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*The Vanishing Venusians*

*Leigh Brackett*

*Planet Stories*

*Spring, 1945*

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The breeze was steady enough, but it was not in a hurry. It filled the lug sail just hard enough to push the dirty weed-grown hull through the water, and no harder. Matt Harker lay alongside the tiller and counted the trickles of sweat crawling over his nakedness, and stared with sullen, opaque eyes into the indigo night. Anger, leashed and impotent, rose in his throat like bitter vomit.

The sea — Rory McLaren's Venusian wife called it the Sea of Morning Opals — lay unstimulating, black, streaked with phosphorescence. The sky hung low over it, the thick cloud blanket of Venus that had made the Sun a half-remembered legend to the exiles from Earth. Riding lights burned in the blue gloom, strung out in line. Twelve ships, thirty-eight hundred people, going no place, trapped in the interval between birth and death and not knowing what to do about it.

Matt Harker glanced upward at the sail and then at the stern lantern of the ship ahead. His face, in the dim glow that lights Venus even at night, was a gaunt oblong of shadows and hard bone, seamed and scarred with living, with wanting and not having, with dying and not being dead. He was a lean man, wiry and not tall, with a snake-like surety of motion.

Somebody came scrambling quietly aft along the deck, avoiding the sleeping bodies crowded everywhere. Harker said, without emotion, "Hi, Rory."

Rory McLaren said, "Hi, Matt." He sat down. He was young, perhaps half Harker's age. There was still hope in his face, but it was growing tired. He sat for a while without speaking, looking at nothing, and then said, "Honest to God, Matt, how much longer can we last?"

"What's the matter, kid? Starting to crack?"

"I don't know. Maybe. When are we going to stop somewhere?"

"When we find a place to stop."

"Is there a place to stop? Seems like ever since I was born we've been hunting. There's always something wrong. Hostile natives, or fever, or bad soil, always something, and we go on again. It's not right. It's not any way to try to live."

Harker said, "I told you not to go having kids."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You start worrying. The kid isn't even here yet, and already you're worrying."

"Sure I am." McLaren put his head in his hands suddenly and swore. Harker knew he did that to keep from crying. "I'm worried," McLaren said, "that maybe the same thing'll happen to my wife and kid that happened to yours. We got fever aboard."

Harker's eyes were like blown coals for an instant. Then he glanced up at the sail and said, "They'd be better off if it didn't live."

"That's no kind of a thing to say."

"It's the truth. Like you asked me, when are we going to stop somewhere? Maybe never. You bellyache about it ever since you were born. Well, I've been at it longer than that. Before you were born I saw our first settlement burned by the Cloud People, and my mother and father crucified in their own vineyard. I was there when this trek to the Promised Land began, back on Earth, and I'm still waiting for the promise."

The sinews in Harker's face were drawn like knots of wire. His voice had a terrible quietness.

"Your wife and kid would be better off to die now, while Viki's still young and has hope, and before the child ever opens its eyes."

Sim, the big black man, relieved Harker before dawn. He started singing, softly – something mournful and slow as the breeze, and beautiful. Harker cursed him and went up into the bow to sleep, but the song stayed with him. *Oh, I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home...*

Harker slept. Presently he began to moan and twitch, and then cry out. People around him woke up. They watched with interest. Harker was a lone wolf awake, ill-tempered and violent. When, at long intervals, he would have one of his spells, no one was anxious to help him out of it. They liked peeping inside of Harker when he wasn't looking.

Harker didn't care. He was playing in the snow again. He was seven years old, and the drifts were high and white, and above them the sky was so blue and clean that he wondered if God mopped it every few days like Mom did the kitchen floor. The sun was shining. It was like a great gold coin, and it made the snow burn like crushed diamonds. He put his arms up to the sun, and the cold air slapped him with clean hands, and he laughed. And then it was all gone...

"By gawd," somebody said. "Ain't them tears on his face?"

"Bawling. Bawling like a little kid. Listen at him."

"Hey," said the first one sheepishly. "Reckon we oughta wake him up?"

"Hell with him, the old sour-puss. Hey, listen to that...!"

"Dad," Harker whispered. "Dad, I want to go home."

The dawn came like a sifting of fire-opals through the layers of pearl-gray cloud. Harker heard the yelling dimly in his sleep. He felt dull and tired, and his eyelids stuck together. The yelling gradually took shape and became the word "Land!" repeated over and over. Harker kicked himself awake and got up.

The tideless sea glimmered with opaline colors under the mist. Flocks of little jewel-scaled sea-dragons rose up from the ever-present floating islands of weed, and the weed itself, part of it, writhed and stretched with sentient life.

Ahead there was a long low hummock of muddy ground fading into tangled swamp. Beyond it, rising sheer into the clouds, was a granite cliff, a sweeping escarpment that stood like a wall against the hopeful gaze of the exiles.

Harker found Rory McLaren standing beside him, his arm around Viki, his wife. Viki was one of several Venusians who had married into the Earth colony. Her skin was clear white, her hair a glowing silver, her lips vividly red. Her eyes were like the sea, changeable, full of hidden life. Just now they had that special look that the eyes of women get when they're thinking about creation. Harker looked away.

McLaren said, "It's land."

Harker said, "It's mud. It's swamp. It's fever. It's like the rest."

Viki said, "Can we stop here, just a little while?"

Harker shrugged. "That's up to Gibbons." He wanted to ask what the hell difference it made where the kid was born, but for once he held his tongue. He turned away. Somewhere in the waist a woman was screaming in delirium. There were three shapes wrapped in ragged blankets and laid on planks by the port scuppers. Harker's mouth twitched in a crooked smile.

"Well probably stop long enough to bury them," he said. "Maybe that'll be time enough."

He caught a glimpse of McLaren's face. The hope in it was not tired any more. It was dead. Dead, like the rest of Venus.

Gibbons called the chief men together aboard his ship—the leaders, the fighters and hunters and seamen, the tough leathery men who were the armor around the soft body of the colony. Harker was there, and McLaren. McLaren was young, but up until lately he had had a quality of optimism that cheered his shipmates, a natural leadership.

Gibbons was an old man. He was the original guiding spirit of the five thousand colonists who had come out from Earth to a new start on a new world. Time and tragedy, disappointment and betrayal had marked him cruelly, but his head was still high. Harker admired his guts while cursing him for an idealistic fool.

The inevitable discussion started as to whether they should try a permanent settlement on this mud flat or go on wandering over the endless, chartless seas. Harker

said impatiently:

"For cripesake, look at the place. Remember the last time. Remember the time before that, and stop bleating."

Sim, the big black, said quietly, "The people are getting awful tired. A man was meant to have roots some place. There's going to be trouble pretty soon if we don't find land."

Harker said, "You think you can find some, pal, go to it."

Gibbons said heavily, "But he's right. There's hysteria, fever, dysentery and boredom, and the boredom's worst of all."

McLaren said, "I vote to settle."

Harker laughed. He was leaning by the cabin port, looking out at the cliffs. The gray granite looked clean above the swamp. Harker tried to pierce the clouds that hid the top, but couldn't. His dark eyes narrowed. The heated voices behind him faded into distance. Suddenly he turned and said, "Sir, I'd like permission to see what's at the top of those cliffs."

There was complete silence. Then Gibbons said slowly, "We've lost too many men on journeys like that before, only to find the plateau uninhabitable."

"There's always the chance. Our first settlement was in the high plateaus, remember. Clean air; good soil, no fever."

"I remember," Gibbons said. "I remember." He was silent for a while, then he gave Harker a shrewd glance. "I know you, Matt. I might as well give permission."

Harker grinned. "You won't miss me much anyhow. I'm not a good influence any more." He started for the door. "Give me three weeks. You'll take that long to careen and scrape the bottoms anyhow. Maybe I'll come back with something."

McLaren said, "I'm going with you, Matt."

Harker gave him a level-eyed stare. "You better stay with Viki."

"If there's good land up there, and anything happens to you so you can't come back and tell us..."

"Like not bothering to come back, maybe?"

"I didn't say that. Like we both won't come back. But two is better than one."

Harker smiled. The smile was enigmatic and not very nice. Gibbons said, "He's right, Matt." Harker shrugged. Then Sim stood up.

"Two is good," he said, "but three is better." He turned to Gibbons. "There's nearly five hundred of us, sir. If there's new land up there, we ought to share the burden of finding it."

Gibbons nodded. Harker said, "You're crazy, Sim. Why you want to do all that climbing, maybe to no place?"

Sim smiled. His teeth were unbelievably white in the sweat-polished blackness of his face. "But that's what my people always done, Matt. A lot of climbing, to no place."

They made their preparations and had a last night's sleep. McLaren said goodbye to Viki. She didn't cry. She knew why he was going. She kissed him, and all she said was, "Be careful." All he said was, "I'll be back before he's born."

They started at dawn, carrying dried fish and sea-berries made into pemmican, and their long knives and ropes for climbing. They had long ago run out of ammunition for their few blasters, and they had no equipment for making more. All were adept at throwing spears, and carried three short ones barbed with bone across their backs.

It was raining when they crossed the mud flat, wading thigh-deep in heavy mist. Harker led the way through the belt of swamp. He was an old hand at it, with an uncanny quickness in spotting vegetation that was as independently alive and hungry as he was. Venus is one vast hothouse, and the plants have developed into species as varied and marvelous as the reptiles or the mammals, crawling out of the pre-Cambrian seas as primitive flagellates and growing wills of their own, with appetites and motive power to match. The children of the colony learned at an early age not to pick flowers. The blossoms too often bit back.

The swamp was narrow, and they came out of it safely. A great swamp-dragon, a *leshen*, screamed not far off, but they hunt by night, and it was too sleepy to chase them. Harker stood finally on firm ground and studied the cliff.

The rock was roughened by weather, hacked at by ages of erosion, savaged by earthquake. There were stretches of loose shale and great slabs that looked as though they would peel off at a touch, but Harker nodded.

"We can climb it," he said. "Question is, how high is up?"

Sim laughed. "High enough for the Golden City, maybe. Have we all got a clear conscience? Can't carry no load of sin that far!"

Rory McLaren looked at Harker.

Harker said, "All right, I confess. I don't care if there's land up there or not. All I wanted was to get the hell out of that damn boat before I went clean nuts. So now you know."

McLaren nodded. He didn't seem surprised. "Let's climb."

By morning on the second day they were in the clouds. They crawled upward through opal-tinted steam, half liquid, hot and unbearable. They crawled for two more days. The first night or two Sim sang during his watch, while they rested on some ledge. After that he was too tired. McLaren began to give out, though he wouldn't say so. Matt Harker

grew more taciturn and ill-tempered, if possible, but otherwise there was no change. The clouds continued to hide the top of the cliff.

During one rest break McLaren said hoarsely, "Don't these cliffs ever end?" His skin was yellowish, his eyes glazed with fever.

"Maybe," said Harker, "they go right up beyond the sky." The fever was on him again, too. It lived in the marrow of the exiles, coming out at intervals to shake and sear them, and then retreating. Sometimes it did not retreat, and after nine days there was no need.

McLaren said, "You wouldn't care if they did, would you?"

"I didn't ask you to come."

"But you wouldn't care."

"Ah, shut up."

McLaren went for Harker's throat.

Harker hit him, with great care and accuracy. McLaren sagged down and took his head in his hands and wept. Sim stayed out of it. He shook his head, and after a while he began to sing to himself, or someone beyond himself. "Oh, nobody knows the trouble I see..."

Harker pulled himself up. His ears rang and he shivered uncontrollably, but he could still take some of McLaren's weight on himself. They were climbing a steep ledge, fairly wide and not difficult.

"Let's get on," said Harker.

About two hundred feet beyond that point the ledge dipped and began to go down again in a series of broken steps. Overhead the cliff face bulged outward. Only a fly could have climbed it. They stopped. Harker cursed with vicious slowness. Sim closed his eyes and smiled. He was a little crazy with fever himself.

"Golden City's at the top. That's where I'm going."

He started off along the ledge, following its decline toward a jutting shoulder, around which it vanished. Harker laughed sardonically. McLaren pulled free of him and went doggedly after Sim. Harker shrugged and followed.

Around the shoulder the ledge washed out completely.

They stood still. The steaming clouds shut them in before, and behind was a granite wall hung with thick fleshy creepers. Dead end.

"Well?" said Harker.

McLaren sat down. He didn't cry, or say anything. He just sat. Sim stood with his arms hanging and his chin on his huge black chest. Harker said, "See what I meant, about

the Promised Land? Venus is a fixed wheel, and you can't win."

It was then that he noticed the cool air. He had thought it was just a fever chill, but it lifted his hair, and it had a definite pattern on his body. It even had a cool, clean smell to it. It was blowing out through the creepers.

Harker began ripping with his knife. He broke through into a cave mouth, a jagged rip worn smooth at the bottom by what must once have been a river.

"That draft is coming from the top of the plateau," Harker said. "Wind must be blowing up there and pushing it down. There may be a way through."

McLaren and Sim both showed a slow, terrible growth of hope. The three of them went without speaking into the tunnel.

## II

They made good time. The clean air acted as a tonic, and hope spurred them on. The tunnel sloped upward rather sharply, and presently Harker heard water, a low thunderous murmur as of an underground river up ahead. It was utterly dark, but the smooth channel of stone was easy to follow.

Sim said, "Isn't that light up ahead?"

"Yeah," said Harker. "Some kind of phosphorescence. I don't like that river. It may stop us."

They went on in silence. The glow grew stronger, the air more damp. Patches of phosphorescent lichen appeared on the walls, glimmering with dim jewels-tones like an unhealthy rainbow. The roar of the water was very loud.

They came upon it suddenly. It flowed across the course of their tunnel in a broad channel worn deep into the rock, so that its level had fallen below its old place and left the tunnel dry. It was a wide river, slow and majestic. Lichen spangled the roof and walls, reflecting in dull glints of color from the water.

Overhead there was a black chimney going up through the rock, and the cool draft came from there with almost hurricane force, much of which was dissipated in the main river tunnel. Harker judged there was a cliff formation on the surface that siphoned the wind downward. The chimney was completely inaccessible.

Harker said, "I'll guess we'll have to go upstream, along the side." The rock was eroded enough to make that possible, showing wide ledges at different levels.

McLaren said, "What if this river doesn't come from the surface? What if it starts from an underground source?"

"You stuck your neck out," Harker said. "Come on."

They started. After a while, tumbling like porpoises in the black water, the golden creatures swam by, and saw the men, and stopped, and swam back again.

They were not very large, the largest about the size of a twelve-year-old child. Their bodies were anthropoid, but adapted to swimming with shimmering webs. They glowed with a golden light, phosphorescent like the lichen, and their eyes were lidless and black, like one huge spreading pupil. Their faces were incredible. Harker could remember, faintly, the golden dandelions that grew on the lawn in summer. The heads and faces of the swimmers were like that, covered with streaming petals that seemed to have independent movements, as though they were sensory organs as well as decoration.

Harker said, "For cripesake, what are they?"

"They look like flowers," McLaren said.

"They look more like fish," the black man said.

Harker laughed. "I'll bet they're both. I'll bet they're plannies that grew where they had to be amphibious." The colonists had shortened plant-animal to planimal, and then just planny. "I've seen gimmicks in the swamps that weren't so far away from these. But jeez, get the eyes on 'em! They look human."

"The shape's human, too, almost." McLaren shivered. "I wish they wouldn't look at us that way."

Sim said, "As long as they just look. I'm not gonna worry..."

They didn't. They started to close in below the men, swimming effortlessly against the current. Some of them began to clamber out on the low ledge behind them. They were agile and graceful. There was something unpleasantly child-like about them. There were fifteen or twenty of them, and they reminded Harker of a gang of mischievous kids – only the mischief had a queer soulless quality of malevolence.

Harker led the way faster along the ledge. His knife was drawn and he carried a short spear in his right hand.

The tone of the river changed. The channel broadened, and up ahead Harker saw that the cavern ended in a vast shadowy place, the water spreading into a dark lake, spilling slowly out over a low wide lip of rock. More of the shining child-things were playing there. They joined their fellows, closing the ring tighter around the three men.

"I don't like this," McLaren said. "If they'd only make a noise!"

They did, suddenly – a shrill tittering like a blasphemy of childish laughter. Their eyes shone. They rushed in, running wetly along the ledge, reaching up out of the water to claw at ankles, laughing. Inside his tough flat belly Harker's guts turned over.

McLaren yelled and kicked. Claws raked his ankle, spiny needle-sharp things like thorns. Sim ran his spear clean through a golden breast. There were no bones in it. The body was light and membranous, and the blood that ran out was sticky and greenish,



like sap. Harker kicked two of the things back in the river, swung his spear like a ball bat and knocked two more off the ledge – they were unbelievably light – and shouted,

"Up there, that high ledge. I don't think they can climb that."

He thrust McLaren bodily past him and helped Sim fight a rearguard action while they all climbed a rotten and difficult transit. McLaren crouched at the top and hurled chunks of stone at the attackers. There was a great crack running up and clear across the cavern roof, scar of some ancient earthquake. Presently a small slide started.

"Okay," Harker panted. "Quit before you bring the roof down. They can't follow us." The plannies were equipped for swimming, not climbing. They clawed angrily and slipped back, and then retreated sullenly to the water. Abruptly they seized the body with Sim's spear through it and devoured it, quarreling fiercely over it. McLaren leaned over the edge and was sick.

Harker didn't feel so good himself. He got up and went on. Sim helped McLaren, whose ankle was bleeding badly.

This higher ledge angled up and around the wall of the great lake-cavern. It was cooler and drier here, and the lichens thinned out, and vanished, leaving total darkness. Harker yelled once. From the echo of his voice the place was enormous.

Down below in the black water golden bodies streaked like comets in an ebon universe, going somewhere, going fast. Harker felt his way carefully along. His skin twitched with a nervous impulse of danger, a sense of something unseen, unnatural, and wicked.

Sim said, "I hear something."

They stopped. The blind air lay heavy with a subtle fragrance, spicy and pleasant, yet somehow unclean. The water sighed lazily far below. Somewhere ahead was a smooth rushing noise which Harker guessed was the river inlet. But none of that was what Sim meant.

He meant the rippling, rustling sound that came from everywhere in the cavern. The black surface of the lake was dotted now with spots of burning phosphorescent color, trailing fiery wakes. The spots grew swiftly, coming nearer, and became carpets of flowers, scarlet and blue and gold and purple. Floating fields of them, and towed by shining swimmers.

"My God," said Harker softly. "How big are they?"

"Enough to make three of me." Sim was a big man. "Those little ones were children, all right. They went and got their papas. Oh, Lord!"

The swimmers were very like the smaller ones that attacked them by the river, except for their giant size. They were not cumbersome. They were magnificent, supple-limbed and light. Their membranes had spread into great shining wings, each rib tipped with fire. Only the golden dandelion heads had changed.

They had shed their petals. Their adult heads were crowned with flat, coiled growths having the poisonous and filthy beauty of fungus. And their faces were the faces of men.

For the first time since childhood Harker was cold.

The fields of burning flowers were swirled together at the base of the cliff. The golden giants cried out suddenly, a sonorous belling note, and the water was churned to blazing foam as thousands of flower-like bodies broke away and started up the cliff on suckered, spidery legs.

It didn't look as though it was worth trying, but Harker said, "Let's get the hell on!" There was a faint light now, from the army below. He began to run along the ledge, the others close on his heels. The flower-hounds coursed swiftly upward, and their masters swam easily below, watching.

The ledge dropped. Harker shot along it like a deer. Beyond the lowest dip it plunged into the tunnel whence the river came. A short tunnel, and at the far end...

"Daylight!" Harker shouted. "Daylight!"

McLaren's bleeding leg gave out and he fell.

Harker caught him. They were at the lowest part of the dip. The flower-beasts were just below, rushing higher. McLaren's foot was swollen, the calf of his leg discolored. Some swift infection from the planny's claws. He fought Harker. "Go on," he said. "Go on!"

Harker slapped him hard across the temple. He started on, half carrying McLaren, but he saw it wasn't going to work. McLaren weighed more than he did. He thrust McLaren into Sim's powerful arms. The big black nodded and ran, carrying the half-conscious man like a child. Harker saw the first of the flower-things flow up onto the ledge in front of them.

Sim hurdled them. They were not large, and there were only three of them. They rushed to follow and Harker speared them, slashing and striking with the sharp bone tip. Behind him the full tide rushed up. He ran, but they were faster. He drove them back with spear and knife, and ran again, and turned and fought again, and by the time they had reached the tunnel Harker was staggering with weariness.

Sim stopped. He said, "There's no way out."

Harker glanced over his shoulder. The river fell sheer down a high face of rock – too high and with too much force in the water even for the giant water-plannies to think of attempting. Daylight poured through overhead, warm and welcoming, and it might as well have been on Mars.

Dead end.

Then Harker saw the little eroded channel twisting up at the side. Little more than a drain-pipe, and long dry, leading to a passage beside the top of the falls – a crack barely

large enough for a small man to crawl through. It was a hell of a ragged hope, but...

Harker pointed, between jabs at the swarming flowers. Sim yelled, "You first." Because Harker was the best climber, he obeyed, helping the gasping McLaren up behind him. Sim wielded his spear like a lightning brand, guarding the rear, creeping up inch by inch.

He reached a fairly secure perch, and stopped. His huge chest pumped like a bellows, his arm rose and fell like a polished bar of ebony. Harker shouted to him to come on. He and McLaren were almost at the top.

Sim laughed. "How you going to get me through that little bitty hole?"

"Come on, you fool!"

"You better hurry. I'm about finished."

"Sim! Sim, damn you!"

"Crawl out through that hole, runt, and pull that stringbean with you! I'm a man-sized man, and I got to stay." Then, furiously, "Hurry up or they'll drag you back before you're through."

He was right. Harker knew he was right. He went to work pushing and jamming McLaren through the narrow opening. McLaren was groggy and not much help, but he was thin and small-boned, and he made it. He rolled out on a slope covered with green grass, the first Harker had seen since he was a child. He began to struggle after McLaren. He did not look back at Sim.

The black man was singing, about the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Harker put his head back into the darkness of the creek. "Sim!"

"Yeah?" Faintly, hoarse, echoing.

"There's land here, Sim. Good land."

"Yeah."

"Sim, we'll find a way..."

Sim was singing again. The sound grew fainter, diminishing downward into distance. The words were lost, but not what lay behind them. Matt Harker buried his face in the green grass, and Sim's voice went with him into the dark.

The clouds were turning color with the sinking of the hidden sun. They hung like a canopy of hot gold washed in blood. It was utterly silent, except for the birds. Birds. You never heard birds like that down in the low places. Matt Harker rolled over and sat up slowly. He felt as though he had been beaten. There was a sickness in him, and a shame, and the old dark anger lying coiled and deadly above his heart.

Before him lay the long slope of grass to the river, which bent away to the left out of

sight behind a spur of granite. Beyond the slope was a broad plain and then a forest of gigantic trees. They seemed to float in the coppery haze, their dark branches outspread like wings and starred with flowers. The air was cool, with no taint of mud or rot. The grass was rich, the soil beneath it clean and sweet.

Rory McLaren moaned softly and Harker turned. His leg looked bad. He was in a sort of stupor, his skin flushed and dry, Harker swore softly, wondering what he was going to do.

He looked back toward the plain, and he saw the girl.

He didn't know how she got there. Perhaps out of the bushes that grew in thick clumps on the slope. She could have been there a long time, watching. She was watching now, standing quite still about forty feet away. A great scarlet butterfly clung to her shoulder, moving its wings with lazy delight.

She seemed more like a child than a woman. She was naked, small and slender and exquisite. Her skin had a faint translucent hint of green under its whiteness. Her hair, curled short to her head, was deep blue, and her eyes were blue also, and very strange.

Harker stared at her, and she at him, neither of them moving. A bright bird swooped down and hovered by her lips for a moment, caressing her with its beak. She touched it and smiled, but she did not take her eyes from Harker.

Harker got to his feet, slowly, easily. He said, "Hello."

She did not move, nor make a sound, but quite suddenly a pair of enormous birds, beaked and clawed like eagles and black as sin, made a whistling rush down past Harker's head and returned, circling. Harker sat down again.

The girl's strange eyes moved from him, upward to the crack in the hillside whence he had come. Her lips didn't move, but her voice—or something—spoke clearly inside Harker's head.

"You came from—There." *There* had tremendous feeling in it, and none of it nice.

Harker said, "Yes. A telepath, huh?"

"But you're not..." A picture of the golden swimmers formed in Harker's mind. It was recognizable, but hatred and fear had washed out all the beauty, leaving only horror.

Harker said, "No." He explained about himself and McLaren. He told about Sim. He knew she was listening carefully to his mind, testing it for truth. He was not worried about what she would find. "My friend is hurt," he said. "We need food and shelter."

For some time there was no answer. The girl was looking at Harker again. His face, the shape and texture of his body, his hair, and then his eyes. He had never been looked at quite that way before. He began to grin. A provocative, be-damned-to-you grin that injected a surprising amount of light and charm into his sardonic personality.

"Honey," he said, "you are terrific. Animal, mineral, or vegetable?"

She tipped her small round head in surprise, and asked his own question right back. Harker laughed. She smiled, her mouth making a small inviting V, and her eyes had sparkles in them. Harker started toward her.

Instantly the birds warned him back. The girl laughed, a mischievous ripple of merriment. "Come," she said, and turned away.

Harker frowned. He leaned over and spoke to McLaren, with peculiar gentleness. He managed to get the boy erect, and then swung him across his shoulders, staggering slightly under the weight. McLaren said distinctly, "I'll be back before he's born."

Harker waited until the girl had started, keeping his distance. The two black birds followed watchfully. They walked out across the thick grass of the plain, toward the trees. The sky was now the color of blood.

A light breeze caught the girl's hair and played with it. Matt Harker saw that the short curled strands were broad and flat, like blue petals.

### III

It was a long walk to the forest. The top of the plateau seemed to be bowl-shaped, protected by encircling cliffs. Harker, thinking back to that first settlement long ago, decided that this place was infinitely better. It was like the visions he had seen in fever-dreams – the Promised Land. The coolness and cleanness of it were like having weights removed from your lungs and heart and body.

The rejuvenating air didn't make up for McLaren's weight, however. Presently Harker said, "Hold it," and sat down, tumbling McLaren gently onto the grass. The girl stopped. She came back a little way and watched Harker, who was blowing like a spent horse. He grinned up at her.

"I'm shot," he said. "I've been too busy for a man of my age. Can't you get hold of somebody to help me carry him?"

Again she studied him with puzzled fascination. Night was closing in, a clear indigo, less dark than at sea level. Her eyes had a curious luminosity in the gloom.

"Why do you do that?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Carry it."

By "it" Harker guessed she meant McLaren. He was suddenly, coldly conscious of a chasm between them that no amount of explanation could bring. "He's my friend. He's...I have to."

She studied his thought and then shook her head. "I don't understand. It's spoiled –"

her thought-image was a combination of "broken," "finished," and "useless" – "Why carry it around?"

"McLaren's not an 'it.' He's a man like me, my friend. He's hurt, and I have to help him."

"I don't understand." Her shrug said it was his funeral, also that he was crazy. She started on again, paying no attention to Harker's call for her to wait. Perforce, Harker picked up McLaren and staggered on again. He wished Sim were here, and immediately wished he hadn't thought of Sim. He hoped Sim had died quickly before – before what? *Oh God, it's dark and I'm scared and my belly's all gone to cold water, and that thing trotting ahead of me through the blue haze...*

The thing was beautiful, though. Beautifully formed, fascinating, a curved slender gleam of moonlight, a chaliced flower holding the mystic, scented nectar of the unreal, the unknown, the undiscovered. Harker's blood began, in spite of himself, to throb with a deep excitement.

They came under the fragrant shadows of the trees. The forest was open, with broad mossy ridges and clearings. There were flowers underfoot, but no brush, and clumps of ferns. The girl stopped and stretched up her hand. A feathery branch, high out of her reach, bent and brushed her face, and she plucked a great pale blossom and set it in her hair.

She turned and smiled at Harker. He began to tremble, partly with weariness, partly with something else.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

She was puzzled. "The branch, you mean? Oh, that!" She laughed. It was the first sound he had heard her make, and it shot through him like warm silver. "I just think I would like a flower, and it comes."

Teleportation, telekinetic energy – what did the books call it? Back on Earth they knew something about that, but the colony hadn't had much time to study even its own meager library. There had been some religious sect that could make roses bend into their hands. Old wisdom, the force behind the Biblical miracles, just the infinite power of thought. Very simple. Yeah. Harker wondered uneasily whether she could work it on him, too. But then, he had a brain of his own. Or did he?

"What's your name?" he asked.

She gave a clear, trilled sound. Harker tried to whistle it and gave up. Some sort of tone-language, he guessed, without words as he knew them. It sounded as though they – her people, whatever they were – had copied the birds.

"I'll call you Button," he said. "Bachelor Button – but you wouldn't know."

She picked the image out of his mind and sent it back to him. Blue fringe-topped flowers nodding in his mother's china bowl. She laughed again and sent her black birds away and led on into the forest, calling out like an oriole. Other voices answered her,

and presently, racing the light wind between the trees, her people came.

They were like her. There were males, slender little creatures like young boys, and girls like Button. There were several hundred of them, all naked, all laughing and curious, their lithe, pliant bodies flitting moth-fashion through the indigo shadows. They were topped with petals – Harker called them that, though he still wasn't sure – of all colors from blood-scarlet to pure white.

They trilled back and forth. Apparently Button was telling them all about how she found Harker and McLaren. The whole mob pushed on slowly through the forest and ended finally in a huge clearing where there were only scattered trees. A spring rose and made a little lake, and then a stream that wandered off among the ferns.

More of the little people came, and now he saw the young ones. All sizes, from tiny thin creatures on up, replicas of their elders. There were no old ones. There were none with imperfect or injured bodies. Harker, exhausted and on the thin edge of a fever-bout, was not encouraged.

He set McLaren down by the spring. He drank, gasping like an animal, and bathed his head and shoulders. The forest people stood in a circle, watching. They were silent now. Harker felt coarse and bestial, somehow, as though he had belched loudly in church.

He turned to McLaren. He bathed him, helped him drink, and set about fixing the leg. He needed light, and he needed flame.

There were dry leaves, and mats of dead moss in the rocks around the spring. He gathered a pile of these. The forest people watched. Their silent luminous stare got on Harker's nerves. His hands were shaking so that he made four tries with his flint and steel before he got a spark.

The tiny flicker made the silent ranks stir sharply. He blew on it. The flames licked up, small and pale at first, then taking hold, growing, crackling. He saw their faces in the springing light, their eyes stretched with terror. A shrill crying broke from them and then they were gone, like rustling leaves before a wind.

Harker drew his knife. The forest was quiet now. Quiet but not at rest. The skin crawled on Harker's back, over his scalp, drew tight on his cheekbones. He passed the blade through the flame. McLaren looked up at him. Harker said, "It's okay, Rory," and hit him carefully on the point of the jaw. McLaren lay still. Harker stretched out the swollen leg and went to work.

It was dawn again. He lay by the spring in the cool grass, the ashes of his fire grey and dead beside the dark stains. He felt rested, relaxed, and the fever seemed to have gone out of him. The air was like wine.

He rolled over on his back. There was a wind blowing. It was a live, strong wind, with a certain smell to it. The trees were rollicking, almost shouting with pleasure. Harker breathed deeply. The smell, the pure clean edge...

Suddenly he realized that the clouds were high, higher than he had ever known them to be. The wind swept them up, and the daylight was bright, so bright that...

Harker sprang up. The blood rushed in him. There was a stinging blur in his eyes. He began to run, toward a tall tree, and he flung himself upward into the branches and climbed, recklessly, into the swaying top.

The bowl of the valley lay below him, green, rich, and lovely. The gray granite cliffs rose around it, grew higher in the direction from which the wind blew. Higher and higher, and beyond them, far beyond, were mountains, flung towering against the sky.

On the mountains, showing through the whipping veils of cloud, there was snow, white and cold and blindingly pure, and as Harker watched there was a gleam, so quick and fleeting that he saw it more with his heart than with his eyes...

Sunlight. Snowfields, and above them, the sun.

After a long time he clambered down again into the silence of the glade. He stood there, not moving, seeing what he had not had time to see before.

Rory McLaren was gone. Both packs, with food and climbing ropes and bandages and flint and steel were gone. The short spears were gone. Feeling on his hip, Harker found nothing but bare flesh. His knife and even his breech-clout had been taken.

A slender, exquisite body moved forward from the shadows of the trees. Huge white blossoms gleamed against the curly blue that crowned the head. Luminous eyes glanced up at Harker, full of mockery and a subtle animation. Button smiled.

Matt Harker walked toward Button, not hurrying, his hard sinewy face blank of expression. He tried to keep his mind that way, too. "Where is the other one; my friend?"

"In the finish-place." She nodded vaguely toward the cliffs near where Harker and McLaren had escaped from the caves. Her thought-image was somewhere between rubbish-heap and cemetery, as nearly as Harker could translate it. It was also completely casual, a little annoyed that time should be wasted on such trifles.

"Did you...is he still alive?"

"It was when we put it there. It will be all right, it will just wait until it—stops. Like all of them."

"Why was he moved? Why did you..."

"It was ugly." Button shrugged. "It was broken, anyway." She stretched her arms upward and lifted her head to the wind. A shiver of delight ran through her. She smiled again at Harker, sidelong.

He tried to keep his anger hidden. He started walking again, not as though he had any purpose in mind, bearing toward the cliffs. His way lay past a bush with yellow flowers and thorny, pliant branches. Suddenly it writhed and whipped him across the belly. He stopped short and doubled over, hearing Button's laughter.



When he straightened up she was in front of him. "It's red," she said, surprised, and laid little pointed fingers on the scratches left by the thorns. She seemed thrilled and fascinated by the color and feel of his blood. Her fingers moved, probing the shape of his muscles, the texture of his skin and the dark hair on his chest. They drew small lines of fire along his neck, along the ridge of his jaw, touching his features one by one, his eyelids, his black brows.

"What are you?" whispered her mind to his.

"This." Harker put his arms around her, slowly. Her flesh slid cool and strange under his hands, sending an indescribable shudder through him, partly pleasure, partly revulsion. He bent his head. Her eyes deepened, lakes of blue fire, and then he found her lips. They were cool and strange like the rest of her, pliant, scented with spice, the same perfume that came with sudden overpowering sweetness from her curling petals.

Harker saw movement in the forest aisles, a clustering of bright flower-heads. Button drew back. She took his hand and led him away, off toward the river and the quiet ferny places along its banks. Glancing up, Harker saw that the two black birds were following overhead.

"You are really plants, then? Flowers, like those?" He touched the white blossoms on her head.

"You are really a beast, then? Like the furry, snarling things that climb up through the pass sometimes?"

They both laughed. The sky above them was the color of clean fleece. The warm earth and crushed ferns were sweet beneath them. "What pass?" asked Harker.

"Over there." She pointed off toward the rim of the valley. "It goes down to the sea, I think. Long ago we used to go down there but there's no need, and the beasts make it dangerous."

"Do they," said Harker, and kissed her in the hollow below her chin. "What happens when the beasts come?"

Button laughed. Before he could stir Harker was trapped fast in a web of creepers and tough fern, and the black birds were screeching and clashing their sharp beaks in his face.

"That happens," Button said. She stroked the ferns. "Our cousins understand us, even better than the birds."

Harker lay sweating, even after he was free again. Finally he said, "Those creatures in the underground lake. Are they your cousins?"

Button's fear-thought thrust against his mind like hands pushing away. "No, don't... Long, long ago the legend is that this valley was a huge lake, and the Swimmers lived in it. They were a different species from us, entirely. We came from the high gorges, where there are only barren cliffs now. This was long ago. As the lake receded, we grew more numerous and began to come down, and finally there was a battle and we

drove the Swimmers over the falls into the black lake. They have tried and tried to get out, to get back to the light, but they can't. They send their thoughts through to us sometimes. They..." She broke off. "I don't want to talk about them any more."

"How would you fight them if they did get out?" asked Harker easily. "Just with the birds and the growing things?"

Button was slow in answering. Then she said, "I will show you one way." She laid her hand across his eyes. For a moment there was only darkness. Then a picture began to form — people, his own people, seen as reflections in a dim and distorted mirror but recognizable. They poured into the valley through a notch in the cliffs, and instantly every bush and tree and blade of grass was bent against them. They fought, slashing with their knives, making headway, but slowly. And then, across the plain, came a sort of fog, a thin drifting curtain of soft white.

It came closer, moving with force of its own, not heeding the wind. Harker saw that it was thistledown. Seeds, borne on silky wings. It settled over the people trapped in the brush. It was endless and unhurrying, covering them all with a fine fleece. They began to writhe and cry out with pain, with a terrible fear. They struggled, but they couldn't get away.

The white down dropped away from them. Their bodies were covered with countless tiny green shoots, sucking the chemicals from the living flesh and already beginning to grow.

Button's spoken thought cut across the image. "I have seen your thoughts, some of them, since the moment you came out of the caves. I can't understand them, but I can see our plains gashed to the raw earth and our trees cut down and everything made ugly. If your kind came here, we would have to go. And the valley belongs to us."

Matt Harker's brain lay still in the darkness of his skull, wary, drawn in upon itself. "It belonged to the Swimmers first."

"They couldn't hold it. We can."

"Why did you save me, Button? What do you want of me?"

"There was no danger from you. You were strange. I wanted to play with you."

"Do you love me, Button?" His fingers touched a large smooth stone among the fern roots.

"Love? What is that?"

"It's tomorrow and yesterday. It's hoping and happiness and pain, the complete self because it's selfless, the chain that binds you to life and makes living it worthwhile. Do you understand?"

"No. I grow, I take from the soil and the light, I play with the others, with the birds and the wind and the flowers. When the time comes I am ripe with seed, and after that I go to the finish-place and wait. That's all I understand. That's all there is."

He looked up into her eyes. A shudder crept over him. "You have no soul, Button. That's the difference between us. You live, but you have no soul."

After that it was not so hard to do what he had to do. To do quickly, very quickly, the thing that was his only faint chance of justifying Sim's death. The thing that Button may have glimpsed in his mind but could not guard against, because there was no understanding in her of the thought of murder.

## IV

The black birds darted at Harker, but the compulsion that sent them flickered out too soon. The ferns and creepers shook, and then were still, and the birds flew heavily away. Matt Harker stood up.

He thought he might have a little time. The flower-people probably kept in pretty close touch mentally, but perhaps they wouldn't notice Button's absence for a while. Perhaps they weren't prying into his own thoughts, because he was Button's toy. Perhaps...

He began to run, toward the cliffs where the finish-place was. He kept as much as possible in the open, away from shrubs. He did not look again, before he left, at what lay by his feet.

He was close to his destination when he knew that he was spotted. The birds returned, rushing down at him on black whistling wings. He picked up a dead branch to beat them off and it crumbled in his hands. Telekinesis, the power of mind over matter. Harker had read once that if you knew how you could always make your point by thinking the dice into position. He wished he could think himself up a blaster. Curved beaks ripped his arms. He covered his face and grabbed one of the birds by the neck and killed it. The other one screamed and this time Harker wasn't so lucky. By the time he had killed the second one he'd felt claws in him and his face was laid open along the cheekbones. He began to run again.

Bushes swayed toward him as he passed. Thorny branches stretched. Creepers rose like snakes from the grass, and every green blade was turned knife-like against his feet. But he had already reached the cliffs and there were open rocky spaces and the undergrowth was thin.

He knew he was near the finish-place because he could smell it. The gentle withered fragrance of flowers past their prime, and under that a dead, sour decay. He shouted McLaren's name, sick with dread that there might not be an answer, weak with relief when there was one. He raced over tumbled rocks toward the sound. A small creeper tangled his foot and brought him down. He wrenched it by the roots from its shallow crevice and went on. As he glanced back over his shoulder he saw a thin white veil, a tiny patch in the distant air, drifting toward him.

He came to the finish-place.

It was a box canyon, quite deep, with high sheer walls, so that it was almost like a wide well. In the bottom of it bodies were thrown in a dry, spongy heap. Colorless flower-bodies, withered and gray, an incredible compost pile.

Rory McLaren lay on top of it, apparently unhurt. The two packs were beside him, with the weapons. Strewn over the heap, sitting, lying, moving feebly about, were the ones who waited, as Button had put it, to stop. Here were the aged, the faded and worn out, the imperfect and injured, where their ugliness could not offend. They seemed already dead mentally. They paid no attention to the men, nor to each other. Sheer blind vitality kept them going a little longer, as a geranium will bloom long after its cut stalk is desiccated.

"Matt," McLaren said. "Oh, God, Matt, I'm glad to see you!"

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. My leg even feels pretty good. Can you get me out?"

"Throw those packs up here."

McLaren obeyed. He began to catch Harker's feverish mood, warned by Harker's bleeding, ugly face that something nasty was afoot. Harker explained rapidly while he got out one of the ropes and half hauled McLaren out of the pit. The white veil was close now. Very close.

"Can you walk?" Harker asked.

McLaren glanced at the fleecy cloud. Harker had told him about it "I can walk," he said. "I can run like hell."

Harker handed him the rope. "Get around the other side of the canyon. Clear across, see?" He helped McLaren on with his pack. "Stand by with the rope to pull me up. And keep to the bare rocks."

McLaren went off. He limped badly, his face twisted with pain. Harker swore. The cloud was so close that now he could see the millions of tiny seeds floating on their silken fibers, thistledown guided by the minds of the flower-people in the valley. He shrugged into his pack straps and began winding bandages and tufts of dead grass around the bone tip of a recovered spear. The edge of the cloud was almost on him when he got a spark into the improvised torch and sprang down onto the heap of dead flower-things in the pit.

He sank and floundered on the treacherous surface, struggling across it while he applied the torch. The dry, withered substance caught. He raced the flames to the far wall and glanced back. The dying creatures had not stirred, even when the fire engulfed them. Overhead, the edges of the seed-cloud flared and crisped. It moved on blindly over the fire. There was a pale flash of light and the cloud vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Rory!" Harker yelled. "Rory!"

For a long minute he stood there, coughing, strangling in thick smoke, feeling the rushing heat crisp his skin. Then, when it was almost too late, McLaren's sweating face appeared above him and the rope snaked down. Tongues of flame flicked his backside angrily as he ran monkey-fashion up the wall.

They got away from there, higher on the rocky ground, slashing occasionally with their knives at brush and creepers they could not avoid. McLaren shuddered.

"It's impossible," he said. "How do they do it?"

"They're blood cousins. Or should I say sap. Anyhow, I suppose it's like radio control—a matter of transmitting the right frequencies. Here, take it easy a minute."

McLaren sank down gratefully. Blood was seeping through the tight bandages where Harker had incised his wound. Harker looked back into the valley.

The flower-people were spread out in a long crescent, their bright multicolored heads clear against the green plain. Harker guessed that they would be guarding the pass. He guessed that they had known what was going on in his mind as well as Button had. New form of communism, one mind for all and all for one mind. He could see that even without McLaren's disability they couldn't make it to the pass. Not a mouse could have made it.

He wondered how soon the next seed-cloud would come.

"What are we going to do, Matt? Is there any way..." McLaren wasn't thinking about himself. He was looking at the valley like Lucifer yearning at Paradise, and he was thinking of Viki. Not just Viki alone, but Viki as a symbol of thirty-eight hundred wanderers on the face of Venus.

"I don't know," said Harker. "The pass is out, and the caves are out...hey! Remember when we were fighting off those critters by the river and you nearly started a cave-in throwing rocks? There was a fault there, right over the edge of the lake. An earthquake split. If we could get at it from the top and shake it down..."

It was a minute before McLaren caught on. His eyes widened. "A slide would dam up the lake..."

"If the level rose enough, the Swimmers could get out." Harker gazed with sultry eyes at the bobbing flower heads below.

"But if the valley's flooded, Matt, and those critters take over, where does that leave our people?"

"There wouldn't be too much of a slide, I don't think. The rock's solid on both sides of the fault. And anyway, the weight of the water backed up there would push through anything, even a concrete dam, in a couple of weeks." Harker studied the valley floor intently. "See the way that slopes there? Even if the slide didn't wash out, a little digging would drain the flood off down the pass. We'd just be making a new river."

"Maybe." McLaren nodded. "I guess so. But that still leaves the Swimmers. I don't

think they'd be any nicer than these babies about giving up their land." His tone said he would rather fight Button's people any day.

Harker's mouth twisted in a slow grin. "The Swimmers are water creatures, Rory. Amphibious. Also, they've lived underground, in total darkness, for God knows how long. You know what happens to angleworms when you get 'em out in the light. You know what happens to fungus that grows in the dark." He ran his fingers over his skin, almost with reverence. "Noticed anything about yourself, Rory? Or have you been too busy."

McLaren stared. He rubbed his own skin, and winced, and rubbed again, watching his fingers leave streaks of livid white that faded instantly. "Sunburn," he said wonderingly. "My God. Sunburn!"

Harker stood up. "Let's go take a look." Down below the flower-heads were agitated. "They don't like that thought, Rory. Maybe it can be done, and they know it."

McLaren rose, leaning on a short spear like a cane. "Matt. They won't let us get away with it."

Harker frowned. "Button said there were other ways beside the seed..." He turned away. "No use standing here worrying about it."

They started climbing again, very slowly on account of McLaren. Harker tried to gauge where they were in relation to the cavern beneath. The river made a good guide. The rocks were almost barren of growth here, which was a godsend. He watched, but he couldn't see anything threatening approaching from the valley. The flower-people were mere dots now, perfectly motionless.

The rock formation changed abruptly. Ancient quakes had left scars in the shape of twisted strata, great leaning slabs of granite poised like dancers, and cracks that vanished into darkness.

Harker stopped. "This is it. Listen, Rory. I want you to go off up there, out of the danger area..."

"Matt, I..."

"Shut up. One of us has got to be alive to take word back to the ships as soon as he can get through the valley. There's no great rush and you'll be able to travel in three – four days. You..."

"But why me? You're a better mountain man..."

"You're married," said Harker curtly. "It'll only take one of us to shove a couple of those big slabs down. They're practically ready to fall of their own weight. Maybe nothing will happen. Maybe I'll get out all right. But it's a little silly if both of us take the risk, isn't it?"

"Yeah. But Matt..."

"Listen, kid." Harker's voice was oddly gentle. "I know what I'm doing. Give my

regards to Viki and the..."

He broke off with a sharp cry of pain. Looking down incredulously, he saw his body covered with little tentative flames, feeble, flickering, gone, but leaving their red footprints behind them.

McLaren had the same thing.

They stared at each other. A helpless terror took Harker by the throat. Telekinesis again. The flower-people turning his own weapon against them. They had seen fire, and what it did, and they were copying the process in their own minds, concentrating, all of them together, the whole mental force of the colony centered on the two men. He could even understand why they focused on the skin. They had taken the sunburn-thought and applied it literally.

Fire. Spontaneous combustion. A simple, easy reaction, if you knew the trick. There was something about a burning bush...

The attack came again, stronger this time. The flower-people were getting the feel of it now. It hurt. Oh God, it hurt. McLaren screamed. His loincloth and bandages began to smoulder.

*What to do, thought Harker, quick, tell me what to do...*

The flower-people focus on us through our minds, our conscious minds. Maybe they can't get the subconscious so easily, because the thoughts are not directed, they're images, symbols, vague things. Maybe if Rory couldn't think consciously they couldn't find him...

Another flare of burning, agonizing pain. In a minute they'll have the feel of it. They can keep it going...

Without warning, Harker slugged McLaren heavily on the jaw and dragged him away to where the rock was firm. He did it all with astonishing strength and quickness. There was no need to save himself. He wasn't going to need himself much longer.

He went away a hundred feet or so, watching McLaren. A third attack struck him, sickened and dazed him so that he nearly fell. Rory McLaren was not touched.

Harker smiled. He turned and ran back toward the rotten place in the cliffs. A part of his conscious thought was so strongly formed that his body obeyed it automatically, not stopping even when the flames appeared again and again on his flesh, brightening, growing, strengthening as the thought-energies of Button's people meshed together. He flung down one teetering giant of stone, and the shock jarred another loose. Harker stumbled on to a third, based on a sliding bed of shale, and thrust with all his strength and beyond it, and it went too, with crashing thunder.

Harker fell. The universe dissolved into shuddering, roaring chaos beyond a bright veil of flame and a smell of burning flesh. By that time there was only one thing clear in Matt Harker's understanding – the second part of his conscious mind, linked to and even stronger than the first.

The image he carried with him into death was a tall mountain with snow on its shoulders, blazing in the sun.

It was night. Rory McLaren lay prone on a jutting shelf above the valley. Below him the valley was lost in indigo shadows, but there was a new sound in it – the swirl of water, angry and swift.

There was new life in it, too. It rode the crest of the flood waters, burning gold in the blue night, shining giants returning in vengeance to their own place. Great patches of blazing jewel-toned phosphorescence dotted the water – the flower-hounds, turned loose to hunt. And in between them, rolling and leaping in deadly play, the young of the Swimmers went.

McLaren watched them hunt the forest people. He watched all night, shivering with dread, while the golden titans exacted payment for the ages they had lived in darkness. By dawn it was all over. And then, through the day, he watched the Swimmers die.

The river, turned back on itself, barred them from the caves. The strong bright light beat down. The Swimmers turned at first to greet it with a pathetic joy. And then they realized...

McLaren turned away. He waited, resting, until, as Harker had predicted, the block washed away and the backed-up water could flow normally again. The valley was already draining when he found the pass. He looked up at the mountains and breathed the sweet wind, and felt a great shame and humility that he was here to do it.

He looked back toward the caves where Sim had died, and the cliffs above where he had buried what remained of Matt Harker. It seemed to him that he should say something, but no words came, only that his chest was so full he could hardly breathe. He turned mutely down the rocky pass, toward the Sea of Morning Opals and the thirty-eight hundred wanderers who had found a home.

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