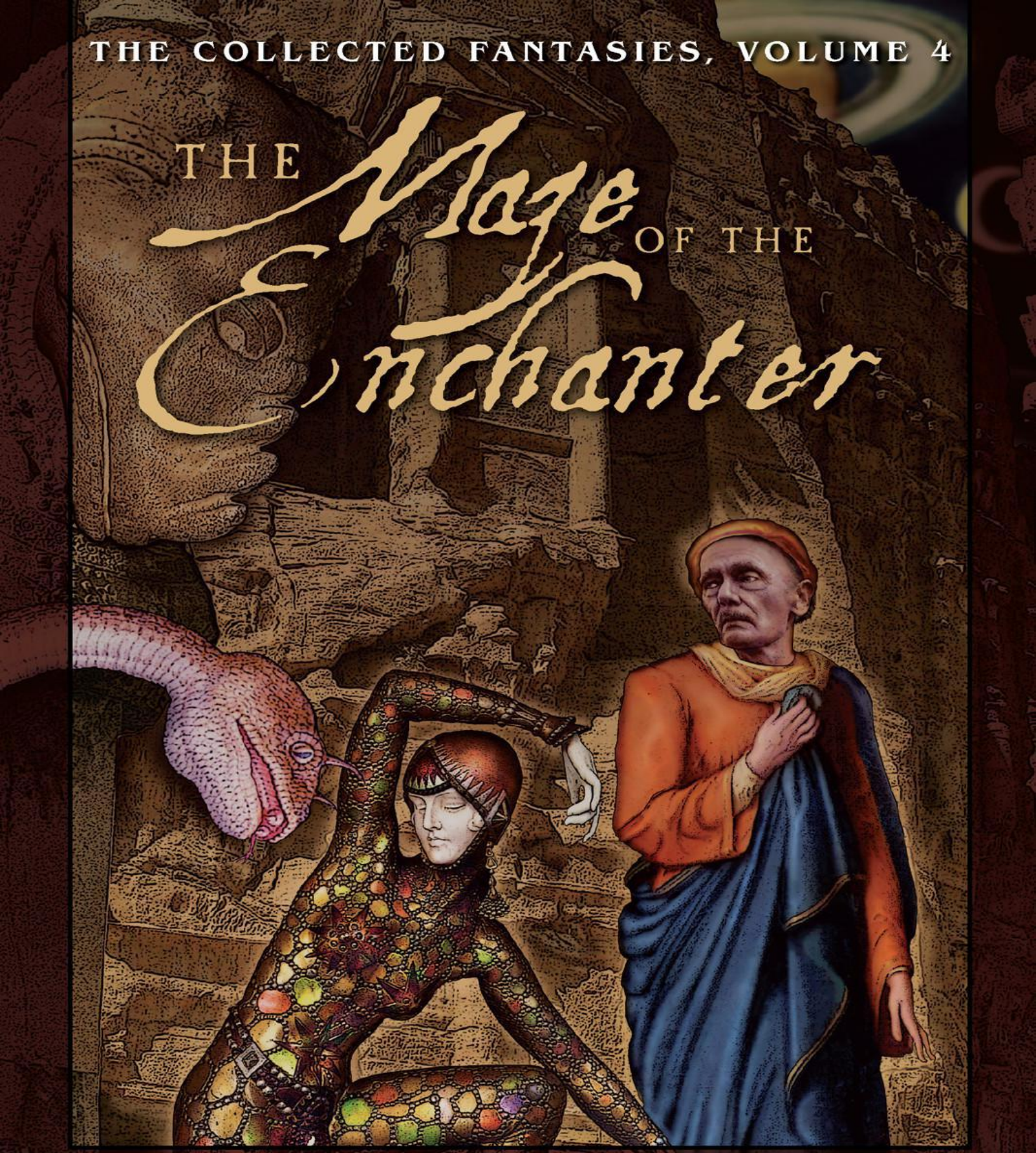
THE COLLECTED FANTASIES, VOLUME 4

THE Mage OF THE Enchanter



CLARK ASHTON SMITH

EDITED BY SCOTT CONNORS AND RON HILGER

THE Maze OF THE Enchanter

Volume Four of

The Collected Fantasies Of

Clark Ashton Smith

Edited by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger

With an Introduction by Gahan Wilson

Night Shade Books

San Francisco

The Maze of the Enchanter © 2009 by The Estate of Clark Ashton Smith
This edition of *The Maze of the Enchanter* © 2009 by Night Shade Books
Jacket art © 2009 by Jason Van Hollander Jacket design by Claudia Noble
Interior layout and design by Jeremy Lassen Author photo by E. Hoffmann Price
Photo courtesy of David Drake and J. Daniel Price
All rights reserved.

Introduction © 2009 by Gahan Wilson A Note on the Texts © 2009 by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger Story Notes © 2009 by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger Bibliography © 2009 by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger **First Edition**

ISBN: 978-1-59780-031-0
Night Shade Books Please visit us on the web at
http://www.nightshadebooks.com

INTRODUCTION

By Gahan Wilson

Clark Ashton Smith's works have always stirred me to the bones. His writings are both meticulously rendered and totally unabashed, his writings can be outrageously grotesque or exquisitely delicate or both simultaneously and without any clashing whatsoever. They are really and truly wonderful.

It took a lot of luck and considerable effort for me to track them down and delight in them, but once I finally came across the first I knew he was the real thing.

I was, frankly, an odd little kid who was always lured by the fantastic and the bizarre. I remember the thing I loved the most about the yearly visit of Barnum and Bailey's big circus to Chicago was the freak show, and I would drag my father to its tent even though I knew he hated it.

Of course I also loved the acrobats and the band and the lion tamers, but they all had chosen to become what they now were whereas the grotesquely huge or absurdly tiny or horribly distorted or otherwise drastically different people of the freak show were born that way and had somehow managed not only to accept their condition fully and without reservation, they had the guts to stand on a platform before throngs of regular-sized, regular-looking folk and make it work for them.

I started my search for this kind of strangeness in art with the Sunday strips, mostly *Dick Tracy* with his ugly villains, but soon expanded the hunt by quietly plucking DC Comics from the magazine racks of the Evanshire Drugstore in Evanston, Illinois, and reading them for free with my small, bare elbows resting on the cool marble counter of the soda fountain while—on the really good days—I spooned and sucked away whole chocolate sodas as, with equal enthusiasm and greed, I read about the early doings of *Superman* and *Batman* and their multitudes of spectacular fiends and loved every crowded panel.

After that, I wandered further afield to the tiny little newsstand lurking beneath the elevated train's Main Street Station in order to collect and soak up science fiction pulp magazines with their shamelessly gaudy covers

featuring green and tentacled alien monsters which were all inexplicably but universally attracted to voluptuous Earth girls who had lots of curly hair and looks of horror on their faces.

I won't pretend I didn't enjoy all of this, but it turned out to be merely a gentle introduction to the glorious day when I worked up the nerve to go to a large and legendary newsstand a whole bus ride further away which was said to carry all kinds of usually unavailable magazines, and my eyes widened and my mouth fell open and joy flooded my heart when I spotted and began to thumb through my very first issue of *Weird Tales* magazine, a publication unashamedly and even proudly devoted to being creepy, and my life was never quite the same again.

Weird Tales was, for a good part of Clark Ashton Smith's life, his major source of income. It's very true the relationship between Smith and the magazine was ever tricky and uneven and that its eccentric and autocratic editor, Farnsworth Wright, was guilty of highhandedly insisting on many alterations and eliminations which were hurtful to both the works and their creators (do note that the producers of this series of Smith's manuscripts have worked scholarly wonders to correct as many of these ill-advised "corrections" as possible), but without that same editor's initial OKs on Smith's stories the great bulk of the tales in these marvelous Night Shade collections would never have been written. Life is complicated.

One very important, if somewhat odd, requirement about creating really good fantasy is that it must be solidly based on reality, and though Clark Ashton Smith was about as romantic as a romantic could get and very gentle with his fellow humans, he was also an astute and occasionally merciless viewer of life and his species and their many failings, and his stories are very often wise teachings as well as entertainments.

I suggest, if you are a Smith beginner, it might be a good idea to start your reading of this book with its title tale—"The Maze of the Enchanter"—as I believe it is a particularly good example of the bizarre startlements, subtly unveiled richnesses and the deeply ironic humor of a great, eccentric artist in top form who is enjoying himself enormously.

At the end of this unabashedly affectionate salute to a man to whom I owe so much, I would like to leave you with a story about Clark Ashton Smith which I deeply treasure. I don't know where I read it, doubtless in something printed by Arkham House, one of Smith's most true-blue

supporters, possibly in the little magazine good old August Derleth put out for some years toward the end.

A group of Smith's fans had written the author to ask if he would be kind enough to let them visit him while traveling in the West, and he not only wrote a note saying he'd be delighted to do so, he drew them a little map showing them how to make their way to his secluded cabin.

They were driving in their car, close to their goal, when they came to a fork in the narrow road which was not indicated on the map and they stopped and were puzzling what they should do next when one of them rose in his seat and pointed out the figure of a man climbing down the mountain slope to their left. They peered at him and saw that he was carrying a sign set on a small post. The sign was shaped like an arrow and it pointed at the man's back and it had CLARK ASHTON SMITH written on it in big bold letters. Of course Smith was on his way to stick it into the ground at the intersection.

I don't know about you, but this story warmed my heart when I first read it, and it still does now that I write it out.

A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

Clark Ashton Smith considered himself primarily a poet and artist, but he began his publishing career with a series of Oriental *contes cruels* that were published in such magazines as the *Overland Monthly* and the *Black Cat*. He ceased the writing of short stories for many years, but under the influence of his correspondent H. P. Lovecraft he began experimenting with the weird tale when he wrote "The Abominations of Yondo" in 1925. His friend Genevieve K. Sully suggested that writing for the pulps would be a reasonably congenial way for him to earn enough money to support himself and his parents.

Between the years 1930 and 1935, the name of Clark Ashton Smith appeared on the contents page of *Weird Tales* no fewer than fifty-three times, leaving his closest competitors, Robert E. Howard, Seabury Quinn, and August W. Derleth, in the dust with forty-six, thirty-three and thirty stories, respectively. This prodigious output did not come at the price of sloppy composition, but was distinguished by its richness of imagination and expression. Smith put the same effort into one of his stories that he did into a bejeweled and gorgeous sonnet. Donald Sidney-Fryer has described Smith's method of composition in his 1978 bio-bibliography *Emperor of Dreams* (Donald M. Grant, West Kingston, R.I.) thus:

> First he would sketch the plot in longhand on some piece of note-paper, or in his notebook, *The Black Book*, which Smith used circa 1929-1961. He would then write the first draft, usually in longhand but occasionally directly on the typewriter. He would then rewrite the story 3 or 4 times (Smith's own estimate); this he usually did directly on the typewriter. Also, he would subject each draft to considerable alteration and correction in longhand, taking the ms. with him on a stroll and reading aloud to himself [. . .]. (19)

Unlike Lovecraft, who would refuse to allow publication of his stories without assurances that they would be printed without editorial alteration, Clark Ashton Smith would revise a tale if it would ensure acceptance. Smith was not any less devoted to his art than his friend, but unlike HPL he had to consider his responsibilities in caring for his elderly and infirm

parents. He tolerated these changes to his carefully crafted short stories with varying degrees of resentment, and vowed that if he ever had the opportunity to collect them between hard covers he would restore the excised text. Unfortunately, he experienced severe eyestrain during the preparation of his first Arkham House collections, so he provided magazine tear sheets to August Derleth for his secretary to use in the preparation of a manuscript.

Lin Carter was the first of Smith's editors to attempt to provide the reader with pure Smith, but the efforts of Steve Behrends and Mark Michaud have revealed the extent to which Smith's prose was compromised. Through their series of pamphlets, the *Unexpurgated Clark Ashton Smith*, the reader and critic could see precisely the severity of these compromises; while, in the collections *Tales of Zothique* and *The Book of Hyperborea*, Behrends and Will Murray presented for the first time these stories just as Smith wrote them.

In establishing what the editors believe to be what Smith would have preferred, we were fortunate in having access to several repositories of Smith's manuscripts, most notably the Clark Ashton Smith Papers deposited at the John Hay Library of Brown University, but also including the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley; Special Collections of Brigham Young University; the California State Library; and several private collections. Most of the typescripts available are carbon copies; where possible, we also consulted the original manuscript appearance of the story, since Smith occasionally would pencil in a change to the top copy of the typescript that did not get recorded on the carbons. Priority was given to the latest known typescript prepared by Smith, except where he had indicated that the changes were made solely to satisfy editorial requirements. In these instances we compared the last version that satisfied Smith with the version sold. Changes made include the restoration of deleted material, except only in those instances where the change of a word or phrase seems consistent with an attempt by Smith to improve the story, as opposed to the change of a word or phrase to a less Latinate, and less graceful, near-equivalent. This represents a hybrid or fusion of two competing versions, but it is the only way that we see that Smith's intentions as author may be honored. In a few instances a word might be changed in the Arkham House collections that isn't indicated on the

typescript. As discussed below, “The Beast of Averoigne” is one such example.

We have also attempted to rationalize Smith’s spellings and hyphenation practices. Smith used British spellings early in his career but gradually switched to American usage. He could also vary spelling of certain words from story to story, e.g. “eerie” and “eery.” We have generally standardized on his later usage, except for certain distinct word choices such as “grey.” In doing so we have deviated from the “style sheet” prepared by the late Jim Turner for his 1988 omnibus collection for Arkham House, *A Rendezvous in Averoigne*. Turner did not have access to such a wonderful scholarly tool as Boyd Pearson’s website, www.eldrichdark.com. By combining its extremely useful search engine with consultation of Smith’s actual manuscripts and typescripts, as well as seeing how he spelled a particular word in a poem or letter, the editors believe that they have reflected accurately Smith’s idiosyncrasies of expression.

However, as Emerson reminds us, “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” Smith may have deliberately varied his spelling and usages depending upon the particular mood or atmosphere that he was trying to achieve in a particular story. As he explained in a letter to H. P. Lovecraft sometime in November 1930:

> The problem of “style” in writing is certainly fascinating and profound. I find it highly important, when I begin a tale, to establish at once what might be called the appropriate “tone.” If this is clearly determined at the start I seldom have much difficulty in maintaining it; but if it isn’t, there is likely to be trouble. Obviously, the style of “Mohammed’s Tomb” wouldn’t do for “The Ghoul”; and one of my chief preoccupations in writing this last story was to *exclude* images, ideas and locutions which I would have used freely in a modern story. The same, of course, applies to “Sir John Maundeville,” which is a deliberate study in the archaic. (*SL* 137)

Therefore we have allowed certain variations in spelling and usage that seem to us to be consistent with Smith’s stated principles as indicated above.

We are fortunate in that typescripts exist for all of the stories in this book except for “The Voyage of King Euvoran.” Smith published both this tale and “The Maze of the Enchanter” in his self-published collection *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933). Smith later published severely

pruned versions of both stories in *Weird Tales*; in these instances we use the version published by Smith himself. The editors also had access to copies of *The Double Shadow*, *The White Sybil*, and *Genius Loci* that included Smith's hand-written corrections.

Several of the stories included in this volume differ significantly from previously published versions. "The Disinterment of Venus" was much more salacious in its original form, and like the later "The Witchcraft of Ulua" was rejected by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright until Smith made it less provocative. Wright was not as specific in his rejection of "The Beast of Averoigne." Reviewers and critics who have commented upon the original version have universally praised its tripartite narration for the deft manner in which CAS handled characterization. When Smith wrote to Derleth, in a letter dated March 22, 1933, that the story was "immensely improved by the various revisions," we believe that he was referring to the new climax, since in the original version the monster was laid in a manner reminiscent of "The Colossus of Ylourgne." We present here a fusion of the two versions, preserving the original narrative structure while retaining the superior climax.

Smith attempted to add several pages of revisions to "The Dimension of Chance" before it appeared in *Wonder Stories*, but these remained unpublished until Steve Behrends brought them to the attention of CAS' readers several years ago. The fate of "The Dweller in the Gulf," another story published by *Wonder Stories*, is notorious; the change of title to "Dweller in Martian Depths" is the least of the indignities inflicted upon it.

We regret that we cannot present a totally authoritative text for Smith's stories. Such typescripts do not exist. All that we can do is to apply our knowledge of Smith to the existing manuscripts and attempt to combine them to present what Smith would have preferred to publish were he not beset by editorial malfeasance in varying degrees. In doing so we hope to present Smith's words in their purest form to date.

The editors wish to thank Douglas A. Anderson, Steve Behrends, Geoffrey Best, Joshua Bilmes, John Boston, Christopher Crites, April Derleth, William A. Dorman, Alan Gullette, Don Herron, Margery Hill, Rah Hoffman, Derrick Hussey, S. T. Joshi, Dennis K. Lien, Terence McVicker, Neil Mechem, Marc Michaud, Andrew Migliore, Will Murray, Boyd Pearson, John Pelan, Alan H. Pesetsky, Rob Preston, Robert M. Price, Dennis Rickard, David E. Schultz, Donald Sidney-Fryer, James Thompson,

Henry Vester, Jason Williams, and especially Jim Rockhill for their help, support, and encouragement of this project, as well as Holly Snyder and the staff of the John Hay Library of Brown University, and D. S. Black of the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, for their assistance in the preparation of this collection. Needless to say, any errors are the sole responsibility of the editors.

THE MANDRAKES

Gilles Grenier the sorcerer and his wife, Sabine, coming into lower Averoigne from parts unknown or at least unverified, had selected the location of their hut with a careful forethought.

The hut was close to those marshes through which the slackening waters of the river Isoile, after leaving the great forest, had overflowed in sluggish, reed-clogged channels and sedge-hidden pools mantled with scum like witches' oils. It stood among osiers and alders on a low, mound-shaped elevation; and in front, toward the marshes, there was a loamy meadow-bottom where the short fat stems and tufted leaves of the mandrake grew in lush abundance, being more plentiful and of greater size than elsewhere through all that sorcery-ridden province. The fleshy, bifurcated roots of this plant, held by many to resemble the human body, were used by Gilles and Sabine in the brewing of love-philtres. Their potions, being compounded with much care and cunning, soon acquired a marvellous renown among the peasants and villagers, and were even in request among people of a loftier station, who came privily to the wizard's hut. They would rouse, people said, a kindly warmth in the coldest and most prudent bosom, would melt the armor of the most obdurate virtue. As a result, the demand for these sovereign magistrals became enormous.

The couple dealt also in other drugs and simples, in charms and divination; and Gilles, according to common belief, could read infallibly the dictates of the stars. Oddly enough, considering the temper of the fifteenth century, when magic and witchcraft were still so widely reprobated, he and his wife enjoyed a repute by no means ill or unsavory. No charges of malefice were brought against them; and because of the number of honest marriages promoted by the philtres, the local clergy were content to

disregard the many illicit amours that had come to a successful issue through the same agency.

It is true, there were those who looked askance at Gilles in the beginning, and who whispered fearfully that he had been driven out of Blois, where all persons bearing the name Grenier were popularly believed to be werewolves. They called attention to the excessive hairiness of the wizard, whose hands were black with bristles and whose beard grew almost to his eyes. Such insinuations, however, were generally considered as lacking proof, insomuch as no other signs or marks of lycanthropy were ever displayed by Gilles. And in time, for reasons that have been sufficiently indicated, the few detractors of Gilles were wholly overborne by a secret but widespread sentiment of public favor.

Even by their patrons, very little was known regarding the strange couple, who maintained the reserve proper to those who dealt in mystery and enchantment. Sabine, a comely woman with blue-grey eyes and wheat-colored hair, and no trace of the traditional witch in her appearance, was obviously much younger than Gilles, whose sable mane and beard were already touched with the white warp of time. It was rumored by visitors that she had oftentimes been overheard in sharp dispute with her husband; and people soon made a jest of this, remarking that the philtres might well be put to a domestic use by those who purveyed them. But aside from such rumors and ribaldries, little was thought of the matter. The connubial infelicities of Gilles and his wife, whether grave or trivial, in no wise impaired the renown of their love-potions.

Also, little was thought of Sabine’s absence, when, five years after the coming of the pair into Averoigne, it became remarked by neighbors and customers that Gilles was alone. In reply to queries, the sorcerer merely said that his spouse had departed on a long journey, to visit relatives in a remote province. The explanation was accepted without debate, and it did not occur to anyone that there had been no eye-witnesses of Sabine’s departure.

It was then mid-autumn; and Gilles told the inquirers, in a somewhat vague and indirect fashion, that his wife would not return before spring. Winter came early that year and tarried late, with deeply crusted snows in the forest and upon the uplands, and a heavy armor of fretted ice on the marshes. It was a winter of much hardship and privation. When the tardy spring had broken the silver buds of the willows and had covered the alders

with a foliage of chrysolite, few thought to ask of Gilles regarding Sabine's return. And later, when the purple bells of the mandrake were succeeded by small orange-colored apples, her prolonged absence was taken for granted.

Gilles, living tranquilly with his books and cauldrons, and gathering the roots and herbs for his magical medicaments, was well enough pleased to have it taken for granted. He did not believe that Sabine would ever return; and his unbelief, it would seem, was far from irrational. He had killed her one eve in autumn, during a dispute of unbearable acrimony, slitting her soft, pale throat in self-defense with a knife which he had wrested from her fingers when she lifted it against him. Afterward he had buried her by the late rays of a gibbous moon beneath the mandrakes in the meadow-bottom, replacing the leafy sods with much care, so that there was no evidence of their having been disturbed other than by the digging of a few roots in the way of daily business.

After the melting of the long snows from the meadow, he himself could scarcely have been altogether sure of the spot in which he had interred her body. He noticed, however, as the season drew on, that there was a place where the mandrakes grew with even more than their wonted exuberance; and this place, he believed, was the very site of her grave. Visiting it often, he smiled with a secret irony, and was pleased rather than troubled by the thought of that charnel nourishment which might have contributed to the lushness of the dark, glossy leaves. In fact, it may well have been a similar irony that had led him to choose the mandrake meadow as a place of burial for the murdered witch-wife.

Gilles Grenier was not sorry that he had killed Sabine. They had been ill-mated from the beginning, and the woman had shown toward him in their quotidian quarrels the venomous spitefulness of a very hell-cat. He had not loved the vixen; and it was far pleasanter to be alone, with his somewhat somber temper unruffled by her acrid speeches, and his sallow face and grizzling beard untorn by her sharp finger-nails.

With the renewal of spring, as the sorcerer had expected, there was much demand for his love-philtres among the smitten swains and lasses of the neighborhood. There came to him, also, the gallants who sought to overcome a stubborn chastity, and the wives who wished to recall a wandering fancy or allure the forbidden desires of young men. Anon, it became necessary for Gilles to replenish his stock of mandrake potions; and with this purpose in mind, he went forth at midnight beneath the full May

moon, to dig the newly grown roots from which he would brew his amatory enchantments.

Smiling darkly beneath his beard, he began to cull the great, moon-pale plants which flourished on Sabine's grave, digging out the homunculus-like taproots very carefully with a curious trowel made from the femur of a witch.

Though he was well used to the weird and often vaguely human forms assumed by the mandrake, Gilles was somewhat surprised by the appearance of the first root. It seemed inordinately large, unnaturally white, and eyeing it more closely, he saw that it bore the exact likeness of a woman's body and lower limbs, being cloven to the middle and clearly formed even to the ten toes! There were no arms, however, and the bosom ended in the large tuft of ovate leaves.

Gilles was more than startled by the fashion in which the root seemed to turn and writhe when he lifted it from the ground. He dropped it hastily, and the minikin limbs lay quivering on the grass. But after a little reflection, he took the prodigy as a possible mark of Satanic favor, and continued his digging. To his amazement, the next root was formed in much the same manner as the first. A half-dozen more, which he proceeded to dig, were shaped in miniature mockery of a woman from breasts to heels; and amid the superstitious awe and wonder with which he regarded them, he became aware of their singularly intimate resemblance to Sabine.

At this discovery, Gilles was deeply perturbed, for the thing was beyond his comprehension. The miracle, whether divine or demoniac, began to assume a sinister and doubtful aspect. It was as if the slain woman herself had returned, or had somehow wrought her unholy simulacrum in the mandrakes.

His hand trembled as he started to dig up another plant; and working with less than his usual care, he failed to remove the whole of the bifurcated root, cutting into it clumsily with the trowel of sharp bone.

He saw that he had severed one of the tiny ankles. At the same instant, a shrill, reproachful cry, like the voice of Sabine herself in mingled pain and anger, seemed to pierce his ears with intolerable acuity, though the volume was strangely lessened, as if the voice had come from a distance. The cry ceased, and was not repeated. Gilles, sorely terrified, found himself staring at the trowel, on which there was a dark, blood-like stain. Trembling, he

pulled out the severed root, and saw that it was dripping with a sanguine fluid.

At first, in his dark fear and half-guilty apprehension, he thought of burying the roots which lay palely before him with their eldritch and obscene similitude to the dead sorceress. He would hide them deeply from his own sight and the ken of others, lest the murder he had done should somehow be suspected.

Presently, however, his alarm began to lessen. It occurred to him that, even if seen by others, the roots would be looked upon merely as a freak of nature and would in no manner serve to betray his crime, since their actual resemblance to the person of Sabine was a thing which none but he could rightfully know.

Also, he thought, the roots might well possess an extraordinary virtue, and from them, perhaps, he would brew philtres of never-equalled power and efficacy. Overcoming entirely his initial dread and repulsion, he filled a small osier basket with the quivering, leaf-headed figurines. Then he went back to his hut, seeing in the bizarre phenomenon merely the curious advantage to which it might be turned, and wholly oblivious to any darker meaning, such as might have been read by others in his place.

In his callous hardihood, he was not disquieted overmuch by the profuse bleeding of a sanguine matter from the mandrakes when he came to prepare them for his cauldron. The ungodly, furious hissing, the mad foaming and boiling of the brew, like a devil’s broth, he ascribed to the unique potency of its ingredients. He even dared to choose the most shapely and perfect of the woman-like plants, and hung it up in his hut amid other roots and dried herbs and simples, intending to consult it as an oracle in the future, according to the custom of wizards.

The new philtres which he had concocted were bought by eager customers, and Gilles ventured to recommend them for their surpassing virtue, which would kindle amorous warmth in a bosom of marble or inflame the very dead.

Now, in the old legend of Averoigne which I recount herewith, it is told that the impious and audacious wizard, fearing neither God nor devil nor witch-woman, dared to dig again in the earth of Sabine’s grave, removing many more of the white, female-shapen roots, which cried aloud in shrill complaint to the waning moon or turned like living limbs at his violence. And all those which he dug were formed alike, in the miniature image of

the dead Sabine, from breasts to toes. And from them, it is said, he compounded other philtres, which he meant to sell in time when such should be requested.

As it happened, however, these latter potions were never dispensed; and only a few of the first were sold, owing to the frightful and calamitous consequences that followed their use. For those to whom the potions had been administered privily, whether men or women, were not moved by the genial fury of desire, as was the wonted result, but were driven by a darker rage, by a woeful and Satanic madness, irresistibly impelling them to harm or even slay the persons who had sought to attract their love.

Husbands were turned against wives, lasses against their lovers, with speeches of bitter hate and scathful deeds. A certain young gallant who had gone to the promised rendezvous was met by a vengeful madwoman, who tore his face into bleeding shreds with her nails. A mistress who had thought to win back her recreant knight was mistreated foully and done to death by him who had hitherto been impeccably gentle, even if faithless.

The scandal of these untoward happenings was such as would attend an invasion of demons. The crazed men and women, it was thought at first, were veritably possessed by devils. But when the use of the potions became rumored, and their provenance was clearly established, the burden of the blame fell upon Gilles Grenier, who, by the law of both church and state, was now charged with sorcery.

The constables who went to arrest Gilles found him at evening in his hut of raddled osiers, stooping and muttering above a cauldron that foamed and hissed and boiled as if it had been filled with the spate of Phlegethon. They entered and took him unaware. He submitted calmly, but expressed surprise when told of the lamentable effect of the love-philtres; and he neither affirmed nor denied the charge of wizardry.

As they were about to leave with their prisoner, the officers heard a shrill, tiny, shrewish voice that cried from the shadows of the hut, where bunches of dried simples and other sorcerous ingredients were hanging. It appeared to issue from a strange, half-withered root, cloven in the very likeness of a woman’s body and legs—a root that was partly pale, and partly black with cauldron-smoke. One of the constables thought that he recognized the voice as being that of Sabine, the sorcerer’s wife. All swore that they heard the voice clearly, and were able to distinguish these words:

“Dig deeply in the meadow, where the mandrakes grow the thickliest.”

The officers were sorely frightened, both by this uncanny voice and the obscene likeness of the root, which they regarded as a work of Satan. Also, there was much doubt anent the wisdom of obeying the oracular injunction. Gilles, who was questioned narrowly as to its meaning, refused to offer any interpretation; but certain marks of perturbation in his manner finally led the officers to examine the mandrake meadow below the hut.

Digging by lantern-light in the specified spot, they found many more of the enchanted roots, which seemed to crowd the ground; and beneath, they came to the rotting corpse of a woman, which was still recognizable as that of Sabine. As a result of this discovery, Gilles Grenier was arraigned not only for sorcery but also for the murder of his wife. He was readily convicted of both crimes, though he denied stoutly the imputation of intentional malefice, and claimed to the very last that he had killed Sabine only in defense of his own life against her termagant fury. He was hanged on the gibbet in company with other murderers, and his dead body was then burned at the stake.

THE BEAST OF AVEROIGNE

1. The Deposition of Brother Gérôme

I, a poor scrivener and the humblest monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Périgon, have been asked by our abbot Théophile to write down this record of a strange evil that is still rampant, still unquelled. And, ere I have done writing, it may be that the evil shall come forth again from its lurking-place, and again be manifest.

We, the friars of Périgon, and all others who have knowledge of this thing, agree that its advent was coeval with the first rising of the red comet which still burns nightly, a flying balefire, above the moonless hills. Like Satan's rutilant hair, trailing on the wind of Gehenna as he hastens worldward, it rose below the Dragon in early summer; and now it follows the Scorpion toward the western woods. Some say that the horror came from the comet, flying without wings to earth across the stars. And truly, before this summer of 1369, and the lifting of that red, disastrous scourge upon the heavens, there was no rumor or legend of such a thing in all Averoigne.

As for me, I must deem that the beast is a spawn of the seventh hell, a foulness born of the bubbling, flame-blent ooze; for it has no likeness to the beasts of earth, to the creatures of air and water. And the comet may well have been the fiery vehicle of its coming.

To me, for my sins and unworthiness, was it first given to behold the beast. Surely the sight thereof was a warning of those ways which lead to perdition: for on that occasion I had broken the rule of St. Benedict which

forbids eating during a one-day's errand away from the monastery. I had tarried late, after bearing a letter from Théophile to the good priest of Ste. Zénobie, though I should have been back well before evensong. And also, apart from eating, I had drunk the mellow white wine of Ste. Zénobie with its kindly people. Doubtless because I had done these things, I met the nameless, night-born terror in the woods behind the abbey when I returned.

The day had vanished, fading unaware; and the long summer eve, without moon, had thickened to a still and eldritch darkness ere I approached the abbey postern. And hurrying along the forest path, I felt an eerie fear of the gnarled, hunchback oaks and their pit-deep shadows. And when I saw between their antic boughs the vengefully streaming fire of the new comet, which seemed to pursue me as I went, the goodly warmth of the wine died out and I began to regret my truancy. For I knew that the comet was a harbinger of ill, an omen of death and Satanry to come.

Now, as I passed among the ancient trees that tower thickly, growing toward the postern, I thought that I beheld a light from one of the abbey windows and was much cheered thereby. But, going on, I saw that the light was near at hand, beneath a lowering bough beside my path; and moreover, it moved as with the flitting of a restless fenfire, and was wholly dissimilar to the honest glow of a lamp, lantern or taper. And the light was of changeable color, being pale as a corposant, or ruddy as new-spilled blood, or green as the poisonous distillation that surrounds the moon.

Then, with ineffable terror, I beheld the thing to which the light clung like a hellish nimbus, moving as it moved, and revealing dimly the black abomination of head and limbs that were not those of any creature wrought by God. The horror stood erect, rising to the height of a tall man, and it moved with the swaying of a great serpent, and its members undulated as if they were boneless. The round black head, having no visible ears or hair, was thrust forward on a neck of snakish length. Two eyes, small and lidless, glowing hotly as coals from a wizard's brazier, were set low and near together in the noseless face above the serrate gleaming of bat-like teeth.

This much I saw, and no more, ere the thing went past me with the strange nimbus flaring from venomous green to a wrathful red. Of its actual shape, and the number of its limbs, I could form no just notion. It uttered no sound, and its motion was altogether silent. Running and slithering rapidly, it disappeared in the bough-black night, among the antique oaks; and I saw the hellish light no more.

I was nigh dead with fear when I reached the abbey and sought admittance at the postern. And the porter who came at last to admit me, after I had knocked many times, forbore to chide me for my tardiness when I told him of that which I had seen in the moonless wood.

On the morrow, I was called before Théophile, who rebuked me sternly for my breach of discipline, and imposed a penance of daylong solitude. Being forbidden to hold speech with the others, I did not hear till the second morn of the thing that was found before nones in the wood behind Périgon, where I had met the nameless beast.

The thing was a great stag which had been slain in some ungodly fashion, not by wolf or hunter or poacher. It was unmarked by any wound, other than a wide gash that had laid bare the spine from neck to tail; and the spine itself had been shattered and the white marrow sucked therefrom; but no other portion of the stag had been devoured. None could surmise the nature of the beast that slew and ravened in such a manner; but many, for the first time, began to credit my tale, which the abbot and the brothers had hitherto looked upon as a sort of drunken dream. Verily, they said, a creature from the Pit was abroad, and this creature had killed the stag and had sucked the marrow from its broken spine. And I, aghast with the recollection of that loathly vision, marvelled at the mercy of God, which had permitted me to escape the doom of the stag.

None other, it seemed, had beheld the monster on that occasion; for all the monks, save me, had been asleep in the dormitory; and Théophile had retired early to his cell. But, during the nights that followed the slaying of the stag, the presence of this baleful thing was made manifest to all.

Now, night by night, the comet greatened, burning like an evil mist of blood and fire, while the stars blenched before it and terror shadowed the thoughts of men. And in our prayers, from prime to evensong, we sought to deprecate the unknown ills which the comet would bring in its train. And day by day, from peasants, priests, woodcutters and others who came to visit the abbey, we heard the tale of fearsome and mysterious depredations, similar in all ways to the killing of the stag.

Dead wolves were found with their chines laid open and the spinal marrow gone; and an ox and a horse were treated in like fashion. Then, it would seem, the beast grew bolder—or else it wearied of such humble prey as deer and wolves, horses and oxen.

At first, it did not strike at living men, but assailed the helpless dead like some foul eater of carrion. Two freshly buried corpses were found lying in the cemetery at Ste. Zénobie, where the thing had dug them from their graves and had laid open their vertebrae. In each case, only a little of the marrow had been eaten; but as if in rage or disappointment, the cadavers had been torn into shreds from crown to heel, and the tatters of their flesh were mixed inextricably with the rags of their cerements. From this, it would seem that only the spinal marrow of creatures newly killed was pleasing to the monster.

Thereafter the dead were not molested; but a grievous toll was taken from the living. On the night following the desecration of the graves, two charcoal-burners, who plied their trade in the forest at a distance of no more than a mile from Périgon, were slain foully in their hut. Other charcoal-burners, dwelling nearby, heard the shrill screams that fell to sudden silence; and peering fearfully through the chinks of their bolted doors, they saw anon in the grey starlight the departure of a black, obscenely glowing shape that issued from the hut. Not till dawn did they dare to verify the fate of their hapless fellows, who, they then discovered, had been served in the same manner as the wolves and other victims of the beast.

When the tale of this happening was brought to the abbey, Théophile called me before him and questioned me closely anent the apparition which I had encountered. He, like the others, had doubted me at first, deeming that I was frightened by a shadow or by some furtive creature of the wood. But, after the series of atrocious maraudings, it was plain to all that a fiendish thing such as had never been fabled in Averoigne, was abroad and ravening through the summer woods. And moreover it was plain that this thing was the same which I had beheld on the eve of my return from Ste. Zénobie.

Our good abbot was greatly exercised over this evil, which had chosen to manifest itself in the neighborhood of the abbey, and whose depredations were all committed within a five-hours' journey of Périgon. Pale from his over-strict austerities and vigils, with hollow cheeks and burning eyes, Théophile called me before him and made me tell my story over and over, listening as one who flagellates himself for a fancied sin. And though I, like all others, was deeply sensible of this hellish horror and the scandal of its presence, I marvelled somewhat at the godly wrath and indignation of our abbot, in whom blazed a martial ardor against the minions of Asmodai.

“Truly,” he said, “there is a great devil among us, that has risen with the comet from Malebolge. We, the monks of Périgon, must go forth with cross and holy water to hunt the devil in its hidden lair, which lies haply at our very portals.”

So, on the afternoon of that same day, Théophile, together with myself and six others chosen for their hardihood, sallied forth from the abbey and made search of the mighty forest for miles around, entering with lifted crosses, by torchlight, the deep caves to which we came, but finding no fiercer thing than wolf or badger. Also, we searched the vaults of the ruined castle of Faussesflammes, which is said to be haunted by vampires. But nowhere could we trace the sable monster, or find any sign of its lairing.

Since then, the middle summer has gone by with nightly deeds of terror, beneath the blasting of the comet. Beasts, men, children, women, have been done to death by the monster, which, though seeming to haunt mainly the environs of the abbey, has ranged afield even to the shores of the river Isoile and the gates of La Frénaie and Ximes. And some have beheld the monster at night, a black and slithering foulness clad in changeable luminescence; but no man has ever beheld it by day.

Thrice has the horror been seen in the woods behind the abbey; and once, by full moonlight, a brother peering from his window descried it in the abbey garden, as it glided between the rows of peas and turnips, going toward the forest. And all agree that the thing is silent, uttering no sound, and is swifter in its motion than the weaving viper.

Much have these occurrences preyed on our abbot, who keeps to his cell in unremitting prayer and vigil, and comes forth no longer, as was his wont, to dine and hold converse with the guests of the abbey. Pale and meager as a dying saint he grows, and a strange illness devours him as if with perpetual fever; and he mortifies the flesh till he totters with weakness. And we others, living in the fear of God, and abhorring the deeds of Satan, can only pray that the unknown scourge be lifted from the land, and pass with the passing of the comet.

2. The Letter of Théophile to Sister Therèse

. . . To you, my sister in God as well as by consanguinity, I must ease my mind (if this be possible) by writing again of the dread thing that harbors close to Périgon: for this thing has struck once more within the abbey walls, coming in darkness and without sound or other ostent than the Phlegethonian luster that surrounds its body and members.

I have told you of the death of Brother Gérôme, slain at evening in his cell, while he was copying an Alexandrian manuscript. Now the fiend has become even bolder; for last night it entered the dormitory, where the brothers sleep in their robes, girded and ready to arise instantly. And without waking the others, on whom it must have cast a Lethean spell, it took Brother Augustin, slumbering on his pallet at the end of the row. And the fell deed was not discovered till daybreak, when the monk who slept nearest to Augustin awakened and saw his body, which lay face downward with the back of the robe and the flesh beneath a mass of bloody tatters.

On this occasion, the Beast was not beheld by anyone; but at other times, full often, it has been seen around the abbey; and its craftiness and hardihood are beyond belief, except as those of an archdevil. And I know not where the horror will end; for exorcisms and the sprinkling of holy water at all doors and windows have failed to prevent the intrusion of the Beast; and God and Christ and all the holy Saints are deaf to our prayers.

Of the terror laid upon Averoigne by this thing, and the bale and mischief it has wrought outside the abbey, I need not tell, since all this will have come to you as a matter of common report. But here, at Périgon, there is much that I would not have rumored publicly, lest the good fame of the abbey should suffer. I deem it an humiliating thing, and a derogation and pollution of our sanctity, that a foul fiend should have ingress to our halls unhindered and at will.

There are strange whispers among the brothers, who believe that Satan himself has risen to haunt us. Several have met the Beast even in the chapel, where it has left an unspeakably blasphemous sign of its presence. Bolts and locks are vain against it; and vain is the lifted cross to drive it away. It comes and goes at its own choosing; and they who behold it flee in irrestrainable terror. None knows where it will strike next; and there are those among the brothers who believe it menaces me, the elected abbot of Périgon; since many have seen it gliding along the hall outside my cell. And Brother Constantin, the cellarer, who returned late from a visit to Vyônes

not long ago, swears that he saw it by moonlight as it climbed the wall toward that window of my cell which faces the great forest. And seeing Constantin, the thing dropped to the ground like a huge ape and vanished among the trees.

All, it would seem, save me, have beheld the monster. And now, my sister, I must confess a strange thing, which above all else would attest the influential power of Hell in this matter, and the hovering of the wings of Asmodai about Périgon.

Each night since the coming of the comet and the Beast, I have retired early to my cell, with the intention of spending the nocturnal hours in vigil and prayer, as I am universally believed to do. And each night a stupor falls upon me as I kneel before the Christ on the silver crucifix; and oblivion steeps my senses in its poppy; and I lie without dreams on the cold floor till dawn. Of that which goes on in the abbey I know nothing; and all the brothers might be done to death by the Beast, and their spines broken and sucked as is its invariable fashion, without my knowledge.

Haircloth have I worn; and thorns and thistle-burs have I strewn on the floor, to awake me from this evil and ineluctable slumber that is like the working of some Orient drug. But the thorns and thistles are as a couch of paradisal ease, and I feel them not till dawn. And dim and confused are my senses when I awaken; and deep languor thralls my limbs. And day by day a lethal weakness grows upon me, which all ascribe to saintly pernoctations of prayer and austerity.

Surely I have become the victim of a spell, and am holden by a baleful enchantment while the Beast is abroad with its hellish doings. Heaven, in its inscrutable wisdom, punishing me for what sin I know not, has delivered me utterly to this bondage and has thrust me down to the sloughs of a Stygian despair.

Ever I am haunted by an eerie notion, that the Beast comes nightly to earth from the red comet which passes like a fiery wain above Averoigne; and by day it returns to the comet, having eaten its fill of that provender for which it seeks. And only with the comet’s fading will the horror cease to harry the land and infest Périgon. But I know not if this thought is madness, or a whisper from the Pit.

Pray for me, Therèse, in my bewitchment and my despair: for God has abandoned me, and the yoke of hell has somehow fallen upon me; and naught can I do to defend the abbey from this evil. And I, in my turn, pray

that such things may touch you not nor approach you in the quiet cloisters of the convent at Ximes ....

3. The Story of Luc le Chaudronnier

Old age, like a moth in some fading arras, will gnaw my memories oversoon, as it gnaws the memories of all men. Therefore I write this record of the true origin and slaying of that creature known as the Beast of Averoigne. And when I have ended the writing, the record shall be sealed in a brazen box, and that box be set in a secret chamber of my house at Ximes, so that no man shall learn the dreadful verity of this matter till many years and decades have gone by. Indeed, it were not well for such evil prodigies to be divulged while any who took part in the happening are still on the earthward side of Purgatory. And at present the truth is known only to me and to certain others who are sworn to maintain secrecy.

The ravages of the Beast, however, are common knowledge, and have become a tale with which to frighten children. Men say that it slew fifty people, night by night, in the summer of 1369, devouring in each case the spinal marrow. It ranged mostly about the abbey of Périgon and to Ximes and Ste. Zénobie and La Frênaie. Its nativity and lairing-place were mysteries that none could unravel; and church and state were alike powerless to curb its maraudings, so that a dire terror fell upon the land and people went to and fro as in the shadow of death.

From the very beginning, because of my own commerce with occult things and with the spirits of darkness, the baleful Beast was the subject of my concern. I knew that it was no creature of earth or of the terrene hells, but had come with the flaming comet from ulterior space; but regarding its character and attributes and genesis, I could learn no more at first than any other. Vainly I consulted the stars and made use of geomancy and necromancy; and the familiars whom I interrogated professed themselves ignorant, saying that the Beast was altogether alien and beyond the ken of sublunar devils.

Then I bethought me of the ring of Eibon, which I had inherited from my fathers, who were also wizards. The ring had come down, it was said, from ancient Hyperborea; and it was made of a redder gold than any that

the earth yields in latter cycles, and was set with a great purple gem, somber and smouldering, whose like is no longer to be found. And in the gem an antique demon was held captive, a spirit from pre-human worlds and ages, which would answer the interrogation of sorcerers.

So, from a rarely opened casket, I brought out the ring of Eibon and made such preparations as were needful for the questioning of the demon. And when the purple stone was held inverted above a small brazier filled with hotly burning amber, the demon made answer, speaking in a voice that was like the shrill singing of fire. It told me the origin of the Beast, which belonged to a race of stellar devils that had not visited the earth since the foundering of Atlantis; and it told me the attributes of the Beast, which, in its own proper form, was invisible and intangible to men, and could manifest itself only in a fashion supremely abominable. Moreover, it informed me of the one method by which the Beast could be banished, if overtaken in a tangible shape. Even to me, the student of darkness, these revelations were a source of horror and surprise. And for many reasons, I deemed the mode of exorcism a doubtful and perilous thing. But the demon had sworn that there was no other way.

Musing on these dark matters, I waited among my books and braziers and alembics, for the stars had warned me that my intervention would be required in good time.

Toward the end of August, when the great comet was beginning to decline a little, there occurred the lamentable death of Sister Therèse, killed by the Beast in her cell at the Benedictine convent of Ximes. On this occasion, the Beast was plainly seen by late passers as it ran down the convent wall by moonlight from a window; and others met it in the shadowy streets or watched it climb the city ramparts, running like a monstrous beetle or spider on the sheer stone as it fled from Ximes to regain its hidden lair.

To me, following the death of Therèse, there came privily the town marshal, together with the abbot Théophile, in whose worn features and bowed form I descried the ravages of mortal sorrow and horror and humiliation. And the two, albeit with palpable hesitation, begged my advice and assistance in the laying of the Beast.

“You, Messire le Chaudronnier,” said the marshal, “are reputed to know the arcanic arts of sorcery, and the spells that summon or dismiss evil demons and other spirits. Therefore, in dealing with this devil, it may be

that you shall succeed where all others have failed. Not willingly do we employ you in the matter, since it is not seemly for the church and the law to ally themselves with wizardry. But the need is desperate, lest the demon should take other victims. In return for your aid, we can promise you a goodly reward of gold and a guarantee of lifelong immunity from all inquisition and prosecution which your doings might otherwise invite. The Bishop of Ximes, and the Archbishop of Vyônes, are privy to this offer, which must be kept secret."

"I ask no reward," I replied, "if it be in my power to rid Averoigne of this scourge. But you have set me a difficult task, and one that is haply attended by strange perils."

"All assistance that can be given you shall be yours to command," said the marshal. "Men-at-arms shall attend you, if need be."

Then Théophile, speaking in a low, broken voice, assured me that all doors, including those of the abbey of Périgon, would be opened at my request, and that everything possible would be done to further the laying of the fiend.

I reflected briefly, and said:

"Go now, but send to me, an hour before sunset, two men-at-arms, mounted, and with a third steed. And let the men be chosen for their valor and discretion: for this very night I shall visit Périgon, where the horror seems to center."

Remembering the advice of the gem-imprisoned demon, I made no preparation for the journey, except to place upon my index finger the ring of Eibon, and to arm myself with a small hammer, which I placed at my girdle in lieu of a sword. Then I awaited the set hour, when the men and the horses came to my house, as had been stipulated.

The men were stout and tested warriors, clad in chain-mail, and carrying swords and halberds. I mounted the third horse, a black and spirited mare, and we rode forth from Ximes toward Périgon, taking a direct and little-used way which ran for many miles through the werewolf-haunted forest.

My companions were taciturn, speaking only in answer to some question, and then briefly. This pleased me; for I knew that they would maintain a discreet silence regarding that which might occur before dawn. Swiftly we rode, while the sun sank in a redness as of welling blood among the tall trees; and soon the darkness wove its thickening webs from bough to bough, closing upon us like some inexorable net of evil. Deeper we went,

into the brooding woods; and even I, the master of sorceries, trembled a little at the knowledge of all that was abroad in the darkness.

Undelayed and unmolested, however, we came to the abbey at late moonrise, when all the monks, except the aged porter, had retired to their dormitory. The abbot, returning at sunset from Ximes, had given word to the porter of our coming, and he would have admitted us; but this, as it happened, was no part of my plan. Saying I had reason to believe the Beast would re-enter the abbey that very night, I told the porter my intention of waiting outside the walls to intercept it, and merely asked him to accompany us in a tour of the building's exterior, so that he could point out the various rooms. This he did, and during the course of the tour, he indicated a certain window in the second story as being that of Théophile's chamber. The window faced the forest, and I remarked the abbot's rashness in leaving it open. This, the porter told me, was his invariable custom, in spite of the oft-repeated demoniac invasions of the monastery. Behind the window we saw the glimmering of a taper, as if the abbot were keeping late vigil.

We had committed our horses to the porter's care. After he had conducted us around the abbey and had left us, we returned to the space before Théophile's window and began our long watch in silence.

Pale and hollow as the face of a corpse, the moon rose higher, swimming above the somber oaks and pines, and pouring a spectral silver on the grey stone of the abbey walls. In the west the comet flared among the lusterless signs, veiling the lifted sting of the Scorpion as it sank.

We waited hour by hour in the shortening shadow of a tall oak, where none could see us from the windows. When the moon had passed over, sloping westward, the shadow began to lengthen toward the wall. All was mortally still, and we saw no movement, apart from the slow shifting of the light and shade. Half-way between midnight and dawn, the taper went out in Théophile's cell, as if it had burned to the socket; and thereafter the room remained dark.

Unquestioning, with ready weapons, the two men-at-arms companioned me in that vigil. Well they knew the demonian terror which they might face before dawn; but there was no trace of trepidation in their bearing. And knowing much that they could not know, I drew the ring of Eibon from my finger, and made ready for that which the demon had directed me to do.

The men stood nearer than I to the forest, facing it perpetually according to a strict order that I had given. But nothing stirred in the fretted gloom; and the slow night ebbed; and the skies grew paler, as if with morning twilight. Then, an hour before sunrise, when the shadow of the great oak had reached the wall and was climbing toward Théophile's window, there came the thing I had anticipated. Very suddenly it came, and without forewarning of its nearness, a horror of hellish red light, swift as a kindling, windblown flame, that leapt from the forest gloom and sprang upon us where we stood stiff and weary from our night-long vigil.

One of the men-at-arms was borne to the ground, and I saw above him, in a floating redness as of ghostly blood, the black and semi-serpentine form of the Beast. A flat and snakish head, without ears or nose, was tearing at the man's armor with sharp serrate teeth, and I heard the teeth clash and grate on the linked iron. Swiftly I laid the ring of Eibon on a stone I had placed in readiness, and broke the dark jewel with a blow of the hammer that I carried.

From the pieces of the lightly shattered gem, the disemprisoned demon rose in the form of a smoky fire, small as a candle-flame at first, and greatening like the conflagration of piled faggots. And, hissing softly with the voice of fire, and brightening to a wrathful, terrible gold, the demon leapt forward to do battle with the Beast, even as it had promised me, in return for its freedom after cycles of captivity.

It closed upon the Beast with a vengeful flaring, tall as the flame of an auto-da-fé, and the Beast relinquished the man-at-arms on the ground beneath it, and writhed back like a burnt serpent. The body and members of the Beast were loathfully convulsed, and they seemed to melt in the manner of wax and to change dimly and horribly beneath the flame, undergoing an incredible metamorphosis. Moment by moment, like a werewolf that returns from its beasthood, the thing took on the wavering similitude of man. The unclean blackness flowed and swirled, assuming the weft of cloth amid its changes, and becoming the folds of a dark robe and cowl such as are worn by the Benedictines. Then, from the cowl, a face began to peer, and the face, though shadowy and distorted, was that of the abbot Théophile.

This prodigy I beheld for an instant; and the men also beheld it. But still the fire-shaped demon assailed the abhorrently transfigured thing, and the face melted again into waxy blackness, and a great column of sooty smoke arose, followed by an odor as of burning flesh commingled with some

mighty foulness. And out of the volumed smoke, above the hissing of the demon, there came a single cry in the voice of Théophile. But the smoke thickened, hiding both the assailant and that which it assailed; and there was no sound, other than the singing of fed fire.

At last, the sable fumes began to lift, ascending and disappearing amid the boughs, and a dancing golden light, in the shape of a will-o'-the-wisp, went soaring over the dark trees toward the stars. And I knew that the demon of the ring had fulfilled its promise, and had now gone back to those remote and ultramundane deeps from which the sorcerer Eibon had drawn it down in Hyperborea to become the captive of the purple gem.

The stench of burning passed from the air, together with the mighty foulness; and of that which had been the Beast there was no longer any trace. So I knew that the horror born of the red comet had been driven away by the fiery demon. The fallen man-at-arms had risen, unharmed beneath his mail, and he and his fellow stood beside me, saying naught. But I knew that they had seen the changes of the Beast, and had divined something of the truth. So, while the moon grew grey with the nearness of dawn, I made them swear an awful oath of secrecy, and enjoined them to bear witness to the statement I must make before the monks of Périgon.

Then, having settled this matter, so that the good renown of the holy Théophile should suffer no calumny, we aroused the porter. We averred that the Beast had come upon us unaware, and had gained the abbot's cell before we could prevent it, and had come forth again, carrying Théophile with its snakish members as if to bear him away to the sunken comet. I had exorcised the unclean devil, which had vanished in a cloud of sulphurous fire and vapor; and, most unluckily, the abbot had been consumed by the fire. His death, I said, was a true martyrdom, and would not be in vain: the Beast would no longer plague the country or bedevil Périgon, since the exorcism I had used was infallible.

This tale was accepted without question by the Brothers, who grieved mightily for their good abbot. Indeed, the tale was true enough, for Théophile had been innocent, and was wholly ignorant of the foul change that came upon him nightly in his cell, and the deeds that were done by the Beast through his loathfully transfigured body. Each night the thing had come down from the passing comet to assuage its hellish hunger; and being otherwise impalpable and powerless, it had used the abbot for its

energumen, moulding his flesh in the image of some obscene monster from beyond the stars.

It had slain a peasant girl in Ste. Zénobie on that night while we waited behind the abbey. But thereafter the Beast was seen no more in Averoigne; and the murderous deeds were not repeated.

In time the comet passed to other heavens, fading slowly; and the black terror it had wrought became a varying legend, even as all other bygone things. The abbot Théophile was canonized for his strange martyrdom; and they who read this record in future ages will believe it not, saying that no demon or malign spirit could have prevailed thus upon true holiness. Indeed, it were well that none should believe the story: for thin is the veil betwixt man and the godless deep. The skies are haunted by that which it were madness to know; and strange abominations pass evermore between earth and moon and athwart the galaxies. Unnamable things have come to us in alien horror and will come again. And the evil of the stars is not as the evil of earth.

A STAR-CHANGE

I

It was on Spanish Mountain, where he had climbed from Donner to escape the society of his fellow-campers, that Lemuel Sarkis first met the people of the planet Mlok.

Since he was far from being an expert mountaineer, he had not cared to assail the crowning castellation of the long, somber ridge, but had contented himself with the lower, more accessible eastern terminus. From this, he could look down on the waters of Frog Lake, lying dark and still at the bottom of a bare declivity.

Among volcanic-looking boulders, well out of the wind that swept the upper ridge, he seated himself in morose contemplation while the mountain shadows lengthened, shaken out like lazy wings, and a pale light crept eastward on the waters of black opal below. The vastness of the solitude, its grim and craggy grandeur, began to have a soothing effect upon Sarkis; and the human trivialities and banalities that had driven him to flight assumed their proper insignificance in the mighty perspectives on which he peered.

He had seen no one, not even a sheepherder or fisherman, in his climb through the forested ravines and up the sunflower-covered slopes. He was startled as well as annoyed when a pebble loosened as if by some unheard foot fall clattered past him and went over the precipice. Someone else had climbed the mountain; and his misanthropic aversion rose in a gall-like bitterness as he turned to survey the intruder.

Instead of the tourist or mountaineer he had expected, he saw two beings who bore not even the remotest appearance to humanity, and, moreover, were obviously unrelated to any species of earth-life. Not only for that first startled moment, but during the entire episode that followed, Sarkis wondered if he had fallen asleep and had been visited by some preposterous dream.

Each of the beings was about four feet high, with a somewhat doubtful division into head and body. Their formation was incredibly flat and two-dimensional; and they seemed to float rather than stand, as if swimming through the air. The upper division, which one accustomed to earthly physical structures would have taken for the head, was much larger than the lower, and more rotund. It resembled the featureless disk of a moonfish, and was fringed with numberless interbranching tendrils or feelers like a floral arabesque. The lower division suggested a Chinese kite. It was marked with unknown goblin features, some of which may have been eyes, of a peculiarly elongated and oblique sort. It ended in three broad, streamer-like members, subdividing into webby tassels, that trailed on the ground but seemed wholly inadequate for the purpose of legs.

The coloration of these beings baffled Sarkis. He received alternate impressions of opal-shot blackness, elusive greyness and blood-bright violet.

Impossible, beyond belief, they hung before him among the rocks, swaying forward with a dreamy slowness, as if attached to the ground by their tasseled streamers. Their fringes of woven tendrils seemed to float toward him, quivering with restless life, and certain of their eyelike features gradually brightened and drew his gaze with the hypnotic gleaming of crystals.

The feeling of divorce from diurnal reality increased upon him; for now he seemed to hear a low, insistent humming, to which he could assign no definite source. It corresponded vaguely with the slow vibration of the fringes in its beat and cadence. He heard it all around him in the air, like a mesh of sound; and yet somehow it was inside his own brain, as if the unused cells were thrilling with a telepathic murmur from worlds unknown to man.

The humming grew louder, it took on a partial coherence and articulation, as if certain semi-phonetic sounds were repeated over and over in a long-drawn sequence. Still more articulate it grew, seeming to form a

prolonged vocable. Startlingly it dawned upon him that the vocable was intended for the English phrase, “Come with us,” and he realized that the beings were trying earnestly to convey an invitation by means of unearthly vocal organs.

Like one who has been mesmerized, without fear or wonder, he gave himself up to the impressions that besieged his senses. On the flat, vacant, moonfish disks, very gradually, dim, intricate lines and masses limned themselves, growing brighter and more distinct till they began to suggest an actual picture.

Sarkis could comprehend little enough of what he saw; but he received an idea of immense distance and alien, distorted perspective. In a blare of exotic light, a sea-like flood of intense color, strange-angled machineries towered, and structures that might have been either buildings or vegetable growths, receded on a ground of baffling dimension and doubtful inclination. Through this baroque scenery, there floated forms that bore a slight and incoherent resemblance to the beings who confronted him: a resemblance like the broken hint of natural shapes maintained in the utmost perversions of cubism. Together with these forms, as if convoyed by them, there moved another figure having an equally remote and dubious likeness to a human being.

Somehow, Sarkis divined that this latter figure was intended for himself. The scene was a picture of some foreign world or dimension which these fantastic creatures invited him to visit! Alike in all its details, the tableau was duplicated on the disks.

With curious lucidity and coolness, he pondered the invitation. Should he accept it? And if he did accept, what would happen? Of course, it was all a dream—and dreams were tricky things, with a habit of vanishing if one tried consciously to fathom their elusive vistas. But—supposing it were not a dream? From what world, then, had these beings emerged, and by what mode of transit were they enabled to visit the earth? Surely they could not have come from any planet of the solar system: their utter strangeness seemed to argue that they were children of another galaxy, or at least of another sun than ours.

The beings appeared to perceive his hesitation. The pictures on their bodies faded, and were slowly replaced by others, as if they sought to woo him with the varied sceneries of their native world. At the same time, the humming noise resumed; and after awhile, the equivocal monotone began

to suggest familiar words, most of which continued to elude Sarkis. He seemed to make out an eerie prolongation of “offer” and “escape,” as if these vocables were uttered by some enormous, droning insect.

Then, through the strange hypnotic sound, he heard the crisp laughter of a girl and the gay chattering of human voices. Plainly several people had climbed the mountain and were coming toward him along the slope, though he could not see them as yet.

The dreamy charm was broken, and he felt a shock of actual fear as well as a deep startlement when he saw that the unknown visitors were still before him. Those intruding human voices had convinced him that the happening was no dream. He felt the involuntary recoil of the earth-born mind from things that are monstrous and inexplicable.

The voices drew nearer behind the rocks, and he thought that he recognized the tones of one or more of his fellow-campers. Then, as he continued to face the apparitions, he discerned above their grotesquely floating forms the sudden flash of sourceless coppery metals that barred the air, hanging aloft like some mechanical mirage. A maze of slanted rods and curving reticulations seemed to hover and descend about the two beings. An instant later, it was gone, and the visitants had also disappeared!

Sarkis hardly saw the approach of a woman and two men, all members of the party he had wished to avoid. To a bewilderment like that of some rudely awakened sleeper, was added the eerie consternation of one who thinks that he has met the supernatural.

A week later, Sarkis had returned to his lodgings in San Francisco and had resumed the tedious commercial art which formed his one reliable source of livelihood. This uncongenial exigency had involved the ruthless smothering of higher ambitions. He had wanted to paint imaginative pictures, had dreamt of fixing in opulent color a fantasy such as Beardsley had caught in ornate line. But such pictures, it seemed, were in small request.

The happening on Spanish Mountain had stirred his imagination profoundly, though he was still doubtful of its actuality. He gave himself to endless speculation, and often he cursed the untimely interruption that had caused the visitants to vanish.

It seemed to him that the beings (if they were not mere hallucinatory images) had appeared in answer to his own vague and undirected longings for the supermundane. Like envoys from a foreign universe, they had

sought him out, had favored him with their invitation. Their attempt at verbal communication argued a knowledge of terrene language; and it was plain that they could come and go at will, no doubt by means of some occult mechanism.

What did they want with him? he wondered. What would have been his fate if he had accompanied them?

His pictorial bent for the fantastic was deeply stimulated; and more than once, after his daily stint of advertising-art was done, he tried to paint the visitants from memory. This he found peculiarly difficult: the images with which he sought to deal were without analogy; and their very hues and proportions baffled his recollection. It was as if an alien spectrum, a trans-Euclidean geometry, had somehow been involved.

One eve, he stood glowering with dissatisfaction before his easel. The picture, he thought, was a silly smudge of over-painted colors which utterly failed to convey the true outlandishness of its theme.

There was no sound or other warning, nothing that could consciously attract his attention. But turning abruptly, he saw behind him the two beings he had met on Spanish Mountain. They swayed slowly in the lamplight between the cluttered table and a somewhat shabby divan, trailing their tasseled members on an old rug whose fading floral designs were splashed with fresh paint.

With the loaded brush in his fingers, Sarkis could only stand and stare, held in the same hypnotic thrall that had swept him beyond fear or wonder on the mountain. Once more he beheld the gradual, somnolent waving of the arabesque feelers; again he heard the dreamy monotonous hum that resolved itself into long-drawn vocables, inviting him to go with the visitants. Again, on the moonfish disks, were depicted scenes that would have been the despair of a futurist.

Almost without emotion or thought of any kind, Sarkis gave an audible consent. He hardly knew that he had spoken.

Slowly, as it had begun, the waving motion of the feelers ceased. The consonant humming died, the pictures faded. Then, as before, there came the coppery flash of air-suspended machinery. Broad, oblique rods and concave meshes hovered between ceiling and floor, descended about the alien entities—and about Sarkis himself. Dimly, between the glowing bars, he descried the familiar furnishings of his room.

An instant more, and the room vanished like a film of shadow wiped away in light. There was no sense of movement or of transit; but it seemed that a foreign sky had opened above, pouring down a deluge of crimson. Redness streamed upon him, it filled his eyes with a fury as of boiling blood, it dripped over him in sullen or burning cascades.

By degrees, he began to distinguish outlines and masses. The bars and meshes were still around him, his strange companions were still beside him. They were weirdly altered now, and they swam in the crimson flood like the goblin fish of some infernal sea. Involuntarily, Sarkis shrank away from them: they were terrifying, monstrous.

He saw now that he was standing on a curiously tesselated floor that curved upward on all sides like the bottom of a huge saucer. High, outward-sloping walls, windowless and roofless, towered all about. The mechanism that surrounded him was also topless, and he perceived that it was changing. Very slowly, like dying flames, the rods and meshes sank and disappeared in a circle of small sockets that were part of the floor.

A deep vermilion heaven domed the tower, pouring down the thick, heavy light. The material of which the building was composed, whether stone, metal or some unheard-of element, flowed with lusters of liquid ruby and dissolving cinnabar.

Sarkis became aware that the air he breathed, though well-supplied with oxygen, was uncomfortably thick and seemed to choke his lungs. Also, when he tried to move, he found his weight enormously increased, as if by the gravitation of a gigantic planet.

Where he was or how be had gotten there, he could not imagine. He had nursed an artistic longing for the weird, the otherworldly; but he had never dreamed of this utter and delirious alienation from known things. Moreover, he had not foreseen the shock to human nerves that would ensue an actual transition into another sphere. His sensations of physical discomfort were soon supplemented by a sort of optic torture: the light troubled him, it stimulated his senses cruelly, and yet it stifled and oppressed him at the same time.

A multitude of beings similar to his companions began to enter the topless tower, floating gradually down from the sky or swimming in through low doors. They crowded about him, and he found himself moving toward one of the exits, with their feelers and streamers tugging gently at his limbs. He felt an unreasoning terror at their touch, like a child in the grip

of nightmare shadows. Their humming awoke in his brain the thought of some hostile horde of abominably droning insects.

Passing through the doorway, he entered a sea of light in which he was unable to discern clearly the features of the landscape. Almost vertically overhead, he saw the blinding blot of a vast sun. The throng of goblin people, increasing momently, bore him down a grassless, barren slope whose bottom was lost in the inundating crimson.

More and more, he felt an inexpressible malaise, a frightful mixture of confusion, irritation and depression, to which all his senses contributed. He tried to recall the circumstances of his departure from earth, tried to assure himself that there was some natural explanation of all that had happened. The beings whose invitation he had accepted were, he told himself, friendly and well-meaning, and he would suffer no harm. But such thoughts were powerless to calm his agitated nerves, now subject to the assault of innumerable vibratory forces which the human system had never been meant to sustain.

The torture deepened. His journey down the slope, rendered doubly slow by the dragging gravitational pull and the leisurely drifting of his fantastic entourage, who seemed to obey another and more decelerated tempo of time than man, was literally a descent into hell. Every impression became a source of pain and terror, and he found a lurking menace of evil in all that surrounded him.

At the bottom of the slope, a second roofless bowl-shaped tower loomed from the murk, on the shore of a stagnant sea. To him, at that moment, it was like a shrine of alien diabolism, hateful and menacing; and he wanted to scream aloud with a nameless horror when the goblin creatures bore him toward it and urged him through its portals.

The interior of this tower, yawning to the red sky, was lined with countless outlandish carvings from floor to top. In the center of the floor, there stood a curious couch, made from a pile of mattress-thick fabrics.

Eyeing the couch with nervous dubiety, Sarkis became aware that the throng had melted away, as if its curiosity were appeased. A mere half-dozen of the beings remained; and since all were equally monstrous, he could not be sure if his original companions were among them.

They gathered around him with their hateful droning, pulling him toward the couch. He resisted, but the tasseled streamers were unbelievably strong, and they tightened about him, clammily repulsive as the tentacles of

octopi. The couch was innocent enough, and no doubt the creatures were merely offering him a hospitality which, in their own way, they had tried to accommodate to human needs. But Sarkis felt the terror of a fever patient, whose doctors and attendants seem like hellish torturers.

His last remnant of control gave way, and he shrieked and fought wildly. His own voice assumed an uncanny volume in the thick air, returning upon him deafeningly, surrounding him with ventriloquistic clamors; and he seemed to lift a Sisyphean load as he struggled.

Very gently but firmly, the creatures laid him on the couch. Fearing he knew not what, he still tried to resist them. Two of the beings proceeded to join their streamers across his recumbent body, interlacing the divided ends like fingers; and two others arranged their members in like fashion across his legs. Floating just above the floor, they held him securely to the couch, like doctors who have tied down a delirious patient.

Lying helpless, he saw the remaining two swim skyward and vanish beyond the tower's rim. After awhile he ceased his futile struggling; but his attendants still held him bound with their flat, clammy streamers.

Sarkis lived in an aching torment, whose duration was not to be measured by earthly time. The red sky appeared to descend upon him, heavier and closer; and the enigmatic details of the sculptures on the tower walls perturbed him with sly suggestions of alien foulness and fear. He saw Satanic faces that leered or frowned obscenely, and faceless gargoyle things that seemed to palpitate with malignant life in the cataracting crimson.

The sky took on an awful, ardent glowing. With intolerable slowness, the huge sun, rising to its meridian, filled with its orb the cup that was formed by the tower's rim. The intricate carvings ran with redoubled light, the stellar monsters and gargoyles dripped a venomous ruby that maddened the staring eyes of Sarkis, till he closed his lids against it, and still saw in his branded brain the corrosive, inexorably irritant color. Finally a great blackness came upon him: a sluggish and leaden Lethe, through which he sank interminably, still pursued by floating blots of acrid crimson, before losing himself.

He awoke in a sort of stupefaction, drugged and exhausted, as if his nerves had been burnt out by that cruel debauch of red. With nightmare effort, he opened his eyes to a heaven of funereal violet. The red sun had been succeeded by a purple binary of equal magnitude, whose orb was now intersecting the topless tower with a mournfully glaring crescent.

Sarkis could not collect his shattered thoughts; but a shapeless fear, an awareness of something irremediably wrong and baleful, rose in his mind. He was still held by the streamers of his four attendants; and moving his head, he saw that several others were floating patiently beside the couch. With their adroit members, more supple and capacious than hands, they bore a multitude of strange articles.

Seeing that he had awakened, they swam toward him, proffering certain smooth, elongated, fruit-like objects. One of them held to his lips a shallow bowl filled with a semi-viscid liquor, which he was plainly expected to drink.

Utterly astray and unstrung, Sarkis shrank in renewed terror from these beings. Bathed in that lugubrious violet, their outré forms were cadaverous as dead things from another star. An infinite melancholia poured from the purple sun, cascaded from the sloping walls, jetted from the monstrous carvings. The humming of his attendants, who doubtless sought to reassure him, was heavy with a dirge-like horror. Refusing the offered food and drink, he closed his eyes and lay inert beneath the dismal madness that had fallen upon him.

All that followed was as if part of this madness, and not to be separated from its teeming phantasms. Sarkis was lifted from the couch by his attendants, who formed a sort of cradle with their streamers, in which they carried him from the tower and along some endless road. At intervals he opened his eyes to ghastly-looking plants that swam and swayed in the violet air like sea-weed in an ocean-stream.

Presently he knew that his bearers were descending a steep incline, as if to some deeper circle of this dolorous inferno. Walls that might have been those of a slanted catacomb, lit with a bluish, deathly lambence, stifled him with their closeness.

He found himself at length in a great chamber, whose furnishings, to his distraught eyes, bore the aspect of frightful and multiform instruments of torture. Sarkis' alarm was increased when the flat-bodied people stretched him on a slightly hollowed slab of pale mineral whose fittings of machinery at sides and ends were reminiscent of some medieval rack.

A stony fear weighed down his faculties, arrested his breathing; and he did not resist. One of his presumable torturers was floating above him in the hell-blue light, while the others swam in a sort of ring about the slab. The floating creature laid the fringy tips of its middle streamer on his mouth and

nostrils, and he felt an odd shock from the contact. An icy coldness flowed across his face, into his brow and head, into his neck, his arms, his body. It seemed that a strange, benumbing force had been exerted by the creature: the flowing coldness was followed by a loss of all sensation, and a singular detachment from the terror and malaise that had tormented him. Without alarm or speculation, he considered the beings about him, who were now removing his garments and applying to his body the sinister little disks and needle-studded plates that formed part of the slab's mechanical equipment.

It was all meaningless to him; and in some fashion that he did not even try to understand, the whole scene took on an ever-growing dimness and remoteness, as if he were floating away from it—and from himself—into another dimension.

II

His return to awareness was like a new birth. Strangeness there was, such as an infant would find in its surroundings; but fear and pain were wholly gone. He found nothing monstrous or unnatural or menacing in the world that was now revealed to his senses.

Later, when he had learned to communicate easily with the people of Mlok, they told him of the singular and radical operations which they had deemed it necessary to perform upon him: operations involving his nerves and sense-organs, so as to alleviate, by changing all his impressions and even certain subconscious functions, the torment he had suffered from the images and vibratory rays of a world in which the human senses were not prepared to function properly. At first they had not understood his sufferings, since they themselves, being far more adaptive than men, endured little discomfort in passing from one world to another. But, having diagnosed his condition, they had hastened to palliate it through the resources of a preter-human science.

Just what had been done to him, Sarkis could never wholly grasp; and the results of the operations, admitting him to an entire new range of perceptions, were well-nigh ineffable. His otherworld hosts had wished to make him hear, see, feel and perceive in much the same manner as themselves.

Perhaps the profoundest change was in his visual images. He saw new colors of supernal softness and beauty. The red daylight, which had almost maddened him, was now a clear and nameless hue which he somehow associated with emerald green. The light of the violet binary no longer depressed him, and its ultra-spectral color was remotely allied to pale amber.

His ideas of form had undergone a corresponding alteration. The bodies and members of the alien people, which he had thought almost two dimensional, and which had terrified him with their goblin grotesquery, presented many subtle planes and curves, together with a depth that argued the addition of at least one totally new dimension. The whole effect was aesthetically pleasing, with a fundamental symmetry such as he had previously discerned in well-shaped human bodies. The vegetation, scenery and architecture no longer impressed him as abnormal or monstrous.

His sense of time had now become synchronized with the slow tempo of the heavy planet, and the speech and movement of the people had lost that former sense of undue prolongation. The thick air, the weighty gravitation, had also ceased to discomfit him.

Moreover, he had acquired several new senses. One of these can best be described as a combination of hearing and touch: many sound images, especially those of high pitch, were perceived by his ears as a local tactility. The sensation was that of a gently varied tapping. Another sense was that of audible color: certain hues were always accompanied by an overtone of sound, often highly musical.

His intercourse with the people of Mlok was carried on through several mediums. After the operations, they could impress telepathic words and images upon his mind. Their other modes of communication, which involved for them less expenditure of energy than pure telepathy, were mastered more gradually by Sarkis. The reflex of thought-pictures, thrown on their bodies as on a screen, became intelligible to him; and the sound-vibration of their arabesque feelers, which served them in lieu of vocal cords, was now fully articulate, with its higher notes perceivable as a graduated tactile pressure.

He learned that his hosts, who called themselves the Mloki after their planet, were an old and highly developed race for whom the marvels of scientific masterdom had become secondary to the delights of pure perception and reflection. Mlok, they told him, was the third planet of a

binary solar system in a galaxy so remote, astronomically speaking, that its light had never reached the earth.

The manner in which they had visited the earth and had taken Sarkis to their own world was indeed strange, and involved the use of an arcanic force, which, by projecting itself through the fifth dimension, could exist simultaneously in opposite corners of the universe. The apparatus of coppery-looking bars and meshes which had descended upon Sarkis was composed of this force. How it was controlled and manipulated, he never quite understood, apart from the fact that it was closely obedient to a certain nervous power possessed by the Mlok.

They had often visited the earth, as well as many other alien planets, through curiosity. In spite of their divergent sense-development, they had acquired a surprising knowledge of terrene conditions. Two of them, whose names were Nlaa and Nluu, had found Sarkis on Spanish Mountain, and had perceived telepathically his dissatisfaction with mundane life. Being sympathetic in their way, and also curious concerning the result of such an experiment, they had invited him to accompany them on their return to Mlok.

The real events of Sarkis' life among the Mloki were his new and wonderful sensations. The outward happenings were all very simple, for the existence of this people, apart from their excursions to remote worlds, was almost wholly contemplative.

For his food and drink, they supplied him with many fruits and vegetable juices. The Mloki themselves drew their nourishment directly from the air and light; and their topless towers were designed to collect and focus all the solar rays, the absorption of which was to them a rare, Epicurean pleasure. To a limited extent, the alteration of Sarkis' nerves had given him a similar faculty; but he still depended mainly on grosser foods.

One very remarkable feature of the sensory change in Sarkis was the vagueness which attended his impressions of his own body. He seemed to possess a dream-like immateriality, and to drift rather than walk in his movement from place to place.

He spent much of his time in converse with certain of the Mlok especially Nlaa and Nluu, who took a tutelary interest in their protégé, and never wearied of imparting to him their immensely recondite and various knowledge. He acquired undreamt-of conceptions regarding time, space, life, matter and energy, and was also instructed in novel aesthetics and in

highly complicated arts which made painting appear a silly and barbarous pastime.

How long he remained in Mlok, he never knew. His instructors, a long-lived people to whom centuries were no more than years, gave little importance to the formal measurement of time. But many of the long, double days and brief, irregular nights had gone by, before a homesickness for the lost earth began to torment him. Amid all the beguilements and novelties of his existence, beneath his altered senses, a nostalgia rose in his brain, which was still, at bottom, the brain of an earth-man.

The feeling came upon him by degrees. His memories of the world he had formerly detested and from which he had longed to escape, took on a haunting charm and poignancy, and were touched with an enchantment such as belongs to early childhood. He recoiled from the sensory opulence of the world about him, and yearned for the simple scenes and faces of the human sphere.

The Mloki, well aware of the growth of this feeling, tried to distract him with new impressions and took him on a tour of their planet. In this tour, they employed a vessel which swam through the thick air like a submarine in some tellurian ocean. Nlaa and Nluu accompanied the earth-man, solicitous, and eager to point out the marvels of each latitude.

The effect however, was merely to aggravate Sarkis' nostalgia. Peering down on the domeless Karnaks and Babylons of this ultra-cosmic world, he thought of the earth-cities with a craving which, in his quondam aversion for the works of man, he would never have believed possible. Drifting among prodigious mountains, where mundane peaks would have been lost like boulders, he recalled the Sierras with a sick yearning that moved him almost to tears.

After rounding the equator of Mlok, and visiting the iceless poles, the expedition returned to its starting-point, which lay in the tropic realms. Sarkis, now desperately ill and languishing, implored Nlaa and Nluu to send him back by means of the occult force-projector to his own world. They tried to dissuade him, saying that his homesickness was merely a brain-wrought illusion that would wear off in time.

In order to relieve him permanently and speedily from his suffering, they proposed a certain treatment of his brain-cells. By the injection of a rare vegetable serum, they could alter his very memories and mental

reactions. These, as well as his sense-impressions, would then approximate those of the Mloki.

Sarkis, though he shrank in a way from the proposed mental transformation, which would have removed him utterly and forever beyond humanity, might well have consented. But certain untoward happenings, wholly unforeseen, were to bring about another eventuation than this.

The planetary system to which Mlok belonged was on the very extreme of its native island universe. In the short intersolar nights, this universe could be seen as a nebulous star-cloud, filling half of the heavens; but the other half was dark and rayless as the Coal Sack familiar to terrene astronomers. It seemed that there were no living stars in the sable gulf, unless at a distance that had not yet permitted their rays to reach the observatories of Mlok.

Nevertheless, there came from this void the first invasion that had ever threatened the security of the two-sunned planet. The first warning of this invasion was a dark cloud—a thing hitherto unknown in Mlok, whose humid element was constant in the thick seas and heavy air, without evaporation or precipitation. The cloud, which had the form of a trapezium, drew down and widened rapidly above the southern zones, doming the sky with intense ebon. It broke on the lands beneath in a rain of black, liquid globules, which acted like a mordant chemical. Flesh, stone, soil, vegetation, everything that was touched by the rain, dissolved instantly, forming tarry pools and rills that soon merged in an ever-spreading sea.

The news of this catastrophe became known immediately all over the planet. The corrosive sea was watched from air-vessels, and every effort was made to curb its inroads. Dykes of atomic energy were built to enclose it; and belts of elemental fire were centered upon the pollution, to burn it away. But all such measures were in vain: the sea like a liquid cancer, ate steadily into the huge planet.

Some of the black fluid was obtained by Mloki who sacrificed their own lives in submitting it to analysis. Even as the element began its ravages upon their bodies, they announced their findings as to its nature. The globules that had fallen from space, they thought, were protoplasmic organisms of an unknown type, which had the power of liquefying all other forms of matter in what was seemingly an illimitable process of assimilation. This process had formed the eroding sea.

Another rain of globules was soon reported, this time in the northern hemisphere. A third precipitation, following swiftly, made certain the eventual doom of Mlok. The people could only flee from the dissolving littorals of the three oceans, which were widening in ravenous circles and would sooner or later unite and surround the planet. It became known, also, that the other worlds of the system, which were not peopled by intelligent beings, had been attacked by the lethal organisms.

The Mloki, a philosophic race, long given to equable meditation on cosmic change and death, were resigned to the coming annihilation. Though they could have fled to alien worlds by means of their space-projectors, they preferred to perish with their planet.

Nlaa and Nluu, however, as well as their fellows in general, now became anxious for the return of Lemuel Sarkis to his own sphere. It was not just or proper, they argued, that he should share the doom of an ultra-terrene people. They had promptly abandoned the idea of subjecting him to further medical treatment, and could only urge his immediate departure.

In a state of oddly bewildered emotions, he was taken by Nlaa and Nluu to the tower through which he had entered Mlok. From the hill on which this tower stood, he could discern the black arc of the encroaching sea of dissolution on the far horizon.

Enjoined by his preceptors, he took his place amid the circle of floor-sockets that formed the generators of the transporting mechanism. With much regret and sadness, he said farewell to Nlaa and Nluu, after vainly pressing them to accompany him.

Since, as they told him, they could determine by means of their thought-images the very spot in which he was to land, he had expressed a desire to return to Earth via his studio in San Francisco. Moreover, since travel in time was no less feasible than space-transit, his mundane re-appearance would occur on the morning that had followed his departure.

Slowly, and having now a different form and hue for his altered eyes, the bars and meshes sprang from the tower floor and surrounded Sarkis. All at once, the air darkened strangely. He turned again toward Nlaa and Nluu for a parting glimpse—and found that they, as well as the tower, had vanished. The transition had already taken place!

The pseudo-metallic rods and meshes began to dissolve about him, and he looked for the familiar outlines and furnishings of his studio. A puzzlement assailed him, and then a hideously growing doubt. Surely Nlaa

and Nluu had made a mistake, or else the projecting power had failed to return him to his chosen bourn. Seemingly he had been landed in a totally unknown sphere or dimension.

Around him, in a sullen light, he saw the looming of dark, chaotic masses, whose very contours were touched with nightmare menace. Surely this place was not his studio room—these crazily angled cliffs that closed him in were not walls, but the sides of some infernal pit! The dome above, with its dolorously distorted planes, pouring down a hellish glare, was not the skylighted roof that he recalled. The bulging horrors that rose before him along the bottom of the pit, with obscene forms and corrupt hues, were surely not his easel, table and chairs.

He took a single step, and was alarmed by the horrible lightness which he felt. As if by some miscalculation of distance, the step carried him against one of the looming objects, and he ran his hands over it, finding that the thing, whatever it might be, was clammily repulsive to the touch as well as repugnant to sight. Something about it, however, on close inspection, was remotely familiar. The thing was like an overswollen, geometric travesty of an armchair!

Sarkis felt a nervous perturbation, a vague and all-surrounding terror comparable to that of his first impressions in Mlok. He realized that Nlaa and Nluu had kept their word, and had returned him to his studio; but the realization merely increased his bewilderment. Because of the profound sensory changes to which he had been subjected by the Mloki, his perceptions of form, light, color and perspective were no longer those of an earth-man. Therefore the well-remembered room and its furnishings were irredeemably monstrous to him. Somehow, in his nostalgia, and the haste and flurry of his departure, he had failed to foresee the inevitability of this change of aspect in all earthly things.

A hideous vertigo swept upon him with the full understanding of his predicament. He was, virtually, in the position of a madman who knows well his own madness, but is utterly without power to control it. Whether or not his new mode of cognition was closer to ultimate reality than the former human mode, he could not know. It mattered little, in the overwhelming sense of estrangement, amid which he sought desperately to recover the least hint or vestige of the world that he remembered.

With the doubtful groping of one who seeks an exit from some formidable maze, he searched for the door, which he had left unlocked on

the evening when he accepted the invitation of Nlaa and Nluu. His very sense of direction, he found, had become inverted; the relative nearness and proportion of objects baffled him; but at last, after many stumblings and collisions with the misshapen furniture, he found an insanely faceted projection amid the perverted planes of the wall. This, he somehow determined, was the door-knob.

After repeated effort he opened the door, which seemed to be of unnatural thickness, with convex distortions. Beyond, he saw a yawning cavern with lugubrious arches, which he knew to be the hall of the apartment house in which he lived.

His progress along the hall, and down the two flights of stairs to the street-level, was like a pilgrimage in some ever-deepening nightmare. The time was early morning, and he met no one. But apart from the maddening visual distortion of everything about him, he was assailed, as he went on, by a multitude of other sense-impressions that confirmed and increased his neural torture.

He heard the noises of the awakening city, set to an alien tempo of delirious speed and fury: a hurtling of cruel clangors, whose higher notes beat upon him like the pounding of hammers, the volleying of pebbles. The ceaseless impingement stunned him more and more; it seemed that the thronging strokes would batter in his very brain.

He emerged at length on what he knew to be the city street: a broad avenue that ran toward the ferry building. The early traffic had begun; and to Sarkis, the passing cars and pedestrians seemed to whirl with lightning speed, like the driven souls of the damned in some nether chasm of an insane hell. For him, the morning sunlight was a balefully tinted gloom that flowed in forky rays from a demonian Eye that brooded above the chasm.

The buildings, with pestilent hues and outlines, were full of the terror of delirium, the abomination of ill dreams. The people were ghastly creatures whose headlong movement barely permitted him to form a clear impression of their bulging eyes, their bloated faces and bodies. They terrified him, even as the people of Mlok beneath the maddening vermilion sun.

The air was thin and bodiless to him, and he suffered a peculiar discomfort from the lessened pressure and gravity, which now added to his feeling of hopeless alienation. He seemed to move like a wildered phantom through the dismal Hades to which he had been committed.

He heard the voices of the monsters who went flying past: voices that partook of the same giddy acceleration as their movements, so that the words were indistinguishable. It was like the sound of some vocal record, played too fast on a phonograph.

Sarkis groped his way along the pavement, searching for some familiar landmark in the alien-angled masses of the buildings. Sometimes he thought that he was about to discover a remembered hotel or shop-front—and then, a moment later, the broken similitude was lost in a mad bizarrerie.

He came to an open space, which he had known as a small park, with well-kept trees and shrubbery amid the greening grass. He had been fond of the place, and its memory had often haunted him in his cosmic homesickness. Now, stumbling upon it in that city of delirium, he sought vainly to retrieve the longed-for charm and loveliness.

The trees and shrubs were like towering fungi of Gehenna, loathsome, unclean, and the grass was a vermin-grey foulness from which he turned in sick revulsion.

Astray in that labyrinth of fear, and virtually out of his senses, he fled at random, and tried to cross an arterial where cars were hurtling by at the apparent speed of projectiles. Here, with no warning that his eyes or ears could perceive, something struck him down like a sudden bolt, and he slid into merciful oblivion.

He awoke an hour later in the hospital to which he had been taken. The injuries which he had sustained, from being knocked down by the slowly driven car before which he had thrust himself as if deaf and blind, were not serious, but his general condition puzzled the doctors.

When, with reviving consciousness, he began to scream horribly, and to shrink away as if in mortal terror from his attendants, they were inclined to diagnose the case as delirium tremens. His nerves were obviously in a bad way; though, curiously enough, the doctors failed to detect the presence of alcohol or any known drug to support their diagnosis.

Sarkis failed to respond to the powerful sedatives which they administered. His sufferings, which seemed to take the form of terrific hallucinations, were prolonged and progressive. One of the internes noted a queer deformation of his eyeballs; and there was much speculation regarding the singular long-drawn *slowness* of his screams and writhings. However, though baffling, his case was readily enough dismissed by the doctors when, a week later, he persisted in dying. It was merely one more of

those unsolved enigmas that sometimes occur even in the best-regulated of professions.

THE DISINTERMENT OF VENUS

I

Prior to certain highly deplorable and scandalous happenings in the year 1550, the vegetable garden of Périgon was situated on the southeast side of the abbey. After these events, it was removed to the northwest side, where it has remained ever since; and the former garden-site was given to weeds and briars which, by strict order of the successive abbots, no one has ever tried to eradicate or curb.

The happenings which compelled this removal of the Benedictine's turnip and carrot patches became a popular tale in Averoigne, to the lasting shame of the good Brothers. It is hard to say how much or how little of the legend is apocryphal.

One April morning, three monks were spading lustily in the garden. Their names were Paul, Pierre and Hughues. The first was a man of ripe years, hale and robust; the second was in his early prime; the third was little more than a boy, and had but recently taken his final vows.

Being moved with an especial ardor, in which the vernal stirring of youthful sap may have played its part, Hughues proceeded to dig the loamy soil even more diligently and deeply than his comrades. The ground was almost free of stones, owing to the careful and industrious tillage of many generations of monks; but anon, through the muscular zeal with which it was wielded, the spade of Hughues encountered a well-buried object of indeterminate size but unquestionable hardness.

Hughues felt that this obstruction, which in all likelihood was a small boulder, should be removed for the honor of the monastery and the glory of God. Bending busily, he shoveled away the moist, blackish loam in an effort to uncover it.

The task was more arduous than he had expected; and the supposed boulder began to reveal an amazing length and a quite singular formation as he bared it by degrees. Leaving their own toil, Pierre and Paul came to his assistance. Soon, through the zealous endeavors of the three, the nature of the buried object became all too manifest.

In the large pit they had now dug, the monks beheld the grimy head and torso of what was plainly a marble woman or goddess from antique years. The pale stone of shoulders and arms, tinged faintly as if with a living rose, had been scraped clean in places by their delving shovels; but the face and breasts were still black with the heavily caked loam.

The figure stood erect, as if on a hidden pedestal or altar. One arm was raised, caressing with a shapely hand the ripe contour of the bosom; the other, hanging idly, was still plunged in the earth. Digging deeper, the monks began to uncover the full voluptuous hips and rounded thighs; and finally, taking turns in the pit, whose rim was now higher than their heads, they came to the sunken pedestal, which stood on a pavement of granite.

During the course of their excavations, as the nature of their find began to disclose itself unmistakably, the Brothers had felt a strange, powerful excitement whose cause they could hardly have explained, but which seemed to arise, like some obscure contagion, from the long-buried arms and bosom of the image. Mingled with a pious horror due to the infamous nudity and paganry of the feminine statue, there was an unacknowledged pleasure which the three would have rebuked in themselves as vile and shameful if they had recognized it.

Oddly fearful of chipping or scratching the marble, they wielded their spades with much chariness; and when the digging was completed and the comely feet were uncovered on their pedestal, Paul, the oldest, standing beside the image in the pit, began to wipe away with a handful of weeds and grass the maculations of dark loam that still clung to its lovely body. This task he performed with great thoroughness; and he ended by polishing the marble with the hem and sleeves of his black robe.

He felt an unwonted but delicious fever as he touched the smooth marble; and he lingered so long over his self-imposed task, and the

movements of his rough hands were so lover-like and caressing, that they aroused the unspoken disapproval of Pierre and Hughues; who, nevertheless, were half conscious of a covert desire to follow his example.

At length, Paul emerged reluctantly from the pit. He and his fellows, who were not without classic learning, now saw that the figure was evidently a statue of Venus, dating no doubt from the Roman occupation of Averoigne, when certain altars to this divinity had been established by the invaders.

The vicissitudes of half-legendary time, the long dark years of inhumation, had harmed the Venus little if at all. The slight mutilation of an ear-tip half-hidden by rippling curls, and the partial fracture of a shapely middle toe, merely served to add, if possible, a keener seduction to her languorously sensual beauty.

She was exquisite as the succubi of youthful dreams, but her perfection was touched with inenarrable evil. The lines of the mature figure were fraught with a maddening luxuriousness; the eyelids were drooped in a pretended coyness of false virtue; the lips of the full, Circean face were half pouting, half smiling with ambiguous allure. It was the masterpiece of an unknown, decadent sculptor; not the noble, maternal Venus of heroic times, but the sly and cruelly voluptuous Cotytto, the Cytherean of dark orgies, ready for her descent into the Hollow Hill.

Staring at the fully revealed image, the good monks became forcibly aware of certain unhallowed emotions which they would never have been willing to avow. A sensuous enchantment, an amorous thralldom, seemed to flow from the flesh-pale marble and to weave itself like invisible hair about the hearts of the Brothers. They felt the prompting of forbidden thoughts and reveries, of rebel desires which they had supposedly put away with the assuming of their monkhood.

With a sudden, mutual feeling of shame, that caused them to avoid each other’s eyes, they began to debate what should be done with the Venus, which, in a monastery garden, was somewhat misplaced, and would become a source of embarrassment. Since their combined efforts would barely have sufficed to elevate the heavy image from the pit, they sent Hughues, as the youngest, to report their find to the abbot and await his decision regarding its disposal. In the meanwhile, Paul and Pierre resumed their garden labors, stealing covert glances at the fair head of the goddess, which was all that they could see in the deep hole at a little distance.

II

The discovery of the Venus was destined to become a cause of much excitement, perturbation, and even dissension amid the quiet Brotherhood at Périgon. Augustin, the abbot, came out in person to inspect the find, accompanied by many monks who were not engaged at that hour in some special task.

Even the saintly abbot, in spite of his reverend age and rigorous temper, was somewhat discomfited by the peculiar witchery which seemed to emanate from the marble. Sternly he repressed his agitation and gave no sign, other than a deepening of the natural austerity of his demeanor. Curtly he ordered the bringing of ropes, and directed the raising of the Venus from her loamy bed to a standing position on the garden ground beside the hole. In this task, Paul, Pierre and Hughues were assisted by two others.

After making sure that their lovely burden had been set firmly on her pedestal, the five brothers showed a singular inclination to tarry about the Venus. Many others now pressed forward to examine the figure closely; and several were even prompted to touch it, till rebuked for this unseemly action by their superior, who, if he felt a similar impulse, would not sacrifice his holy dignity by yielding to it.

Certain of the elder and more severe Benedictines urged the immediate destruction of the image, which, they argued, was a heathen abomination that defiled the abbey garden by its presence, and therefore should not be countenanced. Others, moved by the evil beauty of the Venus in a manner impossible for them to admit, pleaded furtively and shamefacedly for her preservation. Still others, the most practical, pointed out that the Venus, being a rare and beautiful example of Roman sculpture, might well be sold at a goodly price to some rich and impious art-lover.

Augustin, though he felt that the Venus should be indubitably destroyed as an impure pagan idol, was filled with a queer and unaccountable hesitation which led him to defer the necessary orders for her demolishment. It was as if the subtly wanton loveliness of the marble were pleading for clemency like a living form, with a voice half-human, half-divine. Averting his eyes from the white bosom, he spoke harshly, bidding

the Brothers to return to their labors and devotions, and saying that the Venus could remain in the garden till arrangements were made for her ultimate disposition and removal. Pending this, he instructed one of the Brothers to bring sackcloth and drape therewith the unseemly nudity of the goddess.

Even at the time, Augustin was criticized for his peculiar delay and laxness in this matter by some of the deans. During the few years that remained to him, he was to regret bitterly the flash of carnal weakness that had prompted him to defer the destruction of the image.

Contenting himself for the nonce with a severe injunction to the effect that no one should approach the Venus other than those whose labors in the garden should compel an involuntary proximity, Augustin retired with the various Brothers, some of whom, as they went, gave many a backward glance at the life-like charms of the naked goddess. Later, there was much peeping from the cell windows that looked upon the garden; and more than one Brother, caught in this indecorous occupation, was reprimanded austerely by the deans.

However, such peccadillos were trivial indeed, compared with the grave scandal involving a number of the monks, which ensued shortly. Those concerned were Paul, Pierre and Hughues, together with the two who had helped in raising the Venus from her pit, and three others who had also touched the limbs or body of the statue with their fingers.

These eight, it was found, had absented themselves without leave from the monastery during the night that followed the discovery of the Venus. Covertly and shamefastly, several of them returned the next morning; and their fellow-truants straggled in during the day, or were apprehended through rumors and charges that had been brought against them.

All, it was learned, had been guilty of open or furtive lechery. Some had annoyed the peasant women of the neighborhood with satyr-like advances; others had played the incubus with village girls at Ste. Zenobie, or had been seen in houses of ill-fame, many miles away in Ximes.

Summoned before their indignant abbot, these piacular culprits could offer no explanation or defense, other than the plea that they had been driven by an irresistible carnal compulsion. They attributed their downfall to the antique Venus, saying that they had been haunted by lubric thoughts and goaded by lascivious desires such as had tormented Anthony during his

desert vigil, ever since the hour when they had touched the flesh-white marble of the statue.

Many of those who had beheld the evil image but had not touched it, now confessed that they had been conscious of like thoughts and impulses; and all agreed that a foul enchantment had been exerted by the Venus. Since only those who had laid hands on the marble were actually driven beyond the bounds of decorum or decency, it was plain that the full power of the diabolic pagan charm was inherent in such contact; and that anyone who dared to handle the Venus henceforth would be in grave danger of perdition.

The whole situation, though supremely scandalous, was so unusual that it could not be dealt with in any ordinary fashion. In view of their sorcerous temptation and demoniac compulsion, the eight offending monks were not expelled from the order, as their heinous lecheries might well have merited, but were merely sentenced to severe and protracted penance.

In the meanwhile, nothing was done with the Venus; for obviously, anyone who ventured to touch it—even, perhaps, with the motive of demolition—would court the baleful witchcraft that had already brought a profound and far-reaching evil on Périgon. It was suggested that some layman (to whom the penalty of heathen madness would be a less serious matter than to those who had taken vows of chastity) should be hired to shatter the idol and remove and bury its fragments. This, no doubt, would have been accomplished in good time, if it had not been for the hasty and fanatic zeal of Brother Louis.

III

This Brother, a youth of good family, was conspicuous among the Benedictines both for his comely face and his austere piety. Handsome as Adonis, he was given to ascetic vigils and prolonged devotions, outdoing in this regard the abbot and the deans.

At the hour of the statue’s disinterment, he was busily engaged in copying a Latin Testament; and neither then nor at any later time had he cared to inspect a find which he considered more than dubious. He had expressed disapprobation on hearing from his fellows the details of the discovery; and feeling that the abbey garden was polluted by the presence

of an obscene image, he had purposely avoided all windows through which the womanly nakedness of the antique marble might have been visible to his chaste eyes.

Therefore it was with supreme horror and indignation that he learned of the downfall of the eight Benedictines who had touched the image. It seemed to him an insupportable thing that these virtuous, god-fearing monks should be brought to shame through the operation of some carnal pagan spell. He reprobated openly the hesitation of Augustin and his delay in destroying the idol. More mischief, he felt, would ensue if it were suffered to remain intact and were left to contaminate the beholders with its unchaste nudity. The act of demolition should be accomplished at once.

Secure in his own consciousness of sanctity and virtue, and fearless of any temptation or baleful influence that might be exerted by the Venus, Brother Louis, after long and painful reflection, resolved that he would take the matter into his own hands. Though this action would involve a nominal disobedience to the abbot’s order, he would go forth that very evening, armed with a heavy hammer, and would smash the idol into many fragments. Thus the honor of Périgon would be vindicated, and his insubordination become a justifiable thing.

Brooding deeply as he went about his daily toils and devotions, Louis confided this intention to no one. Wild whispers were circulating among the monks; and it was said that several others besides the eight culprits had been drawn to touch the sorcerous marble in secret, and would succumb anon to the overpowering nympholepsy which they had incurred. It was said also that the image was no mere lifeless lump of stone, but had sought to entice with wanton smiles and harlot gestures those who had labored in the garden after Paul, Pierre and Hughues. Hearing these whispers, Louis was confirmed in his resolution.

Visiting on some pretext or other the workshop of the abbey at twilight, he concealed an iron hammer beneath his robe and carried it away with him to his cell. Then, toiling patiently at the Latin manuscript by candle-light, while a holy wrath and ardor mounted within him, he waited till most of the Brothers had retired to their dormitory.

A rosy-tinted moon that was slightly past the full had climbed above the neighboring forest when Louis stole forth into the garden by a postern door. The blackish clods of freshly-spaded loam were topped with an eerie silver; and Louis had not gone far on the open ground when he discerned the

Venus, whose nude limbs and bosom startled him as if they had been those of a living woman.

Indeed, as he went nearer, he could not persuade himself that the figure was a mere statue. The full, wan breasts appeared to quiver in the moonlight as with the rise and fall of a breathing bosom; the drooping eyelids seemed to lift in a captious coquetry; the doubtfully smiling lips assumed a more seductive curve; the delicate fingers stirred a little, as if to beckon him. Aware, however, that this illusion might well be part of the baneful enchantment whose cause he had come forth to destroy, Louis strove to resist the insidious impressions that troubled him more and more.

Sinking into the soft and thoroughly spaded soil at each step, he went boldly forward till he stood face to face with the Venus on the verge of the dark hole from which she had been exhumed. Without delay, with a feeling of imperative haste, he tried to lift the ponderous hammer; but it seemed that his arm, though sustained by a righteous anger, a holy indignation, would no longer obey him.

He knew not how the change had been wrought, nor how the spell had fallen; but he felt the impotence of a dreamer, helpless in the thrall of some strange dream. A subtly clinging web was upon his senses. Wildly, with dying horror and rebellion, he stared at the immemorial temptress who seemed to proffer her divine beauty; and staring, he forgot his wrath, his purpose, his fear and horror—and his cenobitic vows.

The hammer fell unheeded from his fingers. Bathed in a perilous light, and swathed with alluring shadows, the Venus appeared to live and palpitate —to lift comely hands that implored his mercy—to open fair eyes and delicious lips that claimed his love.

An unleashed delirium, sudden and irresistible, sang triumphantly in his brain, exulted madly in his blood. Stepping across the forgotten hammer, he embraced the Venus.... Her arms and bosom were cool as marble to his feverous touch, but they seemed to offer the firm softness and resilience of living flesh....

IV

The absence of Brother Louis, together with that of three others, was noted by the monks at early dawn with much alarm and consternation. Sorrowfully, it was surmised that they had fallen under the spell of the statue, and would be apprehended in the same manner and for the same sinful deeds as their predecessors.

Later, two of the missing monks returned to the abbey of their own will; and a third was caught with the charcoal-burner's wife whom he had seduced into mad elopement. All made the same confession: laboring in the garden on the previous day, they had been prompted by a fatal curiosity to finger the forbidden image; and had been seized, as a result, by the pagan madness.

Brother Louis, however, was not found; and his fate remained a mystery for several hours. Then it happened that one of the older monks, on some errand or other, had occasion to cross the garden. Peering fearfully in the direction of the Venus, he was surprised and mystified to see that she had disappeared.

With much trepidation, deeming the vanishment an act of sorcery or Satanry, he went forward to the place where the status had stood. There, with unspeakable horror, he found the solution of the riddle.

Somehow, the Venus had been overturned and had fallen back into the huge pit. The body of Brother Louis, with a shattered skull and lips bruised to a bloody pulp, was lying crushed beneath her marble breasts. His arms were clasped about her in a stiff embrace, to which death had now added its own rigidity; and later, when the horrified Brothers had been summoned to consider the problem, it was deemed inadvisable to make any effort toward his removal. The iron hammer, lying beside the pit, was proof of the righteous intention with which he had gone forth—but certain other matters, putting him beyond all redemption, were equally evident.

So, by the order of Augustin, the pit was filled hastily to its rim with earth and stones; and the very spot where it had been, being left without mound or other mark, was quickly overgrown by grass and weeds along with the rest of the abandoned garden.

THE WHITE SYBIL

Tortha, the poet, with strange austral songs in his heart, and the dark umber of high and heavy suns on his face, had come back to his native city of Cerngoth, in Mhu Thulan, by the Hyperborean sea. Far had he wandered since early youth in the quest of that alien beauty which had fled always before him like the horizon. Beyond Commoriom of the white, numberless spires, and beyond the marsh-grown jungles to the south of Commoriom, he had floated on nameless rivers, and had crossed the half-legendary realm of Tscho Vulpanomi, upon whose diamond-sanded, ruby-gravelled shore an ignescent ocean was said to beat forever with fiery spume.

Many marvels had he beheld, and things incredible to relate: the uncouthly carven gods of the South, to whom blood was spilt on sun-approaching towers; the plumes of the *huusim*, which were many ells in length and had the color of pure flame; the mailed monsters of the austral swamps; the proud argosies of Mu and Antillia, which moved by enchantment, without oar or sail; the fuming peaks that were shaken perpetually by the struggles of imprisoned demons. But, walking at noon on the familiar streets of Cerngoth, he met a stranger marvel than these. Idly, with no thought or expectation of other than homely things, he beheld the White Sybil of Polarion.

He knew not whence she had come, but suddenly she was before him in the noontide throng. Amid the tawny girls of Cerngoth with their russet hair and blue-black eyes, she was like an apparition descended from the boreal moon. Goddess or ghost or woman, he knew not which, she passed fleetly to some unknowable bourn: a creature of snow and ice and norland light, with unbound hair of wannest silver-gold, with eyes that were like moon-pervaded pools, and lips that were smitten with the same pallor as the brow

and bosom. Her gown was of some filmy white fabric, pure and ethereal as her person.

In wonder that turned to startled rapture, Tortha gazed at the miraculous being, and sustained for a moment the strangely thrilling light of her chill eyes, in which he seemed to find an obscure recognition, such as a long-veiled divinity, appearing at last, would vouchsafe to her worshipper.

Somehow, she seemed to bring with her the infrangible solitude of remote places, the death-deep hush of lonely plateaus and mountains. A silence, such as might dwell in some abandoned city, fell on the chaffering, chattering crowd as she went by; and the people drew back from her in sudden awe. Before the silence could break into gossiping murmurs, Tortha had guessed her identity.

He knew that he had seen the White Sybil, that mysterious being who was rumored to come and go as if by some preterhuman agency in the cities of Hyperborea. No man had ever learned her name, her nativity, or her dwelling-place; but she was said to descend like a spirit from the bleak mountains to the north of Cerngoth; from the desert land of Polarion, where the oncoming glaciers crept in valleys that had once been fertile with fern and cycad, and passes that had been the highways of busy traffic.

No one had ever dared to accost or follow her. Often she came and went in eerie silence; but sometimes, in the marts or public squares, she would utter weird prophecies and cryptic tidings of doom. In many places, throughout Mhu Thulan and central Hyperborea, she had foretold the enormous sheet of ice, now crawling gradually downward from the pole, that would cover the continent in ages to come, and would bury beneath oblivious drift the mammoth palms of its jungles and the superb pinnacles of its metropoles. And in great Commoriom, then the capital, she had prophesied a stranger doom that was to befall this city long before the encroachment of the Arctic ice. Men feared her everywhere, as a messenger of unknown outland gods, moving abroad in supernal bale and beauty.

All this, Tortha had heard many times during the course of his return journey from Tycho Vulpanomi; and he had wondered somewhat at the tale, but had soon dismissed it from his mind, being laden with marvellous memories of exotic things and places. But now that he had seen the Sybil, it was as if an unexpected revelation had been offered to him; as if he had discerned, briefly and afar, the hidden goal of a mystic pilgrimage.

In that single glimpse of the enigmatic entity, he had found the personification of all the vague ideals and unfixed longings that had drawn him from land to land. Here was the eluding strangeness he had sought on alien breasts and waters, and beyond horizons of fire-vomiting mountains. Here was the veiled Star, whose name and luster he had never known, but whose magnetical attraction had led him blindly beneath southron skies—and back again to Cerngoth.

The moon-cold eyes of the Sybil had kindled a strange love in Tortha, to whom love had been, at best, no more than a passing agitation of the heart. Being identified at bottom with his poetic yearning for all high and unachievable things, for the peril and wonder and disaster of untrodden places, the love was profound and lasting, as no passion for a mortal woman could have been.

However, on that occasion, it did not occur to him that he might follow the visitant or come to learn more concerning her. Momentarily, he was content with the rare vision that had fired his soul and dazzled his senses. Dreaming such dreams as the moon might inspire in a moth; dreams through which the Sybil moved like a woman-shaped flame on ways that were too far and too steep for human feet, he returned to his house in Cerngoth.

The days that ensued were dim and dream-like to Tortha, and were presided over by his memory of the White Sybil, which was clearer to him than outward things. He felt a desire that was beyond the senses—a fire that had fallen as if from Arctic stars. A mad Uranian fever mounted in his soul, together with the sure knowledge that he sought an impossible fruition. Idly, to beguile the hours, he copied the poems he had written during his journey, or turned over the pages of boyish manuscripts. All were equally void and without meaning now, like the sere leaves of a bygone year.

With no prompting on the part of Tortha, his servants and visitors spoke to him of the Sybil. Seldom, they said, had she entered Cerngoth, appearing more often in cities remote from the ice-bound waste of Polarion. Truly, she was no mortal being, for she had been seen on the same day in places hundreds of miles apart. Huntsmen had sometimes met her on the mountains above Cerngoth; but always, when encountered thus, she had disappeared quickly, like a morning vapor that melts among the crags.

The poet, listening with a moody and absent mien, spoke of his love to no one. Well he knew that his kinsfolk and acquaintances would deem this

passion a more errant madness than the youthful yearning that had led him to unheard-of lands. No human lover had aspired to the Sybil, whose beauty was a perilous brightness, akin to meteor and fireball; a fatal and lethal beauty, born of transarctic gulfs, and somehow one with the far doom of worlds.

Like the brand of frost or flame, her memory burned in Tortha. Musing among his neglected books, or walking abroad in reverie on which no external thing could intrude, he saw always before him the pale, unearthly radiance of the Sybil. He seemed to hear a whisper from boreal solitudes: a murmur of ethereal sweetness, poignant as ice-born air, vocal with high, unhuman words, that sang of inviolate horizons and the chill glory of lunar auroras above continents impregnable to man.

The long summer days of Hyperborea went by, bringing the outland folk to trade their furs and eider in Cerngoth, and damaskeening the slopes beyond the city with flowers of bright azure and vermilion. But the Sybil was not seen again in Cerngoth; nor was she heard of in other cities. It seemed as if her visitations had ceased; as if, having delivered the enigmatic tidings committed to her by the outer gods, she would appear no more in the haunts of mankind.

Amid the despair that was twin to his passion, Tortha had nurtured a hope that he might again behold the visitant. Slowly the hope grew fainter; but left his longing undiminished. In his daily walks he now went farther afield, leaving the houses and streets and turning toward the mountains that glowered above Cerngoth, guarding with icy horns the glacier-taken plateau of Polarion.

Higher he went each day on the upward-sloping fields, lifting his eyes to the sullen crags from which the Sybil was rumored to descend. An obscure message seemed to call him on; and still, for a time, he did not dare to obey the summons wholly, but turned back to Cerngoth.

There came the forenoon when he climbed to a hill-meadow from which the roofs of the city were like littered shells beside a sea whose tumbling billows had become a smooth floor of turquoise. He was alone in a world of flowers: the frail mantle that summer had flung between the desolate peaks and Cerngoth. The turf seemed to roll away from him on every hand in broad scrolls and carpetries of flaming color. Even the wild briars had put forth their fragile, sanguine-tinted blossoms; and the very banks and precipices were heavily arrased with low-hanging bloom.

Tortha had met no one; for he had long since left the trail by which the squat mountain people came to the city. A vague prompting, which seemed to include a promise unspoken by any voice, had led him to this lofty meadow from which a crystal rill ran seaward amid the bright cascades of flowers.

Pale and diaphanous beneath the sun, a few cirrus clouds went floating idly toward the glacial pinnacles; and the quarrying hawks flew oceanward on broad red wings. A perfume, rich as temple-incense, rose from the crushed blossoms whereon he had trampled; the light lay still and heavy upon him, dazzling his senses; and Tortha, a little weary from his climbing, grew faint for a moment with some strange vertigo.

Recovering, he saw before him the White Sybil, who stood amid the flowers of blood-red and cerulean like a goddess of the snow attired in veils of moon-flame. Her pale eyes, pouring an icy rapture into his veins, regarded him enigmatically. With a gesture of her hand that was like the glimmering of light on inaccessible places, she beckoned him to follow, as she turned and went upward along the slope above the meadow, leaving no trace with her wan feet on the trodden blossoms.

Tortha had forgotten his weariness; had forgotten all but the celestial beauty of the Sybil. He did not question the enchantment that claimed him, the wild Uranian ecstasy that rose in his heart. He knew only that she had reappeared to him, had smiled upon him, had beckoned; and he followed.

Soon the hills grew steeper against the overtowering crags; and barren ribs of rock emerged gloomily through the mantling flowerage. Without effort, light as a drifting vapor, the Sybil climbed on before Tortha. He could not approach her; and though the interval of distance between them appeared to increase at times, he did not altogether lose sight of her luminous figure.

Now he was among bleak ravines and savage scarps, where the Sybil was like a swimming star in the chasmal, crag-flung shadows. The fierce mountain eagles screamed above him, eyeing his progress as they flew about their eyries. The chill trickle of rills born of the eternal glaciers fell upon him from overbeetling ledges; and sudden chasms yawned before his feet with a hollow roaring of vertiginous waters far below.

Tortha was conscious only of an emotion such as impels the moth to pursue a wandering flame. He did not picture to himself the aim and end of his pursuit, nor the fruition of the weird love that drew him on. Oblivious of

mortal fatigue, of peril and disaster that might lie before him, he felt the delirium of a mad ascent to superhuman heights.

Above the wild ravines and escarpments, he came to a lofty pass that had led formerly between Mhu Thulan and Polarion. Here an olden highway, creviced and chasmed, and partly blocked with debris of avalanches and fallen watch-towers, ran between walls of winter-eaten rock. Down the pass, like some enormous dragon of glittering ice, there poured the vanguard of the boreal glaciers to meet the Sybil and Tortha.

Amid the supernal ardor of his ascent, the poet was aware of a sudden chill that had touched the noontide. The rays of the sun had grown dull and heatless; the shadows were like the depth of ice-hewn Arctic tombs. A film of ochreous cloud, moving with magical swiftness, swept athwart the day and darkened like a dusty web, till the sun glowed through it with the lifeless pallor of a December moon. The heavens above and beyond the pass were closed in with curtains of leaden-threaded grey.

Into the gathering dimness, over the machicolated ice of the beginning glacier, the Sybil sped like a flying fire, paler and more luminous against the somber cloud.

Now Tortha had climbed the fretted incline of the ice that crawled out from glacier-bound Polarion. It seemed that he had gained the summit of the pass and would soon reach the open plateau beyond. But like a storm raised up by preterhuman sorcery, the falling snow was upon him now in spectral swirls and blinding flurries. It came as with the ceaseless flight of soft wide wings, the measureless coiling of vague and pallid dragons.

For a time he still discerned the Sybil, as one sees the dim glowing of a sacred lamp through altar-curtains that descend in some great temple. Then the snow thickened, till he no longer saw the guiding gleam, and knew not if he still wandered through the walled pass, or was lost upon some bournless plain of perpetual winter.

He fought for breath in the storm-stifled air. The clear white fire that had sustained him seemed to sink and fall in his icy limbs. The unearthly fervor and exaltation died away, leaving a dark fatigue, an ever-spreading numbness that rose through all his being. The bright image of the Sybil was no more than a nameless star that fell with all else he had ever known or dreamed into grey forgetfulness....

Tortha opened his eyes to a strange world. Whether he had fallen and had died in the storm, or had stumbled on somehow through its white oblivion, he could not guess: but around him now there was no trace of the driving snow or the glacier-shackled mountains.

He stood in a valley that might have been the inmost heart of some boreal paradise—a valley that was surely no part of waste Polarion. About him, the summer turf was piled with flowers that had the frail and pallid hues of a lunar rainbow. They were not the flowers that bloomed around Cerngoth: their delicate forms were those of the blossoms of snow and frost; and in spite of the elfin opulence of their colors, it seemed that they would melt and vanish at a touch.

The sky above the valley was not the low-arching, tender turquoise heaven of Mhu Thulan, but was vague, dream-like, remote, and full of an infinite violescence, like the welkin of a world beyond time and space. Everywhere there was light; but Tortha saw no sun in the cloudless vault. It was as if the sun, the moon, the stars, had been molten together ages ago and had dissolved into some ultimate, eternal luminescence.

Tall, gracile trees, whose leafage of lunar green was thickly starred with blossoms delicate and auroral as those of the turf, grew in groves and clumps above the valley, and lined the margin of a stilly flowing stream that wound away into measureless misty perspectives.

Tortha noticed that he cast no shadow on the brightly flowered ground. The trees likewise were shadowless, and were not reflected in the clear, unfathomable waters. There was no wind to lift the blossom-heavy boughs, or to stir the countless petals amid the grass. A cryptic silence brooded over all things, like the hush of some supernal doom.

Filled with a high wonder, but wholly powerless to surmise the riddle of his situation, the poet turned as if at the bidding of a still, imperatory voice. Behind him, and near at hand, there was an arbor of flowering vines that had draped themselves from tree to slender tree. Through the half-parted arras of bloom, in the bower’s heart, he saw like a drifted snow the white veils of the Sybil.

With timid steps, with eyes that faltered before her mystic beauty, and a flaming as of blown torches in his heart, he entered the arbor. From the bank of blossoms whereon she reclined without crushing the least petal, the Sybil rose to receive her worshipper. . . .

Of all that followed, of that supreme, ineffable hour with his divinity, much was forgotten afterwards by Tortha. It was like a light too radiant to be endured, a thought that eluded conception through surpassing strangeness. It was real beyond all that men deem reality: and yet it seemed to Tortha that he, the Sybil, and all that surrounded them, were part of an after-mirage on the icy deserts of time; that he was poised insecurely above life and death in some bright, fragile bower of dreams.

He thought that the Sybil greeted him in thrilling, mellifluous words of a tongue that he knew well, but had never heard. Her tones filled him with an ecstasy near to pain. He sat beside her on the faery bank, and she told him many things: divine, stupendous, perilous things; dire as the secret of life; sweet as the lore of oblivion; strange and immemorable as the lost knowledge of sleep. But she did not tell him her name, nor the secret of her essence; and still he knew not if she were ghost or woman, goddess or spirit.

Something there was in her speech of time and its mystery; something of that which lies forever beyond time; something of the grey shadow of doom that waits upon world and sun; something of love, that pursues an elusive, perishing fire; of death, the soil from which all flowers spring; of life, that is a mirage on the frozen void.

For awhile Tortha was content merely to listen. A high rapture filled him, he felt the awe of a mortal in the presence of a deity. Then, as he grew accustomed to his situation, the woman-like beauty of the Sybil spoke to him no less eloquently than her words. Vacillant, by degrees, like a tide that lifts to some unearthly moon, there rose up in his heart the human love that was half of his adoration. He felt a delirium of mortal desire, mixed with the vertigo of one who has climbed to an impossible height. He saw only the flame-white loveliness of his divinity; and no longer did he hear clearly the high wisdom of her speech.

The Sybil paused in her ineffable discourse; and somehow, with slow and stumbling words, he dared to tell her of his love.

She made no answer, gave no gesture of assent or denial. But when he had done, she regarded him strangely; whether with love or pity, sadness or joy, he could not tell. Then, swiftly, she bent forward and kissed his brow with her pallid lips. Their touch was like the searing of fire or ice. But, mad with his supreme longing, Tortha strove rashly to embrace the Sybil.

Dreadfully, unutterably, she seemed to change in his arms even as he clasped her—to become a frozen corpse that had lain for ages in a floe-built tomb—a leper-white mummy in whose frosted eyes he read the horror of the ultimate void. Then she was a thing that had no form or name—a dark corruption that flowed and eddied like some dark liquid in his arms—a hueless dust, a flight of gleaming atoms, that rose between his evaded fingers. Then there was nothing—and the faery-tinted flowers about him were changing also, were crumbling swiftly, were falling beneath flurries of white snow. The vast and violet heaven, the tall slim trees, the magic, unreflecting stream—the very ground under him—all had vanished amid the universal, whirling flakes.

It seemed to Tortha that he was plunging dizzily into some deep gulf together with that illimitable chaos of driven snows. Gradually, as he fell, the air grew clear about him, and he appeared to hang suspended above the receding, dissolving storm. He was alone in a still, funereal, starless heaven, like the catafalque of some dying world; and below, at an awesome and giddying distance, he saw the dimly glittering reaches of a land sheathed with glacial ice from horizon to far-curved horizon. The snows had vanished from the dead air; and a searing cold, like the breath of the infinite ether, was about Tortha.

All this he saw and felt for a timeless instant. Then, with the swiftness of a meteor, he resumed his fall toward the frozen continent. And like the rushing flame of a meteor, his consciousness dimmed and went out on the bleak air even as he fell.

Tortha had been seen by the half-savage people of the mountains as he disappeared in the sudden storm that had come mysteriously from Polarion. Later, when the blinding flurries had died down, they found him lying on the glacier. They tended him with rough care and uncouth skill, marvelling much at the white mark that had been imprinted like a fiery brand on his sun-swart brow. The flesh was seared deeply; and the mark was shaped like the pressure of lips. But they could not know that the never-fading mark had been left by the kiss of the White Sybil.

Slowly, Tortha won back to some measure of his former strength. But ever afterward there was a cloudy dimness in his mind, a blur of unresolving shadow, like the dazzlement in eyes that have looked on some insupportable light. Never again did he behold the Sybil; and never was he able to recall wholly the things that had happened to him, or which he had

dreamt as he lay unconscious on the drear threshold of Polarion. And yet the memory, vague, imperfect, broken, was more to him than the memory of a thousand suns in the great darkness that had come upon his days.

THE ISLE OF THE TORTURERS

Between the sun's departure and return, the Silver Death had fallen upon Yoros. Its advent, however, had been foretold in many prophecies, both immemorial and recent. Astrologers had said that this mysterious malady, heretofore unknown on earth, would descend from the great star, Achernar, which presided balefully over all the lands of the southern continent of Zothique; and having sealed the flesh of a myriad men with its bright, metallic pallor, the plague would still go on in time and space, borne by the dim currents of ether to other worlds.

Dire was the Silver Death; and none knew the secret of its contagion or the cure. Swift as the desert wind, it came into Yoros from the devastated realm of Tasuun, overtaking the very messengers who ran by night to give warning of its nearness. Those who were smitten felt an icy, freezing cold, an instant rigor, as if the outermost gulf had breathed upon them. Their faces and bodies whitened strangely, gleaming with a wan luster, and became stiff as long-dead corpses, all in an interim of minutes.

In the streets of Silpon and Siloar, and in Faraad, the capital of Yoros, the plague passed like an eerie, glittering light from countenance to countenance under the golden lamps; and the victims fell where they were stricken; and the deathly brightness remained upon them.

The loud, tumultuous public carnivals were stilled by its passing, and the merry-makers were frozen in frolic attitudes. In proud mansions, the wine-flushed revellers grew pale amid their garish feasts, and reclined in their opulent chairs, still holding the half-emptied cup with rigid fingers. Merchants lay in their counting-houses on the heaped coins they had begun to reckon; and thieves, entering later, were unable to depart with their booty.

Diggers died in the half completed graves they had dug for others; but no one came to dispute their possession.

There was no time to flee from the strange, inevitable scourge. Dreadfully and quickly, beneath the clear stars, it breathed upon Yoros; and few were they who awakened from slumber at dawn. Fulbra, the young king of Yoros, who had but newly succeeded to the throne, was virtually a ruler without a people.

Fulbra had spent the night of the plague's advent on a high tower of his palace above Faraad: an observatory tower, equipped with astronomical appliances. A great heaviness had lain on his heart, and his thoughts were dulled with an opiate despair; but sleep was remote from his eyelids. He knew the many predictions that foretold the Silver Death; and moreover he had read its imminent coming in the stars, with the aid of the old astrologer and sorcerer, Vemdeez. This latter knowledge he and Vemdeez had not cared to promulgate, knowing full well that the doom of Yoros was a thing decreed from all time by infinite destiny; and that no man could evade the doom, unless it were written that he should die in another way than this.

Now Vemdeez had cast the horoscope of Fulbra; and though he found therein certain ambiguities that his science could not resolve, it was nevertheless written plainly that the king would not die in Yoros. Where he would die, and in what manner, were alike doubtful. But Vemdeez, who had served Altath the father of Fulbra, and was no less devoted to the new ruler, had wrought by means of his magical art an enchanted ring that would protect Fulbra from the Silver Death in all times and places. The ring was made of a strange red metal, darker than ruddy gold or copper, and was set with a black and oblong gem, not known to terrestrial lapidaries, that gave forth eternally a strong, aromatic perfume. The sorcerer told Fulbra never to remove the ring from the middle finger on which he wore it—not even in lands afar from Yoros and in days after the passing of the Silver Death: for if once the plague had breathed upon Fulbra, he would bear its subtle contagion always in his flesh, and the contagion would assume its wonted virulence with the ring's removal. But Vemdeez did not tell the origin of the black gem and the red metal, nor the price at which the protective magic had been purchased.

With a sad heart, Fulbra had accepted the ring and had worn it; and so it was that the Silver Death blew over him in the night and harmed him not. But waiting anxiously on the high tower, and watching the golden lights of

Faraad rather than the pale, implacable stars, he felt a light, passing chillness that belonged not to the summer air. And even as it passed, the gay noises of the city ceased; and the moaning lutes faltered strangely and expired. A stillness crept on the carnival; and some of the lamps went out and were not re-lit. In the palace beneath him there was also silence; and he heard no more the laughter of his courtiers and chamberlains. And Vemdeez came not, as was his custom, to join Fulbra on the tower at midnight. So Fulbra knew himself for a realmless king; and the grief that he still felt for the noble Altath was swollen by a great sorrow for his perished people.

Hour by hour he sat motionless, too sorrowful for tears. The stars changed above him; and Achernar glared down perpetually like the bright, cruel eye of a mocking demon; and the heavy balsam of the black-jeweled ring arose to his nostrils and seemed to stifle him. And once the thought occurred to Fulbra, to cast the ring away and die as his people had died. But his despair was too heavy upon him even for this; and so, at length, the dawn came slowly in heavens pale as the Silver Death, and found him still on the tower.

In the dawn, King Fulbra rose and descended the coiled stairs of porphyry into his palace. And midway on the stairs he saw the fallen corpse of the old sorcerer Vemdeez, who had died even as he climbed to join his master. The wrinkled face of Vemdeez was like polished metal, and was whiter than his beard and hair; and his open eyes, which had been dark as sapphires, were frosted with the plague. Then, grieving greatly for the death of Vemdeez, whom he had loved as a foster-father, the king went slowly on. And in the suites and halls below, he found the bodies of his courtiers and servants and guardsmen. And none remained alive, excepting three slaves who warded the green, brazen portals of the lower vaults, far beneath the palace.

Now Fulbra bethought him of the counsel of Vemdeez, who had urged him to flee from Yoros and to seek shelter in the southern isle of Cyntrom, which paid tribute to the kings of Yoros. And though he had no heart for this, nor for any course of action, Fulbra bade the three remaining slaves to gather food and such other supplies as were necessary for a voyage of some length, and to carry them aboard a royal barge of ebony that was moored at the palace porticoes on the river Voum.

Then, embarking with the slaves, he took the helm of the barge, and directed the slaves to unfurl the broad amber sail. And past the stately city

of Faraad, whose streets were thronged with the silvery dead, they sailed on the widening jasper estuary of the Voum, and into the amaranth-colored gulf of the Indaskian Sea.

A favorable wind was behind them, blowing from the north over desolate Tasuun and Yoros, even as the Silver Death had blown in the night. And idly beside them, on the Voum, there floated seaward many vessels whose crews and captains had all died of the plague. And Faraad was still as a necropolis of old time; and nothing stirred on the estuary shores, excepting the plumy, fan-shapen palms that swayed southward in the freshening wind. And soon the green strand of Yoros receded, gathering to itself the blueness and the dreams of distance.

Creaming with a winy foam, full of strange murmurous voices and vague tales of exotic things, the halcyon sea was about the voyagers now beneath the high-lifting summer sun. But the sea's enchanted voices and its long languorous, immeasurable cradling could not soothe the sorrow of Fulbra; and in his heart a despair abided, black as the gem that was set in the red ring of Vemdeez.

Howbeit, he held the great helm of the ebon barge, and steered as straightly as he could by the sun toward Cyntrom. The amber sail was taut with the favoring wind; and the barge sped onward all that day, cleaving the amaranth waters with its dark prow that reared in the carven form of an ebony goddess. And when the night came with familiar austral stars, Fulbra was able to correct such errors as he had made in his reckoning of the course.

For many days they flew southward; and the sun lowered a little in its circling behind them; and new stars climbed and clustered at evening about the black goddess of the prow. And Fulbra, who had once sailed to the isle of Cyntrom in boyhood days with his father Altath, thought to see ere long the lifting of its shores of camphor and sandalwood from the winy deep. But in his heart there was no gladness; and often now he was blinded by wild tears, remembering that other voyage with Altath.

Then, suddenly and at high noon, there fell an airless calm, and the waters became as purple glass about the barge. The sky changed to a dome of beaten copper, arching close and low; and as if by some evil wizardry, the dome darkened with untimely night, and a tempest rose like the gathered breath of mighty devils, and shaped the sea into vast ridges and abysmal valleys. The mast of ebony snapped like a reed in the wind, and the

sail was torn asunder, and the helpless vessel pitched headlong in the dark troughs and was hurled upward through veils of blinding foam to the giddy summits of the billows.

Fulbra clung to the useless helm, and the slaves, at his command, took shelter in the forward cabin. For countless hours they were borne onward at the will of the mad hurricane; and Fulbra could see naught in the lowering gloom, except the pale crests of the beetling waves; and he could tell no longer the direction of their course.

Then, in that lurid dusk, he beheld at intervals another vessel that rode the storm-driven sea, not far from the barge. He thought that the vessel was a galley such as might be used by merchants that voyaged among the southern isles, trading for incense and plumes and vermilion; but its oars were mostly broken, and the toppled mast and sail hung forward on the prow.

For a time the ships drove on together; till Fulbra saw, in a rifting of the gloom, the sharp and somber crags of an unknown shore, with sharper towers that lifted palely above them. He could not turn the helm; and the barge and its companion vessel were carried toward the looming rocks, till Fulbra thought that they would crash thereon. But, as if by some enchantment, even as it had risen, the sea fell abruptly in a windless calm; and quiet sunlight poured from a clearing sky; and the barge was left on a broad crescent of ochre-yellow sand between the crags and the lulling waters, with the galley beside it.

Dazed and marvelling, Fulbra leaned on the helm, while his slaves crept timidly forth from the cabin, and men began to appear on the decks of the galley. And the king was about to hail these men, some of whom were dressed as humble sailors and others in the fashion of rich merchants. But he heard a laughter of strange voices, high and shrill and somehow evil, that seemed to fall from above; and looking up he saw that many people were descending a sort of stairway in the cliffs that enclosed the beach.

The people drew near, thronging about the barge and the galley. They wore fantastic turbans of blood-red, and were clad in closely fitting robes of vulturine black. Their faces and hands were yellow as saffron; their small and slaty eyes were set obliquely beneath lashless lids; and their thin lips, which smiled eternally, were crooked as the blades of scimitars.

They bore sinister and wicked-looking weapons, in the form of saw-toothed swords and doubled-headed spears. Some of them bowed low

before Fulbra and addressed him obsequiously, staring upon him all the while with an unblinking gaze that he could not fathom. Their speech was no less alien than their aspect; it was full of sharp and hissing sounds; and neither the king nor his slaves could comprehend it. But Fulbra bespoke the people courteously, in the mild and mellow-flowing tongue of Yoros, and inquired the name of this land whereon the barge had been cast by the tempest.

Certain of the people seemed to understand him, for a light came in their slaty eyes at his question; and one of them answered brokenly in the language of Yoros, saying that the land was the Isle of Uccastrog. Then, with something of covert evil in his smile, this person added that all shipwrecked mariners and sea-farers would receive a goodly welcome from Ildrac, the king of the Isle.

At this, the heart of Fulbra sank within him; for he had heard numerous tales of Uccastrog in bygone years; and the tales were not such as would reassure a stranded traveller. Uccastrog, which lay far to the east of Cyntrom, was commonly known as the Isle of the Torturers; and men said that all who landed upon it unaware, or were cast thither by the seas, were imprisoned by the inhabitants and were subjected later to unending curious tortures whose infliction formed the chief delight of these cruel beings. No man, it was rumored, had ever escaped from Uccastrog; but many had lingered for years in its dungeons and hellish torture-chambers, kept alive for the pleasure of King Ildrac and his followers. Also, it was believed that the Torturers were great magicians who could raise mighty storms with their enchantments, and could cause vessels to be carried far from the maritime routes, and then fling them ashore upon Uccastrog.

Seeing that the yellow people were all about the barge, and that no escape was possible, Fulbra asked them to take him at once before King Ildrac. To Ildrac he would announce his name and royal rank; and it seemed to him, in his simplicity, that one king, even though cruel-hearted, would scarcely torture another or keep him captive. Also, it might be that the inhabitants of Uccastrog had been somewhat maligned by the tales of travellers.

So Fulbra and his slaves were surrounded by certain of the throng and were led toward the palace of Ildrac, whose high, sharp towers crowned the crags beyond the beach, rising above those clustered abodes in which the island people dwelt. And while they were climbing the hewn steps in the

cliff, Fulbra heard a loud outcry below and a clashing of steel against steel; and looking back, he saw that the crew of the stranded galley had drawn their swords and were fighting the islanders. But being outnumbered greatly, their resistance was borne down by the swarming Torturers; and most of them were taken alive. And Fulbra's heart misgave him sorely at this sight; and more and more did he mistrust the yellow people.

Soon he came into the presence of Ildrac, who sat on a lofty brazen chair in a vast hall of the palace. Ildrac was taller by half a head than any of his followers; and his features were like a mask of evil wrought from some pale, gilded metal; and he was clad in vestments of a strange hue, like sea-purple brightened with fresh-flowing blood. About him were many guardsmen, armed with terrible scythe-like weapons; and the sullen, slant-eyed girls of the palace, in skirts of vermilion and breast-cups of lazuli, went to and fro among huge basaltic columns. About the hall stood numerous engineries of wood and stone and metal such as Fulbra had never beheld, and having a formidable aspect with their heavy chains, their beds of iron teeth and their cords and pulleys of fish-skin.

The young king of Yoros went forward with a royal and fearless bearing, and addressed Ildrac, who sat motionless and eyed him with a level, unwinking gaze. And Fulbra told Ildrac his name and station, and the calamity that had caused him to flee from Yoros; and he mentioned also his urgent desire to reach the Isle of Cyntrom.

"It is a long voyage to Cyntrom," said Ildrac, with a subtle smile. "Also, it is not our custom to permit guests to depart without having fully tasted the hospitality of the Isle of Uccastrog. Therefore, King Fulbra, I must beg you to curb your impatience. We have much to show you here, and many diversions to offer. My chamberlains will now conduct you to a room befitting your royal rank. But first I must ask you to leave with me the sword that you carry at your side; for swords are often sharp—and I do not wish my guests to suffer injury by their own hand."

So Fulbra's sword was taken from him by one of the palace guardsmen; and a small ruby-hilted dagger that he carried was also removed. Then several of the guards, hemming him in with their scythed weapons, led him from the hall and by many corridors and downward flights of stairs into the solid rock beneath the palace. And he knew not whither his three slaves were taken, or what disposition was made of the captured crew of the galley. And soon he passed from the daylight into cavernous halls illumed

by sulphur-colored flames in copper cressets; and all around him, in hidden chambers, he heard the sound of dismal moans and loud, maniacal howlings that seemed to beat and die upon adamantine doors.

In one of these halls, Fulbra and his guardsmen met a young girl, fairer and less sullen of aspect than the others; and Fulbra thought that the girl smiled upon him compassionately as he went by; and it seemed that she murmured faintly in the language of Yoros: “Take heart, King Fulbra, for there is one who would help you.” And her words, apparently, were not heeded or understood by the guards, who knew only the harsh and hissing tongue of Uccastrog.

After descending many stairs, they came to a ponderous door of bronze; and the door was unlocked by one of the guards, and Fulbra was compelled to enter; and the door clanged dolorously behind him.

The chamber into which he had been thrust was walled on three sides with the dark stone of the island, and was walled on the fourth with heavy, unbreakable glass. Beyond the glass, he saw the blue-green, glimmering waters of the undersea, lit by the hanging cressets of the chamber; and in the waters were great devil-fish whose tentacles writhed along the wall; and huge pythonomorphs with fabulous golden coils receding in the gloom; and the floating corpses of men that stared in upon him with eyeballs from which the lids had been excised.

There was a couch in one corner of the dungeon, close to the wall of glass; and food and drink had been supplied for Fulbra in vessels of wood. The king laid himself down, weary and hopeless, without tasting the food. Then, lying with close-shut eyes while the dead men and sea-monsters peered in upon him by the glare of the cressets, he strove to forget his griefs and the dolorous doom that impended. And through his clouding terror and sorrow, he seemed to see the comely face of the girl who had smiled upon him compassionately, and who, alone of all that he had met in Uccastrog, had spoken to him with words of kindness. The face returned ever and anon, with a soft haunting, a gentle sorcery; and Fulbra felt, for the first time in many suns, the dim stirring of his buried youth and the vague, obscure desire of life. So, after a while, he slept; and the face of the girl came still before him in his dreams.

The cressets burned above him with undiminished flames when he awakened; and the sea beyond the wall of glass was thronged with the same monsters as before, or with others of like kind. But amid the floating

corpses, he now beheld the flayed bodies of his own slaves, who, after being tortured by the island people, had been cast forth into the submarine cavern that adjoined his dungeon, so that he might see them on awakening.

He sickened with new horror at the sight; but even as he stared at the dead faces, the door of bronze swung open with a sullen grinding, and his guards entered. Seeing that he had not consumed the food and water provided for him, they forced him to eat and drink a little, menacing him with their broad, crooked blades till he complied. And then they led him from the dungeon and took him before King Ildrac, in the great hall of tortures.

Fulbra saw, by the level golden light through the palace windows and the long shadows of the columns and machines of torment, that the time was early dawn. The hall was crowded with the Torturers and their women; and many seemed to look on while others, of both sexes, busied themselves with ominous preparations. And Fulbra saw that a tall brazen statue, with cruel and demonian visage, like some implacable god of the underworld, was now standing at the right hand of Ildrac where he sat aloft on his brazen chair.

Fulbra was thrust forward by his guards, and Ildrac greeted him briefly, with a wily smile that preceded the words and lingered after them. And when Ildrac had spoken, the brazen image also began to speak, addressing Fulbra in the language of Yoros, with strident and metallic tones, and telling him with full and minute circumstance the various infernal tortures to which he was to be subjected on that day.

When the statue had done speaking, Fulbra heard a soft whisper in his ear, and saw beside him the fair girl whom he had previously met in the nether corridors. And the girl, seemingly unheeded by the Torturers, said to him: “Be courageous, and endure bravely all that is inflicted; for I shall effect your release before another day, if this be possible.”

Fulbra was cheered by the girl’s assurance; and it seemed to him that she was fairer to look upon than before; and he thought that her eyes regarded him tenderly; and the twin desires of love and life were strangely resurrected in his heart, to fortify him against the tortures of Ildrac.

Of that which was done to Fulbra for the wicked pleasure of King Ildrac and his people, it were not well to speak fully. For the islanders of Uccastrog had designed innumerable torments, curious and subtle, wherewith to harry and excruciate the five senses; and they could harry the

brain itself, driving it to extremes more terrible than madness; and could take away the dearest treasures of memory and leave unutterable foulness in their place.

On that day, however, they did not torture Fulbra to the uttermost. But they racked his ears with cacophonous sounds, with evil flutes that chilled the blood and curdled it upon his heart; with deep drums that seemed to ache in all his tissues; and thin tabors that wrenched his very bones. Then they compelled him to breathe the mounting fumes of braziers wherein the dried gall of dragons and the adipocere of dead cannibals were burned together with a fetid wood. Then, when the fire had died down, they freshened it with the oil of vampire bats; and Fulbra swooned, unable to bear the fetor any longer.

Later, they stripped away his kingly vestments and fastened about his body a silken girdle that had been freshly dipt in an acid corrosive only to human flesh; and the acid ate slowly, fretting his skin with infinite fiery pangs.

Then, after removing the girdle lest it slay him, the Torturers brought in certain creatures that had the shape of ell-long serpents, but were covered from head to tail with sable hairs like those of a caterpillar. And these creatures twined themselves tightly about the arms and legs of Fulbra; and though he fought wildly in his revulsion, he could not loosen them with his hands; and the hairs that covered their constringent coils began to pierce his limbs like a million tiny needles, till he screamed with the agony. And when his breath failed him and he could scream no longer, the hairy serpents were induced to relinquish their hold by a languorous piping of which the islanders knew the secret. They dropped away and left him; but the mark of their coils was imprinted redly about his limbs; and around his body there burned the raw branding of the girdle.

King Ildrac and his people looked on with a dreadful gloating; for in such things they took their joy, and strove to pacify an implacable obscure desire. But seeing now that Fulbra could endure no more, and wishing to wreak their will upon him for many future days, they took him back to his dungeon.

Lying sick with remembered horror, feverish with pain, he longed not for the clemency of death, but hoped for the coming of the girl to release him as she had promised. The long hours passed with a half-delirious tedium; and the cressets, whose flames had been changed to crimson,

appeared to fill his eyes with flowing blood; and the dead men and the sea-monsters swam as if in blood beyond the wall of glass. And the girl came not; and Fulbra had begun to despair. Then, at last, he heard the door open gently and not with the harsh clangor that had proclaimed the entrance of his guards.

Turning, he saw the girl, who stole swiftly to his couch with a lifted finger-tip, enjoining silence. She told him with soft whispers that her plan had failed; but surely on the following night she would be able to drug the guards and obtain the keys of the outer gates; and Fulbra could escape from the palace to a hidden cove in which a boat with water and provisions lay ready for his use. She prayed him to endure for another day the torments of Ildrac; and to this, perforce, he consented. And he thought that the girl loved him; for tenderly she caressed his feverous brow, and rubbed his torture-burning limbs with a soothing ointment. He deemed that her eyes were soft with a compassion that was more than pity. So Fulbra believed the girl and trusted her, and took heart against the horror of the coming day. Her name, it seemed, was Ilvaa; and her mother was a woman of Yoros who had married one of the evil islanders, choosing this repugnant union as an alternative to the flaying-knives of Ildrac.

Too soon the girl went away, pleading the great danger of discovery, and closed the door softly upon Fulbra. And after a while the king slept; and Ilvaa returned to him amid the delirious abominations of his dreams, and sustained him against the terror of strange hells.

At dawn the guards came with their hooked weapons, and led him again before Ildrac. And again the brazen, demoniac statue, in a strident voice, announced the fearful ordeals that he was to undergo. And this time he saw that other captives, including the crew and merchants of the galley, were also awaiting the malefic ministrations of the Torturers in the vast hall.

Once more in the throng of watchers the girl Ilvaa pressed close to him, unreprimanded by his guards, and murmured words of comfort; so that Fulbra was enheartened against the enormities foretold by the brazen oracular image. And indeed a bold and hopeful heart was required to endure the ordeals of that day....

Among other things less goodly to be mentioned, the Torturers held before Fulbra a mirror of strange wizardry, wherein his own face was reflected as if seen after death. The rigid features, as he gazed upon them, became marked with the green and bluish marbling of corruption; and the

withering flesh fell in on the sharp bones, and displayed the visible fretting of the worm. Hearing meanwhile the dolorous groans and agonizing cries of his fellow captives all about the hall, he beheld other faces, dead, swollen, lidless, and flayed, that seemed to approach from behind and to throng about his own face in the mirror. Their locks were dank and dripping, like the hair of corpses recovered from the sea; and sea-weed was mingled with the locks. Then, turning at a cold and clammy touch, he found that these faces were no illusion but the actual reflection of cadavers drawn from the undersea by a malign sorcery, that had entered the hall of Ildrac like living men and were peering over his shoulder.

His own slaves, with flesh that the sea-things had gnawed even to the bone, were among them. And the slaves came toward him with glaring eyes that saw only the voidness of death. And beneath the sorcerous control of Ildrac, their evilly animated corpses began to assail Fulbra, clawing at his face and raiment with half-eaten fingers. And Fulbra, faint with loathing, struggled against his dead slaves, who knew not the voice of their master and were deaf as the wheels and racks of torment used by Ildrac....

Anon, the drowned and dripping corpses went away; and Fulbra was stripped by the Torturers and was laid supine on the palace-floor, with iron rings that bound him closely to the flags at knee and wrist, at elbow and ankle. Then they brought in the disinterred body of a woman, nearly eaten, in which a myriad maggots swarmed on the uncovered bones and tatters of dark corruption; and this body they placed on the right hand of Fulbra. And also they fetched the carrion of a black goat that was newly touched with beginning decay; and they laid it down beside him on the left hand. Then, across Fulbra, from right to left, the hungry maggots crawled in a long and undulant wave....

After the consummation of this torture, there came many others that were equally ingenious and atrocious, and were well designed for the delectation of King Ildrac and his people. And Fulbra endured the tortures valiantly, upheld by the thought of Ilvaa.

Vainly, however, on the night that followed this day, he waited in his dungeon for the girl. The cressets burned with a bloodier crimson; and new corpses were among the flayed and floating dead in the sea-cavern; and strange double-bodied serpents of the nether deep arose with an endless squirming; and their horned heads appeared to bloat immeasurably against the crystal wall. Yet the girl Ilvaa came not to free him, as she had

promised; and the night passed. But though despair resumed its old dominion in the heart of Fulbra, and terror came with talons steeped in fresh venom, he refused to doubt Ilvaa, telling himself that she had been delayed or prevented by some unforeseen mishap.

At dawn of the third day, he was again taken before Ildrac. The brazen image, announcing the ordeals of the day, told him that he was to be bound on a wheel of adamant; and, lying on the wheel, was to drink a drugged wine that would steal away his royal memories forever, and would conduct his naked soul on a long pilgrimage through monstrous and infamous hells before bringing it back to the hall of Ildrac and the broken body on the wheel.

Then certain women of the Torturers, laughing obscenely, came forward and bound King Fulbra to the adamantine wheel with thongs of dragon-gut. And after they had done this, the girl Ilvaa, smiling with the shameless exultation of open cruelty, appeared before Fulbra and stood close beside him, holding a golden cup that contained the drugged wine. She mocked him for his folly and credulity in trusting her promises; and the other women and the male Torturers, even to Ildrac on his brazen seat, laughed loudly and evilly at Fulbra, and praised Ilvaa for the perfidy she had practiced upon him.

So Fulbra’s heart grew sick with a darker despair then any he had yet known. The brief, piteous love that had been born amid sorrow and agony perished within him, leaving but ashes steeped in gall. Yet, gazing at Ilvaa with sad eyes, he uttered no word of reproach. He wished to live no longer; and yearning for a swift death, he bethought him of the wizard ring of Vemdeez and of that which Vemdeez had said would follow its removal from his finger. He still wore the ring, which the Torturers had deemed a bauble of small value. But his hands were bound tightly to the wheel, and he could not remove it. So, with a bitter cunning, knowing full well that the islanders would not take away the ring if he should offer it to them, he feigned a sudden madness and cried wildly:

“Steal my memories, if ye will, with your accursed wine—and send me through a thousand hells and bring me back again to Uccastrog: but take not the ring that I wear on my middle finger; for it is more precious to me than many kingdoms or the pale breasts of love.”

Hearing this, King Ildrac rose from his brazen seat; and bidding Ilvaa to delay the administration of the wine, he came forward and inspected curiously the ring of Vemdeez, which gleamed darkly, set with its rayless gem, on Fulbra's finger. And all the while, Fulbra cried out against him in a frenzy, as if fearing that he would take the ring.

So Ildrac, deeming that he could plague the prisoner thereby and could heighten his suffering a little, did the very thing for which Fulbra had planned. And the ring came easily from the shrunken finger; and Ildrac, wishing to mock the royal captive, placed it on his own middle digit.

Then, while Ildrac regarded the captive with a more deeply graven smile of evil on the pale, gilded mask of his face, there came to King Fulbra of Yoros the dreadful and longed-for thing. The Silver Death, that had slept so long in his body beneath the magical abeyance of the ring of Vemdeez, was made manifest even as he hung on the adamantine wheel. His limbs stiffened with another rigor than that of agony; and his face shone brightly with the coming of the Death; and so he died.

Then, to Ilvaa and to many of the Torturers who stood wondering about the wheel, the chill and instant contagion of the Silver Death was communicated. They fell even where they had stood; and the pestilence remained like a glittering light on the faces and the hands of the men and shone forth from the nude bodies of the women. And the plague passed along the immense hall; and the other captives of King Ildrac were released thereby from their various torments; and the Torturers found surcease from the dire longing that they could assuage only through the pain of their fellow-men. And through all the palace, and throughout the Isle of Uccastrog, the Death flew swiftly, visible in those upon whom it had breathed, but otherwise unseen and impalpable.

But Ildrac, wearing the ring of Vemdeez, was immune. And guessing not the reason for his immunity, he beheld with consternation the doom that had overtaken his followers, and watched in stupefaction the freeing of his victims. Then, fearful of some inimic sorcery, he rushed from the hall; and standing in the early sun on a palace-terrace above the sea, he tore the ring of Vemdeez from his finger and hurled it to the foamy billows far below, deeming in his terror that the ring was perhaps the source or agent of the unknown hostile magic.

So Ildrac, in his turn, when all the others had fallen, was smitten by the Silver Death; and its peace descended upon him where he lay in his robes of

blood-brightened purple, with features shining palely to the unclouded sun. And oblivion claimed the Isle of Uccastrog; and the Torturers were one with the tortured.

THE DIMENSION OF CHANCE

Chapter I

The Blur in the Stratosphere

"Better get that pea-shooter ready," warned Markley through the audiphone, from his seat at the controls of the rocket-plane. "At this rate we'll come within range in a few minutes. Those Japs are good gunners, and they'll have a red-hot welcome for us."

Clement Morris, Secret Service operative, and college chum of Andrew Markley, his pilot in a swift and dangerous chase, inspected the cartridge-belt of the new and incredibly rapid-firing machine gun, behind which he sat in lieu of the official gunner. Then he resumed his watching of the bright metallic speck that they followed in the thin, dark, stirless air of the stratosphere, twelve miles above the eastward-flowing blur that was Nevada.

They were beginning to overhaul the Japanese plane that had picked up the fleeing spy, Isho Sakamoto, near Ogden. Morris had been tracking down this preternaturally clever spy for months, under Government orders. Sakamoto was believed to have procured plans of many American fortifications, as well as information regarding projected army movements in the war against the Sino-Japanese Federation that had begun a year previous, in 1975.

The enemy rocket-plane, descending unexpectedly from the isothermal regions, had rescued Sakamoto at the very moment when Morris was about to corner him; and Morris had immediately commandeered the services of his old friend Markley of the Air Corps, then stationed at Ogden.

Markley's rocket-plane was said to be one of the swiftest in the entire Corps. In its air-tight hull, with oxygen-tanks, helmets and parachutes already donned in case of accident, the two men were speeding onward at an acceleration so terrific that it held them in their seats as if with leaden strait-jackets. Morris, however, was little less accustomed to such flights than Markley himself; and it was not the first time that they had hunted down some national foe or traitor in company.

They drove on between the dark-blue heavens and the dim Earth with its mottlings of mountains and desert. The roar of the rockets was strangely thin in that rarefied air. Before them, the light of the stark sun, falling westward, glittered on the wings and hull of the Japanese as if on some great silver beetle. They were many miles from the usual lanes of stratosphere traffic; and no other vessels rode the windless gulf through which pursued and pursuer plunged toward the Sierras and the far Pacific.

Less than a mile now intervened betwixt the two vessels. There was no sign of overt hostility from the Japanese, which carried a heavy machine-gun equal in range to that of the American ship, and was manned by a professional gunner as well as by Sakamoto and the pilot. Morris began to calculate the range carefully. It would be a fair fight; and he thrilled at the prospect. The spy, at all costs, must not be permitted to reach San Francisco, where the enemy had established a hard-won base. If the fight should go against them, he or Markley, as a last resort, would summon other planes by radio from one of the American bases in California, to intercept Sakamoto.

Far off, through the inconceivably clear air, on the enormously extended horizon, he could see the faint notching of the California mountains. Then, as the planes hurtled on, it seemed to him that a vague, misty blur, such as might appear in sun-dazzled eyes, had suddenly developed in mid-air beyond the Japanese. The blur baffled him, like an atmospheric blind spot, having neither form nor hue nor delimitable outlines. But it seemed to enlarge rapidly and to blot out the map-like scene beyond in an inexplicable manner.

Markley had also perceived the blur.

“That’s funny,” he roared through the audiphone. “Anything in the shape of mist or cloud would be altogether impossible at this height. Must be some queer kind of atmospheric phenomenon—the mirage of a remote cloud, perhaps, transferred to the isothermal layer. But I can’t make it out.”

Morris did not answer. Amazement checked the somewhat inconsequential remark that rose to his lips; for at that moment the Japanese rocket-plane appeared to enter the mysterious blur, vanishing immediately from vision as if in actual cloud or fog. There was a quick, tremulous gleaming of its hull and wings, as if it had started to fall or had abruptly changed its course—and then it was gone, beyond the hueless and shapeless veil.

“That’s funnier still,” commented Markley, in a puzzled voice. “But they can’t shake us by flying into any damned mirage or what-you-call-it. We’ll soon pick them up on the other side.”

Diving horizontally ahead at six hundred miles per hour, the vessel neared the strange blur, which had now blotted out a huge section of the sky and world. It was like a sort of blindness spreading on the upper air; but it did not convey the idea of darkness or of anything material or tangible. Both Morris and Markley, as they neared it, felt that they were peering with strained, eluded eyes at something that was virtually beyond the scope of human vision. They seemed to grope for some ungraspable image—an unearthly shadow that fled from sight—a thing that was neither dark nor light nor colored with any known hue.

An instant more, while the blur devoured the heavens with terrible momentum. Then, as the plane rushed into it, a blindness fell on the two men, and they could no longer discern the vessel’s interior or its ports. Ineffable greyness, like an atmosphere of cotton-wool, enveloped them and seemed to intercept all visual images. The roar of the rockets had ceased at the same time, and they could hear nothing. Markley tried to speak, but the oath of astonishment died unuttered in his throat as if before a harrier of infrangible silence. It was as if they had entered some unfamiliar medium, neither air nor ether, that was wholly void and negative, and which refused to carry the vibrations of light, color, and sound.

They had lost the sense of movement, too, and could not know if they were flying or falling or were suspended immovably in the weird vacuum. Nothing seemed able to reach or touch them; the very sense of time was gone; and their thoughts crawled sluggishly, with a dull confusion, a dreamy surprise, in the all-including voidness. It was like the preliminary effect of an anesthetic: a timeless, bodiless, weightless hovering in the gulf that borders upon oblivion.

Very suddenly, like the lifting of a curtain, the blindness cleared away. In a strange, flickering, brownish-red light, the men saw the interior of the hull, and beheld each other’s goggled helmets and leatheroid air-suits. They became aware that the vessel was falling gently and obliquely, with slanted floor. The rocket-explosions had wholly ceased, though Markley had not touched the controlling lever. He could not start them again, and the entire mechanism refused any longer to obey his control. Through the ports, he and Morris saw a multi-colored chaos of outlandish and incomprehensible

forms, into which the plane was descending slowly, with incredible lightness, like a downward-floating leaf or feather.

Chapter II

The Valley of Mirages

"I don't know what has happened, or where we are," said Markley. "But I guess we might as well sit tight. There's no need to jump—we couldn't go down any more safely with parachutes. But what the hell have we gotten into, anyway?"

"Can't say," rejoined his companion, equally dumbfounded and at a loss. "Whatever or wherever the place is, it's not the state of Nevada."

Their descent toward the unknown, mysterious terrain seemed to occupy many minutes; and once or twice the vessel hung motionless for a moment, and then resumed its gliding with a jerk. Staring from the ports in ever-growing bewilderment, they began to distinguish separate forms and masses in the queer chaos of scenery. Irregular hills, mottled with grey, green, ocher and violet-black, lifted about them in the rufous light, and they perceived that they were settling into a kind of valley-bottom. The ground beneath them was partly bare, partly covered with objects that resembled vegetable growths rather than anything else. These plants, or plant-like things, as the plane settled closer above them, displayed a remarkable diversity of shape, size and hue, ranging from leafless, limbless stems to great tree-forms, with a crowded foliation that suggested some impossible crossing of araucaria and banana. The whole impression of this flora, even at that first glimpse, was one of lawless variety and illimitable grotesquery.

The vessel slanted slowly down on an open, level tract, narrowly missing the tops of some of the taller growths. It landed with a light jar, little more pronounced than if it had been checked by the usual process of careful deceleration. Markley and Morris peered out on a scene that amazed them more and more as they began to perceive its innumerable oddities of detail. For the nonce, they forgot the Japanese rocket-plane they had been following, and did not even speculate regarding its fate or whereabouts.

"Jumping Jesus!" cried Markley. "Mother Nature certainly was inventive when she designed this place. Look at those plants—no two of them alike. And the soil would give a geologist a nightmare." He was now

peering at the ground about the vessel, which offered a remarkable mosaic of numberless elements—a conglomeration of parti-colored soils, ores, and mineral forms, wholly unstratified and chaotic. It was mostly bare, and broken into uneven mounds and hummocks; but here and there, in patches of poisonous-looking clay or marl, peculiar grasses grew, with blades that varied in the same manner as the larger growths, so that one might well have imagined that each blade belonged to a separate genus. Not far away was a clump of tree-forms, exhibiting monstrous variations in their leafage, even when there was a vague likeness of bole or branch. It seemed as if the laws of type had been disowned, as if each individual plant were a species in itself.

A stream of some water-like fluid, varying strangely from peacock blue to cloudy umber in its course, ran past the fallen plane and meandered through the valley toward a barren slope at one end. From this slope another stream appeared to descend and join the first, flowing in a series of rapids and low cascades from a hill-top that melted indistinctly into the reddish-brown heavens.

“Well,” observed Markley, after contemplating this milieu with a troubled frown, “the problem of how we got here is equaled in its abstruseness only by the problem of how we are going to get away. It’s beyond me—I pass it up. The whole business is wrong and impossible. And this crazy landscape isn’t the only joker, either. Our nitrone fuel simply won’t explode—there’s something—hell knows what—that prevents combustion.”

“Sure the tubes are all right?” queried Morris. “Maybe we’ve run short of fuel.”

“Huh!” the tone was superbly contemptuous. “I know this boat. There’s nothing the matter with the rocket mechanism. And I loaded up to the limit with nitrone before we started. We could have chased Sakamoto to the Great Wall of China and back again, if necessary, without re-fueling. I tell you, we’re up against something that was omitted from the text-books. Just look at this ungodly hole, anyway. It’s like the scrambled hallucinations of a hundred cases of delirium tremens.”

“I’ve monkeyed with hashish and peyote beans in my time,” said Morris, “but I’ll admit that I never saw anything like this. However, we’re probably missing a lot by staying in the ship. What do you say to a little

promenade? Sakamoto and his friends may be somewhere in the neighborhood, too; and if they are, I'd like to get a line on them."

Very cautiously, the two men unstrapped themselves from their seats and arose. In spite of their heavy garments, they felt a queer physical lightness that argued a lesser gravitation than that of Earth, and which no doubt accounted for the leisurely fall of the plane. They almost seemed to float around the hull; and found great difficulty in controlling and calculating their movements.

They had brought along a few sandwiches and a thermos bottle of coffee. These, their sole provisions, they decided to leave in the plane. Both carried automatic pistols of a new type, firing fifteen shots with terrifically high-powered ammunition, and having almost the range of rifles. Making sure that these pistols were ready in their holsters, which formed part of the leatheroid garments, and re-testing their oxygen-tanks and helmets, the men opened the sealed door of the hull by means of a spring-apparatus, and emerged.

The air of the valley, as far as they could tell, was still and windless. It seemed to be quite warm, and they were forced to shut off the heating mechanism in their suits, which they had turned on against the zero of the stratosphere. Almost vertically overhead, a heavy and lob-sided sun glared down, pouring out its light like a visible flood of reddish-brown liquid. A few clouds, with unearthly forms, floated idly about the sun; and far off in the lower heavens, above dim hills and crags, other clouds went racing by as if driven by a mad tempest.

Trying to determine the course of their descent into the valley, Morris and Markley perceived an aerial blur at one point in the heavens—the same blur, it seemed, into which they had flown above Nevada. It occurred to Markley, in his mounting bewilderment and consternation, that this blur was perhaps formed by the meeting or overlapping of two kinds of space, and was the entrance between their own world and some alien dimension into which they had been precipitated. It was visible in the reddish air like the "ropiness" or cloudy nucleus that sometimes appears in a clear wine.

From Markley's viewpoint, this explanation of their dilemma was extremely wild and fantastical. But he could not think of any other.

"Which way shall we go?" he queried, as he and Morris surveyed the valley on all sides. At the end that had been previously invisible from the plane, the vari-colored stream emerged from a defile of madly tilted cliffs

and pinnacles, hued as with petrified rainbows. On both sides of the valley were long, uneven slopes and barren bluffs, looming vaguely above areas of fantastic forestation. One of these areas, lying on the right hand, approached in a sort of arc to within a hundred yards of the rocket-plane.

“I move that we head for the nearest timber,” said Morris, indicating this mass of grotesquely varied growths. “I have a feeling, somehow, that I’d like to get under cover as quickly as possible. I may be wrong, of course, but something tells me that Sakamoto and his compatriots are somewhere in the vicinity.”

“Their visibility is pretty poor, if they are,” commented Markley. “We may have lost them altogether—maybe they got safely through that atmospheric blind spot.”

“Well, I’m not taking any more chances than I have to. I don’t care for the idea of a soft-nosed Japanese bullet in the back.”

“If rocket fuel won’t explode in this world, there’s no certainty that cartridges will either,” Markley pointed out. “But anyway, we might as well take a look at the woods.”

They started off toward the forest, trying to control the absurd lightness that sent them bounding for twenty feet or more. After a few paces, however, they found that their weight was increasing rapidly, as if they had entered a zone of stronger gravitation. They took one or two steps that were almost normal—and then floated off in ludicrous leaps of a dozen yards that were checked suddenly as if by another belt of increased gravity.

The trees, which had seemed so near, retreated in a strange and disconcerting fashion. At length, after many minutes of variable progression, the men saw the wood looming immediately before them, and could study its details. High in the heavens, above all the other growths, there towered two incredibly elongated boles such as might be seen in the delirium of hashish; and about them a medley of lesser forms, no two of which displayed the same habit, leaned and crawled and squatted or massed themselves in monstrous tangles. There were single plants that combined enormous moon-shaped leaves with others that were fern-like or lanceolate. Gourd-like fruits grew on the same tree with others in the form of tiny plums and huge melons. Everywhere there were flowers that made the most ornate terrestrial orchids appear simple and rudimentary as daisies in comparison.

All was irregular and freakish, testifying to a haphazard law of development. It seemed that this whole chaotic cosmos in which the earthmen found themselves had been shaped from atoms and electrons that had formed no fixed patterns of behavior. Nothing, apparently, was duplicated; the very stones and minerals were anomalous.

So far, they had met nothing in the form of animal life. Now, as they neared the forest, a creature that was like a poddy and spider-legged serpent came down as if from the heavens on one of the preposterously tall boles, running swiftly. With curiosity tinged by a nightmarish horror, the men stepped toward the tree, unable to decide which end of this curious creature was the head and which the tail.

Astoundingly, in a mirage-like fashion, the forest faded away with their change of position; and they saw its baroque tops at a seeming distance of several hundred yards, in a diagonal direction. Turning, they found that the whole valley, during their brief journey, had shifted about and had recomposed itself beyond all recognition. They were not able to locate the rocket-plane for some moments; but finally, in an opposite quarter, and seemingly much further away than they had supposed, they discerned the gleaming of its wings and hull.

Before them, in lieu of the forest, was an open space in which the varicolored stream had mysteriously reappeared. Beyond the stream arose plots of scattered vegetation, backed by opalescent cliffs.

Markley and Morris felt an indescribable confusion, a terrible and growing dubiety that involved the veraciousness of their own senses. Their very sanity was challenged by the labyrinth of impossible and illusory images into which they had wandered. For perhaps the first time in their lives, they knew the sensation of being utterly lost, in a bournless world of incertitude. Their habitual buoyancy and jauntiness began to evaporate, giving place to a furtive, unacknowledged terror.

“We’ll be lucky if we ever find our way back to the plane,” said Markley, in tones that were almost dismal, after a long silence. “Want to look any further for the Japs?”

Morris did not answer at once. His eye had caught a silvery glint, close to one of the far-off plots of vegetation beyond the stream. He pointed it out to his companion silently. Three dark, moving specks, doubtless the figures of men, appeared beside the glint as they watched.

“There they are,” said Morris. “Looks as if they were starting for a *pasear* themselves, or were just returning from one. Shall we try to interview them?”

“You’re the captain, old scout. I’m game if you are.”

Temporarily forgetting, in this glimpse of their quarry, the illusive refraction of the weird scenery, they started toward the stream. It appeared to be only a few paces away, and was seemingly narrow enough to be crossed at a step. By another astonishing shift, however, it moved away from them, reappearing in a different quarter, at a considerable distance; and the gleam of the Japanese rocket-plane and its attendant human specks had vanished from view.

“I guess we’ll play tag with some more mirages,” opined Markley in a tone whose ironic disgust was mingled with profound bewilderment and perturbation.

A nightmare confusion, a doubtfulness that implicated all things, even their own identity, returned and deepened upon them as they pressed forward, trying to relocate the enemy vessel. The changing zones of gravity made their progress erratic and uncertain; and the landscape melted and shifted about them like the imagery of a kaleidoscope. Like lost phantoms, they seemed to pursue a phantom foe through all the jumble and disorder of some incredible terrain of cosmic dementia.

A clump of crowded vegetation, rearing its anomalous boles and monstrous leafage as if from nowhere, leaped into place before them. Rounding the clump, which seemed relatively stable, they came suddenly in sight of the Japanese, who, in air-suits and helmets, were now standing on the opposite brink of the apparently nearby water.

Whether or not Sakamoto and his fellows had seen the Americans was uncertain. They were staring in the direction of Morris and Markley, who did not wait for decisive proof that the enemy had perceived them, but drew their automatics and aimed quickly, each choosing one of the two nearest figures.

Somewhat to their surprise, in view of the various baffling and topsy-turvy phenomena they had encountered, the pressure of the triggers was followed by a sharp double report. The Japanese, however, did not seem to realize that they were being fired at; and their apparent nearness and relative position were no doubt illusory.

Markley and Morris, recognizing the probability of this, did not shoot again, but sprang forward in an effort to approach the deceptive figures. The Japanese vanished; the whole valley seemed to swirl in a semi-circle and rearrange itself; and the two Americans found themselves at the foot of that barren slope from which, in their first remote view of the place, a second stream had appeared to descend and join the meandering creek.

From their new and close vantage, however, there was only one stream, which, flowing down the valley-bottom against the barring slope, ran turbulently *uphill* in a series of skyward-leaping rapids and cascades!

Chapter III

The People of Chance

Too astonished even for profanity, they stared without comment at this unique reversal of what they were accustomed to regard as natural law. For a considerable distance on either side of the stream, the acclivity was hollowed and worn smooth as if by landslides or a process of slow attrition. Occasionally, as the men stood watching it, a pebble, a lump of conglomerate soil, or a few particles of grit were loosened from the ground, to roll heavenward rapidly and disappear beyond the ragged crest of the slide together with the cascading waters.

Drawn by thoughtless curiosity and wonder, Morris stepped toward the beginning of the slope, which was perhaps ten feet away. It was like stepping over a precipice. The ground seemed to tilt beneath him, and the slope fell like an overturning world, till it pitched *downward* at a steep angle with the sky at its bottom. Unable to arrest his strange fall, he slid sidelong into the rushing water, and was carried roughly and dizzily down the rapids and over the cascades. Half-dazed and breathless, he felt that he was shooting across the world's rim toward a nether gulf in which hung the fallen sun.

Markley, seeing his companion's weird fate, also started toward the acclivity, with some dim instinctive idea of rescuing Morris from the inverted stream. A single step, and he too was seized by the skyward gravitation. Slipping, rolling and bumping as if in a steep chute, and unable to regain his foothold, he slid along the topsy-turvy slope, followed by a shower of detritus, without falling into the water.

He and Morris, passing the rim of the slide as if hurled toward the reddish-brown sky that was now *beneath* them, each experienced another bewildering *bouleversement*. Morris found himself floundering in a sort of hilltop pool, where the final cascade foamed itself into quiescence; and Markley, stunned and sprawling but with unbroken bones, was lying on a pile of rubble such as would ordinarily gather at the bottom of an escarpment.

Morris scrambled from the pool, which was only waist-deep, and helped Markley to his feet. The local gravity was almost normal from a terrene viewpoint; and plainly all objects that were drawn skyward along the deficiently attractive area were promptly arrested when they reached the top. Headlong and turbulent, the cascade curved over the rim into the level pool.

The earth-men, finding themselves quite unhurt, proceeded to examine their air-suits and helmets for possible damage. Since the local atmosphere was untested, and might well possess deleterious properties, a rift in the leatheroid fabric would perhaps be a serious matter. The suits, however, were intact; and the tubes that supplied oxygen from flat tanks behind the shoulders were in perfect condition.

The height that they had climbed in a fashion so singular was really part of an uneven plateau that appeared to surround the whole valley. The plateau was divided by long hummocks of mottled soil and stone, which rose gradually into bleak uplands and low mountains at a seeming distance of several miles.

From their present vantage, the valley below was an immense sink. They saw the entire course of the tortuous stream, the areas of outré vegetation, and the gleaming of some metallic object which they assumed to be their own rocket plant. The Japanese plane was not visible, and was perhaps hidden by one of the plots of forestation. Of course, remembering the optical distortion and displacement which they had encountered so often in their wanderings, they could not be sure of the actual distance, perspective and relationship of the various elements in this bizarre scenery.

Turning again from the valley, they considered the plateau itself. Here the stream, running in a normal and tranquil fashion, entered a ravine and disappeared. The whole landscape was intolerably drear and repellent, with the same chaotic mineral formation as the valley, but without even the anomalous plant-life to relieve its deadly desolation. The lopsided sun, declining very swiftly, or else subject to the nearly universal optic transposition, had already fallen half-way from the zenith toward the horizon of amorphous mountains. The clouds had all melted away, but far off above the valley, the men could still discern the mysterious aerial blurred spot.

“I guess we’d better mosey back toward the boat,” said Markley. “That is, if we can find our bearings.” He tried to suppress a terror such as might

be felt by a lost child, tried to collect his wildered faculties. “If we follow the rim of the valley, we ought to find a place where the gravitation won’t drag us the wrong way.”

Made doubly cautious by their disconcerting experiences, they started along the rim of the sink. For some distance the ground was littered with detritus, and even with loose boulders that had rolled upward to be arrested at the top. When they came to the end of this rubble, they surmised that they were beyond the belt of reverse gravitation.

Following the rim toward a point where the slope assumed an easier gradient, they came suddenly into a zone of heavier gravity than any they had yet entered. At one step their weight appeared to treble; a crushing burden descended upon them; and they could lift their feet only with immense effort.

Struggling against the uncanny pull of the strange earth, they heard an indescribable clattering and rustling behind them, and turned their heads laboriously, in much startlement, to ascertain the cause.

Emerging as if from empty air, a concourse of unimaginably monstrous beings had gathered at their very heels on the bleak verge of the plateau. There were scores or hundreds of these entities, who, whether mere beasts or the analogues of humanity, were no less various and freakish in their conformation than the weird flora of the valley-bottom.

Obviously, there was no common norm or type of development as in the terrestrial species. Some of the entities were no less than twelve or thirteen feet tall; others were squat pygmies. Limbs, bodies, and sense-organs were equally diversified. One creature was like a prodigious moonfish mounted on stilts. Another was a legless, rolling globe fringed about the equator with prehensile ropes that served to haul it along by attaching themselves to projections. Still another resembled a wingless bird with a great falcon beak and a tapering serpentine body with lizard legs, that glided half-erect. Some of the creatures possessed double or triple bodies; some were hydra-headed, or equipped with an excessive number of limbs, eyes, mouths, ears and other anatomical features.

Truly these beings were the spawn of chance, the random creations of a lawless biologic force. A horde of fabulous, fantastic nightmare improbabilities, they surged forward upon Morris and Markley, uttering a babel of wordless sounds, of cacklings, hisses, clucks, ululations, roarings and bellowings. Whether they were hostile or merely curious, the earth-men

could not decide. Both were petrified with a horror beyond the horror of evil dreams.

The leaden gravitational drag, rendering the least movement slow and toilsome, re-enforced their sensation of nightmare. Laboriously they drew their pistols, and half-lifting them at the oncoming rout, pulled the triggers. The reports were dull and muffled; the bullets flew with visible slowness, and rebounded harmlessly like tossed pebbles from the monsters that they struck.

Like a stampeding herd, the throng of biologic horrors was upon Morris and Markley. Battling against the gravity as well as against the loathsome bodies and members that engulfed them, they were borne irresistibly along by the seething mass. Their pistols were torn from their hands, they beheld hideous faces and faceless things that milled about them like a torrent of the damned in some nether circle. Occasionally, in broken glimpses, they saw a disordered landscape of amorphous rocks, with pools and streams of fine sand, and sudden, fortuitous vegetation like mad mirages, through which they were being carried.

The origin of the monsters, their purpose, their destination, their intention in regard to the earth-men, were enigmatic as the riddles of delirium. Resistance was futile; and Morris and Markley gave themselves up to the rushing motion of the throng, in the hope that some opportunity of escape would ultimately offer itself.

They seemed to go on for hours. The gravitation still varied, but was often constant over large areas. The sun, instead of sinking further, rose again to the zenith. Sometimes there were brief intervals of darkness, as if the light had been shut off by some queer fluctuation of atmospheric properties. Puffs of wild wind arose and died. Rocks and whole hummocks seemed to crumble abruptly on the waste. But through all this chaos of conditions, the monstrous horde poured onward with its captives.

Apparently the earth-men had fallen in with a whole tribe of these anomalous creatures, who were perhaps migrating from one zone of their random world to another. At least, such was the explanation that suggested itself in lieu of positive knowledge.

Markley and Morris became aware that the ground was slanting downward. Over the heads of the monsters, they saw that they had entered a flat sloping valley. Rough mountains, perhaps the same that they had beheld from the rim of the sink, appeared to loom at no great distance above them.

The low valley debouched in a sort of shallow, crater-like hollow. Here the horde suddenly arrested its onward rush and began to spread out in a curious manner. Markley and Morris, now able to work their way forward, saw that the creatures had arranged themselves in a ring about the slopes of the circular hollow, leaving a clear space at its bottom.

Chapter IV

The Pit of Dissolution

In the center of the vacant space, a singular phenomenon was manifesting itself. A fountain of fine, hueless powder rose from the stone and soil, attaining a height of three feet. Slowly but acceleratively it widened and rose higher, preserving the form of a round column. Its top mushroomed into a vague cloud, spreading above the heads of the assembled throng and floating skyward. It was as if some process of molecular dissolution were taking place to form this fountain.

Markley and Morris were fascinated by the spectacle. Before them, the silent, circular crumbling of the ground went on, the column swelled to titanic proportions, towering above the crater. Seemingly, too, the monsters were fascinated, for none of them stirred to break the ring-like formation.

Then, gradually, as the column of atoms increased, the horde began to surge forward. The ring narrowed till its inmost ranks were driven, close-packed, into the fountain by the pressure from behind. Visibly, as the creatures entered it, their limbs and bodies melted like bursting puff-balls, to swell the columnar cloud of dissolution that mounted skyward.

“Are they all going to commit suicide and take us with them?” Markley’s voice was a horror-tautened whisper. He and Morris, caught in the forward ranks, were being forced slowly toward the fountain. Only two rows of the monsters now intervened; and even as Markley spoke, the bodies of the inmost row began to dissolve in the column.

The earth-men struggled desperately against the massed bodies that crowded from behind. But the living wall, close and implacable, as if bent on nothing but self-immolation, drove them downward inch by inch.

Overhead, the sun was blinded by the mushrooming column. The sky took on a madder-brown twilight. Then, with a suddenness as of some atmospheric legerdemain, the twilight blacked into Cimmerian darkness. A mad, elemental howling tore the air, a blind hurricane filled the crater, blowing as if from above; and bolts of lightning leapt upward from the

ground, enshrouding with blue and violet fire the horrible horde of biologic anomalies.

The pressure behind the earth-men relaxed. A panic seemed to have seized the monsters, who were now dispersing in the bolt-riven darkness. The earth-men, fighting their way upward, stumbled over the half-charred bodies of those who had been slain by the lightning. By intermittent flashes, they saw, looking back, that the column of atomic dissolution still poured from the crater's bottom, to merge with the seething storm that had risen as if at random from nowhere.

Miraculously untouched by the lightning, Morris and Markley found themselves in the flat valley through which they had entered the crater. Most of the monsters had now disappeared, melting away like the shadow of a nightmare; and the last flashes revealed little but vacant soil and rock.

The lightning ceased, leaving the men in darkness. An irresistible wind, like a torrent of rushing water, bore them along through the Stygian night, and they lost all trace of each other henceforth. Often hurled headlong, or lifted bodily from the ground at the mercy of lawless, anarchic elements, they were blown apart like lost leaves.

Abruptly as it had begun, the tumult fell in a great stillness. The darkness dissolved from the heavens. Morris, lying dazed and breathless, found himself alone amid barren reaches of rock and sand. He could trace nothing familiar in the landscape. The mountains were lost to view, and he saw no sign of the fountain of molecules. It was as if he had been transported to another tract of this fantastic realm of chance.

Halloing loudly, but answered only by sardonic echoes, he started off at random in an effort to find Markley. Once or twice, amid the shifting, illusive imageries through which he wandered, he thought that he saw the mountains that had loomed beyond the crater of dissolution.

The sun, changing its apparent position by leaps and bounds, was now close to the horizon, and its rays were indescribably dark and eerie. Morris, plodding doggedly on amid the delusive advances and recessions of the dreary landscape, came without warning to a flat valley that was somehow familiar. Before him the lost mountains re-appeared as if by magic; and going on, he emerged in the crater-like hollow.

Many of the charred monsters, slain by the electric storm, were strewn about the slopes. But the fountain itself was no longer active. A round,

funnel-like pit, twenty feet in diameter, yawned dark and silent at the bottom of the hollow.

Morris felt the descent of an overmastering despair. Lost as he was in this awful trans-dimensional limbo, and separated from his comrade, whose fate he could not imagine, the prospect was indeed drear and hopeless. His whole body ached with accumulated fatigue; his mouth and throat were afire with corrosive thirst. Though the oxygen still poured freely from its tank, he could not tell how much of the supply remained. A few hours, at most, and then his ordeals might end in asphyxiation. Momentarily crushed by the horror of it all, he sat down on the crater-slope in the rusty-brown gloom.

Chapter V

The Masters of Chance

Curiously, the twilight did not darken. As if in a reversed ecliptic, the sun returned slowly into the heavens. But Morris, in his despair, hardly heeded this outré phenomenon.

Staring dully at the re-illumined ground, he saw the appearance of several grotesque, anomalous shadows that fell past him on the slope. Startled from his lethargy, he sprang up. A dozen or more of the monstrous people had returned. Some of them were gnawing the cindery bodies of their late companions; but three, as if disdaining such fare, were closing in upon Morris.

Even as he turned, they assailed him. One of them, a headless thing with ropy arms and a puckered, mouth-like orifice in the center of its gourd-shaped body, tried to drag him down with its frightfully elongated members. Another, which might have been some heraldic griffin minus wings and feathers, began to peck at his air-suit with its tremendous horny beak. The third, which was more like a horribly overgrown toad than anything else, hopped about him on the ground and mumbled his ankles with its toothless mouth.

Sick with nausea, Morris struggled against them. Time and again he kicked away the toad-like creature, which returned with noisome pertinacity. He could not loosen the ropy members of the headless horror, which had wrapped themselves about him in plastic folds. But his worst fear was that the griffin would tear open his leatheroid garments with its slicing beak. He hammered the huge bird-shaped body with his fists, driving it away repeatedly; but as if mad with rage or hunger, it reassailed him. His legs and body were sore in a dozen places from the blows of the cruel beak.

Beyond his attackers, he caught involuntary glimpses of the horrid feast that was being enjoyed by their fellows. It was like the feeding of harpies in some infernal circle; and Morris could surmise his own imminent fate all

too dearly. He saw that several of the feeders, quitting their half-eaten provender, were turning in his direction as if to join the three assailants.

Instinctively, as he fought on, he heard the sound of a measured drumming from above. The sound drew nearer and ceased. In a turn of the eddying combat, he saw that two gigantic beings had arrived among the monsters, and were standing a little apart, as if watching the gruesome orgy with detached interest.

Even amid the frightful preoccupation of his struggles, he noticed a strange thing. The new arrivals, alone of all the life-forms that he and Markley had met in this erratic world, seemed to approximate a common type of physical development. Both of them stood erect, and their conformation was vaguely human in its outlines, except for the enormous wings, ribbed and leathery as those of ancient pterodactyls, which hung half-folded at their backs. Their coloration was a dark, bituminous brown, verging upon ebon blackness in the wings, and lightening somewhat in their heads and faces. They were massively built, with a stature of eleven or twelve feet, and aquiline, sloping, hairless heads that denoted a large brain-capacity. No trace of ears could be detected; but two round, luminous, golden-yellow eyes were set far apart in their faces above sphinx-like mouths and nostrils. Somehow they made Morris think of Satanic angels; but their aspect was not malign, and was wholly poised, aloof and dispassionate.

Such were the impressions that he received, without conscious assortment or definition at the time. Without interlude, the atrocious battle with the three monsters continued. Presently, however, one of the gigantic winged beings came with prodigious strides toward the earth-man and his attackers, as if to watch the uneven combat. Morris felt the regard of the great yellow eyes, which, inscrutable themselves, appeared to search him through and read the inmost secrets of his mind.

The being stepped closer, lifted an enormous hand in a leisurely but imperious gesture. As if fearful or recognizant of a superior power, the loathsome assailants abandoned their efforts to drag Morris down, and slunk away to assuage their hunger on an un-preempted carrion that lay beside the pit in the crater’s bottom.

A dreadful faintness surged upon the earth-man—a reaction from all the intolerable horrors and fatigues of the day. Amid the whirling darkness into

which he slid, he saw the gleaming of two mesmeric golden eyes, and felt the firm grasp of giant hands that seemed to support and lift him.

An electric shock ran through him at their touch. Miraculously, his faintness cleared away, leaving him wonderfully alert. Strength seemed to flow into him from the mighty hands: magnetic strength, buoyant and preterhuman. The horror faded from his shaken nerves, he was no longer lost and bewildered, but was filled with a mystic confidence.

The experience that he now underwent was perhaps the strangest of all that befell him in the dimension of chance. Also, it was the hardest to remember or describe.

Beneath the thrilling touch of the winged being, whose hands held him firmly by the shoulders, he seemed virtually to pass beyond his own consciousness. Thoughts that were not his own rose up and limned themselves with the clearness of actual visions or objective impressions. In some ineffable way, he shared for a moment the thoughts and memories of the being who had rescued him from the monsters. Whether or not an intentional telepathy was being exerted, he never quite knew; but alien vistas, beheld through unfamiliar senses, appeared to open before him.

The two winged beings, he knew, were members of a race that was far from numerous. They were the rulers of this outlandish world, the self-made masters of its incalculable forces and disorganized elements. Their evolution had been supremely difficult and painful. Through their own volition, they had risen from a state that was little higher than that of the unhappy monsters. They had developed faculties that enabled them to circumvent the lawlessness of their environment, to forecast its very randomness, and impose law and order on the ever-changing chaos. They had even learned to control their own development.

The nightmare hollow in which Morris stood had temporarily vanished. There came to him the sense of tremendous flight above strange horizons. He seemed to pass on lofty wings over wastes of chaotically piled and tumbled rocks with the being whom he knew as one of the Masters of Chance. Amid the shifting mirages of desolation, through distorting zones of air, above realms that pitched obliquely for immeasurable leagues like the flattened side of some malformed planet, he flew unerringly to his destination.

Beyond the chaos, on tiered mountains that rose stupendously, he beheld the high and many-terraced citadels of the Masters. As if he had

trodden their battlements, he knew the white walls of a majestically ordered architecture that defied the erratic formlessness of the world beneath, and imposed their harmonic sternness on the tumbled waste. He knew the terraces, lined with geometric rows of trees and flowers, in which, by some miracle of horticultural mastery, the random flora had been subdued and had taken on the characters of type and species.

Dimly, to the limit of his human thought-capacity, he understood something of the Masters. Their powers were those of dynamic will, of occult magnetism and sense-development; and they did not depend entirely on mere physical science or machinery of any kind. In former ages, they had been more numerous, had ruled a larger area of that unstable, incalculably treacherous world. It seemed that the apex of their evolution had passed; though still powerful, they were menaced more and more by the beleaguering forces of cosmic anarchy.

Such were the things that Morris learned in that moment of communion with his rescuer. Returning to his own proper consciousness, he felt also that the telepathic interchange had been mutual: the being had read his own history, his predicament of hopeless alienation in a strange world; and in some inscrutably benign way, was minded to help him.

He felt no surprise whatever at the more than outré happenings that ensued. Somehow, as if he shared the ability of his protector to read the future, all that occurred was familiar as a twice-told tale. In this bizarre but fore-known drama, the winged being lifted him gently but firmly, making a cradle of its vast arms, and spreading its ebon wings, mounted swiftly toward the misshapen sun. Its companion followed; and Morris knew, as they flew steadily above the changing zones of gravitation, above the dreary jumble of wandering mirages, that they were seeking for Markley.

In a dim, partial way, he seemed to share the clairvoyance of the Masters, which enabled them to distinguish the real from the illusory amid the disordered refraction of their atmosphere. He, too, was gifted with a televisual faculty by which he could scan the remote or hidden portions of the waste.

Sure and undeviating, the mighty leathern wings beat onward toward their goal. Amid the kaleidoscopes of desolation, there appeared the rough rim of the valley in which Morris and Markley had left their rocket-plane.

Swifter grew the beating of the wings, louder was their drumming, as if haste were needed. A strange anxiety mounted in Morris, lest they should

be too late.

Now they hovered above the valley, slanting groundward. The place had changed, in some fashion that Morris could not define to himself for a moment. Then he realized that certain of the ringing bluffs and slopes had crumbled away, were still crumbling, to form a moving flood of hueless sand. In places, columns of atomic powder mounted like geysers; some of the areas of forestation had fallen into shapeless heaps of dust, like disintegrated fungi. These sudden, erratic, localized decompositions of matter were common phenomena of the world of chance; and it came to Morris, as part of his mystic knowledge, that the high, narrow realm of form and order which the Masters had wrested from chaos was not wholly secure against their inroads.

Anxiously, with a breathless fear, he scanned the area into which the mighty being who carried him was descending on sloped wings. Markley was somewhere in that area, to which he had wandered back in a blind, bewildered search for his lost companion; and danger—a double danger—threatened him now.

As if with the keen, straight-seeing eyes of the Master, Morris discerned a rocket-plane on the valley floor, and knew it to be the one that the Japanese had used. Seemingly it was deserted; and the moving tide of sand from the crumbling cliffs engulfed it even as he watched.

In the middle of the valley, he descried the glittering of another plane — the one that belonged to Markley. Four tiny figures were milling to and fro beside it, as if in wild combat. Upon them, unheeded, the deluge of dissolution was advancing swiftly. The sands rolled in crested billows. The trees swelled and soared to monstrous arboreal phantoms, and dissolved in pulverous clouds. Pillars of freed molecules built themselves up from the valley-bottom, and were shaped into ominous, floating domes that obscured the sun.

It was a scene of elemental terror and eerie, silent tumult. Across it, sloping and dipping, the wings of the Masters drummed, till they hovered above the knot of struggling figures.

Three men in helmets and air-suits were attacking a fourth, who was similarly attired. The weakness of the local gravity, however, made the combat less unequal that it might have seemed. Also, it served to lighten the blows which the contestants succeeded in delivering. Markley, in great, twenty-foot leaps, was eluding the Japanese much of the time; but plainly

he was tiring; and the three would corner him soon. Several automatic pistols, discarded as if empty or useless, were lying on the ground; but one of the Japanese had drawn an ugly, curved knife, and was watching his chance for a thrust at the darting figure of Markley.

In their desperate struggle, none of the four had perceived the arrival of the Masters. It was Markley who saw them first. As if stupefied, he paused in one of his rushes, and stared at Morris and the winged beings.

Two of the Japanese turned and also beheld the hovering figures. They stood as if petrified with astonishment or terror. But the third, intent on delivering a thrust with his wicked knife, had not seen them; and he flew in a long, aerial leap at Markley.

The second Master, hanging in air beside Morris' protector, raised his right hand and pointed at the flying Japanese. For an instant, his fingers seemed to clutch and hurl a great javelin of living fire. The javelin leapt and faded—and the Japanese, a shapeless pile of fuming cinders, lay at Markley's feet.

The other two, shielding their goggled eyes with their hands, as if the terrible lance of light had blinded them, rushed toward the oncoming storm of atomic disintegration. Before them, on the valley floor, a sudden pillar of dust ascended, swelling awfully as it ate the conglomerate soil. It seemed to topple upon them—and they were gone.

Morris, watching in wordless awe, felt that the lifting arms had been withdrawn—that his feet had been set on the ground. Close above him, the two Masters towered, with spread wings. As if an urgent voice had spoken aloud, he knew the things that must be done without delay.

"Come—we can start the plane!" he cried to Markley. "We've got to move in a hurry."

Markley, who had been staring at the Masters, appeared to emerge from a sort of trance.

"All right, if you say so—and if the fuel will explode," he agreed. "But before we go, I'd like to thank your winged friend for browning Sakamoto. I don't know how it was done; but he sure has a wicked jolt. That Jap would have laid me open like a gutted fish, in another split-second."

A sudden, howling wind blew down the valley, spreading the dust-billows like a blown spray, and lifting the atomic columns into a roof of doom. Swiftly the storm of dissolution gathered, rushing toward the plane.

Markley, following by Morris, sprang for the open man-hole. While Morris swung the heavy lid into place, his companion leapt to the control-board. As if by some miracle of chance, or change in the local atmospheric properties, his pressure of the starting-lever was answered by the loud roar of discharging rockets. The plane lifted, acquiring momentum, till it soared above the seething valley.

Looking back through one of the ports, Morris perceived the two flying colossi, who hung aloof in the heavens, as if watching the departure of the plane. Serene, impassive, on poised wings, they floated beyond the atomic storm, which had already begun to subside.

He turned away with a strange awe, a reverential gratitude. Beneath Markley's skillful guidance, the plane was heading straight for the formless atmospheric blur that still blotted the reddish-brown sky.

Again Morris looked back. High, far, and tiny, between the malformed sun and the chaotically strewn and riven world, the mysterious beings whom he knew as the Masters of Chance flew steadily on level wings toward their remote city. It was his last sight of them; and already the mystic knowledge that had been imparted to him was fading a little in his brain.

The telepathic vision of the citadels that imposed their severe architectural ordination on a mad terrain; the supernal, hard-won power of the Masters, battling perpetually against lawless elements and the treacherous, intractable forces of a cosmic Pandemonium—all had become slightly unreal, like a dreamland from which the dreamer is departing.

Now the blind aerial blur had enveloped the vessel. Greyness, clinging and all-pervasive, filled it like an atmosphere of cotton-wool. Sight, sound—even feeling and thought—were lost as if in some hinterland of oblivion.

Out of the blur, as if from a formless, hueless dream of death between two lives, the plane and its occupants floated into the dark azure of the terrene stratosphere. Sight, consciousness, feeling, memory, returned in a sudden flood to Morris and Markley. Below them again, they saw in mottled relief the familiar reaches of Nevada, edged with white and saw-like mountains.

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 down 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, falconlike eyes.

The trio of earth-men, 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 earth-men 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 earth-men 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 vanished 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 atomlike sand were blown in upon them, stinging their hands and faces like powdered adamant.

“The storm will last for half an hour, at 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 offshoot from the river. It had been swept clean of all detritus, and was like the interior 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 any 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 adown 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 readily 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 downgrade is easy enough at that.”

“Facilis decensus Avernus,” agreed Maspic. “But what’s the use of going further? 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 gulfs 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 abysm. 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 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 flashlights 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 earth-men, 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 earth-man. 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-jointed 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, two 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 earth-men and forced them to turn backward. Then, tightly caught in a moving vice 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 awhile, 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 earth-men 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 earth-men. 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 dessication.

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 a brief visual existence to 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 earth-men 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 pyramidal tiers. On the top, there squatted an image of pale metal: a thing no larger than a hare, but monstrous beyond all imagining.

The Martians crowded about the earth-men. One of them took Bellman by the arm, as if urging him to climb the altar. With the slow steps of a dreamer, he mounted the sloping tiers, and Chivers and Maspic followed.

The image resembled nothing they had ever seen on the red planet—or elsewhere. It was carven of whitish 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 cuplike 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 eidolon 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.

Dimly the earth-men saw that the altar swarmed with the blind Martians, who were crowding past them about the image. As if in some fantastic ritual of touch, these creatures were fondling the eidolon with their

lank fingers, were tracing its loathsome outlines. Upon their brutal faces a narcotic ecstasy was imprinted. Compelled like sleepers in some abhorrent dream, Bellman, Chivers and Maspic followed their example.

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 finger-tips. From it, in heavy, ceaseless waves, a dark vibration surged: an opiate power that clouded the eyes; that poured its baleful slumber into the blood.

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 cavern-floor. 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 miasmal slumber. In those dreams, by insensible gradations, 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 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 one of the eyeless troglodytes. Some of the members were missing; and the remainder was gnawed even to the curiously articulated bones.

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 as 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 footprints, they led away from the half-devoured Martian, 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. Lurching drunkenly, they followed Bellman among the sprawled Martians, away from the pyramid on which the eidolon of white gold 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 earth-men'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 recollection. His dreams and his nightmare awakening in the cave—the white eidolon—the half-eaten troglodyte of the nether cliffs—the rings of wetness, leading toward the gulf—all returned like the figments of a teeming madness, all 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 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 humped, enormous carapace, vaguely recalling the armor of the glyptodon, shone with a luster as of wet white gold. 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 earth-men.

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 earth-men were drugged by an evil stupor, such as they had felt before the eidolon. 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 an 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-narcotised 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 MAZE OF THE ENCHANTER

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, it 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, Tiglari 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 languor, 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 causey 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 this 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 arrased wall. The palace 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, brightly 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 lilied 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 vaporing 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 the 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 certain 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 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 beneath 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 foliage. 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 turn 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 bells 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 obscurely 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 toward alternately 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 the 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 horror, 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?"

"Yea, master," echoed the automaton in an iron voice, "you are Maal Dweb, the all-wise, 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 THIRD EPISODE OF VATHEK: THE STORY OF THE PRINCESS ZULKAÏS AND THE PRINCE KALILAH

My father, lord, can scarcely be unknown to you, inasmuch as the Caliph Motassem had entrusted to his care the fertile province of Masre. Nor would he have been unworthy of his exalted position if, in view of man's ignorance and weakness, an inordinate desire to control the future were not to be accounted an unpardonable error.

The Emir Abou Taher Achmed, however—for such was my father's name—was very far from recognizing this truth. Only too often did he seek to forestall Providence, and to direct the course of events in spite of the decrees of Heaven. Ah! terrible indeed are those decrees! Sooner or later their accomplishment is sure! Vainly do we seek to oppose them!

During a long course of years, everything flourished under my father's rule, and among the Emirs who have successfully administered that beautiful province, Abou Taher Achmed will not be forgotten. Following his speculative bent, he enlisted the services of certain experienced Nubians, born near the sources of the Nile, who had studied the stream throughout its course, and knew all its characteristics, and the properties of its waters; and, with their aid, he carried out his impious design of regulating the overflow of the river. Thus he covered the country with a too luxuriant vegetation, which left it afterwards exhausted. The people, always slaves to outward appearances, applauded his enterprises, worked indefatigueably at the unnumbered canals with which he intersected the land, and, blinded by his successes, passed lightly over any unfortunate circumstances accompanying them. If, out of every ten ships that he sent forth to traffic, according to his fancy, a single ship came back richly freighted after a successful voyage, the wreck of the other nine was counted for nothing. Moreover, as, owing to his care and vigilance, commerce

prospered under his rule, he was himself deceived as to his losses, and took to himself all the glory of his gains.

Soon Abou Taher Achmed came to be convinced that if he could recover the arts and sciences of the ancient Egyptians, his power would be unbounded. He believed that, in the remote ages of antiquity, men had appropriated to their own use some rays of the divine wisdom, and thus been enabled to work marvels, and he did not despair of bringing back once again that glorious time. For this purpose he caused search to be made, among the ruins abounding in the country, for the mysterious tablets which, according to the report of the Sages who swarmed in his court, would show how the arts and sciences in question were to be acquired, and also indicate the means of discovering hidden treasures, and subduing the Intelligences by which those treasures are guarded. Never before his time had any Mussulman puzzled his brains over hieroglyphics. Now, however, search was made, on his behalf, for hieroglyphics of every kind, in all quarters, in the remotest provinces, the strange symbols being faithfully copied on linen cloths. I have seen these cloths a thousand times, stretched out on the roofs of our palace. Nor could bees be more busy and assiduous about a bed of flowers than were the Sages about these painted sheets. But, as each Sage entertained a different opinion as to the meaning of what was there depicted, arguments were frequent, and quarrels ensued. Not only did the Sages spend the hours of daylight in prosecuting their researches, but the moon often shed its beams upon them while so occupied. They did not dare to light torches upon the terraced roofs, for fear of alarming the faithful Mussulmans, who were beginning to blame my father’s veneration for an idolatrous antiquity, and regarded all these painted symbols, these figures, with a pious horror.

Meanwhile, the Emir, who would never have thought of neglecting any real matter of business, however unimportant, for the pursuit of his strange studies, was by no means so particular with regard to his religious observances, and often forgot to perform the ablutions ordained by the law. The women of his harem did not fail to perceive this, but were afraid to speak, as, for one reason and another, their influence had considerably waned. But, on a certain day, Shaban, the chief of the eunuchs, who was very old and very pious, presented himself before his master, holding a ewer and golden basin, and said: “The waters of the Nile have been given for the cleansing of all our impurities; their source is in the clouds of

heaven, not in the temples of idols; take and use those waters, for you stand in need of them."

The Emir, duly impressed by the action and speech of Shaban, yielded to his just remonstrances, and, instead of unpacking a large bale of painted cloths, which had just arrived from a far distance, ordered the eunuch to serve the day's collation in the Hall of the Golden Trellises, and to assemble there all his slaves, and all his birds—of which he kept a large number in aviaries of sandalwood.

Immediately the palace rang to the sound of instruments of music, and groups of slaves appeared, all dressed in their most attractive garments, and each leading in leash a peacock whiter than snow. One only of these slaves —whose slender and graceful form was a delight to the eye—had no bird in leash, and kept her veil down.

"Why this eclipse?" said the Emir to Shaban.

"Lord," answered he with joyful mien, "I am better than all your astrologers, for it is I who have discovered this lovely star. But do not imagine that she is yet within your reach; her father, the holy and venerable Iman Abzenderoud, will never consent to make you happy in the possession of her charms unless you perform your ablutions with greater regularity, and give the go-by to the Sages and their hieroglyphics."

My father, without replying to Shaban, ran to snatch away the veil that hid the countenance of Ghulendi Begum—for such was the name of Abzenderoud's daughter—and he did so with such violence that he nearly crushed two peacocks, and overturned several baskets of flowers. To this sudden heat succeeded a kind of ecstatic stupor. At last he cried: "How beautiful she is, how divine! Go, fetch at once the Iman of Soussouf—let the nuptial chamber be got ready, and all necessary preparations for our marriage be complete within one hour!"

"But, Lord," said Shaban, in consternation, "you forget that Ghulendi Begum cannot marry you without the consent of her father, who makes it a condition that you should abandon..."

"What nonsense are you talking?" interrupted the Emir. "Do you think I am fool enough not to prefer this young virgin, fresh as the dew of the morning, to cartloads of hieroglyphics, mouldy and of the color of dead ashes? As to Abzenderoud, go and fetch him if you like—but quickly, for I shall certainly not wait a moment longer than I please."

“Hasten, Shaban,” said Ghulendi Begum modestly, “hasten; you see that I am not here in case to make any very effectual resistance.”

“It’s my fault,” mumbled the eunuch as he departed, “but I shall do what I can to rectify my error.”

Accordingly he flew to find Abzenderoud. But that faithful servant of Allah had gone from home very early in the morning, and sought the open fields in order to pursue his pious investigations into the growth of plants and the life of insects. A death-like pallor overspread his countenance when he saw Shaban swooping down upon him like a raven of ill omen, and heard him tell, in broken accents, how the Emir had promised nothing, and how he himself might well arrive too late to exact the pious conditions he had so deeply pondered. Nevertheless, the Iman did not lose courage, and reached my father’s palace in a very few moments; but unfortunately he was by this time so out of breath that he sank down on a sofa, and remained for over an hour panting and breathless.

While all the eunuchs were doing their best to revive the holy man, Shaban had quickly gone up to the apartment assigned to Abou Taher Achmed’s pleasures; but his zeal suffered some diminution when he saw the door guarded by two black eunuchs, who, brandishing their sabres, informed him that if he ventured to take one more step forward, his head would roll at his own feet. Therefore he had nothing better to do than to return to Abzenderoud, whose gaspings he regarded with wild and troubled eyes, lamenting the while over his own imprudence in bringing Ghulendi Begum within the Emir’s power.

Notwithstanding the care my father was taking for the entertainment of the new sultana, he had heard something of the dispute between the black eunuchs and Shaban, and had a fair notion of what was going on. As soon, therefore, as he judged it convenient, he came to find Abzenderoud in the Hall of the Golden Trellises, and presenting Ghulendi Begum to the holy man assured him that, while awaiting his arrival, he, the Emir, had made her his wife.

At these words, the Iman uttered a lamentable and piercing cry, which relieved the pressure on his chest; and, rolling his eyes in a fearful manner, he said to the new sultana: “Wretched woman, dost thou not know that rash and ill-considered acts lead ever to a miserable end ? Thy father would have made thy lot secure; but thou hast not awaited the result of his efforts, or rather it is Heaven itself that mocks all human previsions. I ask nothing

more of the Emir; let him deal with thee, and with his hieroglyphics, as he deems best! I foresee untold evils in the future; but I shall not be there to witness them. Rejoice for a while, intoxicated with thy pleasures. As for me, I call to my aid the Angel of Death, and hope, within three days, to rest in peace in the bosom of our great Prophet!”

After saying these words, he rose to his feet, tottering. His daughter strove in vain to hold him back. He tore his robe from her trembling hands. She fell fainting to the ground, and while the distracted Emir was striving to bring her back again to her senses, the obstinate Abzenderoud went muttering from the room.

At first it was thought that the holy man would not keep his vow quite literally, and would suffer himself to be comforted; but such was not the case. On reaching his own house, he began by stopping his ears by cotton wool, so as not to hear the clamor and adjuration of his friends; and then, having seated himself on the mats in his cell, with his legs crossed, and his head in his hands, he remained in that posture speechless, and taking no food; and finally, at the end of three days, expired according to his prayer. He was buried magnificently, and during the obsequies Shaban did not fail to manifest his grief by slashing his flesh without mercy, and soaking the earth with little rivulets of his blood; after which, having caused balm to be applied to his wounds, he returned to the duties of his office.

Meanwhile, the Emir had no small difficulty in assuaging the despair of Ghulendi Begum, and often cursed the hieroglyphics which had been its first efficient cause. At last his attentions touched the heart of the sultana. She regained her ordinary equability of spirits, and became pregnant; and everything returned to its accustomed order.

The Emir, his mind always dwelling on the magnificence of the ancient Pharaohs, built, after their manner, a palace with twelve pavilions—proposing, at an early date, to install in each pavilion a son. Unfortunately, his wives brought forth nothing but daughters. At each new birth he grumbled, gnashed his teeth, accused Mahomet of being the cause of his mishaps, and would have been altogether unbearable, if Ghulendi Begum had not found means to moderate his evil temper. She induced him to come every night into her apartment, where, by a thousand ingenious devices, she succeeded in introducing fresh air, while, in other parts of the palace, the atmosphere was stifling.

During her pregnancy my father never left the dais on which she reclined. This dais was set on a large and long gallery overlooking the Nile, and so disposed as to seem about on a level with the stream,—so close, too, that anyone reclining upon it could throw into the water the seeds of any pomegranate he might be eating. The best dancers, the most excellent magicians, were always about the palace. Every night pantomimes were performed to the light of a thousand golden lamps—lamps placed upon the floor so as to bring out the fineness and grace of the performers' feet. The dancers themselves cost my father immense sums in golden-fringed slippers and sandals a-glitter with jewelry; and, indeed, when they were all in motion together the effect was dazzling.

But notwithstanding this accumulation of splendors, the sultana passed very unhappy days on her dais. With the same indifference that a poor wretch tormented by sleeplessness watches the scintillations of the stars, so did she see pass before her eyes all this whirl of performers in their brilliancy and charm. Anon she would think of the wrath, that seemed almost prophetic, of her venerable father; anon she would deplore his strange and untimely end. A thousand times she would interrupt the choir of singers, crying: "Fate has decreed my ruin! Heaven will not vouchsafe me a son, and my husband will banish me from his sight!" The torment of her mind intensified the pain and discomfort attendant on her condition. My father, thereupon, was so greatly perturbed that, for the first time in his life, he made appeal to Heaven, and ordered prayers to be offered up in every mosque. Nor did he omit the giving of alms, for he caused it to be publicly announced that all beggars were to assemble in the largest court of the palace, and would there be served with rice, each according to his individual appetite. There followed such a crush every morning at the palace gates that the incomers were nearly suffocated. Mendicants swarmed in from all parts, by land, and by river. Whole villages would come down the stream on rafts. And the appetites of all were enormous; for the buildings which my father had erected, his costly pursuit of hieroglyphics, and his maintenance of the Sages, had caused some scarcity throughout the land.

Among those who came from a very far distance was a man of an extreme age, and great singularity, by name Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, the hermit of the Great Sandy Desert. He was eight feet high, so ill-proportioned, and of a leanness so extreme, that he looked like a skeleton,

and was hideous to behold. Nevertheless, this lugubrious and forbidden piece of human mechanism enshrined the most benevolent and religious spirit in the universe. With a voice of thunder he proclaimed the will of the Prophet, and said openly it was a pity that a prince who distributed rice to the poor, and in such great profusion, should be a lover of hieroglyphics. People crowded around him—the Imans, the Mullahs, the Muezins, did nothing but sing his praises. His feet, though ingrained with the sand of his native desert, were freely kissed. Nay, the very grains of the sand from his feet were gathered up, and treasured in caskets of amber.

One day he proclaimed the truth and the horror of the sciences of evil, in a voice so loud and resonant that the great standards set before the palace trembled. The terrible sound penetrated into the interior of the harem. The women and the eunuchs fainted away in the Hall of the Golden Trellises; the dancers stood with one foot arrested in the air; the mummers had not the courage to pursue their antics; the musicians suffered their instruments to fall to the ground; and Ghulendi Begum thought to die of fright as she lay on her dais.

Abou Taher Achmed stood astounded. His conscience smote him for his idolatrous proclivities, and during a few remorseful moments he thought that the Avenging Angel had come to turn him into stone—and not himself only but the people committed to his charge.

After standing for some time, upright, with arms uplifted, in the Gallery of the Daises, he called Shaban to him, and said: “The sun has not lost its brightness, the Nile flows peacefully in its bed, what means then this supernatural cry that has just resounded through my palace?”

“Lord,” answered the pious eunuch, “this voice is the voice of Truth, and is spoken to you through the mouth of the venerable Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, the Hermit of the Sandy Desert, the most faithful, the most zealous, of the servants of the Prophet, who has, in nine days, journeyed three hundred leagues to make proof of your hospitality, and to impart to you the knowledge with which he is inspired. Do not neglect the teachings of a man who in wisdom, in piety, and in stature, surpasses the most enlightened, the most devout, and the most gigantic of the inhabitants of earth. All your people are in an ecstasy. Trade is at a standstill. The inhabitants of the city hasten to hear him, neglecting their wonted assemblies in the public gardens. The story-tellers are without hearers at the

margins of the public fountains. Jussouf himself was not wiser than he, and had no greater knowledge of the future."

At these last words, the Emir was suddenly smitten with the desire of consulting Abou Gabdolle with regard to his family affairs, and particularly with regard to the great projects he entertained for the future advantage of his sons, who were not yet born. He deemed himself happy in being thus able to consult a living prophet; for, so far, it was only in the form of mummies that he had been brought into relation with these inspired personages. He resolved, therefore, to summon into his presence, nay, into his very harem, the extraordinary being now in question. Would not the Pharaohs have so dealt with the necromancers of their time, and was not he determined, in all circumstances, to follow the Pharaohs' example? He therefore graciously directed Shaban to go and fetch the holy man.

Shaban, transported with joy, hastened to communicate this invitation to the hermit, who, however, did not appear to be as much charmed by the summons as were the people at large. These latter filled the air with their acclamations, while Abou Gabdolle stood still, with his hands clasped, and his eyes uplifted to heaven, in a prophetic trance. From time to time he uttered the deepest sighs, and, after, remaining long rapt in holy contemplation, shouted out, in his voice of thunder: "Allah's will be done! I am but his creature. Eunuch, I am ready to follow thee. But let the doors of the palace be broken down. It is not meet for the servants of the Most High to bend their heads."

The people needed no second command. They all set hands to the work with a will, and in an instant the gateway, a piece of the most admirable workmanship, was utterly ruined.

At the sound of the breaking in of the doors, piercing cries arose within the harem, Abou Taher Achmed began to repent of his curiosity. Nevertheless, he ordered, though somewhat reluctantly, that the passages into the harem should be laid open to the holy giant, for he feared lest the enthusiastic adherents of the prophet should penetrate into the apartments occupied by the women, and containing the princely treasures. These fears were, however, vain, for the holy man had sent back his devout admirers. I have been assured that on their all kneeling to receive his blessing he said to them, in tones of the deepest solemnity: "Retire, remain peacefully in your dwellings, and be assured that, whatever happens, Abou Gabdolle Guehaman is prepared for every emergency." Then, turning towards the

palace, he cried: “O domes of dazzling brilliancy, receive me, and may nothing ensue to tarnish your splendor.”

Meanwhile, everything had been made ready within the harem. Screens had been duly ordered, the door-curtains had been drawn, and ample draperies hung before the daises in the long gallery that ran round the interior of the building—thus concealing from view the sultanas, and the princesses, their daughters.

Such elaborate preparations had caused a general ferment; and curiosity was at its height, when the hermit, trampling under foot the ruined fragments of the doorways, entered majestically into the Hall of the Golden Trellises. The magnificence of the palace did not even win from him a passing glance, his eyes remained fixed, mournfully, on the pavement at his feet. At last he penetrated into the great gallery of the women. These latter, who were not at all accustomed to the sight of creatures so lean, gaunt, and gigantic, uttered piercing cries, and loudly asked for essences and cordials to enable them to bear up against the apparition of such a phantasm.

The hermit paid not the smallest heed to the surrounding tumult. He was gravely pursuing his way, when the Emir came forward, and, taking him by the skirt of his garment, led him, with much ceremony, to the dais of the gallery which looked out upon the Nile. Basins of comfits and orthodox liquors were at once served; but though Abou Gabdolle Guehaman seemed to be dying of hunger, he refused to partake of these refreshments, saying that for ninety years he had drunk nothing but the dew of heaven, and eaten only the locusts of the desert. The Emir, who regarded this diet as conformable to what might properly be expected of a prophet, did not press him further, but at once entered into the question he had at heart, saying how much it grieved him to be without a male heir, notwithstanding all the prayers offered up to that effect, and the flattering hopes which the Imans had given him. “But now,” he continued, “I am assured that this happiness will at last be mine. The Sages, the mediciners, predict it, and my own observations confirm their prognostications. It is not, therefore, with the purpose of consulting you with regard to the future that I have caused you to be summoned. It is for the purpose of obtaining your advice upon the education I should give to the son whose birth I am expecting—or rather, to the two sons, for, without doubt, in recognition of my alms, Heaven will

accord to the Sultana Ghulendi Begum a double measure of fertility, seeing that she is twice as large as women usually are on such occasions."

Without answering a word, the hermit mournfully shook his head three times.

My father, greatly astonished, asked if his anticipated good fortune was in any wise displeasing to the holy man.

"Ah! too blind prince," replied the hermit, uttering a cavernous sigh that seemed to issue from the grave itself, "why importune Heaven with rash prayers? Respect its decrees! It knows what is best for all men better than they do themselves. Woe be to you, and woe be to the son whom you will doubtless compel to follow in the perverse ways of your own beliefs, instead of submitting himself humbly to the guidance of Providence. If the great of this world could only foresee all the misfortunes they bring upon themselves, they would tremble in the midst of their splendor. Pharaoh recognized this truth, but too late. He pursued the children of Moussa in despite of the divine decrees, and died the death of the wicked. What can alms avail when the heart is in rebellion? Instead of asking the Prophet for an heir, to be led by you into the paths of destruction, those who have your welfare at heart should implore him to cause Ghulendi Begum to die—yes, to die before she brings into the world presumptuous creatures, whom your conduct will precipitate into the abyss! Once again I call upon you to submit. If Allah's angel threatens to cut short the days of the sultana, do not make appeal to your magicians to ward off the fatal blow: let it fall, let her die! Tremble not with wrath, Emir; harden not your heart! Once again call to mind the fate of Pharaoh and the waters that swallowed him up!"

"Call them to mind yourself!" cried my father, foaming with rage, and springing from the dais to run to the aid of the sultana, who, having heard all, had fainted away behind the curtains. "Remember that the Nile flows beneath these windows, and that thou hast well deserved that thy odious carcass should be hurled into its waters!"

"I fear not," cried the gigantic hermit in turn; "the prophet of Allah fears naught but himself," and he rose on the tips of his toes and touched with his hands the supports of the dome of the apartment.

"Ha! ha! thou fearest nothing," cried all the women and eunuchs, issuing like tigers out of their den. "Accursed assassin, thou hast just brought our beloved mistress to death's door, and yet fearest nothing! Go, and become food for the monsters of the river!" Screaming out these words,

they threw themselves, all at once, on Abou Gabdolle Guehaman, bore him down, strangled him without pity, and cast his body through a dark grating into the Nile, which there lost itself obscurely among the piers of iron.

The Emir, astonished by an act at once so sudden and so atrocious, remained with his eyes fixed on the waters; but the body did not again come to the surface; and Shaban, who now appeared upon the scene, bewildered him with his cries. At last he turned to look upon the perpetrators of the crime; but they had scattered in every direction, and hidden behind the curtains of the gallery, each avoiding the other, they were all overwhelmed by the thought of what they had done.

Ghulendi, who had only come to herself in time to witness this scene of horror, was now in mortal anguish. Her convulsions, her agonizing cries, drew the Emir to her side. He bedewed her hand with tears. She opened her eyes wildly, and cried: “O Allah! Allah! put an end to a wretched creature who has already lived only too long, since she has been the cause of so terrible an outrage, and suffer not that she should bring into the world—”

“Stop, stop,” interrupted the Emir, holding her hands which she was about to turn against herself, “thou shalt not die, and my children shall yet live to give the lie to that demented skeleton, worthy only of contempt. Let my Sages be summoned instantly. Let them use all their art to keep thy soul from flitting hence and to save from harm the fruit of thy body.”

The Sages were convened accordingly. They demanded that one of the courts in the palace should be placed entirely at their disposal, and there began their operations, kindling a fire whose light penetrated into the gallery. The sultana rose from her couch, notwithstanding all the efforts made to restrain her, and ran to the balcony overlooking the Nile. The view from thence was lonely and drear. Not a single boat showed upon the surface of the stream. In the distance were discernible reaches of sand which the wind, from time to time, sent whirling into the air. The rays of the setting sun dyed the waters blood-red. Scarcely had the deepening twilight stretched over the horizon, when a sudden and furious wind broke the open lattice-work of the gallery. The sultana, beside herself, her heart beating, tried to plunge back into the interior of the apartment, but an irresistible power held her where she was, and forced her, against her will, to contemplate the mournful scene before her eyes. A great silence now reigned. Darkness had insensibly covered the earth. Then suddenly a streak of blue light furrowed the clouds in the direction of the pyramids. The

princess could distinguish their enormous mass against the horizon as clearly as if it had been noonday. The spectacle thus suddenly revealed, chilled her with fear. Several times did she try to call her slaves, but her voice refused its office. She endeavored to clap her hands, but in vain.

While she remained thus—as if in the grip of some horrible dream—a lamentable voice broke the stillness, and uttered these words: “My latest breath has just been exhaled into the waters of the river; vainly have thy servants striven to stifle the voice of truth; it rises now from the abysses of death. O wretched mother! see whence issues that fatal light, and tremble!”

Ghulendi Begum endured to hear no more. She fell back senseless. Her women, who had been anxious about her, hurried up at this moment, and uttered the most piercing cries. The Sages approached, and placed into the hands of my father, who was in terrible perturbation, the powerful elixir they had prepared. Scarcely had a few drops fallen on the sultana’s breast, when her soul, which had seemed about to follow the orders of Asrael, the Angel of Death, came back, as if in nature’s despite, to reanimate her body. Her eyes reopened to see, still illumining the pyramids, the fatal furrow of blue light which had not yet faded from the sky. She raised her arms, and, pointing out to the Emir with her finger that dread portent, was seized with the pains of childbirth, and, in the paroxysm of an unspeakable anguish, brought into the world a son and a daughter: the two wretched beings you see before you here.

The Emir’s joy in the possession of a male child was greatly dashed when he saw my mother die before his eyes. Notwithstanding his excessive grief, however, he did not lose his head, and at once handed us over to the care of his Sages. The nurses, who had been engaged in great number, wished to oppose this arrangement; but the ancient men, all uttering incantations simultaneously, compelled them to silence. The cabalistic lavers in which we were to be immersed stood all ready prepared; the mixture of herbs exhaled a vapor that filled the whole palace. Shaban, whose very stomach was turned by the odor of these unspeakable drugs, had all the trouble in the world to restrain himself from summoning the Imans, and doctors of the law, in order to oppose the impious rites now in contemplation. Would to Heaven he had had the courage to do so! Ah, how terrible has been the influence upon us of the pernicious immersions to which we were then subjected! In short, Lord, we were plunged, both successively and together, into a hell-broth which was intended to impart to

us a strength and intelligence more than human, but has only instilled into our veins the ardent elixir of a too exquisite sensibility, and the poison of an insatiable desire.

It was to the sound of brazen wands beating against the metal sides of the lavers, it was in the midst of thick fumes issuing from heaps of burning herbs, that invocations were addressed to the Jinns, and specially to those who preside over the pyramids, in order that we might be endowed with miraculous gifts. After this we were delivered over to the nurses, who scarcely could hold us in their arms, such was our liveliness and vivacity. The good women shed tears when they saw how our young blood boiled within us, and strove in vain to cool its effervescence, and to calm us by cleansing our bodies from the reeking mess with which they were still covered; but, alas! the harm was already done! Nay, if even, as sometimes happened in after days, we wished to fall into the ordinary ways of childhood, my father, who was determined at all hazards to possess children of an extraordinary nature, would brisk us up with heating drugs and the milk of negresses.

We thus became unendurably headstrong and mettlesome. At the age of seven, we could not bear contradiction. At the slightest restraint, we uttered cries of rage, and bit those who had us in charge till the blood flowed. Shaban came in for a large share of our attentions in this kind; sighing over us, however, in silence, for the Emir only regarded our spitefulness as giving evidence of a genius equal to that of Saurid and Charobé. Ah! how little did anyone suspect the real cause of our forwardness! Those who look long into the light are soonest afflicted with blindness. My father had not yet remarked that we were never arrogant and overbearing towards one another; that each was ready to yield to the other’s wishes; that Kalilah, my brother, was never at peace save in my arms; and that, as for me, my only happiness lay in overwhelming him with caresses.

Up to this time, we had in all things been educated together: the same book was always placed before the eyes of both, each turned over the leaves alternately. Though my brother was subjected to a course of study rigorous, and above his years, I insisted on sharing it with him. Abou Taher Achmed, who cared for nothing save the aggrandisement of his son, gave directions that in this I should be humored, because he saw that his son would only fully exert himself when at my side.

We were taught not only the history of the most remote ages of antiquity, but also the geography of distant lands. The Sages never ceased to indoctrinate us with the abstruse and ideal moral code, which, as they pretended, lurked hidden in the hieroglyphics. They filled our ears with a magnificent verbiage about wisdom and foreknowledge, and the treasure houses of the Pharaohs, whom sometimes they compared to ants, and sometimes to elephants. They inspired us with a most ardent curiosity as to those mountains of hewn stone beneath which the Egyptian kings lie sepulchred. They compelled us to learn by heart the long catalogue of architects and masons who had labored at the building of them. They made us calculate the quality of provisions that would be required by the workmen employed, and how many threads went to every ell of silk with which Sultan Saurid had covered his pyramid. Together with all this rubbish, these most weariful old dotards bewildered our brains with a pitiless grammar of the language spoken of old by the priests in their subterranean labyrinths.

The childish games in which we were allowed to indulge, during our playtime, had no charms for us unless we played them together. The princesses, our sisters, wearied us to death. Vainly did they embroider for my brother the most splendid vests. Kalilah disdained their gifts, and would only consent to bind his lovely hair with the muslin that had floated over the breast of his beloved Zulkaïs. Sometimes they invited us to visit them in the twelve pavilions which my father, no longer hoping to have that number of sons, had abandoned to their use—erecting another, and of greater magnificence, for my brother, and for myself. This latter building, crowned by five domes, and situated in a thick grove, was, every night, the scene of the most splendid revels in the harem. My father would come thither, escorted by his most beautiful slaves—each holding in her hand a candlestick with a white taper. How many times has the light of these tapers, appearing through the trees, caused our hearts to beat in sad anticipation? Everything that broke in upon our solitude was in the highest degree distasteful. To hide among the leafage, and listen to its murmur, seemed to us sweeter far than attending to the sound of the lute and the song of the musicians. But these soft luxurious reveries of ours were highly offensive to my father, he would force us back into the cupolaed saloons, and force us to take part in the common amusements.

Every year the Emir treated us with greater sternness. He did not dare to separate us altogether for fear of the effect upon his son, but tried rather to win him from our languorous dalliance by throwing him more and more into the company of young men of his own age. The game of reeds, so famous among the Arabs, was introduced into the courts of the palace. Kalilah gave himself up to the sport with immense energy; but this was only so as to bring the games to a speedier end, and then fly back to my side. Once reunited we would read together, read of the loves of Jussouf and Zelica, or some other poem that spoke of love—or else, taking advantage of our moments of liberty, we would roam through the labyrinth of corridors looking out upon the Nile, always with our arms intertwined, always with eyes looking into each other's eyes. It was almost impossible to track us in the mazy passages of the palace; and the anxiety we inspired did but add to our happiness.

One evening when we were thus tenderly alone together, and running side by side in childish glee, my father appeared before us and shuddered. "Why," said he to Kalilah, "why are you here and not in the great courtyard, shooting with the bow, or else with the horse-trainers training the horses which are to bear you into battle? Must the sun, as it rises and sets, see you only bloom and fade like a weak narcissus flower? Vainly do the Sages try to move you by the most eloquent discourses, and unveil before your eyes the learned mysteries of an older time; vainly do they tell you of warlike and magnanimous deeds. You are now nearly thirteen, and never have you evinced the smallest ambition to distinguish yourself among your fellow-men. It is not in the lurking haunts of effeminacy that great characters are formed; it is not by reading love poems that men are made fit to govern nations! Princes must act; they must show themselves to the world. Awake! Cease to abuse my patience which has too long allowed you to waste your hours by the side of Zulkaïs. Let her, tender creature that she is, continue to play among her flowers, but do you cease to haunt her company from dawn till eve. I see well enough that it is she who is perverting you."

Having spoken these words, which he emphasized by angry and threatening gestures, Abou Taher Achmed took my brother by the arm, and left me in a very abyss of bitterness. An icy numbness overcame me. Though the sun still shed its fullest rays upon the water, I felt as if it had disappeared below the horizon. Stretched at length upon the ground, I did nothing but kiss the sprays of orange flower that Kalilah had gathered. My

sight fell upon the drawings he had traced, and my tears fell in greater abundance. “Alas!” said I, “All is over. Our blissful moments will return no more. Why accuse me of perverting Kalilah? What harm can I do him? How can our happiness offend my father? If it was a crime to be happy, the Sages would surely have given us warning.”

My nurse Shamelah found me in this condition of languor and dejection. To dissipate my grief she immediately led me to the grove where the young girls of the harem were playing at hide-and-seek amid the golden aviaries of which the place was full. I derived some little solace from the song of the birds, and the murmur of the rillets of clear water that trickled round the roots of the trees, but when the hour came at which Kalilah was wont to appear these sounds did but add to my sufferings.

Shamelah noticed the heavings of my breast; she drew me aside, placed her hand upon my heart, and observed me attentively. I blushed, I turned pale, and that very visibly. “I see very well,” said she, “that it is your brother’s absence that so upsets you. This is the fruit of the strange education to which you have been subjected. The holy reading of the Koran, the due observance of the Prophet’s laws, confidence in the known mercies of Allah, these are as milk to cool the fever heat of human passion. You know not the soft delight of lifting up your soul to Heaven, and submitting without a murmur to its decrees. The Emir, alas! would forestall the future; while, on the contrary, the future should be passively awaited. Dry your tears; perchance Kalilah is not unhappy though distant from your side.”

“Ah!” I cried, interrupting her with a sinister look, “if I were not fully convinced that he is unhappy, I should myself be far more miserable.”

Shamelah trembled at hearing me speak thus. She cried: “Would to Heaven that they had listened to my advice, and the advice of Shaban, and instead of handing you over to the capricious teaching of the Sages, had left you, like true believers, at peace in the arms of a blissful and quiet ignorance. The ardor of your feelings alarms me in the very highest degree. Nay, it excites my indignation. Be more calm; abandon your soul to the innocent pleasures that surround you, and do so without troubling yourself whether Kalilah shares in those pleasures or not. His sex is made for toil and manly hardship. How should you be able to follow him in the chase, to handle a bow, and to dart reeds in the Arab game? He must look for

companions manly and worthy of himself, and cease to fritter away his best days here at your side amid bowers and aviaries."

This sermon, far from producing its desired effect, made me altogether beside myself. I trembled with rage, and, rising to my feet like one bereft of reason, I rent my veil into ten thousand pieces, and, tearing my breast, cried with a loud voice that my nurse had mishandled me.

The games ceased. Everyone crowded about me; and though the princesses did not love me overmuch, because I was Kalilah's favorite sister, yet my tears, and the blood that flowed from my self-inflicted wounds, excited their indignation against Shamelah. Unfortunately for the poor woman, she had just awarded a severe punishment to two young slaves who had been guilty of stealing pomegranates; and these two little vipers, in order to be revenged, bore testimony against her, and confirmed all I said. They ran, and retailed their lies to my father, who, not having Shaban at his side, and being, moreover, in a good temper because my brother had just thrown a javelin into a crocodile's eye, ordered Shamelah to be tied to a tree, and whipped without mercy.

Her cries pierced my heart. She cried without ceasing: "O you, whom I have carried in my arms, whom I have fed from my breast, how can you cause me to suffer thus? Justify me! Declare the truth! It is only because I tried to save you from the black abyss, into which your wild and unruly desires cannot fail to precipitate you in the end, that you are thus causing this body of mine to be torn to shreds."

I was about to ask that she should be released and spared further punishment, when some demon put into my mind the thought that it was she who, conjointly with Shaban, had inspired my father with the desire of making a hero of Kalilah. Whereupon I armed myself against every feeling of humanity, and cried out that they should go on whipping her till she confessed her crime. Darkness at last put an end to this horrible scene. The victim was unloosed. Her friends, and she had many, endeavored to close her wounds. They asked me, on their knees, to give them a sovereign balm which I possessed, a balm which the Sages had prepared. I refused. Shamelah was placed before my eyes on a litter, and, of set purpose, kept for a moment in front of the place where I stood. That breast, on which I had so often slept, streamed with blood. At this spectacle, at the memory of the tender care she had taken of my infancy, my heart at last was moved—I

burst into tears; I kissed the hand she feebly extended to the monster she had nourished in her bosom; I ran to fetch the balm; I applied it myself, begging her, at the same time, to forgive me, and declaring openly that she was innocent, and I alone guilty.

This confession caused a shudder to pass among all who surrounded us. They recoiled from me with horror. Shamelah, though half dead, perceived this, and stifled her groans with the skirt of her garment so as not to add to my despair and the baleful consequences of what I had done. But her efforts were vain. All fled, casting upon me looks that were evil indeed.

The litter was removed, and I found myself alone. The night was very dark. Plaintive sounds seemed to issue from the cypresses that cast their shadows over the place. Seized with terror, I lost myself amid the black foliage, a prey to the most harrowing remorse. Delirium laid its hand upon me. The earth seemed to yawn before my feet, and I to fall headlong into an abyss which had no bottom. My spirit was in this distraught condition when, through the thick underwood, I saw shine the torches of my father's attendants. I noticed that the cortége stopped suddenly. Someone issued from the crowd. A lively presentiment made my heart beat. The footsteps came nearer; and, by the light of a faint and doleful glimmer, such as prevails in the place where we now are, I saw Kalilah appear before me.

"Dear Zulkaïs," cried he, intermingling words and kisses, "I have passed an age without seeing you, but I have spent it in carrying out my father's wishes. I have fought with one of the most formidable monsters of the river. But what would I not do when, for recompense, I am offered the bliss of spending a whole evening with you alone? Come! Let us enjoy the time to the full. Let us bury ourselves among these trees. Let us, from our retreat, listen, disdainful, to the tumultuous sound of music and dances. I will cause sherbet and cakes to be served on the moss that borders the little porphyry fountain. There I shall enjoy your sweet looks, and charming converse, till the first dawn of the new day. Then, alas! I must plunge once more into the world's vortex, dart accursed reeds, and undergo the interrogatories of Sages."

Kalilah said all this with such volubility that I was unable to put in a word. He drew me after him, scarce resisting. We made our way through the leafage to the fountain. The memory of what Shamelah had said concerning my excessive tenderness for my brother, had, in my own despite, produced a strong impression upon me. I was about to withdraw my hand from his,

when, by the light of the little lamps that had been lit on the margin of the fountain, I saw his charming face reflected in the waters, I saw his large eyes dewy with love, I felt his looks pierce to the very bottom of my heart. All my projects of reform, all my agony of remorse, made way for a ferment of very different feelings. I dropped on the ground by Kalilah's side, and, leaning his head upon my breast, gave a free course to my tears. Kalilah, when he saw me thus crying passionately, eagerly asked me why I wept. I told him all that had passed between myself and Shamelah, without omitting a single particular. His heart was at first much moved by the picture I drew of her sufferings; but, a moment after, he cried: "Let the officious slave perish! Must the heart's soft yearnings ever meet with opposition! How should we not love one another, Zulkaïs? Nature caused us to be born together. Has not nature, too, implanted in us the same tastes, and a kindred ardor? Have not my father and his Sages made us partakers in the same magic baths? Who could blame a sympathy all has conspired to create? No, Zulkaïs, Shaban and our superstitious nurse may say what they please. There is no crime in our loving one another. The crime would rather be if we allowed ourselves, like cowards, to be separated. Let us swear—not by the Prophet, of whom we have little knowledge, but by the elements that sustain man's existence—let us swear that, rather than consent to live the one without the other, we will take into our veins the soft distillation of the flowers of the stream, which the Sages have so often vaunted in our hearing. That essence will lull us painlessly to sleep in each other's arms, and so bear our souls imperceptibly into the peace of another existence."

These words quieted me. I resumed my ordinary gaiety, and we played and sported together. "I shall be very valiant tomorrow," Kalilah would say, "so as to purchase such moments as these, for it is only by the promise of such a prize that my father can induce me to submit to his fantastic injunctions."

"Ha, ha!" cried Abou Taher Achmed, issuing from behind some bushes, where he had been listening. "Is that your resolve! We will see if you keep to it! You are already fully paid this evening for the little you have done during the day. Hence! And as to you, Zulkaïs, go and weep over the terrible outrage you have committed against Shamelah."

In the greatest consternation we threw ourselves at his feet; but, turning his back upon us, he ordered the eunuchs to conduct us to our separate apartments.

It was no scruple with regard to the kind and quality of our love that exercised the Emir. His sole end was to see his son become a great warrior, and a potent prince, and with regard to the character of the means by which that end was to be obtained, he cared not one tittle. As for me, he regarded me only as an instrument that might have its uses; nor would he have felt any scruples concerning the danger of inflaming our passion by the alternation of obstacles and concessions. On the other hand, he foresaw that indolence and pleasure, too constantly indulged in, must necessarily interfere with his designs. He deemed it necessary, therefore, to adopt with us a harsher and more decided line of conduct than he had hitherto done; and in an unhappy moment he carried that resolution into effect. Alas! without his precautions, his projects, his accursed foresight, we should have remained in innocence, and never been brought to the horror of this place of torment!

The Emir, having retired to his apartments, caused Shaban to be summoned, and imparted to him his fixed resolve to separate us during a certain time. The prudent eunuch prostrated himself immediately, with his face to the ground, and then, rising to his feet, said: “Let my lord forgive his slave if he ventures to be of a different opinion. Do not loose upon this nascent flame the winds of opposition and absence, lest the final conflagration should be such as you are unable to master. You know the Prince’s impetuous disposition; his sister has today given proofs, only too signal, of hers. Suffer them to remain together without contradiction; leave them to their childish propensities. They will soon grow tired of one another; and Kalilah, disgusted with the monotony of the harem, will beg you on his knees to remove him from its precincts.”

“Have you done talking your nonsense?” interrupted the Emir impatiently. “Ah, how little do you know the genius of Kalilah! I have carefully studied him, I have seen that the operations of my Sages have not been void of their effect. He is incapable of pursuing any object with indifference. If I leave him with Zulkaïs, he will be utterly drowned in effeminacy. If I remove her from him, and make their reunion the price of the great things I require at his hands, there is nothing of which he will not prove himself capable. Let the doctors of our law dote as they please! What can their idle drivel matter so long as he becomes what I desire him to be? Know besides, O eunuch, that when he has once tasted the delights of ambition, the idea of Zulkaïs will evaporate in his mind as a light morning

mist absorbed into the rays of the noonday sun—the sun of glory. Therefore enter tomorrow morning into the chamber of Zulkaïs, forestall her awakening, wrap her up in these robes, and convey her, with her slaves and all that may be necessary to make her life pleasant, to the borders of the Nile, where a boat will be ready to receive you. Follow the course of the stream for twenty-nine days. On the thirtieth you will disembark at the Isle of Ostriches. Lodge the princess in the palace which I have had built for the use of the Sages who roam those deserts—deserts replete with ruins and with wisdom. One of these Sages you will find there, called the Palm-tree-climber, because he pursues his course of contemplation upon the tops of the palm-trees. This ancient man knows an infinite number of stories, and it will be his care to divert Zulkaïs, for I know very well that, next to Kalilah, stories are the chief object of her delight."

Shaban knew his master too well to venture upon any further opposition. He went, therefore, to give the necessary orders, but sighed heavily as he went. He had not the slightest desire to undertake a journey to the Isle of Ostriches, and had formed a very unfavorable opinion of the Palm-tree-climber. He was himself a faithful Mussulman, and held the Sages and all their works in abomination.

Everything was made ready all too soon. The agitation of the previous day had greatly fatigued me, so that I slept very heavily. I was taken from my bed so quietly, and carried with such skill, that I never woke till I was at a distance of four leagues from Cairo. Then the noise of the water gurgling round the boat began to alarm me. It filled my ears strangely, and I half fancied I had drunk of the beverage spoken of by Kalilah, and been borne beyond the confines of our planet. I lay thus, bewildered with strange imaginings, and did not dare to open my eyes, but stretched out my arms to feel for Kalilah. I thought he was by my side. Judge of the feelings of hateful surprise to which I was doomed, when, instead of touching his delicate limbs, I seized hold of the horny hand of the eunuch who was steering the boat, and was even older, and more grotesquely ugly, than Shaban himself.

I sat up and uttered piercing cries. I opened my eyes, and saw before me a waste stretch of sky, and of water bounded by bluish banks. The sun was shining in its fullness. The azure heavens caused all nature to rejoice. A thousand river birds played around amid the water-lilies, which the boat shore through at every moment, their large yellow flowers shining like gold,

and exhaling a sweet perfume. But all these objects of delight were lost upon me, and, instead of rejoicing my heart, filled me with a somber melancholy.

Looking about me, I saw my slaves in a state of desolation, and Shaban who, with an air at once of discontent and authority, was making them keep silence. The name of Kalilah came at every moment to the tip of my tongue. At last I spoke it aloud, with tears in my eyes, and asked where he was, and what they intended to do with me. Shaban, instead of replying, ordered his eunuchs to redouble their exertions, and to strike up an Egyptian song, and sing in time to the cadence of their oars. Their accursed chorus rang out so potently that it brought an even worse bewilderment in my brain. We shot through the water like an arrow. It was in vain that I begged the rowers to stop, or at least to tell me where I was going. The barbarous wretches were deaf to my entreaties. The more insistent I was, the louder did they roar out their detestable song so as to drown my cries. Shaban, with his cracked voice, made more noise than the rest.

Nothing can express the torments I endured, and the horror I felt at finding myself so far from Kalilah, and on the waters of the fearful Nile. My terrors increased with nightfall. I saw, with an inexpressible anguish, the sun go losing itself in the waters—its light, in a thousand rays, trembling upon their surface. I brought to mind the quiet moments which, at that same hour, I had passed with Kalilah, and, hiding my head in my veil, I gave myself up to despair.

Soon a soft rustling became audible. Our boat was shearing its way through banks of reeds. A great silence succeeded to the song of the rowers, for Shaban had landed. He came back in a few moments, and carried me to a tent, erected a few paces from the river’s bank. I found there lights, mattresses stretched on the ground, a table covered with various kinds of food, and an immense copy of the Koran, unfolded. I hated the holy book. The Sages, our instructors, had often turned it into ridicule, and I had never read it with Kalilah. So I threw it contemptuously to the ground. Shaban took upon himself to scold me; but I flew at him, and endeavored to reduce him to silence. In this I proved successful, and the same treatment retained its efficacy during the whole course of the long expedition.

Our subsequent experiences were similar to those of the first day. Endlessly did we pass banks of water-lilies, and flocks of birds, and an infinite number of small boats that came and went with merchandise.

At last we began to leave behind us the plain country. Like all who are unhappy and thus led to look forward, I kept my eyes continually fixed on the horizon ahead of us, and one evening I saw, rising there, great masses of much greater height, and of a form infinitely more varied, than the pyramids. These masses proved to be mountains. Their aspect inspired me with fear. The terrible thought occurred to me that my father was sending me to the woeful land of the Negro king, so that I might be offered up as a sacrifice to the idols, who, as the Sages pretended, were greedy of princesses. Shaban perceived my increasing distress, and at last took pity upon me. He revealed our ultimate destination, adding that though my father wished to separate me from Kalilah, it was not forever, and that, in the meanwhile, I should make the acquaintance of a marvellous personage, called the Palm-tree-climber, who was the best story-teller in the universe.

This information quieted me to some extent. The hope, however distant, of seeing Kalilah again, poured balm into my soul, and I was not sorry to hear that I should have stories to my liking. Moreover, the idea of a realm of solitude, such as the Ostrich Isle, flattered my romantic spirit. If I must be separated from him whom I cherished more than life itself, I preferred to undergo my fate rather in some savage spot than amid the glitter and chatter of a harem. Far from all such impertinent frivolities, I purposed to abandon my whole soul to the sweet memories of the past, and give a free course to the languorous reveries in which I could see again the loved image of my Kalilah.

Fully occupied with these projects, it was with heedless eyes that I saw our boat approaching nearer and nearer to the land of mountains. The rocks encroached more and more upon the border of the stream, and seemed soon about to deprive us of all sight of the sky. I saw trees of immeasurable height whose intertwisted roots hung down in the water. I heard the noise of cataracts, and saw the boiling eddies flash in foam and fill the air with a mist thin as silver gauze. Through this veil I perceived, at last, a green island of no great size, on which the ostriches were gravely promenading. Still further forward I discerned a domed edifice standing against a hill all covered with nests. This palace was utterly strange of aspect, and had, in truth, been built by a noted cabalist. The walls were of yellow marble, and shone like polished metal, and every object reflected in them assumed gigantic proportions. I trembled when I saw what fantastic figures the ostriches presented as seen in that strange mirror; their necks seemed to go

losing themselves in the clouds, and their eyes shone like enormous balls of iron heated red in a furnace.

My terrors were observed by Shaban, who made me understand the magnifying qualities of the palace walls, and assured me that even if the birds were really as monstrous as they appeared, I might trust, in all security, to their good manners, since the Palm-tree-climber had been laboring for over a hundred years to reduce their disposition to an exemplary mildness. Scarcely had he furnished me with this information, when I landed at a spot where the grass was green and fresh. A thousand unknown flowers, a thousand shells of fantastic shape, a thousand oddly fashioned snails, adorned the shore. The ardor of the sun was tempered by the perpetual dew distilled from the falling waters, whose monotonous sound inclined to slumber.

Feeling drowsy, I ordered a penthouse to be affixed to one of the palm-trees of which the place was full; for the Palm-tree-climber, who always bore at his girdle the keys of the palace, was at that hour pursuing his meditations at the other end of the island.

While a soft drowsiness took possession of my senses, Shaban ran to present my father’s letters to the man of wisdom. In order to do this, he was compelled to attach the missives to the end of a long pole, as the Climber was at the top of a palm-tree fifty cubits high, and refused to come down without knowing why he was summoned. So soon as he had perused the leaves of the roll, he carried them respectfully to his forehead, and slipped down like a meteor; and indeed he had somewhat the appearance of a meteor, for his eyes were of flame, and his nose was a beautiful blood-red.

Shaban, amazed by the rapidity of the old man’s descent, uninjured, from the tree, was somewhat outraged when asked to take him on his back; but the Climber declared that he never so far condescended as to walk. The eunuch, who loved neither Sages nor their caprices, and regarded both as the plagues of the Emir’s family, hesitated for a moment; but, bearing in mind the positive order he had received, he conquered his aversion, and took the Palm-tree-climber on his shoulders, saying: “Alas, the good hermit Abou Gabdolle Guehaman would not have behaved after this manner, and would, moreover, have been much more worthy of my assistance.”

The Climber heard these words in high dudgeon, for he had aforetime had pious squabbles with the hermit of the Sandy Desert; so he administered a mighty kick on to the small of Shaban’s back, and thrust a

fiery nose into the middle of his countenance. Shaban, on this, stumbled, but pursued his way without uttering a syllable.

I was still asleep. Shaban came up to my couch, and, throwing his burden at my feet, said, and his voice had a certain ring in it that woke me without difficulty: “Here is the Climber! Much good may he do you!”

At the sight of such an object, I was quite unable, notwithstanding all my sorrows, to help bursting out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. The old man did not change countenance, notwithstanding; he jingled his keys with an air of importance, and said to Shaban, in grave tones: “Take me again upon your back; let us go to the palace, and I will open its doors, which have never, hitherto, admitted any member of the female sex save my great egg-layer, the queen of the ostriches.”

I followed. It was late. The great birds were coming down from the hills, and surrounded us in flocks, pecking at the grass and at the trees. The noise they made with their beaks was such that I seemed to be listening to the feet of an army on the march. At last I found myself before the shining walls of the palace. Though I knew the trick of them, my own distorted figure terrified me, as did also the figure of the Climber on the shoulders of Shaban.

We entered into a vaulted apartment, lined with black marble starred with golden stars, which inspired a certain feeling of awe—a feeling to which, however, the old man’s grotesque and amusing grimaces afforded some relief. The air was stifling and nearly made me sick. The Climber, perceiving this, caused a great fire to be lit, and threw into it a small aromatic ball which he drew from his bosom. Immediately a vapor, rather pleasant to the smell, but very penetrating, diffused itself throughout the room. The eunuch fled, sneezing. As for me, I drew near to the fire, and sadly stirring the ashes, began to form in them the cipher of Kalilah.

The Climber did not interfere. He praised the education I had received, and approved greatly of our immersions, just after birth, by the Sages, adding maliciously that nothing so sharpened the wits as a passion somewhat out of the common. “I see clearly,” he continued, “that you are absorbed in reflections of an interesting nature; and I am well pleased that it should be so. I myself had five sisters; we made very light of Mahomet’s teachings, and loved each other with some fervor. I still, after the lapse of a hundred years, bear this in my memory with pleasure, for we scarcely ever forget early impressions. Thus my constancy has greatly commended me to

the Jinns whose favorite I am. If you are able, like myself, to persevere in your present sentiments, they will probably do something for you. In the meanwhile, place your confidence in me. I shall not prove surly or unsympathetic as a guardian and keeper. Don't get it into your head that I am dependent on the caprice of your father, who has a limited outlook, and prefers ambition to pleasure. I am happier amid my palms, and my ostriches, and in the enjoyments of the delights of meditation, than he in his divan, and in all his grandeur. I don't mean to say that you yourself cannot add to the pleasures of my life. The more gracious you are to me, the more shall I show civility to you, and make you the partaker in things of beauty. If you seem to be happy in this place of solitude, you will acquire a great reputation for wisdom, and I know, by my own experience, that under the cloak of a great reputation it is possible to hide whole treasures of folly. Your father in his letters has told me all your story. While people think that you are giving heed to my instructions, you can talk to me about your Kalilah as much as you like, and without offending me in anyway. On the contrary, nothing affords me greater pleasure than to observe the movements of a heart abandoning itself to its youthful inclinations, and I shall be glad to see the bright colors of a first love mantling on young cheeks."

While listening to this strange discourse, I kept my eyes on the ground; but the bird of hope fluttered in my bosom. At last I looked at the Sage, and his great red nose, that shone like a luminous point in that room of black marble, seemed to me less disagreeable. The smile accompanying my glance was of such significance that the Climber easily perceived I had swallowed his bait. This pleased him so mightily that he forgot his learned indolence, and ran to prepare a repast of which I stood greatly in need.

Scarcely had he departed, when Shaban came in, holding in his hand a letter, sealed with my father's seal, which he had just opened. "Here," said he, "are the instructions I was only to read when I reached this place; and I have read them only too clearly. Alas! how wretched it is to be the slave of a prince whose head has been turned by much learning! Unhappy princess! I am compelled, much against my will, to abandon you here. I must re-embark with all who have followed me hither, and only leave in your service the lame Mouzaka, who is deaf and dumb. The wretched Climber will be your only helper. Heaven alone knows what you will gain from his

companionship. The Emir regards him as a prodigy of learning and wisdom; but as to this he must suffer a faithful Mussulman to have his doubts.” As he spoke these words, Shaban touched the letter three times with his forehead, and then, leaping backwards, disappeared from my sight.

The hideous manner in which the poor eunuch wept on leaving me, amused me much. I was far indeed from making any attempt to keep him back. His presence was odious to me, for he always avoided all conversation about the only subject that filled my heart. On the other hand, I was enchanted at the choice of Mouzaka as my attendant. With a deaf and dumb slave, I should enjoy full liberty in imparting my confidences to the obliging old man, and in following his advice, if so be that he gave me advice of which I approved.

All my thoughts were thus assuming a somewhat rosy hue, when the Climber returned, smothered up in carpets and cushions of silk, which he stretched out on the ground; and he then proceeded, with a pleasant and contented air, to light torches, and to burn pastilles in braziers of gold. He had taken these sumptuous articles from the palace treasury, which, as he assured me, was well worthy of exciting my curiosity. I told him I was quite ready to take his word for it at that particular time, the smell of the excellent viands which had preceded him having very agreeably whetted my appetite. These viands consisted chiefly of slices of deer spiced with fragrant herbs, of eggs prepared after divers recipes, and of cakes more dainty and delicate than the petals of a white rose. There was besides a ruddy liquor, made of date juice, and served in strange translucent shells, and sparkling like the eyes of the Climber himself.

We lay down to our meal together in very friendly fashion. My amazing keeper greatly praised the quality of his wine, and made very good use of it, to the intense surprise of Mouzaka, who, huddled up in a corner, indulged in undescribable gestures which the marble reflected on all sides. The fire burnt gaily, throwing out sparks, which, as they darkened, exhaled an exquisite perfume. The torches gave a brilliant light, the braziers shone brightly, and the soft warmth that reigned in the apartment inclined to a voluptuous indolence.

The situation in which I found myself was so singular, the kind of prison in which I was confined was so different from anything I could have imagined, and the ways of my keeper were so grotesque, that from time to time I rubbed my eyes to make sure that the whole thing was not a dream. I

should even have derived amusement from my surroundings, if the thought that I was so far from Kalilah had left me for a single moment. The Climber, to distract my thoughts, began the marvellous story of the Giant Gebri, and the artful Charodé, but I interrupted him, and asked him to listen to the recital of my own real sorrows, promising that, afterwards, I should give ear to his tales. Alas! I never kept that promise. Vainly, at repeated intervals, did he try to excite my curiosity: I had none save with regard to Kalilah, and did not cease to repeat: “Where is he? What is he doing? When shall I see him again?”

The old man, seeing me so headstrong in my passion, and so well resolved to brave all remorse, became convinced that I was a fit object for his nefarious purposes, for, as my hearers will doubtless have already understood, he was a servant of the monarch who reigns in this place of torment. In the perversity of his soul, and that fatal blindness which makes men desire to find an entrance here, he had vowed to induce twenty wretches to serve Eblis, and he exactly wanted my brother and myself to complete that number. Far indeed was he, therefore, from really trying to stifle the yearnings of my heart; and though, in order to fan the flame that consumed me, he seemed, from time to time, to be desirous of telling me stories, yet, in reality, his head was filled with quite other thoughts.

I spent a great part of the night in making my criminal avowals. Towards morning I fell asleep. The Climber did the same, at a few paces’ distance, having first, without ceremony, applied to my forehead a kiss that burned me like a red-hot iron. My dreams were of the saddest. They left but a confused impression on my mind; but, so far as I can recollect, they conveyed the warnings of Heaven, which still desired to open before me a door of escape and of safety.

So soon as the sun had risen, the Climber led me into his woods, introduced me to his ostriches, and gave me an exhibition of his supernatural agility. Not only did he climb to the tremulous tops of the tallest and most slender palms, bending them beneath his feet like ears of corn, but he would dart like an arrow from one tree to another. After the display of several of these gymnastic feats, he settled on a branch, told me he was about to indulge in his daily meditations, and advised me to go with Mouzaka and bathe by the border of the stream, on the other side of the hill.

The heat was excessive. I found the clear waters cool and delicious. Bathing-pools, lined with precious marbles, had been hollowed out in the middle of a little level mead over which high rocks cast their shadow. Pale narcissi and gladioli grew on the margin, and, leaning towards the water, waved over my head. I loved these languid flowers, they seemed an emblem of my fortunes, and for several hours I allowed their perfumes to intoxicate my soul.

On returning to the palace, I found that the Climber had made great preparations for my entertainment. The evening passed like the evening before; and from day to day, pretty nearly after the same manner, I spent four months. Nor can I say that the time passed unhappily. The romantic solitude, the old man's patient attention, and the complacency with which he listened to love's foolish repetitions, all seemed to unite in soothing my pain. I should perhaps have spent whole years in merely nursing those sweet illusions that are so rarely realized, have seen the ardor of my passion dwindle and die, have become no more than the tender sister and friend of Kalilah, if my father had not, in pursuit of his wild schemes, delivered me over to the impious scoundrel who sat daily watching at my side to make me his prey. Ah! Shaban! ah, Shamelah! you, my real friends, why was I torn from your arms? Why did you not, from the very first, perceive the germs of a too passionate tenderness existing in our hearts, germs which ought then and there to have been extirpated, since the day would come when not fire and steel would be of any avail!

One morning when I was steeped in sad thoughts, and expressing in even more violent language than usual my despair at being separated from Kalilah, the old man fixed upon me his piercing eyes, and addressed me in these words: "Princess, you, who have been taught by the most enlightened of Sages, cannot doubtless be ignorant of the fact that there are Intelligences, superior to the race of man, who take part in human affairs, and are able to extricate us from the greatest difficulties. I, who am telling you this, have had experience, more than once, of their power; for I had a right to their assistance, having been placed, as you yourself have been, under their protection from birth. I quite see that you cannot live without your Kalilah. It is time, therefore, that you should apply for aid to such helpful spirits. But will you have the strength of mind, the courage to endure the approach of Beings so different from mankind? I know that their coming produces certain inevitable effects, as internal tremors, the

revulsion of the blood from its ordinary course; but I know also that these terrors, these revulsions, painful as they undoubtedly are, must appear as nothing compared with the mortal pain of separation from an object loved greatly and exclusively. If you resolve to invoke the Jinn of the Great Pyramid, who, as I know, presided at your birth, if you are willing to abandon yourself to his care, I can, this very evening, give you speech of your brother, who is nearer than you imagine. The Being in question, so renowned among the Sages, is called Omoultakos: he is, at present, in charge of the treasure which the ancient cabalist kings have placed in this desert. By means of the other spirits under his command, he is in close touch with his sister, whom, by the by, he loved in his time just as you now love Kalilah. He will, therefore, enter into your sorrows just as much as I do myself, and will, I make no doubt, do all he can to further your desires."

At these last words, my heart beat with unspeakable violence. The possibility of seeing Kalilah once again excited a transport in my breast. I rose hastily, and ran about the room like a mad creature. Then, coming back to the old man's side, I embraced him, called him my father, and throwing myself at his knees, I implored him, with clasped hands, not to defer my happiness, but to conduct me, at whatever hazard, to the sanctuary of Omoultakos.

The crafty old scoundrel was well pleased, and saw with a malicious eye into what a state of delirium he had thrown me. His only thought was how to fan the flame thus kindled. For this purpose, he resumed a cold and reserved aspect, and said, in tones of great solemnity: "Be it known to you, Zulkaïs, that I have my doubts, and cannot help hesitating, in a matter of such importance, great as is my desire to serve you. You evidently do not know how dangerous is the step you propose to take; or, at least, you do not fully appreciate its extreme rashness. I cannot tell how far you will be able to endure the fearful solitude of the immeasurable vaults you must traverse, and the strange magnificence of the place to which I must conduct you. Neither can I tell in what shape the Jinn will appear. I have often seen him in a form so fearful that my senses have long remained numbed; at other times he has shown himself under an aspect so grotesque that I have scarcely been able to refrain from choking laughter, for nothing can be more capricious than beings of that nature. Omoultakos, mayhap, will spare your weakness; but it is right to warn you that the adventure on which you are bound is perilous, that the moment of the Jinn's apparition is uncertain, that

while you are waiting in expectation you must show neither fear nor horror, nor impatience, and that, at the sight of him, you must be very sure not to laugh, and not to cry. Observe, moreover, that you must wait in silence, and the stillness of death, and with your hands crossed over your breast, until he speaks to you, for a gesture, a smile, a groan, would involve not only your destruction, but also that of Kalilah, and my own."

"All that you tell me," I replied, "carries terror into my bosom; but, impelled by such a fatal love as mine, what would one not venture!"

"I congratulate you on your sublime perseverance," rejoined the Climber, with a smile of which I did not then appreciate the full significance and wickedness. "Prepare yourself. As soon as darkness covers the earth, I will go and suspend Mouzaka from the top of one of my highest palm-trees, so that she may not be in our way. I will then lead you to the door of the gallery that leads to the retreat of Omoultakos. There I shall leave you, and myself, according to my custom, go and meditate at the top of one of the trees, and make vows for the success of your enterprise."

I spent the interval in anxiety and trepidation. I wandered aimlessly amid the valleys and hillocks on the island. I gazed fixedly into the depths of the waters. I watched the rays of the sun declining over their surface, and looked forward, half in fear and half in hope, to the moment when the light should abandon our hemisphere. The holy calm of a serene night at last overspread the world.

I saw the Climber detach himself from a flock of ostriches that were gravely marching to drink at the river. He came to me with measured steps. Putting his finger to his lips, he said: "Follow me in silence."

I obeyed. He opened a door, and made me enter, with him, into a narrow passage, not more than four feet high, so that I was compelled to walk half doubled up. The air I breathed was damp and stifling. At every step I caught my feet in viscous plants that issued from certain cracks and crevices in the gallery. Through these cracks the feeble light of the moon's rays found an entrance, shedding light, every here and there, upon little wells that had been dug to right and left of our path. Through the black waters in these wells I seemed to see reptiles with human faces.

I turned away my eyes in horror. I burned with desire to ask the Climber what all this might mean, but the gloom and solemnity of his looks made me keep silence. He appeared to progress painfully, and to be brushing aside with his hands something to me invisible. Soon I was no longer able

to see him at all. We were going, as it seemed, round and round in complete darkness; and, so as not to lose him altogether in that frightful labyrinth, I was compelled to lay hold upon his robe.

At last we reached a place where I began to breathe a freer and fresher air. A solitary taper of enormous size, fixed upright in a block of marble, lighted up a vast hall, and discovered to my eyes five staircases, whose banisters, made of different metals, faded upwards into the darkness. There we stopped, and the old man broke the silence, saying: “Chose between these staircases. One only leads to the treasury of Omoultakos. From the others, which go losing themselves to cavernous depths, you would never return. Where they lead you would find nothing but hunger, and the bones of those whom famine has aforetime destroyed.”

Having said these words, he disappeared, and I heard a door closing behind him.

Judge of my terror, you who have heard the ebony portals, which confine us forever in this place of torment, grind upon their ebony hinges! Indeed, I dare to say that my position was, if possible, even more terrible than yours, for I was alone. I fell to the earth at the base of the block of marble. A sleep, such as that which ends our mortal existence, overcame my senses. Suddenly a voice, clear, sweet, insinuating like the voice of Kalilah, flattered my ears. I seemed, as in a dream, to see him on the staircase, the banisters of which were of brass. A majestic warrior, whose pale front bore a diadem, held him by the hand. “Zulkaïs,” said Kalilah, with an afflicted air, “Allah forbids our union. But Eblis, whom you see here, extends to us his protection. Implore his aid, and follow the path to which he points you.”

I awoke in a transport of courage and resolution, seized the taper, and began, without hesitation, to ascend the stairway with the brazen banisters. The steps seemed to multiply beneath my feet; but my resolution never faltered; and, at last, I reached a chamber, square, and immensely spacious, and paved with a marble that was of flesh color, and marked as with the veins and arteries of the human body. The walls of this place of terror were hidden by huge piles of carpets of a thousand kinds, and a thousand hues, and these moved slowly to and fro, as if painfully stirred by human creatures stifling beneath their weight. All around were ranged black chests, whose steel padlocks seemed encrusted with blood.[1] Muffled hissings

appeared to issue from under the lids of some of these chests; from others, groans and cries as of indistinct voices, and metallic clinkings. I thought that the voices were those of dives, or afrits, rather than men. I shuddered, and fled on, all the more precipitately because some of them had seemed to call me by name. The chamber was endless, and I saw that I had been mistaken as to its form. It enlarged itself before me, like the perspectives of a hall of ill dreams. Insensibly, and as if by the operation of some enchantment, it assumed a more frightful aspect. The marble pavement was now of that livid color seen in the flesh of bodies after death, its veinings were dark as if blood had coagulated within them, and were interspersed with mottlings such as would be made on human skin by the contusions of iron maces. Columns, higher than the monumental pillars of the old kings of Egypt, rose round me into gloom that the great taper was unable to pierce. A blue mist, such as might ascend from nether gulfs, wavered like a curtain before the removed walls, and the light flickered woefully in my arms, as it met the dank sighing exhaled by the subterranean reaches.

I had need of all my resolution, and was forced to summon up the loved image of Kalilah, with all possible clearness, before I could proceed any further. The vastness of the room, its dismal character and furnishings, terrified me more and more. A weakness seized upon my limbs and senses, the taper became an almost insupportable burden, and I could scarce uplift it to inspect the curious treasures piled about me. Notwithstanding this, I perceived that there were open caskets, overrunning with divers jewels, with goldwork wrought in the fashion of antiquity, and still untarnished; so that I felt sure, at first, that I had reached the treasury of Omoultakos, the Jinn to whom the cabalist kings had entrusted their wealth. But soon doubt came upon me, as I began to note the hideous confusion that prevailed everywhere, the human finger-bones, and other charnel relics, that were heaped without discrimination amid the precious stones, or stored in separate vessels of graven silver, as if they too had been of rare worth. I saw, also, that some of the larger caskets were really sarcophagi, such as were used by the Egyptians. They had been brimmed with skulls, and the severed members of mummies, and gold coins. Serpents, milk-white, and wholly scaleless, crept to and fro, bringing in their mouths bright jewels, or fragments of bone, which they deposited in certain receptacles that were not yet filled to the rim.

A faintness, such as the dying must undergo, would have overcome me at the sight of these horrors, and the musty odors which they emitted; but I was revived by an extraordinary apparition, which, through the speed and brilliance of its descent from one of the topless pillars, I took for a moment to be the Palm-tree-climber. The apparition reached the floor in a flash; it rose up, and I saw my mistake. It was almost more than I could do to refrain from bursting into wild laughter, for the uncommon personage before me resembled, as much as anything else, a mangy baboon whose hair had fallen out in broad patches. His head and face, indeed, were altogether hairless, like those of the ancient priests, but the brows had been painted with kohl to relieve their blank appearance, and the same cosmetic had been applied in large mouches about the jowls. He carried at his side, from a girdle of human gut, a capacious and somewhat tattered pouch, in the form of a stomach sac, from whose rifts unmentionable objects protruded. More amazing than all this, however, was the long tail, seeming to be on fire perpetually, which the remarkable being flourished in my face like a torch.

Recalling the injunctions of the Climber, I succeeded in smothering my mirth, and maintained a strict silence. It was well, no doubt, that I did so. Omoultakos, for it was indeed the Jinn himself, addressed me in a hollow and lugubrious voice that accorded somewhat strangely with his aspect, saying: “Princess, you need carry no longer the immense taper whose weight has grown so burdensome to you. My tail, which burns with inexhaustible fire, will now serve as a flambeau for us both.”

He indicated a half-empty sarcophagus, in which, with expressive signs, he told me to deposit the taper, leaving it upright, so that the grease would not gutter upon the rare contents of that reliquary. Then he said to me: “As a fitting reward for your perseverance in daring the shadows of the subterranean labyrinth, I shall show you the many treasures which have been amassed in this chamber, during the eras of my custodianship. To the wealth of the cabalist rulers, in itself quite prodigious, I have since added much that I prize peculiarly. Eblis, it is true, in his deep-lying halls, has been able to gather together a far more inclusive assortment of terrestrial riches; but I venture to assert that my collection, in some ways, is a little choicer than his. For example, in this casket, you behold, among other remnants of former delight and beauty, a thigh-bone that once belonged to Balkis.”

He waved his tail, which flared brightly, above the relic in question, and then, with a ludicrous and proprietary air, passed on to others. At one time, during our tour, he paused before a small box of green bronze, filled with a dark brown powder, and lifting a pinch of the powder to his nostrils, gave vent to prolonged and violent sternutations. When these had ceased, he remarked with much satisfaction: “There is, to my knowledge, no sneezing-powder more efficacious than the one I have just employed, which was obtained through the atomizing of the mummies of antique embalmers.”

My astonishment and disgust were mingled with a strange propensity to laughter, which I conquered again and yet again, with much difficulty. Omoultakos, in a most extensive circuit of inspection about the chamber, illumined for me with the unfailing light of his appendage, an infinite variety of objects that testified to mortal corruption. All the while, he discoursed upon their quondam ownership, and their history, in a fashion that was no less proud than funereal. He showed me, moreover, certain musical instruments, which he himself had designed during hours of leisure. Among them, I remember that there were lutes fashioned from the ribs and arm-bones of women, and stringed with male sinews, and also there were tabors of human skin, that had a deep sonority. On more than one of these instruments, he played a while for my diversion, and though I thought the airs he extorted from them were more than atrocious, I felt that it would be politic to commend, rather than criticize, his playing. In the meanwhile, I burned with desire to question him regarding the whereabouts of Kalilah, and the means through which we might again be united; but mindful of all that the Climber had told me, I restrained my eagerness.

At last, Omoultakos, who had led me on for a great distance between the columns, and the sarcophagi, and had laid aside his unusual instruments of music, turned on me, and said: “Think not, O princess, that all my treasures are things which have come down from antiquity. In the recesses of this unfathomable chamber, objects of more recent date are also conserved. One of them, at least, will interest you. Be patient, and follow the illumination of my tail.”

With this adjuration, he conducted me to an open sarcophagus, gilded, and carved from end to end with hieroglyphics, that stood a little apart from the others. In it, with unutterable horror and anguish, I discerned the form of Kalilah, lying as if dead, with a mortal pallor on his cheeks, and lips, and

eyelids. I noted that the bosom of his raiment was torn and bloody. I hurled myself upon him, and sought to revive him with kisses, but in vain.

Omoultakos, at this point, chose to interrupt my efforts by inserting the agile tip of his combustive tail between myself and the face of Kalilah. He observed, in a severe tone: “There is but one way in which the prince, your beloved brother, can be revived. The method, fortunately, lies at my immediate disposal. First, however, I will explain to you the presence of Kalilah in this place. The Emir Abou Taber Achmed, in attempting to continue the heroic education he designed for your brother, sent him forth with a small retinue the other day, to hunt the ferocious lions of the Nubian Desert. These lions, appearing in unwonted number, and with more than their usual rapacity, disposed of the followers of Kalilah, and would have served the prince in like manner, if some of my subordinate Jinns, who were watching over the expedition, had not intervened. Unluckily, they were too late to keep Kalilah from being wounded almost to death by the talons of the beasts. They brought him here, only a few hours since, and I have permitted him to occupy the sarcophagus of an elder Pharaoh, though my wisdom has told me that the tenancy will be of brief duration, and that Kalilah can not be numbered among my permanent acquisitions. If you, Zulkaïs, will consent to a very simple matter, I will give into your hand, without delay, a supremely sovereign restorative.”

“Anything! Anything!” I cried, wildly. “I consent to whatever you ask, if only Kalilah be brought back to life.”

“You need promise only one thing,” quoth Omoultakos. “Pledge your fealty to Eblis, the lord of the fiery globe, and the shadowy caverns.”

“It is pledged,” I replied, hastily. “Give me the restorative.”

Omoultakos, with his apish fingers, began to fumble in the tattered pouch that hung at his girdle. I caught sight of certain highly nauseating oddments, from among which, presently, he produced a pale yellow fruit, having somewhat the form and size of a peach, and laid it in the palm of my hand.

“This fruit,” he informed me, “was grown in a garden which, without ever having beheld the sun, is more fertile than the gardens of Irem. If you squeeze it very gently above the lips of Kalilah, a single drop of its juice, falling down upon them, will suffice to resuscitate him in all the bloom that you have loved so dearly. The fruit, after that, is yours to retain; but I trust that you will not be so careless as to devour it at any future time. If you

were to do this, the results would be very surprising, since the action of the juice on those who languish at the gates of death, and those who exult in the fullness of life, is an altogether different thing."

Scarcely heeding any of his words, I hastened to squeeze the yellow fruit above Kalilah's lips, which were white as those of a cadaver. I was transported with joy when a living ruby returned into them beneath the dripping of the fluid, and the eyes of Kalilah opened, to give back my ardent gaze. He lifted his arms from the sarcophagus to embrace me, and I quite forgot the presence of Omoultakos. That personage, after a decorous interval, observed in a loud voice: "I am sorry to break in upon your reunion, since I cannot do otherwise than approve and admire the fervor which animates you, but it is more than probable that I shall have, before long, another use for the receptacle you are both occupying. For that reason, I shall conduct you to an alcove beyond my treasury. This alcove is fitted with comfortable couches that will serve your purpose fully as well."

Kalilah, rearing his head at the sound of Omoultakos' voice, perceived, for the first time, the remarkable baboon, who had hitherto been screened from his view by my bosom. He, in his turn, was no less amazed than I had been. However, heeding the injunction of our host, he got up from the sarcophagus. In low tones, I begged him to repress the injudicious laughter that quivered visibly upon his countenance. We both followed Omoultakos. As we went, I placed the yellow fruit in the bosom of my garment.

Kalilah, more impressed by the person of our guide than by the doleful surroundings, could not forbear commenting on the igneous properties of the tail, which emitted showers of sparks on the gloom, as the owner flourished it in his progress. He remarked to me, in great wonder, that the baboon seemed to experience no discomfort whatever from this unique process of combustion. Omoultakos, who had overheard him, turned and said: "Know, young prince, that it is the nature of my tail to burn in this manner, and the sensation it affords me is, in its degree, no more painful, or extraordinary, than that which women experience from the flushing of their cheeks, or men from an excitement of the blood."

After a journey that appeared brief indeed, and which I could not reconcile with my former impression of the vastness of the chamber, we came to an open portal. The flambeau of Omoultakos, reared aloft, illumined for us a much smaller room, with couches of golden cloth, and dark draperies. My father would have loved the draperies, since they were

entirely covered with hieroglyphics; but the hieroglyphics, which appeared to change altogether from moment to moment, would have maddened the Sages whom he employed. Here the Jinn left us, after lighting with his torch the many lamps of brass, and copper censers, with which the room had been supplied. I thought that his departure was attended by an odd lack of ceremony, but recalled that he had come down from the pillar, on the occasion of his appearance before me, in a manner no less informal. Through the open doorway, Kalilah and I continued, for some time, to see the luminosity that he made in his movements about the treasury. He seemed to be very busy, and we caught glimpses of certain peculiar assistants, who were bringing in a new lot of treasures. But our joy in being together once more, preoccupied us so fully, that we paid little heed to these activities, and were enabled to disregard, for the time being, their somewhat sinister import.

Between our caresses, we asked each other a thousand questions, and told all that had happened to us severally, since the date of our separation. Kalilah was much dismayed when he learned the circumstances of my visit to the underground palace, and the promise I had made, on his behalf, to the Jinn. “Alas!” he said, “I fear that all this has been prearranged, and for no good purpose. The lions who attacked me were of supernatural size and fierceness. No doubt they were the very Jinns of whom Omoultakos told you, and after their talons had slain my followers, and had rendered me senseless, they brought me here. You, Zulkaïs, through your affection for me, have entered the trap. However, let us try to forget this. No matter how dark and precarious our situation, we have at least the consolation of each other’s society.”

“All that I have done was nothing,” I replied. “Gladly would I pledge myself to Eblis a thousand times, for your sake.”

In such converse, the hours went by, and we began to wonder at the long absence of Omoultakos, who had vanished after a while among the pillars of the treasury, and had not returned. He had left us without declaring his intentions as to our future destiny, and it seemed that he had forgotten us. Moreover, he had made no provision for us, beyond lighting the lamps and censers. By the illumination that these vessels yielded, we began to remark the moth-holes in the figured hangings, and the great age of the couches, whose coverings might have been exhumed from palaces

long buried in the desert sand. We noted, also, that the lamps and censers were overspread with verdigris. The fumes of the latter vessels troubled us, being both musty and aromatic, like the balms that exhale from the cerements of the Pharaohs. We heard, at intervals, equivocal and disquieting sounds, in a direction of which we were not sure. Together with all this, I grew faint with hunger, but there were no viands in the room for my regalement. At last, I remembered the fruit which I had placed in my bosom, after using it to revive Kalilah. Forgetful of the warning of the Jinn, I drew it forth. I would have shared it with Kalilah, but he, noting my hunger, declined. I devoured it greedily, finding a strange and spicy savor in its pulp.

Almost immediately, I experienced a feeling of unbearable heat, an intense ardor of life rose within me, as if it would burst the confines of my heart. The chamber seemed to blaze with a light that was not that of the lamps. My senses burned with a confused delirium of desires, a madness possessed me, and Kalilah was lost to my perception, like the shadows of the apartment. Then I thought that a ball of fire, hued with a thousand colors that changed momently, swam up and floated before me in the air. An extravagant longing seized me, to possess the ball, and I sprang to my feet and tried to clasp it, but the globe eluded me, and fled swiftly, and I, without heeding the cries of Kalilah, pursued it. I ran through a small portal at the rear of the chamber, and down a labyrinth of cavernous corridors, which, save for the illumination of the globe, would have been altogether lightless. Intent only on overtaking the bright ball, I did not notice my surroundings, or the route I followed. At last, the light disappeared, leaving only a dim glimmer, like the afterglow of the sunken sun, and I came to the verge of a precipice. Far below, the ball receded, plunging into abysses from which the dismal and eternal roaring of lost waters came up to arrest me. However, in my delirium, I should still have followed the globe, if it had not seemed, after an interval, to return toward me from the depths. I waited, ready to seize it, but, as the light drew nearer, I perceived its true source. It was Omoultakos, climbing nimbly from the gulf, by means of the slight projections of the stone.

In an instant, he stood beside me, and said, with an air of reproof: “Princess, why this haste to fling yourself into the underground river that flows eternally toward the realms of Eblis? The destined hour of your departure thither, borne by that doleful tide, is not yet at hand. Fortunately, I

met your brother, who was seeking you in the darkness of the caverns; and, learning what had happened, I came without delay, by another route than yours, to intercept you. Kalilah, in consideration of this act of succor, has plighted himself to the prince of the fiery globe, and the flaming hearts. Let us rejoin him, for I fear that he still wanders, lost and distracted, in the darkness. In a sense, I am to blame for what has occurred. Carried away by the duties of my custodianship of the treasury—duties that are often exigent—I forgot the obligations of a host, and failed to provide for your natural needs. If I had done as I should, hunger would never have prompted you to devour the fruit that gave rise to your delirium."

My madness had abated. I followed Omoultakos, perceiving, as I went, the horrors of the labyrinth of caverns, to which the orb with the thousand colors had blinded me. At every turn, there were scattered bones, and skeletons, which had belonged, mayhap, to wretches who had lost themselves in the maze, and had perished of famine. Some of the skeletons lay close together, but I could not tell whether the intimacy of their postures had been dictated by human love, or anthropophagism. Omoultakos did not enlighten me upon this point, nor did I care to question him. At last, we found Kalilah, whose joy was little less extravagant than the delirium which had led me to the floating ball.

"I must provide more adequately for your entertainment," said Omoultakos. "Eblis permits me to keep you here a while, as my guests. My subterranean garden lies not far away, and in it is a pavilion, which you may occupy. Food and drink will be served regularly to you, and in plenteous quantities, and I trust that neither of you will be tempted, in view of what has occurred, to sample the fruit of my trees."

He conducted us along a short passage, from which we emerged into an immense cavern whose roof was purple like the vault of night, and was starred with effulgent ores that resembled the planets and the constellations. Here we beheld the garden of which he had spoken. It consisted of fantastic trees, heavily laden with divers fruits and blossoms, and cunningly illumed by lamps, which, very often, I could not distinguish from the fruits. In the midst was a small pavilion, built of a marble mottled with rose and black. It was furnished with luxurious divans, and a table on which delicious viands, and wines like molten ruby and topaz, had been spread for our refection. Omoultakos, after again assuring us of his hospitality, begged leave to

excuse himself, and departed with the same celerity that had marked his former movements.

In the pavilion he had placed at our disposal, Kalilah and I dwelt for a period of time that neither of us could calculate. That period, however, in spite of certain forebodings, was the happiest we had known, since our childhood days when the Emir was still content to leave us together without interruption. In that place, there was no difference between day and night: for the lamps burned eternally amid the fruited foliage, and the star-like ores continued to sparkle ever in the vault above us. Often we wandered through the garden, which had a strange beauty, though we did not care, after certain indiscreet delvings, to examine too closely into its hidden particulars. The odors of the blossoms, richer than myrrh and santal, conduced to an agreeable languor; and since the Jinn supplied us with an infinity of savorous foods, and wines more delicate than those of Persia, we were well content to leave his fruits alone. In the happiness of being together, and in transports renewed perpetually, we almost forgot the rash pledges we had given. Nor were we troubled overmuch by the fact that the attendants who served us were invisible, and gave proof of their presence only by a sound that resembled the noise made by the flittering of great bats. Also, for the most part, we found ourselves able to ignore a sullen roaring that pervaded the garden continually, seeming to issue from subterranean waters, at a vague distance, and in a direction of which we were never sure. Indeed, we became so accustomed to the sound, mournful and menacing though it was, that it seemed to us little more than a quality of the silence in which we were sequestered.

Our host, who was no doubt busily engaged with the care of his acquisitions, and the treasure confided to him by the cabalist rulers, failed to visit us again. We remarked his negligence, but under the circumstances, we did not miss him.

Alas! though we knew it not, or strove to forget it, the malign forces of our destiny were always at work. Our sojourn in the garden of Omoultakos was to have a frightful denouement. By virtue of the allegiance we had both pledged to the Lord of Evil, we were to share, at the appointed time, the fate of all others who have thus damned themselves irretrievably. And yet—in order to live again those happy hours—I, and Kalilah, too, would repeat the same bond without hesitation. Dream not that we repent.

We were plighting other vows, as we had done a thousand times, and were seated upon a divan in the pavilion, when the date of perdition arrived. It came without announcement, save an insupportable thunder, that seemed to rive apart the foundations of the world. We were tossed as if by earthquake, the air darkened around us, and the ground gave way. Clasped in each other's arms, we had the sensation of falling, together with the pavilion, into a deep abyss. The thunder ceased, the vertigo of our descent grew less, and we heard on every side the woeful and furious noise of rushing waters. A melancholy glimmering dawned about us, and by it, we saw the pavilion had become a raft of serpents plaited together in the fashion of reeds, that was borne headlong on a dark tumultuous river. The serpents, large and rigid as beams of wood, had preserved on their skins the black and rosy mottling of the marble, and they had formed themselves into a cabin around us, like the superstructure of the pavilion. As we went, they added a loud and sinister hissing to the sound of the driven waters.

In this horrible manner, we were carried through unfathomable caves, ever deeper, toward the accursed realms of Eblis. Night surrounded us, we beheld no longer the least ray or glimmer, and, clasped tightly in each other's embrace, we sought by means of such contact to mitigate the noisome clamminess of the reptiles, and the terror of our situation. Thus we seemed to go on for a length of time that was equivalent to many days.

At last, a light broke upon us, lurid and doleful, and the clamor of the river deepened, with a thunder of mighty waterfalls before us. We thought surely that the torrent would precipitate us over some fatal verge, but at this point, the serpents of our raft began to exert themselves, and swimming vigorously, they landed us in the halls of Eblis, not far from that place where the Sultan Soliman listens eternally to the tumult of the cataract, and waits for the release that will come to him only with its cessation. After that, preserving no longer the form of a raft, they re-entered the stream, and swam back separately, in the direction of the garden of Omoultakos. Now, lord, we await, even as you, the moment when our hearts shall be kindled with the unconsuming fire, and shall burn brightly as the tail of the Baboon —but, alas! shall derive unutterable anguish, like the hearts of all other mortals, from that flame in which is the ecstasy of demons.

GENIUS LOCI

"It is a very strange place," said Amberville, "but I scarcely know how to convey the impression it made upon me. It will all sound so simple and ordinary. There is nothing but a sedgy meadow, surrounded on three sides by slopes of yellow pine. A dreary little stream flows in from the open end, to lose itself in a *cul-de-sac* of cat-tails and boggy ground. The stream, running slowly and more slowly, forms a stagnant pool of some extent, from which several sickly-looking alders seem to fling themselves backwards, as if unwilling to approach it. A dead willow leans above the pool, tangling its wan, skeleton-like reflection with the green scum that mottles the water. There are no blackbirds, no kildees, no dragon-flies even, such as one usually finds in a place of that sort. It is all silent and desolate. The spot is evil—it is unholy in a way that I simply can't describe. I was compelled to make a drawing of it, almost against my will, since anything so outré is hardly in my line. In fact, I made two drawings. I'll show them to you, if you like."

Since I had a high opinion of Amberville's artistic abilities, and had long considered him one of the foremost landscape painters of his generation, I was naturally quite eager to see the drawings. He, however, did not even pause to await my avowal of interest, but began at once to open his portfolio. His facial expression, the very movements of his hands, were somehow eloquent of a strange mixture of compulsion and repugnance as he brought out and displayed the two water-color sketches he had mentioned.

I could not recognize the scene depicted from either of them. Plainly it was one that I had missed in my desultory rambling about the foot-hill environs of the tiny hamlet of Bowman, where, two years before, I had

purchased an uncultivated ranch and had retired for the privacy so essential to prolonged literary effort. Francis Amberville, in the one fortnight of his visit, through his flair for the pictorial potentialities of landscape, had doubtless grown more familiar with the neighborhood than I. It had been his habit to roam about in the forenoon, armed with sketching-materials; and in this way he had already found the theme of more than one lovely painting. The arrangement was mutually convenient, since I, in his absence, was wont to apply myself assiduously to an antique Remington.

I examined the drawings attentively. Both, though of hurried execution, were highly meritorious, and showed the characteristic grace and vigor of Amberville's style. And yet, even at first glance, I found a quality that was alien to the spirit of his work. The elements of the scene were those he had described. In one picture, the pool was half hidden by a fringe of mace-reeds, and the dead willow was leaning across it at a prone, despondent angle, as if mysteriously arrested in its fall toward the stagnant waters. Beyond, the alders seemed to strain away from the pool, exposing their knotted roots as if in eternal effort. In the other drawing, the pool formed the main portion of the foreground, with the skeleton tree looming drearily at one side. At the water's further end, the cat-tails seemed to wave and whisper among themselves in a dying wind; and the steeply barring slope of pine at the meadow's terminus was indicated as a wall of gloomy green that closed in the picture, leaving only a pale margin of autumnal sky at the top.

All this, as the painter had said, was ordinary enough. But I was impressed immediately by a profound horror that lurked in these simple elements and was expressed by them as if by the balefully contorted features of some demoniac face. In both drawings, this sinister character was equally evident, as if the same face had been shown in profile and front view. I could not trace the separate details that composed the impression; but ever, as I looked, the abomination of a strange evil, a spirit of despair, malignity, desolation, leered from the drawings more openly and hatefully. The spot seemed to wear a macabre and Satanic grimace. One felt that it might speak aloud, might utter the imprecations of some gigantic devil, or the raucous derision of a thousand birds of ill omen. The evil conveyed was something wholly outside of humanity—more ancient than man. Somehow—fantastic as this will seem—the meadow had the air of a vampire, grown old and hideous with unutterable infamies. Subtly, indefinably, it thirsted for other things than the sluggish trickle of water by which it was fed.

“Where is the place?” I asked, after a minute or two of silent inspection. It was incredible that anything of the sort could really exist—and equally incredible that a nature so robust as Amberville should have been sensitive to its quality.

“It’s in the bottom of that abandoned ranch, a mile or less down the little road toward Bear River,” he replied. “You must know it. There’s a small orchard about the house, on the upper hillside; but the lower portion, ending in that meadow, is all wild land.”

I began to visualize the vicinity in question. “Guess it must be the old Chapman place,” I decided. “No other ranch along that road would answer your specifications.”

“Well, whoever it belongs to, that meadow is the most horrible spot I have ever encountered. I’ve known other landscapes that had something wrong with them—but never anything like this.”

“Maybe it’s haunted,” I said, half in jest. “From your description, it must be the very meadow where old Chapman was found dead one morning by his youngest daughter. It happened a few months after I moved here. He was supposed to have died of heart failure. His body was quite cold, and he had probably been lying there all night, since the family had missed him at supper-time. I don’t remember him very clearly, but I remember that he had a reputation for eccentricity. For some time before his death, people thought that he was going mad. I forget the details. Anyway, his wife and children left, not long after he died, and no one has occupied the house or cultivated the orchard since. It was a commonplace rural tragedy.”

“I’m not much of a believer in spooks,” observed Amberville, who seemed to have taken my suggestion of haunting in a literal sense. “Whatever the influence is, it’s hardly of human origin. Come to think of it, though, I received a very silly impression once or twice—the idea that someone was watching me while I did those drawings. Queer—I had almost forgotten that, till you brought up the possibility of haunting. I seemed to see him out of the tail of my eye, just beyond the radius that I was putting into the picture: a dilapidated old scoundrel with dirty grey whiskers and an evil scowl. It’s odd, too, that I should have gotten such a definite conception of him, without ever seeing him squarely. I thought it was a tramp who had strayed into the meadow-bottom. But when I turned to give him a level glance, he simply wasn’t there. It was as if he melted into the miry ground, the cat-tails, the sedges.”

“That isn’t a bad description of Chapman,” I said. “I remember his whiskers—they were almost white, except for the tobacco juice. A battered antique, if there ever was one—and very unamiable, too. He had a poisonous glare toward the end, which no doubt helped along the legend of his insanity. Some of the tales about him come back to me now. People said that he neglected the care of his orchard more and more. Visitors used to find him in that lower meadow, standing idly about and staring vacantly at the trees and water. Probably that was one reason they thought he was losing his mind. But I’m sure I never heard that there was anything unusual or queer about the meadow—either at the time of Chapman’s death, or since. It’s a lonely spot, and I don’t imagine that anyone ever goes there now.”

“I stumbled on it quite by accident,” said Amberville. “The place isn’t visible from the road, on account of the thick pines.... But there’s another odd thing: I went out this morning with a strong and clear intuition that I might find something of uncommon interest. I made a bee-line for the meadow, so to speak—and I’ll have to admit that the intuition justified itself. The place repels me—but it fascinates me, too. I’ve simply got to solve the mystery, if it has a solution,” he added, with a slightly defensive air. “I’m going back early tomorrow, with my oils, to start a real painting of it.”

I was surprised, knowing that predilection of Amberville for scenic brilliance and gaiety which had caused him to be likened to Sorolla. “The painting will be a novelty for you,” I commented. “I’ll have to come and take a look at the place myself, before long. It should really be more in my line than yours. There ought to be a weird story in it somewhere, if it lives up to your drawings and description.”

Several days passed. I was deeply preoccupied, at the time, with the toilsome and intricate problems offered by the concluding chapters of a new novel; and I put off my proposed visit to the meadow discovered by Amberville. My friend, on his part, was evidently engrossed by his new theme. He sallied forth each morning with his easel and oil-colors, and returned later each day, forgetful of the luncheon-hour that had formerly brought him back from such expeditions. On the third day, he did not re-appear till sunset. Contrary to his custom, he did not show me what he had done, and his answers to my queries regarding the progress of the picture were somewhat vague and evasive. For some reason, he was unwilling to

talk about it. Also, he was apparently loath to discuss the meadow itself, and in answer to direct questions, merely reiterated in an absent and perfunctory manner the account he had given me following his discovery of the place. In some mysterious way that I could not define, his attitude seemed to have changed.

There were other changes, too. He seemed to have lost his usual blitheness. Often I caught him frowning intently, and surprised the lurking of some equivocal shadow in his frank eyes. There was a moodiness, a morbidity, which, as far as our five years' friendship enabled me to observe, was a new aspect of his temperament. Perhaps, if I had not been so preoccupied with my own difficulties, I might have wondered more as to the causation of his gloom, which I attributed readily enough at first to some technical dilemma that was baffling him. He was less and less the Amberville that I knew; and on the fourth day, when he came back at twilight, I perceived an actual surliness that was quite foreign to his nature.

"What's wrong?" I ventured to inquire. "Have you struck a snag? Or is old Chapman's meadow getting on your nerves with its ghostly influences?"

He seemed, for once, to make an effort to throw off his gloom, his taciturnity and ill humor.

"It's the infernal mystery of the thing," he declared, "I've simply got to solve it, in one way or another. The place has an entity of its own—an indwelling personality. It's there, like the soul in a human body, but I can't pin it down or touch it. You know that I'm not superstitious—but, on the other hand, I'm not a bigoted materialist, either; and I've run across some odd phenomena in my time. That meadow, perhaps, is inhabited by what the ancients called a *Genius Loci*. More than once, before this, I have suspected that such things might exist—might reside, inherent, in some particular spot. But this is the first time that I've had reason to suspect anything of an actively malignant or inimical nature. The other influences, whose presence I have felt, were benign in some large, vague, impersonal way—or were else wholly indifferent to human welfare—perhaps oblivious of human existence. This thing, however, is hatefully aware and watchful: I feel that the meadow itself—or the force embodied in the meadow—is scrutinizing me all the time. The place has the air of a thirsty vampire, waiting to drink me in, somehow, if it can. It is a *cul-de-sac* of everything evil, in which an

unwary soul might well be caught and absorbed. But I tell you, Murray, I can't keep away from it."

"It looks as if the place *were* getting you," I said, thoroughly astonished by his extraordinary declaration, and by the air of fearful and morbid conviction with which he uttered it.

Apparently he had not heard me, for he made no reply to my observation. "There's another angle," he went on, with a feverish intensity in his voice. "You remember my impression of an old man lurking in the background and watching me, on my first visit. Well, I have seen him again, many times, out of the corner of my eye; and during the last two days, he has appeared more directly, though in a queer, partial way. Sometimes, when I am studying the dead willow very intently, I see his scowling, filthy-bearded face as a part of the bole. Then, again, it will float among the leafless twigs, as if it had been caught there. Sometimes a knotty hand, a tattered coat-sleeve, will emerge through the mantling algae in the pool, as if a drowned body were rising to the surface. Then, a moment later—or simultaneously—there will be something of him among the alders or the cat-tails. These apparitions are always brief, and when I try to scrutinize them closely, they melt like films of vapor into the surrounding scene. But the old scoundrel, whoever or whatever he may be, is a sort of fixture. He is no less vile than everything else about the place—though I feel that he isn't the main element of the vileness."

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "You certainly have been seeing things. If you don't mind, I'll come down and join you for a while, tomorrow afternoon. The mystery begins to inveigle me."

"Of course I don't mind. Come ahead." His manner, all at once, for no tangible reason, had resumed the unnatural taciturnity of the past four days. He gave me a furtive look that was sullen and almost unfriendly. It was as if an obscure barrier, temporarily laid aside, had again risen between us. The shadows of his strange mood returned upon him visibly; and my efforts to continue the conversation were rewarded only by half-surly, half-absent monosyllables. Feeling an aroused concern, rather than any offence, I began to note, for the first time, the unwonted pallor of his face, and the bright, febrile luster of his eyes. He looked vaguely unwell, I thought—as if something of his exuberant vitality had gone out of him, and had left in its place an alien energy of doubtful and less healthy nature. Tacitly, I gave up any attempt to bring him back from the secretive twilight into which he had

withdrawn. For the rest of the evening, I pretended to read a novel, while Amberville maintained his singular abstraction. Somewhat inconclusively, I puzzled over the matter till bed-time. I made up my mind, however, that I would visit Chapman's meadow. I did not believe in the supernatural; but it seemed apparent that the place was exerting a deleterious influence upon Amberville.

The next morning, when I arose, my Chinese servant informed me that the painter had already breakfasted and had gone out with his easel and colors. This further proof of his obsession troubled me; but I applied myself rigorously to a forenoon of writing.

Immediately after luncheon, I drove down the highway, followed the narrow dirt road that branched off toward Bear River, and left my car on the pine-thick hill above the old Chapman place. Though I had never visited the meadow, I had a pretty clear idea of its location. Disregarding the grassy, half-obliterated road into the upper portion of the property, I struck down through the woods into the little blind valley, seeing more than once, on the opposite slope, the dying orchard of pear and apple trees, and the tumbledown shanty that had belonged to the Chapmans.

It was a warm October day; and the serene solitude of the forest, the autumnal softness of light and air, made the idea of anything malign or sinister seem impossible. When I came to the meadow-bottom, I was ready to laugh at Amberville's notions; and the place itself, at first sight, merely impressed me as being rather dreary and dismal. The features of the scene were those that he had described so clearly, but I could not find the open evil that had leered from the pool, the willow, the alders and the cat-tails in his drawings.

Amberville, with his back toward me, was seated on a folding stool before his easel, which he had placed among the plots of dark green wire-grass in the open ground above the pool. He did not seem to be working, however, but was staring intently at the scene beyond him, while a loaded brush drooped idly in his fingers. The sedges deadened my footfalls; and he did not hear me as I drew near.

With much curiosity, I peered over his shoulder at the large canvas on which he had been engaged. As far as I could tell, the picture had already been carried to a consummate degree of technical perfection. It was an almost photographic rendering of the scummy water, the whitish skeleton of the leaning willow, the unhealthy, half-disrooted alders, and the cluster of

nodding mace-reeds. But in it I found the macabre and demoniac spirit of the sketches: the meadow seemed to wait and watch like an evilly distorted face. It was a deadfall of malignity and despair, lying apart from the autumn world around it; a plague-spot of nature, forever accurst and alone.

Again I looked at the landscape itself—and saw that the spot was indeed as Amberville had depicted it. It wore the grimace of a mad vampire, hateful and alert! At the same time, I became disagreeably conscious of the unnatural silence. There were no birds, no insects, as the painter had said; and it seemed that only spent and dying winds could ever enter that depressed valley-bottom. The thin stream that lost itself in the boggy ground was like a soul that went down to perdition. It was part of the mystery, too; for I could not remember any stream on the lower side of the barring hill that would indicate a subterranean outlet.

Amberville's intentness, and the very posture of his head and shoulders, were like those of a man who has been mesmerized. I was about to make my presence known to him; but at that instant there came to me the apperception that we were not alone in the meadow. Just beyond the focus of my vision, a figure seemed to stand in a furtive attitude, as if watching us both. I whirled about—and there was no one. Then I heard a startled cry from Amberville, and turned to find him staring at me. His features wore a wild look of terror and surprise, which had not wholly erased a hypnotic absorption.

"My God!" he said, "I thought you were the old man!"

I cannot be sure whether anything more was said by either of us. I have, however, the impression of a blank silence. After his single exclamation of surprise, Amberville seemed to retreat into an impenetrable abstraction, as if he were no longer conscious of my presence; as if, having identified me, he had forgotten me at once. On my part, I felt a weird and overpowering constraint. That infamous, eerie scene depressed me beyond measure. It seemed that the boggy bottom was trying to drag me down in some intangible way. The boughs of the sick alders beckoned. The pool, over which the bony willow presided like an arboreal Death, was wooing me foully with its stagnant waters.

Moreover, apart from the ominous atmosphere of the scene itself, I was painfully aware of a further change in Amberville—a change that was an actual alienation. His recent mood, whatever it was, had strengthened upon him enormously: he had gone deeper into its morbid twilight, and was lost

to the blithe and sanguine personality I had known. It was as if an incipient madness had seized him; and the possibility of this terrified me.

In a slow, somnambulistic manner, without giving me a second glance, he began to work at his painting, and I watched him for a while, hardly knowing what to do or say. For long intervals, he would stop and peer with dreamy intentness at some feature of the landscape. I conceived the bizarre idea of a growing kinship, a mysterious *rapport* between Amberville and the meadow. In some intangible way, it seemed as if the place had taken something from his very soul—and had given something of itself in exchange. He wore the air of one who participates in some unholy secret, who has become the acolyte of an unhuman knowledge. In a flash of horrible definitude, I saw the place as an actual vampire, and Amberville as its willing victim.

How long I remained there, I can not say. Finally I stepped over to him and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

“You’re working too hard,” I said. “Take my advice, and lay off for a day or two.”

He turned to me with the dazed look of one who is lost in some narcotic dream. This, very slowly, gave place to a sullen, evil anger.

“Oh, go to hell!” he snarled. “Can’t you see that I’m busy?”

I left him then, for there seemed nothing else to do under the circumstances. The mad and spectral nature of the whole affair was enough to make me doubt my own reason. My impressions of the meadow—and of Amberville—were tainted with an insidious horror such as I had never before felt in any moment of waking life and normal consciousness.

At the bottom of the slope of yellow pine, I turned back with repugnant curiosity for a parting glance. The painter had not moved, he was still confronting the malign scene like a charmed bird that faces a lethal serpent. Whether or not the impression was a double optic image, I have never been sure: but at that instant, I seemed to discern a faint, unholy aura, neither light nor mist, that flowed and wavered above the meadow, preserving the outlines of the willow, the alders, the reeds, the pool. Stealthily it appeared to lengthen, reaching toward Amberville like ghostly arms. The whole image was extremely tenuous, and may well have been an illusion; but it sent me shuddering into the shelter of the tall, benignant pines.

The remainder of that day, and the evening that followed, were tinged with the shadowy horror I had found in Chapman’s meadow. I believe that I

spent most of the time in arguing vainly with myself, in trying to convince the rational part of my mind that all I had seen and felt was utterly preposterous. I could arrive at no conclusion, other than a conviction that Amberville's mental health was endangered by the damnable thing, whatever it was, that inhered in the meadow. The malign personality of the place, the impalpable terror, mystery and lure, were like webs that had been woven upon my brain, and which I could not dissipate by any amount of conscious effort.

I made two resolves, however: one was, that I should write immediately to Amberville's fiancé, Miss Avis Olcott, and invite her to visit me as a fellow-guest of the artist during the remainder of his stay at Bowman. Her influence, I thought, might help to counteract whatever was affecting him so perniciously. Since I knew her fairly well, the invitation would not seem out of the way. I decided to say nothing about it to Amberville: the element of surprise, I hoped, would be especially beneficial.

My second resolve was, that I should not again visit the meadow myself, if I could avoid it. Indirectly—for I knew the folly of trying to combat a mental obsession openly—I should also try to discourage the painter's interest in the place, and divert his attention to other themes. Trips and entertainments, too, could be devised, at the minor cost of delaying my own work.

The smoky autumn twilight overtook me in such meditations as these; but Amberville did not return. Horrible premonitions, without coherent shape or name, began to torment me as I waited for him. The night darkened; and dinner grew cold on the table. At last, about nine o'clock, when I was nerving myself to go out and hunt for him, he came in hurriedly. He was pale, dishevelled, out of breath; and his eyes held a painful glare, as if something had frightened him beyond endurance.

He did not apologize for his lateness; nor did he refer to my own visit to the meadow-bottom. Apparently he had forgotten the whole episode—had forgotten his rudeness to me.

"I'm through!" he cried. "I'll never go back again—never take another chance. That place is more hellish at night than in the daytime. I can't tell you what I've seen and felt—I must forget it, if I can. There's an emanation—something that comes out openly in the absence of the sun, but is latent by day. It lured me, it tempted me to remain this evening—and it nearly got me... God! I didn't believe that such things were possible—that abhorrent

compound of—” He broke off, and did not finish the sentence. His eyes dilated, as if with the memory of something too awful to be described. At that moment, I recalled the poisonously haunted eyes of old Chapman whom I had sometimes met about the hamlet. He had not interested me particularly, since I had deemed him a common type of rural character, with a tendency to some obscure and unpleasant aberration. Now, when I saw the same look in the eyes of a sensitive artist, I began to wonder, with a shivering speculation, whether Chapman too had been aware of the weird evil that dwelt in his meadow. Perhaps, in some way that was beyond human comprehension, he had been its victim.... He had died there; and his death had not seemed at all mysterious. But perhaps, in the light of all that Amberville and I had perceived, there was more in the matter than any one had suspected.

“Tell me what you saw,” I ventured to suggest.

At the question, a veil seemed to fall between us, impalpable but tenebrific. He shook his head morosely and made no reply. The human terror, which perhaps had driven him back toward his normal self, and had made him almost communicative for the nonce, fell away from Amberville. A shadow that was darker than fear, an impenetrable alien umbrage, again submerged him. I felt a sudden chill, of the spirit rather than the flesh; and once more there came to me the outré thought of his growing kinship with the ghoulish meadow. Beside me, in the lamp-lit room, behind the mask of his humanity, a thing that was not wholly human seemed to sit and wait.

Of the days that followed, I shall offer only a summary. It would be impossible to convey the eventless, phantasmal horror in which we dwelt and moved.

I wrote immediately to Miss Olcott, pressing her to pay me a visit during Amberville’s stay, and, in order to insure acceptance, I hinted obscurely at my concern for his health and my need of her coadjutation. In the meanwhile, waiting her answer, I tried to divert the artist by suggesting trips to sundry points of scenic interest in the neighborhood. These suggestions he declined, with an aloof curtness, an air that was stony and cryptic rather than deliberately rude. Virtually, he ignored my existence, and made it more than plain that he wished me to leave him to his own devices. This, in despair, I finally decided to do, pending the arrival of Miss Olcott. He went out early each morning, as usual, with his paints and easel, and

returned about sunset or a little later. He did not tell me where he had been; and I refrained from asking.

Miss Olcott came on the third day following my letter, in the afternoon. She was young, lissome, ultra-feminine, and was altogether devoted to Amberville. In fact, I think she was in awe of him. I told her as much as I dared, and warned her of the morbid change in her fiancé, which I attributed to nervousness and overwork. I simply could not bring myself to mention Chapman's meadow and its baleful influence: the whole thing was too unbelievable, too phantasmagoric, to be offered as an explanation to a modern girl. When I saw the somewhat helpless alarm and bewilderment with which she listened to my story, I began to wish that she were of a more resolute and determined type, and were less submissive toward Amberville than I surmised her to be. A stronger woman might have saved him, but even then I began to doubt whether Avis could do anything to combat the imponderable evil that was engulfing him.

A heavy crescent moon was hanging like a blood-dipt horn in the twilight, when he returned. To my immense relief, the presence of Avis appeared to have a highly salutary effect. The very moment that he saw her, Amberville came out of the singular eclipse that had claimed him, as I feared, beyond redemption, and was almost his former affable self. Perhaps it was all make-believe, for an ulterior purpose; but this, at the time, I could not suspect. I began to congratulate myself on having applied a sovereign remedy. The girl, on her part, was plainly relieved; though I saw her eyeing him in a slightly hurt and puzzled way, when he sometimes fell for a short interval into moody abstraction, as if he had temporarily forgotten her. On the whole, however, there was a transformation that appeared no less than magical, in view of his recent gloom and remoteness. After a decent interim, I left the pair together, and retired.

I rose very late the next morning, having overslept. Avis and Amberville, I learned, had gone out together, carrying a lunch which my Chinese cook had provided. Plainly he was taking her along on one of his artistic expeditions; and I augured well for his recovery from this. Somehow, it never occurred to me that he had taken her to Chapman's meadow. The tenuous, malignant shadow of the whole affair had begun to lift from my mind; I rejoiced in a lightened sense of responsibility; and, for the first time in a week, was able to concentrate clearly on the ending of my novel.

The two returned at dusk, and I saw immediately that I had been mistaken on more points than one. Amberville had again retired into a sinister, saturnine reserve. The girl, beside his darkly looming height and massive shoulders, looked very small, forlorn, and pitifully bewildered and frightened. It was as if she had encountered something altogether beyond her comprehension—something with which she was humanly powerless to cope.

Very little was said by either of them. They did not tell me where they had been—but, for that matter, it was unnecessary to inquire. Amberville's taciturnity, as usual, seemed due to an absorption in some dark mood or sullen reverie. But Avis gave me the impression of a dual constraint—as if, apart from some enthralling terror, she had been forbidden to speak of the day's events and experiences. I knew that they had gone to that accursed meadow; but I was far from sure whether Avis had been personally conscious of the weird and baneful entity of the place, or had merely been frightened by the unwholesome change in her lover beneath its influence. In either case, it seemed obvious that she was wholly subservient to him, I began to damn myself for a fool in having invited her to Bowman—though the true bitterness of my regret was still to come.

A week went by, with the same daily excursions of the painter and his fiancé—the same baffling, sinister estrangement and secrecy in Amberville—the same terror, helplessness, constraint and submissiveness in the girl. How it would all end, I could not imagine; but I feared, from the ominous alteration of his character, that Amberville was heading for some form of mental alienation, if nothing worse. My offers of entertainment and scenic journeys were rejected by the pair; and several blunt efforts to question Avis were met by a wall of almost hostile evasion which convinced me that Amberville had enjoined her to secrecy—and had perhaps, in some sleightful manner, misrepresented my own attitude toward him.

"You don't understand him," she said, repeatedly. "He is very temperamental."

The whole affair was a maddening mystery, but it seemed more and more that the girl herself was being drawn, either directly or indirectly, into the same phantasmal web that had enmeshed the artist.

I surmised that Amberville had done several new pictures of the meadow; but he did not show them to me, nor even mention them. My own recollection of the place, as time went on, assumed an unaccountable

vividness that was almost hallucinatory. The incredible idea of some inherent force or personality, malevolent and even vampirish, became an unavowed conviction against my will. The place haunted me like a phantasm, horrible but seductive. I felt an impelling morbid curiosity, an unwholesome desire to visit it again, and fathom, if possible, its enigma. Often I thought of Amberville's notion about a *Genius Loci* that dwelt in the meadow, and the hints of a human apparition that was somehow associated with the spot. Also, I wondered what it was that the artist had seen on the one occasion when he had lingered in the meadow after nightfall, and had returned to my house in driven terror. It seemed that he had not ventured to repeat the experiment, in spite of his obvious subjection to the unknown lure.

The end came, abruptly and without premonition. Business had taken me to the county seat, one afternoon, and I did not return till late in the evening. A full moon was high above the pine-dark hills. I expected to find Avis and the painter in my drawing-room; but they were not there. Li Sing, my factotum, told me that they had returned at dinner-time. An hour later, Amberville had gone out quietly while the girl was in her room. Coming down a few minutes later, Avis had shown excessive perturbation when she found him absent, and had also left the house, as if to follow him, without telling Li Sing where she was going or when she might return. All this had occurred three hours previously; and neither of the pair had yet re-appeared.

A black and subtly chilling intuition of evil seized me as I listened to Li Sing's account. All too well I surmised that Amberville had yielded to the temptation of a second nocturnal visit to that unholy meadow. An occult attraction, somehow, had overcome the fright of his first experience, whatever it had been. Avis, knowing where he was, and perhaps fearful of his sanity—or safety—had gone out to find him. More and more, I felt an imperative conviction of some peril that threatened them both—some hideous and innominable thing to whose power, perhaps, they had already yielded.

Whatever my previous folly and remissness in the matter, I did not delay now. A few minutes of driving at precipitate speed through the mellow moonlight brought me to the piny edge of the Chapman property. There, as on my former visit, I left the car, and plunged headlong through the shadowy forest. Far down, in the hollow, as I went, I heard a single

scream, shrill with terror, and abruptly terminated. I felt sure that the voice was that of Avis; but I did not hear it again.

Running desperately, I emerged in the meadow-bottom. Neither Avis nor Amberville was in sight; and it seemed to me, in my hasty scrutiny, that the place was full of mysteriously coiling and moving vapors that permitted only a partial view of the dead willow and the other vegetation. I ran on toward the scummy pool, and nearing it, was arrested by a sudden and twofold horror.

Avis and Amberville were floating together in the shallow pool, with their bodies half hidden by the mantling masses of algae. The girl was clasped tightly in the painter's arms, as if he had carried her with him, against her will, to that noisome death. Her face was covered by the evil, greenish scum; and I could not see the face of Amberville, which was averted against her shoulder. It seemed that there had been a struggle; but both were quiet now, and had yielded supinely to their doom.

It was not this spectacle alone, however, that drove me in mad and shuddering flight from the meadow, without making even the most tentative attempt to retrieve the drowned bodies. The true horror lay in the thing, which, from a little distance, I had taken for the coils of a slowly moving and rising mist. It was *not* vapor, nor anything else that could conceivably exist—that malign, luminous, pallid emanation that enfolded the entire scene before me like a restless and hungrily wavering extension of its outlines—a phantom projection of the pale and death-like willow, the dying alders, the reeds, the stagnant pool and its suicidal victims. The landscape was visible through it, as through a film; but it seemed to curdle and thicken gradually in places, with some unholy, terrifying activity. Out of these curdlings, as if disgorged by the ambient exhalation, I saw the emergence of three human faces that partook of the same nebulous matter, being neither mist nor plasm. One of these faces seemed to detach itself from the bole of the ghostly willow; the second and third swirled upward from the seething of the phantom pool, with their bodies trailing formlessly among the tenuous boughs. The faces were those of old Chapman, of Francis Amberville, and Avis Olcott.

Behind this eerie, wraith-like projection of itself, the actual landscape leered with the same infernal and vampirish air which it had worn by day. But it seemed now that the place was no longer still—that it seethed with a malignant secret life—that it reached out toward me with its scummy

waters, with the bony fingers of its trees, with the spectral faces it had spewed forth from its lethal deadfall.

Even terror was frozen within me for a moment. I stood watching, while the pale, unhallowed exhalation rose higher above the meadow. The three human faces, through a further agitation of the curdling mass, began to approach each other. Slowly, inexpressibly, they merged in one, becoming an androgynous face, neither young nor old, that melted finally into the lengthening phantom boughs of the willow—the hands of the arboreal Death, that were reaching out to enfold me. Then, unable to bear the spectacle any longer, I started to run....

There is little more that need be told, for nothing that I could add to this narrative would lessen the abominable mystery of it all in any degree. The meadow—or the thing that dwells in the meadow—has already claimed three victims... and I sometimes wonder if it will have a fourth. I alone, it would seem, among the living, have guessed the secret of Chapman’s death, and the death of Avis and Amberville; and no one else, apparently, has felt the malign genius of the meadow. I have not returned there, since the morning when the bodies of the artist and his fiancé were removed from the pool... nor have I summoned up the resolution to destroy or otherwise dispose of the four oil paintings and two water-color drawings of the spot that were made by Amberville. Perhaps... in spite of all that deters me... I shall visit it again.

THE SECRET OF THE CAIRN

It will be said, by nearly all who peruse this narrative, that I must have been mad from the beginning; that even the first of the phenomena related herein were sensory hallucinations betokening some grave disorder. It is possible that I am mad now, at those times when the gulfward-sliding tide of memory sweeps me away; those times when I am lost anew in the tracts of dreadful light and unknown entity that were opened before me by the last phase of my experience. But I was sane at the outset, and I am still sane enough to write down a sober and lucid account of all that occurred.

My solitary habit of life, as well as my reputation for eccentricity and extravagance, will no doubt be urged against me by many, to support the theory of mental unsoundness. Those who are unconventional enough to credit me with rationality will smile at my story and deem that I have forsaken the province of bizarre pictorial art (in which I have achieved a certain eminence) to invade that of super-scientific fiction.

However, if I wished, I could bring forward much corroborative evidence of the strange visitations. Some of the phenomena were remarked by other people in the locality; though I did not know this at the time, owing to my thorough isolation. One or two brief and obscure notices, giving a somewhat commonplace meteoric explanation, appeared shortly afterwards in metropolitan journals, and were reprinted even more briefly and obscurely in scientific gazettes. I shall not quote them here, since to do so would involve a repetition of details which, in themselves, are more or less doubtful and inconclusive.

I am Dorian Wiermoth. My series of illustrative paintings, based on the poems of Poe, will perhaps be familiar to some of my readers.

For a number of reasons, some of which it is needless to mention, I had decided to spend a whole year in the high Sierras. On the shore of a tiny sapphire tarn, in a valley sheltered by hemlocks and granite crags, I had built a rough cabin and had stocked it plentifully with provisions, books, and the materials of my art. For the time being, I was independent of a world whose charms and enchantments were, to say the least, no longer irresistible.

The region possessed, however, other allurements than those of seclusion. Everywhere, in the stark mountain masses and pinnacles, the juniper-studded cliffs, the glacier-moulded sheets of rock, there was a mingling of grandeur and grotesquery that appealed most intimately to my imagination. Though my drawings and paintings were never, in any sense, literal transcriptions of nature, and were often avowedly fantastic, I had made at all times a careful study of natural forms, realizing that the wildest evocations of the unknown are merely, at bottom, recombinations of known shapes and colors, even as the furthest worlds are compositions of elements familiar to terrene chemistry.

Therefore, I found much that was suggestive in this scenery; much that I could interweave with the arabesques of weirdly imaginative designs; or could render more directly, as pure landscape, in a semi-Japanese style with which I was then experimenting.

The place in which I had settled was remote from the state highway, the railroad, and the path of aeroplanes. My only near neighbors were the mountain crows and jays and chipmunks. Occasionally, in my rambles, I met a fisherman or hunter; but the region was miraculously free of tourists. I began a serene regimen of work and study, which was interrupted by no human agency. The thing that ended my stay so prematurely, came, I am sure, from a sphere that is not mapped by geographers, nor listed by astronomers.

The mystery began, without forewarning or prescience, on a quiet evening in July, after the scimitar-shaped moon had sheathed itself in the firs and hemlocks. I was sitting in my cabin, reading for relaxation a detective story whose title I have since forgotten. The day had been quite warm; there was no wind in that sequestered valley; and the oil lamp was burning steadily between the half-open door and the wide windows.

Then, on the still air, there came a sudden aromatic perfume that filled the cabin like a flooding wave. It was not the resinous odor of the conifers, but a rich and ever-deepening spice that was wholly exotic to the region—perhaps alien to the *Earth.* It made me think of myrrh and sandal and incense; and yet it was none of these, but a stranger thing, whose very richness was pure and supernal as the odors that were said to attend the apparition of the Holy Grail.

Even as I inhaled it, startled, and wondering if I were the victim of some hallucination, I heard a faint music that was somehow allied to the perfume and inseparable from it. The sound, like a breathing of fairy flutes, ethereally sweet, thrilling, eldritch, was all about me in the room; and I seemed to hear it in my inmost brain, as one hears the sea-whisper in a shell.

I ran to the door, I flung it wide open, and stepped out into the azure-green evening. The perfume was everywhere, it arose before me, like the frankincense of veiled altars, from the tarn and the hemlocks, and it seemed to fall from the stilly burning stars above the Gothic trees and granite walls, to the north. Then, turning eastward, I saw the mysterious light that palpitated and revolved in a fan of broad beams upon the hill.

The light was soft, rather than brilliant, and I knew that it could be neither aurora nor aeroplane beacon. It was hueless—and yet somehow it seemed to include the intimation of a hundred colors lying beyond the familiar spectrum. The rays were like the spokes of a half-hidden wheel that turned slowly and more slowly, but did not change its position. Their center, or hub, was behind the hill. Presently they became stationary, except for a slight trembling. Against them, I saw the bowed masses of several mighty junipers.

I must have stood there for a long while, gaping and staring like any yokel who beholds a marvel beyond his comprehension. I still breathed the unearthly odor, but the music had grown fainter with the slackening of the wheel of light, and had fallen to a sub-auditory sighing—the suspicion of a murmur far away in some undiscovered world. Implicitly, though perhaps illogically, I connected the sound and the scent with that unexplained luminance. Whether the wheel was just beyond the junipers, on the craggy hill-top, or a billion miles away in astronomic space, I could not decide; and it did not even occur to me that I could climb the hill and ascertain this particular for myself.

My main emotion was a sort of half-mystic wonder, a dreamy curiosity that did not prompt me to action. Idly I waited, with no clear awareness of the passing of time, till the wheel of rays began once more to revolve slowly. It swiftened, and presently I could no longer distinguish the separate beams. All I could see was a whirling disk, like a moon that spun dizzily but maintained the same position relative to the rocks and junipers. Then, without apparent recession, it grew dim and faded on the sapphire darkness. I heard no longer the remote and flute-like murmur; and the perfume ebbed from the valley like an out-going tide, leaving but elusive wraiths of its unknown spicery.

My sense of wonder sharpened with the passing of these phenomena; but I could form no conclusion as to their origin. My knowledge of natural science, which was far from extensive, seemed to afford no plausible clue. I felt, with a wild thrilling, half-fearful, half-exultant, that the thing I had witnessed was not to be found in the catalogues compiled by human observers.

The visitation, whatever it was, had left me in a state of profound nervous excitement. Sleep, when it came, was intermittent; and the problematic light, perfume, and melody recurred again and again with my dreams with a singular vividness, as if they had stamped themselves upon my brain with more than the force of normal sensory impressions.

I awoke at earliest dawn, filled with a well-nigh feverish conviction that I must visit the eastern hill immediately and learn if any tangible sign had been left by the agency of the turning beams. After a hasty and half-eaten breakfast, I made the ascent, armed with my drawing-pad and pencils. It was a short climb among overbeetling boulders, sturdy tamaracks, and dwarf oaks that took the form of low-growing bushes.

The hill-top itself comprised an area of several hundred yards, roughly elliptic. It fell gently away toward the east, and ended on two sides in sheerly riven cliffs and jagged scarps. There were patches of soil amid the enormous granite folds and out-croppings; but these patches were bare, except for a few alpine flowers and grasses; and the place was given mainly to a number of gnarled and massive junipers, which had rooted themselves by preference in the solid rock. From the beginning, it had been one of my favorite haunts. I had made many sketches of the mightily mortised junipers, some of which, I verily believe, were more ancient than the famed sequoias, or the cedars of Lebanon.

Surveying the scene with eager eyes in the cloudless morning light, I saw nothing untoward at first. As usual, there were deer-tracks in the basins of friable soil; but apart from these, and my own former footprints, there was no token of any visitor. Somewhat disappointed, I began to think that the luminous, turning wheel had been far-off in space, beyond the hill.

Then, wandering on toward the lower levels of the crest, I found, in a sheltered spot, the thing that had previously been hidden from my view by the trees and out-croppings.

It was a cairn of granite fragments—but a cairn such as I had never beheld in all my mountain explorations. Built in the unmistakable form of a star with five blunt angles, it rose waist-high from the middle of a plot of intersifting loam and sand. About it grew a few plants of mountain phlox. On one side were the charred remnants of a tree that had been destroyed by lightning in recent years. On two other sides, forming a right angle, were high walls to which several junipers clung like coiling dragons with tenacious claws, embedded in the riven rock.

On the summit of the strange pile, in the center, I perceived a pale and coldly shining stone with star-like points that duplicated and followed the five angles. This stone, I thought, had been shaped by artificial means. I did not recognize its material; and I felt sure that it was nothing native to the region.

I felt the elation of a discoverer, deeming that I had stumbled on the proof of some alien mystery. The cairn, whatever its purpose, whoever its builders, had been reared during the night; for I had visited this very spot on the previous afternoon, a little before sunset, and would have seen the structure if it had been there at that time.

Somehow, I dismissed immediately and forever all idea of human agency. There occurred to me the bizarre thought that voyagers from some foreign world had paused on the hill and had left that enigmatic pile as a sign of their visit. In this manner, the queer nocturnal manifestations were accounted for, even if not fully explained.

Arrested by the weird enigma of it all, I had paused on the verge of the loamy basin, at a distance of perhaps twelve feet from the cairn itself. Now, my brain on fire with fantastical surmise, I stepped forward to examine the cairn more closely. To my utter dumbfoundment, it appeared to recede before me, preserving the same interval, as I went toward it. Pace after pace I took, but the ground flowed forward beneath me like a treadmill; my

moving feet descended in their former tracks; and I was unable to make the least progress toward the goal that was apparently so near at hand! My movements were in no sense impeded, but I felt a growing giddiness, that soon verged upon nausea.

My disconcertment can more readily be imagined than expressed. It seemed obvious that either I or nature had gone suddenly mad. The thing was absurd, impossible—it belied the most elementary laws of dimension. By some incalculable means, a new and arcanic property had been introduced into the space about the cairn.

To test further the presence of this hypothetical property, I abandoned my efforts at direct approach, and began to circle the basin, resuming the attempt from other angles. The pile, I found, was equally unapproachable from all sides: at a distance of twelve feet, the soil began its uncanny treadmill movement when I tried to encroach upon it. The cairn, to all intents and purposes, might have been a million miles away, in the gulf between the worlds!

After a while, I gave up my weird and futile experiments, and sat down beneath one of the overhanging junipers. The mystery maddened me, it induced a sort of mental vertigo as I pondered it. But also, it brought into the familiar order of things the exhilaration of a novel and perhaps supernatural element. It spoke of the veiled infinitudes I had vainly longed to explore; it goaded my feverish fantasy to ungovernable flights.

Recalling myself from such conjectures, I studied with sedulous care the stelliform pile and the soil around it. Surely the beings who had built it would have left their footprints. However, there were no discernible marks of any kind; and I could learn nothing from the arrangement of the stones, which had been piled with impeccable neatness and symmetry. I was still baffled by the five-pointed object on the summit, for I could recall no terrene mineral that resembled its substance very closely. It was too opaque for moonstone or crystal, too lucid and brilliant for alabaster.

At whiles, as I continued to sit there, I was visited by an evanescent whiff of the spicy perfume that had flooded my cabin on the previous night. It came and went like a dying phantom, and I was never quite sure of its presence.

At length I roused myself and made a thorough search of the hill-top, to learn if any other trace had been left by the problematic visitors. In one of the sandy patches of soil, near the northern verge, I saw a curious

indentation, like the slender, three-toed footmark of some impossibly gigantic bird. Close at hand was the small hollow from which a loose fragment of stone, doubtless employed in the building of the cairn, had been removed. The three-pointed mark was very faint, as if the maker had trodden there with an airy lightness. But apart from the finding of this doubtful vestige, my search was wholly without result.

During the weeks that ensued, the unearthly riddle upon which I had fallen preoccupied me almost to the point of mania. Perhaps, if there had been anyone with whom I could have discussed it, anyone who could have thrown upon it the calm and sober light of technical knowledge, I might have rid myself of the obsession to some extent. But I was entirely alone; and, to the best of my belief, the neighborhood of the cairn was visited by no other human being at that time.

On several occasions, I renewed my efforts to approach the cairn; but the unheard-of, incredible property of a concealed *extension*, a treadmill *flowing*, still inhered in the space about it, as if established there to guard it from all intrusion. Faced with this abrogation of known geometry, I felt at whiles the delirious horror of one for whom the infinite has declared its yawning gulf amid the supposed solidity of finite things.

I made a pencil drawing of the long, light footmark before it was erased by the Sierran winds; and from that one vestige, like a paleontologist who builds up some extinct monster from a single bone, I tried to reconstruct in my imagination the being that had left it there. The cairn itself was the theme of numerous sketches; and I believe that I formed and debated in turn almost every conceivable theory as to its purpose and the identity of its builders.

Was it a monument that marked the grave of some intercosmic voyager from Algol or Aldebaran? Had it been reared as a token of discovery and possession by a Columbus of Achernar, landing on our planet? Did it indicate the site of a mysterious cache, to which the makers would return at some future time? Was it a landmark between dimensions? a hieroglyphic milepost? a signal for the guidance of other travelers who might pass among the worlds, going from deep to deep?

All conjectures were equally valid—and worthless. Before the wildering mystery of it all, my human ignorance drove me to veritable frenzy.

A fortnight had gone by, and the midsummer month was drawing to its close, when I began to notice certain new phenomena. I have mentioned, I think, that there were a few tiny patches of alpine phlox within the circle of occultly altered space around the cairn. One day, with a startlement that amounted to actual shock, I saw that an extraordinary change had occurred in their pale blossoms. The petals had doubled in number, they were now of abnormal size and heaviness, and were tinged with ardent purple and lambent ruby. Perhaps the change had been going on for some time without my perception; perhaps it had developed overnight. At any rate, the modest little flowers had taken on the splendor of asphodels from some mythologic land!

Beyond all mortal trespass, they flamed in that enchanted area, moated with unseen immensities. Day after day I returned, smitten with the awe of one who witnesses a miracle, and saw them there, ever larger and brighter, as if they were fed by other elements than the known air and earth.

Then, presently, in the berries of a great juniper bough that overhung the ring, I perceived a corresponding change. The tiny, dull-blue globes had enlarged enormously, and were colored with a lucent crimson, like the fiery apples of some exotic paradise. At the same time, the foliage of the bough brightened to a tropic verdancy. But on the main portion of the tree, outside the cryptic circle, the leaves and berries were unaltered.

It was as if something of another world had been intercalated with ours.… More and more, I began to feel that the star of lucent, nameless stone that topped the cairn was in some manner the source or key of these unique phenomena. But I could prove nothing, could learn nothing. I could feel sure of only one thing: I was witnessing the action of forces that had never intruded heretofore upon human observation. These forces were obedient to their own laws—which, it appeared, were not altogether synonymous with the laws that man in his presumption has laid down for the workings of nature. The meaning of it all was a secret told in some alien, clueless cipher.

I have forgotten the exact date of those final occurrences, in whose aftermath I was carried beyond the imaginable confines of time and space. Indeed, it seems to me that it would be impossible to date them in terms of terrene chronology. Sometimes I feel that they belong only to the cycles of another world; sometimes, that they never happened; sometimes, that they are still happening—or yet to happen.

I remember, though, that there was a half-moon above the crags and firs on that fatal evening. The air had turned sharp with a prescience of the coming autumn, and I had closed the door and windows and had kindled a fire of dead juniper-wood that was perfuming the cabin with its subtle incense. I heard the soughing of a wind in the higher hemlocks, as I sat before my table, looking over the recent sketches I had made of the cairn and its surroundings, and wondering for perhaps the millionth time if I, or anyone, would ever solve the unearthly riddle.

This time, I began to hear the faint, aerial music, as if in the inmost convolutions of my brain, before I caught the mystic odor. At first, it was little more than the memory of a sound; but it seemed to rise and flow and pour *outward*, slowly, tortuously, as if through the windings of some immeasurable conch, till it was all about me with its labyrinthine murmuring. The cabin—the world outside—the very heavens—were filled with tenuous horns and susurrous flutes that told the incommunicable dreams of a lost elfland.

Then, above the redolence of the clearly burning, smokeless wood, I smelt that other perfume, rich and ethereal, and no less pervasive than on the former occasion. It seemed that the closed doors and windows were no barrier to its advent: it came as if through another medium than the air, another avenue than the space in which we move and have our being.

In a fever of exalted wonder and curiosity, I threw the door open and went out into the sea of unearthly fragrance and melody that overflowed the world. On the eastern hill, as I had expected, the turning wheel of light was slowing in a stationary position beyond the tower-like junipers. The rays were soft and hueless, as before, but their luster was not diminished by the moon.

This time, I felt an imperative desire to solve the enigma of that visitation: a desire that drew me, stumbling and racing upward among the craggy boulders and low-grown bushes. The music ebbed to a far, faint whisper, the wheel revolved more gradually, as I neared the summit.

A rudiment of that caution which humanity has always felt in the presence of unknown things, impelled me to slacken my reckless pace. Several immense trees and granite out-croppings, however, still intervened betwixt myself and the source of those trembling beams. I stole forward, seeing with an inexpressible thrill, as of some mystic confirmation, that the beams emanated from the site of the stelliform cairn.

It was an easy matter to climb the massive folds of rock and reach a vantage from which I could look directly down on that mysterious area. Crawling flat on my stomach, in a line with the mightiest of the overjutting junipers, I attained my objective, and could peer from behind a heavy bough that grew horizontally along the rock, at the wall's edge.

The loamy basin in which the cairn had been reared was beneath me. Poised in mid-air, level and motionless, and a little to one side of the cairn, there hung a singular vessel that I can liken only to a great open barge with upward curving prow and stern. In its center, above the bulwarks, arose a short mast or slender pillar, topped with a fiery, dazzling disk from which the wheel of beams, as if from a hub, poured vertically and transversely. The whole vessel was made of some highly translucent material, for I could see the dim outlines of the landscape beyond it; and the beams poured earthward through its bottom with little diminution of their radiance. The disk, as well as I could tell from the sharply foreshortened position in which I viewed the barge, was the only semblance of mechanism.

It was as if a crescent moon of milky crystal had come down to flood that shadowy nook with its alien light. And the prow of this moon was no more than six or seven feet from the granite wall that formed my place of vantage!

Four beings, whom I can compare to no earthly creatures, were hovering in air about the cairn, without wings or other palpable support, as if they, like the barge, were independent of terrene gravity. Though little less in stature than men, their whole aspect was slight and imponderable to a degree that is found only in birds or insects. Their bodily plasm was almost diaphanous, with its intricate nerves and veinings dimly visible, like iridescent threads through a gauzy fabric of pearl and faint rose.

One of them, hanging aloft before the wheel of beams, with his head averted from my view, was holding in his long, frail hands the cold and lucent star that had topped the cairn. The others, stooping airily, were lifting and throwing aside the fragments that had been piled with such impeccable symmetry.

The faces of two were wholly hidden; but the third presented a strange profile, slightly resembling the beak and eye of an owl beneath an earless cranium that rose to a lofty ridge aigretted with nodding tassels like the topknots of quail.

The tearing-down of the pile was accomplished with remarkable deftness and speed; and it seemed that the pipy arms of these creatures were far stronger than one would have imagined. During the process of demolition, they stooped lower and lower, till they floated almost horizontally, just above the ground. Soon all the fragments were removed; and the entities began to scoop away with their fingers the soil beneath, whose looseness appeared to evince a previous digging at some recent date.

Breathless and awed before the cryptic vision, I bent forward from my eyrie, wondering what inconceivable treasure, what cache of unguessed glory and mystery, was about to be exhumed by these otherworld explorers.

Finally, from the deep hollow they had made in the loamy soil, one of the beings withdrew his hand, holding aloft a small and colorless object. Apparently it was the thing for which they had been searching, for the creatures abandoned their delving, and all four of them swam upward toward the barge as if wafted by invisible wings. Two of them took their stations in the rear part of the vessel, standing behind the mast-like pillar and its wheel of rays. The one who bore the shining, star-shaped stone, and the carrier of the dull, unknown object, posted themselves in the prow, at a distance of no more than nine or ten feet from the crag on which I crouched.

For the first time, I beheld their faces in front view, peering straight toward me with glowing, pale-gold eyes of inscrutable strangeness. Whether or not they saw me, I have never been sure: they seemed to gaze through me and beyond—illimitably beyond—into occulted gulfs, and upon worlds forever sealed to the sight of man.

I discerned more clearly now, in the fingers of the foremost being, the nameless object they had dug from beneath the dismantled cairn. It was smooth, drab, oval, and about the size of a falcon’s egg. I might have deemed it no more than a common pebble, aside from one peculiar circumstance: a crack in the larger end, from which issued several short, luminous filaments. Somehow, the thing reminded me of a riven seed with sprouting roots.

Heedless of any possible peril, I had risen to my feet and was staring raptly at the barge and its occupants. After a few moments, I became aware that the wheel of beams had begun to turn gradually, as if in response to an unperceived mechanism. At the same time, I heard the eerie whispering of a million flutes, I breathed a rushing gale of Edenic spices. Faster and faster the rays revolved, sweeping the ground and the air with their phantom

spokes, till I saw only a spinning moon that divided the crescent vessel and seemed to cleave asunder the very earth and rocks.

My senses reeled with the dizzy radiance, the everpouring music and perfume. An indescribable sickness mounted through all my being, the solid granite seemed to turn and pitch under my feet like a drunken world, and the heavily buttressed junipers tossed about me against the overturning heavens.

Very swiftly, the wheel, the vessel and its occupants took on a filmy dimness, fading in a manner that is hard to convey, as if, without apparent diminishment of perspective, they were receding into some ultra-geometric space. Their outlines were still before me—and yet they were immeasurably distant. Coincidentally, I felt a terrific suction, an unseen current more powerful than cataracting waters, that seized me as I stood leaning forward from the rock, and swept me past the violently threshing boughs.

I did not fall toward the ground beneath—for there was no longer any ground. With the sensation of being wrenched asunder in the ruin of worlds that had returned to chaos, I plunged into grey and frigid space, that included neither air, earth, stars nor heaven; void, uncreated space, through which the phantom crescent of the strange vessel fell away beneath me, bearing a ghostly moon.

As well as I can recollect, there was no total loss of consciousness at any time during my fall; but, toward the end, there was an increasing numbness, a great dubiety, and a dim perception of enormous arabesques of color that had risen before me, as if created from the grey nothing.

All was misty and two-dimensional, as if this new-made world had not yet acquired the attribute of depth. I seemed to pass obliquely over painted labyrinths. At length, amid soft opals and azures, I came to a winding area of rosy light, and settled into it till the rosiness was all about me.

My numbness gave way to a sharp and painful tingling as of frost-bite, accompanied by a revival of all my senses. I felt a firm grasp about my shoulders, and knew that my head and upper body had emerged from the rosiness.

For an instant, I thought that I was leaning horizontally from a slowly plunging cataract of some occult element, neither water, air nor flame, but somehow analogous to all three. It was more tangible than air, but there was

no feeling of wetness; it flowed with the soft fluttering of fire, but it did not burn.

Two of the strange, ethereal entities were drawing me out on a luminous golden cliff, from which an airy vegetation, hued as with the rainbows of towering fountains, projected its lightly arching masses into a gold-green abyss. The crescent barge and its wheel of beams, now stationary, were hovering close at hand in a semi-capsized position. Farther away, beyond the delicate trees, I saw the jutting of horizontal towers. Five suns, drowning in their own glory, were suspended at wide intervals in the gulf.

I wondered at the weird inversion of gravity that my position evinced; and then, as if through a normalizing of equilibrium, I saw that the great cliff was really a level plain, and the cataract a gentle stream.

Now I was standing on the shore, with the people of the barge beside me. They were no longer supporting me with their frail, firm hands. I could not guess their attitude, and my brain awoke with a keen electric shock to the eerie terror and wildering strangeness of it all. Surely the world about me was no part of the known cosmos! The very soil beneath me thrilled and throbbed with unnameable energies. All things, it seemed, were composed of a range of elements nearer to pure force than to common matter. The trees were like fountains of supernal pyrotechnics, arrested and made permanent in mid-air. The structures that soared at far intervals, like celestial minarets, were built as of moulded morning cloud and luminescence. I breathed an air that was more intoxicating than the air of alpine heights.

Out of this world of marvel, I saw the gathering of many people similar to the entities beside me. Amid the trees and towers, from the shimmering vistas, they came as if summoned by magic. Their movements were swift and silent as the gliding of phantoms, and they seemed to tread the air rather than the ground. I could not hear even the least whispering among them, but I had the feeling of inaudible converse all about me—the vibrant thrilling of overtones too high for the human ear.

Their eyes of pale gold regarded me with unsearchable intentness. I noted their softly curving mouths, which appeared to express an alien sadness, but perhaps were not sad at all. Beneath their gaze, I felt a queer embarrassment, followed quickly by something that I can describe only as an inward illumination. This illumination did not seem to be telepathic: it was merely as if my mind had acquired, as a concomitant of the new

existence into which I had fallen, a higher faculty of comprehension impossible in its normal state. This faculty was something that I drew in from the strange soil and air, the presence of the strange multitude. Even then, my understanding was only partial, and I knew there was much that still eluded me through certain insuperable limitations of my brain.

The beings, I thought, were benignantly disposed, but were somewhat puzzled as to what should be done with me. Inadvertently, in a way without parallel, I had trespassed upon another cosmos than my own. Caught in the pull of some transdimensional vortex wrought by the crescent vessel as it departed from earth, I had followed the vessel to its own world, which adjoined ours in transcendental space.

This much I understood, but the mechanics of my entrance into the supernal realm were somewhat obscure to me. Apparently my fall into the rosy river had been providential, for the stream had revived me with its superaqueous element, and had perhaps served to prevent a sort of frostbite that would otherwise have been incurred by my plunge through an interspatial vacuum.

The purpose of the granite cairn, and the visits made by its builders to earth, were things that I could apprehend but dimly. Something had been planted beneath the cairn, and had been left there for a stated interval, as if to absorb from the grosser mundane soil certain elements or virtues lacking in the soil of this ethereal world. The whole process was based on the findings of an arcanic but severely ordered science; and the experiment was one that had been made before. The lucent stone on the cairn, in some way that I could not grasp, had established around it the guarding zone of fluent treadmill space, on which no earthly denizen could intrude. The unearthly changes of the vegetation within this zone were due to certain mystic emanations from the planted seed.

The nature of the seed eluded me; but I knew that it possessed an enormous and vital importance. And the time for its transplanting to the otherworld soil was now at hand. My eyes were drawn to the fingers of the entity who carried it, and I saw that the seed had swollen visibly, that the shining rootlets had lengthened from its riven end.

More and more of the people had gathered, lining the shore of that rosy river, and the intervals of the airy boskage, in a silent multitude. Some, I perceived, were thin and languid as wasting spectres; and their bodily plasm, as if clouded by illness, was dull and opaque, or displayed unhealthy

mottlings of shadow amid the semi-translucence that was plainly a normal attribute.

In a clear area, beside the hovering vessel, a hole had been dug in that Edenic soil. Amid the bewildering flux of my impressions, I had not noticed it heretofore. Now it assumed a momentous import, as the bearer of the seed went forward to deposit his charge in that shallow pit, and bury it with a curious oval spade of crystalline metal beneath the golden element that was like a mixture of loam and sunset glory.

The crowd had drawn back, leaving a vacant field about the planted seed. There was a sense of awful and solemn and ceremonial expectation in the stillness of that waiting people. Dim, sublime, ungraspable images hovered upon the horizon of my thought like unborn suns; and I trembled with the nearness of some tremendous thaumaturgy. But the purpose of it all was still beyond my comprehension.

Darkly I felt the anticipation of the alien throng ... and somewhere—in myself or in those about me—a great need and a crying hunger that I could not name.

It seemed that whole months and seasons went by; that the five suns revolved about us in altered ecliptics, ere the end of the interim of waiting.… But time and its passing were perhaps obedient to unknown laws, like all else in that other sphere, and were not as the hours and seasons of earthly time.

There came at last the awaited miracle: the pushing of a pale shoot from the golden sod. Visibly, dynamically it grew, as if fed with the sap of accelerating years that had turned to mere minutes. From it, there burst a multitude of scions, budding in their turn with irised leafage. The thing was a fountain of unsealed glories, an upward-rushing geyser of emerald and opal that took the form of a tree.

The rate of growth was beyond belief, it was like a legerdemain of gods. From moment to moment the boughs multiplied and lengthened with the leaping of wind-wrought flames. The foliage spread like a blown spray of jewels. The plant became colossal, it towered with a pillar-thick stem, and its leafage meshed the five suns, and drooped down toward the river and above the barge, the crowd, and the lesser vegetation.

Still the tree grew, and its boughs came down in glorious arches and festoons, laden with starlike blossoms. I beheld the faces of those about me in a soft umbrage, along arboreal arcades, as if beneath some paradisal

banyan. Then, as the festoons hung nearer, I saw the fruiting of the tree: the small globules, formed as of blood and light, that were left by the sudden withering of the starry blossoms. Swiftly they swelled, attaining the size of pears, and descending till they grew well within my reach—and within the reach of that embowered throng.

It seemed that the marvellous growth had attained its culmination, and was now quiescent. We were domed as if by some fabulous Tree of Life that had sprung from the mated energies of Earth and the celestial Otherworld.

Suddenly I knew the purpose of it all, when I saw that some of the people about me were plucking and devouring the fruit. Many others abstained, however, and I perceived that the sanguine-colored pears were eaten only by the languid, sickly beings I have mentioned before. It seemed that the fruit was a sovereign curative for their illness: even as they devoured it, their bodies brightened, the mottlings of shadow disappeared, and they began to assume the normal aspect of their fellows.

I watched them—and upon me there came a kindred hunger, a profound and mystic craving, together with the reckless vertigo of one who is lost in a world too far and high for human tread. There were doubts that woke within me, but I forgot them even as they woke. There were hands that reached out as if to warn and restrain me, but I disregarded them. One of the luscious, glowing pears hung close before me—and I picked it.

The thing filled my fingers with a sharp, electric tingling, followed by a coolness that I can compare only to snow beneath a summer sun. It was not formed of anything that we know as matter—and yet it was firm and solid to the touch, and it yielded a winy juice, an ambrosial pulp, between my teeth. I devoured it avidly, and a high, divine elation coursed like a golden lightning through all my nerves and fibers.

I have forgotten much of the delirium (if delirium it was) that ensued.… There were things too vast for memory to retain. And much that I remember could be told only in the language of Olympus.

I recall, however, the colossal expansion of all my senses, the flowering of thought into stars and worlds, as if my consciousness had towered above its mortal tenement with more than the thaumaturgic spreading of the Tree. It seemed that the life of the strange people had become a province of my being, that I knew from all time the arcana of their wisdom, the

preterhuman scale of their raptures and sorrows, of their triumphs and disasters.

Holding all this as an appanage, I rose into spheres ulterior and superior. Infinities were laid before me, I conned them as one cons an unrolled map. I peered down upon the utmost heavens, and the hells that lie contiguous to the heavens; and I saw the perennial process of their fiery transmutation and interchange.

I possessed a million eyes and ears; my nerves were lengthened into nether gulfs, were spun out beyond the suns. I was the master of strange senses, that were posted to oversee the activities of unlit stars and blind planets.

All this I beheld and comprehended with the exultation of a drunken demiurge; and all was familiar to me, as if I had seen it in other cycles.

Then, quickly and terribly, there came the sense of division, the feeling that part of myself no longer shared this empire of cosmic immensitude and glory. My delirium shrank like a broken bubble, and I seemed to lose and leave behind me the colossal, shadowy god that still towered above the stars. I was standing again beneath the Tree, with the transdimensional people about me, and the ruddy fruit still burning in the far-flung arches of leafage.

Here, also, the inexorable doom of division pursued me, and I was no longer one, but *two*. Distinctly I saw myself, my body and features touched with the ethereal radiance of the beings who were native to that world; but *I*, who beheld that *alter ego*, was aware of a dark and iron weight, as if some grosser gravity had claimed me. It seemed that the golden soil was yielding under me like a floor of sunset cloud, and I was plunging and falling through nether emptiness, while that other self remained beneath the Tree.

I awoke with the sultry beams of the midday sun upon my face. The loamy ground on which I lay, the scattered fragments of the cairn beside me, and the rocks and junipers, were irrecognizable as if they had belonged to some other planet than ours. I could not remember them for a long while; and the things I have detailed in this narrative came back to me very tardily, in a broken and disordered sequence.

The manner of my return to Earth is still a mystery. Sometimes I think that the supernal people brought me back in that shining vessel whose mechanism I have never understood. Sometimes, when the madness is upon

me, I think that I—or part of myself—was precipitated hither as an aftermath of the eating of the fruit. The energies to whose operation I exposed myself by that act were wholly incalculable. Perhaps, in accord with the laws of a transdimensional chemistry, there was a partial revibration, and an actual separation of the elements of my body, by which I became two persons, in different worlds. No doubt the physicists will laugh at such ideas.…

There were no corporeal ill effects from my experience, apart from a minor degree of what appeared to be frostbite, and a curious burning of the skin, mild rather than severe, that might have resulted from a temporary exposure to radioactive matters. But in all other senses, I was, and still am, a mere remnant of my former self.… Among other things, I soon found that my artistic abilities had deserted me; and they have not returned after an interim of months. Some higher essence, it would seem, has departed wholly and forever.

I have become as it were, a clod. But often, to that clod, the infinite spheres descend in their terror and marvel. I have left the lonely Sierras and have sought the refuge of human nearness. But the streets yawn with uncharted abysms, and Powers unsuspected by others move for me amid the crowd. Sometimes I am no longer here among my fellows, but am standing with the eaters of the fruit, beneath the Tree, in that mystic otherworld.

THE CHARNEL GOD

I

"Mordiggian is the god of Zul-Bha-Sair," said the innkeeper with unctuous solemnity. "He has been the god from years that are lost to man's memory in shadow deeper than the subterranes of his black temple. There is no other god in Zul-Bha-Sair. And all who die within the walls of the city are sacred to Mordiggian. Even the kings and the optimates, at death, are delivered into the hands of his muffled priests. It is the law and the custom. A little while, and the priests will come for your bride."

"But Elaith is not dead," protested the youth Phariom for the third or fourth time, in piteous desperation. "Her malady is one that assumes the lying likeness of death. Twice before has she lain insensible, with a pallor upon her cheeks, and a stillness in her very blood, that could hardly be distinguished from those of the tomb; and twice she has awakened after an interim of days."

The innkeeper peered with an air of ponderous unbelief at the girl who lay white and motionless as a mown lily on the bed in the poorly furnished attic chamber.

"In that case you should not have brought her into Zul-Bha-Sair," he averred in a tone of owlish irony. "The physician has pronounced her dead; and her death has been reported to the priests. She must go to the temple of Mordiggian."

"But we are outlanders, guests of a night. We have come from the land of Xylac, far in the north; and this morning we should have gone on through

Tasuun, toward Pharaad, the capital of Yoros, which lies near to the southern sea. Surely your god could have no claim upon Elaith, even if she were truly dead."

"All who die in Zul-Bha-Sair are the property of Mordiggian," insisted the taverner sententiously. "Outlanders are not exempt. The dark maw of his temple yawns eternally, and no man, no child, no woman, throughout the years, has evaded its yawning. All mortal flesh must become, in due time, the provender of the god."

Phariom shuddered at the oily and portentous declaration.

"Dimly have I heard of Mordiggian, as a legend that travelers tell in Xylac," he admitted. "But I had forgotten the name of his city; and Elaith and I came ignorantly into Zul-Bha-Sair.... Even had I known, I should have doubted the terrible custom of which you inform me. ...What manner of deity is this, who imitates the hyena and the vulture? Surely he is no god, but a ghoul."

"Take heed, lest you utter blasphemy," admonished the innkeeper. "Mordiggian is old and omnipotent as death. He was worshipped in former continents, before the lifting of Zothique from out the sea. Through him, we are saved from corruption and the worm. Even as the people of other places devote their dead to the consuming flame, so we of Zul-Bha-Sair deliver ours to the god. Awful is the fane, a place of terror and obscure shadow untrod by the sun, into which the dead are borne by his priests and are laid on a vast table of stone to await his coming from the nether vault in which he dwells. No living men, other than the priests, have ever beheld him; and the faces of the priests are hidden behind masks of silver, and even their hands are shrouded, that men may not gaze on them that have seen Mordiggian."

"But there is a king in Zul-Bha-Sair, is there not? I shall appeal to him against this heinous and horrible injustice. Surely he will heed me."

"Phenquor is the king; but he could not help you even if he wished. Your appeal will not even be heard. Mordiggian is above all kings, and his law is sacred. Hark!—for already the priests come."

Phariom, sick at heart with the charnel terror and cruelty of the doom that impended for his girlish wife in this unknown city of nightmare, heard an evil, stealthy creaking on the stairs that led to the attic of the inn. The sound drew nearer with inhuman rapidity, and four strange figures came into the room, heavily garbed in funereal purple, and wearing huge masks

of silver graven in the likeness of skulls. It was impossible to surmise their actual appearance, for, even as the taverner had hinted, their very hands were concealed by fingerless gloves; and the purple gowns came down in loose folds that trailed about their feet like unwinding cerecloths. There was a horror about them, of which the macabre masks were only a lesser element; a horror that lay partly in their unnatural, crouching attitudes, and the beast-like agility with which they moved, unhampered by their cumbrous habiliments.

Among them, they carried a curious bier, made from interwoven strips of leather, and with monstrous bones that served for frame and handles. The leather was greasy and blackened as if from long years of mortuary use. Without speaking to Phariom or the innkeeper, and with no delay or formality of any sort, they advanced toward the bed on which Elaith was lying.

Undeterred by their more than formidable aspect, and wholly distraught with grief and anger, Phariom drew from his girdle a short knife, the only weapon he possessed. Disregarding the minatory cry of the taverner, he rushed wildly upon the muffled figures. He was quick and muscular, and, moreover, was clad in light, close-fitting raiment, such as would seemingly have given him a brief advantage.

The priests had turned their backs upon him; but, as if they had foreseen his every action, two of them wheeled about with the swiftness of tigers, dropping the handles of bone that they carried. One of them struck the knife from Phariom’s hand with a movement that the eye could barely follow in its snaky darting. Then both assailed him, beating him back with terrible flailing blows of their shrouded arms, and hurling him half across the room into an empty corner. Stunned by his fall, he lay senseless for a term of minutes.

Recovering dazedly, with eyes that blurred as he opened them, he beheld the face of the stout taverner stooping above him like a tallow-colored moon. The thought of Elaith, more sharp than the thrust of a dagger, brought him back to agonizing consciousness. Fearfully he scanned the shadowy room, and saw that the cerемented priests were gone, that the bed was vacant. He heard the orotund and sepulchral croaking of the taverner:

“The priests of Mordiggian are merciful, they make allowance for the frenzy and distraction of the newly bereaved. It is well for you that they are compassionate, and considerate of mortal weakness.”

Phariom sprang erect, as if his bruised and aching body were scorched by a sudden fire. Pausing only to retrieve his knife, which still lay in the middle of the room, he started toward the door. He was stopped by the hand of the hosteler, clutching greasily at his shoulder.

“Beware, lest you exceed the bounds of the mercy of Mordiggian. It is an ill thing to follow his priests—and a worse thing to intrude upon the deathly and sacred gloom of his temple.”

Phariom scarcely heard the admonition. He wrenched himself hastily away from the odious fingers, and turned to go; but again the hand clutched him.

“At least, pay me the money that you owe for food and lodging, ere you depart,” demanded the innkeeper. “Also, there is the matter of the physician’s fee, which I can settle for you, if you will entrust me with the proper sum. Pay now—for there is no surety that you will return.”

Phariom drew out the purse that contained his entire worldly wealth, and filled the greedily cupped palm before him with coins that he did not pause to count. With no parting word or backward glance, he descended the mouldy and musty stairs of the worm-eaten hostelry, as if spurred by an incubus, and went out into the gloomy, serpentine streets of Zul-Bha-Sair.

II

Perhaps the city differed little from others, except in being older and darker; but to Phariom, in his extremity of anguish, the ways that he followed were like subterrene corridors that led only to some profound and monstrous charnel. The sun had risen above the overjutting houses, but it seemed to him that there was no light, other than a lost and doleful glimmering such as might descend into mortuary depths. The people, it may have been, were much like other people, but he saw them under a malefic aspect, as if they were ghouls and demons that went to and fro on the ghastly errands of a necropolis.

Bitterly, in his distraction, he recalled the previous evening, when he had entered Zul-Bha-Sair at twilight with Elaith, the girl riding on the one dromedary that had survived their passage of the northern desert, and he

walking beside her, weary but content. With the rosy purple of afterglow upon its walls and cupolas, with the deepening golden eyes of its lit windows, the place had seemed a fair and nameless city of dreams, and they had planned to rest there for a day or two before resuming the long, arduous journey to Pharaad, in Yoros.

This journey had been undertaken only through necessity. Phariom, an impoverished youth of noble blood, had been exiled because of the political and religious tenets of his family, which were not in accord with those of the reigning emperor, Caleppos. Taking his newly wedded wife, Phariom had set out for Yoros, where certain allied branches of the house to which he belonged had already established themselves, and would give him a fraternal welcome.

They had traveled with a large caravan of merchants, going directly southward to Tasuun. Beyond the borders of Xylac, amid the red sands of the Celotian waste, the caravan had been attacked by robbers, who had slain many of its members and dispersed the rest. Phariom and his bride, escaping with their dromedaries, had found themselves lost and alone in the desert, and, failing to regain the road toward Tasuun, had taken inadvertently another track, leading to Zul-Bha-Sair, a walled metropolis on the southwestern verge of the waste, which their itinerary had not included.

Entering Zul-Bha-Sair, the couple had repaired for reasons of economy to a tavern in the humbler quarter. There, during the night, Elaith had been overcome by the third seizure of the cataleptic malady to which she was liable. The earlier seizures, occurring before her marriage to Phariom, had been recognized in their true character by the physicians of Xylac, and had been palliated by skillful treatment. It was hoped that the malady would not recur. The third attack, no doubt, had been induced by the fatigues and hardships of the journey. Phariom had felt sure that Elaith would recover; but a doctor of Zul-Bha-Sair, hastily summoned by the innkeeper, had insisted that she was actually dead; and, in obedience to the strange law of the city, had reported her without delay to the priests of Mordiggian. The frantic protests of the husband had been utterly ignored.

There was, it seemed, a diabolic fatality about the whole train of circumstances through which Elaith, still living, though with that outward aspect of the tomb which her illness involved, had fallen into the grasp of the devotees of the charnel god. Phariom pondered this fatality almost to

madness, as he strode with furious, aimless haste along the eternally winding and crowded streets.

To the cheerless information received from the taverner, he added, as he went on, more and more of the tardily remembered legends which he had heard in Xylac. Ill and dubious indeed was the renown of Zul-Bha-Sair, and he marvelled that he should have forgotten it, and cursed himself with black curses for the temporary but fatal forgetfulness. Better would it have been if he and Elaith had perished in the desert, rather than enter the wide gates that stood always open, gaping for their prey, as was the custom of Zul-Bha-Sair.

The city was a mart of trade, where outland travellers came, but did not care to linger, because of the repulsive cult of Mordiggian, the invisible eater of the dead, who was believed to share his provender with the shrouded priests. It was said that the bodies lay for days in the dark temple and were not devoured till corruption had begun. And people whispered of fouler things than necrophagism, of blasphemous rites that were solemnized in the ghoul-ridden vaults, and nameless uses to which the dead were put before Mordiggian claimed them. In all outlying places, the fate of those who died in Zul-Bha-Sair was a dreadful byword and a malediction. But to the people of that city, reared in the faith of the ghoulish god, it was merely the usual and expected mode of mortuary disposal. Tombs, graves, catacombs, funeral pyres, and other such nuisances, were rendered needless by this highly utilitarian deity.

Phariom was surprised to see the people of the city going about the common businesses of life. Porters were passing with bales of household goods upon their shoulders. Merchants were squatting in their shops like other merchants. Buyers and sellers chaffered loudly in the public bazaars. Women laughed and chattered in the door ways. Only by their voluminous robes of red, black and violet, and their strange, uncouth accents, was he able to distinguish the men of Zul-Bha-Sair from those who were outlanders like himself. The murk of nightmare began to lift from his impressions; and gradually, as he went on, the spectacle of everyday humanity all about him helped to calm a little his wild distraction and desperation. Nothing could dissipate the horror of his loss, and the abominable fate that threatened Elaith. But now, with a cool logic born of the cruel exigence, he began to consider the apparently hopeless problem of rescuing her from the ghoul-god’s temple.

He composed his features, and constrained his febrile pacing to an idle saunter, so that none might guess the preoccupations that racked him inwardly. Pretending to be interested in the wares of a seller of men's apparel, he drew the dealer into converse regarding Zul-Bha-Sair and its customs, and made such inquiries as a traveler from far lands might make. The dealer was talkative, and Phariom soon learned from him the location of the temple of Mordiggian, which stood at the city's core. He also learned that the temple was open at all hours, and that people were free to come and go within its precincts. There were, however, no rituals of worship, other than certain private rites that were celebrated by the priesthood. Few cared to enter the fane, because of a superstition that any living person who intruded upon its gloom would return to it shortly as the provender of the god.

Mordiggian, it seemed, was indeed a benign deity in the eyes of the inhabitants of Zul-Bha-Sair. Curiously enough, no definite personal attributes were ascribed to him. He was, so to speak, an impersonal force akin to the elements—a consuming and cleansing power, like fire. His hierophants were equally mysterious; they lived in the temple and emerged from it only in the execution of their funeral duties. No one knew the manner of their recruiting, but many believed that they were both male and female, thus renewing their numbers from generation to generation with no ulterior commerce. Others thought that they were not human beings at all, but an order of subterranean earth-entities, who lived forever, and who fed upon corpses like the god himself. Through this latter belief, of late years, a minor heresy had risen, some holding that Mordiggian was a mere hieratic figment, and the priests were the sole devourers of the dead. The dealer, quoting this heresy, made haste to disavow it with pious reprobation.

Phariom chatted for awhile on other topics, and then continued his progress through the city, going as forthrightly toward the temple as the obliquely running thoroughfares would permit. He had formed no conscious plan, but desired to reconnoiter the vicinage. In that which the garment-dealer had told him, the one reassuring detail was the openness of the fane and its accessibility to all who dared enter. The rarity of visitors, however, would make Phariom conspicuous, and he wished above all to avoid attention. On the other hand, any effort to remove bodies from the temple was seemingly unheard of—a thing audacious beyond the dreams of the

people of Zul-Bha-Sair. Through the very boldness of his design, he might avoid suspicion, and succeed in rescuing Elaith.

The streets that he followed began to tend downward, and were narrower, dimmer and more tortuous than any he had yet traversed. He thought for awhile that he had lost his way, and he was about to ask the passers to redirect him, when four of the priests of Mordiggian, bearing one of the curious litter-like biers of bone and leather, emerged from an ancient alley just before him.

The bier was occupied by the body of a girl, and for one moment of convulsive shock and agitation that left him trembling, Phariom thought that the girl was Elaith. Looking again, he saw his mistake. The gown that the girl wore, though simple, was made of some rare exotic stuff. Her features, though pale as those of Elaith, were crowned with curls like the petals of heavy black poppies. Her beauty, warm and voluptuous even in death, differed from the blond pureness of Elaith as tropic lilies differ from narcissi.

Quietly, and maintaining a discreet interval, Phariom followed the sullenly shrouded figures and their lovely burden. He saw that people made way for the passage of the bier with awed, unquestioning alacrity; and the loud voices of hucksters and chafferers were hushed as the priests went by. Overhearing a murmured conversation between two of the townsfolk, he learned that the dead girl was Arctela, daughter of Quaos, a high noble and magistrate of Zul-Bha-Sair. She had died very quickly and mysteriously, from a cause unknown to the physicians, which had not marred or wasted her beauty in the least. There were those who held that an indetectable poison, rather than disease, had been the agency of death; and others deemed her the victim of malefic sorcery.

The priests went on, and Phariom kept them in sight as well as he could in the blind tangle of streets. The way steepened, without affording any clear prospect of the levels below, and the houses seemed to crowd more closely, as if huddling back from a precipice. Finally the youth emerged behind his macabre guides in a sort of circular hollow at the city’s heart, where the temple of Mordiggian loomed alone and separate amid pavements of sad onyx, and funerary cedars whose green had blackened as if with the undeparting charnel shadows bequeathed by dead ages.

The edifice was built of a strange stone, hued as with the blackish purple of carnal decay: a stone that refused the ardent luster of noon, and

the prodigality of dawn or sunset glory. It was low and windowless, having the form of a monstrous mausoleum. Its portals yawned sepulchrally in the gloom of the cedars.

Phariom watched the priests as they vanished within the portals, carrying the girl Arctela like phantoms who bear a phantom burden. The broad area of pavement between the recoiling houses and the temple was now deserted, but he did not venture to cross it in the blare of betraying daylight. Circling the area, he saw that there were several other entrances to the great fane, all open and unguarded. There was no sign of activity about the place; but he shuddered uncontrollably at the thought of that which was hidden within its walls, even as the feasting of worms is hidden in the marble tomb.

Like a vomiting of charnels, the abominations of which he had heard rose up before him in the sunlight; and again he drew close to madness, knowing that Elaith must lie among the dead, in the temple, with the foul umbrage of such things upon her, and that he, consumed with unremitting frenzy, must wait for the favorable shrouding of darkness before he could execute his nebulous, doubtful plan of rescue. In the meanwhile, she might awake, and perish from the mortal horror of her surroundings... or worse even than this might befall, if the whispered tales were true....

III

Abnon-Tha, sorcerer and necromancer, was felicitating himself on the bargain he had made with the priests of Mordiggian. He felt, perhaps justly, that no one less clever than Abnon-Tha could have conceived and executed the various procedures that had made possible this bargain, through which Arctela, daughter of the proud Quaos, would became his unquestioning slave. No other lover, he told himself, could have been resourceful enough to obtain a desired woman in this way. Arctela, betrothed to Alos, a young noble of the city, was seemingly beyond the aspiration of a sorcerer. Abnon-Tha, however, was no common hedge-wizard, but an adept of long standing in the most awful and profound arcana of the black arts. He knew the spells that kill more quickly and surely than knife or poison, at a distance; and he knew also the darker spells by which the dead can be reanimated, even after

years or ages of decay. He had slain Arctela in a manner that none could detect, with a rare and subtle invultuation that had left no mark; and her body lay now among the dead, in Mordiggian's temple. Tonight, with the tacit connivance of the terrible, shrouded priests, he would bring her back to life.

Abnon-Tha was not native to Zul-Bha-Sair, but had come many years before from the infamous, half-mythic isle of Sotar, lying somewhere to the east of the huge continent of Zothique. Like a sleek young vulture, he had established himself in the very shadow of the charnel fane, and had prospered, taking to himself pupils and assistants.

His dealings with the priests were long and extensive, and the bargain he had just made was far from being the first of its kind. They had allowed him the temporary use of bodies claimed by Mordiggian, stipulating only that these bodies should not be removed from the temple during the course of any of his experiments in necromancy. Since the privilege was slightly irregular from their viewpoint, he had found it necessary to bribe them—not, however, with gold, but with the promise of a liberal purveyance of matters more sinister and corruptible than gold. The arrangement had been satisfactory enough to all concerned: cadavers had poured into the temple with more than their usual abundance ever since the coming of the sorcerer; the god had not lacked for provender; and Abnon-Tha had never lacked for subjects on which to employ his more baleful spells.

On the whole, Abnon-Tha was not ill-pleased with himself. He reflected moreover, that, aside from his mastery of magic and his sleightful ingenuity, he was about to manifest a well-nigh unexampled courage. He had planned a robbery that would amount to dire sacrilege: the removal of the reanimated body of Arctela from the temple. Such robberies (either of animate or exanimate corpses), and the penalty attached to them, were a matter of legend only; for none had occurred in recent ages. Thrice terrible, according to common belief, was the doom of those who had tried, and failed. The necromancer was not blind to the risks of his enterprise; nor, on the other hand, was he deterred or intimidated by them.

His two assistants, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, apprised of his intention, had made with all due privity the necessary preparations for their flight from Zul-Bha-Sair. The strong passion that the sorcerer had conceived for Arctela was not his only motive, perhaps, in removing from that city. He was desirous of change, for he had grown a little weary of the odd laws that

really served to restrict his necromantic practices, while facilitating them in a sense. He planned to travel southward, and establish himself in one of the cities of Tasuun, an empire famous for the number and antiquity of its mummies.

It was now sunset-time. Five dromedaries, bred for racing, waited in the inner courtyard of Abnon-Tha's house, a high and mouldering mansion that seemed to lean forward upon the open, circular area belonging to the temple. One of the dromedaries would carry a bale containing the sorcerer's most valuable books, manuscripts, and other impedimenta of magic. Its fellows would bear Abnon-Tha, the two assistants—and Arctela.

Narghai and Vemba-Tsith appeared before their master to tell him that all was made ready. Both were much younger than Abnon-Tha; but, like himself, they were outlanders in Zul-Bha-Sair. They came of the swart and narrow-eyed people of Naat, an isle that was little less infamous than Sotar.

"It is well," said the necromancer, as they stood before him with lowered eyes, after making their announcement. "We have only to await the favorable hour. Midway between sunset and moonrise, when the priests are at their supper in the nether adytum, we will enter the temple and perform that which must be done for the rising of Arctela. *They* feed well tonight, for I know that many of the dead grow ripe on the great table in the upper sanctuary; and it may be that Mordiggian feeds also. None will come to watch us at our doings."

"But, master," said Narghai, shivering a little beneath his robe of nacarat red, "is it wise, after all, to do this thing? ... Must you take the girl from the temple? Always, ere this, you have contented yourself with the brief loan that the priests allow, and have rendered back the dead in the required state of exanimation. Truly, is it well to violate the law of the god? Men say that the wrath of Mordiggian, though seldom loosed, is more dreadful than the wrath of all other deities. For this reason, none has dared to defraud him in latter years, or attempt the removal of any of the corpses from his fane. Long ago, it is told, a high noble of the city bore hence the cadaver of a woman he had loved, and fled with it into the desert; but the priests pursued him, running more swiftly than jackals... and the fate that overtook him is a thing whereof the legends whisper but dimly."

"I fear neither Mordiggian nor his creatures," said Abnon-Tha, with a sort of solemn vainglory in his voice. "My dromedaries can outrun the priests—even granting that the priests are not men at all, but ghouls, as

some say. And there is small likelihood that they will follow us: after their feasting tonight, they will sleep like gorged vultures. The morrow will find us far on the road to Tasuun, ere they awake."

"The master is right," interpolated Vemba-Tsith. "We have nothing to fear."

"But they say that Mordiggian does not sleep," insisted Narghai, "and that he watches all things eternally from his black vault beneath the temple."

"So I have heard," said Abnon-Tha, with a dry and learned air. "But I consider that such beliefs are mere superstition. There is nothing to confirm them in the real nature of corpse-eating entities. So far, I have never beheld Mordiggian, either sleeping or awake; but in all likelihood he is merely a common ghoul. I know these demons and their habits. They differ from hyenas only through their monstrous shape and size, and their immortality."

"Still, I must deem it an ill thing to cheat Mordiggian," muttered Narghai beneath his breath.

The words were caught by the quick ears of Abnon-Tha. "Nay, there is no question of cheating. Well have I served Mordiggian and his priesthood, and amply have I larded their black table. Also, I shall keep, in a sense, the bargain I have made concerning Arctela: the providing of a new cadaver in return for my necromantic privilege. Tomorrow, the youth Alos, the betrothed of Arctela, will lie in her place among the dead. Go now, and leave me, for I must devise the inward invultuation that will rot the heart of Alos, like a worm that awakens at the core of fruit."

IV

To Phariom, fevered and distraught, it seemed that the cloudless day went by with the sluggishness of a corpse-clogged river. Unable to calm his agitation, he wandered aimlessly through the thronged bazaars, till the western towers grew dark on a heaven of saffron flame, and the twilight rose like a grey and curdling sea among the houses. Then he returned to the inn where Elaith had been stricken, and claimed the dromedary which he had left in the tavern stables. Riding the animal through dim thoroughfares,

lit only by the covert gleam of lamps or tapers from half-closed windows, he found his way once more to the city's center.

The dusk had thickened into darkness when he came to the open area surrounding Mordiggian's temple. The windows of mansions fronting the area were shut and lightless as dead eyes, and the fane itself, a colossal bulk of gloom, was rayless as any mausoleum beneath the gathering stars. No one, it seemed, was abroad, and though the quietude was favorable to his project, Phariom shivered with a chill of deathly menace and desolation. The hoofs of his camel rang on the pavement with a startling and preternatural clangor, and he thought that the ears of hidden ghouls, listening alertly behind the silence, must surely hear them.

However, there was no stirring of life in that sepulchral gloom. Reaching the shelter of one of the thick groups of ancient cedars, he dismounted and tied the dromedary to a low-growing branch. Keeping among the trees, like a shadow among shadows, he approached the temple with infinite wariness, and circled it slowly, finding that its four doorways, which corresponded to the four quarters of the Earth, were all wide-open, deserted, and equally dark. Returning at length to the eastern side, on which he had tethered his camel, he emboldened himself to enter the blackly gaping portal.

Crossing the threshold, he was engulfed instantly by a dead and clammy darkness, touched with the faint fetor of corruption, and a smell as of charred bone and flesh. He thought that he was in a huge corridor, and feeling his way forward along the right-hand wall, he soon came to a sudden turn, and saw a bluish glimmering far ahead, as if in some central adytum where the hall ended. Massy columns were silhouetted against the glimmering; and across it, as he drew nearer, several dark and muffled figures passed, presenting the profiles of enormous skulls. Two of them were sharing the burden of a human body which they carried in their arms. To Phariom, pausing in the shadowy hall, it appeared that the vague taint of putrescence upon the air grew stronger for a few instants after the figures had come and gone.

They were not succeeded by any others, and the fane resumed its mausolean stillness. But the youth waited for many minutes, doubtful and trepidant, before venturing to go on. An oppression of mortuary mystery thickened the air, and stifled him like the noisome effluvia of catacombs. His ears became intolerably acute, and he heard a dim humming, a sound of

deep and viscid voices indistinguishably blent, that appeared to issue from crypts beneath the temple.

Stealing at length to the hall's end, he peered beyond into what was obviously the main sanctuary: a low and many-pillared room, whose vastness was but half-revealed by the bluish fires that glowed and flickered in numerous urnlike vessels borne aloft on slender stelae.

Phariom hesitated upon that awful threshold, for the mingled odors of burnt and decaying flesh were heavier on the air, as if he had drawn nearer to their sources; and the thick humming seemed to ascend from a dark stairway in the floor, beside the left-hand wall. But the room, to all appearance, was empty of life, and nothing stirred except the wavering lights and shadows. The watcher discerned the outlines of a vast table in the center, carved from the same black stone as the building itself. Upon the table, half-lit by the flaming urns, or shrouded by the umbrage of the heavy columns, a number of people lay side by side; and Phariom knew that he had found the black altar of Mordiggian, whereon were disposed the bodies claimed by the god.

A wild and stifling fear contended with a wilder hope in his bosom. Trembling, he went toward the table; and a cold clamminess, wrought by the presence of the dead, assailed him. The table was nearly thirty feet in length, and it rose waist-high on a dozen mighty legs. Beginning at the nearer end, he passed along the row of corpses, peering fearfully into each upturned face. Both sexes, and many ages and differing ranks were represented. Nobles and rich merchants were crowded by beggars in filthy rags. Some were newly dead, and others, it seemed, had lain there for days, and were beginning to show the marks of corruption. There were many gaps in the ordered row, suggesting that certain of the corpses had been recently removed. Phariom went on in the dim light, searching for the loved features of Elaith. At last, when he was nearing the further end, and had begun to fear that she was not among them, he found her.

With the cryptic pallor and stillness of her strange malady upon her, she lay unchanged on the chill stone. A great thankfulness was born in the heart of Phariom, for he felt sure that she was not dead — and that she had not awakened at any time to the horrors of the temple. If he could bear her away from the hateful purlieus of Zul-Bha-Sair without detection, she would recover from her death-simulating sickness.

Cursorily, he noted that another woman was lying beside Elaith, and recognized her as the beautiful Arctela, whose bearers he had followed almost to the portals of the fane. He gave her no second glance, but stooped to lift Elaith in his arms.

At that moment, he heard a murmur of low voices in the direction of the door by which he had entered the sanctuary. Thinking that some of the priests had returned, he dropped swiftly on hands and knees and crawled beneath the ponderous table, which afforded the only accessible hiding-place. Retreating into shadow beyond the glimmering shed from the lofty urns, he waited and looked out between the pillar-thick legs.

The voices grew louder, and he saw the curiously sandaled feet and shortish robes of three persons who approached the table of the dead and paused in the very spot where he himself had stood a few instants before. Who they were, he could not surmise; but their garments of light and swarthy red were not the shroudings of Mordiggian's priests. He was uncertain whether or not they had seen him; and crouching in the low space beneath the table, he plucked his dagger from its sheath.

Now, he was able to distinguish three voices, one solemn and unctuously imperative, one somewhat guttural and growling, and the other shrill and nasal. The accents were alien, differing from those of the men of Zul-Bha-Sair, and the words were often strange to Phariom. Also, much of the converse was inaudible.

"... here... at the end," said the solemn voice. "Be swift... We have no time to loiter."

"Yes, Master," came the growling voice. "But who is this other?... Truly, she is very fair."

A discussion seemed to take place, in discreetly lowered tones. Apparently the owner of the guttural voice was urging something that the other two opposed. The listener could distinguish only a word here and there; but he gathered that the name of the first person was Vemba-Tsith, and that the one who spoke in a nasal shrilling was called Narghai. At last, above the others, the grave accents of the man addressed only as the Master were clearly audible:

"I do not altogether approve... It will delay our departure... and the two must ride on one dromedary. But take her, Vemba-Tsith, if you can perform the necessary spells unaided. I have no time for a double incantation... It will be a good test of your proficiency."

There was a mumbling as of thanks or acknowledgment from Vemba-Tsith. Then the voice of the Master: “Be quiet now, and make haste.” To Phariom, wondering vaguely and uneasily as to the import of this colloquy, it seemed that two of the three men pressed closer to the table, as if stooping above the dead. He heard a rustling of cloth upon stone, and an instant later, he saw that all three were departing among the columns and stelae, in a direction opposite to that from which they had entered the sanctuary. Two of them carried burdens that glimmered palely and indistinctly in the shadows.

A black horror clutched at the heart of Phariom, for all too clearly he surmised the nature of those burdens—and the possible identity of one of them. Quickly he crawled forth from his hiding-place, and saw that Elaith was gone from the black table, together with the girl Arctela. He saw the vanishing of shadowy figures in the gloom that zoned the chamber’s western wall. Whether the abductors were ghouls, or worse than ghouls, he could not know, but he followed swiftly, forgetful of all caution in his concern for Elaith.

Reaching the wall, he found the mouth of a corridor, and plunged into it headlong. Somewhere in the gloom ahead, he saw a ruddy glimmering of light. Then he heard a sullen, metallic grating; and the glimmer narrowed to a slit-like gleam, as if the door of the chamber from which it issued were being closed.

Following the blind wall, he came to that slit of crimson light. A door of darkly tarnished bronze had been left ajar, and Phariom peered in on a weird, unholy scene, illumined by the blood-like flames that flared and soared unsteadily from high urns upborne on sable pedestals.

The room was full of a sensuous luxury that accorded strangely with the dull, funereal stone of that temple of death. There were couches and carpets of superbly figured stuffs, vermilion, gold, azure, silver; and jewelled censers of unknown metals stood in the far corners. A low table at one side was littered with curious bottles, and occult appliances such as might be used in medicine or sorcery.

Elaith was lying on one of the couches, and near her, on a second couch, the body of the girl Arctela had been disposed. The abductors, whose faces Phariom now beheld for the first time, were busying themselves with singular preparations that mystified him prodigiously. His impulse to invade

the room was repressed by a sort of wonder that held him enthralled and motionless.

One of the three, a tall, middle-aged man whom he identified as the Master, had assembled certain peculiar vessels, including a small brazier and a censer, and had set them on the floor beside Arctela. The second, a younger man with lecherously slitted eyes, had placed similar impedimenta before Elaith. The third, who was also young and evil of aspect, merely stood and looked on with an apprehensive, uneasy air.

Phariom divined that the men were sorcerers when, with a deftness born of long practice, they lit the censers and braziers, and began simultaneously the intonation of rhythmically measured words in a strange tongue accompanied by the sprinkling, at regular intervals, of black oils that fell with a great hissing on the coals in the braziers and sent up enormous clouds of pearly smoke. Dark threads of vapor serpentined from the censers, interweaving themselves like veins through the dim, misshapen figures as of ghostly giants that were formed by the lighter fumes. A reek of intolerably acrid balsams filled the chamber, assailing and troubling the senses of Phariom, till the scene wavered before him and took on a dreamlike vastness, a narcotic distortion.

The voices of the necromancers mounted and fell as if in some unholy paean. Imperious, exigent, they seemed to implore the consummation of forbidden blasphemy. Like thronging phantoms, writhing and swirling with malignant life, the vapors rose about the couches on which lay the dead girl and the girl who bore the outward likeness of death.

Then, as the fumes were riven apart in their baleful seething, Phariom saw that the pale figure of Elaith had stirred like a sleeper who awakens, that she had opened her eyes and was lifting a feeble hand from the gorgeous couch. The younger necromancer ceased his chanting on a sharply broken cadence; but the solemn tones of the other still went on, and still there was a spell on the limbs and senses of Phariom, making it impossible for him to stir.

Slowly, the vapors thinned like a rout of dissolving phantoms. The watcher saw that the dead girl, Arctela, was rising to her feet like a somnambulist. The chanting of Abnon-Tha, standing before her, came sonorously to an end. In the awful silence that followed, Phariom heard a weak cry from Elaith, and then the exultant, growling voice of Vemba-Tsith, who was stooping above her:

“Behold, O Abnon-Tha! My spells are swifter than yours, for she that I have chosen awakened before Arctela!”

Phariom was released from his thralldom, as if through the lifting of an evil enchantment. He flung back the ponderous door of darkened bronze, that ground with protesting clangors on its hinges. His dagger drawn, he rushed into the room.

Elaith, her eyes wide with piteous bewilderment, turned toward him and made an ineffectual effort to arise from the couch. Arctela, mute and submissive before Abnon-Tha, appeared to heed nothing but the will of the necromancer. She was like a fair and soulless automaton. The sorcerers, turning as Phariom entered, sprang back with instant agility before his onset, and drew the short, cruelly crooked swords which they all carried. Narghai struck the knife from Phariom’s fingers with a darting blow that shattered its thin blade at the hilt, and Vemba-Tsith, his weapon swinging back in a vicious arc, would have killed the youth promptly if Abnon-Tha had not intervened and bade him stay.

Phariom, standing furious but irresolute before the lifted swords, was aware of the darkly searching eyes of Abnon-Tha, like those of some nyctalopic bird of prey.

“I would know the meaning of this intrusion,” said the necromancer. “Truly, you are bold to enter the temple of Mordiggian.”

“I came to find the girl who lies yonder,” declared Phariom. “She is Elaith, my wife, who was claimed unjustly by the god. But tell me, why have you brought her to this room, from the table of Mordiggian, and what manner of men are you, that raise up the dead as you have raised this other woman?”

“I am Abnon-Tha, the necromancer, and these others are my pupils, Narghai and Vemba-Tsith. Give thanks to Vemba-Tsith, for verily he has brought back your wife from the purlieus of the dead with a skill excelling that of his master. She awoke ere the incantation was finished!”

Phariom glared with implacable suspicion at Abnon-Tha. “Elaith was not dead, but only as one in a trance,” he averred. “It was not your pupil’s sorcery that awakened her. And verily, whether Elaith be dead or living is not a matter that should concern any but myself. Permit us to depart, for I wish to remove with her from Zul-Bha-Sair, in which we are only passing travelers.”

So speaking, he turned his back on the necromancers, and went over to Elaith, who regarded him with dazed eyes but uttered his name feebly as he clasped her in his arms.

“Now this is a remarkable coincidence,” purred Abnon-Tha. “I and my pupils are also planning to depart from Zul-Bha-Sair, and we start this very night. Perhaps you will honor us with your company.”

“I thank you,” said Phariom, curtly. “But I am not sure that our roads lie together. Elaith and I would go toward Tasuun.”

“Now, by the black altar of Mordiggian, that is a still stranger coincidence, for Tasuun is also our destination. We take with us the resurrected girl Arctela, whom I have deemed too fair for the charnel god and his ghouls.”

Phariom divined the dark evil that lay behind the oily, mocking speeches of the necromancer. Also, he saw the furtive and sinister sign that Abnon-Tha had made to his assistants. Weaponless, he could only give a formal assent to the sardonic proposal. He knew well that he would not be permitted to leave the temple alive, for the narrow eyes of Narghai and Vemba-Tsith, regarding him closely, were alight with the red lust of murder.

“Come,” said Abnon-Tha, in a voice of imperious command, “it is time to go.” He turned to the still figure of Arctela and spoke an unknown word. With vacant eyes and noctambulistic paces, she followed at his heels as he stepped toward the open door. Phariom had helped Elaith to her feet, and was whispering words of reassurance in an effort to lull the growing horror and confused alarm that he saw in her eyes. She was able to walk, albeit slowly and uncertainly. Vemba-Tsith and Narghai drew back, motioning that she and Phariom should precede them; but Phariom, sensing their intent to slay him as soon as his back was turned, obeyed unwillingly and looked desperately about for something that he could seize as a weapon.

One of the metal braziers, full of smouldering coals, was at his very feet. He stooped quickly, lifted it in his hands, and turned upon the necromancers. Vemba-Tsith, as he had suspected, was prowling toward him with upraised sword, and was making ready to strike. Phariom hurled the brazier and its glowing contents full in the necromancer’s face, and Vemba-Tsith went down with a terrible, smothered cry. Narghai, snarling ferociously, leapt forward to assail the defenseless youth. His scimitar gleamed with a wicked luster in the lurid glare of the urns as he swung it

back for the blow. But the weapon did not fall; and Phariom, steeling himself against the impending death, became aware that Narghai was staring beyond him as if petrified by the vision of some Gorgonian specter.

As if compelled by another will than his own, the youth turned—and saw the thing that had arrested Narghai's blow. Arctela and Abnon-Tha, pausing before the open door, were outlined against a colossal shadow that was not wrought by anything in the room. It filled the portals from side to side, it towered above the lintel—and then, swiftly, it became more than a shadow: it was a bulk of darkness, black and opaque, that somehow blinded the eyes with a strange dazzlement. It seemed to suck the flame from the red urns and inform the chamber with a chill of utter death and voidness. Its form was that of a worm-shapen column, huge as a dragon, its further coils still issuing from the gloom of the corridor; but it changed from moment to moment, swirling and spinning as if with the vortical energies of dark eons. Briefly it took the semblance of some demoniac giant with eyeless head and limbless body; and then, leaping and spreading like smoky fire, it swept forward into the chamber.

Abnon-Tha fell back before it, with frantic mumblings of malediction or exorcism; but Arctela, pale and slight and motionless, remained full in its path, while the thing enfolded her and enveloped her with a hungry flaring until she was hidden wholly from view.

Phariom, supporting Elaith, who leaned weakly on his shoulder as if about to swoon, was powerless to move. He forgot the murderous Narghai, and it seemed that he and Elaith were but faint shadows in the presence of embodied death and dissolution. He saw the Blackness grow and wax with the towering of fed flame as it closed about Arctela; and he saw it gleam with eddying hues of somber iris, like the spectrum of a sable sun. For an instant, he heard a soft and flame-like murmuring. Then, quickly and terribly, the thing ebbed from the room. Arctela was gone, as if she had dissolved like a phantom on the air. Borne on a sudden gust of strangely mingled heat and cold, there came an acrid odor, such as would rise from a burnt-out funeral pyre.

"Mordiggian!" shrilled Narghai, in hysteric terror. "It was the god Mordiggian! He has taken Arctela!"

It seemed that his cry was answered by a score of sardonic echoes, unhuman as the howling of hyenas, and yet articulate, that repeated the name Mordiggian. Into the room, from the dark hall, there poured a horde

of creatures whose violet robes alone identified them in Phariom's eyes as the priests of the ghoul-god. They had removed the skull-like masks, revealing heads and faces that were half-anthropomorphic, half-canine, and wholly diabolic. Also, they had taken off the fingerless gloves.... There were at least a dozen of them. Their curving talons gleamed in the bloody light like hooks of darkly tarnished metal; their spiky teeth, longer than coffin nails, protruded from snarling lips. They closed like a ring of jackals on Abnon-Tha and Narghai, driving them back into the farthest corner. Several others, entering tardily, fell with a bestial ferocity on Vemba-Tsith, who had begun to revive, and was moaning and writhing on the floor amid the scattered coals of the brazier.

They seemed to ignore Phariom and Elaith, who stood looking on as if in some baleful trance. But the hindmost, ere he joined the assailants of Vemba-Tsith, turned to the youthful pair and addressed them in a hoarse, hollow voice, like a tomb-reverberate barking:

"Go, for Mordiggian is a just god, who claims only the dead, and has no concern with the living. And we, the priests of Mordiggian, deal in our own fashion with those who would violate his law by removing the dead from the temple."

Phariom, with Elaith still leaning on his shoulder, went out into the dark hall, hearing a hideous clamor in which the screams of men were mingled with a growling as of jackals, a laughter as of hyenas. The clamor ceased as they entered the blue-lit sanctuary and passed toward the outer corridor; and the silence that filled Mordiggian's fane behind them was deep as the silence of the dead on the black altar-table.

THE DARK EIDOLON

Thasaidon, lord of seven hells
Wherein the single Serpent dwells,
With volumes drawn from pit to pit
Through fire and darkness infinite —
Thasaidon, sun of nether skies,
Thine ancient evil never dies,
For aye thy somber fulgors flame
On sunken worlds that have no name,
Man’s heart enthrones thee, still supreme,
Though the false sorcerers blaspheme.
— *The Song of Xeethra*

On Zothique, the last continent of Earth, the sun no longer shone with the whiteness of its prime, but was dim and tarnished as if with a vapor of blood. New stars without number had declared themselves in the heavens, and the shadows of the infinite had fallen closer. And out of the shadows, the older gods had returned to man: the gods forgotten since Hyperborea, since Mu and Poseidonis, bearing other names but the same attributes. And the elder demons had also returned, battening mightily on the fumes of evil sacrifice, and fostering again the primordial sorceries.

Many were the necromancers and magicians of Zothique, and the infamy and marvel of their doings was legended everywhere in the latter days. But among them all there was none greater than Namirrha, who imposed his black yoke on the cities of Xylac, and later, in a proud delirium, deemed himself the veritable peer of Thasaidon, lord of Evil.

Namirrha had built his abode in Ummaos, the chief town of Xylac, to which he came from the desert realm of Tasuun with the dark renown of his

thaumaturgies like a cloud of desert storm behind him. And no man knew that in coming to Ummaos he returned to the city of his birth, for all deemed him a native of Tasuun. Indeed, none could have dreamt that the great sorcerer was one with the beggar-boy, Narthos, an orphan of questionable parentage, who had begged his daily bread in the streets and bazaars of Ummaos. Wretchedly had he lived, alone and despised; and a hatred of the cruel, opulent city grew in his heart like a smothered flame that feeds in secret, biding the time when it shall become a conflagration consuming all things.

Bitterer always, through his boyhood and early youth, was the spleen and rancor of Narthos toward men. And one day the prince Zotulla, a boy but little older than he, riding a restive palfrey, came upon him in the square before the imperial palace; and Narthos implored an alms. But Zotulla, scorning his plea, rode arrogantly forward, spurring the palfrey; and Narthos was ridden down and trampled under its hooves. And afterwards, nigh to death from the trampling, he lay senseless for many hours, while the people passed him by unheeding. And at last, regaining his senses, he dragged himself to his hovel; but he limped a little thereafter all his days, and the mark of one hoof remained like a brand on his body, fading never. Later, he left Ummaos and was forgotten quickly by its people. Going southward into Tasuun, he lost his way in the great desert, and was near to perishing. But finally he came to a small oasis, where dwelt the wizard Ouphaloc, a hermit who preferred the company of honest hyenas and jackals to that of men. And Ouphaloc, seeing the great craft and evil in the starveling boy, gave succor to Narthos and sheltered him. He dwelt for years with Ouphaloc, becoming the wizard’s pupil and the heir of his demon-wrested lore. Strange things he learned in that hermitage, being fed on fruits and grain that had sprung not from the watered earth, and wine that was not the juice of terrene grapes. And like Ouphaloc, he became a master in devildom and drove his own bond with the archfiend Thasaidon. When Ouphaloc died, he took the name of Namirrha, and went forth as a mighty sorcerer among the wandering peoples and the deep-buried mummies of Tasuun. But never could he forget the miseries of his boyhood in Ummaos and the wrong he had endured from Zotulla; and year by year he spun over in his thoughts the black web of revenge. And his fame grew ever darker and vaster, and men feared him in remote lands beyond Tasuun. With bated whispers they spoke of his deeds in the cities of Yoros, and in Zul-Bha-Sair,

the abode of the ghoulish deity Mordiggian. And long before the coming of Namirrha himself, the people of Ummaos knew him as a fabled scourge that was direr than simoom or pestilence.

Now, in the years that followed the going-forth of the boy Narthos from Ummaos, Pithaim, the father of Prince Zotulla, was slain by the sting of a small adder that had crept into his bed for warmth on an autumn night. Some said that the adder had been purveyed by Zotulla, but this was a thing that no man could verily affirm. After the death of Pithaim, Zotulla, being his only son, was emperor of Xylac, and ruled evilly from his throne in Ummaos. Indolent he was, and tyrannic, and full of strange luxuries and cruelties; but the people, who were also evil, acclaimed him in his turpitude. So he prospered, and the lords of hell and heaven smote him not. And the red suns and ashen moons went westward over Xylac, falling into that seldom-voyaged sea, which, if the mariners' tales were true, poured evermore like a swiftening river past the infamous isle of Naat, and fell in a worldwide cataract upon nether space from the far, sheer edge of Earth.

Still grosser he grew, and his sins were as overswollen fruits that ripen above a deep abyss. But the winds of time blew softly; and the fruits fell not. And Zotulla laughed amid his fools and eunuchs and lemans; and the tale of his luxuries was borne afar, and was told by dim outland peoples, as a twin marvel with the bruited sorceries of Namirrha.

It came to pass, in the year of the Hyena, and the month of the star Canicule, that a great feast was given by Zotulla to the inhabitants of Ummaos. Meats that had been cooked in exotic spices from Sotar, isle of the east, were spread everywhere; and the ardent wines of Yoros and Xylac, filled as with subterranean fires, were poured inexhaustibly from huge urns for all. The wines awoke a furious mirth and a royal madness; and afterwards they brought a slumber no less profound than the Lethe of the tomb. And one by one, as they drank, the revellers fell down in the streets, the houses and gardens, as if a plague had struck them; and Zotulla slept in his banquet-hall of gold and ebony, with his odalisques and his chamberlains about him. So, in all Ummaos, there was no man or woman wakeful at the hour when Sirius began to fall toward the west.

Thus it was that none saw or heard the coming of Namirrha. But awakening heavily in the latter forenoon, the emperor Zotulla heard a confused babble, a troublous clamor of voices from such of his eunuchs and

women as had awakened before him. Inquiring the cause, he was told that a strange prodigy had occurred during the night; but, being still bemused with wine and slumber, he comprehended little enough of its nature, till his favorite concubine, Obexah, led him to the eastern portico of the palace, from which he could behold the marvel with his own eyes.

Now the palace stood alone at the center of Ummaos, and to north, west and south, for wide intervals of distance, there stretched the imperial gardens, full of superbly arching palms and loftily spiring fountains. But to eastward was a broad open area, used as a sort of common, between the palace and the mansions of high optimates. And in this space, which had lain wholly vacant at eve, a building towered colossal and lordly beneath the full-risen sun, with domes like monstrous fungi of stone that had come up in the night. And the domes, rearing level with those of Zotulla, were builded of death-white marble; and the huge facade, with multi-columned porticoes and deep balconies, was wrought in alternate zones of night-black onyx and porphyry hued as with dragons'-blood. And Zotulla swore lewdly, calling with hoarse blasphemies on the gods and devils of Xylac; and great was his dumbfoundment, deeming the marvel a work of wizardry. The women gathered about him, crying out with shrill cries of awe and terror; and more and more of his courtiers, awakening, came to swell the fearful hubbub; and the fat castradoes diddered in their cloth-of-gold like immense black jellies in golden basins. But Zotulla, mindful of his dominion as emperor of all Xylac, strove to conceal his own trepidation, saying:

"Now who is this that has presumed to enter Ummaos like a jackal in the dark, and has made his impious den in proximity and counterview of my palace? Go forth, and inquire the miscreant's name; but ere you go, instruct the imperial headsman to make sharp his double-handed sword."

Then, fearing the emperor's wrath if they tarried, certain of the chamberlains went forth unwillingly and approached the portals of the strange edifice. It seemed that the portals were deserted till they drew near, and then, on the threshold, there appeared a titanic skeleton, taller than any man of earth; and it strode forward to meet them with ell-long strides. The skeleton was swathed in a loin cloth of scarlet silk with a buckle of jet, and it wore a black turban, starred with diamonds, whose topmost foldings nearly touched the lofty lintel. Eyes like flickering marsh-fires burned in its deep eye-sockets; and a blackened tongue like that of a long-dead man

protruded between its teeth; but otherwise it was clean of flesh, and the bones glittered whitely in the sun as it came onward.

The chamberlains were mute before it, and there was no sound except the golden creaking of their girdles, the shrill rustling of their silks, as they shook and trembled. And the foot-bones of the skeleton clicked sharply on the pavement of sable onyx as it paused; and the putrefying tongue began to quiver between its teeth; and it uttered these words in an unctuous, nauseous voice:

“Return, and tell the emperor Zotulla that Namirrha, seer and magician, has come to dwell beside him.”

Hearing the skeleton speak as if it had been a living man, and hearing the dread name of Namirrha as men hear the tocsin of doom in some fallen city, the chamberlains could stand before it no longer, and they fled with ungainly swiftness and bore the message to Zotulla.

Now, learning who it was that had come to neighbor with him in Ummaos, the emperor’s wrath died out like a feeble and blustering flame on which the wind of darkness has blown; and the vinous purple of his cheeks was mottled with a strange pallor; and he said nothing, but his lips mumbled loosely as if in prayer or malediction. And the news of Namirrha’s coming passed like the flight of evil night-birds through all the palace and throughout the city, leaving a noisome terror that abode in Ummaos thereafter till the end. For Namirrha, through the black renown of his thaumaturgies and the frightful entities who served him, had become a power that no secular sovereign dared dispute; and men feared him everywhere, even as they feared the gigantic, shadowy lords of hell and of infinite space. And in Ummaos, people said that he had come on the desert wind from Tasuun with his underlings, even as the pestilence comes, and had reared his house in an hour with the aid of devils beside Zotulla’s palace. And they said that the foundations of the house were laid on the adamantine cope of hell; and in its floors were pits at whose bottom burned the nether fires, or stars could be seen as they passed under in lowermost night. And the followers of Namirrha were the dead of strange kingdoms, the demons of sky and earth and the abyss, and mad, impious, hybrid things that the sorcerer himself had created from forbidden unions.

Men shunned the neighborhood of his lordly house; and in the palace of Zotulla, few cared to approach the windows and balconies that gave thereon; and the emperor himself spoke not of Namirrha, pretending to

ignore the intruder; and the women of the harem babbled evermore with a baleful gossip concerning Namirrha and his supposed concubines. But the sorcerer himself was not beheld by the city's people, though some believed that he walked forth at will, clad with invisibility. His servitors were likewise not seen; but a howling as of the damned was sometimes heard to issue from his portals; and sometimes there came a stony cachinnation, as if some adamantine image had laughed aloud; and sometimes there was a chuckling like the sound of shattered ice in a frozen hell. Dim shadows moved in the porticoes when there was neither sunlight nor lamp to cast them; and red, eerie lights appeared and vanished in the windows at eve, like a blinking of demoniac eyes. And slowly the ember-colored suns went over Xylac, and were quenched in far seas; and the ashy moons were blackened as they fell nightly toward the hidden gulf. Then, seeing that the wizard had wrought no open evil, and that none had endured palpable harm from his presence, the people took heart; and Zotulla drank deeply, and feasted in oblivious luxury as before; and dark Thasaidon, prince of all turpitudes, was the true but never-acknowledged lord of Xylac. And in time the men of Ummaos bragged a little of Namirrha and his dread thaumaturgies, even as they had boasted of the purple sins of Zotulla.

But Namirrha, still unbeheld by living men and living women, sat in the inner walls of that house which his devils had reared for him, and spun over and over in his thoughts the black web of revenge. And in all Ummaos there was none, not even among his fellow-beggars, who recalled the beggar-boy Narthos. And the wrong done by Zotulla to Narthos in old times was the least of those cruelties which the emperor had forgotten.

Now, when the fears of Zotulla were somewhat lulled, and his women gossiped less often of the neighboring wizard, there occurred a new wonder and a fresh terror. For, sitting one eve at his banquet-table with his courtiers about him, the emperor heard a noise as of myriad iron-shod hooves that came trampling through the palace-gardens. And the courtiers also heard the sound, and were startled amid their mounting drunkenness; and the emperor was angered, and he sent certain of his guards to examine into the cause of the trampling. But, peering forth upon the moon-bright lawns and parterres, the guards beheld no visible shape, though the loud sounds of trampling still went to and fro. It seemed as if a rout of wild stallions passed and re-passed before the facade of the palace with tumultuous gallopings and capricoles. And a fear came upon the guards as they looked and

listened; and they dared not venture forth, but returned to Zotulla. And the emperor himself grew sober when he heard their tale; and he went forth with high blusterings to inspect the prodigy. And all night the unseen hooves rang out sonorously on the pavements of onyx, and ran with deep thuddings over the grasses and flowers. The palm-fronds waved on the windless air, as if parted by racing steeds; and visibly the tall-stemmed lilies and broad-petalled exotic blossoms were trodden under. And rage and terror nested together in Zotulla's heart as he stood in a balcony above the garden, hearing the spectral tumult, and beholding the harm done to his rarest flower-beds. The women, the courtiers and eunuchs cowered behind him, and there was no slumber for any occupant of the palace; but toward dawn the clamor of hooves departed, going toward Namirrha's house.

When the dawn was full-grown above Ummaos, the emperor walked forth with his guards about him, and saw that the crushed grasses and broken-down stems were blackened as if by fire where the hooves had fallen. Plainly were the countless marks imprinted, like the tracks of a great company of horses, in all the lawns and parterres; but they ceased at the verge of the gardens. And though everyone believed that the visitation had come from Namirrha, there was no proof of this in the grounds that fronted the sorcerer's abode; for here the turf was untrodden.

"A pox upon Namirrha, if he has done this!" cried Zotulla. "For what harm have I ever done him? Verily, I shall set my heel on the dog's neck; and the torture-wheel shall serve him even as these horses from hell have served my blood-red lilies of Sotar and my vein-colored irises of Naat and my orchids from Uccastrog which were purple as the bruises of love. Yea, though he stand the viceroy of Thasaidon above earth, and overlord of ten thousand devils, my wheel shall break him, and fires shall heat the wheel white-hot in its turning, till he withers black as the seared blossoms." Thus did Zotulla make his brag; but he issued no orders for the execution of the threat; and no man stirred from the palace toward Namirrha's house. And from the portals of the wizard none came forth; or if any came, there was no visible sign or sound.

So the day went over, and the night rose, bringing later a moon that was slightly darkened at the rim. And the night was silent; and Zotulla, sitting long at the banquet-table, drained his wine-cup often and wrathfully, muttering new threats against Namirrha. And the night wore on, and it

seemed that the visitation would not be repeated. But at midnight, lying in his chamber with Obexah, and fathom-deep in his slumber from his wine, Zotulla was awakened by a monstrous clangor of hooves that raced and capered in the palace-porticoes and in the long balconies. All night the hooves thundered back and forth, echoing awfully in the vaulted stone, while Zotulla and Obexah, listening, huddled close amid their cushions and coverlets; and all the occupants of the palace, wakeful and fearful, heard the noise but stirred not from their chambers. A little before dawn the hooves departed suddenly; and afterwards, by day, their marks were found on the marble flags of the porches and balconies; and the marks were countless, deep-graven, and black as if branded there by flame.

Like mottled marble were the emperor's cheeks when he saw the hoof-printed floors; and terror stayed with him henceforward, following him to the depths of his inebriety, since he knew not where the haunting would cease. His women murmured and some wished to flee from Ummaos, and it seemed that the revels of the day and the evening were shadowed by ill wings that left their umbrage in the yellow wine and bedimmed the aureate lamps. And again, toward midnight, the slumber of Zotulla was broken by the hooves, which came galloping and pacing on the palace-roof and through all the corridors and the halls. Thereafter, till dawn, the hooves filled the palace with their iron clatterings, and they rung hollowly on the topmost domes, as if the coursers of gods had trodden there, passing from heaven to heaven in tumultuous cavalcade.

Zotulla and Obexah, lying together while the terrible hooves went to and fro in the hall outside their chamber, had no heart or thought for sin, nor could they find any comfort in their nearness. In the grey hour before dawn, they heard a great thundering high on the barred brazen door of the room, as if some mighty stallion, rearing, had drummed there with his forefeet. And soon after this, the hooves went away, leaving a silence like an interlude in some gathering storm of doom. Later, the marks of the hooves were found everywhere in the halls, marring the bright mosaics. Black holes were burnt in the golden-threaded rugs and the rugs of silver and scarlet; and the high white domes were pitted pox-wise with the marks; and far up on the brazen door of Zotulla's chamber, the prints of a horse's forefeet were incised deeply.

Now, in Ummaos, and throughout Xylac, the tale of this haunting became known, and the thing was deemed an ominous prodigy, though

people differed in their interpretations. Some held that the sending came from Namirrha, and was meant as a token of his supremacy above all kings and emperors; and some thought that it came from a new wizard who had risen in Tinarath, far to the east, and who wished to supplant Namirrha. And the priests of the gods of Xylac held that their various deities had dispatched the haunting, as a sign that more sacrifices were required in the temples.

Then, in his hall of audience, whose floor of sard and jasper had been grievously pocked by the unseen hooves, Zotulla called together many priests and magicians and soothsayers, and asked them to declare the cause of the sending and devise a mode of exorcism. But, seeing that there was no agreement among them, Zotulla provided the several priestly sects with the wherewithal of sacrifice to their sundry gods, and sent them away; and the wizards and prophets, under threat of decapitation if they refused, were enjoined to visit Namirrha in his mansion of sorcery and learn his will, if haply the sending were his and not the work of another.

Loath were the wizards and the soothsayers, fearing Namirrha, and caring not to intrude upon the frightful, obscure mysteries of his mansion. But the swordsmen of the emperor drave them forth, lifting great crescent blades against them when they tarried; so one, by one, in a straggling order, the delegation went toward Namirrha’s portals and vanished into the devil-builded house.

Pale, muttering and distraught, like men who have looked upon hell and have seen their doom, they returned before sunset to the emperor. And they said that Namirrha had received them courteously and had sent them back with this message:

“Be it known to Zotulla that the haunting is a sign of that which he has long forgotten; and the reason of the haunting will be revealed to him at the hour prepared and set apart by destiny. And the hour draws near: for Namirrha bids the emperor and all his court to a great feast on the afternoon of the morrow.”

Having delivered this message, to the wonder and consternation of Zotulla, the delegation begged his leave to depart. And though the emperor questioned them minutely, they seemed unwilling to relate the circumstances of their visit to Namirrha; nor would they describe the sorcerer’s fabled house, except in a vague manner, each contradicting the other as to what he had seen. So, after a little, Zotulla bade them go, and

when they had gone he sat musing for a long while on the invitation of Namirrha, which was a thing he cared not to accept but feared to decline. That evening he drank even more liberally than was his wont; and he slept a Lethean slumber, nor was there any noise of loud, trampling hooves about the palace to awaken him. And silently, during the night, the prophets and the magicians passed like furtive shadows from Ummaos; and no man saw them depart; and at morning they were gone from Xylac into other lands, never to return.

Now, on that same evening, in the great hall of his house, Namirrha sat alone, having dismissed the mummies, the monsters, the skeletons and familiars who attended him ordinarily. Before him, on an altar of jet, was the dark, gigantic statue of Thasaidon which a devil-begotten sculptor had wrought in ancient days for an evil king of Tasuun, called Pharnoc. The archdemon was depicted in the guise of a full-armored warrior, lifting a spiky mace as if in heroic battle. Long had the statue lain in the desert-sunken palace of Pharnoc, whose very site was disputed by the nomads; and Namirrha, by his divination, had found it and had reared up the infernal image to abide with him always thereafter. And often, through the mouth of the statue, Thasaidon would utter oracles to Namirrha, or would answer interrogations.

Before the black-armored image, there hung seven silver lamps, wrought in the form of horses' skulls, with flames issuing changeably in blue and purple and crimson from their eye-sockets. Wild and lurid was their light, and the face of the demon, peering from under his crested helmet, was filled with malign, equivocal shadows that shifted and changed eternally. And sitting in his serpent-carven chair, Namirrha regarded the statue grimly, with a deep-furrowed frown between his eyes: for he had asked a certain thing of Thasaidon, and the fiend, replying through the statue, had refused him. And rebellion was in the heart of Namirrha, grown mad with pride, and deeming himself the lord of all sorcerers and a ruler by his own right among the princes of devildom. So, after long pondering, he repeated his request in a bold and haughty voice, like one who addresses an equal rather than the all-formidable suzerain to whom he had sworn a fatal fealty.

"I have helped you heretofore in all things," said the image, with stony and sonorous accents that were echoed metallically in the seven silver lamps. "Yea, the undying worms of fire and darkness have come forth like

an army at your summons, and the wings of nether genii have risen to occlude the sun when you called them. But, verily, I will not aid you in this revenge you have planned: for the emperor Zotulla has done me no wrong and has served me well though unwittingly; and the people of Xylac, by reason of their turpitudes, are not the least of my terrestrial worshippers. Therefore, Namirrha, it were well for you to live in peace with Zotulla, and well to forget this olden wrong that was done to the beggar-boy Narthos. For the ways of destiny are strange, and the workings of its laws sometimes hidden; and truly, if the hooves of Zotulla's palfrey had not spurned you and trodden you under, your life had been otherwise, and the name and renown of Namirrha had still slept in oblivion as a dream undreamed. Yea, you would tarry still as a beggar in Ummaos, content with a beggar's guerdon, and would never have fared forth to become the pupil of the wise and learned Ouphaloc, and I, Thasaidon, would have lost the lordliest of all necromancers who have accepted my service and my bond. Think well, Namirrha, and ponder these matters: for both of us, it would seem, are indebted to Zotulla in all gratitude for the trampling he gave you."

"Yea, there is a debt," Namirrha growled implacably. "And truly, I will pay the debt tomorrow, even as I have planned.... There are Those who will aid me, Those who will answer my summoning in your despite."

"It is an ill thing to affront me," said the image, after an interval. "And also, it is not wise to call upon Those that you designate. However, I perceive clearly that such is your intent. You are proud and stubborn and revengeful. Do, then, as you will, but blame me not for the outcome."

So, after this, there was silence in the hall where Namirrha sat before the eidolon; and the flames burned darkly, with changeable colors, in the skull-shapen lamps; and the shadows fled and returned, unresting, on the face of the statue and the face of Namirrha. Then, toward midnight, the necromancer rose and went upward by many spiral stairs to a high dome of his house in which there was a single small round window that looked forth on the constellations. The window was set in the top of the dome; but Namirrha had contrived, by means of his magic, that one entering by the last spiral of the stairs would suddenly seem to descend rather than climb, and, reaching the final step, would peer *downward* through the window while stars passed under him in a giddying gulf. There, kneeling, Namirrha touched a secret spring in the marble, and the circular pane slid back without sound. Then, lying prone on the curved interior of the dome, with

his face over the abyss, and his long beard trailing stiffly into space, he whispered a prehuman rune, and held speech with certain entities who belonged neither to hell nor the mundane elements, and were more fearsome to invoke than the infernal genii or the devils of earth, air, water, and flame. With them he made his compact, defying Thasaidon's will, while the air curdled about him with their voices, and rime gathered palely on his sable beard from the cold that was wrought by their breathing as they leaned earthward.

Laggard and loth was the awakening of Zotulla from his wine; and quickly, ere he opened his eyes, the daylight was poisoned for him by the thought of that invitation which he feared to accept or decline. But he spoke to Obexah, saying:

"Who, after all, is this wizardly dog, that I should obey his summons like a beggar called in from the street by some haughty lord?"

Obexah, a golden-skinned and oblique-eyed girl from Uccastrog, Isle of the Torturers, eyed the emperor subtly, and said:

"O Zotulla, it is yours to accept or refuse, as you deem fitting. And truly, it is a small matter for the lord of Ummaos and all Xylac, whether to go or to stay, since naught can impugn his sovereignty. Therefore, were it not as well to go?" For Obexah, though fearful of the wizard, was curious regarding that devil-builded house of which so little was known; and likewise, in the manner of women, she wished to behold the famed Namirrha, whose mien and appearance were still but a far-brought legend in Ummaos.

"There is something in what you say," admitted Zotulla. "But an emperor, in his conduct, must always consider the public good; and there are matters of state involved, which a woman can scarcely be expected to understand."

So, later in the forenoon, after an ample and well-irrigated breakfast, he called his chamberlains and courtiers about him and took counsel with them. And some advised him to ignore the invitation of Namirrha; and others held that the invitation should be accepted, lest a graver evil than the trampling of ghostly hooves be sent later upon the palace and the city.

Then Zotulla called the many priesthoods before him in a body, and sought to resummon those wizards and soothsayers who had fled privily in the night. Among all the latter, there was none who answered the crying of

his name through Ummaos; and this aroused a certain wonder. But the priests came in greater numbers than before, and thronged the hall of audience so that the paunches of the foremost were straightened against the imperial dais and the buttocks of the hindmost were flattened on the rear walls and pillars. And Zotulla debated with them the matter of acceptance or refusal. And the priests argued, as before, that Namirrha was nowise concerned with the sending ; and his invitation, they said, portended no harm nor bale to the emperor; and it was plain, from the terms of the message, that an oracle would be imparted to Zotulla by the wizard; and this oracle, if Namirrha were a true archmage, would confirm their own holy wisdom and reestablish the divine source of the sending; and the gods of Xylac would again be glorified.

Then, having heard the pronouncement of the priests, the emperor instructed his treasurers to load them down with new offerings; and calling unctuously upon Zotulla and all his household the vicarious blessings of the several gods, the priests departed. And the day wore on, and the sun passed its meridian, falling slowly beyond Ummaos through the spaces of the afternoon that were floored with sea-ending deserts. And still Zotulla was irresolute; and he called his wine-bearers, bidding them pour for him the strongest and most magistral of their vintages; but in the wine he found neither certitude nor decision.

Sitting still on his throne in the hall of audience, he heard, toward middle afternoon, a mighty and clamorous outcry that arose at the palace portals. There were deep wailings of men and the shrillings of eunuchs and women, as if terror passed from tongue to tongue, invading the halls and apartments. And the fearful clamor spread throughout all the palace, and Zotulla, rousing from the lethargy of wine, was about to send his attendants to inquire the cause.

Then, into the hall, there filed an array of tall mummies, clad in royal cerements of purple and scarlet, and wearing gold crowns on their withered craniums. And after them, like servitors, came gigantic skeletons who wore loincloths of nacarat orange and about whose upper skulls, from brow to crown, live serpents of banded saffron and ebon had wrapped themselves for head-dresses. And the mummies bowed before Zotulla, saying with thin, sere voices:

“We, who were kings of the wide realm of Tasuun aforetime, have been sent as a guard of honor for the emperor Zotulla, to attend him as is

befitting when he goes forth to the feast prepared by Namirrha."

Then, with dry clickings of their teeth, and whistlings as of air through screens of fretted ivory, the skeletons spoke:

"We, who were giant warriors of a race forgotten, have also been sent by Namirrha, so that the emperor's household, following him to the feast, should be guarded from all peril and should fare forth in such pageantry as is meet and proper."

Witnessing these prodigies, the wine-bearers and other attendants cowered about the imperial dais or hid behind the pillars, while Zotulla, with pupils swimming starkly in a bloodshot white, with face bloated and ghastly-pale, sat frozen on his throne and could utter no word in reply to the ministers of Namirrha.

Then, coming forward, the mummies said in dusty accents: "All is made ready, and the feast awaits the arrival of Zotulla." And the cerements of the mummies stirred and fell open at the bosom, and small rodent monsters, brown as bitumen, eyed as with accursed rubies, reared forth from the eaten hearts of the mummies like rats from their holes and chittered shrilly in human speech, repeating the words. The skeletons in their turn took up the solemn sentence; and the black and saffron serpents hissed it from their skulls; and the words were repeated lastly in baleful rumblings by certain furry creatures of dubious form, hitherto unseen by Zotulla, who sat behind the ribs of the skeletons as if in cages of white wicker.

Like a dreamer who obeys the doom of dreams, the emperor rose from his throne and went forward, and the mummies surrounded him like an escort. And each of the skeletons drew from the reddish-yellow folds of his loincloth a curiously pierced archaic flute of silver; and all began a sweet and evil and deathly fluting as the emperor went out through the halls of the palace. A fatal spell was in the music: for the chamberlains, the women, the guards, the eunuchs, and all members of Zotulla's household even to the cooks and scullions, were drawn like a procession of night-walkers from the rooms and alcoves in which they had vainly hidden themselves; and, marshalled by the flutists, they followed after Zotulla. A strange thing it was to behold this mighty company of people, going forth in the slanted sunlight toward Namirrha's house, with a cortège of dead kings about them, and the blown breath of skeletons thrilling eldritchly in the silver flutes. And little was Zotulla comforted when he found the girl Obexah at his side,

moving, as he, in a thralldom of involitient horror, with the rest of his women close behind.

Coming to the open portals of Namirrha's house, the emperor saw that they were guarded by great crimson-wattled things, half-dragon, half-man, who bowed before him, sweeping their wattles like bloody besoms on the flags of dark onyx. And the emperor passed with Obexah between the louting monsters, with the mummies, the skeletons and his own people behind him in strange pageant, and entered a vast and multi-columned hall, where the daylight, following timidly, was drowned by the baleful arrogant blaze of a thousand lamps.

Even amid his horror, Zotulla marvelled at the vastness of the chamber, which he could hardly reconcile with the mansion's outer length and height and breadth, though these indeed were of most palatial amplitude. For it seemed that he gazed adown great avenues of topless pillars, and vistas of tables laden with piled-up viands and thronged urns of wine, that stretched away before him into luminous distance and gloom as of starless night.

In the wide intervals between the tables, the familiars of Namirrha and his other servants went to and fro incessantly, as if a phantasmagoria of ill dreams were embodied before the emperor. Kingly cadavers in robes of time-rotten brocade, with worms seething in their eye-pits, poured a blood-like wine into cups of the opalescent horn of unicorns. Lamias, trident-tailed, and four-breasted chimeras, came in with fuming platters lifted high by their brazen claws. Dog-headed devils, tongued with lolling flames, ran forward to offer themselves as ushers for the company. And before Zotulla and Obexah, there appeared a curious being with the full-fleshed lower limbs and hips of a great black woman and the clean-picked bones of some titanic ape from there-upward. And this monster signified by certain indescribable becks of its finger-bones that the emperor and his favorite odalisque were to follow it.

Verily, it seemed to Zotulla that they had gone a long way into some malignly litten cavern of hell, when they came to the end of that perspective of tables and columns down which the monster had led them. Here, at the room's end, apart from the rest, was a table at which Namirrha sat alone, with the flames of the seven horse-skull lamps burning restlessly behind him, and the mailed black image of Thasaidon towering from the altar of jet at his right hand. And a little aside from the altar, there stood a diamond mirror upborne by the claws of black iron basilisks.

Namirrha rose to greet them, observing a solemn and funereal courtesy. His eyes were bleak and cold as distant stars in the hollows wrought by strange fearful vigils. His lips were like a pale-red seal on a shut parchment of doom. His beard flowed stiffly in black anointed banded locks across the bosom of his vermilion robe, like a mass of straight black serpents. Before him, Zotulla felt the blood pause and thicken about his heart, as if congealing into ice. And Obexah, peering beneath lowered lids, was abashed and frightened by the visible horror that invested this man and hung upon him even as royalty upon a king. But amid her fear, she found room to wonder what manner of man he was in his intercourse with women.

"I bid you welcome, O Zotulla, to such hospitality as is mine to offer," said Namirrha, with the iron ringing of some hidden funereal bell deep down in his hollow voice. "Prithee, be seated at my table."

Zotulla saw that a chair of ebony had been placed for him opposite Namirrha; and another chair, less stately and imperial, had been placed at the left hand for Obexah. And the twain seated themselves; and Zotulla saw that his people were sitting likewise at other tables throughout the huge hall, with the frightful servitors of Namirrha waiting upon them busily, like devils attending the damned.

Then Zotulla perceived that a dark and corpse-like hand was pouring wine for him in a crystal cup; and upon the hand was the signet-ring of the emperors of Xylac, set with a monstrous fire-opal in the mouth of a golden bat: even such a ring as Zotulla himself wore perpetually on his index-finger. And, turning, he beheld at his right hand a figure that bore the likeness of his father, Pithaim, after the poison of the adder, spreading through all his limbs, had left behind it the purple bloating of death. And Zotulla, who had caused the adder to be placed in the bed of Pithaim, cowered in his seat and trembled with a guilty fear. And the thing that wore the similitude of Pithaim, whether corpse or ghost or an image wrought by Namirrha's enchantment, came and went at Zotulla's elbow, waiting upon him with stark, black, swollen fingers that never fumbled. Horribly he was aware of its bulging, unregarding eyes, and its livid purple mouth that was locked in a rigor of mortal silence, and the spotted adder that peered at intervals with chill orbs from its heavy-folded sleeve as it leaned beside him to replenish his cup or to serve him with meat. And dimly, through the icy mist of his terror, the emperor beheld the shadowy-armored shape, like a moving replica of the still, grim statue of Thasaidon, which Namirrha had

reared up in his blasphemy to perform the same office for himself. And vaguely, without comprehension, he saw the dreadful ministrant that hovered beside Obexah: a flayed and eyeless corpse in the image of her first lover, a boy from Cyntrom who had been cast ashore in shipwreck on the Isle of the Torturers. There Obexah had found him, lying beyond the ebbing wave; and reviving the boy, she had hidden him awhile in a secret cave for her own pleasure, and had brought him food and drink. Later, wearying, she had betrayed him to the Torturers, and had taken a new delight in the various pangs and ordeals inflicted upon him before death by that cruel, pernicious people.

“Drink,” said Namirrha, quaffing a strange wine that was red and dark as if with disastrous sunsets of lost years. And Zotulla and Obexah drank the wine, feeling no warmth in their veins thereafter, but a chill as of hemlock mounting slowly toward the heart.

“Verily, ‘tis a good wine,” said Namirrha, “and a proper one in which to toast the furthering of our acquaintance: for it was buried long ago with the royal dead, in amphorae of somber jasper shapen like funeral urns; and my ghouls found it, whenas they came to dig in Tasuun.”

Now it seemed that the tongue of Zotulla froze in his mouth, as a mandrake freezes in the rime-bound soil of winter; and he could find no reply to Namirrha’s courtesy.

“Prithee, make trial of this meat,” quoth Namirrha, “for it is very choice, being the flesh of that boar which the Torturers of Uccastrog are wont to pasture on the well-minced leavings of their wheels and racks; and, moreover, my cooks have spiced it with the powerful balsams of the tomb, and have farced it with the hearts of adders and the tongues of black cobras.”

Naught could the emperor say; and even Obexah was silent, being sorely troubled by the presence of that flayed and piteous thing which had the likeness of her lover from Cyntrom. And her dread of the necromancer grew prodigiously; for his knowledge of this old, forgotten crime, and the raising of the phantasm, appeared to her a more baleful magic than all else.

“Now, I fear,” said Namirrha, “that you find the meat devoid of savor, and the wine without fire. So, to enliven our feasting, I shall call forth my singers and my musicians.”

He spoke a word unknown to Zotulla or Obexah, which sounded throughout the mighty hall as if a thousand voices in turn had taken it up

and prolonged it. Anon there appeared the singers, who were she-ghouls with shaven bodies and hairy shanks, and long yellow tushes full of shredded carrion curving across their chaps from mouths that fawned hyena-wise on the company. Behind them entered the musicians, some of whom were male devils pacing erect on the hindquarters of sable stallions and plucking with the fingers of white apes at lyres of the bone and sinew of cannibals from Naat; and others were pied satyrs puffing their goatish cheeks at hautboys made from the femurs of young witches, or bagpipes formed from the bosom-skin of negro queens and the horn of rhinoceri.

They bowed before Namirrha with grotesque ceremony. Then, without delay, the she-ghouls began a most dolorous and execrable howling, as of jackals that have sniffed their carrion; and the satyrs and devils played a lament that was like the moaning of desert-born winds through forsaken palace-harems. And Zotulla shivered, for the singing filled his marrow with ice, and the music left in his heart a desolation as of empires fallen and trod under by the iron-shod hooves of time. Ever, amid that evil music, he seemed to hear the sifting of sand across withered gardens, and the windy rustling of rotted silks upon couches of bygone luxury, and the hissing of coiled serpents from the low fusts of shattered columns. And the glory that had been Ummaos seemed to pass away like the blown pillars of the simoom.

“Now that was a brave tune,” said Namirrha when the music ceased and the she-ghouls no longer howled. “But, verily I fear that you find my entertainment somewhat dull. Therefore, my dancers shall dance for you.” He turned toward the great hall, and described in the air an enigmatic sign with the fingers of his right hand. In answer to the sign, a hueless mist came down from the high roof and hid the room like a fallen curtain for a brief interim. There was a babel of sounds, confused and muffled, beyond the curtain, and a crying of voices faint as if with distance.

Then, dreadfully, the vapor rolled away, and Zotulla saw that the laden tables were gone. In the wide interspaces of the columns, his palace-inmates, the chamberlains, the eunuchs, the courtiers and odalisques and all the others, lay trussed with thongs on the floor, like so many fowls of glorious plumage. Above them, in time to a music made by the lyrists and flutists of the necromancer, a troupe of skeletons pirouetted with light clickings of their toe-bones; and a rout of mummies bowed stiffly; and others of Namirrha’s creatures moved with mysterious caperings. To and fro

they leapt on the bodies of the emperor's people, in the paces of an evil saraband. At every step they grew taller and heavier, till the saltant mummies were as the mummies of Anakim, and the skeletons were boned like colossi; and louder and more lugubrious the music rose, drowning the faint cries of Zotulla's people. And huger still became the dancers, towering far into vaulted shadow among the vast columns, with thudding feet that wrought thunder in the room; and those whereon they danced were as grapes trampled for a vintage in autumn; and the floor ran deep with a sanguine must.

As a man drowning in a noisome, night-bound fen, the emperor heard the voice of Namirrha:

"It would seem that my dancers please you not. So now I shall present you a most royal spectacle. Arise and follow me, for the spectacle is one that requires a whole empire for its stage."

Zotulla and Obexah rose from their chairs in the fashion of night-walkers. Giving no backward glance at their ministering phantoms, or the hall where the dancers still bounded, they followed Namirrha to an alcove beyond the altar of Thasaidon. Thence, by the upward-coiling stairways, they came at length to a broad high balcony that faced Zotulla's palace and looked forth above the city roofs toward the bourn of sunset.

It seemed that several hours had gone by in that hellish feasting and entertainment; for the day was near to its close, and the sun, which had fallen from sight behind the imperial palace, was barring the vast heavens with bloody rays.

"Behold," said Namirrha, adding a strange vocable to which the stone of the edifice resounded like a beaten gong. The balcony pitched a little, and Zotulla, looking over the balustrade, beheld the roofs of Ummaos lessen and sink beneath him. It seemed that the balcony flew skyward to a prodigious height, and he peered down across the domes of his own palace, upon the houses, the tilled fields and the desert beyond, and the huge sun brought low on the desert's verge. And Zotulla grew giddy; and the chill airs of the upper heavens blew upon him. But Namirrha spoke another word, and the balcony ceased to ascend.

"Look well, O Zotulla," said the necromancer, "on the empire that was yours, but shall be yours no longer." Then, with arms outstretched toward the sunset, and the gulfs beyond the sunset, he called aloud the twelve

names that were perdition to utter, and after them the tremendous invocation: *Gna padambis devompra thungis furidor avoragomon*.

Instantly, it seemed that great ebon clouds of thunder beetled against the sun. Lining the horizon, the clouds took the form of colossal monsters with heads and members somewhat resembling those of stallions. Rearing terribly, they trod down the sun like an extinguished ember; and racing as in some hippodrome of Titans, they rose higher and vaster, coming toward Ummaos. Deep, calamitous rumblings preceded them, and the earth shook visibly, till Zotulla saw that these were not immaterial clouds, but actual living forms that had come forth to tread the world in macrocosmic vastness. Throwing their shadows for many leagues before them, the coursers charged as if devil-ridden into Xylac, and their feet descended like falling mountain crags upon far oases and towns of the outer wastes.

Like a many-turreted storm they came, and it seemed that the world sank gulfward, tilting beneath the weight. Still as a man enchanted into marble, Zotulla stood and beheld the ruining that was wrought on his empire. And closer drew the gigantic stallions, racing with inconceivable speed, and louder was the thundering of their footfalls, that now began to blot the green fields and fruited orchards lying for many miles to the west of Ummaos. And the shadow of the stallions climbed like an evil gloom of eclipse, till it covered Ummaos; and looking up, the emperor saw their eyes half-way between earth and zenith, like baleful suns that glare down from soaring cumuli.

Then, in the thickening gloom, above that insupportable thunder, he heard the voice of Namirrha, crying in mad triumph:

“Know, Zotulla, that I have called up the coursers of Thamogorgos, lord of the abyss. And the coursers will tread your empire down, even as your palfrey trod and trampled in former time a beggar-boy named Narthos. And learn also that I, Namirrha, was that boy.” And the eyes of Namirrha, filled with a vainglory of madness and bale, burned like malign, disastrous stars at the hour of their culmination.

To Zotulla, wholly mazed with the horror and tumult, the necromancer’s words were no more than shrill, shrieked overtones of the tempest of doom; and he understood them not. Tremendously, with a rending of staunch-built roofs, and an instant cleavage and crumbling down of mighty masonries, the hooves descended upon Ummaos. Fair temple-domes were pashed like shells of the haliotis, and haughty mansions were broken and stamped into

the ground even as gourds; and house by house the city was trampled flat with a sound as of hammers clanging on the anvils of cyclops and a crashing as of worlds beaten into chaos. Far below, in the darkened streets, men and camels fled like scurrying emmets but could not escape. And implacably the hooves rose and fell, till ruin was upon half the city, and night was over all. The palace of Zotulla was trodden under, and now the forelegs of the coursers loomed level with Namirrha's balcony, and their heads towered awfully above. It seemed that they would rear and trample down the necromancer's house; but at that moment they parted to left and right, and a dolorous glimmering came from the low sunset; and the coursers went on, treading under them that portion of Ummaos which lay to the eastward. And Zotulla and Obexah and Namirrha looked down on the city's fragments as on a shard-strewn midden, and heard the cataclysmic clamor of the hooves departing toward eastern Xylac.

"Now that was a goodly spectacle," quoth Namirrha. Then, turning to the emperor, he added malignly: "Think not that I have done with thee, however, or that doom is yet consummate."

It seemed that the balcony had fallen to its former elevation, which was still a lofty vantage above the sharded ruins. And Namirrha plucked the emperor by the arm and led him from the balcony to an inner chamber, while Obexah followed mutely. The emperor's heart was crushed within him by the trampling of such calamities, and despair weighed upon him like a foul incubus on the shoulders of a man lost in some land of accursed night. And he knew not that he had been parted from Obexah on the threshold of the chamber, and that certain of Namirrha's creatures, appearing like shadows, had compelled the girl to go downward with them by the stairs, and had stifled her outcries with their rotten cerements as they went.

The chamber was one that Namirrha used for his most unhallowed rites and alchemies. The rays of the lamps that illumed it were saffron-red like the spilt ichor of devils, and they flowed on aludels and crucibles and black athanors and alembics whereof the purpose was hardly to be named by mortal man. The sorcerer heated in one of the alembics a dark liquid full of star-cold lights, while Zotulla looked on unheeding. And when the liquid bubbled and sent forth a spiral vapor, Namirrha distilled it into goblets of gold-rimmed iron, and gave one of the goblets to Zotulla and retained the

other himself. And he said to Zotulla with a stern imperative voice: “I bid thee quaff this liquor.”

Zotulla, fearing that the draught was poison, hesitated. And the necromancer regarded him with a lethal gaze, and cried loudly: “Fearest thou to do as I?” and therewith he set the goblet to his lips.

So the emperor drank the draught, constrained as if by the bidding of some angel of death, and a darkness fell upon his senses. But, ere the darkness grew complete, he saw that Namirrha had drained his own goblet. Then, with unspeakable agonies, it seemed that the emperor died; and his soul floated free; and again he saw the chamber, though with bodiless eyes. And discarnate he stood in the saffron-crimson light, with his body lying as if dead on the floor beside him, and near it the prone body of Namirrha and the two fallen goblets.

Standing thus, he beheld a strange thing: for anon his own body stirred and arose, while that of the necromancer remained still as death. And Zotulla looked at his own lineaments and his figure in its short cloak of azure samite sewn with black pearls and balas-rubies; and the body lived before him, though with eyes that held a darker fire and a deeper evil than was their wont. Then, without corporeal ears, Zotulla heard the figure speak, and the voice was the strong, arrogant voice of Namirrha, saying:

“Follow me, O houseless phantom, and do in all things as I enjoin thee.”

Like an unseen shadow, Zotulla followed the wizard, and the twain went downward by the stairs to the great banquet hall. They came to the altar of Thasaidon and the mailed image, with the seven horse-skull lamps burning before it as formerly. Upon the altar, Zotulla’s beloved leman Obexah, who alone of all women had power to stir his sated heart, was lying bound with thongs at Thasaidon’s feet. But the hall beyond was deserted, and nothing remained of that Saturnalia of doom, except the fruit of the treading, which had flowed together in dark pools among the columns.

Namirrha, using the emperor’s body in all ways for his own, paused before the dark eidolon; and he said to the spirit of Zotulla: “Be imprisoned in this image, without power to free thyself or to stir in any wise.”

Being wholly obedient to the will of the necromancer, the soul of Zotulla was embodied in the statue, and he felt its cold, gigantic armor about him like a strait sarcophagus, and he peered forth immovably from the bleak eyes that were overhung by its carven helmet.

Gazing thus, he beheld the change that had now come on his own body through the sorcerous possession of Namirrha: for below the short azure cloak, the legs had turned suddenly to the hind legs of a black stallion, with hooves that glowed redly as if heated by infernal fires. And even as Zotulla watched this prodigy, the hooves glowed white and incandescent, and fumes mounted from the floor beneath them.

Then, on the black altar, the hybrid abomination came pacing haughtily toward Obexah, and smoking footprints appeared behind it as it came. Pausing beside the girl, who lay supine and helpless regarding it with eyes that were pools of bright-frozen horror, it raised one glowing hoof and set the hoof on her naked bosom between the small breast-cups of golden filigree begemmed with rubies. And the girl screamed beneath that atrocious treading as the soul of one newly damned might scream in hell; and the hoof glared with intolerable brilliance, as if freshly plucked from a furnace wherein the weapons of demons were forged.

At that moment, in the cowed and crushed and sodden shade of the emperor Zotulla, close-locked within the adamantine image, there awoke the manhood that had slumbered still-unaroused before the ruining of his empire and the trampling under of his retinue. Immediately a great abhorrence and a high wrath were alive in his soul, and mightily he longed for his own right arm to serve him, and a sword in his right hand.

Then it seemed that a voice spoke within him, chill and bleak and awful, and as if uttered inwardly by the statue itself. And the voice said: “I am Thasaidon, lord of the seven hells beneath the earth, and the hells of man’s heart above the earth, which are seven times seven. For the moment, O Zotulla, my power is become thine for the sake of a mutual vengeance. Be one in all ways with the statue that has my likeness, even as the soul is one with the flesh. Behold! there is a mace of adamant in thy right hand. Lift up the mace, and smite.”

Zotulla was aware of a great power within him, and giant thews about him that thrilled with the power and responded agilely to his will. He felt in his mailed right hand the haft of the huge spiky-headed mace; and though the mace was beyond the lifting of any man in mortal flesh, it seemed no more than a goodly weight to Zotulla. Then, rearing the mace like a warrior in battle, he struck down with one crashing blow the impious thing that wore his own rightful flesh united with the legs and hooves of a demon courser. And the thing crumpled swiftly down and lay with the brain

spreading pulpily from its shattered skull on the shining jet. And the legs twitched a little and then grew still; and the hooves glowed from a fiery, blinding white to the redness of red-hot iron, cooling slowly.

For a space there was no sound, other than the shrill screaming of the girl Obexah, mad with pain and the terror of those prodigies which she had beheld. Then, in the soul of Zotulla, grown sick with that screaming, the chill, awful voice of Thasaidon spoke again, and said to him:

"Go free, for there is nothing more for thee to do." So the spirit of Zotulla passed from the image of Thasaidon, and found in the wide air the freedom of utter nothingness and oblivion.

But the end was not yet for Namirrha, whose mad, arrogant soul had been loosened from Zotulla's body by the blow, and had returned darkly, not in the manner planned by the magician, to its own body lying in the room of accursed rites and forbidden transmigrations. There Namirrha woke anon, with a dire confusion in his mind, and a partial forgetfulness: for the curse of Thasaidon was upon him now because of his blasphemies.

Nothing was clear in his thought except a malign, exorbitant longing for revenge; but the reason thereof, and the object, were as doubtful shadows. And still prompted by that obscure animus, he arose; and girding to his side an enchanted sword with runic sapphires and opals in the hilt, he descended the stairs and came again to the altar of Thasaidon, where the mailed statue stood as impassive as before, with the poised mace in its immovable right hand, and below it, on the altar, the double sacrifice.

A veil of weird darkness was upon the senses of Namirrha, and he saw not the stallion-legged horror that lay dead with slowly blackening hooves; and he heard not the moaning of the girl Obexah, who still lived beside it. But his eyes were drawn by the diamond mirror that was upheld in the claws of black iron basilisks beyond the altar; and going to the mirror, he saw therein a face that he knew no longer for his own. And because his eyes were shadowed, and his brain filled with the shifting webs of delusion, he took the face for that of the emperor Zotulla. Insatiable as hell's own flame, his old hatred rose within him; and he drew the enchanted sword and began to hew therewith at the reflection. Sometimes, because of the curse laid upon him, and the impious transmigration which he had performed, he thought himself Zotulla warring with the necromancer; and again, in the shiftings of his madness, he was Namirrha smiting at the emperor; and then, without name, he fought a nameless foe. And soon the sorcerous blade,

though tempered with formidable spells, was broken close to the hilt, and Namirrha beheld the image still unharmed. Then, howling aloud the half-forgotten runes of a most tremendous curse, made invalid through his own forgettings, he hammered still with the heavy sword-hilt on the mirror, till the runic sapphires and opals cracked in the hilt and fell away at his feet in little fragments.

Obexah, dying on the altar, saw Namirrha battling with his own image, and the spectacle moved her to mad laughter like the pealing of bells of ruined crystal. And above her laughter, and above the cursings of Namirrha, there came anon like the rumbling of swift-driven storm the thunder made by the macrocosmic stallions of Thamogorgos, returning gulfward through Xylac over Ummaos, to trample down the one house that they had spared aforetime.

THE VOYAGE OF KING EUVORAN

The crown of the kings of Ustaim was fashioned only from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. The magically graven gold of its circlet had been mined from a huge meteor that fell in the southern isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle from shore to shore with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of Earth, and was changeable in color from a flamelike red to the yellow of young moons. It was set with thirteen jewels, every one of which was unique and without fellow even in fable. These jewels were a wonder to behold, starring the circlet with strange unquiet fires and fulgurations terrible as the eyes of the cockatrice. But more wonderful than all else was the stuffed gazolba-bird which formed the superstructure of the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws above the wearer's brow, and towering royally with resplendent plumage of green, violet and vermilion. Its beak was the hue of burnished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in bezels of silver; and seven lacy, carmine quills arose from its ebon-dappled head, and a white tail fell down in a straightly spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle. The gazolba-bird was the last of its kind, according to the mariners who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east of Zothique. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim, and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, and a talisman inseparable from their royalty, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran, the son of Karpoom, was the ninth wearer of the crown. Superbly and magnificently he had worn it for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamanders' eggs. On all state occasions, levees, and daily grantings of

public audience and administerings of justice, it had graced the brow of the young king and had conferred upon him a dreadful majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the lamentable increase of an early baldness.

It came to pass, in the late autumn of the third year of his reign, that King Euvoran rose from a goodly breakfast of twelve courses and twelve wines, and went forth as was his custom to the hall of justice, which occupied an entire wing of his palace in the city of Aramoam, looking down in several-colored marble from its palmy hills to the rippled lazuli of the orient ocean.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most involute skeins of legality and crime, and was likewise ready for the meting of swift punishment to all malefactors. And beside him, at the right arm of his kraken-sculptured throne of ivory, there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head that was tempered to the hardness of iron. Full often, with this mace, the bones of the more flagitious offenders were broken immediately, or their brains were split in the king's presence on a floor that was strewn with black sand. And beside the left arm of the throne, a professional torturer busied himself continually with the screws and pulleys of certain fearsome instruments of torture, as a warning of their fate to all evil-doers. And not always idle were the turnings of these screws and the tightenings of these pulleys, and not always empty were the metal beds of the machines.

Now, on that morning, the constables of the city brought before King Euvoran only a few petty thieves and suspicious vagrants; and there were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace or the use of the torture-implements. So the king, who had looked forward to a pleasurable session, was somewhat balked and disappointed; and he questioned with much severity the minor culprits before him, trying to extort from each of them, in turn, an admission of some graver crime than that whereof he was accused. But it seemed that the pilferers were innocent of aught but pilfering; and the vagrants were guilty of naught worse than vagrancy; and Euvoran began to think that the morning would offer scant entertainment. For the bastinado was the heaviest punishment that he could legally impose on such misdemeanants.

"Away with these mackerel!" he roared to the officers, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to

nod and bow. “Away with them, for they pollute my presence. Give each of them a hundred strokes with the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels. Then drive them forth from Aramoam toward the public refuse-grounds, and prod them with red-hot tridents if they linger in their crawling.”

Then, ere the officers could obey him, there entered the hall of justice two belated constables, haling between them a peculiar and most unsavory individual with the long-handled, many-pointed hooks that were used in Aramoam for the apprehending of malefactors and suspects. And though the hooks were seemingly embedded in his flesh as well as in the filthy rags that served him for raiment, the prisoner bounded perpetually aloft in the manner of a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow in these lively and undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of tumblers. With a final volitation in which the officers were drawn through the air like the tails of a kite, the incredible personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement, blinking rapidly, and was not prepossessed by the singular suppleness with which he louted to the very floor, upsetting the scarce-recovered equilibrium of the officers, and causing them to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

“Ha! what have we now?” said the king in an ominous voice.

“Sire, ‘tis another vagabond,” replied the breathless officers, when they had regained a more respectfully inclined position. “He would have passed through Aramoam by the main avenue in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the altitude of his saltations, if we had not arrested him.”

“Such behavior is highly suspicious,” growled Euvoran hopefully. “Prisoner, declare your name, your nativity and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which, beyond doubt, you are guilty.”

The captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to regard Euvoran, the royal mace-wielder, and the royal torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree, his nose, ears and other features were all possessed of unnatural mobility, and he grimaced perpetually in a manner that caused his unclean beard to toss and curl like sea-weed on a boiling whirlpool.

“I have many names,” he replied, in an insolent voice whose pitch was peculiarly disagreeable to Euvoran, setting his teeth on edge like the grating

of metal upon glass. “As for my nativity and occupation, the knowledge of these, O king, would profit you little.”

“Sirrah, you are malapert. Give answer, or tongues of red-hot iron shall question you,” roared Euvoran.

“Be it known to you, then, that I am a necromancer, and was born in the realm where the dawn and the sunset come together and the moon is equal in brightness to the sun.”

“Ha! a necromancer!” snorted the king. “Know you not that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? Verily, we shall find means to dissuade you from the practice of such infamies.”

At a sign from Euvoran, the officers drew their captive toward the instruments of torture. Much to their surprise, in view of his former ebullience, he allowed himself to be chained supinely on the iron bed that produced a remarkable elongation of the limbs of its occupants. The official engineer of these miracles began to work the levers, and the bed lengthened little by little with a surly grating, till it seemed that the prisoner’s joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; and though, after a time, he had gained more than a half-cubit from the stretching, he appeared to experience no discomfort whatever; and to the stupefaction of all present, it became plain that the elasticity of his arms, legs and body was beyond the extensibility of the rack itself; for the latter was now drawn to its limit.

All were silent, viewing this prodigy; and Euvoran rose from his seat and went over to the rack, as if doubtful of his own eyes that testified to a thing so enormous. And the prisoner said to him:

“It were well to release me, O King Euvoran.”

“Say you so?” the king cried out in a rage. “However, it is not thus that we deal with felons in Ustaim.” And he made a private sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, rearing his massive, leaden-headed mace aloft.

“On your own head be it,” said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the iron bed, breaking the bonds that held him, as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a terrible height, which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger, dark and sere as that of a mummy, at the king’s crown; and simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of migrant fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night. And lo! as if in answer to that

word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran’s head and the king felt that his brow was lightened of the crown’s goodly and well-accustomed weight. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all who were present, beheld above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been slain more than two hundred years before by sea-faring men in a remote isle. The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread as if for flight, and it carried still in its steely claws the rare circlet of the crown. Librating, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in wordless awe and consternation. Then, with metallic whirring, its white tail deployed like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the open portals, and passed seaward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it, with great bounds and goatish leapings, the necromancer followed; and no man tried to deter him. But those who saw him depart from the city swore that he went north along the ocean-strand, while the bird flew directly eastward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. Thereafter, as if he had gone at a single bound into alien realms, the necromancer was not seen in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley from Sotar, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had passed over them in mid-main, a several-colored glory still flying toward the sources of the dayspring. And they said that the crown of changeable gold, with its thirteen fellowless gems, was still carried by the bird. And though they had trafficked long in the archipelagoes of wonder, and had seen many prodigies, they deemed this thing a most rare and unexampled portent.

King Euvoran, so strangely reft of that avian headgear, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants in the hall of justice, was as one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. If the sun had turned black in heaven, or his palace walls had crumbled about him, his dumbfoundment would hardly have been more excessive. For it seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem and the talisman of his fathers. And, moreover, the thing was wholly against nature, and the laws of god and man were annulled thereby: since never before, in all history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity, and Euvoran, having donned a voluminous turban of purple samite, held council with his sagest ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than the king: for the bird and the circlet were both

irreplaceable. And in the meanwhile, the rumor of this misfortune was borne abroad through Ustaim, and the land became filled with lamentable doubt and confusion, and some of the people began to murmur covertly against Euvoran, saying that no man could be the rightful ruler of that country without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in a time of national exigence, Euvoran repaired to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, who was a terrestrial god and the chief deity of Aramoam. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet, as was ordained by hierarchal law, he entered the dim adytum where the image of Geol, pot-bellied, and wrought of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and regarded the motes in a narrow beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. And, falling prone in the dust that had gathered around the idol through ages, the king gave homage to Geol and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. And after an interim, a voice issued from the god's navel, as if a subterrene rumbling had become articulate. And the voice said to King Euvoran:

"Go forth and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie beneath the orient sun. There, O king, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty; and there, with thine own hand, thou shalt slay the bird."

Euvoran was much comforted by this oracle, since the utterances of the god were deemed infallible. And it seemed to him that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim, which had the reanimated bird for its superstructure. So, returning to the royal palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest argosies of war, which lay then at anchor in the tranquil harbor of Aramoam, and ordered them to make immediate provision for a long voyage into the east and among the archipelagoes of morning.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship of the fleet, which was a towering quadrireme with oars of beef-wood and sails of stout-woven byssus dyed in yellowish scarlet, and a long gonfalon at the mast-head, bearing the gazolba bird in its natural colors on a field of heavenly cobalt. The rowers and sailors of the quadrireme were mighty negroes from the north; and the soldiers who manned it were fierce mercenaries from Xylac in the west; and with him, going aboard, the king took certain of his concubines and jesters and other ministrants, as well as an ample store of liquors and rare viands, so that he should lack for nothing

during the voyage. And, mindful of the prophecy of Geol, the king armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with parrot-feathered arrows; and he also carried a sling of lion-leather and a blow-gun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

It seemed that the gods favored the voyage; for a wind blew strongly from the west on the morning of departure; and the fleet, which numbered fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the sea-risen sun. And the farewell clamors and shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and the marble houses of Aramoam on its four palmy hills were drowned in that swiftly foundering bank of azure which was the shoreline of Ustaim. And thereafter, for many days, the iron-wood beaks of the galleys clove a softly weltering sea of indigo that rose unbroken on all sides to a cloudless, dark-blue heaven.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, that earthen god who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his wont; and reclining beneath a saffron canopy on the poop of the quadrireme, he swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace-vaults, storing the warmth of elder, ardent suns whereon oblivion's black rime was fallen. And he laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, at unquenchable ancient bawdries that had won the laughter of other kings in the sea-lost continents of yore. And his women diverted him with harlotries that were older than Rome or Atlantis. And ever he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons wherewith he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba-bird, according to the oracle of Geol.

The winds were unfailing and auspicious, and the fleet sped onward, with the great black oarsmen singing gaily at their oars, and the gorgeous sail-cloths flapping loudly, and the long banners floating on the air like straight-blown flames. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coast of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred leagues from north to south; and in Loithe, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba-bird. There were rumors that the bird had passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer of that isle, named Iffibos, had drawn it down through his sorcery and had closed it in a cage of sandalwood. So the king landed in Loithe, deeming his quest perhaps already nigh to its end, and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to visit Iffibos, who dwelt in a retired vale among the mountains at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey, and Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, which were no respecters of royalty, and were always insinuating themselves under his turban. And when, after some delay and divagation in the deep jungle, he came to the house of Iffibos on a high, precarious crag, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to the region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. So the king returned to Loithe, after declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. And in Loithe the king tarried no longer than was needful for the laying aboard of fifty jars of the sovereign arrack in which Sotar excels all other orient lands.

Then, coasting the southern cliffs and promontories, where the sea bellowed prodigiously in mile-deep caverns, the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar, and Tosk, whose people were more akin to apes and lemurs than to men. And Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba, and received only a chattering as of apes in answer. So the king ordered his men-at-arms to catch a number of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. And the men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day among the trees and boulders in which the isle abounded, but without catching a single one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying several of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him and sailed on to the seven atolls of Yumatot, whose inhabitants were mostly cannibals. And beyond Yumatot, which was the usual limit of eastern voyaging from Ustaim, the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea, and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story.

It were tedious to relate the full particulars of that voyage, in which Euvoran and his captains went ever toward the sources of the dawn. Various and without number were the strange marvels they found in the archipelagoes beyond Yumatot; but nowhere could they find a single feather such as had formed part of the gazolba’s plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

Howbeit, the king beheld many a flock of unknown, fiery-winged fowl that went over the galleys in mid-sea, passing between the unmapped islets. And, landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyrebirds and boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoos with his blowgun. And he chased the dodo and dinornis on shores that were otherwise unpeopled. And once, in a sea of high-beetling barren rocks, the fleet was assailed by mighty

griffins that flew down from their crag-built eyries, with wings shining like feathery brass under the meridian sun, and making a harsh clangor as of shields shaken in battle. And the griffins, being both ferocious and pertinacious, were driven away with much difficulty by boulders hurled from the catapults of the vessels.

Everywhere, as the ships drove eastward, there were multitudes of fowl. But at the sunset of a day in the fourth moon following their departure from Aramoam, the vessels approached a nameless isle that towered mile-high with cliffs of black, naked basalt, around whose base the sea cried with baffled anger, and about whose precipices there were no wings nor voices of birds. The isle was topped with gnarly cypresses that might have grown in a windy graveyard; and sullenly it took the afterglow, as if drenched with a gore of darkening blood. Far up in the cliffs there were strange columned eaves like the dwellings of forgotten troglodytes, but seemingly inaccessible to men; and the caves to all appearances were unoccupied by any kind of life, though pitting the face of the isle for leagues. And Euvoran ordered his captains to drop anchor, meaning to search for a landing-place on the morrow: since, in his anxiety to retrieve the gazolba, he would pass no isle of the dawnward main, not even the unlikeliest, without due inquiry and examination.

Quickly fell the darkness, without moon, till the close-anchored ships were visible to each other only by their lanterns. And Euvoran sat at supper in his cabin, sipping the golden arrack of Sotar between mouthfuls of mango-jelly and phenicopter’s meat. And, saving a small watch on each of the vessels, the sailors and men-at-arms were all at evening mess; and the rowers ate their figs and lentils in the oar-decks. Then, from the watches, there was a wild shouting of alarm, and the shouting ceased in a moment, and each of the great vessels rocked and sagged in the water, as if a monstrous weight had settled upon it. No man knew the thing that had happened, but everywhere there was turmoil and confusion, some saying that the fleet was attacked by pirates. Those who peered from the ports and oar-holes saw that the lanterns of their neighbors had been quenched, and perceived a milling and seething as of low-driven clouds in the darkness, and saw that foul black creatures, large as men and winged like oupires, were clinging to the ranged oars in myriads. And those who dared to approach the open hatches found that the decks, the rigging and the masts were crowded with similar creatures, who, it seemed, were of nocturnal

habit and had come down in the manner of bats from their caves in the island.

Then, like things of nightmare, the monsters began to invade the hatches and assail the ports, clawing with hellish talons at the men who opposed them. And, being somewhat hampered by their wings, they were driven back with spears and arrows, but returned again and again in a thickening press without number, cheeping with a faint and bat-like sound. It was plain that they were vampires, for whenever they had dragged a man down, as many of them as could gain mouthhold would fasten upon him incontinently, and suck his blood till little more remained than a skinful of bones. The upper oar-decks, being half open to the sky, were quickly usurped, and their crews overcome with a hideous swarming; and the rowers in the orlops cried that the sea-water was pouring in through the oar-holes as the ships sank deeper beneath an ever-gathering weight.

All night, at the ports and hatches, the men of Euvoran fought the vampires, taking turns in shifts when they wearied. Many of them were seized and their blood sucked before the eyes of their fellows as the night wore on; and the vampires, it seemed, were not to be slain by mortal weapons, though the blood they had gorged came forth in spouting rills from their wounded bodies. And thicklier they clustered upon the fleet, till the biremes began to founder, and the rowers were drowned in the sunken lower decks of certain triremes and quadriremes.

King Euvoran was wroth at this unseemly turmoil that had interrupted his supper; and when the golden arrack was spilt and the dishes of rare meat were emptied on the floor by the vessel’s violent rocking, he would have issued from his cabin, fully armed, to try conclusions with these piacular miscreants. But, even as he turned to fling wide the cabin-door, there was a soft infernal pittering at the port-holes behind him; and the women who were with him began to shriek, and the fools cried out in terror. And the king saw in the lamplight a grisly face with the teeth and nostrils of a flittermouse, that leaned in through one of the cabin-ports. He sought to repel the face, and thereafter, till dawn, he fought the vampires with those very weapons he had designed for the slaying of the gazolba; and the ship’s captain, who was with him at supper, guarded a second port with his claymore; and the others were held by two of the king’s eunuchs, armed with scimitars. In this warfare they were favored by the smallness of the ports, which could hardly in any case have allowed the free passage of their

winged assailants. And, after lightless hours of tedious, horrid struggle, the darkness became thinned with brown twilight, and the vampires lifted from the vessels in a black cloud and returned to their caves in the mile-high cliffs of that unnamed island.

Heavy was the heart of Euvoran within him when he surveyed the damage done to his proud argosies of war: for, among the fifteen vessels, seven had sunk in the night, borne under and swamped by those obscenely clinging hordes of oupires; and the decks of the others were bloody as abattoirs; and half of their sailors and rowers and men-at-arms were lying flat and flaccid as empty wineskins after the greedy drinking of the great bats. And the sails and banners were shredded into rags; and everywhere, from beak to rudder of Euvoran's galleys, there was the stain and reek of a Stymphalian foulness. So, lest another eve should find them within wing-shot of that accursed isle, the king ordered his remaining captains to weigh anchor: and the other ships, with sea-water still awash in their orlops, and some with drowned rowers still at the oars of their nether banks, drew slowly and heavily to eastward, till the pitted walls of the isle began to sink beneath the main. At eve there was no land in sight anywhere; and after two days, still unharried by the vampires, they came to a coral island, low in the wave, with a calm lagoon that was haunted only by ocean-fowl. And there, for the first time, Euvoran paused to repair his tattered sails, and pump the sea from his holds, and clean the blood and vileness from his decks.

However, in spite of this disaster, the king abated not in any degree his purpose, to sail ever on toward the fountains of the day, until, as Geol had predicted, he should come again on the flown gazolba and slay it with his own royal hand. So, for another moon, they passed amid other and stranger archipelagoes, and penetrated deeplier into the regions of myth and story.

Bravely they drove into mornings of amaranth crossed by gilded lories, and noontides of darkly ardent sapphire where the rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands. The stars changed above them, and under the alien-figured Signs they heard the wild, melancholy crying of swans that flew southward fleeing the winter of realms indiscoverable, and seeking the summer in trackless worlds. And they held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the ell-wide pennons of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them; and men who arrayed themselves in aepyornis plumes. And they spoke also with antic people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was

studded as if with pin-feathers. But nowhere could they learn aught of the gazolba.

At mid-forenoon, early in the sixth month of the voyage, a new and unheard-of shore ascended from the deep, curving for many miles, from north-east to south-west, with sheltered harbors, and cliffs and pinnacled crags that were interspaced with low-lying verdurous dales. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran and his captains saw that towers were builded on certain of the highmost crags; but in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass. And, sailing still nearer, and entering the harbor, they descried no evident sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds, ranging in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wing-spread than eagle or condor. They circled over the ships in coveys and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary; and Euvoran saw that a winged concourse, as it were, went to and fro above the woods and about the cliffs and towers. He bethought him that here was a likely haunt in which to track down the gazolba; so, arming himself for the chase, he went ashore in a small boat with several of his men.

The birds, even the largest, were patently timid and inoffensive; for when the king landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and flew inland, or sought the crags and pinnacles that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and Euvoran marvelled at such cunning; and moreover he was somewhat exasperated, for he wished not to depart without bringing down a trophy of his skill, even though he should fail to find the gazolba itself. And he deemed the behavior of the birds all the more curious because of the island’s solitude: for here there were no paths other than would be made by forest animals; and the woods and meadows were wholly wild and incult; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their empty windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods along the shore, and came to a steep slope of bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower at one side. Here, at the slope’s bottom, Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if wholly unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. And

Euvoran trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry. And he was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of the men who accompanied him cried out as if in alarm. Then, turning his head as he stooped beneath the foliage of the cedar, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet descried on that isle, who came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him, making a loud roar with the drumming of their mighty vans, and beating him instantly to the ground, so that he was aware of them only as a storm of dreadfully rushing plumes and a hurlyburly of cruel beaks and talons. And, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the birds fastened its huge claws in the shoulder-cape of the king's mantle, not sparing the flesh beneath in its fell clutch, and carried him away to the tower on the crag as easily as a ger-falcon would have carried a small leveret. The king was wholly helpless, and he had dropped his longbow beneath the onset of the birds, and his blowgun had been shaken loose from the girdle at which it depended, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. And he had no weapon remaining, other than a sharp misericordia; and this he could not use to any purpose against his captor in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if with derision till he was deafened by their din. And a sickness came upon him because of the height to which he had been carried and the violence of his ascent; and giddily he saw the walls of the tower sink past him with wide and portal-like windows. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a high and spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face and lay vomiting for awhile, heedless of his surroundings. Then, recovering somewhat, he raised himself to a sitting position, and beheld before him, above a sort of dais, an enormous perch of red gold and yellow ivory wrought in the form of a new crescent arching upward. The perch was supported between posts of black jasper flecked as if with blood, and upon it there sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran with a grim and dreadful and austere mien, as an emperor might eye the gutter-scum that his guards have haled before him for some obscene offense. The plumage of the bird was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a mighty pickaxe of pale bronze that darkened greenly toward the point, and he clutched the perch with iron talons that

were longer than the mailed fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with quills of turquoise blue and amber yellow, like a many pointed crown; and about his long, unfeathered throat, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads, and the heads of various ferine beasts such as the weasel, the wildcat, the stoat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no larger than groundnuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl; and his alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other birds of a size inferior only to his were sitting about the chamber on less costly and less elevated perches, even as grandees of the realm might sit in the presence of their sovereign. And behind Euvoran, like guards, there stood together with its fellow the creatures that had rapt him to the tower.

Now, to his utter confounding, the great Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech. And the bird said to him in a harsh but magniloquent and majestic voice:

“Too hardily, O filth of mankind, thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornava, isle that is sacred to the birds, and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For know that I am the monarch of all birds that fly, walk, wade or swim on this terraqueous globe of Earth; and in Ornava is my seat and my capital. Verily, justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught to say in thy defense, I will give thee hearing now, for I would not that even the vilest of earthly vermin, and the most pernicious, should accuse me of inequity or tyranny.”

Then, blustering somewhat, though sorely afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer to the bird, and said:

“I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me together with the crown through the spell of a lawless necromancer. And know that I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow me to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species.”

Thereat the ruler of the birds, as if amazed and more indignant than before, made question of Euvoran and interrogated him sharply concerning the gazolba. And, learning that this bird had been slain by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the whole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried in a great and wrathful voice:

“This helpeth not thy case, but showeth thee guilty of a twofold crime and a triple infamy: for thou hast owned a most abominable thing, and one that subverteth nature. In this my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but truly, it is not allowable nor sufferable that man should do thus to birds. So, for the sake of justice and retribution, I shall presently commit thee to the care of my taxidermists. Indeed, methinks that a stuffed king (since even the vermin have kings) will serve to enhance my collection.”

After that, he addressed Euvoran’s guards and enjoined them: “Away with this vileness. Confide it to the man-cage, and maintain a strict watch before it.”

Euvoran, urged and directed by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sort of sloping ladder with broad rungs of teak, that led from the chamber to one above it in the tower’s top. In the center of this room there was a bamboo cage of capacity more than ample for the housing of six men. The king was driven into the cage, and the birds bolted the door upon him with their claws, which seemed to have the deftness of fingers. Thereafter one of them remained beside the cage, eyeing Euvoran vigilantly through the spaces of the bars; and the other flew away through a great window and did not return.

The king sat down on a litter of straw, since the cage contained no better provision for his comfort. Despair was heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. And sorely was he astonished, that a bird should speak with human speech, insulting and reviling humankind; and he deemed it an equally monstrous thing that a bird should dwell in royal state, with servitors to do his will, and the pomp and power of a king. And, pondering these unholy prodigies, Euvoran waited for his doom in the man-cage; and after awhile, water and raw grain were brought to him in earthen vessels; but he could not eat the grain. And still later, as the day drew toward afternoon, he heard a shouting of men and a shrieking of birds below the tower; and above these noises, anon, there were clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. So Euvoran knew that his sailors and soldiers, having seen him borne into captivity in the tower, were assailing the place in an effort to succor him. And the noises waxed, mounting to a most tremendous and atrocious din, and there were cries as of people mortally wounded, and a vengeful shrilling as of harpies in battle. Then, presently, the clamor ebbed

away, and the shoutings grew faint, and Euvoran knew that his men had failed to take the tower. And hope waned within him, dying in a darker murk of despair.

So the afternoon went over, declining seaward, and the sun touched Euvoran with its level beams through a western window and colored the bars of his cage with a mockery of gold. Presently the light flowed from the room, and after awhile the twilight rose, weaving a tremulous phantom web on the pale air. And between the sunset and the darkness, a night-guard came in to relieve the day-flying fowl who warded the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes, and he stood taller than Euvoran himself, and was formed and feathered somewhat in the burly fashion of an owl, and he had the stout legs of a megapode. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, which burned upon him with a brighter bale as the dusk deepened. Hardly could he sustain that ever vigilant scrutiny. But anon the moon rose, being but little past the full, and poured a spectral quicksilver into the room, and paled the eyes of the bird; and Euvoran conceived a desperate plan.

His captors, deeming all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the misericordia, which was long and double-edged and needle-sharp at the tip. And stealthily he gripped the hilt of the misericordia under his mantle, and feigned a sudden illness with groanings and tossings and convulsions that threw him against the bars. And, even as he had schemed, the great nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owl-like head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, pretending a more violent convulsion, drew the misericordia from its sheath and struck quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

Shrewdly the thrust went home, piercing the deepest veins, and the squawking of the bird was choked by his own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so that Euvoran feared that all the occupants of the tower would be awakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were bootless; for none came to the chamber; and soon the flappings ceased, and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers. Thereupon the king proceeded with his plan, and shot back the bolts of the wide-latticed bamboo door with small difficulty. Then, going to the head of the teak-wood ladder which ran to the room beneath, he looked down and beheld the ruler of the birds asleep in the moonlight on his chryselephantine perch, with his terrible

pickaxe beak under his wing. And Euvoran was afraid to descend into the chamber, lest the ruler should awake and see him. And also, it occurred to him that the lower stories of the tower might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had slain.

Again his despair returned upon him; but being of a sleightful and crafty bent, Euvoran bethought him of another scheme. With much labor, using the misericordia, he skinned the mighty nyctalops, and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then Euvoran wrapped himself in the skin, with the head of the nyctalops rearing above his own head, and eyeholes in its burly throat through which he could look out amid the feathers. And the skin fitted him well enough because of his pigeon-breast and his potbelly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the heavy shanks of the bird as he walked.

Then, imitating the gait and carriage of this fowl, the king descended the ladder, treading cautiously to avoid a fall and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. And the ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In this room there were many great birds asleep on perches, and the king was nigh to perishing with terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him. And he went down to a third room, and was startled to see therein the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clad like merchants, and others nude and ruddled with bright ores like savages. And the men were still and stark as if enchanted; and the king feared them little less than he had feared the birds. But, remembering that which the ruler had told him, he divined that these were persons who had been captured even as he himself, and had been slain by the birds and preserved through the art of an avian taxidermy. And, trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of bird-kind. And the room below this was the ground story of the tower, and its windows and portals were guarded by several gigantic night-fowl similar to those whose skin was worn by the king. Here, indeed, was his greatest peril and the supreme trial of his courage; for the birds eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs, and they greeted him with a soft whoo-whooing as of owls.

And the knees of Euvoran knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but, imitating the sound in reply, he passed among the guards and was not molested by them. And, reaching an open portal of the tower, he saw the moonlit rock of the crag lying at a distance of no more than two cubits below him; and he hopped from the door-sill in the manner of a fowl, and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge along the crag, till he reached the upper beginning of that declivity at whose bottom he had slain the little owl. Here his descent was easier, and he came anon to the woods around the harbor.

But, ere he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows about him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows, and he roared out in anger, and dropped the mantling bird-skin. Thereby, no doubt, he was saved from death at the hands of his own men, who were coming through the wood with intent to assail the tower at night. And, learning this, the king forgave the jeopardy in which their arrows had placed him. But he thought it best to refrain from attacking the tower, and to quit the isle with all dispatch. So, returning to his flagship, he ordered all his captains to set sail immediately; for, knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was more than apprehensive of pursuit; and he deemed it well to place a wide interval of sea between his vessels and that isle ere dawn. So the galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a north-eastern promontory, they went due east in a course contrary to the moon. And, Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, regaled himself with a variety and plenitude of viands to make up for his fasting in the man-cage; and he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and added thereto a jarful of the puissant pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

Halfway betwixt midnight and morn, when the isle of Ornava was left far behind, the steersmen of the vessels beheld a wall of ebon cloud that rose swiftly athwart the lowering moon. Higher it climbed upon the heavens, spreading and toppling in towers of thunder, till the storm overtook Euvoran’s fleet and drove it on as if with the loosed hurricanes of hell through a weltering of unstarred chaos. The ships were sundered in the gloom and were borne far apart; and at daybreak the king’s quadrireme was alone in a prone-rushing tumult of mingled wave and cloud; and the mast was shattered, along with most of the beef-wood oars; and the vessel was a toy for the demons of the tempest.

For three days and nights, with no glimmer of sun or star discerned through the ever-boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract of elements pouring to some bottomless gulf beyond the verges of the world. And early on the fourth day the clouds were somewhat riven; but a wind still blew like the breath of perdition. Then, lifting darkly through the spray and vapor, a half-seen land arose before the prow, and the helmsman and the rowers were wholly helpless to turn the doomed ship from its course. And shortly after, with a great crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, the vessel struck on a low reef hidden by the flying foam, and its lower decks were flooded quickly. And the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and the water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Gaunt and cragged and austere was the shore beyond the reef, beheld only through the veils of the sea's foaming fury. And scant, it seemed, was the hope of reaching land. But, ere the wrecked argosy had gone beneath him, Euvoran lashed himself with ropes of coir to an empty wine-barrel, and cast himself from the sloping deck. And those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard by the typhoon, leapt after him into that high wallowing sea, some trusting only to their might as swimmers and others clinging to casks or broken spars or planks. And most were drawn under in the seething maelstroms or were beaten to death on the rocks; and of all the ship's company, the king alone survived and was cast ashore with the breath of life unquenched within him by the bitter sea.

Half-drowned and senseless, he lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence, and the billows came in with falling crests, and the clouds went over in a rack of pearl, and the sun, climbing above the rocks, shone down upon Euvoran from a deep immaculate azure. And the king, still dazed from the buffeting rudeness of the sea, heard dimly and as if in dream the shrilling of an unknown bird. Then, opening his eyes, he beheld betwixt himself and the sun, librating on spread wings, that various-colored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice that was harsh and shrill as that of the peafowl, the bird hung above him for a moment, and then flew inland through a rift among the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys of war, the king unbound himself in haste from the empty barrel; and, rising giddily, he followed the bird. And, though he was now weaponless, it

seemed to him that the fulfillment of the oracle of Geol was at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a great cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

Beyond the cleft in the high and rugged crags, he found a sheltered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and woods of exotic leaf, and fragrant orient shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded eyes, there darted great numbers of fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba; and among them he was unable to distinguish the one he had followed, deeming it the avian garniture of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was a thing beyond his comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed fowl unique and fellowless throughout the world, even as the other components of the crown of Ustaim. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the mariners who had slain the birds in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of its kind.

However, though wrath and confusion were in his heart, Euvoran bethought him that a single bird from out the flock would still stand as the emblem and the talisman of his royalty in Ustaim, and would vindicate his quest among the isles of dawn. So, with a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. And ever before him as he chased them, the birds flew from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking, and a flurry of plumes that wrought an imperial splendor on the air. And at length, by his own good aim or the cast of chance, Euvoran slew him a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered raiment of an uncouth cut, armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with tough grass. And the man wore in lieu of other headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvoran, shouting indistinctly through his matted beard; and the king beheld him with surprise and anger, and cried loudly:

“Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold you to a dire accounting of these deeds.”

At this, eyeing Euvoran strangely, the man laughed a long and derisive laugh, as if he deemed the king a person somewhat addled in his wits. And he seemed to find much merriment in the aspect of the king, whose garments were draggled and were stiff and stained with the drying sea-

water, and whose turban had been snatched away by the felon waves, leaving his baldness without disguise. And when he had done laughing, the man said:

“Verily, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. For nine years agone I was shipwrecked on this isle, being a sea-captain from the far southwestern land of Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship’s company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no other man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes, and has no people other than the birds. And as for your questions, they are readily answered: I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of famine, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance, apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because my tarboosh was stolen by the sea whenas it flung me rudely upon this strand. And I wot not of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover, your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless, and you and I are alone thereon, and I am the stronger of us twain and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran; and since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl: for I must deem that you are more familiar with the products of the culinary art than with the practice.”

Now, hearing all this, the wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in the true oracle of Geol. And he knew that the wreckage of his fleet of war was scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor live in pleasant luxury, nor administer the dooms of law between the torturer and the executioner in the hall of justice, nor wear the gazolba-crown amid the plaudits of his people. So, not being utterly bereft of reason, he bowed him to his destiny. And he said to the sea-captain:

“There is sense in what you say. Therefore, lead on.”

Then, laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and the captain, whose name was Naz Obbamar, repaired companionably to a cave in the rocky hill-slope of the isle’s interior, which Naz Obbamar had chosen for his abode. Here the captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs, and showed the king the proper manner in which to pluck his fowl and broil it over the

fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor-wood. And Euvoran, being famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. And after they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing a wine he had made from certain berries; and he and Euvoran drank from the jar by turns, and told each other the tale of their adventures, and forgot for awhile the rudeness and desolation of their plight.

Thereafter they shared the isle of gazolbas, killing and eating the birds as their hunger ordained. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they slew and ate some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvoran made him a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolba, even as Naz Obbamar had done. And this was the fashion of their days till the end.

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 with the laudable desire of fortifying his imaginative talent by a solid groundwork of observation and experience. Being over-sanguine, and a poor arithmetician, he had started on this ambitious journey without proper funds. 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 training, 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 waters of somber green.

The light waned with visible swiftness behind the top-heavy towers and pagoda-angled pyramids of Ignar-Luth. It failed upon the sluggish canal, like a reflection of copper on opaque enamel. The chill of the coming night began to pervade the shadows of the huge solar gnomons that lined the shore at frequent intervals. The querulous clangors of the gongs died suddenly in Ignar-Vath, and left a weirdly whispering silence. The strange buildings of the immemorial city bulked enormous, with a few saffron and unwinking lights, 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 earth-men, who became silent as they approached the bridge, feeling the oppression of eerie 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 Earth-man 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, as well as the traits of the Martian psychology, were the fruit of alien forces and conditions.

At that moment, faced with the precariousness of their situation, the threat of long or permanent exile, 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, five on each side, that loomed in war-like attitudes before the beginning of the first aerial span.

The earth-men 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 custom, 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. However, they don’t usually go out of their way to befriend terrestrials. 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. And we’ll never know what it’s all about unless we go.”

“All right,” said Haines, to the towering giant. “Lead us to your master.” From his smattering of Martian etiquette, he knew that it was not

permissible to ask questions. The identity of the person who had summoned them, and his motive, were barred from inquiry by common politeness; though the peremptory invitation itself could have been easily declined without giving offense.

With strides that were moderated to match those of the earth-men, 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 mid-air. 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 medieval 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 ante-chamber. 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, whose inner door was also grimly shut, 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 nervous unease and 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 earth-men. 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 by 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 earth-men 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. They could not conceive the purpose of their descent, but more and more it assumed a sinister aspect.

The strident shrieking of metal slowed and sank to a sullen whine. The earth-men 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 they felt themselves shrinking into mere pygmies when they saw that none of the Martians about them was less than nine or ten feet in height. Some were closer to eleven, and all were muscled in proportion. Their faces bore a look of immense, mummy-like age, incongruous with their agility and vigor. They seemed oblivious of the earth-men, their deeply shadowed eyes preoccupied with some ulterior vision.

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, like all the others, 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 orb 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 earth-men 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, apparently, 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 earth-man.

“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 or overly difficult. 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 creatures 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; and I was regarded with mingled awe and hostility. 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 earth-men, 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? Your offer is too strange, too incredible, to be accepted hastily.”

“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. I can make allowance for your incredulity. 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 otherworld sweetness, it curled about their nostrils, deepening slowly but acceleratively to a spicy flood, and seeming to mix, in some paradoxical manner, 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 swam 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 giddying 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—a horticultural annex of Ravormos. 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, cocaine, 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 an unpleasant one."

"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 earth-man 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 earth-men, conscious of a ravening hunger, addressed themselves to the foodstuffs, which had been moulded or cut into various geometric forms. Though possibly of synthetic origin, the foods were delicious, and the earth-men 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 unattended; 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-magnetic force of wave-length 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, hundred-colored gems as if to tempt the earth-men.

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 amphorae. 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 earth-men 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 figures 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 other 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 earth-men 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 could discuss at leisure the proposition of Vulthoom.

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 engineries 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 illumine it in the same fashion as the other halls of Ravormos. A fine dust was stirred by the feet of the earth-men 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 earth-men 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 prehistoric flood. The bottom, deeply eroded, and riffled 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 tugging. 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 Chandler; 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 eerie 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 earth-men.

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 and smoulder as if they had just issued from a fiery furnace.

A palpable heat emanated from these hellish chimeras, and the earth-men 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 at the same unvarying distance 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 earth-men 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 earth-men 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, at a former time. The breath of the chimeras, like a soft gale, was upon the faces of the earth-men... 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 glamour 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 had 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 was a thing that 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 tri-dimensional 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 eerie 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 earth-man 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 amphorae 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. What ever 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 gentle 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 earth-man 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 engineries seemed to ebb and recede before it. The earth-man 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 earth-man.

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 surprise when he found himself lifted from the floor and

borne along through mid-air in an inexplicable levitation. It was as if he were caught in a rushing stream, or were carried on 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 thronged 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 grey mist that had risen between them. There was silence everywhere, as if the Tartarean engineries 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 WEAVER IN THE VAULT

The instructions of Famorgh, fifty-ninth king of Tasuun, were minutely circumstantial and explicit, and, moreover, were not to be disobeyed without the incurring of penalties that would make mere death a pleasant thing. Yanur, Grotara, and Thirlain Ludoch, three of the king's hardiest henchmen, riding forth at morn from the palace in Miraab, debated with a thin semblance of jocosity whether, in their case, obedience or disobedience would prove the direr evil.

The commission they had just received from Famorgh was no less singular than distasteful. They were to visit Chaon Gacca, the long-forsaken seat of the kings of Tasuun, lying more than ninety miles to the north of Miraab amid the desert hills; and, descending into the burial-vaults beneath the ruined palace, were to find and bring back to Miraab whatever remained of the mummy of King Tnepreez, founder of the dynasty to which Famorgh belonged. No one had entered Chaon Gacca for centuries, and the preservation of its dead in the catacombs was uncertain; but even if only the skull of Tnepreez was left, or the bone of his little finger, or the dust of mummia into which he had crumbled, the men-at-arms were to fetch it carefully, guarding it like a holy relic.

"'Tis an errand for hyenas rather than warriors," grumbled Yanur in his black and spade-shaped beard. "By the god Yululun, Keeper of the Tombs, I deem it an ill thing to disturb the peaceful dead. And truly it is not well for men to enter Chaon Gacca, where Death has made his capital, and has gathered all the ghouls to do him homage."

"The king should have sent his embalmers," opined Grotara. He was the youngest and hugest of the three, being taller by a full head than Yanur or

Thirlain Ludoch; and like them, he was a veteran of savage wars and desperate perils.

“Yea, I said it was an errand for hyenas,” rejoined Yanur. “But the king knew well that there were no mortal beings in all Miraab, saving ourselves, who would dare to enter the accursed vaults of Chaon Gacca. Two centuries ago, King Mandis, wishing to retrieve the golden mirror of Queen Avaina for his favorite leman, commanded two of his bravos to descend within the vaults, where the mummy of Avaina sits enthroned in her separate tomb, holding the mirror in her withered hand....And the bravos went to Chaon Gacca...but they did not return; and King Mandis, being warned by a soothsayer, made no second attempt to procure the mirror, but contented his leman with another gift.”

“Yanur, thy tales would gladden those who await the scything of the executioner,” said Thirlain Ludoch, the oldest of the trio, whose brown beard was faded to a hempen hue by desert suns. “But I chide thee not. It is common knowledge that the catacombs are ridden with worse hauntings than those of liches or phantoms. Strange devils came there long ago from the mad, unholy desert of Dloth; and I have heard it told that the kings forsook Chaon Gacca because of certain Shadows, that appeared at full noon in the palace-halls, with no visible form to cast them, and would not depart thereafter, being changeless amid all the changings of the light, and wholly undimmed by the exorcisms of priests and sorcerers. Men say that the flesh of any who dared to touch the Shadows, or to tread upon them, became black and putrid like the flesh of month-old corpses, all in a mere instant. Because of such testing, when one of the Shadows came and sat upon his throne, the right hand of King Agmeni rotted to the wrist, and fell away like the sloughing of a leper.... And after that, no man would dwell in Chaon Gacca.”

“Verily, I have heard other stories,” said Yanur. “The town’s abandonment was due mainly to the failure of the wells and cisterns, from which the water vanished following an earthquake that left the land riven with hell-deep chasms. The palace of the kings was sundered to its nethermost vault by one of the chasms; and King Agmeni was seized by a violent madness when he inhaled the infernal vapors issuing from the rent; nor was he ever wholly sane in his latter lifetime, after the quitting of Chaon Gacca and the rearing of Miraab.”

“Now that is a tale that I can believe,” said Grotara. “And surely I must deem that Famorgh has inherited the madness of his forefather, Agmeni. Methinks that the royal house of Tasuun rots and totters to its fall. Harlots and sorcerers swarm in the palace of Famorgh like charnel-worms; and now, in this princess Lunalia of Xylac whom he has taken to wife, he has found a harlot and a witch in one. He has sent us on this errand at the prompting of Lunalia, who desires the mummy of Tnepreez for her own unhallowed purpose. Tnepreez, I have heard, was a great wizard in his time; and Lunalia would avail herself of the potent virtue of his bones and dust in the brewing of her philtres. Pah! I like not the task of such purveyance. There are mummies enow in Miraab for the making of potions to madden the Queen’s lovers. Famorgh is utterly besotted and befooled.”

“Beware,” admonished Thirlain Ludoch, “for Lunalia is a vampire who lusts ever for the young and strong...and thy turn may come next, O Grotara, if fortune brings us back alive from this enterprise. I have seen her watching thee.”

“I would sooner mate with the wild lamia,” protested Grotara in virtuous indignation.

“Thy aversion would help thee not,” said Thirlain Ludoch... “for I know others who have drunk the potions.... But we are now nearing the last wineshop in Miraab; and my throat is dusty beforehand with the very thought of this journey. I shall need a whole stoup of wine from Yoros to wash the dust away.”

“Thou sayest sooth,” agreed Yanur. “Already, I have become dry as the mummy of Tnepreez. And thou, Grotara?”

“I will quaff any drink, if it be not the philtre-brew of Queen Lunalia.”

Mounted on swift, untiring dromedaries, and followed by a fourth camel bearing on its back a light wooden sarcophagus for the accommodation of King Tnepreez, the three henchmen had soon left behind them the bright and noisy streets of Miraab, and the fields of sesame, the crofts of apricot and pomegranate, lying for miles about the city. Before noon, they had parted from the route of caravans, and had taken a road that was seldom used by any but lions and jackals. However, the way to Chaon Gacca was plain, for the ruts of olden chariots were still deeply marked in the desert soil, where rain no longer fell at any season.

On the first night, they slept beneath the cold and crowding stars, and kept watch by turn lest a lion should come upon them unaware, or a viper

should crawl among them for warmth. During the second day, they passed amid steepening hills and deep ravines that retarded their progress. Here there was no rustling of serpent or lizard, and naught but their own voices and the shuffling of the camels to break the silence that lay upon all things like a mute malediction. Sometimes, on the desiccating tors above them, against the darkly litten sky, they saw the boughs of century-withered cacti, or the boles of trees that immemorial fires had blasted.

The second sunset found them in sight of Chaon Gacca, rearing its dilapidated walls at a distance of less than four leagues in a broad open valley. Coming then to a wayside shrine of Yuckla, the small and grotesque god of laughter, whose influence was believed to be mainly benignant, they were glad to go no farther on that day, but took shelter in the crumbling shrine for fear of the ghouls and devils, who might dwell in such vicinage to those accursed ruins. They had brought with them from Miraab a wineskin filled with the fervent ruby wine of Yoros; and though the skin was now three-fourths empty, they poured a libation in the twilight on the broken altar, and prayed to Yuckla for such protection as he might give them against the demons of the night.

They slept on the worn and chilly flags about the altar, watching by turn, as before. Grotara, who kept the third watch, beheld at last the paling of the close-hung stars, and aroused his companions in a dawn that was like a sifting of ashes through the cinder-black darkness.

After a scanty meal of figs and dried goat-flesh, they resumed their journey, guiding their camels down the valley, and weaving back and forth on the bouldered slopes when they came to abysmal rents in the earth and rock. Their approach to the ruins was rendered slow and tortuous by such divagations. The way was lined by the stocks of orchard trees that had perished long ago, and by cotes and granges where even the hyena no longer made his lair.

Because of their many detours, it was hard upon noon when they rode through the hollow-ringing streets of the city. Like ragged purple cloaks, the shadows of the ruining houses were drawn close to their walls and portals. Everywhere the havoc of earthquake was manifest, and the fissured avenues and mounded mansions served to verify the tales that Yanur had heard concerning the reason of the city’s abandonment.

The palace of the kings, however, was still pre-eminent above the other buildings. A tumbled pile, it frowned in dark porphyry on a low acropolis

amid the northern quarter. For the making of this acropolis, a hill of red syenite had been stripped of its covering soil in elder days, and had been hewn to sheer and rounding walls, circled by a road that wound slowly about it to the summit. Following this road, and nearing the portals of the courtyard, the henchmen of Famorgh came to a fissure that clove their path from wall to precipice, yawning far in the cliff. The chasm was less than a yard in width; but the dromedaries balked before it. The three dismounted; and, leaving the camels to await their return, they leapt lightly across the fissure. Grotara and Thirlain Ludoch carrying the sarcophagus, and Yanur bearing the wineskin, they passed beneath the shattered barbican.

The great courtyard was heavily strewn with the wreckage of once-lofty towers and balconies, over which the warriors climbed with much wariness, eyeing the shadows closely, and loosening their swords in the sheath, as if they were surmounting the barricades of a hidden foe. All three were startled by the pale and naked form of a colossean female, which they saw reclining on the blocks and rubble in a portico beyond the court. But, drawing nearer, they found that the shape was not that of a she-demon, as they had apprehended, but was merely a marble statue that had once stood like a caryatid among the mighty pillars.

Following the directions given them by Famorgh, they entered the main hall. Here, beneath the chasmed and collapsing roof, they moved with the utmost caution, fearing that a light jar, a whisper, would bring the suspended ruin upon their heads like an avalanche. Overturned tripods of greening copper, tables and trivets of splintered ebony, and the shards of gayly painted porcelains, were mingled with the huge fragments of pedestals and fusts and entablatures; and upon a shivered dais of green, blood-spotted heliotrope, the tarnished silver throne of the kings careened amid the mutilated sphinxes, carved from jasper, that kept eternal guard beside it.

At the further end of the hall, they found an alcove, still unblocked by fallen debris, in which were the stairs that led downward to the catacombs. They paused briefly ere beginning their descent. Yanur applied himself without ceremony to the skin which he carried, and lightened it considerably before giving it into the hands of Thirlain Ludoch, who had marked his potations with solicitude. Thirlain Ludoch and Grotara drank the remainder of the vintage between them; and the latter did not grumble at the thick lees which fell to his lot. Thus replenished, they lit three torches of

pitchy terebinth, which they had brought along in the sarcophagus. Yanur led the way, daring the tenebrous depths with drawn sword, and a torch flaming smokily in his left hand. His companions followed, bearing the sarcophagus, in which, by raising the hinged lid slightly, they had socketed the other torches. The potent wine of Yoros mounted within them, driving away their shadowy fears and apprehensions; but all three were seasoned drinkers, and they moved with great care and circumspection, and did not stumble on the dim, uncertain steps.

Passing through a series of wine-cellars, full of cracked and sharded jars, they came at last, after many zig-zag plungings of the stairs, to a vast corridor hewn in the nether syenite, below the level of the city streets. It stretched before them through illimitable gloom, its walls unshattered, and its roof admitting no crevice-filtered ray. It seemed that they had entered some impregnable citadel of the dead. On the right hand were the tombs of the elder kings; on the left, were the sepulchers of the queens; and lateral passages led to a world of subsidiary vaults, reserved for other members of the royal family. At the further end of the main hall, they would find the burial-chamber of Tnepreez.

Yanur, following the right-hand wall, soon came to the first tomb. According to custom, its portals were open, and were lower than a man’s stature, so that all who entered must bow in humbleness to death. Yanur held his torch to the lintel, and read stumblingly the legend graven in the stone, which told that the vault was that of King Acharnil, father of Agmeni.

“Verily,” he said, “we shall find nothing here, other than the harmless dead.” Then, the wine he had drunk impelling him to a sort of bravado, he stooped before the portals and thrust his flickering flambeau into the tomb of Acharnil.

Surprised, he swore a loud and soldierly oath, that made the others drop their burden and crowd behind him. Peering into the square, concamerated chamber, which had a kingly spaciousness, they saw that it was unoccupied by any visible tenant. The tall chair of mystically graven gold and ebony, in which the mummy should have sat crowned and robed as in life, was addorsed against the farther wall on a low dais. In it, there lay an empty robe of sable and carmine, and a miter-shaped crown of silver set with black sapphires, as if the dead king had doffed them and had gone away!

Startled, with the wine dying swiftly in their brains, the warriors felt the crawling chill of an unknown mystery. Yanur, however, steeled himself to enter the vault. He examined the shadowy corners, he lifted and shook the raiment of Achanil, but found no clue to the riddle of the mummy's disappearance. The tomb was clean of dust, and there was no visible sign nor faintest odor of mortal decay.

Yanur rejoined his comrades, and the three eyed each other in eerie consternation. They resumed their exploring of the hall; and Yanur, as he came to the doorway of each tomb, paused before it and thrust his flambeau into the wavering murk, only to discover a vacant throne, and the cast-off regalia of royalty.

There was, it seemed, no reasonable explanation for the vanishing of the mummies, in whose preservation the powerful spices of the Orient had been employed, together with natron, rendering them virtually incorruptible. From the circumstances, it did not appear that they had been removed by human robbers, who would hardly have left behind the precious jewels, fabrics and metals; and it was even more unlikely that they had been devoured by animals: for in that case the bones would have remained, and the vestments would have been torn and disordered. The mythic terrors of Chaon Gacca began to assume a darker imminence; and the seekers peered and listened fearfully as they went on in the hushed sepulchral hall.

Presently, after they had verified the vacancy of more than a dozen tombs, they saw the glimmering of several steely objects before them on the floor of the corridor. These, on investigation, proved to be two swords, two helmets and cuirasses of a slightly antiquated type, such as had formerly been worn by the warriors of Tasuun. They might well have belonged to the unreturning bravos sent by King Mandis to retrieve the mirror of Avaina.

Yanur, Grotara and Thirlain Ludoch, viewing these sinister relics, were seized by an almost frantic desire to accomplish their errand and regain the sunlight. They hurried on, no longer pausing to inspect the separate tombs, and debating, as they went, the curious problem that would be presented if the mummy sought by Famorgh and Lunalia should have vanished like the others. The king had commanded them to fetch the remains of Tnepreez; and they knew that no excuse or explanation of their failure to do this would be accepted. Under such circumstances, their return to Miraab would be inadvisable; and the only safety would lie in flight beyond the northern desert, along the route of caravans to Zul-Bha-Sair or Xylac.

It seemed that they traversed an enormous distance, among the more ancient vaults. Here the formation of the stone was softer and more friable, and the earthquake had wrought considerable damage. The floor was littered with detritus, the sides and roof were full of fractures, and some of the chambers had partially fallen in, so that their vacancy was revealed to the casual peering of Yanur and his companions.

Nearing the hall's end, they were confronted by a chasm, dividing both floor and roof, and splitting the sill and lintel of the last chamber. The gulf was about four feet wide, and the torch of Yanur could not disclose its bottom. He found the name of Tnepreez on the lintel, whose antique inscription, telling the deeds and titles of the king, had been sundered in twain by the cataclysm. Then, walking on a narrow ledge, he entered the vault. Grotara and Thirlain Ludoch crowded behind him, leaving the sarcophagus in the hall.

The sepulchral throne of Tnepreez, overturned and broken, was lying across the fissure that had rifted the whole tomb from side to side. There was no trace of the mummy, which, from the chair's inverted position, had doubtless fallen into those yawning depths in the hour of its overthrow.

Before the seekers could voice their disappointment and their dismay, the silence about them was broken by a dull rumbling as of distant thunder. The stone trembled beneath their feet, the walls shook and wavered, and the rumbling noise, in long, shuddering undulations, grew louder and more ominous. The solid floor appeared to rise and flow with a continuous, sickening motion; and then, as they turned to flee, it seemed that the universe came down upon them in a roaring deluge of night and ruin.

Grotara, wakening in darkness, was aware of an agonizing burden, as if some monumental shaft were builded on his crushed feet and lower legs. His head throbbed and ached as if from the stroke of a stunning mace. He found that his arms and body were free; but the pain in his extremities became insufferable, causing him to swoon anew, when he tried to drag them from beneath their incumbrance.

Terror closed upon him like the clutch of ghoulish fingers, as he realized his situation. An earthquake, such as had caused the abandonment of Chaon Gacca, had occurred; and he and his fellows were entombed in the catacombs. He called aloud, repeating the names of Yanur and Thirlain Ludoch many times; but there was no groan nor rustle to assure him that they still lived.

Reaching out with his right hand, he encountered numerous pieces of rubble. Slewing himself toward them, he found several boulder-sized fragments of stone, and among them a smooth and roundish thing, with a sharp ridge in the center, which he knew for the crested helmet worn by one of his companions. Even with the most painful striving, he could reach no further, and was unable to identify the owner. The metal was heavily dented, and the comb was bent as if by the impact of some ponderous mass.

In spite of his predicament, the fierce nature of Grotara refused to yield itself to despair. He drew himself to a sitting position, and, doubling forward, he contrived to reach the enormous block that had fallen across his nether limbs. He pushed against it with herculean effort, raging like a trapped lion, but the mass was immovable. For hours, it seemed, he strove as if with some monstrous cacodemon. His frenzy was calmed only by exhaustion. He lay back at length; and the darkness weighed upon him like a live thing, and seemed to gnaw him with fangs of pain and horror.

Delirium hovered near, and he thought that he heard a dim and hideous humming, far below in the stony bowels of the earth. The noise grew louder, as if ascending from a riven hell. He became aware of a wan, unreal light that wavered above him, disclosing in doubtful glimpses the shattered roof. The light strengthened; and lifting himself a little, he saw that it poured from the earthquake chasm in the floor.

It was a light such as he had never seen: a livid luster, that was not the reflection of lamp or torch or firebrand. Somehow, as if the senses of hearing and sight were confused, he identified it with the hideous humming.

Like a sourceless dawn, the luminosity crept upon the ruin wrought by the temblor. Grotara saw that the whole entrance of the tomb, and much of its concameration, had caved in. A fragment, striking him on the head, had knocked him senseless; and a huge section of the roof had fallen across his extremities.

The bodies of Thirlain Ludoch and Yanur were lying close to the broadened chasm. Both, he felt sure, were dead. The grizzled beard of Thirlain Ludoch was dark and stiff with blood that had run down from the crushed cranium; and Yanur was half-buried in a pile of blocks and detritus, from which his torso and left arm were emergent. His torch had burned itself out in his stiffly clutching fingers, as if in a blackened socket.

All this Grotara noted in a vague dream-like manner. Then he perceived the real source of the strange illumination. A coldly shining, hueless globe,

round as a puffball and large as a human head, had risen from the fissure and was hovering above it like a mimic moon. The thing oscillated with a slight but ceaseless vibratory motion. From it, as if caused by this vibration, the heavy humming poured, and the light fell in ever-trembling waves.

A dim awe was upon Grotara; but he felt no terror. It seemed that the light and sound were woven upon his senses like some Lethean spell. Rigid he sat, forgetful of his pain and despair, while the globe hovered for a few instants above the chasm, and then floated slowly and horizontally, till it hung directly over the upturned features of Yanur.

With the same deliberate slowness, the same ceaseless oscillation, it descended upon the face and neck of the dead man, which appeared to melt away like tallow as the globe settled lower and lower. The humming deepened, the globe flamed with an eerier luster, and its death-like pallor was mottled with impure iris. It swelled and bloated obscenely, while the whole head of the warrior shrank within the helmet, and the plates of his cuirass fell in as if the very torso were shrivelling beneath them.

Grotara’s eyes beheld the horrific vision clearly; but his brain was numbed as if by a merciful hemlock. It was hard to remember, hard to think... but somehow he recalled the empty tombs, the ownerless crowns and vestments. The enigma of the missing mummies, over which he and his companions had puzzled vainly, was now resolved. But the thing that battened upon Yanur was beyond all mortal knowledge or surmise. It was some ghoulish denizen of a nether world, set free by the demons of earthquake.

Now, in the catalepsy that thralled him, he saw the gradual settling of the piled debris in which the legs and hips of Yanur were inhumed. The helmet and body-mail were like empty shards, the outflung arm had withered, had shortened, and the very bones were dwindling away, appearing to melt and liquefy. The globe had grown enormous. It was flushed with unclean ruby, like a vampire moon. From it, there issued palpable ropes and filaments, pearly, shuddering into strange colors, that appeared to fasten themselves to the ruined floor and walls and roof, like the weaving of a spider. Thickly and more thickly they multiplied, forming a curtain between Grotara and the chasm, and falling upon Thirlain Ludoch and himself, till he saw the sanguine burning of the globe as through arabesques of baleful opal.

Now the web had filled the entire tomb. It ran and glistened with a hundred changing hues, it dripped with glories drawn from the spectrum of dissolution. It bloomed with ghostly blossoms, and foliages that grew and faded as if by necromancy. The eyes of Grotara were blinded; more and more he was meshed in the weird web. Unearthly, chill as the fingers of death, its gossamers clung and quivered upon his face and hands.

He could not tell the duration of the weaving, the term of his enthrallment. Dimly, at last, he beheld the thinning of the luminous threads, the retraction of the trembling arabesques. The globe, a thing of evil beauty, alive and aware in some holocryptic fashion, had risen now from the empty armor of Yanur. Diminishing to its former size, and putting off its colors of blood and opal, it hung for a little above the chasm. Grotara felt that it was watching him... was watching Thirlain Ludoch. Then, like a satellite of the nether caverns, it fell slowly into the fissure, and the light faded from the tomb and left Grotara in deepening darkness.

After that, there were ages of fever, thirst and madness, of torment and slumber, and recurrent strugglings against the massive block that held him prisoner. He babbled insanely, he howled like a wolf; or, lying supine and silent, he heard the multitudinous, muttering voices of ghouls that conspired against him. Gangrening swiftly, his crushed extremities seemed to throb like those of a Titan. He drew his sword with the strength of delirium, and endeavored to saw himself free at the shins, only to swoon from loss of blood.

Awakening feebly, and scarce able to lift his head, he saw that the light had returned, and heard once more the incessant vibrant humming that filled the vault. His mind was clear, and a weak terror stirred within him: for he knew that the Weaver had risen again from the chasm...and knew the reason of its coming.

He turned his head laboriously, and watched the glowing ball as it hung and oscillated, and then came down in leisurely descent on the face of Thirlain Ludoch. Again he saw it bloat obscenely, like a blood-flushed moon, fed with the wasting of the old warrior’s body. Again, with dazzled eyes, he beheld the weaving of the web of impure iris, patterned with deathly splendor, veiling the ruinous catacomb with its weird illusions. Again, like a dying beetle, he was meshed in its chill, unearthly strands; and its necromantic flowers, blooming and perishing, latticed the void air above him. But, ere the retracting of the web, his delirium came upon him and

brought a demon-peopled darkness; and the Weaver finished its toil unseen, and returned unheeded to the chasm.

He tossed in the hells of fever, or lay at the black, undivined nadir of oblivion. But death tarried, still aloof; and he lived on by sheer virtue of his youth and giant strength. Once more, toward the end, his senses cleared, and he saw for the third time the unholy light and heard again the thrice-odious humming. The Weaver was poised above him, pale, shining and vibrant...and he knew that it was waiting for him to die.

Lifting his sword with weak fingers, he sought to drive it away. But the thing hovered, alert and vigilant, beyond his reach; and he thought that it watched him like a vulture. The sword dropped from his hand. The luminous horror did not depart. It drew nearer, like an eyeless, pertinacious face; and it seemed to follow him, swooping through the ultimate night as he fell deathward.

With none to behold the glory of its weaving, with darkness before and after, the Weaver spun its final web in the tomb of Tnepreez.

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 domination. 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 nor 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 power from which it springs. Therefore, 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 carven 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 mid-air, 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, Nouph 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 microscopic oceans, isles, mountains, jungles and deserts. Peering closer, as if into a crystal, the enchanter saw the mimic planet swell and deepen. 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 and 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 too familiar volume, and he saw nothing over which he cared to linger. The wars of gigantic wyverns; the matings of half-vegetable monsters; the queer algâe that had filled a certain ocean with their living, moving labyrinths; the

remarkable spawn of certain polar glaciers—all these elicited no gleam nor sparkle in his dulled eyes of blackish emerald.

At length, on that portion of the planet which was turning into the double dawn from its moonless night, he perceived an occurrence that drew and held his attention. He began to calculate, for the first time, 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 in the years of his novitiate, he went forth into the garden of his mountain-builded 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 awful space, and metallic palms deployed their armaments of foliage against the far-flown 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 psammite 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 conterminate 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 further 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 grey 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 further 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 deep hues and shadows of the valley with strange copper and orange. The emerald sun was still below the horizon.

The terminus of the silver 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 eerie, plaintive singing, like the voices 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 single, 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 darting 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 disapproval 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 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 in 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, Maal Dweb found himself far from insensible to the perilous luring of the voices. Contrary to his intention, half-forgetful of the danger, he found himself emerging from the lee of the lichen-crested rocks. By insidious degrees, the melody began to fire 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 canorous 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 naive beings forgot their vampiric intentions, their surprise 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 humankind; 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 red and sable mountains at the valley’s upper extreme. These beings, known as the Ispazars, seven in number, had become formidable sorcerers, developing 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 the bird-people of the valley had borne to 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 winged 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 couch of voluminous 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 and undulant bodies, their lizard limbs with 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 had 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 as if 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 scaly 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 concamerated 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 pharmaceutics. 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 various contents of the cauldron, 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 curious 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 long 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 sable 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, no 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 was 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 seemed to shrink and dwindle 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 serpent-hood, 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. 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 of the alchemy, 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 viewpoint, 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 bridge 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 multi-dimensional 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.

APPENDIX ONE:
STORY NOTES

***Abbreviations Used**:*

AHT Arkham House Transcripts: a set of transcriptions and excerpts from the letters of H. P. Lovecraft prepared by Donald Wandrei and August Derleth after Lovecraft's death in preparation for what would be five volumes of *Selected Letters* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965-1976).

AWD August W. Derleth (1909-1971), Wisconsin novelist, *Weird Tales* author, and co-founder of Arkham House.

AY The Abominations of Yondo (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1960).

BB The Black Book of Clark Ashton Smith (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1979).

BL Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

CAS Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961).

DAW Donald A. Wandrei (1908-1987), poet, *Weird Tales* writer and co-founder of Arkham House.

DS The Door to Saturn: The Collected Fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith, Volume Two. Ed. Scott Connors and Ron Hilger (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2007).

EOD Emperor of Dreams: A Clark Ashton Smith Bio-Bibliography by Donald Sidney-Fryer et al. (West Kingston, RI: Donald M. Grant, 1978).

ES The End of the Story: The Collected Fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith, Volume One. Ed. Scott Connors and Ron Hilger (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2006).

FFT The Freedom of Fantastic Things. Ed. Scott Connors (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2006).

FW Farnsworth Wright (1888-1940), editor of *Weird Tales* from 1924 to 1939.

GL Genius Loci and Other Tales (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1948).

HPL Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937), informal leader of a circle of writers for *Weird Tales* and related magazines, and probably the leading exponent of weird fiction in the twentieth century.

JHL Clark Ashton Smith Papers and H. P. Lovecraft Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University.

LL Letters to H. P. Lovecraft. Ed. Steve Behrends (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1987).

LW Lost Worlds (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1944).

MHS Donald Wandrei Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

OD Other Dimensions (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1970).

OST Out of Space and Time (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1942).

PD Planets and Dimensions: Collected Essays. Ed. Charles K. Wolfe (Baltimore: Mirage Press, 1973).

PP Poems in Prose (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1965).

RA A Rendezvous in Averoigne (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1988).

RHB Robert H. Barlow (1918-1951), correspondent and collector of manuscripts of CAS, HPL, and other *WT* writers.

RW Red World of Polaris. Ed. Ronald S. Hilger and Scott Connors (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2003).

SHSW August Derleth Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Library.

SL Selected Letters of Clark Ashton Smith. Ed. David E. Schultz and Scott Connors (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 2003).

SS Strange Shadows: The Uncollected Fiction and Essays of Clark Ashton Smith. Ed. Steve Behrends with Donald Sidney-Fryer and Rah Hoffman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989).

ST Strange Tales of Mystery and Terror, a pulp edited by Harry Bates in competition with *WT.*

TSS Tales of Science and Sorcery (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1964).

VA A Vintage from Atlantis: The Collected Fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith, Volume Three. Ed. Scott Connors and Ron Hilger (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2007).

WS Wonder Stories, a pulp published by Hugo Gernsback and edited first by David Lasser and then Charles D. Hornig.

WT Weird Tales, Smith's primary market for fiction, edited by FW (1924-1940) and later Dorothy McIlwraith (1940-1954).

The Mandrakes

Smith completed "The Mandrakes" on May 15, 1932, describing it as "short, sweet & medieval. It's about a sorcerer who murdered his wife and buried her in the field where he got the mandrakes for the love-philtres in which he specialized. Later, something happened to the mandrake-crop…."[1] He would later describe it as "not a very important item."[2]

Weird Tales paid Smith $25 when it published the story in its February 1933 issue.[3] The check was returned to Smith as unpaid when the Fletcher-American Bank, where the bulk of the funds of *WT*'s parent Popular Fiction Publishing Company were deposited, had its assets frozen. Smith would not receive any monies for this tale until August, and even then *WT* only paid half. *WT,* which had paid reasonably promptly on publication up to this point, would take longer and longer to pay for stories.[4]

1. CAS, letter to AWD, May 15, 1932 (*SL* 177).
2. CAS, letter to AWD, December 13, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
3. Popular Fiction Publishing Company, letters to CAS, February 23, 1933; April 13, 1933; August 29, 1933 (ms, JHL).
4. See Scott Connors, "*Weird Tales* and the Great Depression," in *The Robert E. Howard Reader,* ed. Darrell Schweitzer (Wildside Press, forthcoming).

The Beast of Averoigne

The first intimation of what would eventually evolve into “The Beast of Averoigne” may perhaps be found in a plot outline that Clark Ashton Smith tentatively called “The Werewolf of Averoigne:” “A terrible, semi-human thing—the progeny of a sorceress and a demon—which terrorizes the wood of Averoigne.”[1] Sometime after this, Smith jotted down an idea with the present title that fleshed out the core idea of an unknown predator terrorizing the forests, but which provided a wholly ultramundane origin:

> The depredations of a fearsome beast, beginning near a Nestorian monastery in the hills of Averoigne during a year of comets, meteors, and {. . . }. First p. of narrative is a deposition by one of the N. monks. It ends abruptly, through the death of the monk at the hands of this beast. Other people are slain by the monster; and finally the aid of the sorcerer is invoked against it. Through the skill of this sorcerer, the beast is tracked to the Nestorian monastery, is cornered in the cell of the abbot, and when a certain magic water is sprinkled upon it, is revealed as the abbot himself. Amid the horror of the beholders, the abbot flees to the wilderness. He is seen again in the form of the beast but is prevented from re-entering the monastery. After the passing of the comet, the depredations cease, and he is found dead in his own form.[2]

Smith completed the story on June 18, 1932. He submitted the story to *Weird Tales,* confident that its “cumulative horror” would find favor with the sometimes capricious Farnsworth Wright. Much to Smith’s surprise, “Wright returned ‘The Beast of Averoigne,’ with no specific criticism, merely saying that he didn’t like it as well as my other medieval stories.” This rejection appears to have shaken Smith’s self-confidence, since he asked Derleth “to look it over with an idea to structural or other flaws. Personally, I don’t quite see why it was rejected, unless the documentary mode of presentation may have led me into more archaism than was palatable to Wright. The abbot’s letter to Therèse might be cut out, thus deepening the mystery; but I can’t quite make up my mind in this.”[3] Derleth responded

> As you hinted, the tale is I feel much too diffuse, and I would suggest telling the entire story from the point of view of Luc le Chaudronnier. This part held my best attention, while I felt that the others dragged

> slightly. If, however, you insist upon using the two other depositions, why you can use them nicely enough by inserting them directly into Luc's narrative, as if he had come upon them as here fitting the unusual facts together. It is, of course, no secret in your version as to whom the beast will turn out to be. This should be covered up just a little more, though I realize that you have done very well with it as it is. I was at first very much against the comet business, but have come to see that it is very vital indeed, and contributes much to the plot; so of course it must be kept, though it might be somewhat soft-pedalled (merely my personal reaction, and in no sense of the word a criticism). I feel that if you open with Luc's narrative, shorten the other two depositions and include them as presented by Luc, and then continue with Luc's story, the tale as a whole will be immeasurably tightened.[4]

Smith took some time the next month to rework a few of Wright's rejects and incorporated Derleth's suggestions into "Beast." He eliminated fourteen hundred words by cutting "the abbot's letter entirely and [he] told Gerome's tale in Luc le Chaudronnier's words. I think the result is rather good—terse, grim and devilishly horrible."[5] Much to Smith's growing frustration, Wright once more rejected the tale, "though admitting that the tale had much to recommend it. The tale seems a marvel of originality, by comparison with most of the hackneyed junk he has been printing lately." Smith added in exasperation, "I give it up."[6] This proved somewhat premature, since that autumn he reworked several previously rejected stories including "Beast," reducing it to "a mere four thousand words and adding "a more dramatic twist at the climax."[7] This effort was rewarded by an acceptance, proving third time the charm.

The present version of "The Beast of Averoigne" restores the tripartite organization of the story, eliminating the redundant portions of Luc le Chaudronnier's narrative while keeping the revised climax. Smith did write that he thought the story was "immensely improved by the various revisions." This would argue that the version published in the May 1933 issue of *Weird Tales* should be given preference. However, the present editors believe that Smith's preference extended chiefly to the new ending, since Smith may have felt that the ending of the original version was too reminiscent of "The Colossus of Ylourgne." Stefan Dziemianowicz has observed of this revision that "By merging these three viewpoints into the single perspective of le Chaudronnier, Smith created a story that appealed

more to Wright...but wound up purging it of the elements that make it one of his most extraordinary pieces of writing." Derleth's suggestions were all aimed at making a more *salable* story, not necessarily a *better* one. They concern chiefly plot, but as Smith once blithely remarked to Lovecraft, "Few of my stories, I fear, exhibit what is known in pulpdom as a 'plot'."[8] In particular, Derleth appears to have felt that the identity of the monster should have been more of a mystery, whereas we believe that Smith intended the climax to be one of *confirmation* rather than of *revelation.* This is apparent from the abbot's final plea to his sister, which Dziemianowicz properly calls "one of the most poignant passages to be found in all Smith's writing: 'Pray for me, Therèse, in my bewitchment and my despair: for God has abandoned me, and the yoke of hell has somehow fallen upon me; and naught can I do to defend the abbey from this evil'."[9] When the tale appeared finally in print, Smith told Derleth that "I think that I have done better tales, but few that are technically superior."[10]

Smith included "The Beast of Averoigne" in LW. The original version was first published by Steve Behrends in *Strange Shadows.* Carbon copies of the first and final versions of the story may be found in Smith's papers at Brown University, and were consulted to establish the present text.

1. *SS* 173.
2. *SS* 174-175.
3. CAS, letter to AWD, July 10, 1932 (*SL* 180).
4. AWD, letter to CAS, July 23 [1932] (ms, JHL).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, August 21, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
6. CAS, letter to AWD, September 1, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
7. CAS, letter to AWD, December 3, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
8. CAS, letter to HPL [c. early November 1933] (*SL* 236).
9. Stefan Dziemianowicz, "Into the Woods: The Human Geography of Averoigne." In *FFT* 302.
10. CAS, letter to AWD, April 18, 1933 (ms, SHSW).

A Star-Change

Smith wrote to Lovecraft late in 1930 that he had "a whale of an idea" for a story "[that illustrated] the conditional nature of our perception of

reality."[1] Smith had touched on this idea in "The Monster of the Prophecy," but here he allows his imagination to run rampant. An outline from October 1930 reads

> A man taken to an alien world, who suffers from the strange impressions to which he is subjected, and undergoes for relief an operation at the hands of his hosts which transforms all his sensory reactions so that the new world becomes tolerable. When he returns to earth, he sees an utterly alien and terrifying world—and dies mad in a hospital, his case having been diagnosed as d.t.[2]

He expounded further on the idea in the same letter to Lovecraft quoted above:

> I think there are huge possibilities in this, if it is carefully and graphically worked out. The change in the feeling of time, movement, geometry, the monstrous transmutations and amplifications and distortions and combinations of visual, aural, and other images, could be dealt with in a minutely realistic style. For instance, there might be an extension, or combination of tactility with visions which would cause acute torture from certain terrestrial images. The tale is so damnably possible when you think of what a little fever, or a dose of hashish, can do to one's sensory apparatus. But it will be hard to write —and harder still to sell, since it will be analytic and descriptive rather than actional: which brings me to the reflection that one reason there are so few good weird stories is the damned editorial requirement for "action", which makes it very difficult to build up any solid or convincing background, or to treat the incidents themselves with the necessary fulness of detail.[3]

CAS described it to Derleth as "high-grade science fiction," and thought that it might "be eligible for 'Amazing,' but probably won't have enough plot or excitement for" either *WS* or *Astounding Stories*.[4] He completed it on or about July 4, 1932. Smith submitted the story first to *Weird Tales*, but Wright returned it as "too descriptive and actionless."[5] *Amazing* held on to it for five months before returning it,[6] after which it was submitted to, and accepted by *WS*, where it was published in the May 1933 issue as "The Visitors from Mlok," another victim of Hugo Gernsback's penchant for changing titles. Smith was to have received fifty dollars for the story, but as discussed in the note for "The Dweller in the Gulf" he had to resort to legal action to collect.

Smith was proud of this story, stating “As far as I know, it is almost the only attempt to convey the profound disturbance of function and sensation that would inevitably be experienced by a human being on an alien world.”[7] After reading the story in manuscript, Derleth passed it along to Lovecraft with the comment that “This is not very good, I regret to say.”[8] This could be attributed to AWD’s antipathy toward contemporary sf,[9] but in his response Lovecraft agreed, observing that “The *idea* is magnificent—but as you say, the mode of handling is mediocre.”[10] CAS was undoubtedly handicapped by the necessity of using the trappings of Gernsbackian “scientifiction” in his treatment, since as he once remarked to HPL“the mythology of science is not one that intrigues me very deeply.”[11]

After the story appeared, sf fan Forrest J. Ackerman objected to the appearance of stories such as “A Star-Change” in the pages of *Wonder Stories* (see note to “The Dweller in the Gulf” for further details). Smith wrote in a letter to a fan living in the San Francisco Bay area that “The funny part of this is, that this tale is about a hundred times closer to genuine reality in conveying the problematic sensations of an interplanetary traveler than the usual tales dealing with such themes. Oh, well... what’s the use?”[12]

1. CAS, letter to HPL, *c*. October 24, 1930 (*SL* 128).
2. *SS* 159 .
3. CAS, letter to HPL, *c*. October 24, 1930 (*SL* 129).
4. CAS, letter to AWD, June 28, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, August 2, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
6. CAS, letter to AWD, December 3, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
7. CAS, letter to AWD, May 23, 1933 (*SL* 206-207).
8. AWD, letter to HPL, July 17, 1933 (*Essential Solitude: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth: 1932-1937*, ed. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi [New York: Hippocampus Press, 2008], p. 594).
9. See Derleth’s remarks in the notes to “The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis, ” *VA*, 307n6.
10. HPL, letter to AWD, July 23, 1933 (*Essential Solitude: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth: 1932-1937*, ed. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi [New York: Hippocampus Press, 2008], p. 595).
11. CAS, letter to HPL, *c*. October 21, 1930 (*LL* 15).
12. CAS, letter to Lester Anderson, June 20, 1933 (*SL* 211).

The Disinterment of Venus

CAS mentioned to Derleth early in June 1931 that he had plotted three other tales of Averoigne, the first of which was "The Disinterment of Venus."[1] This story, which was inspired in part by Prosper de Mérimée's "The Venus of Ille" (1837), would describe what happened when

> A marble Venus, exhumed in a monastery garden in Averoigne by some monks, which has a baleful influence on all who touch or behold it, inducing nympholepsy and a sort of pagan madness or possession. The statue is left standing in the field beside the pit from which it had been digged, and people fear to approach it. A young monk goes to it by night before moonrise, with a hammer, intending to smash it to fragments. The monk fails to return; and the next day it is seen that the statue has disappeared. People, among whom are the possessed and the unpossessed, visit the field, and find that the statue has fallen back into the pit, carrying with it the monk, who lies dead beneath its weight with his arms about the Venus, which is still unbroken.[2]

When Smith finished the story in July 1932, he described it to Derleth as "a rather wicked story"[3]—too wicked, as it turned out, for Farnsworth Wright, who rejected it with the indignant complaint that "satyriasis is not a suitable theme for a *WT* story."[4] Smith revised and retyped the story, although he feared "of all my recent tales, [it] will be the hardest to sell, since it combines the risque and the ghastly."[5] Wright accepted the story after four revisions, stating that he liked it "much better with the new ending" and offering thirty dollars.[6] Although CAS told Derleth that this version, as published in the July 1934 issue of *WT,* "practically restored"[7] the original ending, he may have forgotten just how suggestive the story was originally. The expenditure of so much effort for such minimal remuneration did not do much to endear "The Disinterment of Venus" to Smith, since when he presented the original typescript to Robert H. Barlow, he offered this assessment, that it wasn't "much of a story in any of its phases."[8] The present text is based upon this copy, which was presented by Barlow to the Bancroft Library, with reference to CAS' carbon of the *WT* version at the John Hay Library.

1. CAS, letter to AWD, June 6, 1931 (ms, SHSW).
2. *SS* 16-167.

3. CAS, letter to AWD, July 10, 1932 (*SL* 180).
4. FW, letter to CAS, July 13, 1932 (ms, JHL).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, December 3, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
6. FW, letter to CAS, February 9, 1934 (ms, JHL).
7. CAS, letter to AWD, February 20, 1934 (ms, SHSW).
8. CAS, letter to RHB, June 15, 1934 (ms, JHL).

The White Sybil

It has often been remarked, by Farnsworth Wright, Donald Sidney-Fryer, and others, that many of Clark Ashton Smith's ultra-imaginative short stories are extended poems in prose,[1] and this is well illustrated by "The White Sybil." As Smith was turning his creative energies exclusively toward fiction, his output of poetry fell drastically. Late in 1929, Smith was moved to compose a series of ten poems in prose, which he called "prose pastels" in echo, conscious or otherwise, of Stuart Merrill's collection *Pastels in Prose* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890). The third of these, completed on December 22, 1929, was "The Muse of Hyperborea" (see Appendix 3).

"The White Sybil of Polarion" is the second entry in Smith's *Black Book*, which he described as "a notebook containing used and unused plot-germs, notes on occultism and magic, synopses of stories, fragments of verse, fantastic names for people and places, etc., etc." when he allowed excerpts to appear in the Spring 1944 issue of Francis T. Laney's fan magazine *The Acolyte:*[2]

> A pale, beautiful, unearthly being, goddess or woman, who comes and goes mysteriously in the cities of Hyperborea, sometimes uttering strange prophecies or cryptic tidings. Tortha, the young poet, sometimes seeing her on the streets of Cerngoth in Mhu-Thulan, is deeply smitten, and seeks to follow and find her dwelling-place. Pursuing her into a bleak mountainous region verging on the eternal glaciers, he loses sight of her in a great snow-storm that falls suddenly from the clear summer heavens. Wandering in this storm, and losing his way, he emerges presently in an unknown fantastic land, where, in a faery bower, he is received by the White Sybil, who seems to look kindly upon him. She kisses him on the brow; but trying to clasp her, he finds a frozen mummy in his arms; and a moment later the trees and blossoms of the faery bower dissolve in whirling snow. Later, Tortha, with the mark of frost-bite on his brow, where the Sybil kissed him, is found on the barren mountain-side; and he recovers slowly, remembering only dimly what has happened.[3]

The genesis for this story may be traced to the earlier "prose pastel," although we might suggest that this plot synopsis found among CAS' papers may also have contributed to the development of the story:

> "The Hyperborean City:" A lost explorer who is freezing to death in the Arctic falls, into a dream, in which he lives through a long drama that takes place in some ancient Hyperborean city, before the Ice Age. He is aroused by his companions at the moment when, in his dream, he is about to wed the lovely princess Alactyssa. Still possessed by the vision, which he cannot throw off, he wanders forth again in the snows, and is lost this time forever.[4]

Originally entitled "The White Sybil of Polarion," Smith first mentions the story in a letter to Genevieve Sully, mentioning that it was "a title I have long had in mind to use, though I didn't think up the story until recently," and describing it as "poetic and romantic."[5] He completed the story on July 14, 1932 and submitted it to *Weird Tales*, but Wright, while acknowledging its "poetic quality," reluctantly returned it.[6] CAS put the story aside until mid-November, when he devoted his efforts to revising some rejected stories for resubmission. It was at this time he gave "The Beast of Averoigne" its new "twist to the climax," and mentions "the similarly treated White Sybil." The revision was completed on November 21; he cut out approximately two hundred words and changed the ending to a wryly romantic one. Unfortunately, while the effort paid off for "The Beast of Averoigne," Wright still could not convince himself that the story would appeal to his readership.

When a teenage science fiction fan from Everett, Pennsylvania named William L. Crawford (1911-1984) solicited stories from CAS for a semi-professional magazine called *Unusual Stories*, Smith sent him the revised version, now called simply "The White Sybil." Crawford, who would later publish Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* in book form, printed it, along with "Men of Avalon" by David H. Keller, as a pamphlet in 1934. When Lovecraft read the copy sent to him by CAS, he contrasted Smith's tale with that of Dr. Keller, "whose tale is mawkish & naive, while its companion is a splendid specimen of Klarkash-Tonic fantasy."[7] (A year later, HPL would downgrade his estimate, writing to R. H. Barlow that "The White Sybil is good, but hardly stands out among other Clericashtonia."[8])

During the 1940s, Smith attempted to sell the story to Mary Gnaedinger of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries,* who had expressed interest in reprinting "The City of the Singing Flame," as well as to Dorothy McIlwraith, Wright's successor as editor at *Weird Tales.* Smith fumed about the latter, "I

was rather disgusted last January when she fired back my White Sybil and Kingdom of the Worm after holding them for several months. They were 'too poetic' or something."[9]

Smith presented the original typescript to Mrs. Sully, and did not keep a copy for his own files. We used this as the foundation for our text, along with reference both to the typescript sent to Crawford, now in a private collection, and to two copies of the 1934 pamphlet that Smith had corrected by hand. We have restored Smith's original ending, but are including the published ending as Appendix 2.

1. See Wright's remarks in the notes to "The Abomination of Yondo," *ES* 256; also Sidney-Fryer, *The Sorcerer Departs: Clark Ashton Smith* (1893-1961) (Dole, France: Silver Key Press, 2007), p. 46: "Regarded more exactly as extended poems in prose, which is what many of them are...." S. T. Joshi, on the other hand, expressed a slightly more hesitant view in "Lands Forgotten or Unfound: The Prose Poetry of Clark Ashton Smith," in *FFT* 147: "To the extent that nearly all Smith's prose tales employ poetic prose, they could all be classed as prose poems."

2. Reprinted in *BB* p. 77.

3. *BB* item 2.

4. *SS* 157.

5. CAS, letter to Genevieve K. Sully, July 12, 1932 (ms, private collection).

6. CAS, letter to AWD, August 21, 1932 (ms, SHSW).

7. HPL, letter to RHB, *c.* December 1, 1934 (*O Fortunate Floridian: H. P. Lovecraft's Letters to R. H. Barlow,* ed. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz [University of Tampa Press, 2007), p. 192).

8. HPL, letter to RHB, *c.* April 20, 1935 (*O Fortunate Floridian: H. P. Lovecraft's Letters to R. H. Barlow,* ed. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz [University of Tampa Press, 2007), p. 252).

9. CAS, letter to AWD, April 23, 1943 (ms, SHSW).

The Ice-Demon

Smith returned to Hyperborea with "The Ice Demon," which he completed on July 22, 1932. A plot synopsis for this story forms the very

first item in the *Black Book:*

> Quangah the huntsman and two merchants of Mhu-Thulan, seeking the lost treasure of a king who had fled from the north before the glacial ice and had perished with his retainers in an outland region, enter the realms of eternal ice and snow during the summer season. They find the cave in which the treasure is hidden, together with the preserved bodies of the king and his followers; but departing with their loot, they are followed by an invisible icy presence. One of the merchants is found frozen to death on the morning after their first stop. Later, the second perishes in like fashion; and Quangah, fleeing into a warm, semi-tropic volcanic valley, is also overtaken, and dies of cold. The thing manifests itself as a sort of spiral wind or gust, enfolding the victims from head to foot. A kind of sub-auditory whispering is also connected with its presence.[1]

The story was first submitted to *Strange Tales*. Harry Bates apologized to CAS, writing "It happened that Mr. Clayton got to your story, 'The Ice Demon,' before I did, and the no he hung on it was sufficiently emphatic to render useless my reading it after him. Therefore I have to let it go back, without even some specific criticism or objection."[2] Smith complained to Derleth that Clayton's "ideas of the disgusting must indeed be peculiar."[3] Wright also rejected the story upon first submission, which HPL called "a calamity, for we need a few tales in which the weirdness takes other than stock forms."[4] Wright accepted the story upon resubmission, after Smith revised the ending;[5] unfortunately, there are no copies of the original version still extant, unless one such is held in a private collection. "The Ice Demon" appeared in the April 1933 issue of *Weird Tales.* The current text is based upon a carbon copy of the final revised version among Smith's papers at the John Hay Library.

1. *BB* item 1.
2. Harry Bates, letter to CAS, September 16, 1932 (ms, JHL).
3. CAS, letter to AWD, September 28, 1932 (*SL* 191).
4. HPL, letter to CAS, postmarked August 27, 1932 (ms, private collection).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, October 27, 1932 (ms, SHSW).

The Isle of the Torturers

Completed on July 31, 1932, CAS called this story "a sort of companion to 'The Empire of the Necromancers'."[1] He described it to August Derleth as "a strange mixture of eeriness, grotesquery, bright color, cruelty, and stark human tragedy," and added "I think it is the best of the summer's crop...."[2] Lovecraft expressed the hope that Wright would take the story "in spite of the realistic details which might raise doubts in his milk-&-water judgment. It is full of magnificent atmosphere, & has a truly Dunsanian glamour & convincingness."[3]

Smith received sixty dollars for the story when it was published in the March 1933 issue of *WT*.[4] It was also reprinted by Christine Campbell Thomson for inclusion in *Keep on the Light*, which was part of the famous *Not at Night!* series of anthologies, making it the second of his stories to appear between boards. The present text is from a typescript presented to Genevieve K. Sully, and from a carbon copy in the CAS papers at Brown University.

1. CAS, letter to Lester Anderson, July 29, 1932 (ms, private collection).
2. CAS, letter to AWD, August 2, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
3. HPL, letter to CAS postmarked July 26, 1932 (ms, JHL).
4. Popular Fiction Publishing Company, letter to CAS, April 21, 1933 (ms, JHL).

The Dimension of Chance

The beginning of August 1932 saw Smith begin "a new scientific tale" that described "a universe in which the electrons did not form any regular patterns of behavior, and in which, therefore, the action of all natural forces was subject to no other law than that of chance. In such a world a plum-tree might bear avacadoes or grape-fruit—or both! The law of gravity might work in one place or at one time—and be non-effective at others—etc., etc. —a dizzy idea, n'est ce pas?"[1]

As in the case of "An Adventure in Futurity," the idea for the story originated in a suggestion by *Wonder Stories* editor David Lasser, which caused H. P. Lovecraft to observe that Lasser and Gernsback were probably "brighter & more sensible in many ways than the philistines controlling Astounding & the technologists in charge of Amazing! Really, there is little doubt but that Wonder is the most generally interesting of the scientifiction magazines."[2] Lasser accepted "The Dimension of Chance" on August 25, 1932, but with reservations: he observed that "I would rather have had a little less description, if necessary, and more conflict with the residents of the dimension."[3]

Smith did not think much of the story, noting that it "was probably better as a satire than anything else." After the story was accepted by Lasser, Smith thought of changes that would improve it and sent in some new pages, but they arrived too late.[4] As Steve Behrends has previously noted, those changes survive in the carbon copy of the story surviving at Brown University among Smith's papers.[5] They are incorporated into the present text. Attorney Ione Weber eventually collected sixty-five dollars for Smith for this story.[6]

"The Dimension of Chance" was first published in *Wonder Stories'* November 1932 issue, and remained uncollected until it was posthumously included in *OD.*

1. CAS, letter to Genevieve K. Sully, August 4, 1932 (ms, private collection).
2. HPL, letter to CAS, postmarked August 27, 1932 (ms, Northern Illinois University).
3. David Lasser, letter to CAS, August 25, 1932 (ms, JHL).
4. CAS, letter to AWD, November 15, 1932 (ms, SHSW).

5. Steve Behrends, “Unpublished Revisions to ‘The Dimension of Chance’ by Clark Ashton Smith,” *Dark Eidolon* no. 2 (June 1989): 33.

6. Mike Ashley, “The Perils of Wonder: Clark Ashton Smith’s Experiences with *Wonder Stories.” Dark Eidolon* no. 2 (June 1989): 2-8.

The Dweller in the Gulf

Smith's next story probably provided him with more headaches than the rest of his stories combined. He originally intended to call it "The Eidolon of the Blind." He called it "a sort of running mate for 'The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis,'" and like its predecessor it suffered greatly from editorial tampering. Smith described the story as "equally monstrous and cruel."[1] (He was particularly proud of its "magnificent Dantesque ending.") Wright rejected it for *Weird Tales* "on the plea that it was too horrific for his select circle of Babbits [sic] and Polyannas."[2] The story then went to Harry Bates before it finally landed at *Wonder Stories*, but not before Lasser and Gernsback required the addition of a "semi-scientific explanation" that he supplied through the addition of a new character.[3] No mention was made that the horror element was objectionable.

When Smith saw its appearance in the March 1933 issue, he waxed apoplectic:

> My triply unfortunate tale, "The Dweller in the Gulf," is printed in the current *Wonder Stories* under the title of "Dweller in Martian Depths," and has been utterly ruined by a crude attempt on the part of someone —presumably the office-boy—to rewrite the ending. Apart from this, paragraph after paragraph of imaginative description and atmosphere has been hewn bodily from the story. I have written to tell the editor what I thought of such Hunnish barbarity, and have also told him that I do not care to have my work printed at all unless it can appear verbatim or have the desired alterations made by my own hand. It shows what fine literature means to the Gernsback crew of hog-butchers.[4]

Gernsback had already demonstrated a tendency to change Smith's titles, but he had generally allowed Smith himself to make any required revisions. CAS wrote that "The chief reason that I've had anything to do with them is that Gernsback has had the perspicacity to print some of my more out-of-the-way stuff which no one else would touch."[5] Even Lovecraft paid Gernsback a left-handed compliment, albeit in a tasteless manner of the sort that makes his present-day admirers cringe: "It's odd, but in spite of that damn'd kike's financial remissness & sharp dealings, I really think he offers a better & more vital range of scientifiction than either of his two competitors. He is not quite so rigid, in his demand for the commonplace &

the stereotyped."[6] Smith now revised drastically his opinion of Gernsback and of *Wonder Stories:*

> It's hard to understand the botching of "The Dweller in the Gulf," except on the theory that Gernsback or one of the editors thought that the horror needed toning down. But I hadn't understood that the horror element was objectionable: the only criticism they made of the tale in its original form was, that it "lacked scientific motivation." I am utterly disgusted with that outfit. Gernsback's present policy strikes me as being suicidal. Science fiction requires abundant descriptive matter to put it over at all—and most of the tales I have sent in recently have been objected to as containing a surplus of descriptive matter, adjectives, etc. Oh, hell.... And the bastards owe me about six hundred dollars anyway. They might at least have the decency to print my stuff straight.[7]

Some of Gernsback's motivation for altering the story might be inferred from remarks Lasser had made concerning what they regarded as Smith's "over-reliance" on atmosphere. Lasser had sent Smith a letter dated August 11, 1932—about the time he was writing "Dweller"—that warned Smith that *Wonder Stories* was "not interested in weird tales" or any "bizarre scientific themes," which of course was Smith's forte; instead he should concentrate on "originality of plot, drama, conflict, situation, environment, character."[8] Lasser apologized to Smith on February 15, 1933 and insisted that the changes were made at Gernsback's "special request,"[9] but the damage was already done: "Gernsback must be loco [...] Lasser apologized profusely in reply to the verbal drubbing that I gave him—but that hardly mends matters. I judge that the idiotic alterations have cooked the story pretty well with readers who might otherwise have admired it."[10]

Smith didn't realize just how right he was. Forrest J. Ackerman wrote a letter to the fan magazine *Fantasy Fan* attacking the story. Ackerman stated that he "could not find one redeeming feature about the story" and called for the ink in Smith's pen to "dry up."[11] He even went so far as to write Smith a personal letter asking that he not submit such stories to *WS.* (Ackerman would later approach Smith about publishing a collection of his science fiction stories, includung this tale, and would include "The Dweller in the Gulf" in an anthology that he published in Spain.[12])

Smith was to have received fifty dollars for “The Dweller in the Gulf.” By the time of the “Boiling Point” controversy, Gernsback already owed Smith $741, which according to Mike Ashley was probably the most money he owed to any writer. Ashley observes that “though the payments would obviously have been beneficial, they were not critical.” [13]. They soon became critical when Smith’s elderly mother scalded her foot in October 1933, throwing “another monkey wrench into my literary programme.”[14]

The domestic duties that his mother performed now fell to CAS, along with the task of providing nursing care, so he was no longer producing stories with the same regularity as before. It became imperative that Smith collect what he was due, so he hired a New York attorney, Ione Weber, to pursue collection of the debt. Smith was surprised when payments were forthcoming despite Gernsback’s having dissolved *Wonder Stories’* old publisher, Stellar Publishing, which Ashley notes would have limited Smith’s claim.[16] Miss Weber reported to Smith that “it is getting even more difficult to collect from Gernsback. However, you are the one getting paid. I have not had a check for any other author for months and months.”[15] Since Smith was not submitting stories, Ashley concludes that Gernsback held him in high enough regard that he was attempting to lure him back. This might be the reason why Gernsback himself wrote to Smith the next year to invite him to serve as an “incorporator” and Honorary Member of the Science Fiction League that he was sponsoring; Smith was listed as a Director of the League in the May 1934 issue of *Wonder Stories*.

1. CAS, letter to DAW, September 1, 1932 (ms, MHS).
2. CAS, letter to AWD, September 1, 1932 (*SL* 190).
3. CAS, letter to AWD, November 24, 1932 (*SL* 197). See Appendix 4.
4. CAS, letter to AWD, February 9, 1933 (*SL* 201).
5. CAS, letter to DAW, November 10, 1932 (*SL* 196).
6. HPL, letter to CAS, April 4, 1932 (AHT 32.83).
7. CAS, letter to AWD, February 19, 1933 (ms, SHSW).
8. David Lasser, letter to CAS, August 11, 1932 (ms, JHL).
9. David Lasser, letter to CAS, February 15, 1933 (ms, JHL).
10. CAS, letter to AWD, March 1, 1933 (ms, SHSW).
11. Forrest J. Ackerman, letter to “The Boiling Point,” *Fantasy Fan* 1, no. 1(September 1933): 6; rpt. In *The Boiling Point* by Clark Ashton

Smith et al (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, April 1985): [1].

12. See Ackerman's letter to CAS, July 1, 1947 (ms, JHL); also Forrest J. Ackerman, ed., *Los mejores historias de horror* (Barcelona: Editorial Bruguera, 1969).

13. Mike Ashley, "The Perils of Wonder: Clark Ashton Smith's Experiences with *Wonder Stories.*" *Dark Eidolon* no. 2 (June 1989): 7.

14. CAS, letter to RHB, October 25, 1933 (*SL* 234).

15. Mike Ashley and Robert A. W. Lowndes, *The Gernsback Days: A study of the evolution of modern science fiction from 1911 to 1936* (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press, 2004): 243.

16. Ione Weber, letter to CAS, March 15, 1935 (ms, JHL).

The Maze of the Enchanter

After completing "The Dimension of Chance," Smith apparently felt the need to cleanse his literary palate by writing something more to his liking. The result was originally entitled "The Maze of Mool Dweb," which he described to August Derleth as "ultra-fantastic, full-hued and ingenious, with an extra twist or two in the tail for luck."[1] He did not think that it would find favor with Wright, and was proven correct when the manuscript was returned as "too poetic and finely phrased." The rejections of "Mool Dweb" and "The Eidolon of the Blind," in combination with a perceived decline in the quality of *Weird Tales* in recent issues, "make me feel that the chances for fine literature in that direction are growing decidedly slimmer."[2]

Smith next submitted the story to *Argosy,* which had published interplanetary romances by Otis Adelbert Kline (1891-1946) that were perhaps in the same phylum but definitely not the same class, but without success. (Smith probably expected as much, since he wrote to Derleth not "if *Argosy* returns it," but "when.") He decided that a preferable title would be "The Enchanter's Maze," and also that "Maal Dweb—two syllables,—would be preferable, perhaps, for tone-color, etc. The few rare (?) words, with the exception of valence, termini, and possibly one or two others, can be replaced with less exotic terms without an actual sacrifice of meaning." He added defiantly "But beyond this, I won't touch the story for anyone, if I never sell it."[3] Lovecraft wrote at the time that the story "had much charm, & Satrap Pharnabazus [Wright] was certainly an ass (as usual) to reject it."[4]

Smith revised and retyped the story at the beginning of October 1932. He presented the original version to a Bay Area science fiction fan named Lester Anderson, whose position at a bookstore allowed Smith to purchase a number of long-desired titles at bargain prices. This typescript was "so overcrawled with alterations that I had to make a clean copy to send out. But maybe the variant readings will interest you." (This typescript is now part of the Bancroft Library's collection.) He went on to explain that

> Wright objected to the "unfamiliar" exotic diction of the tale, so I tried to eliminate almost everything that might bother a fifth-grade grammar student. My sole reason for using words not usually employed by "pulp" writers have been to achieve precision, variety and richness. The words are never plugged in for their own sake, but simply because they expressed a fine shade of meaning or gave the tone-color that I

wanted. I am forced to infer, though, that all this is lost on the average reader. And yet the A. R., formally speaking, has probably received more education than I have had.[5]

Despairing of ever selling the story to a magazine, Smith decided to publish "The Maze of the Enchanter" (as the story was now called) in *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies.* Later, when the revived *Astounding Stories* invited the submission of weird material, Smith asked his new correspondent Robert H. Barlow to prepare a new typescript for submission. Unfortunately, *Astounding Stories* changed its policy before he could submit the story. This was possibly a result of letters written by "Forrest Ackerman and other laboratory-minded donkeys of the same breed" who had "been braying their disapproval of the mild and tepid element of weirdness in some of the Astounding items." (See also the notes for "The Dweller in the Gulf.") Smith expressed his annoyance by wishing that those " who are so hell-bent on realism and scientific verisimilitude should stick to the *Scientific American*, in which they will find no superstitions other than those of current materialism."[6]

Donald Wandrei and his brother Howard sold some weird stories to *Esquire* in 1937. Seeing a possible new market, Smith revised the story in an attempt to make it more acceptable, by cutting approximately one thousand words and modifying the language.[7] The story also reverted to a version of the original title, "The Maze of Maal Dweb." ("I think it should be admitted," wrote CAS of this, "that some of my nomenclature achieves certain nuances of suggestive and atmospheric associative value.") *Esquire* editor Arnold Gingrich rejected it as "'reminiscent of both Burroughs and Cabell;' a criticism that amazed and disgusted me. I was not aware that Burroughs had any copyright on jungle hunters, or that Cabell had acquired a monopoly of irony. ********!!********* I fear that Mr. Gingrich is a better judge of garbage than of literature.**********!!"[8] After all these travels, "The Maze of Maal Dweb" ended up where it began when Wright accepted this version, which was published in the October 1938 issue of *Weird Tales*.

Since Smith himself selected the present text for inclusion in *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies*, a venture that was as much a gesture of defiance at the editorially-dictated mediocrity he saw infesting the pulps as iy was an attempt at financial independence, it is abundantly clear that this is the version he wished to present to the world. While he would

ultimately come to prefer “The Maze of Maal Dweb” as a title, this has come entwined with the “abridged and pruned” version published in *Weird Tales* and included in *OST* and *RA.* The editors have decided to retain “The Maze of the Enchanter” to distinguish between the two.

“Maze” also has the distinction of being the second story of Smith’s to be reprinted in a hardcover anthology, and also the second item by Smith to be included in a school textbook (the first being a poem, “The Cherry-Snows,” which was included in a grade school text book). William Whittingham Lyman (1885-1983) was a correspondent of Smith’s and also an instructor at Los Angeles Junior College. In 1935 he edited, along with two of his colleagues, a textbook called *Today’s Literature*. Smith contributed “Maze” and four poems. Since this was a textbook, several questions were offered “for study and discussion;” we would have enjoyed being the proverbial “fly on the wall” for the classroom discussions that ensued!

For study and discussion

1. How much do the names in the story add to the weird effect?

2. Note that the sentences have a definite cadence. Do you find this effect pleasing?

3. Did you expect a happy ending? Did the conclusion surprise you?

4. Compare the story and the others in the volume T*he Maze of the Enchanter and Other Stories* [sic] with *A Dreamer's Tales* by Lord Dunsany. Which do you prefer?

5. Compare them with *John Silence* by Algernon Blackwood.

6. What other writers of terror stories do you know?

For themes

1. The modern literature of terror.
2. The intellectual (or moral) value of the terror story.[9]

1. CAS, letter to AWD, September 11, 1932 (*SL* 188).
2. CAS, letter to AWD, September 20, 1932 (*SL* 190).
3. CAS, letter to AWD, September 28, 1932 (*SL* 192).
4. HPL, letter to AWD, October 11, 1932 (in *Essential Solitude: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth: 1932-1937*, ed. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi [New York: Hippocampus Press, 2008], p. 503).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, October 10, 1932 (*SL* 193).
6. CAS, letter to RHB, November 16, 1933 (ms, JHL).
7. For a discussion of how "making the tale more commercially acceptable and closer to the assumed reading level of the herd ... brought about a corresponding loss to the finer shades of meaning," see Jim Rockhill, "The Poetics of Morbidity: The Original Text to Clark Ashton Smith's 'The Maze of the Enchanter' and Other Works First Published in *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies," Lost Worlds* no. 1 (2004): 20-25.
8. CAS, letter to RHB, September 9, 1937 (SL 312).
9. Dudley Chadwick Gordon, Vernon Rupert King, and William Whittingham Lyman, eds. *Today's Literature. An Omnibus of Short Stories, Novelettes, Poems, Plays, Profiles, and Essays* (New York: American Book Company, 1935), p. 950.

The Third Episode of *Vathek:* The Story of the Princess Zulkaïs and the Prince Kalilah

"Posthumous collaborations," a practice of which it has been said that the writers involved should trade places, is a controversial yopic, and the stories that have been written by divers hands from notes or fragments by Clark Ashton Smith have generally not been well regarded except possibly as homages. It is a little ironic that Smith himself was a practitioner of this particular form of literary necromancy, and that "The Third Episode of *Vathek"* holds up well.

William Beckford's Gothic novel *Vathek* (1786), which Smith first read when he was fifteen, was one of his chief literary influences.[1] Beckford had also written a series of separate stories, *The Episodes of Vathek*, in French, in which each of the princes awaiting their damnation along with Vathek at the end of the novel recounts the series of events that brought them to their ultimate fate. The last of these, "The Story of the Princess Zulkaïs and the Prince Kalilah," (hereafter referred to as "Zulkaïs") was left unfinished by Beckford. An English translation by Sir Frank T. Marzials was published in 1922, and in the course of time a copy found its way into the library of H. P. Lovecraft, whose 1926 novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* was heavily influenced by *Vathek*.[2] Lovecraft, along with his friend James F. Morton, thought that Smith would be the ideal candidate for completing the unfinished "Zulkaïs:"

> Regarding "Episodes of Vathek"—my copy is even now on its way to you as a long-term loan, & it is my hope that—as interest—you will ere long shew me a completion of the 3d Episode which shall out-Beckford Beckford! Possibly you may not wish to write the text in French, as Beckford did, but I am sure you can capture the general atmosphere better than anyone else in the gang. [W. Paul] Cook once had a wild idea of letting us all try our hands at this job of completion, & of publishing the collected results in book form. That plan has now evaporated, but I don't think literature has lost very much thereby—since most of us would be very inept at this form of composition. You, however, are really well fitted for it—& Morton & I were impressed with the idea of what a splendid result you could obtain. I'll wager Wright would publish the episode with your ending—& perhaps a brief explanatory introduction.[3]

After reading the *Episodes*, Smith was sanguine about the project, noting that "the unfinished one is particularly good, and certainly merits an ending. I hope I can do something that won't fall too far short. The development that Beckford intended is obvious enough."[4] As enticing as the completion was to CAS as an artistic challenge, he was worried about whether he would be able to recoup the time and money invested:[5] "I don't feel at all sure, though, that [Farnsworth] Wright will be receptive: the length of the tale will militate against it—also, perhaps, the slight hint of perversity in the affection of Zulkaïs and Kalilah."[6]

Smith finished “Zulkaïs” on September 16, 1932, and promptly announced its completion, along with the presentation of a typescript, to Lovecraft in suitably mock-archaic language:

> As a result of your instigation I have striven, with all due necromantic rites, and the burning of Arabian gums in censers well greened with verdigris, to invoke the spirit of William Beckford. Our ghostly collaboration has eventuated in the continuation and conclusion of Zulkaïs and Kalilah enclosed herewith. It is, of course, tentative, and may require sundry revisions ere the aforementioned revenant will fully approve it. In the meanwhile, I should greatly appreciate your opinion, before submitting the composite whole to Tyrant Pharnabeezer. My feeling is, that the arbiter of W. T. will find it too poisonous, perverse, fantastickal, et al., for his select circle of Babbitts and Polyannas.[7]

A few days later CAS would write to Lester Anderson that his contribution ran to 4000 words, as opposed to 13,000 by Beckford, and described the story as “a strange mixture of the ludicrous, the grotesque, the sinister and the devilish.” [8]

Smith sent “Zulkaïs” to Wright,[9] who held onto the typed manuscript for several months until reluctantly returning it on grounds that “he saw no opportunity of using it at present, but might possibly ask me to re-submit it at some future time.”[10] Wright found much merit in “Zulkaïs,” as evidenced by its frequent mention in his latter letters to Smith. For example, when apologizing for the rejection of “The Coming of the White Worm,” he expressed a hope that he could use it and “Zulkaïs” at a time “when we can realize our ambition for Weird Tales….” [11] Wright confided to CAS in 1934 that

> My head is full of plans, to be carried out in that hypothetical future (I hope not too hypothetical) when the Depression will be far enough behind us so that plans can be brought to realization. One of these plans is to put out yearly, on excellent paper, with an attractive typeface, a really attractive book. I think we could then use your “Third Episode of Vathek;” that is, we could then publish Beckford’s work, including your ending of the third episode, and starting the book off with a foreword by yourself or Lovecraft. What say, feller?[12]

Unfortunately, such a project never came to fruition; Wright instead used the resources of the Popular Fiction Publishing Company to subsidize

The Magic Carpet and *Oriental Stories*, unprofitable companion magazines to *WT*, as well as an edition of Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (part of a never-realized "Wright Shakespeare Library").

Clark submitted the story next to *The Golden Book*, "which has published some mildly fantastic material of late," but in mentioning this he gave more evidence of his growing disdain for the entire publication machine: "of course, I am thoroughly cynical about the chances of acceptance. I know too much about the gutless emmets and pismires who edit magazines—particularly of the 'quality(?)' type."[13]

By the end of 1933, CAS had decided that "Zulkaïs" was not likely ever to sell. If it were ever to achieve the dignity of print, it would be in the humbler venue of the science fiction and fantasy fanzine. He approached R. H. Barlow to print the tale.[14] Barlow, an intelligent and gifted, if socially awkward, teenager who was an earnest student and collector of weird fiction, owned a printing press with which he would later publish two issues of an amateur magazine called *The Dragon-Fly* as well as a poetry collection by Frank Belknap Long and a special edition of HPL's "The Cats of Ulthar" as a Christmas card. He was a logical contender for this task, since none of the other fan publishers could consider printing the tale's combined 17,000 words. (Barlow was also planning on issuing a new collection of Smith's poetry, to be called *Incantations.)* Unfortunately, various personal disasters and permanent relocations prevented Barlow from publishing "Zulkaïs" until 1937, when it led off the first issue of a mimeographed fanzine called *Leaves.*

Smith had wanted to include "Zulkaïs" in his third Arkham collection of short fiction, *Genius Loci and Other Tales*, but because of space limitations it was included instead in *The Abominations of Yondo*, a book that did not appear until the year before CAS died. Our text is based upon the original typescript that was sent to Barlow for *Leaves*, which later came into the possession of August Derleth and was used in the preparation of *AY;* it is now in a private collection.

1. See CAS, letter to L. Sprague de Camp, October 21, 1953 (*SL* 371).

2. See Peter Cannon, "The Influence of Vathek on H. P. Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism,* ed. S. T. Joshi (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980) 153-157.

3. HPL, letter to CAS, August 27, 1932 (ms, Northern Illinois University Library Special Collections)

4. CAS, letter to AWD, September 11, 1932 (*SL* 188-189).

5. Postage for the typescript cost thirty-six cents each way (cf. CAS, letter to AWD, October 8, 1932 [*SL* 194]).

6. CAS, letter to AWD, September 11, 1932 (*SL* 188-189).

7. CAS, letter to HPL, c. September 15, 1932 (*SL* 189).

8. CAS, letter to Lester Anderson, September 7, 1932 (ms, private collection).

9. HPL wrote to Barlow (letter, December 10, 1932) that the story was submitted for *WT*'s companion magazine *Magic Carpet*, which specialized in non-fantastic adventures in the East (*O Fortunate Floridian: H. P. Lovecraft's Letters to R. H. Barlow*, ed. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz [University of Tampa Press, 2007]), p. 44).

10. CAS, letter to AWD, February 1, 1933 (*SL* 199).

11. FW, letter to CAS, September 29, 1933 (ms, JHL).

12. FW, letter to CAS, April 25, 1934 (ms, JHL).

13. CAS, letter to HPL, c. March 1, 1933 (*SL* 203-204).

14. CAS, letter to RHB, November 16, 1933 (ms, JHL).

Genius Loci

Smith announced to August Derleth that he had "round[ed] out my third year of professional fictioneering" by writing a new story that he called "rather an experiment for me—and I hardly know what to do with it." This story, "Genius Loci," was completed on September 2, 1932. It dealt with

> a landscape with an evil and vampiric personality, which both terrifies and allures people and finally "gets" them in some intangible, mysterious way. An old rustic, who owned the place, is found dead there, apparently of heart-failure. Years later, a landscape painter senses the quality of the place, starts doing pictures of it, and undergoes a repellent change of temperament under the influence. His host, who tells the story, calls in the painter's fiancé to counteract this influence, but the girl is too weak, too much under the domination of her lover, to help. Finally, one night, the narrator finds the pair drowned in a swimming pool that is part of the evil meadow-bottom. The indications are, that the artist has committed suicide, and has dragged the girl with him against her will. Coincidentally with this shocking discovery, the narrator sees a strange emanation that surrounds all the features of the place like a sort of mist, forming a phantom and "hungrily wavering" projection of the whole vampirish scene. From certain curdlings in this restless, ghostly exhalation, the faces of the old man,—the first victim—and of the newly dead painter and girl—emerge as if "spewed forth by that lethal deadfall," and are decomposed and reabsorbed. There is a hint in the tale that the painter had previously been very much frightened by something that came out of the place at night; and the presence of the old man, as an elusive figure of the scene, was also suggested. At the end, there is a hint that the narrator may eventually make a fourth victim. It was all damnably hard to do, and I am not certain of my success. I am even less certain of being able to sell it to any editor—it will be too subtle for the pulps, and the highbrows won't like the supernatural element. Oh, hell….[1]

Despite Smith's doubts as to the salability of the tale, he "was agreeably surprised to have [Wright] accept it almost by return mail."[2] Wright had bought so many of CAS's stories by this time that "Genius Loci" had to wait until the June 1933 issue to see print. Smith had mistakenly calculated

the length of the tale as 6300 words, whereas it actually ran 6500. As a result, he cheated himself out of five dollars and received only sixty instead.[3]

Shortly before its publication, Clark wrote to Derleth that he "hope[s] you will like Genius Loci, which differs from most of my tales in having a local setting. Most of the action is mental, so it's a wonder that Wright took the tale." [4] He was no doubt gratified by the reaction of H. P. Lovecraft, who wrote to congratulate him "on the dark fascination of 'Genius Loci'… you have succeeded in capturing that vague, geographical horror after which I have so often striven…." HPL added that "it interested me greatly to hear of the actual folklore background of this lethal phantasy—Montague Summers (of whose work I have read only the Vampire volume) must be full of data rich in fictional suggestions."[5] While the Smith letter to HPL does not appear to have survived, we know from elsewhere that Smith considered his copy of Summer's *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* to be one of his most prized possessions.[6] Therein we find the following discussion:

> In [China] wills-o'-the-wisp are thought to be an unmistakenable sign of a place where much blood has been shed… and all mists and gaseous marsh-lights are connected with the belief in vampires and specters which convey disease. Since the effluvia, the vapour and haze from a swamp or quaggy ground are notoriously unhealthy and malarial fevers result in delirium and anaemia it may be that in some legends the disease has been personified as a ghastly creature who rides on the infected air and sucks the life from his victims.[7]

Earlier Summers also speculates that if a sensitive person who is "fatigued and languid so as to offer little or no resistance, a vampirish entity may temporarily utilize his vitality to attempt a partial materialization."[8] Another possible source may be traced to Smith's readings of Algernon Blackwood the previous month.[9] "Genius Loci" is reminiscent of Blackwood's story "The Transfer" (first published in *Pan's Garden*, 1912), which also deals with a plot of ground that exercises a sort of psychic vampirism on the vitality of those who come across it.

"Genius Loci" was selected by Smith as the title story for his third collection of fiction from Arkham House, which was published in 1948. It was also included in *RA.* The present text is based upon a carbon of the typescript among the Smith Papers at the John Hay Library.

1. CAS, letter to AWD, September 28, 1932 (*SL* 192).
2. CAS, letter to AWD, October 8, 1932 (*SL* 193).
3. CAS, letter to AWD, May 23, 1933 (*SL* 206).
4. CAS, letter to AWD, May 2, 1933 (ms, SHSW).
5. HPL, letter to CAS, June 14, 1933 (ms, JHL).
6. CAS, letter to Margaret and Ray St. Clair, May 23, 1933 (*SL* 207).
7. Montague Summers, *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* (1928; rpt. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1960), p. 198.
8. Summers, p. 197.
9. See CAS, letter to Genevieve K. Sully, August 5, 1932 (*SL* 184-185).

The Secret of the Cairn

Plotted in the autumn of 1931 at around the same time as “The Eternal World,” but not written until a year after, was “The Secret of the Cairn,” a title that was changed by *Wonder Stories* to “The Light from Beyond” without consultation with Smith (although he mentioned in a letter that he had no objection to the new title). Under its original title, “The Cairn,” Smith developed this plot synopsis:

> Certain strange phenomena noted by a lonely artist, who sees one night a brilliant display of light, followed by a weird sub-auditory music and a spicy perfume. The next day, on the end of the hill above his cabin, he finds a new-built cairn of boulders, crowned by a queer three-pointed lucent star of unknown material. Starting forward to examine the cairn, he discovers that he cannot approach it—the ground seems to move forward beneath his feet like a treadmill at every step; he tries it from other sides, with the same result; and growing giddy and sick from his sensations, at length he desists, realizing that the space about the cairn is possessed of some unfamiliar property. He is immensely thrilled and excited, insomuch as he has long desired to find something supernatural or supernormal—something that would transcend the established laws of nature. He returns again and again to the location of the cairn, and notices about it a lingering trace of the same spicy perfume he had hitherto perceived, together with certain odd changes of the vegetation inside the circle of uncrossable space. The ground becomes covered with asphodel-like blossoms such as he has never beheld before; and a juniper tree near the cairn puts out great fiery crimson globes in lieu of its small bluish berries.
>
> A fortnight later, there is a repetition of the strange lights and music that had first aroused his attention; and emerging from his cabin, he sees that the light is located in the vicinity of the cairn. Hastening thither, he sees through veils of blinding radiance a bizarre barge-like vessel and living figures that exhume a shrouded object from beneath the cairn and carry it aboard the vessel, which then disappears, soaring upward in a great flash and seeming to vanish into some alien dimension of space.
>
> At dawn he visits the place, and finds that he can now approach the scattered remnants of the cairn, from among which the lucent

> triangular stone is gone. In a deep pit he finds a piece of glowing fabric, which may have formed an outer cerement; and touching it, he experiences some peculiar sensations. Beneath the cloth there is a seal-like object, formed of odd jewels that seem to have been wrought into cryptic characters. He is about to pick it up, when, in a blaze of intolerable light, the vessel returns. He loses consciousness, after seeming to fall through interminable gulfs and labyrinths of arcanic spaces and splendors. Amid this, he has the queer sense of being touched on the forehead by some{one}.
>
> When he recovers, the vessel is gone, and the strange seal has likewise vanished, together with the glowing fabric. His fingers have turned blue where he touched the object, and are subject henceforward to certain queer disorders of sensation, one of which is an extension of tactility. There is a queer mark on his forehead, like a burn, but displaying intricately patterned crispations like some ultra-human fingerprint. He is seldom entirely sane afterwards, and is troubled by repetitions of the falling sensation, and by disorders of vision, such as chronic repetition of the bright light, and a recurrent vision of gulfs at his feet, together with the haunting perfume.[1]

Shortly after writing the above, Smith decided that the ending could be improved in the following manner:

> The teller of the tale presses so close to the strange vessel, in irresistible attraction, that he is drawn into some sort of trans-dimensional vortex created by its departure, and seems to fall into the sky, losing consciousness. He comes to himself with the sensations of a person recovering from terrible frost-bite, and finds that he is being immersed in a river of rosy flame, flowing through a strange city of semi-crystalline buildings, by people such as he had seen in the vessel. He is in a new world, and his equilibrium, when he is taken out of the river, is so thoroughly upset that he seems to see everything upside-down. In spite of the ministrations of his hosts, he becomes violently ill, and again loses consciousness, to find on recovering that he has returned to the neighborhood of the cairn.[2]

The reader may notice that this is not dissimilar to the reaction of Lemuel Sarkis in “A Star-Change.”

Smith completed “The Secret of the Cairn” on Halloween 1932, just over a month from the completion of “Genius Loci.” He had not been idle during this period, using the time to revise two previously rejected science fiction stories, “The Invisible City” and “The Letter to Mohaun Los.”[3] Neither of these was a favorite of his, so just as “The Empire of the Necromancers” followed “The Immortals of Mercury” and the first version of “The Invisible City,” so perhaps did this tale represent a literary “cleansing of the palate,” an expression of something much closer to what Smith wanted to write, as opposed to what he had to write if he wanted to expand his markets beyond *Weird Tales*. He frequently referred to the story in letters as being “first rate.”[4]

The story was first submitted to Harry Bates and *Astounding Stories*, but it was returned when the magazine folded as part of the collapse of the Clayton magazine chain.[5] It next went, by default, to Gernsback and Lasser, who published it in *Wonder Stories* for April 1933. It was collected (as “The Light from Beyond”) in *Lost Worlds.* The current text is based upon the carbon of the typescript submitted to WS.

Like “The City of the Singing Flame,” “The Secret of the Cairn” is essentially a weird tale describing an unexplained phenomenon, and with its allusions to the Grail is highly reminiscent of Arthur Machen’s “The Great Return.” The description of the unusual “tread-mill property in space”[6] may have been inspired by Smith’s reading of the works of Charles Fort around this time, while the descriptions of the magnificent vistas of his native Sierra Nevada mountains adds immensely to the sublimity of his descriptions.

1. *SS* 168-169.
2. *SS* 170.
3. CAS, letter to AWD, February 10, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
4. CAS, letters to AWD, February 10, 1932 and April 16, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, November 15, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
6. CAS, letter to HPL, *c.* early August 1931 (SL 159-160).

The Charnel God

This is the third story that Smith set in Zothique. The plot germ for "The Charnel God" appears in the *Black Book* under the same title:

> The city of Zoul-Bha-Sair in Zothique, where the terrible eater of the dead, the great ghoul Mordiggial, is worshipped as a god in a fane of purple-black marble, and is served by a necrophagous priesthood, who wear masks to hide the fact that they are only half-human. All those who die in Zoul-Bha-Sair, even outlanders, are claimed by the priests of Mordiggial.[1]

He finished writing the story on November 15, 1932, and Wright snatched it up "promptly and without cavil. This gives him a round dozen of my tales—and I wish to God he'd hurry up with the printing."[2] Wright also commissioned Smith to draw an illustration for the story. At one point it looked as if Wright might give it the prestigious cover spot (which elicited from Smith the wish that "he'd let me do a cover for W.T. some time. I work better in colour than in black-and-white"[3]), but it finally lost out to Hugh B. Cave for "The Black Gargoyle."

One appreciative reader of the story was Robert E. Howard, who wrote to Smith that "I was glad to see your illustration of your really magnificent 'Charnel God'. That story is really a tremendously powerful thing, sinister figures moving mysteriously against a black background of subtle horror. I don't know when I've read anything I admired more."[4] Lovecraft wrote to the young Robert Bloch that the tale had "some exceedingly powerful moments," and offered the following criticism of CAS' drawing: "curiously impressive despite a certain stiffness in the human figure. The cyclopean columned hall, & the two nameless corpse-bearers, form a rather unforgettable combination."[5]

"The Charnel God" was collected in *GL* and in *RA.* The text is based upon the carbon copy that Smith kept, which is now among his papers at Brown University.

1. *BB* item 7.
2. CAS, letter to AWD, December 3, 1932 (ms, SHSW).
3. CAS, letter to AWD, November 17, 1933 (ms, SHSW).
4. Robert E. Howard, letter to CAS, *c.* March 1934 (*Collected Letters of Robert E. Howard,* ed. Rob Roehm, vol. 3 [Robert E. Howard

Foundation, 2008], p. 197.)

5. HPL, letter to Robert Bloch, c. late March 1934 (*H. P. Lovecraft: Letters to Robert Bloch Supplement*, ed. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi [West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1993], p.8).

The Dark Eidolon

Of all the stories in this book that required restoration, the editors most regret not being able to accomplish this with "The Dark Eidolon," which is widely regarded as one of, if not the, best stories written by Clark Ashton Smith. As he wrote in the *Black Book*, the story would concern

> A sorcerer of Zothique, who traps a hated tyrant and imprisons the king's soul in a black statue of the evil god Tisaina. From this statue, the king is forced to look on while the sorcerer, himself animating the king's body, tortures the latter's beloved sister. The frantic king, offering himself to Tisiana for the privilege of intervention, finds the statue [has] become a living body, and smites down his own body that is torturing the girl. Tisiana, with a dark irony, takes the soul of the wizard, and puts the king's soul in the wizard's body, which lies in another apartment. The king, going to the room where his sister is imprisoned, finds the girl has gone stark mad beside his own corpse. She shrieks from him; and looking in a mirror beyond her, he sees for the first time his reflection—the features of the sorcerer. He assails the mirror with a sword while the screaming girl looks on, and the black statue seems to sneer with sardonic humor.[1]

As the story developed, Tisaina became Thaisadon, the sister became the emperor's leman, and a motivation was provided for the sorcerer, who as a beggar boy was accidentally trampled and crippled by the young prince who would succeed to the throne.

CAS announced its completion to August Derleth:

> I have finished The Dark Eidolon, which ran upwards of 10,000 words, and have shipped it to Wright. It's a devil of a story, and if Wright knows his mandrakes, he certainly ought to take it on. If the thing could ever be filmed—and no doubt it could with a lot of trick photography—it might be a winner for diabolic drama and splendid infernal spectacles.[2] There is one scene where a wizard calls up macrocosmic monsters in the form of stallions that trample houses and cities under their hooves like eggshells. The tale ends with the wizard gone stark mad and fighting his own image in a diamond mirror under the delusion that the image was the enemy on whom he had sought to inflict all manner of hellish revenges. A girl, on whose bosom he has trodden in the borrowed body of her own lover united to the legs of a

> demon horse with white hot-hooves, laughs at him amid her dying agonies, and over all, there is the stormy thunder of the cosmic stallions returning, no longer checked by the wizard's spells, to trample down his own mansion.[3]

Unfortunately, Wright apparently knew not the mandrakes, since he "has just sent back my new thriller, The Dark Eidolon, complaining that the latter part of the story (about one-third) is too long drawn out. I am somewhat at loss to know whether he refers to the incidents themselves or their treatment. I suppose something will have to be done with the yarn, which contains, as Wright admits, some of my best imaginative writing."[4]

It's unclear exactly how much Smith cut from "The Dark Eidolon," since as it was published it is over ten thousand words long. Wright accepted the revised story upon resubmission for one hundred dollars, which "looks like a lot of money these days." The cuts "involved no sacrifice of incident, and really served to get rid of a few redundancies and leave more to the imagination."[5]

Weird Tales published "The Dark Eidolon" in the January 1935 issue, along with an illustration that Smith did that earned him an extra seven dollars. It was warmly received by both the readers (sharing a four-way tie for first place with Robert Bloch's "The Feast in the Abbey," Seabury Quinn's "Hands of the Dead," and Laurence J. Cahill's "Charon") and by CAS's fellow writers. Lovecraft wrote that "'The Dark Eidolon' is gaining a clamorous & unanimous panegyric among all my correspondents—& it certainly deserves it. 'dopol, what a yarn! It comes close to the best W T has ever printed."[6] "The Dark Eidolon" was included in *OST* and *RA.* The present text is based upon the carbon typescript kept by Smith and now deposited at Brown University.

1. BB item 10.
2. See note to "The Colossus of Ylourgne," *VA* 329-330.
3. CAS, letter to AWD, December 23, 1932 (*SL* 198).
4. CAS, letter to AWD, January 4, 1933 (ms, SHSW).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, January 16, 1933 (ms, SHSW).
6. HPL, letter to CAS, January 23-24, 1935 to *c.* Feb. 1935 (AHT). At the same time Lovecraft wrote of the January 1935 *Weird Tales* "C A S is the whole thing. What a magnificent opiate 'The Dark Eidolon' is!" (Letter to AWD, January 28, 1932 [*Essential Solitude: The Letters of H.*

P. Lovecraft and August Derleth: 1932-1937, ed. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2008), p. 677]).

The Voyage of King Euvoran

Smith announced the composition of "The Voyage of King Euvoran" in a letter to Derleth written in mid-January 1933, describing it as "humorous and grotesque rather than terrific."[1] He submitted it to Farnsworth Wright with the suggestion that it might be suitable both for *Weird Tales* and its sister publication *The Magic Carpet,* but Wright rejected it, "saying he had enjoyed it greatly himself, but feared that it would not have enough plot and suspense for many of his readers. I agree, in a way—it's hardly a magazine story, but is more like a narrative poem in prose. If I print a pamphlet, I may include it for variety."[2] When Smith printed *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies*, "The Voyage of King Euvoran" was the lead story.

About a decade later, Smith looked to capitalize on the success of his first Arkham House collection *Out of Space and Time* by submitting old stories that had not seen professional publication to a new generation of editors, such as Dorothy McIlwraith at *Weird Tales* and Mary Gnaedinger at *Famous Fantastic Mysteries.* He cut out a third of "King Euvoran," reducing it from nine thousand to six thousand words, and changed the title to "Quest of the Gazolba."[3] McIlwraith accepted it, and not only published it in the September 1947 issue of *Weird Tales,* but had Boris Dolgov prepare a wonderful cover illustration that captures precisely the flavor of the story. When Smith decided to include the tale in his fourth Arkham House collection, *The Abominations of Yondo,* in 1960, he not only restored the original title but also used the 1933 text. No typescript or manuscript exists of this version, so we consulted a copy of *The Double Shadow* that bears Smith's handwritten corrections.

A reader who has read the stories in this series in sequence will undoubtedly notice that the overall tone of this tale of Zothique, the fifth in that series, is more akin to that of a "Hyperborean Grotesque," to borrow the appellation Smith gave that series in *Out of Space and Time.* It seems that Smith originally conceived of "King Euvoran" as an entry in the earlier series, since it appears on a proposed table of contents for a hypothetical *Book of Hyperborea* book project described in the *Black Book.*[4]

1. CAS, letter to AWD, January 16, 1933 (ms, SHSW).
2. CAS, letter to AWD, February 9, 1933 (*SL* 201).

3. CAS, letter to AWD, July 9, 1946 (ms, SHSW).
4. *BB* item 8.

Vulthoom

An exceptionally complete synopsis of this, the third tale of Aihai (Mars), which was originally to have received the somewhat frivolous title “Beach-Combers of Mars,” exists among the Smith papers:

> Two earthmen, stranded on Mars, and without funds, are approached by a great Martian, who offers them lucrative employment of an unspecified nature. Accepting the offer, they find themselves in the hands of the followers of Vulthoom, the evil deity of the Martians, who is worshipped in underground temples. Vulthoom is an actual being, almost immortal, who is said to have come to Mars thousands of years before from a world of the outer void. He is possessed of mysterious, though not necessarily supernatural, powers. His worship is forbidden by law, but he has many adherents, and desires to establish his power on earth as well as on Mars. He makes use of a terrible and degrading drug, administered as a perfume to enslave his devotees. The drug, which emanates from a fossilized flower, is worshipped on his altars, and gives off its carnalizing, brutalizing odor beneath the application of heat.
>
> The two earthmen are compelled to take part in the ritual of the drug. One falls a temporary victim to its influence; the other, through some rare constitutional quirk, is comparatively immune. At the height of the drug-orgy, Vulthoom appears behind a geometric screen of {... } and approaches the terrestrials with a proposition. He will send them back to earth to proselytize his cause, if they will go voluntarily.
>
> They refuse, and are turned loose in his caverns, ostensibly to wander as they will, but actually prisoners, besieged by terrible impressions and subtle influences—even pseudo-memories of a subjection to Vulthoom in some other frame of time and space—all of which is designed to break down their resistance. They see the frightful weaponries of Vulthoom; and a bodiless voice tells them the use of these weapons, to impress them further with the powers of the strange lord. They are separated, and each is made to believe that the other has yielded. Chanler, the more resistant, mad with rage at this belief, shatters a vial which is one of the weapons of Vulthoom—a vial that looses a black fire which eats its way upward through matter, and lets in the waters of the Yahan Canal on the cavern-world of the monster.

> Trying to escape before this catastrophe, Chanler finds his companion in the universal confusion; and both of them see Vulthoom for the first and last time, as the waters sweep him {...} cataract from his hidden sanctuary.
>
> {detail:} Vulthoom and his people have awakened after a hibernation of a thousand akkals, or ten thousand years.[1]

Smith began "Vulthoom" in October 1932, but did not finish the story until February 14, 1933. In the aftermath of the "Dweller in the Gulf" fiasco, CAS was no longer submitting stories to *Wonder Stories; Strange Tales* was dead and *Astounding Stories* comatose, so he took a chance and submitted it to Wright at Weird Tales. Smith didn't think much of its chances, so he was pleasantly surprised when Wright accepted the tale, which was published in the September 1935 issue. "It fails to please me,"[2] he wrote to Derleth, adding the next month that "It seems to have pleased [Wright], for some ungodly reason; but after all it's a cut or two above Edmond Hamilton."[3] Smith received one hundred dollars for the story, which he later included in *GL*. In his letter of acceptance Wright mentioned that they were reserving the radio broadcast rights, but promised "if we receive any money from such broadcasting we will turn it over to you."[4] "Vulthoom" tied in the Eyrie's reader's poll for most popular story in the issue in which it appeared, sharing the honors with a reprint of Edmond Hamilton's fine story "The Monster-God of Mamurth" and "The Man Who Chained the Lightning" by Paul Ernst.[5] The present text is based upon Smith's carbon, which is now deposited at the John Hay Library.

1. *SS* 175-176.
2. CAS, letter to AWD, February 19, 1933 (ms, SHSW)
3. CAS, letter to AWD, March 14, 1934 (ms, SHSW)
4. FW, letter to CAS, March 10, 1933 (ms, JHL).
5. See Sam Moskowitz, "The Most Popular Stories in Weird Tales 1924 to 1940," in *World Fantasy Convention 1983* (Chicago: Weird Tales Ltd., 1983), p. 37.

The Weaver in the Vaults

Smith finished this, the sixth tale of Zothique, on March 15, 1933. Like its immediate predecessor in the sequence, "The Voyage of King Euvoran," it may not have been originally conceived as part of this series. In a letter to Lovecraft dated January 27, 1930, CAS mentions the titles of several stories he was planning to write, among them one called "The Ghoul from Mercury." A synopsis exists under that title, which describes "An entity like a gigantic fire-ball, from some alien planet, which devours the corpses in graveyards and morgues, and even breaks into the mummy-cases in museums."[1]

The *Black Book* contains a more detailed plot synopsis under the present title:

> Two henchmen of a king of Zothique, who are sent down into the royal catacombs of a deserted city to retrieve the bones of an ancient ancestor of the king. They find that many of the vaults are empty, and reaching the last vault, in which is interred the monarch that they seek, they find a nameless horror gorging itself upon the mummy and spinning an arabesque web of filthy iris and unclean splendor in the dark. They flee, and are separated; the narrator of the tale becomes lost in the catacombs, and returning, finds the Weaver spinning its charnel web, more foul and refulgent than before, from the body of his late companion.[2]

Wright not only accepted the story, but asked Smith to draw an illustration for it as well. "Someone has evidently been extolling my drawings around the W.T. office,"[3] Smith wryly observed to Lovecraft, who had mentioned CAS' artwork in several of his stories, most recently "The Horror in the Museum," a story that he "revised" (i.e., ghost-wrote) for Hazel Heald, which had appeared in the July 1933 issue along with "Ubbo-Sathla." *Weird Tales* paid Smith a total of fifty-two dollars for this story, seven dollars of which were for the illustration.[4] Smith would illustrate a total of seven stories for *WT,* including "The Dark Eidolon" and "The Charnel God."

After the story's publication (in the January 1934 issue), August Derleth expressed his appreciation, which elicited this response from CAS: "I am glad The Weaver pleased you. I like the tale myself, particularly some of the atmospheric touches. In the drawing, I tried to achieve composition as

well as illustrative value. The lines of the figure are part of a set arrangement, designed to create the feelings of incarceration, despair and burdenous rigour. But maybe I overdid it a little."[5] Lovecraft was typically appreciative of the story, singling out "the atmosphere of that unhallowedly ancient crypt" as "tremendously vivid!"[6] "The Weaver in the Vault" was collected in *GL*. This text is based upon CAS' carbon, now at Brown University.

1. *SS* 156.
2. *BB* item 11.
3. CAS, letter to HPL, *c.* mid-October 1933 (*SL* 230).
4. Popular Fiction Publishing Company, letter to CAS, May 29, 1934 (ms, JHL).
5. CAS, letter to AWD, January 10, 1934 (ms, SHSW).
6. HPL, postcard to CAS, postmarked January 24, 1934 (ms, JHL).

The Flower-Women

Despite not being able to sell "The Maze of the Enchanter," Smith began to write a further tale of the archmage Maal Dweb in October 1932, but did not complete it until March of the next year. The plot that he outlined that October is essentially the same as what he ultimately wrote, differing only in the methods in which he disposed of the rival sorcerers:

> Maal Dweb, bored with his omnipotence, goes forth in disguise to visit one of the worlds over which he rules. There he allows himself to be captured by certain fantastic creatures, the flower-women, who are half-woman, half-plant. These creatures, who have somewhat the character of vampires, and are about to make him their victim, but he diverts them by various feats of thaumaturgy, so that they defer his doom. Learning that they are preyed upon by certain half-ophidian sorcerers of the region, who use their corporeal substance in the compounding of magic drugs, Maal Dweb undertakes to deal with these sorcerers. He reduces himself in size, and hidden in the floriation of one of the living blossoms, gains entrance to the lair of the sorcerers in a honey-combed mountain. There, while they sleep, he changes the

ingredients of the brew, which they intend as an elixir for their own use; and drinking the brew they dissolve instantly in liquid corruption.[1]

Farnsworth Wright rejected "The Flower-Women" upon first submission, calling it "well done, but [it] seemed a fairy story rather than a weird tale proper."[2] Smith then sent it to William Clayton, who had invited him to submit manuscripts "of occult and weird stories"[3] for a possible revival of *Astounding Stories*, but this did not materialize because Clayton resigned "due to ill health."[4] When Smith purchased a new typewriter to replace his old worn-out Remington, he resubmitted "The Flower-Women" and "The Death of Malygris" to Wright, who "evidently ... liked them better when I retyped them on my new Underwood,"[4] since he accepted the former that July.[5]

This story is unusual in that it did not evoke the same effusive enthusiasm from Lovecraft that Smith's tales often called forth. He confided to Barlow "Yes—C A S' s 'Flower-Women' is below par."[6] Although he always encouraged Smith in his fiction writing, HPL was by no means blindly uncritical. As early as 1933 Lovecraft voiced agreement with Robert Bloch when the young writer complained that CAS "produces too much. That is the tragedy of economic necessity—he knows that much of his stuff is hack junk, yet has to keep grinding it out for the sake of the cash." However, as we have seen from earlier notes, he was genuinely appreciative of Smith's best efforts such as "The Dark Eidolon" or "The City of the Singing Flame."[7]

"The Flower-Women" appeared in the May 1935 issue of *WT*, and was collected in *LW*. As usual, a carbon of the typescript from CAS's papers at the John Hay Library provided the text.

1. *SS* 175.
2. William M. Clayton, letter to CAS, March 17, 1933 (ms, JHL).
3. H. C. Mayer, letter to CAS, May 1, 1933 (ms, JHL).
4. CAS, letter to DAW, August 6, 1933 (ms, MHS).
5. See CAS, letter to August Derleth, July 12, 1933 (*SL* 211).
6. HPL, letter to RHB, May 29, 1935 (in *O Fortunate Floridian: H. P. Lovecraft's Letters to R. H. Barlow*, ed. S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz [University of Tampa Press, 2007], p. 281).
7. HPL, letter to Robert Bloch, May 9, 1933 (in *H. P. Lovecraft, Letters to Robert Bloch* Supplement, ed. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi

[West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1993], p.6).

APPENDIX TWO:
ALTERNATE ENDING TO
"THE WHITE SYBIL"

Slowly, Tortha won back to some measure of his former strength. But ever afterward there was a cloudy dimness in his mind, a blur of unresolving shadow, like the dazzlement in eyes that have looked on some insupportable light.

Among those who tended him was a pale maiden, not uncomely; and Tortha took her for the Sybil in the darkness that had come upon him. The maiden's name was Illara, and Tortha loved her in his delusion; and, forgetful of his kin and his friends in Cerngoth, he dwelt with the mountain people thereafter, taking Illara to wife and making the songs of the little tribe. For the most part, he was happy in his belief that the Sybil had returned to him; and Illara, in her way, was content, being not the first of mortal women whose lover had remained faithful to a divine illusion.

APPENDIX THREE:
THE MUSE OF HYPERBOREA

Too far away is her wan and mortal face, and too remote are the snows of her lethal breast, for mine eyes to behold them ever. But at whiles her whisper comes to me, like a chill unearthly wind that is faint from traversing the gulfs between the worlds, and has flown over ultimate horizons of ice-bound deserts. And she speaks to me in a tongue I have never heard but have always known; and she tells of deathly things and of things beautiful beyond the ecstatic desires of love. Her speech is not of good or evil, nor of anything that is desired or conceived or believed by the termites of earth; and the air she breathes, and the lands wherein she roams, would blast like the utter cold of sidereal space; and her eyes would blind the vision of men like suns; and her kiss, if one should ever attain it, would wither and slay like the kiss of lightning.

But, hearing her far, infrequent whisper, I behold a vision of vast auroras, on continents that are wider than the world, and seas too great for the enterprise of human keels. And at times I stammer forth the strange tidings that she brings: though none will welcome them, and none will believe or listen. And in some dawn of the desperate years, I shall go forth and follow where she calls, to seek the high and beatific doom of her snow-pale distances, to perish amid her indesecrate horizons.

APPENDEX FOUR:
THE DWELLER IN THE GULF:
ADDED MATERIAL

Smith added over a thousand words to the story to satisfy Gernsback and Lasser's requirement for more "scientific motivation." This was accomplished through an additional character, a terrestrial explorer named John Chalmers who had earlier fallen victim to the Dweller and its troglodytic worshippers. Smith inserted the following material after the paragraph beginning "Between the thick and seemingly topless pillars" on page 102:

The queer, unnatural drowsiness seemed to increase upon the Earth-men 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 as 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 Earth-men! 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 Chalmer's 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.

This material was inserted after the paragraph beginning "Unclean and bestial as a figment of some atavistic madness..." on page 103:

"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, and 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.

Several mentions of Chalmers were inserted after this point. The final significant mention of Chalmers occurs after the paragraph beginning “Whether he passed from these obscure nightmares...” on page 104. Whereas in our text the Earth-men stumble across the half-eaten body of one of the Martians, in the version published in Wonder Stories *it was Chalmers who fell prey to the Dweller.*

APPENDIX FIVE:
BIBLIOGRAPHY

"The Mandrakes." *WT* 21, no. 2 (February 1933): 254-259. In *OD*.

"The Beast of Averoigne." *WT* 21, no. 5 (May 1933): 628-635. In *LW*.

"A Star-Change" (as "The Visitors from Mlok"). *WS* 4, no. 12 (May 1933): 962-969. *Tales of Wonder and Super-Science* no. 15 (Autumn 1941): 57-67 (as "Escape to Mlok"). In *GL*.

"The Disinterment of Venus." *WT* 24, no. 1 (July 1934): 112-117. In *GL*.

"The White Sybil." *The White Sybil by Clark Ashton Smith and Men of Avalon by David H. Keller, M.D.* (Everett, PA: Fantasy Publications [1934]): 2-18. In AY.

"The Ice-Demon." *WT* 21, no. 4 (April 1933): 484-494. In *AY.*

"The Isle of the Torturers." *WT* 21, no. 3 (March 1933): 362-372. In *LW, RA*. Reprinted in *Keep on the Light.* Ed. Christine Campbell Thomson (London: Selwyn & Blount [1933]) (as "Isle of Torturers").

"The Dimension of Chance." *WS* 4, no. 6 (November 1932): 521-529. *Tales of Wonder and Super-Science* no. 13 (Winter 1941): 61-73. *Startling Stories* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1946): 72-83. In *OD.*

"The Dweller in the Gulf" (as "Dweller in Martian Depths"). *WS* 4, no. 10 (March 1933): 768-775. In *AY, RA*.

"The Maze of the Enchanter." Original version: in *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (Auburn Journal Press, 1933). Reprinted in *Today's Literature: An Omnibus of Short Stories, Novelettes, Poems, Plays, Profiles, and Essays*. Edited by Dudley Chadwick Gordon, Vernon Rupert King, and William Whittingham Lyman (NY: American Book Co., 1935). Revised Version (as "The Maze of Maal Dweb"): *WT* 32, no. 4 (October 1938): 475-483. In *LW, RA*.

"The Third Episode of Vathek." *Leaves* no. 1 (Summer 1937): 1-24. In *AY*.

"Genius Loci." *WT* 21, no. 6 (June 1933): 747-758. In *GL, RA*.

“The Secret of the Cairn” (as “The Light from Beyond”). *WS* 4, no. 11 (April 1933): 823-829. In *LW.*

“The Charnel God.” *WT* 23, no. 3 (March 1934): 316-330. In *GL, RA.*

“The Dark Eidolon.” *WT* 25, no. 1 (January 1935): 93-111. In *OST, RA.*

“The Voyage of King Euvoran.” Original version: in *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (Auburn Journal Press, 1933). In *AY*. Revised version (as “Quest of the Gazolba”): *WT* 39, no. 12 (September 1947): 4-13.

“Vulthoom.” *WT* 26, no. 3 (September 1935): 336-352. In *GL*. Reprinted in *Avon Science-Fiction Reader* No. 2. Edited by Donald A. Wollheim (NY: Avon Book Co., 1951).

“The Weaver in the Vault.” *WT* 23, no. 1 (January 1934): 85-93. In *GL*.

“The Flower-Women.” *WT* 25, no. 5 (May 1935): 624-632. In *LW.* Reprinted in *Avon Fantasy Reader* No. 9. Edited by Donald A. Wollheim (NY: Avon Book Co., 1949).

“The Muse of Hyperborea.” *Fantasy Fan* 1, no. 10 (June 1934): 154. *Acolyte* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1943): 4. In *PP.*

Table of Contents

Introduction
A Note on the Texts
The Mandrakes
The Beast of Averoigne
A Star-Change
The Disinterment of Venus
The White Sybil
The Isle of the Torturers
The Dimension of Chance
The Dweller in the Gulf
The Maze of the Enchanter
The Third Episode of Vathek: The Story of the Princess Zulkaïs and the Prince Kalilah
Genius Loci
The Secret of the Cairn
The Charnel God
The Dark Eidolon
The Voyage of King Euvoran
Vulthoom
The Weaver in the Vault
The Flower-Women
Appendix One: Story Notes
Appendix Two: Alternate Ending to “The White Sybil”
Appendix Three: The Muse of Hyperborea
Appendex Four: The Dweller in the Gulf: Added Material
Appendix Five: Bibliography

Table of Contents

Introduction
A Note on the Texts
The Mandrakes
The Beast of Averoigne
A Star-Change
The Disinterment of Venus
The White Sybil
The Isle of the Torturers
The Dimension of Chance
The Dweller in the Gulf
The Maze of the Enchanter
The Third Episode of Vathek: The Story of the Princess Zulkaïs and the Prince Kalilah
Genius Loci
The Secret of the Cairn
The Charnel God
The Dark Eidolon
The Voyage of King Euvoran
Vulthoom
The Weaver in the Vault
The Flower-Women
Appendix One: Story Notes
Appendix Two: Alternate Ending to “The White Sybil”
Appendix Three: The Muse of Hyperborea
Appendex Four: The Dweller in the Gulf: Added Material
Appendix Five: Bibliography