

EDMOND HAMILTON

Devolution

Edmond Hamilton was one of the most prolific and popular authors of science fiction before the Golden Age. His first professionally published story appeared in 1926 in *Weird Tales*, and it was in this magazine that he first made his reputation writing a low-tech hybrid of science fiction and fantasy dubbed the "weird scientific" tale. Hamilton's stories are fast-paced and action-packed, cast with heroic scientists and space explorers and featuring men-of-aces of such colossal proportions-evolution gone awry, interstellar invasion, planets on collision courses-that fans nicknamed him "World Wrecker Hamilton." Some of Hamilton's best work from these years was collected in 1936 in *The Horror on the Asteroid*, one of the earliest appearances of pulp science fiction in book form. Standout works from this period include *The Time Raiders*, a time-travel tale about a crack army of soldiers assembled from different eras to fight a threat to civilization, and the stories of the Interstellar Patrol, collected as *Crossed Suns* and *Outside the Universe*, about a pangalactic space brigade that protects galactic civilization from nonstop challenges to its existence. Hamilton's renown as a writer of thrilling space opera earned him the slot to write most of the lead novels for the science fiction hero pulp *Captain Future*, under his own name and the pseudonym Brett Sterling, and his affiliation with this magazine eventually earned him work writing for the Superman comics. He also wrote detective fiction and occasionally, under the pseudonym Hugh Davidson, tales of straight horror, some of which have been collected in *The Vampire Master*. Hamilton was one of the few early writers to adapt to the changing demands of science fiction in the years after World War II. His novels *The Haunted Stars*, *A Yank at Valhalla*, *The Star Kings*, and *City at the World's End* are notable for their fully drawn characterization and focus on human moods and motives. Some of his best short fiction from this time appears in *What's It Like Out There?* His Star Wars novels, *Weapon from Beyond*, *The Closed World*, and *World of the Starwolves*, are ranked as some of the best space operas of the postwar years.

Ross had ordinarily the most even of tempers, but four days of canoe travel in the wilds of North Quebec had begun to rasp it. On this, their fourth stop on the bank of the river to camp for the night, he lost control and for a few moments stood and spoke to his two companions in blistering terms.

His black eyes snapped and his darkly unshaven handsome young face worked as he spoke. The biologists listened to him without reply at first. Gray's blond young countenance was indignant but Woodin, the older biologist, just listened impassively with his gray eyes level on Ross's angry face.

When Ross stopped for breath, Woodin's calm voice struck in. "Are you finished?"

Ross gulped as though about to resume his tirade, then abruptly got hold of himself. "Yes, I'm finished," he said sullenly.

"Then listen to me," said Woodin, like a middle-aged father admonishing a sulky child.

"You're working yourself up for nothing. Neither Gray nor I have made one complaint yet. Neither of us has once said that we disbelieve what you told us."

"You haven't *said* you disbelieve, no!" Ross exclaimed with anger suddenly re-flaring. "But don't suppose I can tell what you're thinking?"

"You think I told you a fairy story about the things I saw from my plane, don't you? You think I dragged you two up here on the wildest wild-geese chase, to look for incredible creatures that could never have existed. You believe that, don't you?"

"Oh, *damn* these mosquitoes!" said Gray, slapping viciously at his neck and staring with unfriendly eyes at the aviator.

Woodin took command. "We'll go over this after we've made camp. Jim, get out the dufflebags. I'll show you how to rustle firewood?"

They both glared at him and at each other, but grudgingly they obeyed. The tension eased for the time.

By the time darkness fell on the little riverside clearing, the canoe was drawn up on the bank, the trim little balloon-silk tent had been erected, and a fire crackled in front of it. Gray fed the fire with fat knots of pine while Woodin cooked over it coffee, hot cakes, and the inevitable bacon.

The firelight wavered feebly up toward the tall trunks of giant hemlocks that walled the little clearing on three sides. It lit up their three khaki-clad, stained figures and the irregular white block of tent. It gleamed out there on the ripples of the McNorton, chuckling softly as it flowed on toward the I

Whale.

They ate silently, and as wordlessly cleaned the pans with bunches of grass. Woodin got his pipe going, the other two lit crumpled cigarettes, and then they sprawled for a time by the fire, listening to chuckling, whispering river-sounds, the sighing sough of the higher hemlock branches, the lonesome cheeping of insects.

Woodin finally knocked his pipe out on his boot-heel and sat up.

"All right," he said, "now we'll settle this argument we were having."

Ross looked a little shamefaced. "I guess I got too hot about it," he said subduedly. Then added, "all the same, you fellows do more than half disbelieve me."

Woodin shook his head calmly. "No, we don't, Ross. When you told us that you'd seen creatures unlike anything ever heard of while flying over this wilderness, Gray and I both believed you.

"If we hadn't, do you think two busy biologists would have dropped their work to come up here with you into these unending woods and look for the things you saw?"

"I know, I know," said the aviator unsatisfiedly. "You think I saw something queer and you're taking a chance that it will be worth the trouble of coming up here after."

"But you don't believe what I've told you about the look of the things. You think that sounds too queer to be true, don't you?"

For the first time Woodin hesitated in answering. "After all, Ross," he said in-directly, "one's eyes play tricks when you're only glimpsing things for a moment from a plane a mile up."

"Glimpsing them?" echoed Ross. "I tell you, man, I saw them as clearly as I see you. A mile up, yes, but I had my big binoculars with me and was using them when I saw them."

"It was near here, too, just east of the fork of the McNorton and the Little Whale. I was streaking south in a hurry for I'd been three weeks up at that government mapping survey on Hudson's Bay. I wanted to place myself by the river fork, so I brought my plane down a little and used my binoculars." Then, down there in a clearing by the river, I saw something glisten and saw- the things. I tell you, they were incredible, but just the same I saw them clear! I forgot all about the river fork in the moment or two I stared down at them.

"They were big, glistening things like heaps of shining jelly, so translucent that I could see the ground through them. There were at least a dozen of them and when I saw them they were gliding across that little clearing, a floating, flowing movement.

"Then they disappeared under the trees. If there'd been a clearing big enough to land in within a hundred miles, I'd have landed and looked for them, but there wasn't and I had to go on. But I wanted like the devil to find out what they were, and when I took the story to you two, you agreed to come up here by canoe to search for them. But I don't think now you've ever fully believed me."

Woodin looked thoughtfully into the fire. "I think you saw something queer, all right, some queer form of life. That's why I was willing to come up on this search.

"But things such as you describe, jelly-like, translucent, gliding over the ground like that-there's nothing like that since the first protoplasmic creatures, the beginning of life on earth, glided over our young world ages ago."

"If there were such things then, why couldn't they have left descendants like them?" Ross argued.

Woodin shook his head. "Because they all vanished ages ago, changed into different and higher forms of life, starting the great upward climb of life that has reached its height in man.

"Those long-dead, single-celled protoplasmic creatures were the start, the crude, humble beginning of our life. They passed away and their descendants were unlike them. We men are their descendants."

Ross looked at him, frowning. "But where did they come from in the first place, those first living things?"

Again Woodin shook his head. "That is one thing we biologists do not know and can hardly

speculate upon, the origin of those first protoplasmic forms of life.

"It's been suggested that they rose spontaneously from the chemicals of earth, yet this is disproved by the fact that no such things rise spontaneously *now* from inert matter. Their origin is still a complete mystery. But, however they came into existence on earth, they were the first of life, our distant ancestors."

Woodin's eyes were dreaming, the other two forgotten, as he stared into the fire, seeing visions.

"What a glorious saga it is, that wonderful climb up from crude protoplasm creatures to a man! A marvelous series of changes that has brought us from that first low form to our present splendor.

"And it might not have occurred on any other world but earth! For science is now almost sure that the cause of evolutionary mutations is the radiations of the radioactive deposits inside the earth, acting upon the genes of all living matter."

He caught a glimpse of Ross's uncomprehending face, and despite his raptness smiled a little.

"I can see that means nothing to you. I'll try to explain. The germ-cell of every living thing on earth contains in it a certain number of small, rod-like things which are called chromosomes. These chromosomes are made up of strings of tiny particles which we call genes. And each of these genes has a potent and different controlling effect upon the development of the creature that grows from that germ-cell.

"Some of these genes control the creature's color, some control his size, some the shape of his limbs and so on. Every characteristic of the creature that grows from that germ-cell will be greatly different from the fellow-creatures of its species. He will be, in fact, of an entirely new species. That is the way in which new species come into existence on earth, the method of evolutionary change.

"Biologists have known this for some time and they have been searching for the cause of these sudden great changes, these mutations, as they are called. They have tried to find out what it is that affects the genes so radically. They have found experimentally that X-rays and chemical rays of various kinds, when turned upon the genes of a germ-cell, will change them greatly. And the creature that grows from that germ-cell will thus be a greatly changed creature, a mutant.

"Because of this, many biologists now believe that the radiation from the radioactive deposits inside earth, acting upon all the genes of every living thing on earth, is what causes the constant change of species, the procession of mutations, that has brought life up the evolutionary road to its present height.

"That is why I say that on any other world but earth, evolutionary progress might never have happened. For it may be that no other world has similar radioactive deposits within it to cause by gene-effect the mutations. On any other world, the first protoplasmic things that began life might have remained forever the same, down through endless generations.

"How thankful we ought to be that it was not so on earth! That mutation after mutation has followed, life ever changing and progressing into new and higher species, until the first crude protoplasm things have advanced through countless changing forms into the supreme achievement of man!"

Woodin's enthusiasm had carried him away as he talked, but now he stopped, laughed a little as he relit his pipe.

"Sorry that I lectured you like a college freshman, Ross. But that's my chief subject of thought, my *idée fixe*, that wonderful upward climb of life through the ages."

Ross was staring thoughtfully into the fire. "It does seem wonderful the way you tell it. One species changing into another, going higher all the time—"

Gray stood up by the fire and stretched. "Well, you two can wonder over it, but this crass materialist is going to emulate his remote invertebrate ancestors and return to a prostrate position. In other words, I'm going to bed."

He looked at Ross, a doubtful grin on his young blond face, and said, "No hard feelings."

now, feller?"

"Forget it." The aviator grinned back. "The paddling *was* hard today and you fellows look mighty skeptical. But you'll see! Tomorrow we'll be at the fork of the Little Whale and then I'll bet we won't scout an hour before we run across those jelly-creatures."

"I hope so," said Woodin yawningly. "Then we'll see just how good your eyesight is a mile up, and whether you've yanked two respectable scientists up here for nothing."

Later as he lay in his blankets in the little tent, listening to Gray and Ross snore and looking sleepily out at the glowing fire embers, Woodin wondered again about that. What had Ross actually seen in that fleeting glimpse from his speeding plane? Something queer Woodin was sure of that, so sure that he'd come on this hard trip to find it. But what exactly?

Not protoplasmic things such as he described. That couldn't be, of course. Or could it? If things like that had existed once, why couldn't they—couldn't they—?

Woodin didn't know he'd been sleeping until he was awakened by Gray's cry. It wasn't a nice cry, was the hoarse yell of someone suddenly assaulted by bone-freezing terror.

He opened his eyes at that cry to see the Incredible looming against the stars in the open door of the tent. A dark, amorphous mass humped there in the open-ing, glistening all over in the starlight, and gliding into the tent. Behind it were others like it.

Things happened very quickly then. They seemed to Woodin to happen not consecutively but in succession of swift, clicking scenes like the successive pictures of a motion picture film.

Gray's pistol roared red flame at the first viscous monster entering the tent, and the momentary flash showed the looming, glistening bulk of the thing, and Gray's panic-frozen face, and Ross clawing in his blankets for his pistol.

Then that scene was over and instantly there was another one, Gray and Ross both stiffening suddenly as though petrified, both falling heavily over. Woodin knew they were both dead now, but he didn't know how he knew it. The glistening monsters were coming on into the tent.

He ripped up the wall of the tent and plunged out into the cold starlight of the clearing. He ran a few steps, he didn't know in what direction, and then he stopped. He didn't know why he stopped dead, but he did.

He stood there, his brain desperately urging his limbs to fly, but his limbs would not obey. He couldn't even turn, could not move a muscle of his body. He stood, his face toward the starlit gleam of the river, stricken by a strange and utter paralysis.

Woodin heard rustling, gliding movements in the tent behind him. Now from *behind*, there came in *the line of his vision several of the glistening things*. They were gathering around him, a dozen of them it seemed, and he now could see them quite clearly.

They weren't nightmares, no. They were real as real, poised here around him, humped, amorphous masses of viscous, translucent jelly. Each was about four feet tall and three in diameter, though their shapes kept constantly changing slightly, making dimensions hard to guess.

At the center of each translucent mass was a dark, disk-like blob or nucleus. There was nothing close to the creatures, no limbs or sense-organs. He saw that they could protrude pseudopods, though, for the tentacles who held the bodies of Gray and Ross in such tentacles, were now bringing them out and laying them down beside Woodin.

Woodin, still quite unable to move a muscle, could see the frozen, twisted faces of the two men and could see the pistols still gripped in their dead hands. And then as he looked on Ross's face he remembered.

The things the aviator had seen from his plane, the jelly-creatures the three had come north to search for, they were the monsters around him! But how had they killed Ross and

Gray, how were they holding him petrified like this, who were they?

"We will permit you to move, but you must not try to escape."

Woodin's dazed brain numbed further with wonder. Who had said those words to him? He had heard nothing, yet he had *thought* he heard.

"We will let you move but you must not attempt to escape or harm us."

He *did* hear those words in his mind, even though his ears heard no sound. And now his brain heard more.

"We are speaking to you by transference of thought impulses. Have you sufficient mentality to understand us?"

Minds? Minds in these things? Woodin was shaken by the thought as he stared at the glistening monsters.

His thought apparently had reached them. "Of course we have minds," came the thought answer into his brain. "We are going to let you move now, but do not try to flee."

"I-I won't try," Woodin told himself mentally.

At once the paralysis that held him abruptly lifted. He stood there in the circle of the glistening monsters, his hands and body trembling violently.

There were ten of them, he saw now. Ten monstrous, humped masses of shining, translucent jelly, gathered around him like cowered and faceless genii come from some haunts of the unknown. One stood closer to him than the others, apparently spokesman and leader.

Woodin looked slowly around their circle, then down at his two dead companions. In the midst of the unfamiliar terrors that froze his soul, he felt a sudden aching pity as he looked down at them.

Came another strong thought into Woodin's mind from the creature closest him. "We do not wish to kill them, we came here simply to capture and communicate with the three of you."

"But when we sensed that they were trying to kill us, we slew quickly. You, who did not try to kill us but fled, we harmed not."

"What-what do you want with us, with me?" Woodin asked. He whispered it through his lips, as well as thinking it.

There was no mental answer this time. The things stood unmoving, a silent ring of brooding, unearthly figures. Woodin felt his mind snapping under the strain of silence as he asked the question again, screamed it.

This time the mental answer came. "I did not answer, because I was probing your mentality to ascertain whether you are of sufficient intelligence to comprehend our ideas."

"While your mind seems of an exceptionally low order, it seems possible that it can appreciate enough of what we wish to convey to understand us."

"Before beginning, however, I warn you again that it is quite impossible for you to escape or to harm any of us and that attempts to do so will result disastrously for you. It is apparent you know nothing of mental energy, so I will inform you that your two fellow-creatures were killed by the sheer power of our wills, and that your muscles were held unresponsive to your brain's commands by the same power. By our mental energy we could completely annihilate your body, if we chose."

There was a pause, and in that little space of silence, Woodin's dazed brain clutched desperately for sanity, for steadiness.

Then came again that mental voice that seemed so like a real voice speaking in his brain.

"We are children of a galaxy whose name, as nearly as it can be approximated in your tongue, is Arctar. The galaxy of Arctar lies so many million light-years from this galaxy that it is far around the curve of the sphere of the three-dimensional cosmos."

"We came to dominance in that galaxy long ages ago. For we were creatures who could utilize our mental energy for transport, for physical power, for producing almost any effect we required. Because of this we rapidly conquered and colonized that galaxy, traveling from sun to sun without need of any vehicle.

"Having brought all the matter of the galaxy Arctar under our control, we looked out upon the realms beyond. There are approximately a thousand million galaxies in the three-dimensional cosmos and it seemed fitting to us that we should colonize them all so that all the matter in the cosmos should at some time be brought under our control.

"Our first step was to proliferate our numbers so as to multiply our number to that required for the great task of colonization of the cosmos. This was not difficult since, of course, reproduction with us was a matter of mere fission. When the requisite number of us were ready, they were divided into four forces.

"Then the whole sphere of the three-dimensional cosmos was quartered out among those four forces. Each was to colonize its division of the cosmos and so in their tremendous hosts they set out from Arctar in four different directions.

"A part of one of these forces came to this galaxy of yours eons ago and spread out deliberately to colonize all its habitable worlds. All this took great lengths of time, of course, but our lives are of lengths vastly exceeding yours, and we comprehend that racial achievement is everything and individual achievement is nothing. In the colonization of this galaxy, a force of several million Arctarians came to this particular sun and, finding but this one planet of its nine nearer worlds habitable, settled here.

"Now it has been the rule that the colonists of all these worlds throughout the cosmos have kept in communication with the original home of our race, the galaxy Arctar. In that way, our people, who now hold the whole cosmos, are able to concentrate at one point all their knowledge and power, and from that point go forth commands that shape great projects for the cosmos.

"But from this world no communications have ever been received since shortly after the force of colonizing Arctarians came here. When this was first noted the matter was deferred, it being thought that within a few more million years reports would surely be made from this world, too. But still no word came, until after more than a thousand million years of this silence the directing council at Arctar ordered an expedition sent to this world to ascertain the reason for such silence on the part of its colonists.

"We ten form that expedition and we started from one of the worlds of the sun you call Sirius, a small distance from your own sun, where we too are colonists. We were ordered to come with full speed to this world and ascertain why its colonists had made no report. So, wafting ourselves by mental energy through the void, we crossed the span from sun to sun and a few days ago arrived on your world.

"Imagine our perplexity when we floated down here on your world! Instead of a world peopled everywhere every square mile by Arctarians like ourselves, descended from the original colonists, a world completely under their mental control, we find a planet that is largely a wilderness of weird forms of life.

"We remained at this spot where we had landed and for some time sent our vision forth and scanned this whole globe mentally. And our perplexity increased, for never had we seen such grotesque and degraded forms of life as presented themselves to us. And not one Arctarian was to be seen on this world planet.

"This has sorely perplexed us, for what could have done away with the Arctarians who colonized this world? Our mighty colonists and their descendants surely could never have been overcome and destroyed by the pitifully weak mentalities that now inhabit this globe. Yet where, when, are they?

"That is why we sought to seize you and your companions. Low as we knew your mentalities must be, it seemed that surely even such as you would know what had become of our colonists who once inhabited this world."

The thought-stream paused a moment, then raced into Woodin's mind with a clear question.

"Have you not some knowledge of what became of our colonists? Some clue as to their strange disappearance?"

The numbed biologist found himself shaking his head slowly. "I never-I never heard before of such creatures as you, such minds. They never existed on earth that we know of, and we now know almost of the history of earth."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the thought of the Arctarian leader. "Surely you must have some knowledge of our mighty people if you know all the history of this planet."

From another Arctarian's mind came a thought, directed at the leader but impinging indirectly on Woodin's brain.

"Why not examine the past of the planet through this creature's brain and see what we can see for ourselves!"

"An excellent idea!" exclaimed the leader. "His mentality will be easy enough to probe."

"What are you going to do?" cried Woodin shrilly, panic edging his voice.

The answering thoughts were calming, reassuring. "Nothing that will harm you in the least. We are simply going to probe your racial past by unlocking the inherited memories of your brain.

"In the unused cells of your brain lie impressed inherited racial memories that go back to your remotest ancestors. By our mental power of command we shall make those buried memories temporarily dominant and vivid in your mind.

"You will experience the same sensations, see the same scenes, that your remote ancestors of millions of years ago saw. And we, here around you, can read your mind as we now do, and so see what you are seeing, looking into the past of this planet.

"There is no danger. Physically you will remain standing here, but mentally you will leap back across the ages. We shall first push your mind back to a time approximating that when our colonists first came to this world, to see what happened to them."

No sooner had this thought impinged on Woodin's mind than the starlit scene around him, the humped masses of the Arctarians, suddenly vanished and his consciousness seemed whirling through a gray mist.

He knew that physically he was not moving, yet mentally he had a sense of terrific velocity of motion. It was as though his mind was whirling across unthinkable gulfs, his brain expanding.

Then abruptly the gray mists cleared. A strange new scene took hazy form inside Woodin's mind.

It was a scene that he sensed, not saw. By other senses than sight did it present itself to his mind, and it was none the less real and vivid.

He looked with those strange senses upon a strange earth, a world of gray seas and harsh continents of rock without any speck of life upon them. The skies were heavily clouded and rain fell continually.

Down upon that world Woodin felt himself dropping, with a host of weird companions. They were each an amorphous, glistening, single-celled mass, with a dark nucleus at its center. They were Arctarians and Woodin knew that *he* was an Arctarian, and that he had come with the others a long way through space toward this world.

They landed in hosts upon the harsh and lifeless planet. They exerted their mentalities and by a telekinetic force of mental energy they altered the material world to suit them. They reared great structures and cities, cities that were not of matter but of *thought*. He realized a vast ordered mass of inquiry, investigation, experiment, and communication, but all beyond his present human mind in motives and achievement. Abruptly all dissolved in gray mists again.

The mists cleared almost at once and now Woodin looked on another scene. It was later in time, one. And now Woodin saw that time had worked strange changes upon the hosts of Arctarians, of which he still was one. They had changed from unicellular to multicellular beings. And they were no longer the same. Some were sessile, fixed in one spot, others mobile. Some betrayed a tendency toward the water, others toward the land. Something had changed the bodily form of the Arctarians as generations passed, branching them out in different lines.

This strange degeneration of their bodies had been accompanied by a kindred degeneration of the

minds. Woodin sensed that. In the thought-cities the ordered process of search for knowledge and power had become confused, chaotic. And the thought-cities themselves were vanishing, the Arctarians having no longer sufficient mental energy to maintain them.

The Arctarians were trying to ascertain what was causing this strange bodily and mental degeneration in them. They thought it was something that was affecting the genes of their bodies, but what it was they could not guess. On no other world had they ever degenerated so!

That scene passed rapidly into another much later. Woodin now *saw* the scene, for by then the ancestor, whose mind he looked through, had developed eyes. And he saw that the degeneration had now gone far, the Arctarians' multicellular bodies more and more stricken by the diseases of complexity and diversification.

The last of the thought-cities now were gone. The once mighty Arctarians had become hideous, complex organisms degenerating ever further, some of them creeping and swimming in the waters, others fixed upon the land.

They still had left some of the great original mentality of their ancestors. These monstrously degenerated creatures of land and sea, living in what Woodin's mind recognized as the late Paleozoic age, still made frantic and futile attempts to halt the terrible progress of their degradation.

Woodin's mind flashed into a scene later still, in the Mesozoic. Now the spreading degeneration made of the descendants of the colonists a still more horrible group of races. Great webbed and scaled and taloned creatures they were now, reptiles living in land and water.

Even these incredibly changed creatures possessed a faint remnant of their ancestors' mental power. They made vain attempts to communicate with Arctarians far on other worlds of distant suns, to appeal to them of their plight. But their minds were now too weak.

There followed a scene in the Cenozoic. The reptiles had become mammals; the downward progress of the Arctarians had gone further. Now only the merest shreds of the original mentality remained in these degraded descendants. And now this pitiful posterity had produced a species even more foolish and lacking in mental power than any before, ground-apes that roamed the cold plain in chattering, quarreling packs. The last shreds of Arctarian inheritance, the ancient instincts toward dignity and cleanliness and forbearance, had faded out of these creatures.

And then a last picture filled Woodin's brain. It was the world of the present day, the world he had seen through his own eyes. But now he saw and understood it as he never had before, a world in which degeneration had gone to the utmost limit.

The apes had become even weaker bipedal creatures, who had lost almost every atom of inheritance of the old Arctarian mind. These creatures had lost, too, many of the senses which had been retained by the apes before them. And these creatures, these humans, were now degenerating with increasing rapidity. Where at first they had killed like their animal forebears only for food, they had learned to *wantonly*. And had learned to kill each other in groups, in tribes, in nations and hemispheres. In the madness of their degeneracy they slaughtered each other until earth ran with their blood.

They were more cruel even than the apes who had preceded them, cruel with the utter cruelty of the mad. And in their progressive insanity they came to starve in the midst of plenty, to slay each other in their own cities, to cower beneath the lash of superstitious fears as no creatures had before them.

They were the last terrible descendants, the last degenerated product, of the ancient Arctarian colonists who once had been kings of intellect. Now the other animals were almost gone. These, the hideous freaks, would soon wind up the terrible story entirely by annihilating each other in their madness.

Woodin came suddenly to consciousness. He was standing in the starlight in the center of the riverside clearing. And around him still were poised the ten amorphous Arctarians, a silent ring.

Dazed, reeling from that tremendous and awful vision that had passed through his mind with incredible vividness, he turned slowly from one to the other of the Arctarians. Their thoughts impinging on his brain, strong, somber, shaken by terrible horror and loathing.

The sick thought of the Arctarian leader beat into Woodin's mind.

"So *that* is what became of our Arctarian colonists who came to this world! They degenerated, changed into lower and lower forms of life, until these pitiful insane things, who now swarm on this world, are their last descendants.

"This world is a world of deadly horror! A world that somehow damages the genes of our race's bodies and changes them bodily and mentally, making them de-generate further each generation. Because of us we see the awful result."

The shaken thought of another Arctarian asked, "But what can we do now?"

"There is nothing we can do," uttered their leader solemnly. "This degeneration, this awful change has gone too far for us ever to reverse it now.

"Our intelligent brothers became on this poisoned world things of horror, and we cannot now turn back the clock and restore them from the degraded things their descendants are."

Woodin found his voice and cried out thinly, shrilly.

"It isn't true!" he cried. "It's all a lie, what I saw! We humans aren't the product of downward devolution, we're the product of ages of upward evolution! We must be, I tell you! Why, we wouldn't want to live, I wouldn't want to live, if that other tale was true. It can't be true!"

The thought of the Arctarian leader, directed at the other amorphous shapes, reached his raving mind. It was tinged with pity, yet strong with a superhuman loathing.

"Come, my brothers," the Arctarian was saying to his fellows. "There is nothing we can do here on this soul-sickening world."

"Let us go, before we too are poisoned and changed. And we will send warning to Arctar that this world is poisoned, a world of degeneration, so that never again may any of our race come here and go down the awful road that those others went down.

"Come! We return to our own sun."

The Arctarian leader's humped shape flattened, assumed a disk-like form, then rose smoothly upward into the air. The others too changed and followed, in a group, and a stupefied Woodin stared at them, glistening dots lifting rapidly into the starlight.

He staggered forward a few steps, shaking his fist insanely up at the shining, receding dots.

"Come back, damn you!" he screamed. "Come back and tell me it's a lie!"

"It must be a lie-it must-"

There was no sign of the vanished Arctarians now in the starlit sky. The darkness was brooding and intense around Woodin.

He screamed up again into the night, but only a whispering echo answered. Wild-eyed, staggering, soul-smitten, his gaze fell on the pistol in Ross's hand. He seized it with a hoarse cry.

The stillness of the forest was broken suddenly by a sharp crack that reverberated a moment and died rapidly away. Then all was silent again save for the chuckling whisper of the river hurrying on.