

LOST PARADISE

Across the table-top Yarol the Venusian reached a swift hand that closed on Northwest Smith's wrist heavily. "Look! ~ he said in a low voice.

Smith's no-colored eyes turned leisurely in the direction of the little Venusian's almost imperceptible nod.

The panorama that stretched out under his casual gaze would have caught at a newcomer's breath with its very magnitude, but to Smith the sight was an old story. Their table was one of many ranged behind a rail along the edge of a parapet below which the dizzy gulf of New York's steel terraces dropped away in a thousand-foot sweep to the far earth. Lacing that swooning gulf of emptiness the steel spans of the traffic bridges arched from building to building, a swarm with New York's countless hordes. Men from the thine planets, wanderers and space-rangers and queer, brutish things that were not wholly human mingled with the throngs of Earth as they streamed endlessly over the great, steel bridges spanning the gulfs of New York. From the high parapet table where Smith and Yarol sat one could watch the solar system go by, world upon world over the arches that

descended by tiers and terraces into the perpetual darkness. and twinkling, far-off lights of the deeps where solid earth lay hidden. In mighty swoops and arcs they latticed the void yawning below the parapet on which Yarol leaned a negligent elbow and stared.

Smith's pale eyes, following that stare, saw only the usual crowd of pedestrians swarming across the steel span of the bridge a story below.

"See?" murmured Yarol. "That little fellow in the red leather coat. The white-haired one, walking slow at the edge

of the rail. See?" -

"Urn-rn." Smith made a non-committal noise in his throat as he found the object of Yarol's interest. It was an odd-

- looking specimen of humanity That loitered slowly along in the outer edges of the crowd surging across the bridge. His red coat was belted about a body whose extreme fragility was

- apparent even at this elevation; though from what Smith could see of his foreshortened figure he did not seem like one in ill health. On his uncovered head the hair grew silky and silvery, and under one arm he clutched a squarish package which he was careful, Smith noticed, to keep on the railing side, away from the p-ssmg crowd.

"I'll bet you the next drinks," murmured Yarol, his wise black eyes twinkling under long lashes, "that you can't guess what race that little fellow's from, or where it originated."

"The next drinks are on me anyhow," grinned Smith. "No I can't guess. Does it matter?"

"Oh—curious, that's, all. I've seen a member of that race only once before in my life, and I'll bet you never saw one. And yet it's an Earth race, perhaps the very oldest. Did you ever hear of the Seles?"

Smith shook his head silently, his eyes on the little figure below, which was

slowly drawing out of sight beneath the overhang of the terrace on which they sat.

"They live somewhere in the remotest part of Asia, no one knows exactly where. But they're not Mongolian. It's a pure race, and one that has no counterpart anywhere in the solar

system that I ever heard of. I think, even among themselves their origin has been forgotten, though their legends go back so far it makes you dizzy to think of it. They're queer-looking, all white-haired and fragile as glass. Keep very much to themselves, of course. When one ventures out into the work you can be sure it's for some tremendously important reason. Wonder why that fellow--oh well, not that it matters. Only seeing him reminded me of the queer story that's told about them. They have a Secret. No, don't laugh; it's supposed to be something very strange and wonderful, which their race life is dedicated to keeping quiet. I'd give a lot to know what it is, just for curiosity's sake."

"None of your business, my boy," said Smith sleepily.

- "Like as not it's better for you that you don't know. These secrets have a way of being uncomfortable things to know."

"No such luck," Yarol shrugged. "Let's have another drink--on you, remember--and forget it."

He lifted a finger to summon the hurrying waiter.

But the summons was never given. For just then, around the corner of the railing which separated the little enclosure of tables from the street running along the edge of the terrace came a flash of red that caught Yarol's eye abruptly. It was the little white-haired man, hugging his squarish parcel and walking timorously, as if he were not accustomed to thronged streets and terraces a thousand feet high in steel-shimmering air.

And at the moment Yarol's eye caught him, something happened. A man in a dirty brown uniform, whose defaced insignia was indecipherable pushed forward and jostled the red-coated stroller roughly. The little man gave a squeak of alarm and clutched frantically at his parcel, but too late. The jostling had knocked it almost out from under his arm, and before he could recover his grip the burly assailant had seized it and shouldered quickly away through the crowd.

Stark terror was livid on the little man's face as he stared wildly around. And in the first desperate glance his eyes encountered the two men at the table watching him with

absorbing interest. 'Across the rail his gaze met theirs in a passion of entreaty. There was something about the attitude of them, their worn spaceman's leather and faces stamped with the indefinable ideal of lives lived dangerously, which must have, told him in that desperate glimpse that perhaps help lay here. He gripped the rail, white-knuckled, and gasped across it,

"Follow him! Get it back--reward--oh, hurry!"

"How much of a reward?" demanded Yarol with sudden purpose in his voice.

"Anything--your own price--only hurry!"

"You swear that?"

The little man's face was suffusing with anguished scarlet. "I swear it—of course I swear it! But hurry! Hurry, or you'll—"

"Do you swear it by—" Yarol hesitated and cast a curiously guilty glance-over his shoulder at Smith. Then he rose and leaned across the rail, whispering something in the stranger's ear. Smith saw a look of intense terror sweep across the flushed face. In its wake the crimson drained slowly away, leaving the man's moon-white features blank with an emotion to which Smith could put no name. But he nodded frantically. In a voice that had strained itself to a hoarse and gasping whisper he said,

"Yes, I swear. No.v go!"

With no further words Yarol vaulted the rail and plunged into the crowd in the wake of the vanishing thief. The little man stared after him for an instant, then came slowly around to the gate in the railing and threaded the empty tables to Smith's. He sank into the chair Yarol had left and buried his silkily silver head in hands that shook.

Smith regarded him impassively. He was somewhat surprised to see that it was not an old man who sat here opposite him. The mark of no more than middle years lay upon the anxiety-ravaged face, and the hands which were clenched

- above the bowed head were strong and firm,. with a queerly
- fragile slenderness that somehow did not belie the sense of

indwelling strength which he had noticed in his first glance. It wa~ not, thought Smith, an individual slenderness, but, as Yarol had said, a racial trait that made the man look as if a blow would break him into fragments. And the race, had he not known better, he would have sworn dwelt upon some-, smaller planet than Earth, some world of lesser gravity where such delicate bone-structure as this would have purpo~e.

After a while the stranger's head rose slowly and he stared at Smith with haggard eyes. They were a queer color, those eyes—dark, soft, veiled in a sort of filmed translucency so that they seemed never to dwell directly upon anything. They gave the whole face a look of withdrawn, introspective peace wildly at odds now with the anguish of unrest upon the

delicate features of the man. —

He' was scrutinizing Smith, the depseration in his eyes robbing the long stare of any inipertinence~ With averted eyes Smith let him look. Twice he was aware that the other's lips had parted and his breath caught as if for speech; but he must have seen something in that dark, impassive face across the table, scarred with the tale of many battles, cold-eyes, emotionless, which made him think better of attempting questions. So he sat there silently, hands twisting on the table, naked anguish in his eyes, waiting.

The minutes went by slowly. It must have been all of a quarter of an hour before Smith heard a step behind him and knew by the light which dazzled across the face of the man opposite that Yarol had returned. The little Venusian pulled up a chair and sank into it silently, grinning and laying on the table a flat, squansh package.

The stranger pounced upon it with a little, inarticulate cry, running anxious hands over the brown paper in which it was wrapped, testing the brown seals which splotched the %ide where the edges of the covering came together.

Satisfied then, he turned to Yarol. The wild desperation had died upon his face now, magically allowing it to fall into lines of a vast tranquility. Smith thought he had never seen a face so suddenly and serenely at peace. And yet there was in its peace-

fulness a queer sort of resignation, as if something lay ahead of him which he accepted without a struggle; as if, perhaps, he was prepared to pay whatever tremendous price Yarol asked, and knew it would be high.

"What is it," he asked Yarol in a gentle voice, "that you wish as your reward?"

"Tell me the Secret," said Yarol boldly. He was grinning as he said it. The rescue of the package had not been a task of any great difficulty for a man of his knowledge and character. How he had accomplished it not even Smith knew—the ways of Venusians are strange—but he had had no doubt that Yarol would succeed. He was not looking now at the Venusian's fair, cherubic face with its wise black eyes dancing. He was watching the stranger, and he saw no surprise upon the man's delicate features, only a little flash of quickly darkened brightness behind the veiled eyes, a little spasm of pain and acknowledgment twisting his face for a moment.

"I might have known that," he said quietly, in his soft, low voice that held a taint of some alien inflection of speech beneath its careful English. "Have you any conception of what it is you ask?"

"A little." Yarol's voice was sobering under the graveness of the other's tone. "I—I knew one of your race once—one of the Seles—and learned just enough to make me want very badly the whole Secret."

"You learned a name, too," said the little man gently. "And I swore by it to give you what you asked. I shall give it to you. But you must understand that I would never have given that oath had even so vital a thing as my own life depended upon it. I, or any of the Seles, would die before swearing by that name in a cause less great than—the one for which I swore. By that"—he smiled faintly—"you may guess how precious a thing this package is. Are you sure, are you very sure you wish to know our secret?"

Smith recognized the stubbornness that was beginning to shadow Yarol's finely featured face.

"I am," said the Venusian firmly. "And you promised it

to me in 'the name of—" he broke off, faintly mouthing syllables he did not utter. The little man smiled at him with a queer hint of pity on his face.

"You are invoking powers," he said, "which you very clearly know nothing of. A dangerous thing to do. But—yes, I have sworn, and I will tell you. I must tell you now, even if you did not wish to know; for a promise made in that name must be fulfilled, whatever it cost either promiser or promisee."

"I am sorry—but now you must know." -

"Tell us, then," urged Yarol, leaning forward across the table.

The little man turned to Smith, his face serene with a peace that vaguely roused unease in the Earthman's mind.

"Do you, too, wish to know?" he asked. -

Smith hesitated for an instant, weighing that nameless unease against his own curiosity. Despite himself he felt curiously impelled to know the answer to Yarol's question, though he sensed more surely as he thought it over a queer, quiet threat behind the little stranger's calmness. He nodded shortly and scowled at Yarol.

Without further ado the man crossed his arms on the table over his precious parcel, leaned forward and began to speak'

in his soft~, slow voice. And as he talked, it seemed to Smith that a greater serenity even than before was coming into his eyes, something as vast and calm as death itself. He seemed to be leaving life behind as he spoke, with every word sinking deeper and deeper into a peace that nothing in life could trouble. And Smith knew that the precious guarded secret must not be thus on the verge of betrayal, and its betrayer so deathly calm, unless a peril as great as death itself lay behind the revelation. He caught his breath to check the disclosures, but a compulsion seemed to be on him now that he could not break. Almost apathetically he listened.

"You must imagine," the little man was saying quietly, "the analogy of--well, for example, of a race of people driven by necessity into pitch-black caverns where their children and grandchildren are reared without ever once having

seen light or made any use of their eyes. As the generations passed a legend would grow up around the ineffable beauty and mystery of Sight. It would become a religion, perhaps, the tale of a greater glory than words could describe--for how can one describe sight to the blind?--which their forebears had known and which they still possessed the organs for perceiving, if conditions were such as to permit it.

"Our race has such a legend. There is a faculty--a sense--that we have lost through the countless eons since at our peak and origin we possessed it. With us 'peak' and 'origin' are synonymous; for, like no other race in existence, our most ancient legends begin in a golden age of the infinitely long past. Beyond that they do not go. We have no stories among us of any crude beginnings, like other races. Our origin is lost to us, though the legends of our people go farther back than I could make you believe. But so far as history tells us, we sprang full-fledged from some remote, unlegended birth into highly civilized, perfectly cultured being. And in that state of perfection we possessed the lost sense which exists only 'in veiled tradition today.

"In the wilderness of Tibet the remnants of our once mighty race dwell. Since Earth's beginnings we have dwelt there, while in the outside world mankind struggled slowly up out of savagery. And by infinite degrees we have declined, until to the majority of us the Secret is lost. Yet our past is too splendid to forget, and we disdain even now to mingle with the young civilizations that have risen. For our glorious Secret is not wholly gone. Our priests know it, and guard it with dreadful magics, and though it is not meet that even the whole of our own race should share the mystery, yet the meanest of us would scorn even so much as the crown of your greatest empire, because we, who inherited the Secret, are so far greater than kings."

He paused, and the withdrawn look in his queer, translucent eyes deepened. Yarol said urgently, as if to call him back into the present again.. - - -

"Yes, but what is it? What is the Secret?"

The soft eyes turned to him compassionately.

'~Yes—you must be told. There is no escape for you now. How you learned that name by which you invoked me I cannot guess, but I know that you did not learn much more, or

you would never have used the power of it to ask me this question. It is—unfortunate—for us all that I can answer you—that I am one of the few who know. None but we priests ever venture outside our mountain retreat. So you have asked your question of one of the little number who could answer—and that is a misfortune for you as well—as for me."

Again he paused, and Smith saw that vast tranquility deepening upon his serene features. So might a man look who gazes, without protest, into the face of death. -

"Go on," urged Yarol impatiently. "Tell us. Tell us the Secret."

"I can't," the little man's white head shook. He smiled faintly. "There are no words. But! will show you. Look."

He reached out onó fragile hand and tilted the glass that stood at Smith's elbow so that the red dregs of the segirwhisky spilled in a tiny pool on the table.

"Look," he said'again.

Smith's eyes sought the shining redness of the spilled liquid. There was a darkness in it through which pale shadows moved so strangely that he bent closer to see, for nothing near them could possibly have cast such reflections.

He was conscious that Yarol too was leaning to look, but after that he was conscious of nothing but the red darkness of the pool stirred with pale flickerings, and his eyes were plunging so deeply into its secretness that he could not stir a muscle, and the table and the terrace and the whole great teeming city of steel about him was a mist that faded into oblivion..

'From a great way off he heard that soft, slow voice, full of infinite -resignation, infinite calm, and a vast, transcendent pity. -

"Do not struggle," it said gently. "Surrender your minds -

to mine and I will show you, poor foolish children, what you ask. I must, by virtue of the name. And it may be that the knowledge you gain will be worth even the price it costs us all—for we three must die when the secret is revealed. You understand that, surely? Our whole race-life, from ages immemorial, is dedicated to tl~€Secret's keeping, and any outside the circle of our priesthood who learn it must die that the knowledge be not betrayed. And I, who in my foolishness swore by the name, must tell you what you ask, and see that you die before I pay the price of my own weakness—with my own death.

"Well, this was ordaine . Do not struggle against it—it is the pattern into which our lives are woven, and from our births we three moved forward to this moment around a table, together. Now watch, and listen—and learn.

"In the fourth dimension, which is time, man can travel only with the flow of its stream. In the other three he can move freely at will, but In time he must submit to the forward motion which is all he knows. Incidentally, only this dimension of the four affects him physically. As he moves along the fourth dimension he ages. Now once we knew the secret of moving as freely through

time as through space, and in a way that did not affect our bodies any more than, the motion of stepping forward or back, up or down. That secret involved the use of, a special sense which I believe all men possess, though through ages of disuse it has atrophied almost to non-existence. Only among the Seles does even a memory of it exist, and only among our priesthood have we those who possess that ancient sense in its full power.

"It is not physically that even we can move at will through time. Nor can we in any way affect what has gone before or is to come after, save in the knowledge of past and future which we gain in our journeyings. For our motion in time is confined strictly to what you may call memory. Through that all but lost sense we can look back into the lives of those who went before, or forward through the still unbodied but definitely existent 'memories' of those who come after us. For as I have said, all

life is woven into a finished pattern, in which future and past are irrevocably limned.

"There is danger, even in this way of traveling. Just what it is no one knows, for none who meet the danger return. Perhaps the voyager chances into the memories of a man dying, and cannot escape. Or perhaps—! do not know. But sometimes the mind does not return—snaps out..

"Though there are no limits to any of these four dimensions so far as mankind is concerned, yet the distance which we may venture along any one of them is limited to the capacity of the mind that journeys. No mind, however powerful, could trace life back to its origin. For that reason we have no knowledge of our own beginnings, before that golden age I spoke of. But we do know that we are exiles from a place too lovely to have lasted, a land more exquisite than anything Earth can show. From a world like a jewel we came, and our cities were so fair that even now children sing' songs of Baloise the Beautiful, and ivory-walled Ingala and Nial of

the white roofs. -

"A catastrophe drove us out of that land—a catastrophe that no one understands. Legend says that our gods were

angered and forsook us. What actually happened no-one seems to know. But we mourn still for the lovely world of

Seles where we were born. It was—but look, you shall see."

The voice had been a low rising and falling of undernotes upon a sea of darkness; but now Smith, all his consciousness still centred upon the reflecting pool of hypnotic red,, was aware of a stirring and subtle motion deep down in its darkness. Things were moving, rising, dizzily so that his head swam and the void trembled about him. - -

Out of that shaking darkness a light began to glow. Reality was taking shape about him, a new substance and a new scene, and as the light 'and the landscape formed out of darkness, so his own mind clothed itself in flesh again, taking on reality by slow degrees.

Presently he was standing on the slope of a low hill, velvet with dark grass in the twilight. Below him in that lovely

half-translucency of dusk ~Baloise the Beautiful lay outspread, ivory-white, glimmering through the dimness like a pearl half drowned in dark wine. Somehow he knew the city for what it was, knew its name and loved every pale spire and

dome and archway spread out in the dusk below him. Baloise the Beautiful, his lovely city~"

He had no time to wonder at this sudden, aching familiarity; for beyond the ivory roofs a great moony shimmer was beginning to lighten the dim sky, such a vast and farspreading glow that he caught his breath as he stood watching; for surely no moon that ever rose on Earth gave forth so mighty an illumination. It spread behind the stretch of Baloise's ivory roof-tops in a great halo that turned the whole night breathless with coming miracle. Then beyond the city he saw the crest of a vast silver circle glimmering through a wash of ground vapor, and suddenly he understood.

Slowly, slowly it rose. The ivory roof-tops of Baloise the Beautiful took that great soft glimmering light and turned it into pearly gleaming, and the whole night was miraculous with the wonder of rising Earth.

On the hillside Smith was motionless while the vast bright globe swung clear of the roofs and floated free at last in the pale light of the Moon. He had seen this sight before, from a dead and barren satellite, but never the exquisite luminance of Earth through the vapors of Moon-air that veiled the vast globe in a shimmer of enchantment as it swung mistily through the dusk, all its silvery continents faintly flushed with green, the translucent wonder of its seas shining jewel-clear, jewel-pale, colored like opals in the lucid tranquility of the Earth-bright dark.

It was almost, too lovely a sight for man to gaze on unprepared. His mind was an ache of beauty too vivid for eyes to dwell on long as he found himself moving slowly down the hill. Not until then did he realize that this was not his own body through whose eyes he looked. He had no control over it; he had simply borrowed it to convey him through the moony dusk down the hillside, that he might perceive by its

perceptions the immeasurably long-ago time which he was beholding now. This, then, was the "sense" the little stranger had spoken of. In some eons-dead moon-dweller's memory the sight of rising Earth, marvelous over the spires' of the forgotten city, had been graven so deeply that the *ash of countless ages could not blot it away. He was seeing now, feeling now what this unknown-man had known on a hillside on the Moon a million years ago.

Through the magic of that lost "sense" he walked the Moon's verdant surface toward that exquisite city which was' lost to everything but dreams so many eons ago. Well, he might have guessed from the little priest's extreme fragility alone that his race was not a native of Earth. The lesser gravity of the Moon would have bred a race of bird-like delicacy. Curious that they had moon-silver hair and eyes as translucent and remote as the light of the dead Moon. A queer, illogical link with their lost homeland. -

But there was little time for wonder and speculation now. He was watching the loveliness of Baloise floating nearer and nearer through the dusk that seemed as swim with a radiance so softly real that it was like walking through darkly shining water. He was testing just how much latitude this new experience allowed him. He could see what his host saw, and he began to realize now that the man's other senses were open to his perception too. He could even share in his emotions, for he had known a moment of passionate longing for the whole white city of Baloise as he looked down from the-hill, longing and love such as an exile might feel for his native city.

Gradually, too, he became aware that the man was afraid. A queer, dark, miasmatic terror lurked just below the surface of his conscious thoughts, something whose origin he could not fathom. It gave the loveliness he looked

on a poignancy almost as sharp as pain, etching every white spire and gleaming dome of Baloise deep into his remembering mind.

Slowly, moving in the shadow of his own dark terror, the man went down the hill. The ivory wall that circled Baloise rose over him, a low wall with a crest fretted into a band of

lacy carving upon whose convolutions the lucent Earthlight lay like silver. Under a pointed arch he walked, still moving with that slow resolute step as if he approached something dreadful from which there was no escape. And strongly and more strongly Smith was aware of the fear that drowned the man's unformulated thoughts, washing in a dark tide beneath the consciousness of everything he did. And stronger still the poignant love for Baloise ached in him and his eyes lingered like slow caresses on the pale roofs and Earth-washed walls and the pearly dimness that lay shadowily between, where the light of rising Earth was only a reflection. He was memorizing the loveliness of Baloise, as an exile might do. He was lingering upon the sight of it with a yearning so deep that it seemed as if even unto death he must carry behind his eyes the Earth-lit loveliness on which he gazed.

Pale walls and translucent domes and arches rose about him as he walked slowly along a street paved in white seasand, so that his feet fell soundlessly upon its surface and he might have been walking in a translucent dream. Now Earth had swum higher above the reflecting roofs, and the great shining globe of it floated free overhead, veiled and opalescent with the rainbow seas of its atmosphere. Smith, looking up through the eyes of this unknown stranger, could scarcely recognize the configuration of the great green continents spread out beneath their veils of quivering air, and the shapes of the shining seas were strange to him. He looked into a past so remote that little upon his native planet was familiar to him.

Now his strange host was turning aside from the broad, sandy street. He went down a little paved alley, dim in the swimming light of Earth, and pushed open the gate of grillework that closed its end. Under the opened arch he walked into a garden, beyond whose Earth-bright loveliness a low white house rose pale as ivory against dark trees.

There was a pool in the garden's center, Earth swam like a great glimmering opal in its darkness, brimming the water with a greater glory than ever shone into earthly pool. And

bending over that basin of spilled Earthlight was a woman.

The silvery cascade of her hair swung forward about a face paler than the pallor of rising Earth, and lovely with a delicacy

more exquisite than ever shaped an Earthwoman's features into beauty. Her moon-born slimness as she bent above the pool was the slimness of some airy immortal; for no earthly woman ever walked whose delicacy was half so

sweet and fragile.

She lifted her head as the grille-gate opened, and swayed to her feet in a motion so unearthly light that she scarcely seemed to touch the grass as she moved forward, a creature of pale enchantment in an enchanted Moon-garden. The man crossed the grass to her reluctantly, and Smith was aware in him of a dread and a soul-deep aching that choked up in his throat until he could scarcely speak. The woman lifted her face, clear now in the Earthlight and so delicately modeled that it was more like some exquisite jewel-carving than a face of bone and Moon-white flesh. Her eyes were great and dark with an

unnamed dread. She breathed in the lightest echo of a
voice. - -

"It has come?". . . and the tongue she spoke rippled like running water, in
strange, light, breathing cadences that Smith understood only through the mind
of the man whose

memory he shared. -

His host said in a voice that was a little too loud in its
resolution not to quiver. - - -

"Yes—it has come."

At that the woman's eyes closed involuntarily, her whole exquisite face
crumpling into sudden, stricken grief so heavy that it seemed those fragile
creatures must be crushed under the weight of it, the whole delicate body-sink
overburdeiled to the grass. But she did not fall. She stood swaying for an
instant, and then the man's arms were about her, holding her close in a
desperate embrace. And through the memory of the long-dead man who held her,
Smith could feel the delicacy of the eons-dead woman, the warm softness of her
flesh, the tiny bones, like a bird's. Again he felt futilely that she was

too fragile a creature to know such sorrow as racked her now, and a helpless
anger rose in him against whatever unnamed thing it was that kindled such
terror and heartbreak in them

both. - -

For a long moment the man held her close, feeling the soft fragility of her
body warm agalast him, the rack of silent sobs that must surely tear her very
bones apart, so delicate were they, so desperate her soundless agony. And in
his own throat the tightness of sorrow was choking, and his own eyes burned
with unshed tears. The dark miasma of terror had strengthened until the
Earth-lit garden was blotted out behind it, and nothing remained but the black
weight of his fear, the pain of his hopeless grief.

At last he loosed the girl in his arms a little and murmured against her
silvery hair, "Hush, hush, my darling. Do not sorrow so—we knew' that this
must come some day. It comes to everyone alive—it has come to us too. Do not
weep so. . .

She sobbed once more, a deep ache of pure pain, and then stood back in his
arms and nodded, shaking back the silver hair. -

"I know," she said. "I know." She lifted her head and looked up toward Earth's
great haloed mystery swimming through veils of colored enchantment above them.
The light of it glistened in the tears on her face. "Almost," she said, I
'wish we two had goni_there."

- He shook her a little in his arms.

"No—life in the colonies, with only Seles' little glimmer of green light
shining down on us to tear our hearts with memories of home—no, my dear. That
would have been a lifetime of longing and yearning to return. We have lived in
happiness here, knowing only this moment of pain at the end. It is better."

'She bent her head and laid her forehead against his shoulder, shutting out

the sight of risen Earth.

"Is it?" she asked him thickly, her voice indistinct with tears. "Is a lifetime of nostalgia and grieving, with you, not

better than paradise without you? Well, the choice is made now. I am happy only in this—that you have been summoned

first and need not know this—this dreadfulness—of facing life alone. You must go now—quickly, or I shall never let you. Yes—we knew it must end—that the summons must come. Good-bye—my very dear."

She lifted her wet face and closed her eyes.

Smith would have looked away then if it had been possible for him. But he could not detach himself even in emotion from the host whose memory he shared, and the unbearable instant stabbed as deeply at his own heart as it did at the man whose memory he shared. He took her gently again into his arms and kissed the quivering mouth, salt with the taste of her tears. And then without a backward glance he turned toward the open gate and walked slowly out under its arch, moving as a man moves to his doom.

He went down the narrow way into the open street again, under the glory of risen Earth. The beauty of the eons-dead

Balaise he walked through ached like a dull pain in his heart beneath the sharper anguish of that farewell. The salt of the girl's tears was still on his lips, and it seemed to him that not even the death he went to could give him ease from the pain of the moments he had just passed through. He went on

lutely. - ' -

Smith realized that they were turning now toward the center of Balaise the Beautiful. Great open squares here and there broke the ivory ranks of the buildings, and there were men and women moving infrequently through the streets, fragile as birds in their Moon-born delicacy, silvery pale under the immense -pale disk of high-swinging Earth that dominated that scene until nothing seemed real but its vast marvel hanging overhead. The buildings were larger here, and though they lost none of their enchanted beauty they were more clearly places of industry than had been those domed and grille-fretted dwellings on the outskirts of the city.

Once they skirted a great square in whose center bulked a vast sphere of silvery sheen that reflected the brightness of

the sky-filled Earth. It was a ship—a space-ship. Smith's

eyes would have told him that even if the knowledge that

floated through his mind from the mind of the Moon-dweller had not made it clear. It was a space-ship loaded with men and machinery and supplies for the colonies struggling against the invading jungles upon steamy, prehistoric Earth.

They watched the last passengers filing up the ramps that led to orifices in its lower curve, Moon-white people moving silently as people in a dream under the vast pale glowing of the Moon-high Earth. It was queer how silent they were. The whole great square and the immense sphere that filled it and the throngs moving up and down the ramps might have been figures in a dream. It

was hard to realize that they were not—that they had existed, flesh and blood, stone and steel, under the light of a vast, heaven-filling globe haloed in its rainbowy haze of atmosphere, once, milleniums ago.

As they neared the farther side of the square, Smith saw through his host's scarcely observing eyes the ramps lower and the orifices close in the huge bubble-ship. The Moonman was too wrapped in his agony and heartbreak and despair to pay much heed to what was taking place there in the square, so that Smith caught only abstract glimpses of the great ship floating bubble-light up from the pavement, silently, effortlessly, with no such bursts of thunderous noise and great washes of flame as attend the launching of modern spaceships. Curiosity rode him hard, but he could do nothing. His only glimpses of this ages-past scene must be taken through' 'the eyes of his host's 'memory. They went on out of the,~ square.

A great dark building loomed up above the pale-roofed houses. It was the only dark thing he had seen in Baloise, and the sight of it woke into sudden life the terror that had been dwelling formlessly and deep in the mind of his host. But he went on unhesitatingly. The broad street led straight up to the archway that opened in the dark wall's façade, a portal as~ cavernous and blackly threatening as the portals of death~ itself.

Under the shadow of it the man paused. He looked back lingeringly upon the pearly pallor of Baloise. Over the domed and pinnacled roofs the great pale light of Earth brooded. Earth itself, swimming in seas of opalescent atmosphere, all

its continents silver-green, all its seas colored like veiled'

jewels, glowed down upon him for the last time. The full tide of his love for Baloise, of his love for the lost girl in the garden, of his love for the whole green, sweet satellite he

lived on came choking up in his throat, and his heart was near bursting with the sweet fullness of the life he must leave~

Then he turned resolutely and went in under the dark

archway. Through his set eyes Smith could 'see nothing within but a gloom like moonlight shining through mist, so that the space inside was full of a grayness faintly translucent, faintly luminous. And the terror that clogged the man 's mind was laying hold on his own as they went steadily forward, in

sick fright, through the gloom. -

The dimness brightened as they advanced. More and more inexplicable in Smith's mind grew the wonder that, though fear was turning the Moon-dweller's very brain- icy with dread, yet he went unhesitatingly forward, no compulsion driving him but his own will. It was death 'he went to—there was no doubt about that now, from the glimpses he had of his

host's mind—a death from which by instinct he shrank with~ every fiber of his being. But he went on.

Now walls were becoming visible through the dim fog of

the darkness. They were smooth walls, black, unfeatured. The interior of this great dark building -was appalling in its very simplicity. Nothing but a wide black corridor whose walls rose into invisibility overhead. Contrasting with the ornateness of every other man-made surface in Baloise, the stark severity

of the building struck a note of added terror into the numbed brain of the man who walked here.

The darkness paled and brightened. The corridor was widening. Presently its walls had fallen back outside range of sight; and over a black, unclustered floor, through misty brightness the Moon-man walked forward to his death;

The room into which the hail had widened was immense.

Smith thought it must comprise the whole interior of the great dark building; for many minutes passed while his host paced

steadily, slowly forward over the darkness of the floor.

Gradually through that queer bright dimness a flame began

to glow. It danced in the misUike the light of a windblown fire, brightening, dimming, flaring up again so that the mist pulsed with its brilliance. There was the regularity of life in that pulsing.

It was a wall of pale flame, stretching through the misty

dimness as far as the eye could reach on either side. The man paused before it, with bowed head, and he tried to speak.

Terror thickened his voice so that it was only on the third attempt that he managed to articulate, very low, in a choked voice, "Hear me, O Mighty. I am come."

'In the silence after his voice ceased, the wall of beating flame flickered once again, like a heart's beat, and then rolled back on both sides like curtains. Beyond the back-drawn flame a high-roofed hollow in the mist loomed dimly. It had no more tangibility than the mist itself, the inside of a sphere of dim clarity. And in that mist-walled hollow three gods sat. Sat? They crouched, dreadfully, hungrily, with such a bestial ravening in their poise that only gods could maintain the awful dignity which veiled them with terror despite the ugly

humped hunger of their posture. -

This one glimpse through glazing eyes Smith caught as the Moonman flung himself face down on the black floor, the breath stopping in his throat, choking against unbearable terror as a drowning man chokes against sea-water. But as the eyes through which he looked lost sight of the three ravenous figures, Smith had an instant's glimpse of the shadow behind them, monstrous on the curved mist-wall that hollowed them in, cast waveringly by the back-drawn flame. And it was a single shadow. These three were One.

'And the One spoke. In a voice like the lick of flames, tenuous as the mist that reflected it, terrible as the voice of death itself, the One said:

"What mortal dares enter our immortal Presence?"

"One whose god-appointed cycle is complete," gasped

the prostrate man, his voice coming in little puffs as if he had

been running hard. "One who fulfills his share of his race's

debt to the Three who are One."

The voice of the One had been a voice full, complete, an individual speaking. Now out of the dim hollow where the three crouched a thin, iflickering voice, like hot flame, less than 'full, less than complete, came quavering.

"Be it remembered," said the thin, hot little voice, "that all the world of Seles owes its existence to ourselves, who by our might hold fire and air and water around its globe. Be it remembered that only through ourselves does the flesh of life clothe this little world's bare bones. Be it remembered!"

The man on the floor shuddered in one long quiver of acquiescence. And Smith, his mind aware- as that other mind was aware, knew that it was true. The Moon's gravity was too weak, even in this long-vanished era, to hold its cloak of life-supporting air without the aid of some other force than its own. Why these Three furnished that power he did not know, but he was beginning to guess.'

A second little voice, hungry as flame, took up the ritual chant as the first died away.

"Be it remembered that only for a price do we wrap the robe of life about Seles' bones. Be that bargain remembered that the progenitors of the race of Seles made with the Three who are One, in the very long ago when even the gods were young. Let the price be, not forgotten that every man must pay at the end of his appointed cycle. Be it remembered that only through our divine hunger Can mankind reach us to pay his vow. All who live owe us the debt of their living, and by the age-old pact of their forefathers must return when we summon them into the shadow that gives their loved world life."

Again the prostrate man shuddered, deep and coldly, acknowledging the ritual truth. And a third voice quavered out of that misty hollow with aflame's fflickering hunger in its sound. -

"Be it remembered that all who come to pay the race's debt and buy anew our favor that their world may live, must come to us willingly, with no resistance against our divine hunger- must surrender without struggle. And be it remembered that if so much as one man alone dares resist our will, then in that instant is our power withdrawn, and all our anger called down upon the world of Seles. Let one man struggle against our desire, and the world of Seles goes bare to the void, all life upon it ceasing in a breath. Be that remembered!"

On the floor the Moonman's body shivered again. Through his mind ran one last ache of love and longing for the beautiful world whose greenness and Earth-lit wonder his death was to preserve. Death was a little thing, if by it Seles lived.

In one full, round thunder the One said terribly, "Come you willingly into our Presence?"

From the prone man's hidden face a voice choked, "Willingly- that Soles may live." -

And the voice of the One pulsed through the flamewashed

dimness so deeply that the ears did not hear, and only the beat of the Mooninan's heart, the throbbing of his blood, caught the low thunder of the sodS' command.

"Then come!" -

He stirred. Very slowly he got to his feet. -He faced the three. And for the first time Smith knew a quickened fear for his own safety. Heretofore the awe and terror he had shared with the Moon-host had been solely for the man himself. But now—was death not reaching out for him no less than for his host? For he knew of no way to dissociate his own spectator mind from the mind with which it was united that it might be aware of this fragment of the measureless past. And when the Moonman went forward into oblivion, must not oblivion engulf his own mind too? This, then, was what the little priest had meant when he told them that some, adventuring backward through the minds of their forebears, never returned. Death in one guise or another must have swallowed them up

with the minds they looked through. Death yawned for himself, now, if he could not escape. -For the first time he

struggled, testing his independence. And it was futile. He could not break away.

With bowed head the Moonman stepped forward through the curtain of flame. It hissed hotly on either side, and then it was behind and he was close to that dim hell where the three gods sat, their shadow hovering terribly behind them on the mist. And it looked in that uncertain light, as if the three strained forward eagerly, hunger ravenous in every dreadful line of them, and the shadow behind spread itself like a waiting mouth.

Then with a swishing roar the flame-curtains swept to behind him, and darkness like the dark of death itself fell blindingly upon the hollow of the Three. Smith knew naked terror as he felt the mind he had hidden thus far falter as a horse falters beneath its rider—fail as a mount fails—and he was falling, falling into gulfs of vertiginous terror, emptier than the space between the worlds, a blind and empty hungriness that outrayened vacuum itself. -

He did not fight it. He could not. It was too tremendous. But he did not yield.—One small conscious entity in an infinity of pure hunger, while sucking emptiness raved around him, he was stubborn and unwavering. The hunger of the Three must never before have known anything but acquiescence to the debt man owed them, and now fury roared through the vacuum of their hunger more terribly than any mortal—mind could combat. In the midst of it, Smith clung stubbornly to his flicker—of consciousness, incapable of doing anything more than resist feebly the ravenous desire that sucked at his life.

Dimly he realized what he was doing. It was the death of a world he compassed, if resistance to the hunger of the Three meant what they had threatened. It meant the death of every living thing on the satellite—of the girl in the Earth-bright garden;— of all who walked Baloise 's streets, of Baknse herself in the grinding eons, unprotected from the bombarding

meteors that would turn this sweet green world into a pitted skull. - -

But the urge to live was blind in him. He could not have relinquished it if he would, so deeply rooted is the life-desire in us all, the raw, animal desperation—against extinction. He would not die—he would not surrender,

let the price be what it might. He could not fight that blind ravening that typhooned about him, but he would not submit. He was simply a passive stubbornness against the hunger of the Three, while eons swirled about him and time ceased and nothing had existence but himself, his living, desperate self, rebellious against death. ~

Others, adventuring through the past, must too have met this peril, most have succumbed to it in the weakness of their inborn love for the green Moon-world. But he had not such weakness. Nothing was so important as life—his own life, here and now. He would not surrender. Deep down under the veneer of his civilized self lay a bed-rock of pure savage power that nothing on any world he knew had ever tested beyond its strength. It supported him now against the anger of—divinity, the unshakable foundation of his resolution not to yield.

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And slowly, slowly the ravening hunger abated its fury about him. It could not absorb what refused to surrender, and all its fury could not terrorize him into acquiescence. This, then, was why the Three had demanded and reiterated the necessity for submission to their hunger. They had not the power to overcome that unshakable life-urge if it were not willingly put aside, and they dared not let the world they—terrorized know this weakness in their strength. For a flash—ing moment he visioned the vampire Three, battering on

the race that dared not defy them for love of the beautiful cities—the soft gold days and Earth-bright miracles of nights that counted more to mankind than its own life counted. But it was ended now. - :1

One last furnace-blast of white-hot hunger raved around Smith's stubbornness. But whatever vampiric things they

were, spawned in what unknown, eons-forgotten place, the

Three who were One had not the power to break down that last rock-steady savagery in which all that was Smith rooted deep. And at last, in one final burst of typhoon-fury, which

roared about him in tornado-blasts of hunger and defeat, the

vacuum ceased to be.

For one blinding instant sight flashed unbearably through his brain. He saw sleeping Seles, the green Moonworld that

time itself was to forget pearl-pale under the glory of risen Earth, washed with the splendor of a brighter night than man was to know again, the mighty globe swimming through seas of floating atmosphere, veiled in it, glorious for one last brief instant in the wonder of its misty continents, its pearly seas. Baloise the Beautiful slept under the luminance of highriding Earth. For one last radiant moment the exquisite Moon-world floated through its dream-pale darkness that no world in space was ever to equal again, nor any descendant of the race that knew it ever wholly forget.

And then—disaster. In a stunned, remote way Smith was

aware of a high, ear-splitting wail that grew louder, louder—intolerably louder until his very brain could no longer endure the agony of its sound. And over Baloise, over Seles and all who dwelt thereon, a darkness began to fall. High-swimming Earth shimmered through gathering dark, and from the rolling green hills and verdant meadows and silver sea of Seles the atmosphere ripped

away. In long, opalescent streamers, bright under the light of Earth, the air of Seles was forsaking the world it cloaked. Not in gradual dissipation, but in abrupt.

angry destruction as if the invisible hands of the Three were tearing it in long bright ribbons from the globe of Seles.—so the atmosphere fell away.

That was the last Smith saw of it as darkness closed him in—Seles, lovely even in its destruction, a little green jewel shimmering with color and brightness, unrolling from its cloak of life as the long, streaming ribbons of rainbow translucency tore themselves away and trailed in the void behind, slowly paling into the blackness of space.

Then darkness closed in about him, and oblivion rolled ~ver him and nothing—nothing.

He opened his eyes, and startingly, New York'i steel ~owers were all about him, the hum of traffic in his ears.

Irresistibly his eyes sought the sky, where a moment before, so it seemed to him, the treat bright globe of pearly Earth hung luminous. And then, realization coming buck slowly, he lowered his eyes and met across the table the wide, haunted stare of the little priest of the Moon-people. The face he-saw shocked him. It had aged ten years in the incalculable interval of his journey back into the past. Anguish, deeper than any personal anguish could strike, had graven sharp lines into his unearthly pallor, and the great strange eyes were nightmare-haunted.

"It was through me, then," he was whispering, as if to himself. "Of all my race I was the one by whose hand Seles died. Oh, gods—"

"I did it!" Smith broke in harshly, driven out of his habit of silence in a blind effort to alleviate something of that unbearable anguish. "I was the one!"

"No—you were the instrument, I the wielder. I sent you back. I am the destroyer of Baloise and Nial and ivory-white Ingala, and all the gre~loveliness of our lost,world. How can! ever look up again by night upon the bare white skull of the world I slew? It was I—I!"

"What the devil the you two talking about?" demanded Yarol across the table. "I didn't see a thing, except a lot of darkness and lights, and a sort of moon...."

"And yet"—~—that haunted - whisper went on, obliviously—' 'yet I have seen the Three in their temple. No other of all my race ever saw them before, for no living memory ever returned out of that temple save the memory that broke them. Of all my race only I know the secret of the Disaster. Our legends tell of what the exiles saw, looking up that night in terror through the thick air of Earth—but I know!

And no man of flesh and blood can bear that knowledge long—who murdered—a world by his blundering. Oh gods of

Seles—help me!" -

His Moon-white hanth groped blindly over the table,

found the square package that had cost him so dear a price. He stumbled to his feet. Smith rose too, actuated by some inarticulate emotion he could not have

named. But the Moonpnest shook his head

"No," he said, as if in answer to some question of his own mind, "you are not to blame for what happened so many eons ago—and yet in the last few minutes. This tangle Of time and space, and the disaster that a living man can bring to something dead millenniums ago—it is far beyond our narrow

grasp of understanding. I was chosen to be the vessel of that

disaster—yet not I alone am responsible, for this was ordained from time's beginning. I could not have changed it had I known at the beginning what the end must be. It is not for what you did, but for what you know now—that you must

die!"

The words had not wholly left his lips before he was

swinging up his square parcel like a deadly weapon. Close against Smith's face he held it, and the shadow of death was in his Moon-pale eyes and dark upon his anguished white face. For the flash of an instant it seemed to Smith that a blaze of intolerable light was bursting out all around the square of the package, though actually he could see nothing but the commonplace outlines of it in the priest's white hands.

For the breath of an instant almost too brief to~ register on his brain, death brushed him hungrily. But in that instant as the threatening hands swung up there was a burst of bluewhite flame behind the priest's back, the familiar crackle of a gun. The little mati's face turned livid with pain for an instant, and then peace in a great gush of calmness washed across it, blanking the anguished dark eyes. He slumped.

sidewise, the square box faffing.

Across the huddle of his body on the floor Yarol 's crouched figure loomed, slipping the heat-gun back into its holster as he glanced across his shoulder.

"Come on—come on! "he whispered urgently. "Let's get outof here!" -

There was a shout from behind Smith, the beat of running

feet~ He cast one covetous glance at the fallen square of that mysterious package, but it was a fleeting one as he cleared the body in a leap and on Yarol's flying heels made for the lower

- ramp to the crowded level beneath. He would never know.