

THE COLLECTED FANTASIES, VOLUME 2

THE

Door

TO

Saturn



CLARK ASHTON SMITH

EDITED BY SCOTT CONNORS AND RON HILGER

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THE *Door*  
TO *Saturn*

Volume two of  
The Collected Fantasies Of  
Clark Ashton Smith

Edited by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger  
With an Introduction by Ramsey Campbell

Night Shade Books  
San Francisco

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# INTRODUCTION

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Behind all the colorful gods and heroes of Greek and Roman mythology—behind even Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos who measured out and snipped off the length of a man’s life, and more unanswerable even than Zeus and Hera together—stood Fate. This force—not a person, personifying what would be as hard as personifying entropy—was what made Tantalus kill his own son and abominably serve him as dinner to the unwitting gods, what led Agamemnon to kill his daughter, what drove the Bacchantes to commit perverse murders incomprehensible even to themselves.

Those figures, so remote in ancient history, helplessly acted out their fated, prophesied roles. Freedom will was a mocking lie for Theseus and Oedipus and Hercules. Foreordained fatal error was the true story.

We live in a different universe now, or a differently-perceived one, at any rate. The Judeo-Christian world-view, even just coasting on past momentum as it mostly is these days, has introduced the idea of justice and mercy—redemption. Even the Gnostic philosophy, with its bleak belief in an insatiable demiurge responsible for the creation of this world, acknowledged a perfect God, unapproachable but at least out there somewhere.

Modern writers can write stories set in those ancient Fate-cursed days, but they can’t really assume or convey the perspective of being an organic part of that sort of world. Well, none of them besides Clark Ashton Smith.

*I leaned from some black precipice, to see  
The pits beneath. One came, not far from me,  
Who hurled therein the sockets of the stars  
And shells of worlds that rattled emptily.*  
—Clark Ashton Smith

Really it’s only in dreams, when the oldest catacombs of our brains serve up symbols that mystify as much as terrify, that we dimly comprehend the grammar of that merciless unredeemed universe. And dreams, like fairy tales, have their own compelling pre-rational “logic”—as Chesterton said of the stories in mythology, “we do not know why something stirs in the subconsciousness, or why what is impossible seems almost inevitable.”

We don’t know why the culminating event in Smith’s “The Testament of Athammaus,” impossible though it is, is clearly inevitable. The Singing Flame, in its vast temple in the weirdly besieged city of Ydmos, is an image that seems to spring authoritatively from the earliest dreams we ever had.

I use the word “dreams,” not specifically “nightmares.” It would be careless to label Smith’s fantasies as “horror.” Certainly horror is an element in them, but the ugly or terrifying aspects are incidental features of a world that is simply not ours. They never seem to be the main point, and to focus on them is like paying attention only to the familiar-seeming instruments in a profound and strange orchestra. The narrative voice often describes the most appalling scenes as dispassionately as it describes the most gorgeous ones. They’re often the same, in fact—the standard lumber of horror stories, all the decrepit old houses and possessed children and cosmopolitan vampires, fades into relative mundanity beside Smith’s vaultingly glamorous dooms.

Smith's stories are truly "magic casements, opening on the foam/ Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." They're shot through with an antediluvian beauty which is indifferent to human security even comprehension, but which is more siren-like because of that remoteness. Each of the creatures who gladly immolates itself in the Singing Flame has made a vast pilgrimage to attain it. And even then, Fate scrawls the last, bitter hieroglyph.

*"And, leaning from the mouldered bed of lust,  
Love's skeleton writes Nada in the dust."*

—Clark Ashton Smith

Not surprisingly, true love never seems to work out, in Smith's worlds. Smith's typical luckless protagonist is more likely to be endlessly seeking a long-lost lover, or endlessly mourning an irretrievably dead one, than enjoying the beloved's company. Eroticism abounds, though, whether as dangerous as the variously deadly ladies in "The Kiss of Zoraida" and "A Rendezvous in Averaigne" or as grotesque and ultimately funny as the "national mother" in "The Door to Saturn," but it's a fatal eroticism, and to give in to it is generally to be obliterated—though often we can queasily sympathize with the brave and foolhardy souls who choose just that. Lamiae, succubi, sirens—for the duration of the story, at least, Smith can convince you that plain love between a human man and woman is the lowest possible reading on a meter than stretches very high, though nearly all of the calibrations are in the red-lit danger zone.

Ultimately we realize that the dazzling glamors we find in these stories are inextricable from, are in fact a consequence of, the merciless field-equations of Fate—the cold stone beneath the ornate and enchanted Bokhaira carpets. Even for the Emperor of Dreams, the narrator of Smith's grandest poem "The Hashish-Eater," there waits at the end of all the splendors of a million universes,

*"... a huge white eyeless Face  
That fills the void and fills the universe,  
And bloats against the limits of the world  
With lips of flame that open..."*

Tim Powers  
March 2007

Clark Ashton Smith considered himself primarily as 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 each 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 the 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. 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 can see that Smith's intentions as author may be honored. In a few instances a word might be changed to match the Arkham House collections that isn't indicated on the typescript.

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 the 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 Averroigne*. Turner did not have access to such a wonderful scholarly tool as Boyd Pearson's website, [www.eldritchdark.com](http://www.eldritchdark.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 idiosyncracies 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 moderate story. The same, of course, applies to "Sir John Maundeville," which is a deliberate study of 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.

Four of the stories included in this volume were published after Smith's death in 1961. "Told in the Desert" was first published by August Derleth in an original anthology from Arkham House, and no manuscript or typescript survives in either the Clark Ashton Smith Papers at Brown University or the August Derleth Papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin Library in Madison, Wisconsin. A search of the remaining papers at Arkham House itself failed to locate any manuscript. "A Good Embalmer" was first published in *Strange Shadows*, a collection of unpublished stories, variant fragments, synopses, notes, and other prose edited by Steve Behrends in 1989. A holograph manuscript exists at Brown's John Hay Library. Two stories, "The Red World of Polaris" and "The Face by the River," were long believed to be lost. A copy of the latter was located among the papers of the late Genevieve K. Sully. The original typescript of "The Red World of Polaris" was sold by Smith

to a Brooklyn, New York fan named Michael DeAngelis, who planned to publish it in a fanzine. DeAngelis himself disappeared, and it was feared that the story disappeared with him. However, Roy Hilger located DeAngelis' co-editor Alan Pesetsky, who found a typescript that he had made in preparation for that aborted fanzine appearance, which we published in 2003 as part of the collected adventures of Captain Volmar.

Smith published six stories himself in a 1933 pamphlet, *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies*, but later revised some of these for sale to *Esquire* (unsuccessfully) and *Weird Tales* (successfully) in the late 1930s. In these instances we use the version published by Smith himself.

Typescripts exist at the JHL of two stories included here, "An Offering to the Moon" and "The Kingdom of the Worm" (also known as "A Tale of Sir John Maundeville"), but in both cases it appears that these are of an earlier draft. In the case of the former it seems to us that the published version is the superior, possibly the result of the Smith of 1950 revising his earlier work, and in the latter evidence exists that a revised version was submitted to *Fantasy Fan* editor Charles D. Hornum that leads us to favor that text.

Although tearsheets from *Weird Tales* were used in the preparation of *Out of Space and Time*, the latter's text differs from both the magazine appearance and the original typescript in a manner not reflected elsewhere in the Arkham House editions. The first involves the elimination of some text and the merging of two paragraphs into one. We suspect that this represents a transcription error on the part of Alice Conger, August Derleth's secretary. The second occurs at the very end: both the typescript and *Weird Tales* have as the last line "But Fleurette was still bemused with wonder, and could only answer him with a kiss." *Out of Space and Time* changes this to "respond to his words.. This last change could have easily been changed in any of the several copies of *OST* corrected by CA that we have been fortunate to consult, and he did not. The first change, however, while also not reflected in any of the corrected copies, might have been allowed to stand since its correction would have involved quite a bit of effort and would have altered the meaning but slightly. However, since that meaning is altered, we have decided to restore the missing text.

"The City of the Singing Flame" presents an unusual case. The text published in *Out of Space and Time* represents a fusion of this story with its sequel, "Beyond the Singing Flame" (*Wonder Stories*, November 1931), that was carried out by Walter H. Gillings, editor of the British pulp magazine *Tales of Wonder*, when the stories were reprinted together in the Spring 1940 issue. Smith could provide Arkham House publisher August Derleth with neither the typescript nor tear sheets from the *Wonder Stories* appearance, so he resorted to the one version that he had at hand. Smith's financial situation was such at the time that it was imperative he hand in the book as soon as possible. When Jim Turner was preparing the text for Arkham House's collection *A Rendezvous in Averaigne*, he reversed many but not all of the changes. His text differs from both the final typescript prepared by Smith as well as the story's original appearance in the July 1931 issue of *Wonder Stories*.

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 so that the reader might experience what Ray Bradbury described in his foreword to *Rendezvous in Averaigne*: "Take one step across the threshold of his stories, and you plunge into color, sound, taste, smell, and texture—into language."

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1. "Like Mohammed's Tomb," a science fiction story written in October 1930. As with "The Real World of Polaris," Smith sold the only known manuscript to Michael DeAngelis.

## I

When Morghi, the high-priest of the goddess Yhoundeh, together with twelve of his most ferocious and efficient underlings, came at morning twilight to seek the infamous heretic Eibon in his house of black gneiss on a headland above the northern main, they were surprised as well as disappointed to find him absent. Their surprise was due to the fact that they had fully thought to take him unaware; for all their tribunals against Eibon had been carried on with meticulous privacy in underground vaults with sound-proof bolted doors; and they themselves had made the long journey to his house in a single night, immediately following the hour of his condemnation. They were disappointed because the formidable writ of arrest, with symbolic flame-etched runes on a scroll of human skin, was now useless; and because there seemed to be no early prospect of trying out the ingenious agonies, the intricately harrowing ordeals which they had devised for Eibon with such providential forethought.

Morghi was especially disappointed; and the malisons which he muttered when the emptiness of the topmost room had revealed itself, were of truly cabbalistic length and fearfulness. Eibon was his chief rival in wizardry, and was acquiring altogether too much fame and prestige among the peoples of Mithras Thulan, that ultimate peninsula of the Hyperborean continent. So Morghi had been glad to believe certain malignant rumors concerning Eibon and to utilize them in the charges he had preferred. The rumors were, that Eibon was a devotee of the long-discredited heathen god Zhothaquah, whose worship was incalculably older than man; and that Eibon's magic was drawn from his unlawful affiliation with this dark deity, who had come down by way of other worlds from a foreign universe, in primeval times when the earth was still no more than a steaming morass. The power of Zhothaquah was still feared; and it was said that those who were willing to forgo their humanity by serving him would become the heritors of antemundane secrets, and the masters of a knowledge so awful that it could only have been brought from outlying planets coeval with night and chaos.

The house of Eibon was built in the form of a pentagonal tower, and possessed five stories including the two that were underground. All, of course, had been searched with painstaking thoroughness; and the three servants of Eibon had been tortured with a slow drip of boiling-hot asphaltum to make them reveal their master's whereabouts. Their continued denial of all knowledge after a half hour of this, was taken as proof that they were genuinely ignorant. No sign of a subterranean passage was unearthed by delving in the walls and floor of the lower rooms; though Morghi had even gone so far as to remove the flagstones beneath an obscene image of Zhothaquah which occupied the nethermost. This he had done with extreme reluctance, for the squat, fur-covered god, with his bat-like features and sloth-like body, was fearsomely abhorrent to the high-priest of the elk-goddess Yhoundeh.

Returning in renewed search to the highest room of Eibon's tower, the inquisitors were compelled to own themselves baffled. There was nothing to be found but a few articles of furniture, a few antique volumes on conjuration such as might be owned by any sorcerer, some disagreeable and gruesome paintings on rolls of pterodactyl parchment, and certain primitive urns and sculptures and totem-poles of the sort that Eibon had been so fond of collecting. Zhothaquah, in one form or another, was represented in most of these: his face even leered with a bestial somnolence from the urn-handles; and he was to be found in half the totems (which were those of sub-human tribes) along with the seal, the

mammoth, the giant tiger, and the aurochs. Morghi felt that the charges against Eibon were not substantiated beyond all remaining doubt; for surely no one who was not a worshipper of Zhothaquah would care to own even a single representation of this loathsome entity.

However, such additional evidence of guilt, no matter how significant or damnatory, was of small help in finding Eibon. Staring from the windows of the topmost chamber, where the walls fell sheer to the cliff and the cliff dropped clear on two sides to a raging sea four hundred feet below, Morghi was driven to credit his rival with superior resources of magic. Otherwise, the man's disappearance was altogether too much of a mystery. And Morghi had no love for mysteries, unless they were part of his own stock-in-trade.

He turned from the window and re-examined the room with minutely careful attention. Eibon had manifestly used it as a sort of study: there was a writing-table of ivory, with reed-pens, and various colored inks in little earthen pots; and there were sheets of paper made from a kind of calamite, and scribbled over with odd astronomical and astrological calculations that caused Morghi to frown because he could not understand them. On each of the five walls there hung one of the parchment paintings, all of which seemed to be the work of some aboriginal race. Their themes were blasphemous and repellent; and Zhothaquah figured in all of them, amid forms and landscapes whose abnormality and sheer uncouthness may have been due to the half-developed technique of the primitive artists. Morghi now tore them from the walls one by one, as if he suspected that Eibon might in some manner be concealed behind them.

The walls were now entirely bare; and Morghi considered them for a long time, amid the respectful silence of his underlings. A queer panel, high up in the south-eastern side above the writing-table, had been revealed by the removal of one of the paintings. Morghi's heavy brows met in a long black bar as he eyed this panel. It was conspicuously different from the rest of the wall, being an oval-shaped inlay of some reddish metal that was neither gold nor copper—a metal that displayed an obscure and fleeting fluorescence of rare colors when one peered at it through half-shut eyelids. But somehow it was impossible even to remember with open eyes the colors of this fluorescence.

Morghi—who, perhaps, was cleverer and more perspicacious than Eibon had given him credit for being—conceived a suspicion that was apparently baseless and absurd, since the wall containing the panel was the outer wall of the building, and could give only on the sky and sea.

He climbed upon the writing-table and struck the panel with his fist. The sensations which he felt and the result of the blow, were alike astounding. A sense of icy cold so extreme that it was hardly distinguishable from extreme heat, ran along his hand and arm through his whole body as he smote the unknown reddish metal. And the panel itself swung easily outward, as if on unseen hinges, with a high and sonorous clang that seemed to fall from an incomputable distance. Beyond it, Morghi saw that there was neither sky nor sea nor, in fact, anything he had ever seen or heard of, or had even dreamt of in his most outrageous nightmares...

He turned to his companions. The look on his face was half amazement, half triumph.

“Wait here till I return,” he commanded, and leapt headlong through the open panel.

## II

The charges that had been brought against Eibon were indeed true. The sagacious wizard, in his lifelong study of laws and agencies, both natural and supernatural, had taken account of the myths that were prevalent in Mhu Thulan regarding Zhothaquah, and had thought it conceivably worth while to make a personal investigation of this obscure pre-human entity. He had cultivated the acquaintance of Zhothaquah, who, in the desuetude of his worship, was now driven to lead an existence wholly subterranean; he had offered the prescribed prayers, had made the sacrifices that were mo-

acceptable; and the strange, sleepy little god, in return for Eibon's interest and his exvotes, had confided to him certain information that was more than useful in the practice of the black arts. Also he had told Eibon some autobiographical data that confirmed the popular legends in more explicit detail. For reasons which he did not specify, he had come to earth in former aeons from the planet Cykranosh (the name by which Saturn was called in Mhu Thulan); and Cykranosh itself had been merely a way-station in his travels from remoter worlds and systems. As a special reward, after years of service and burnt-offerings, he presented to Eibon a large thin oval plate of some ultra-telluric metal, instructing him to have it fitted as a hinged panel in an upper room of his house. The panel, if swung outward from the wall on open air, would have the peculiar property of giving admittance to the world of Cykranosh, many million miles away in space.

According to the vague and somewhat unsatisfactory explanation vouchsafed by the god, this panel being partly wrought from a kind of matter which belonged to another universe than man's, possessed uncommon radiative properties that served to ally it with some higher dimension of space, through which the distance to astronomically remote spheres was a mere step.

Zhothaquah, however, warned Eibon not to make use of the panel unless in time of extreme need as a means of escape from otherwise inevitable danger; for it would be difficult if not impossible to return to earth from Cykranosh—a world where Eibon might find it anything but easy to acclimatize himself, since the conditions of life were very different from those in Mhu Thulan, even though they did not involve so total an inversion of all terrene standards and norms as that which prevailed in the more outlying planets. Some of Zhothaquah's relatives were still resident in Cykranosh and were worshipped by its peoples; and Zhothaquah told Eibon the almost unpronounceable name of the most powerful of these deities, saying that it would be useful to him as a sort of pass-word if he should ever need to visit Cykranosh.

The idea of a panel that would open on some remote world impressed Eibon as being rather fantastic, not to say far-fetched; but he had found Zhothaquah to be in all ways and at all times the most veracious deity. However, he made no trial of the panel's unique virtues, till Zhothaquah (who maintained a close surveillance of all underground doings) had warned him of the machinations of Morghi and the processes of ecclesiastic law that were being instituted in the vaults below the temple of Yhoundeh. Knowing as he did the power of these jealous bigots, Eibon decided that it would be injudicious to the point of folly if he were to let himself fall into their hands. Bidding a short and grateful farewell to Zhothaquah, and collecting a small parcel of bread and meat and wine, he retired to his study and climbed upon the writing-table. Then, lifting aside the crude picture of a scene in Cykranosh with which Zhothaquah had inspired some primeval half-human artist, he pushed open the panel it had served to conceal.

Eibon saw that Zhothaquah was indeed a god of his word: for the scene beyond the panel was nothing that could ever find a legitimate place in the topography of Mhu Thulan or of any terrestrial region. It did not altogether appeal to him; but there was no alternative, save the inquisitorial cells of the goddess Yhoundeh. Envisaging in thought the various refinements and complications of torture which Morghi would have now prepared, he sprang through the opening into Cykranosh with an agility that was quite juvenile for a wizard of mature years.

It was only a step; but turning he saw that all trace of the panel or of his dwelling had now disappeared. He was standing on a long declivity of ashen soil, down which a sluggish stream that was not water, but some liquescent metal resembling mercury, ran from tremendous unscalable shoulders and horns of the mountain-heights above, to debouch in a hill-surrounded lake of the same liquid. The slope beneath him was lined with rows of peculiar objects; and he could not make up his mind whether they were trees, mineral forms or animal organisms, since they appeared to combine certain characteristics of all these. This preternatural landscape was appallingly distinct in every detail, und

a greenish-black sky that was over-arched from end to end with a triple cyclopean ring of dazzling luminosity. The air was cold, and Eibon did not care for its sulphurescent odor, or the odd pucker sensation it left in his nostrils and lungs. And when he took a few steps on the unattractive-looking soil, he found that it had the disconcerting friability of ashes that have dried once more after being wetted with rain.

He started down the slope, half-fearing that some of the equivocal objects around him would reach out their mineral boughs or arms to arrest his progress. They seemed to be a kind of bluish-purple obsidian cacti, with limbs that ended in formidable talon-like spines, and heads that were altogether too elaborate for either fruits or blossoms. They did not move as he passed among them; but he heard a faint and singular tinkling with many modulations of tone, that preceded and followed him along the slope. Eibon conceived the uncomfortable notion that they were holding converse with each other; and were perhaps debating what should be done with him or about him.

However, he reached without mishap or hindrance the end of the declivity, where terraces and ledges of decomposing trap, like a mighty stairway of elder aeons, had rimmed the sunken lake of liquescent metal. Wondering as to the way he should now take, Eibon stood irresolute on one of the ledges.

His train of conjecture was broken by a shadow that fell suddenly athwart him and lay like a monstrous blot on the crumbling stone at his feet. He was not prepossessed by the shadow: it was outrageously defiant of all known aesthetic standards; and its malformation and distortion were no less than extravagant.

He turned to see what manner of creature had flung the shadow. This being, he perceived, was no easy to classify, with its insanely short legs, its exceedingly elongated arms, and its round, sleepy-looking head that was pendulous from a spherical body, as if it were turning a somnambulist's somersault. But after he had studied it awhile and had noted its furriness and somnolent expression, he began to see a vague though inverted likeness to the god Zhothaquah. And remembering how Zhothaquah had said the form assumed by himself on earth was not altogether that which he had worn in Cykranosh, Eibon now wondered if this entity was one of Zhothaquah's relatives.

He was trying to recall the almost inarticulate name that had been confided to him by the god as a sort of pass-word, when the owner of that unusual shadow, without seeming to note Eibon's presence, began a descent of the terraces and ledges toward the lake. Its locomotion was mainly on its hands, for the absurd legs were not half long enough for the steps it had to take. Arriving at the lake-edge, the creature drank of the liquid metal in a hearty and copious manner that served to convince Eibon of its godship; for surely no being of an inferior biologic order would quench its thirst with a beverage so extraordinary. Then, re-ascending to the ledge where Eibon stood, it paused and appeared to notice him for the first time.

Eibon had finally remembered the outlandish name for which he was groping.

"Hziulquoigmnzhah," he sought to articulate. Doubtless the result was not wholly conformable to Cykranoshian rules; but Eibon did the best he could with the vocal organs at his command. His auditor seemed to recognize the word, for it peered at Eibon a little less sleepily than before, with its inverse-situated eyes; and even deigned to utter something which sounded like an attempt to correct his pronunciation. Eibon wondered how he was ever to learn such a language; or, having learned it, how he was ever to pronounce it. However, it heartened him a little to find that he was understood at all.

"Zhothaquah," he said, repeating the name three times in his most orotund incantatory manner.

The topsy-turvy being opened its eyes a trifle more, and again admonished him, uttering the word Zhothaquah with an indescribable abbreviation of vowels and thickening of consonants. Then it stood regarding him for awhile as if in doubt or cogitation. Finally it raised one of its ell-long arms from the ground and pointed along the shore, where the mouth of a low valley was discernible among the hills.

It said distinctly the enigmatic words: "*Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh*;" and then, while the sorcerer was pondering the significance of this unusual locution, it turned away from him and started to re-ascend the higher steps, toward a rather spacious cavern with columned opening, that he had not heretofore perceived. It had hardly passed from sight into the cavern, when Eibon was greeted by the high priest Morghi, who had readily followed him by his tracks in the ashen soil.

"Detestable sorcerer! Abominable heretic! I arrest you!" said Morghi with pontifical severity.

Eibon was surprised, not to say startled; but it re-assured him to see that Morghi was alone. He drew the sword of highly tempered bronze which he carried, and smiled.

"I should advise you to moderate your language, Morghi," he admonished. "Also, your idea of arresting me is slightly out of place now, since we are alone together in Cykranosh, and Mhu Thulan and the temple-cells of Yhoundeh are many million miles away."

Morghi did not appear to relish this information. He scowled and muttered:

"I suppose this is some more of your damnable wizardry."

Eibon chose to ignore the insinuation.

"I have been conversing with one of the gods of Cykranosh," he said magniloquently. "The god whose name is Hziulquoigmnzhah, has given me a mission to perform, a message to deliver, and has indicated the direction in which I should go. I suggest that you lay aside our little mundane disagreement, and accompany me. Of course we could slit each other's throats or eviscerate each other, since we are both armed. But under the circumstances I think you will see the puerility, not to mention the sheer inutility, of such a proceeding. If we both live we may be of mutual use and assistance, in a strange world whose problems and difficulties, if I mistake not, are worthy of our united powers."

Morghi frowned and pondered.

"Very well," he said grudgingly, "I consent. But I warn you that matters will have to take their course when we return to Mhu Thulan."

"That," rejoined Eibon, "is a contingency which need not trouble either of us. Shall we start?"

### III

The two Hyperboreans had been following a defile that wound away from the lake of fluid metal among hills whose vegetation thickened and grew more various as their height decreased. It was the valley that had been indicated to the sorcerer by the topsy-turvy biped. Morghi, a natural inquisitor in all senses, was plying Eibon with questions.

"Who, or what, was the singular entity that disappeared in a cavern just before I accosted you?"

"That was the god Hziulquoigmnzhah."

"And who, pray, is this god? I confess that I have never heard of him."

"He is the paternal uncle of Zhothaqquah."

Morghi was silent, except for a queer sound that might have been either an interrupted sneeze or an exclamation of disgust. But after awhile he asked:

"And what is this mission of yours?"

"That will be revealed in due time," answered Eibon with sententious dignity. "I am not allowed to discuss it at present. I have a message from the god which I must deliver only to the proper persons."

Morghi was unwillingly impressed.

"Well, I suppose you know what you are doing and where you are going. Can you give me any hints as to our destination?"

"That, too, will be revealed in due time."

The hills were lapsing gently to a well-wooded plain whose flora would have been the despair

earthly botanists. Beyond the last hill, Eibon and Morghi came to a narrow road that began abruptly and stretched away in the distance. Eibon took the road without hesitation. Indeed there was little else to do, for the thickets of mineral plants and trees were rapidly becoming impenetrable. They lined the way with serrate branches that were like sheaves of darts and daggers, of sword-blades and needles.

Eibon and Morghi soon noticed that the road was full of large footprints, all of them circular in form and rimmed about with the marks of protruding claws. However, they did not communicate their misgivings to each other.

After an hour or two of progression along the yielding ashy thoroughfare, amid the vegetation that was more horrent than ever with knives and caltrops, the travellers began to remember that they were hungry. Morghi, in his haste to arrest Eibon, had not breakfasted; and Eibon, in his natural hurry to evade Morghi, had committed a like omission. They halted by the wayside, and the sorcerer shared his parcel of food and wine with the priest. They ate and drank with frugality, however, since the supply was limited, and the landscape about them was not likely to prove a source of any viands that were suitable for human sustenance.

With strength and courage revived by this little refecton, they continued their journey. They had not gone far when they overtook a remarkable monster that was plainly the originator of the numerous footprints. It was squatting down with its armored haunches toward the travellers, filling the whole of the road for an indeterminable distance ahead. They could see that it was possessed of a myriad short legs, but they could form no idea of what its head and forequarters were like.

Eibon and Morghi were much dismayed.

“Is this another of your ‘gods’?” asked Morghi with attempted irony.

The sorcerer did not reply. But he realized that he had a reputation to sustain. He went boldly forward and cried out: “Hziulquoigmnzah” in the most resonant bellow that he could summon. At the same time he drew his sword and thrust it between two plates of the horny mail that covered the monster’s hindquarters.

Greatly to his relief, the animal began to move and resumed its progression along the road. The Hyperboreans followed it; and whenever the creature slackened its pace Eibon would repeat the formula which he had found so effective. Morghi was compelled to regard him with a certain awe.

They travelled on in this manner for several hours. The great luminous triple ring still over-arched the zenith, but a strangely small and chilly sun had now intersected the ring and was declining toward the west of Cykranosh. The forest along the way was still a high wall of sharp metallic foliage; but other roads and paths and byways were now branching off from the one that the monster followed.

All was very silent, except for the many-footed shuffling of this uncouth animal; and neither Eibon nor Morghi had spoken for miles. The high-priest was regretting more and more his rashness in pursuing Eibon through the panel; and Eibon was wishing that Zhothaquah had given him the entrance to a different sort of world. They were startled out of their meditations by a sudden clamor of deep and booming voices that rose from somewhere in advance of the monster. It was a veritable tintamar of unhuman guttural bellowings and croakings, with notes that were somehow suggestive of reproof and objurgation, like shrewish drums, as if the monster were being scolded by a group of unimaginable entities.

“Well?” queried Morghi.

“All that we are destined to behold will reveal itself at the proper time,” said Eibon.

The forest was thinning rapidly, and the clamor of termagant bellows was drawing closer. Still ensuing the hindquarters of their multipedal guide, which was crawling on with reluctant slowness, the travellers emerged in an open space, on a most singular tableau. The monster, which was plainly of a tame and harmless and stupid sort, was cowering before a knot of beings no larger than men, who were armed only with long-handled goads. These beings, though they were bipeds, and were not quite

unheard-of in their anatomic structure as the entity which Eibon had met by the lake, were nevertheless sufficiently unusual; for their head and bodies were apparently combined in one, and their ears, eyes, nostrils, mouths, and certain other organs of doubtful use were all arranged in somewhat unconventional grouping on their chests and abdomens. They were wholly naked, and were rather dark in color, with no trace of hair on any of their parts or members. Behind them at a little distance were many edifices of a kind which hardly conformed to human ideas of architectural symmetry.

Eibon strode valorously forward, with Morghi following discreetly. The torso-headed beings ceased their objurgation of the fawning monster and peered at the earth-men with expressions that were difficult to read on account of the odd and baffling relationship of their features.

“Hziulquoigmnzah! Zhothaquah!” said Eibon with oracular solemnity and sonority. Then, after a pause of hieratic length: “*Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh!*”

The result was indeed gratifying, and was all that could be expected even from a formula so remarkable; for the Cykranoshian beings dropped their goads and bowed before the sorcerer till the featured bosoms almost touched the ground.

“I have performed the mission, I have delivered the message given me by Hziulquoigmnzah,” said Eibon to Morghi.

#### IV

For several Cykranoshian months the two Hyperboreans were the honored guests of this quaint and worthy and virtuous people, who called themselves the Bhlemphroims. Eibon had a real gift for languages and made progress in the local tongue far more readily than Morghi. His knowledge of the customs, manners, ideas, and beliefs of the Bhlemphroims soon became extensive; but he found it a source of disillusionment as well as of illumination.

The armored monster that he and Morghi had driven before them so valiantly was, he learned, a domestic beast of burden that had strayed away from its owners amid the mineral vegetation of the desert lands adjoining Vhlorrh, the chief town of the Bhlemphroims. The genuflections with which Eibon and Morghi had been greeted were only an expression of gratitude for the safe return of the beast; and were not, as Eibon had thought, an acknowledgment of the divine names he had quoted and the fearsome phrase, “*Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh.*” The being that Eibon had met by the lake was indeed the god Hziulquoigmnzah; and there were dim traditions of Zhothaquah in certain early myths of the Bhlemphroims. But this people, it seemed, were most regrettably materialistic and had long ceased to offer sacrifice and prayer to the gods; though they spoke of them with a sort of distant respect and with no actual blasphemy. Eibon learned that the words “*Iqhui dlosh odhqlonqh*” doubtless belonged to a private language of the gods, which the Bhlemphroims no longer understood; but which, however, was still studied by a neighboring people, the Ydheems, who maintained the ancient formal worship of Hziulquoigmnzah and various related deities.

The Bhlemphroims were indeed a practical race, and had few if any interests beyond the cultivation of a great variety of edible fungi, the breeding of large centipedal animals, and the propagation of their own species. The latter process, as revealed to Eibon and Morghi, was somewhat unusual: though the Bhlemphroims were bisexual, only one female in a generation was chosen for reproductive duties, and this female, after growing to mammoth size on food prepared from a special fungus, became the mother of an entire new generation.

When they had been well-initiated into the life and customs of Vhlorrh, the Hyperboreans were privileged to see the future national mother, called the Djhenquomh, who had now attained the requisite proportions after years of scientific nourishment. She lived in an edifice that was necessarily



larger than any of the other buildings in Vhlorrh; and her sole activity was the consumption of immense quantities of food. The sorcerer and the inquisitor were impressed, even if not captivated, by the mountainous amplitude of her charms and by their highly novel arrangement. They were told that the male parent (or parents) of the forthcoming generation had not yet been selected.

The possession of separate heads by the Hyperboreans seemed to lend them a remarkable biological interest in the eyes of their hosts. The Bhlemphroims, it was learned, had not always been headless but had reached their present physical conformation through a slow process of evolution, in which the head of the archetypal Bhlemphroim had been merged by imperceptible degrees with the torso. But unlike most peoples, they did not regard their current stage of development with unqualified complacency. Indeed, their headlessness was a source of national regret; they deplored the retrenchment of nature in this regard; and the arrival of Eibon and Morghi, who were looked upon as ideal exemplars of cephalic evolution, had served to quicken their eugenic sorrow.

The sorcerer and the inquisitor, on their part, found life rather dull among the Bhlemphroims after the initial quaintness and feeling of exoticism had worn off. The diet was tiresome for one thing—an endless succession of raw and boiled and roasted mushrooms, varied only by the coarse and flabby meat of tame monsters. And this people, though they were always polite and respectful, did not seem to be greatly awed by the exhibitions of Hyperborean magic with which Eibon and Morghi favored them; and their lamentable want of religious ardor made all evangelistic endeavor a thankless task. And, being fundamentally unimaginative, they were not even duly impressed by the fact that their visitors had come from a remote ultra-Cykranshian world.

“I feel,” said Eibon to Morghi one day, “that the god was sadly mistaken in deigning to send the people a message of any sort.”

It was very soon after this that a large committee of the Blemphroims waited upon Eibon and Morghi and informed them that after long consideration they had been selected as the fathers of the next generation and were to be married forthwith to the tribal mother in the hope that a well-headed race of Bhlemphroims would result from the union.

Eibon and Morghi were quite overcome by the proposed eugenic honor. Thinking of the mountainous female they had seen, Morghi was prone to remember his sacerdotal vows of celibacy and Eibon was eager to take similar vows upon himself without delay. The inquisitor, indeed, was so overwhelmed as to be rendered almost speechless; but, with rare presence of mind, the sorcerer temporized by making a few queries as to the legal and social status which would be enjoyed by Morghi and himself as the husbands of the Djhenquomh. And the naive Blemphroims told him that this would be a matter of brief concern; that after completing their marital duties the husbands were always served to the national mother in the form of ragouts and other culinary preparations.

The Hyperboreans tried to conceal from their hosts the reluctance with which they both regarded the coming honor in all its stages. Being as usual a master of diplomatics, Eibon went so far as to make formal acceptance on behalf of himself and his companion. But when the delegation of Bhlemphroims had departed he said to Morghi:

“I am more than ever convinced that the god was mistaken. We must leave the city of Vhlorrh with all feasible dispatch, and continue our journey till we find a people who are worthier to receive his communication.”

It did not seem to have occurred to the simple and patriotic Bhlemphroims that the fathering of their next national litter was a privilege that anyone would dream of rejecting. Eibon and Morghi were subjected to no manner of duress or constraint, and their movements were not even watched. It was an easy matter to leave the house in which they had been domiciled, when the rumbling diaphragm snores of their hosts were ascending to the great rings of Cykranshian moons, and follow the highway that led from Vhlorrh toward the country of the Ydheems.

The road before them was well-marked; and the ring-light was almost as clear and brilliant as full day. They travelled a long distance through the diversified and always unique scenery which it served to illumine, before the rising of the sun and the consequent discovery of their departure by the Bhlemphroims. These single-minded bipeds, it is likely, were too sorely perplexed and dumbfounded by the loss of the guests whom they had chosen as future progenitors to even think of following them.

The land of the Ydheems (as indicated on an earlier occasion by the Bhlemphroims) was many leagues away; and tracts of ashen deserts, of mineral cacti, of fungoid forests and high mountains intervened. The boundary of the Bhlemphroims—marked by a crude sculpturesque representation of the tribal mother beside the way—was passed by the travellers before dawn. And during the following day they journeyed among more than one of those unusual races who diversify so widely the population of Saturn. They saw the Djhibbis, that apterous and Stylitean bird-people, who roost on their individual dolomites for years at a time and meditate upon the cosmos, uttering to each other at long intervals the mystic syllables *yop*, *yeep*, and *yoop*, which are said to express an unfathomed range of esoteric thought. And they met those flibbertigibbet pygmies, the Ephiqhs, who hollow out their homes in the trunks of certain large fungi, and are always having to hunt new habitations because the old ones crumble into powder in a few days. And they heard the underground croaking of the mysterious people, the Ghlonghs, who dread not only the sunlight but also the ring-light, and who have never yet been seen by any of the surface-dwellers.

By sunset, however, Eibon and Morghi had crossed the domains of all the afore-mentioned, and had even clomb the lower scarps of those mountains which still divided them from the land of Ydheems. Here, on a sheltered ledge, their weariness impelled them to halt; and since they had now ceased to dread pursuit from the Blemphroims, they wrapped themselves more tightly in their mantles against the cold, after a meager supper of raw mushrooms, and fell asleep.

Their slumber was disturbed by a series of cacodemoniactal dreams in which they both thought they had been recaptured by the Bhlemphroims and were forced to espouse the Djhenquomh. They awoke shortly before dawn, from visions whose details were excruciatingly vivid, and were more than ready to resume their ascent of the mountains.

The slopes and cliffs above them were desolate enough to have deterred any travellers of inferior hardihood or less cogent fears. The tall woods of fungi dwindled ere long to alpine size; they lessened to forms that were no bigger than lichens; and after these, there was nothing but black and naked stone. The wiry and slender Eibon suffered no great inconvenience from the climb; but Morghi, with his sacerdotal girth and bulk, was soon winded. Whenever he paused to recover his breath, Eibon would say to him: "Think of the national mother," and Morghi would climb the next acclivity like an agile but somewhat asthmatic mountain-sheep.

They came at noon to a pinnacle-guarded pass from which they could look down on the country of the Ydheems. They saw that it was a broad and fertile realm, with woods of mammoth mushrooms and other thallophytes that excelled in size and number those of any other region they had yet traversed. Even the mountain-slopes were more fruitful on this side, for Eibon and Morghi had not descended far when they entered a grove of enormous puff-balls and toadstools.

They were admiring the magnitude and variety of these growths, when they heard a thunderous noise on the mountains above them. The noise drew nearer, gathering to itself the roar of new thunders. Eibon would have prayed to Zhothaquah, and Morghi would have supplicated the goddess Yhoundeh, but unfortunately there was no time. They were caught in a mighty mass of rolling puff-balls and toppling toad-stools overthrown by the huge avalanche that had started on the heights above, and, borne with increasing momentum, with vertiginous speed and tumult amid an ever-growing heap of shattered fungi, they finished their descent of the mountain in less than a minute.

Endeavoring to extricate themselves from the pile of thallophytic debris in which they were buried, Eibon and Morghi noticed that there still seemed to be a good deal of noise, even though the avalanche had stopped. Also, there were other movements and heavings than their own in the pile. When they had managed to get their necks and shoulders clear, they discovered that the commotion was being made by certain people who differed from their late hosts, the Bhlemphroims, in that they possessed rudimentary heads. These people were some of the Ydheems, on one of whose towns the avalanche had descended. Roofs and towers were emerging from the mass of boulders and puff-balls; and just in front of the Hyperboreans there was a large temple-like edifice from whose blocked-up door a multitude of the Ydheems had now tunneled their way. At sight of Eibon and Morghi they suspended their labors; and the sorcerer, who had freed himself and had made sure that all his bones and members were intact, now took the opportunity to address them.

“Harken! I have come to bring you a message from the god Hziulquoigmnzah. I have borne it faithfully on ways beset with many hazards and perils. In the god’s own divine language, it runs thus: *‘Iqhui dlosh odhqfonqh.’*”

Since he spoke in the dialect of the Bhlemphroims, which differed somewhat from their own, it is doubtful if the Ydheems altogether understood the first part of his utterance. But Hziulquoigmnzah was their tutelary deity; and they knew the language of the gods. At the words: *“Iqhui dlosh odhqfonqh,”* there was a most remarkable resumption and increase of activity, a ceaseless running and fro on the part of the Ydheems, a shouting of guttural orders, and a recrudescence of new heads and limbs from the avalanche. Those who had issued from the temple re-entered it, and came out once more carrying a huge image of Hziulquoigmnzah, some smaller eikons of lesser though allied deities, and a very ancient-looking idol which both Eibon and Morghi recognized as having a resemblance to Zhothaquah. Others of the Ydheems brought their household goods and furniture forth from the dwellings; and, signing the Hyperboreans to accompany them, the whole population began to evacuate the town.

Eibon and Morghi were much mystified. And it was not until a new town had been built on the fungus-wooded plain at the distance of a full day’s march, and they themselves had been installed among the priests of the new temple, that they learned the reason of it all and the meaning of: *“Iqhui dlosh odhqfonqh.”* These words meant merely: “Be on your way,” and the god had addressed them to Eibon as a dismissal. But the coincidental coming of the avalanche and of Eibon and Morghi with their purported message from the god, had been taken by the Ydheems as a divine injunction to remove them from their present location. Thus the wholesale exodus of people with their idols and domestic belongings.

The new town was called Ghloiph, after the one that the avalanche had buried. Here, for the remainder of their days, Eibon and Morghi were held in much honor; and their coming with their message, *“Iqhui dlosh odhqfonqh,”* was deemed a fortunate thing, since there were no more avalanches to threaten the security of Ghloiph in its new situation remote from the mountains.

The Hyperboreans shared the increment of civic affluence and well-being resultant from their security. There was no national mother among the Ydheems, who propagated themselves in a far more general manner than the Bhlemphroims, so existence was quite safe and tranquil. Eibon, at least, was really in his element; for the news which he brought of Zhothaquah, who was still worshipped in the region of Cykranosh, had enabled him to set up as a sort of minor prophet, even apart from the renown which he enjoyed as the bearer of the divine message.

Morghi, perchance, was not entirely happy: though the Ydheems were religious, they did not carry their devotional fervor to the point of bigotry or intolerance; so it was quite impossible to start a

inquisition among them. But still there were compensations: the fungus-wine of the Ydheems was potent though evil-tasting; and there were females of a sort, if one were not too squeamish. So Morg and Eibon both settled down to an ecclesiastic regimen which, after all, was not so radically different from that of Mhu Thulan or any other place.

Such were the various adventures, and such was the final lot of this redoubtable pair in Cykranos. But in Eibon's tower of black gneiss on that headland of the northern sea in Mhu Thulan, the underlings of Morghi waited for days, neither daring to follow the high-priest through the magic pan nor daring to leave in despite of his orders. At length they were recalled by a special dispensation from the hierophant who had been chosen as Morghi's temporary successor. But the result of the whole affair was highly regrettable from the standpoint of the hierarchy of Yhoundeh. It was universally believed that Eibon had not only escaped by virtue of the powerful magic he had learned from Zhothaquah, but had made away with Morghi into the bargain. As a consequence of this belief the faith of Yhoundeh declined, and there was a wide-spread revival of the dark worship of Zhothaquah throughout Mhu Thulan in the last centuries before the onset of the great Ice Age.

## I

As he studied the slowly changing configuration of the stars in the huge reflectors of his ether-ship the *Alcyone*, Captain Volmar was now seized by a memory of his younger years, when he had been first officer of a trans-Atlantic liner. He recalled the broken mists and unclouded icy sapphire nights when he had watched the pole-star from the vessel's bridge. For now, amid the scattered flecks of light that formed the rearranged and scarce identifiable constellations, a single flaming point had begun to emerge beyond the rest and was taking on the proportions of a remote sun; and this point, he knew from his astronomical chart, was Polaris.

His thin face, sharpened by the fires and rigors of well-nigh sacerdotal consecration to an ideal, was lit as with a reflection of the approaching orb. He watched it with the thrill of a mystic devotee as well as the eager curiosity of a scientist; and felt a renewal of all his pristine ardors, together with an actual sense of consummation. The terrestrial nights which he remembered so vividly, here in the everlasting night of space, had been marked by the inception of that unearthly vaulting ambition which had led years later to his first intersidereal voyage and then to his present project of circumnavigating the known universe. In those earlier times he had looked to Polaris as a far-off, unattainable goal; it had been the symbol of his dreams, the lodestar of his aspirations; and now he was nearing it, after more than a decade of cosmic voyaging among the illimitable systems.

To Jasper, the first mate of the *Alcyone*, to Roverton the second mate, to the five members of the crew, Polaris was only one of a myriad array of suns; and they regarded it with no more than the quotidian interest accorded to the others. Jasper was guiding the controls of the *Alcyone*; and without express comment he turned to Volmar and asked for instructions:

"We shall pass Polaris in about four hours, sir. Shall we keep the straight course, to the left?"

"No—steer to the right. I want to take a look at Polaris. Also, there may be a planetary system; and if so, I'm curious to see it." The dry, formal voice betrayed no evidence of Volmar's internal eagerness.

"Yes, sir." Nothing more was said, as Jasper turned the heavy steering-rod of neo-manganese steel and the vessel responded with inconceivable lightness, leaping through tremendous gulfs in the mere changing of its course, at more than the speed of any cosmical vibration.

Burning with preternatural whiteness in the black ether, Polaris broadened hour by hour to a huge incandescent disk. Soon the flames of its corona were visible, soaring in the face of the measureless night; and, falling through the crystalline ports of the ether-ship, its rays mingled weirdly with the violet-tinged illumination of the electric bulbs, and cast their supermundane gleams on the pale faces of Volmar and his crew.

Volmar, peering ahead with aquiline keenness, was the first to see the planets. Three of them were now discernible, one quite close to Polaris, at a distance comparable to that of Mercury from our sun, and the others travelling in more remote and widely divergent orbits. The inner world was very small, and the voyagers soon saw that it could be no more than a desert of torrid stone, of continental sands, and gauntly rising mountains, with no trace of water or vegetation anywhere. The second world, as the *Alcyone* neared it, was found to differ little from the first; and Volmar and his men gave it merely a casual inspection, for all their interest was now centered on the third and outmost world, in i

aphelion on the farther side of Polaris.

This world, even as seen from afar, was plainly remarkable. It glowed with a deep red that was both sullen and fulgorant, in opposition to the livid grey of the other two; and since it revolved in a far ulterior orbit, at a distance where the reflected light of Polaris should be proportionately feeble, the brilliance of its ruddy luster was mysterious and difficult to explain.

Volmar and his crew watched it in a fascinated silence, as the ether-ship drove on and the strange planet became an ever-swelling globe. Its mystery grew with its apparent bulk, for there were no geographical or geological markings, no indications of seas or sea-beds, of mountains or hills, valleys or elevations or depressions of any kind. It was an unbroken expanse of glowing red that dazzled the eyes and left an after-image of changing colors. It was somehow suggestive of heated metal, and also gave the impression of an artificial rather than a natural body.

The space-voyagers had approached many planets in their journeying; they had even landed on many number; and they knew the limitless variations of planetary development. They had found worlds that were shrouded with mist or snow, with clouds or ice, or were belted with auroral flames or seas of burning bitumen. They had found ocean-covered worlds where gigantic algae towered like forests above incalculable leagues of water; they had seen others that were riven from pole to pole with typhonian fissures and chasms, where etiolated fungi large as hillocks grew in the sunless river-bottoms; they had seen still others that were lob-sided with their burden of colossal mountains. But they had never before encountered a world that in any way resembled this.

“What do you make of it, Captain?” queried Jasper.

“I don’t know.” Volmar’s slow, deliberate voice was frankly puzzled. “Fly nearer—as near as you can.”

The *Alcyone* dipped in a long spiral descent toward the monotonous ball that was now directly beneath. Soon it hung above the gleaming surface at an elevation of less than a mile. The red world was larger than Mars, though it lacked the dimensions of the Earth or Venus. But as far as the eyes could see its horizons were perfectly smooth and level, and its plains were like a sheet of some luminous and deeply tinted copperish metal. The eyes of Volmar and his men were almost blinded with its glare. However, their approach to the weird orb had not occasioned any rise in the temperature of the space-vessel’s interior; so evidently the first impression of glowing heat was erroneous.

“Still nearer—but be careful. We don’t know what it is, or what properties it may possess.”

The *Alcyone* descended until it almost skimmed the ruddy plain. Now it could be seen that the surface was apparently made of innumerable tiny darting sparks and coruscations, interweaving like a dance of fiery atoms at a speed which the eye could hardly follow.

“It must be some new form of matter,” suggested Roverton. “It looks like a million quintrillions of red-hot filings chasing each other in a field of magnetic force.”

“Perhaps.” Volmar was studying the strange surface intently; and it seemed to him that directly below the vessel the gyrations of the dazzling particles were becoming slower, and that many of them disappeared and did not return to visibility. Then, with incredible suddenness, a deep and yawning pit revealed itself below the *Alcyone*, forming a circular shaft in the unknown substance. At the same time the ether-ship pitched violently downward, though Jasper had not moved the clutch that should have held it perfectly level and motionless in space. It sank dizzily into the shaft, as if all the gears and engines and levitative mechanisms had become utterly powerless. Jasper switched on the full force of the electromagnetic turbines, and sought to reverse the descent, but all in vain. The vessel shook and trembled as though it were fighting some irresistible power that drew it nadir-ward; but it continued to fall at an undiminished rate between the red walls of the shaft. A second more, and it plunged into a vast open space, where a world of glaring light, of kaleidoscopically various forms and colors, leaped up to meet it like a reeling and ever-broadening mosaic.

The transition from the outer sky to this internal gulf beneath the glowing red surface had occupied merely a few moments; and only men of supreme nervous alertness and presence of mind could have adjusted themselves in any degree to a situation so extraordinary. Jasper still strove to arrest the *Alcyone's* descent, while the others watched with a swift cognizance of all apparent detail the world toward which they were falling with headlong velocity. Then, turning from it to gaze upward, they saw that the unknown fiery substance was arched above them from horizon to horizon like the cope of some unnatural metallic heaven. The sudden shaft that had formed to admit them was no longer visible; and the vault presented an unbroken expanse, pouring down a blinding, fulgurating lustre though no sun was now discernible.

The vessel was helpless in the grip of the mysterious ultragravitational force that still dragged it downward. The roar of the fulminating engines, the response of the tightened brakes and the drawn levers, all served to attest that the machinery was in perfect order, and was struggling against a power such as never before had been encountered. Volmar and his crew resigned themselves to the seeming inevitable crash; and all the events of their intersidereal voyage were marshalled before them in a crowded flash that was virtually simultaneous with the thought-image of its disastrous end.

However, they were still able to note with astronomic interest the unknown world that surged toward them in geometric mazes of widening forms and spreading zones of color. There were belts that suggested water, there were others that gave the impression of a many-tinted vegetation, and still others denotive of a mineraloid character, like immense plots of ground with pavements of silver and cinnabar and lapis lazuli. And at intervals of many leagues on the great plain, colossal architectural piles upreared themselves to the zenith; and each separate edifice was vaster far than any terrene city.

The ether-ship was falling directly upon one of these piles, whose level diamond-shaped roof was outstretched below in multiform and labyrinthine patterns of a hundred hues, like parterres and flower-beds. The headlong descent began to slacken gently at an elevation of three or four miles, the vessel drifted down with a buoyant ease, it landed and was brought to rest as skillfully and adroitly as if Jasper himself had guided it.

Volmar and his men peered through the ports on a scene that was no less unbelievable than the indescribable. They had come down on a vacant space at the center of the diamond roof, which reached away for a half-mile in every direction, and was seemingly made of some mineral substance unknown to terrene geology—a highly metallic stone with striations of black and yellow and bluish green. The roof was laid out like a garden with concentric rows of bizarre plants, all of which were either set in basins of fretted stone or were standing rootlessly on the bare pavement; and was crowded with living and moving creatures no less bizarre than the plants, who began immediately to collect around the *Alcyone*.

Volmar was almost startled out of his habitual ascetic reserve as he studied these beings; and the others exclaimed with frank amazement. The beings resembled a multitude of forms and types; and all of them were either clothed in shards of metal or else possessed bodies that were radically different in their biological composition from any that the vessel's crew had ever seen. They glittered and shone in the glaring light with a myriad hues and lusters redoubled by the intricate irregular facets in which their surfaces were divided. The commonest type among them was perhaps five feet tall, with a perfectly spherical head which was joined without a neck to a triangular body that radiated on each side, from a common center, four limbs that evidently served as both arms and legs since all of them were used alternately or simultaneously in locomotion and also in prehension. This type had a single cyclopean eye like a burning ruby in the middle of its silver face; and above the rounded dome of its

head there were several glossy black antennae with vermicular segments, all terminating in tinny concave disks; and a short proboscis ending in a double mouth issued from the jointure of head and shoulders. There were other types, and certain unique individuals, varying monstrously in size and shape, and in the number or arrangement of their limbs and sense organs. But all of them gave the impression of artificial shells, of masks and armors, as if the entities that actuated them were unknowably domiciled within.

“Talk about robots!” cried Roverton. “Did you ever see anything like them? Look at those copper joints that are as flexible as the joints of an acrobat. Look at those fingers or toes with seven flanges that can bend in any direction.”

Two-score of the multifarious entities had grouped themselves around the vessel and were examining it with their single or manifold eyes. Behind the fixed inhuman expression of their metallic masks, in the movements of their cunningly constructed limbs, the curiosity of an incomprehensible alien people somehow made itself felt. And the orchestral chattering of their voices, with notes that were resonant as drums, or shrill as clarions, or sweet as lute-strings, could be heard through the sound-valves of the *Alcyone*. They came nearer and touched the sides of the vessel as if to determine the material of which it was made; and some of them climbed the ladder to the man-hole and inspected it closely. After a little these latter descended and seemed to be holding a serious debate with the others, as if to decide a moot point or a course of action, while all of them continued to watch the *Alcyone*.

Now the crowd drew back and a number departed, to return in a few minutes bearing among them an instrument whose use defied conjecture. It was a large tripod of some antimony-type substance supporting a revolving globe of the same material, from which issued a long, slender tube with a flaring mouth. The tube was levelled at the vessel's man-hole; and when a lever at the side of the tripod was pressed, a thin stream of ghostly yellow light emerged from the mouth and played upon the neo-vitriolene of the man-hole's lid. Then, as if in response to the electrical mechanism by which it was operated, the lid unscrewed; and likewise the inner door of the ether-ship, giving on the compartment where Volmar and his crew were gathered, flew open to the same mysterious agency.

### III

An atmosphere of humid warmth, laden as with hot-house odors of an ultra-tropical flora, flooded the vessel's interior. Obviously there were strange elements, non-terrestrial gases in this air, for Volmar and his men began immediately to gasp for breath, and to experience a peculiar giddiness and lightheadedness. Volmar pressed the button which should have closed the outer and inner doors; but the mechanism refused to work, as if the batteries had gone dead or their force had somehow been nullified or paralyzed.

“Quick! The respirative masks and air-tanks!” cried Volmar with a voice that fought the asphyxiating elements. These masks, covering the entire head and connected by a tube with a tank that was strapped to the shoulders, had been carried along for use in landing on alien worlds where the atmosphere might prove unfit for human respiration.

The apparatus was quickly donned, and none too soon; for one of the men fainted, and the others had to fasten his mask. All of them felt an instantaneous relief from the symptoms of vertigo and difficult breathing.

The act of putting on the masks had no sooner been completed, when a number of the weird, multiform entities invaded the vessel one by one and surrounded Volmar and his crew. They gibbered among themselves with their instrument-like voices, they eyed the men with the unchanging glare of their single or triple or quadruple eyes, which offered the appearance of many-angled and divers



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