THE 100th MILLENNIUM

John Brunner

I

"It's a very *small* star," said the man in gold doubtfully.

"Big enough," said Creohan, and thought how tiny Earth was in comparison. The man in gold eyed him, and then gave another glance at the image in the field of the great telescope.

"This, then, is your device for seeing into the years to come?" he asked. "And is that all it will show? Man, I can go out o' nights—or could, did I not have better uses to put my time to—and stare my fill of stars! You told me you had a way of looking into the future, and I followed you because I grow weary of looking at the past. But this—this is nothing!"

"Is it nothing that that star will pass so close to Earth that the seas will boil and the land will parch, cities rise in smoke and flame towards the sky? Is that *nothing?*"

Creohan's vehemence took aback the man in gold, who withdrew a step, his hand falling to the hilt of his jewelled poignard. "Show me this thing, I say!" he demanded.

Creohan sighed, but he knew already he had failed. "I cannot bring it to your sight like the Lymarian Empire whose clothes and manners you affect. But it will surely come about, and in a much lesser space of time in the future than your beloved Lymarians are in the past."

"How soon?" There was almost greed in the eyes of the man in gold.

"In less than three hundred years."

The man's unease vanished like mist on a sunny morning. He relaxed with a sneer. "Three hundred years! Write it down for the future to read, then, you fool—by that time I'll be dead, and you, and what shall we know of it? Bah! I should never have believed you when you made your promise."

"I have given you the chance to see into the future," Creohan snapped. "Is it to be blamed on me that you have neither the wit nor the will to use that chance?"

Very nearly, the sting of the insult caused the man in gold to draw his poignard. But he was a Historian—a man who spent his moments gazing with a voyeur's greed into the long-dead past—and his appetite was small for the reality of cold iron. He would wear the costume and the weapon fashionable in his vanished Empire, but he would not match its deeds with actions of its own. Abruptly he turned on his heel, his cape swinging out as he spun around, and strode from the house, leaving Creohan clutching the smooth metal uprights of the telescope mounting and lost in a deep blank despair.

He had thought that this knowledge at least would strike through the man's defences, bring him to share the feelings that had torn him all the day long.

Across the object mirror of the telescope the image of the stellar runaway crawled. As yet, it was tiny. He might never have paid it any special attention, but for Molichant.

That small, dark, astute man was a Historian likewise, and last time he had dropped by, full as ever of enthusiasm and proselytising zeal—he would probably never learn that Creohan had no mind to be a Historian—he had suffered his friend's talk about the stars in the sky with his usual good grace. Indeed, he had mentioned casually that this star, now so bright, had not been visible in the time of the Mending of Men, less than ten centuries before, into which he had lately been peering.

Intrigued, Creohan had indulged in a few measurements, a little calculation—the sort of thing he loved. And last night he had remained awake checking and re-checking his calculations, until he was certain beyond a possibility of error.

In two hundred and eighty-eight years, that star would pass close to Earth; it would be drawn in to circle the sun in a dwindling spiral until the two united in a giant hell of flame.

Only there would be no one to see it—on Earth.

In the first few minutes, Creohan had wished fervently that he might have been born a Historian by inclination, a Dreamer, or anyone who did not have to meddle with knowledge of reality. In the next, he had resigned himself to the facts of his existence, and had determined to alert someone—anyone.

All that day he had walked the streets, accosting strangers, being rebuffed or laughed away like a man crazed. The man in gold had been his last attempt; a momentary inspiration had supplied the promise of a glimpse into the future, and the man—a sensation-seeker like all his breed—had taken the bait. And to no purpose.

But was the fate of Earth, which had brought forth the manifold richness they turned to their unworthy ends, of no interest to these people? Had they no love at all for the planet which bore them? Creohan could not bring himself to believe that true. Surely, somewhere in the city, he must find someone who could feel with him for a disaster which would not occur till he was long dead and forgotten, except perhaps by Historians of that future day.

That was something he had often posed to Molichant, when his friend called by. In response to the memory, the room—having gathered an excellent image of Molichant from his frequent visits—conjured up the man's likeness in the air so vividly that Creohan all but addressed him aloud.

"Have you not thought"—so he would say—"that in a few centuries men like yourself will be turning to *this* time, our own time, and finding it superior to theirs?"

He had thought Molichant—addicted as he was to a time less than ten centuries ago, moderation as Historianism went (the Lymarian Empire which had taken the fancy of the man in gold lay fourteen thousand years in the past)—he, then, should be

vulnerable to such an argument.

"Find *this* age worth living in?" Molichant had chuckled to think of such an amusing idea. "Maybe, compared to theirs, it will be! Maybe each age is indeed inferior to its predecessors."

"In what sense? You choose your time; another man will take the era of the Brydwal, or the Gerynts, or the Minogovaristo. On your argument, why does not every Historian go as far back as is possible?"

Molichant had shrugged. "In the last resort, it's something impossible to define. Maybe it happens that some people, owing to their ancestry and their way of thinking, are better suited to ages other than our own."

"What then of a man who can find *no* age in all the past to suit him? Surely, there must be some such."

"I never heard of anyone like that," Molichant mused. "And yet there may not, as you say, be a place for everyone in history. The lure, then, may have to do with the security one feels in an age of which one knows the outcome."

On that, Creohan had left the dispute unresolved. Now, coming back from memory, he dismissed the image of Molichant and it faded abruptly.

Now he knew the outcome of this age he and the Historians and everyone else lived in: would that make it more tolerable to live in? Would Molichant become secure, knowing what Creohan knew? No, never—he would flee further and more often into the years gone by.

He desired to be outside, and the room around him closed like a tired flower, leaving him standing on its roof. There was something he had never questioned, and now he started to wonder about it, as though in the instant when he knew it must end, Earth

had become an object of total and complete fascination to him.

The house had been—not a part of him, exactly, but an extension of him, since he acquired it. He had taken it because of its telescope; before he came along, it had stood empty, as all houses had to, forgetting its previous owner. Perhaps he had been a little too hasty to take it on; even now, it occasionally displayed a trait which he did not recognise as his own; conversely, he wondered on occasion how many of the habits he did now so recognise were in fact unconsciously inherited from his predecessor.

Once, a few years ago, he had been sufficiently moved by curiosity to ask the house, "Who was your former occupier? Can you show him to me?"

The room shivered; the whole house seemed to strain in recollection. But by that time the house did in fact know only Creohan as owner, and the image it projected for him was a slightly younger edition of himself.

Well, it didn't matter. The long-gone owner of the house would—seeing that he had had this telescope and the curiosity to use it, presumably—have understood the emotions which now racked Creohan. But he must be long dead. There was only one way to find out who he had been, and that was to turn Historian; he had considered asking Molichant, as already an addict, to do the task for him, but had refrained—Historians begrudged the periods they had to spend in the past, and would not readily spend them on others' purposes. "Find out for yourself!" would be even his friend Molichant's reply.

Cool night breezes tugged at his full beard as he stood on the roof; in the distance, over the calling and the music of the city going about its affairs, he could faintly discern the insane laughter of the next day's meat as it assembled on the gentle slopes of the hills inland prior to descending to the shore and dying there. Overhead, hordes of circling lights blinded the people to the stars.

On impulse, he whistled one of the lights down to him, and gazed at it as it perched on his outstretched hand, its mindless head cocked on one side, its beady eyes closed. This one was green, for his street was green and had been for the past week—roadway, the walls of the houses, and in consequence the lights circling in the air. Some elementary reflex in their nervous systems drew them always to places of their own colour.

He had never given the lights much thought; they existed, served their purpose, and that was all. Now he found himself wishing to know where they came from—there were so many of them, and when he turned on his killer screen to clear the view for his telescope they fell from the air by thousands. Did they eat? If so, what? Surely they must breed and reproduce, presumably during the length of the day when they fluttered out of sight of the sun.

Suppose one put up a killer screen all around the city, so that the people could see the stars? Would that bring home to them the menace threatening Earth?

He shook the creature back into the sky, and it spread its radiance-shedding wings and resumed its aimless circling.

Once more, he decided, *once* more he would make the attempt to find a companion to lament the fate of Earth. He could hope for no more than a fellow-mourner's solace—he had no means to turn the stars aside in their courses and so spare the planet its fate.

Somewhere in the city, then, he would find the person he needed. Or if not in the city, then out in the wide world-inland across the plains of Cruin, or across the near and far Arbelline Oceans…

He needed some way to impress people with the reality of his pleading; after a moment's thought, he commanded the house to bring him a suit of mourning clothes: a hat with a brim that cast a

melancholy shadow on his face, a slashed tunic the colour of drying blood, and leggings that appeared to be plastered from ankle to knee with slowly crusting mud.

Arrayed in this garb, Creohan set out to find his fellow-mourner.

II

For hours he walked. The streets were all the same, superficialities aside. His own street—that of the Musicians—was currently green; earlier it had been blue and before that again orange-yellow. Now it was the Street of the Carvers that was orange-yellow and the Street of the Travellers beyond it was white. He noted the fact in passing; often, when he needed a white light for some special task, he found it hard to whistle down one of that colour if his street was of another tint.

Except for the Historians—and at this time of night most of them were mentally far away in the past—one could tell a man's street by his clothing, which would be of the same colour. His friends would call to him, his neighbours would exchange a greeting. To one wearing mourning clothes, however, no one chose to speak, and on Creohan's addressing them the people he stopped as he went returned a blank, uncomfortable gaze and no attention.

He grew weary, and found that he was far from home, his purpose unaccomplished. He had come right down the length of the city towards the sea; he stood on a broad road that curved with the shore around a bay and towards a headland where it vanished from sight. A quiet succession of waves rolled inwards off the ocean, leaving the sandy beach littered with crabs and molluscs

which were dying in luminescent pulses of ice-green and white. In response to them a few white and green lights circled overhead, but the road was a sombre purple like a shadow, and the lights that were actually over his head were so few that they did not altogether hide the stars.

A solitary tavern grew from the beach.

Creohan had not been into a tavern for years, since he seldom felt the need for refreshment in company, but now he wanted to be with people—and besides, someone sitting or lying in a tavern would be less likely to move away before he could speak his knowledge than someone made to halt at random on the street. He made towards it.

It was circular, like all taverns; seven rooms followed spiral curves outwards from a central circle, and in this centre grew the waiter, blind, slow-thinking, and at his—at everyone's—service.

The dull green knob, as high as a man and studded with the sphincter-muscled projections from which it served the clients, did not ask him what he wanted. It was content to wait, as content as the jugs on the low counter ringing it, as content as the sea outside.

There was only one other person in the central circle at the moment, though the sound of voices and laughter came from two of the curved side-rooms; the customers were out of sight beyond the bend. This person that Creohan could see was a Historian, a woman, addicted to the period of the Glorious Gerynts, and she was drawing her liquor directly from the projection on the waiter which secreted it, like an infant at the breast.

Creohan debated a few moments as to which of the infinity of liquors he should choose, but before he could make up his mind, the woman drew back from her sucking. She had a heavy body which sagged and heaved as she panted, making her drab black

chiton stretch and hang loose by turns. That was the Gerynt way: they had scorned ornament or decoration. And in this case, perhaps, Molichant's theory had been correct—being neither decorative nor interesting herself, she might well have fled to that undecorative, uninteresting age.

Then, as she caught sight of him and started to approach, Creohan realised what she was doing here. He glanced about for a way of escape as she fumbled for the ugly sword at her waist, but she had come between him and the exit. Her words only confirmed his fears.

"You mourn," she said thickly. "Is it your custom to mourn in taverns? That is unfitting."

No wonder she had been sucking directly at the waiter. Intrigued sufficiently at long last, she had come here to try the Gerynts' "blood of women" for herself; the waiter, as was its purpose, had provided it for her, and now the co-life would be whispering its sibilant words inside her brain. Thrice a year the Gerynts had imbibed their drink from the full breasts of their lobotomised repositories of right thinking, for in their day the co-life could only be kept alive in the human environment; once in a lifetime was once too many for a citizen of the modern age.

"Give me poison," said Creohan to the waiter. "In a jug."

Ice-cold liquid that burned with a black glow rushed from the living spigot; before the jug was a quarter full the woman had spoken again.

"Whom do you mourn, or is your mourning a lie?"

"I mourn for Earth," said Creohan, and knew as he uttered the words that he had made a mistake. The co-life that had entered the woman's brain was remorseless—that was why the Gerynts had disappeared.

"Earth is not alive, and therefore cannot be dead," the woman

stated. “Earth is still in existence, and therefore it is stupid to mourn it. You are plainly a person incapable of logical reasoning, or very dishonest. In either case it is a public duty to dispose of you.”

Just so had the Gerynts thought and spoken; for that reason too they had disappeared.

The sword left its scabbard; at the same moment the jug was filled, and Creohan took it and dashed it in the woman’s face. The sword tinkled as it fell; she made only a thud. She was finished, but the co-life that shared her brain was not, and as it oozed from the openings of her ears Creohan poured the last few drops of the poison on to its naked protoplasm. It writhed and died.

Wiping his forehead, he put the jug back on the counter. The waiter said suddenly, “You asked for poison.”

He nodded, forgetting it could not see, and it went on, “You are not dead. When one orders poison, one must die. Was it not strong poison?”

“It was very strong poison,” said Creohan. “Is it not enough that one should be dead? The poison did not go to waste.”

With that he left the central circle of the tavern, and entered the nearer of the two occupied rooms. He withdrew hastily; the couple in there would be interested in nothing but each other at such a moment.

In the other occupied room sat three women and a man, watching a small creature picked up on the sea-shore die in a series of graceful gyrations. It was not until it had performed the last of its antics and lay still on the floor between their four tall glasses of bluish liquor that they looked up and saw him.

“Whom do you mourn?” said one of the women merrily. “This thing here?” She jabbed a finger downwards.

"No," said Creohan wearily. "I lament that the world is soon to end."

"That will save us having to think of new ways to pass the time," said the same woman; her male companion, more practically, muttered, "The man's deranged."

"How is this thing to happen?" said a second woman; she had an expression of genuine interest on her face, the upper half of which was hidden under a samite mask.

"Another sun is going to burn Earth up."

"Another sun? There isn't but one sun," said the first woman lazily. "Unless we get a new sun every day—I never thought of that."

"There are hundreds of suns," said Creohan. "Thousands! All the stars are suns."

"Stars?" said the woman uncomprehendingly. The masked woman spoke up.

"The little lights in the sky. You've seen them."

"I've seen them, yes, but I've never heard them called by any such name," said the first woman. "Besides, that's silly. They aren't anything like hot enough to burn up the world—they're barely even warm. They flutter—like this!" She waved her arms in imitation of the night-flying lights, and gave the man of the party cause to regret choosing that moment to raise his glass to his lips. During the recriminations that followed, Creohan withdrew sickly, more than a little ashamed of the race spawned by his beloved Earth.

No, it was stupid to think of finding his fellow-mourner in this haphazard fashion. After all, what was his hurry? He had the rest of his life to spend on the task; he could advertise his discovery, announce it publicly, and someone would respond. It was not, after all, as though there were something he could do to avert the fate of Earth.

And yet he could not escape from an overwhelming sense of urgency, as though every day he spent on this doomed world would now be wasted unless it held some meaningful action directed towards—towards what? Turning aside a gigantic ball of flaming gas called a star? It was ridiculous.

He turned unthinking across the shore, noticing with interest that low over the sea one could make out the stars without being dazzled by the whirling lights. His feet grew damp as he plodded over the sea-soaked sand until he reached a rock almost at the edge of the ocean. Dropping into its shadow, he sat and watched the stars vanish in succession below the horizon.

His mind calmed slowly, and he felt almost settled enough to return home and sleep. He was on the point of rising stiffly to his feet, when someone said, "It's very beautiful, isn't it?"

Wonderingly, he turned, and saw that a girl sat not a man's height to his left, on the other side of the rock. A dying light wheeled over and cast a momentary glow on her before it fell into the sea, and Creohan said, "So are you!"

The girl laughed with a little musical ripple of sound. "I know," she said without conceit, and flexed her supple body so that the swell of her breasts caught the pearly light of the waves. Her body was slender, but not thin; her face was broad and underlain by strong bones, and her dark hair was wet and clung to her head and neck.

"I heard you come down," she said. "I almost went away, thinking you had seen me. But when you sat down to watch the sea I knew there was no need."

"What were you doing here, then?"

"I have been in the water, looking at the creatures. I do it every night, and often in the day as well."

"Why?"

She shrugged, and shook back her hair, spattering Creohan with a rain of salty drops. "I like it down there."

"*Under* the water? Surely it is not possible to breathe there."

"I hold my breath, of course!" The girl laughed again. "I think my friends there suspect I'm more of a ghost than a living creature, for I come and go so oddly."

"There are people in the sea, then?"

"Not people, exactly. Creatures—some of them quite intelligent, some of them curious about me."

"So," said Creohan, nodding, and continued almost inaudibly, "It is indeed a pity that all this should end so soon."

"End?" cried the girl. "Why should it end?"

Creohan did not answer directly. Instead he said, "Would you join with me in regretting its passing?"

"Of course I would. But I do not understand you."

He extended his arm, pointing. "Do you see that star?"

"The greenish one?"

"No, the yellow one, very bright and almost at the horizon."

She leaned close to press her cheek to his arm and followed its line. "Yes, I see it. What about it?"

"That is a sun almost as large as ours. In a short time—longer than our lifetimes, but shorter than the times the Historians go back through—it will come so close that it will burn the Earth to ashes."

"A—a sun? Like the one which shines on us by day?"

"They are all suns. Perhaps they have worlds like ours circling them—who knows?"

The girl shivered, and reached around the rock for a cloak which lay there on the sand. Wrapping it about her, she sat with her knees drawn up under her chin and her eyes on Creohan's face. "To think I have lived all my life without wondering about the nature of the sky," she mused. "It must be a great place up there—bigger by far than my little world beneath the sea. Tell me about it."

He told her, and a great deal more besides, including things he had never told to anybody; he talked the threatening star down below the horizon, and others along with it, and the girl sat listening like a statue.

At long last he stretched his cramped body and gave a short bitter laugh. "Thank you for hearing me out," he said. "All day and the earlier part of tonight I have been hunting for someone who would do that. But no one seems to care!"

"No one?" said the girl quietly. "*I* care."

"You do indeed, and I am grateful for it. But for the rest of the people—why, they live and laugh and love and there's an end of it. They know they will be dead in any case before this disaster happens—what interest has it for them? It seems to me as though all the spirit that motivated these lusty ages the Historians flee to has been drained from our modern breed!"

"Perhaps it has," she replied. "You are more like myself than anyone I have ever known; you have—well, call it curiosity. I was curious about the sea, so I went to look at it at first hand." She shrugged, and one pale shoulder escaped from her cloak.

"But if this spirit has been drained, where has it flowed to? Answer me that!" A sudden vehemence filled her voice. "When you summoned up the energy to go looking, you found in the short space of one day this other person—me—to join with you. The world is wide, and we have many days. Let's show that our race still has the strength to take on an impossible task, and a love for Earth

great enough to achieve it! All right, so there is no one here who loves adventure, who has vigour and an eye to tomorrow. Why should such a man stay here? With all the world before us, why should we?"

"Yes, you are right," said Creohan. He rose to his feet, and she did the same lithely. Together they turned and looked out across the sea towards the low stars.

"To turn aside a star," said Creohan in a low voice. "I think we must be insane…"

Confidently enough, the girl answered, "But it is a glorious madness!"

Nonetheless, her hand stole into his, and he felt that it was very cold, and she was trembling.

III

"I do not know your name or place of residence," said Creohan when they finally wearied of their staring and made to depart. "I am called Creohan, and live on the Street of the Musicians."

"My name is Chalyth," the girl told him. "And as for my home—why, here, or anywhere, all about and around."

"You have no house of your own?"

"What need has one of a house? I have few belongings—the nights are always warm, and when rain falls, there are trees and shrubs to shelter under if I care to take the trouble. But I spend so much time under water that the wetness of rain no longer troubles

me."

She laughed at his patent incredulity. "And tell me this truly," she said. "Could someone anchored by possessions suggest so lightly that we should depart on our quest?"

He shook his head slowly. "Well, then, when shall we begin—and where? I feel an urgency in this, a need to act at once."

"Then let us yield to it," Chalyth said matter-of-factly. "The morning will suit us as well as any time and better than most. I will come home with you, for whichever way we start our journey, it will be long before we sleep again beneath a roof. You permit it?"

"Willingly," said Creohan, and together they turned and re-entered the city.

Chalyth did not speak through their walk, except to inquire for whom he was mourning when the sombre purple lights near the shore gave way to others which were bright enough for her to discern the nature of his garb. He told her, and she answered that it would not be needed after all. He hoped deeply and fervently that she was right.

They passed their night in troubled thinking, and Creohan, when he rose, felt that he might as well have lain out on the shore for all the comfort his soft couch had afforded him. Chalyth too seemed quiet when she came from her chamber, arrayed in a flame-red shirt and loose grey breeches from Creohan's own wardrobe. Of course, he recalled: she had nothing but her cloak when she came.

They spoke desultorily of commonplace matters as they broke their fast; he showed her the telescope with which he had made his discovery, and at length in a fit of misery commanded the house to cause it to disappear. At once, it went, and the room seemed infinitely empty.

"Why did you do that?" cried Chalyth. "Was it not one of

your greatest treasures?"

"Once it was," said Creohan grimly. "But each time I would have gone to it, had I not done that, I would have looked first for that disastrous star, and remained gazing at it until the night was gone. And looking at it will do nothing. It is better so."

He wrenched his eyes from the empty space left by the telescope and asked, "Which way do we go?"

"Out across the ocean, or inland over the hills?" Chalyth had only another question as an answer.

Creohan thought deeply for a while. Then he said, "I know of a man who is now old. Once in his youth he is said to have voyaged out across the ocean to a distant shore. If he yet lives and remembers, he may give us guidance."

"Come, then," said Chalyth, and they set forth.

The man they sought went by the name of Glyre, and he had formerly dwelt on the Street of the Travellers, out of vanity, perhaps, that he alone of the people on that street had journeyed further than out of sight. When they asked for him, they were told he had removed, and no one knew where to. Someone also said that he had turned Historian, and Creohan's heart sank.

"Of what period?" he asked the informant, and the man chuckled.

"That I do know!" he said surprisingly. "On this voyage he was so fond of boasting about he chanced across the ruins of a city washed by the sea, its tall towers crumpled by the blows of time. It was to seek the origins of that city that he became Historian, and the last I heard he was still watching that age."

"I know of that city," said Chalyth slowly. "One of my friends beneath the sea brought me a golden helmet which he had found there, and said in the way these creatures have that he had had to

swim many times faster than a boat could sail for a day and a night to reach the spot. It was not known to his people how long ago the city fell."

"Let us continue to look for him," said Creohan, and thanked the man who had told them about Glyre. "To the House of History, then. A taster, perhaps, will have chanced across this same period."

"I do not like tasters," said Chalyth bluntly, and Creohan shrugged.

"I dislike Historians, and a taster is a Historian in the making. But needs must."

So they went up the hill on which the House of History stood in its bower of green and blue leaves. It had stood there for so long that everyone in the city knew it as a landmark, while to Historians it was a home and a promise. About its dark brown walls stretched a lawn pleasant and green in the morning sunlight, and here tasters, coming to sip at the vanished ages of history, dabbled like incipient drug addicts in search of the time when they fancied they should have been born.

"Wait," said Creohan as they were on the point of crossing the lawn to the entrance that yawned in the side of the House, three times as high as a man and dark inside. "There goes a new Historian."

A boy, no more than twenty years of age, with a certain nervousness in his gait, was rising to his feet from where he had been lying on the lawn among his fellow-tasters. A moment's hesitation, and he was marching with decision to the entrance. At a distance of ten paces, Creohan and Chalyth followed him.

Inside the entrance, strange memories began to waft into their minds—drawn from the dark recesses of ancestral knowledge by

the powers built into the House. A taster who desired to become a Historian had only to walk the passageways of the House, waiting until he reached an area where were concentrated thoughts and memories which appealed to him; then he would stand still for a while, and return to the lawn outside, to brood over the memories he had acquired. If, on reflection, they were not what he required, he could return, as often as he wished, until he found what he sought. As this youth was doing.

For a day and a night without food or drink, he would lie in the place he had chosen. At last, he would rise and go like a blind man, and thereafter when he willed it he would have the power to see alive and real about him the visions of a dead era.

Before they had reached the first branching of the passages, the youth had disappeared from sight, and they halted irresolutely. At once the uncalled-for memories re-doubled in their minds, and Creohan was stung to move.

"Do not let us stand still for a moment," he said. "I do not know how thinly my urge against fleeing into the past is armoured now I know the future holds disaster."

But Chalyth brushed aside his arm as he tugged at her, *listening* , with her head on one side. "This is fascinating, Creohan," she breathed. "Why—"

By main force he turned her around and marched her into the clean sunlight. Panting, he glared at her, and she came slowly back to herself.

"Oh, Creohan!" she exclaimed. "I would not dare go in again. It saps the purpose like strong liquor!"

"Indeed it does," said Creohan grimly, "and that to us would be fatal. No, this is not the way."

They turned dispiritedly to look at the tasters on the lawn, and suddenly Chalyth grasped Creohan's arm. "Do you see a man—a

Historian—who goes yonder with a golden helmet on his head? Even such a helmet as the one that my sea-friend brought out of the depths for me!"

"Almost," said Creohan musingly, "almost I could find it in me to believe that Earth itself knows our needs and is causing them to be fulfilled. Quickly, after him."

They ran pell-mell across the lawn, almost stepping on prostrate tasters as they went, and yet their haste was unnecessary, for the old head of their quarry seemed bent by the weight of the golden helmet and his clothes hung loose on a frame scrawny with age. His slow steps were directed towards the entrance to the House of History, and he was still a dozen paces from it when they caught up to him.

"Is your name Glyre?" said Creohan, panting.

The old man's bleary eyes turned towards him, seeming to have difficulty in focussing on something in the present.

"It is," he said rustily. "And why do you stop me?"

Creohan fumbled for words. Chalyth said directly, "You are a Historian already, Glyre. What brings you back to the House of History—is it that you grow weary and wish to choose another period?"

Fire shone for a moment in the old tired eyes, but the man was now long past the power of growing angry. He made his head imply denial; the weight of his helmet prevented a definite gesture.

"No one who has looked on the richness of my age can grow weary of it," he said thinly. "I wish to see more of it, and still more! It grows dim to me, and I must make it strong again."

Creohan felt a surge of pity for the man; the weakness was not in the memories but in Glyre's own aged brain. He said, "Are you not the Glyre who made that great voyage out of sight across

the ocean many years ago?"

"I am," said Glyre, and pride crept into his voice.

"You were a man of spirit!" Creohan protested. "And yet you turned aside and fled into a long-gone age. *Why?*"

Glyre laughed creakingly. "What place is there in today's world for a man of spirit? If I could have found but one such man or woman as walked my islands in the past, I would perhaps have been content with life as it is. But I could not find even one! So"—he made a little shrug—"I, as you put it, fled."

"Here is a man of spirit," said Chalyth. "Let us sit down here on the grass, and we will tell you what we propose."

Glyre cast a longing eye towards the yawning entrance of the House of History, acknowledged to himself that his legs were weak, and joined them on the lawn. Interest—something approaching excitement—showed in his eyes as he listened to the tale Creohan told.

When he was done, Glyre spoke in admiration. "This is a noble project!" he said. "It is such as the people of the past used to undertake—people who did not know the word 'impossible.' I shall soon be dead, and forgotten, but if you succeed you will live in the memories of real men and real women, of everyone on Earth, instead of the minds of a few Historians who choose to enjoy your age."

"Will you not join with us?" pressed Chalyth, and he answered wistfully.

"Had you asked me a century ago, when I was young, and vigorous, and daring, I would have said yes on the instant. Now"—he stretched out his wasted arm—"I am a weak and very old man. No, I cannot join with you, except in spirit. I can, though, give you this advice which you want. Do not seek your goal across the sea. I went there. I found islands which had once been great

and populous and are now a waste of ruins. Beyond them again is only a vast ocean, so great that I dared not venture further. But if beyond that there were adventurous souls of the kind you seek, surely they would have come to us! No, you must go inland, for that way there is at least a possibility you will chance across what you seek."

He began to rise, and could not; Creohan helped him. With dignity, Glyre returned thanks. "And this I would say," he declared. "I had thought nothing could tear my heart from the long-dead people of my beloved islands. But if it were possible, I would forget them—for you."

He hobbled onwards towards the House of History in search of his dreams, and Chalyth and Creohan found that they turned their gazes away from him and towards each other in the same instant.

IV

So they turned back towards the foot of the hill, and went in the direction away from the sea, until they came to the place where the city blended almost imperceptibly into the green hills from which the meat came nightly, shrieking its insane laughter.

The last house was a delicate bower, all fresh and yellow, and a girl sat in the doorway singing. She had hair as yellow as sunlight and a voice like running water.

"Pardon us, friend," said Creohan civilly. "Do you know what lies beyond the hills yonder?"

The girl laughed. "No, stranger, I do not! I have sung here for

ten years, and I have never been further than you can see. Is it not wonderful?"

"I call it craven-hearted," said Chalyth bluntly, and she and Creohan walked by.

They had gone only a few paces when the girl got up and came after them, crying for them to wait a while. Creohan turned and looked at her; she was very lovely, and she wore nothing but garlands of huge yellow flowers picked from the walls of her house. "What do you call us for?" he demanded.

"If you are in truth going over the hills and inland, you may see a man who—who went that way a year ago. He is called Vence, and you may know him by his eyes: one is blue, the other brown."

"So others have gone this way," Chalyth murmured, and the girl dressed in yellow blossoms shook her head.

"One other, only one." Her lip trembled and her eyes began to fill. "Vence was my lover, and we shared this house. We sang, we ate and drank and loved—what else was needed for us? And yet a year ago he went out into the hills and said to me that if I wanted him I could follow. I tried—in truth, I did try! But as I lost sight of the house my heart failed me, and I returned. Again I set out; again I had to return. After that, I—I have been waiting." She blinked and spilt a tear into the upturned cup of one of the yellow flowers.

"And if we see this Vence?" Chalyth asked:

"Tell him—I'm still waiting."

"If a man sets out from this city, he does so with a purpose," said Creohan. "I think he will not come back with that purpose unfulfilled. You will sit here growing old; those yellow blossoms will wither and fall away, showing your naked body, how it is wrinkled and your breasts sag. Your voice will begin to crack on the high notes. Your golden hair will tarnish. And you will still be waiting."

The girl, horrified, looked at Chalyth, and read unsympathy in her eyes also. "You, then? You are following your man?"

"No," said Chalyth, and told her where and why they were going.

"Take me with you," said the girl when they were through. "Take me with you. And if I grow faint-hearted when we are out of sight of the house, drag me onwards. I do not want to sit here singing till I die—and alone I cannot do anything else!"

"Change your blossoms for warm clothing, and put strong shoes on your feet, then," Creohan answered. "The way may be hard, or it may not. Surely it will be very long. But we will not drag you, for it will delay us. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said the girl in subdued tones, and went into her yellow house.

"Was that wise?" said Chalyth in a low voice while she was gone, and Creohan shrugged.

"Almost anyone in the city would say that what we are doing is extremely unwise in any case! What difference does one more piece of folly make?"

The girl was long in coming back, so that Creohan and Chalyth began to suspect she had regretted her hasty decision. But she did appear, clothed in plain grey and with shoes on her pretty feet; in her leather belt was thrust a knife, and over her shoulder was slung a bag that held a little harp and a generous quantity of food.

"Just so did my man set out," she said as she came near. "Except that he had a flute instead of a harp. I am called Madal. And you?"

They told her, Creohan thinking that she had more sense than he had given her credit for. Then they gave a last lingering glance

back towards the city, though Madal's eyes went no further than her home.

"Onward," said Creohan, and they began to walk.

The sun passed the zenith and began to slide towards setting. At first they went on level turf. Then they came to a place where the ground was rutted, in a pass between two hills, and after looking at the prints in the earth Creohan said that it must be by this path that the meat came to the city. They picked their way delicately over the upturned dirt, and decided to follow the tracks because they at least led somewhere.

Out of the corner of his eye Creohan noticed that Madal kept looking back, but he resolutely refused to copy her, even to see whether they were yet out of sight of her yellow home. The golden girl's face was set, and she had a tight line to her mouth, but she showed no sign of yielding.

No sign, that is, until the sun had set and they were still following the track of the meat. Chalyth, who was the least burdened of the trio, was leading them, when suddenly she halted and cried, "Listen!"

Far in the distance they could make out the crazy laughter of the meat as it made its way towards the city. Creohan looked about them; the light was dim now and it was hard to see where they were.

"We had best leave the track," he suggested. "I have never confronted a herd on the move, but I imagine they would give us scant attention. Up that way, to the left."

They ran from the road up a steep slope, and perched on its grassy lip to wait till the way was clear. Always the shrieking mirth grew louder, until the leaders of the herd shambled into sight—horrid in the deepening gloom.

Twice as high as a man, low-browed and lank-limbed, the creatures went past, their manic delight ringing and echoing from the hills about. Creohan shuddered, and nearly stopped his ears against it.

"I have never seen our meat alive before," said Chalyth as the silence returned. "How like those beings are to men! My stomach turns to think of it—shall I ever be able to eat their flesh again?"

But Madal reacted differently. Her gaze fixed on the place at which the herd had gone from sight, she whispered, "They are going to the city! And in the morning my neighbour will bring up my provisions for me, and he will find my house empty and no sign to tell where I have gone. Tonight I shall lie out under the sky, when waiting there is the couch in which I have slept these ten years—alone of late, but not of wishing it so…"

Chalyth rounded on her. "Follow them, then! These ten years that you have lain in your soft couch, I have slept under the sky, when I could have had my choice of a hundred beds. *I* have lain alone from wishing it so, and has it done me ill, you think? Faugh! Go after those brutish unthinking clods, treading a path their fellows have trodden for centuries. We would rather make our own path, Creohan and I."

"You shame me," said Madal after a pause. "Even so did Vence shame me when he left and I could not follow. I do not like to be shamed. So be it; we sleep under the sky. Here? Or shall we go on until we drop from weariness?"

"No, here, I think," said Creohan, and sought a place to lay his cloak. Chalyth broke branches from a low, dry bush and built a fire, and Madal brought out a little food from the sack on her shoulder.

Afterwards, she took her harp and sang a sad slow song; she was still singing when Creohan and Chalyth fell asleep, and it rang through their dreams as though it was echoing from side to side of

their skulls in the way the laughter of the herd of meat had rung between the hills.

The next morning they went on their way in silence, finding that they had almost reached the highest point of their area. For it was still well before noon when they breasted a rise—still following the track of the meat, which ran quite straight—and looked out over a plain rich with ripe yellow grasses.

It stretched as far as their eyes could see, and Chalyth murmured, "Now I can tell how Glyre felt when he launched out into the trackless ocean!"

"This is not trackless," said Creohan, and led the way scrambling down the abruptly sloping path. Thorny shrubs bordered it at this point, and caught on the sharp prickles were patches as big as a man's palm of the grey-furred hide of the meat creatures. Bloody stains testified to the way they used these bushes to aid them as they climbed up. Creohan was bigger than either of his companions, and he could barely make a way between the thorns; the giant brutes must be torn and scarred every time they passed by, he reflected—yet they laughed still, they laughed always.

The grasses towered huge about them, their stems thick as his fingers. "Now we *must* follow the track," he said. "Otherwise we shall be lost."

"Always supposing we are not lost anyway, and that the track leads somewhere," said Madal flatly.

"It cannot only be our city that the creatures go to," said Creohan. "Even if it takes us first to some breeding-place, there will be another track beyond that—maybe several tracks. Let's go ahead as quickly as we can."

Madal made to say something; a glint in Chalyth's eye

forestalled her, and she only settled her bag more comfortably before striking out again.

"You saw the threatening star last night?" Chalyth asked Creohan as they fell into step behind Madal. Creohan nodded.

"Here where there are no lights in the sky, we shall see it every night."

"It is probably my fancy—yet it seemed brighter already!"

Creohan made no reply.

The trail wandered and twisted among the high grass; it was no use trying to strike away from it on a straight line, for there were no points of vantage. Wearying, they walked until the sunlight no longer reached the ground between the ripe yellow vegetable walls of the track, and at that time they again heard the crazy laughing of the meat on its way.

"Of course! The nearer we get to their breeding-ground, the earlier we shall meet them," reasoned Creohan, and they turned round a bend in the track.

Here it abruptly straightened for a hundred and fifty paces, and rounding the bend at the other extreme of the straight stretch they saw the herd facing them.

Somehow by daylight they looked even more like evil-tempered men, though they laughed—*how* they laughed! A blind panic seized Madal, and she turned incontinently and ran.

"Get off the track, you fool!" shouted Creohan, and he seized Chalyth by the arm and parted the grass to let them through. Hidden, they panted out of sight while the herd went by, the thick stems springing back to the vertical as they watched.

After the sound of the meat's passage faded, Creohan made to return to the track, but Chalyth begged him to wait a while. He

consented worriedly, wondering whether Madal was still fleeing blindly down the way, or had managed to dive among the grasses also. Their answer came soon.

"Creohan! Chalyth!" It was a high, frightened call. "I am lost! I cannot find the track again!"

They exchanged meaning glances. "You cannot be far away," Creohan called back. "We hear you quite close to us. Can you not see the way you came?"

Chalyth tugged at his sleeve and silently indicated the way they themselves had come; except where their weight still bowed the stalks, there was no trace of their passage.

"Stay where you are, Madal!" Creohan cried when he had realised the truth. "Call out every now and again, and we will make our way to you."

"That direction," said Chalyth, pointing. "Maybe she is on the other side of the track from us, in which case we will stumble across it as we go."

"Agreed," said Creohan, and they set out.

But the tough stems kept twisting them aside from their course; terror grew in Madal's calls, and when they at long last heard her very close and thrust aside the grasses and saw her, she was crouched on her knees with her face buried in her hands. When she raised it to them, it was wet with tears.

"Where is the trail?" she demanded. "Where is it?"

Creohan hesitated, and Chalyth spoke for him. "We did not cross it while we were finding you."

"Then we are lost! We shall starve to death here, for we cannot see out of these cursed plants!" Madal wept.

"Nonsense," said Creohan. "Next time a herd passes, we will hear them and follow their direction!"

"I have a faster way than that," Chalyth declared. "Bow your back, Creohan, and I will stand on it and look out."

Amazed he had not thought of that device himself, he bent, and she scrambled up nimbly. "Well?" Madal demanded. "Do you see the trail?"

"No," Chalyth replied. "But what I do see is smoke—rising from someone's fire!"

"You are certain?" said Creohan, so startled that he all but straightened and sent Chalyth flying.

"It's certainly smoke, and I think the meat creatures would not build fires. At least the person with it must have a clear space to light it in, for these stems would take fire easily. Let us go see."

V

Still snuffling, Madal rose, and they forced their way slowly between the grasses, halting every now and again to take a fresh bearing. It was not long, however, before they came out into a trampled clearing twenty paces wide, in the centre of which a man sat incuriously watching the little curl of smoke that rose from the fire. One of the meat creatures, gutted and bloody, lay at the edge of the cleared space, and the arm which was missing from it was singeing above the flames.

The man hardly turned his shaggy head as they approached. Irresolute, Creohan addressed him. "Friend, do you know of the path that runs across this plain?"

The stranger's beard and hair were so tangled together that his

head seemed to be a ball of whiskers; his body was dirty and if he had ever had any clothes they had long ago worn to shreds. Now he opened his eyes wide and looked direct at Creohan, and Creohan started, for one of those eyes was blue and the other was brown…

"There is no way across this plain," the man said rustily, and went back to looking at his fire. Creohan glanced at Madal, but it was plain she had not recognised this unclean wretch.

Hoping that the shock would not overcome her he said harshly, "Vence, you lie! Tell us where the track lies!"

The man leapt to his feet, and in the same instant Madal let out a sighing gasp and fainted. Chalyth saved her from falling, before echoing Creohan incredulously.

"Vence! You mean—*this* is Madal's lover?"

"Is it not true?" Creohan asked the naked man fiercely, and he wilted under the burning stare.

"Yes, it is true. And that is Madal with you yonder. I had—forgotten her name—until your woman spoke it."

Creohan let the assumption pass. "What happened to you?" he demanded. "What do you do here? How do you live?"

"Live?" said Vence sullenly. "As always. There is no end to this horrible plain! I do not know how long I have tramped it, up and down, round and about. The days melt together like coloured wax till they are all grey and featureless…"

"Yet you are not far from your city," said Chalyth bitingly. "Your spirit must have failed you very soon!"

"Near the city?" Vence started. "Not so! For thirty days I *know* I went forward, growing more weary and more hungry, until in my last resort I stumbled across the place where the meat creatures breed, and I knew I must stay near there or starve to death." He laughed harshly. "Do I seem to starve? Tell me that!"

"And do you want nothing else of life now?"

Vence shrugged and sat down again on his haunches, his sullen self-possession returning. "What else have I ever *had* of life?"

"But—how do you get your meat here? You are surely not strong enough to kill these brutes with your bare hands, and the knife I see yonder in that carcass seems a puny weapon…"

Vence's upper lip curled back in a derisory grin. "The brutes are near enough human in some ways." He seemed to take a relish in boasting of his degradation. "You'll see that my prize is female, if you look. All my prizes are female—like I say, they're near enough human. For me."

Creohan did not know that he had such powerful emotions buried in him. The slap he delivered on Vence's jaw hardly stung his palm, but it knocked the naked man literally off his feet, to sprawl among the trampled-down grasses.

"You less than human *thing*," said Creohan, glad in a detached way that Madal was still unconscious and had not heard the last words. "You may have abdicated your purpose in life, but there is still a function for you to perform. If you know where the meat breeds, you know where the track runs. Set us on it, and we will be glad to see the last of you!"

Touching his jaw wonderingly, Vence's mismatched eyes glared at Creohan. Then with an animal screech he threw himself at his attacker, his mouth opening to bite at Creohan's throat. But the earlier blow had injured it—how, the matted beard prevented Creohan from seeing—and when he moved the muscles the pain was so great he cried out again and could do no more.

Creohan bent and seized a brand from the still smouldering fire. "If you do not lead us, I will set your hair alight, and you will

die lost *and blind* in the middle of this plain you hate so much. Put out your fire in case it sets the grasses alight, and let us begone."

Vence yielded, and while he was extinguishing the fire in the only way possible to him Creohan addressed Chalyth.

"How is she?"

"I think she recovers," Chalyth told him, glancing down at Madal's white face. The pale lips moved, and she bent close to catch the words.

"Is that—is *that* truly Vence?"

"Yes it is. He's going to lead us out of here."

"I have been listening," said Madal faintly. "Tell him—tell him Madal is waiting no longer." She licked her dry lips. "Thanks to you, Creohan and Chalyth. I might have wasted my life on something that had become a dream, had you not shamed me out of it. I think I am strong enough now to look."

She opened her eyes and stared directly at her former lover, exactly as she had looked at the meat creatures, but without the terror.

After a moment she freed herself from Chalyth's support, and in a manner that was kept normal by an effort, settled her bag on her shoulder.

"Let us follow him," she said.

Sullenly Vence thrust forward through the grasses, one hand parting the stems, the other clutching his painful jaw; in this way they went on for the rest of the day. At sundown they heard the laughter of the meat herds very close at hand, and Vence stopped. He tried to speak, but could not, and resorted to gestures to let them know he would go no further.

"It's safe enough from here, I think," Creohan said in answer to questioning looks from the women. "The breeding ground must

be quite large, for many of the brutes come from it daily, and they must have large herds. I do not see how we could miss it from here."

Vence nodded his head eagerly.

So they went forward, leaving him in their rear, and before they had gone fifty paces found the grasses begin to shorten and the ground to take an upward slope. More cheerful, Creohan put his muscles into the climb, but they had not yet left the grass when Madal spoke hesitantly.

"Creohan—should we leave him alone and injured as he is? With his jaw broken, how can he eat? Will he not starve?"

Chalyth glanced round at her, seeing that she had come to a halt and was fingering the sling of her shoulder bag. "You would take him back with you to your yellow house?" she said wonderingly.

"No," Madal admitted, and passed a sad hand across her forehead. "But is it right that we who are seeking a way to save the lives of people unborn should lightly throw away those of the people of the present?"

"You're right," said Creohan soberly. "But can we go back into that sea of grass and hope to find him now?"

They could see over the waving tops of the plants by this time; they stretched endless and featureless to the horizon.

"Vence!" Creohan shouted. "Will you come here and let us set your broken jaw before we go on?"

There was no reply.

After a while they turned without speaking and pressed onwards, Madal giving an occasional suppressed sob; eventually she yielded enough to speak what was in her mind.

"Vence was a strong and good man once," she said. "I know that! And yet he has become—what we saw just now. Of course, he was alone, and there are three of us, but even if we get three times as far as he did, what will it profit us if we become as he?"

"We won't," said Creohan bluntly. "Vence went out into the world because he was restless, because he was discontented. And in the end he found he had not enough courage, not enough knowledge of himself, to carry his purpose out. We have come for a much more pressing reason. We are afraid."

"Of what?" said Chalyth. "I know what makes me fearful—that the universe is so large and I so small, and that I may die before I understand its largeness. But you, Creohan?"

"I suppose—because though I may be forgotten by the will of those who come after, I do not wish there to be no one at all who might choose to remember me. And Madal?"

"I?" The golden-haired girl laughed nervously. "I am afraid of becoming what Vence has become."

Soon their climb became very steep indeed, and in place of the yellow grasses there grew purple moss and lichens that clung to otherwise naked rocks; here and there a red-leaved tree made obscene gestures at the sky with its branches. The laughter of the meat creatures was never far below audibility, yet it seemed to go and come by turns.

"I hope we have not been misled," said Chalyth anxiously.

"I think not," said Creohan, who had been considering. "If I guess rightly, within these hills we are climbing, there is a valley shaped like a bowl, and the noise of laughter is echoed to us by hard rocks which direct it."

"My feet are bleeding," said Madal inconsequently, and Creohan glanced down; red patches did indeed stain the shoes the girl wore.

"We will rest when we reach the top," he promised, and wondered how it was that his own body had answered so well to the strain he had put on it, Chalyth, of course, had been accustomed to fight ocean currents in the dark and struggle back to shore against the outgoing tide; she was as strong and supple as a good sword-blade, and by this time she was outstripping him.

Now she vanished between two high boulders, and in a moment her cry came back to them: Creohan hastily, Madal painfully, made to join her.

"Your guess was right, Creohan," she said. "But this is—enormous!"

The bowl-shaped valley was indeed there; it was not very deep, but it was vast, and they could not see the other side of it because a lump of something huge and weathered rose in the middle. Creohan looked at the way the hills were piled up about them, like mud splashed by a blow from a hammer, and remembered the shape of certain features on Mercury which had passed into the field of his telescope. Nodding, he almost forgot to look at the vast hordes of meat which roamed and rambled below them, tearing chunks of ripe white flesh from the stems of a kind of enormous cactus which grew everywhere in clumps. They ate with feverish ecstasy, as if knowing that the more they ate the sooner would they be fat and ready to be themselves eaten.

"You are they who have been despoiling my flock," said a voice behind them harshly. "Deny it if you dare!"

They swung around. Facing them from an overhang of rock was what at first looked like one of the meat creatures; in fact it was, as they shortly realised, a man little bigger than average, who had taken the whole skin, grey hair and all, from one of the brutes and after shortening the limbs had put it on himself. His muscled arms held taut the string of a bow, and the arrow nocked to it looked sharp enough to pierce them all three at once.

VI

"You have been robbing me," the stranger declared passionately. "Prepare to die!"

"The man who has been robbing you," said Creohan with inspiration, "is named Vence, and we left him yonder on the plain with a broken jaw. We have killed none of your meat."

Cautiously, so that the stranger would not be frightened, Madal opened her bag so that it was clear they had no meat with them; indeed, they had eaten the last of their supplies the previous evening. Creohan had been considering taking some of the carcass Vence had, but in the heat of his anger he had forgotten, and now he was very glad.

"I see you have none of my meat," agreed the man in a meat creature's skin. He lowered his bow in puzzlement. "But where do you come from? Why are you here?"

"We come from the city which lies yonder over the plain," began Creohan cautiously, and the effect of these few words on the other was astonishing. Abruptly he let fall his bow, put his face in his hands, and wept uncontrollably.

"What does this mean?" demanded Chalyth wonderingly. Madal forgot her wounded feet and sought for a way to reach the outcrop on which the man stood; finding none, she seized the lip of the rock and swung herself up by main force.

"What ails you, my poor friend?" she said tenderly. "What ails you?"

"You can only have had—" the man snuffled like a huge baby "—you can only have had—one reason for making that—terrible journey! We have failed! My brothers and I, we have failed!"

"What do you mean?" Madal pressed him, stroking his thick unkempt hair with gentle hands.

"We give up our lives to watch over our herds, and we send them out to all the cities as our fathers did before us and their fathers before them since time began, and we had thought we discharged our task well. It is longer ago than any of us can remember since a man came to tell us we had failed of our purpose."

"You have not failed," said Madal firmly. "We did not come here for any such purpose as that."

The man's mood changed like sunlight breaking through a stormcloud. "That is the truth?" he demanded, wiping his eyes.

"It's truth," said Chalyth and Creohan together, and he let out a whoop of pure joy and all but tried to run up the sheer side of a nearby boulder.

"Come then! Come with me to my brothers! We must feast and rejoice, because we have not failed in our task! Oh, but there will be such rejoicing at this news!" He broke off, and came to lean over the outcrop's edge to address Chalyth and Creohan. Mercurially, his mood had changed again, and he seemed half angry. "Why could you not have done this before? It is such a little thing to ask! You know, my father lived all his life and died without once discovering whether he had done his task well or ill! I have often considered going out to one of the cities in the wake of the herds when we turn them on to the paths they must follow each day—just to go thither and *ask* if we have done well or ill! But there are few of us, and I did not know if I could spare the time for the trip…"

"We did not—" began Chalyth, and Creohan silenced her

with a glare. He was not minded to dispel the man's favourable illusions regarding their journey.

"Come!" he exhorted. "Come down and see my brothers and tell them what you have told me." He dropped lightly from the ledge, stretched out his arms to bring Madal down, and in so doing saw her bleeding feet.

"Why, you have hurt yourself for our sake!" he exclaimed. "You must walk no more till you are healed. I will carry you to our home."

And cradling the girl in his arms without effort, he led the way downhill.

Exchanging glances, Creohan and Chalyth followed. As they went, Chalyth murmured under her breath, "Did you suspect there were such people as he in the world?"

Creohan almost laughed. "The world is so much greater and stranger than I ever dreamed, I am surprised at no one who is in it! And he has brothers, too—like himself, I am sure."

They hesitated at first when they came down to the valley floor, for the meat stopped grazing on the cactus as they approached and often came towards them. But their guide called them by name, and spared one hand from his living burden to slap their buttocks or scratch their hairy coats, and they laughed their demonic laugh and went away.

Creohan wondered how many names this man had to know to keep track of his herds, and how it felt to send creatures so very like himself off to their deaths each and every day.

The "home" he had spoken of proved to be a cave hollowed out in the side of the central massif; Creohan was more than ever certain that it could only be a vast meteorite that had crashed here some time in the far past. It was dark, except for wicks soaked in

tallow that filled its air with a stink of burning which hardly overcame the powerful reek of human occupation. There was no furniture; piles of skins served apparently as beds, and a fire was smoking near the mouth of the cave.

"Wait here," the man ordered them. "I go to fetch my brothers." He glanced down at Madal, and his face registered enormous surprise—as indeed did Creohan's—when he saw that she had fallen asleep with her head against the rough skin on his chest.

He put her carefully down on one of the piles of furs, and explained that his brothers were out detailing off the herds which should go on the tracks to the cities today. Creohan, puzzled by an elementary question in biology, asked if he had sisters also, but the word seemed to mean nothing to him, and he let it go.

"One thing further," said Chalyth, before the man went off. "Have you a name?"

"Of course!" the man cried. "You are strangers, and I am not known to everyone in the world as I am to everyone in my valley. Hey!" he shouted to a group of meat creatures grazing not far from the cave-mouth. "Name me!"

As one the meat threw back their heads and bellowed in screeching, laughing voices, "Arrheeharr!"

"You see?" said the man. "When a child is born here, we show it to the meat and ask them to name it, and the first name they give that we do not have already, it takes."

Then his excitement overcame him, and he departed at a wild run.

The warmth of the blazing fire brought it home to Creohan that here it was chilly; he moved to spread his hands before the flames. "Well?" he said to Chalyth. "Do you think they will let us

go now we have found them?"

Chalyth shuddered. "Let us hope so! Creohan, however could beasts so like men have become nothing but—*food?*"

"I think perhaps," Creohan said thoughtfully, "it is rather the other way round. Who knows how long these men—these brothers—have guarded their precious herds in this valley? Is it not more probable that the animals have become more like men over the generations?"

"I suppose so," said Chalyth. "But then—who is going to say when they have *become* men, real men? Vence told us their females were near enough—" She choked on the word.

"Not one of their herdsmen, for sure," Creohan admitted. "It would kill them to leave their task, I feel sure of it. Oh, I don't know!"

He broke off. "Look yonder!" he said. "The threatening star is showing in the sky."

Whooping and shouting very like that of the meat creatures disturbed them, and Madal stirred and sat up. Through the gathering twilight they saw Arrheeharr and his brothers approaching, bounding from hillock to hillock in their joy. There were eight of them, clad as he was in skins, and one of them bore the carcass of a freshly killed animal on his back, while another carried a child of a few summers in his arms. Chalyth fearfully took Creohan's arm, and the newcomers clustered about them, asking questions, exclaiming in wonder at their clothing and belongings, and demanding confirmation of what Arrheeharr had told them.

"Yes, I can assure you," Creohan declared absently as he studied them, "never once in all my life in the city yonder have I heard a word of complaint about the way you discharge your task, and we owe you many thanks for your devotion."

This delighted them more than ever, and they fell to preparing

their feast; one stoked the fire, another began stripping the carcass of its skin, a third plumped up the piles of furs and added fresh ones to make the piles softer. Watching them, Creohan saw the answer to his unasked question: it was evident through the gaps down the front of the skins they wore that these "brothers" were in fact of both sexes—four and four, with the child a boy. Perhaps in this life when all must work and act alike, the distinction between "he" and "she" had somewhere been lost. They were all as muscular and tough-looking as each other, with one notable exception.

It was to this exception that Creohan's attention turned, for he read a detached intelligence in the man's dark-browed face as he stood a little apart from the others, neither adding his voice to the general acclamation nor falling over himself to aid with the preparations. He was only as tall as Chalyth, and he had a nervous, intense air.

Creohan felt that his dark eyes were posing questions he would find it impossible to answer.

"Hoo!" called Arrheeharr from a spot near the fire, and the dark one turned his head slowly. "Fetch the liquor from the store, won't you? This is a time of joy!"

A ghost of a smile touched the dark man's lips, but he departed into the depths of the cave. While he was gone, Creohan's attention was caught by Madal, who had struck up an instant friendship with the small boy, and was now coming out with him to join the group round the fire.

The clumsiness with which they were going about their work seemed to irritate her, and with a questioning look at the brawny woman carving up the meat she took a knife and attacked the job like an expert butcher. Creohan did not catch all that passed between them, but soon he saw that the skin-clad "brothers" were

intently watching as Madal prepared a stone-built oven for the meat, so that it might roast instead of being scorched on a spit, and sent for juicy roots and fruits to cook with it and flavour it. Arrheeharr departed running and returned with Madal's bag, left behind at the place where they had first met; from it she took salt and other condiments, and soon a rich and appetising smell went up.

"This I could not have done," said Chalyth softly, and Creohan saw that she was still standing at his elbow.

"Nor I," he admitted. "My one fear is that she may be so successful at gaining their favour that they may try to prevent us departing again."

At that moment Hoo returned with a barrel made of a hollowed cactus stem, so heavy that he could barely carry it, and Arrheeharr scooped the thick, sweetish, fermented juice it held into bowls of the same material for everyone to drink. Creohan and Chalyth took it cautiously, finding it not unpleasant, but Madal—hot and thirsty with her work at the fire—drank it down as if it had been spring water and demanded more.

Shortly the feast began; they sat around the fire on their haunches, tearing at the meat with their fingers. It was not to the visitors' taste; still, they were so hungry and Madal's skill had made the meat so appetising, they did not let nicety of manner hinder them. Curious stares fell on Madal as the "brothers" tasted her work, and Arrheeharr declared that never before had he known meat so good. Hoo, licking his fingers, studied Madal with interest, but made no comment.

When they had eaten their fill, two of the brothers got up and began a shambling dance around the fire, like the gait of the meat creatures; they too laughed as they went. The night blackened about them, and the curious meat gathered at the edge of the circle of

firelight, but did not intrude. Flushed with liquor and delight, the pain of her feet forgotten, Madal brought her harp and began to improvise a wild melody that matched the dance; shortly it had become a crazy rout in which everyone but Creohan and Chalyth appeared to have joined.

But not quite everyone.

A voice spoke out of a shadow behind Creohan, subtly pitched so that it could be heard clearly despite the shouting of the dancers and the ringing of the harp. "I do not think you came here for the reason Arrheeharr so glibly accepted," said the speaker.

Creohan swung round, and saw Hoo gazing at him from the dimness. There was nothing threatening about his manner; he had merely made a statement of fact.

"It is true," Creohan admitted, nodding. "But it is likewise true that your meat has come faithfully and in sufficient numbers since I can remember and probably for long before that."

"So?" Hoo shrugged. "This has been done—what has it profited us, or anyone? For all we knew, we might have been acting out a meaningless ritual, alone on the surface of a devasted globe…" His face drew into a scowl.

"For someone who has spent his life in this valley," said Creohan, glancing at Chalyth and seeing that she was rapt in watching the dance, "you speak with strange knowledge."

"We have stories among ourselves from the days when men and women of the cities used to come here often—in the time of my father's father's father's father's father. I alone, I think, of all of us have believed that there might be truth in these stories." He fixed Creohan with his gaze. "Why then did you come here? The truth, this time!"

Creohan told him, unwillingly, but in full.

"I see," said Hoo at long last. "So we are indeed wasting our

lives to no end save to support communities of idle dreamers who have never given us a thought. Faugh! If I could draw down that star you speak of to burn this earth up tomorrow instead of when I am long dead, I would do it. And laugh!"

He spat very deliberately into the fire, and rose and disappeared, leaving Creohan silent behind him.

"Oh, my life!" said Chalyth faintly; she seemed to have heard nothing of the words that had passed so near her. "Creohan, look!"

She flung up a trembling arm, and Creohan saw that at the edge of the firelight the meat creatures had aped the antics of the dancers, and were likewise shambling through rhythmic pattern in time to Madal's music.

Astonished, Creohan gave an exclamation, and Chalyth said passionately, "I feel as if I have eaten my brother!"

She leapt to her feet, her face paling, and staggered to lean with one arm against the wall of the cave entrance. Creohan heard the sound of her over-laden stomach giving up her meal in expiation.

VII

At last the dancers grew weary; they began to fall out in couples and go into the cave. Madal alone remained at her post, and the wild beat of her harping gave way to a tune more gentle, more nostalgic. Creohan also rose and felt his way into the cave, and when he came to Chalyth lying on a heap of skins and sobbing very quietly to herself, he lay down beside her, and sleep overcame them both.

In the dawn, they were roused by the others going about their business. They seemed tired, and yet there was a quiet delight in their manner, as though they performed their tasks more willingly for believing that someone was grateful to them. Creohan, blinking in the daylight as he left the cave, found Hoo's eyes on him, inscrutable, and could not return the other's gaze.

The little boy led them to a clear spring that welled from the foot of the rock so that they could refresh themselves; Chalyth, with a sigh of pure pleasure, stripped off her clothes and plunged into the icy water, but Creohan contented himself with rinsing his head and feet and then returned to the cave.

Beside the entrance stood Madal, her harp held loosely in one hand, the other toying with something in her bosom, as if she was undecided about something. Arrheeharr was engaged in burying the bones from last night's meat in a shallow pit close at hand, and when he saw Creohan return he came to put a huge arm round his shoulders.

"Never can I remember such a time of joy!" he declared. "It is good that you came here. You must stay long with us, so that you may tell your city all about us when you go back."

"We—cannot stay," said Creohan huskily, and Arrheeharr looked to be about to burst into tears again. "No, we must go on to visit another city beyond here—but when we pass this way again, we will have another such feast together."

Arrheeharr looked slightly cheered by this vague promise, though Hoo's lip curled at the corner as if he would spit this time at Creohan himself. Then Madal spoke up.

"Creohan—I—I shall not be going with you."

"What?" said Creohan disbelievingly.

"I like these people," said Madal. "For of all the people I have ever known, these are the only ones performing useful duties; I

have known since I saw Vence as he had become that unless I found a task for myself, I—the I inside myself—would never amount to anything at all. Look here!"

She drew out what she had been hiding in her bosom, and Creohan saw that it was one of the yellow flowers from the wall of her house, its petals now brown and withered, but the seed-case in the centre ripe and hard.

"There are five seeds in this pod," she said. "From each seed I can grow just such another home as mine, and I shall plant them here, beside the cave. I could not come among these people unless I brought a gift to make up for the intrusion; I found when I could not follow Vence that I loved my yellow home more than anything in the world, and I think this is a fitting gift—"

Her voice broke, and Arrheeharr hastened clumsily to comfort her as she had comforted him.

"But if we— Well, then," Creohan yielded, "we shall go on alone."

"Not so," said Hoo, and his brother looked incredulously at him. "I will go with you from here."

"*What?*" Arrheeharr demanded.

"I do not think it is right that of all the cities to which we send meat only one should send to thank us," Hoo declared. "You will have an extra hand here now; I can be spared to go to these other cities and ask why they have never given us a thought!"

Relieved above measure that Hoo had not revealed the truth about their mission and thus deprived his "brothers" of their simple happiness, Creohan was effusive in welcoming the suggestion, and Chalyth, on coming back from her bathe in the spring as fresh and beautiful as a newly opened flower, raised no objection.

"We shall travel with the meat," said Hoo decidedly, and Arrheeharr let out a volley of protests.

"How can we spare three trained steeds? We have only ten between us, and it takes a year to break another!"

"Madal will not be riding before a year is out, I am sure," said Hoo pointedly, and before his brother could speak further, threw back his head and yelled in a giant voice, three times.

At once three of the meat grazing creatures ceased their grazing and shambled towards the cave. "Now," said Hoo, "we shall spend the time before the meat is due to be dispatched in showing these two strangers how to ride."

He brooked no denial, and in the end—more tempted perhaps by the hope that more people would come to give thanks for their supplies of meat than convinced by Hoo's words—his "brothers" all agreed to the project.

Towards the end of the day, then, mounted on the amazingly tractable and gentle meat creatures, the three of them joined the herds selected to be put on the trail this day, and started across the valley towards the passes that led to the outer world.

"To which city shall we go?" Creohan demanded, and Hoo shrugged.

"Let us take any, other than yours, for we have nothing to guide us except guesswork."

They turned and waved farewell to the keepers of the meat, among whom stood Madal, looking very small and fragile compared to the huskiness of her new "brothers."

"I hope," said Chalyth sincerely, "that she has made a wise choice."

"As wise as ours," said Creohan with an assumed confidence, and urged his steed into the wake of Hoo's.

This journey was a better one than their first. The way led them through country that was bare beside the plain of ripe yellow grasses; here, low scrub with leaves of red and purple and deep sea-green clung first to the sides of the mountains and then spread out more thickly over a narrow valley that had a gentle downward slope. Except for the jolting gait of his mount, and the heavy animal smell that assailed his nose from its coat, Creohan found himself beginning to enjoy the trip. They spoke little among themselves, except once when Creohan asked whether Hoo had ever left the valley before like this, and was told never; for the most part they were occupied with their own thoughts.

After a time, they found that they could even ignore the maniac laughter which the herd uttered ever louder as it put the miles behind it.

The night passed, and the next day, and they did not so much as halt to rest. At intervals Hoo jockeyed his steed close to the others' and passed to them sips of liquor and hunk of cold meat left over from the feast, which he had brought; Creohan ate with a will, but Chalyth had to allow hunger to overcome prejudice before she could make herself swallow.

"They are not very much like men," said Hoo, the second time she had refused to take any. "Remember I have lived all my life among them. Never once have I seen them act as a man may act—without compulsion, of his own free will. They do not speak among themselves; they have never created anything, though they will ape a man's doings. And that, I think, is due only to the fact that they have nothing else to imitate."

Slightly reassured, the third time Chalyth ate.

The air grew warmer as they descended; apparently unhindered by their burdens, their mounts kept pace with the leaders of the herd, and tirelessly pushed onwards. At last they came to a river that flowed along the lowest level of the valley, and Hoo glanced at the sky which was now darkening again.

"Meat should arrive in the city during the night," he said. "We cannot have more than another few hours' journey before us."

Splashing and leaping among the pools that fringed the slow-flowing stream, the meat jolted them and rubbed sores on their arms and legs where they clung to the back of their steeds. Grimly, they obliterated the pain from their minds, seeing that Hoo did not complain, and when the night was well advanced they were relieved to find the laughter of the leaders quietening.

"This must be near our destination," said Creohan. "Yes, look!"

He flung up an arm, and pointed to where a host of lights wheeled and circled in the sky. "Under them!" he said.

But Hoo seemed to pay no attention. "I like this not at all," he said sharply. "Can you not tell that the brutes are nervous? Something is frightening them!" He sniffed, and shook his head as if still undecided. He urged his mount onwards.

Then the others began to scent it too: a stink of a vast putrefaction, that loaded the clean night breeze with suggestions of all-embracing decay.

"Do you hear, too?" demanded Hoo. "Ahead of us, there is laughter like the meat's—but faint, and dispirited!"

Now they emerged on to a table of rock overlooking the city, but the circling lights were below them, and prevented them from making out anything that went on there. They had to contain themselves in patience as they descended, the stink mounting with every yard of their progress.

"What are those brightly-coloured things?" Hoo asked, and Creohan told him about them.

They passed through a point at which the lights almost beat about their heads, and then they could see.

Ahead, stretched a gigantic cemetery. On the side near to them, herds of meat milled about pointlessly, seeming very weak and on the point of collapse. Their own herd, copying their fellows, ceased their steady advance and not all the urging of Hoo could make them continue.

"Dismount!" ordered Hoo, taking command naturally, and they slid to the ground gratefully. But he did not mean to rest; he strode forward and they perforce went with him, till they stood among corpses.

The dead meat lay tumbled about them, on the ground, in the branches of houses that had run wild and grown into unbelievable tangles, all but blocking the road; some of the carcasses were fresh, those beyond were crawling with the worms of decay, and in the heart of the city, to which they penetrated with difficulty, they were clean white skeletons.

"So this is why one city, at least, did not send to thank us for our work!" said Hoo in a voice of tremendous anger, and while Chalyth and Creohan stood looking about them and shaking their heads in sorrow, he gave way to his frustrated feelings and ran in among the bones, smashing them and breaking them with his feet.

All at once his temper subsided, and he returned soberly to where they stood, carrying something round and white on which the lights above them played fantastically. Since the city was decayed, there was no order or grouping of colour in the sky.

"That—" said Chalyth, and swallowed. "That's a skull."

"It is indeed," Hoo answered, and Creohan stared at it.

"I did not know you sent out meat when it was so young and small as that," he began. Hoo cut him short.

"We don't!" He set the grinning bone on his shoulder, so that for an instant they thought they saw Death looking at them, and then Creohan realised.

"It's a man's," he said sickly. "So they are dead, the people of this city…"

A vista of desolation spread out around him, and he asked himself whether his goal might not after all be futile, whether his own city might perhaps not be the last in the world to be populated. Chalyth gave a little cry and hid her face on his shoulder.

Then a noise came to them; another; another. Sounds of movement—purposeful, distinct from the aimless shambling of the meat. It was very close at hand…

VIII

Seizing the skull by the stump of neckbone beneath it as if it was a club, Hoo looked round for the source of the sound. Black shadows gathered among the heaped skeletons, and a man was looking at them. He was not alone; he was very purposeful.

He was small in stature, barely reaching Chalyth's elbow; his glossy brown body was protected with tough leather cuirass and leggings, and on his head was a round white half-helmet that could only have been made from one of the meat creatures' skulls. A broad-bladed axe rested lightly in his hands as he looked at them.

Seeming satisfied, he gestured to someone out of sight, and a dozen others accoutred as he was sprang into view. Creohan, a little nervously, said, "Who are you? And what do you want?"

"For da time been, you ull do," the first man to show himself replied. A mirthless grin accompanied the words; he spoke with an accent unlike any Creohan had ever heard—and with the contagion

of dead languages introduced by the Historians, his home city was full of strange accents. But the man had spoken fluently; this was patently his native tongue.

"Com wid us," he added, and Hoo and Creohan exchanged glances.

"We would do better not to resist," Creohan counselled. "Maybe these are the survivors of whatever overwhelmed the rest of this city's people—"

"We uh whatever overw'elmed dis people!" declared the little brown man proudly. "It is well you doan resist!" He turned his back contemptuously, and the others like him pressed close at the travellers' backs. Tiredly, they went forward.

Behind them the insane laughter of the meat grew faint; the reek of rotting carcasses was blown away from this direction, and they could breathe more freely. But it was with a heavy heart that Creohan looked at the wild-growing houses through which they passed and read into this riot of wild vegetation the splendour which must once have reigned here. The city must have been twice the size of his own, as he had already guessed from the much larger herd of meat which they had come with. And yet now it was a desolation.

Hoo kept his thoughts to himself, but it was plain from the wide-eyed sadness on Chalyth's face that she too was puzzling over the fate of this fine city.

They came into clearer roads, along which their captors escorted them at a near-run that strained their weary muscles. Attempts to slow the pace resulted in insults and jeers that had something to do with their greater tallness, and Creohan began to see a pattern in the little men's behaviour.

They reached a causeway, irregular now and patched with lichens, but which must once have been a splendid road along the bank of the river. The river, indeed, was still there; it was probably

the same one that the herd of meat had run along the banks of on their way here. At the brink the party halted, and on glancing down they saw that a whole fleet of boats lay tied up to a cable stretched from bank to bank, bows to the sluggish stream. Men—all little, all brown of skin, all clad in leather armour—guarded them.

"Down," said the leader, and indicated a flight of moss-grown steps that led to the muddy riverside. When they hesitated, his face twitched into a snarl, and with a broadside blow of his axe he struck Chalyth in the buttocks, so that she cried out and fell forwards, losing her footing and tumbling headlong into the stagnant mud.

Creohan looked at Hoo, and found they had come to the same decision at the same instant. Forgetting their sores and their stiffness, they turned to their nearest neighbours, Hoo taking the cocky little leader and Creohan another man, seized them by the arms and pitched them bodily as far as they could into the river. Two splashes sounded as one; the guards waiting on the boats straightened with shouts of alarm.

How light and fragile these little men were! Creohan thought. But their axes were not; one whistled past his head as he moved aside. The weight of the blade took the weapon to the ground before its wielder could recover; Creohan seized his chance, and sent a second victim after his first. And another, and another, while Hoo did the same.

"As light and insubstantial as air," said Hoo scornfully. "I'd like to see one of these children wrestle with a rogue meat creature as I have had to do!"

The causeway was clear of their escorts; splashes from the water told them where the little men were swimming to the safety of their boats. Creohan possessed himself on an axe dropped by one of them in his involuntary and quite literal flight from the scene, and started down the steps to see to Chalyth.

He exclaimed anxiously when he saw her; she had sunk to her knees in the clinging wetness of the bank, and her futile struggles were only sinking her ever deeper. A rusty metal ring was set in the wall of the causeway near at hand, and he grasped it while stretching out his other arm towards her. It was no use—the distance was too great.

"Let me!" said Hoo, and Creohan gave place; the other's span was greater than his. Chalyth tried vainly to come closer; by now the sucking mud was up to her thighs, and her face was set and frightened.

"So!" said Hoo, linking his fingers in hers. He tugged and hauled; Creohan tried to find a footing for himself and come to Chalyth's aid also, but wherever he stepped his feet began to sink in.

"Not so," said a quiet voice at hand, and he glanced round in fright to see that one of the boats on the river had put close in to the bank. On its thwarts stood two of the little brown men with coils of rope around their arms, and in the stern sat a third—the one who had spoken. Creohan had no time to take in details of their appearance, for this last man gave urgent instructions.

"Da one widda hand on da metal ring! Take da rope an' t'read it t'rough! Baseena, t'row uh loop over da woman—"

Hoo seized the end of the rope that was tossed to him and passed it through the ring; one of the men in the boat made a loop in his coil of rope and dropped it over Chalyth's shoulders.

"So," said the man in the stern. "Com help us haul!"

The boat rocked as Hoo and Creohan scrambled aboard, and laid hands to the ropes. With the pulley action of the ring and both of them hauling hard, the mud yielded Chalyth up and she sprawled panting across the foot of the steps.

"So. Help her in da boat," said the man in the stern, and they

did so. Mud ran and dripped down her legs as she stood shivering in the night breeze, but she was calming, and in answer to Creohan's eager questions insisted she was all right.

Not satisfied, but curious, Creohan studied the man who sat watching them from the stern. He wore a robe that hid his body from shoulders to feet; on his head was a woven cap shot with glistening sequins, and the axe laid across his knees was twice as big and heavy as the one Creohan still held.

"You uv cost me t'irteen of my best fighters," said he before Creohan could speak, and, scenting a threat of retaliation implied in the words, Hoo hastily answered.

"We only threw them in the river! They'll be no more than wet and sorry for themselves!"

In answer, the man in the stern gestured, and they turned to see a wet head bob up from the river alongside the next boat from the shore. The guard on the boat raised and let fall his axe, and the head went floating down the current. The body, spurting blood that looked black in the light from overhead, sank where it was.

"Dey are no good any more. Dey have been beaten by a q'arter of deir number," said the man in the stern, and shrugged. Then he snapped at the men with the ropes, and they hauled on a painter at the bows which returned their vessel, rocking, to the cable stretched across the river.

"You are not from dis city," the man went on, making it a plain statement. Creohan nodded.

"Neither are you," he said, "but how could you tell?"

"Och! Dis city's dead." The man spat over the side. "Like all da rest, dis city's dead."

Chalyth gave a little gasp, and Hoo took a step forward which made the boat roll heavily. "All the rest are dead?" he demanded.

"They can't be!"

The man in the stern gave a sad smile. "But dey can be," he contradicted. "Dey are! See!" He made a large gesture that took in everything within a half circle to his left. "All over dere we roamed an' wandered, and we found—dis. Again, again, again. No, dat is all dere is left now."

Voices, curious to know what the noise had been, called across the river; the man in the stern quieted them with a sharp order, and sighed.

"Soon now my people com back from da city, an' dey tell me w'at I a'ready know—dat dere is nothing here but da animals dat are like biggest men. And you, only you not belong here. Were you from?"

"We are not from a city," lied Creohan, and to his surprise the man took the statement at face value.

"Dat I know. If you came from a city, I ud uv conquered it. But dere are only dead cities now. Dis is de end for us, I know."

He was interrupted in his melancholy refrain by the arrival—hand over hand along the cable to which the boats were moored—of just such a cocky little man as had led the party that had captured them. He hesitated with one foot on the bow on seeing Hoo, Chalyth and Creohan, but a gesture from the man in the stern brought him nimbly down to fall on his knees and make his way painfully forward in that position towards the stern.

"Lord, we uv been t'rough da city. Dere is no one."

"Go!" said the man who had been addressed as "lord," and he went, to be followed by another, and another, and still more like him—just as many, Creohan noticed, as there were boats moored on the river. And at the same time the boats—including their own—began to fill with the little brown men, who laid down their axes as they sat on the thwarts and took up broad paddles instead.

The three strangers stood together at the lord's right, waiting for this strange performance to end. In whispers they asked each other who these people might be and came to no solution. Chalyth, the mud sticky and foul on her body, kept glancing longingly at the water over the side, and in the end could stand it no more. Clothes and all, she slipped down into the river and rinsed the dirt away in water not all that less filthy.

At last one party alone had not filled its boat, and that one, Creohan realised, was the one which they had so ignominiously defeated. The lord laid aside his axe, which was patently far too heavy for him ever to wield in combat, and rose to his feet, at which the men in the boats slid forward to their knees, and Creohan had his guess confirmed.

The lord stood head and shoulders above any of his men—but his long robe concealed tall wooden platforms strapped to his feet, which clumped betrayingly as he moved.

These people, then, must be jealous of taller races; it would be that jealousy which had driven them to lay waste cities such as this—and Creohan saw no reason to doubt the truth of the boast which the cocky leader of the party they had first met had made—"*we* uh whatever overw'elmed dis people!"

And now they had no more cities to conquer; now they were returning again and again to the scenes of past victories in the hope of finding people there—taller people, whom they could humble and bring low.

So there were no more cities here—but how about his own city? Creohan almost snapped his fingers with impatience at himself. Of course: they had crossed a ridge of hills, and probably an isthmus, therefore his city must face a different ocean from the one over which these people had spread destruction. All hope was not yet lost; somewhere, there might still be more cities where all

love of Earth and ability to act was not yet lost.

From his post in the stern, the lord gave orders to cast loose the mooring cable, and one by one the boats swung about and made for the sea, downstream.

IX

"Sit," instructed the lord, and they did so awkwardly. Chalyth, shivering from her dip, pressed close to Creohan for warmth, while Hoo, his dark face brooding, set his chin in his palm and his elbow on his knee to stare at the brown man who had so completely taken control of their destiny.

"W'at were you doing in da city?" the lord asked, and Creohan, hoping that his guesses were good ones, answered.

"You look for cities to conquer. We—who are done with cities—seek to conquer a star."

The statement made so bluntly filled the lord's face with sudden awe, and he clasped his heavy axe and laid it across his knees again as if it would protect him from—from whatever he feared about these people bigger than himself. Delighted, Creohan went on, and felt Chalyth squeeze his hand to show that she understood what he was doing.

"You have searched up and down this coast—the one from which this river runs inland—and you have found only empty cities. Is not that so? Why then do you go on searching?"

Pleased to find something these people did not know, the lord shrugged. "It is among our people dat before a lord can become a

king he must prove himself and conquer a city of da biggest people. For ten, for maybe twelve generations we uv ad no king—my fader, like myself, was only a lord. For dere are no more cities to conquer."

"You come from an island far out in the sea," suggested Creohan, making another reasonable guess, and the lord nodded.

Creohan continued; before they had reached the river's mouth, he had established all he needed to know. Far to the north and south the coastline stretched unbroken; a short way inland lay a line of hills which these people had never crossed—they were tied so closely to the sea and to their boats, and they had found so many cities on or near the sea, that they had made the tacit assumption no one could live elsewhere. For the sake of his home city he was very glad; a band of these men arriving by the route he and Chalyth had taken would have laid the place waste in a day, and this lord would have become a king.

Soon the man's tongue was loosened, and he began to tell them of the legendary exploits of his ancestors. Creohan was shaken, but not altogether surprised, to find them similar to tales he had heard from Historians at home. The race of which these few boatloads of warriors were the last remnant must once have made a tremendous mark on the world.

"And where do you go now?" Creohan demanded at last, when the sky was greying towards dawn and the sound of surf on a beach had announced that they were about to change from fresh water to salt.

"We go on," said the lord hopelessly. "Somew'ere—maybe even now—dere remains a city."

Creohan rose to his feet slowly, and looked down on the lord. "We will guide you to a land where you have never been," he said solemnly. "We will show you the way to a victory such as your people have never seen!"

The lord, disliking to look *up* to Creohan, and yet afraid to stand up in his turn in case he lost his balance on the thick soles strapped to his feet, shifted uneasily. "Den w'ere shall we go?" he demanded.

At that instant, something flapped and swooped overhead; looking up, Creohan saw that it was a covey of lights fleeing before the dawn from the deserted city they had left. Inspiration took hold of him.

"Do you know where the flying lights go to?" he asked, and the lord shook his head.

Rapidly Creohan told how Hoo and Arrheeharr and their "brothers" had kept the herds of meat, and how he and Chalyth had chanced across them. Perhaps the lights too had a breeding ground, from which they set out to cities on both sides of this great ocean; he, as an astronomer, should find little difficulty in guiding this fleet by his knowledge of the stars to the opposite coast where none of the little brown warriors had ever been.

"You t'ink da lights com from da star you go to conquer?" said the lord dubiously. "Dat is w'y you go after dem?"

Creohan let the assumption pass unchallenged; the lord thought for a while, and then bowed his head in agreement. It had been an anxious moment for Creohan, wondering whether his offer would appeal enough to the man's ambitions to allow him to compromise with his hatred of people larger than himself, and even now, despite the fact that he and Hoo had gained some sort of respect by their disposal of the thirteen warriors, they would have to beware of treachery. But at least they had been saved long and fruitless searching up and down the land they were now leaving.

The boats rocked and staggered through the surf where the river ran into the sea; dawn shone bright across a vast and open expanse of water. The lord cupped his hands round his mouth and

gave orders that the fleet should follow the line the lights had taken, and no one questioned it.

Ignoring his passengers, the lord then lay down on the stern thwart, curling himself like a baby, and went to sleep; cramped, uncomfortable, but willing, the three travellers did the same in the bottom of the boat.

When they awoke, they were out of sight of land, and they did not see a shore again for fourteen days.

The matter-of-factness with which these people undertook journeys beside which Glyre's vaunted trip to his deserted islands was puny, never ceased to amaze Creohan. They treated their boats as home; they slept at their posts, their paddles across their knees, they ate and drank without leaving their places. When there was need of food, a group of men would be told off to dive overboard and search the near waters, harpoons in hand; seldom did they fail to return with great fishes, or clams, or polypods, or at the worst with clumps of juicy free-floating algae that—once the travellers had got over the qualms they felt at eating something which was still living when they got it to their mouths—drove hunger away swiftly.

On the second day, when the fleet had hove to for such a fishing expedition, Chalyth went to join the swimmers, and gained their admiration by returning with a fish bigger than two of the little men could have handled between them; Creohan watched with no little envy, for he felt lonely and lost in this emptiness of sea.

They were able to talk little together, naturally, for though the space nearest the lord's place in the stern had been left free for them—in the other boats, it was used for storage of food and weapons—they could not get far away from the lord's acute ears.

Under cover of the to-do which accompanied Chalyth's return

with her prize, then, Creohan seized his chance and spoke to Hoo. The dark man had kept himself to himself since they came aboard, as though all purpose in life had been drained from him on discovering how much of his family's work had indeed gone for nothing.

"Hoo!" said Creohan. "What think you of these people?"

Hoo raised his bushy eyebrows and spat into the sea.

"I feel for you," said Creohan sincerely. "Yet they may redeem their deeds of savagery and violence if they convey us safely across the ocean. They have already saved us from much futile time and trouble."

"Saved *you* from it," said Hoo dispassionately. "If it were not that I should be disbelieved, I would go back to tell my brothers just how stupid we have been all our lives. And tell me this! When we do cross the ocean, and supposing we do find other cities on the shore yonder, how will you be able to quiet your conscience in the knowledge that you have carried the seeds of destruction thither? Hey?"

Creohan could not answer, and Hoo, giving him a final glance of scorn, sank back into his sullen silence.

Shortly Chalyth came back on board, laughing and merry, and having wrung out her dark hair sat naked on the gunwale to dry herself in the warm breeze. "Creohan!" she called to him. "You must learn to swim and come with us—it's wonderful down here! It's so different from the shallow waters I have known before, and the creatures are big and blundering and foolish—"

Hoo glanced up at her and said cuttingly, "You must feel quite at home down there."

Chalyth flushed and bit her lip, and when she descended into the bottom of the boat demanded of Creohan what was wrong.

Thoughtfully, Creohan explained, but had no chance to ask Chalyth's opinion before the lord, who had been supervising the fishing, resumed his place and the paddlers began their rhythmic driving again.

After that it became habitual for Chalyth to join the fishers and she was soon accepted as a leader among them. Hoo remained silent and apart as far as possible, and Creohan cudgelled his brains for an answer to the problem of how to stop these people short of wreaking destruction on the far shore as complete as they had wrought on their own.

Still they followed the line of flight the lights had taken, and fourteen days slipped away. The lord grew more and more anxious, though he tried not to reveal the fact, and Creohan caught many suspicious glances thrown at him. He was relieved beyond measure when at last his guess was proved right; two or three hours past dawn on the fifteenth day a covey of lights—in their drab daytime garb—flew overhead and were plainly seen to strike downwards to a knob of an island which soon loomed up on the horizon.

Great excitement filled the boats; even Hoo rose from his apathy to look as they pulled in towards a rounded, vegetation-clothed beach, beyond which lights that must have been numbered in the millions crowded and clustered, flying, perching, sometimes even doing something Creohan had never suspected they might do—squawking.

"You a right dis far," said the lord from his seat in the stern. "I 'ope very much you a right *all* da way!"

"From here we have only to follow the line of flight of another group of lights if they strike out across the sea in the opposite direction," pointed out Creohan, and was uncomfortably aware of Hoo's eyes on him again.

They put in to shore, and groups of warriors disappeared to scout the island, returning with two items of information: that the

place was devoid of human beings, and that the lights smelled like good eating. Accordingly, the boats were beached, a camp made, and orders given that the party was to remain until they had determined at what time and in what direction lights did depart for the far coast.

No one took any notice of the three travellers, being too excited at the prospect of actually finding a new land to conquer after all this time. Chalyth at once disappeared, and was seen thereafter at occasional intervals bobbing among the rocks which stuck out of the sea not far from the beach; Hoo did as Creohan expected—walked moodily off by himself; Creohan himself hastened to take advantage of this chance to find out something about the way of life of the strange creatures that bred here.

And yet he learned nothing he might not have guessed. They bred here; from high ledges, families of young ones dived hesitantly into the air and tried their wings. They did indeed eat, and broke open hard-shelled molluscs by dropping them from a height on to the rocks or seized small fishes that were unwary enough to break the surface. But the pattern of their behaviour—the reason for their regular, deliberately timed flights to illuminate cities which now had no use for them—that remained an enigma.

Weary, he returned to the beach at the end of the day, and accepted a portion of roasted light for his meal; as the scouts had suspected, they were delicious. There was no sign of Chalyth, and he grew worried; he sat up long after he would willingly have been sleeping like the rest of the party, until she stole up from the beach with a little of the phosphorescence of the waves still clinging to her hair.

"Where have you been?" Creohan demanded. "I have been worrying about you."

"I've made some new friends," said Chalyth with a smile, and Creohan had to be content with that as an answer.

In the course of the night several parties of lights did flap away over the sea towards the opposite coast, which satisfied the lord greatly, and accordingly at daybreak the boats were launched again into the surf, and they resumed their even progress.

Only one thing seemed different about this half of the trip. The sea was as wide, the rhythm of the paddlers only slightly less regular—for they were growing stale as the days slipped by—and the stoppages for fishing as frequent. The thing that had changed was that, whenever he looked astern, Creohan thought he saw something in the water, following them, in shape like a brown, blunt rock, and in pace more than the equal of the boats. But it might well have been only an illusion caused by long staring into the bright water.

X

"We are very near now," whispered Chalyth amazingly, when she came aboard from another plunge with the fishers on the twelfth day of their voyage's second stage. Creohan gave her a puzzled stare.

"How do you know?" he asked, but she only shook her head, smiling.

"You have little time left, then, to find a way to still your conscience," said Hoo sarcastically, and Chalyth gave him a wide-eyed look of innocence.

"But I have already found that way," she said, and with that

ringing in their ears they had to be silent, for the lord returned to his place and they went onward.

And indeed they were very near; soon after sunset that night they again saw a covey of lights dive out of the sky, but this time they began to circle without landing, and as the night darkened so they themselves grew brighter.

The sight brought the lord to his feet, careless of his precarious balance. "Dere is a city!" he shouted. "Dere is da new city for us to conquer!"

A shout of delight went up from all the boats, and the paddlers began to put their backs into the word anew. The lord sat down again and looked at his passengers quizzically. His fingers began to stroke the haft of his axe.

Creohan felt a surge of fear; suppose he did not even intend to give them the chance of reaching shore alive?

Chalyth spoke up in a cool voice. "Is it not dangerous to approach a strange shore in darkness? The lights may not be bright enough to give warning of sunken rocks."

"My men are too skilled to strike rocks even in darkness," said the lord carelessly. "Well, big people—you uv paid da price for da t'irteen warriors you cost me. I t'ink we uv no more need of you."

"So," said Hoo quietly, and rose to his feet.

"So," said Chalyth, and glanced at her companions. "Prepare to swim!" Without a second's hesitation she dived overboard, and in the same moment their boat gave a sickening shudder and two boards stove in amidships. A rush of water flooded round the feet of the incredulous paddlers, so that the lord's gaiety dissolved into panic.

Hoo lost no time; he grabbed Creohan bodily and heaved him over the side after Chalyth, following himself. Before the

astonished brown men had got over their shock, Chalyth had swum up to them, her body glimmering whitely under the water.

Creohan, spluttering and frightened, still understood when she told him to slip out of his clothes for freedom and follow her. Another of the boats was sinking now, and before they were well clear of the scene a third and a fourth were likewise going down.

"Strike for the shore," Chalyth whispered. "We will not have to go far on our own."

Not comprehending, but willing to let her take command, they obeyed, and saw as they went that every last one of the brown men's boats had been stove in. They had barely had time to digest that fantastic fact when a face loomed up in the water ahead of them. It was a giant face, as big across as a man's chest; it had a kind of humour about it, and Creohan saw at once that it was set on just such a brown, rock-like body as he had seen following the boats.

"I told you I had made a new friend," said Chalyth softly, and swam up to the creature, gesturing. It wriggled as if in modesty; Creohan almost thought to see it blush.

"Come!" Chalyth whispered, and under her guidance they took hold of the broad finned tail her "friend" had in place of feet. As soon as they had a secure grasp, the animal began to swim by undulating its body, so that the rush of water almost left them behind.

The brilliance of the lights in the sky grew; the water became shallow enough to stand in, and at that point Chalyth directed them to let go, which they did. The creature which had helped them swung in a tight circle and paused in front of them for a second; Chalyth stroked the huge blunt head briefly, and then it was gone.

They stood chest-high in the shallows and looked up at the

shore; there *was* a city here under the lights, though not such a city as Creohan had ever known, and there were people. His spirits rose.

"How did you manage it, Chalyth?" said Hoo quietly; he seemed to have recovered his self-possession entirely.

"Once, a long time ago, his people were friends and servants of human beings," said Chalyth. "I had met many of his kind before—it was one such as he, Creohan, who brought me that golden helmet from the islands Glyre visited. Remember?"

"I do," said Creohan; it seemed like a century since he had been told of that.

"So when I asked him to help us, he did so gladly. He followed our boats, and as soon as we came in sight of the circling lights, he butted in the sides with his snout. Soon, though, the brown men will be following us hither; we only outpaced them a little. We must warn these people here—"

"They are coming down to be warned," said Hoo, and lifted a dripping arm.

Down towards the edge of the sea was coming a group of men and women with skins as yellow as old gold and liquid dark eyes. Some of them were clad in flowing blue and white gowns, but most wore short and occasionally ragged kirtles. They were of all ages; the tallest among them would overtop Creohan by half a head, but he was an exception. They were talking excitedly as they approached, and Creohan realised with a sinking heart that he could not understand them.

On the beach the newcomers stopped, and the three of them waded inshore stiffly. Creohan reflected on what a sight they must look: all naked, he and Hoo shaggy of hair and beard—but clean, at least, after their soaking.

One who seemed to be a leader among the inhabitants looked them up and down thoughtfully, and then addressed them musically. He had no weapons, nor did any of his companions, and Creohan wondered what they would have done had the brown savages reached their goal unhindered.

He said, "Do any of you speak our tongue?"

A man and woman dressed identically in blue gowns answered him together, speaking with a far better accent than the brown warriors. "Yes, some of us do."

Creohan summarised their story briefly, and at the end was surprised when the woman laughed. The man turned to interpret to the others, while she spoke to Creohan.

"My name is Liang-liang, and I am a student of history. I know that many times in the past such people have in fact come out of the east and thought to prey on us, but each time we have sent them away. This time, thanks to you, it will be simpler than ever." She turned to Chalyth. "It is ingenious to have borrowed the help of the People of the Sea; we shall undertake to repay your debt for you."

"You have met the brown people, then?" Creohan said.

"Of course. Though, as we each time drove them away in disgrace, they would not remember our meeting. You shall see how simple it is to frighten them, for their spirits in truth are as small in stature as their bodies. Come with us into the city, and we will clothe and feed you and let you rest, for you must be weary of your tribulations."

The group was breaking up; young men and women in kirtles were departing at a run to attend to something along the beach, and the leader, who seemed to have been amused to hear Creohan's story as it was translated to him, laughed quietly as he also turned to go.

Their path took them over soft, smooth sand, which was as well for their salt-caked feet. They passed among houses which were unlike any Chalyth or Creohan had ever seen, for these were plainly made by human hand and not grown from seed; they were simple and low-built and square, and around each of them was a plot of land where plants grew in straight, tidy lines. This was a community that differed very widely from his own, and Creohan wondered if here he might find knowledge that would enable him to do something—anything—towards averting the fate of the world. At the least, these people would probably listen to him with understanding.

"Creohan!" said Chalyth abruptly. "Look there!"

And he saw it with a pang of despair. Unmistakable in the light from above, squat and huge, there reared up just such another House of History as the one in their own city, where they had waylaid Glyre and learnt of the desolation of the islands he loved.

"Here, too…" he said sickly, and did not have the heart to finish the statement.

They were taken into one of the houses and given gowns of white and plain woven sandals for their feet; their hair was combed by Liang-liang herself, and Hoo and Creohan had their beards singed to manageable length. They did no more than submit, for the strain of their voyage had left them exhausted.

"Come back to the beach, now," said Liang-liang when she was done. "By now the little brown men should be swimming to shore, and you will find it amusing how we conquer them."

They went accordingly, and indeed it was amusing. It was simple, too. No one of ordinary stature was in sight at all, though crowding behind trees and bushes were perhaps a hundred people armed with lanterns in front of which were placed jointed wooden figures. Fires had been lighted that gave off huge drifts of smoke

and obscured the houses; on this smoke the shadows of the little dolls stood out ten times as high as a man.

The first sign they had of the presence of the little brown warriors came when a despairing cry went up from the sea. One of the giant shadows turned menacingly towards the source of the cry, and a huge echoing voice called, "I see you, little men!"

"That is only my friend Tra-niong," explained Liang-liang. "He speaks through a long wooden tube. Oh, it is not hard to drive away these brown people…"

One or two, bolder than the rest, actually scrambled up on the sand; among them Creohan thought he saw the lord of that race. For their benefit, four men bore forward out of the smoke a huge wicker figure carrying a bloody sword; its presence overwhelmed the intruders, and they returned to the sea, leaving their axes abandoned on the shore.

"Were I one of them," said Hoo soberly, "I should think this a land of devils!"

"It is only a land of what they themselves fear," said Liang-liang. "If they did not wander into other lands, they would have no cause to be ashamed of their small stature, for all their people are the same. They are jealous without cause; it is therefore easy to make them afraid of shadows."

She got up. "Enough of this. What purpose brought you into the hands of these savages?"

"First tell me something," said Creohan slowly. "Is that not a House of History I see yonder?"

"Not a House—a Tree of History," corrected Liang-liang. "It is a place where students such as myself go to look into the past history of our race and search out the way things happened."

"You use it for that purpose?" questioned Chalyth. "To gain knowledge, and that is all?"

"Of course." Liang-liang sounded surprised. "What purpose *could* it serve but that?"

"In our city," began Creohan, and explained. Liang-liang was horrified at what he told her.

"No, indeed!" she said warmly. "The Tree is not open to anyone who wishes to waste his life in dreaming—it is the tool of our craft. Would you have a—a scribe lend his ink to any child that wishes to scrawl on a wall? From the memories which the Tree imparts, we seek to understand the whole story of human endeavour, tracing it back little by little and omitting nothing. In the end, we hope that we may grow another Tree, so planned that a man may enter the door and pass through it slowly, seing the entire story of the earth and understanding all of human history."

Her voice changed subtly. "We may never manage that task, though. For what we cannot determine is how we have these memories! Already we have traced our story complete fourteen thousand years into the past—to the age of the Lymarian Empire. And this Tree of ours has been here only a bare thousand. It was brought here in the time of the Mending of Men, when our project was begun."

"That may never matter," said Creohan sadly, glancing at the clouds of smoke already dispersing across the night. "There is a more certain reason why you should not finish the project, noble though it may be." He sought for the threatening star, but could not see it for the wheeling lights; regardless, he told Liang-liang why they had begun their trip anyway.

XI

"This is a very serious matter," said Kiong-binu. He was the chief of this people; he was very distinguished of manner and bearing, and he was also so old that the golden-yellow of his skin had dulled to grey. He was speaking at a full assembly of his subjects, held in a natural amphitheatre not far inland. Perhaps twenty thousand persons were gathered there about the high wooden platform from which the chief spoke—his words were relayed by men with bigger voices who followed him sentence by sentence, keeping their utterances precisely in unison by hand signals. Chalyth, Hoo and Creohan sat behind him on the platform, and Liang-liang translated for them.

About half the people present wore the blue or white gowns that marked them out as students of history—a very different thing from the Historians Creohan and Chalyth knew. The entire community centred around their project; it was perhaps symbolic, thought Creohan, that the tree he called the House of History—since all the houses in his own city were trees—should stand on a hill and dominate the citizens, whereas here the Tree of History stood on level ground and was in no way overawing.

Kiong-binu finished his résumé of what he had heard via Liang-liang from Creohan, and a buzz of discussion went up from the crowd. Some of them, though it was broad daylight, automatically glanced up towards the sky.

Then the elderly chief turned towards Creohan and asked a question; Liang-liang interpreted, "He wishes to know how you propose to turn aside this star."

The question took Creohan aback. "When we set out," he stammered, "we—we had in mind nothing more than to find someone who would share our dismay at Earth's fate—some fellow-mourners, if you like. How could anyone hope to turn aside a star?"

Liang-liang frowned. "It may be difficult to explain this," she said. "Here it is not the custom to mourn the dead, for we are

mostly students of history, and for us the past can be as alive as the present. Only the future is sealed to us. But why should one *not* hope to turn aside a star? Things as seemingly impossible have often been achieved in the past."

She broke off and spoke in her own tongue to Kiong-binu, who frowned and shook his head. Then he addressed the multitude again. "He is calling for suggestions from anyone who might have seen the necessary knowledge in some age of the past," Liang-liang whispered.

All through the ranked crowd a stir passed, like the wind making waves in grass. No one stood forth or spoke, except a young man with tousled hair and an aggressive manner, who seemed to be saying something that startled them.

"I like this not," said Liang-liang. "That is Paro-mni—he is said to be a malcontent and trouble-maker, and he is proposing that since no one has the answer now, we should change the end of our project and look for it."

Kiong-binu snapped an answer. "We cannot, after a thousand years, give up our goal in favour of another!"

"What good is our goal going to be to us in face of this approaching star?" shot back Paro-mni, and several of the audience called approvingly. But more protested.

"What do you suggest, then?" demanded Kiong-binu, and Paro-mni answered in detail.

"It will be no use to us to continue with a job we have no chance of finishing. Therefore I recommend that all our students of history begin to search the far past, for we know already that the information we seek does not lie in the nearest fourteen thousand years. We must scan and skip until we chance across a period whose knowledge of how to control matter seems great enough to extend to the mass of a star. Then we shall have to make use of that information—we shall have to build the necessary machines,

the sources of power, the—"

By this time the flood of protests had become a sea, from which Liang-liang picked out a few typical examples: "We cannot throw aside the result of a thousand years' study!"

"We cannot leave our work to soil our hands with dirt!"

"We cannot condemn our children to be slaves!"

"We cannot—"

"Silence!" called Kiong-binu. "It is right. We cannot change from our own ways. We will provide any information we can to help these brave people to divert this star, but more we cannot justly be called upon to do." He turned beaming to look at Creohan, expecting thanks, perhaps; instead, the normally taciturn Hoo, shocked into activity by this short-sightedness, leapt to his feet and bellowed at him.

"You think a star is something you can turn aside with shadows like the little brown savages? You think you can sit back and wait for three puny human beings to save you from a frying you richly deserve? You've got your brains stuck so far back in the past you can't see beyond the ends of your own noses! Why, if everyone on this planet was as stupid and selfish as you are, I'd say to my companions, 'Let's save our own skins and forget about these idiots—they aren't worth doing a hand's turn for!'"

It was plain that many of the audience understood him, for they shifted uneasily in their places, and Paro-mni, standing up and cupping his hands round his mouth, cried, "Agreed! A thousand times agreed! If no one else in this brood of faint-hearts will join with you, I will!"

The tide and clamour of the controversy swung from side to side; Kiong-binu was quite unable to control it, and Creohan felt like a bobbing cork, buffeted by the waves in which it floated. Liang-liang tried for a while to keep them abreast of what was

being said, but finally gave up, for it was impossible.

Slowly, though, a half-hearted compromise emerged, and it seemed that the one side had been shamed into allowing some small divergence from their traditional plans, while the other had been unable to feel so strongly about something which would not happen till they were dead that they took a firm stand on it.

"This is the verdict," said Kiong-binu at last, looking very weary. "Paro-mni and anyone else who so wishes is to be permitted to undertake this survey of the past. All the information he can gather will be given to the visitors. For the rest, anyone who chooses to join in building machines and the rest of it"—he made the idea sound faintly obscene—"may be allowed to. That is all."

"With all these people," said Chalyth, "we might have been able to *hope* to turn aside that star. As things are—I do not see that we have found anything more than a fellow-mourner."

But Paro-mni, still not satisfied, was on his feet yet again, and shouting, "I desire that the visitors may be allowed to help me in my search! That much, at least!"

"Granted," said Kiong-binu, and dismissed the meeting.

"That was a near thing," Liang-liang said, wiping her brow and preparing to leave. "A trouble-maker in truth, that Paro-mni! When I think what he wanted us to do—"

"He is the only man among you with a grain of courage or common sense," said Hoo bitingly. "You, and the rest of them, are stupid dreamers as bad as the Historians of whom Chalyth and Creohan told me. You make me sick!"

He jumped from the platform and strode away into the crowd; with distasteful glances at Liang-liang, Chalyth and Creohan followed him, leaving the girl looking as if she would cry but was ashamed to.

Paro-mni was fighting his way through the press towards

them, and they met quite soon. At close quarters the yellow-skinned man proved to be as quivering with repressed anger as his voice had suggested; he clenched and unclenched his hands constantly as he spoke.

"Oh, but I am one of a race of fools!" he said passionately. "Is there no one left in the world who has the strength of character to get up and *do* things?"

"Not where Chalyth and I come from," Creohan answered, and explained.

"Well, then, that makes two things we must look for. First, we must discover whether at any time our race possessed the knowledge we require—and we may have to search a hundred thousand years of history or more for the answer! Second, we have to learn whether there is anywhere a group of survivors who would put their backs into the job of implementing that knowledge."

The confidence with which he spoke of their tremendous difficulties lent new heart to Creohan. He said, "We know already that the coast opposite this, across the sea, is quite barren. On our own coast, on the opposite side, I suspect the case may be the same, though I don't know."

"I do," said Chalyth. "I had that much from my friends beneath the sea. At the least, there is no city left with even one such as I curious about the sea; if they are not capable of that little effort, any cities there are are in the same plight as our own."

"And up and down this coast there are only a few scattered communities of simple folk who are content to live on what the sea offers them," said Paro-mni. "Until today, I was proud to live among people who—I thought—used their lives for a higher purpose than their neighbours did. But this has opened my eyes."

"How about inland?" said Hoo, and Paro-mni frowned.

"Inland is—as I recall—a much bigger word in this case than

in the case of the continent from which you come. South of us is a giant island, where only animals live, most of them savage and fearful; west, the continent on which most of the greatest periods of human history have blossomed. This makes me suspect that somewhere we *might* find the people we seek. Still…" His voice trailed away for a second, and his eyes veiled with thought.

Then he resumed, briskly, "Have either of you experience in the study of history?"

Chalyth recalled the moment she had stood in the House of History back home, and shuddered, but did not protest when Creohan answered steadily, "No, but we are ready to help you, of course."

"Um. Well, then, today I shall have to spend in teaching you some elementary precautions to enable you to keep your mind on some given subject instead of wandering; tomorrow we can begin."

By now the amphitheatre had almost drained of people; not far from them a woman was standing, waiting for a chance to speak to them. Creohan gestured, and she came forward.

"Paro-mni, I admire your boldness. I'm with you. My name is Kiong-la."

"Your father is an idiot," said Paro-mni dispassionately, meaning Kiong-binu, and the woman shrugged.

"One does not choose one's parents. What do we do first?"

They went to Paro-mni's house and spent the afternoon there learning a system of simple but rigorous mental exercises designed to aid concentration. Chalyth took to them with particular speed; Creohan reasoned that after the frightening experience they had had in the House of History before they began their trip, she was eager to guard against a recurrence.

Still, it was with pounding hearts that they accompanied

Paro-mni and Kiong-la the next morning to the entrance of the Tree. This was a less powerful one than their own, however; it was not hard to blank one's mind to the impact of the memories it induced, and Creohan guessed this was due to the different way it had been used over the years. In passing, he wondered where these Trees had come from; either both those he knew had been in existence for about the same period—a thousand years—or after reaching a certain stage they ceased to grow.

With the aid of a map brought by Paro-mni, they learnt the areas of the complex passageways within the Tree which held the key only to areas of history that had been exhausted of their possibilities. "Broadly speaking, that covers the Lymarian Empire and after," said Paro-mni. "I make one notable exception—on thinking back, I believe I know where there may be a group of survivors who can help us."

"When do these memories begin, then?" said Creohan. "I should have thought that by looking into the most recent past—"

"That is impossible," said Paro-mni regretfully. "After all, the memories had to be conducted hither somehow, not so? The time of the Mending of Men, when our community was founded, is the most recent age in which knowledge and memories covering the whole surface of the earth met together in any one place. From that, funnel back lines that lead to everything that happened earlier. Still, for our first task, no matter; if a mechanically-minded society had existed in that period, we would have found physical traces of it. Let us begin, then. For a start, you must examine the ages near to the Lymarian Empire. Say, more than three centuries previously—a culture as powerful as the one we seek would have left traces on the Empire had it existed later. Chalyth, go down this passage to its second branch and take two paces to the right. Then lie down and wait. If you find nothing, move on. Creohan, you must do the same in the first branch; Hoo, in the third. Kiong-la and I, being more experienced, will endeavour to search out a wider range. Good luck go with you."

So they parted, and set off on a voyage of the mind far stranger than the voyage of the body they had undertaken so far.

XII

Once he had grown accustomed to it, Creohan found the fascination of his task struggling in his mind with the urgency he still felt to go on, to make progress. For in truth they made very little progress in their search.

Before the Lymarian Empire, as he knew, had been the Glorious Gerynts, but they had concentrated on welding their people together into a single uniform horde; Creohan had unpleasant memories of the effects of that.

Before them again were the Lucothids and the Pretascans, who had divided almost the entire planet between them and had tapped the surge of the tides to power giant drifting cities that farmed the oceans; that must have been when the People of the Sea became friends and servants of man.

Before them were the Tymoletri, and the Gwams, and the Tridwelion, who had been like and yet unlike a thousand other cultures; before them the Minogovaristo. These were people who had drawn the clouds together as a backdrop for shadow-plays covering whole countries, but their domain, like all the rest, had stopped at the edge of space.

Before them the Dos had reigned, and the Glygly, and the Ngrotor; before them, the Chatrik, whose domain had *not* ended with the frontier of the air—but they had been content to plant huge forests of mutated lichens across the face of the now

vanished moon, to play games of hide and seek in the vastness of nearer space, to build pyramidal and quite uninhabitable houses, or maybe temples, on the arid soil of Mars, for a purpose comprehensible only to themselves. They could not have turned aside a star.

Half a year went by; Creohan, Hoo and Chalyth could scarcely tell the passage of time any more, for they were now as skilful as Paro-mni and Kiong-la at skipping through memories that covered centuries, seizing one here and another there and discarding them.

Before the Chatrik were the Pledowzi, whose main task had been to contend with the depredations of a race of lizard-like people who had emerged from ruins sunken in a great ocean and had struggled for the ownership of the land. The Pledowzi, being merciful, had spent five centuries in adapting the wet, hot planet of Venus for these creatures' use; then they deported them thither by force. A possibility: all five of them studied that period for a week, and then decided that they could not have swung a planet from its course, let alone a star, and they did not have the key to such power.

Before the Pledowzi, the Kinkakans, the Dwyge, the Combara Comita, the Thnab—petty societies who left behind perhaps one folk tale apiece and some houses that rotted. Then there were the Umftiti, whose houses grew like the ones to which Creohan was accustomed, and who had left groves of them waiting for the period, twenty-nine thousand years later, of the Mending of Men, when another culture had discovered the use that could be made of these plants, trained them again for the companionship of men, and left them for their descendants.

It was the Umftiti also who had first exploited the possibilities of the Trees of History, but they had been unable to control what they had invented, and their successors the Thnab had not understood any of it; so that too was left for twenty-nine

thousand years.

The wave of humanity seemed to surge back and forth over the planet; a pattern seemed to form—an age of machinery gave way to an age of working with living things, and that degenerated into violence and a return to machines. Never the two together; the nearest approach to such a combination had been that achieved by the Lucothids and Pretascans, and they had advanced only a little way with the control of matter before abandoning their work, satisfied with what they had previously achieved.

Beginning to despair, they skipped ever greater periods. There were gaps, too—real ones, when a continent might be unaccounted for. These were usually in periods when a culture was dying alone, and chance weeded out its descendants one by one until there were none left at all. Whole societies might have vanished in this way; still, it was a consolation that technically inclined cultures had spread over the face of the world in most cases, and therefore were least likely to be forgotten.

Fifty thousand years in the past, they chanced across the Muve, who had undertaken to divert the course of the planet Mercury in order to save their despotic ruler from an unfavourable astrological conjunction. This was more like it! Only the Muve had failed in their task, and the effort had spent their energy to such an extent that they collapsed in a disastrous war which altered the shape of mountains and caused many islands to sink from sight completely. Discouraged, the seekers pressed on.

The memories were growing dim now, overlead by multitudes of others; sometimes a tantalising glimpse proved impossible to identify again. A few great periods stood out brilliantly even yet: the Cursiles, the Lomril, the Slarf, all of whom had attempted to travel to the stars, and none of whom had truly succeeded.

A year went by, and the time came when Paro-mni said at

their evening meal, "We are at a point which will perhaps defeat even the concerted efforts of all my people—if they ever get so far! In a thousand years we have pushed the frontiers of the past back only fourteen thousand; here at the seventy and eighty thousand years mark, we find not one but several civilisations that may have attempted what we need—"

"Why they?" put in Hoo. "Why no one after them? One might almost think that there were once a—a breed of people, so to speak, to whom the stars formed a challenge, and who have died off, leaving the race content to live on a single world."

"It cannot have died out so completely," said Creohan. "You spent all your life—till we came—among the herds of meat in your valley; yet *you* understood what we were trying to do, and came with us."

"One thing that does suggest itself to me," put in Kiong-la, "is that knowledge of the physical universe has become a less and less sought-after goal. The opposite trend, surely, has climaxed here in our own city with an attempt to know and understand everything about *man* and not his environment."

"But you cannot divorce the two," said Paro-mni firmly. "That is something I have often suspected, and with the advent of the news of the threatening star, I became certain. What will become of this so-noble attempt to understand man if there are no men left to appreciate it?"

"Are we to admit defeat?" said Chalyth. "We know now that within the range of memory there is no knowledge that can save Earth; in any case, there is no one living who could apply it—"

"There you may be wrong," said Creohan, and the others stared at him. He continued, "Does it not seem strange that this turning cycle of technology, biology, degeneration, has remained stuck at the lowest part of its cycle for so long? Since the time of the Mending of Men, which gave us the Trees of History and the

trees my people use for houses, there has plainly been a time of degeneration. Unless the pattern has suddenly changed completely, somewhere on Earth people must again be learning to build with tools, to design machines. They cannot *all* be dominated by the past, or savages like the little brown men."

"How long do the Trees of History live?" asked Hoo, and Paro-mni answered impatiently.

"No one knows. The original Umftiti Trees had sown and re-sown themselves in their grove for twenty-nine thousand years before—"

"Let us go to the Umftiti period," said Hoo, rising, so that the others stared.

"But what use will that be to us?" Paro-mni demanded.

"At some time in that age, a man may have gone to a Tree, and he may have looked into a past that was cluttered by thirty thousand years' fewer memories," said Hoo significantly, and as the words sank in he was the last to manage to leave the room, such was the rush.

And indeed such a man there had been. His name they could not speak—it consisted largely of a tongue-click and a grimace—and his way of life and his manner of thinking were alike strange. He had been a priest, and he wore the flayed skin of some long-vanished animal and his hair was plastered to his skull with clay. But he had believed in the truth of what the Trees showed him at a time when it was held that the memories were visions conjured up by evil spirits, and he had stretched the past to the uttermost limit.

And he watched the Cursiles, *and* the Lomril, *and* the Slarf; he had seen others before them, who seemed to pile up swiftly as civilisation succeeded civilisation, who had launched for the stars.

The five seekers grew to know—through his memory of the Tree's memory—the shape of any vessel that was designed to travel space, the method of powering it, the success or failure it achieved. In most cases it was failure; the Slarf, the latest of them all, had had success as they counted success, but the object of their one trip had been merely to prove that stars *were* suns like the Earth's own sun, and it cost one man a life-time and his sanity to make the long, long trip of which that one proved fact was the prize.

And yet further back still there was a hint that someone had had success. There was a mountain, a huge and inaccessible mountain, about which legends clustered thick like fruit ripe on a tree. A tradition had lasted through seven successive space-flying cultures that any successful venture must start from here, which was unheard-of in the case of any other such tradition. Many starships that had nearly achieved success crashed to ruins in the mountain range nearby; gigantic efforts were directed to levelling the mountains, but not harming *the* mountain; then the altered disposition of weight on the Earth's crust caused an upthrust of magma which ruined the attempt, and by the era of the Slarf the idea had been dismissed and forgotten.

Forgotten, that is, until this man of the Umftiti decided to exile himself from his people and trek far to the east in search of the mountain. Presumably the journey had cost him his life far from human society, for hunt as they might they found no clue to his fate.

Almost as if they had discussed it among themselves, they found that the idea of going to see whether that mountain had survived the intervening millennia was accepted among them. "I know my father will be glad to see us go," said Kiong-la one evening, when they were met together to talk over their day's adventuring through the past.

"I know he will not be the only one," said Paro-mni bitterly. "One would think these people had managed conveniently to

forget the fate hanging over Earth. The students complain that we interfere with their work—as if they were using the same areas of the Tree of History as we are!"

"They cannot forget their fate so long as we are here among them. But they would like to forget it," said Hoo shrewdly. The others nodded agreement.

"And what do we expect to find if we do go to this—mountain?" asked Creohan. "Do we hope perhaps that on the way we may chance across the machine-building people who, in two centuries, knowing what must befall them, will seek out and use a means of turning aside the stars? And if we find nothing on the way, do we spend the rest of our days combing the continents for those people—if they exist?"

"Why not?" said Chalyth softly. "Is not man even now worth trying to save? Have we not found devotion to duty among Hoo's family, gentleness and sympathy in Madal, a thirst for knowledge—even if a limited one—here in this city? Even in those cruel brown savages I think there is a trace of the refusal to fear anything merely because it is bigger than oneself that must have driven these very early men out to conquer the universe. Much that has made mankind what it is is worth keeping—and who knows to what new heights we may once again rise if disaster is averted?"

"Our race has *never* possessed the knowledge that we want," said Kiong-la doubtfully. "That we have established."

"Maybe this thing has never happened before," said Creohan, and got to his feet, joy in his heart. "We have spent too much time here, Chalyth and Hoo and I. We must go on. Are you with us?"

Paro-mni and Kiong-la exchanged glances. And nodded.

XIII

The people of the city were indeed glad to see them go. They were too polite to admit it; indeed, they wished the travellers well with simulated warmth. But as the five of them started out on their new journey, Creohan imagined he heard a collective sigh of relief rising from their rear. Even so, he could not raise more than a half-hearted sort of annoyance.

Their way lay almost due west; they knew the ground almost as well as if they had travelled it already, for many of Earth's lost civilisations had built here and decayed here, without significantly altering the face of the land. Twice or three times in the past which they had explored, hungry wild animals and wilder men had roamed the area, but the beasts had long ago given up the unequal struggle, after men—several times—had re-descended to the beasts' level and beaten them at their own ferocious game. Yet there were creatures about—long-eared, gentle, shy animals that dodged among the scrub; things with gaunt limbs which scuttered among rocks; plump, amiable objects with fat tails that dragged behind them and blunt snouts with which they rooted in the ground, grunting with delight when they unearthed succulent tubers.

Creohan wished he and Chalyth had been as well prepared for their first trip as they were now. Their voyage across the ocean was nothing compared to the distance separating them from the mountain which was their goal, but in all those thousands of years the landscape they had seen by means of the Tree of History had changed only in detail, not in outline. They could camp for the night now and say, "Tomorrow we will go on an hour's march and come to a shallow ravine, which should by now have been weathered so that we can cross it"; or "From here we cannot go straight, for the land was becoming desert a thousand years ago and is probably all sandy and rocky"; or "These plump creatures never

stray far from water; if we follow them we shall come to such-and-such a river."

In this way they progressed amazingly, eating the roots that the plump animals favoured and the leaves and shoots the long-eared animals chose. Occasionally they had to take advantage of these creatures' trusting behaviour, and use them for meat, but they did not do so often.

Made lean and untalkative by what they had undergone, they felt no need to discuss their rate of progress, their intentions on reaching their objective, or even the country through which they passed. A calm certainty filled them; uncomplaining they put miles behind them between every sun-up and sundown. Each of them felt—Creohan perhaps more than the others, because his need was older and greater—the fulfilment of acting together with companions in a worthy purpose.

Three months brought them three parts of the way to their goal, and they were moving into a rich region, whose vegetation was luxuriant but whose nights were very cold. And here, for the first time, they ran into something that had changed since they had seen memories of it.

Across their path stretched a forest which could easily have seeded itself and grown to such a thickness in a hundred years, let alone a thousand or so: too big to go round, too heavily grown with underbrush to be penetrated easily.

And—as they discovered very much too late—composed of a certain species of tree whose tops interlaced more and more thickly as they approached the centre, so that they looked up eventually and found they could not see the sun or the stars.

A dim gloom reigned by night and by day in this forest; the silence was punctuated only by far-distant cries from animals different from those which roamed the plains outside. They

guessed; they tried to climb the trees to see the sky, they followed watercourses that eventually gathered so much brush about them that they disappeared into a green tunnel and were lost.

So, the travellers had to admit, were they.

"We should go that way," suggested Kiong-la, staunching blood on her ankle where a thorny bush had torn her skin.

"Rather that way," said Chalyth, panting as she leaned against the bole of a giant tree.

"Whichever way we go, we must stay together," said Creohan. "Otherwise one of us may be doomed."

"Which is better—that one of us should be doomed, or all of us?" said Kiong-la bitterly. "I say *that* way, and I shall go that way whether you come or not."

In an instant tempers flared; tired, discouraged, rather hungry—for the animals of the forest were hard to snare, and the trees yielded few eatable shoots—the travellers found relief in shouting at each other. In a while, they were relieved enough, except for Kiong-la, who, with a set line to her mouth and her body trembling, demanded whether anyone was going her way or whether they were leaving her to set off alone.

Creohan's peaceable suggestion that they sleep on a decision did not satisfy her, though it did the others, and when they woke after their rest, Kiong-la was gone.

The forest offered no clue as to the way she had taken; in the direction she had proposed going the scrub soon became impassable, so she could not have travelled far. Creohan put forward the idea that they should split into pairs and go two one way, two the other, in search of her, but Hoo vetoed it, saying they might never find their way back to this spot where they stood. So they cast about the area, shouting, but either Kiong-la did not hear or she could not answer, or she would not.

At last their shouting roused a group of animals in the nearer dimness, who came swinging down from the tree-tops on long strands of creeper, but who had no sooner scented human beings than they made off with chattering howls of terror.

"Now that can be due to one of two things," said Hoo, as if suddenly coming to the solution of a difficult problem. "Either the smell of man is utterly new in this forest or—which is more likely—those creatures know man and are afraid of us. Quickly—take the direction opposite to theirs!"

They did so wearily; they had gone only a short way when the sound of splashing water reached them, and they found the undergrowth thinning. With renewed heart they pressed forward, until for the first time in how many days they did not know the sky was grey and open above their heads. A rocky cliff jutted upwards here, and down it cascaded a stream of clear water in a fall three times as high as a man. A deep pool stretched away from the foot of the fall, and Chalyth uttered a cry of joy and ran forward into it, not stopping to take off her thorn-ragged clothing.

In the middle of the pool she looked up towards the fall, and saw something that so astonished her she all but sank straight down. When she recovered, she flung up an arm, and they all saw it at once.

A water-wheel turned in the never-ending flow; crude iron shafts whose squeaking was overlaid with the splashing of the cascade drove something inside a wooden box, and from the box there led away two thick cables sheathed in waterproof insulation.

Paro-mni let out a long slow sigh. "If Kiong-la had not yielded to fear and crossed pride, she would have been with us now," he said, but Creohan, shaking his head, interrupted.

"If Kiong-la had remained with us, we might not have come this way and chanced across it," he corrected. "I am afraid chance is not being kind to Kiong-la as it is to the rest of us. Now we must

follow that cable, and at the end of it we shall find the machine-using people who—given two hundred years—may learn how to turn aside a star."

They went; in a little while they found a brick-built town with paved streets along which wheeled carts with iron tyres rolled bumping, driven by electric motors, and from which more paved roads led away to other towns in the area. The forest—the impenetrable, close-growing forest—was all that stood between them and Paro-mni's people, and very soon it was plain they would have conquered that barrier.

Astonished people saw them emerging from the forest and hastened to discover who they might be; the country over which they could be seen was too rough for the electric carts, and the travellers were weary enough to be content to let the natives come to them, so they had a little time to talk if they so wished. And Paro-mni, seeing Creohan eyeing the dim blur of the sun through the clouds as if estimating which way was west from here, had to speak.

"Creohan! You think of—going further than this? Why, here is what we were looking for! In two hundred years, with a purpose, these people will have all the necessary power—we can take them to my city and show them the past, from which they can draw lost knowledge to help them—"

"Yes, you can," said Creohan abstractedly, still calculating. "But—well, we shall see."

Then the first of the natives were among them, talking a language which was a remote cousin of one spoken in this area at the time of the Mending of Men, and which Paro-mni could follow if it was slow enough. Their journey through the forest seemed to impress these people as if it were a miracle, for they themselves appeared dismayed by its green depths, and when Creohan demanded that someone go in search of Kiong-la he was told it was impossible to find her, or anything, and that they were the

luckiest people alive.

These were a sober, industrious race, very curious about the world they lived in, and very eager to turn its physical properties to their own account. The electrical generator was new among them, and they were disappointed for a time to learn that they had been anticipated not once but many times, yet they soon recovered, and the inventor—whom they met—hastened to incorporate in his gadget improvements suggested by Paro-mni from his memories of ancient designs. Creohan demanded to be taken to an astronomer, and found that they had such people, armed with poor but diligently used refracting telescopes. They had deduced that the world was round, but they had not measured its size; the fact that their country lay some distance from the equator had prevented that. Neither had they measured the distance or size of the stars; Creohan showed them how, and worked out for them in his own symbols—which Paro-mni impatiently translated after a fashion—the calculations that showed how great was the danger to Earth.

The task overawed the natives at first, but in a week or two they were talking confidently of achieving it—after all, they reasoned, two centuries before they had been uncivilised scratchers in the mud; two centuries hence, they might well be attempting the stars. In two weeks, they were testing their first rocket-driven glider, and the barrier of the great forest seemed about to vanish forever.

Paro-mni, as Creohan had expected, was enthusiastic about their discovery; Hoo—as Creohan had *not* expected—had suddenly become an unreserved, whole-hearted supporter of the people he found himself among. And yet it was not so unexpected, after all: these people had much in common with Hoo's own family; they were diligent, methodical, content to live by certain binding rules, the ideal sort of people to develop science, with its intractable

natural laws.

Yet Creohan missed something from the very start. What, he could not quite define—a hint of irrationality, perhaps, a certain glorious spark of idealistic determination. Creohan remembered something his Historian friend Molichant had said a very long time ago, a long way away: "Maybe it happens that some people are better suited to ages other than our own."

And he had asked what happened to the man for whom no time in all history was ideal.

For "ages other than our own" he had only to put "places other than our own," and he had summed up his own position.

At length he sought out Hoo and Paro-mni and Chalyth, gathered them together in a house which had been allotted to them, and announced his inescapable decision.

"I'm going on to the mountain," he said.

"But—but why?" exploded Paro-mni. "Have we not found what we sought? Have we not the key to the safety of Earth in the work these people will undertake?"

"Possibly," nodded Creohan. "But I cannot help them more than I have done. I've shown them the threatening star; I could tell them again about it, and again, but that would be of no use. No, I can say only this: that I feel I must go on to the mountain because these people would not think it worth going on to the mountain. Don't say you understand me—I can't explain it clearly enough for that."

"Hoo?" said Paro-mni, and glanced at him. Hoo shrugged.

"For me, I am content. I spent my early life acting out a meaningless pattern of tasks. Here I can become part of a meaningful one. I shall stay here."

"Chalyth?" said Paro-mni.

The girl did not answer for a very long time; she was thinking of the ordeal in the forest, and Vence on the plain of yellow grasses, and the savagery of the little brown men. But at long last she raised her head and looked at Creohan; when she spoke, she was addressing him alone.

"I do understand, and you are quite right. Whether that mountain holds an answer to anything or not, is irrelevant. Whether we go or not, makes no difference—probably—to what the people here do, whether they succeed or fail. But we set out from Paro-mni's city to go there, and you and I are going."

XIV

Creohan tried to say that he was very tired, but his mouth was as parched as a desert, and in any case Chalyth knew and was equally weary. The going had become worse, and worse, and then worse again, until for the past three days they had seen neither water nor any living thing bar a few lichens. Men had not been this way for centuries; it was a vast bare scar on the face of Earth, cold, bleak, inhospitable, its characteristics lost to the memory of the human race.

Suppose, Creohan had often thought, that the mountain they sought had been worn away, or brought low by an earthquake? They did not even know if the man of the Umftiti had reached it a mere thirty thousand years ago, and whatever had happened here that was of such vast importance must have taken place a hundred thousand years before…

Yet they had gone on—somehow: scrambling, crawling, plodding over ground that was sometimes level and sometimes

steeply sloped and sometimes craggy and rough. How much further they could continue Creohan didn't know; his eyes, red with tiredness, focussed on Chalyth and he saw that her privations had overlaid her old beauty with a haggard, drawn ugliness. He knew he himself was skeletal and ragged, and he felt an ambition to become a corpse.

And then he saw that she was smiling at him—a ghastly smile, that cracked a layer of dust on her cheeks into wide ravines, but an unmistakable smile. He forced himself to imitate it, and then he raised his head.

A moment before there had *not* been a mountain; now there was a mountain—black, tremendous, awe-inspiring, its sides running with clear water, its peak catching the light as if it were a vast and polished jewel. It was *still growing*.

Chalyth saw it a second later than Creohan had; she gave a gasp that might have been a scream if her throat had not been so dry, and clutched at him for support, for the wave of concussion that gigantic movement had caused in the ground was like an earthquake. Then the first of the streams that had started from the ground washed round their feet, and they slaked their thirst, panting.

When he could speak, Creohan said, "Those were the people we need today! Does it not seem that that mountain was waiting for someone to approach—hiding beneath the ground? My life, that a *mountain* could wait a hundred thousand years—" His words failed him.

"There's a gap in the side facing us," said Chalyth after a pause. "Do you think we're—expected?"

"I think someone is expected," said Creohan. Limping, hand-in-hand, they began to cross the intervening ground.

The gap in the side proved to be a doorway, trapezoidal in shape, giving on to a passage. Its walls were illumined by pale blue

fluorescence; behind this glow something huge and powerful pulsed, as though they were entering the veins of a beast and listening to its heartbeat. The air was crisp with a scent of electricity.

They crossed the threshold, and began to learn.

It seemed like the Tree of History, this mountain, but it was not, for it held only one memory which was an explanation, and it was not alive—it was only a gigantic storage device for certain patterned electric currents, which by induction could start other patterns working in a living brain.

"If they could do this," said Chalyth, as she gazed down the vastness of the corridor ahead, "*they* could move a star."

"*They did*," said Creohan, who had gone a few paces further than she. "Be silent, and come with me."

He took her hand, and together they walked forward into knowledge of the greatest adventure the human race had ever undertaken.

Who these people were, they did not know. It was enough, in those days, that they were men and women of Earth. They had studied, and explored, and probed, being possessed with a great hunger to understand the universe about them.

So they covered the surface of the planet, and plunged beneath its seas, and trekked into its jungles and across its icecaps; they bored deep into the solid crust of their world, and soared high through its tenuous atmosphere.

When—or while, it was not clear—they were engaged on this, the moon tempted them, so they turned their scrutiny on that world, too. After the moon, the planets. They did not decorate the surface of the moon with coloured vegetation to satisfy a passing whim; nor did they, like the Muve, attempt to drive a planet from

its orbit to fend off an imagined disaster. They were possessed of a curiosity which at times approached an obsession; what lay at the end of their trail of knowledge-getting they never inquired—perhaps they had a vague idea it was happiness; much more likely, to Creohan's way of thinking (for he felt he understood these people), it was the satisfaction of having attained a self-imposed objective and therewith overcoming their limitations.

And so the time came when they had charted the course of the tides in Saturn's rings, and seen the sun as a mere speck from the surface of frigid Pluto, and travelled by proxy into that same sun's glowing atmosphere, and they found themselves standing on the shore of a more gigantic ocean than any they had ever crossed: a gulf so vast that even a ray of speeding light took years to cross it.

Undaunted, and challenged by the stars, they looked for a way to defeat the laws of the universe itself; they tried—and failed—to exceed the pace of those dawdling rays crawling from star to earth. Nonetheless, they had to know. Speedy—and yet too slow—their ships launched out into interstellar space, and some of them came back, to tell how there were other worlds, other kinds of people, other beings who looked at the Earth's sun and saw it as a dim star.

But to visit even one of these worlds might take ten years.

They proceeded to lengthen their life-span artificially, and so continued for a while; but the universe was vast, the galaxy a mere unit of it, and nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine parts out of a million of it were out of reach.

At this time, therefore, some people began to say "Enough!"

But others did not.

The problem could be stated quite simply: men's puny ships did not allow them to cross interstellar, let alone intergalactic,

gulfs. Yet it had by then become plain that—if they cared to use it—men had all the time they needed to explore the universe; it would continue to exist for so long that it virtually amounted to eternity.

And so it was agreed between the people who said "Enough" and those who did not that all the world should unite one last time in a single gigantic project. A ship could not carry sufficient numbers of men through the universe—but a planet could. So, by using the energies of the star itself they brought another solar system closer to that of Earth, so that those who wished to undertake the most fantastic voyage of exploration in all history might go to it; and then they set the star to swing on an orbit which would bring it back to earth in one hundred thousand years, with its harvest of knowledge, and its people.

And that was where the impulse to explore the universe had gone. For the curious, the inquiring, the adventurous, were on that other world; old habits died hard, and for a few thousands of years after the departure other men had half-remembered and tried—out of shame?—to emulate that one superlative gesture. But the time had come and gone, and so, eventually, went the memory.

This too they had foreseen, that great people. Therefore they had built this mountain, hiding it, waiting for men of understanding to come near it again. The electronic patterns circulating in its supercooled memory banks would go on, as near as made no matter, for ever; now and again someone might chance to come nearby, might learn of his race's glory, might be glad to be alive when the time was near for a return.

They found themselves outside the mountain; they had walked blindly, and lost themselves in visions beyond their imaginings. Now, too overcome to speak, they stood and breathed heavily as though they had made some terrific physical effort.

The sky was nearly dark; they had passed many hours in the mountain. The threatening star, which was no longer threatening, for its awful rush would be checked long before it became dangerous, had risen.

"I had begun to think of the end," said Creohan, half choking with joy. "And now we've learned there need be no end, so far as mankind is concerned…"

"There was a poem," said Chalyth, wrinkling her brow. "Did you hear it? I did, very clearly—I remember it. A poem, from a hundred thousand years ago!"

"*I* didn't hear it," said Creohan. "Perhaps—perhaps whatever it is that makes that mountain make us remember affects different people different ways. What was it?"

Chalyth shut her eyes, trying to cast the ideas into patterns of words. She managed it at length, and recited:

"*When that great market by the sea shuts fast,*

All that calm Sunday that goes on and on—"

Creohan suddenly remembered the great market by the sea which had been shut forcibly by the little brown savages, and the memory and the sorrow caused him to miss the next line.

He came back to catch the last few words.

"*—And Earth is but a star, that once—had shone*."

"Never!" said Creohan, and was almost surprised that he had spoken aloud. Then he went on, "Earth need never cease to shine, so long as men think of it and remember it! If one day this planet dies, why, there are other worlds, and some of them, like that one up there which has been on so incredible a journey, will be other Earths."

"Do you think the people with whom we left Hoo and Paro-mni will welcome what we have to tell them, or not?" said

Chalyth. Creohan, coming back with a start from the infinite depths of space to the here and now, shrugged.

"How can one tell? Perhaps, in two hundred years, they would have been able to turn aside that star; perhaps not. Maybe they will still have to—after all, it's possible that these people who set off a hundred thousand years ago died out on their new world and left no descendants, or that their descendants have forgotten as we on Earth have forgotten, and no longer know why their sun and ours are rushing together, or how to prevent the collision."

Chalyth gave a little cry of horror, and nodded. "I suppose that is possible. Well, we shall know one day."

"And now," said Creohan, "we must go back."

He rubbed his sore eyes with the back of his hand, and looked at Chalyth. They had come hither by force of will and determination; somehow their new knowledge would have to sustain them on their return. He did not look forward to the trip with pleasure, but he still felt—indeed, now more than ever he felt—he owed it even to the ungrateful, short-sighted human beings who were not, after all, the last decaying remnants of a once-proud race.

"Look, Creohan," said Chalyth in a suddenly changed voice. "Look up there—see, a star that is moving!"

Creohan blinked and tilted back his head. Yes, it was true; across the sky, speeding like a thrown jewel, there was a blue-white star which seemed to be growing larger as they watched. Of an instant, he knew what it must be. He said:

"The star must be near enough for them now. Soon they will start to turn it aside…"

Chalyth glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that that can only be one thing. A hundred thousand years ago such ships as that one left Earth for another world. Now

they're coming back. Chalyth, Chalyth, what it is to be alive today!"

"Let—" began Chalyth, and stumbled over the words. "Let's not go back. Let's wait for them. They'll come here, won't they? Probably first of all, if they can still remember where this mountain is?"

"They remember," said Creohan, not taking his eyes from the brilliant blue-white glare of the spaceship's drive. "And of course we'll wait. If we'd only known it, we would have been waiting for them all our lives."

The spaceship grew larger in the sky. It was coming down.