shai could be trusted, was a mystery even to his own followers, most of whom had never beheld him in person.

Ta-Vho-Shai conducted the Earthmen from the room of bottles, and down a long straight cavern, wholly deserted, where a rumbling and pounding as of innumerable engines came to meet them. The sound broke upon them like a Niagara of evil thunders when they emerged finally in a sort of pillared gallery that surrounded a mile-wide gulf illumined by the terrible flaring of tongued fires that rose incessantly from its depths.

It was as if they looked down into some infernal circle of angry light and tortured shadow. Far beneath, they saw a colossal structure of curved and glittering girders, like the strangely articulated bones of a metal behemoth outstretched along the bottom of the pit.

Around it, furnaces belched like the flaming mouths of dragons; tremendous cranes went up and down perpetually with a motion as of long-necked plesiosaurs; and the figure of giants, red as laboring demons, moved through the sinister glare.

"They build the ether-ship in which Vulthoom will voyage to the Earth," said Ta-Vho-Shai. "When all is ready, the ship will blast its way to the surface by means of atomic disintegrators. The very stone will melt before it like vapor. Ignar-Luth, which lies directly above, will be consumed as if the central fires of the planet had broken loose."

Haines and Chanler, appalled, could offer no rejoinder. More and more they were stunned by the mystery and magnitude, the terror and menace, of this unsuspected cavern-world. Here, they felt, a malign power, armed with untold arcana of science, was plotting some baleful conquest; a doom that might involve the peopled worlds of the system was being incubated in secrecy and darkness. They, it seemed, were helpless to escape and give warning, and their own fate was shadowed by insoluble gloom.

A gust of hot, metallic vapor, mounting from the abyss, burned corrosively in their nostrils as they peered from the gallery's verge. Ill and giddy, they drew back.

"What lies beyond this gulf?" Chanler inquired, when his sickness had passed.

"The gallery leads to outer caverns, little used, which conduct on the dry bed of an ancient underground river. This river-bed, running for many miles, emerges in a sunken desert far below sea-level, and lying to the west of Ignarh."

The Earthmen started at this information, which seemed to offer them a possible avenue of escape. Both, however, thought it well to dissemble their interest. Pretending fatigue, they asked the Aihai to lead them to some chamber in which they could rest awhile and discuss Vulthoom's proposition at leisure.

Ta-Vho-Shai, professing himself at their service in all ways, took them to a small room beyond the laboratories. It was a sort of bed-chamber, with two tiers of couches along the walls. These couches, from their length, were evidently designed to accommodate the giant Martians. Here Haines and Chanler were left alone by Ta-Vho-Shai, who had tacitly inferred that his presence was no longer needed.

"Well," said Chanler, "it looks as if there were a chance of escape if we can only reach that river-bed. I took careful note of the corridors we followed on our return from the gallery. It should be easy enough—unless we are being watched without our knowledge."

"The only trouble is, it's too easy.... But anyway, we can try. Anything would be better than waiting around like this. After what we've seen and heard, I'm beginning to believe that Vulthoom really is the Devil—even though he doesn't claim to be."

"Those ten-foot Aihais give me the creeps," said Chanler. "I can readily believe they are a million years old, or thereabouts. Enormous longevity would account for their size and stature. Most animals that survive beyond the normal term of years become gigantic; and it stands to reason that these Martian men would develop in a similar fashion."

It was a simple matter to retrace their route to the

pillared gallery that encircled the great abyss. For most of the distance, they had only to follow a main corridor; and the sound of the rumbling engineering alone would have guided them. They met no one in the passages; and the Aihais that they saw through open portals in laboratory rooms were deeply intent on enigmatic chemistries.

"I don't like this," muttered Haines. "It's too good to be true."

"I'm not so sure of that. Perhaps it simply hasn't occurred to Vulthoom and his followers that we might try to escape. After all, we know nothing about their psychology."

Keeping close to the inner wall, behind the thick pillars, they followed the long, slowly winding gallery on the right hand. It was lit only by the shuddering reflection of the tall flames in the pit below. Moving thus, they were hidden from the view of the laboring giants, if any of these had happened to look upward. Poisonous vapors were blown toward them at intervals, and they felt the hellish heat of the furnaces; and the clangors of welding, the thunder of obscure machineries, beat upon them as they went with reverberations that were like hammer-blows.

By degrees they rounded the gulf, and came at last to its further side, where the gallery curved backward in its return toward the entrance corridor. Here, in the shadows, they discerned the unlit mouth of a large cavern that radiated from the gallery.

This cavern, they surmised, would lead them toward the sunken river-bed of which Ta-Vho-Shai had spoken. Haines, luckily, carried a small pocket-flash, and he

turned its ray into the cavern, revealing a straight corridor with numerous minor intersections. Night and silence seemed to swallow them at a gulp, and the clangors of the toiling Titans were quickly and mysteriously muted as they hurried along the empty hall.

The roof of the corridor was fitted with metal hemispheres, now dark and rayless, that had formerly served to illuminate it in the same fashion as the other halls of Ravormos. A fine dust was stirred by the feet of the Earthmen as they fled; and soon the air grew chill and thin, losing the mild and somewhat humid warmth of the central caverns. It was plain, as Ta-Vho-Shai had told them, that these outer passages were seldom used or visited.

It seemed that they went on for a mile or more in that Tartarean corridor. Then the walls began to straiten, the floor roughened and fell steeply. There were no more cross-passages, and hope quickened in the Earthmen as they saw plainly that they had gone beyond the artificial caverns into a natural tunnel. The tunnel soon widened, and its floor became a series of shelf-formations. By means of these, they descended into a profound abyss that was obviously the river-channel of which Ta-Vho-Shai had told them.

The small flashlight barely sufficed to reveal the full extent of this underground waterway, in which there was no longer even a trickle of its pre-historic flood. The bottom, deeply eroded, and riddled with sharp boulders, was more than a hundred yards wide; and the roof arched into gloom irresoluble. Exploring the bottom tentatively for a little distance, Haines and Chanler determined by its gradual falling the direction in which

the stream had flowed. Following this downward course, they set out resolutely, praying that they would find no impassable barriers, no precipices of former cataracts to impede or prevent their egress in the desert. Apart from the danger of pursuit, they apprehended no other difficulties than these.

The obscure windings of the bottom brought them first to one side and then to the other as they groped along. In places the cavern widened, and they came to far-recessive beaches, terraced, and marked by the ebbing waters. High up on some of the beaches, there were singular formations resembling a type of mammoth fungi grown in caverns beneath the modern canals. These formations, in the shape of Herculean clubs, arose often to a height of three feet or more. Haines, impressed by their metallic sparkling beneath the light as he flashed it upon them, conceived a curious idea. Though Chanler protested against the delay, he climbed the shelving to examine a group of them more closely, and found, as he had suspected, that they were not living growths, but were petrified and heavily impregnated with minerals. He tried to break one of them loose, but it resisted all his tuggings. However, by hammering it with a loose fragment of stone, he succeeded in fracturing the base of the club, and it toppled over with an iron tinkling. The thing was very heavy, with a mace-like swelling at the upper end, and would make a substantial weapon in case of need. He broke off a second club for Chanler; and thus armed, they resumed their flight.

It was impossible to calculate the distance that they covered. The channel turned and twisted, it pitched

abruptly in places, and was often broken into ledges that glittered with alien ores or were stained with weirdly brilliant oxides of azure, vermilion and yellow. The men floundered ankle-deep in pits of sable sand, or climbed laboriously over dam-like barricades of rusty boulders, huge as piled menhirs. Ever and anon, they found themselves listening feverishly for any sound that would betoken pursuit. But silence brimmed the Cimmerian channel, troubled only by the clatter and crunch of their own footsteps.

At last, with incredulous eyes, they saw before them the dawning of a pale light in the further depths. Arch by dismal arch, like the throat of *Avernus* lit by nether fires, the enormous cavern became visible. For one exultant moment, they thought that they were nearing the channel mouth; but the light grew with an eery and startling brilliance, like the flaming of furnaces rather than sunshine falling into a cave. Implacable, it crept along the walls and bottom and dimmed the ineffectual beam of *Haines'* torch as it fell on the dazzled Earthmen.

Ominous, incomprehensible, the light seemed to watch and threaten. They stood amazed and hesitant, not knowing whether to go on or retreat. Then, from the flaming air, a voice spoke as if in gentle reproof: the sweet, sonorous voice of *Vulthoom*.

"Go back as you came, O Earthlings. None may leave *Ravormos* without my knowledge or against my will. Behold! I have sent my Guardians to escort you."

The lit air had been empty to all seeming, and the river-bed was peopled only by the grotesque masses and squat shadows of boulders. Now, with the ceasing of

the voice, Haines and Chanler saw before them, at a distance of ten feet, the instant apparition of two creatures that were comparable to nothing in the whole known zoology of Mars or Earth.

They rose from the rocky bottom to the height of giraffes, with shortish legs that were vaguely similar to those of Chinese dragons, and elongated spiral necks like the middle coils of great anacondas. Their heads were triple-faced, and they might have been the trimurti of some infernal world. It seemed that each face was eyeless, with tongue-shapen flames issuing voluminously from deep orbits beneath the slanted brows. Flames also poured in a ceaseless vomit from the gaping gargoyle mouths. From the head of each monster a triple comb of vermilion flared aloft in sharp serrations, glowing terribly; and both of them were bearded with crimson scrolls. Their necks and arching spines were fringed with sword-long blades that diminished into rows of daggers on the tapering tails; and their whole bodies, as well as this fearsome armament, appeared to burn as if they had just issued from a fiery furnace.

A palpable heat emanated from these hellish chimeras, and the Earthmen retreated hastily before the flying splotches, like the blown tatters of a conflagration, that broke loose from their ever-jetting eye-flames and mouth-flames.

"My God! These monsters are supernatural!" cried Chanler, shaken and appalled.

Haines, though palpably startled, was inclined to a more orthodox explanation. "There must be some sort of television behind this," he maintained, "though I can't imagine how it's possible to project three-

dimensional images, and also create the sensation of heat. . . . I had an idea, somehow, that our escape was being watched."

He picked up a heavy fragment of metallic stone and heaved it at one of the glowing chimeras. Aimed unerringly, the fragment struck the frontal brow of the monster, and seemed to explode in a shower of sparks at the moment of impact. The creature flared and swelled prodigiously, and a fiery hissing became audible. Haines and Chanler were driven back by a wave of scorching heat; and their wardens followed them pace by pace on the rough bottom. Abandoning all hope of escape, they returned toward Ravormos, dogged by the monsters as they toiled through yielding sand and over the ledges and riffles.

Reaching the point where they had descended into the river-channel, they found its upper stretches guarded by two more of these terrific dragons. There was no other recourse than to climb the lofty shelves into the acclivitous tunnel. Weary with their long flight, and enervated by a dull despair, they found themselves again in the outer hall, with two of their guardians now preceding them like an escort of infernal honor. Both were stunned by a realization of the awful and mysterious powers of Vulthoom; and even Haines had become silent, though his brain was still busy with a futile and desperate probing. Chanler, more sensitive, suffered all the chills and terrors that his literary imagination could inflict upon him under the circumstances.

They came at length to the columned gallery that circled the vast abyss. Midway in this gallery, the chimeras who preceded the Earthmen turned upon them

suddenly with a fearsome belching of flames; and, as they paused in their intimidation, the two behind continued to advance toward them with a hissing as of Satanic salamanders. In that narrowing space, the heat was like a furnace-blast, and the columns afforded no shelter. From the gulf below, where the Martian titans toiled perpetually, a stupefying thunder rose to assail them at the same time; and noxious fumes were blown toward them in writhing coils.

"Looks as if they are going to drive us into the gulf," Haines panted, as he sought to draw breath in the fiery air. He and Chanler reeled before the looming monsters, and even as he spoke, two more of these hellish apparitions flamed into being at the gallery's verge, as if they had risen from the gulf to render impossible that fatal plunge which alone could have offered an escape from the others.

Half swooning, the Earthmen were dimly aware of a change in the menacing chimeras. The flaming bodies dulled and shrank and darkened, the heat lessened, the fires died down in the mouths and eye-pits. At the same time, the creatures drew closer, fawning loathsomely, and revealing whitish tongues and eyeballs of jet.

The tongues seemed to divide . . . they grew paler . . . they were like flower-petals that Haines and Chanler had seen somewhere. The breath of the chimeras, like a soft gale, was upon the faces of the Earthmen . . . and the breath was a cool and spicy perfume that they had known before . . . the narcotic perfume that had overcome them following their audience with the hidden master of Ravormos. . . . Moment by moment, the monsters turned to prodigious blossoms; the pillars of the

gallery became gigantic trees in a glamor of primal dawn; the thunders of the pit were lulled to a far-off sighing as of gentle seas on Edenic shores. The teeming terrors of Ravormos, the threat of a shadowy doom, were as things that had never been. Haines and Chanler, oblivious, were lost in the paradise of the unknown drug. . . .

Haines, awakening darkly, found that he lay on the stone floor in the circling colonnade. He was alone, and the fiery chimeras had vanished. The shadows of his opiate swoon were roughly dissipated by the clangors that still mounted from the neighboring gulf. With growing consternation and horror, he recalled everything that had happened.

He arose giddily to his feet, peering about in the semi-twilight of the gallery for some trace of his companion. The petrified fungus-club that Chanler had carried, as well as his own weapon, were lying where they had fallen from the fingers of the overpowered men. But Chanler was gone; and Haines shouted aloud with no other response than the eerily prolonged echoes of the deep arcade.

Impelled by an urgent feeling that he must find Chanler without delay, he recovered his heavy mace and started along the gallery. It seemed that the weapon could be of little use against the preternatural servants of Vulthoom; but somehow, the metallic weight of the bludgeon reassured him.

Nearing the great corridor that ran to the core of Ravormos, Haines was overjoyed when he saw Chanler coming to meet him. Before he could call out a cheery greeting, he heard Chanler's voice:

"Hello, Bob, this is my first televisual appearance in tridimensional form. Pretty good, isn't it? I'm in the private laboratory of Vulthoom, and Vulthoom has persuaded me to accept his proposition. As soon as you've made up your mind to do likewise, we'll return to Ignarh with full instructions regarding our terrestrial mission, and funds amounting to a million dollars each. Think it over, and you'll see that there's nothing else to do. When you've decided to join us, follow the main corridor through Ravormos, and Ta-Vho-Shai will meet you and bring you into the laboratory."

At the conclusion of this astounding speech, the figure of Chanler, without seeming to wait for any reply from Haines, stepped lightly to the gallery's verge and floated out among the wreathing vapors. There, smiling upon Haines, it vanished like a phantom.

To say that Haines was thunderstruck would be putting it feebly indeed. In all verisimilitude, the figure and voice had been those of the flesh-and-blood Chanler. He felt an eery chill before the thaumaturgy of Vulthoom, which could bring about a projection so veridical as to deceive him in this manner. He was shocked and horrified beyond measure by Chanler's capitulation; but somehow, it did not occur to him that any imposture had been practiced.

"That devil has gotten him," thought Haines. "But I'd never have believed it. I didn't think he was that kind of a fellow at all."

Sorrow, anger, bafflement and amazement filled him alternately as he strode along the gallery; nor, as he entered the inner hall, was he able to decide on any clearly effective course of action. To yield, as Chanler

had avowedly done, was unthinkably repugnant to him. If he could see Chanler again, perhaps he could persuade him to change his mind and resume an unflinching opposition to the alien entity. It was a degradation, and a treason to humankind, for any Earthman to lend himself to the more than doubtful schemes of Vulthoom. Apart from the projected invasion of Earth, and the spread of the strange, subtle narcotic, there was the ruthless destruction of Ignar-Luth that would occur when Vulthoom's ether-vessel should blast its way to the planet's surface. It was his duty, and Chanler's, to prevent all this if prevention were humanly possible. Somehow, they—or he alone if necessary—must stem the cavern-incubated menace. Bluntly honest himself, there was no thought of temporizing even for an instant.

Still carrying the mineraloid club, he strode on for several minutes, his brain preoccupied with the dire problem but powerless to arrive at any solution. Through a habit of observation more or less automatic with the veteran space-pilot, he peered through the doorways of the various rooms that he passed, where the cupels and retorts of a foreign chemistry were tended by age-old colossi. Then, without premeditation, he came to the deserted room in which were the three mighty receptacles that Ta-Vho-Shai had called the Bottles of Sleep. He remembered what the Aihai had said concerning their contents.

In a flash of desperate inspiration, Haines boldly entered the room, hoping that he was not under the surveillance of Vulthoom at the moment. There was no

time for reflection or other delay, if he were to execute the audacious plan that had occurred to him.

Taller than his head, with the swelling contours of great amphoras, and seemingly empty, the Bottles glimmered in the still light. Like the phantom of a bulbous giant, he saw his own distorted image in the upward-curving glass as he neared the foremost one.

There was but one thought, one resolution, in his mind. Whatever the cost, he must smash the Bottles, whose released gases would pervade Ravormos and plunge the followers of Vulthoom—if not Vulthoom himself—into a thousand-year term of slumber. He and Chanler, no doubt, would be doomed to share the slumber; and for them, unfortified by the secret elixir of immortality, there would be in all likelihood no awakening. But under the circumstances it was better so; and, by the sacrifice, a thousand years of grace would be accorded to the two planets. Now was his opportunity, and it seemed improbable that there would ever be another one.

He lifted the petrified fungus-mace, he swung it back in a swift arc, and struck with all his strength at the bellying glass. There was a gong-like clangor, sonorous and prolonged, and radiating cracks appeared from top to bottom of the huge receptacle. At the second blow, it broke inward with a shrill, appalling sound that was almost an articulate shriek, and Haines' face was fanned for an instant by a cool breath, gentle as a woman's sigh.

Holding his breath to avoid the inhalation of the gas, he turned to the next Bottle. It shattered at the first

stroke, and again he felt a soft sighing, that followed upon the cleavage.

A voice of thunder seemed to fill the room as he raised his weapon to assail the third Bottle: "Fool! you have doomed yourself and your fellow Earthman by this deed." The last words mingled with the crash of Haines' final stroke. A tomb-like silence followed, and the far-off, muted rumble of engineering seemed to ebb and recede before it. The Earthman stared for a moment at the riven Bottles, and then, dropping the useless remnant of his mace, which had been shattered into several fragments, he fled from the chamber.

Drawn by the noise of breakage, a number of Aihais had appeared in the hall. They were running about in an aimless, unconcerted manner, like mummies impelled by a failing galvanism. None of them tried to intercept the Earthman.

Whether the slumber induced by the gases would be slow or swift in its coming, Haines could not surmise. The air of the caverns was unchanged as far as he could tell: there was no odor, no perceptible effect on his breathing. But already, as he ran, he felt a slight drowsiness, and a thin veil appeared to weave itself on all his senses. It seemed that faint vapors were forming in the corridor, and there was a touch of insubstantiality in the very walls.

His flight was without definite goal or purpose. Like a dreamer in a dream, he felt little surprize when he found himself lifted from the floor and borne along through midair in an inexplicable levitation. It was as if he were caught in a rushing stream, or were carried in invisible clouds. The doors of a hundred secret rooms,

the mouths of a hundred mysterious halls, flew swiftly past him, and he saw in brief glimpses the colossi that lurched and nodded with the ever-spreading slumber as they went to and fro on strange errands. Then, dimly, he saw that he had entered the high-vaulted room that enshrined the fossil flower on its tripod of crystal and black metal. A door opened in the seamless stone of the further wall as he hurtled toward it. An instant more, while he seemed to fall downward through a nether chamber beyond, among prodigious masses of unnamable machines, upon a revolving disk that droned infernally; then he was deposited on his feet, with the whole chamber righting itself about him, and the disk towering before him. The disk had now ceased to revolve, but the air still throbbed with its hellish vibration. The place was like a mechanical nightmare, but amid its confusion of glittering coils and dynamos, Haines beheld the form of Chanler, lashed upright with metal cords to a rack-like frame. Near him, in a still and standing posture, was the giant Ta-Vho-Shai; and immediately in front of him, there reclined an incredible thing whose further portions and members wound away to an indefinite distance amid the machinery.

Somehow, the thing was like a gigantic plant, with innumerable roots, pale and swollen, that ramified from a bulbular bole. This bole, half hidden from view, was topped with a vermilion cup like a monstrous blossom; and from the cup there grew an elfin figure, pearly-hued, and formed with exquisite beauty and symmetry; a figure that turned its Lilliputian face toward Haines and spoke in the sounding voice of Vulthoom:

"You have conquered for the time, but I bear no rancor toward you. I blame my own carelessness."

To Haines, the voice was like a far-off thunder heard by one who is half asleep. With halting effort, lurching as if he were about to fall, he made his way toward Chanler. Wan and haggard, with a look that puzzled Haines dimly, Chanler gazed upon him from the metal frame without speaking.

"I . . . smashed the Bottles," Haines heard his own voice with a feeling of drowsy unreality. "It seemed the only thing to do . . . since you had gone over to Vulthoom."

"But I hadn't consented," Chanler replied slowly. "It was all a deception . . . to trick you into consenting. . . . And they were torturing me because I wouldn't give in." Chanler's voice trailed away, and it seemed that he could say no more. Subtly, the pain and haggardness began to fade from his features, as if erased by the gradual oncoming of slumber.

Haines, laboriously trying to comprehend through his own drowsiness, perceived an evil-looking instrument, like a many-pointed metal goad, which drooped from the fingers of Ta-Vho-Shai. From the arc of needle-like tips, there fell a ceaseless torrent of electric sparks. The bosom of Chanler's shirt had been torn open, and his skin was stippled with tiny blue-black marks from chin to diaphragm . . . marks that formed a diabolic pattern. Haines felt a vague, unreal horror.

Through the Lethe that closed upon his senses more and more, he became aware that Vulthoom had spoken; and after an interval, it seemed that he understood the meaning of the words. "All my methods of persuasion

have failed; but it matters little. I shall yield myself to slumber, though I could remain awake if I wished, defying the gases through my superior science and vital power. We shall all sleep soundly . . . and a thousand years are no more than a single night to my followers and me. For you, whose life-term is so brief, they will become—eternity. Soon I shall awaken and resume my plans of conquest . . . and you, who dared to interfere, will lie beside me then as a little dust . . . and the dust will be swept away.”

The voice ended, and it seemed that the elfin being began to nod in the monstrous vermilion cup. Haines and Chanler saw each other with growing, wavering dimness, as if through a gray mist that had risen between them. There was silence everywhere, as if the Tartarean engineering had fallen still, and the titans had ceased their labor. Chanler relaxed on the torture-frame, and his eyelids drooped. Haines tottered, fell, and lay motionless. Ta-Vho-Shai, still clutching his sinister instrument, reposed like a mummied giant. Slumber, like a silent sea, had filled the caverns of Ravormos.

The Dweller in the Gulf

Swelling and towering swiftly, like a genie loosed from one of Solomon's bottles, the cloud rose on the planet's rim. A rusty and colossal column, it strode above the dead plain, through a sky that was dark as the brine of desert seas that have ebbed to desert pools.

"Looks like a blithering sandstorm," commented Maspic.

"It can't very well be anything else," agreed Bellman rather curtly. "Any other kind of storm is unheard of in these regions. It's the sort of hell-twister that the Aihais call the *zoorth*—and it's coming our way, too. I move that we start looking for shelter. I've been caught in the *zoorth* before, and I don't recommend a lungful of that ferruginous dust."

"There's a cave in the old river bank, to the right," said Chivers, the third member of the party, who had been searching the desert with restless, falcon-like eyes.

The trio of Earthmen, hard-bitten adventurers who disdained the services of Martian guides, had started five days before from the outpost of Ahoom, into the uninhabited region called the Chaur. Here, in the beds of great rivers that had not flowed for cycles, it was rumored that the pale, platinum-like gold of Mars could

be found lying in heaps, like so much salt. If fortune were propitious, their years of somewhat unwilling exile on the red planet would soon be at an end. They had been warned against the Chaur, and had heard some queer tales in Ahoom regarding the reasons why former prospectors had not returned. But danger, no matter how dire or exotic, was merely a part of their daily routine. With a fair chance of unlimited gold at the journey's end, they would have gone down through Hinnom.

Their food-supplies and water-barrels were carried on the backs of three of those curious mammals called *vortlups*, which with their elongated legs and necks, and horny-plated bodies, might seemingly have been some fabulous combination of llama and saurian. These animals, though extravagantly ugly, were tame and obedient, and were well adapted to desert travel, being able to go without water for months at a time.

For the past two days they had followed the mile-wide course of a nameless ancient river, winding among hills that had dwindled to mere hummocks through aeons of exfoliation. They had found nothing but worn boulders, pebbles and fine rusty sand. Heretofore the sky had been silent and stirless; and nothing moved on the river-bottom, whose stones were bare even of dead lichen. The malignant column of the *zoorth*, twisting and swelling toward them, was the first sign of animation they had discerned in that lifeless land.

Prodding their *vortlups* with the iron-pointed goads which alone could elicit any increase of speed from these sluggish monsters, the Earthmen started off toward the cavern-mouth descried by Chivers. It was perhaps a

third of a mile distant, and was high up in the shelving shore.

The *zoorth* had blotted out the sun ere they reached the bottom of the ancient slope, and they moved through a sinister twilight that was colored like dried blood. The *vortlups*, protesting with unearthly bellows, began to climb the beach, which was marked off in a series of more or less regular steps that indicated the slow recession of its olden waters. The column of sand, rising and whirling formidably, had reached the opposite bank when they came to the cavern.

This cavern was in the face of a low cliff of iron-veined rock. The entrance had crumbled down in heaps of ferro-oxide and dark basaltic dust, but was large enough to admit with ease the Earthmen and their laden beasts of burden. Darkness, heavy as if with a weaving of black webs, clogged the interior. They could form no idea of the cave's dimensions till Bellman got out an electric torch from his bale of belongings and turned its prying beam into the shadows.

The torch served merely to reveal the beginnings of a chamber of indeterminate size that ran backward into night, widening gradually, with a floor that was worn smooth as if by varnished waters.

The opening had grown dark with the onset of the *zoorth*. A weird moaning as of baffled demons filled the ears of the explorers, and particles of atom-like sand were blown in upon them, stinging their hands and faces like powdered adamant.

"The storm will last for half an hour, a least," said Bellman. "Shall we go on into the cave? Probably we won't find anything of much interest or value. But the

exploration will serve to kill time. And we might happen on a few violet rubies or amber-yellow sapphires, such as are sometimes discovered in these desert caverns. You two had better bring along your torches also, and flash them on the walls and ground as we go."

His companions thought the suggestion worth following. The *vortlups*, wholly insensible to the blowing sand in their scaly mail, were left behind near the entrance. Chivers, Bellman and Maspic, with their torch-beams tearing a clotted gloom that had perhaps never known the intrusion of light in all its former cycles, went on into the widening cave.

The place was bare, with the death-like emptiness of some long-deserted catacomb. Its rusted floor and walls returned no gleam or sparkle to the playing lights. It sloped downward at an easy gradient, and the sides were water-marked at a height of six or seven feet. No doubt it had been in earlier aeons the channel of an underground off-shoot from the river. It had been swept clean of all detritus, and was like the anterior of some Cyclopean conduit that might give upon a sub-Martian Erebus.

None of the three adventurers was overly imaginative or prone to nervousness. But all were beset by certain odd impressions. Behind the arras of cryptic silence, time and again, they seemed to hear a faint whisper, like the sigh of sunken seas far down at some hemispheric depth. The air was tinged with a slight and doubtful dankness, and they felt the stirring of an almost imperceptible draft upon their faces. Oddest of all was the hint of a nameless odor, reminding them both of

animal dens and the peculiar smell of Martian dwellings.

"Do you suppose we'll encounter any kind of life?" said Maspic, sniffing the air dubiously.

"Not likely." Bellman dismissed the query with his usual curtness. "Even the wild *vortlups* avoid the Chaur."

"But there's certainly a touch of dampness in the air," persisted Maspic. "That means water, somewhere; and if there is water, there may be life also—perhaps of a dangerous kind."

"We've got our revolvers," said Bellman. "But I doubt if we'll need them—as long as we don't meet rival gold-hunters from the Earth," he added cynically.

"Listen." The semi-whisper came from Chivers. "Do you fellows hear anything?"

All three had paused. Somewhere in the gloom ahead, they heard a prolonged, equivocal noise that baffled the ear with incongruous elements. It was a sharp rustling and rattling as of metal dragged over rock; and also it was somehow like the smacking of myriad wet, enormous mouths. Anon it receded and died out at a level that was seemingly far below.

"That's queer." Bellman seemed to make a reluctant admission.

"What is it?" queried Chivers. "One of the millipedal underground monsters, half a mile long, that the Martians tell about?"

"You've been hearing too many native fairy-tales," reproved Bellman. "No terrestrial has ever seen anything of that kind. Many deep-lying caverns on Mars have been thoroughly explored; but those in desert

regions, such as the Chaur, were devoid of life. I can't imagine what could have made that noise; but, in the interests of science, I'd like to go on and find out."

"I'm beginning to feel creepy," said Maspic. "But I'm game if you others are."

Without further argument or comment, the three continued their advance into the cave. They had been walking at a fair gait for fifteen minutes, and were now at least half a mile from the entrance. The floor was steepening, as if it had been the bed of a torrent. Also, the conformation of the walls had changed: on either hand there were high shelves of metallic stone and columnated recesses which the flashed rays of the torches could not always fathom.

The air had grown heavier, the dampness unmistakable. There was a breath of stagnant ancient waters. That other smell, as of wild beasts and Aihai dwellings, also tainted the gloom with its clinging fetor.

Bellman was leading the way. Suddenly his torch revealed the verge of a precipice, where the olden channel ended sheerly and the shelves and walls pitched away on each side into incalculable space. Going to the very edge, he dipped his pencil of light down the abyss, disclosing only the vertical cliff that fell at his feet into darkness with no apparent bottom. The beam also failed to reach the further shore of the gulf, which might have been many leagues in extent.

"Looks as if we had found the original jumping-off place," observed Chivers. Looking about, he secured a loose lump of rock, the size of a small boulder, which he hurled as far out as he could into the abysm. The Earthmen listened for the sound of its fall; but several

minutes went by, and there was no echo from the black profound.

Bellman started to examine the broken-off ledges on either side of the channel's terminus. To the right he discerned a downward-sloping shelf that skirted the abyss, running for an uncertain distance. Its beginning was little higher than the channel-bed, and was accessible by means of a stair-like formation. The shelf was two yards wide; and its gentle inclination, its remarkable evenness and regularity conveyed the idea of an ancient road hewn in the face of the cliff. It was overhung by the wall, as if by the sharply sundered half of a high arcade.

"There's our road to Hades," said Bellman. "And the down-grade is easy enough at that."

"What's the use of going further?" said Maspic. "I, for one, have had enough darkness already. And if we were to find anything by going on, it would be valueless—or unpleasant."

Bellman hesitated. "Maybe you're right. But I'd like to follow that ledge far enough to get some idea of the magnitude of the gulf. You and Chivers can wait here, if you're afraid."

Chivers and Maspic, apparently, were unwilling to avow whatever trepidation they might have felt. They followed Bellman along the shelf, hugging the inner wall. Bellman, however, strode carelessly on the verge, often flashing his torch into the vastitude that engulfed its feeble beam.

More and more, through its uniform breadth, inclination and smoothness, and the demi-arch of cliff above, the shelf impressed the Earthmen as being an artificial

road. But who could have made and used it? In what forgotten ages and for what enigmatic purpose had it been designed? The imagination of the terrestrials failed before the stupendous gulf of Martian antiquity that yawned in such tenebrous queries.

Bellman thought that the wall curved inward upon itself by slow degrees, No doubt they would round the entire abyss in time by following the road. Perhaps it wound in a slow, tremendous spiral, ever downward, about and about, to the very bowels of Mars.

He and the others were awed into lengthening intervals of silence. They were horribly startled, when, as they went on, they heard in the depths beneath the same peculiar long-drawn sound or combination of sounds which they had heard in the outer cavern. It suggested other images now: the rustling was a file-like scraping; the soft, methodical, myriad smacking was vaguely similar to the noise made by some enormous creature that withdraws its feet from a quagmire.

The sound was inexplicable, terrifying. Part of its terror lay in an implication of remoteness, which appeared to signalize the enormity of its cause, and to emphasize the profundity of the abyss. Heard in that planetary pit beneath a lifeless desert it astonished—and shocked. Even Bellman, intrepid heretofore, began to succumb to the formless horror that rose up like an emanation from the night.

The noise grew fainter and ceased at length, giving somehow the idea that its maker had gone directly down on the perpendicular wall into nether reaches of the gulf.

"Shall we go back?" inquired Chivers.

"We might as well," assented Bellman without demur. "It would take all eternity to explore this place anyway."

They started to retrace their way back along the ledge. All three, with that extra-tactile sense which warns of the approach of hidden danger, were now troubled and alert. Though the gulf had grown silent once more with that withdrawal of the strange noise, they somehow felt that they were not alone. Whence the peril would come, or in what shape, they could not surmise; but they felt an alarm that was almost panic. Tacitly, none of them mentioned it; nor did they discuss the eerie mystery on which they had stumbled in a manner so fortuitous.

Maspic was a little ahead of the others now. They had covered at least half of the distance to the old cavern-channel, when his torch, playing for twenty feet ahead on the path, illumined an array of whitish figures, three abreast, that blocked the way. The flash-lights of Bellman and Chivers, coming close behind, brought out with hideous clearness the vanward limbs and faces of the throng, but could not determine its number.

The creatures, who stood perfectly motionless and silent, as if awaiting the Earthmen, were generically similar to the Aihais or Martian natives. They seemed, however, to represent an extremely degraded and aberrant type; and the fungus-like pallor of their bodies denoted many ages of underground life. They were smaller, too, than full-grown Aihais, being, on the average, about five feet tall. They possessed the enormous open nostrils, the flaring ears, the barrel chests and lanky

limbs of the Martians—but all of them were eyeless. In the faces of some, there were faint, rudimentary slits where the eyes should have been; in the faces of others, there were deep and empty orbits that suggested a removal of the eyeballs.

"Lord! what a ghastly crew!" cried Maspic. "Where do they come from? and what do they want?"

"Can't imagine," said Bellman. "But our situation is somewhat ticklish—unless they are friendly. They must have been hiding on the shelves in the cavern above, when we entered."

Stepping boldly forward, ahead of Maspic, he addressed the creatures in the guttural Aihai tongue, many of whose vocables are scarcely to be articulated by an Earthman. Some of the people stirred uneasily, and emitted shrill, cheeping sounds that bore little likeness to the Martian language. It was plain that they could not understand Bellman. Sign-language, by reason of their blindness, would have been equally useless.

Bellman drew his revolver, enjoining the others to follow suit. "We've got to get through them somehow," he said. "And if they won't let us pass without interference—" the click of a cocked hammer served to finish the sentence.

As if the metallic sound had been an awaited signal, the press of blind white beings sprang into sudden motion and surged forward upon the terrestrials. It was like the onset of automatons—an irresistible striding of machines, concerted and methodical, beneath the direction of a hidden power.

Bellman pulled his trigger, once, twice, thrice, at a point-blank range. It was impossible to miss; but the

bullets were futile as pebbles flung at the spate of an onrushing torrent. The eyeless beings did not waver, though two of them began to bleed the yellowish-red fluid that serves the Martians for blood. The foremost of them, unwounded, and moving with diabolical sureness, caught Bellman's arm with long, four-joined fingers, and jerked the revolver from his grasp before he could press the trigger again. Curiously enough, the creature did not try to deprive him of his torch, which he now carried in his left hand; and he saw the steely flash of the Colt, as it hurtled down into darkness and space from the hand of the Martian. Then the fungus-white bodies, milling horribly on the narrow road, were all about him, pressing so closely that there was no room for effectual resistance. Chivers and Maspic, after firing a few shots, were also deprived of their weapons, but, through an uncanny discrimination, were permitted to retain their flashlights.

The entire episode had been a matter of moments. There was only a brief slackening of the onward motion of the throng, several of whose members had been shot down by Chivers and Maspic and then hurled expeditiously into the gulf by their fellows. The foremost ranks, opening deftly, included the Earthmen and forced them to turn backward. Then, tightly caught in a moving vise of bodies, they were borne resistlessly along. Handicapped by the fear of dropping their torches, they could do nothing against the nightmare torrent. Rushing with dreadful strides on a path that led ever deeper into the abyss, and able to see only the lit backs and members of the creatures before them, they became a part of that eyeless and cryptic army.

Behind them, there seemed to be scores of the Martians, driving them on implacably. After a while, their plight began to paralyze their faculties. It seemed that they moved no longer with human steps, but with the swift and automatic stalking of the clammy *things* that pressed about them. Thought, volition, even terror, were numbed by the unearthly rhythm of those abyssward-beating feet. Constrained by this, and by a sense of utter unreality, they spoke only at long intervals, and then in monosyllables that appeared to have lost all proper meaning, like the speech of machines. The blind people were wholly silent—there was no sound, except that of a myriad, eternal padding on the stone.

On, on they went, through ebon hours that belonged to no diurnal period. Slowly, tortuously, the road curved inward, as if it were coiled about the interior of a blind and cosmic Babel. The Earthmen felt that they must have circled the abyss many times in that terrific spiral; but the distance they had gone, and the actual extent of the stupefying gulf, were inconceivable.

Except for their torches, the night was absolute, unchangeable. It was older than the sun, it had brooded there through all past aeons. It accumulated above them like a monstrous burden; it yawned frightfully beneath. From it, the strengthening stench of stagnant waters rose. But still there was no sound, other than the soft and measured thud of marching feet that descended into a bottomless Abaddon.

Somewhere, as if after the lapse of nocturnal ages, the pitward rushing had ceased. Bellman, Chivers and Maspic felt the pressure of crowded bodies relax; felt

that they were standing still, while their brains continued to beat the unhuman measure of that terrible descent.

Reason—and horror—returned to them slowly. Bellman lifted his flashlight, and the circling ray recovered the throng of Martians, many of whom were dispersing in a huge cavern where the gulf-circling road had now ended. Others of the beings remained, however, as if to keep guard over the Earthmen. They quivered alertly at Bellman's movements, as if aware of them through an unknown sense.

Close at hand, on the right, the level floor ended abruptly; and stepping to the verge, Bellman saw that the cavern was an open chamber in the perpendicular wall. Far, far below in the blackness, a phosphorescent glimmer played to and fro, like noctilucae on an underworld ocean. A slow, fetid wind blew upon him; and he heard the weird sighing of waters about the sunken cliffs: waters that had ebbed through untold cycles, during the planet's desiccation.

He turned giddily away. His companions were examining the cave's interior. It seemed that the place was of artificial origin; for, darting here and there, the torch-beams brought out enormous columnations lined with deeply graven bas-reliefs. Who had carved them or when were problems no less insoluble than the origin of the cliff-hewn road. Their details were obscene as the visions of madness; they shocked the eye like a violent blow, conveying an extra-human evil, a bottomless malignity, in the passing moment of disclosure.

The cave was indeed of stupendous extent, running far back in the cliff, and with numerous exits, giving,

no doubt, on further ramifications. The beams of the flashlights half dislodged the flapping shadows of shelved recesses; caught the salients of far walls that climbed and beetled into inaccessible gloom; played on the creatures that went to and fro like monstrous living fungi; gave to a brief visual existence the pale and polyp-like plants that clung noisomely to the nighted stone.

The place was overpowering, it oppressed the senses, crushed the brain. The very stone was like an embodiment of darkness; and light and vision were ephemeral intruders in this demesne of the blind. Somehow, the Earthmen were weighed down by a conviction that escape was impossible. A strange lethargy claimed them. They did not even discuss their situation, but stood listless and silent.

Anon, from the filthy gloom, a number of the Martians reappeared. With the same suggestion of controlled automatism that had marked all their actions, they gathered about the men once more, and urged them into the yawning cavern.

Step by step, the three were borne along in that weird and leprous procession. The obscene columns multiplied, the cave deepened before them with endless vistas, like a revelation of foul things that drowse at the nadir of night. Faintly at first, but more strongly as they went on, there came to them an insidious feeling of somnolence, such as might have been caused by mephitical effluvia. They rebelled against it, for the drowsiness was somehow dark and evil. It grew heavier upon them and then they came to the core of the horror.

Between the thick and seemingly topless pillars, the floor ascended in an altar of seven oblique and py-

ramidal tiers. On the top, there squatted an image of pale metal: a thing no larger than a hare, but monstrous beyond all imagining.

The queer, unnatural drowsiness seemed to increase upon the Earthmen as they stared at the image. Behind them, the Martians thronged with a restless forward movement, like worshippers who gather before an idol. Bellman felt a clutching hand on his arm. Turning, he found at his elbow an astounding and wholly unlooked-for apparition. Though pale and filthy as the cave-dwellers, and with gaping orbits in lieu of eyes, the being was, or had formerly been, a man! He was barefooted, and was clad only in a few rags of khaki that had seemingly rotted away with use and age. His white beard and hair were matted with slime, were full of unmentionable remnants. Once, he had been tall as Bellman; but now he was bowed to the height of the dwarfish Martians, and was dreadfully emaciated. He trembled as if with ague, and an almost idiotic look of hopelessness and terror was stamped on the wreck of his lineaments.

"My God! who are you?" cried Bellman, shocked into full wakefulness.

For a few moments, the man gibbered unintelligibly, as if he had forgotten the words of human speech, or could no longer articulate them. Then he croaked feebly, with many pauses and incoherent breaks, "You are Earthmen! Earthmen! They told me you had been captured . . . even as they captured me . . . I was an archaeologist once. . . . My name was Chalmers . . . John Chalmers. It was years ago. . . . I don't know how many years. I came into the Chaur to study some of the old

ruins. They got me—these creatures of the pit. . . . I have been here ever since. There is no escape. . . . The Dweller takes care of that.”

“But who are these creatures? And what do they want with us?” queried Bellman.

Chalmers seemed to collect his ruined faculties. His voice became clearer and steadier.

“They are a degenerate remnant of the Yorhis, the old Martian race that flourished before the Aihais. Everyone believes them to be extinct. The ruins of some of their cities are still extant in the Chaur. As far as I can learn (I am able to speak their language now) this tribe was driven underground by the dehydration of the Chaur, and they followed the ebbing waters of a sub-Martian lake that lies at the bottom of this gulf. They are little more than animals now, and they worship a weird monster that lives in the lake . . . the Dweller . . . the thing that walks on the cliff. The small idol that you see on the altar is an image of that monster. They are about to hold one of their religious ceremonies; and they want you to take part in it. I am to instruct you. . . . It will be the beginning of your initiation into the life of the Yorhis.”

Bellman and his companions, listening to the strange declaration of Chalmers, felt a mixture of nightmarish revulsion and wonder. The white, eyeless, filthy-bearded face of the creature before them seemed to bear a hint of the same degradation that they saw in the cave-dwelling people. Somehow, the man was hardly human. But, no doubt, he had broken down through the horror of his long captivity in darkness, amid an alien race. They felt themselves among abhorrent mysteries;

and the empty orbits of Chalmers prompted a question that none of them could ask.

"What is this ceremony?" said Bellman, after an interval.

"Come, and I'll show you." There was a queer eagerness in Chalmers' broken voice. He plucked at Bellman's sleeve, and began to ascend the pyramid with an ease and sureness of footing that bespoke a long familiarity. Like dreamers in a dream, Bellman, Chivers and Maspic followed him.

The image resembled nothing they had ever seen on the red planet—or elsewhere. It was carved of a strange metal that seemed whiter and softer even than gold, and it represented a humped animal with a smooth and overhanging carapace from beneath which its head and members issued in tortoise fashion. The head was venomously flat, triangular—and eyeless. From the drooping corners of the cruelly slitted mouth, two long proboscides curved upward, hollow and cup-like at the ends. The thing was furnished with a series of short legs, issuing at uniform intervals from under the carapace; and a curious double tail was coiled and braided beneath its crouching body. The feet were round, and had the shape of small, inverted goblets.

Unclean and bestial as a figment of some atavistic madness, the idolon seemed to drowse on the altar. It troubled the mind with a slow, insidious horror; it assailed the senses with an emanating stupor, an effluence as of primal worlds before the creation of light, where life might teem and raven slothfully in the blind ooze.

"And this thing really exists?" Bellman seemed to

hear his own voice through a creeping film of slumber, as if another than himself had spoken, and had roused him.

"It is the Dweller," mumbled Chalmers. He leaned toward the image, and his outstretched fingers trembled above it in the air, moving to and fro as if he were about to caress the white horror. "The Yorhis made the idol long ago," he went on. "I don't know how it was made. . . . And the metal they moulded it from is like nothing else. . . . A new element. Do as I am doing . . . and you won't mind the darkness so much. . . . You don't miss your eyes or need them here. You'll drink the putrid water of the lake, you'll eat the raw slugs, the raw blind fish and lake-worms, and find them good. . . . And you won't know if the Dweller comes and gets you."

Even as he spoke he began to caress the image, running his hands over the gibbous carapace, the flat reptilian head. His blind face took on the dreamy languor of an opium-eater, his voice died to inarticulate murmurs, like the lapping sound of a thick liquid. About him, there was an air of strange subhuman depravity.

Bellman, Chivers and Maspic, watching him in amazement, became aware that the altar swarmed with the white Martians. Several of them crowded forward on the side opposite Chalmers, around the summit, and also began to fondle the eidolon, as if in some fantastic ritual of touch. They traced its loathsome outlines with lank fingers, their movements appearing to follow a strictly prescribed order from which none of them deviated. They uttered sounds that were like the cheepings

of sleepy bats. Upon their brutal faces a narcotic ecstasy was imprinted.

Completing their bizarre ceremony, the foremost devotees fell back from the image. But Chalmers, with slow and sleepy movements, his head lolling on his tattered bosom, continued to caress it. With a queer mingling of revulsion, curiosity and compulsion, the other Earthmen, prompted by the Martians behind them, went nearer and laid their hands on the idol. The whole proceeding was highly mysterious, and somehow revolting, but it seemed wise to follow the custom of their captors.

The thing was cold to the touch, and clammy as if it had lain recently in a bed of slime. But it seemed to live, to throb and swell under their fingertips. From it, in heavy ceaseless waves, there surged an emanation that could be described only as an opiate magnetism or electricity. It was as if some powerful alkaloid, affecting the nerves through superficial contact, was being given off by the unknown metal. Quickly, irresistibly, Bellman and the others felt a dark vibration course through all their members, clouding their eyes, and filling their blood with slumber. Musing drowsily, they tried to explain the phenomenon to themselves in terms of terrene science; and then, as the narcotism mounted more and more like an overwhelming drunkenness, they forgot their speculations.

With senses that swam in a strange darkness, they were vaguely aware of the pressure of thronging bodies that displaced them at the altar-summit. Anon, certain of these, recoiling as if satiate with the drug-like effluence, bore them along the oblique tiers to the cav-

ern-floor, together with the limp and sodden Chalmers. Still retaining their torches in nerveless fingers, they saw that the place teemed with the white people, who had gathered for that unholy ceremony. Through blackening blurs of shadow, the men watched them as they seethed up and down on the pyramid like a leprous, living frieze.

Chivers and Maspic, yielding first to the influence, slid to the floor in utter sopor. But Bellman, more resistant, seemed to fall and drift through a world of lightless dreams. His sensations were anomalous, unfamiliar to the last degree. Everywhere there was a brooding, palpable Power for which he could find no visual image: a Power that exhaled a miasmatic slumber. In those dreams, by insensible graduations, forgetting the last glimmer of his human self, he somehow identified himself with the eyeless people; he lived and moved as they, in profound caverns, on nighted roads. And yet—as if by a participation to which the obscene ritual had admitted him—he was something else: an Entity without name that ruled over the blind and was worshipped by them; a thing that dwelt in the ancient putrescent waters, in the nether deep, and came forth at intervals to raven unspeakably. In that duality of being, he sated himself at blind feasts—and was also devoured. With all this, like a third element of identity, the eidolon was associated; but only in a tactile sense, and not as an optic memory. There was no light anywhere—and not even the recollection of light.

Whether he passed from these obscure nightmares into dreamless slumber, he could not know. His awakening, dark and lethargic, was like a continuation of the

dreams at first. Then, opening his sodden lids, he saw the shaft of light that lay on the floor from his fallen torch. The light poured against something that he could not recognize in his drugged awareness. Yet it troubled him; and a dawning horror touched his faculties into life.

By degrees, it came to him that the thing he saw was the half-eaten body of Chalmers. There were rags of rotten cloth on the gnawed members; and though the head was gone, the remaining bones and viscera were those of an Earthman.

Bellman rose unsteadily and looked about with eyes that still held a web-like blurring of shadow. Chivers and Maspic lay beside him in heavy stupor; and along the cavern and upon the seven-tiered altar were sprawled the devotees of the somnific image.

His other senses began to awake from their lethargy, and he thought that he heard a noise that was somehow familiar: a sharp slithering, together with a measured sucking. The sound withdrew among the massy pillars, beyond the sleeping bodies. A smell of rotten water tinged the air, and he saw that there were many curious rings of wetness on the stone, such as might be made by the rims of inverted cups. Preserving the order of foot-prints, they led away from the body of Chalmers, into the shadows of that outer cave which verged upon the abyss: the direction in which the queer noise had passed, sinking now to inaudibility.

In Bellman's mind a mad terror rose and struggled with the spell that still benumbed him. He stooped down above Maspic and Chivers, and shook them

roughly in turn, till they opened their eyes and began to protest with drowsy murmurs.

"Get up, damn you," he admonished them. "If we're ever to escape from this hell-hole, now's the time."

By dint of many oaths and objurgations and much muscular effort, he succeeded in getting his companions to their feet. In their stupor, they did not seem to notice the remnants of that which had been the unfortunate Chalmers. Lurching drunkenly, they followed Bellman among the sprawled Martians, away from the pyramid on which the white eidolon still brooded in malign somnolence above its worshippers.

A clouding heaviness hung upon Bellman; but somehow there was a relaxation of the opiate spell. He felt a revival of volition and a great desire to escape from the gulf and from all that dwelt in its darkness. The others, more deeply enslaved by the drowsy power, accepted his leadership and guidance in a numb, brute-like fashion.

He felt sure that he could retrace the route by which they had approached the altar. This, it seemed, was also the course that had been taken by the maker of the ring-like marks of fetid wetness. Wandering on amid the repugnantly carven columns for what seemed an enormous distance, they came at last to the sheer verge: that portico of the black Tartarus, from which they could look down on its ultimate gulf. Far beneath, on those putrefying waters, the phosphorescence ran in widening circles, as if troubled by the plunge of a heavy body. To the very edge, at their feet, the watery rings were imprinted on the rock.

They turned away. Bellman, shuddering with half-memories of his blind dreams, and the terror of his

awakening, found at the cave's corner the beginning of that upward road which skirted the abyss: the road that would take them back to the lost sun.

At his injunction, Maspic and Chivers turned off their flashlights to conserve the batteries. It was doubtful how much longer these would last; and light was their prime necessity. His own torch would serve for the three till it became exhausted.

There was no sound or stirring of life from that cave of lightless sleep where the Martians lay about the narcotizing image. But a fear such as he had never felt in all his adventurings caused Bellman to sicken and turn faint as he listened at its threshold.

The gulf, too, was silent; and the circles of phosphor had ceased to widen on the waters. Yet somehow the silence was a thing that clogged the senses, retarded the limbs. It rose up around Bellman like the clutching slime of some nethermost pit, in which he must drown. With dragging effort he began the ascent, hauling, cursing and kicking his companions till they responded like drowsy animals.

It was a climb through Limbo, an ascent from nadir through darkness that seemed palpable and viscid. On and up they toiled, along the monotonous, imperceptibly winding grade where all measure of distance was lost, and time was meted only by the repetition of eternal steps. The night lowered before Bellman's feeble shaft of light; it closed behind like an all-engulfing sea, relentless and patient; biding its time till the torch should go out.

Looking over the verge at intervals, Bellman saw the gradual fading of the phosphorescence in the depths.

Fantastic images rose in his mind: it was like the last glimmering of hell-fire in some extinct inferno; like the drowning of nebulae in voids beneath the universe. He felt the giddiness of one who looks down upon infinite space. . . . Anon there was only blackness; and he knew by this token the awful distance they had climbed.

The minor urges of hunger, thirst, fatigue, had been trod under by the fear that impelled him. From Maspic and Chivers, very slowly, the clogging stupor lifted, and they too were conscious of an adumbration of terror vast as the night itself. The blows and kicks and objurgations of Bellman were no longer needed to drive them on.

Evil, ancient, soporous, the night hung about them. It was like the thick and fetid fur of bats: a material thing that choked the lungs, that deadened all the senses. It was silent as the slumber of dead worlds. . . . But out of that silence, after the lapse of apparent years, a twofold and familiar sound arose and overtook the fugitives: the sound of something that slithered over stone far down in the abyss: the sucking noise of a creature that withdrew its feet as if from a quagmire. Inexplicable, and arousing mad, incongruous ideas, like a sound heard in delirium, it quickened the Earthmen's terror into sudden frenzy.

"God! what is it?" breathed Bellman. He seemed to remember sightless things, abhorrent, *palpable* shapes of primal night, that were no legitimate part of human recollections. His dreams, and his nightmare awakening in the cave—the narcotic idol—the half-eaten body of Chalmers—the hints that Chalmers had let drop—the rings of wetness, leading toward the gulf—all returned

like the figments of a teeming madness, to assail him on that terrible road midway between the underworld sea and the surface of Mars.

His question was answered only by a continuation of the noise. It seemed to grow louder—to ascend the wall beneath. Maspic and Chivers, snapping on their lights, began to run with frantic leaps; and Bellman, losing his last remnant of control, followed suit.

It was a race with unknown horror. Above the labored beating of their hearts, the measured thudding of their feet, the men still heard that sinister, unaccountable sound. They seemed to race on through leagues of blackness; and yet the noise drew steadily nearer, climbing below them, as if its maker were a thing that walked on the sheer cliff.

Now the sound was appallingly close—and a little ahead. It ceased abruptly. The running lights of Maspic and Chivers, who moved abreast, discovered the crouching thing that filled the two-yard shelf from side to side.

Hardened adventurers though they were, the men would have shrieked aloud with hysteria, or would have hurled themselves from the precipice, if the sight had not induced a kind of catalepsy. It was as if the pale idol of the pyramid, swollen to mammoth proportions, and loathsomely *alive*, had come up from the abyss and was squatting before them!

Here, plainly, was the creature that had served as a model for that atrocious image: the creature that Chalmers had called the Dweller. The humped, enormous carapace, vaguely recalling the armor of the glyptodon, shone with a luster as of wet white metal. The eyeless

head, alert but somnolent, was thrust forward on a neck that arched obscenely. A dozen or more of short legs, with goblet-shapen feet, protruded slantwise beneath the overhanging shell. The two proboscides, yard-long, with cupped ends, arose from the corners of the cruelly slitted mouth and waved slowly in air toward the Earthmen.

The thing, it seemed, was old as that dying planet: an unknown form of primal life that had dwelt always in the caverned waters. Before it, the faculties of the Earthmen were drugged by an evil stupor, as if it were composed, in part, of the same opiate mineral as its image. They stood with their flashlights playing full on the Terror; and they could not move nor cry out when it reared suddenly erect, revealing its ridged belly and the queer double tail that slithered and rustled metallically on the rock. Its numerous feet, beheld in this posture, were hollow and chalice-like, and they oozed with mephitic wetness. No doubt they served for suction-pads, enabling it to walk on a perpendicular surface.

Inconceivably swift and sure in all its motions, with short strides on its hindmost legs, levered by the tail, the monster came forward on the helpless men. Unerringly the two proboscides curved over, and their ends came down on Chivers' eyes as he stood with lifted face. They rested there, covering the entire sockets—for a moment only. Then there was a wild, agonizing scream, as the hollow tips were withdrawn with a sweeping movement lithe and vigorous as the lashing of serpents.

Chivers swayed slowly, nodding his head, and twisting about in half-narcotized pain. Maspic, standing at

his side, saw in a dull and dream-like manner the gaping orbits from which the eyes were gone. It was the last thing that he ever saw. At that instant the monster turned from Chivers, and the terrible cups, dripping with blood and fetor, descended on Maspic's own eyes.

Bellman, who had paused close behind the others, comprehended what was occurring like one who witnesses the abominations of a nightmare but is powerless to intervene or flee. He saw the movements of the cupped members, he heard the single atrocious cry that was wrung from Chivers, and the swiftly ensuing scream of Maspic. Then, above the heads of his fellows, who still held their useless torches in rigid fingers, the proboscides came toward him. . . .

With blood rilling heavily upon their faces, with the somnolent, vigilant, implacable and eyeless Shape at their heels, herding them on, restraining them when they tottered at the brink, the three began their second descent of the road that went down forever to a night-bound Avernus.

The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis

If the doctors are correct in their prognostication, I have only a few Martian hours of life remaining to me. In those hours I shall endeavor to relate, as a warning to others who might follow in our footsteps, the singular and frightful happenings that terminated our researches among the ruins of Yoh-Vombis. If my story will only serve to prevent future explorations, the telling will not have been in vain.

There were eight of us, professional archaeologists with more or less terrene and interplanetary experience, who set forth with native guides from Ignarh, the commercial metropolis of Mars, to inspect that ancient, aeon-deserted city. Allan Octave, our official leader, held his primacy by knowing more about Martian archaeology than any other Terrestrial on the planet; and others of the party, such as William Harper and Jonas Halgren, had been associated with him in many of his previous researches. I, Rodney Severn, was more of a newcomer, having spent but a few months on Mars; and the greater part of my own ultra-terrene delvings had been confined to Venus.

The nude, spongy-chested Aihais had spoken detersingly of vast deserts filled with ever-swirling sand-

storms, through which we must pass to reach Yoh-Vombis; and in spite of our munificent offers of payment, it had been difficult to secure guides for the journey. Therefore we were surprised as well as pleased when we came to the ruins after seven hours of plodding across the flat, treeless, orange-yellow desolation to the southwest of Ignarh.

We beheld our destination, for the first time, in the setting of the small, remote sun. For a little, we thought that the domeless, three-angled towers and broken-down monoliths were those of some unlegended city, other than the one we sought. But the disposition of the ruins, which lay in a sort of arc for almost the entire extent of a low, gneissic, league-long elevation of bare, eroded stone, together with the type of architecture, soon convinced us that we had found our goal. No other ancient city on Mars had been laid out in that manner; and the strange, many-terraced buttresses, like the stairways of forgotten Anakim, were peculiar to the prehistoric race that had built Yoh-Vombis.

I have seen the hoary, sky-confronting walls of Machu Pichu amid the desolate Andes; and the frozen, giant-built battlements of Uogam on the glacial tundras of the nightward hemisphere of Venus. But these were as things of yesteryear compared to the walls upon which we gazed. The whole region was far from the life-giving canals beyond whose environs even the more noxious flora and fauna are seldom found; and we had seen no living thing since our departure from Ignarh. But here, in this place of petrified sterility, of eternal bareness and solitude, it seemed that life could never have been.

I think we all received the same impression as we stood staring in silence while the pale, sanies-like sunset fell on the dark and megalithic ruins. I remember gasping a little, in an air that seemed to have been touched by the irrespirable chill of death; and I heard the same sharp, laborious intake of breath from others of our party.

"That place is deader than an Egyptian morgue," observed Harper.

"Certainly it is far more ancient," Octave assented. "According to the most reliable legends, the Yorhis, who built Yoh-Vombis, were wiped out by the present ruling race at least forty thousand years ago."

"There's a story, isn't there," said Harper, "that the last remnant of the Yorhis was destroyed by some unknown agency—something too horrible and outré to be mentioned even in a myth?"

"Of course, I've heard that legend," agreed Octave. "Maybe we'll find evidence among the ruins to prove or disprove it. The Yorhis may have been cleaned out by some terrible epidemic, such as the Yashta pestilence, which was a kind of green mold that ate all the bones of the body, starting with the teeth. But we needn't be afraid of getting it, if there are any mummies in Yoh-Vombis—the bacteria will all be dead as their victims, after so many cycles of planetary desiccation."

The sun had gone down with uncanny swiftness, as if it had disappeared through some sort of prestidigitation rather than the normal process of setting. We felt the instant chill of the blue-green twilight; and the ether above us was like a huge, transparent dome of sunless ice, shot with a million bleak sparklings that were

the stars. We donned the coats and helmets of Martian fur, which must always be worn at night; and going on to westward of the walls, we established our camp in their lee, so that we might be sheltered a little from the *jaar*, the cruel desert wind that always blows from the east before dawn. Then, lighting the alcohol lamps that had been brought along for cooking purposes, we huddled around them while the evening meal was prepared and eaten.

Afterward, for comfort rather than because of weariness, we retired early to our sleeping-bags; and the two Aihais, our guides, wrapped themselves in the cerement-like folds of *bassa*-cloth which are all the protection their leathery skins appear to require even in sub-zero temperatures.

Even in my thick, double-lined bag, I still felt the rigor of the night air; and I am sure it was this, rather than anything else, which kept me awake for a long while and rendered my eventual slumber somewhat restless and broken. At any rate, I was not troubled by even the least presentiment of alarm or danger; and I should have laughed at the idea that anything of peril could lurk in Yoh-Vombis, amid whose undreamable and stupefying antiquities the very phantoms of its dead must long since have faded into nothingness.

I must have drowsed again and again, with starts of semi-wakefulness. At last, in one of these, I knew vaguely that the small twin moons, Phobos and Deimos, had risen and were making huge and far-flung shadows with the domeless towers; shadows that almost touched the glimmering, shrouded forms of my companions.

The whole scene was locked in a petrific stillness; and none of the sleepers stirred. Then, as my lids were about to close, I received an impression of movement in the frozen gloom; and it seemed to me that a portion of the foremost shadow had detached itself and was crawling toward Octave, who lay nearer to the ruins than we others.

Even through my heavy lethargy, I was disturbed by a warning of something unnatural and perhaps ominous. I started to sit up; and even as I moved, the shadowy object, whatever it was, drew back and became merged once more in the greater shadow. Its vanishment startled me into full wakefulness; and yet I could not be sure that I had actually seen the thing. In that brief, final glimpse, it had seemed like a roughly circular piece of cloth or leather, dark and crumpled, and twelve or fourteen inches in diameter, that ran along the ground with the doubling movement of an inch-worm, causing it to fold and unfold in a startling manner as it went.

I did not go to sleep again for nearly an hour; and if it had not been for the extreme cold, I should doubtless have gotten up to investigate and make sure whether I had really beheld an object of such bizarre nature or had merely dreamt it. But more and more I began to convince myself that the thing was too unlikely and fantastical to have been anything but the figment of a dream. And at last I nodded off into light slumber.

The chill, demoniac sighing of the *jaar* across the jagged walls awoke me, and I saw that the faint moonlight had received the hueless accession of early dawn. We all arose, and prepared our breakfast with fingers that grew numb in spite of the spirit-lamps.

My queer visual experience during the night had taken on more than ever a phantasmagoric unreality; and I gave it no more than a passing thought and did not speak of it to the others. We were all eager to begin our explorations; and shortly after sunrise we started on a preliminary tour of examination.

Strangely, as it seemed, the two Martians refused to accompany us. Stolid and taciturn, they gave no explicit reason; but evidently nothing would induce them to enter Yoh-Vombis. Whether or not they were afraid of the ruins, we were unable to determine: their enigmatic faces, with the small oblique eyes and huge, flaring nostrils, betrayed neither fear nor any other emotion intelligible to man. In reply to our questions, they merely said that no Aihai had set foot among the ruins for ages. Apparently there was some mysterious taboo in connection with the place.

For equipment in that preliminary tour we took along only our electric torches and a crowbar. Our other tools, and some cartridges of high explosives, we left at our camp, to be used later if necessary, after we had surveyed the ground. One or two of us owned automatics; but these also were left behind; for it seemed absurd to imagine that any form of life would be encountered among the ruins.

Octave was visibly excited as we began our inspection, and maintained a running fire of exclamatory comment. The rest of us were subdued and silent: it was impossible to shake off the somber awe and wonder that fell upon us from those megalithic stones.

We went on for some distance among the triangular, terraced buildings, following the zigzag streets that con-

formed to this peculiar architecture. Most of the towers were more or less dilapidated; and everywhere we saw the deep erosion wrought by cycles of blowing wind and sand, which, in many cases, had worn into roundness the sharp angles of the mighty walls. We entered some of the towers, but found utter emptiness within. Whatever they had contained in the way of furnishings must long ago have crumbled into dust; and the dust had been blown away by the searching desert gales.

At length we came to the wall of a vast terrace, hewn from the plateau itself. On this terrace, the central buildings were grouped like a sort of acropolis. A flight of time-eaten steps, designed for longer limbs than those of men or even the gangling modern Martians, afforded access to the hewn summit.

Pausing, we decided to defer our investigation of the higher buildings, which, being more exposed than the others, were doubly ruinous and delapidated, and in all likelihood would offer little for our trouble. Octave had begun to voice his disappointment over our failure to find anything in the nature of artifacts or carvings that would throw light on the history of Yoh-Vombis.

Then, a little to the right of the stairway, we perceived an entrance in the main wall, half choked with ancient debris. Behind the heap of detritus, we found the beginning of a downward flight of steps. Darkness poured from the opening, noisome and musty with primordial stagnancies of decay; and we could see nothing below the first steps, which gave the appearance of being suspended over a black gulf.

Throwing his torch-beam into the abyss, Octave be-

gan to descend the stairs. His eager voice called us to follow.

At the bottom of the high, awkward steps, we found ourselves in a long and roomy vault, like a subterranean hallway. Its floor was deep with siftings of immemorial dust. The air was singularly heavy, as if the lees of an ancient atmosphere, less tenuous than that of Mars today, had settled down and remained in that stagnant darkness. It was harder to breathe than the outer air: it was filled with unknown effluvia; and the light dust arose before us at every step, diffusing a faintness of bygone corruption, like the dust of powdered mummies.

At the end of the vault, before a strait and lofty doorway, our torches revealed an immense shallow urn or pan, supported on short cube-shaped legs, and wrought from a dull, blackish-green material. In its bottom, we perceived a deposit of dark and cinder-like fragments, which gave off a slight but disagreeable pungence, like the phantom of some more powerful odor. Octave, bending over the rim, began to cough and sneeze as he inhaled it.

"That stuff, whatever it was, must have been a pretty strong fumigant," he observed. "The people of Yoh-Vombis may have used it to disinfect the vaults."

The doorway beyond the shallow urn admitted us to a larger chamber, whose floor was comparatively free of dust. We found that the dark stone beneath our feet was marked off in multiform geometric patterns, traced with ochreous ore, amid which, as in Egyptian cartouches, hieroglyphics and highly formalized drawings were enclosed. We could make little from most of them; but the figures in many were doubtless designed

to represent the Yorhis themselves. Like the Aihais, they were tall and angular, with great, bellows-like chests. The ears and nostrils, as far as we could judge, were not so huge and flaring as those of the modern Martians. All of these Yorhis were depicted as being nude; but in one of the cartouches, done in a far hastier style than the others, we perceived two figures whose high, conical craniums were wrapped in what seemed to be a sort of turban, which they were about to remove or adjust. The artist seemed to have laid a peculiar emphasis on the odd gesture with which the sinuous, four-jointed fingers were plucking at these head-dresses; and the whole posture was unexplainably contorted.

From the second vault, passages ramified in all directions, leading to a veritable warren of catacombs. Here, enormous pot-bellied urns of the same material as the fumigating pan, but taller than a man's head and fitted with angular-handled stoppers, were ranged in solemn rows along the walls, leaving scant room for two of us to walk abreast. When we succeeded in removing one of the huge stoppers, we saw that the jar was filled to the rim with ashes and charred fragments of bone. Doubtless (as is still the Martian custom) the Yorhis had stored the cremated remains of whole families in single urns.

Even Octave became silent as we went on; and a sort of meditative awe seemed to replace his former excitement. We others, I think, were utterly weighed down to a man by the solid gloom of a concept-defying antiquity, into which it seemed that we were going farther and farther at every step.

The shadows fluttered before us like the monstrous

and misshapen wings of phantom bats. There was nothing anywhere but the atom-like dust of ages, and the jars that held the ashes of a long-extinct people. But, clinging to the high roof in one of the farther vaults, I saw a dark and corrugated patch of circular form, like a withered fungus. It was impossible to reach the thing; and we went on after peering at it with many futile conjectures. Oddly enough, I failed to remember at that moment the crumpled, shadowy object I had seen or dreamt of the night before.

I have no idea how far we had gone, when we came to the last vault; but it seemed that we had been wandering for ages in that forgotten underworld. The air was growing fouler and more irrespirable, with a thick, sodden quality, as if from a sediment of material rotteness; and we had about decided to turn back. Then, without warning, at the end of a long, urn-lined catacomb, we found ourselves confronted by a blank wall.

Here we came upon one of the strangest and most mystifying of our discoveries—a mummified and incredibly dessicated figure, standing erect against the wall. It was more than seven feet in height, of a brown, bituminous color, and was wholly nude except for a sort of black cowl that covered the upper head and drooped down at the sides in wrinkled folds. From the size and general contour, it was plainly one of the ancient Yorhis—perhaps the sole member of this race whose body had remained intact.

We all felt an inexpressible thrill at the sheer age of this shriveled thing, which, in the dry air of the vault, had endured through all the historic and geologic vicis-

situdes of the planet, to provide a visible link with lost cycles.

Then, as we peered closer with our torches, we saw *why* the mummy had maintained an upright position. At ankles, knees, waist, shoulders and neck it was shackled to the wall by heavy metal bands, so deeply eaten and embrowned with a sort of rust that we had failed to distinguish them at first sight in the shadow. The strange cowl on the head, when closelier studied, continued to baffle us. It was covered with a fine, mold-like pile, unclean and dusty as ancient cobwebs. Something about it, I know not what, was abhorrent and revolting.

"By Jove! this is a real find!" ejaculated Octave, as he thrust his torch into the mummified face, where shadows moved like living things in the pit-deep hollows of the eyes and the huge triple nostrils and wide ears that flared upward beneath the cowl.

Still lifting the torch, he put out his free hand and touched the body very lightly. Tentative as the touch had been, the lower part of the barrel-like torso, the legs, the hands and forearms all seemed to dissolve into powder, leaving the head and upper body and arms still hanging in their metal fetters. The progress of decay had been queerly unequal, for the remnant portions gave no sign of distintegration.

Octave cried out in dismay, and then began to cough and sneeze, as the cloud of brown powder, floating with airy lightness, enveloped him. We others all stepped back to avoid the powder. Then, above the spreading cloud, I saw an unbelievable thing. The black cowl on the mummy's head began to curl and twitch upward at

the corners, it writhed with a verminous motion, it fell from the withered cranium, seeming to fold and unfold convulsively in midair as it fell. Then it dropped on the bare head of Octave who, in his disconcertment at the crumbling of the mummy, had remained standing close to the wall. At that instant, in a start of profound terror, I remembered the thing that had inched itself from the shadows of Yoh-Vombis, in the light of the twin moons, and had drawn back like a figment of slumber at my first waking movement.

Cleaving closely as a tightened cloth, the thing enfolded Octave's hair and brow and eyes, and he shrieked wildly, with incoherent pleas for help, and tore with frantic fingers at the cowl, but failed to loosen it. Then his cries began to mount in a mad crescendo of agony, as if beneath some instrument of infernal torture; and he danced and capered blindly about the vault, eluding us with strange celerity as we all sprang forward in an effort to reach him and release him from his weird incumbrance. The whole happening was mysterious as a nightmare; but the thing that had fallen on his head was plainly some unclassified form of Martian life, which, contrary to all the known laws of science, had survived in those primordial catacombs. We must rescue him from its clutches if we could.

We tried to close in on the frenzied figure of our chief—which, in the far from roomy space between the last urns and the wall, should have been an easy matter. But, darting away, in a manner doubly incomprehensible because of his blindfolded condition, he circled about us and ran past, to disappear among the urns toward the outer labyrinth of intersecting catacombs.

"My God! What has happened to him?" cried Harper. "The man acts as if he were possessed."

There was obviously no time for a discussion of the enigma, and we all followed Octave as speedily as our astonishment would permit. We had lost sight of him in the darkness; and when we came to the first division of the vaults, we were doubtful as to which passage he had taken, till we heard a shrill scream, several times repeated, in a catacomb on the extreme left. There was a shrill, unearthly quality in those screams, which may have been due to the long-stagnant air or the peculiar acoustics of the ramifying caverns. But somehow I could not imagine them as issuing from human lips—at least not from those of a living man. They seemed to contain a soulless, mechanical agony, as if they had been wrung from a devil-driven corpse.

Thrusting our torches before us into the lurching, fleeing shadows, we raced along between rows of mighty urns. The screaming had died away in sepulchral silence; but far off we heard the light and muffled thud of running feet. We followed in headlong pursuit; but, gasping painfully in the vitiated, miasmal air, we were soon compelled to slacken our pace without coming in sight of Octave. Very faintly, and farther away than ever, like the tomb-swallowed steps of a phantom, we heard his vanishing footfalls. Then they ceased; and we heard nothing, except our own convulsive breathing, and the blood that throbbed in our temple-veins like steadily beaten drums of alarm.

We went on, dividing our party into three contingents when we came to a triple branching of the caverns. Harper and Halgren and I took the middle

passage, and after we had gone on for an endless interval without finding any trace of Octave, and had threaded our way through recesses piled to the roof with colossal urns that must have held the ashes of a hundred generations, we came out in the huge chamber with the geometric floor-designs. Here, very shortly, we were joined by the others, who had likewise failed to locate our missing leader.

It would be useless to detail our renewed and hour-long search of the myriad vaults, many of which we had not hitherto explored. All were empty, as far as any sign of life was concerned. I remember passing once more through the vault in which I had seen the dark, rounded patch on the ceiling, and noting with a shudder that the patch was gone. It was a miracle that we did not lose ourselves in that underworld maze; but at last we came back again to the final catacomb, in which we had found the shackled mummy.

We heard a measured and recurrent clangor as we neared the place—a most alarming and mystifying sound under the circumstances. It was like the hammering of ghouls on some forgotten mausoleum. When we drew nearer, the beams of our torches revealed a sight that was no less unexplainable than unexpected. A human figure, with its back toward us and the head concealed by a swollen black object that had the size and form of a sofa cushion, was standing near the remains of the mummy and was striking at the wall with a pointed metal bar. How long Octave had been there, and where he had found the bar, we could not know. But the blank wall had crumbled away beneath his furious blows, leaving on the floor a pile of comet-like

fragments; and a small, narrow door, of the same ambiguous material as the cinerary urns and the fumigating-pan, had been laid bare.

Amazed, uncertain, inexpressibly bewildered, we were all incapable of action or volition at that moment. The whole business was too fantastic and too horrifying, and it was plain that Octave had been overcome by some sort of madness. I, for one, felt the violent upsurge of sudden nausea when I had identified the loathsome bloated thing that clung to Octave's head and drooped in obscene tumescence on his neck. I did not dare to surmise the causation of its bloating.

Before any of us could recover our faculties, Octave flung aside the metal bar and began to fumble for something in the wall. It must have been a hidden spring; though how he could have known its location or existence is beyond all legitimate conjecture. With a dull, hideous grating, the uncovered door swung inward, thick and ponderous as a mausolean slab, leaving an aperture from which the nether midnight seemed to well like a flood of aeon-buried foulness. Somehow, at that instant, our electric torches appeared to flicker and grow dim; and we all breathed a suffocating feter, like a draft from inner worlds of immemorial putrescence.

Octave had turned toward us now, and he stood in an idle posture before the open door, like one who has finished some ordained task. I was the first of our party to throw off the paralyzing spell; and pulling out a clasp-knife—the only semblance of a weapon which I carried—I ran over to him. He moved back, but not quickly enough to evade me, when I stabbed with the four-inch blade at the black, turgescient mass that envel-

oped his whole upper head and hung down upon his eyes.

What the thing was, I should prefer not to imagine—if it were possible to imagine. It was formless as a great slug, with neither head nor tail nor apparent organs—an unclean, puffy, leathery thing, covered with that fine, mold-like fur of which I have spoken. The knife tore into it as if through rotten parchment, making a long gash, and the horror appeared to collapse like a broken bladder. Out of it there gushed a sickening torrent of human blood, mingled with dark, filiated masses that may have been half-dissolved hair, and floating gelatinous lumps like molten bone, and shreds of a curdy white substance. At the same time, Octave began to stagger, and went down at full length on the floor. Disturbed by his fall, the mummy-dust arose about him in a curling cloud, beneath which he lay mortally still.

Conquering my revulsion, and choking with the dust, I bent over him and tore the flaccid, oozing horror from his head. It came with unexpected ease, as if I had removed a limp rag: but I wish to God that I had let it remain. Beneath, there was no longer a human cranium, for all had been eaten away, even to the eyebrows, and the half-devoured brain was laid bare as I lifted the cowl-like object. I dropped the unnamable thing from fingers that had grown suddenly nerveless, and it turned over as it fell, revealing on the nether side many rows of pinkish suckers, arranged in circles about a pallid disk that was covered with nerve-like filaments, suggesting a sort of plexus.

My companions had pressed forward behind me; but, for an appreciable interval, no one spoke.

"How long do you suppose he has been dead?" It was Halgren who whispered the awful question, which we had all been asking ourselves. Apparently no one felt able or willing to answer it; and we could only stare in horrible, timeless fascination at Octave.

At length I made an effort to avert my gaze; and turning at random, I saw the remnants of the shackled mummy, and noted for the first time, with mechanical, unreal horror, the half-eaten condition of the withered head. From this, my gaze was diverted to the newly opened door at one side, without perceiving for a moment what had drawn my attention. Then, startled, I beheld beneath my torch, far down beyond the door, as if in some nether pit, a seething, multitudinous, worm-like movement of crawling shadows. They seemed to boil up in the darkness; and then, over the broad threshold of the vault, there poured the verminous vanguard of a countless army: things that were kindred to the monstrous, diabolic leech I had torn from Octave's eaten head. Some were thin and flat, like writhing, doubling disks of cloth or leather, and others were more or less poddy, and crawled with glugged slowness. What they had found to feed on in the sealed, eternal midnight I do not know; and I pray that I never shall know.

I sprang back and away from them, electrified with terror, sick with loathing, and the black army inched itself unendingly with nightmare swiftness from the unsealed abyss, like the nauseous vomit of horror-sated hells. As it poured toward us, burying Octave's body from sight in a writhing wave, I saw a stir of life from the seemingly dead thing I had cast aside, and saw the

loathely struggle which it made to right itself and join the others.

But neither I nor my companions could endure to look longer. We turned and ran between the mighty rows of urns, with the slithering mass of demon leeches close upon us, and scattered in blind panic when we came to the first division of the vaults. Heedless of each other or of anything but the urgency of flight, we plunged into the ramifying passages at random. Behind me, I heard some one stumble and go down, with a curse that mounted to an insane shrieking; but I knew that if I halted and went back it would be only to invite the same baleful doom that had overtaken the hindmost of our party.

Still clutching the electric torch and my open clasp-knife, I ran along a minor passage which, I seemed to remember, would conduct with more or less directness upon the large outer vault with the painted floor. Here I found myself alone. The others had kept to the main catacombs; and I heard far off a muffled babel of mad cries, as if several of them had been seized by their pursuers.

It seemed that I must have been mistaken about the direction of the passage; for it turned and twisted in an unfamiliar manner, with many intersections, and I soon found that I was lost in the black labyrinth, where the dust had lain unstirred by living feet for inestimable generations. The cinerary warren had grown still once more; and I heard my own frenzied panting, loud and stertorous as that of a Titan in the dead silence.

Suddenly, as I went on, my torch disclosed a human figure coming toward me in the gloom. Before I could

master my startlement, the figure had passed me with long, machine-like strides, as if returning to the inner vaults. I think it was Harper, since the height and build were about right for him; but I am not altogether sure, for the eyes and upper head were muffled by a dark, inflated cowl, and the pale lips were locked as if in a silence of tetanic torture—or death. Whoever he was, he had dropped his torch, and he was running blind-fold, in utter darkness, beneath the impulsion of that unearthly vampirism, to seek the very fountain-head of the unloosed horror. I knew that he was beyond human help; and I did not even dream of trying to stop him.

Trembling violently, I resumed my flight, and was passed by two more of our party, stalking by with mechanical swiftness and sureness, and cowed with those Satanic leeches. The others must have returned by way of the main passages; for I did not meet them; and I was never to see them again.

The remainder of my flight is a blur of pandemonian terror. Once more, after thinking that I was near the outer cavern, I found myself astray, and fled through a ranged eternity of monstrous urns, in vaults that must have extended for an unknown distance beyond our explorations. It seemed that I had gone on for years; and my lungs were choking with the aeon-dead air, and my legs were ready to crumble beneath me, when I saw far off a tiny point of blessed daylight. I ran toward it, with all the terrors of the alien darkness crowding behind me, and accursed shadows flittering before, and saw that the vault ended in a low, ruinous entrance, littered by rubble on which there fell an arc of thin sunshine.

It was another entrance than the one by which we had penetrated this lethal underworld. I was within a dozen feet of the opening when, without sound or other intimation, something dropped upon my head from the roof above, blinding me instantly and closing upon me like a tautened net. My brow and scalp, at the same time, were shot through with a million needle-like pangs—a manifold, ever-growing agony that seemed to pierce the very bone and converge from all sides upon my inmost brain.

The terror and suffering of that moment were worse than aught which the hells of earthly madness or delirium could ever contain. I felt the foul, vampiric clutch of an atrocious death—and of more than death.

I believe that I dropped the torch; but the fingers of my right hand had still retained the open knife. Instinctively—since I was hardly capable of conscious volition—I raised the knife and slashed blindly, again and again, many times, at the thing that had fastened its deadly folds upon me. The blade must have gone through and through the clinging monstrosity, to gash my own flesh in a score of places; but I did not feel the pain of those wounds in the million-throbbing torments that possessed me.

At last I saw light, and saw that a black strip, loosened from above my eyes and dripping with my own blood, was hanging down my cheek. It writhed a little, even as it hung, and I ripped it away, and ripped the other remnants of the thing, tatter by oozing, bloody tatter, from off my brow and head. Then I staggered toward the entrance; and the wan light turned to a far, receding, dancing flame before me as I lurched and fell

outside the cavern—a flame that fled like the last star of creation above the yawning, sliding chaos and oblivion into which I descended. . . .

I am told that my unconsciousness was of brief duration. I came to myself, with the cryptic faces of the two Martian guides bending over me. My head was full of lancinating pains, and half-remembered terrors closed upon my mind like the shadows of mustering harpies. I rolled over, and looked back toward the cavern-mouth, from which the Martians, after finding me, had seemingly dragged me for some little distance. The mouth was under the terraced angle of an outer building, and within sight of our camp.

I stared at the black opening with hideous fascination, and descried a shadowy stirring in the gloom—the writhing, verminous movement of things that pressed forward from the darkness but did not emerge into the light. Doubtless they could not endure the sun, those creatures of ultramundane night and cycle-sealed corruption.

It was then that the ultimate horror, the beginning madness, came upon me. Amid my crawling revulsion, my nausea-prompted desire to flee from that seething cavern-mouth, there rose an abhorrently conflicting impulse to return; to thread my backward way through all the catacombs, as the others had done; to go down where never men save they, the inconceivably doomed and accursed, had ever gone; to seek beneath that damnable compulsion a nether world that human thought can never picture. there was a black light, a soundless calling, in the vaults of my brain: the implanted sum-

mons of the Thing, like a permeating and sorcerous poison. It lured me to the subterranean door that was walled up by the dying people of Yoh-Vombis, to immure those hellish and immortal leeches, those dark parasites that engraft their own abominable life on the half-eaten brains of the dead. It called me to the depths beyond, where dwell the noisome, necromantic Ones, of whom the leeches, with all their powers of vampirism and diabolism, are but the merest minions. . . .

It was only the two Aihais who prevented me from going back. I struggled, I fought them insanely as they strove to retard me with their spongy arms; but I must have been pretty thoroughly exhausted from all the superhuman adventures of the day; and I went down once more, after a little, into fathomless nothingness, from which I floated out at long intervals, to realize that I was being carried across the desert toward Ignarh.

Well, that is all my story. I have tried to tell it fully and coherently, at a cost that would be unimaginable to the sane . . . to tell it before the madness falls upon me again, as it will very soon—as it is doing now. . . . Yes, I have told my story . . . and you have written it all out, haven't you? Now I must go back to Yoh-Vombis—back across the desert and down through all the catacombs to the vaster vaults beneath. Something is in my brain, that commands me and will direct me. . . . I tell you, I must go. . . . :

POSTSCRIPT

As an intern in the territorial hospital at Ignarh, I had charge of the singular case of Rodney Severn, the

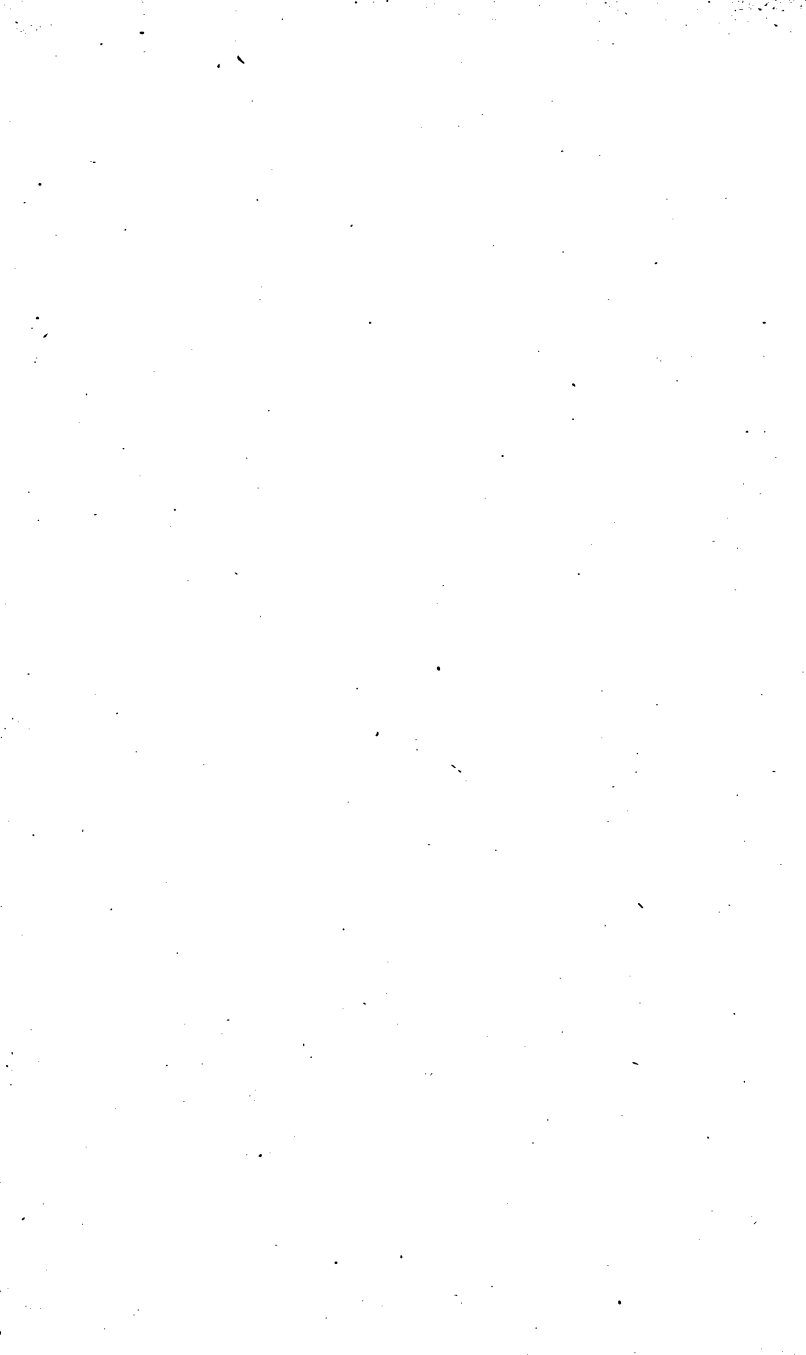
one surviving member of the Octave Expedition to Yoh-Vombis, and took down the above story from his dictation. Severn had been brought to the hospital by the Martian guides of the Expedition. He was suffering from a horribly lacerated and inflamed condition of the scalp and brow, and was wildly delirious part of the time and had to be held down in his bed during recurrent seizures of a mania whose violence was doubly inexplicable in view of his extreme debility.

The lacerations, as will have been learned from the story, were mainly self-inflicted. They were mingled with numerous small round wounds, easily distinguished from the knife-slashes, and arranged in regular circles, through which an unknown poison had been injected into Severn's scalp. The causation of these wounds was difficult to explain; unless one were to believe that Severn's story was true, and was no mere figment of his illness. Speaking for myself, in the light of what afterward occurred, I feel that I have no other resource than to believe it. There are strange things on the red planet; and I can only second the wish that was expressed by the doomed archaeologist in regard to future explorations.

The night after he had finished telling me his story, while another doctor than myself was supposedly on duty, Severn managed to escape from the hospital, doubtless in one of the strange seizures at which I have hinted: a most astonishing thing, for he had seemed weaker than ever after the long strain of his terrible narrative, and his demise had been hourly expected. More astonishing still, his bare footsteps were found in

the desert, going toward Yoh-Vombis, till they vanished in the path of a light sandstorm; but no trace of Severn himself has yet been discovered.

Phandiom



The Doom of Antarion

By profession, Francis Melchior was a dealer in antiques; by avocation, he was an astronomer. Thus he contrived to placate, if not to satisfy, two needs of a somewhat complex and unusual temperament. Through his occupation, he gratified in a measure his craving for all things that have been steeped in the mortuary shadows of dead ages, in the dusky amber flames of long-sunken suns; all things that have about them the irresoluble mystery of departed time. And through his avocation, he found a ready path to exotic realms in further space, to the only spheres where his fancy could dwell in freedom and his dreams could know contentment. For Melchior was one of those who are born with an immedicable distaste for all that is present or near at hand; one of those who have drunk too lightly of oblivion and have not wholly forgotten the transcendent glories of other aeons, and the worlds from which they were exiled into human birth; so that their furtive restless thoughts and dim, unquenchable longings return obscurely toward the vanishing shores of a lost heritage. The earth is too narrow for such, and the compass of mortal time is too brief; and paucity and

barrenness are everywhere; and in all places their lot is a never-ending weariness.

With a predisposition ordinarily so fatal to the acquisitive faculties, it was indeed remarkable that Melchior should have prospered at all in his business. His love of ancient things, of rare vases, paintings, furniture, jewels, idols and statues, made him readier to buy than to sell; and his sales were too often a source of secret heart-ache and regret. But somehow, in spite of all this, he had managed to attain a degree of financial comfort. By nature, he was something of a solitary, and was generally looked upon as eccentric. He had never cared to marry; he had made no intimate friends; and he lacked many of the interests, which, in the eyes of the average person, are supposed to characterize a normal human being.

Melchior's passion for antiquities and his devotion to the stars both dated from his childhood days. Now, in his thirty-first year, with increasing leisure and prosperity, he had turned an upper balcony of his suburban hill-top house into an amateur observatory. Here, with a new and powerful telescope, he studied the summer heavens night after night. He possessed little talent and less inclination for those recondite mathematical calculations which form so large a part of orthodox astronomy; but he had an intuitional grasp of the heavenly immensitudes, a mystic sensitivity toward all that is far off in space. His imagination roamed and adventured among the suns and nebulae; and for him, each tiny gleam of telescopic light appeared to tell its own story and invite him toward its own unique realm of ultramundane fantasy. He was not greatly concerned with

the names which astronomers have given to particular stars and constellations; but nevertheless, each of them possessed for him a separate individuality not to be mistaken for that of any other.

In especial, Melchior was drawn by one minute star in a wide-flung constellation south of the Milky Way. It was barely discernible to the naked eye; and even through his telescope, it gave an impression of cosmic solitude and remoteness such as he had never felt in any other orb. It allured him more than the moon-surrounded planets or the first-magnitude stars with their flaming spectra; and he returned to it again and again, forsaking for its lonely point of light the marvelous manifold rings of Saturn and the cloudy zone of Venus and the intricate coils of the great nebula of Andromeda.

Musing through many midnights on the attraction the star held for him, Melchior reasoned that in its narrow ray was the whole emanation of a sun and perhaps of a planetary system; that the secret of foreign worlds and even something of their history was implicit in that light, if one could only read the tale. And he longed to understand, and to know the far-woven thread of affinity which drew his attention so perennially to this particular orb. On each occasion when he looked, his brain was tantalized by obscure intimations of loveliness and wonder that were still a little beyond the reach of his boldest reveries, of his wildest dreams. And each time, they seemed a trifle nearer, and more attainable than before. And a strange, indeterminate expectancy began to mingle with the eagerness that prompted his evening visits to the balcony.

One midnight, when he was peering through the telescope, he fancied that the star looked a little larger and brighter than usual. Unable to account for this, in a mounting excitement he stared more intently than ever, and was suddenly seized by the unnatural idea that he was peering downward into a vast, vertiginous abyss, rather than toward the zenithal heavens. He felt that the balcony was no longer beneath his feet, but had somehow become inverted; and then, all at once, he was falling from it into the headlong ether, with a million thunders and flames about and behind him. For a brief while, he still seemed to see the star he had been watching, far down in the terrible Cimmerian void; and then he forgot, and could find it no more. There was the sickness of incalculable descent, an ever-swiftening torrent of vertigo not to be borne; and after moments or aeons (he could not tell which) the thunders and flames died out in ultimate darkness, in utmost silence; and he no longer knew that he was falling, and no longer retained any sort of sentiency.

2

When Melchior returned to consciousness, his first impulse was to clutch the arm of the chair in which he had been sitting beneath the telescope. It was the involuntary movement of one who has fallen in a dream. In a moment he realized the absurdity of this impulse; for he was not sitting in a chair at all; and his surroundings bore no manner of resemblance to the nocturnal balcony on which he had been seized by a strange vertigo, and from which he had seemed to fall and lose himself.

He was standing on a road paven with cyclopean blocks of gray stone—a road that ran interminably before him into the vague, tremendous vistas of an inconceivable world. There were low, funereal, drooping trees along the road, with sad-colored foliage and fruits of a deathly violet; and beyond the trees were range on range of monumental obelisks, of terraces and domes, of colossal multiform piles, that reached away in endless, countless perspectives toward an indistinct horizon. Over all, from an ebon-purple zenith, there fell in rich, unglorious rays the illumination of a blood-red sun. The forms and proportions of the labyrinthine mass of buildings were unlike anything that has been designed in terrestrial architecture; and, for an instant, Melchior was overwhelmed by their number and magnitude, by their monstrosity and bizarrerie. Then, as he looked once more, they were no longer monstrous, no longer bizarre; and he knew them for what they were, and knew the world upon whose road his feet were set, and the destination he was to seek, and the part he was fated to play. It all came back to him as inevitably as the actual deeds and impulses of life return to one who has thrown himself obviously for a while into some dramatic role that is foreign to his real personality. The incidents of his existence as Francis Melchior, though he still recalled them, had become obscure and meaningless and grotesque in the reawakening of a fuller state of entity, with its train of recovered reminiscences, of revived emotions and sensations. There was no strangeness, only the familiarity of a homecoming, in the fact that he had stepped into another condition of being, with its own environment, with its own past,

present and future, all of which would have been incognizably alien to the amateur astronomer who had peered a few moments before at a tiny star remote in sidereal space.

"Of course, I am Antarion," he mused. "Who else could I be?" The language of his thoughts was not English, nor any earthly tongue; but he was not surprized by his knowledge of this language; nor was he surprized when he looked down and saw that he was attired in a costume of somber moth-like red, of a style unknown to any human people or epoch. This costume, and certain differences in his physical personality that would have appeared rather odd a little previously, were quite as he expected them to be. He gave them only a cursory glance, as he reviewed in his mind the circumstances of the life he had now resumed.

He, Antarion, a renowned poet of the land of Charmalos, in the elder world that was known to its living peoples by the name of Phandiom, had gone on a brief journey to a neighboring realm. In the course of this journey, a distressing dream had befallen him—the dream of a tedious, unprofitable life as one Francis Melchior, in a quite unpleasant and peculiar sort of planet, lying somewhere on the farther side of the universe. He was unable to recall exactly when and where he had been beset by this dream; and he had no idea how long it had lasted: but at any rate, he was glad to be rid of it, and glad that he was now approaching his native city of Saddoth, where dwelt in her dark and splendid palace of past aeons the beautiful Thameera, whom he loved. Now, once more, after the obscure clouding of that dream, his mind was full of

the wisdom of Saddoth; and his heart was illumed by a thousand memories of Thameera; and was darkened at whiles by an old anxiety concerning her.

Not without reason had Melchior been fascinated by things antique and by things that are far away. For the world wherein he walked as Antarion was incomputably old, and the ages of its history were too many for remembrance; and the towering obelisks and piles along the paven road were the high tombs, the proud monuments of its immemorial dead, who had come to outnumber infinitely the living. In more than the pomp of earthly kings, the dead were housed in Phandiom; and their cities loomed insuperably vast, with never-ending streets and prodigious spires, above those lesser abodes wherein the living dwelt. And throughout Phandiom the bygone years were a tangible presence, an air that enveloped all; and the people were steeped in the crepuscular gloom of antiquity; and were wise with all manner of accumulated lore; and were subtle in the practise of strange refinements, of erudite perversities, of all that can shroud with artful opulence and grace and variety the bare uncouth cadaver of life, or hide from mortal vision the leering skull of death. And here, in Saddoth, beyond the domes and terraces and columns of the huge necropolis, like a necromantic flower wherein forgotten lilies live again, there bloomed the superb and sorrowful loveliness of Thameera.

3

Melchior, in his consciousness as the poet Antarion, was unable to remember a time when he had not loved

Thameera. She had been an ardent passion, an exquisite ideal, a mysterious delight and an enigmatic grief. He had adored her implicitly through all the selenic changes of her moods, in her childish petulance, her passionate or maternal tenderness, her sybilline silence, her merry or macabre whims; and most of all, perhaps, in the obscure sorrows and terrors that overwhelmed her at times.

He and she were the last representatives of noble ancient families, whose untabulated lineage was lost in the crowded cycles of Phandiom. Like all others of their race, they were imbued with the heritage of a complex and decadent culture; and upon their souls the never-lifting shadow of the necropoles had fallen from birth. In the life of Phandiom, in its atmosphere of elder time, of aeon-developed art, of epicureanism consummate and already a little moribund, Antarian had found an ample satisfaction for all the instincts of his being. He had lived as an intellectual sybarite; and by virtue of a half-primitive vigor, had not yet fallen upon the spiritual exhaustion and desolation, the dread implacable ennuï of racial senescence, that marked so many of his fellows.

Thameera was even more sensitive, more visionary by nature; and hers was the ultimate refinement that is close to an autumnal decay. The influences of the past, which were a source of poetic fruition to Antarian, were turned by her delicate nerves to pain and languor, to horror and oppression. The palace wherein she lived, and the very streets of Saddoth, were filled for her with emanations that welled from the sepulchral reservoirs of death; and the weariness of the innumerable dead

was everywhere; and evil or opiate presences came forth from the mausolean vaults, to crush and stifle her with the formless brooding of their wings. Only in the arms of Antarion could she escape them; and only in his kisses could she forget.

Now, after his journey (whose reason he could not quite remember) and after the curious dream in which he had imagined himself as Francis Melchior, Antarion was once more admitted to the presence of Thameera by slaves who were invariably discreet, being tongueless. In the oblique light of beryl and topaz windows, in the mauve and crimson gloom of heavy-folded tapestries, on a floor of marvelous mosaic wrought in ancient cycles, she came forward languidly to greet him. She was fairer than his memories, and paler than a blossom of the catacombs. She was exquisitely frail, voluptuously proud, with hair of a lunar gold and eyes of nocturnal brown that were pierced by fluctuating stars and circled by the dark pearl of sleepless nights. Beauty and love and sadness exhaled from her like a manifold perfume.

"I am glad you have come, Antarion, for I have missed you." Her voice was as gentle as an air that is borne among flowering trees, and melancholy as remembered music.

Antarion would have knelt, but she took him by the hand and led him to a couch beneath the intricately figured curtains. There the lovers sat and looked at each other in affectionate silence.

"Are all things well with you, Thameera?" The query was prompted by the anxious divination of love.

"No, all things are not well. Why did you go away?"

The wings of death and darkness are abroad, they hover more closely than ever; and shades more fearful than those of the past have fallen upon Saddoth. There have been strange perturbations in the aspect of the skies; and our astronomers, after much study and calculation, have announced the imminent doom of the sun. There remains to us but a single month of light and warmth, and then the sun will go out on the noontide heavens like an extinguished lamp, and eternal night will fall, and the chill of outer space will creep across Phandiom. Our people have gone mad with the predicted horror; and some of them are sunk in despairing apathy, and more have given themselves to frenzied revels and debaucheries. . . . Where have you been, Antarion? In what dream did you lose yourself, that you could forsake me so long?"

Antarion tried to comfort her. "Love is still ours," he said. "And even if the astronomers have read the skies aright, we have a month before us. And a month is much."

"Yes, but there are other perils, Antarion. Haspa the king has looked upon me with eyes of senile desire, and woos me assiduously with gifts, with vows and with threats. It is the sudden, inexorable whim of age and ennui, and the caprice of desperation. He is cruel, he is relentless, he is all-powerful."

"I will take you away," said Antarion. "We will flee together, and dwell among the sepulchers and the ruins, where none can find us. And love and ecstasy shall bloom like flowers of scarlet beneath their shadow; and we will meet the everlasting night in each other's arms; and thus we will know the utmost of mortal bliss."

4

Beneath the black midnight that hung above them like an imminence of colossal, unremoving wings, the streets of Saddoth were aflame with a million lights of yellow and cinnabar and cobalt and purple. Along the vast avenues, the gorge-deep alleys, and in and out of the stupendous olden palaces, temples and mansions, there poured the antic revelry, the tumultuous merriment of a night-long masquerade. Everyone was abroad, from Haspa the king and his sleek, sybaritic courtiers, to the lowliest mendicants and pariahs; and a rout of extravagant, unheard-of costumes, a melange of fantasies more various than those of an opium dream, seethed and eddied everywhere. As Thameera had said, the people were mad with the menace of doom foretold by the astronomers; and they sought to forget, in a swift and ever-mounting delirium of all the senses, their dread of the nearing night.

Late in the evening, Antarion left by a postern door the tall and gloomy mansion of his forefathers, and wended his way through the hysteric whirling of the throng toward Thameera's palace. He was garbed in apparel of an antique style, such as had not been worn for a score of centuries in Phandiom; and his whole head and face were enveloped in a painted mask designed to represent the peculiar physiognomy of a people now extinct. No one could have recognized him; nor could he, on his part, have recognized many of the revellers he met, no matter how well-known to him, for most of them were disguised in apparel no less outré,

and wore masks that were whimsical or absurd, or loathsome or laughable beyond conception. There were devils and empresses and deities, there were kings and necromancers from all the far, unfathomed ages of Phandiom, there were monsters of mediaeval or prehistoric types, there were things that had never been born or behold except in the minds of insane decadent artists, seeking to surpass the abnormalities of nature. Even the tomb had been drawn upon for inspiration, and shrouded mummies, worm-gnawed cadavers, promenaded among the living. All these masks were the screen of an orgiastic license without precedent or parallel.

All the needful preparations for flight from Saddoth had been made; and Antarion had left minute and careful instructions with his servants regarding certain essential matters. He knew from of old the ruthless, tyrannic temperament of Haspa, knew that the king would brook no opposition to the indulgence of any whim or passion, no matter how momentary. There was no time to be lost in leaving the city with Thameera.

He came by winding devious ways to the garden behind Thameera's palace. There, among the high and spectral lilies of deep or ashen hues, the bowed funereal trees with their fruit of subtle and opiate savor, she awaited him, clad in a costume whose antiquity matched his own, and which was no less impenetrable to recognition. After a brief murmur of greeting, they stole forth together from the garden and joined the oblivious throng. Antarion had feared that Thameera might be watched by the henchmen of Haspa; but there was no evidence of such watching, no one in sight who seemed to lurk or loiter; only the swift movement of an ever-

changing crowd, preoccupied with the quest of pleasure. In this crowd, he felt that they were safe.

However, through a scrupulous caution, they allowed themselves to be carried along for a while in the tide of the city's revel, before they sought the long arterial avenue that led to the gates. They joined in the singing of fescennine songs, they returned the bachannalian jests that were flung by passers-by, they drank the wines that were proffered them by public urn-bearers, they tarried when the throng tarried, moved when it moved.

Everywhere, there were wildly flaming lights, and the ribaldry of loud voices, and the strident moan or feverous pulsing of musical instruments. There were feasting in the great squares, and the doorways of immemorial houses poured out a flood of illumination, a tumult of laughter and melody, as they offered their hospitality to all who might choose to enter them. And in the huge temples of former aeons, delirious rites were done to the gods who stared forth with unchanging eyes of stone and metal to the hopeless heavens; and the priests and worshippers drugged themselves with terrible opiates, and sought the stupefying ecstasy of abandonment to an hysteria both carnal and devout.

At length Antarion and Thameera, by unobtrusive states, by many windings and turnings, began to approach the gates of Saddoth. For the first time in their history, these gates were unguarded; for, in the general demoralization, the sentinels had stolen away without fear of detection or reproof, to join the universal orgy. Here, in the outlying quarter, there were few people, and only the scattered flotsam of the revels; and the broad open space between the last houses and the city

wall was utterly abandoned. No one saw the lovers when they slipped like evanescent shadows through the grim yawning of the gates, and followed the gray road into an outer darkness thronged with the dim bulks of mausoleums and monuments.

Here, the stars that had been blinded by the flaring lights of Saddoth were clearly visible in the burnt-out sky. And presently, as the lovers went on, the two small ashen moons of Phandiom arose from behind the necropolises, and flung the despairing languor of their faint beams on the multitudinous domes and minarets of the dead. And beneath the twin moons, that drew their uncertain light from a dying sun, Antarion and Thameera doffed their masks, and looked at each other in a silence of unutterable love, and shared the first kiss of their month of ultimate delight.

5

For two days and nights, the lovers had fled from Saddoth. They had hidden by daylight among the mausoleums, they had traveled in darkness and by the doubtful glimmering of the moons, on roads that were little used, since they ran only to age-deserted cities lying in the ulterior tracts of Charmalos, in a land whose very soil had long become exhausted, and was now given over to the stealthy encroachment of the desert. And now they had come to their journey's end; for, mounting a low, treeless ridge, they saw below them the ruinous and forgotten roofs of Urbyzaun, which had lain unpeopled for more than a thousand years; and beyond the roofs, the black unlustrous lake

surrounded by hills of bare and wave-corroded rock, that had once been the inlet of a great sea.

Here, in the crumbling palace of the emperor Altanoman, whose high, tumultuous glories were now a failing legend, the slaves of Antarion had preceded them, bringing a supply of food and such comforts and luxuries as they would require in the interim before oblivion. And here they were secure from all pursuit; for Haspa, in the driven fever and goaded ennui of his last days, had doubtless turned to the satisfying of some other and less difficult caprice, and had already forgotten Thameera.

And now, for the lovers, began the life that was a brief epitome of all possible delight and despair. And, strangely enough, Thameera lost the vague fears that had tormented her, the dim sorrows that had obsessed, and was wholly happy in the caresses of Antarion. And, since there was so little time in which to express their love, to share their thoughts, their sentiments, their reveries, there was never enough said or enough done between them; and both were blissfully content.

But the swift, relentless days went by; and day by day, the red sun that circled above Phandiom was darkened by a tinge of the coming shadow; and chillness stole upon the quiet air; and the still heavens, where never clouds or winds or bird-wings passed, were ominous of doom. And day by day, Antarion and Thameera saw the dusking of the sun from a ruinous terrace above the dead lake; and night by night, they saw the paling of the ghostly moons. And their love became an intolerable sweetness, a thing too deep and dear to be borne by mortal heart or mortal flesh.

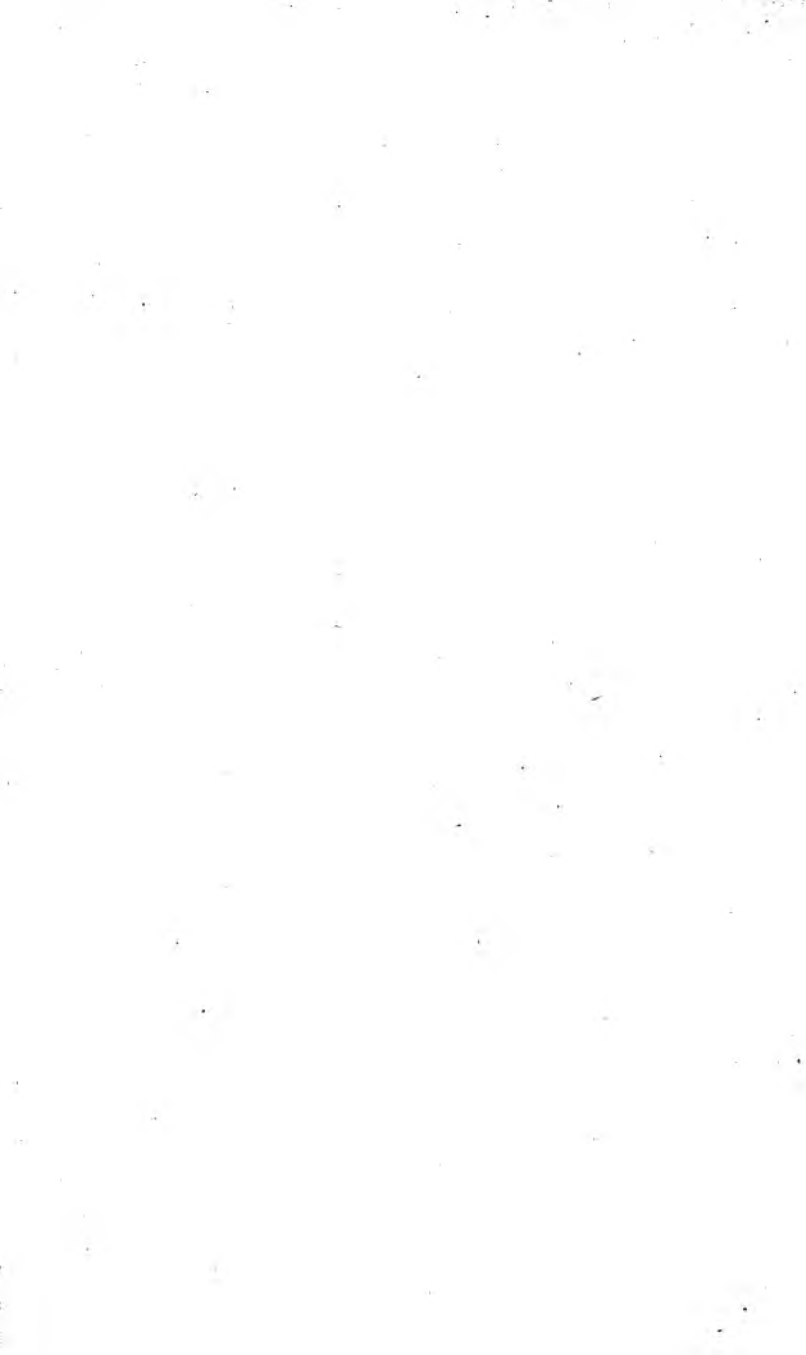
Mercifully, they had lost the strict count of time, and knew not the number of days that had passed, and thought that several more dawns and noons and eves of joyance were before them. They were lying together on a couch in the old palace—a marble couch that the slaves had strewn with luxurious fabrics—and were saying over and over some litany of love, when the sun was overtaken at high noon by the doom astronomers had foretold; when a slow twilight filled the palace, heavier than the umbrage wrought by any cloud, and was followed by a sudden wave of overwhelming ebon darkness, and the creeping cold of outer space. The slaves of Antarion moaned in the darkness; and the lovers knew that the end of all was at hand; and they clung to each other in despairing rapture, with swift, innumerable kisses, and murmured the supreme ecstasy of their tenderness and their desire; till the cold that had fallen from infinitude became a growing agony, and then a merciful numbness, and then an all encompassing oblivion.

6

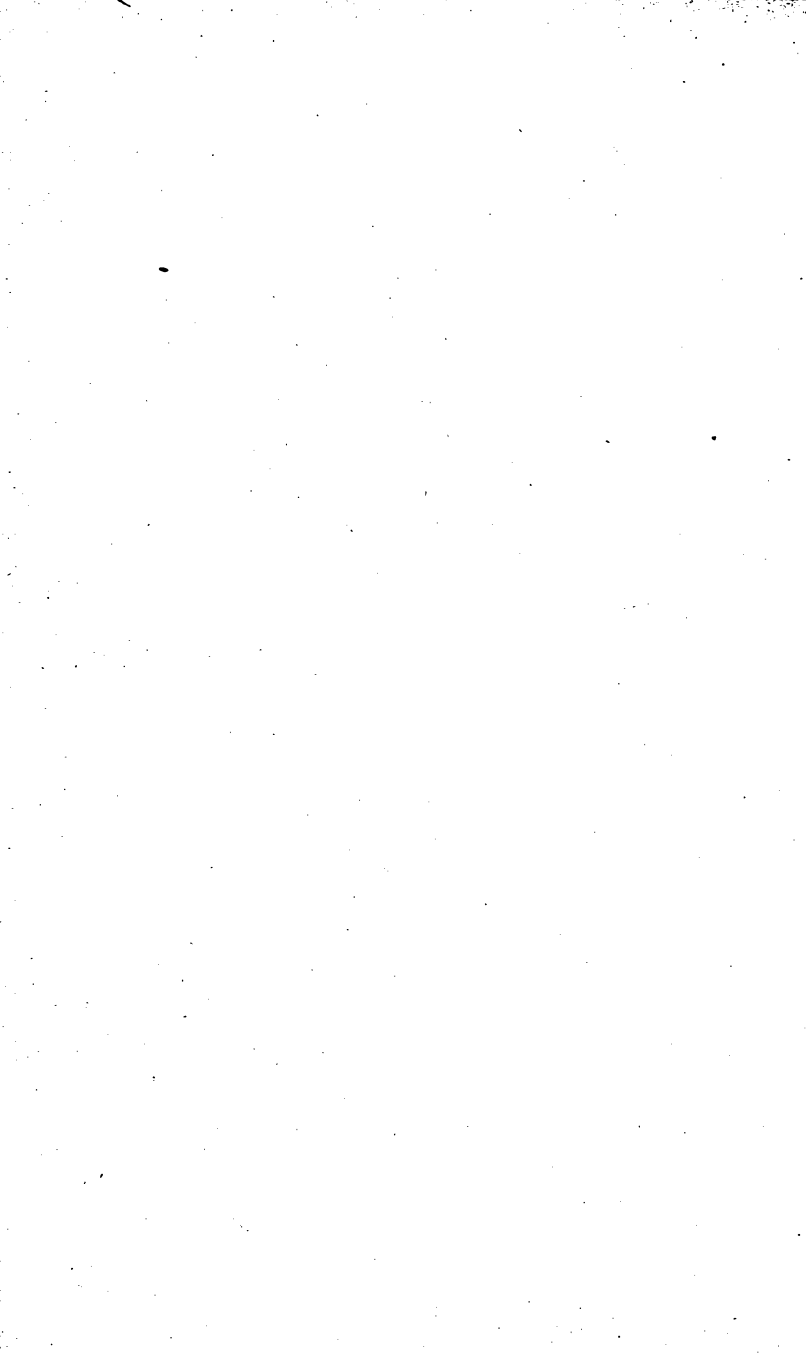
Francis Melchior awoke in his chair beneath the telescope. He shivered, for the air had grown chill; and when he moved, he found that his limbs were strangely stiff, as if he had been exposed to a more rigorous cold than that of the late summer night. The long and curious dream that he had undergone was inexpressibly real to him; and the thoughts, the desires, the fears and despairs of Antarion were still his. Mechanically, rather than through any conscious renewal of the impulses of

his earthly self, he fixed his eye to the telescope and looked for the star he had been studying when the premonitory vertigo had seized him. The configuration of the skies had hardly changed, the surrounding constellation was still high in the southeast; but, with a shock that became a veritable stupefaction, he saw that the star itself had disappeared.

Never, though he searched the heavens night after night through the alternation of many seasons, has he been able to find again the little far-off orb that drew him so inexplicably and irresistibly. He bears a double sorrow; and, though he has grown old and gray with the lentor of fruitless years, with the buying and selling of antiques and the study of the stars, Francis Melchior is still a little doubtful as to which is the real dream: his lifetime on earth, or the month in Phandiom below a dying sun, when, as the poet Antarion, he loved the superb and sorrowful beauty of Thameera. And always he is troubled by a dull regret that he should ever have awakened (if awakening it was) from the death that he died in the palace of Altanoman, with Thameera in his arms and Thameera's kisses on his lips.



Lophai



Smith's notes record that he finished writing "The Doom of Antarion" on April 6, 1930, and that it was his eighteenth story to be completed. *Weird Tales* took it for publication two years later.

"The Demon of the Flower," however, seems to have been a little too outré for Farnsworth Wright and so it appeared in *Astounding Stories*. Smith's log of completed stories gives the date of first writing as October 17, 1931; a second draft was finished on September 19, 1933. From this gap of time I gather *Weird Tales* rejected the first version and it sat on Smith's shelf for two years before *Astounding* indicated interest in the tale, perhaps requesting some revisions. This would account for the second draft date.

As for "The Monster of the Prophecy," which follows as the third of these non-cyclic tales, it was completed in December 1929, the year Smith suddenly started producing stories at a great rate, and it appeared in *Weird Tales* three years later. I was unable to secure a text of this tale until Robert A. W. Lowndes very kindly xeroxed it from his copy of the magazine and sent it to me; for that reason I wish to thank him in print for his friendly cooperation.

The Demon of the Flower

Not as the plants and flowers of Earth, growing peacefully beneath a simple sun, were the blossoms of the planet Lophai. Coiling and uncoiling in double dawns; tossing tumultuously under vast suns of jade green and balas-ruby orange; swaying and weltering in rich twilights, in auroa-curtained nights, they resembled fields of rooted serpents that dance eternally to an other-world music.

Many were small and furtive, and crept viper-wise on the ground. Others were tall as pythons, rearing superbly in hieratic postures to the jewelled light. Some grew with single or dual stems that burgeoned forth into hydra heads. And some were frilled and festooned with leaves that suggested the wings of flying lizards, the pennants of faery lances, the phylacteries of a strange sacerdotalism. Some appeared to bear the scarlet wattles of dragons; others were tongued as if with black flames or the coloured vapours that issue with weird writhings from out barbaric censers; and others still were armed with fleshy nets of tendrils, or with huge blossoms like bucklers perforated in battle. And all were equipped with venomous darts and fangs, all were alive, restless and sentient.

They were the lords of Lophai, and all other life existed by their sufferance. The people of the world had been their inferiors from unrecorded cycles; and even in the most primitive myths there was no suggestion that any other order of things had ever prevailed. And the plants themselves, together with the fauna and mankind of Lophai, gave immemorial obeisance to that supreme and terrible flower known as the Voorqual, in which a tutelary demon, more ancient than the twin suns, was believed to have made its immortal avatar.

The Voorqual was served by a human priesthood, chosen from amid the royalty and aristocracy of Lophai. In the heart of the chief city, Lospar, in an equatorial realm, it had grown from antiquity on the summit of a high pyramid of sable terraces that loomed over the town like the hanging gardens of some greater Babylon, crowded with the lesser but deadly floral forms. At the center of the broad apex, the Voorqual stood alone in a basin level with the surrounding platform of black mineral. The basin was filled with a compost in which the dust of royal mummies formed an essential ingredient.

The demon flower sprang from a bulb so encrusted with the growth of ages that it resembled a stone urn. Above this there rose the gnarled and mighty stalk that had displayed in earlier times the bifurcation of a mandrake, but whose halves had now grown together into a scaly, furrowed thing like the tail of some mythic sea-monster. The stalk was variegated with hues of greening bronze, of antique copper, with the livid blues and purples of fleshly corruption. It ended in a crown of still, blackish leaves, banded and spotted with poi-

sonous, metallic white, and edged with sharp serrations as of savage weapons. From below the crown issued a long, sinuous arm, scaled like the main stem, and serpentine downward and outward to terminate in the huge upright bowl of a bizarre blossom—as if the arm, in sardonic fashion, should hold out a hellish beggar's-cup.

Abhorrent and monstrous was the bowl—which, like the leaves, was legended to renew itself at intervals of a thousand years. It smouldered with sullen ruby at the base; it lightened into zones of dragon's-blood, into belts of the rose of infernal sunset, on the full, swelling sides; and it flamed at the rim to a hot yellowish nacarat red, like the ichor of salamanders. To one who dared peer within, the cup was lined with sepulchral violet, blackening toward the bottom, pitted with myriad pores, and streaked with turgescient veins of sulphurous green.

Swaying in a slow, lethal, hypnotic rhythm, with a deep and solemn sibilation, the Voorqual dominated the city of Lospar and the world Lophai. Below, on the tiers of the pyramid, the thronged ophidian plants kept time to this rhythm in their tossing and hissing. And far beyond Lospar, to the poles of the planet and in all its longitudes, the living blossoms obeyed the sovereign tempo of the Voorqual.

Boundless was the power exercised by this being over the people who, for want of a better name, I have called the humankind of Lophai. Myriad and frightful were the legends that had gathered through aeons about the Voorqual. And dire was the sacrifice demanded each year at the summer solstice by the demon: the filling of

its proffered cup with the life-blood of a priest or priestess, chosen from amid the assembled hierophants who passed before the Voorqual till the poised cup, inverted and empty, descended like a devil's miter on the head of one of their number.

Lunithi, king of the realms about Lospar, and high-priest of the Voorqual, was the last if not the first of his race to rebel against this singular tyranny. There were dim myths of some primordial ruler who had dared to refuse the required sacrifice; and whose people, in consequence, had been decimated by a mortal war with the serpentine plants which, obeying the angry demon, had uprooted themselves everywhere from the soil and had marched on the cities of Lophai, slaying or vampirizing all who fell in their way. Lunithi, from childhood, had obeyed implicitly and without question the will of the floral overlord; had offered the stated worship, had performed the necessary rites. To withhold them would have been blasphemy. He had not dreamt of rebellion till, at the time of the annual choosing of the victim, and thirty suns before the date of his nuptials with Nala, priestess of the Voorqual, he saw the hesitant, inverted grail come down in deathly crimson on the fair head of his betrothed.

A sorrowful consternation, a dark, sullen dismay which he sought to smother in his heart, was experienced by Lunithi. Nala, dazed and resigned, in a mystic inertia of despair, accepted her doom without question; but a blasphemous doubt formed itself surreptitiously in the mind of the king.

Trembling at his own impiety, he asked himself if there was not some way in which he could save Nala,

could cheat the demon of its ghastly tribute. To do this, and escape with impunity to himself and his subjects, he knew that he must strike at the very life of the monster, which was believed to be deathless and invulnerable. It seemed impious even to wonder concerning the truth of this belief, which had long assumed the force of a religious tenet and was held unanimously.

Amid such reflections, Lunithi remembered an old myth about the existence of a neutral and independent being known as the Occlith: a demon coeval with the Voorqual, and allied neither to man nor the flower creatures. This being was said to swell beyond the desert of Aphom, in the otherwise unpeopled mountains of white stone above the habitat of the ophidian blossoms. In latter days no man had seen the Occlith, for the journey through Aphom was not lightly to be undertaken. But this entity was supposed to be immortal; and it kept apart and alone, meditating upon all things but interfering never with their processes. However, it was said to have given, in earlier times, valuable advice to a certain king who had gone forth from Lospar to its lair among the white crags.

In his grief and desperation, Lunithi resolved to seek the Occlith and question it anent the possibility of slaying the Voorqual. If, by any mortal means, the demon could be destroyed, he would remove from Lophai the long-established tyranny whose shadow fell upon all things from the sable pyramid.

It was necessary for him to proceed with utmost caution, to confide in no one, to veil his very thoughts at all times from the occult scrutiny of the Voorqual. In the interim of five days between the choosing of the

victim and the consummation of the sacrifice, he must carry out his mad plan.

Unattended, and disguised as a simple hunter of beasts, he left his palace during the short three-hour night of universal slumber, and stole forth toward the desert of Aphom. In the dawn of the balas-ruby sun, he had reached the pathless waste, and was toiling painfully over its knife-sharp ridges of dark stone, like the waves of a mounting ocean petrified in storm.

Soon the rays of the green sun were added to those of the other, and Aphom became a painted inferno through which Lunithi dragged his way, crawling from scarp to glassy scarp or resting at whiles in the coloured shadows. There was no water anywhere; but swift mirages gleamed and faded; and the sifting sand appeared to run like rills in the bottom of deep valleys. At setting of the first sun, he came within sight of the pale mountains beyond Aphom, towering like cliffs of frozen foam above the desert's dark sea. They were tinged with transient lights of azure, of jade and orange in the going of the yellow-red orb and the westward slanting of its binary. Then the lights melted into beryl and tourmaline, and the green sun was regnant over all, till it too went down, leaving a twilight whose colours were those of sea-water. In the gloom, Lunithi reached the foot of the pale crags; and there, exhausted, he slept till the second dawn.

Rising, he began his escalade of the white mountains. They rose bleak and terrible before him against the hidden suns, with cliffs that were like the sheer terraces of gods. Like the king who had preceded him in the ancient myth, he found a precarious way that led up-

ward through narrow, broken chasms. At last he came to the vaster fissure, riving the heart of the white range, by which it was alone possible to reach the legendary lair of the Occlith.

The chasm's beetling walls rose higher and higher above him, shutting out the suns but creating with their whiteness a wan and deathly glimmer to illumine his way. The fissure was such as might have been cloven by the sword of a macrocosmic giant. It led downward, steepening ever, like a wound that pierced to the heart of Lophai.

Lunithi, like all of his race, was able to exist for prolonged periods without other nutriment than sunlight and water. He had brought with him a metal flask, filled with the aqueous element of Lophai, from which he drank sparingly as he descended the chasm; for the white mountains were waterless, and he feared to touch the pools and streams of unknown fluids upon which he came at intervals in the dusk. There were sanguine-coloured springs that fumed and bubbled before him, to vanish in fathomless rifts; and brooklets of mercurial metal, green, blue or amber, that wound beside him like liquescent serpents and then slipped away into dark caverns. Acrid vapours rose from clefts in the chasm; and Lunithi felt himself among strange chemistries of nature. In this fantastic world of stone, which the plants of Lophai could never invade, he seemed to have gone beyond the Voorqual's grim, diabolic tyranny.

At last he came to a clear, watery pool, occupying almost the entire width of the chasm. In passing it he was forced to scramble along a narrow, insecure ledge

at one side. A fragment of the marble stone, breaking away beneath his footfall, dropped into the pool as he gained the opposite edge; and the hueless liquid foamed and hissed like a thousand vipers. Wondering as to its properties, and fearful of the venomous hissing, which did not subside for some time, Lunithi hurried on; and came after an interval to the fissure's end.

Here he emerged in the huge crater-like pit that was the home of the Occlith. Fluted and columned walls went up to a stupendous height on all sides; and the sun of orange ruby, now at zenith, was pouring down a vertical cataract of gorgeous fires and shadows.

Addorsed against the further wall of the pit in an upright posture, he beheld that being known as the Occlith, which had the likeness of a high cruciform pillar of blue mineral, shining with its own isoteric luster. Going forward he prostrated himself before the pillar; and then, in accents that quavered with a deep awe, he ventured to ask the desired oracle.

For awhile the Occlith maintained its aeon-old silence. Peering timidly, the king perceived the twin lights of mystic silver that brightened and faded with a slow, rhythmic pulsation in the arms of the blue cross. Then, from the lofty, shining thing, there issued a voice that was like the tinkling of mineral fragments lightly clashed together, but which somehow shaped itself into articulate words.

"It is possible," said the Occlith, "to slay the plant known as the Voorqual, in which an elder demon has its habitation. Though the flower has attained millennial age, it is not necessarily immortal: for all things have their proper term of existence and decay; and nothing

has been created without its corresponding agency of death. . . . I do not advise you to slay the plant . . . but I can furnish you with the information which you desire. In the mountain chasm through which you came to seek me, there flows a hueless spring of mineral poison, deadly to all the ophidian plant-life of this world. . . .”

The Occlith went on, and told Lunithi the method by which the poison should be prepared and administered. The chill, toneless, tinkling voice concluded:

“I have answered your question. If there is anything more that you wish to learn, it would be well to ask me now.”

Prostrating himself again, Lunithi gave thanks to the Occlith; and, considering that he had learned all that was requisite, he did not avail himself of the opportunity to question further the strange entity of living stone. And the Occlith, cryptic and aloof in its termless, impenetrable meditation, apparently saw fit to vouchsafe nothing more except in answer to a direct query.

Withdrawing from the marble-walled abyss, Lunithi returned in haste along the chasm; till, reaching the pool of which the Occlith had spoken, he paused to empty his water-flask and fill it with the angry, hissing liquid. Then he resumed his homeward journey.

At the end of two days, after incredible fatigues and torments in the blazing hell of Aphom, he reached Lospar in the time of darkness and slumber, as when he had departed. Since his absence had been unannounced, it was supposed that he had retired to the underground adyta below the pyramid of the Voorqual for purposes of prolonged meditation, as was sometimes his wont.

In alternate hope and trepidation, dreading the mis-

carriage of his plan and shrinking still from its audacious impiety, Lunithi awaited the night preceding that double dawn of summer solstice when, in a secret room of the black pyramid, the monstrous offering was to be made ready. Nala would be slain by a fellow-priest or priestess, chosen by lot, and her life-blood would drip from the channeled altar into a great cup; and the cup would then be borne with solemn rites to the Voorqual and its contents poured into the evilly supplicative bowl of the sanguinated blossom.

He saw little of Nala during that interim. She was more withdrawn than ever, and seemed to have consecrated herself wholly to the coming doom. To no one—and least of all to his beloved—did Lunithi dare to hint a possible prevention of sacrifice.

There came the dreaded eve, with a swiftly changing twilight of jewelled hues that turned to a darkness hung with auroral flame. Lunithi stole across the sleeping city and entered the pyramid whose blackness towered massively amid the frail architecture of buildings that were little more than canopies and lattices of stone. With infinite care and caution he made the preparations prescribed by the Occlith. Into the huge sacrificial cup of black metal, in a room lit with stored sunlight, he emptied the seething, sibilant poison he had brought with him from the white mountains. Then, opening adroitly a vein in one of his arms, he added a certain amount of his own life-fluid to the lethal potion, above whose foaming crystal it floated like a magic oil, without mingling; so that the entire cup, to all appearance, was filled with the liquid most acceptable to the Satanic blossom.

Bearing in his hands the black grail, Lunithi ascended a hewn stairway that led to the Voorqual's presence. His heart quailing, his senses swooning in chill gulfs of terror, he emerged on the lofty summit above the shadowy town.

In a luminous azure gloom, against the weird and iridescent streamers of light that foreran the double dawn, he saw the dreamy swaying of the monstrous plant, and heard its somnolent hissing that was answered drowsily by myriad blossoms on the tiers below. A nightmare oppression, black and tangible, seemed to flow from the pyramid and to lie in stagnant shadow on all the lands of Lophai.

Aghast at his own temerity, and deeming that his shrouded thoughts would surely be understood as he drew nearer, or that the Voorqual would be suspicious of an offering brought before the accustomed hour, Lunithi made obeisance to his floral suzerain. The Voorqual vouchsafed no sign that it had deigned to perceive his presence; but the great flower-cup, with its flaring crimsons dulled to garnet and purple in the twilight, was held forward as if in readiness to receive the hideous gift.

Breathless, and fainting with religious fear, in a moment of suspense that seemed eternal, Lunithi poured the blood-mantled poison into the cup. The venom boiled and hissed like a wizard's brew as the thirsty flower drank it up; and Lunithi saw the scaled arm draw back, tilting its demon grail quickly, as if to repudiate the doubtful draught.

It was too late; for the poison had been absorbed by the blossom's porous lining. The tilting motion changed

in midair to an agonized writhing of the reptilian arm; and then the Voorqual's huge, scaly stalk and pointed leaf-crown began to toss in a deathly dance, waving darkly against the auroral curtains of morn. Its deep hissing sharpened to an insupportable note, fraught with the pain of a dying devil; and looking down from the platform edge on which he crouched to avoid the swaying growth, Lunithi saw that the lesser plants on the terraces were now tossing in a mad unison with their master. Like noises in an ill dream, he heard the chorus of their tortured sibilations.

He dared not look again at the Voorqual, till he became aware of a strange silence, and saw that the blossoms below had ceased to writhe and were drooping limply on their stems. Then, incredulous, he knew that the Voorqual was dead.

Turning in triumph mingled with horror, he beheld the flaccid stalk that had fallen prone on its bed of unholy compost. He saw the sudden withering of the stiff, sworded leaves, of the gross and hellish cup. Even the stony bulb appeared to collapse and crumble before his eyes. The entire stem, its evil colours fading swiftly, shrank and fell in upon itself like a sere, empty serpent-skin.

At the same time, in some obscure manner, Lunithi was still aware of a presence that brooded above the pyramid. Even in the death of the Voorqual, it seemed to him that he was not alone. Then, as he stood and waited, fearing he knew not what, he felt the passing of a cold and unseen thing in the gloom—a thing that flowed across his body like the thick coils of some enormous python, without sound, in dark, clammy un-

dulations. A moment more and it was gone; and Lunithi no longer felt the brooding presence.

He turned to go; but it seemed that the dying night was full of an unconceived terror that gathered before him as he went down the long, somber stairs. Slowly he descended; and a weird despair was upon him. He had slain the Voorqual, had seen it wither in death. Yet he could not believe the thing he had done; the lifting of the ancient doom was still no more than an idle myth.

The twilight brightened as he passed through the slumbering city. According to custom, no one would be abroad for another hour. Then the priests of the Voorqual would gather for the annual blood-offering.

Midway between the pyramid and his own palace, Lunithi was more than startled to meet the maiden Nala. Pale and ghostly, she glided by him with a swift and swaying movement almost serpentine, which differed oddly from her habitual languor. Lunithi dared not accost her when he saw her shut, unheeding eyes, like those of a somnambulist; and he was awed and troubled by the strange ease, the unnatural surety of her motion, which reminded him of something which he feared to remember. In a turmoil of fantastic doubt and apprehension, he followed her.

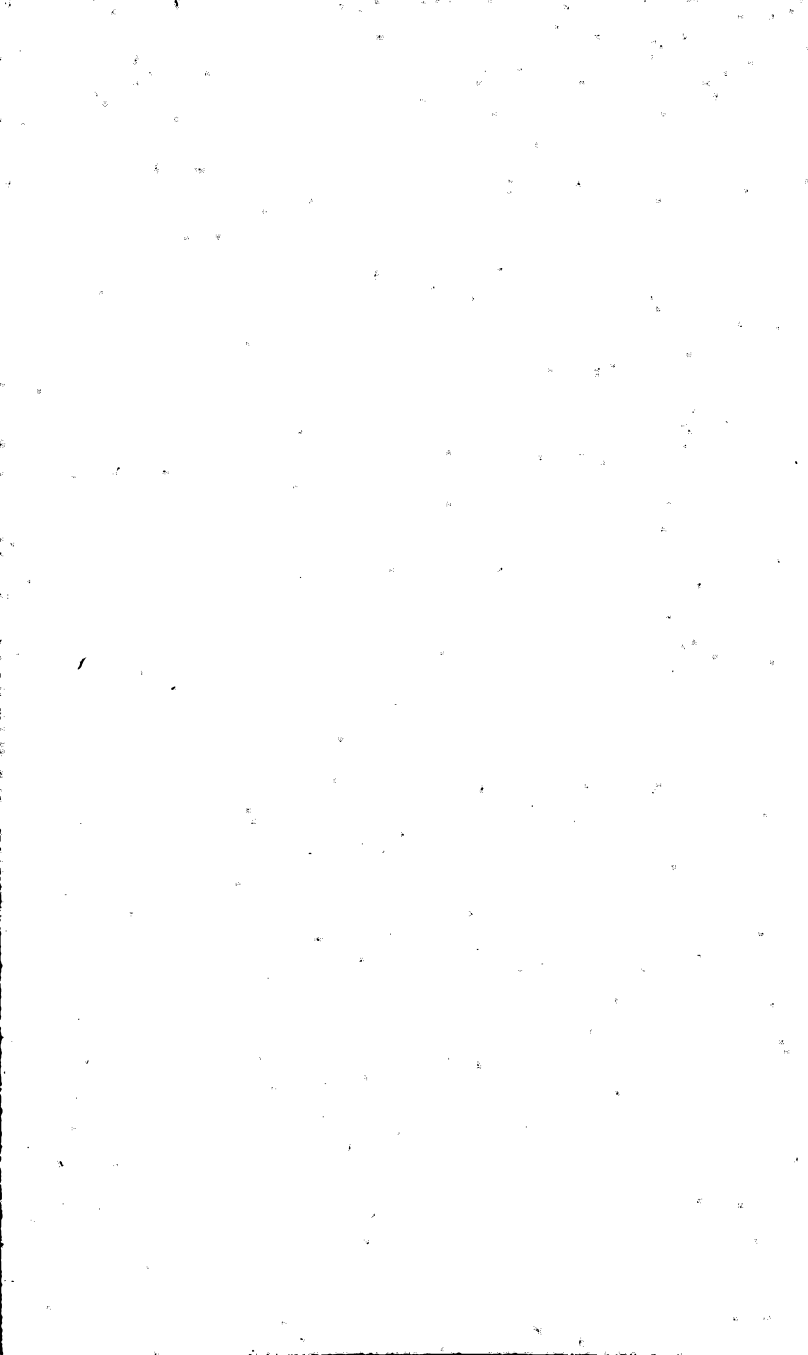
Threading the exotic maze of Lospar with the fleet and sinuous glide of a homing serpent, Nala entered the sacred pyramid. Lunithi, less swift than she, had fallen behind; and he knew not where she had gone in the myriad vaults and chambers; but a dark and fearsome intuition drew his steps without delay to the platform of the summit.

He knew not what he should find; but his heart was

drugged with an esoteric hopelessness; and he was aware of no surprise when he came forth in the varicolored dawn and beheld the thing which awaited him.

The maiden Nala—or that which he knew to be Nala—was standing in the basin of evil compost, above the withered remains of the Voorqual. She had undergone—was still undergoing—a monstrous and diabolic metamorphosis. Her frail, slight body had assumed a long and dragon-like shape, and the tender skin was marked off in incipient scales that darkened momentarily with a mottling of baleful hues. Her head was no longer recognizable as such, and the human lineaments were flaring into a weird semi-circle of pointed leaf-buds. Her lower limbs had joined together, had rooted themselves in the ground. One of her arms was becoming a part of the reptilian bole; and the other was lengthening into a scaly stem that bore the dark-red bud of a sinister blossom.

More and more the monstrosity took on the similitude of the Voorqual; and Lunithi, crushed by the ancient awe and dark, terrible faith of his ancestors, could feel no longer any doubt of its true identity. Soon there was no trace of Nala in the thing before him, which began to sway with a sinuous, python-like rhythm, and to utter a deep and measured sibilation, to which the plants on the lower tiers responded. He knew then that the Voorqual had returned to claim its sacrifice and preside forever above the city Lospar and the world Lophai.



Satabor



The Monster of the Prophecy

A dismal, fog-dank afternoon was turning into a murky twilight when Theophilus Alvor paused on Brooklyn Bridge to peer down at the dim river with a shudder of sinister surmise. He was wondering how it would feel to cast himself into the chill, turbid waters, and whether he could summon up the necessary courage for an act which, he had persuaded himself, was now becoming inevitable as well as laudable. He felt that he was too weary, sick and disheartened to go on with the evil dream of existence.

From any human standpoint, there was doubtless abundant reason for Alvor's depression. Young, and full of unquenched visions and desires, he had come to Brooklyn from an upstate village three months before, hoping to find a publisher for his writings; but his old-fashioned classic verses, in spite (or because) of their high imaginative fire, had been unanimously rejected both by magazines and book-firms. Though Alvor had lived frugally and had chosen lodgings so humble as almost to constitute the proverbial poetic garret, the small sum of his savings was now exhausted. He was not only quite penniless, but his clothes were so worn as to be no longer presentable in editorial offices,

and the soles of his shoes were becoming rapidly non-existent from the tramping he had done. He had not eaten for days, and his last meal, like the several preceding ones, had been at the expense of his soft-hearted Irish landlady.

For more reasons than one, Alvor would have preferred another death than that of drowning. The foul and icy waters were not inviting from an aesthetic viewpoint; and in spite of all he had heard to the contrary, he did not believe that such a death could be anything but painful and disagreeable. By choice he would have selected a sovereign Oriental opiate, whose insidious slumber would have led through a realm of gorgeous dreams to the gentle night of an ultimate oblivion; or, failing this, a deadly poison of merciful swiftness. But such Lethean media are not readily obtainable by a man with an empty purse.

Damning his own lack of forethought in not reserving enough money for such an eventuation, Alvor shuddered on the twilight bridge, and looked at the dismal waters, and then at the no less dismal fog through which the troubled lights of the city had begun to break. And then, through the instinctive habit of a countrybred person who is also imaginative and beauty-seeking, he looked at the heavens above the city to see if any stars were visible. He thought of his recent *Ode to Antares*, which, unlike his earlier productions, was written in *vers libre* and had a strong modernistic irony mingled with its planturous lyricism. It had, however, proved as unsalable as the rest of his poems. Now, with a sense of irony far more bitter than that which he had put into his ode, he looked for the ruddy spark of

Antares itself, but was unable to find it in the sodden sky. His gaze and his thoughts returned to the river.

"There is no need for that, my young friend," said a voice at his elbow. Alvor was startled not only by the words and by the clairvoyance they betrayed, but also by something that was unanalyzably strange in the tones of the voice that uttered them. The tones were both refined and authoritative; but in them there was a quality which, for lack of more precise words or imagery, he could think of only as metallic and unhuman. While his mind wrestled with swift-born unseizable fantasies, he turned to look at the stranger who had accosted him.

The man was neither uncommonly nor disproportionately tall; and he was modishly dressed, with a long overcoat and top hat. His features were not unusual, from what could be seen of them in the dusk, except for his full-lidded and burning eyes, like those of some nyctalopic animal. But from him there emanated a palpable sense of things that were inconceivably strange and terrifying and remote—a sense that was more patent, more insistent than any impression of mere form and odor and sound could have been, and which was well-nigh tactual in its intensity.

"I repeat," continued the man, "that there is no necessity for you to drown yourself in that river. A vastly different fate can be yours, if you choose. . . . In the meanwhile, I shall be honored and delighted if you will accompany me to my house, which is not far away."

In a daze of astonishment preclusive of all analytical thought, or even of any clear cognizance of where he

was going or what was happening, Alvor followed the stranger for several blocks in the swirling fog. Hardly knowing how he had come there, he found himself in the library of an old house which must in its time have had considerable pretensions to aristocratic dignity, for the paneling, carpet and furniture were all antique and were both rare and luxurious.

The poet was left alone for a few minutes in the library. Then his host reappeared and led him to a dining-room where an excellent meal for two had been brought in from a neighboring restaurant. Alvor, who was faint with inanition, ate with no attempt to conceal his ravening appetite, but noticed that the stranger made scarcely even a pretense of touching his own food. With a manner preoccupied and distrait, the man sat opposite Alvor, giving no more ostensible heed to his guest than the ordinary courtesies of a host required.

"We will talk now," said the stranger, when Alvor had finished. The poet, whose energies and mental faculties had been revived by the food, became bold enough to survey his host with a frank attempt at appraisal. He saw a man of indefinite age, whose lineaments and complexion were Caucasian, but whose nationality he was unable to determine. The eyes had lost something of their weird luminosity beneath the electric light, but nevertheless they were most remarkable, and from them there poured a sense of unearthly knowledge and power and strangeness not to be formulated by human thought or conveyed in human speech. Under his scrutiny, vague, dazzling, intricate unshapable images rose on the dim borders of the poet's mind and fell back into oblivion ere he could confront them. Apparently with-

out rime or reason, some lines of his *Ode to Antares* returned to him, and he found that he was repeating them over and over beneath his breath:

"Star of strange hope,
Pharos beyond our desperate mire,
Lord of unscalable gulfs,
Lamp of unknowable life."

The hopeless, half-satiric yearning for another sphere which he had expressed in this poem, haunted his thoughts with a weird insistence.

"Of course, you have no idea who or what I am," said the stranger, "though your poetic intuitions are groping darkly toward the secret of my identity. On my part, there is no need for me to ask you anything, since I have already learned all that there is to learn about your life, your personality, and the dismal predicament from which I am now able to offer you a means of escape. Your name is Theophilus Alvor, and you are a poet whose classic style and romantic genius are not likely to win adequate recognition in this age and land. With an inspiration more prophetic than you dream, you have written, among other masterpieces, a quite admirable *Ode to Antares*."

"How do you know all this?" cried Alvor.

"To those who have the sensory apparatus with which to perceive them, thoughts are no less audible than spoken words. I can hear your thoughts, so you will readily understand that there is nothing surprising in my possession of more or less knowledge concerning you."

"But who are you?" exclaimed Alvor. "I have heard

of people who could read the minds of others; but I did not believe that there was any human being who actually possessed such powers."

"I am not a human being," rejoined the stranger, "even though I have found it convenient to don the semblance of one for a while, just as you or another of your race might wear a masquerade costume. Permit me to introduce myself: my name, as nearly as can be conveyed in the phonetics of your world, is Vizaphmal, and I have come from a planet of the far-off mighty sun that is known to you as Antares. In my own world, I am a scientist, though the more ignorant classes look upon me as a wizard. In the course of profound experiments and researches, I have invented a device which enables me at will to visit other planets, no matter how remote in space. I have sojourned for varying intervals in more than one solar system; and I have found your world and its inhabitants so quaint and curious and monstrous that I have lingered here a little longer than I intended, because of my taste for the bizarre—a taste which is ineradicable, though no doubt reprehensible. It is now time for me to return: urgent duties call me, and I cannot tarry. But there are reasons why I should like to take with me to my world a member of your race; and when I saw you on the bridge tonight, it occurred to me that you might be willing to undertake such an adventure. You are, I believe, utterly weary of the sphere in which you find yourself, since a little while ago you were ready to depart from it into the unknown dimension that you call death. I can offer you something much more agreeable and diversified than death, with a scope of sensation, a potentiality of experience beyond

anything of which you have had even the faintest intimation in the poetic reveries looked upon as extravagant by your fellows."

Again and again, while listening to this long and singular address, Alvor seemed to catch in the tones of the voice that uttered it a supervening resonance, a vibration of overtones beyond the compass of a mortal throat. Though perfectly clear and correct in all details of enunciation, there was a hint of vowels and consonants not to be found in any terrestrial alphabet. However, the logical part of his mind refused to accept entirely these intimations of the supermundane; and he was now seized by the idea that the man before him was some new type of lunatic.

"Your thought is natural enough, considering the limitations of your experience," observed the stranger calmly. "However, I can easily convince you of its error by revealing myself to you in my true shape."

He made the gesture of one who throws off a garment. Alvor was blinded by an insufferable blaze of light, whose white glare, emanating in huge beams from an orb-like center, filled the entire room and seemed to pass illimitably beyond through dissolving walls. When his eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw before him a being who had no conceivable likeness to his host. This being was more than seven feet in height, and had no less than five intricately jointed arms and three legs that were equally elaborate. His head, on a long, swan-like neck, was equipped not only with visual, auditory, nasal and oral organs of unfamiliar types, but had several appendages whose use was not readily to be determined. His three eyes,

obliquely set and with oval pupils, rayed forth a green phosphorescence; the mouth, or what appeared to be such, was very small and had the lines of a downward-curving crescent; the nose was rudimentary, though with finely wrought nostrils; in lieu of eyebrows, he had a triple series of semi-circular markings on his forehead, each of a different hue; and above his intellectually shapen head, above the tiny drooping ears with their complex lobes, there towered a gorgeous comb of crimson, not dissimilar in form to the crest on the helmet of a Grecian warrior. The head, the limbs and the whole body were mottled with interchanging lunes and moons of opalescent colors, never the same for a moment in their unresting flux and reflux.

Alvor had the sensation of standing on the rim of prodigious gulfs, on a new earth beneath new heavens; and the vistas of illimitable horizons, fraught with the multitudinous terror and manifold beauty of an imagery no human eye had ever seen, hovered and wavered and flashed upon him with the same unstable fluorescence as the lunar variegations of the body at which he stared with such stupefaction. Then, in a little while, the strange light seemed to withdraw upon itself, retracting all its beams to a common center, and faded in a whirl of darkness. When this darkness had cleared away, he saw once more the form of his host, in conventional garb, with a slight ironic smile about his lips.

"Do you believe me now?" Vizaphmal queried.

"Yes, I believe you."

"Are you willing to accept my offer?"

"I accept it." A thousand questions were forming in

Alvor's mind, but he dared not ask them. Divining these questions, the stranger spoke as follows:

"You wonder how it is possible for me to assume a human shape. I assure you, it is merely a matter of taking thought. My mental images are infinitely clearer and stronger than those of any Earth-being, and by conceiving myself as a man, I can appear to you and your fellows as such.

"You wonder also as to the *modus operandi* of my arrival on Earth. This I shall now show and explain to you, if you will follow me."

He led the way to an upper storey of the old mansion. Here, in a sort of attic, beneath a large skylight in the southward-sloping roof, there stood a curious mechanism, wrought of a dark metal which Alvor could not identify. It was a tall, complicated framework with many transverse bars and two stout upright rods terminating at each end in a single heavy disk. These disks seemed to form the main portions of the top and bottom.

"Put your hand between the bars," commanded Alvor's host.

Alvor tried to obey this command, but his fingers met with an adamantine obstruction, and he realized that the intervals of the bars were filled with an unknown material clearer than glass or crystal.

"You behold here," said Vizaphmal, "an invention which, I flatter myself, is quite unique anywhere this side of the galactic suns. The disks at top and bottom are a vibratory device with a twofold use; and no other material than that of which they are wrought would have the same properties, the same achievable rates of

vibration. When you and I have locked ourselves within the framework, as we shall do anon, a few revolutions of the lower disk will have the effect of isolating us from our present environment, and we shall find ourselves in the midst of what is known to you as space, or ether. The vibrations of the upper disk, which we shall then employ are of such potency as to annihilate space itself in any direction desired. Space, like everything else in the atomic universe, is subject to laws of integration and dissolution. It was merely a matter of finding the vibrational power that would effect this dissolution; and, by untiring research, by ceaseless experimentation, I located and isolated the rare metallic elements which, in a state of union, are capable of this power."

While the poet was pondering all he had seen and heard, Vizaphmal touched a tiny knob, and one side of the framework swung open. He then turned off the electric light in the garret, and simultaneously with its extinction, a ruddy glow was visible in the interior of the machine, serving to illumine all the parts, but leaving the room around it in darkness. Standing beside his invention. Vizaphmal looked at the skylight, and Alvor followed his gaze. The fog had cleared away and many stars were out, including the red gleam of Antares, now high in the south. The stranger was evidently making certain preliminary calculations, for he moved the machine a little after peering at the star, and adjusted a number of fine wires in the interior, as if he were tuning some stringed instrument.

At last he turned to Alvor.

"Everything is now in readiness," he announced. "If

you are still prepared to accompany me, we will take our departure."

Alvor was conscious of an unexpected coolness and fortitude as he answered: "I am at your service." The unparalleled occurrences and disclosures of the evening, the well-nigh undreamable imminence of a plunge across untold immensitude, such as no man had been privileged to dare before, had really benumbed his imagination, and he was unable at the moment to conceive the true awesomeness of what he had undertaken.

Vizaphmal indicated the place where Alvor was to stand in the machine. The poet entered, and assumed a position between one of the upright rods and the side, opposite Vizaphmal. He found that a layer of the transparent material was interposed between his feet and the large disk in which the rods were based. No sooner had he stationed himself, than, with a celerity and an utter silence that were uncanny, the framework closed upon itself with hermetic tightness, till the jointure where it had opened was no longer detectable.

"We are now in a sealed compartment," explained the Antarean, "into which nothing can penetrate. Both the dark metal and the crystalline are substances that refuse the passage of heat and cold, of air and ether, or of any known cosmic ray, with the one exception of light itself, which is admitted by the clear metal."

When he ceased, Alvor realized that they were walled about with an insulating silence utter and absolute as that of some intersidereal void. The traffic in the streets without, the rumbling and roaring and jarring of the great city, so loud a minute before, might have been

a million miles away in some other world for all that he could hear or feel of its vibration.

In the red glow that pervaded the machine, emanating from a source he could not discover; the poet gazed at his companion. Vizaphmal had now resumed his Antarean form, as if all necessity for a human disguise were at an end, and he towered above Alvor, glorious with intermerging zones of fluctuant colors, where hues the poet had not seen in any spectrum were simultaneous or intermittent with flaming blues and coruscating emeralds and amethysts and fulgurant purples and vermilions and saffrons. Lifting one of his five arms, which terminated in two finger-like appendages with many joints all capable of bending in any direction, the Antarean touched a thin wire that was stretched overhead between the two rods. He plucked at this wire like a musician at a lute-string, and from it there emanated a single clear note higher in pitch than anything Alvor had ever heard. Its sheer unearthly acuity caused a shudder of anguish to run through the poet, and he could scarcely have borne a prolongation of the sound, which, however, ceased in a moment and was followed by a much more endurable humming and singing noise which seemed to arise at his feet. Looking down, he saw that the large disk at the bottom of the medial rods had begun to revolve. This revolution was slow at first, but rapidly increased in its rate, till he could no longer see the movement; and the singing sound became agonizingly sweet and high till it pierced his senses like a knife.

Vizaphmal touched a second wire, and the revolution of the disk was brought abruptly to an end. Alvor felt

an unspeakable relief at the cessation of the torturing music.

"We are now in etheric space," the Antarean declared. "Look out, if you so desire."

Alvor peered through the interstices of the dark metal, and saw around and above and below them the unlimited blackness of cosmic night and the teeming of uncountable trillions of stars. He had a sensation of frightful and deadly vertigo, and staggered like a drunken man as he tried to keep himself from falling against the side of the machine.

Vizaphmal plucked at a third wire, but this time Alvor was not aware of any sound. Something that was like an electric shock, and also like the crushing impact of a heavy blow, descended upon his head and shook him to the soles of his feet. Then he felt as if his tissues were being stabbed by innumerable needles of fire, and then that he was being torn apart in a thousand thousand fragments, bone by bone, muscle by muscle, vein by vein and nerve by nerve, on some invisible rack. He swooned and fell huddled in a corner of the machine, but his unconsciousness was not altogether complete. He seemed to be drowning beneath an infinite sea of darkness, beneath the accumulation of shoreless gulfs, and above this sea, so far away that he lost it again and again, there thrilled a supernal melody, sweet as the singing of sirens or the fabled music of the spheres, together with an insupportable dissonance like the shattering of all the battlements of time. He thought that all his nerves had been elongated to an enormous distance, when the outlying parts of himself were being tortured in the oubliettes of fantastic inquisitions by the

use of instruments of percussion, diabolically vibrant, that were somehow identified with certain of his own body-cells. Once he thought that he saw Vizaphmal standing a million leagues remote on the shore of an alien planet, with a sky of soaring many-colored flame behind him and the night of all the universe rippling gently at his feet like a submissive ocean. Then he lost the vision, and the intervals of the far unearthly music became more prolonged, and at last he could not hear it at all, nor could he feel any longer the torturing of his remote nerve-ends. The gulf deepened above him, and he sank through aeons of darkness and emptiness to the very nadir of oblivion.

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Alvor's return to consciousness was even more slow and gradual than his descent into Lethe had been. Still lying at the bottom of a shoreless and boundless night, he became aware of an unidentifiable odor with which in some way the sense of ardent warmth was associated. This odor changed incessantly, as if it were composed of many diverse ingredients, each of which predominated in turn. Myrrh-like and mystic in the beginning as the fumes of an antique altar, it assumed the heavy languor of unimaginable flowers, the sharp sting of vaporizing chemicals unknown to science, the smell of exotic water and exotic earth, and then a medley of other elements that conveyed no suggestion of anything whatever, except of revolutionary realms and ranges that were beyond all human experience or calculation. For a while he lived and was awake only in his sensory response to

this potpourri of odors; then the awareness of his own corporeal being came back to him through tactual sensations of an unusual order, which he did not at first recognize as being within himself, but which seemed to be those of a foreign entity in some other dimension, with whom he was connected across unbridgeable gulfs by a nexus of gossamer tenuity. This entity, he thought, was reclining on a material of great softness, into which he sank with a supreme and leaden indolence and a feeling of sheer bodily weight that held him utterly motionless. Then, floating along the ebon cycles of the void, this being came with ineffable slowness toward Alvor, and at last by no perceptible transition, by no breach of physical logic or mental congruity, was incorporate with him. Then a tiny light, like a star burning all alone in the center of infinitude, began to dawn far off; and it drew nearer and nearer and grew larger and larger till it turned the black void to a dazzling luminescence, to a many-tinted glory that smote full upon Alvor.

He found that he was lying with wide-open eyes on a huge couch, in a sort of pavilion consisting of a low and elliptical dome supported on double rows of diagonally fluted pillars. He was quite naked, though a sheet of some thin and pale yellow fabric had been thrown across his lower limbs. He saw at a glance, even though his brain-centers were still half benumbed as by the action of some opiate, that this fabric was not the product of any terrestrial loom. Beneath his body, the couch was covered with gray and purple stuffs, but whether they were made of feathers, fur or cloth he was altogether uncertain, for they suggested all three of

these materials. They were very thick and resilient, and accounted for the sense of extreme softness underneath him that had marked his return from the swoon. The couch itself stood higher above the floor than an ordinary bed, and was also longer, and in his half-narcotized condition this troubled Alvor even more than other aspects of his situation which were far less normal and explicable.

Amazement grew upon him as he looked about with reviving faculties, for all that he saw and smelt and touched was totally foreign and unaccountable. The floor of the pavilion was wrought in a geometric marquetry of ovals, rhomboids and equilaterals, in white, black and yellow metals that no earthly mine had ever disclosed; and the pillars were of the same three metals, regularly alternating. The dome alone was entirely of yellow. Not far from the couch, there stood on a squat tripod a dark and wide-mouthed vessel from which poured an opalescent vapor. Someone standing behind it, invisible through the cloud of gorgeous fumes, was fanning the vapor toward Alvor. He recognized it as the source of the myrrh-like odor that had first troubled his reanimating senses. It was quite agreeable but was borne away from him again and again by gusts of hot wind which brought into the pavilion a mixture of perfumes that were both sweet and acrid and were altogether novel. Looking between the pillars, he saw the monstrous heads of towering blossoms with pagoda-like tiers of sultry, sullen petals, and beyond them a terraced landscape of low hills of mauve and nacarat soil, extending toward a horizon incredibly remote, till they rose and rose against the heavens. Above

all this was a whitish sky, filled with a blinding radiation of intense light from a sun that was now hidden by the dome. Alvor's eyes began to ache, the odors disturbed and oppressed him, and he was possessed by a terrible dubiety and perplexity, amid which he remembered vaguely his meeting with Vizaphmal, and the events preceding his swoon. He was unbearably nervous, and for some time all his ideas and sensations took on the painful disorder and irrational fears of incipient delirium.

A figure stepped from behind the veering vapors and approached the couch. It was Vizaphmal, who bore in one of his five hands the large thin circular fan of bluish metal he had been using. He was holding in another hand a tubular cup, half full of an erubescant liquid.

"Drink this," he ordered as he put the cup to Alvor's lips. The liquid was so bitter and fiery that Alvor could swallow it only in sips, between periods of gasping and coughing. But once he had gotten it down, his brain cleared with celerity and all his sensations were soon comparatively normal.

"Where am I?" he asked. His voice sounded very strange and unfamiliar to him, and its effect bordered upon ventriloquism—which, as he afterward learned, was due to certain peculiarities of the atmospheric medium.

"You are on my country estate, in Ulphalor, a kingdom which occupies the whole northern hemisphere of Satabbor, the inmost planet of Sanarda, that sun which is called Antares in your world. You have been unconscious for three of our days, a result which I antici-

pated, knowing the profound shock your nervous system would receive from the experience through which you have passed. However, I do not think you will suffer any permanent illness or inconvenience; and I have just now administered to you a sovereign drug which will aid in the adjustment of your nerves and your corporeal functions to the novel conditions under which you are to live henceforward. I employed the opalescent vapor to arouse you from your swoon, when I deemed that it had become safe and wise to do this. The vapor is produced by the burning of an aromatic seaweed, and is magisterial in its restorative effect."

Alvor tried to grasp the full meaning of this information, but his brain was still unable to receive anything more than a melange of impressions that were totally new and obscure and outlandish. As he pondered the words of Vizaphmal, he saw that rays of bright light had fallen between the columns and were creeping across the floor. Then the rim of a vast ember-colored sun descended below the rim of the dome and he felt an overwhelming, but somehow not insupportable, warmth. His eyes no longer ached, not even in the direct beams of this luminary; nor did the perfumes irritate him, as they had done for a while.

"I think," said Vizaphmal, "that you may now arise. It is afternoon, and there is much for you to learn, and much to be done."

Alvor threw off the thin covering of yellow cloth, and sat up, with his legs hanging over the edge of the couch.

"But my clothing?" he queried.

"You will need none in our climate. No one has ever worn anything of the sort in Satabbor."

Alvor digested this idea, and though he was slightly disconcerted, he made up his mind that he would accustom himself to whatever should be required of him. Anyway, the lack of his usual habiliments was far from disagreeable in the dry, sultry air of this new world.

He slid from the couch to the floor, which was nearly five feet below him, and took several steps. He was not weak or dizzy, as he had half expected, but all his movements were characterized by the same sense of extreme bodily weight of which he had been dimly aware while still in a semi-conscious condition.

"The world in which you now dwell is somewhat larger than your own," explained Vizaphmal, "and the force of gravity is proportionately greater. Your weight has been increased by no less than a third; but I think you will soon become habituated to this, as well as to the other novelties of your situation."

Motioning the poet to follow him, he led the way through that portion of the pavilion which had been behind Alvor's head as he lay on the couch. A spiral bridge of ascending stairs ran from this pavilion to a much larger pile where numerous wings and annexes of the same aerial architecture of domes and columns flared from a central edifice with a circular wall and many thin spires. Below the bridge, about the pavilion, and around the whole edifice above, were gardens of trees and flowers that caused Alvor to recall the things he had seen during his one experiment with hashish. The foliage of the trees was either very fine and hair-like, or else it consisted of huge, semiglobular and

discoïd forms depending from horizontal branches and suggesting a novel union of fruit and leaf. Almost all colors, even green, were shown in the bark and foliage of these trees. The flowers were mainly similar to those Alvor had seen from the pavilion, but there were others of a short, puffy-stemmed variety, with no trace of leaves, and with malignant purple-black heads full of crimson mouths, which swayed a little even when there was no wind. There were oval pools and meandering streams of a dark water with irisated glints all through this garden, which, with the columnar edifice, occupied the middle of a small plateau.

As Alvor followed his guide along the bridge, a perspective of hills and plains all marked out in geometric diamonds and squares and triangles, with a large lake or island sea in their midst, was revealed momentarily. Far in the distance, more than a hundred leagues away, were the gleaming domes and towers of some baroque city, toward which the enormous orb of the sun was now declining. When he looked at this sun and saw the whole extent of its diameter for the first time, he felt an overpowering thrill of imaginative awe and wonder and exultation at the thought that it was identical with the red star to which he had addressed in another world the half-lyric, half-ironic lines of his ode.

At the end of the spiral bridge, they came to a second and more spacious pavilion, in which stood a high table with many seats attached to it by means of curving rods. Table and chairs were of the same material, a light, grayish metal. As they entered this pavilion, two strange beings appeared and bowed before Vizaphmal. They were like the scientist in their organic structure,

but were not so tall, and their coloring was very drab and dark, with no hint of opalescence. By certain bizarre indications Alvor surmised that the two beings were of different sexes.

"You are right," said Vizaphmal, reading his thought. "These persons are a male and female of the two inferior sexes called Abbars, who constitute the workers, as well as the breeders, of our world. There are two superior sexes, who are sterile, and who form the intellectual, aesthetic and ruling classes, to whom I belong. We call ourselves the Alphads. The Abbars are more numerous, but we hold them in close subjection; and even though they are our parents as well as our slaves, the ideas of filial piety which prevail in your world would be regarded as truly singular by us. We supervise their breeding, so that the due proportion of Abbars and Alphads may be maintained, and the character of the progeny is determined by the injection of certain serums at the time of conceiving. We ourselves, though sterile, are capable of what you call love, and our amorous delights are more complex than yours in their nature."

He now turned and addressed the two Abbars. The phonetic forms and combinations that issued from his lips were unbelievably different from those of the scholarly English in which he had spoken to Alvor. There were strange gutturals and linguals and oddly prolonged vowels which Alvor, for all his subsequent attempts to learn the language, could never quite approximate and which argued a basic divergence in the structure of the vocal organs of Vizaphmal from that of his own.

Bowing till their heads almost touched the floor, the two Abbars disappeared among the columns in a wing of the building and soon returned, carrying long trays on which were unknown foods and beverages in utensils of unearthly forms.

"Be seated," said Vizaphmal. The meal that followed was far from unpleasant, and the foodstuffs were quite palatable, though Alvor was not sure whether they were meats or vegetables. He learned that they were really both, for his host explained that they were the prepared fruits of plants which were half animal in their cellular composition and characteristics. These plants grew wild, and were hunted with the same care that would be required in hunting dangerous beasts, on account of their mobile branches and the poisonous darts with which they were armed. The two beverages were a pale, colorless wine with an acrid flavor, made from a root, and a dusky, sweetish liquid, the natural water of this world. Alvor noticed that the water had a saline after-taste.

"The time has now come," announced Vizaphmal at the end of the meal, "to explain frankly the reason why I have brought you here. We will now adjourn to that portion of my home which you would term a laboratory, or workshop, and which also includes my library."

They passed through several pavilions and winding colonnades, and reached the circular wall at the core of the edifice. Here a high narrow door, engraved with heteroclitic ciphers, gave admission to a huge room without windows, lit by a yellow glow whose cause was not ascertainable.

"The walls and ceiling are lined with a radio-active

substance," said Vizaphmal, "which affords this illumination. The vibrations of this substance are also highly stimulating to the processes of thought."

Alvor looked about him at the room, which was filled with alembics and cupels and retorts and sundry other scientific mechanisms, all of unfamiliar types and materials. He could not even surmise their use. Beyond them, in a corner, he saw the apparatus of intersecting bars, with the two heavy disks, in which he and Vizaphmal had made their passage through etheric space. Around the walls there were a number of deep shelves, laden with great rolls that were like the volumes of the ancients.

Vizaphmal selected one of these rolls, and started to unfurl it. It was four feet wide, was gray in color, and was closely written with many columns of dark violet and maroon characters that ran horizontally instead of up and down.

"It will be necessary," said Vizaphmal, "to tell you a few facts regarding the history, religion and intellectual temper of our world, before I read to you the singular prophecy contained in one of the columns of this ancient chronicle.

"We are a very old people, and the beginnings, or even the first maturity of our civilization, antedate the appearance of the lowliest forms of life on your earth. Religious sentiment and the veneration of the past have always been dominant factors among us, and have shaped our history to an amazing extent. Even today, the whole mass of the Abbars and the majority of the Alphads are immersed in superstition, and the veriest details of quotidian life are regulated by sacerdotal law.

A few scientists and thinkers, like myself, are above all such puerilities; but, strictly between you and me, the Alphads, for all their superior and highly aristocratic traits, are mainly the victims of arrested development in this regard. They have cultivated the epicurean and aesthetic side of life to a high degree, they are accomplished artists, sybarites and able administrators or politicians; but, intellectually, they have not freed themselves from the chains of a sterile pantheism and an all too prolific hierarchy.

"Several cycles ago, in what might be called an early period of our history, the worship of all our sundry deities was at its height. There was at this time a veritable eruption, a universal plague of prophets, who termed themselves the voices of the gods, even as similarly minded persons have done in your world. Each of these prophets made his own especial job-lot of predictions, often quite minutely worked out and elaborate, and sometimes far from lacking in imaginative quality. A number of these prophecies have since been fulfilled to the letter, which, as you may well surmise, has helped enormously in confirming the hold of religion. However between ourselves, I suspect that their fulfilment has had behind it more or less of a shrewd instrumentality, supplied by those who could profit therefrom in one way or another.

"There was one vates, Abbolechiolor by name, who was even more fertile-minded and long-winded than his fellows. I shall now translate to you, from the volumen I have just enrolled, a prediction that he made in the year 299 of the cycle of Sargholoth, the third of the

seven epochs into which our known history has been subdivided. It runs thus:

“When, for the second time following this prediction, the two outmost moons of Satabor shall be simultaneously darkened in a total eclipse by the third and innermost moon, and when the dim night of this occultation shall have worn away in the dawn, a mighty wizard shall appear in the city of Sarpoulom, before the palace of the kings of Ulphalor, accompanied by a most unique and unheard-of monster with two arms, two legs, two eyes and a white skin. And he that then rules in Ulphalor shall be deposed ere noon of this day, and the wizard shall be enthroned in his place, to reign as long as the white monster shall abide with him.”

Vizaphmal paused, as if to give Alvor a chance to cogitate the matters that had been presented to him. Then, while his three eyes assumed a look of quizzical sharpness and shrewdness, he continued:

“Since the promulgation of this prophecy, there has already been one total eclipse of our two outer moons by the inner one. And, according to all the calculations of our astronomers, in which I can find no possible flaw, a second similar eclipse is now about to take place—in fact, it is due this very night. If Abbolechiolor was truly inspired, tomorrow morn is the time when the prophecy will be fulfilled. However, I decided some while ago that its fulfilment should not be left to chance; and one of my purposes in designing the mechanism with which I visited your world, was to find a monster who would meet the specifications of Abbolechiolor. No creature of this anomalous kind has ever been known, or even fabled, to exist in Satabor; and I

made a thorough search of many remote and outlying planets without being able to obtain what I required. In some of these worlds there were monsters of very uncommon types, with an almost unlimited number of visual organs and limbs; but the variety to which you belong, with only two eyes, two arms and two legs, must indeed be rare throughout the infragalactic universe, since I have not discovered it in any other planet than your own.

"I am sure that you now conceive the project I have long nurtured. You and I will appear at dawn in Sarpoulom, the capital of Ulphalor, whose domes and towers you saw this afternoon far off on the plain. Because of the celebrated prophecy, and the publicly known calculations regarding the imminence of a second twofold eclipse, a great crowd will doubtless be gathered before the palace of the kings to await whatever shall occur. Akkiel, the present king, is by no means popular, and your advent in company with me, who am widely famed as a wizard, will be the signal for his dethronement. I shall then be ruler in his place, even as Abbolechiolor has so thoughtfully predicted. The holding of supreme temporal power in Ulphalor is not undesirable, even for one who is wise and learned and above most of the vanities of life, as I am. When this honor has devolved upon my unworthy shoulders, I shall be able to offer you, as a reward for your miraculous aid, an existence of rare and sybaritic luxury, of rich and varied sensation, such as you can hardly have imagined. It is true, no doubt, that you will be doomed to a certain loneliness among us: you will always be looked upon as a monster, a portentous anomaly; but

such, I believe, was your lot in the world where I found you and where you were about to cast yourself into a most unpleasant river. There, as you have learned, all poets are regarded as no less anomalous than double-headed snakes or five-legged calves."

Alvor had listened to this speech in manifold and ever-increasing amazement. Toward the end, when there was no longer any doubt concerning Vizaphmal's intention, he felt the sting of a bitter and curious irony at the thought of the rôle he was destined to play. However, he could do no less than admit the cogency of Vizaphmal's final argument.

"I trust," said Vizaphmal, "that I have not injured your feelings by my frankness, or by the position in which I am about to place you."

"Oh, no, not at all," Alvor hastened to assure him.

"In that case, we shall soon begin our journey to Sarpoulom, which will take all night. Of course, we could make the trip in the flash of an instant with my space-annihilator, or in a few minutes with one of the air-machines that have long been employed among us. But I intend to use a very old-fashioned mode of conveyance for the occasion, so that we will arrive in the proper style, at the proper time, and also that you may enjoy our scenery and view the double eclipse at leisure."

When they emerged from the windowless room, the colonnades and pavilions without were full of a rosy light, though the sun was still an hour above the horizon. This, Alvor learned, was the usual prelude of a Sataborian sunset. He and Vizaphmal watched while the whole landscape before them became steeped in the

ruddy glow, which deepened through shades of cinabar and ruby to a rich garnet by the time Antares had begun to sink from sight. When the huge orb had disappeared, the intervening lands took on a fiery amethyst, and tall auroral flames of a hundred hues shot upward to the zenith from the sunken sun. Alvor was spellbound by the glory of the spectacle.

Turning from this magnificent display at an unfamiliar sound, he saw that a singular vehicle had been brought by the Abbars to the steps of the pavilion in which they stood. It was more like a chariot than anything else, and was drawn by three animals undreamt of in human fable or heraldry. These animals were black and hairless, their bodies were extremely long, each of them had eight legs and a forked tail, and their whole aspect, including their flat, venomous, triangular heads, was uncomfortably serpentine. A series of green and scarlet wattles hung from their throats and bellies, and semitranslucent membranes, erigible at will, were attached to their sides.

"You behold," Vizaphmal informed Alvor, "the traditional conveyance that has been used since time immemorial by all orthodox wizards in Ulphalor. These creatures are called *orpods*, and they are among the swiftest of our mammalian serpents."

He and Alvor seated themselves in the vehicle. Then the three *orpods*, who had no reins in all their complicated harness, started off at a word of command on a spiral road that ran from Vizaphmal's home to the plain beneath. As they went, they erected the membranes at their sides and soon attained an amazing speed.

Now, for the first time, Alvor saw the three moons of Satabbor, which had risen opposite the afterglow. They were all large, especially the innermost one, a perceptible warmth was shed by their pink rays, and their combined illumination was nearly as clear and bright as that of a terrestrial day.

The land through which Vizaphmal and the poet now passed was uninhabited, in spite of its nearness to Sarpoulom, and they met no one. Alvor learned that the terraces he had seen upon awaking were not the work of intelligent beings, as he had thought, but were a natural formation of the hills. Vizaphmal had chosen this location for his home because of the solitude and privacy, so desirable for the scientific experiments to which he had devoted himself.

After they had traversed many leagues, they began to pass occasional houses, of a like structure to that of Vizaphmal's. Then the road meandered along the rim of cultivated fields, which Alvor recognized as the source of the geometric divisions he had seen from afar during the day. He was told that these fields were given mainly to the growing of root-vegetables, of a gigantic truffle, and a kind of succulent cactus, which formed the chief foods of the Abbars. The Alphads ate by choice only the meat of animals and the fruits of wild, half-animal plants, such as those with which Alvor had been served.

By midnight the three moons had drawn very close together and the second moon had begun to occlude the outermost. Then the inner moon came slowly across the others, till in an hour's time the eclipse was complete. The diminution of light was very marked, and the

whole effect was now similar to that of a moonlit night on earth.

"It will be morning in a little more than two hours," said Vizaphmal, "since our nights are extremely short at this time of year. The eclipse will be over before then. But there is no need for us to hurry."

He spoke to the *orpods*, who folded their membranes and settled to a sort of trot.

Sarpoulom was now visible in the heart of the plain, and its outlines were rendered more distinct as the two hidden moons began to draw forth from the adumbration of the other. When to this triple light the ruby rays of earliest morn were added, the city loomed upon the travelers with fantastic many-storied piles of that same open type of metal architecture which the home of Vizaphmal had displayed. This architecture, Alvor found, was general throughout the land, though an older type with closed walls was occasionally to be met with, and was used altogether in the building of prisons and the inquisitions maintained by the priesthoods of the various deities.

It was an incredible vision that Alvor saw—a vision of high domes upborne on slender elongated columns, tier above tier, of airy colonnades and bridges and hanging gardens loftier than Babylon or than Babel, all tinged by the ever-changing red that accompanied and followed the Satabborian dawn, even as it had preceded the sunset. Into this vision, along streets that were paven with the same metal as that of the buildings, Alvor and Vizaphmal were drawn by the three *orpods*.

The poet was overcome by the sense of an unimaginably old and alien and diverse life which descended

upon him from these buildings. He was surprized to find that the streets were nearly deserted and that little sign of activity was manifest anywhere. A few Abbars, now and then, scuttled away in alleys or entrances at the approach of the *orpods*, and two beings of a coloration similar to that of Vizaphmal, one of whom Alvor took to be a female, issued from a colonnade and stood staring at the travelers in evident stupefaction.

When they had followed a sort of winding avenue for more than a mile, Alvor saw between and above the edifices in front of them the domes and upper tiers of a building that surpassed all the others in its extent.

"You now behold the palace of the kings of Ulphalor," his companion told him.

In a little while they emerged upon a great square that surrounded the palace. This square was crowded with the people of the city, who, as Vizaphmal had surmised, were all gathered to await the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the prophecy of Abbolechiolor. The open galleries and arcades of the huge edifice, which rose to a height of ten stories, were also laden with watching figures. Abbars were the most plentiful element in this throng, but there were also multitudes of the gayly colored Alphads among them.

At sight of Alvor and his companion, a perceptible movement, a sort of communal shuddering which soon grew convulsive, ran through the whole assemblage in the square and along the galleries of the edifice above. Loud cries of a peculiar shrillness and harshness arose, there was a strident sound of beaten metal in the heart of the palace, like the gongs of an alarm, and mysterious lights glowed out and were extinguished in the

higher stories. Clangors of unknown machines, the moan and roar and shriek of strange instruments, were audible above the clamor of the crowd, which grew more tumultuous and agitated in its motion. A way was opened for the car drawn by the three *orpoths*, and Vizaphmal and Alvor were soon at the entrance of the palace.

There was an unreality about it all to Alvor, and the discomfiture he had felt in drawing upon himself the weird phosphoric gaze of ten thousand eyes, all of whom were now intent with a fearsome uncanny curiosity on every detail of his physique, was like the discomfiture of some absurd and terrible dream. The movement of the crowd has ceased, while the car was passing along the unhuman lane that had been made for it, and there was an interval of silence. Then, once more, there were babble and debate, and cries that had the accent of martial orders or summonses were caught up and repeated. The throng began to move, with a new and more concentric swirling, and the foremost ranks of Abbars and Alphads swelled like a dark and tinted wave into the colonnades of the palace. They climbed the pillars with a dreadful swift agility to the stories above, they thronged the courts and pavilions and arcades, and though a weak resistance was apparently put up by those within, there was nothing that could stem them.

Through all this clangor and clamor and tumult, Vizaphmal stood in the car with an imperturbable mien beside the poet. Soon a number of Alphads, evidently a delegation, issued from the palace and made obeisance

to the wizard, whom they addressed in humble and supplicative tones.

"A revolution has been precipitated by our advent," explained Vizaphmal, "and Akkiel the king has fled. The chamberlains of the court and the high priests of all our local deities are now offering me the throne of Ulphalor. Thus the prophecy is being fulfilled to the letter. You must agree with me that the great Abbolecholor was happily inspired."

3

The ceremony of Vizaphmal's enthronement was held almost immediately, in a huge hall at the core of the palace, open like all the rest of the structure, and with columns of colossal size. The throne was a great globe of azure metal, with a seat hollowed out near the top, accessible by means of a serpentine flight of stairs. Alvor, at an order issued by the wizard, was allowed to stand at the base of this globe with some of the Alphads.

The enthronement itself was quite simple. The wizard mounted the stairs, amid the silence of a multitude that had thronged the hall, and seated himself in the hollow of the great globe. Then a very tall and distinguished-looking Alphad also climbed the steps, carrying a heavy rod, one half of which was green, and the other a swart, sullen crimson, and placed this rod in the hands of Vizaphmal. Later, Alvor was told that the crimson end of this rod could emit a death-dealing ray, and the green a vibration that cured almost all the kinds of illness to which the Sataborians were subject. Thus

it was more than symbolical of the twofold power of life and death with which the king had been invested.

The ceremony was now at an end, and the gathering quickly dispersed. Alvor, at the command of Vizaphmal, was installed in a suite of open apartments on the third story of the palace, at the end of many labyrinthine stairs. A dozen Abbars, who were made his personal retainers, soon came in, each carrying a different food or drink. The foods were beyond belief in their strangeness, for they included the eggs of a moth-like insect large as a plover, and the apples of a fungoid tree that grew in the craters of dead volcanoes. They were served in ewers of a white and shining mineral, upborne on legs of fantastic length, and wrought with a cunning artistry. Likewise he was given, in shallow bowls, a liquor made from the blood-like juice of living plants, and a wine in which the narcotic pollen of some night-blooming flower had been dissolved.

The days and weeks that now followed were, for the poet, an experience beyond the visionary resources of any terrestrial drug. Step by step, he was initiated, as much as possible for one so radically alien, into the complexities and singularities of life in a new world. Gradually his nerves and his mind, by the aid of the erubescient liquid which Vizaphmal continued to administer to him at intervals, became habituated to the strong light and heat, the intense radiative properties of a soil and atmosphere with unearthly chemical constituents, the strange foods and beverages, and the people themselves with their queer anatomy and queerer customs. Tutors were engaged to teach him the language, and, in spite of the difficulties presented by certain

unmanageable consonants, certain weird ululative vowels, he learned enough of it to make his simpler ideas and wants understood.

He saw Vizaphmal every day, and the new king seemed to cherish a real gratitude toward him for his indispensable aid in the fulfilment of the prophecy. Vizaphmal took pains to instruct him in regard to all that it was necessary to know, and kept him well-informed as to the progress of public events in Ulphalor. He was told, among other things, that no news had been heard concerning the whereabouts of Akkiel, the late ruler. Also, Vizaphmal had reason to be aware of more or less opposition toward himself on the part of the various priesthoods, who, in spite of his life-long discretion, had somehow learned of his free-thinking propensities.

For all the attention, kindness and service that he received, and the unique luxury with which he was surrounded, Alvor felt that these people, even as the wizard had forewarned him, looked upon him merely as a kind of unnatural curiosity or anomaly. He was no less monstrous to them than they were to him, and the gulf created by the laws of a diverse biology, by an alien trend of evolution, seemed impossible to bridge in any manner. He was questioned by many of them, and, in especial, by more than one delegation of noted scientists, who desired to know as much as he could tell them about himself. But the queries were so patronizing, so rude and narrow-minded and scornful and smug, that he was soon wont to feign a total ignorance of the language on such occasions. Indeed, there was a gulf; and he was rendered even more acutely conscious of it

whenever he met any of the female Abbars or Alphads of the court, who eyed him with disdainful inquisitiveness, and among whom a sort of tittering usually arose when he passed. His naked members, so limited in number, were obviously as great a source of astonishment to them as their own somewhat intricate and puzzling charms were to him. All of them were quite nude; indeed, nothing, not even a string of jewels or a single gem, was ever worn by any of the Sataborians. The female Alphads, like the males, were extremely tall and were gorgeous with epidermic hues that would have outdone the plumage of any peacock; and their anatomical structure was most peculiar. . . . Alvor began to feel the loneliness of which Vizaphmal had spoken, and he was overcome at times by a great nostalgia for his own world, by a planetray homesickness. He became atrociously nervous, even if not actually ill.

While he was still in this condition, Vizaphmal took him on a tour of Ulphalor that had become necessary for political reasons. More or less incredulity concerning the real existence of such a monstrosity as Alvor had been expressed by the folk of outlying provinces, of the polar realms and the antipodes, and the new ruler felt that a visual demonstration of the two-armed, two-legged and two-eyed phenomenon would be far from inadvisable, to establish beyond dispute the legitimacy of his own claim to the throne. In the course of this tour, they visited many unique cities, and rural and urban centers of industries peculiar to Satabor; and Alvor saw the mines from which the countless minerals and metals used in Ulphalor were extracted by the toil of millions of Abbars. These metals were found in a pure

state, and were of inexhaustible extent. Also, he saw the huge oceans, which, with certain inland seas and lakes that were fed from underground sources, formed the sole water-supply of the aging planet, where no rain had even been rumored to fall for centuries. The seawater, after undergoing a treatment that purged it of a number of undesirable elements, was carried all through the land by a system of conduits. Moreover, he saw the marshlands at the north pole, with their vicious tangle of animate vegetation, into which no one had ever tried to penetrate.

They met many outland peoples in the course of this tour; but the general characteristics were the same throughout Ulphalor, except in one or two races of the lowest aborigines, among whom there were no Alphads. Everywhere the poet was eyed with the same cruel and ignorant curiosity that had been shown in Sarpoulom. However, he became gradually inured to this, and the varying spectacles of bizarre interest and the unheard-of scenes that he saw daily, helped to divert him a little from his nostalgia for the lost earth.

When he and Vizaphmal returned to Sarpoulom, after an absence of many weeks, they found that much discontent and revolutionary sentiment had been sown among the multitude by the hierarchies of the Satabborian gods and goddesses, particularly by the priesthood of Cunthamosi, the Cosmic Mother, a female deity in high favor among the two reproductive sexes, from whom the lower ranks of her hierophants were recruited. Cunthamosi was worshipped as the source of all things: her maternal organs were believed to have given birth to the sun, the moon, the world, the stars, the planets, and

even the meteors which often fell in Satabbor. But it was argued by her priests that such a monstrosity as Alvor could not possibly have issued from her womb, and that therefore his very existence was a kind of blasphemy, and that the rule of the heretic wizard, Vizaphmal, based on the advent of this abnormality, was likewise a flagrant insult to the Cosmic Mother. They did not deny the apparently miraculous fulfilment of the prophecy of Abbolechiolor, but it was maintained that this fulfilment was no assurance of the perpetuity of Vizaphmal's reign, and no proof that his reign was countenanced by any of the gods.

"I cannot conceal from you," said Vizaphmal to Alvor, "that the position in which we both stand is now slightly parlous. I intend to bring the space-annihilator from my country home to the court, since it is not impossible that I may have need for it, and that some foreign sphere will soon become more salubrious for me than my native one."

However, it would seem that this able scientist, alert wizard and competent king had not altogether grasped the real imminence of the danger that threatened his reign; or else he spoke, as was sometimes his wont, with sardonic moderation. He showed no further concern, beyond setting a strong guard about Alvor to attend him at all times, lest an attempt should be made to kidnap the poet in consideration of the last clause of the prophecy.

Three days after the return to Sarpoulom, while Alvor was standing in one of his private balconies looking out over the roofs of the town, with his guards chattering idly in the rooms behind, he saw that the streets

were dark with a horde of people, mainly Abbars, who were streaming silently toward the palace. A few Alphads, distinguishable even at a distance by their gaudy hues, were at the head of this throng. Alarmed at the spectacle, and remembering what the king had told him, he went to find Vizaphmal and climbed the eternal tortuous series of complicated stairs that led to the king's personal suite. Others among the inmates of the court had seen the advancing crowd, and there were agitation, terror and frantic hurry everywhere. Mounting the last flight of steps to the king's threshold, Alvor was astounded to find that many of the Abbars, who had gained ingress from the other side of the palace and had scaled the successive rows of columns and stairs with ape-like celerity, were already pouring into the room. Vizaphmal himself was standing before the open framework of the space-annihilator, which had now been installed beside his couch. The rod of royal investiture was in his hand, and he was levelling the crimson end at the foremost of the invading Abbars. As this creature leapt toward him, waving an atrocious weapon lined by a score of hooked blades, Vizaphmal tightened his hold on the rod, thus pressing a secret spring, and a thin rose-colored ray of light was emitted from the end, causing the Abbar to crumple and fall. Others, in nowise deterred, ran forward to succeed him, and the king turned his lethal beam upon them with the calm air of one who is conducting a scientific experiment, till the floor was piled with dead Abbars. Still others took their place, and some began to cast their hooked weapons at the king. None of these touched him, but he seemed to weary of the sport, and stepping within the

framework, he closed it upon himself. A moment more, and then there was a roar as of a thousand thunders, and the mechanism and Vizaphmal were no longer to be seen. Never, at any future time, was the poet to learn what had become of him, nor in what stranger world than Satabor he was now indulging his scientific fancies and curiosities.

Alvor had no time to feel, as he might conceivably have done, that he had been basely deserted by the king. All the nether and upper stories of the great edifice were now aswarm with the invading crowd, who were no longer silent, but were uttering shrill, ferocious cries as they bore down the opposition of the courtiers and slaves. The whole place was inundated by an ever-mounting sea, in which there were now myriads of Alphads as well as of Abbars; and no escape was possible. In a few instants, Alvor himself was seized by a group of the Abbars, who seemed to have been enraged rather than terrified or discomforted by the vanishing of Vizaphmal. He recognized them as priests of Cunthamosi by an odd oval and vertical marking of red pigments on their swart bodies. They bound him viciously with cords that were made from the intestines of a dragon-like animal, and carried him away from the palace, along streets that were lined by a staring and gibbering mob, to a building on the southern outskirts of Sarpoulom, which Vizaphmal had once pointed out to him as the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother.

This edifice, unlike most of the buildings in Sarpoulom, was walled on all sides and was constructed entirely of enormous gray bricks, made from the local soil, and bigger and harder than blocks of granite. In a

long five-sided chamber illumined only by narrow slits in the roof, Alvor found himself arraigned before a jury of the priests, presided over by a swollen and pontifical-looking Alphad, the Grand Inquisitor.

The place was filled with ingenious and grotesque implements of torture, and the very walls were hung to the ceiling with contrivances that would have put Torquemada to shame. Some of them were very small, and were designed for the treatment of special and separate nerves; and others were intended to harrow the entire epidermic area of the body at a single twist of their screw-like mechanism.

Alvor could understand little of the charges that were preferred against him, but gathered that they were the same, or included the same, of which Vizaphmal had spoken—to wit, that he, Alvor, was a monstrosity that could never have been conceived or brought forth by Cunthamosi, and whose very existence, past, present and future, was a dire affront to this divinity. The entire scene—the dark and lurid room with its array of hellish instruments, the diabolic faces of the inquisitors, and the high unhuman drone of their voices as they intoned the charges and brought judgment against Alvor—was laden with a horror beyond the horror of dreams.

Presently the Grand Inquisitor focussed the malign gleam of his three unblinking orbs upon the poet, and began to pronounce an interminable sentence, pausing a little at quite regular intervals which seemed to mark the clauses of the punishment that was to be inflicted. These clauses were well-nigh innumerable, but Alvor could comprehend almost nothing of what was said;

and doubtless it was as well that he did not comprehend.

When the voice of the swollen Alphad had ceased, the poet was led away through endless corridors and down a stairway that seemed to descend into the bowels of Satabor. These corridors, and also the stairway, were luminous with self-emitted light that resembled the phosphorescence of decaying matter in tombs and catacombs. As Alvor went downward with his guards, who were all Abbars of the lowest type, he could hear somewhere in sealed unknowable vaults the moan and shriek of beings who endured the ordeals imposed by the inquisitors of Cunthamosi.

They came to the final step of the stairway, where, in a vast vault, an abyss whose bottom was not discernible yawned in the center of the floor. On its edge there stood a fantastic sort of windlass on which was wound an immense coil of blackish rope.

The end of this rope was now tied about Alvor's ankles, and he was lowered head downward into the gulf by the inquisitors. The sides were not luminous like those of the stairway, and he could see nothing. But, as he descended into the gulf, the terrible discomfort of his position was increased by sensations of an ulterior origin. He felt that he was passing through a kind of hairy material with numberless filaments that clung to his head and body and limbs like minute tentacles, and whose contact gave rise to an immediate itching. The substance impeded him more and more, till at last he was held immovably suspended as in a net, and all the while the separate hairs seemed to be biting into his flesh with a million microscopic teeth, till the initial

itching was followed by a burning and a deep convulsive throbbing more exquisitely painful than the flames of an *auto da fe*. The poet learned long afterward that the material into which he had been lowered was a subterranean organism, half vegetable, half animal, which grew from the side of the gulf, with long mobile feelers that were extremely poisonous to the touch. But at the time, not the least of the horrors he underwent was the uncertainty as to its precise nature.

After he had hung for quite a while in this agonizing web, and had become almost unconscious from the pain and the unnatural position, Alvor felt that he was being drawn upward. A thousand of the fine thread-like tentacles clung to him and his whole body was encircled with a mesh of insufferable pangs as he broke loose from them. He swooned with the intensity of this pain, and when he recovered, he was lying on the floor at the edge of the gulf, and one of the priests was prodding him with a many-pointed weapon.

Alvor gazed for a moment at the cruel visages of his tormenters, in the luminous glow from the sides of the vault, and wondered dimly what infernal torture was next to follow, in the carrying-out of the interminable sentence that had been pronounced. He surmised, of course, that the one he had just undergone was mild in comparison to the many that would succeed it. But he never knew, for at that instant there came a crashing sound like the fall and shattering of the universe; the walls, the floor and the stairway rocked to and fro in a veritable convulsion, and the vault above was riven in sunder, letting through a rain of fragments of all sizes, some of which struck several of the inquisitors and

swept them into the gulf. Others of the priests leapt over the edge in their terror, and the two who remained were in no condition to continue their official duties. Both of them were lying beside Alvor with broken heads from which, in lieu of blood, there issued a glutinous light-green liquid.

Alvor could not imagine what had happened, but knew only that he himself was unhurt, as far as the results of the cataclysm were concerned. His mental state was not one to admit of scientific surmise: he was sick and dizzy from the ordeal he had suffered, and his whole body was swollen, was blood-red and violently burning from the touch of the organisms in the gulf. He had, however, enough strength and presence of mind to grope with his bound hands for the weapon that had been dropped by one of the inquisitors. By much patience, by untiring ingenuity, he was able to cut the thongs about his wrists and ankles on the sharp blade of one of the five points.

Carrying this weapon, which he knew that he might need, he began the ascent of the subterranean stairway. The steps were half blocked by fallen masses of stone, and some of the landings and stairs, as well as the sides of the wall, were cloven with enormous rents; and his egress was by no means an easy matter. When he reached the top, he found that the whole edifice was a pile of shattered walls, with a great pit in its center from which a cloud of vapors issued. An immense meteor had fallen, and had struck the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother.

Alvor was in no condition to appreciate the irony of this event, but at least he was able to comprehend his

chance of freedom. The only inquisitors now visible were lying with squashed bodies whose heads or feet protruded from beneath the large squares of overthrown brick, and Alvor lost no time in quitting the vicinity.

It was now night, and only one of the three moons had arisen. Alvor struck off through the level arid country to the south of Sarpoulom, where no one dwelt, with the idea of crossing the boundaries of Ulphalor into one of the independent kingdoms that lay below the equator. He remembered Vizaphmal telling him once that the people of these kingdoms were more enlightened and less priest-ridden than those of Ulphalor.

All night he wandered, in a sort of daze that was at times delirium. The pain of his swollen limbs increased, and he grew feverish. The moonlit plain seemed to shift and waver before him, but was interminable as the landscape of a hashish-dream. Presently the other two moons arose, and in the overtaxed condition of his mind and nerves, he was never quite sure as to their actual number. Usually, there appeared to be more than three, and this troubled him prodigiously. He tried to resolve the problem for hours, as he staggered on, and at last, a little before dawn, he became altogether delirious.

He was unable afterward to recall anything about his subsequent journey. Something impelled him to go on even when his thews were dead and his brain an utter blank: he knew nothing of the waste and terrible lands through which he roamed in the hour-long ruby-red of morn and beneath a furnace-like sun; nor did he know when he crossed the equator at sunset and entered

Omanorion, the realm of the empress Ambiala, still carrying in his hand the five-pointed weapon of one of the dead inquisitors.

4

It was night when Alvor awoke, but he had no means of surmising that it was not the same night in which he had fled from the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother; and that many Sataborian days had gone by since he had fallen totally exhausted and unconscious within the boundary-line of Omanorion. The warm, rosy beams of the three moons were full in his face, but he could not know whether they were ascending or declining. Anyhow, he was lying on a very comfortable couch that was not quite so disconcertingly long and high as the one upon which he had first awakened in Ulphalor. He was in an open pavilion, and this pavilion was also a bower of multitudinous blossoms which leaned toward him with faces that were both grotesque and weirdly beautiful, from vines that had scaled the columns, or from the many curious metal pots that stood upon the floor. The air that he breathed was a medley of perfumes more exotic than frangipani; they were extravagantly sweet and spicy, but somehow he did not find them oppressive. Rather, they served to augment the deep, delightful languor, of all his sensations.

As he opened his eyes and turned a little on the couch, a female Alphad, not so tall as those of Ulphalor and really quite of his own stature, came out from behind the flower-pots and addressed him. Her lan-

guage was not that of the Ulphalorians, it was softer and less utterly unhuman, and though he could not understand a word, he was immediately aware of a sympathetic note or undertone which, so far, he had never heard on the lips of any one in this world, not even Vizaphmal.

He replied in the language of Ulphalor, and found that he was understood. He and the female Alphad now carried on as much of a conversation as Alvor's linguistic abilities would permit. He learned that he was talking to the empress Ambiala, the sole and supreme ruler of Omanorion, a quite extensive realm contiguous to Ulphalor. She told him that some of her servitors, while out hunting the wild, ferocious, half-animal fruits of the region, had found him lying unconscious near a thicket of the deadly plants that bore these fruits, and had brought him to her palace in Lompior, the chief city of Omanorion. There, while he still lay in a week-long stupor, he had been treated with medicaments that had now almost cured the painful swellings resultant from his plunge among the hair-like organism in the Inquisition.

With genuine courtesy, the empress forbore to question the poet regarding himself, nor did she express any surprize at his anatomical peculiarities. However, her whole manner gave evidence of an eager and even fascinated interest, for she did not take her eyes away from him at any time. He was a little embarrassed by her intent scrutiny, and to cover this embarrassment, as well as to afford her the explanations due to so kind a hostess, he tried to tell her as much as he could of his own history and adventures. It was doubtful if she

understood more than half of what he said, but even this half obviously lent him an increasingly portentous attraction in her eyes. All of her three orbs grew round with wonder at the tale related by this fantastic Ulysses, and whenever he stopped she would beg him to go on. The garnet and ruby and cinnabar gradations of the dawn found Alvor still talking and the empress Ambiala still listening.

In the full light of Antares, Alvor saw that his hostess was, from a Sataborian viewpoint, a really beautiful and exquisite creature. The iridescence of her coloring was very soft and subtle, her arms and legs, though of the usual number, were all voluptuously rounded, and the features of her face were capable of a wide range of expression. Her usual look, however, was one of a sad and wistful yearning. This look Alvor came to understand, when, with a growing knowledge of her language, he learned that she too was a poet, that she had always been troubled by vague desires for the exotic and the far-off, and that she was thoroughly bored with everything in Omanorion, and especially with the male Alphads of that region, none of whom could rightfully boast of having been her lover even for a day. Alvor's biological difference from these males was evidently the secret of his initial fascination for her.

The poet's life in the palace of Ambiala, where he found that he was looked upon as a permanent guest, was from the beginning much more agreeable than his existence in Ulphalor had been. For one thing, there was Ambiala herself, who impressed him as being infinitely more intelligent than the females of Sarpoulom,

and whose attitude was so thoughtful and sympathetic and admiring, in contra-distinction to the attitude of these aforesaid females. Also, the servitors of the palace and the people of Lompior, though they doubtless regarded Alvor as a quite singular sort of being, were at least more tolerant than the Ulphalorians; and he met with no manner of rudeness among them at any time. Moreover, if there were any priesthoods in Omanorion, they were not of the uncompromising type he had met north of the equator, and it would seem that nothing was to be feared from them. No one ever spoke of religion to Alvor in this ideal realm, and somehow he never actually learned whether or not Omanorion possessed any gods or hierarchies. Remembering his ordeal in the Inquisition of the Cosmic Mother, he was quite willing not to broach the subject, anyway.

Alvor made rapid progress in the language of Omanorion, since the empress herself was his teacher. He soon learned more and more about her ideas and tastes, about her romantic love for the triple moonlight, and the odd flowers that she cultivated with so much care and so much delectation. These blossoms were rare anywhere in Satabor: some of them were anemones that came from the tops of almost inaccessible mountains many leagues in height, and others were forms inconceivably more bizarre than orchids, mainly from terrific jungles near the southern pole. He was soon privileged to hear her play on a certain musical instrument of the country, in which were combined the characters of the flute and the lute. And at last, one day, when he knew enough of the tongue to appreciate a few of its subtleties, she read to him from a scroll of

vegetable vellum one of her poems, an ode to a star known as Atana by the people of Omanorion. This ode was truly exquisite, was replete with poetic fancies of a high order, and expressed a half-ironic yearning, sadly conscious of its own impossibility, for the ultra-sidereal realms of Atana. Ending, she added:

"I have always loved Atana, because it is so little and so far away."

On questioning her, Alvor learned to his overwhelming amazement, that Atana was identical with a minute star called Arot in Ulphalor, which Vizaphmal had once pointed out to him as the sun of his own Earth. This star was visible only in the rare interlunar dark, and it was considered a test of good eyesight to see it even then.

When the poet had communicated this bit of astronomical information to Ambiala, that the star Atana was his own native sun, and had also told her of his *Ode to Antares*, a most affecting scene occurred, for the empress encircled him with her five arms and cried out:

"Do you not feel, as I do, that we were destined for each other?"

Though he was a little discomposed by Ambiala's display of affection, Alvor could do no less than assent. The two beings, so dissimilar in external ways, were absolutely overcome by the rapport revealed in this comparing of poetic notes; and a real understanding, rare even with persons of the same evolutionary type, was established between them henceforward. Also, Alvor soon developed a new appreciation of the outward charms of Ambiala, which, to tell the truth, had not altogether intrigued him heretofore. He reflected that

after all her five arms and three legs and three eyes were merely a superabundance of anatomical features upon which human love was wont to set a by no means lowly value. As for her opalescent coloring, it was, he thought, much more lovely than the agglomeration of outlandish hues with which the human female figure had been adorned in many modernistic paintings.

When it became known in Lompior that Alvor was the lover of Ambiala, no surprize or censure was expressed by any one. Doubtless the people, especially the male Alphads who had vainly wooed the empress, thought that her tastes were queer, not to say eccentric. But anyway, no comment was made: it was her own amour after all, and no one else could carry it on for her. It would seem, from this, that the people of Oman-orion had mastered the ultra-civilized art of minding their own business.



Beyond
the Stars



Sadastor

Listen, for this is the tale that was told to a fair lamia by the demon Charnadis as they sat together on the top of Mophi, above the sources of the Nile, in those years when the sphinx was young. Now the lamia was vexed, for her beauty was grown an evil legend in both Thebais and Elephantine; so that men were become fearful of her lips and cautious of her embrace, and she had no lover for almost a fortnight. She lashed her serpentine tail on the ground, and moaned softly, and wept those mythical tears which a serpent weeps. And the demon told this tale for her comforting:

Long, long ago, in the red cycles of my youth (said Charnadis), I was like all young demons, and was prone to use the agility of my wings in fantastic flights; to hover and poise like a gier-eagle above Tartarus and the pits of Python; or to lift the broad blackness of my vans on the orbit of stars. I have followed the moon from evening twilight to morning twilight; and I have gazed on the secrets of that Medusean face which she averts eternally from the earth. I have read through filming ice the ithyphallic runes on columns yet extant in her deserts; and I know the hieroglyphs which solve forgotten riddles, or hint aeonian histories, on the walls

of her cities taken by ineluctable snow. I have flown through the triple ring of Saturn, and have mated with lovely basilisks, on isles towering league-high from stupendous oceans where each wave is like the rise and fall of Himalayas. I have dared the clouds of Jupiter, and the black and freezing abysses of Neptune, which are crowned with eternal starlight; and I have sailed beyond to incommensurable suns, compared with which the sun that thou knowest is a corpse-candle in a stunted vault. There, in tremendous planets, I have furled my flight on the terraced mountains, large as fallen asteroids, where, with a thousand names and a thousand images, undreamt-of Evil is served and worshipt in unsurmisable ways. Or, perched in the flesh-colored lips of columnar blossoms, whose perfume was an ecstasy of incommunicable dreams, I have mocked the wiving monsters, and have lured their females, that sang and fawned at the base of my hiding-place.

Now, in my indefatigable questing among the remoter galaxies, I came one day to that forgotten and dying planet which in the language of its unrecorded peoples was called Sadastor. Immense and drear and gray beneath a waning sun, far-fissured with enormous chasms, and covered from pole to pole with the never-ebbing tides of the desert sand, it hung in space without moon or satellite, an abomination and a token of doom to fairer and younger worlds. Checking the speed of my interstellar flight, I followed its equator with a poised and level wing, above the peaks of cyclopean volcanoes, and bare, terrific ridges of elder hills, and deserts pale with the ghastliness of salt, that were manifestly the beds of former oceans.

In the very center of one of these ocean-beds, beyond sight of the mountains that formed its primaeval shoreline, and leagues below their level, I found a vast and winding valley that plunged even deeper into the abysses of this dreadful world. It was walled with perpendicular cliffs and buttresses and pinnacles of a rusty-red stone, that were fretted into a million bizarrely sinister forms by the sinking of the olden seas. I flew slowly among these cliffs as they wound ever downward in tortuous spirals for mile on mile of utter and irredeemable desolation, and the light grew dimmer above me as ledge on ledge and battlement on battlement of that strange red stone upreared themselves between my wings and the heavens. Here, when I rounded a sudden turn of the precipice, the profoundest depth where the rays of the sun fell only for a brief while at noon, and the rocks were purple with everlasting shadow, I found a pool of dark-green water—the last remnant of the former ocean, ebbing still amid steep, insuperable walls. And from this pool there cried a voice, in accents that were subtly sweet as the mortal wine of mandragora, and faint as the murmuring of shells. And the voice said:

“Pause and remain, I pray, and tell me who thou art, who comest thus to the accursed solitude wherein I die.”

Then, pausing on the brink of the pool, I peered into its gulf of shadow, and saw the pallid glimmering of a female form that upreared itself from the waters. And the form was that of a siren, with hair the color of ocean-kelp, and berylline eyes, and a dolphin-shapen tail. And I said to her:

“I am the demon Charnadis. But who art thou, who

lingerest thus in this ultimate pit of abomination, in the depth of a dying world?"

She answered: "I am a siren, and my name is Lyspial. Of the seas wherein I swam and sported at leisure many centuries ago, and whose gallant mariners I drew to an enchanted death on the shores of my disastrous isle, there remains only this fallen pool. Alas! For the pool dwindles daily, and when it is wholly gone I too must perish."

She began to weep, and her briny tears fell down and were added to the briny waters.

Fain would I have comforted her, and I said:

"Weep not, for I will lift thee upon my wings and bear thee to some newer world, were the sky-blue waters of abounding seas are shattered to intricate webs of wannest foam, on low shores that are green and aureate with pristine spring. There, perchance for aeons, thou shalt have thine abode, and galleys with painted oars and great barges purple-sailed shall be drawn upon thy rocks in the red light of sunsets domed with storm, and shall mingle the crash of their figured prows with the sweet sorcery of thy mortal singing."

But still she wept, and would not be comforted, crying:

"Thou art kind, but this would avail me not, for I was born of the waters of this world, and with its waters I must die. Alas! my lovely seas, that ran in unbroken sapphire from shores of perennial blossoms to shores of everlasting snow! Alas! the sea-winds, with their mingled perfumes of brine and weed, and scents of ocean flowers and flowers of the land, and far-blown exotic balsams! Alas! the quinquiremes of cycle-ended

wars, and the heavy-laden argosies with sails and cordage of byssus, that plied between barbaric isles with their cargoes of topaz or garnet-colored wines and jade and ivory idols, in the antique summers that now are less than legend! Alas! the dead captains, the beautiful dead sailors that were borne by the ebbing tide to my couches of amber seaweed, in my caverns underneath a cedared promontory! Alas! the kisses that I laid on their cold and hueless lips, on their sealed marmorean eyelids!"

And sorrow and pity seized me at her words, for I knew that she spoke the lamentable truth, that her doom was in the lessening of the bitter waters. So, after many proffered condolences, no less vague than vain, I bade her a melancholy farewell and flew heavily away between the spiral cliffs where I had come, and clomb the somber skies till the world Sadastor was only a darkling mote far down in space. But the tragic shadow of the siren's fate, and her sorrow, lay grievously upon me for hours, and only in the kisses of a beautiful fierce vampire, in a far-off and young and exuberant world, was I able to forget it. And I tell thee now the tale thereof, that haply thou mayest be consoled by the contemplation of a plight that was infinitely more dolorous and irremediable than thine own.

From the Crypts of Memory

Aeons of aeons ago, in an epoch whose marvelous worlds have crumbled, and whose mighty suns are less than shadow, I dwelt in a star whose course, decadent from the high, irremeable heavens of the past, was even then verging upon the abyss in which, said astronomers, its immemorial cycle should find a dark and disastrous close.

Ah, strange was that gulf-forgotten star—how stranger than any dream of dreamers in the spheres of today, or then any vision that hath soared upon visionaries, in their retrospection of the sidereal past! There, through cycles of a history whose piled and bronze-writ records were hopeless of tabulation, the dead had come to outnumber infinitely the living. And built of a stone that was indestructible save in the furnace of suns, their cities rose beside those of the living like the prodigious metropoli of Titans, with walls that overgloom the vicinal villages. And over all was the black funereal vault of the cryptic heavens—a dome of infinite shadows, where the dismal sun, suspended like a sole, enormous lamp, failed to illumine, and drawing back its fires from the face of the irresolvable ether, threw a baffled and despairing beam on the vague remote hori-

zons, and shrouded vistas illimitable of the visionary land.

We were a sombre, secret, many-sorrowed people—we who dwelt beneath that sky of eternal twilight, pierced by the towering tombs and obelisks of the past. In our blood was the chill of the ancient night of time; and our pulses flagged with a creeping prescience of the lentor of Lethe. Over our courts and fields, like invisible sluggish vampires born of mausoleums, rose and hovered the black hours, with wings that distilled a malefic languor made from the shadowy woe and despair of perished cycles. The very skies were fraught with oppression, and we breathed beneath them as in a sepulcher, forever sealed with all its stagnancies of corruption and slow decay, and darkness impenetrable save to the fretting worm.

Vaguely we lived, and loved as in dreams—the dim and mystic dreams that hover upon the verge of fathomless sleep. We felt for our women, with their pale and spectral beauty, the same desire that the dead may feel for the phantom lilies of Hadean meads. Our days were spent in roaming through the ruins of lone and immemorial cities, whose palaces of fretted copper, and streets that ran between lines of carven golden obelisks, lay dim and ghastly with the dead light, or were drowned forever in seas of stagnant shadow; cities whose vast and iron-built fanes preserved their gloom of primordial mystery and awe, from which the simulacra of century-forgotten gods looked forth with unalterable eyes to the hopeless heavens, and saw the ulterior night, the ultimate oblivion. Languidly we kept our gardens, whose gray lilies concealed a necromantic

perfume, that had power to evoke for us the dead and spectral dreams of the past. Or, wandering through ashen fields of perennial autumn, we sought the rare and mystic immortelles, with sombre leaves and pallid petals, that bloomed beneath willows of wan and veil-like foliage: or wept with a sweet and nepenthe-laden dew by the flowing silence of Acherontic waters.

And one by one we died and were lost in the dust of accumulated time. We knew the years as a passing of shadows, and death itself as the yielding of twilight unto night.

These last two brief tales I have gathered under the heading of "Beyond the Stars" are not precisely what one would call short stories; they are more properly termed prose poems, a form in which Smith delighted and which he borrowed from the famous French poet of the macabre, Baudelaire. I include them here as examples of Smith's work in this form.

Next year, I hope to compile yet another collection of Clark Ashton Smith's short stories in the genre of weird fantasy. If all goes according to plan, our next book of Klarkash-Tonian fiction will be entitled *Poseidonis*, and will include Smith's story cycle laid on the last isle of foundering Atlantis. You may find it interesting to compare Smith's conception of the elder Atlantis with the stories of his friend and correspondent, Robert E. Howard, whose tales of King Kull are set in the very early days of the same fabulous civilization of lost antiquity.

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