

YVALA

Northwest Smith leaned against a pile of hemp-wrapped bales from the Martian drylands and stared with expressionless eyes, paler than pale steel, over the confusion of the Lakkdarol space-port before him. In the clear Martian day the tatters of his leather spaceman's garb were pitilessly plain, the ray-burns and the rents of a hundred casual brawls. It was evident at a glance that Smith had fallen upon evil days. One might have guessed by the shabbiness of his clothing that his pockets were empty, the charge in his ray gun low.

Squatting on his heels beside the lounging Earthman, Yarol the Venusian bent his yellow head absently over the thin-bladed dagger which he was juggling in one of the queer, interminable Venusian games so pointless to outsiders. Upon him too the weight of ill fortune seemed to have pressed heavily. It was eloquent in his own shabby garments, his empty holster. But the insouciant face he lifted to Smith was as careless as ever, and no more of weariness and wisdom and

pure cat-savagery looked out from his sidelong black eyes than Smith was accustomed to see there. Yarol's face was the face of a seraph, as so many Venusian faces are likely to be, but the set of his mouth told a tale of dissoluteness and reckless violence which belied his features' racial good looks.

' 'Another half-hour and we eat," he grinned up at his tall companion.

Smith glanced at the tri-time watch on his wrist.

"If you haven't been having another dope dream," he grunted. "Luck's been against us so long I can't quite believe in a change now."

' 'By Pharol I swear it," smiled Yarol. ' "The man came up to me in the New Chicago last night and told me in so many words how much money was waiting if we 'd meet him here at noon."

Smith grunted again and deliberately took up another notch in the belt that circled his lean waist. Yarol laughed softly, a murmur of true Venusian sweetness, as he bent again to the juggling of his knife. Above his bent blond head Smith looked out again across the busy port.

Lakkdarol is an Earthman's town upon Martian soil, blending all the more violent elements of both worlds in its lawless heart, and the scene he watched had under-currents that only a ranger of the space ways could fully appreciate. A semblance of discipline is maintained there, but only the space-rangers know how superficial that likeness is. Smith grinned a little to himself, knowing that the bales being trundled down the gangplank from the Martian liner Inghti carried a core of that precious Martian "lamb's-wool" on which the duties run so high. And a whisper had run through the New Chicago last night as they sat over their segir- whisky glasses that the shipment of grain from Denver expected in at noon on the Friedland would have a copious leavening of opium in its heart. By devious ways, in whispers running from mouth to mouth covertly through the spacemen's rendezvous, the outlaws of the space ways glean more knowledge than the Patrol ever knows.

Smith watched a little air-freight vessel, scarcely a quarter the size of the monstrous ships of the Lines, rolling sluggishly out from the municipal hangar far across the square, and a little frown puckered his brows. The ship bore only the non-commercial numerals which all the freighters carry by way of identification, but that particular sequence was notorious among the initiate. The ship was a slaver.

This dealing in human freight had received a great impetus at the stimulation of space-travel, when the temptation presented by the savage tribes on alien planets was too great to be ignored by unscrupulous Earthmen who saw vast fields opening up before them. For even upon Earth slaving has never died entirely, and Mars and Venus knew a small and legitimate traffic in it before John Willard and his gang of outlaws made the very word "slaving" anathema on three worlds. The Willards still ran their pirate convoys along the space-ways three generations later, and Smith knew he was looking at one now, smuggling a cargo of misery out of Lakkdarol for distribution among the secret markets of Mars.

Further meditations on the subject were cut short by Yard's abrupt rise to his feet. Smith turned his head slowly and saw a little man at their elbow, his rotundity cloaked in a long mantle like those affected by the lower class of Martian shopkeepers in their walks abroad. But the face that peered up into his was frankly Celtic. Smith's expressionless features broke reluctantly into a grin as he met the irrepressible good-humor on that fat Irish face from home. He had not set foot upon Earth's soil for over a year now—the price on his liberty was too high in his native land—and curious pricks of homesickness came over him at the oddest moments. Even the toughest of space-rangers know them sometimes. The ties with the home planet are strong.

"You Smith?" demanded the little man in a rich Celtic voice.

Smith looked down at him a moment in cold-eyed silence. There was much more in that query than met the ear. Northwest Smith's name was one too well known in the annals of the Patrol for him to acknowledge it incautiously. The little

Irishman's direct question implied what he had been expecting—if he acknowledged the name he met the man on the grounds of outlawry, which would mean that the employment in prospect was to be as illegal as he had thought it would be.

The merry blue eyes twinkled up at him. The man was laughing to himself at the Celtic subtlety with which he had introduced his subject. And again, involuntarily, Smith's straight mouth relaxed into a reluctant grin.

"I am," he said.

' 'I 've been looking for you. There's a job to be done that'll pay you well, if you want to risk it."

Smith's pale eyes glanced about them warily. No one was within earshot. The place seemed as good as any other for the discussion of extra-legal bargains.

"What is it?" he demanded.

The little man glanced down at Yarol, who had dropped to one knee again and was flicking his knife tirelessly in the intricacies of his queer game. He had apparently lost interest in the whole proceeding.

"It 'll take the both of you,'" said the Irishman in his merry, rich voice. "Do you see that air freighter loading over there?" and he nodded toward the slaver.

Smith's head jerked in mute acknowledgment.

"It's a Willard ship, as I suppose you know. But the business is running pretty low these days. Cargoes too hot to ship. The patrol is shutting down

hard, and receipts have slackened like the devil in the last year. I suppose you've heard that too."

Smith nodded again without words. He had.

"Well, what we lose in quantity we have to make up in quality. Remember the prices Minga girls used to bring?"

Smith's face was expressionless. He remembered very well indeed, but he said nothing.

"Along toward the last, kings could hardly pay the price they were asking for those girls. That's really the best market, if you want to get into the 'ivory' trade. Women. And there you come in. Did you ever hear of Cembre?"

Blank-eyed, Smith shook his head. For once he had run

across a name whose rumors he had never encountered before in all the tavern gossip.

'Well, on one of Jupiter's moons—which one I 'll tell you later, if you decide to accept—a Venusian named Cembre was wrecked years ago. By a miracle he survived and managed to escape; but the hardships he'd undergone unsettled his mind, and he couldn't do much but rave about the beautiful sirens he'd seen while he was wandering through the jungles there. Nobody paid any attention to him until the same thing happened again, this time only about a month ago. Another man came back half-cracked from struggling through the jungles, babbling about women so beautiful a man could go mad just looking at them.

"Well, the Willards heard of it. The whole thing may sound like a pipe-dream, but they've got the idea it's worth investigating. And they can afford to indulge their whims, you know. So they're outfitting a small expedition to see what basis there may be for the myth of Cembre's sirens. If you want to try it, you're hired."

Smith slanted a non-committal glance downward into Yarol's uplifted black gaze. Neither spoke.

"You'll want to talk it over," said the little Irishman comprehendingly. "Suppose you meet me in the New Chicago at sundown and tell me what you've decided."

"Good enough," grunted Smith. The fat Celt grinned again and was gone in a swirl of black cloak and a flash of Irish merriment.

"Cold-blooded little devil," murmured Smith, looking after the departing Earthman. 'It's a dirty business, Yarol.'

'Money's clean,' observed Yarol lightly. 'And I 'm not a man to let my scruples stand in the way of my meals. I say take it. Someone'll go, and it might as well be us.'

Smith shrugged.

"We've got to eat," he admitted.

"This," murmured Yarol, staring downward on hands and -knees at the edge of space-ship's floor-port, "is the prettiest little hell I ever expect to see."

The vessel was arching in a long curve around the Jovian

moon as its pilot braked slowly for descent, and a panorama of ravaging jungle slipped by in an unchanging wilderness I below the floor-ports. 1

Their presence here, skimming through the upper atmosphere of the wild little satellite, was the end of a long series of the smoothest journeying either had ever known. The Willard network was perfect over the three planets and the colonized satellites beyond, and over the ships that ply the spaceways. This neat little exploring vessel, with its crew of three coarse-faced, sullen slavers, had awaited them at the end of their journey outward from Lakkdarol, fully fitted with supplies and every accessory the most modern adventurer could desire. It even had a silken prison room for the hypothetical sirens whom they were to carry back for the Willard approval and the Willard markets if the journey proved successful.

"It's been easy so far," observed Smith, squinting downward over the little Venusian's shoulder. "Can't expect everything, you know. But that is a bad-looking place."

The dull-faced pilot at the controls grunted in fervent agreement as he craned his neck to watch the little world spinning below them.

"Damn' glad I'm not goin' out with you," he articulated thickly over a mouthful of tobacco.

Yarol flung him a cheerful Venusian anathema in reply, but Smith did not speak. He had little liking and less trust in this sullen and silent crew. If he was not mistaken—and he rarely made mistakes in his appraisal of men—there was going to be trouble with the three before they completed their journey back into civilization. Now he turned his broad back to the pilot and stared downward.

From above, the moon seemed covered with the worst type of semi-animate, ravenous super-tropical jungle, reeking with fertility and sudden death, hot under lurid Jupiter's blaze. They saw no signs of human life anywhere below as their ship swept in its long curve over the jungle. The tree-tops spread in an unbroken blanket over the whole sphere of the satellite. Yarol, peering downward, murmured,

"No water. Somehow I always expect sirens to have fishtails."

Out of his queer, heterogeneous past Smith dragged a fragment of ancient verse, "—gulfs enchanted, where the sirens sing ..." and said aloud,

"They're supposed to sing, too. Oh, it'll probably turn out to be a pack of ugly savages, if there's anything but delirium behind the story."

The ship was spiraling down now, and the jungle rushed up to meet them at express-train speed. Once again the little moon spun under their searching eyes, flower-garlanded, green with fertile life, massed solid in tangles of ravaging growth. Then the pilot's hands closed hard on the controls and with a shriek of protesting atmosphere the little spaceship slid in a long dive toward the unbroken jungle below.

In a great crashing and crackling they sank groundward through smothering foliage that masked the ports and plunged the interior of the ship into a green twilight. With scarcely an impact the jungle floor received them. The pilot leaned back in his seat and heaved a tobacco-redolent sigh. His work was done. Incuriously he glanced at the forward port.

Yarol was scrambling up from the floor-glass that now showed nothing but crushed vines and branches and the reeking mud of the moon's surface. He joined Smith and the pilot at the forward port.

They were submerged in jungle. Great serpentine branches and vines like cables looped downward in broken lengths from the shattered trees which had given way at their entrance. It was an animate jungle, full of hungry, reaching things that sprang in one wild, prolific tangle from the rich mud. Raw-colored flowers, yards across, turned sucking mouths blindly against the glass here and there, trickles of green juice slavering down the clear surface from their insensate hunger. A thorn-fanged vine lashed out as they stood staring and slid harmlessly along the glass, lashed again and again blindly until the prongs were dulled and green juice bled from its bruised surfaces.

"Well, we'll have blasting to do after all," murmured Smith as he looked out into the ravenous jungle. 'No wonder those poor devils came back a little cracked. I don't see how they got through at all. It's—"

'Well—Pharol take me!" breathed Yarol in so reverent a whisper that Smith's voice broke off in mid-sentence and he spun around with a hand dropping to his gun to front the little Venusian, who had sought the stern port in his exploration. "It's a road!" gasped Yarol. "Black Pharol can have me for dinner if there isn't a road just outside here!"

The pilot reached for a noxious Martian cigarette and stretched luxuriously, quite uninterested. But Smith had reached the Venusian's side before he finished speaking, and in silence the two stared out upon the surprising scene the stern port framed. A broad roadway stretched arrowstraight into the dimness of the jungle. At its edges the hungry green things ceased abruptly, not encroaching by so much as a tendril or a leaf into the clearness of the path. Even overhead the branches had been forbidden to intrude, their vein-looped greenery forming an arch above the road. It was as if a destroying beam had played through the jungle, killing all life in its path. Even the oozing mud was firmed here into a smooth pavement. Empty, enigmatic, the clear way slanted across their line of vision and on into the writhing jungle. "Well," Yarol broke the silence at last, "here's a good start. All we've got to do is follow the road. It's a safe bet there won't be any lovely ladies wandering around through this jungle. From the looks of the road there must be some civilized people on the moon after all."

"I'd be happier if I knew what made it," said Smith. 'There are some damned queer things on some of the moons and asteroids."

Yard's cat-eyes were shining.

"That's what I like about this life," he grinned. "You don't get bored. Well, what do the readings say?"

From his seat at the control panel the pilot glanced at the gauges which gave automatic report on air and gravity oufc side.

"O.K.," he grunted. "Better take blast-guns."

Smith shrugged off his sudden uneasiness and turned to the weapon rack.

"Plenty of charges, too," he said. "No telling what we'll run into."

The pilot rolled his poisonous cigarette between thick lips and said, "Luck. You'll need it," as the two turned to the outer lock. He had all the

indifference of his class to anything but his own comfort and the completion of his allotted tasks with a minimum of effort, and he scarcely troubled to turn his head as the lock swung open upon an almost overwhelming gush of thick, hot air, redolent of green growing things and the stench of swift decay.

A vine-tip lashed violently into the opened door as Smith and Yarol stood staring. Yarol snapped a Venusian oath and dodged back, drawing his blast-gun. An instant later the eye-destroying blaze of it sheered a path of destruction through the lush vegetable carnivora straight toward the slanting roadway a dozen feet away. There was an immense hissing and sizzling of annihilated green stuff, and an empty path stretched before them across the little space which parted the ship's outer lock from the road. Yarol stepped down into reeking mud that bubbled up around his boots with a stench of fertility and decay. He swore again as he sank knee-deep into its blackness. Smith, grinning, joined him. Side by side they floundered through the ooze toward the road.

Short though the distance was, it took them all of ten minutes to cover it. Green things whipped out toward them from the walls of sheared forest where the blast-gun had burned, and both were bleeding from a dozen small scratches and thorn-flicks, breathless and angry and very muddy indeed before they reached their goal and dragged themselves onto the firmness of the roadway.

"Whew!" gasped Yarol, stamping the mud from his caked boots. "Pharol can have me if I stir a step off this road after this. There isn't a siren alive who could lure me back into that hell again. Poor Cembre!"

"Come on," said Smith. "Which way?"

Yarol slatted sweat from his forehead and drew a deep breath, his nostrils wrinkling distastefully.

' 'Into the breeze, if you ask me. Did you ever smell such a stench? And hot! Gods! I'm soaked through already."

Without words Smith nodded and, turned to the right, from where a faint breeze stirred the heavy, moisture-laden air. His own lean body was impervious to a great variation in climate, but even Yarol, native of the Hot Planet, dripped with sweat already and Smith's own leather-tanned face glistened and his shirt clung in wet patches to his shoulders.

The cool breeze struck gratefully upon their faces as they turned into the wind. In a gasping silence they plodded muddily up the road, their wonder deepening as they advanced. What had made the roadway became more of a mystery at every step. No vehicle tracks marked the firm ground, no footprints. And nowhere by so much as a hair's breadth did the forest encroach upon the path.

On both sides, beyond the rigid limits of the road, the lush and cannibalistic life of the vegetation went on. Vines dangled great sucking disks and thorn-toothed creepers in the thick air, ready for a deadly cast at anything that wandered within reach. Small reptilian things scuttled through the reeking swamp mud, squeaking now and then in the toils of some thorny trap, and twice they heard the hollow bellowing of some invisible monster. It was raw primeval life booming and thrashing and devouring all about them, a planet in the first throes of animate life.

But here on the roadway that could have been made by nothing less than a well-advanced civilization that ravaging jungle seemed very far away, like some unreal world enacting its primitive dramas upon a stage. Before they had

gone far they were paying little heed to it, and the bellowing and the lashing, hungry vines and the ravenous forest growths faded into half-heard oblivion. Nothing out of that world entered upon the roadway.

As they advanced the sweltering heat abated in the steady breeze that was blowing down the road. There was a faint

perfume upon it, sweet and light and utterly alien to the fetor of the reeking swamps which bordered their way. The scented gusts of it fanned their hot faces gently.

Smith was glancing over his shoulder at regular intervals, and a pucker of uneasiness drew his brows together.

"If we don't have trouble with that crew of ours before we're through," he said, "I'll buy you a case of segir."

"It 's a bet," agreed Yarol cheerfully, turning up to Smith his sidelong cat-eyes as insouciantly savage as the ravening jungle around them. "Though they were a pretty tough trio, at that."

' "They may have the idea they can leave us here and collect our share of the money back home," said Smith. "Or once we get the girls they may want to dump us and take them on alone. And if they haven't thought of anything yet, they will."

' 'Up to no good, the whole bunch of 'em,'" grinned Yarol. "They-they--"

His voice faltered and faded into silence. There was a sound upon the breeze. Smith had stopped dead-still, his ears straining to recapture the echo of that murmur which had come blowing toward them on the breeze. Such a sound as that might have come drifting over the walls of Paradise.

In the silence as they stood with caught breath it came again—a lilt of the loveliest, most exquisitely elusive laughter. From very far away it came floating to their ears, the lovely ghost of a woman's laughing. There was in it a caress of kissing sweetness. It brushed over Smith's nerves like the brush of lingering fingers and died away into throbbing silence that seemed reluctant to let the exquisite sound of it fade into echoes and cease.

The two men faced each other in rapt bewilderment. Finally Yarol found his voice.

"Sirens!" he breathed. "They don't have to sing if they can laugh like that! Come on!"

At a swifter pace they went on up the road. The breeze blew fragrantly against their faces. After a while its perfumed breath carried to their ears another faint, far-away echo of

that heavenly laughter, sweeter than honey, drifting on the wind in fading cadences that died away by imperceptible degrees until they could no longer be sure if it was the lovely laughter they heard or the quickened beating of their own hearts.

Yet before them the road stretched emptily, very still in the green twilight under the low-arching trees. There seemed to be a sort of haze here, so that though the road ran straight the green dimness veiled what lay ahead and they walked in a queer silence along the roadway through ravening jungles whose sights and sounds might almost have been on another world for all the heed

they paid them. Their ears were straining for a repetition of that low and lovely laughter, and the expectation if it gripped them in an unheeding spell which wiped out all other things but its own delicious echoes.

When they first became aware of a pale glimmer in the twilight greenness ahead, neither could have told. But somehow they were not surprised that a girl was pacing slowly down the roadway toward them, half veiled in the jungle dimness under the trees.

To Smith she was a figure walking straight out of a dream. Even at that distance her beauty had a still enchantment that swallowed up all his wondering in a strange and magical peace. Beauty flowed along the long, curved lines of her body, alternately cloaked and revealed by the drifting garment of her hair, and the slow, swinging grace of her as she walked was a potent enchantment that gripped him helpless in its spell.

Then another glimmer in the dimness caught his eyes away from the bewitchment that approached, and in bewilderment he saw that another girl was pacing forward under the low-hanging trees, her hair swinging about her in slow drifts that veiled and unveiled the loveliness of a body as exquisite as the first. That first was nearer now, so that he could see the enchantment of her face, pale golden and lovelier than a dream with its subtly molded smoothness and delicately tilted planes of cheek-bone and cheek smoothing deliciously upward into a broad, low forehead when the richly colored hair

sprang back in tendrils like licking flames. There was a subtly Slavic tilting to those honey-colored features, hinted in the breadth of the cheeks and the sweet straightness with which their planes slanted downward to a mouth colored like hot embers, curving now in a smile that promised--heaven.

She was very near. He could see the peach-like bloom upon her pale gold limbs and the very throb of the pulse beating in her round throat, and the veiled eyes sought his. But behind her that second girl was nearing, every whit as lovely as the first, and her beauty drew his gaze magnetlike to its own delicate flow and ripple of enchantment. And beyond her--yes, another was coming, and beyond her a fourth; and in the green twilight behind these first, pale blurs bespoke the presence of yet more.

And they were identical. Smith's bewildered eyes flew from face to face, seeking and finding what his brain could, still not quite believe. Feature by feature, curve by curve, they were identical. Five, six, seven honey-colored bodies, half veiled in richly tinted hair, swayed toward him. Seven, eight, nine exquisite faces smiled their promise of ecstasy. Dizzy and incredulous, he felt a hand grip his shoulder. Yard's voice, bemused, half whispered, murmured,

"Is this paradise--or are we both mad?"

The sound of it brought Smith out of his tranced bewitchment. He shook his head sharply, like a man half awake and striving for clarity, and said,

"Do they all look alike to you?"

"Every one. Exquisite--exquisite--did you ever see such satin-black hair?"

"Black--black?" Smith muttered that over stupidly, wondering what was so wrong with the word. When realization broke upon him at last, the shock of it was strong enough to jerk his eyes away from the enchantment before him and turn them sharply around to the little Venusian's rapt face.

Its stainless clarity was set in a mask of almost holy wonder. Even the wisdom and weariness and savagery of its black eyes was lost in the glamor of what they gazed on. His voice murmured, almost to itself,

' 'And white—so white—like lilies, aren 't they?—black and whiter than—'

"Are you crazy?" Smith's voice broke harshly upon the . Venusian's rapture. That trance-like mask broke before the impact of his exclamation. Like a man awaking from a dream, Yarol turned blinking to his friend.

' 'Crazy? Why—why—aren't we both? How else could we be seeing a sight like this?"

"One of us is," said Smith grimly. "I'm looking at red-haired girls colored like-peaches."

Yarol blinked again. His eyes sought the bevy of bewildering loveliness in the roadway. He said,

' 'It's you, then. They 've got black hair, every one of them, shiny and smooth and black as so many lengths of satin, and nothing in creation is whiter than their bodies."

Smith's pale eyes turned again to the road. Again they met honey-pale curves and planes of velvet flesh half veiled in hair like drifting flames. He shook his head once more, dazedly.

The girls hovered before him in the green dimness, moving with little restive steps back and forth on the hardbeaten road, their feet like the drift of flower-petals for lightness, their hair rippling away from the smoothly swelling curves of their bodies and furling about them again in ceaseless motion. They turned lingering eyes to the two men, but they did not

speak.

Then down the wind again came drifting the far echo of that exquisite, lilting laugh. The sweetness of it made the very breeze brush lighter against their faces. It was a caress and a promise and a summoning almost irresistible, floating past them and drifting away into the distance in low, far-off cadences that lingered in their ears long after its audible music had ceased.

The sound of it woke Smith out of his daze, and he turned to the nearest girl, blurting,

"Who are you?"

Among the fluttering throng a little shiver of excitement ran. Lovely, identical faces turned to him from all over the

whole group, and the one addressed smiled bewilderingly.

"I am Yvala," she said in a voice smoother than silk, pitched to caress the ear and ripple along the very nerve fibers with a slow and soothing sweetness. And she had spoken in English! It was long since Smith had heard his mother tongue. The sound of it plucked at some hidden heart-string with intolerable poignancy, the home language spoken in a voice of enchanted sweetness. For a moment he could not speak.

The silence broke to Yarol's low whistle of surprise.

' 'I know now we 're crazy," he murmured. ' 'No other way to explain her speaking in High Venusian. Why, she can't ever have—"

"High Venusian!" exclaimed Smith, startled out of his moment of silence. "She spoke English!"

They stared at each other, wild suspicions rising in their eyes. In desperation Smith turned and hurled the question again at another of the lovely throng, waiting breathless for her answer to be sure his ears had not deceived him.

"Yvala—I am Yvala," she answered in just that silken voice with which the first had answered. It was English unmistakably, and sweet with memories' of home.

Behind her among the bevy of curved, peach-colored bodies and veils of richly tinted hair other full red lips moved and other velvety voices murmured, "Yvala, Yvala, I am Yvala," like dying echoes drifting from mouth to mouth until the last syllable of the strange and lovely name faded into silence.

Across the stunned quiet that fell as their murmurs died the breeze blew again, and once more that sweet, low laughter rang from far away in their ears, rising and falling on the wind until their pulses beat in "answer, and falling, fading, dying away reluctantly on the fragrant breeze.

"What—who was that?" demanded Smith softly of the fluttering girls, as the last of it faded into silence.

"It was Yvala," they chorused in caressing voices like multiple echoes of the same rich, lingering tones. "Yvala laughs—Yvala calls. . . . Come with us to Yvala. . . ."

Yarol said in a sudden ripple of musical speech,

"Geth norri a "Yvali?" at the same moment that Smith's "

query broke out, J

"Who is Yvala, then?" in his own seldom-used mother 5]

tongue.

But they got no reply to that, only beckonings and mur- • murous repetitions of the name, "Yvala, Yvala, Yvala—" j and smiles that set their pulses beating faster. Yarol reached " out a tentative hand toward the nearest, but she melted like i> smoke out of his grasp so that he no more than grazed the l velvety flesh of her shoulder with a touch that left his fingers ; tingling delightfully. She smiled over her shoulder ardently, and Yarol gripped Smith's arm. | "Come on," he said urgently. ji In a pleasant dream of low voices and lovely warm bodies ^ circling just out of reach they went slowly on down the road -J in the midst of that hovering group, walking upwind whence . that tantalizing laughter had rung, and all about them the golden girls circled on restless, drifting feet, their hair floating and furling about the loveliness of their half-seen bodies,] the echoes of that single name rising and falling in cadences '\ -as rich and smooth as cream. Yvala—Yvala—Yvala—a? magical spell to urge them on their way. j How long they walked they never knew. The changeless ; jungle slid away behind them unnoticed; the broad enigmatic pavement stretched ahead, a mysterious, green gloom shadowing the whole length of that laughter-haunted roadway. Nothing had any meaning to them outside the circle the murmurous girls were weaving with their swaying bodies and swinging

hair and voices like the echoes of a dream. All the wonder and incredulity and bewilderment in the minds of the two men had sunk away into nothingness, drowned and swallowed up in the flagrant music of their enchantresses. After a long, rapt while they came to the roadway's end. Smith lifted dreaming pale eyes and saw as if through a veil, so remotely that the scene had little meaning to him, the great park-like clearing stretching away before them as the jungle walls fell away on either side. Here the primeval swamplands

and animate green life ceased abruptly to make way for a scene that might have been lifted straight over a million years. The clearing was columned with great patriarchal trees ages removed in evolution from the snaky things which grew in the hungry jungle. Their leaves roofed the place in swaying greenery, through which the light sifted with twilight softness upon a carpet of flower-starred moss. With one step they spanned ages of evolution and entered into the lovely dim clearing that might have been lifted out of a world a million years older than the jungle that raved impotently around its borders.

The moss was velvety under their pacing feet. With eyes that but half comprehended what they say, Smith gazed out across the twilight vistas through the green gloom brooding beneath the trees. It was a hushed place, mystical, very quiet. He thought sometimes he saw the flash of life through the leaves overhead, the stir of it among the trees as small wild things crossed their path and birds fluttered in the foliage, but he could not be sure. Once or twice it seemed to him that he had caught an echo of bird-song, somehow as if the melody had rung in his ears a moment before, and only now, when the sound was fading, did he realize it. But not once did he hear an actual song note or see any animate life, though the presence of it was rife in the green twilight beneath the leaves.

They went on slowly. Once he could have sworn he saw a dappled fawn staring at him with wide, unhappy eyes from a covert of branches, but when he looked closer there was nothing but leaves swaying emptily. And once upon his inner ear, as if with the echo of a just-past sound, he thought he heard a stallion's high whinny. But after all it did not greatly matter. The girls were shepherding them on over the flowery moss, circling like hollow-throated doves whose only music was "Yvala-Yvala-Yvala. . . ." in unending harmony of rising and falling notes.

They paced on dreamily, the trees and mossy vistas of park sliding smoothly away behind them in unchanging quiet. And more and more strongly that impression of life among

the trees nagged at Smith's mind. He wondered if he might | not be developing hallucinations, for no arrangement of branches and shadows could explain the wild boar's head that he could have sworn thrust out among the leaves to stare at him for an instant with small, shamed eyes before it melted into patterned shadow under his direct gaze.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes in momentary terror lest his own brain was betraying him, and an instant later was peering uncertainly at the avenue between two low-hanging trees where from the corner of his eye he thought he had seen a magnificent white stallion hesitating with startled head upflung and the queerest, urgent look in its eyes, somehow warning and afraid—and ashamed. But it faded into mere leaf-cast shadows when he turned.

And once he started and stumbled over what was nothing more than a leafy branch lying across their path, yet which an instant before had looked bewilderingly like a low-slung cat-beast slinking across the moss with sullen, hot eyes upturned in hate and warning and distress to his.

There was something about these animals that roused a vague unrest in his mind when he looked at them—something in their eyes that was warning and agonized and more hotly aware than are the eyes of beasts—something queerly dreadful and hauntingly familiar about the set of their heads upon their shoulders—hinting horribly at another gait than the four-footed.

At last, just after a graceful doe had bounded out of the leaves, hesitated an instant and flashed away with a fleetness that did not look like the fleetness of a quadruped, turning upon him as she vanished a great-eyed agony that was warning as a cry, Smith halted in his tracks. Uneasiness too deep to be magicked away by the crooning girls urged him of danger. He paused and looked uncertainly around. The door had melted into leaf-shadows flickering upon the moss, but he could not forget the haunting shame and the warning of her eyes.

He stared about the dim greenness of the tree-roofed clearing. Was all this a lotus-dream, an illusion of jungle fever, or

a suddenly unstable mind? Could he have imagined those beasts with their anguished eyes and their terribly familiar outlines of head and neck upon four-footed bodies? Was any of it real at all?

More for reassurance than for any other reason he reached out suddenly and seized the nearest honey-colored girl in a quick grip. Yes, she was tangible. His fingers closed about a firm and rounded arm, smoothly soft with the feel of peach-bloom velvet over its curving surface. The girl did not pull away. She stopped dead-still at his touch, slowly turning her head, lifting her face to his with a dream-like easiness, tilting her chin high until the long, full curve of her throat was arched taut and he could see the pulse beating hard under her velvet flesh. Her lips parted softly, her lips drooped low.

His other arm went out of its own accord, drawing her against him. Then her hands were in his hair, pulling his head down to hers, and all his uneasiness and distress and latent terror spun away at the kiss of her parted lips.

The next thing he realized was that he was strolling on under the trees, a girl's lithe body moving in the bend of his arm. Her very nearness was a delight that sent his senses reeling, so that the green woodland was vague as a dream and the only reality dwelt in the honey-colored loveliness in the circle of his arm.

Dimly he was aware that Yarol strolled parallel with them a little distance away through the leaves, a bright head on his shoulder, another golden girl leaning against his encircling arm. She was so perfectly the counterpart of his own lovely captive that she might have been a reflection in a mirror. Uneasily a remembrance swam up in Smith's mind. Did it seem to Yarol that a snow-white maiden walked with him, a black head leaned upon his shoulder? Was the little Venusian's mind yielding to the spell of the place, or was it his own? What tongue could it be that the girls spoke which fell upon his ears in English phrases and upon Yarol's in the musical lilt of High Venusian? Were they both mad?

Then in his arm the supple golden body stirred, the softly shadowed face turned to his. The woodland vanished like

smoke from about him in the magic of her lips.

There were dim glades among the trees where piles of white ruins met Smith's unseeing eyes sometimes without leaving more than the merest trace of conscious remembrance. Vague wonders swam through his mind of what they might

once have been, what vanished race had wrested this clearing from the jungle and died without leaving any trace save these. But he did not care. It had no significance. Even the half-seen beasts, who now turned eyes full of sorrow and despair rather than warning, had lost all meaning to his enchanted brain. In a lotus dream he wandered on in the direction he was urged, unthinking, unalarmed. It was very sweet to stroll so through the dim green gloom, with purest magic in the bend of his arm. He was content.

They strolled past the white ruins of scattered buildings, past great bending trees that dappled them with shadow. The moss yielded underfoot as softly as thick-piled carpets. Unseen beasts slunk by them now and then, so that the tail of Smith's eyes was continually catching the—almost—hint of humanity in the lines of their bodies, the set of a head upon bestial shoulders, the clarity of urgent eyes. But he did not really see them.

Sweetly—intolerably sweetly and softly, laughter rang through the woods. Smith's head flung up like a startled stallion's. It was a stronger laughter now, from near, very near among the leaves. It seemed to him that the voice indeed must come from some lovely, ardent houri leaning over the wall of Paradise—that he had come a long way in search of her and now trembled on the very brink of his journey's end. The low and lovely sound echoed through the trees, ringing down the green twilight aisles, shivering the leaves together. It was everywhere at once, a little world of music superimposed upon the world of matter, enclosing everything within its scope in a magical spell that left no room for any other thing but its lovely presence. And its command rang through Smith's mind with the sharpness of a sword in his flesh, calling, calling unbearably through the woods.

Then they came out of the trees into a little space of mossy

clearing in whose center a small white temple rose. Somehow Yarol was there too—and somehow they were alone. Those exquisite girls had melted like smoke into oblivion. The two men stood quite still, their eyes dazed as they stared. This building was the only one they had seen whose columns still stood upright, and only here could they tell that the architecture of those fallen walls whose ruins had dotted the wooded glades had been one at variance to anything on any world they knew. But upon the mystery of that they had no desire to dwell. For the woman those slim columns housed drove every other thought out of their dazzled minds.

She stood in the center of the tiny temple. She was pale golden, half veiled in the long cloak of her curls. And if the siren girls had been lovely, then here stood loveliness incarnate. Those girls had worn her form and face. Here was that same exquisitely molded body, colored like honey, half revealed among the drifts of hair that clung to it like tendrils of bright flames. But those bewildering girls had been mere echoes of the beauty that faced them now. Smith stared with a kindling of colorless eyes.

Here was Lilith—here was Helen—here was Circe—here before him stood all the beauty of all the legends of mankind; here on this marble floor, facing them gravely, with unsmiling eyes. For the first time he looked into the eyes that lighted that sweet, tilt-planed face, and his very soul gasped from the sudden plunge into their poignant blueness. It was not a vivid blue, not a blazing one, but its intensity far transcended anything he had words to name. In that blueness a man's soul could sink for ever, reaching no bottom, stirred by no tides, drowned and steeped through and through with an infinity of absolute light.

When the blue, blue gaze released him he gasped once, like a drowning man, and then stared with new amazement upon a reality whose truth had escaped him

until this moment. That instant of submerged ecstasy in the blue deeps of her eyes must have opened a door in his brain to new knowledge, for he saw as he stared a very strange quality in the loveliness he faced.

Tangible beauty dwelt here, an indwelling thing that could root itself in human flesh and clothe a body in loveliness as with a garment. Here was more than fleshly beauty, more than symmetry of face and body. A quality like a flame glowed all but visibly—no, more than visibly—along the peach-bloomy lines and smoothly swelling curve of her," giving a glory to the high tilt of her bosom and the long, subtly curved thigh and the exquisite line of shoulder gliding down into fuller beauty half veiled in drifting hair.

In that dazed, revealing moment her loveliness shimmered before him, too intensely for his human senses to perceive save as a dazzle of intolerable beauty before his half-comprehending eyes. He flung up his hands to shut the glory out and stood for a moment with hidden eyes in a self-imposed darkness through which beauty blazed with an intensity that transcended the visible and beat unbearably on every fiber of his being until he stood bathed in light that permeated the ultimate atoms of his soul.

Then the blaze died. He lowered shaking hands and saw that lovely, pale-gold face melting slowly into a smile of such heavenly promise that for an instant his senses failed him again and the world spun dizzily around a focus of honey-pale features breaking into arcs and softly shadowed curves, as the velvety mouth curled slowly into a smile.

"All strangers are very welcome here," crooned a voice like a vibration of sheerest silk, sweeter than honey, caressing as the brush of a kissing mouth. And she had spoken in the purest of earthly English. Smith found his voice.

"Who—who are you?" he asked in a queer gasp, as if his very breath were stopped by the magic he faced.

Before she could answer, Yarol's voice broke in, a little unsteady with sudden, savage anger.

"Can't you answer in the language you're addressed in?" he demanded in a violent undertone. "The least you could do is ask her name in High Venusian. How do you know she speaks English?"

Quite speechless, Smith turned a blank gray gaze upon his companion. He saw the blaze of hot Venusian temper fade

like mist from Yarol's black eyes as he turned to the glory in the temple. And in the lovely, liquid cadences of his native tongue, that brims so exquisitely with hyperbole and symbolism, he said.

"Oh, lovely and night-dark lady, what name is laid upon you to tell how whiter than sea-foam is your loveliness?"

For a moment, listening to the beauty of phrase and sound that dwells in the High Venusian tongue, Smith doubted his own ears. For though she had spoken in English, yet the loveliness of Yarol's speech seemed infinitely more suited to have fallen from the lyric curving of her velvet-red mouth. Such lips, he thought, could never utter less than pure music, and English is not a musical tongue.

But explain Yarol's visual illusion he could not, for his own steel-pale eyes were steadfast upon richly colored hair and pale gold flesh, and no stretch of imagination could transform them into the black and snow-whiteness his

companion claimed to see.

A hint of mirth crept into the smile that curled "Up the softness of her mouth as Yarol spoke. She answered them both in one speech that to Smith was pure English, though he guessed that it fell upon Yarol's ears in the music of High Venusian cadences.

"I am Beauty," she told them serenely. "I am incarnate Beauty. But Yvala is my name. Let there be no quarrel between you, for each man hears me in the tongue his heart speaks, and sees me in the image which spells beauty to his own soul. For I am all men's desire incarnate in one being, and there is no beauty but Me."

"But—those others?"

' 'I am the only dweller here—but you have known the shadows of myself, leading you through devious ways into the presence of Yvala. Had you not gazed first upon these reflections of my beauty, its fullness which you see now would have blinded and destroyed you utterly. And later, perhaps, you shall see me even more clearly. . . .

"But no, Yvala alone dwells here. Save for yourselves there is in this park of mine no living creature. Everything is

illusion but myself. And am I not enough? Can you desire anything more of life or death than you gaze on now?"

The query trembled into a music-ridden silence, and they knew that they could not. The heaven-sweet murmur of that voice was speaking sheerest magic, and in the sound of it neither of them was capable of any emotion but worship of the loveliness they faced. It beat out in waves like heat from that incarnate perfection, wrapping them about so that nothing in the universe had existence but Yvala.

Before the glory that blazed in their faces Smith felt adoration pouring out of him as blood gushes from a severed artery. Like life-blood it poured, and like life-blood draining it left him queerly weaker and weaker, as if some essential part of him were gushing away in great floods of intensest worship.

But somewhere, down under the lowest depths of Smith's subconsciousness, a faint disquiet was stirring. He fought it, for it broke the mirror surfaces of his tranced adoration, but he could not subdue it, and by degrees that unease struggled up through layer upon layer of rapt enchantment until it burst through into his conscious mind and the little quiver of it ran disturbingly through the exquisite calm of his trance. It was not an articulate disquiet, but it was somehow bound up with the scarcely seen beasts he had glimpsed—or had he glimpsed?—in the wood. That, and the memory of an old Earth legend which try as he would he could not quite exorcise: the legend of a lovely woman—and men turned into beasts. . . . He could not grasp it, but the elusive memory pricked at him with little pinpoint goads, crying danger so insistently that with infinite reluctance his mind took up the business of thinking once more.

Yvala sensed it. She sensed the lessening in that lifeblood gush of rapt adoration poured out upon her loveliness. Her fathomless eyes turned upon his in a blaze of transcendent blueness, and the woods reeled about him at the impact of their light. But somewhere in Smith, under the ultimate layer of conscious thought, under the last quiver of instinct and reflex and animal cravings, lay a bedrock of savage strength

which no power he had ever met could wholly overcome, not even this—not even Yvala. Rooted deep in that immovable solidity the little uneasy murmur persisted. "There is something wrong here. I mustn't let her swallow me up again—I must know what it is. . . ."

That much he was aware of. Then Yvala turned. With both velvety arms she swept back the curtain of her hair, and all about her in a glory of tangible loveliness blazed out the radiance that dwelt in such terrible intensity here. Smith's whole consciousness snuffed out before it like a blown candle-flame.

Remotely, after eons, it seemed, awareness overtook him again. It was not consciousness, but a sort of dumb, blind knowledge of processes going on around him, in him, through him. So an animal might be aware, without any hint of real self-consciousness. But hot above everything else the tranced adoration of sheer beauty was blazing now in the center of his universe, and it was devouring him as a flame devours fuel, sucking out his worship, draining him utterly. Helpless, unbodied, he poured forth adoration into the ravenous blaze that held him, and as he poured it out he felt himself fading, somehow sinking below the level of a human being. In his dumb awareness he made no attempt to understand, but he felt himself-degenerating.

It was as if the insatiable appetite for admiration which consumed Yvala and was consuming him sucked him dry of all humanity. Even his thoughts were sinking now as she drained him, so that he no longer fitted words to his sensations, and his mind ran into figures and pictures below the level of human minds. . . .

He was not tangible. He was a dark, inarticulate memory, bodiless, mindless, full of queer, hungry sensations. . . . He remembered running. He remembered the dark earth flowing backward under his flying feet, wind keen in his nostrils and rife with the odors of a thousand luscious things. He remembered the pack baying around him to the frosty stars, his own voice lifting in exultant, throat-filling clamor with the rest. He remembered the sweetness of flesh yielding under fangs,

the hot gush of blood over a hungry tongue. Little more than this he remembered. The ravenous craving, the exultation of the chase, the satisfying reek of hot flesh under ripping fangs—all these circled through his memory round and round, leaving room for little else.

But gradually, in dim, disquieting echoes, another realization strengthened beyond the circle of hunger and feeding. It was an intangible thing, nothing but the faint knowledge that somehow, somewhere, in some remote existence, he had been-different. He was little more than a recollection now, a mind that circled memories of hunting and killing and feeding which some lost body in long-ago distances had performed. But even so—he had once been different. He

had—

Sharply through that memory-circle broke the knowledge of presences. With no physical sense was he aware of them, for he possessed no physical senses at all. But his awareness, his dumb, numb mind, knew that they had come—knew what they were. In memory he smelled the rank, blood-stirring scent of man, felt a tongue lolling out over suddenly dripping fangs; remembered hunger gushed up through his sensations. Now he was blind and formless in a formless void, recognizing those presences only as they impinged upon his. But from the man-presences realization reached out and touched him, knowing his presence, realizing his nearness. They sensed him, lurking hungrily so close. And because they sensed him so vividly, their minds receiving the ravenous impact of his, their brains must have translated that hungry nearness into sight for

just an instant; for from somewhere outside the gray void where he existed a voice said clearly,

"Look! Look—no, it's gone now, but for a minute I thought I saw a wolf. . . ."

The words burst upon his consciousness with all the violence of a gun-blast; for in that instant, he knew. He understood the speech the man used, remembered that once it had been his speech—realized what he had become. He knew too that the men, whoever they were, walked into just such danger as had conquered him, and the urgency to warn them

surged up in his dumbness. Not until then did he know clearly, with a man's word-thoughts, that he had no being. He was not real—he was only a wolf-memory drifting through the dark. He had been a man. Now he was pure wolf-beast—his soul shorn of its humanity down to the very core of savagery that dwells in every man. Shame flooded over him. He forgot the men, the speech they used, the remembered hunger. He dissolved into a nothingness of wolf-memory and man-shame.

Through the dizziness of that a stronger urge began to beat. Somewhere in the void sounded a call that reached out to him irresistibly. It called him so strongly that his whole dim being whirled headlong in response along currents that swept him helpless into the presence of the summoner.

A blaze was burning. In the midst of the universal emptiness it flamed, calling, commanding, luring him so sweetly that with all his entity he replied, for there was in that burning an element that wrenched at his innermost, deepest-rooted desire. He remembered food—the hot gush of blood, the crunch of teeth on bone, the satisfying solidarity of flesh under his sinking fangs. Desire for it gushed out of him like life itself, draining him—draining him. . . . He was sinking lower, , past the wolf level, down and down. . . .

Through the coming oblivion terror stabbed. It was a lightning-flash of realization from his long-lost humanity, one last throb that brightened the dark into which he sank. And out of that bed-rock of unshakable strength which was the core of his being, even below the wolf level, even below the oblivion into which he was being sucked—the spark of rebellion lashed.

Before now he had floundered helplessly with no firmness anywhere to give him foothold to fight; but now, in his uttermost extremity, while the last dregs of conscious life drained out of him, the bed-rock lay bare from which the well-springs of his strength and savagery sprang, and at that last stronghold of the self called Smith he leaped into instant rebellion, fighting with all the wolf-nature that had been the soil from which his man-soul rooted. Wolfishly he fought,

with a beast's savagery and a man's strength, backed by the bed-rock firmness that was the base for both. Space whirled about him, flaming with hungry fires, black with flashes of oblivion, furious and ravenous in the hot presence of Yvala. But he was winning. He knew it, and fought harder, and abruptly felt the snap of yielding opposition and was blind-ingly aware again, blindingly human. He lay on soft moss as a dead man lies, terribly relaxed in every limb and muscle. But life was flowing back into him, and humanity was gushing like a river in spate back into the drained hollows of his soul. For a while he lay quiet, gathering himself into one body again. His hold on it was so feeble that sometimes he thought he was floating clear and had to struggle hard to force re-entrance. Finally, with infinite effort, he tugged his eyelids open and lay there in a deathly quiet, watching.

Before him stood the white marble shrine which housed Beauty. But it was not Yvala's delirious loveliness he gazed on now. He had been through the fire of her deepest peril, and he saw her now as she really was—not in the form which spelled pure loveliness to him, and, as he guessed, to every being that gazed upon her, whether it be man or beast—not in any form at all, but as a blaze of avid light flaming inside the shrine. The light was alive, quivering and trembling and animate, but it bore no human form. It was not human. It was a life so alien that he wondered weakly how his eyes could ever have twisted it into the incarnate loveliness of Yvala. And even in the depths of his peril he found time to regret the passing of that beauty—that exquisite illusion which had never existed save in his own brain. He knew that as long as life burned in him he could never forget her smile.

It was a thing of some terribly remote origin that blazed here. He guessed that the power of it had fastened on his brain as soon as he came within its scope, commanding him to see it in that lovely form which meant heart's-desire to him alone. It must have done the same thing to countless other beings—he remembered the beast wraiths that had brushed his brain in the forest with the faint, shamed contact of theirs.

Well, he had been one of them—he knew now. He understood the warning and the anguish in their eyes. He remembered too the ruins he had seen in the woods. What race had dwelt here once, imposing its civilization and its stamp of quiet glades and trees upon the ravenous forest? A human race, perhaps, dwelling in seclusion under the leaves until Yvala the Destroyer came. Or perhaps not a human race, for he knew now that to every living creature she wore a different form, the incarnation of each individual's highest desire.

Then he heard voices, and after an infinity of effort twisted his head on the moss until he could see whence they came. At what he saw he would have risen if he could, but a deathly weariness lay like the weight of worlds upon him and he could not stir. Those man-presences he had felt in his beast-form stood here—the three slavers from the little ship. They must have followed them not far behind, with what dark motives would never be known now, for Yvala's magic had seized them and there would be no more of humanity for them after the next few moments were past. They stood in a row there before the shrine with an ecstasy almost holy on their faces. Plainly he saw reflected there the incarnate glory of Yvala, though to his eyes the thing they faced was only a formless flame.

He knew then why Yvala had let him go so suddenly in that desperate struggle. Here was fresh fodder for her avidity, new worship to drink in. She had turned away from his outworn well-springs to drain new prey of its humanity. He watched them standing there, drunk with loveliness before what to them must be a beautiful woman veiled in drifting hair, glowing with more than mortal ardency where, to him, only a clear flame burned.

But he could see more. Cloudy about those three figures, rapt before the shrine, he could see—was it some queer reflection of themselves dancing upon the air? The misty outlines wavered as, with eyes that in the light of what he had just passed through had won momentarily a sight which penetrated beyond the flesh, he looked upon that dancing

shimmer which clearly must be the reflection of some vital part of those three men, visible now in some strange way at the evocation of Yvala's calling.

They were man-shaped reflections. They strained toward Yvala from their anchorage in the bodies that housed them, yearning, pulling as if they would forsake their fleshly roots and merge with the incarnate beauty that called them so irresistibly. The three stood rigid, faces blank with rapture,

unconscious of that perilous tugging at what must be in their
very souls.

Then Smith saw the nearest man sag at the knees, quiver, topple to the moss. He lay still for a moment while from his fallen body that tenuous reflection of himself tugged and pulled and then in one last great effort jerked free and floated like a smoke-wreath into the white-hot intensity in the shrine. The blaze engulfed it, flaring brighter as if at the kindling of new fuel.

When that sudden brightness died again the smokewreath drifted out, trailing through the pillars in a form that even to Smith's dimmed eyes wore a strange distortion. It was no longer a man's soul. All of humanity had burned out from it to feed the blaze that was Yvala. And that beast foundation which lies so close under the veneer of civilization and humanity in every human creature was bared and free. Cold with understanding, Smith watched the core of beast instinct which was all that remained now that the layer of man-veneer had been stripped away, a core of animal memories rooted eons deep in that far-away past when all man's ancestors ran

on four paws.

It was a cunning beast that remained, instinct with foxy slyness. He saw the misty thing slink away into the green gloom of the woods, and he realized afresh why it was he had seen fleeting glimpses of animals in the park as he came here, wearing that terrible familiarity in the set of their heads, the line of shoulder and neck that hinted at other gaits than the four-footed. They must have been just such wraiths as this, drifting through the woods, beast-wraiths that wore still the tatters and rags of their doffed humanity, brushing his mind

with the impact of theirs until their vividness evoked actual sight of the reality of fur and flesh, just for a glimpse, just for a hint, before the wraith blew past. And he was cold with horror at the thought of how many men must have gone to feed the flame, stripping off humanity like a garment and running now in the nakedness of their beast natures through the enchanted woods.

Here was Circe. He realized it with a quiver of horror and awe. Circe the Enchantress, who turned the men of Greek legend into beasts. And what tremendous backgrounds of reality and myth loomed smokily behind what happened here before his very eyes! Circe the Enchantress—ancient Earthly legend incarnate now on a Jovian moon far away through the void. The awe of it shook him to the depths. Circe—Yvala—alien entity that must, then, rove through the universe and the ages, leaving dim whispers behind her down the centuries. Lovely Circe on her blue Aegean isle—Yvala on her haunted moon under Jupiter's blaze—past and present merged into a blazing whole.

The wonder of it held him so wrapt that when the reality of the scene before him finally bore itself in upon his consciousness again, both of the remaining slavers lay prone upon the moss, forsaken bodies from which the vitality had been sucked like blood in Yvala's flame. That flame burned more rosily now, and out of its pulsing he saw the last dim wraith of the three who had fed her come hurrying, a swinish brute of a wraith whose grunts and snorts were almost audible, tusks and bristles all but visible as it scurried off into the wood.

Then the flame burned clear again, flushed with hot rose, pulsing with regular beats like the pulse of a heart, satiate and ecstatic in its shrine. And he was aware of a withdrawal, as if the consciousness of the entity that burned here were turned inward upon itself, leaving the world it dominated untouched

as Yvala drowsed and digested the sustenance her vampire-craving for worship had devoured.

Smith stirred a little on the moss. Now, if ever, he must make some effort to escape, while the thing in the shrine was replete and uninterested in its surroundings. He lay there,

shaken with exhaustion, forcing strength back into his body, willing himself to be strong, to rise, to find Yarol, to make his way somehow back to the deserted ship. And by slow degrees he succeeded. It took a long while, but in the end he had dragged himself up against a tree and stood swaying, his pale eyes alternately clouding with exhaustion and blinking aware again as he scanned the space under the trees for Yarol.

The little Venusian lay a few steps away, one cheek pressing the ground and his yellow curls gay against the moss. With closed eyes he looked like a seraph asleep, all the lines of hard living and hard fighting relaxed and the savageness of his dark gaze hidden. Even in his deadly peril Smith could not suppress a little grin of appreciation as he staggered the half-dozen steps that parted them and fell to his knees beside his friend's body.

The sudden motion dazed him, but in a moment his head cleared and he laid an urgent hand on Yarol's shoulder, shaking it hard. He dared not speak, but he shook the little Venusian heavily, and in his brain a silent call went out to whatever drifting wraith among the trees housed Yarol's naked soul. He bent over the quiet yellow head and called and called, turning the force of his determination in all its intensity to that summoning, while weakness washed over him in great slow waves.

After a long time he thought he felt a dim response, somewhere from far off. He called harder, eyes turned apprehensively toward the rosily pulsing flame in the shrine, wondering if this voiceless summoning might not impinge upon the entity there as tangibly as speech. But Yvala's satiety must have been deep, and there was no changing in the

blaze.

The answer came clearer from the woods. He felt it pulling! in toward him along the strong compulsion of his call as a fisherman feels a game fish yielding at last to the tug of his line. And presently among the leafy solitudes of the trees a little mist-wraith came gliding. It was a slinking thing, feline, savage, fearless. He could have sworn that for the briefest instant he saw the outlines of a panther stealing across the

moss, misty, low-slung, turning upon him the wise black gaze of Yarol—exactly his friend's black eyes, with no lessening in them of lost humanity. And something in that familiar gaze sent a little chill down his back. Could it be—could it possibly be that in Yarol the veneer of humanity was so thin over his savage cat-nature that even when it had been stripped away the look in his eyes was the same?

Then the smoke-beast was hovering over the prone Venusian figure. It curled round Yarol's shoulders for an instant; it faded and sank, and Yarol stirred on the moss. Smith turned him over with a shaking hand. The long Venusian lashes quivered, lifted. Black, sidelong eyes looked up into Smith's pale gaze. And Smith in a gush of chilly uncertainty did not know if humanity had returned into his friend's body or not, if it was a panther's gaze looking up into his or if that thin' layer of man-soul veiled it, for Yarol's eyes had always looked like this.

"Are—are you all right?" he asked in a breathless whisper.

Yarol blinked dizzily once or twice, then grinned. A twinkle lighted up his black cat gaze. He nodded and made a little effort to rise. Smith helped him sit up. The Venusian was not a fraction so weak as the Earthman had been. After a little interval of hard breathing he struggled to his feet and helped Smith up, apprehension in his whole demeanor as he eyed the flame that pulsed in its white shrine. He jerked his head urgently.

"Let's get out of here!" his silent lips mouthed. And Smith in fervent agreement turned in the direction he indicated, hoping that Yarol knew where he was going. His own exhaustion was still too strong to permit him anything but acquiescence.

They made their way through the woods, Yarol heading unerringly in a direct course toward the roadway they had left such a long time ago. After a while, when the flamehousing shrine had vanished among the trees behind them, the Venusian's soft voice murmured, half to itself.

.,"—wish, almost, you hadn't called me back. Woods were

so cool and still—remembering such splendid things—j killing and killing—I wish—"

The voice fell quiet again. But Smith, stumbling on beside his friend, understood. He knew why the woods seemed familiar to Yarol, so that he could head for the roadway unerringly. He knew why Yvala in her satiety had not even wakened at the withdrawal of Yarol's humanity—it was so small a thing that the loss of it meant nothing. He gained a new insight in that moment into Venusian nature that he remembered until the day he died.

Then there was a gap in the trees ahead, and Yarol's shoulder was under his supportingly, and the road to safety shimmered in its tree-arched green gloom ahead.