

SCARLET DREAM

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

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

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

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

"How much for the scarf?"

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

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

"Ten."

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

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

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

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

The man shrugged.

"Who knows? It came in with a bale of scrap cloth from

New York. I was a little curious about it myself, and called the market-master there to trace it. He says it was sold for scrap by a down-and-out Venusian who claimed he'd found it in a derelict ship floating around one of the asteroids. He didn't know what nationality the ship had been—a very early model, he said, probably one of the first space-ships, made before the identification symbols were adopted. I've

wondered why he sold the thing for scrap. He could have got double the price, anyhow, if he'd made any effort."

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

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

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

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

in under the steel portals of the great door, rubbed shoulders with smugglers and pirates and fugitives and sinners of all the sins that keep the spaceways thronged.

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

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

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

That threading scarlet was a labyrinthine path down which he stumbled blindly, and at every turn he looked back and saw himself in myriad replicas, always wandering lost and alone through the pattern of the path. Sometimes it shook itself under his feet; and whenever he thought he saw the end it would writhe into fresh intricacies.-. .

The sky was a great shawl threaded with scarlet lightning that shivered and squirmed as he watched, then wound itself into the familiar, dizzy pattern that became one mighty Word

in a nameless writing, whose meaning he shuddered on the verge of understanding, and woke in icy terror

just before the significance of it broke upon his brain.

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

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

mist. -

And now, suddenly, he was aware of a stirring in the dimness, and a girl came flying down the stairs in headlong, stumbling terror. He could see the shadow of it on her face, and her long, bright-colored hair streamed out behind her, and from head to foot she was dabbled with blood. In her blind flight she must not have seen him, for she came plunging downward three steps at a time and blundered full into him as he stood undecided, watching. The impact all but unbalanced him, but his arms closed instinctively about her and for a moment she hung in his embrace, utterly spent, gasping against his broad leather breast and too breathless even to wonder who had stopped her. The smell of fresh blood rose to his nostrils from her dreadfully spattered garments.

Finally she lifted her head and raised a flushed, creamybrown face to him, gulping in air through lips the color of

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

“Oh!” she gasped. “It—it has her! Let me go! . . . Let me—”

Smith shook her gently.

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

She shook her head wildly.

“No—no—let me go! I must—not my blood— hers

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

He must have climbed for all of five minutes before the twilight thinned a little and he saw that the stairs ended at the head of a long hallway; high-arched like a cathedral aisle. A row of low doors ran down one side of the hall, and he turned aside at random into the nearest. It gave upon a gallery whose arches opened into blue space. A low bench ran along the wall under the gallery windows, and he crossed it,

gently setting down the sobbing girl and supporting her against his shoulder.

“My sister,” she wept. “It has her—oh, my sister!”

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

She jerked her head up at that, startled out of her sobs for a moment, and—stared at him with sherry-brown eyes drowned in tears. Her lashes clung together in wet, starry points. She

stared with searching eyes, taking in the leather-brownness of him, his spaceman’s suit, his scared dark face and eyes paler than steel. And then a look of infinite pity softened the strangeness of her face, and she said gently.

“Oh. . . you come from—from—you still believe that you dream!”

“I know I’m dreaming,” persisted Smith childishly. “I’m lying asleep in Lakkarol and dreaming of you, and all this, and when I wake—”

She shook her head sadly.

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

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

could not be mistaken. . . . —

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

you?” -

“The shawl,” Smith murmured. “The shawl . . . of course. That damnable red pattern, dizzy—”

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

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

“A red pattern,” he said slowly, “a thread of bright scarlet woven into a blue shawl—nightmare pattern—painted on the gate I came by. . . . but it’s only ~a dream, of

course. In a few minutes I’ll wake. . . .” She clutched his knee excitedly.

“Can you remember?” she demanded. “The pattern—.the red pattern? The Word?”

“Word?” he wondered stupidly. “Word—in the sky?”

No—no, I don't want to remember—crazy pattern, you know. Can't forget it—but no, I couldn't tell you what it was, or trace it for you. I never was anything like it—thank God. It was on that shawl. . .

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

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

“Tell me what happened.” Smith woke from his daze at the sound of her sob. “Can't I help? Please let me try—tell

me about it.” - -

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

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

She caught the gesture and smiled a little scornfully

through her tears. , -

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

“But what is it? What does it look like? Is it near?”

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

- “Where did it come from? What is it?” -

“No one knows—it has always been here—always will be

too nebulous to die or be killed—a Thing out of some

alien place we couldn't understand, ‘I suppose—somewhere so long ago, or in some such unthinkable dimension that we will never have any knowledge of its origin. But as I say, we try not to think.’ -

“If it eats flesh,” said Smith stubbornly, “it must be vulnerable—and I have my gun.”

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

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

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

“Of course. I’m sorry, my dear. I’ll do what I can for you—until! wake.” He grinned at the fantastic sound of this.

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

He rose and held out his hand.

“Let’s go, then,” he said. “Maybe you’re right, but— well, come on.”

She took his hand and jumped up. The orange hair, too fantastically colored for anything outside a dream, swung about her brilliantly. He saw now that she wore a single white garment, brief and belted, over the creamy brownness of her body. It was torn now, and hideously stained. She made a picture of strange and vivid loveliness, all white and gold and bloody, in the misted twilight of the gallery.

“Where are we going?” she asked Smith. “Out there?” And he nodded toward the blueness beyond the windows.

— She drew her shoulders together in a little shudder of distaste. “Oh, no,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Listen.” She took him by the hand and lifted a serious

face to his. “If you must stay here—and you must, for there

is only one way out save death, and that is a worse way even than dying—you must learn to ask no questions about the— the Temple. This is the Temple. Here it dwells. Here we— feed.

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

She took his hand, smiling a little.

“Come with me, now.” - -~

And in silence they left the gallery opening on space and went down the hall where the blue mist floated so beautifully with its clouds of violet and green confusing, the eye, and a great stillness. all about.

The hallways led straight, as nearly as he could see, for the floating clouds veiled it, toward the great portals of the Temple. In the form of a mighty triple arch it opened out of the clouded twilight upon a shining day like no day he had ever seen, on any planet. The light came from no visible source, and there was a lucid quality about it, nebulous but

unmistakable, as if one were looking through the depths of a crystal, or through clear water that trembled a little now and then. It was diffused through the translucent day from a sky as shining and unfamiliar as everything else in this amazing dreamland.

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

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

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

"Yes, of course," she said indifferently. -

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

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

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

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

"I live here," she said.

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

"Doesn't it ever get cold?" he asked. "Where do you eat?"

"Where are your books and food- and clothes?"

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

"But what do you do?"

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

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

“When one knows,” she said, “that the next moment may be one’s last, life is savored to the full. One stretches the hours out as long as possible. No, for us it is not tire— some.” -

“But have you no cities? Where are the other people?”

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

She took his hand and led him across the clinging grass to the sandy brink of the water, and they sank in silence on the narrow beach. Smith looked out over the lake where vague colors misted the blue, trying not to think of the fantastic things that were happening to him. Indeed, it was hard to do

‘much thinking, here, in the midst of the blueness and the silence, the very air dreamy about them . . . the cloudy water lapping the shore with tiny, soft sounds like the breathing of a sleeper. The place was heavy with the stillness and the dreamy colors, and Smith was never sure, afterward, whether in his dream he did not sleep for a while; for presently he heard a stir at his side and the girl reseated herself, clad in a fresh tunic, all the blood washed away. He could not remember her having left, but it did not trouble him.

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

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

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

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

- II

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

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

“I’m hungry,” he said. “When and what do we eat?”

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

“Hungry?”

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

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

“Very well,” she said.

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

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

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

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

She did not meet his eyes as she answered, in that troubled

voice, “Worse than dying, I said. A way out we do not speak of here.

“But if there’s any way at all, I must know of it,” he persisted. “Tell me.” -

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

“I must know,” said Smith relentlessly. -

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

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

“Why?”

“It is death to pronounce the Word. (Literally). I do not know it now, could not speak it if I would. But in the Temple there is one room where the Word is graven in scarlet on the wall, and its power is so great that the echoes of it ring for ever round and round that room. If one stands before the graven symbol and lets the force of it beat upon his brain he will hear, and know—and shriek the awful syllables aloud—and so die. It is a word from some tongue so alien to all our being that the spoken sound of it, echoing in the throat of a living man, is disruptive enough to rip the very fibers of the human body apart—to blast its atoms asunder, to destroy body and mind as utterly. as if they had never been. And because the sound is so disruptive it somehow blasts open for an instant the door between your world and mine. But the danger is dreadful, for it may open the door to other worlds too, and let things through more terrible than we can dream of. Some say it was thus that the Thing gained access to our land eons ago. And if you are not standing exactly where the door opens, on the one spot in the room that is protected, as the center of a whirlwind is quiet, and if you do not pass instantly out of the sound of the Word, it will blast you asunder as it does the one who has pronounced it for you. So you see how impos—” Here she broke off with a little scream,

and glanced down in half-laughing annoyance, then took two or three little running steps and turned.

“The grass,” she explained ruefully, pointing to her feet. The brown bareness of them was dotted with

scores of tiny blood-spots. “If one stands too long in one place, barefoot, it will pierce the skin and driiik”--stupid of me to forget. But come.”

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

ahead. . -

The Temple stood tall before them, a building of some

nameless material as mistily blue as far-off mountains on the Earth. The mistiness did not condense or clarify as they approached, and the outlines of the place were mysteriously hard to fix in mind—he could never understand, afterward, just why. When he tried too hard to concentrate on one

particular corner or tower or window it blurred before his eyes as if the focus were at fault—as if the whole strange, veiled building stood just on the borderland of another dimension.

From the immense, triple arch of the doorway, as they approached—a triple arch like nothing he had ever seen before, so irritatingly hard to focus upon that he could not be sure just wherein its difference lay—a pale blue mist issued smokily: And when they stopped within they walked into that twilight dimness he was coming to know so well.

The great hall lay straight and veiled before them, but after a few steps the girl drew him aside and under another archway, into a long gallery through whose drifting haze he could see rows of men and women kneeling against the wall with bowed heads, as if in prayer. She led him down the line to the

end, and he saw then that they knelt before small spigots

curving up from the wall at regular intervals. She dropped to

her knees before one and, motioning him to follow, bent her head and laid her lips to the up-curved spout. Dubiously he followed her example.

Instantly with the touch of his mouth on the nameless

substance of the spigot something hot and, strangely, at once salty and sweet flowed into his mouth. There was an acidity about it that gave a curious tang, and the more he drank the more avid he became. Hauntingly delicious it was, and,

warmth flowed through him more strongly with every draft.

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

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

finger on her reddened lips. -

He followed her in silence past the kneeling lines again. When they reached the ball outside he swung upon her and gripped her shoulders angrily.

“What was ‘that?’” he ‘demanded.

Her eyes slid away. She shrugged.

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

A moment longer he stared angrily down into her evasive, strangely lovely face. Then he turned without a word and strode down the hallway through the drifting mists toward the

door. He heard her bare feet pattering along behind hurriedly, but he did not look back. Not until he had come out into the glowing day and half crossed the grasslands did he relent, enough to glance around. She paced at his heels with bowed

head, the orange hair swinging about her face and unhappiness eloquent in every motion. The submission of her

touched him suddenly, and he paused for her to catch up, smiling down half reluctantly on the bent orange head.

She lifted a tragic face to his, and there were tears in the

sherry eyes. So he had no choice but to laugh and lift her up

against his leather-clad breast and kiss the drooping mouth into smiles again. But he understood, now—the faintly acrid bitterness of her kisses.

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

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

“No,” she said. “Nothing but the grass grows here. No’

living thing dwells in this land but man—and it. And as for the fruit of the trees—give thanks that they bloom but once in a lifetime.”

“Better not to—speak of it,” she said.

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

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

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

- Once more the Temple rose veiled and indefinite under the glowing sky, and once more he plunged into the eternal twilight of its corridors, turned aside as one who knows the

way, knelt of his own accord in the line of drinkers along the wall....

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

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

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

Life held little any more but the bright clarity of the day and' the dimness of the dark, morning journeys to drink at the Temple fountain and the bitter kisses of the girl with the

orange hair. Time had ceased for him. Slow day followed slow day, and the same round of living circled over and over, and the only change—perhaps he did not see it then—was the

- deepening-look in the girl's eyes when they rested upon him,

her growing silences. --

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

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

The girl turned her head quickly and her sherry-brown eyes

- darkened with something like dread.

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

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

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

She turned the sorrowful, sherry gaze upon him.

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

questions if you would live.

"As for the mountains beyond, and all the unknown country that lies over the horizons—they are as

unreachable as a

mirage. For in "a land where no food grows, where we must visit the Temple daily or starve, how could an explorer provision himself for a journey? No, we are bound here by unbreakable bonds, and we must live here until we die."

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

as it rose. ' -

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

On all sides stretched the moving, restless woods, farther than the eye could reach. The grasslands rippled, and over the 'dim horizon the far mountains beckoned him. Even the

mystery of the Temple and its endless twilight began to torment his waking moments. He dallied with the idea of exploring those hallways which the dwellers in this lotusland avoided, of gazing from the strange windows that opened upon inexplicable blue. Surely life, even here, - must hold some more fervent meaning than that he followed now. What lay beyond the wood and grasslands? What mysterious country did those mountains wall?

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

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

Daily the unrest grew upon him. The girl made pathetic little attempts to find some sort of entertainment that would occupy his ranging mind. She led him on timid excursions into the living woods, even conquered her horror of the Temple enough to follow him on timorous tiptoe as he

explored a little way down the corridors which did not arouse in her too anguished a terror. But she must have known from the first that it was hopeless.

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

pushing away the girl who had been leaning on his shoulder.

“I’m through,” he said harshly, and rose.

“What—what is it?” The girl stumbled to her feet.

“I’m going away—anywhere. To those mountains, I think. I’m leaving now!”

“But—you wish to die, then?”

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

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

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

She looked at him miserably, tears brimming her sherry

eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word her eyes strayed beyond his shoulder and suddenly she smiled, a dreadful, frozen little smile.

“You will not go,-” she said. “Death has come for us now.” -

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

The air between them and the shrine was curiously agi

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

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

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

- “So I die with you, I am content.” And the sound of her voice freed him from the snare of the crimson pulse.

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

Smith swept, the ray back and forth along the redness, tracing its' pattern with destruction, but it faded too swiftly for him. In little more than an instant it had pale and disembodied and vanished save for a fading flush of rose, and the blue-hot. blade of his flame sizzled harmlessly through the disappearing mist to sear the ground beyond. He switched off the heat, then, and stood breathing a little unevenly as the death-cloud

thinned and paled and vanished before his eyes, until no trace of it was left and the air glowed lucid and transparent once

more. . -

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

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

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

“Is—it dead?.” she breathed, when she could master her quivering mouth.

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

“What will—will you do now?”

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

“What I started out to do.” -

The girl scrambled up in desperate haste.

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

“All right. Not a bad idea. It may be a long time before my next—meal.”

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

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

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

It seemed to him that the mist thickened~ as they advanced,

~,and in the uncertain light he could never be sure that the walls did not waver as nebulously as the blurring air.- He felt a curious impulse to step through their intangible barriers and out of the hail into—what?

Presently steps rose under his feet, almost imperceptibly, and after a while the pressure on his arm drew

him aside. They went in under a low, heavy arch of stone and entered the strangest room he had ever seen. It appeared to be sevensided, as nearly as he could judge through the drifting mist, and curious, converging lines were graven deep in the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And he saw knowledge dawning terribly upon her face, as

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

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

“He’s waking up!” said an exultant voice in his ear.

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

“Smith! N.W.! Wake up!” urged that familiar voice from somewhere near—

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

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

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

“I’m a doctor,” said that individual, meeting the questing

stare. “Your friend called me in three days ago and I’ve been working on you ever since. It must have been all of five or six days since you fell into this coma—have you any idea what caused it?” -

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

“Shawl?”

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

“Where—?”

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

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

“And—I-qiever even knew—her namd