

*Alien
Planet*

Fletcher Pratt

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ALIEN PLANET

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FOREWORD

This novel was originally published in 1932; the date is of importance only in relation to the footnotes, which comment upon scientific material in the narrative from the standpoint of what was known in the early Thirties. The story itself purports to have occurred some twelve years earlier, which would place it between 1919 and 1920. It is presented here as a period piece, and no attempt has been made to update it in any way.

In 1919-20, it would have been entirely possible for an alien being from some other galaxy to have landed on Earth, in a wilderness region, without his presence being known or suspected—except to human beings who happened to be close by. It would have been equally possible for his presence to be concealed, and for him to have departed again without the world being any the wiser.

To the best of our knowledge this is the last literate science fiction novel to appear in science fiction magazines wherein the traditional technique of the “marvelous voyage” and the “manuscript found in a bottle” is combined with a penetrating and satiric representation of human society through the method of exploring an alien culture. Satire has, indeed, appeared since 1932; but the styles of presentation have

changed. We feel that this novel, whether or not it is truly the last of its kind, is worthy of inclusion with the classics of imaginative fiction.

PROLOGUE

Those who followed the technical periodicals during the Thirties know that the Hudson-Bird expedition to Central Asia was most successful, scientifically. But there is one result of the expedition's labors which is now being given to the world for the first time. Briefly, its history is this:

While the expedition was in Mongolia, Professor Hudson was visited one night by the headman of a small village near Kiakhta. The headman's only son was, it appeared, going blind. Professor Hudson acceded to the headman's request for aid (for some reason the man thought Hudson to be in league with the powers of the air) and found that the boy was suffering from ophthalmia. Hudson treated him and left some eye-wash with the chieftain, to be used with certain incantations which the professor invented on the spur of the moment to make certain that the eye-wash was used properly and not drunk.

There was some difficulty about the camel-train at this point and the expedition was forced to remain in the neighborhood for three weeks. The headman, whose son had now completely recovered, became almost embarrassing in his gratitude, and capped the climax by offering to present Professor Hudson with a stone that had fallen from the skies.

Thinking it might be of some interest as a meteorite, the professor accepted the offer, and the next day the headman arrived with the stone, which was about thirty inches in diameter, roughly prolate in shape and deeply pitted. It was packed with other specimens and forgotten for a time.

During the return journey, while the expedition was descending a pass in the Great Khingan, one of the pack animals, becoming frightened at a bird which swerved near, lost its footing and tumbled from a ledge into a rocky valley a hundred feet below. The animal was killed, and the case it carried burst. Among the contents was the meteorite which the headman had presented to Professor Hudson. It struck on a projecting pinnacle of rock and a piece was broken off: Upon retrieving it, members of the expedition noted that the surface of the break was clearly metallic and not at all like that of the average meteorite, and further examination revealed it to be faintly radioactive. 6

Subsequent chemical examination showed that the meteorite was in fact composed of a perfect alloy of tantalum, platinum and other metals, with a small quantity of uranium X present (which accounted for the radioactivity). The combination was so exceedingly curious that Professor Hudson had it cut in two for further examination upon the arrival of the expedition in New York.

It proved to be hollow, and within the central core were several extremely thin sheets of nickel closely covered with minute writing. To the astonishment of those present, the writing, on being placed under a magnifying glass, proved to be in English. It had been applied to the metal by some

means, chemical or mechanical, whose exact nature is not known.

The present narrative is a recension of that found on the nickel sheets. It tells its own story. The internal evidence of its authenticity is good; it was apparently begun at some leisure (even with an eye to publication) and finished in haste and under the shadow of some overwhelming event. The account holds together as a whole; it has no scientific inaccuracies that can be checked, except insofar as it disagrees with the Einstein theory of velocity in empty space, and this disagreement is explained in the narrative itself.

However, at points in the narrative, some sheets are missing, so that it has been necessary for the transcriber to condense and summarize. In addition certain restrictions were placed upon the transcriber by the conditions under which the sheets were turned over to him after Professor Hudson's death.

7

In the letter accompanying the sheets, Hudson tells of his attempts to check external evidence. No traces could be found at Joyous Gard, but a broker named Alvin Schierstedt disappeared from a cottage on Sunderland Lake under circumstances of considerable mystery in 1920. The only Merrick Wells, lawyer, who was in practice at the time, and might have supplied the final check, acknowledging that he was the Merrick Wells of this story, was killed in an aviation accident in the spring of 1928. Due to the lack of corroborating evidence, as well as to material which the transcriber was bound to admit, Professor Hudson and his colleagues decided to postpone publication of the narrative of

Alvin Schierstedt during their lifetime.

The actual transcribing of the manuscript on the nickel plates was a matter of no small difficulty, particularly as the writing was in an exceptionally illegible hand. After some experiment, the happy idea of putting the sheets in an old-fashioned magic lantern (so arranged as to give a positive instead of a reversed image) was hit upon. A friend worked the lantern and I sat before the screen transcribing the manuscript direct on the typewriter. The writing, which was not very good in the first part, became worse as the manuscript continued, and finally so bad that a considerable portion had to be omitted entirely. The division into chapters, was, at the beginning, the work of the author—Mr. Schierstedt. Toward the end, the division is mine, as a large portion of the latter part was lumped in a single connected whole.

Fletcher Pratt.

I

On an evening so ideal as that when the adventure began we hurried through the dishwashing with uncleanly speed and adjourned to the “front yard” for a pipe before the fire. The front yard was a yard by courtesy only; the name implies clearings and settled dwelling places, whereas our front yard reached out for miles into hills thickly covered with virgin forest.

We had chanced on the spot some years before, after taking a wrong turn during a walking trip in the Adirondacks. It won our hearts at once, and when we got back to the city, Merrick turned all his legal wiles to the task of finding the owner. It proved by no means easy; it took nearly a year to locate and make a deal with one Pierre Chevigny of Three Rivers, Quebec.

We were settled before the fire, drinking in the glory of the night; one of the most gorgeous I have seen anywhere. As we leaned back, we could see the vast pageant of the Milky Way wheeling across the central heavens. Below it was mirrored in the lake, still as marble, save where some touch of the tiny airs that always lurk in the funnels of the mountains touched it. Through the trees, dark and spectral, or picked out with crude orange by the light of the fire, we could just catch this

multiple reflection of the stars.

It was Merrick who noticed the big meteor first. Not caring to break the charm of our quiet content, he swung his arm up to call my attention to it. For perhaps two or three minutes we watched it, as it grew and grew, to the size of a street light, to the size of a great electric arc-light, to the size of a full moon, a yellow globe of dazzling radiance, rushing straight toward us. I realized suddenly that it was going to strike and that it was aimed right between my eyes. Merrick was on his feet, striking the end of a burning log and scattering the fire in a shower of sparks, and then the monster was upon us. 9

There was a blinding rush of light, a whistling roar of air, and the meteor struck the verge of the lake, not two hundred yards away, with a terrifying crash and an upflung pillar of steam and driftwood. We heard the sough of the waters as they closed round the sizzling shape, saw the boughs of the trees tossed by the wind of its passage, and with common impulse raced down toward the spot.

After all, it was not so large. Formless and black, its top stood out from the steaming water of the miniature bay created by its arrival, perhaps two feet across. A tiny spot still glowed redly on the pitted irregular surface. For the rest it was simply a big, black stone. We gazed at it more or less vacuously for a moment, then turned toward each other, and laughed at the relief of the sudden tension.

We went back to reconstruct our scattered fire, but the celestial intruder had broken in on our train of thought and it

refused to be restored; so after a few desultory attempts at conversation, we dragged off to bed.

We were up at sunrise the next morning. After the matutinal dip in the lake, I set about getting breakfast while Merrick looked up wood and water for the day's utilities. I was just coaxing a refractory fire into burning, when I heard his shout. "Oh, Al!"

"Well, what is it?" I called back without turning around. I was annoyed by the stubbornness of the fire.

"Come here a minute."

"Can't it wait?"

"No. Come here, quick." I abandoned fire and breakfast to run down the path to the water. He was standing at the lake's edge where the meteorite lay nearly buried in mud and water.

"Look," he said, pointing. I followed the line of his finger to see a slow little curl of mud clouding the clear water, as when one stirs the bottom with a stick.

10

"Well, what of it?" I asked with some asperity, and was about to return to my interrupted cooking when my ear caught a gentle hissing noise.

"What is it?" I asked. "Turtle?"

"Don't think so. Turtle wouldn't make that much fuss. Something going on inside our visitor."

The mud was clearing now and the hissing had ceased. “Probably chemical action of some sort,” said I. “Come on, let’s get breakfast and look at it afterwards.” Merrick gazed for a moment or two and then followed my impatient steps toward the shack.

Breakfast diverted us both from the subject and when it was over, Merrick set off in the canoe for the spot where he thought a crane had built a nest and would now be teaching the young to fly, while I retired to a corner with my microscope and a field book of fungi to identify a curious pink mushroom I had found.

The sun was high and I was beginning to wonder whether it were not time for lunch when I heard the grate of the canoe on the beach and Merrick’s hail. A moment later he appeared, swinging a couple of pond lilies in one hand.

“Any luck?” I asked.

“Some. Think I saw one of the young cranes. Either that or an awfully small old one. Say, there’s quite a stew going on around that meteorite of ours. Wonder what it’s got inside it to make the water act so.”

“That’s odd,” I remarked. “They’re not usually composed of things that would be very soluble, I believe. ^[1] Most of those I’ve heard of were pretty largely iron. What’s it like?”

“Oh, quite a sizzling and bubbling. Lot of mud stirred up. Maybe the inside is still hot and the water’s getting at it.”

“Possibly,” I agreed, not deeply interested. “We ought to get some sticks and lever it out of there. I’ll chip a piece off and take it to the museum when we get back and see what they think of it.”

Lunch put an end to the subject, but after we had eaten I dug the old axe-head we used for a wedge out of the wood pile and went down to see if I could chip a fragment off the gift showered so unexpectedly on us by the skies.

When struck, it gave back a dull ringing sound as though I were striking an anvil, and my utmost efforts with the axe-head failed to bring loose the smallest chip. Finally, I propped the axe-head between a couple of stones where it would bear on a projecting boss of the meteorite, and getting the good axe from the shack, struck it a swinging blow. There was a heavy clang of metal meeting metal, a few sparks and the axe-head, accompanied by fragments of stone, sailed through the air at a tangent to bury itself deeply in the mud.

When I fished it out again, I found the edge quite turned over but on the flinty surface of the meteorite only the slightest scar was to be seen. There remained the chance of breaking a piece loose by the old Indian method of building a fire on it and then hastily pouring water on the hot rock, but I regarded it as hardly worth the trouble, and went about my business of the afternoon without more than a casual thought of this singular shooting star.

Dusk had come again, and we were just finishing off an uncommonly good dinner of lake trout when the mystery solved itself. The woods are filled with small noises at this

hour, and neither of us gave particular attention to the slap of some flat surface against the water, but when it was followed by the gurgling rush of waves, we both looked in the direction of the meteorite.

“What was that?” asked Merrick.

12

“More chemical action down there, I fancy,” I replied. “Let’s go see.” I rose from my chair, and then catching sight of the expression of stark amazement on Merrick’s face, turned swiftly to meet the most astonishing sight ever seen on an Adirondack lake, or for that matter, anywhere else.

A man stood, half-leaning against a tree, perhaps fifty yards from the porch where we sat. His clothes, of some close-fitting dark material, were dripping wet and spotted with mud. On his head was a helmet, with narrow projections over the ears that gave him an odd, faun-like appearance. In one hand he gripped an electric flashlight, and his head was bent as though he had difficulty in holding it upright.

For a moment we stood, transfixed with astonishment, then both together sprang toward the stranger. As we did so, he lifted his head with an effort, looked at us a moment, cried “Kingomi!” in a strong, resonant voice, and tumbled in a dead faint at the foot of the tree, the flashlight dropping from his hand.

We got him on the porch, and while Merrick went for some of the illegally potent beverage with which old Pierre kept us supplied, I made shift to wash from the face of the stranger some of the caked mud, sweat, and blood which encrusted it.

My labors revealed a not unpleasing masculine countenance, with the long lines from nostril to lip deep-graven by fatigue. When Merrick had forced a teaspoonful of the cognac into his mouth, the stranger opened a pair of sharp eyes, looked at us a moment, lifted his hands toward his head as though to remove the encumbering helmet and then, his forehead wrinkling with pain, closed his eyes again.

He was obviously badly done up. Just as obviously he wanted the helmet off, and while Merrick lifted his head, I tried to pull it loose. Despite my utmost efforts it would not budge.

13

“Wait a minute,” said Merrick. “Don’t pull his head off. There’s a button.” He pointed to a spot just over one ear where two little flattened studs were recessed into the glossy covering. At a venture I turned the upper one. Immediately, from inside the helmet, a voice began to speak, as though we had turned on a radio set in mid-sentence. “—*arroum livolongale*,” or some such gibberish it said, as nearly as I could make out; but Merrick had returned the stud to its original position in feverish haste and it fell silent again.

“Golly,” he remarked, “it’s a radio set. Here, let’s see what the other stud will do.”

But as I bent over I saw that the eyes of the patient were opening again and motioned Merrick back. This time he succeeded in raising his hands to the peculiar helmet; there was a snapping of tiny levers, and he dropped his arms again with a little gasp.

I reached for the helmet, understanding that whatever lock had held it in position had been released. It came away in my hand, revealing to our complete astonishment, a head as bald as a newly-laid egg, contrasting oddly with the youthfulness of the man's face. He smiled wanly as I got the apparatus off, and then lay relaxed with closed eyes, apparently not unconscious, but as though ill or injured.

“Seems to be hurt,” said Merrick. “I don't know much about anatomy, but with the manual and what we do know between us, I imagine we can find out if anything's broken. D'you suppose you can make him understand what we're after?”

“Apparently he doesn't understand English,” I answered, “and I have no idea what that language was we heard his radio spouting. *Parlez-vous Francais?*”—this last to the visitor.

14

He merely opened his eyes on being addressed, but there was no gleam of comprehension, and Merrick, who was more of a linguist than I, tried him in German, Spanish and Portuguese, with equally barren results.

“No, go,” said Merrick. “Let's try direct action,” and he began feeling of the stranger's arms and legs. Apparently there were no breaks. “But I'm not much of a doctor,” protested my friend. “Wonder if we could get him in to Fort Ann.”

There were five miles of lake and five more of particularly villainous country road between Joyous Gard and Fort Ann. How we were to get a sick man that far with no means of transportation besides a canoe, which would be useless once

we left the lake, I did not see, and I said so.

“He’s probably suffering more from fatigue and shock than anything else, and has some lake water inside him, too. Suppose we give him another dose of brandy and later on we’ll try to feed him.”

“O.K.,” said Merrick, “and if he’s not better by morning, one of us can run in to Fort Ann and dig up a doctor.”

Our patient was better in the morning, however; he sat up in the bunk and accepted a cup of coffee with languid gratitude, drinking the liquid with relish. Toast, on the other hand, he first nibbled and then refused. When we offered him one of the small fish we were breakfasting on, he dug away at it with his coffee spoon and then crammed a goodsized portion, bones and all, into his mouth. I imagine the bones surprised and hurt him; he made an inarticulate sound of displeasure and spat them out, looking at us with some indignation, which changed to obvious astonishment as we separated the bones from our portions before eating.

After breakfast, the stranger (whom Merrick forthwith christened “Friday”) went to sleep again, and Merrick and I strolled to the beach to have another look at what must have been his vehicle. There was not much of it visible; his exit had evidently been made under water. Below the clear surface, a double ring, not more than a couple of yards in diameter, indicated where the top had come off. It was a wonder he had not been drowned in escaping, and at the time, more of a wonder that he had not been burned to death.

At one side of the main mass of the thing, where the hole made by its arrival rose sharply to the beach, lay the lid, half in and half out of the water—a huge thing that it took both of us to pull up on the sand. We marveled that Friday, faint and weary as he was, had been able to move it at all.

The outer coating was as we had seen—some extremely hard material, pitted and scarred by the heat of its contact with the atmosphere. The inner surface was a light gray in color, soft to the touch, but firm and rubbery. When Merrick jabbed it with his knife, the material closed over the wound without leaving a visible scar. At the edges a white layer of some third composition, about an inch in thickness, lay between the lining and the outer hard shell. It was as unfamiliar as the other two and Merrick’s knife would not even scratch it. Clearly, for one who was neither a chemist nor a metallurgist, there was little information to be gathered from the composition of this singular vehicle; leaving it where it lay, we returned to the shack.

On the way up the path my foot struck the flashlight the stranger had dropped the night before. I bent to pick it up, noted that it was of the ordinary cylindrical type but furnished with a frosted glass cover, and pointing it off to one side, idly snapped it on. Immediately there was a low buzz and a beam like a lightning flash leaped from the ground glass into the trees. We heard a vicious *whup!* saw a gleam of flame, and when I snapped the flashlight off again, we could easily perceive the circular hole—all burned round the edges, where the beam had struck a foot-thick maple.

“Heavens!” I said, gooseflesh creeping on my back,

“Lucky I wasn’t looking into that thing when I turned it on. What is it?”

“Don’t know,” said Merrick. “Never saw anything like it. Golly, this beats a gun if it’s real. Let’s try it on the lake and see how much range it has.”

We stepped back to the shore, and holding the dangerous flashlight carefully, I pointed it far down the lake and pressed the key. The buzz and flash were repeated, and perhaps a mile away a silver plume of steam sprang from the water.

“A heat-ray,” pronounced Merrick. “Just like H. G. Wells’. This johnny knows his stuff, whoever he is. He’s got a nice adjunct to the gentle trade of murder there. Better put it away. He might get peeved and try to use it on us.”

For the next three or four days Friday did not seem inclined to try to do anything. He rested in the bunk, watched us at our daily tasks and enjoyments with a friendly but detached interest, and slept. Though he accepted food with a certain graceful courtesy, he seemed curiously uneducated as to table manners. From the first he refused to use a fork, testing its sharp points with an inquisitive finger and laying it aside. The iron knives we used in lieu of silver at the camp, he examined with interest, but did not attempt to use. Spoons alone he seemed perfectly familiar with, and pressed into service for all his eating. Indeed, he acted surprised when he failed to cut the steak we gave him one evening with the edge of his spoon, and after several ineffective attempts at dividing the meat by this means, finally picked up the whole piece and worried a mouthful loose with his teeth.

He made no attempt to speak in any language, and as the days passed we noted a further peculiarity. Although he did nothing but lie in the bunk, he was no more in need of a shave than when he had arrived, and there was not a trace of hair on his bald but singularly youthful head.

The days since his arrival had grown into nearly a week in this state of burning curiosity on the one side and polite suspended animation on the other, when one evening, when rain pattered on the roof and the wind rattled the window frames, Merrick and I sat before the fire in the larger of our two rooms, reading. Friday had risen from his bunk and was ensconced in one of our chairs at one side of the fire, watching us with silent interest.

As it happened, Merrick was reading one of those one-volume editions of Shakespeare.

“Do you know,” he remarked, “I have always thought ‘King John’ the most underrated of Shakespeare’s plays. There is some of the most gorgeous rhetoric he ever wrote in it—better than anything that has been done since, even Yeats’s ‘Wanderings of Oisinn.’ Listen to this—” and he began to read the last lines of the play, the speech of the Bastard which ends with:

*“Come the three corners of the world in arms
And we shall shock them; nought shall make us rue
If England to herself do rest but true.”*

Merrick reads poetry very well, and I heard him as I always do, with a little thrill of pleasure. But it was upon our guest

that the greatest effect was produced. He rose from his chair, staring at Merrick, and then pointing to the book, began to move his hands vigorously.

“For the love of Mike,” said Merrick, “what do you suppose he wants now?”

“Wants you to read some more, of course,” said I. “Try it.” He ruffled the pages a minute and then began again. The stranger smiled and bowed, with a scraped-back foot, in approval. After a moment, when Merrick came to a pause, Friday rose, went to his bunk, and returned with the curious radio helmet he had worn when we first saw him. After fiddling with some keys inside it for a moment he put it on, lay down on the floor beside the fire, and closed his eyes.

18

“I’ve got it,” said Merrick after a moment. “He wants me to read to him while he’s asleep. But what for?”

I cogitated. “It might be some system of learning while you’re asleep. Didn’t they try something like that with sailors at Pensacola? Seems to me I read somewhere they learned radio with head-sets on while they were in bed.”^[2]

“And you think he wants to learn English that way? All right, let’s try it.”

Turning the pages and clearing his throat, Merrick began:

“*Antonio: in sooth I know not why I am so sad—*” the opening lines of “The Merchant of Venice.” Friday settled himself down with a contented smile.

II

In the morning came fresh airs that shook the rain from the sky and presently cleared it for the languid warmth of an August day. We were early afoot, and as I busied myself about the kitchen, Friday emerged from the bunk room to which he had evidently retired after we went to bed. His helmet was off, and I thought I saw a new light in his face as he advanced across the room.

When he was a few feet away, he suddenly bent his knees in a gesture of greeting, and without the slightest hesitation, began to speak:

“Though even yet I know not your strange tongue,
(I pray you pardon my indigencies);
I wish you well and would hold nomination
Upon him matters. Speak your noble friend.”

19

I fear I did him the discourtesy of staring, open-mouthed. Both grammar and accent left something to be desired—he rolled his r’s furiously and his s’s were slurred into the indescribable French j—but that a man who had been unable to speak or understand English one day before should suddenly burst into Shakespearean blank verse—well, it seemed impossible. As I stared, he was off again:

“Have I not made you read my tongue aright?
Oh, hell! What costly post—”

But I had recovered the use of my voice. “Oh, Merrick, come here quickly!” I called.

As my friend entered, Friday again bent his knees in a little curtsy, and flinging out his arms to include both of us in a gesture, began once more:

“Kingomi, friends! Ashembe is my name.
Before the stormy shipwreck of my fortunes
Upon your most inhospitable shore

(I was a little taken aback by this—but remembered that it was his maiden effort in the English language.)

I left a ruddy moon deeper in space
Than all your candles. I would gabo.
Tell me, do you possess it in this deed?”

It was all so grotesquely intelligible-unintelligible that both of us laughed. “What is he trying to say?” asked Merrick. “And what is gabo?”

“Haven’t the slightest idea,” I answered, thinking of the last question first. “But I think he’s trying to tell us that he came from another planet.”

20

“Another planet!” cried Merrick. “Why . . . still, that would explain . . . there’s that heat-ray—”

I turned to the man who had described himself as Ashembe.

“Am I not right?” I asked.

He stared for a moment, his brows wrinkling with concentration. Then:

“Ah, who will now unriddle me this tongue?
Right? Planet? What are these? I only know
I left a deed—”

It was as bad as the first effort, but at all events communication of a kind had been established. Ashembe continued to speak in blank verse; you could see him winding up for the effort as it were, before each speech, his lips moving silently, his brows wearing an expression of intense concentration. He used his newly acquired English with a terrible accent and with so many misplaced words that we only understood a third of what he was saying; but with patience and interest to aid us we managed to make out the general drift.

As I recall that first day’s conversation, it turned upon quite unimportant matters. The Shakespearean vocabulary is no doubt extensive, but so much of it is given to the expression of the abstract passions of love, grief and hate that there is little left with which to carry on an ordinary conversation. And in this technical age one would find amazing gaps if he were to try to discuss things, using only the words found in “The Merchant of Venice.”

Even worse than his paucity of English words was the wealth of metaphor with which Ashembe found it necessary to clothe the most simple statements, and the

archaic character of Elizabethan English as a medium for expressing just what he wanted. “Leaden casket” was the best phrase he could find to describe his vehicle (whatever it was) and he kept referring to the place from which he had come as a “moon” or a “deed,” doubtless remembering the “*so shines a good deed in a naughty world*” line in the play.

Unraveling these difficulties consumed the greater part of the day. What we finally made out of it all was that he had come from another planet; and that he wished to exchange valuable formulae for “gabo.” What “gabo” was, neither of us had any idea, except that it was apparently some metal, judging from Ashembe’s description of it as “glittering more than gold.”

He confirmed that his radio helmet in some mysterious way enabled him to learn things while asleep, helping him appraise ideas as well as words, and thus enabling him to learn a new language in remarkably quick time. He was particularly anxious to have us read more to him on scientific and technical subjects.

Fortunately, there was, among the few books we maintained at Joyous Gard, an old set of the International Encyclopedia that Merrick had once purchased in a moment of aberration, and had brought up here to help us identify various plants and insects. When we managed to communicate to Ashembe that we had a compendium of worldly knowledge, he was off on the instant for his helmet, explaining in a good many splurges of oratorical blank verse that he wanted to begin absorbing it at once.

That evening Merrick took up the task of reading to him,

while I set about the obtruding necessity of food, and from then far into the night we kept at it ceaselessly, skipping all the articles that were historical, literary or merely of interest to the curious, and confining ourselves to technical and scientific matters—which, it must be admitted, we understood very badly ourselves. In the morning Ashembe put us at it again, this time discarding his helmet and trying to learn to read by the ordinary method.

“My father’s people have for long and long unable been to extract attainments (knowledge?) by images of the glittering eye. So thoroughly have we become imbued with the use of the Tensal (his helmet, apparently) that the method of the printed page to us is lost. But in reading from your book, the children of your thought creep feebly on their hands and knees, and I would even follow the book myself, gramercy.” 22

“The children of your thought?” repeated Merrick.

“The image of the mind whereof you speak,” said Ashembe. “You read to me, ‘*the brontosaurus is a sauropod*’ but in my mind I see you have in yours no picture of the brontosaurus, nor of sauropods. All, all is words, beyond the ken of vacant heads.”

“I like that,” murmured Merrick. “Vacant heads!”

“Have I unwitting wrought your senses harm?” queried Ashembe, with anxious courtesy. “I crave forgiveness. Read me further.” And that evening, like the previous one, saw us alternating at the International Encyclopedia while our guest

from another planet slumbered before the fireplace.

“Your information-book is faithless,” Ashembe told us the next morning. “It halteth always at the verge—I would dig deeper in your mines of knowledge. Do you sense more?”

“Not much more than the encyclopedia, I’m afraid,” I said. “Neither of us is well posted on science, except for a little corner of knowledge. I have looked into the fungi some, and Merrick understands birds.”

A light seemed to dawn on our visitor. “My friends, I have not asked you of your argosies,” he said. “What they are? It is improbable that you are to sciences of me unknown?”

“Argosies?” I asked, not quite comprehending. “An argosy is a ship—something that moves on water.”

“Forgive the halting utterance of my tongue,” said Ashembe. “Argosies—I would inquire your arts, your merchandise.” He moved his hands, helplessly.

23

“Oh, he means what do we do,” Merrick broke in. “I am a lawyer”—there was no comprehension on Ashembe’s face —“that is, I . . . well, see here. The relations between men are governed by rules. I am one of those who interpret the rules. Suppose there are two men. Each of them says, ‘This is mine.’ One of them comes to me and I try to find out if it really belongs to him. If it does, I present proof and they give it to him.”

“Oh, hell,” said Ashembe (for some reason he had acquired the idea that this was a particularly fine way to begin a

sentence) “you are an arbiter of destiny. I comprehend. May you be happy.” He touched his forehead and bent his knees in the formal gesture of congratulation we had seen him use but once or twice before. “In my world such are high art men and are held in great honor. To you they bring their arguments; you say to one ‘You are right. It is yours.’ Like Portia. Tell me, is this the meaning in your tongue?”

“No, not quite.” said Merrick patiently. “The man who decides is the judge. In this country he is assisted by twelve other men who are called the jury. All I do is bring the truth out for the judge and jury. I represent only one side of the argument.”

“The other man of the argument, he does also have a lawyer?” queried Ashembe, in some astonishment. “Improbable! Twelve—fifteen men for one dispute. But you are great in art to thus give your time to others. By what art do all these earn their gold and good? They are workers with hands?”

“No,” Merrick went on, patiently. “The man I am representing pays me, and the man on the other side pays his lawyer. The judge is paid by the State, but the costs of the action are supposed to be paid by whoever loses the case. Judges don’t have anything else to do.”

“Important!” declared our guest. “You gain gold by coming to judgment. But how do you decide aright? The man you represent might be wrongdoing, but have great lawyer. In my world it would be crime to give any man of justice money. It would make man with best brains always serve those with most gold. Your men in argument why not

tell stories immediately to the judge and the jury? Else judge and jury make mistakes.”

“They do that all right,” said Merrick, “but how do you make sure that a man knows all the law in your courts?”

“We have the arbiter of destiny, like a judge,” said Ashembe. “The men of the argument tell their ownership to him. If they disagree he names a—a pollave, who around him gathers all the facts. All men are made to leave their arts and come at the pollave’s call. But only high art men are made arbiters of destinies. The laws, the rules, we teach them to children. So many they are in this country you need interpreters and representatives?”

Merrick nodded.

“Important! Such would be crime in my world. Like crime of giving money to justice men. . . . But hold! I recollection. Long many years ago we decided arguments like you, save for one word. The lawyer on the wrong side from him they took gold equal in direct proportion to that gained by the right side of the argument. Thus all lawyer was sure to be on the right side. But that was long many years ago. Your judge and jury is very behind.” He dismissed the subject, and, turning to where I stood grinning at Merrick’s discomfiture, asked me, “Your art, what is he?”

I answered, “When a man wants to go into business and has not money enough, he borrows from others and agrees to pay their money back together with more out of the profits of his business. These promises he puts in writing, and the writings

are called bonds. I sell them to people who wish to lend money.”

“How is it good to you?” asked Ashembe. “Gramercy for your courtesy, my friends,” he went on with a smile, “I do not well understand the meanings of your primitive institutions. They give you gold for sell these promises to pay back money lendend?”

25

“That’s it,” I said. “You see, it’s not always easy to sell bonds. The men who have money may not want to lend it or they may not know anything about the man who is going into business. So I have to tell them how good a thing it would be for them to loan the money on these bonds.”

“No scientific board is yours? Improbable! You sell them something they do not want and they give you gold for doing it. Your world is strange. . . . I do not understand. On my world, when man would go into the business he must be permitted by scientific board, who look at his attainment of art of business and ask, ‘Is the business necessary?’ If he need articles, scientific board produces them, but not make him pay out his profits on work to parasites.”

It seemed about time to draw the conversation to a close.

We sat on a ledge of rock among green-black shadows from the pines. All about was the fluid splendor of late summer, hot and unquiet, with an indefinable feel of life and movement even in its silences. Ashembe, uncomfortably warm, dipped his hand in the water and drew it across his forehead.

“Yours is the hot nation,” he said.

Merrick grinned. “You ought to be in New York,” said he. “This is just cool enough to be pleasant.”

“In my world is colder,” our visitor went on, as though he had been interrupted while telling something. “Gabo is great necessity. We shall how otherwise keep ourselves warmed and lighted. Our sun burns small with resultant decrease in illumination and calories. Locked in all atoms are reservoirs of power and light, but only from the atom of gabo do we secure the means of release ec—ec—economically. Therefore of our little mine of gabo we expend much in sending scientific to other worlds for great quantity.”

26

“So that’s why you came,” I said. “I wondered, but it wasn’t quite polite to ask.”

“Which is polite?” inquired Ashembe innocently. “Is it the local moral code? In my country, if man wishes to know informatively he asks.”

“Not a moral code,” I attempted to explain (I was always being caught in something like this by our wide-awake and inquisitive visitor) “but a code of—well, manners. Politeness indicates that one is of good breeding, of good behavior, will not do things that offend other people. It’s a social code.”

“But you have those who offend others because they are not of the good breeding?” asked Ashembe, dabbing his hand in the water. “Astonish! In my country the social code is more simplicity. It is the rule always to be fair. Your polite code must be very complication.”

“It is,” Merrick chipped in with feeling. “It is not polite to ask people about their reasons for doing things because a good many people do things or have reasons for doing things that they do not care to admit. They might feel them a trifle discreditable.”

“Improbable!” said Ashembe. “In my country could not be. Attend—my entire name are Koumar Ashembe Bodrog Fotas. Koumar Ashembe are merely personal. Bodrog indicates I am ^[3] of the hereditary exploring or war-fight science. Fotas indicate my rank in identical class. All the people thus named in my country. But speak—actions of crime are they still so many that people conceal not only thoughts but also actions? You do not eliminate crime tendency children?”

“How can we?” asked Merrick. “A man may be perfectly all right till he gets to be thirty years old, and then blooey! He blows off and murders somebody or commits some other crime.” 27

“Not. Never.” Ashembe was positive. “Psychology is behind science with you. I tell you what we have found in many years. No man makes first crime at thirty years age. As the child he performs small things like purloining parents’ tickets or telling small non-truths. Nobody notices. But when the same child grows he becomes large crime. In my nation once every month, each child is examined with truth serum and inquired about all his actions. If he shows crime tendency, we examine very carefully by scientific board. All are treated in direct proportion to amount of crime tendency. Some we do cure with the Tensal and drugs. Some we do sterilize. The bad ones we dead.”

“You execute little children?”

“Certain. Wherefore not? Is cheaper, less harm to rest of people than spending great sum on education of these, allowing same to grow and commit crime before execution. Your system all weak. You take revenge on criminal. We prevent crime.”

“But don’t you think,” said Merrick, “that some of them would make useful citizens if they had the proper training? We find it so.”

“Not,” declared Ashembe. “Deep crime tendency is ineradicable. Your scientists know the laws in physics, also in chemics, also in optics. It is aberrant they do not know psychology governed by equally firm laws. No hope is for child with crime tendency so strong as those we dead. It is measured on scale with scientist instruments, following application of Tensal and truth-serum. You do not have the truth-serum?”

“Yes, we have something like that,” said Merrick, “but it was only recently discovered and its use is far from general. People distrust it. . . . How many children do you execute in a year?”

28

“In one annual revolution of planet about solar sphere, one or two entire planet, yes? Ten or fifteen we sterilized. Rest, one hundred in year, we cure with Tensal and drugs.”

I thought I detected an inconsistency. “Why do you execute some and only sterilize others?”

Ashembe smiled in his superior fashion. “Only very bad ones we execute,” he answered. “Those we sterilize the scientific board tests and finds in them that they have very good brains of high service. Psychological law that men of high brains—how do you say it, genius?—one of every three has crime tendency of one kind. They would make slaves of people, or acquire all wealth for selves, or bring the purple panoplies of war-fight. Also is psychological law that children of genius with crime tendency have crime tendency without genius. But it is great loss to world if we execute genius men who might make civilization advance very rapid. We sterilize them and put them by very close watch so they do not make the crime, and they do us great works. Solely when the child has deep crime tendency and very small brain we execute.”

“But if you can cure mild tendencies toward crime, why can’t you cure the rest?” asked Merrick.

“Our civilization is there point defective,” said Ashembe, frankly. “What use? We cure with the Tensal.” He indicated the helmet apparatus he had worn with a motion toward his head. “The Tensal makes the man to sleep and we cure crime with what your knowledge book says mesmerism, hypnotism. Very good for imparting knowledge when the man is willing, but to eradicate some things, like crime tendency, not easy. The man who wears Tensal while he is being eradicated of some thing makes psychological struggle against it. Some men must acquire dominance over their mind. This weakens the brain and makes it not so good. If crime tendency is small, weakening man is small, man is not hurt much, and will make useful manual labor. If the crime tendency is large the man can be dominated but the

brain is stress too strong and he becomes the idiot. Viz., when we find the genius with crime tendency we only sterilize and not try to cure. We might cure, but we would have the idiot and not genius.”

“Sounds logical, but it must be unpleasant for the geniuses,” murmured Merrick. “But tell us about gabo. What is it? Is it a metal?”

“Affirmative,” said Ashembe, “what is your better affirmative word? . . . Gabo is the metal with bright metallic luster. We find in ore of ruddy color, chemically united with sulphur. Preparation is by roasting and distilling. Spectrum has bright yellow and green line and smaller red, blue and three violet lines. I am not remember numbers of these. Atomic structures is of tenth rank, third order, decahedral pattern. Is liquid at this hottitude and heavy. Close like cadmium. You do recognize?”

I looked at Merrick and Merrick looked at me. “Liquid, did you say,” I asked, “and a metal? Why, that must be mercury or something very like it. It’s the only liquid metal I know of.”

“Mer-cu-ry,” repeated Ashembe. “Pause.” And he trotted off for the shack to return with the M volume ^[4] of the encyclopedia and his Tensal helmet. “Read me,” he said, tossing me the book, and settling himself in the shade against a moss-covered log.

When I had finished the brief article, which is all the encyclopedia allots to the subject of the occurrence,

properties and uses of mercury, our guest rose, fumbling with the keys of his Tensal helmet.

“Mercury!” he cried, “I have achieved! This is truthful gabo, and I am cursed of my world to find. You have it of common occurrence in this world. Your knowledge book declares thus. Where to get it is next problem.”

“It shouldn’t be difficult,” I remarked. “I fancy that plenty of it could be had in New York. How much do you need?”

“Five hundred kilograms last us for many century,” said Ashembe. “I give formula for Tensal or heat-gun in exchange. Is it worth?”

“Ye-es,” I said rather doubtfully. “I don’t know whether I can make it clear, but articles of that kind have to be patented, manufactured and marketed before you can get much money out of them. It would probably take you two or three years, at the very least.”

“Astonish!” said Ashembe. “Oh, hell, I forgot you use metal for exchange medium. Gold?”

“Yes. Silver too. And how are you going to get back with your mercury?”

“Great simplicity. Construct Shoraru like this I make arrival,” he swung his hand toward the spot where his vehicle lay in the water. “With mercury not difficulty. But you need the metal exchange medium for mercury” . . . he ruminated for a moment . . . “Oh, hell, I make gold for you. Silver, I know not. You obtain small quantity of mercury and I will erect all

gold desirable.”

“You can *make* gold?” I asked.

“Certain. Other metals also from those of same system,” he assured us calmly. “Mercury not. Calcium not. Antimony can make. Gold can make—almost any metal out of another of similar system. Copper not rare, no?”

“No, copper isn’t rare and it’s fairly cheap,” I assured him.

“Easy to do. Will make multiple gold for your entire world, to end shortage thereof under which you suffer.”

31

He rattled on, but my thoughts had gone off at a tangent.

“Come on, let’s have dinner,” I said, rising. “Where’d you put those rabbits, Merrick?”

The time we could spend at Joyous Gard was nearly up. Already a September chill had come to the nights, and the wintergreen berries were showing red warning of coming frost.

The problem of what to do with Ashembe when we left had formed a ground-swell to my conversations with Merrick for the past three weeks, and it was now becoming insistent. Our original intention had been to take him along, introduce him to the head of some chemical company (where his knowledge would doubtless make a tremendous fluttering in the dove-cotes) and leave him to his own devices.

But I, at least, was coming to doubt the wisdom of such a course. Ashembe’s ideas and ideals had brought about a

disagreement that made a change of plans necessary. And it was something far more difficult to deal with. The thought had occurred to both Merrick and me that a man as guileless as this visitor from the depths of space, possessed of such secrets as the heat-ray flash and a means for making gold from copper—and God alone knew what else!—might very easily fall into unscrupulous hands. Murder has been done for information of far less value than either of these, and everyone can remember instances of stolen formulae too numerous to mention. One recalls Diesel.

We tried to explain this to Ashembe, begging him to entrust us with his formulas in order that Merrick might have them patented. To our fears about his safety he retorted only with polite gibes on the moral standards of this imperfect Earth.

32

“Oh, hell, my friends,” quoth Ashembe. “You say if you have this thing patented, only I can use. But such an eventuality would be crime in my country. I am criminal if I detain information of benefit to all males and females for personal utility. How now, good sirs?”

“But who in your country is going to know anything about it?”

“I am obligated to fill out one report on all actions of scientific import since leaving Murashema,” was Ashembe’s reply. “What then if I insert in it statements of falsification? What then if I commit it worse falsification by suppression of the evidence? I could not accomplish this.”

“Why not give us your formulas, then?” said Merrick, “and let us operate them for you. If you give them out publicly, no chemical firm will agree to furnish your mercury. They will gain nothing from what everyone else knows. And besides, if you give a gold-making formula to the public, everyone will be making it, and it will be so worthless you will be unable to buy mercury with it, no matter how much you have.”

“That is due to terrestrial defective metallic coinage system,” said Ashembe solemnly. “Readily would I give the information to you, provided you obligated your personal selves to spread the said information to your entire world. But to give formulas to you for your own benefit would be causing you to commit the same crime as myself. I would thus be no less guilty. The only non-criminal process would be thusly—to give formulas to the scientists of the world and permit them to reward with mercury or other matters. Also there is other consideration. You declare it will take long to patent articles and build machines and purchase mercury. You refer to inferior morals of this orb of day which causes men to dispossess others of rights in processes. If I give the formulas to scientists, no one can steal because all will know.”

33

Merrick shook his head. “You don’t know this world,” said he. “About all the reward you’d get at once would be jealousy and hatred.”

“What we need,” Merrick went on in his best “gentlemen-of-the-jury” manner, “is a compromise by which we can adjust Ashembe’s standards of justice and the practical difficulties of the situation. He wants us to give his formulas to everyone. But as he has thus far given it out to no one, why not continue

in that way? Would it be all right with you,” he turned to our guest, “to regard our world as simply not yet far enough advanced to make the proper use of your formulas? Frankly, I think it would be for the best. If you feel that you wish to reward us with something besides gold, you can write out some of your formulas and leave them in trust with a Board of Scientists, not to be opened or used until some future date. This form of trust is fairly common with us, and is never violated. And if you wish to give something of immediate value to the public, why not the means of taking your Tensal helmet? That would be of the highest value.”

Ashembe nodded thoughtfully. “Such would be the upright course,” he admitted with some reluctance, “but leave me feeling ingratitude. I could so much help you and not to do!”

“Still, there’s no use teaching us to fly till we have learned to walk,” said Merrick. “We find in this world that we cannot civilize a race from the outside. It must work out its own destiny.”

“But if you do that, how is Ashembe going to get his mercury?” I broke in. “He can have all I can buy for him and welcome, but I rather fancy it will take more than that for his needs.”

34

“Why, that’s simple,” said Merrick. “We’ll bring him a little mercury right here, and he can set up his gold-making plant to pay for it.”

“Finished,” said Ashembe, touching his fingers to his forehead. “Gratitude for your plan. It is scientific to me.”

And with that we left the thorny subject. Ashembe was to stay at Joyous Gard, with one of us to keep him company and take the deliveries of materials that would be sent from New York. We spun a coin to decide who should go, and for better or worse the lot fell on Merrick. I was to stay.

III

At this point, the transcriber must enter in briefly, as he was hampered both by material missing from Schierstedt's manuscript, and the restrictions Professor Hudson laid upon him. I can only assume that Ashembe read the manuscript and removed pages which detailed the methods through which he manufactured gold and diamonds—what remains is fascinating, but meaningless; and Professor Hudson and his colleagues felt that it would be better to omit these sections entirely, feeling that amateur experimenters might be induced to make attempts which would be dangerous to say the very least.

Merrick went back to the city and arranged for the delivery of equipment; and while the successful, though crude, experiments were going on, Ashembe was also beginning work on what he described as a “cometary car” in English, and a “Shoraru” in his own language.

The beginnings of Ashembe's “cometary car” were made in the woods some two hundred feet back from the shore line, where a jutting outcrop of rock made a natural platform about five feet each way. With infinite labor I had cleared off the trees around this rock to enlarge the space to a crude circle something over twenty feet in diameter, and

under Ashembe's direction had cut up the trees thus removed into convenient lengths for transformation into charcoal. "Important," he had said, "to have large supply of pure carbon. Charcoal is easy form to refine."

In the center of the clearing, on the rock, he was building his apparatus, not amid a towering pile of scaffolding, as I had somehow expected, but flat on the rock. He began by forming a circular plate of the chrome-nickel steel, flattening and welding it readily with his heat-flash, handling with marvelous dexterity the instrument and the two little spreading tools he had made. As he worked, he treated the plate with the iridium he had made from the cobalt and again treated the whole with the mercury tube.

Using the destructive flash, he now punched a large hole through the exact center of the plate and a row of smaller holes around the edges. From the plate he now proceeded to build up sides, arching them in to form a projectile-shaped whole, almost twelve feet tall, and leaving a small doorway through which a man could just crawl conveniently, near the base. Around the top, at the point of the projectile, the steel was reinforced by a row of thin nickel plates, and the big central hole at the base was similarly treated.

Just below each of the nickel plates, and at one side of the round nickel plate at the base, a little aluminum shelf was welded to the shell. The whole interior of the shell was now lined with aluminum racks, just about big enough to hold the cylinders in which Merrick had shipped the mercury.

This much completed, I set to work gathering heaps of

dead leaves. These were assembled into a couple of good-sized portable bathtubs Merrick had sent up and bathed in chemicals, then treated with the ray tube and given another chemical bath. When the process was finished, a gelatinous, transparent mass remained in the bathtubs.

“Atotta,” Ashembe explained to us. “What you could call artificial rubber, only different in important characters. Is effective insulator against heat, which your rubber is not. Also effective insulator against shock, which your rubber is. The same is produced from juice of plant in my country, but is more easier to manufacture by synthesis.”

He moved off to the shell with a bathtub load of stuff, staggering under the weight.

Up at the clearing, where the “cometary car” was building, Ashembe was brushing his atotta over the inside surface of the structure, covering it all but the tops of the little aluminum racks. As he brushed it on, it hardened into the same gray, stiff substance Merrick and I had noticed on the inner side of the lid of the car in which he had arrived.

“Finished,” he said finally, laying down his brush.

“The whole thing finished?” I inquired.

“Ahno,” he said, all one word. “This is only interior-central chamber. Very much more to be made yet.”

I gazed at the fat, glittering shape that towered above us. “But the one you arrived in couldn’t have been much bigger than this.”

“Certain—ly. Action of atmosphere caused the destruction of outer chambers. Also, some discarded in coming here from considerable distance.”

I made an inarticulate sound indicating a desire for further enlightenment.

“I perceive non-comprehension,” Ashembe remarked. 37
“Mark you well. The propulsive force of the cometary car is the pleci ray. Incidental, I do not find your word for pleci. In traveling, the car goes long distance. Pleci is very little used up but long distances are so long that it gradually exhausts. Consequential, very large quantities is required—the same being stored in outer shells of cometary car, like this in all respects but larger. You follow?”

I nodded.

“Excellent. The next thing is that when pleci in one outer shell is complete exhausted, the shell must be allowed to discard to reduce unnecessary mass. Complete car is made of several shells. You follow?”

“In order to discard properly, explorer must be able to reach outer shells to cast off when pleci contained therein—under is exhaust. Consequential, pleci is carried only in the upper point portion of the shell, the same being partitioned off lightly, and lower portion being fitted for access by the explorer, since pleci has corrosive activity.

“Now since explorer must have access to lower portions, he may easily have comfort in them also. Lower portions accordingly receive fittings for living. You follow?”

“Last interior shell, but one, is not to discard. Necessary for protection of explorer. Similar to the present instance. Upon arriving at planet with atmosphere, the impact at high speeds maintained by cometary car is very serious. Oxidation of outer shell occurs, and heat would oxidize explorer within unless he had additional protection besides wall of inner shell. I personally was much overcome by heat at the interior of shell on arrival within your atmosphere, and perchance would have suffered complete damage by falling into water or otherwise because unable to rise and steer the cometary car. But I personally had no choice. I had come such long distance that all my shells but one were gone upon arrival. If not encountering your planet, would have failed for lack of materials to eat.

“In early days of exploration by our people many did this same, and many more were oxidized or torn apart by solar attractions within space. You follow?”

Yes, I followed—all too clearly. Before my mind’s eye rose a picture of Ashembe’s home, that Murashema he mentioned always with an almost religious patriotism. A world like our own, a tiny ball adrift in space; its people harnessing the huge forces of a malign nature through long centuries of development, and as their knowledge grew, faced with the fact that their world was dying, their home surely turning to a ball of ice, within which there can be no life. It would be discussed gravely at meetings of scientific societies, first, as a novel and interesting theory, and then as evidence accumulated, would seep down and down through all the levels of intelligence until the certainty of destruction was ever before all men. Philosopher, scientist and economist

would know that death was the only end of their long ages of evolution from the slime, and religion would be asked to explain the fact that man had been created only for the purpose of being extinguished in cold and fear.

Yes, I followed. I could even picture the bankruptcy of spiritual leadership at such a moment, the decay of all philosophy to a despairing and debased hedonism. And through all a few proud souls would work on amid the universal wreck; a few stern Puritans of science, fighting their battle for a world which would give them little time. A decade of this, a century perhaps, and the glad tidings that the world was out of danger—saved.

Saved for how long? The cycle would only begin anew. For it would become apparent that life was measured in the terms of the mercury it could find. There would be anxious conferences, inventions, until one day some bold genius ventured out on the ways of space in the first cometary car, seeking for a new source of the element that would keep the world.

I could picture the lonely men in those cars, like the one before me, gradually discarding shell after shell on their journeys from their island homes, driven from apartment to apartment within them, searching perhaps vainly for some place to land. Many of them would never land at all, would spin forever in the vast loneliness of space, fuel-less and dark. Many more would land on strange planets peopled by fearful monsters or filled with noxious gases, or so massive that the very gravitational forces would crush the explorers, before they put foot on land. Only a few, a very few, would ever

return, and of those few, fewer still would bring back any encouragement. Does such a future hang before our own world, I wonder?

“Come,” Ashembe said, “I am hungry.”

Four automobile jacks were Ashembe’s means of getting the inner chamber of his cometary car off the ground to place the plates for the base of the next shell beneath it, a system of fine arches carrying the weight of the inner projectile not more than two feet above the base of the outer.

The outer shell was oval in section. A small living chamber about four feet each way and about eight feet high was located in the longer axis of the oval and was partitioned off from the upper section of the projectile. In the large space above (which extended some five or six feet beyond the inner chamber) the fuel was to be carried. From this space a complex series of tubes led down to the base of the inner chamber by way of the narrow space between the shorter axis of the oval and the outside of the inner shell.

Like the inner chamber, the outer was provided with nickel plates at point and base, Ashembe taking the greatest care to fit them to the inner layer of plates. At the very point of the inner projectile a stout duralumin (or some similar metal) column, which spread out into a heavy capital, carried the peak of the outer shell. This much done, Ashembe lined the interior of the new living chambers with atotta as he had the inner ones, and set to work on a third shell.

This was constructed on the same lines as the second,

save that its section was circular, thus bringing the whole projectile again to a circular shape, and providing two more chambers of considerable size at the points where the short axis of the oval second chamber had fallen. The tubes leading down from the points of the two outer shells were now carried to the space below the inner chamber, where they were led into an arrangement of valves that cost Ashembe several days' work. When he had finished there was a rod with a key attached, which ran up through every other one of the series of holes he had punched in the base of the inner shell.

“This is the propulsive force of the Shoraru,” he explained as I watched him forging one of the delicate little keys. “Pleci is admitted to small chambers underneath, also small amount of hydrogen. Violent reaction ensues, giving propulsive force under mercury ray. The slight additional reaction is obtained by bringing in small amount of fresh pleci to displace that spent in the previous reaction. Entire process is controlled from the central chamber. You comprehend?”^[6]

Ashembe exhibited a dexterity in modeling the parts of his machine at which I never ceased to marvel, but by the time he had begun work on a third outer shell (like the first, oval in shape) it was already November and threatening days and frosty nights warned us that winter was at hand. As for myself, I was unremittingly busy aiding Ashembe and trying to transform a summer shack into a house, which would be habitable throughout an Adirondack winter.

It was one evening during the early part of December, as I recall it, that the first event in the series that broke the calm

serenity of our plans occurred. Ashembe, who had nearly finished the third outer shell, was seated by the fire reading Stratton's "Astronomical Physics," while I was absorbed in a report from the office. I was suddenly startled by a whoop from our interplanetary visitor.

"Oh, hell!" he cried, leaping from his chair.

"For Heaven's sake, what's the matter?" I asked.

"Pleci! Oh, hell! It is coronium. What to do!" He began to pace the floor in sudden and uncontrollable excitement.

42

"Can't you use—" I began, but he waved me to silence, and without another word seized a sheet of paper and a pencil, and seating himself at the table, began to make mathematical calculations. I could not draw him from his silent labors, so I went to bed.

I emerged from the bunk room in the morning to find a worn and drawn Ashembe still seated by a table now covered with papers bearing the queer symbols of his mathematics. He looked up wanly as I entered.

"Ah, the dawn!" he declared. "Give me some of your slightly stimulating brown liquid."

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"Pleci. The propulsive force of cometary cars depends upon pleci. But I find in your book (he laid his hand on it) what previously terrified my vitals. Pleci is the same as coronium.

It has been identified by your scientists in your sun, but does not exist on this globe, being of too high parabolic velocity to be retained by the Earth. Upon Murashema it is in combination, but not here. Do you comprehend?”

“No,” I answered with perfect truth.

“Attend, fool. Molecules of any gas are continually flying about in all directions, colliding and rebounding. You understand? Velocities with which molecules fly about are less for the heavy gases, also less at lower temperatures. Velocities are the higher for lighter gases, also for gases at higher temperatures. Each planet exercises certain attraction on gases, due to gravitation. If velocity of gas molecules is higher than attraction of planet, it will seep off into space one molecule at a time because of velocity, comprehend?”

“Ye-es.”

“Oh, hell. Now velocity at which this earth lets go of gases is 11.188 kilometers per second in your measurement. Such is called the parabolic velocity. Velocity of hydrogen, which is lightest gas retained, is about 2. Therefore your earth retains hydrogen, except for small quantity which escapes out from upper atmosphere in extreme warm spots where heat of sun raises temperature and also velocity of hydrogen. But pleci—coronium—has velocity of 11.104. Therefore, when a little heat is applied to the same, it bounces out of Earth away. Consequential, even if you once had much coronium here, all is now disappeared. But coronium is hitherto necessary to propulsion of cometary car, or how shall I return to Murashema? Therefore, I calculate

whether any other substance can be subjected to required atomic vibrations to carry the cometary car to another planet, perchance to find coronium. You comprehend?”

“I think so,” I said. “It’s like this, isn’t it? The Earth is so small that gravity has no effect on coronium on it. In other words, if you had coronium here, it would fly right off the Earth, making a big disturbance as it went. So you’re going to try making something else.”

“That is well-nigh exact,” said Ashembe, “except big disturbance upon departure of coronium. No such results would appertain. You will make the scientist some day. I advise continued study.”

“Have you found anything else that will do?”

He shrugged. “Perchance helium can be made to perform the necessary function. I have not completed computations in this regard. But send to your friend of New York for one small cylinder of helium and we will make the attempt.”

I began to fill the coffee pot. A thought occurred to me. “Look here.” I said. “How is it if you came from a planet about the size of this one that you have coronium there and we do not?”

“That I am not quite sure,” said Ashembe. “Coronium exists in Murashema in combination with other elements. The combination must have taken place at high temperatures not now existing, at period when our sun was a nova. You understand?”

“I do not,” I smiled.

“Never mind. I will demonstrate at future date. Further, Murashema is nearer to our sun than Earth is to yours. Coronium exists very large in upper atmosphere of the sun in region called chromosphere. Large disturbances in the sun, accompanied by sun spots, cause small portions of it to rise very far out in very rarefied condition. Some of this it is possible to collect from Murashema, not from Earth, because of greater distance of your planet from the sun.”

Well, that was that. Ashembe spent the day as he had the night—in making computations, and after his one brief outburst of speech, was not to be drawn from a busy silence. Seeing there was nothing more to be got from him, I hauled out the canoe and went in to Fort Ann. And there, to climax our chapter of misadventure, I found an ominous letter from my friend.

“. . . You know, I’ve been taking the gold to the U.S. Assay office,” he wrote. “They accept it there and pay you for it in an equal weight of coin, with no questions asked. But I think they’re beginning to suspect I’m some sort of a criminal. The clerks there are always polite, but they have taken to quizzing me—oh, very unofficially, of course, and in the gentlest manner possible. No questions asked, you understand, but any information is very welcome. I wouldn’t have noticed it even then, probably, but yesterday afternoon, when I made my usual deposit, I noticed a fat johnny with big feet, leaning over my shoulder. He followed me out, and though I lost sight of him later, I’m sure I saw the same chap standing across the street in front of the house this morning, gazing at the milk on the doorstep as though he thought it contained gold in solution. You couldn’t miss the size of those feet—why do all

policemen wear size 14? That doesn't mean that I want you to quit sending me the root of all evil or anything. But, it's rather curious and might become annoying.”

IV

Getting a cylinder of helium, or a supply of it in any other form, Merrick wrote me, was a troublesome job. It was deep in December, the snow lay thick on the ground, and Ashembe had completed a fourth and final outer shell to the cometary car, with all its complex arrangement of tubes, valves and sheathing, before Merrick reported victory in the helium hunt, and a small iron cylinder of the precious gas was delivered at Fort Ann. By this time the lake was nearly impassable for a canoe, so congested it was with slush and ice, and every shipment of materials meant a long trek through the woods around the shore with a heavy load packed on one's back. I was glad the cylinder was no larger. Fortunately five months in the woods had made me hard as nails.

Meanwhile, Ashembe was engaged on the interior fittings of his space ship. His first care had been to make three complete suits of flexible atotta, covering his hands with gloves and his head with a crude helmet we managed to botch together out of cloth, and having me paint the hot liquid over his clothes. A narrow space was left in front to be closed with some kind of fastener, and after the suit had been finished, this was fitted with a tongue like that of a shoe, also of atotta. When complete, the outfit looked like those worn by Arctic explorers, save that it was of the heavy, soft atotta instead of

fur. One stepped into it, closed the front and closed down the hood over the face.

For the eyes, Ashembe made a pair of lenses, refining his own glasses in the crucible, and inside the suit, just where the chin leaves a little notch above the chest, he fitted a respirator, connected with a small vessel which was filled with liquid air and provided with a heating arrangement to warm it as it emerged from the vessel.

46

The suits, when made, were stored in the central chamber of the space car in three of the aluminum racks that had interested me when they were being installed. The car itself, complete as to its outward semblance, now towered above the trees in the clearing, its huge metallic flanks reflecting the frosty light of winter, filling the whole of the open space at the base and rising up to a height of something over thirty feet. Inside one crawled through the various chambers, each lighted by a soft glow from a piece of quartz which Ashembe had exposed to his mercury tube for a time and then installed under a glass hood.

He was hard at work now on the fittings for the interior chamber. A hole was bored down through the centers of the columns connecting the peaks of the shells and another valve like those at the base was installed where the hole debouched into the central chamber. "To check the momentum of the Shoraru upon arrival at the desirable destination," he explained. Just below it, where the nickel plates had been set into the point of the projectile, a small telescope carefully insulated with atotta, was placed on a swinging arm. Below this again, and in the upper racks of the outer chambers,

Ashembe began installing boxes of thin metal filled with food.

This food he produced himself, using the charcoal I had prepared for him, water, and various chemical reagents, as the raw materials. When he completed his work with each batch, a dun-colored liquid that hardened shortly after being placed in the boxes resulted. At Ashembe's behest, I sampled some of these synthetic provisions. The first lot had a taste not unlike that of a nectarine or peach—sweet and pungent; and it was extraordinarily filling for its bulk. Another lot, if eaten with closed eyes, one could have sworn to be roast beef. But all these foods possessed one characteristic in common. They were all soft and not very “chewy.” I began to understand why our visitor had refused our knives and forks on his arrival.

And speaking of the mercury tube, I am reminded that by this time the acetylene heater for running the dynamo had been discarded. From a bag of kitchen salt Ashembe had produced chlorine, which was subjected to the mercury tube, then placed in a cylinder just behind a motor he had constructed, not unlike a small model of a turbine engine. When a key was turned in this apparatus, it became a veritable speed demon—indeed, the first time it was used on the dynamo that piece of earth-born machinery burned out its bearings. “Highly ionized chlorine,” going through the process of atomic decomposition into fluorine and oxygen, Ashembe explained his power plant, as he took it apart one day to scrape from the flanges of the interior a dull deposit which he assured me was caused by the action of the nascent

fluorine on the interior of the mechanism.

A stinging, cough-producing odor rose from the machine, and when Ashembe made a duplicate of it for the interior of his Shoraru, he provided it with a hood terminating in a metallic flask “to catch the fluorine emerging,” he remarked. “Very bad it is to have fluorine in the atmosphere of cometary cars.”

The big day was that following the one when I dragged into the camp in the evening, dead beat and with a cylinder of helium weighing down my shoulders. Ashembe had built what was essentially a model of his space ship, providing it with an upper and a lower chamber and a valve set into the latter. That very evening he put the helium under the rays of the mercury tube, and the first thing he did in the morning was to run it from the cylinder (where it had been replaced following its exposure to the decomposing ray) into the upper part of the small model he had made.

The lower chamber was now filled with some of the liquid hydrogen he had produced after having made the gas by electrolyzing water.

These arrangements completed, he lifted a cup of coffee in a toast to the model where it stood, braced between two rocks at the side of the lake, a few feet from the spot where he had emerged from the car that had brought him.

“The great moment has arrived,” he declared. “Whether I return to Murashema or remain citizen of this interesting but backward Earth, will now become evident.” With a flourish he drained the coffee, then bent down and turned the key at

the base of the model.

For a moment nothing at all happened. I glanced at Ashembe, saw his face flash from anticipation to disappointment, and in that instant there was a reaction—a gentle hiss from the model. I turned back—it was rocking slightly—and then with a rumbling explosion of sound it rose like a rocket, gained speed, swerved a trifle, and went winging slantwise up, like a bullet, leaving not even a trail of smoke to mark its progress.

“Success!” shouted Ashembe, capering with delight, and then, “But not altogether success. I must make the other test.”

“The other test” proved a laboratory one, and I went off to examine the line of traps I had set out. When I got back, I found Ashembe at work in the kitchen-laboratory.

49

“How did it come out?” I inquired, tossing on the table the one rabbit I had harvested.

“Moderate success,” he answered. “The power contained in helium is insufficient for me to reach Murashema without enlarging the Shoraru to unwieldy and heretofore unuseful dimensions. Nevertheless, it will be complete to carry me beyond the gravitational attraction of this Earth and to one of the planets nearer your star, whereupon I trust coronium will be available due to the nearness of the sun to these planets. In the last emergency I can always return to this orb and rebuild.”

That night a big snowstorm came down on the wings of a tearing northwest wind and we were winter-bound. For a whole week there was no possible chance of getting as far as

Fort Ann to send off a letter for more helium; and on the last day of the week, we actually began to run short of provisions. The only compensation in it was that good thick ice formed right across the lake and I could trot out a handsledge with plates, or a pair of skis I had been wise enough to provide myself with, and make the trip to Fort Ann for more provisions in a comparatively short time.

To Ashembe the bad weather made no difference. He had been working on the interior fittings of his craft and he merely continued to work on them. It was liquid hydrogen now—he was using water from the lake for electrolysis, liquefying the hydrogen that resulted and storing it in cylinders in the aluminum racks with which the whole interior of the car was lined. The cylinders in which he stored it were of his own manufacture, lined within and without with the heat-insulating atotta.

In the racks also went a smaller number of cylinders of liquid air, each fitted with the same tiny heating apparatus he had installed in the suits. But the most curious of the supplies, he did not place in the car at all. It consisted of a connecting series of tubes underneath a tray on which a kind of green jelly was exposed. 50

“This is a chlorophyllic substance,” Ashembe told me, as he arranged a bank of a dozen or more of these trays behind the kitchen stove. “Chlorophyll is substance that causes leaves to absorb carbon dioxide and give off oxygen. These things do the work of many plants and keep atmosphere in the cometary car forever pure for breathing. The action is chemical with delicate catalyzers. But the same must be in constant use or

the chemical action will stop and the apparatus decay. Therefore I keep them here where there is plentiful supply of carbon dioxide.”

I was thinking of the completeness and efficiency of Ashembe’s arrangements for navigating space and how great an advance over our own somewhat stumbling science they represented, as I made my way across the white-sheathed lake, the snow creaking sharply under my skis. Soon he would be on his way again and we would have missed opportunities for knowledge that would almost certainly change our whole civilization. Perhaps Merrick and I had been wrong after all in urging him to withhold his formulae.

At the postoffice there was a mass of mail and a few packages. I opened the office mail first to make sure there was nothing requiring urgent attention, secured my supplies and the one or two packages to the sled, dispatched a telegram to Merrick for more helium, stuffed the letters bearing his return address into my pocket for later perusal at Joyous Gard, and set out, anxious not to be caught on the way by night or by storm.

When I did open Merrick’s letters, I found ominous news: “The world’s finest police force,” he began, “seems to be getting excited about me.” He told of being arrested on a spurious traffic charge, and an interview with an Inspector Grant, who wanted to know where he got all the gold.

“I told him it was none of his business where I got it, and threw a line about legal complications and suits for false arrest, and he quieted down. There isn’t anything they can do

about it, but they'll probably check up on me closer than ever and it's quite on the cards that they'll find I'm getting it by mail from you. In that case, you may have them up there any time. Better tell Ashembe to be careful, or even to stop making gold for a while. He's paid for all the stuff sent so far, and some over."

This would never do. Again I cursed the practical difficulties of our situation, for if the New York police got to meddling with the affair, it would take just long enough for them to get back to the city for the whole story to get out of the bag.

I laid the whole case before Ashembe, explaining to the best of my ability the police system which made it necessary for officers to check up on any supply of the precious metals appearing in unusual quantity, and he agreed to stop sending gold for the time being. "How if I manufacture instead other objects of value?" he asked, anxious to do something for us. "Silver, or the crystalline jewels persons of your planet do treasure?"

"Silver isn't worth enough," I said, "but can you make jewels? Surely, though, you ought to be able to make them. Can you make diamonds?"

"What is diamond? Oh, crystallized carbon, I remember. Certainly, I can make." And he set to work to make diamonds as calmly as he had gold.

But from this day onward something of the idyllic contest with which I had stayed in the woods began to be lost. I was forever expecting men in the blue of the New York police to

come popping out of the forest. In spite of these troubles, two more cylinders of helium duly arrived at the railroad station just after Christmas, together with a note saying he was sending more at New Year.

We made a little holiday of Christmas at Joyous Gard. I had explained to Ashembe that it was our great religious festival, and though I fear he misunderstood the purpose of it (he called it an interesting survival of “heliocentric solar worship marking the turn of the year”) he fell into the spirit of the occasion with an avidity which surprised me. 52

“In Murashema,” he informed me, “we also have holidays, recreational periods having been determined upon as necessary at certain times.”

Upon a small spruce we rigged some lights; I had procured the material for a plum pudding in the village, and Ashembe’s contribution was a game which he described as “played during recreational periods by my people.” As near as I could make out, it was a kind of three-dimensional chess, played in a cube ten squares long on each side, and made of some transparent material that allowed one to perceive the pieces within. Each floor of this arrangement was fitted with a hinge at the back and a little clasp at the front so that in moving a piece, one simply released the clasp at the desired level and swung the whole top of the cube back. The pieces moved in all three dimensions. [8]

I am no world-beater at chess, although I play a fairly strong game, and it was perhaps only natural that Ashembe should prove so much my superior at this more virulent form of it.

The holiday over, Ashembe went to work on his machine again. It did not take him more than a couple of days to pass the helium we had on hand through the emanations from the mercury tube and store it in the point of the shell, and then he went to work on a small generator which was to furnish the current for the mercury tube he proposed to carry in the car, as the motor he had already made was to furnish power.

Meanwhile, I made a couple of trips to town, and mailed Merrick some of Ashembe's diamonds. Not indeed, his first effort—I had perhaps unwisely told the interplanetary traveler that the larger the stone, the more it was worth, and he had naively produced a huge rock all of six inches in diameter and of the purest lustre—quite enough to give us publicity for the rest of our lives. I buried the monster with some care, back in the woods. There's a fine shock awaiting the man who some day digs it out.

Even on the smaller stones that followed this experimental effort Merrick reported difficulties. Dealers, he said, were reluctant to handle such large and perfect diamonds without being sure of the pedigrees, and he was finally forced to consent to an arrangement by which they were to sell them for him on commission. The third shipment of helium came through with a note promising a fourth, and the days wheeled by to the middle of January.

Then events resolved themselves rapidly. I could see now that time was short, and the best thing to be done was to get Ashembe away before the police or other investigators came down on us. I laid the case before him; he agreed; and though

doubtful of helium as a source of power and not entirely satisfied with the supply of it he had on hand, he began next morning to carry some of his supplies to the car and put the finishing touches on it, while I went in to Fort Ann to send off a final letter to Merrick, cancelling all orders for supplies.

However, neither of us had counted on the speed with which those normally elephantine gentlemen, the police, can move at times. As I stepped out of the postoffice after mailing the letter, I almost ran into old Marvin Pritchard, village constable. “Oh, Mr. Schierstedt,” he said.

54

“Yes?” I said, bending down to strap on my ski.

“Can you come over to my place for a minute? There’s something I want to ask you.”

“What is it?” I asked, tightening the second strap and standing up. “I can’t spare much time.”

“Well, I wouldn’t like to say right here, now. It’s about a complaint I got.”

“I’m in rather a hurry. Suppose we got into it tomorrow. I’ll be in,” I temporized, taking a step away.

“’Fraid it won’t wait, young man. Gov’ment business. Come —” I let him get no further; I turned suddenly and with both hands pushed—not struck him—violently in the chest. Over he went, into the high-piled soft snow, head and shoulders going right out of sight, feet waving grotesquely. I started, heading for the back of the houses, where the slope away from the town would give my skis a decided advantage over

the pursuit in the deep snow.

“Stop!” I heard behind me as I cleared the edge of the house. “Stop! You’re under arrest!” The end of the fence, sticking a post a few inches through the drift, and the crest of the hill. Would he shoot? More shouts behind. I was over the crest, and my skis began to gain a momentum of their own on the down-slant. I dared not risk a long look back, but cast a quick glance over one shoulder and caught a flashing glimpse of the cobbler-constable just floundering through the snow round the corner of the house, and other bobbing heads behind him.

The winter day had already run into indigo shadows and silence when I made it, stumbling, tired and famished. Barely pausing to kick loose my skis, I flung myself through the door into the kitchen, crying, “Did they get here yet?”

Ashembe, working on the bench at one side of the room, looked up in cool astonishment. “They are persons who perform a visit?” he inquired.

55

“Yes,” I snapped. “The police. They’re on their way. Here any minute now. You can’t wait ten minutes. You must go right away, or we’ll have trouble.”

He gazed at me for a minute, doubtless meditating on the curiosity of a world where it is necessary for science to evade the law, and then, with wordless efficiency, began to gather up his materials and carry them to the space ship. Trembling with exhaustion and excitement, I sank into a chair, but only for a moment. Ashembe had carried only a portion of his materials out. The chlorophyll trays, for instance, were still in

their place behind the stove. He would need all the help I could give him. Fortunately, the coffee-pot was full, and a long drink of the steaming liquid made a new man of me. I began to help my guest carry his impedimenta to the clearing where the cometary car stood, pointed toward the heavens like a projectile for some monstrous piece of artillery. We formed a division of labor in which my part was to bring things to Ashembe, who met me at the door of the space ship and carried them back through the tortuous rooms to be stored in the center.

I have no very clear memory of how many trips I accomplished up the path beaten in the snow under the silent stars. My weariness had left me and I was febrile with excitement. It was like a dream; the shack, the toil up the path among the clutching branches, and Ashembe at the end, meeting me in the moonlike radiance that flowed from the interior of the car and carrying things back in with swift movements, like an efficient machine.

It had to end some time, of course. As I came down the path on one of my return trips to the shack, I heard the crunch of feet in the snow, and saw the glow of a flashlight snapped on and heard voices.

“Nobody here,” said someone. “Try around the back, Ed.”

I stopped, listening.

56

“Here’s a path,” called a voice. “Maybe they’ve gone this way. They haven’t gone long. The lights still are on.” Abruptly the flashlight ran up the path toward me, and I

moved quickly enough. The light caught my arm for a second, held it, and then switched it full into my face. A yell.

“Stop! Hands up! This way, Jerry, I see him!”

I turned toward the car, running. “Stop!” “Where is he?” I heard behind. Then, past my head there was the vicious *when* of a bullet, and the pistol report sounded like a cannon.

The door of the car was right ahead, with Ashembe’s bent form outlined against the interior light. Without even thinking, I dived for it; there was another report as I dived and a bullet smacked against the steely side of the car. I was inside, striking my knee a savage blow as I went through the low opening. Footsteps sounded behind me, more shouts and a clang of metal as Ashembe lifted the door to slide it into place. I writhed to hands and knees, turned and saw that someone had gripped the door from outside and was trying to keep Ashembe from closing it, but even as I reached out to help him, my visitor let go his hold, fumbled at his belt and produced the destructive flash.

“No!” I cried, but too late. The beam of intense violet radiance leaped from the screen, striking the bent figure on the outside fairly in the middle. I heard a low “Augh!” of agony and the figure collapsed in the snow as the door slid into place with a clang.

Without even a glance at me, Ashembe produced the welding flash and began to weld the edges of the door indissolubly into place. The realization that I was a prisoner in the cometary car and an accessory to a murder, suddenly struck

me, and all at once I felt the accumulated muscular and nervous fatigue of the day. A whirling universe of sparks danced before my eyes, and I lost consciousness.

V

My first sensation was one of extreme annoyance that it should be morning before I had half the sleep I wanted. Dreamily I turned over to gather the covers about me for that last delightful five minutes of doze before clambering out into a cold world. My hands met neither blanket nor sheet and, startled into consciousness, I looked up to see above me not the beams of the shack but the tapering, tan-colored interior of the Shoraru, lined with its rows of racks and apparatus. Then I remembered.

I sat up with difficulty. I was in the central chamber of the car, on the floor, and beside me was Ashembe, locking tight the joints of the interior door and closing the cracks with atotta. A dull tapping sound, like the racket of a distant woodpecker, filled the place.

“Hello!” I remarked rather fatuously. (I could think of nothing else to say.)

“You are revived,” he said, turning from his task with a smile. “I am happy. You do not objection to journeying with me? I can return you here after a trip to your interior planets.”

I became aware of the pain in my knee, and memory rushed in upon me. “Why, yes,” I said, rubbing the injured member.

“There’s nothing else for me to do. I’m afraid you killed that policeman, and they’d probably hang me if I went back now.”

“Hang you? Oh, you signify execution. But you did not do it.”

“I know,” I said. “But I was present. That makes me an accessory or something. What’s that noise?”

“Your police anxious to enter herein. However, no matter. We depart upon the instant.”

I realized that the police were trying to batter down the outer door of the car—that massive steel and iridium door. Ashembe turned to the control keys of the car. Then —“But won’t the explosion when you start injure some of them?” I asked.

58

He looked up in perfectly genuine surprise. “Certainly,” he said. “But no matter of that. They would do us harm.” And this extraordinary individual, who would not give us information, unless we promised to altruistically surrender it to the whole world, calmly turned the keys that would very likely blow half a dozen men to bits.

Nothing happened. The hammering on the distant periphery of the car did not even stop. There was only a gentle hissing. It rose to a rattle, and then, just as I was about to speak, a tremendous explosion burst that sent me caroming off the side wall of the chamber to the floor of the car. We were off.

After that first burst of sound, however, there was neither noise nor perceptible motion. I raised myself somewhat cautiously to my hands and knees, then to my feet, and looked

around. Everything in the car was the same as before; the soft daylight radiance from Ashembe's quartz flooded the interior of the narrow chamber; the various pieces of apparatus and metal cylinders of liquefied gases stood firmly in their racks. Below them others held materials that remained in the cases sent from New York, removed to the car in that state during our last hasty moments of flight.

Ashembe had seated himself cross-legged on the floor and was gazing intently into the workings of one of his mercury motors, which apparently had something wrong with it. Everything was perfectly serene, almost monotonously so, as though instead of sitting in a cometary car bound across those vast wildernesses of space, which even light takes centuries to cross, we might have been back in the shack. In the shack, but for the shape of the room and—a thought struck me suddenly.

“Why, how can you tell where we're going?” I asked.
“There aren't any windows.”

59

Ashembe smiled up at me. “Gramercy,” he said. “I forget you are a novice. Perceive.” He fumbled a minute with keys, making adjustments. A little ring-shaped heater around the hole at the center of the base of the car, the one he had windowed with nickel, sprang into activity. There was a snap as though a shutter somewhere had slid back, and simultaneously one of the mercury tubes, placed above and to one side of the nickel plate, began to play a stream of radiance upon it.

Under the impact of the ray, the gleaming metal lost its lustre, turned to a bluish, milky plate, became translucent and then

transparent. It was as though it had been slid aside and one could see right through the space to the background of the black heavens picked out with the blazing points of stars. I gave a cry of surprise.

“Simple,” said Ashembe in answer to my unspoken query. “The other side of the nickel has been sensitized—like the thing your scientists call the ‘photo-glow’ tube. It responds perfectly to all change in intensity of light thrown on it. Such changes are transmitted through reflection of the tube within which throws them on nickel plate on inside. Much like periscope in your submarine ships. You comprehend?”

I didn’t. “Why not use glass?”

“Glass transmits harmful emanations. While in atmosphere of planet, said atmosphere is sufficient insulation against emanatory radiation which are dangerous to life. Glass is not opaque to them, but properly treated metals are. Also there is question of heat. We would be over-warmed by the effect of your sun if glass were used, since we have no atmospheric insulation. Ah, you are enchanted by the vista.”

I was; it was the most magnificent panorama ever beheld by the eye of man. I saw it as though through an enormous porthole. (My conjecture that the nickel plate was lens-shaped for a wider field of vision was later confirmed by

60

^[9] Ashembe.) Around the edge of the circular opening, on every side a dancing trail of sparks flashed off and were extinguished in the velvet black of interstellar space—a trail of fire from our car. (And here again I must insert a parenthetical remark at the risk of irritating the reader. These

were not, as I originally imagined, blazing sparks; since there was no atmosphere there could, of course, be no combustion. They were rather in the nature of single electrons or ions, cast off by the fierce electrochemical reaction going on within our motors and glowing with a light of their own.)

Within this circle of sparks the stars stood out bright and clear on the background of black, shining not with the twinkling light they have as seen from Earth, but with a steady, strong radiance, like distant lamps. At the upper part of the circle was one redder than the rest, larger and dimmer—perceptibly a disc. I took this to be Mars. The moon was nowhere visible, but Earth filled the whole lower half of the picture, and it was the most glorious celestial object I have ever seen.

It was half shrouded in dark, but even the dark part was visible by the blotting out of the innumerable stars against which it stood, and it was ringed nearly round with a radiant ring where the sun, below and on one side, was reflected back from the upper reaches of the atmosphere. The line where the western coast of North America dipped under the Pacific was still illumined and the continent's edge was visible against the shimmering blue of the ocean as a yellowish-green mass. Further down, around the line of the equator, a white ring of clouds shrouded the masses of land and water, and right in the center of the Pacific was a huge, dazzling spot of pure gold—the reflection of the sun, sent back from the water as from a mirror.

61

I felt the rub of Ashembe's shoulder against my own. Like me, he was contemplating the view spread before us with rapt attention. "Wonderful, isn't it?" I said.

“Yes,” he replied shortly. “We move very slow at present. Your world still has predominating gravitational attraction. If too much speed is made at the present moment, said gravitational attraction would cause serious injury by crushing. But we escape. You do not feel less weighty?”

As he mentioned it, I became more fully conscious of what had been, as it were, poised in the back of my head—a minor irritation. I felt curiously, as he put it, “less weighty.” I stood up, and the muscular effort carried me right off my feet, a couple of inches off the floor of the space ship, and I floated gently back as though on wings. It was a singular and not altogether agreeable sensation; a feeling of disembodiment, such as one experiences in those horrible nightmares during which one drifts for hours just above the floor, pursued by some avenging shape. I shuddered a trifle—and the motion propelled me several inches across the car. Ashembe laughed.

“This is nothing. Wait for the moment when we shall arrive beyond the attraction of your sun.”

No wonder he had been haggard and racked when he rose out of the waters of Sunderland Lake from the wreck of his first car. . . .

Ashembe watched Earth fading away behind us for a few minutes, made some adjustments here and there, pulled himself upwards to the peak of the projectile along the racks. There he turned on the tubes that enabled him to look out through the nickel plates at that point and after a few minutes of observation returned, coming head downward along the racks like a monkey to the floor of the car again. I watched

him as he turned off two of the circle of motors at the base and swung the keys of those on the opposite side to their full power, hardly daring to trust myself to motion, fearful of what I would do with my new-found strength in that constricted space.

“I am causing a change in direction,” explained my fellow voyager. “We do now escape from predominating attraction of your Earth and must change course toward Venus. These motors no longer necessary for progress on so short journey, but we must turn course.”

“Why aren’t the motors necessary?”

“Absurd not to understand. You are badly taught in schools. We are now free body floating in vacuum, except for small amount of dust, solely under attraction of your sun, except for minor attraction from planets. Consequently, having momentum, we are minor planet of the same and would circulate around it in orbit with amount of speed required on leaving limit of Earthly attraction. Such orbit would not bring us to Venus. Consequently, having been unable to leave your Earth at moment which would bring our course to intersect that planet, we must change direction.”

“Why not just turn off all motors but the one on the opposite side from the direction you want to go? Wouldn’t it save fuel?”

“Because if I do this, it would give us rotation only and we spin forever around your sun as a minor planet.” A shadow crossed his face. “Such was the unhappy case of early

explorers from Murashema. Three or four of them now circle forever around our sun. So I merely turn off the motor at one side and then turn those opposite to full power, giving our motion moments in more than one direction and thereby swinging our course in wide hyperbola. You comprehend?"

For a marvel, I did. "How long before we will arrive?" I asked.

63

From one of his pockets he produced a small calculating machine. "Venus is now approaching inferior conjunction." he said, sliding the parts back and forth. "Due to eccentricity of orbit and fact, we are projected from Earth at point on opposite side from Venus we must go on long hyperbola to get to this planet. . . ." He calculated for a moment. "Distance to be covered totals about 20,000,000 miles in your measure. We cannot go much faster than average speed of forty miles per second or a little more than the speed of your Mercury planet. To go faster would not allow us to slow down on approaching Venus, and we would shoot past into your sun, ending in flaming smoke. . . ." Again a calculation. "About one hundred and thirty-six hours from departure to arrival."

A hundred and thirty-six hours. I pulled my watch out, but being still unfamiliar with the curious effects of the lack of gravity in our exceedingly small planet, tossed it clear over my head, where it bounced gently off a cylinder of liquid hydrogen and returned with the deliberate motion of objects in the slow movies. Ashembe snickered. When I seized it again, it showed half-past eleven by the time of the spot we have left. We had already been gone some three hours and had about five and a half days more to travel before making a

landing.

One altogether loses the sense of time, I found, in a place where it is perpetual day, where the warmth is even and the surroundings unendingly the same. On the third day of our journey I forgot to wind my watch, and it was not until some time later—not, indeed, till we left Venus—that I set it going again. When either of us felt like it, we retired to one of the outer chambers, from which the light had been removed, and slept. Again, when we felt like it, we helped ourselves to food from Ashembe's store, though there was very little eaten. The sense of hunger seemed to have been left behind with the earth.

At first I helped Ashembe a little. He had left before his preparations were fairly complete, and there was still some apparatus to be built. He fitted up one of the shells next to the interior chamber as a workshop. There he spent long hours cutting and grinding, working with welding tool and mercury tube to his heart's content. But I early tired of watching operations of whose method and purpose I had no understanding and at which I could be but of small assistance.

64

In one of the cases which we had tumbled aboard at the last moment I found a few books, but they turned out to be useless, technical things—differential calculus, metallurgy and astronomy—and however deep my boredom, it did not reach the level of reading abstruse volumes on subjects of which I understood nothing.

It was on the second or third day out, I think, that I discovered the deck of cards. They kept me busy for as much as forty-

eight hours playing endless games of solitaire and trying to work out the probabilities of the game coming out correctly or of a certain card turning up from past performances. But I soon found that the cards responded to no discoverable laws in their permutations.

Only a limited amount of time could be spent in looking through the nickel screen at the landscape (or should I say space-scape?); it had a depressing sameness once the marvel of the first glance had worn off. Altogether I found time hanging so heavily on my hands that I wondered all voyagers from planet to planet did not go raving mad before arriving. It was just as I had taken up a last desperate attempt to give mind and body something to do (by setting down the words of all the poems I knew and counting up the letters to see which appeared oftenest—to such depths of inanity does boredom reduce even comparatively intelligent persons!) that Ashembe, returning from a trip to the observation screens in the central chamber, announced the near approach of our destination.

I followed him back through the low doors, which had to be entered belly-wise, waiting while he tightened each

65

^[10] behind us. Within the interior chamber the tube and heater around the nickel plates at the peak of the projectile were turned on, and through them the orb of Venus could be clearly seen—now about the same size to the sight as Earth when we had left it. We seemed to be drifting slowly sidewise down toward it, an effect attributable to the fact that the observation screen was not right at the point of the car. I have seen the same effect as I stood at the bow of a ship pulling in to a

dock; it seems as though her course is altogether wrong and will take her clear past, until you hear the grinding of her plates against the piles.

The night side of the planet was toward us; beyond it the sun, a greater and more glorious sun than any person of Earth ever sees, was just emerging from the planet's shadow, tossing huge red flames of blinding radiance millions of miles high. It hurt my eyes, and I turned away, but Ashembe, noting my trouble, threw a switch of some kind and the radiance was dimmed. Then I saw Venus as she is—a great dark shield of a planet, picked out all round the edge with a glow of unearthly radiance where the sun is reflected from her cloudy surface.

Out beyond her a star or two burned in the heavens, and down across the picture sprayed the stream of sparks from the big motor at the prow, now working at full speed to check our momentum before we reached the planet's atmosphere. Ashembe floated beside me working energetically with observational instruments of one sort and another, prominent among which was a small spectroscope. 66

“Correct for your astronomers,” he murmured as he bent over the instrument. “Rate of revolution of this planet is very slow, if upper atmosphere forms any criterion. Hence it will be well to turn the Shoraru upon arrival in upper atmosphere and land at point within sunlit hemisphere. Otherwise we might spend considerable period in the dark in a bad place. I do not like the same.” He fell silent, turning the adjusting arrangements on his instruments. “And still I do not like to do the same. It too rapidly uses up much-needed fuel. Efficiency of all fuel is fifty per cent less in atmosphere than in a vacuum.”

“What is Venus like?” I asked. “Can you tell anything about it from your instruments?”

“No, certainly not,” he answered promptly. “Am I a saint? No, you call that kind of prophet—am I a prophet? The upper atmosphere is deficient in water vapor and oxygen as compared with our worlds and has much carbon dioxide, but what else? We can tell when we arrive.”

A silence fell upon us; Ashembe was busy with his instruments and I with my thoughts as we watched the planet grow slowly larger on our sight. Now it had completely blotted out the sun from our sight and filled the whole of the central heavens for us—a great disc of black, rimmed round with light on which no mark or feature was visible. One by one the stars were swallowed up in that wall of blackness as we drew closer, and it seemed as though we had slowly changed our course in some way and were now falling down toward it instead of approaching it along the same straight path we had been following.

I began to feel once more the blessed sensation of weight. I had been holding to the racks near the peak of the projectile and now it seemed as though we had been tilted forward and I was sliding down a steeply inclined plane toward the huge dark planet that rose up to meet us. A pencil from my vest pocket fell out, striking the edge of one of the racks with a tinkling sound. With an effort, for my muscles had become cramped during the hour or more we must have been there, I reversed position. Ashembe lay on his side, consulting a perfect congress of instruments.

I noted that the sparks from our bow motor had taken on a greenish tinge, quite unlike their previous color and that we seemed to be moving more slowly. Pointing an inquisitive finger at the sparks, I demanded, “What is it?”

“Now entering—atmosphere of planet—” he replied jerkily, working the keys of his instruments. “Must check progress. No—quickly!” he shouted, springing to his feet and bracing himself against the racks. He began to pull from one of them the atotta suit we had made—how many aeons ago was it?—at Joyous Gard.

“Here,” he said, pulling the suit on. “Unlock door of this chamber and each other for me. Fear I must explode whole of fuel in outer chamber to check progress and assure landing on other face of planet. . . . Lock outer door after me and return to next chamber within. When I give the signal, admit me.” I did not stop to learn what the signal might be, but began climbing along the racks to where the door, like the transom over a window, now stood some twelve feet above my head. It was a difficult job, made harder by the fact that the Shoraru had begun to rock in the most alarming manner, and when I reached it, I thought I would never get the lock open.

Ashembe, tightly buckled in his atotta suit, followed, urging me to speed by jabbing me with an instrument he carried. Together we tumbled through the narrow opening; I nearly fell to the bottom of the next chamber in doing it, but managed to catch one of the racks in time and to navigate around its walls as if on a mountain ledge. The rocking motion increased and was accompanied by a sibilant whistle, low and monotonous.

Through the next door we went and the next—would those infernal rooms never come to an end?—and then finally into one so much hotter than the rest that the perspiration started out on my face. With his hand at my chest, Ashembe motioned me to go back and began to lower himself down the racks toward the peak of the projectile.

“Explode whole of fuel,” he had said. That meant danger—near and pressing. I slid the door into position and turned the lock, climbing round the racks to reach the next door. What if he were killed in the explosion—or injured? What a position for a bond salesman, I thought, clinging to a rack which held a jar of liquid hydrogen, to steady myself against the alarming pitching of the car. At that moment there came a great burst of sound and a pitch so violent that it jerked loose my hold and hurled me downward half a dozen feet to what had been the ceiling and had become the floor of the chamber.

It was lined with atotta and I lit on what is supposed to be the least sensitive portion of man’s anatomy, but the bump was severe, and I had no more than gotten to my hands and knees when there came a second explosion and another pitch that flattened me against the side of the chamber, knocking the wind from my body.

It was several minutes before I recovered myself sufficiently to stand upright. The pitching had ceased as had the whistling sound without. The bow seemed higher too—the space-ship was traveling at an angle that now made one of her sides the floor. But there was no sign of Ashembe.

Taking advantage of our change of course, I walked

along the side of the car among the racks and placed my ear against the door. Silence. The suspense was agonizing. There was no sense of motion now, no sound whatever, nothing but the soft light from the sensitized quartz and the silent racks filled with materials for an interplanetary voyage. I squatted down, hanging to one of the racks with both hands, fearful of another abrupt change of direction. An age passed by.

Finally, just as I had made up my mind to climb back to the central chamber and get into one of the other atotta suits and dare the dangers of whatever lay beyond the locked door, there came three measured metallic taps against it; a pause, and then again three taps. Fumbling with haste, I threw back the complex lock to look down into the outer chamber, now directly below me, and meet a breath of icy air. There he was, hanging to the racks near the door by his hands. I reached down, gripped his arm and pulled amain, and in a moment he was beside me.

Together we climbed to the door of the next chamber, being aided by the slight slant the Shoraru now took. For all the fact that he was loaded with the atotta suit, it was Ashembe who got through first, pulling me up after him, and it was he who preceded me all the way to the inner chamber. We hurried down the side to the nickel screens.

At first I thought there was something wrong with them. They showed nothing but a whirling, indistinct mass, shadowy gray in hue, behind which, as behind a curtain, there was a dim, red light. The gray mist seemed to be flashing past at tremendous speed, and after a moment I realized we were among the clouds that perpetually encircle the planet, just emerging into

the daylight zone. The rain of sparks from the motor at the bow had ceased. I found my voice.

“It’s all right then. What did you do?”

“I exploded the helium in the outer chamber,” answered Ashembe, who had flung back the hood of his suit and was now busy with his instruments again, “thereby lifting the forward end of the Shoraru and giving us direction more tangential to surface of the planet. But alas! We are now deficient in fuel. I desire greatly to find pleci in this atmosphere or in combination in surface formations. No further great distance can we go without liberal supply of fuel—Attend!” He pointed suddenly to the screen.

70

I just caught a fleeting glimpse of the surface of the planet through the rolling clouds. A surface of steaming moisture, with long, irregular blots across it—nothing more. And then we were again swallowed up in the clouds. The light behind them was stronger now, like that on a day filled with both sunshine and mist. I turned to Ashembe, opened my mouth to speak—and suddenly we met ground with a rending crash that threw me off my feet again and rattled the cylinders in their beds. We had landed on Venus.

[11]

VI

It was with a kind of subconscious surprise that I gazed around after I had put on one of the atotta suits and followed Ashembe through the intricate passages of the space ship. All around us was a fog, thick and yellow-gray in color, like the famous pea-soup fogs of London. Behind it a large but sickly and strangely prolate sun gave the dull illumination of a frosted electric globe.

I looked down. We were in a swamp, up nearly to our knees in the ooze. Around our legs and as far as we could see across this universal slough, an intricate tangle of pale, slimy, almost gelatinous vegetation coiled. Its clinging tendrils hampered our movements, but only here and there did it project a leaf above the surface and then feebly, as though it lacked the strength to stand upright. 71

Beside us the curved flank of the Shoraru rose up and away, glimmering wetly in the dulled rays of the sun. It lay on its side, its point slightly down, half-submerged, like some wallowing monster. The door through which we had left it stood just above the surface of the swamp, and but for this one object there was nothing to see but swamp, fog and sun.

I turned to look at Ashembe. With detached scientific calm, he was busy filling an emptied liquid hydrogen cylinder with

the swamp water, snipping off and cramming in with it samples of the vegetation. This done, he handed me the container, produced a bottle from a pocket in his suit and waved it around in the air for a moment or two—to take a sample of the atmosphere, I imagined. While I was taking both containers back to deposit them in the Shoraru, he busied himself with some instrument he had brought, taking an observation of the sun.

We returned together, helping each other through the door, which Ashembe bolted behind us. ^[12] I began to open the next door inward, but he halted me with a gesture.

“Give pause,” he said, his voice sounding deep and muffled through the telephonic apparatus of the suit. “This atmosphere may be poisonous, in which case it would be bad for us to carry with us into inner chambers. I will create a vacuum. Seize something.”

At the base of the car (now become the side in the position in which it lay) just over where the propulsive tubes passed through the shell, was a row of keys. Hooking one arm through a rack, Ashembe began to turn them rapidly. 72

I heard a whirring sound, and felt strong winds pluck at me. The dimness of the chamber (the fog had followed us in) decreased, became non-existent. The cylinder of swamp water rolled from the place where I had dropped it, and accompanied by the bottle of air, banged against the base of the car, and Ashembe began to turn off the keys again.

As soon as he had opened one of the cylinders of liquid air he

had prepared at Joyous Gard and the released gas had restored the pressure in our outer chamber to normal, we penetrated deeper into the car. Ashembe fell at once to analyzing the samples he had brought, while I, unable to help him with this, was reduced to the state of enforced idleness of our journey.

“You perceive,” he explained, “I could not do thus when landing on your planet. Upon arrival I was practically without fuel, running upon inertia. Consequently I lacked power to check my progress through your atmosphere. The progress was too rapid and friction not only severely damaged my Shoraru, but rendered it impossible to open at the door, door being fused into place. Therefore I had to cut my way through the base of the Shoraru.”

“My God,” I said. “You’re lucky that you didn’t land in an ocean or on a mountain.”

“Truthful. So are we this time.”

I shuddered a little. “What if we had?”

“Not hard to escape. Simply by blowing out more fuel through peak of the Shoraru. But difficult is that we have not much fuel.”

“What about the revolution of the planet?”

“Very slow from observation,” was the reply. “One revolution in six hundred seventy-four of your hours—73 about twenty-eight days. Me, I am not entirely certain of this result, but it is accurate within two or three hours. We have nearly twenty days before it becomes dark at this point.”

“Why,” I said, “then everything ought to be frozen here, hadn’t it? At our poles where they have long periods of light and dark like this, the ice forms so deeply during the dark that the sun can’t melt it again.”

“Case is different. One difference is that sun is twice as hot here as at your planet. Another is perhaps the difference in chemical composition of the atmosphere and liquids. Perchance it is not water. I am now determining.”

He fell silent for a moment, fiddling with his reagents and apparatus. Then: “This air is not good for us,” he announced. “It is highly deficient in oxygen—only about four per cent of that in your or our atmosphere. I find also that it has high percentage of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, also small proportion of hydrogen sulphide and much dust . . .”

Somewhere in the back of my head a memory from some book stirred. “Why, that’s almost exactly what our scientists predicted from observations!”

“Truthful. Your scientists are backward in many points, but their spectroscopic work is well done . . . They are correct about this being the early planet also. The dust which is very much in the air is composed of silica, alumina, oxides of iron and titanium and compounds of calcium, sodium and potassium. This is exactly the formula for matter flowing from volcanic action, and gases in atmosphere, especially carbon dioxide, indicate the same thing. There must be very intense volcanic activity throughout this Venus. Very dangerous to remain there any time.”

“Then the whole of Venus is like this?”

“Question. Entire of your planet is not like the place where I landed? But all this planet may be more like this place because it is the younger and more homogeneous world. For certainly, the atmosphere is altogether like it is here—thick and heavy and bad. Of the rest it is mostly impossible to tell unless we make journeys here and there, but I think it is much like this place. For one thing water is very plentiful here.”

74

“Oh, the swamp liquid is water, then?” I interrupted.

“Yes, but with very little salt therein. Water is plentiful here, but there is extremely small amounts of water in the atmosphere. This would show that water is almost absent from most portions of the planet, though the atmosphere is so heavily saturated with carbon dioxide vapor and dust that it could hardly take up much. Come.”

He was putting away the chemical apparatus.

“What about the chances for getting your pleci?”

Ashembe shook his head. “I am in doubt. Not very promising, although this is a young world and may have it in volcanic vapor or in combination in volcanic rocks.” He began to pull on his atotta suit again, and I did likewise.

When we reached the outside of the car, he paused to fix above the door one of the light-giving quartz rocks from the interior, and we set off together, plunging our way through the slimy vegetation of the swamp.

Fifteen minutes of amphibian progress brought us to a place where the vines thinned out and the water became shallower. I noticed that to right and left and occasionally straight ahead vague spots were visible here at the edge; three-foot circles of changing color like the iridescence that is formed on the surface of water by a drop of oil. I pointed to one of them in question, but Ashembe merely shook his head without deigning to speak.

A little farther along one of these agglomerations lay directly before us and we paused to look at it. It was apparently a solid structure, a flat, deep object floating just below the surface of the swamp, pulsating gently with a motion of its own.

“What is it?” I asked.

“An algal growth of some kind perchance,” said Ashembe. “They are common on early worlds.”

He turned away, but I held back and with the same impulse that makes one kick at a hat in the street, poked my foot into it. It met nothing solid at all; just as though I had kicked a jelly. But swifter than thought, before I could withdraw the foot, the whole iridescent, purple and green mass flowed forward around the offending member and then around my other foot, and held both in a soft, firm grip. I tried to draw loose, to run. The thing clung, creeping slowly upward. I bent to tear it loose with my fingers and my hand, like my feet, was seized in a steady, paralyzing grip. I could not move, struggle as I would. A chill of horror went over me.

“Ashembe!” I called after my companion’s retreating form,

and with a vast effort, heaved the imprisoned arm up a few inches. The growth came up with it, like a great pancake, then fell back with a solid plop as I could no longer hold its weight. It gripped my legs all the tighter for the interruption. I almost pitched onto my face in the slimy mass.

“Ashembe!” I cried again, struggling to retain my balance, and out of the corner of my eye, caught sight of his arm as he brought the destructive heat-ray into sudden action. I heard the warning hum, saw the gleam of fierce light, and a great plume of steam sprang up and obscured the lenses that covered my eyes. The tugging at my arm ceased, and though my fingers were still caught, I could draw the hand loose and raise it. About my feet the water toiled, furiously. Steam covered everything. Then Ashembe’s arm was about me, pulling me loose.

Through the cloud of steam the expressionless mask that covered Ashembe’s features became visible. “Are you liberated?” he asked, anxiously.

I extended toward him the hand that had been caught. Around the fingers still clung fragments and tatters of the iridescent jelly of the thing that had tried to drag me down, its heart a mass of color too lovely to be deadly. He reached an inquisitive finger toward it, touched, and the jelly clung to him as it had to me. Torn as it was, it took our united strength to pull it loose, and when we returned to the Shoraru after our journey, there were still bits of it hanging here and there on the atotta suit.

“You are extremely faulty,” Ashembe told me severely. “It is

the very good rule we have never to interfere with unknown plants and animals. All have great potentialities of danger.”

“But who would think a formless thing like that—?”

“In your own planet you have the blossoms of some plants, not only harmless looking but artistic in appearance, that are highly dangerous,” was his reply. “Some of them catch insects and small animals. I have visited other planets and in each found obviously innocent objects that were really of danger. Beware.”

We had been forging on as we spoke, and the water had now become definitely shoal. A moment later we stepped out on land. But what a land! The huge, languid sun still shone through the yellow fog to show us a land without earth, a coast of striated, tortured rock, with long cracks running through it away back into the distance. Under our feet the rock was hard and bare, and every few paces we came upon a little pocket of jagged stones, black and fearfully rough, like the clinkers from a furnace. Over these Ashembe paused. They seemed to excite his interest, and he picked up several to add to the collection of similar objects in the cylinder he had brought.

“I am justified,” he said as we worked slowly up the rough slope from the foreshore. “This is clearly the outflow from a volcano, these rocks being ordinary volcanic cinders. We must hasten. Dangerous to remain here on account of volcanic activity.”

Soon we were assisting each other over and around big

boulders, and then without realizing the gradations, were climbing, hand and foot, up a veritable mountain. We must have been at it for three or four hours before my indefatigable companion paused for a rest.

I looked around. The thickness of the atmosphere obscured everything, but we could see away behind us the slope up which we had come, jagged and torn, like nothing on Earth, so much as the slope of Vesuvius just beyond Naples. Above us the same slope stretched on to an invisible height.

“How are we going to find our way back?” I asked.

From his belt Ashembe produced a little instrument, not unlike a watch with a bright metal face. “Attend,” said he, holding it up, its face pointing down the slope up which we had come, then slowly turning it so that it swept the compass. At one point he paused. A loud ticking sound was audible and the gleaming metal face was clouded over.

“In that direction lies the Shoraru,” said my companion, pointing toward the locality the instrument faced. “This is the Boshee, always used by our explorers. In the Shoraru is a—a small radio apparatus, you would call. The Boshee is a receiver, attuned to receive only impulses from this apparatus. It has within an arrangement like ears on either side.” He pointed to two tiny, bell-shaped openings on opposite sides of the instrument. “When the impulse entering by one ear is equal to that entering by the other it causes the instrument to make sound and obscures the receiving mirror. Thus it must point in the correct direction.”

“But what if it is pointed in the direction exactly opposite to the right one?”

“Then it makes the sound, but the mirror is not obscured. The impulses within the Boshee are directed in the direction from which they come—reflected. When it is pointed in the exact opposite direction, they are reflected to the back of the instrument, and there is no cloud on mirror. See.” He turned the Boshee and, as he had said, the ticking was distinctly audible, but the mirror remained unclouded.

We resumed our progress, climbing heavily over the crags that now barred our path. It was monotonously alike—gray rocks with tearing edges that crumbled and broke as we climbed, red sun and silence. 78

It became apparent, after a little further progress, that we were no longer going upward. For a while longer we stumbled among the rocks of a kind of plateau and then found ourselves going definitely downward through the same infinitudes of monotonous gray stone, featureless save for the fantastic shapes given them by successive outpourings and crumbings of bluetonian material. I grew weary, begged Ashembe to halt, and as we paused again, throwing ourselves flat to rest, we heard a low drum-beat of sound, regularly repeated.

“What’s that?” I asked, starting to a sitting position.

“The possibility is a volcano,” he declared with entire calm. “Let us proceed with caution.”

We “proceeded with caution” toward the sound. The down slope, like the upgrade before it, now came to an end, and we

found ourselves in a valley between cyclopean blocks of detritus from some silent volcano, all as void of life or any sign of it as everything we had passed since we emerged from the swamp of the algae. The sound became louder, a steady boom-boom of reverberations somewhere in the distance, and when we stopped we could feel the ground vibrate with the attendant shock. Suddenly Ashembe gripped my arm and pointed straight ahead.

“You see?” he asked.

I could see nothing but the silent sun and rock and said so. “No? Well, come,” and we toiled on for another quarter mile or so. My attention was taken up with negotiating the ground, which now began to show a series of alarming cracks beneath our feet, but when we next halted I could see dimly, in the distance, a black cloud like a darker spot in the surrounding murk, floating high above the surface. Beneath it and equally far was a great red funnel of flame, dimmed to a ghostly pink by the distance. The booming sound we heard came from it, and all around us the vibration of the ground was now clearly perceptible.

“A volcano?”

79

“Certainly. What else?”

We pressed on. The shock of the eruption became more pronounced as we advanced. Here and there small pieces of the gray rock would tumble from overhanging balconies of stone, startling by the sharp clash of sound they made in that enormous silence. The red outpouring of the volcano, with its

crown of black cloud, became clearer, though the air was thicker than ever. One could see millions of tiny dust-motes dancing about as in a sunbeam. Off to one side, from a long crack, a slow curl of heavy vapor oozed into the air. I pointed it out to my companion.

“Ah!” he cried with awakened interest and in an instant was clambering over the rocks toward the spot, to hold over it one of the bottles he had brought. “If there is pleci anywhere here, it is within such gas,” he announced as he put the bottle away in one of the pockets of his suit.

Still forward. (Why didn't he turn back?) The long valley up which we had been traveling gradually wore out to a flat and then became an upward slope as we approached the volcano. More fumaroles, like the one I had first seen, made their appearance to either side. The rocks seemed firmer for some peculiar reason, and Ashembe led the way with obvious caution. Then, rounding a block as big as a house that stood all by itself, he stopped altogether, indicating something ahead. I followed his finger to see a long, smoking surge of volcanic material moving ever so gently down the slope toward us.

“The magma,” he said, and began to produce another collecting bottle.

I detained him. “Isn't it hot?”

“Certainly. But we have atotta suits. We would have been too hot long ago but for them. Temperature probably about forty of your centigrade system degrees.” And

leaving me to wonder over the statement, he was off with his bottle to get a sample of the gas from over the burning lava.

We turned back after that, guiding our course by means of Ashembe's "boshee." For myself I was quite ready to stop and take a prolonged rest. We had been traveling for something like five hours and had eaten nothing in that time. I was aching in every muscle from the exertions of climbing among the torn and broken rocks. But Ashembe's desire for speed was insatiable. "Dangerous to remain," he said.

The reason became apparent as we reached the foot of the valley up which we had approached the volcano. Smoke and steam were pouring from a crack at the left of our path in quick, short puffs like the exhalation of an automobile's exhaust. There was an ominous underground rumbling, and we had gotten hardly two hundred yards beyond the spot when the rumbling rose to a roar and the ground began to tremble so violently we could hardly keep our feet.

Casting a glance over my shoulder, I saw the crack widen and run. Through the mouth thus made a quick flicker of flame poured forth. Not merely dust, but rocks of considerable size began to fall about us. The sound of the eruption rose to a deafening outburst. "Come!" I heard Ashembe's shout faint above the racket, and tailed after him down the quivering path, giving no attention to direction. The shower of rocks and ashes increased to a perfect hailstorm.

We ran. My God, how we ran!

It was I who stopped first. Stones or not, I could not go

another step, and I flung myself down in the shelter of an overhanging block of stone, declaring my intention to move no further. Ashembe, unwilling perhaps to leave, sank down by my side, and for some time we lay there, breathing in deep gasps and wondering whether the stone would collapse on us or a lava stream engulf us.

Neither of which happened. The dust and ashes grew round us like a black snowstorm to a depth of several inches, but the fall of stones had ceased, and we had managed to put enough distance between ourselves and the eruption to avoid the lava streams. After an hour or so of rest, we set out again, moving cautiously and regulating our direction by the “boshee,” but making a wide circuit around the scene of the eruption. We reached the edge of the swamp dead beat at a point not at all resembling that where we had left our car. . . .

Both of us snatched a little food and fell asleep like dead men, not troubling to remove our suits. The air of even the small space of the car was wonderfully good after ten or twelve hours in the constricted quarters of the atotta garments. I woke up stiff in every muscle.

Ashembe was already up, conducting a chemical analysis at the end of the chamber, a slight frown of concentration on his face as he worked.

“I’m hungry,” I remarked.

“Ah, so you are aroused,” my companion answered. “Your muscles feel as though ankylosed?”

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully, “but they’re stiff.”

“Apply this with care,” he said, tossing me a little box of ointment according to his directions.

“Very small quantity in gas from the crater,” he said. “I fear not large enough to use without extensive recovering process which would consume much time and mercury. Such would make the trip uneconomic and I hesitate to use.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. (The ointment stung and burned but removed all the stiffness and fatigue from my muscles.)
“What made the volcano break out like that? Are there more eruptions coming?”

“This is the very young world, like your planet or mine in an extremely early stage of history. Water not yet formed upon the surface. All is semi-fluid state underneath, with thin crust, liable to break through at any moment. It is in the state corresponding to the Archaeozoic of your scientists. Represented by oldest volcanic rocks. Very low forms of life alone exist here.”

82

“Then it will go through the course of development our world has?”

“Perhaps. Who can tell? Now all is very early; nothing but algal growths and eruptions. But I do not think it will be the same. This Venus is unfortunate. It must become always very cold at night and grow very hot in daytime. The higher forms of life, when they develop, will be more heat and cold resistant than our forms and will therefore be different.”

“Is your world so much like ours then?”

“Very much, but longer developed. Do you not wonder that I should have the same bodily form as you? This is because of the law of adaptive symmetry, which we have found to be universal. That is, similar conditions always produce similar effects.”

“And your conditions on Murashema are similar to ours? . . . By the way, this blue stuff tastes uncommonly good. What is it?”

“A protein compound, valuable as a stimulant. Yes, our conditions are similar. Our planet occupies the same relation to its star as this Venus does to your sun. But we have two moons. The geological history is much similar, however. Your own scientists have the beginnings of the correct idea that similar causes produce always similar effects.”

“How is that?”

“Do I not find in your knowledge-book and your biological book what they call ‘convergence’? Your shark, your fish, your ichthyosaur, your mosasaur, your dolphine, they all have the same outward bodily form. They all have the same mode of life and pursue the same kind of food. Many internal details are dissimilar, but they have more likenesses than dissimilarity. Your rhinoceros and your monoceratops are equally alike, though both are different to start with, like all the marine animals I have mentioned. It is because in such cases animals are coping with similar environments. That is, the life spirit is dealing with similar causes and produces similar effects.”

“I see.”

“Attend then. Your scientists have this idea. They only lack the application of it to the evolution of worlds as like individual forms. But . . . Ah, sorrow.”

I looked up.

“Not sufficient quantity of pleci in any of these gases or rocks to be of economic recovery. What now?”

“There’s another planet—” I began.

“I am aware. There is very good opportunity. We may be able to obtain pleci from the atmosphere of the sun at that distance, since pleci is very light and is driven out to high distances through radiation pressure. With no planetary atmosphere to interfere, it should be present.”

He fell silent, absorbed in thought, and after a moment or two began to work the calculating machine he had been using so much on our journey. Finally:

“There is a choice,” he said. “It is difficult. . . .”

“Yes,” I said, encouragingly.

“Three things are to be done. The first is to remain on this Venus and extract quantity of pleci from volcanic gases. Difficulty is that following such operation, we would need a necessary return to your Earth for larger supply of mercury. Also it would take a very long time, four or five of your years. Also it would be a work of danger, but all courses remaining

open have parallel dangers.

“The second course is to go on to your inner planet Mercury. How is it that metal and planet have the same name? Danger of this course is that we do not find pleci drive far enough from your sun by radiation pressure. Also there is the danger that we may land on the wrong place on this very minor planet, on the very bright side where quantity of heat would be bothersome, or very dark side, where we could not work. There is also danger that uncareful operation of this Shoraru would cause us to miss the planet entirely and throw us into your sun, then good-bye. Also that we cannot go anywhere else if fuel is all gone and pleci is unobtainable.

84

“The third course is to return to your Earth, reconstructing now Shoraru with helium power. The danger is that helium power plant would be insufficient after all to return me to Murashema, and thus I would wander for perpetual time in empty space. Not to speak of the delay. But you would arrive home.”

“I’m for the second plan. The most dangerous thing is frequently the safest,” I said boldly.

Ashembe glanced at me with approval.

“I am glad you say thus. May you be happy.” He made the formal salute of courtesy. “What then, let us depart.” And he turned to stowing away the various articles that had been taken from their racks.

If the trip from the Earth to Venus had been a bore after the novelty wore off, that from Venus to Mercury was nerve-

racking. Every possibility of destruction he had outlined was fresh and clear in my mind—and I had nothing else to think about. I hardly slept at all during the two days the trip consumed, and Ashembe, busied with computations and navigation (now become a task of extreme delicacy) was of no help at all as a companion.

It was about this time I discovered that my watch had stopped. I wound it up again and marked the minutes as we spun through the void toward what might be our last stop in the universe.

It was about thirty-six hours from the time I wound my watch when Ashembe called me to look through the screens. Spread out below us (for we had already reached the stage where we seemed to be falling down into it) I saw the panorama of the planet Mercury.

85

The surface we were approaching was on the border of night and day, like a moon at its half-moon stage. And like the moon when seen through a telescope, all the upper surface of the planet was pitted and ridged with wide, jagged rings that cast long shadows where light joined dark. Very tall must those Mercurian craters be and very rough their sides.

Toward the dark side they seemed taller than on the side facing the sun. On the solar side, indeed, there was a tendency for them to lose form and run into one another, to have less jagged and more rounded edges. The craters just at the border line resembled holes punched in the sand with a child's stick, while those over on the light side looked like the same holes after a wave has passed over them, breaking down the sharp

lines to a conformable smoothness.

VII

The ground of the planet rushed up at us with a speed I had not imagined possible. I caught a glimpse of the peak of one of the mountains flashing past, then saw Ashembe feverishly working the keys at the base of the Shoraru. There was an outburst of sound, loud even inside the car, as he fired the motors at the base, all at once, to check our too rapid progress, and right on the heels of the explosion came a shock that sent me rolling from one side to the other of the compartment. We had landed.

I picked myself up (with astonishingly little effort) and turned to speak. At that moment there came another shock that pitched me off my feet again, then a whole succession of minor bumps and the Shoraru rolled over and over, with Ashembe and me frantically clawing for some hold as it tumbled us down. It came to rest with a crash, and there was another racket over our heads. I managed to reach a sitting posture.

86

“What happened?” I asked.

“We have rolled down a declivity,” said my companion. “I fear that certain objects have fallen upon our car also, which will cause egress to become difficult.”

He turned to the screens. That at the base of the projectile showed nothing whatever. Those at the peak, to which we presently made our way up the steeply sloping side of the car, in all but one case gave the same result. From this one we could discern the edge of a rock, hazy and out of focus because of its nearness, cutting off most of the view, but leaving just space enough to show us a single star bright against the black of the heavens.

The explanation was obvious. We had struck on some insecure pinnacle or rock and the crash of our arrival had started a landslide that had carried us downhill and nearly buried the whole car under a huge pile of rock.

I looked at Ashembe in something like dismay. “Can’t you start the car and pull us out?”

“It might work serious damage to outer surface of the car which we shall need,” he said. “I think I know a better way. Come.”

We slipped into our atotta suits and Ashembe took his destructive flash, over the outlet of which he fitted a disc of translucent material. “Dispersion screen,” he commented. “This will cause the ray to have wide range like one fish-eye lens.”

At the outer door he paused. “Hearken,” he said. “When the door is opened we will be inhabitants of a vacuum. If it should prove impossible to hear me after the door is opened, I wish to say these things at present. I desire to blast the hole through these rocks. If they should cause injury to me in

falling, do not fail to close the door again, turning on the liquid air after returning to the interior compartment. You have watched me sufficiently to apprehend how to operate the car in that event. You will be able to pull it out, and by careful economy of fuel may have sufficient power to reach your Earth. Farewell.”

Before I could confess to the apprehension with which this speech filled me, he turned to the door and began to snap back the locks.

He swung it open quickly to show a pile of brown, granite-like rock glittering frostily in the reflected light of the interior. A rush of air, like a strong wind, tore at me, and even through the atotta suit I felt the nip of cold—the vast cold of space, the [\[13\]](#) absolute zero below which nothing can exist. But I had no time to notice my sensations.

Ashembe had turned his flash on the rocks and, brighter than the light of the car’s interior, the impact of it lighted up the stones for a minute in a circle at the opening.

Then they appeared to move back out of sight in a dancing circle of sparks. Instantaneously a tunnel appeared in the edges of rock. But it did not endure. With a rumble that became a thin rattle in the airless void, more rocks tumbled in upon the burning ray, to be again dissolved into nothingness as they fell. One small stone came right through, even to fall beside us on the floor of the car, a round, smooth object, its surface covered with tears of fused material where the tough granite had melted under the impact of the ray.

“How long will your flash last?” I asked, looking over Ashembe’s shoulder into the ever-deepening tunnel where solid rock was disappearing forever in a flash of sparkling light. He paid no attention, holding his instrument steadily on the circle of stone. I tapped him on the shoulder and repeated the question.

The flash went off and he turned the blank mask of the atotta helmet toward me. “Ee—ee—r,” I heard, hardly louder than a mouse’s squeak. The vacuum did cut off sound then.

The flash went on again. This time, by some freak of pressure, the overarching blocks of stone held, and we could follow the track of the flash far down into the black heart of the Mercurian mountain. Ashembe turned his weapon slightly upward, bearing on the rocks overhead. For a moment they too held, then as some key-piece dissolved in the ray came crashing down. A big block, scored to concavity down one side by the ray, rolled right in under his outstretched arm, striking him heavily on the knee and bending in one of the racks as it caromed off. Ashembe went down like a nine-pin, dropping the flash.

My eyes caught an instantaneous impression of the deadly tube swinging in a wide arch as it fell. Ashembe writhed in agony, trying to reach it to turn it off, and as he did so it cut a neat semi-circular hole through the wall of the car and bored a new tunnel into the rocks in that direction. All this happened in an instant—in the next I had the flash off and was bending over my companion with questions as to whether he was hurt, forgetting that the vacuum imposed silence upon us.

Evidently injured, he strove to rise, but could not make it, and fell back on the floor of the chamber, pointing to the inner door. I snapped back the locks and with the strength of desperation pulled him inside as though he were a doll. Fortunately I had sense enough to close the door behind me and turn on a cylinder of liquid air to make up for the atmosphere that had rushed out at us in a cloud of vapor congealing to white hoar-frost when I first opened it.

As the air filled the inner compartment, I turned to Ashembe. “Are you badly hurt?”

89

“I think that not,” was his astonishing reply. “Only a broken leg bone.”

A broken leg seemed to me no cause for cheerfulness, but as long as he thought so it was all right. With some difficulty I managed to get him through the succeeding doors into the inner compartment. Then I found why he considered it trivial.

He had me lay bare the injured member and place him on the floor of the compartment. Under his instructions I then set up one of the mercury tubes he had used in the transmutation experiments at Joyous Gard, so that it bore on the leg just where the fracture had occurred and inserted between the tube and its objective a slide I found in one of the racks. Still following his directions, I next hooked up a helium motor to the tube and then turned it on at about one-quarter speed.

When the low hum of the motor began, instead of the vivid glare that came from the tube at full speed and without the screen, it exuded a soft radiance, not unlike that of the

sensitized quartz that supplied us with light. Ashembe lay back and closed his eyes.

“Nothing more to do,” said he, “but await the reconstruction of the bone.”

“What is it and how does it operate?” I asked.

“You see what is it,” he answered. “It operates by stimulating to the high point all interior metabolic activities. The bone is set in proper position. By being held in the same position, it would knit slowly and normally. But softened emanations from the tube cause the process to take place with speed.”

That was all there was to it. When he called me, however, it was to have me turn off the motor and anoint the leg with the healing ointment that had taken the weariness from my limbs the day of our invasion of Venus. “There is some pain,” he told me, “and the ointment is merely for this purpose. Otherwise cure will care for itself. Your medical work, unlike your astronomic work, is very far behind. Your doctors do not know that natural methods of cure are always better. They have not yet attained simplicity. Drugs are very bad except for rare cases of stimulants. What is needed is something to speed up metabolic processes, which always cure if allowed to do so.”

90

The curing of the leg took three days by my watch. I say “days,” though there was no difference between day and night either within or without the car, and we were spinning around the sun on a planet which has neither day nor night and whose year lasted barely ninety earthly days. Indeed, it was not until

that period when Ashembe's leg was setting that I realized how much of an empirical creation of our earth-bound scientists is time. The screen at the top of the car revealed the same vista of blank heavens with insolently shining stars, whether it was day or night according to my watch. Events within the car flowed along the same as ever. When I was hungry I ate and when sleepy slept, but I no longer thought of regulating either eating or sleeping by the time of day. After a while, indeed, I merely kept it going and ticked off the flowing days on the flyleaf of a book to give myself something to do. I was quite uncertain of how much time I had dropped out during the journey to Venus and the intervening hours we had spent there. And, lacking any means of discovering what day or what time of day it was on Earth, I simply opened a new calendar of my own, making January 1, year 1, date from the time I wound my watch, halfway between Venus and Mercury. The dates mentioned in this account hereafter are expressed in that measurement.

Ashembe ate prodigiously during his convalescence, more than I had ever seen him eat. He explained that the heightened metabolic processes in his leg caused the difference. “The leg is living faster,” he expressed it. “If I were very sick with interior disease and had the tube turned on my whole body, it would cause me to live faster throughout and still more nourishment would be needed. You see?”

91

“Not quite.”

“Stupidity. Attend. On your planet, when you are sick, it takes you three, four weeks to recover from illness, not so? Good.

You recover because body resists illness and finally throws it off through metabolic processes. Ray tube hastens these processes, compressing three or four weeks to three or four days. You see? Consequently you need the amount of food that metabolic processes would ask for in three or four weeks.”

“Oh. It’s as if you sacrificed three or four weeks of your life in order quickly to get over being sick.”

“Yes, but one avoids the tearing down that illness always brings, thereby lengthening life. Consequently you really sacrifice nothing.”

Whatever the theory behind the method, it certainly healed the broken leg rapidly. On the fourth day from the injury (January 6, year 1) Ashembe was able to test it by taking a few tentative steps. He subjected it to further baking in the ray and on the next day was about again, though somewhat limpingly.

We had discussed at length the possibility of getting out of the rock piled above us by further use of the destructive flash and finally abandoned it as impractical. “It is evident from what I did accomplish,” said Ashembe, “that upon that side we are against the rocks of the mountain. The more we used the ray on these rocks, the more they tumbled from above upon us. We will have to blow the Shoraru out of this place by the use of motors, I highly fear. We have already wrecked the outer shell of one compartment where the ray bored through it and it would be dangerous to run chances of doing the same on the opposite side.”

He insisted on waiting two days more, giving his injured leg intermittent baths in the ray to bring it to full strength before we attempted the perilous experiment of blowing out. And then one morning he announced briskly, "Come, all is prepared for our trial."

We lay on the floor of the car side by side, but facing in opposite directions. At the word of command, we were both to turn on all the motors within reach, then turn them off again quickly so that the blow should not be so violent as to carry us clear away from the planet, whose small gravity would exert none too strong a hold on us. The impact of the first discharge of the motors, we surmised, would carry us free from our trap.

As we stretched out, Ashembe opened a cylinder of liquid atotta, and as a final safety measure cast small belts of the material around both of us, to hold us in position for the expected jerk. A moment later he gave the word. "Preparation," he said, and then "Now!"

He was half a second before me, and as he was on the lower side, I think this saved us. I felt the Shoraru give a violent lurch, turned all the keys I could reach, and then, as we swung clear with a rending crash that reverberated through even to the central car, turned them off again. The breath was knocked from my body by the shock, and, before I had recovered it, there came another and equally violent impact, and we were rolled over and over as the space ship struck again and tumbled down some peak of the planet.

For a few minutes we lay still, half-dazed by the impact.

Ashembe was the first to recover, and producing a knife from his pocket, began to cut loose the atotta belt he had cast around himself. A moment later he had me also loose, and was helping me to my feet. The Shoraru now lay on one side with a slight upward angle, and the screen at the base, which was the first we turned on, showed us a landscape of rock, a wide open plain, seamed across with deep cracks. (What if we had fallen into one? I thought. Not all our motors would have gotten us out again.)

The whole prospect was bathed in a blazing brilliance of light, a refulgence so intense that it seemed to turn the rocks on which it rested to polished metal. Far in the distance (several miles, as nearly as I could judge distances in that clear and airless void) a ring of low hills lay round the plain. We were evidently in one of those wide crater plateaus which on Mercury, as on the moon, cover the entire landscape.

93

We turned to the screens at the peak. On this side we were nearer to the ring of the crater—all around the view presented we could see mountains running away and around in the distance; very mountainous, indeed, taller than anything on Earth but the highest of the Rockies, and like the Rockies, nude of vegetation, bare and cold even in the intense sunlight. They stood out with astonishing clarity against the black star-studded nothingness of space, no interrupting atmosphere softening the grim outlines, and had it not been for the effect of perspective, even the most distant would have seemed right upon us.

The screen that lay upward above our heads revealed nothing but the now familiar background of star-studded night, now

curiously crossed and woven about with vague lines of brightness like the auroral light of Earth. But when Ashembe turned on the screen on the opposite side to the mountains, we both staggered back with a cry, for the light that entered and filled the whole chamber with a fiery radiance was more than our eyes could stand. Even indirectly we could not bear to glance at it, for we were looking directly into the eye of the sun—and such a sun! A sun hardly farther from us than the moon is from the Earth.

For a second only its light paled the quartz that illumined the chamber and then, even as Ashembe reached to turn it off, there was a snap somewhere and everything seemed to go dark. “Malediction!” cried my companion. “It has burned out the photoelectric cell.”

We hurried into our atotta suits, and after loading himself with a ray motor and two or three cylinders, Ashembe led the way cautiously to the outside of the Shoraru.

94

We found we had fallen with the wrecked outer compartment of the space ship underneath us, and the only door left to emerge by lay at the top of the car, several feet from the ground. Unburdened as I was, I led the way, and balancing with difficulty on the round, smooth surface of the outside of the ship, reached down a hand to pull Ashembe up. He glanced around for a moment as he came through, then handed me his cylinders and then dived back into the interior to return after an interval with a pliable ladder of atotta, which he fixed to the inside of the door, so that it dangled down over the smooth surface of the shell.

As I waited, I experienced a curious sensation. My back and one side were exposed to the sun as I lay on the car, and even through the insulation of the atotta suit, these began to feel uncomfortably warm. On the other hand, a shiver of cold ran through me from the opposite side, and I realized that in this atmosphereless land, wherever the sun struck, the heat was as intense as was the cold of the shadows. It was like sitting before a huge bonfire on a zero night.

We lowered ourselves down the swinging ladder, and without paying the slightest attention to the landscape (I had expected him to strike out on a journey of exploration) Ashembe set down one of his cylinders and began to rig the motor up beside it. This done, he took from the pocket of his suit a tiny apparatus like a windmill, with sails which, when unfolded, were about six inches long. This was fitted over the top of the cylinder, and to it was connected the motor. Two more cylinders were similarly treated, and when all three were connected he turned the switch sending the sails on his miniature windmills spinning merrily. Then motioning me to follow, he started back to the interior of the Shoraru.

When the entrance compartment had acquired its quota of atmosphere from a cylinder of liquid air, he explained. 95
“Pleci,” said he, “for certain exists in the outer atmosphere of your sun, and being extremely tenuous is blown outward by radiation pressure. It exists about here in very small quantity—so small that the finest of the artificial vacua you produce in your laboratories have more matter in them than there is pleci in the hereabout. But since we are so far from your sun as this, there is nothing floating about but pleci. Nothing else is so light as to be so far cast out from the sun by radiation

pressure. Therefore, we obtain pure pleci. The apparatus installed is one for concentration of the same. It produces both chemical and physical concentration [14] and the cylinders being valved, installs pleci therein. Come, we must set up more cylinders or the project is uneconomic.”

We secured several more empty cylinders (including those which had held liquid air and which had been emptied during our various trips to and from the interior of our car) and set them up in series with those first installed, each with its little windmill atop.

After that there was nothing to do but return to our interior chambers and wait. There we stayed until January 18, year 1, by my watch—a space of something less than two weeks, during which we went the round of a series of distressingly uninteresting activities; eating, sleeping, talking. To relieve the monotony of the days, I even studied mathematics.

Ashembe occupied himself with minor adjustments and construction work inside the space ship; preparations for the long jump from Mercury to wherever we were going. Motors had to be furbished up and examined for flaws; the heating arrangements for the interior of the car he went over with extreme care and in much detail, and during the last two or three days he spent every waking moment over the burned out photoelectric cell. The repair was not an entire success; the potassium of the cell had undergone a certain amount of chemical decomposition, he informed me, and he lacked both the space and the laboratory facilities to recover the pure metal from the salts that had been formed.

It was the eighteenth of January, then, when we donned our atotta suits and again made the trip to the outside. The first thing I noticed was that two of the windmills had ceased to revolve and that others were going very slowly. Ashembe's gesture was one of pure delight when he saw this, and he hurried to replace the cylinders under these windmills with others. They were filled, it appeared. The loaded cylinders were taken to the outer compartment of the car, and released into the vacant space at the bow that had held our helium fuel.

Two of the bow compartments were still filled with the gas that had borne us from the Earth, and of all the sights I saw on that singular planet I think that of the emerging helium was the most curious. In the shadow of the outer compartment it fell out, a thick, visible steam that curled along the floor, gradually rising about us to the opening above our heads. As it reached the dazzling rays of the Mercurian sun, it suddenly danced with rainbow radiance and as though blown by a strong wind (though there was no stir on that airless and lifeless planet) trailed off and away to the distant mountains.

Another month elapsed before we had gathered enough of the precious pleci to fill all the compartments at the peak of our space ship. The time was spent in eating, sleeping, studying in the interior of the car. It was no use going out on exploring expeditions. The heat and cold of the unchanging Mercurian landscape were so severe that they bit through even an atotta suit after a small period of exposure, and the long cracks across the plateau on which we had landed made any journey of exploration doubly dangerous.

I may say here for the benefit of those few who will be

interested, that the material of Mercury is an igneous rock of extremely ancient character. At the surface on the side where we landed (near the north pole of the planet and on the light side close to the edge of the dark) the impact of solar heat and the small particles of material which have been driven out from the sun by radiation pressure in the course of ages had exercised a certain erosional effect on the solid rock of the surface. A close examination of it showed it filled with minute pits and bubbles and at times, stepping on an apparently solid piece of stone, one would sink ankle deep in the crumbling material. To complete the picture, a thick coating of dust lay over everything, dust a foot or two deep. Mercury, from my one view of it, is certainly not a place I would care to visit again—a shell of a world, wrecked and rotten, spoiled in the making. A melancholy place. . . .

VIII

At this point in Schierstedt's manuscript, several sheets apparently are missing, so that we skip abruptly from the opening sentence, "We left Mercury late in February of my year 1 . . ." to the middle of a statement by Ashembe, ". . . and we are now in the region of your planet Jupiter." He continues, "I calculate that when we arrive just beyond the radius of your planet Uranus, we will be far enough from your sun's gravitational attraction to make the turn toward Murashema and put on the full power of the motors. That will be in about two hundred seventy or more of your days—about nine of your months."

From internal evidence, as the reader will see at the close of the manuscript, Schierstedt's story was concluded in considerable haste; but this alone does not seem to account for such lacunae as this one. I can only conjecture that the missing pages contained Ashembe's explanation to Schierstedt of the exact location of Murashema, and that it was decided not to allow this information to reach Earth. However, this is only conjecture on my part. 98

Appalling prospect—nine months of travel through the void toward nothing at all, merely to reach a point where we could turn around and begin our real journey. I murmured

something inarticulate.

“Far from some difficult as it appears,” said Ashembe, guessing at my thought. “After we once turn around toward Murashema, speed will rapidly become high. Perceive by what I have told you. When we turn on full power of motors, this is sufficient to represent an acceleration of 200 kilometers per second. In twenty-five minutes, we will arrive at the speed of light. In seven hours from that time, we will arrive at sixteen times the speed of light. That is the highest speed we dare to obtain even in empty space as gravitational attraction of unexpected dark bodies might draw us from the course without opportunity for rectification, and at speed beyond this, rectification would become impossible.

“If we maintained the above speed, would reach Murashema in one year eight months of your time. It will take slightly longer, as when we arrive at such speed we will very soon be necessary to produce slow negative acceleration to arrive within the gravitational field of Murashema at proper speed for navigating interplanetary space.”

He looked at me and perceived that further explanations were needed.

“When we turn toward Murashema,” he continued, “we must point the Shoraru directly at the same sun. You perceive? Our planet being dark and therefore not visible, all we can do at this extreme distance is to point at the sun. Very good, then. If we approach the sun of Murashema at extreme speed of sixteen times speed of light, what then? Add this to gravitational attraction, and we would charge right into the

sun with crash. Therefore we must slow down soon after we reach the peak of speed, allowing us to make the proper turn in direction when we reach the Murashema system. Now do you perceive?”

It was all very complicated. I never did have a good head for mathematics and the abstract (and abstruse) sciences that are based upon it. If he could only explain the whole business simply to me, I thought. One thing did stick in my gullet, however, and that was the statement that it would take another nine months or so to reach the limits of the solar system and two years beyond that to reach Murashema. Three years in that miserable little world of a Shoraru with nothing to do!

[15]

Good Lord what a prospect!

In the days and months that followed, however, I discovered unplumbed possibilities of occupation within myself. Without any natural capacity for mathematics, I studied the subject as a matter of necessity and to keep from going mad. To my surprise, I found I was making considerable progress. Long before we reached Murashema I was able to make independent checks on some of Ashembe’s calculations, much to the delight of my companion.

100

During those early days of our progress through the solar system, Ashembe initiated me more and more deeply into the mysteries of the three dimensional chess he had shown me

[16]

back at Joyous Gard. . . .

After the early stages, in which Ashembe was kept constantly warning me against this or that indiscretion, I began to hold

my own to a certain extent, even in winning an occasional victory. But these, I regret to say, were usually in cases where my defense proved unexpectedly stubborn, and Ashembe, losing interest, would deliberately make injudicious moves to get the thing over with.

Ashembe, of course, had the tensal helmet.

101

Occasionally he would have me read to him from some of the mathematical books, but more often he would put on the helmet, touch some of the keys, and drop off to sleep. He informed me that in addition to being an educational device, it was a radio receiving set of a power higher than anything we had on Earth, and by manipulating it properly, he was able to tune in on broadcasts from Murashema, although he could not transmit messages. The transmission apparatus was one of the things he had intended to build back at Joyous Gard, but he had been deprived of any such possibility by the sudden raid of the police.

My own distrust of the apparatus probably kept me from much knowledge that would have been useful on our journey and afterward. But to bolster that distrust, I had Ashembe's hesitancy to let me use the instrument. "I am not certain of your mental quality," he told me frankly. "At some times you have the good mind, at others you appear more like the mentality of a low manual laborer. If your mentality is not actually high, the tensal will do you more harm than otherwise by abandoning part of the control of your mind. It is as I have said of those with small criminal tendencies on Murashema. If much knowledge were stuffed into your head by means of the tensal, you might become nothing but manual laborer with plenty of useless knowledge. You are a special

case, unlike our own people. I would not really recommend it, although you may attempt it if you desire.”

And so we rushed onward through space to the point where we would turn back and make for Murashema at a speed impossible for the ordinary man even to imagine. Saturn was on the other side of the sun ^[17] just double the radius of its orbit distant from us and my hope of seeing at close range the rings one sees in every picture of the planet was vain.

But we passed Uranus fairly close, though the angle with the ecliptic at which we were traveling made it appear below and behind us at the very moment when we made the great turn. There it lay, clearly bigger and brighter than any of the stars, a sea-green demi-lune of light, magnified to impressive size in the telescope, with the two inner moons close by tugs around an ocean liner. The color of the huge planet pulsed and moved as though internal convulsions of intense fierceness were agitating it. Ashembe shivered a little as he pointed it out. 102

“A dead world,” he pronounced. “You see the movement upon the planetary surface? At the temperature of this planet all known substances are at least liquids, even hydrogen and pleci, and there is constant chemical interchange between substances that are chemically inert gases in our worlds. You know, of course, that advances in temperature up to a certain time promote chemical activity, but soon arrive at the point where chemical combinations will not form, as in the suns?”

I said I had heard something of the kind.

“Good, then, the gases of our atmospheres at the temperatures of our worlds are at temperatures too high to permit of chemical combination except in cases of unusual excitement. Upon this planet (he indicated the careening ball of sea-green) all the gases have sunk to temperatures where chemical combinations are normally possible. Activity is intense.”

“But,” I asked, “might there not be forms of life suited to such conditions?”

“A thought,” he said, “that has occurred to our philosophers, and promotes discussion, as does also the question of whether there are forms of life able to exist at high temperatures like those of the suns. But if there are such forms of life, they are imperceptible to any of our senses. So, for practical purposes they do not exist.”

I do not remember the rest of this conversation on life exactly, and my diary for the date is silent on the point.

103

The reason is, no doubt, that it was that same afternoon that Ashembe, after making careful observations from all the screens, shut off the power at the base of the car except for one motor, which was turned to its full strength, the motor at the bow being turned on simultaneously.

Through the screens I watched the stars, expecting to see them swing in a slow, wide arc as our craft swung around and squared away for the long trip to Murashema. On the contrary there was no visible change.

It was not, indeed, till several hours later, when I had returned from a nap, that I could see any change at all, and then only a

tiny one—less than takes place in the heavens during a single hour of night on Earth. “Aren’t we making the turn?” I asked.

“Certainly,” was Ashembe’s cheerful reply. “Do you not notice the difference? We are going at high speed, but we have already swung three degrees, thirty-six minutes of the arc. That is quite sufficient speed of turning to carry us in the correct direction.”

With this encouraging comment, he plunged back again into the maze of observational instruments and calculating machines, and for the whole of the next six or seven days I could draw little from him.

It was not until January 6, year 2, that he at last laid down his calculating machine with a sigh, and turned the rest of the base motors on, one by one, shutting off the one at the bow that had been the brake on our progress. “All is complete for the present,” he said, and then, pointing to the picture of a bright and brilliant star near the base of one of the bow screens, asked, “Do you know what that star is?”

There was nothing remarkable about it except its unusual brightness. “Neptune?” I guessed, “or Sirius?”

“Not either. That same star is your sun.”

104

I gave a cry of surprise. “So far away already?”

“Ah, you forget. We have now practically escaped from its gravitational attraction. Your sun moves through space at a rapid rate. We also now move through space at a rapid rate in a direction nearly opposite. Therefore we achieve a great

distance of separation.”

We were launched at last on the wilderness of interstellar space.

IX

The months that followed were divided almost evenly between periods of intense labor and periods of intense boredom. Every ten hours we took observations (I soon learned to assist Ashembe in this work), made calculations of speed, distance and direction, and translated them into action by cutting off the power of the motors on this side or that.

This done (it was far more arduous than it sounds) there was nothing left but study or amusement with Ashembe's three-dimensional chess-board. More and more I came to wonder at his mental equipment. For something over two years he had been shut up alone in a narrow car the duplicate of this, practically without occupation, on a voyage not toward his home, but to an unknown destination, whose terrors he could only guess at, and from which he ran about an even chance of never returning at all. He had come through that ordeal with sanity and cheerfulness unimpaired, and now here he was debonair and happy, attempting a second such leap.

Some time after we made the turn, Ashembe announced that as the fuel in the outer shell was exhausted, he would cut it loose. He scrambled into his atotta suit, and taking the destructive flash, let himself through the inner compartments. Within an hour he was back, bidding me look through the

screen at the base.

I saw a dark object of uncertain shape fitfully outlined against the stars behind us, following on with a velocity but little less than our own.

105

“The outer shell,” I was told.

The acceleration by this time was approaching the dizzy heights predicted by Ashembe at the beginning of the trip, and one day, after making his observations, he stepped briskly to the motors at the base of the projectile and turned them all off, announcing that we had reached a speed sufficient to carry us the rest of the way without further acceleration.

In those hours of spinning down the grooves of space, a miniature universe in ourselves, motorless and silent, I learned how false were all my ideas of interstellar travel. In the scientific romances of Jules Verne, in the lunar adventure tales of H. G. Wells and of their successors, it is only sufficient for the painstaking scientist to construct a space car. As if by magic he is whisked from one world to another and plunges at once into a set of new and thrilling adventures. I have never found in one of them a word of the intense boredom of such travel, besides which the accumulated boredoms of Earth are as nothing.

In the romances, the space traveler passes his time agreeably enough. He is entertained by the glittering conversation of his companions, by dazzling scientific explanations of what he had thought impossible, by sights and sounds and wonders of the universe beyond the Earth. (An exceptionally crowded

universe it is, too, in the books.) Forgive me for insisting upon the point, but nothing could be more inaccurate. I set it down because the point deserves emphasis.

I have recorded here practically every word of importance that passed between us, omitting only such matters as “Please pass some more of that green stuff. It isn’t bad,” and “Well, p equals 4.74 times v prime minus v , divided by V sine lambda, doesn’t it?” Aside from these minutia of our everyday life and the conversation that centered around cubical chess, there was absolutely nothing to talk about. Subjects for conversation were as lacking as they would be in a shack in the Arctic Circle, and talk as infrequent. One is almost totally thrown in upon one’s own resources. Imagine the few scraps of conversation of which I have given examples, lasting two human beings for the whole duration of three years!

106

As for sights and sounds, there were none. The sight of the blazing stars on their velvet background, so impressive when first seen on the voyage between the earth and Venus, had become a monotony to which I paid no more attention than did Ashembe. We were now long since beyond the system of any sun; there was no remotest possibility of collision with planet or meteor; in fact, we reached the stage where we would have welcomed the spice of danger as a relief from the all-embracing ennui of existence in that circular apartment of seven rooms with its soft lights and eternal sameness.

All things have an end, however, even interstellar travel. The screens at the bow began to show the star toward which we were traveling larger and larger on our sight till it stood out

sharp and bold. Now there came a day when Ashembe finished his observations by turning on the bow motor, checking down our run before we should enter the system of Murashema.

And now, as we drew in upon the Murasheman sun, our calculations showed that though our velocity was only a little short of that of light itself, the bow motor was cutting it down at the rate of twenty kilometers every second, and Ashembe had finally to turn it off lest we approach too slowly.

It was July of my year 3 when we really began to drift into the outer limits of the system of Murashema, with all motors silent, swinging along at a furious pace, with our inertia to drive us. I remember well my first view of a Murasheman planet, gained through the bow screens as we bore down upon it from a distance; a round, green object like some huge melon, larger and darker than was Uranus, when we had passed it on our outward voyage from the Earth.

107

“Radil,” Ashembe called it, as we made our observations and by means of it calculated our velocity and direction more closely than we could by using the stars. They showed that we were still moving too rapidly—or perhaps that the Murasheman sun had begun to exercise some gravitational pull, for immediately after the observation we had to turn on the bow motor again and check down our speed.

Immense though the distances are in the system, as in ours, they are as choked with the chances of collision as a crowded street compared with the blank space through which we had been traveling. In September we passed a second planet,

larger than Radil, lighter in color, and attended by a caracolling flock of moons of all sizes; at least eleven or twelve of them there must have been, some small and barren, like Mercury, showing their craggy character in the faint light, some larger and, like the planet itself, lost in sea-green obscurity.

October, November and December whirled by as we passed slowly through the Murasheman system, losing speed against the day of our landing. Twice more we passed planets, one a large, cold and lifeless orb like Radil of the outer planets or our own Uranus, and the other, smaller and more like the earth in size and makeup, but long since sunk in the death-silence that ultimately awaits every world.

“It is the outermost of the once-habitable planets,” he said. “About as far from our sun as your Jupiter. But it is useless to do with. Our explorers have encountered it much. Even I have been there. Long ago it lost nearly all atmosphere, and liquids on its surface are frozen. It contained life once, however. We find many fossils and some few ruins. It is a planet of the otherwise proper type for the development of men, but unfortunately too far away from the sun.”

X

Murashema I first saw as a silver crescent early in April of the year 4; silver on black. It was pointed out to me by Ashembe with the nearest approach to emotion I ever saw him show.

We plunged along now with the bow motor always and one of those at the base generally going, correcting our course by small degrees to this side or that to bring the space ship to Murashema at the right point.

To reduce the speed at which we would enter the planet's atmosphere, our course had been turned so that we swung in behind it along the line of its orbit, so we should overtake it. Even then, as we bore down on this new world below us, we could detect a quickening of motion as we came within the [\[18\]](#) predominating influence of the planet's gravity. Only half of it was in the light from our point of view, and the light seemed less vigorous and redder than that of our own sun, though the computations, which I was by now competent to make, showed us that Murashema lay nearer its sun than Earth does to ours. Taken by and large, the planet also showed considerably less space given to ocean and considerably more of the yellow-brown streakings that Ashembe had taught me were due to deserts.

A few hours more and the planet had lost the form of a ball; the horizon was rising about us, and the edge of light where the day struck drawing away from us. The bow motor had been turned to nearly full speed to soften the inevitable shock of the fall to Murashema's surface, and now cast a huge plume of sparkling light across the picture on the screen. A little farther and the sparks changed color as we penetrated the atmosphere, and then, abruptly, they died away and fell altogether silent. Ashembe looked at me. "Out of fuel," was his brief comment. We had made Murashema, but with nothing to spare.

Our penetration of the denser layers of air announced itself by a loud hissing sound on the outside and a series of quick, disturbing jerks. The point of the projectile had long since become our floor as we entered Murashema's gravitational field, but the effect was now redoubled, and for the first time in many months I felt that there was something solid beneath my feet. The jerking increased; so did the hissing from the outside of the car, and Ashembe looked anxiously about him. In spite of the repeated layers of atotta that lined the machine and its chambered construction, it began to grow warm within.

I went to turn on the screen, but my companion stopped me. "Useless," he said. "The heat of passage through this atmosphere has already sufficiently corroded the outer layers to make vision impossible." I wondered how much farther we would have to go before landing, and as I wondered, with a shock that threw me halfway up the car and back again with a savage jounce, we struck.

When I had picked myself up and a cursory examination showed that none of my bruises were of a serious character, I began at once to climb toward what had been the base of the car with the idea of getting out at once. Ashembe restrained me with the comment that I would lose no more than my life by emerging in the present heated state of the exterior, and I desisted. A moment later there was a violent explosion.

“What is it?”

110

“Part of one of the outer shells,” said Ashembe. “Under the extreme heat and pressure of progress through the atmosphere, the outer shells melt and while in this state absorb gases. The gases are now emitted with violence.”

So, unwillingly on my part, and calmly on his, we made our beds in the central chamber—the first time we had done so. Like a child on Christmas morn, I found difficulty in going to sleep, and when I did, dreamed lively dreams that kept me alternately waking and dozing all night. Oh, to be out in the air again! When I finally could sleep no more, I sat up. Ashembe was sitting beside me, but my watch showed that only five hours had passed.

“Can we go out now?” I asked. He shook his head, and for another fifteen hours we stood or sat around the interior of the car, avid with excitement, waiting for it to cool enough to permit egress.

At last Ashembe rose, and taking down his atotta suit, began to put it on. “Do we need the suits?” I asked, scrambling into my own, so as not to be left behind.

“Perchance we will need to use the ray for escaping,” he answered, “and the heat developed in this small space would be highly discomforting until we succeeded in obtaining egress.”

And seizing the instrument mentioned in one hand, he began to climb the racks to the door, with me close behind him. It shot back readily enough, but as we emerged into the second chamber, we saw at once evidences of the terrific forces that had played on our space ship as it rushed through the Murasheman atmosphere. The next door outward sagged to one side as though it had been made of clay and damaged in the making, and all round its edges an ooze of little black bubbles of fused metal had broken through the atotta lining, scorching and searing it where they had passed. Toward the peak of the car (now the bottom) the atotta was everywhere bulged and pitted and in some places burned clean through by fires fiercer than the heat of the sun on Mercury. At one place near the peak, indeed, there was evidently a hole right through the side of the vessel, for clean white sand had poured through the gap into a little cone against the side of the chamber. Most of the wall racks were twisted out of shape by the sagging of the walls and several had parted from their moorings.

Testing his footing as he went, Ashembe worked his way around the walls and when he reached the point where the door still stood in its distorted frame, began to work on its edges with his flash ray. 111

A glow of light, like that from an electric welding machine, filled the chamber and a rain of bright sparks ran down. Evidently the atotta lining of the shell was high in resisting

power, for it was some moments before Ashembe, working slowly, was able to make even a narrow slit.

Ten minutes more and the door was free on three sides. Ashembe switched off his flash, made a vain effort to move it, and bent to his work again.

At last he got the thing so loose that it hung only by a thread of metal, and reaching up he gave it a vigorous blow. It fell with a thud outside somewhere, and the opening was immediately blocked by Ashembe's body as he clambered through. I was after him in less time than it takes to tell it.

Once outside, we had a five-foot drop to the ground, Ashembe catching me neatly to break the force of the fall as I made it. Silently we stripped off the atotta suits and then for the first time I was able to look about me.

The ground beneath my feet seemed all sand, in which I sank almost to the ankles. We were among sandy dunes on a flat plain, gently rolling away to the distance where there was a vista of purple-hazed hills. All about was a low forest of scrub, just a little taller than a man and appearing very open until one tried to see through it to a distance, when it became evident that the trees stood much closer than they seemed at first. The sand seemed universal—white, soft and fine, and our space ship stood half buried in it.

112

It was twilight. The whole landscape was suffused by the slow light of dying day, and a monstrous ruddy sun was just sinking from sight behind the range of hills in the distance. I turned round and saw the same landscape of rolling levels and

scrub forest, unrelieved, save by the monstrous form of the Shoraru.

Ashembe stood at gaze with me for a moment. Then, reaching down to the pocket of his atotta suit for the destructive flash, he stepped over to one of the dwarfed trees, and in a moment cut it down. Dragging it back to the car, he set it against the side, and motioning me to come on, said, “Quick. We must return within at once.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“This is the hunting land,” he replied briefly, fixing the point of his improvised ladder in the ground and offering me a hand to help me up. [\[19\]](#)

XI

He shook off my inquiries, hurrying to get into the interior chamber again and snap shut the locks on the door. Then he turned to me.

“This is a hunting ground,” he repeated, a bit out of breath. “It is very dangerous and unfortunate that we should land herein.”

“Why is it dangerous and why is it unfortunate that we should land here? Wild animals?”

“A few. But these are far from the chief danger. The danger is from men.”

“From men! Is your part of this planet at war with the rest, or do you still have savages on Murashema?”

“Not so. We have no savages. These are the young men in training. The substitute for armed combat. Every explorer has to pass through it as part of his training course. It is an evolutionary process.”

I remained dense.

“Attend,” said Ashembe patiently. “On your planet you have

many different groups of men under different governments, not so? Between these governments there are always wars. This creates tumult and disturbances and kills off many people. Your philosophers recognize that this should not be so and seek to abolish all wars. On this planet we have long ago arrived at this stage. There is only one government and one language. No wars, no, not one.”

“Very good for you,” said I, “but what has that to do with it?”

“Permit me to say. You fight your wars with scientific apparatus which is unselective. The best men in your world might as easily be killed in wars as the worst.”

“True,” I admitted, “and that’s what’s the matter with war. You don’t mean to tell me that you wish to justify it as an institution?”

114

“No. We know this. However, your people do not carry their knowledge to the logical conclusion.

“We have passed through the similar stages. Our scientists decided that something was necessary to produce an effect of selection, an elimination of the unfit. Hence, we have the hunting grounds, of which this is it.”

“But what’s the point? What is a hunting ground, and how does it help?”

“This is one. They are certain districts of the planet where the agricultural value is small. Forestation is allowed to occur on them and they are stocked with various animals which run wild. They are of very large extent.

“Every young man or woman of the Bodrog class, when he arrives at seventeen years of age or a germane period, is turned loose in them and furnished with primitive weapons.

“From the time he is admitted to the hunting ground, the young man is not allowed to emerge for five years of your time. It is permitted for him to make certain studies if he cares to take the handicap of instruments of study along with his weapons and tools. For all other matters, his dependence is totally upon himself. The young men and women are under no restraint. They may do as they choose. If there are others of the same class they wish to kill, it is not imputed a crime. They may hunt for a living or engage in agriculture, if they think they can do this without others raiding and stealing their crops. They may form into associations. No one guides them. Upon emerging after their period is up, their rank in society depends upon how they have accomplished the period in the hunting ground. It supplies also an excellent evolutionary process, as only two-thirds of them survive.”

“But, what if they don’t wish to enter the hunting ground?”

“Very good, they cannot belong to the Bodrog or even the Davex. In youth, every child is subjected to a scientific determination for intellectual quality. Those of certain grades of intellect are named as Bodrogs, and unless they object, are turned into the hunting grounds. According to their conduct there, they receive different work when they come out. Those who form groups or associations, for instance, being appointed political administrators. Some few of the Davex, who are our scientists, also come from here. Those who do not enter the hunting ground or who are barred

from it by previous determination are shut out of upper employments and are not allowed to have more than two children.”

“Did you go through a hunting ground?”

“Most certain. Is not my name Bodrog? But I am of the Fotas class, which is explorer. During my period in the hunting ground, I stayed almost altogether alone and wandered about from place to place. Hence, I am a Fotas.”

The shadow of a problem rose in my mind. “Did you say that girls were turned loose in the hunting ground as well as men?”

“Certainly. Women are in all professions.”

“What if . . . that is, suppose—do they ever join with any of the men?”

“Oh, you mean do they ever have children? Certainly. If they have children while in the hunting ground, the responsibility is their own. But in cases where it happens, the mother is nearly always of a high type fitted for a lofty administrative or scientific position, and receives due credit for her courage.”

“Did you say that nothing was done to those who kill others while in the hunting ground?”

“Certainly not. Before going to the hunting ground, as I already say, they are examined for all criminal tendencies. In the hunting ground everything is lawful. Merely a stage in development of the individual. Our

scientists only want to know how each occupies his time in the hunting ground.”

“How do you make certain you do know?”

“All persons tell the truth. Of what use to do otherwise? Of course, all young men are taught to know the truth only will avail them, and besides we have the truth serum. One application and it becomes impossible for the individual to do otherwise than tell the truth.”

I stretched. “All very interesting,” I said, “but I’m hungry. Let’s have something to eat. How soon before we will dare to go out?”

“In the morning,” said Ashembe. “I am uncertain how far we are from the borders of the hunting ground. We will have to make instrumental calculation. It may be long journey. There are always those in the hunting ground who will attempt to secure from us whatever we possess.”

“What about your destructive ray? Isn’t that weapon enough to protect us?”

He laughed, a trifle grimly. “You do our people insufficient credit. Some young men and women in the hunting ground are very clever at laying ambush. We would not have the chance to use the ray, if caught. Moreover, the use of the ray-flash in the hunting ground is contrary to regulation. I am unable to do so.”

“I should think there would also be regulations against attacking returning explorers,” I said.

“Wherefore? Explorers of the Bodrog Fotas are supposed to be able to care for themselves. To impose regulations of such a kind would be the beginning of destroying the whole spirit of the hunting ground. There is no regulation in the hunting ground.”

“Didn’t you just say there was a regulation against using modern weapons?”

“The law is against bringing them to the hunting ground. Since we are here with the Shoraru, it is considered a small spot of territory belonging to the rest of Murashema.”

“Oh. But won’t someone else on Murashema have seen you landing, and be sending expeditions?”

117

“Not expeditions. I am an explorer, as I repeatedly say. I am supposed to aid myself. Pause.” He dug out his tensal helmet, snapped some keys in it and put it on. An hour later, he rose. “The landing has been perceived, but they do not know it is I. There are always many Shoraru traveling here and there. They are awaiting report and conjecture that my sending apparatus is damaged. Nothing further to do.”

[20]

XII

The Murasheman day is only about twenty-one hours in length, and as the planet's orbit is more nearly circular than Earth's and the axial inclination less, both days and seasons have greater regularity than ours. In something near ten hours, I should judge, Ashembe led the way to the door of the space ship again, and we crawled through into the wrecked outer chamber, where he paused long enough to seal the inner door with the welding flash, before taking a cautious look around outside.

Our improvised ladder still stood against the side of the space ship, to my eyes, just as we had left it, but Ashembe frowned as he looked it over in the pale cold light that just precedes the rising of the sun. "We are found," he said in a whisper, looking intently at the ground nearby. "See," he pointed. I could make out nothing but a little depression in the sand which might have been a heel mark made when the tree was set against the side of the car. 118

"Print of a sling base," said my companion. "The comer has covered footprints but forgotten this. Here!"

He handed me a knife with a narrow six-inch blade, made in one piece with a metal handle. "Made it during the night," he said. "Quickly, descend the tree. I will cover your descent."

Producing a knife, the mate in all respects of the one he had handed me, he balanced himself just inside the door with the weapon ready in his hand for throwing.

I had begun to realize that the danger was perfectly genuine and imminent, and I slid down the tree at the cost of some scratches with the weapon firmly clutched in my fist. Nothing happened. My feet struck the sand with a soft plud! I picked myself up and looked around. A few branches were stirring gently in the light air of morning; that was all. No sound; no other motion.

A moment more and Ashembe stood beside me. He looked around briefly, and motioned me wordlessly to follow him. Imitating his motions, I bent low, and ran rapidly behind him into the scrub, straight ahead for a short distance, then back along the way we had come, and off to the right a little way from our path to a clump of stubby trees. "Cut down two straight trees," Ashembe whispered, balancing his knife for throwing, "while I prepare the footprints."

Still no sound or motion from the scrub. Under the direction of my companion I hacked down, cut the limbs from and smoothed into staves a couple of the short, pinelike trees. I noted the thickness of the bark and the softness of the wood where I cut into it. Ashembe, returning from his business, looked them over critically, and drew from his pocket two long and broad metal points, with sockets at their bases. At the side of the socket, each had an ingenious screw arrangement to hold the head firmly to the shaft. He fixed these heads on the staves I had cut, hefted and balanced them, and then cut an inch or two off one. They made not

unsatisfactory javelins.

By now I had become contemptuous of the promised terrors of the hunting ground. Surely, if we were to be set upon, the most defenseless moment when we emerged from the Shoraru would have been the time.

A huge red sun popped suddenly above the low mountains in the east, flooding the shrub with light. It was all very delicious—light, open air, green things around. We were home at last. I turned to say something to Ashembe, and just as I turned, he gripped my arm quickly, pulling me down beside him to a crouching position and pointing in the direction of our vehicle.

Its top was clearly visible above the thicket, not far away, the rays of the dawn-sun picking out the pits and scars of the surface. I could see nothing unusual, but as I looked, there was the sudden sound of a clanging blow—of metal striking metal. Ashembe pulled me by the arm, motioning me to follow, and crawled on hands and knees away from the clump where we had made our weapons in the direction we had come. The clanging blow on the Shoraru was repeated; my companion halted by another clump of trees and peered cautiously through the branches. I watched with him. Nothing.

Again the sound of the blow, and among the branches I thought I detected something that had not been there before. A moment later I was certain—a man was cautiously following our trail into the scrub. He looked young; was dressed in a jerkin of dark leather, sleeveless and stained in

weird markings by some woodland dye. On his head was a close-fitting Phrygian cap of the same material and his legs bore pliable buskins. At his belt, a hand-axe swung and over his shoulder a quiver. He was carrying a bow, with arrow astring, and moving slowly, peering from this side to that.

The enemy! I thought, and drew back my arm to test my new javelin on him. But Ashembe, before I could throw, grasped me by arm and body, pulling me flat on my face behind the trees. I dared to lift my head and caught a glimpse of the hunter. He had turned, and stood with drawn arrow pointing in our direction, eagerly watching for the source of whatever whisper of sound had reached him. 120

As I watched, another man, dressed like the first, and like him, armed with a bow, but carrying also a round shield slung over his shoulder, appeared soundlessly not twenty feet away from us on our side of the trail as though he had risen from the ground. The first Bowman relaxed his tension on the string and made a rapid series of motions with one hand; the other turned and looked in our direction—right in my eyes apparently—then turned back and himself moved a hand rapidly. I saw why Ashembe had kept me from throwing the javelin.

A moment more of this silent colloquy and the newcomer vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared, while the questing Bowman turned again to the trail. From the left, the clanging sound of another blow on the Shoraru rang out again.

We lay in our covert for perhaps two hours more. After a time

the sound of the blows on the side of the car ceased and we saw one of the hunters among the trees as he glided silently back along our trail, his face wearing an expression of cold and intense thoughtfulness. At last Ashembe, moving slowly and holding his body low, started out motioning me to follow him.

He led across the intervening space to the trail, where there were now two series of footsteps mingled with our own, and stepping carefully, so that his feet should fall in the same tracks as before, began to lead down it. Every few moments he paused, listening intently. It was not till he reached the place where we had turned aside, that he let out a long breath, and stepped out briskly, moving away from the car. 121

He set a killing pace and at the end of an hour I was forced to grab his arm and whisper that I wished to halt. He smiled, "All right," and then in an ordinary voice, "I think we have outdistanced pursuit for the moment. Let us have to eat."

We dined on some of the concentrated foods from the Shoraru, and after a brief rest, set out again at the same rapid pace as before. The sun grew warm. Unused to exercise, I tired easily, and it was not long before I was again calling for a halt. Ashembe spared me as much as possible during that day's journey, but for all that, it was a nightmare to me. I was never so heartily glad as when, with the sun westering, Ashembe turned round, led me back along the trail we had made and off to one side as before, returning to obliterate the footprints that marked our divagation.

The landscape had changed not at all. Twice we crossed the beds of small streams, deep-cut to reddish rock amid the sandy soil. For the rest there was only an infinitude of the pine-like trees, and low rolling sandy ground. Our camp was pitched a few paces back from the edge of one of the little canyons where a stream ran. From it we secured water for drinking and washing, one of us dipping it up while the other watched from concealment on the bank above, javelin in hand. When our meal was finished, Ashembe cut down another of the trees, and working with some care and many pauses to measure the result, began to shape it into something or other. It became distinctly chilly; my request for a fire was refused with a mere shake of the head, and when I dozed off to sleep, it was from sheer weariness.

I was wakened by the pressure of Ashembe's hand on my shoulder. The night was extraordinarily bright; I could make out his features clearly in the light of the stars, and he had a finger laid on his lips to enjoin silence as I rose. He pointed off in the direction I took to be north and I dimly perceived a faint, ruddy glow somewhere there. As silently, he motioned me to gather up my few belongings and follow, and set off through the brush, following the line of the stream a little back from its verge.

122

I was staggering sleepy, but I toiled after him, wondering what all this meant. We had traveled about twenty minutes and must have covered nearly a couple of miles with the red glow growing stronger all the time, when he halted so suddenly that I ran into him. After a second of listening he dropped to his hands and knees; I imitated him and we began to crawl toward the bank of the stream, pausing every time a

twig snapped. I heard nothing. He came to a halt behind a clump of trees, holding out a restraining hand to keep me from making unnecessary noise. I still heard nothing, but a moment later my ears caught the sound of a pebble, rolled by a careless foot, and then a low gurgle of laughter. Shadowy forms became apparent in the canyon below.

There were four of them, following the stream toward its mouth; first one man alone, then three in a group, all heavily loaded. I expected Ashembe to spring out, but he remained perfectly silent until they were past.

Then, with his lips close to my ear, he whispered, "No more. We will pursue. I will take the first one." And without further explanation, he began to work his way along the bank. I followed, my heart in my mouth.

We were not long in overtaking them. The canyon made a bend away at a point not far below, and Ashembe led me across the tongue of land at a rapid gait. We ensconced ourselves at the edge of the bank and a moment later I could make out the form of the first picking his way among the rocks, and then the other three. Without a sound Ashembe rose to one knee, balanced his javelin carefully, and flung it straight down into the form of the leader.

123

The man gave a curious strangled cry and tumbled into a heap with a clash of metal, as I flung my own weapon at the next fellow. Ashembe leaped down the bank with a shout; I followed him and things resolved into a haze of conflict. I was struggling with a burly chap who had dropped an armload of something and was struggling to get a sword from its

scabbard. I realized I had missed him and without trying to pick up the javelin, flung myself upon his arm. He let go the hilt abruptly, swinging me half round, and as I tripped over the things he had dropped, swung his foot up in a glancing kick, which was stout enough to throw me sprawling. I saw him draw the blade and take a stride, but before he could do more, he was jerked backward from behind. My clutching fingers caught a loose stone; I threw it as I rose, and though it only caught him on the chest, it took him off balance again, and I dived forward in a football tackle before he could swing his weapon, catching him around the knees and taking him cleanly off his feet.

We went down together. I was on top, but as we fell, someone else landed on my back, screaming rapid, unintelligible words in Murasheman. I let go my man's legs and rolled free, catching at the javelin where it stood in the ground; missed it; clutched again, successfully, and struggled to my feet. My two adversaries lay on the ground, engaged in combat, the big fellow underneath trying to get loose the hand that held the sword. I suddenly grasped the idea that the other was a friend and flung myself into the combat again, pinning the big man's hands just as he managed to work free. I heard the slap of his blade as it struck the other chap sidelong; he said something quickly, the big man bellowed, and as though despairing of my comprehension, my ally thrust close to my face a pair of hands bound together with leather thongs.

I shifted position to bring the big man under me, holding him down with difficulty. The prisoner began to rub his bonds frantically against the edge of the sword, and I heard a clash of arms behind that told me Ashembe was

busy. The big man gave a heave that threw me on my side. I clutched him desperately, but at that moment the prisoner won free, snatched up the javelin and calmly and accurately plunged it into the throat of the man who was now trying to down me. He gripped me convulsively for a second, then went limp and something warm and wet hit me under the chin. I felt ill, but struggled unsteadily to my feet in time to see Ashembe's opponent making off down the canyon and my friend making toward the recent prisoner with arm drawn back to strike.

“Don't!” I called. “He's with us!” Ashembe lowered his blade and came over to us.

“Quickly,” he said to me, rummaging among the articles our adversaries had dropped. “We must go. Here.”

He was extending to me a sword, a bow and some packages. I bundled them together and followed him up the bank of the canyon and off into the low forest. Our newfound friend came with us wordlessly.

I was ready to drop with fatigue and sleepiness. But Ashembe led on remorselessly through the clutching branches and it was not for a good hour that he halted at all, flinging down his load and motioning me to do likewise. We were in a circular clearing, with trees all around it, and I didn't even bother to pull branches for a bed; simply sank to sleep, utterly worn out.

The sun, striking down through the trees, woke me at last. I urged my aching limbs to a sitting posture and

saw Ashembe and our new friend sitting on the ground before me, sorting the various things we had brought, and engaged in low conversation. Ashembe smiled a greeting at me and handed me food—dark meat of some kind with a strong wild taste, quite unlike the concentrated foods we had lived on for the last three years.

“This is,” he said, “Tandana Kabu,” and then to the former prisoner, “Angara sheg Alvin Schierstedt loth umt mashec.” I bowed from the waist and received the bent-kneed gesture of courtesy in return.

“She is,” continued Ashembe in English, “extremely grateful for our rescuing her.” (“*She!*” I thought, looking at the newcomer with aroused interest. I perceived a slender young woman, clad more or less like the hunters who had sought us the day before, but without the helmet; a pleasing face tanned by exposure to the sun and of the triangular shape softened to an oval, and—with so little hair that she would have passed for bald in New York.) “Grateful for rescuing her. She was a member of a small agricultural association in the hunting ground—where we last night saw the fire. It was raided by a predatory association, and most of the people killed. She was taken prisoner by the three we attacked.”

“Tell me something,” I said. “Did you know you would run into that gang with a prisoner?”

He smiled. “Oh, no. I did not attempt. But I felt sure that where there was a fire there had been a raid. At first I hoped only to find some equipment the raiders had overlooked. When I heard them . . .”

Tandana Kabu put in a word or two. Ashembe turned to me again. “She says you are a very brave man to attack the raider. He was Agogai Besh and he was regarded as a very brilliant young man.”

“Is this the way your process of selection works out? You lose your best young men through a mere accidental encounter.”

“You do us injustice,” he countered. “Appearances are erroneous. Agogai Besh was regarded as a brilliant young man but he made strong errors on this occasion. Mark you well. First, he failed to keep his band together at the end on the raid. Second, he carried Tandana Kabu off as unwilling captive—he should either have persuaded her to come, or let her go. Third, he was overburdened with plunder. Fourth, he came down the bed of the stream because it was easy instead of taking the safe path through the forest. Fifth, he had no picket out, so our attack was the complete surprise. This is all very irrational, passionate, and careless, and it is just such irrational and careless characters that we desire to eliminate. He depended too much on physical strength. Not so much unlucky as a bad workman.”

126

“But we have no picket out either,” I protested.

“Truthful,” replied my mentor, “but this is daytime, and not on a traveled road, and we are to move immediately. Come hither.”

He had gathered a number of articles into a pack which he proceeded to adjust for me; not on the shoulders as I have always carried packs in the woods, but so that the weight was

carried on the hips by a system of leather thongs running round the body and over the shoulders. After a short time I found it more comfortable than the familiar system.

I was also given one of the swords captured in the fight of the night before; a short, heavy blade shaped like the illustrations show Roman swords to have been, and better suited for close-range cutting than thrusting. Each of the others carried a duplicate of this weapon and a bow as well. In place of the latter, I was supplied with three or four javelins, and we set out.

Ashembe and I plodded along together, threading our way carefully through the trees. Our new friend disappeared into the growth at the right, arrow on string, and I did not see her again until we halted for rest, when she suddenly materialized out of the scrub with the carcass of a small animal slung over her shoulders.

The need for hurry had passed, and we moved slowly through the forest, halting to examine suspicious clumps of trees. Once or twice a rustling sound would bring us to the alert, but always Ashembe lowered his bow with the announcement that it was only an animal of some kind.

127

“Don’t you have any birds?” I asked.

Ashembe shook his head. “No birds on this whole planet,” he said. “They represent a peculiar order of evolution on your own planet. Never have I seen anything like. We have avian animals, in character similar to your bats, though of further development, but nothing like your birds.”

[21]

We halted by another of the canyon-cutting streams, just back from the edge as we had on the previous night, and Tandana Kabu popped suddenly in on us with the results of her hunting for the meal. I gathered dry wood while our companion skinned and prepared the animal for cooking. We dined merrily enough, with the sun warming our backs and an Octoberish tang in the air that lent comfort to the campfire.

I expected Ashembe to press on at once after we had eaten, but after exchanging a few words with Tandana Kabu, he sprawled out under a tree and went incontinently to sleep, while she slipped off with her bow to stand guard. It was not till some time later that I discovered that he found the clear, bright autumn-like noon uncomfortably warm.

The rest of our journey through the hunting ground was a repetition (or nearly so) of that one. Twice we ran across footprints and on the second occasion Ashembe, after running back along the trail for some distance and giving the marks a prolonged study, changed direction abruptly and put us on a forced march of half a day. “Raiding party from a predatory association,” he explained, “at least four well-armed people.”

128

The encounter was a real danger. It came one afternoon, when Ashembe was going on some little distance in the lead with Tandana Kabu out at one side and myself at the rear of the procession—a triangular formation with each just out of sight but within hearing of the others. Dusk was coming on when I heard a low whistle from the right—Tandana Kabu’s signal.

As rapidly and silently as possible I made for the spot,

holding a javelin in readiness. As I rounded a clump of the bush-like trees, I caught sight of the girl, poised like Diana behind a small trunk, her face pale, an arrow drawn to the head on her bowstring, and just beyond her among the trees a yellow-brown form that moved rapidly in and out. As I emerged on the scene, there was a snarl of animal ferocity; Tandana Kabu let drive the shaft and at the same moment the yellow-brown animal leaped. She dodged, but not quite clear. I saw her tumble, saw the beast swing round to hurl itself upon her, and not daring to throw, hurled myself upon it with a shout, driving my javelin into the furry back, and snatching for my sword.

The animal switched suddenly round, jerking the javelin past my head. I fended off the force of his rush with the other javelins in my left hand, taking a long, diagonal scratch down the arm as I did so, and struck furiously at the snapping head with my sword—once, twice, three times. I got another scratch, everything was covered with blood, and my antagonist collapsed suddenly, giving me a final back-hand swipe, just as Tandana Kabu picked herself up.

A moment later Ashembe was with us, and the two looked at my injured arm and the animal I had killed, talking excitedly in Murasheman. The beast bore a certain resemblance to a kangaroo, but the head was heavy, lupine and infinitely more savage than that of any kangaroo. The ears were short, and where I had laid its face open with one of my blows, there was a double rank of the most savage-looking teeth.

“She says,” said Ashembe, bandaging my arm, “you are very

valiant, but I do not think so. I think you are only ignorant. This animal is an apya, and is considered more than a match for men armed with primitive weapons. Observe that you have given it several wounds, any one of which should be mortal, but they are so tenacious of life that even after such wounds they frequently kill people.”^[22]

After this incident, Tandana Kabu’s gratitude became so pronounced as to be actually embarrassing. She set aside for me all the tidbits at our meals; she tried to relieve me of my share of the carrying; and I had the greatest difficulty in persuading her to wake me up to take my turn at watching our camp at night instead of doing her own share and mine as well. On all these proceedings Ashembe looked with an amused tolerance. “She is very young and romantic,” he said. “That is why we put young people in the hunting ground. They grow out of this.”

We had journeyed for nearly ten days, when one night I saw along the horizon the haze of distant lights like an aurora and quite different from the inefficient illumination with which the two diminutive moons of Murashema furnished us from time to time.

“That is the border of the hunting ground,” said Ashembe when I asked. “It is Atargol city.”

Tandana Kabu had seen it too, and after a few moments she turned to Ashembe with a remark, then looked expectantly at me while he translated.

“She says,” he declared, “that if you will remain in the

hunting ground with her until her time is up, she will have a child by you and after coming out of the hunting ground she will remain with you if the eugenic committee permit. . . . I should advise against it. The affections of these young persons are not fixed. Moreover, it would be a most uneugenic proceeding. If you emerged from the hunting ground in safety, the eugenists would be almost certain to remove any child you had. And I doubt whether they would permit you to live together afterward. You have not passed any of the necessary tests. I suggest it would be well to promise her to return if possible. You had better at least see our cities first.”

I was not prepared to agree with him as to Tandana Kabu’s fickleness; but at the same time it was true that I was more desirous of seeing Murasheman civilization than of plunging into a life of idyllic barbarism. “Tell her that I’ll think it over and let her know in the morning,” I said.

Ashembe translated rapidly; I saw her face fall from eager expectancy to dark disappointment. She stepped forward, made the gesture of salutation and disappeared in the gathering darkness.

XIII

The next day, about evening, we toiled up a long, low hill, and from the summit looked down a backslope, perhaps half a mile wide, to where a deep, swift river curled round the walls of a city—the first buildings I had seen since, my God! how long since I left New York for my summer vacation at Joyous Gard with Merrick Wells.

For a moment we stood at gaze, Ashembe like myself struck dumb with the glory of the prospect. Above the river a congress of lights sent long penciled beams up and down the stream as far as the eye could reach. And up and up, as far as the eye could reach, also in the uncertain light, the buildings towered immensely, white and glorious, their terraced sides holding the last rays of the sun from behind us, with arched windows and doorways breaking the monotony of the plane surfaces. Above the soaring towers one could just make out tiny black dots that hovered and dropped or moved here and there with the rapid vivacity of flies. The whole scene was utterly silent, like a picture in a dream.

131

For a moment we gazed, then Ashembe led the way down the hill and across the sand to the river's brim. A beam of light, paler and yellower than those that searched the surface of the water, detached itself from the wall near us and smote our

faces. Ashembe tossed his arms aloft in a gesture of triumph and began to signal with his hands.

He finished; and the light about us turned redder till it was like the setting sun, and we walked the last three hundred yards of our journey bathed in a fiery glow. Save for the light there was no sign from the silent city till we reached the very edge of the river. Then a boat of some kind, unmanned as far as I could see, shot out from the opposite bank.

At the bank where we stood, it nosed gently in—a wide, shallow, high-ended craft with the bow decked over, and lacking in any visible means of propulsion or control. Following Ashembe's lead I stepped into it and seated myself. The boat swung round, and with a humming of unseen motors, drove rapidly across the current, trembling with the impact of the water. I looked up; one moment I saw through the red radiance around us the endless vista of searchlights reaching far up into the cloudless sky; the next we were moving under an archway down a dark passage where the walls came in close enough to be touched on either hand. Another moment still and we were out of the arch into the blaze of a daylight more brilliant than any I had seen on Murashema. The silence around us dissolved into a vast roar of commingled sounds.

My senses reeling with the shock, I looked to Ashembe for moral support, but there was no help there. He sat beside me like a ramrod, stern and proud, his lips compressed. The boat was moving slowly to a white stone jetty, where a little group of people stood waiting to receive us. There was something inconceivably odd about them and it was not for

some moments that my numbed senses gathered, that it was not the unfamiliarity of their clothes or the thinness and delicacy of their faces and fingers, but the fact that one and all they were hairless and hatless.

Ashembe sprang out of the boat, extended his hand to help me up and turned to those waiting on the pier with a few rapid words, at the end of which he indicated me with outstretched hand. They bent their knees in the gesture of welcome and I bowed, then followed them across the pier and up a ramp to a platform where a circle of curved seats with arms, padded in dark material, stood in a waist-high enclosure of metal. We seated ourselves; one of the Murashemans bent forward a moment and the enclosure revealed itself as a vehicle. We moved off gently without shock or noise, swinging around an arc of a great circular street among buildings of cyclopean mass, occasionally meeting other vehicles like our own.

Our car began to climb a ramp that branched inward from the circular street, issuing presently upon a long, straight avenue some twenty feet above the level of the pier. It stretched away before us, perfectly straight and banded with alternate streaks of light and dark where it ran under the overarching buildings. But I caught no more than a flashing glimpse of this. Our vehicle swung to the left, gathering speed at a terrific rate, and, as it did so, a series of folding arms rose out of the metal enclosure, and carrying some transparent web of material between them, met overhead to roof us in against the wind due to our speed.

We slowed up suddenly and the car moved off the straight roadway and down a ramp to another circular

street exactly like the one we had left at the pier. I caught a vista of architecture as we swept round the curve and then we were in a wide doorway that gave on a great hall. Several people were walking about, but they gave us no more than momentary attention as our vehicle crossed the hall to the farther side. Here one of the Murashemans rose and turned a key that projected from amid the decoration. A solid section of the wall slid back silently and our car passed into the gap. Another key was turned; the panel slid shut again, and we began to rise.

An elevator ride is always long when one has been absent from cities for some time. But this one seemed exceptionally prolonged, and I felt the blood drumming in my ears with the speed and distance of the ascent. Ashembe whispered, with a smile, "Open the mouth to preserve yourself from the effects of pressure."

A moment later we came to rest without a jar. Another panel moved open and the reception committee led us out along a long and narrow passage at the end of which a door was opened by one of the omnipresent keys. One of our guides said something to Ashembe, and he turned to me with a translation.

"This is your apartment," he said. "You are to stay here for some several days, while I return to the place where the Shoraru has been left with a guard and remove therefrom the mercury and the records of our journey. You will find everything necessary in the apartment and your food will be sent to you. If you have any difficulty, turn this key (he indicated the second one of a row just inside the sliding panel)

and someone will come to assist you. Fare thee well.”

I entered, and was left alone.

I looked around.

My temporary home was an apartment of three rooms, the outer walls of which, formed by the outer wall of the building, were curved to the arc of a large circle. All these outer walls were of glass (or some other transparent material—I found by experiment that it was practically unbreakable) from floor to ceiling. From them one could look out and see beyond the glass walls of the exactly similar building some hundred feet or more away, a succession of other towers, stretching off into the utmost distance. 134

Though it had been evening outside the city when we crossed the river, I noticed no trace of night here; a soft light, like that of a brilliant but cloudy day, suffused everything, and when I stepped to the window to look up I could see only an overarching roof of what appeared to be bright clouds, far above me. Up to this cloudy source of light the buildings around me soared, to be truncated abruptly where they met it, and when I looked down, I saw that though the tops of the buildings were far above, streets were just barely visible below.

The floor of the central room of the three, to which I had been admitted first, was covered with a soft brown material not unlike a carpet for flexibility under foot; apparently it was a composition of some sort forming the floor. The walls were decorated in a geometrical pattern of yellow and dark gray,

with a pleasing irregularity of design. Near the door, as I have said, was a row of keys; over each a plate of white metal bore Murasheman characters. Against one of the inner walls, near where they slanted toward each other at the narrowest part of the apartment just by the door, a table stood against the wall. Like all the other furnishings, it was a dark metal, its supports decorated with the same tasteful geometric arrangement as the walls, and its top quite bare.

Against the opposite wall, a row of seats like those in the car was placed, and scattered about the room were several more chairlike seats, the seat curving up to form the arms. They had flattened arms on which one might conceivably rest a notebook, and a single band across the back, just below shoulder height.

This completed the furnishings of the main room. Near 135 the glass outer walls, doors led right and left to the other rooms of the apartment. Both of these stood open, though one was closed off by a curtain, and at the side of each was one of the keys, with its accompanying metal plate hanging on the wall. These were, as I correctly assumed, for the purpose of opening and closing the doors.

The doorknob is a device unknown on Murashema.

I tried the door at my left first. The room it gave on was smaller, the floor bright and hard. Three of the chairlike seats were arranged against the wall here, and there were two more in the room. Over against the wall seats stood a table, simpler than that in the living room, and covered with a white substance of soft texture. In the opposite wall was the usual

row of keys, and instead of the yellow and gray of the living room, this one had large panels in blue and cream. Save for the tables and chairs, it was quite empty. I conjectured that it might be the kitchen or dining room.

The room on the opposite side was totally different. Instead of the cheerful blue and cream and yellow and gray, it was decorated in a neutral green and save for two chairs, was quite devoid of furniture. There was an unusually long row of keys just inside the door. It might have been a bedroom had any bed been visible; and as I thought of this, I remembered that nowhere in the apartment had I seen such an article. For the present, my chief need was food, and I returned to the room I thought was a kitchen, fully intending to try each of the keys until I got what I wanted.

I tried the key at the left end of the line first, with the idea of seeing what I could get for myself without summoning an attendant. One of the blue and cream panels slid to one side, giving place to a screen of shining metal. Upon it appeared a picture of an ornate goblet filled with a sparkling red liquid. A wonderfully clear voice said a few words in Murasheman; the goblet turned round without any visible agency directing it, and before I could decide what it meant, disappeared, to be replaced by a plate piled high with a jelly-like substance in green and blue stripes. Like the other, this picture was accompanied by a brief speech, and like the other it presently disappeared.

It was interesting, but inconclusive. For something like ten minutes I gazed at this Barmecide feast, while dish after dish was presented to my gaze and then withdrawn. Then, before I

could decide how I ought to go about expressing my desire for the viands, the last dish vanished, the panel closed again with a click, and the key was returned to its position automatically.

Clearly, in order to bring the meal to materialization, some definite act on my part was needed. I tried the key again; and when the panel slid back on the representation of a bowl filled with a steaming amber-colored liquid, I quickly snapped the second key. A smaller panel near the ceiling opened and from it issued the sound of a stringed instrument, being played in a series of the most execrable screeches and squawks I have ever heard in my life. I hastily returned the key to the first position, closing the panel, and tried the next one as the soup vanished from the screen in favor of a platter of rather delicious looking buns. This time I got a voice, engaged in a lecture of oratorical character. I shut this one off, and gave my attention to the screen where the food was appearing again. I was looking at some round red objects swimming in a brown sauce.

There must be some special way of setting the key, I thought, and tried to turn it to a position halfway between on and off. It immediately slipped from my fingers to the off position and the panel slid to with a bang to cut off the pictured meal.

Once more I turned the key. The panel slipped back again, and a wholly new procession of dishes began. This time I gave my attention to the edges of the panel itself. At one corner there was a small projection that might be either a stud or the head of a screw. I tried pressing it, and when that was without result, remembered in time that I had

never seen Ashembe use a button-control of any kind; everything had been turnable keys. With a flash of inspiration I turned the stud. Picture and voice ceased immediately; the screen, like the panel before it, slid back, and a moment later there appeared in the deep-recessed hole a round container of [\[23\]](#) brass.

I lifted it out and took it over to the table. At one side near the base, the inevitable key was placed in a countersunk niche. I turned it; there was a snap and the lid of the container came away in my hands revealing a dish like a soup-plate filled with a jelly from which a faint flower-like odor exuded.

A round flat spoon accompanied it. I tasted it—it was sweet and pungent, of the same character as the foods Ashembe had made on the Shoraru, and I ate with a relish sharpened by hunger. The dish finished, I returned to the screen, snapped it again into position by means of the stud and when another pictured dish appeared, ordered it by the same means as the last.

My dinner over, the problem of how to dispose of the dishes arose. I decided that they would probably be returnable by the same means that brought them, and snapping on the food key again, I turned the stud and when the panel slid back, balanced one of the used containers on top of the new one that appeared in the gap. There hardly seemed to be room for more.

I shot the screen back into position, waited a moment for the containers to be taken care of and then opened it again. Three containers came tumbling out of the narrow

space and I opened them, to find two entirely new dishes of food in addition to the empty dish I had left there.

There was only one thing to do and that was to try more keys. I already knew what the second and third of the series would produce. The fourth snapped another panel back, and on the screen I saw a couple of diminutive figures in Murasheman costume who began to speak and move around. A play of some kind. I shut it off and tried the next key.

The result was truly startling. Instead of a single panel, half a dozen small ones at the base of the wall and all the way around slid back, revealing rows of tiny nozzles from which jets of water issued with such force that I was nearly carried off my feet. I hastily shut the panels, but the damage was done. My dining room was already half afloat and the water was pouring through into the living room. I snapped the door shut to cut off the floor, and balancing myself with some difficulty on the seat of one of the chairs to get out of the water, turned the key again in the hope that the faucets were accompanied by a drainage arrangement for disposing of the surplus water. It seemed that they were, for the floor rose no higher, but whenever I shut the panels, a residue of water remained on the floor. I turned to the next key.

This time I got a current of warm air from panels at top and bottom of the room. It dried the water in a trice, whistled through the room in a miniature gale and would even have carried off one of the spoons, had I not rescued it. It was all very useful, but I was getting no further with my problem of dirty dishes.

With the next key I finally achieved success. A panel next to the one that had brought me my dinner slid back on what would be called a dumbwaiter on Earth. In it I placed my dishes, shut the panel, and when I opened it again, found that they were gone.

By this time I was thoroughly tired. I decided to try the bedroom and its devices.

139

Luck was with me there. The first key I turned caused a big panel to slide back in the wall, revealing a bed on four wheels, which, animated by a spirit of its own, trundled out into the middle of the room. At the same time, apparently by means of some synchronized device, a slow current of cool, fresh air, from an indiscernible source, filled the whole apartment. Had it not been for the light which streamed uninterruptedly through the glass outer walls, the sleeping arrangements would have been perfect.

I woke after ten hours with a fine feeling of comfort and strength. After keying the bed back into place, I went to the dining room and had breakfast.

Breakfast out of the way, I started out with the determination of trying every key in the three rooms, which were extraordinarily bare by Earthly standards. I decided to try the living room. The second key would bring me an attendant, I recalled—so I tried the first key.

Bzzz-click! said a piece of machinery somewhere, and I stood in utter darkness! Fortunately my hand was still at the key. I snapped it back again and turned in time to catch sight of the

quickly-rising shutters that closed off the glass wall of the apartment. If I had only known that the night before!

Passing over the second key, I tried the next. A portion of the wall slid back, revealing a screen like that from which my dinner had been ordered. On it appeared the picture of a Murasheman city, the towering walls glowing in the rays of a dawn sun. The point of view changed as one watched, the whole gorgeous structure appearing to sink and tilt. A moment more and I was looking down on it from above. Seen from overhead, the city was no longer a collection of towers but a flat, gray plain, with markings of various colors here and there, and little figures running about on it. It struck me suddenly that the whole city was roofed in.

The pictured city rose toward me, slipped a little to one side, and then stood still; the point of view changed and I saw two Murashemans alighting from a vehicle like a small edition of an airplane with diminutive wings, no propeller at all in front and a long, knife-like helicopter blade that was just ceasing to revolve. I heard the sound of their feet on the roof of the city and they began to talk. Another play.

140

The next key gave me what appeared at first to be a different type of play (or movie). I saw a group of men sitting in a large oval hall walled with windows and running into a series of arches at the top. One of them was making a speech. Though I could understand no word of what he was saying, there was something so arresting in his demeanor that I kept the screen on. To my surprise, it suddenly went blank, a voice spoke a few words in Murasheman and another picture began to form.

I saw the scrubby pines and rolling sandy hills of the hunting ground before me. A group of men clad, not in the neutral leather jerkins of the people of the hunting ground, but in bright uniforms of a peculiar electric magenta, were marching through the scrub. I noted that they wore closefitting metal helmets with nasals ^[24] and neck-pieces and carried shields inscribed with some device. As I watched, I could catch the motion of others to left and ahead of the party, scouts thrown out to guard them against surprise. Then one in the center of the group, who wore a crested helmet as an indication of authority, turned to speak to one of the others, and I saw it was Ashembe!

The picture was already beginning to fade when, remembering my experience with the dinner, I leaped forward and found the little stud at one side of the panel. I turned it; the picture came back in full strength, and I was watching the expedition to the Shoraru.

141

Ashembe and his guard marched through the forest glades without pause or interruption. Once there was a flicker of motion among the trees at one flank, but it proved to be only one of the scouts who had killed some small animal and was bringing it in to hand to the main guard. Half an hour of watching this uneventful progress was plenty. I turned the stud.

Workmen, now, handling a tall, intelligent machine at the top of one of the cities. They were placing molds of various shapes in position and as they did so, the spout of the machine discharged a viscous, shining material of a pale yellow color. I let the picture fade out to one of a seashore and white-

winged boats speeding across an ocean as clear and blue as a sapphire. A voice accompanied this picture and a shadowy pointer appeared across it to indicate one of the craft. Then this too, faded.

Apparently this was the Murasheman version of a newspaper. This, like the play, would do for a little later. I snapped the [\[25\]](#) key off and turned to the next one.

XIV

A high narrow panel revealed a row of little pulltabs with letters on them. I pulled at one and a thin sheet of metal attached to a spool somewhere came running out. It was covered with Murasheman characters arranged in columns, and as the first character of each word appeared the same, I guessed it was a directory of some kind.

By this time I was learning how things worked on Murashema, and anxious to try the device out I looked for the inevitable studs. I found seven of them at one side of the directory rolls, each marked with a character or two. Working on the analogy of our own telephones, I turned them all in succession, some to one point and some to another.

142

The result was not long in arriving. The panel of the directory slid to with a click, another and larger one opened. On the metal screen appeared the picture of a room similar to my own living room. At the moment it was vacant, but as I looked, the door at the bedroom side snapped back and there emerged an exceedingly fat and pink gentleman dripping wet and with a long red robe clutched around him.

He looked so much like a Thanksgiving Day pig, trussed up for roasting, that I could not forbear a burst of laughter. The irritation in his countenance increased, then changed to

bewilderment; he said something and began to make motions which indicated a desire to decapitate me. I hurriedly turned the key that shut off the screen.

The next key in the series gave me nothing but a blank screen and a voice which repeated some question several times in a tone that grew increasingly querulous as I failed to reply and finally shut off altogether. The next key proved to be for the door into the hall, but I was afraid of being locked out.

The next key brought a gust of fresh and invigorating cold air, but the remainder was a complete washout. There was one for cleaning the room (which, of course, I turned on with the same blissful ignorance I had expended on the one in the dining room) and one for drying it, a key that showed an empty panel which slid back on an equally empty dumbwaiter. There was a row of studs beside this one, probably for ordering various objects, and I did not venture it.

This exhausted the resources of the living room and the dining room was already pretty well used up. There remained the bedroom. My first attempt here met with a reception that was dampening in both senses of the word. The bedroom door closed with a click, panels in the ceiling slid back with another, and I was treated to the Murasheman equivalent of a bath—a quick shower of hard, driving rain that wet my ragged clothes to my skin and filled the room with a couple of inches of water before I was able to turn it off.

In a moment or two I was shivering; the air was distinctly chilly by our standards, and I did not quite dare to peel off my

clothes in view of the efficiency of the telephone system. The moment for an appeal to an attendant seemed to have arrived.

Leaving little puddles where my shoes squished on the floor, I walked across the living room, turned the second key and waited.

Not more than five minutes later one of those disembodied voices, which pop at you from all corners of Murashema, said something from the door. I opened it and the attendant entered. He was a little wizened man of perhaps fifty, dressed in sober blue clothes, loose jerkin sleeved to the elbows and provided with a belt and numerous pockets, close-fitting trousers that ended at the knee and soft boots or shoes that ran up to meet the trousers. The shoulders of his jerkin bore a light blue emblem of complicated design, woven into the cloth. As I opened the door, he bent his knees and spread his hands in the gesture of greeting.

“Come in,” said I. “Dry clothes? Can do?” And I held out the edge of my water-soaked coat.

For answer he produced from one of his pockets a tensal helmet, fitted it on and sat down in one of the chairs, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

“I want some dry clothes, if it’s not too much trouble,” I said. “These are pretty ragged anyway. I can arrange to pay for them later, I suppose.”

144

Up he jumped, snapping off the tensal and dashing across the room to the key which gave on the empty panel. When the voice spoke, he answered and a moment later a picture

appeared on the panel.

A figure was turning and twisting before a background of yellow and gray not unlike that of the walls of my room. I saw it was a man, dressed in the same Murashema costume my attendant wore. His costume was crimson and white and he was booted and belted in black. My servant indicated the picture with his finger, making a gurgling noise, the purpose of which was apparently to express his extreme admiration for it. A moment later the figure stepped away to be replaced by one clad in vivid diagonals of blue and yellow. My assistant gave a little gasp of admiration and looked at me questioningly. I comprehended that this was a style show, but picture me in that combination! To the obvious disappointment of my attendant, I shook my head, and the figure passed from the screen. I negatived a variety of others until one appeared in a suit of gray-green with belt and boots in bright blue. I nodded and pointed and the attendant, with a look that clearly indicated his disgust for so anemic a taste, turned one of the studs at the side of the panel.

“Your name?” I asked him to fill in the time as it closed. Out came the tensal. “What is your name?” I repeated. “Fixi Hadeq,” he said, removing the apparatus. “Biyamo Oksen.” He pointed to the emblem on his shoulder. “Hadeq,” I repeated, and added “Good.” I had to halt his motion for the tensal to find out what this word meant.

A voice at the door announced a visitor and Hadeq hurried to open it to a melancholy looking individual in pale lavender, who pushed a machine from which projected a system of padded knobs. There was a moment’s conversation

and by means of signs and the unbuttoning of my coat I was informed that they wished me to undress. With a glance over my shoulder at the telephone panel, I did so, while the man with the machine surveyed my hair and beard with a covert interest, picking up each garment as I let it fall and examining the buttons. It was not until that moment that I noted that neither of the Murashemans had a single button visible anywhere.

Once stripped, I was steered to a position in front of the machine. The lavender man turned a key in it, and the knobs, actuated by the machinery within, began to move over my whole body, feeling it to the tune of a portentous clicking within the device. They tickled. Under Hadeg's directions, I turned slowly round, the knobs felt gently down my back, and then still guided by my attendant I thrust first one foot and then the other into holes at the base of the instrument. The man in lavender nodded, shut off his machine and took it out again.

The next question was finding something to do. "Can't I learn Murasheman?" I asked when Hadeg had his tensal on again, "or have you some other means of amusement?"

He nodded brightly, stepped to the telephone-television panel and turned the key as I fled to the bedroom. I don't know whom he called. They had a long conversation, at the end of which he came to get me and, turning to the newspaper key, showed me Ashembe sitting with his men in a circle, eating. By the inefficient method of signs, I was at last made to understand that learning Murasheman would have to wait until the return of my friend. Seeing that I had grasped the

idea at last, Hadeq turned to one of the plays, and when I disapproved this, for lack of better occupation, returned to the panel by means of which he had summoned the tailor.

Upon its surface there appeared a row of weapons and armor. I shook my head again. Hadeq sighed and spoke a few words into the machine. The weapons gave place to a representation of the cubical chessboard. At last there was something I could understand. I nodded eagerly.

Hadeq turned a stud at the side of the panel and a moment later a clear voice spoke out into the room and he snapped open the dumbwaiter to reveal the chessboard. It was considerably larger than the one Ashembe had made and the pieces were beautifully worked, whether carved or molded, I could not tell. (Though from what I have learned since, I assume they were cast—the Murasheman dislikes the handwork of carving.) In a few minutes Hadeq and I were deep in the game and we played comfortably along until he led the way to the dining room for lunch.

146

We had hardly finished the meal before the voice from the next room spoke again, and we went to take my new clothes from the dumbwaiter. There was a close-fitting undergarment just short of knee length and of silky texture; the outer garments were simply the boots, trousers and jerkin like those I described Hadeq and the tailor as wearing, with the exception that they were of the color I had chosen and that the shoulder bore a white star, woven into the green of the cloth. Of buttons there was not one. The clothes were secured by a series of tongue-snaps and the belt closed around my middle by the same means.

The fit of the garments was perfect and the boots were of so soft a material that it was more like cloth than leather, though it had the texture of leather to the fingers. Only at the soles were they stiff and even here the stiffness was caused by a greater thickness of material rather than by any difference in the character of the goods.

After lunch we returned to our game. Hadege beat me, but I had expected it, and at least had the satisfaction of having given him a run for his money.

And thus began my three weeks of waiting for Ashembe's return from the Shoraru.

XV

He came one night when I was asleep. I had left the door into the living room open and turned on the cold air current to get the apartment aired out, or I would hardly have heard even Ashembe's voice on the announcer at the door. Clad as I was in the scanty Murasheman sleeping garment I dashed out, snapped up the light-proof shutters and opened the door for my friend.

He was in the full panoply I had seen in the newspaper-screen; suit of bright magenta, set off with black and gleaming with the metal scales of armor; crested helmet and sword. How welcome his face and voice after those days of one-sided conversation.

"Did you get the mercury?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, and it is received with honor. See—" and he pointed to the emblem on his shoulder where an oblong bore an arrangement of blue and white bars with the same white star that I wore below it.

"What does it mean?"

"This emblem," he touched the star, "signifies that I am a guest of the state, an arbiter of difficulties. You have been

accorded that rank as a stranger. The other is my name emblem.”

“Yes? Does everybody wear emblems?”

“Certainly. How else to know? But this emblem is honorific. In your country you have judges. We have them here also, but to become a judge one must perform an honorific work.”

“What a queer system. Why?”

“Attend. All men are desirous of power, also of leisure. 148
Is this not axiomatic? Very good. Administrative powers require special training and are reserved for those with the same. But any man may aspire to judicial powers, which only require intelligence. Moreover, it is more worthy, since in the end, judicial power is behind and above all other. We hold that when a man has done something beyond others, he has demonstrated unusual intelligence. He is therefore able to see deeper in complex questions than others and he is entrusted with judicial power.

“On the other side, man who has accomplished unusual affairs is entitled also to rest from labors. His reward, therefore, is to obtain judicial power and with nothing else to do. Very satisfactory system except for artists who are excluded from this system, having one of their own. I have received this reward, hence my name is now Koumar Ashembe Bodrog Acle. You are Alvin Schierstedt Acle Kunrun, which is to say you are Acle but without authority to make decisions. Tell me, how did you spend your time?”

I described Hadeq, our cube-chess matches and our walks on

the roofs of the city, ending with a plaint that I wished to learn Murasheman.

The shadow of a smile crossed Ashembe's face. "Come, let us eat, and I will tell you of it," he said, as we sat at the table a few minutes later. "They do not know how to teach you Murasheman, my friend. Your mentality is peculiar, being unlike those of this world and they are uncertain of the effects of the tensal which is our sole education instrument. . . . But I am surprised that he did not take you to museum."

"But how am I to learn Murasheman, then?"

"We might teach you through the museum where we have antique appliances of education," he said, "but I may have to teach you the language by oral means. You will not find it impossible. This is a *koia*" (he held up one of the spoons) "and to eat is *dlibotu*."

"And 'with'?"

"*Aceff*."

"*Dlibotu aceff koia*," I said, pronouncing my first sentence in Murasheman.

"*Aceff koia dlibotu*," he corrected with a smile. "In our tongue the verb is always finial. Or better yet, 'Koia dlibotu' since prepositions are antiquarian words, which are dropped by all languages as time grows."

149

Lesson and meal progressed together—a better meal than I had succeeded in ordering in my ignorance of Murasheman

cookery—and it was topped off by huge goblets of a pleasing and spicy drink which, without the peculiar benumbing effect of alcohol, seemed to cast a rosy glow of wit and wisdom over our postprandial conversation.

“Now, what would you see?” Ashembe said finally, wiping his lips after the last of the drink.

“Why—” I temporized, running over the prospects of amusement in my mind, and then for the first time lighting with astonishment on the fact that Ashembe was there with me. He must be something of a national hero with his successful interstellar trip and his supply of mercury. “By the way,” I remarked, “did you have a tough time getting away from the crowds?”

He looked up in surprise. “Getting away from the crowds? What crowds?”

“From the reception committee or whatever they call it here.”

“Oh, you mean the scientific board. But I was examined by them before, when we arrived. I must, of course, present the complete report of the trip to them for matters of astronomical and anthropological interest later. But that is a long time and I shall dictate the same to an akelshard. ^[26] There will be no men to examine.”

“But don’t you have public receptions and speeches and honors for people who have accomplished noteworthy things here?”

“Honors? Oh, yes, I am made Aclé . . . I told you that. No public receptions.”

“But you have practically saved your world, haven’t you?”

150

“No more than many others who have done actions of eminence. I have received my honor; that is sufficient. . . . Ah, I recall seeing the same in some of your books. People on Earth crowd around men of accomplishment to see them and shout at them. It is very primitive. What do you wish to see?”

The subject was dismissed. What did I wish to see? “You said something about being surprised that Hadeq had not taken me to a museum. I wonder if I could see one of your museums or art galleries.”

“Surely.” He jumped from the chair. “But pause. What is an art gallery? Extraordinary I find now many things I do not know of your Earth since I left it. Art gallery? An artfully built tunnel? We have them.”

“No, a place where pictures are kept.”

“We do not have them. Permanent pictures are not considered of art any longer on Murashema, though I believe they did have them in the historical past. Come.”

He took off his helmet, then glanced a moment at the armor he was wearing. “Oh, hell, I cannot go into the city so improperly dressed. Pause.”

He turned the key in the living room—the one that gave on

the blank panel, and when the voice came, said a few rapid words. In a moment came the announcer and he opened the waiter to take from it a suit in magenta and dark gray (sufficiently vivid combination) which, when he had it on, though far from the remarkable fit of the tailored suit I wore, was yet good enough to be considered excellent on Earth. The shoulder bore no emblem, but from a pocket he produced one which he attached with one of the tongue-clasps universal there, and we were ready for the trip.

Whether through weariness or excitement, I had hardly noticed the architecture of the building when we came in, several days before, and the trips Hadege and I had made to the roofs were mere whiskings of an elevator there and back. Now I took the trouble to look. The halls, like my own rooms, had high ceilings and were very light. I assumed quite correctly that the whole outer surface of the buildings was devoted to living or working quarters. The architecture as a whole was almost Gothic in character, everything being carried on delicate columns which sprayed out above into the most exquisite tracery of fan vaulting around the circles where the lights were fixed.

151

Colors, subdued to pastel shades, were everywhere. Indeed, one might almost say that all Murasheman life went to the music of color—their dress, their buildings, their appliances, their food even. Walls and columns were softer to the touch than any Earthly building material; yet for all their slenderness and surface softness, they carried huge weights. The walls between columns were merest curtain walls at best; those in my own rooms were hardly an inch in thickness, save where they gave on dumbwaiters or something of the sort. I

asked Ashembe of what material the building was made.

“All architecture is in nickel, chrome, palladium and other steel alloys according to the amount of strain carried,” he said, “with some platinum.”

“But the surface?”

“After construction everything is coated with a plastic in which colors are placed. Building is done by operations with machines in which the mercury tube forms a part. Proper alloy is made under the tube and at once poured into molds in liquid state.”

By this time we had reached the elevator.

“How far away is it?” I asked.

“Next building only. This center does not have a museum. Oh, you do not know—attend. Each building is a living and working center. Living quarters are at the top of the building and working quarters at the base. It is found that living at high altitude induces great energy and better workmanship when worker descends to lower levels. Therefore, all living quarters are at least thirty-five stories above working quarters. Each building is round and is a city in itself. A circle of seven buildings, six around the periphery and one in the middle is a ‘center,’ all workshops being around the periphery and the central building being devoted to educational and amusement purposes.”

“And how many stories to a building?”

“Mostly two hundred twenty. Atargol is a two hundred twenty city, but Ursel Gnyfian at the south pole is a three hundred city and Fornogos in the east is a two hundred eighty city. All buildings throughout the same city are similar.”

“At the south pole!” I said. (We were going down in the elevator.)

“Surely. Why not? It is waste of space to build cities on lands that might produce products or be used for otherwise purposes. The poles are useless, therefore we build cities on them.”

“But doesn’t it cost a lot of energy to produce the heat for them? I should think that with the weakness of your sun—”

“But our sun has been so weak for so long that it would be insufficiently warm in almost any city. We have for long foreseen its extinction. All cities are completely lighted and heated by artificial means and it takes very little more at the poles than other places.”

“How do you heat your buildings?”

“The architecture is tubular in construction. Even between your walls there is a slight space as sound deadening device. Heat is applied to currents of air which circulate through the building. Very simple.”

“Should think it would dry everything out. Heat through metals is supposed to be drying, isn’t it?”

“Oh, it is proved that dry heat is more healthful. There

are less bacteria in dry heat. However certain small amounts of humidity are supplied through the cleaning tubes. Enough remains in the atmosphere. You have a prejudice in favor of extreme dampness from your planet where it rains perpetually and you have large oceans of water.”

We had reached the level where we were to cross to the next building, and I stepped out after my conductor on a spidery flying bridge high above the level of the street on which we had entered the building. Down the long vista between the structures I could see cars, like the one we had arrived in, passing back and forth, and the clear glassy walls of the buildings rising far above into the hazy distance where the roof of the city stood. A moment more and we were again indoors, passing down a corridor.

And here I must note another curious feature—the almost universal silence of those Murasheman cities. Down at the ground level (if it were the ground level and not an illusion) where we had entered, there was a clamor of tongues and sounds; farther upward, it sank into a hardly distinguishable murmur.

We paused before a door. “Would you like to see instruction of children?” Ashembe asked, and when I nodded, turned a key and slid back a panel.

We were in a long, wide room, its ceiling carried on brackets instead of the fairy arches of the halls, its walls cheerfully decorated with mechanical designs of a somewhat less intricate character than those of my room. It was filled with rows of little cots. On each lay a child, clad in a single

garment that stopped at the thighs. They all seemed to be asleep and every child had on one of the tensal helmets. From an unseen source a voice was speaking, slowly and carefully enunciating every word.

“This,” whispered Ashembe, “is a schoolroom for the Hetheleg, the manual workers. They are now having a geographical and historical lesson.”

“How long do you keep them in school?” I asked.

154

“As long as the child can continue to absorb information without strain. Two hours a day is sufficient for all lessons, however. You see, everything is learned by use of the tensal. There is no repetition.”

“And the parents of these children? At work?”

“Certainly, or asleep, or doing what they like. Do children still live with parents in your country? I remember. It is not so here. All parents may keep children as long as they wish, but few do so.”

“But who takes care of the children?”

“Most care is automatic like this. The Biyamo give what personal attendance is needed. Hadege is one.”

“It all sounds heartless.”

“Heartless? What is this word? It has to do with passions, perchance. We have outlawed passions.”

There was a step behind us. I turned to see a pale womanish face above a brown suit whose shoulder bore the same emblem Hadeq's had. The owner glanced at the stars on our shoulders with something like awe, and passed into the room to the end where she began to remove the tensals from the children.

"Come," said Ashembe, "the study hour is closed. We will go to the museum."

We passed down the hall to another room. It was dark within and the darkness made it look so low that I involuntarily ducked. It was not until my eyes became acclimated that I realized the size of the place. To left and right galleries ran off around the arc of a circle so enormous that the room must have occupied the entire center of the building—a space nearly as large as a city block. Overhead a tracery of metal indicated another room like the schoolroom.

"What do you wish?" asked Ashembe. "These are all educational exhibits. You can have an astronomy exhibit or history or biology or anything."

Astronomy would be a little too much. I had had enough of that to last a while. "How about a biology exhibit?" I said. "Did you ever have dinosaurs and that sort of thing here?"

155

"Reptilian forms? They come early in the series. I will show."

He led the way down a darkened passage at the side of the central room and turned a key in an invisible panel. I found myself in a room not unlike one of the intimate theaters that

were the fashion when I left New York. There was a dim light around the stage at the lower end of the room and we had entered behind the uppermost row of tiered seats. We seated ourselves (there was no one else in the place) and Ashembe turned the key that projected from the back of the seat before him. A panel slid back soundlessly and we were looking at a picture of an open, desolate plain, covered with cactus-like growths and bunches of heavy, dusty grass shimmering under a sun of tropical intensity and reaching back to a range of distant mountains.

“Why, it’s marvelous,” I said, admiringly. “It’s almost as though the picture had three dimensions.”

“It has three dimensions,” replied Ashembe. “All our exhibits have.”

Presently, from one side of the pictured landscape there stepped forth a creature as strange as a madman’s dream. It was sandy yellow in color, spotted with green and brown, somewhat like a big lizard in form, if one can imagine a lizard with a huge frill like an umbrella projecting from its neck. It had curiously short legs, and held them in bent position as it ran, with quick light steps toward a tuft of the grass at the center of the scene; then rocked itself up and down on its limbs, turning its head this way and that as though looking about for danger.

Apparently it saw none; lowering its head rapidly, it began to feed on the grass, and as it did so, another animal, smaller and so swift of foot that I hardly caught a glimpse of it, dashed out and off at one side of the picture.

“Fahit nexar; he’ag,” said a voice and fell silent. I looked at Ashembe. “These are the names of the animals,” he said. “Attend.”

At the right of the scene I caught a glimpse of another animal, a glimpse and no more. But I had seen a low, ugly, crocodilian head, a row of savage teeth in that instant, and I knew that I was watching the hunter and the hunted. The first animal went on feeding quietly. Suddenly it paused, lifted its head. The frill at its neck spread and swelled, standing straight up, and then it leaped for safety. But it leaped too late. There was a sudden vision of a jumping figure, a brief moment of struggle, and the frill-neck was groveling on the ground, its back broken, while the other bent to tear a great piece of flesh from the quivering body. “Lectodya,” announced the sound device.

Save for the accompanying voice, the scene had hitherto been without a sound. Now there was a sudden fierce hiss from the cactus-like growth in the rear. The lectodya paused in its banquet and stood at gaze in the direction of the sound. From behind the growth came another animal, like the others, flat-bodied and marked with spots of tan on a background of mingled colors. Its little head and high-placed eyes bespoke a bestial lack of intelligence, but it had long savage teeth and one could actually hear the rustle of the claws on the sandy soil. But the strangest feature of the beast was the double row of bony spines that projected from its back, and as it sidled hissing toward the lectodya, these spines rose and fell with a rhythmical movement. “Oughlipi,” said the voice and the two ran together with quick pattering footsteps. For a moment they were in contact, snapping and clawing; then the lectodya

had enough of it and turned to run. The other leaped for his back; almost missed, striking the long narrow tail, which broke off close to the lectodya's body and snapped around on the ground with a motion of its own, the oughlipi struggling fiercely with it. The sound device made a few remarks and the picture faded.

“How do you do it?” I asked Ashembe. “It's the most lifelike thing I ever saw.”

157

“These are merely educational devices for older children,” he informed me. “Not difficult to make. It is all mechanical. Same thing will be repeated for the next visitor. Some of the better ones, such as good histories, are the work of great artists. You should really see them. This is a representation of conditions during our age of reptilians.”

He turned the key again and the panel slid back on an altogether different scene, on which another drama of blood and death began to unfold itself. For the best part of three hours we must have stayed there, with the spectral voice from the wings describing each scene. We saw these dragons of old time through their lives, emerging from the egg, struggling through the dangers of youth, pairing and bearing and finally run down by younger and stronger beasts, or dying of mere old age in some deserted corner. After I had gotten over my first feeling of awe for the wonder of the Murasheman craftsmanship, I began to find the spectacle depressing.

At last I shuddered openly at some particularly gruesome slaughter. Ashembe glanced up quickly and then shut off the key.

“You grow weary?” he asked.

“No . . . but are they all as bloody as this?”

He looked at me in plain non-comprehension. “You object to the deaths?”

“Well, I suppose I’m a bit of a humanitarian.”

“Humanitarian? I do not know the word. Curious . . . but I forget. You belong to a sentiment age. In Murashema we have long discarded such things. Death is the normal end to life.”

“But is that all? Don’t you believe in anything higher than humanity, any after-life?”

158

He laughed. “Oh, you mean primitive religion. No, we do not have such manifestations. I believe the Biyamo maintain some superstitions. Some of the philosophers comment on them. But we of the Bodrog class know better. The body is only a series of chemical reactions, which include even the thoughts. When the chemical reactions stop or go wrong, that is an end. That is all.” ^[27]

“We are brought up to a different conception. We believe there is a higher power directing the universe.”

“It is possible, but we have accepted the fact that this is something we cannot know about. Only we know that this higher power, if there is one, has established certain laws by which the universe is guided. A power so huge as to frame so great a universe cannot possibly be in the least interested in

such infinitesimal pieces of matter as ourselves.”

“Then you don’t believe that the individual should allow his action to be influenced by the fear of favor of this higher power? What basis have you for ethics?”

He laughed again. “If such a higher power exists, what we do is as indifferent to it as what a bacterium does is to us. If the bacterium is noxious, we exterminate it, that is all. Nothing that the bacterium does has the least influence with us. It must be so between us and any higher power. As for ethics, what are they? Systems of conduct, not so? We have them not here. We know that the Scientific Board has removed personals of criminal tendencies and we tell truth. Lies are the basis of all infringements of ethics.”

XVI

“I omit taking you to any of the historical exhibits as yet,” said Ashembe as we stood in the corridor, “because you lack knowledge of our language . . . but—I am reminded.” He glanced at his watch—a bracelet encircling the arm just above the wrist with characters that ran right around the bracelet and an inner circle that moved past an indicator. [\[28\]](#) “I am to bring you up before the Scientific Board for Examination and Adjudication in two periods.”

“By the way, how long is two periods?” I asked, “and what is your system of time? And do your scientific boards sit all day and all night? I find people going around at whatever hour I come out. I noticed this when I was taking walks with Hadeq.”

“Your questions are too many. Certainly our scientific boards sit all night and day. How else to get work accomplished? It is not always the same members, some come and some go, but there are sufficient numbers on duty. Scientific board members must work or cease from their positions.”

“That’s one question. How about other people?”

“That also. Practically all labor is process work, involving the

attention of highly skilled workers. They guard machines which must be kept going at all hours. Consequently at all hours there are workers of all kinds leaving or going to work. Their hours stop at irregular intervals to prevent traffic troubles.”

“Yes, yes. And your time system?”

160

“Based on the decimal. Our minute is practically the same as yours, though arrived at in different way—by averaging the pulse beats of many normal individuals and allotting a certain arbitrary number of these to a division of time. Twelve of these make a tenth and tenths a ‘period.’ A period corresponds to your hour, though it is nearly twice as long. Ten periods make a day. That is the time in which Murashema revolves on its axis. Ten days make a ‘division,’ the tenth being a holiday, and different holidays are for different people. Two hundred and thirty days, or ten divisions make a year. Our planet revolves about the sun in two hundred thirty-three days, so that every third, seventh and tenth year we add an intercalary division to make things straight.”

By the time this explanation was complete we were at my room again, and for the time we had to wait sat down to watch the Murasheman newspaper screen, Ashembe explaining the importance of the various events as each unrolled its pageant before me.

The headquarters of the Scientific Board before which I was summoned were at some distance apparently, for we had a long ride in a two-man car before reaching it. More observing than on the previous trip, I noted that with each circle of

seven buildings the architecture changed. Here the tall supporting columns of the building ran up side by side like the mass of some enormous pipe-organ; next would be a series of monoliths with shimmering walls of naked metal, and beyond that a dazzling pattern of geometrical blocks set at crazy angles and blazing with color.

We ascended the ramp to the center of a fine group of pillared construction. Ashembe led the way to a big room decorated in a pattern of varying shades of brown and furnished with a semi-circular desk or table about two feet across, with its face toward the glass outer wall of the room. At the center of this table were two chairs; my conductor led the way to them, seated himself and pointed out the other to me. I was in the presence of the great governing body of Murashema.

161

Around the outer border of the table were seven or eight more chairs. Only two of them were occupied, one by an old man who was tinkering with an intricate model with shining metal rods sticking out of it, the other by a woman who was working the keys of a calculating machine. Several others were standing about the room in groups of two or three, talking or watching news pictures.

When we came in there was a general lifting of heads and a movement toward the table. I counted nine persons when they had taken their places, all but two of them men. All bore a recognizable mountain-top on the cloth of their shoulders.

Ashembe spoke first, rising and bending his knees before he began. I heard my name mentioned a couple of times and

once he pointed to me, then sat down as a buzz of talk rose among my inquisitors. “I have told them,” my companion said in a low voice, “who you are and have given them a little about your world. I have warned them that lying is considered customary there, but that I think your statements are to be trusted for the most part.”

The Board, all but the old man who had been examining the model, were producing and adjusting tensal helmets as he spoke. When Ashembe finished, the old man turned directly to me and addressed to me a short speech ending with what, from the inflection of his voice, I took to be a question.

Ashembe translated:

“With the technical details of your planet we will become acquainted through the report of Koumar Ashembe. They are not of great interest in any case, as it is unlikely that we will visit it again, in view of the fact that our respective suns are moving away from each other. What we wish you to tell is what points in your social and artistic organization are worthy of imitation. I must also tell you that your place in our commonwealth will be determined by your answers.”

I caught my breath with a little gasp. “Unlikely we shall visit it again,” “your place in our commonwealth”— these phrases struck me full in the face.

162

“—labor organization that are not clear, and we are unaware whether you may not belong to the remote class of labor troublers,” Ashembe was translating. “What is your labor organization precisely?”

“What is your organization here?” I countered.

“Everyone wears the badge of the class to which he belongs. There are the Biyamo, like your personal attendant. Then come the Hetheleg, who are the manual laborers. The Davex are workers of higher type, such as chemists and political administrators, then come the Bodrog, the Acle and finally the Scientific Board. Artists form a separate class, and below all are the imitative arts performers.”

“Oh,” I said, “I see. . . . Why, no, there is no such sharp division with us. Manual laborers are, of course, held to belong to a lower class than men in administrative positions, so much so that though workers in certain lines of manual labor, such as bricklayers, earn more than any but the very highest grade of intellectual workers, there is constant difficulty in getting enough of these laborers to supply the demand. I am afraid that manual labor is looked upon as something of a disgrace.” There was a stir of surprise among the helmeted members of the board.

“You still adhere to the monetary system?”

“Yes.”

“How do you select individuals for administrative duties? Are they the men who make the most money?”

“Frequently,” I was obliged to confess. “We have what we call democracy. All the people elect the administrators and certain others who pass the laws as well as the judges.”

“What is the result of selecting an incapable administrator?”

“There’s nothing to be done but wait till his term runs out. They are elected for a short time only. Then we elect a different man.”

Another stirring of the figures around the table.

“Who decides upon the ability of an administrator?”

“The people at large.”

“If an administrator is unable, but claims to be able, who contradicts him?”

“His opponent. There are usually two or more who wish the same office.”

“Why? You said that the men who made the greatest rewards in money were most esteemed. Do administrative positions pay the largest rewards?”

“No. But they like the office, I suppose, and there is something in being paid by the public at large.”

“Oh, you have the system of everybody contributing to pay officials. What becomes of the rest of the contributions? In such cases there is always a surplus.”

“It is used for various public works.”

“And the administrators have charge of these?”

“Yes.”

There was a moment's silence. The old man said something in which a sneer could hardly be missed. "Oh, but that's not fair," I burst out. "They don't tap the treasury—" The old man spoke again.

"He says you are probably lying," Ashembe translated, "and that your social organization is so archaic that it has no interest. You will be asked to tell more about it later to a specialist in antiquarian institutions."

For a moment red rage gripped me.

"Are artists highly esteemed?" came the remorseless question.

"It depends," I told them, trying desperately to be fair in spite of my annoyance, "upon the degree of civilization in any particular country and what artistic taste it has. There is no complete answer. In general, yes."

"What arts are most high?"

164

"Painting, writing, the theater, sculpture, music . . ." I began slowly.

"Painting we know, sculpture we know, and the theater. But how does the theater differ from writing?"

"Well, in the theater you see people in a performance. Writing is read from a book."

("I have added by means of printed characters," Ashembe whispered aside as they were considering the answer. "Is the change of your speech approved?" I nodded.)

“What do you write about?”

“Well, there are history, and philosophy, and biography, and fiction . . . and essays . . . and poetry. . . .”

They seemed mystified.

“What is poetry?”

Frankly, I was stumped. (Let any man try to define it.) “Why . . . it’s the combination of various words so that they rhyme—no, that won’t do—so that they have a musical sound and a certain rhythm . . . and association values . . . and a lot of other things.”

More mystification and consultation. Then “Make some poetry,” Ashembe translated.

My stock of memorized verse is not large, although I am fond enough of poetry to have committed most of the pieces I like best to memory. I felt a perfect ass besides. However, I did the best I could.

*“There was an old man of Peru,” I struck out boldly,
“Who dreamed he was eating his shoe,
He woke in the night
In a terrible fright
And found it was perfectly true.”*

Again the tenses came off and there was a little buzz of admiration that almost drowned Ashembe’s floundering effort to translate the verse.

“They are very much pleased,” Ashembe reported.
“They think your poetry is very fine indeed and a noble art. They wish you to recite more of it.”

These queer people actually thought a limerick something extra! My wounded pride mended rapidly under the admiring glances of the august governing body of Murashema. Well, if they thought a limerick was good, how about some real poetry? Encouraged, I swung into the intoxicating music of “Atalanta in Calydon”:

*“When the hounds of spring are on winter’s traces,
The mother of months in meadow or plain—”*

I broke down toward the end, not remembering beyond the “Maenad and the Bassarid” line, but the rendition, bad though it was, was received with a perfectly genuine and quite astounding burst of applause. One after another these rulers of worlds rose and made me the bent-kneed gesture of courtesy which is the highest form of appreciation with them, and when they had quieted down they demanded more.

I think I must have been kept there reciting poetry for the better part of an hour, giving them everything in my repertoire—even some snatches of epitaphs. Everything I offered was received with the same uncritical applause, and when I finally called a halt from sheer weariness they forgot to ask me any further questions and bowed me out with the announcement that I should hold myself ready to receive a special commissioner who would give me full information about my place in the Commonwealth of Murashema.

I fear I must pass over the next few periods hurriedly. Like those of a happy people, my annals were brief. I spent my days loafing around and looking at things with Hadeq or learning Murashema under the tutelage of Ashembe in the hours he could spare from his duties in the courts. Of other people I saw hardly any and spoke to none until the day the philosopher called.

He was announced by television-phone as the emissary of the Scientific Board, and I made ready to receive him with something like trepidation.

He turned out to be a tall, thin individual whose pinched-up nose gave him an air of superciliousness and who had the carefully studied precision of gesture and speech of an actor. He glanced about the room for approval after every statement. I discovered the reason for this later when it was explained to me that the leading philosophers are in the custom of giving to whoever wishes to tune in on their consultations the benefit of what they are saying to the individual, and that it is quite the custom to connect one's television set with a private home in which a philosopher is talking to pick up the pearls of wisdom that fall from his lips.

He bent his knees in greeting and addressed me in Murasheman. "Man from another world," he said, "you have come across the years to us, freighted with precious gifts of art. Therefore the Scientific Board has decided to permit you to become a free member of the community of Murashema, although you have a low intelligence rating. Accept my congratulations."

I murmured my appreciation of the honor.

“You have been assigned to the ranks of the Thutiya Volva. (The artist of sound, *i.e.*, musicians.) The rights and privileges of this class are yours.”

“Just what are they? What do I have to do?”

“Make further those exquisite sounds with which you delighted the ears of the Scientific Board.”

“Oh . . .” (I had given them almost my entire stock of poetry.)

“You understand, of course, that the Thutiya Volva are under primitive organization.”

“Just what does that mean?”

“All workers, whether Biyamo, Davex, Hetheleg or Bodrog, are under direction of our glorious commonwealth and do what work is asked by their superiors in the state. In return to them the state guarantees food and clothing and living quarters and recreation. Above this the workers must purchase recreation for themselves with labor tickets.”

167

“But not the artists?” (What an autocracy, I thought.)

“Our scientists have long known that artists are individualists—you, no less than the rest. Individualists are of primitive mold of mind and are therefore subjected to primitive conditions. All arts are classified as amusement and are paid for in labor tickets by those who enjoy them. Artists are not

furnished with food and clothes by our glorious commonwealth. They must pay for everything in the labor tickets obtained from those who enjoy their arts.”

“Isn’t that a bit hard on the artists? It seems unfair.”

A theatrically adequate expression of horror spread slowly over the face of the philosopher and he lifted his hands before his face. (I noted that the fingers were painted, a form of vanity I found quite prevalent among Murashemans of the upper classes.)

“Are you so steeped in ignorance then that you do not know that the wise scientists who control our great commonwealth are never unfair? They know that if the state furnished livings to artists many persons disinclined to labor would claim to be artists in order to obtain the benefits of idleness. We hold rightly that a genuine artist will be appreciated by other people who will show their appreciation by maintaining him. This method automatically starves out false artists and forces them to enter work.”

“But aren’t there any artists who are genuinely good but are so far ahead of their times that they are not appreciated? We have them where I come from.”

“Child of another age, do you not know that under a true civilization such as that we have achieved all people are equal in artistic appreciation? If an artist is unable to earn his living by pleasing people, a poor artist he must be. I tell you this for your own good as well. You must please people. The future has no arts as distinct from the present.”

(What an ass, I thought. And this was a specimen of the Murasheman philosopher! . . . And no wonder a people who regulated things in this way had no poetry. I wondered what their other arts were like.)

“I see . . .” I said, making a show of agreement. “How am I to get in touch with possible clients for my art?”

“They will search you out,” said the philosopher. “It is my recommendation that you give one or two performances at gatherings to spread the news of your arrival. I bid you farewell.”

And rising, he curtsied to me again with the stiff sweep of a marionette and left. Half an hour later the television-phone announced that new clothes bearing my emblem were being sent to me, and the dumbwaiter, when opened, revealed them as exact duplicates of those I had been wearing, save that a series of concentric rings replaced the star on the shoulder.

It was while Ashembe was giving me my lesson in Murasheman that evening that the first request for my artistic talents came. The television-phone gave a warning shout, and the panel slid back to show a circle of people seated in a room not unlike my own, one of whom I recognized as a member of the Scientific Board that had conducted my examination.

I gave them some limericks and what I could remember of “Jabberwocky,” remembering in time that the tensal helmets the members of the board had worn caused them to memorize the other selections they had heard. As the panel slid into place before the picture of the curtseying group I turned to my

friend:

“I’m afraid I’m going to have difficulty if this keeps up,” I told him. “I don’t know so very much poetry, and they *will* use those tensals.”

169

A curious expression of surprise and horror spread over his face. “What’s the matter?” I cried.

“You are not then—inventing these poetry?”

“Why, of course not. All I’ve done is recite some of the best poetry I knew.”

He placed his hands on my shoulders and looked at me gravely. “It is contrary to the regulations,” he said, “but I am your friend and will say no more of this. I implore you not to reveal it to others.”

“Of course not if you think best. But why?”

He glanced around as though somebody might overhear us and then shut off the television-phone before replying.

“Those who create no new art themselves but use the arts others produce are not of the Thutiya Volva.”

“What are they then?”

“Has none told you of the Thutiya Bunyo? They are the imitative artists who give nothing themselves to the world but only pass on what others have given them. They are of the lowest rank, below even the Biyamo, and their time is mostly

devoted to . . . despicable duties. If it were found out you had concealed that you were reciting the works of others, you would be sent to the farms.” He shuddered. Then, after a moment, “Attempt to make new poetry—in Murasheman, if you can.”

I did try it, but without any great amount of success. Murasheman would be the easiest of languages for a good poet; it lacks in the harsh s and z sounds of English, replacing them with a vast number of labials. It is entirely monosyllabic. Where a longer word appears it is due to the welding together of a number of monosyllables. “Ashembe,” for instance, meaning “Glory of the time spirit,” “ashem” being a compound word signifying “exaltation” (ash) “of heart,” “em” and “be” being the word for “time spirit.”

Speaking of “be” reminds me of the type of philosophy that passes for a religion in Murashema. They appear to hold (that is, the Bodrog, Davex and Acle do) a belief in an amorphous entity they call “Beyarya,” which may be rendered as “the first cause” or the “indestructible spirit of time” in the sense of a spirit of progress. Beyarya is not conceived of as having any interest in mortal affairs. The principal article in the Murasheman ethical code is that one must always tell the truth. They hold that all misconduct flows out of lies, either of omission or commission.

170

Beyarya’s part in the making of the universe is limited, in Murasheman thought, to having set in motion the chain of events which resulted in the formation of the Murashema and other solar systems. The Murashemans believe that all such systems are governed by a single set of physical laws which

are unchanging throughout the universe.

They believe that the thoughts and actions of men and animals (they deny the existence of a soul and hence make no difference between men and animals) are controlled by these laws, thus touching on the extreme mechanistic point of view.

This is the Murasheman religion or philosophy in its purest and highest form. Naturally their conception of Beyarya as an impersonal and disinterested force precludes any religious worship or any ministers of religion. In the lower ranks of the people and particularly among the Biyamo and Thutiya Bunyo this religion is incrustated with a certain amount of anthropomorphism. There are numerous superstitions and a tendency to elevate certain heroes of the past to the rank of demigods or intercessors with the divine Beyarya, whom they regard as having a more personal interest in the doings of the individual.

This philosophy, as I have said, underlies all Murasheman thought. Nevertheless they have philosophers who belong to the Davex class (intellectual workers) and who elaborate on the fundamental idea and apply its tenets in detail to the problems of the individual. The philosophers are very numerous; they are consulted on all knotty ethical points, and the more fashionable ones receive high prices in labor tickets above the fee the state pays them, though this practice is frowned upon by the scientific boards.

171

Besides being philosophers, these professional philosophers are acute psychologists. Their mission is not merely to solve the ethical problems of the individual but his business

problems as well; in fact, to furnish advice at every turn of his life. Every man and woman is compelled to consult them every so often, and if the records, which are kept in great detail, show that an individual has not had his regular philosophic (or rather psychological) examination, the Scientific Board sends one around.

XVII

The chain of circumstances that led up to the writing of this manuscript began in August of my year 5.

Through Ashembe I had met another member of the artist caste—Tenengi Anyecso Thutiya Marog—and through him again I was invited to be present at a “gathering.” A gathering is, I may explain, the Murasheman equivalent of any kind of more or less formal social evening on Earth; they are limited by custom to those of the same caste and class.

It was held in a room larger than any of the apartments I had seen thus far, and the decorations on the walls were of animal motifs instead of the uniform geometrical patterns to be seen elsewhere. Instead of the conventional furniture it held only a number of low divans, about a foot high and nearly as wide as a double bed. A cleared space at the window held a dais, behind which the shutters of the room were drawn. It was the only place in Murashema where I had seen interior lighting. Three or four people were standing about talking as we entered, the shoulders of all bearing the concentric rings of the Thutiya Volva. I was introduced to each.

One of them drew from his pocket a note-pad with a waxed surface on which he proceeded to draw a rapid and unflattering sketch of me, which emphasized my hair and

beard. I noted that he used an elongated and carefully trimmed index fingernail for the purpose.

Commenting upon the sketch, I fell into conversation with him. His name, it appeared, was Ang Redike and he was one of those artists engaged in preparing the backgrounds and costumes for historical “movies” of the same character as those I had seen in the museum.

“I am surprised,” I told him, “that you still need to make them. I should think that in a civilization as standardized as yours everything of that kind would long since have become a mere process of mechanics.”

“That is true,” he said, “but there are always more to be made. Events which may seem small have big consequences. Thus there are not yet showings of explorations in space by the Bodrog Fotas, but now that Ashembe has succeeded in finding mercury, that subject is important and must be illustrated.”

“And you sketch me for that?”

He smiled and nodded. “We have no difficulty with most things of your world. Koumar Ashembe’s reports are good. But your appearance is strange. . . . You must have many violent men there.”

“We have,” I admitted briefly, and then to turn the subject, “Why haven’t they shown interplanetary exploration before? I should think it would be of the utmost interest.”

He glanced about quickly, then regarded me for a moment

with an intent scrutiny. Then, lowering his voice, “They were failures,” he said briefly. “The suicide associations.”

“Suicide associations? What are they and what have they got to do with interstellar travel?”

173

Again the apprehensive glance and then, taking me by the arm, Ang Redike led me to one of the divans at the side of the room. “It is not permitted to discuss the subject,” he told me in a low tone, “but I will tell. . . . There are those who believe we have a dying world. They began to form the Associations of the Grehm (I can only translate this as “the hopeless,” though it also signifies “the helpless”) before the last revolution. They believe that we exist only for pleasure and that the final pleasure is death. They refuse to do labor, doing nothing but holding gatherings and carousing, and at each gathering some member of the Grehm is put to death.”

“Yes,” I said, “go on. . . . Why are they so serious?”

“Before the last revolution they had almost complete control. It was not discovered then that energy could be released with the mercury tube.” He shuddered a little. “The Biyamo and Hetheleg got out of hand and gave themselves up to laziness and carousing. I don city was ruined and several others. No work was done. . . . Then the scientific boards found the mercury tube and began to put down the Associations of the Grehm. They established the eugenic regulations then to prevent the Biyamo and Hetheleg from becoming too numerous and sent all the Grehm they could find to the farms.”

“But there are still some left, I take it?” I said.

“Yes. . . . They influence the Biyamo and Hetheleg badly. We fear sometimes that all will cease work and civilization fall. Therefore the Scientific Board does not permit any exhibitions of scenes that do not end in success. . . . They make constant investigations through the philosophers in the Grehm.” He shuddered again.

“But I should think it would be easy—” I began. He stopped me with a gesture. Someone was approaching.

Before the introduction could take place, however, there came the sound of a soft, sweet-toned bell from the upper end of the room. I looked up to see that it had gradually filled with people, men and women, all comparatively young and nearly all bearing the concentric rings of the Thutiya on their shoulders. 174

The bells (I now perceived there was a series of them hanging from a rod) were being played by a performer with a small padded mallet; some subtle, wordless air, without melody, but singularly pleasing in its rapid changes of tempo and tone. A moment later a very soft wind instrument struck in, high-pitched and clear. As the two played their duet a man, standing at the side of the dais, stepped upon it and began to move through the complex figures of a dance. It was all new and rather wonderful to me, but I noted that Ang Redike was bored, and though the rest of the room were listening and watching, they were doing it with an air of politeness rather than with one of enjoyment.

A few minutes later, as the performance finished on a series of repeated high notes from the wind instrument, one or two persons stood up and curtsied in acknowledgment, but most of the audience merely returned to their interrupted conversation. I turned to my companion.

“They seemed good to me,” I remarked.

“Merely Thutiya Bunyo,” he said disparagingly. “Wait till some of the Volva begin. Ah!”

A short man, with a round, cherub-like countenance, was making his way to the dais, a painted box about the size of a suitcase in his hand. He looked about the room, nodded a greeting here and there, opened his box and sat down. Someone at the back turned out the lights, and before my eyes had gotten used to the dimness I saw a pale green, ghostly radiance begin to grow from the box. It rose like a note of music, becoming more and more brilliant, and then dying slowly away to an intense blue tone that seemed to penetrate the very walls. Then abruptly the blue was shattered by three vivid orange flashes, so bright they seemed to have material body, and before the last one had died out color on color flowed from the box, inundating the gathering with a wild melody of tints. Here a face would be picked out by a sudden white shaft to fade into dimness in purple shadows; a series of chords in red ran around the room. . . .

I fear my best efforts at description are quite inadequate to tell the beauty of this singular color-organ in the hands of the artist. He used the room and the people in it as his material. The lights sought them out, here and there,

focusing the eyes of all present first on one and then another, and so cleverly did the artist manipulate his keys that in each case he seemed to accent some feature that brought out an essential bit of character and follow it with what might be described as notes in color. One *felt* rather than saw that he was describing the people. It is as impossible for me to express in words what he was doing as it would be for me to manipulate the instrument.

As the lights went on again at the end of his performance, a low murmur of appreciation ran round the room, and almost as one person we stood up to express our appreciation to the little apple-faced man. I felt that I had passed through an emotional experience.

“Who is he?” I whispered.

“Thase Tobong,” answered Ang Redike. “He is a good artist. You think so?”

“Wonderful,” I agreed. “We have nothing like it—”

“And we have nothing like your art. But then every artist creates his own art to a degree. Come, they wish you.”

To my embarrassment I saw that people were staring at me and the host of the evening was approaching. It was a nervous moment. My previous audiences had all been Bodrog, that is, scientists of one kind or another, men no doubt brilliant but lacking in artistic sense, at least if they were anything like those on Earth. (I remember old Professor Burton, one of my clients, ^[29] a splendid biologist and a

delightful old soul who thought Laura Jean Libbey ranked just above Shakespeare.) But now I was among a gathering of artists. Surely they would see through me. . . .

At all events, I gave them the best poetry I could, inwardly blessing the high-school teacher who had made me learn Marc Anthony's oration over the body of Caesar by rote. It saved me and I found myself bowing and blushing my thanks for more unearned applause.

I was followed by a violinist (I call him a violinist to give some idea of what he was like in familiar terms), who played a long instrument with strings that spread out fan-wise from the point where they crossed the bridge at its base. He apparently depended for his tone not so much on fingering (the strings were too widely spread for that) as upon exquisitely careful bowing. The resultant music was fundamentally much the same as that I had heard on my first day in my own dining room, high-pitched squeals, utterly lacking in any sort of charm for me.

There were more entertainers—Ang Redike himself, with a series of sheets of some white material and a box of liquid colors which he sprayed upon the sheets through stencils of adjustable size and shape to form cubistic portraits of those present; a wind instrument player, more dancers and an emaciated individual who demonstrated with lightning rapidity a complex series of manoeuvres in the cubical chess game Ashembe and I had played.

But by the time this last performer had taken his place on the dais I had begun to notice something peculiar about the room.

There was a faint but perfectly definite odor, not unlike that of the piney slopes of the Adirondacks, most peculiar of smells for that far place.

Again I turned to Ang Redike. “What is that—” (What was their word for odor? For lack of it I wrinkled my nose and sniffed expansively.)

177

“You do not know the gas?” he asked. “What do they do for intellectual stimulus on your Earth when they hold gatherings?”

“Why, we usually drink liquids containing alcohol,” I said. “Although when I left there was effort on foot to prohibit such drinks.”

“Alcohol! How curious!” He laughed in the polite chuckle, which is all the cultured Murashemans allow themselves. “But alcohol has lowering physiological effects, has it not? It is a poison.”

“In sufficient quantity, I believe,” I said. “Although it is a matter in dispute on our Earth. There are parties for it and against it. Those in favor of it are called wets and those opposed dries.” (The odor was becoming stronger and even a little dizzying.)

“Wets—ha, ha!” said Ang Redike, lolling back on the lounge. (What ailed him? If I had not felt such a sense of lazy comfort, I would have asked.) I looked about. Was it my dizzied senses or was the room really a trifle misty? A little hum of conversation mingled with the gurgling laughter of the Murashemans.

Ang Redike sat up suddenly. (Odd how he seemed to be swimming rather than moving in that misty and uncanny light.) He whistled and motioned with his arm and then sank back as though exhausted. I would have sat up myself had it not been too much of an effort.

Besides, it was dizzying to sit up.

Through the light, now foggy, of the room two figures swam toward us, women with the thin, triangular faces and regular, delicate features one sees in the paintings of the pre-Raphaelites. I noted with a mild surprise that their shoulders bore not the circles of the Thutiya Volva but a tiny representation of a human figure on the background of a fan, but it was almost too much effort to conjecture that they must be Thutiya Bunyo. And for them, too, the effort of movement seemed considerable. The odor in the room was permeating everything, and it was a delight merely to breathe it.

178

One of the girls seated herself by Ang Redike, the other by me. The mist in the room became thicker and thicker, the odor more permeating, till one sank in a delicious languor in which one could not see one's hand before one's face. A throaty gurgle dying out into a sigh of pleasure rose somewhere in the room. The girl beside me flung an arm around me, laid her face close to mine. I looked for Ang Redike, six feet away, but the mist was too thick, I could not see him. Again the throaty gurgle of pleasure somewhere in the room.

The light was streaming through the opened shutters. I moved slightly, trying to remember, then did remember and sat up with a jerk, feeling the back of my neck where the headache

ought to be. To my surprise there was no headache at all. I felt glorious as though I had energy enough for anything. I looked about. Mist and people were gone—the room was empty save for the huge divans, a couple of articles of clothing on one of them and Ang Redike standing over me, smiling.

“Come,” he said. “I must continue my work and there are probably calls waiting for you also.”

I looked around again. “Where has everyone gone?”

“To their places. I allowed you to sleep.”

“You needn’t really have bothered. . . . Tell me, what made that mist in the room last night and the odor?”

“The gas. You do not know the gas?”

“No, we have nothing like it but alcohol. Doesn’t it have any after-effects? I don’t notice any.”

“You mean ill after-effects? Certainly not. The Scientific Board would not permit it to be used. Let us go.”

XVIII

So there (I meditated when I had reached my apartment) were the Thutiya Bunyo. And this was the class I was escaping by the ignorance of the Murashemans and the grace of Ashembe. . . . And the Associations of the Grehm. . . .

My thoughts were interrupted by a shout from the television-phone, which proved, when answered, to be the secretary of the local Scientific Board with the information that since I had not called on a philosopher for three periods they were sending one around.

It proved to be the same thin and theatrical gentleman who had visited me before.

“Man of another universe,” he said, as he entered, “I have read the secrets of your heart. You have not sent for me. Therefore your mind is troubled with some unnameable trouble. I admit it is difficult for us to understand one another, but such as we are, voices calling feebly across vast spaces, let us try to arrive at a communion of minds. I implore you to open your full heart.”

My heart misgave me at the thought of trusting this sententious sounding board of a philosopher with my secret. “There are some things I wish to know,” I admitted with a

show of reluctance, “and my friend Koumar Ashembe seems unwilling to aid me.”

“No true man is unwilling to aid another,” the philosopher answered, pat as you please. “The truth makes free by slaying errors of mind with its intense white light. Yet all men know that day is hard and twilight comfortable, and one who has climbed the difficult heights to understanding is loath to draw his comrades from the pleasant dusk of their little vices and ignorances. Hence your friend is not to be blamed that he did not earn your hatred by rousing you from a sleep you find so pleasing.”

Words, words—as bad as any Dr. Frank Crane of Earth. 180
However, one more try before I tossed him out, I thought. Aloud I said, “The specific question is this . . . it’s a little hard to put into words. . . . It’s a general question. Why, in a civilization that has progressed as far as yours, do you allow such a class as the Thutiya Bunyo?”

“Ah!” said the philosopher. He swung an accusatory arm at me. “You have been attending an artistic gathering and inwardly are somewhat ashamed of your attendance, and of the attraction that the Thutiya Bunyo, or some one of them, holds for you. You are also slightly desirous of a recurrence of the incident, shameful but pleasant. Do not fear on this account, you are yourself of the Thutiya, and no odium attaches to you for this. . . . But—

“I would judge that you have no similar class in your own planet or that you did not belong to it if you do have such a class. But let me assure you that in the eyes of the divine

Beyarya you need not fear. You are exempt from mean scruples, which are for a range of men far below the attainments of the creative artist. You belong to an exalted class which demands great passions and fiery reliefs from those passions, and any amount of license is permitted to you. Your only care should be to produce your art.”

I started in amazement. Too late, I remembered Ashembe’s remark to me, so long ago, that the philosophers of Murashema were also its psychologists, and that psychology had been reduced to an exact science. Stripped of the flowery language, the philosopher had, in fact, given me a most accurate reading of my own psychology.

The philosopher lifted a supercilious nose. “You are thinking that I have talked to your friend, the Koumar Ashembe Acle,” he said. “It is not so. Your psychology is of a simplicity absurd. All artists are either excessively simple or complex of mentality. Sometimes both are combined in one individual. But never are they of the puzzling average. The springs of your being lie close to the surface. But pause!” He pointed one hand toward the ceiling and shaking the skinny forefinger of the other under my nose with a theatrical gesture, continued, “There are indications that you were only recently raised to the state of the Thutiya. In the name of the divine Beyarya, I abjure you—is this not true?”

181

If I told him, would I not be degraded to the ranks of the Thutiya Bunyo?

“No—no,” I told him.

His head jerked back in surprise; the pointing fingers came down—but even here his movement was smoothly theatrical. “You are to be felicitated,” he said, “upon an extraordinary prudery of mind in that case. You will become a very great artist, or at least a very original one, with so remarkable an equipment. It will give you a singular, if not attractive, outlook on existence. But as for your question the reason I have stated. You are half ashamed and half delighted with the gathering you have been attending.”

“True,” I said, “in all probability. But why do you tell me this?”

An expression of surprise spread over his features. “Is it possible that you do not know? You are here to be assisted. I am here to give assistance. The need for philosophical assistance is caused by a condition of mental stress. The assistance of a philosopher is given by analyzing the reasons behind the stress. When they are found and their triviality is made apparent, the stress disappears. Under such conditions the question you ask becomes academic and unimportant.”

“But as a matter of interest,” I persisted, “why do you have the Thutiya Bunyo?”

He struck an attitude of intense thought almost grotesque in its likeness to Rodin’s famous statue. “The deepest reason is their usefulness to the Thutiya Volva and to a lesser degree to the more intense spirits among the Bodrog. There are certain types of workers who require violent passionate activity as a relief to the intensity of their mental labors and who are yet so unsocial they cannot tolerate

permanent alliances. . . . The Hetheleg Arboath are at work on a modification of the tensal treatment that will preserve artistic tendencies unimpaired while removing unsocial qualities But,” and he fixed me with his eyes, “there is still something unsettled in your mind or you would not have asked that. Tell me, I implore you, why you thus seek to turn the conversation from your own case, which is the reason for my presence? Between us, you and me, there can be nothing hidden.”

“Well,” I admitted, “there is something . . .” I groped for words. “From what I know of your astronomy—I don’t see why, if there is a controlling intelligence in the universe, it causes such a vast waste of material and time in producing . . . so insignificant an animal as man. Think of all the dead worlds and those on which life was never born.”

He regarded me for a moment from bright, bird-like eyes. “You are oppressed by the smallness and hopelessness of life?” he inquired, and then with a quickness that showed the question was rhetorical, “That is because you are homesick for your own backward planet. I should say also . . . hm, hm . . . that you are withholding facts of importance from me, since you are convinced of your failure in this environment. A man who is happy and successful in his world is troubled by no such doubtings. Do not be so. Every man has within him the seeds of his own success. The Scientific Board will find the proper soil in which they may grow. But I cannot say more to you. A man who withholds facts from me is denying my mission, and for such I can do nothing.”

He rose. “Farewell,” he said, “until that happier day when you

will see fit to give me your full confidence.”

And he left me to my thoughts.

XIX

I went to the ball game a day or so later with Ang Redike, who was much interested in that form of sport. A Murasheman ball game is played by players harnessed under their shoulders with small helium-filled balloons that serve to just lift them free of the ground. The ball is propelled with an instrument resembling a force-pump. With the aid of the balloons, the players can jump as much as forty feet into the air, and it requires considerable skill to control one's leaps and at the same time to strike the ball in the desired direction. An expert player can follow it through the wildest gyrations, however, somersaulting over and under it in all directions.

I noted, when I sat down to watch the game, that a young man bearing the ideograph of the Hetheleg Arboath had seated himself beside me. He seemed to be trying to attract my attention, but I was interested in the game and did not respond to his advances, until, in an interval of the game, he whispered in my ear, "See me after the game."

I turned toward him; but he glanced quickly at me and then away, evidently not wishing to give my companion a clue to any connection between us. When the crowd began to leave the place after the game, I turned toward him again. "Coming tonight," he whispered quickly. "Turn off your television and

lights.”

Mystified, but willing to learn what he wanted, I let down my shutters early that night and disconnected the television-phone (a privilege, by the way, allowed only to artists—all other persons being required to leave their sets on at all times to allow the Scientific Board to inspect their doings). After a wait of about half an hour there was a discreet tap at the door. I opened it to the young man, who slipped in quickly, looked around, and announced his name in a whisper. “Poran Tiali,” he said, “I wish to speak to you. Dule Jujuk told me you might wish to see me.”

“Dule Jujuk?” I asked, mystified.

184

He looked about apprehensively; I could just catch the flicker of his movement in the velvet black of the darkened apartment. “The philosopher,” he whispered.

“Oh,” I said. “Well?”

He did not reply for a moment, and I guessed he was gathering his nerve for the next remark whatever it was.

“Dule Jujuk informs me that you are in despair with life,” he said.

“Not exactly in despair,” I disagreed, “but I don’t see why the divine Beyarya should go to so much trouble to produce such insects as we are. . . . But what the devil! That was some time ago and a part of a conversation. Why should he send you to me because of it? Tell me.”

“I belong to a body which is unjustly accused of subversive ideas,” said he, “whereas we only see things in their true light. . . . We are called the Grehm. . . .”

I started. “The suicide associations!”

“So we are called. But you believe as we do in all essentials, and it is my mission to lay our program before you. . . . Do you know they dare not put the truth in the museum machines? They dare not tell the truth anywhere, these precious scientists of ours, who set so much store by truth. They dare not because we would all cease from this insect-like labor and live the only life of a true man, free and open, like the people of the hunting ground.”

“Yes,” I said. “Go on.”

“I will go on. I will tell you the truth—the truth you will never learn with these scientists with their serums and tensals. But they would send me to the farms for it if they knew.”

“Really?” I asked.

He paid no attention, but warmed to his subject and went on. “Do you know what the truth is that does not appear in their museum machines? Do you know what our life on this planet and yours on yours really is? It means that our planets are approaching the end of their history and that all life on them is a disease indicative of the old age of the system, like wrinkles in the faces of men or the diseases of old age. It is a mere surface manifestation. Do you know that the stars have a life of their own? Do you know that they are sentient bodies? Our philosophers would tell you this if they

dared. They all know it. The scientists will not let them. They are satisfied with the botched world they have made.”

He paused for breath. “Well—” I began, but he interrupted me.

“Let me tell you the truth. Life, as the divine Beyarya sees it, is concerned with His stars. We are insects, parasites, forms of disease. We are not life. We are the negation of life. The divine Beyarya would willingly see us exterminated. Constantly he strives to wipe out this little life from the planets surrounding His suns so that they may live their great life undisturbed.

“We have no purpose here. That much is obvious, is it not?” A pointed finger struck me suddenly on the chest in the dark, a finger fairly trembling with the passion of its owner’s utterance.

“Why, I don’t know,” I temporized, willing to admit the force of his arguments, but not quite seeing where he was leading. (It all fitted in—the unwillingness of the Scientific Board to permit movies of interplanetary travel until Ashembe’s great success, the tyranny over every act of life.)

“Grant me that we have no purpose here. What follows then? This follows, that our only purpose should be to amuse ourselves. And how can man amuse himself under so bitter a tyranny over thought and action? Do you know what the Scientific Board does with members of the Associations of the Grehm it catches? It gives them a tental treatment that reduces them to idiots and sends them to the farms—the

farms, mind you!”

His voice had risen almost to a scream.

“Well, what of it?”

“Believing as you do, you must join us. We have plans in train for the overthrowing of this tyranny and the substitution of a reign of reason in which there shall be no more overstuffed civilization—just the free life of natural man in the hunting grounds.”

“And what if I refuse and report you to the Scientific Board?”

“You condemn me to the farms. I do not think you would willingly do that. But you would also condemn yourself to the tensal and the farms as well as the serum. For Dule Jujuk would include in his report the undoubted fact that you have withheld information from him. He thinks that the information is that you are not an artist at all. A philosopher’s report would carry more weight than anything you could possibly say. You must be one of us. Anyone who withholds information is of necessity.”

I saw the point. A species of blackmail. And yet—

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Come with me to the next meeting of the Association of the Grehm and I will tell you. At 77 Farm this side of Idon. I will have one of our Thutiya members call for you. You had best go to bed at once now to cover my visit.”

A moment more and he was gone.

Two days later, just at evening, my door was opened on a member of the Thutiya I did not know. “To take you to the gathering my friend spoke of the other night,” he said briefly as he came in, and closing my shutters I went with him. ^[30]

It was my first experience of a trip outside a Murasheman city. We descended to a level below the lower street level where a station with platforms would have reminded any visitor from Earth of a subway station, save for the better lighting. At the side of the platforms a number of cars stood. They were about thirty feet long and their cross-section would have been round. At the front end they tapered like a fish’s head, at the rear the superstructure was expanded to a rocket-like tail and the whole end was surrounded by a heavy ring of atotta. 187

Within, the cars held seats arranged in no particular order, and each car bore a number on its side. The one we were to travel in was numbered 77 in large characters. We stepped in through the side (the whole side was opened out) and sat down. A moment later a bell tinkled in warning, the curved sides slid up automatically in grooves from somewhere below the car body and closed above our heads. A few moments later we moved gently past the platform with a hum of motors into a darkened tube. There we paused. And then a moment later we started (I could tell the difference only by the tiniest shifting of my position) and in hardly a moment it seemed stopped again.

“This is the place,” said my companion. I looked up. “How

far have we come?” “About eighty miles,” he said. [31]

All Murasheman travel is done by this means, the propulsive force being compressed air, like the pneumatic tubes familiar on Earth for carrying messages and change in department stores. Several of the round cars travel in a single tube. . . . [32]

We emerged from the station into a perfect wilderness of tall, cabbage-like leaves that reached far above our heads. Still farther up I could see the room of the building that contained the farm, and behind the rows of plants ran a line of electrical connections. Interested, I asked their purpose, and was told they were for the electrification of the growing vegetables. 188

Among them also I could occasionally see a figure clad in the gray of the Biyamo, moving slowly and apparently aimlessly about.

“You see what the farms are,” said my companion in a low tone as he led the way to a building which rose suddenly from among the greenery, “these people do nothing for all their lives but tend plants. They have no life, no amusements.”

“Aren’t they unhappy?”

“Why should they be? They are Biyamo, made so by the tensal for punishments in many cases.” I shuddered a little at this.

We met in a small room in the interior of the farm building,

one side of which was taken up by the reducing apparatus with which the Murashemans produce the alcohols from the raw material—the basis of all their chemistry. Perhaps a dozen of us were gathered there, mostly Hetheleg, although I saw one Bodrog ideograph of a style unfamiliar to me and one of the Davex besides us two Thutiya.

A middle-aged man rapped for order and began, “We have gathered here, my friends, in the name—” when all at once there sounded from the door the shrill notes of a whistle. In a moment we were in wild tumult. There was a rush for the door, but before anyone could reach it, it burst open with a shattering crash and the officers came in. . . .

[33]

. . . this means one of two things, either I shall be given treatment under the tensal and leave this room a changed personality, the same only in name, to become a humble and unintelligent laborer with my hands or I shall be degraded to the ranks of the Thutiya Bunyo to become an outcast, despised even by the lowliest workmen of Murashema. In either case my doom is sealed.

189

For the time to write this narrative and the promise to send it back to the Earth I am indebted to Koumar Ashembe, who has steadily stood my friend, even in my great guilt and trouble. I can only hope that it will fall on some spot where it will be found and preserved and ultimately revealed to the world. I am certain that it will find the world, so much confidence I have in Murasheman science. But this is my only hope that some memory of Alvin Schierstedt will be preserved among my friends. Farewell.

FOOTNOTES

[1] He was quite right. Most meteorites are crystalline rock of extremely permanent character. A few are metallic iron, alloyed with nickel and cobalt. But in either case, there is little or no chemical action with water.

[2] He is again perfectly right. The experiment of teaching navy men radio while asleep was tried at Pensacola, and with complete success. The sailors were unable to remember what they had heard while asleep, but on waking were able to send and receive radio messages with remarkable skill, though they had had almost no previous training.

[3] Evidently Ashembe, in his ignorance of English, did not quite mean what he said here. Later on in the narrative, Mr. Schierstedt makes it abundantly clear that hereditary classes, as such, have no existence on Ashembe's planet.

[4] Evidently, the evening readings of the two friends to Ashembe had not progressed as far as M in the encyclopedia yet.

[5] Who fell (or was pushed) overboard from a cross-channel steamer in 1913 while he was on his way to sell, in England, certain formulas for improvements on the Diesel engine. To say the least his death was singularly opportune for a German government which one year later began a war in which submarines (with Diesel engines) played a large part.

[6] It seems proper, at this point, to give the observations of Professor Francis X. McGreevy late of the New Jersey State University's Department of Chemistry, to whom this manuscript was submitted, on the nature of Ashembe's mercury tube and "pleci ray."

"According to J. H. Jeans," Professor McGreevy writes, "there is only one force adequate to explain the immense amount of energy expended in solar (and stellar) radiation. This is the total annihilation of matter. He points out that if the energy of the stars were supplied from any other source, they would long since have burned out; our own sun would long since have become a blackened cinder (from the amount of time we know the Earth to have been circling around it) if its energy had any other source. He gives the striking illustration of the several thousand tons of coal consumed in driving an ocean liner across the Atlantic; whereas the total annihilation of the matter contained in only a few grams of coal would drive the same ship several times around the world.

"It seems, from the evidence presented in the manuscript,

that the Murashemans have discovered some means of annihilating matter in the mercury tube. This would explain the immense supplies of energy they derive from a small amount of mercury; it would also explain why they must continually search through the universe for more supplies of this metal, as their stocks become exhausted. I am aware that Mr. Schierstedt gives his opinion that the mercury is used as a catalytic agent. This must be inaccurate; one is to remember that Mr. Schierstedt time and again emphasizes the fact that he is not a chemist.

“As to the pleci ray; this seems to me to present no particular difficulties. Since the discovery that hydrogen is a mixture (composed of two substances, called for convenience, orthohydrogen and parahydrogen) there has been no difficulty in recognizing the existence of chemical elements of less atomic weight than 1. That one of these elements possesses immense stores of energy under the influence of the annihilating mercury ray is perfectly logical.”

[7] Again a reaction not clear in the light of our chemical knowledge. The atomic weight of chlorine is 35 (plus a fraction), that of oxygen 16 and that of fluorine 19. So much is clear. But from what we know of atomic decomposition, the natural process (supposing we had any means of decomposing the chlorine atom, which we have not) would be for the chlorine atom to shoot off a number of alpha and beta particles and come to rest as an atom of Argon or Carbon, both of which are much more stable elements than either oxygen or fluorine. Moreover, the

breaking up of the chlorine atom should absorb, not release energy—but it may be assumed that the reaction of the mercury tube caused this effect.

[8] It is interesting to recall that the players of the Marshall Chess Club of New York City tried out a form of three-dimensional chess after Capablanca's demonstration that the old two-dimensional chess is becoming obsolete through lacking in complication for modern minds. The earthly form of three-dimensional chess was played on several boards simultaneously, these boards being only imagined as one above the other; and the total dimensions of the cube used were four squares by eight by eight. It would require a super-mathematician to play the game Schierstedt describes.

[9] He apparently means a fish-eye lens. Schierstedt's lack of scientific knowledge throughout obscures details that might be both interesting and useful. In this same paragraph he speaks of "single electrons or ions," which, of course, are not at all the same thing; neither does the casting of single electrons or ions fit in with any rational theory of the source of power of the car.

[10] Schierstedt mentions above that just before leaving the Earth the door of the inner chamber was tightened and the crack caulked with atotta. Evidently this had been removed. Possibly it was a temporary arrangement, while passing through the atmosphere, or he may have been

mistaken.

[11]

It is only fair to mention that Professor Appleyard, one of the members of the expedition which gave this narrative to the world, thinks the amount of time consumed in passing through the atmosphere of Venus is, according to Schierstedt's account, excessive. From measurements by astronomers we know that the atmosphere cannot be so deep as the account would seem to indicate. But it should be remembered that in such moments the human memory is apt to occupy itself with many details of experience which make an account seem long, but which actually are passed through in a few seconds.

[12]

But Schierstedt specifically mentions that on leaving Earth, this outer door was welded shut. Evidently Ashembe must have unsealed it—a fact which our traveler fails to mention.

[13]

Another instance of defective scientific knowledge resulting in empty rhetoric on Schierstedt's part. Nobody any longer seriously believes that nothing can exist at absolute zero.

[14]

“Physical concentration” is comprehensible, but what does Schierstedt mean by “chemical concentration”? He must have misquoted his mentor here, for in the same paragraph he mentions there is nothing but pleci to concentrate. One

error for the writer of the manuscript.

[15]

To persons of a scientific turn of mind, it will always be a matter of regret that Schierstedt was so much concerned with his precious mental reaction and so little concerned with the mathematical and physical details of the trip. If he had only been a scientist!

His whole explanation of the trip flies in the face of modern scientific theory. According to Einstein (and so far, we have no physicist who has plumbed such matters more deeply) it would be quite impossible for the car to attain a speed sixteen times the speed of light. The speed of light is of the order of 186,000 miles per second, and nothing, on the Einstein theory, can exceed this speed. It is a more or less arbitrary limit to cosmical velocities.

But it is only fair to say that Murasheman physical science appears to be beyond ours. Einstein's predictions, marvelously as they have been borne out so far, are theoretical only; no man from this Earth has succeeded in navigating space and applying to them the empirical test. And even on Einstein's own theory a body in free space would maintain a uniform velocity through inertia. If Schierstedt is right in setting down the influence of acceleration, and if the acceleration could be applied in the manner described (according to Earthly science it could not) it is quite possible that the result might be as Schierstedt has stated. In this case, the extreme speeds mentioned by him are perfectly explicable.

At all events, the whole matter is one worthy the attention of physical scientists, and is recommended to their attention.

[16]

There follows a lengthy description of the game (which Schierstedt had already described before) and some notes on how to play it, with samples of illustrative games. As these are of no possible interest, I have taken the liberty of omitting them in this published version of the manuscript.

[17]

It is possible to check the positions of these planets in their orbits at the time Schierstedt says he passed them. Astronomical calculations show that a couple of months after he disappeared from the cottage on Sunderland Lake, they were exactly in the positions he mentions—a valuable piece of evidence as to the veracity of the manuscript.

[18]

Gravity seems about the only scientific idea Schierstedt's head was capable of holding—probably because it is the simplest of physical phenomena for one who is neither by training nor disposition a scientist. The nonscientific reader of this manuscript should beware of ascribing to gravity all the effects Schierstedt does.

[19]

The reader cannot have failed to notice the general falling off in quality of the writing of this narrative in this chapter. Apparently Schierstedt's diary, which he

mentions above, ends here; or perhaps just before this chapter begins.

From this point on there are numerous discrepancies in the narrative, due either to faulty memory, haste in writing or some strong emotion on the part of the writer, a theory which is perfectly explicable in view of the end of the narrative.

In this chapter there is one discrepancy to be noted. Schierstedt has spoken of Ashembe's climbing out and cutting loose one shell from the space ship while in transit; but when they arrive, there is only one shell remaining besides the central chamber. The other was probably cut away during the voyage at some time not mentioned.

The transcriber also wishes to point out that from this point on the handwriting of the original manuscript was particularly bad and occasioned much trouble.

[20]

This chapter is in quite bad shape. The text is frequently well-nigh unreadable, and at the end of the chapter appears the following note in Schierstedt's handwriting:

“Don't forg. 2 insrt. my quest. 'Don't you leave lot to chance' & Ash's ans. explaining there is no such thing as chance; all governed by natural laws.”

It would be interesting to have Schierstedt's (or rather Ashembe's) exposition of this point of view.

Unfortunately we have not, nor is there any place where such a remark would seem to have been the proper thing.

[21]

Odd in view of the doctrine laid down by Ashembe that similar causes always produce similar effects. But perhaps the cause was lacking on Murashema. We know nothing of the underlying reason for the evolution of the bird on Earth.

[22]

Professor Grummett expresses surprise over this statement. There is nothing astonishing about it. The grizzly bear has been known to do the same.

[23]

More likely the vessel was gold which, of course, has no particular value on Murashema.

[24]

The noseguard of a helmet.

[25]

With this chapter Schierstedt's division of the manuscript into chapters ceases. The remainder is written hurriedly, and in some cases the text is so hopelessly muddled that I have not made any attempt to straighten it out. I have, however, taken the liberty of dividing the remainder of the manuscript into chapters.

[26] Akelshard. Meaning obscure. Not mentioned again in the narrative.

[27] In view of this extreme mechanistic philosophy on the part of the Bodrog (or some of them) what follows later is not surprising. But one wonders whether Schierstedt's reporting of this conversation was not colored to some extent by after events.

[28] A good example of Schierstedt's most muddy style of description, which gains more and more control of him in the latter part of the narrative. This particular passage is well-nigh illegible in the manuscript. Apparently he is describing a handless time-piece with figures which run past a point, like the indicator of a modern radio set.

[29] Another check on the accuracy of the manuscript. The Educational Directory shows that a Professor A. M. Burton was head of the biology department at Galton College about 1920.

[30] Throughout the whole of this chapter, the handwriting of the mss. is execrable, in places so nearly unreadable that it was only after some guessing I was able to piece it together at all. The above paragraph is a case in point; in its final state, it is mostly mine. This portion of the mss. was evidently written in a great hurry and under pressure of strong emotion.

[31]

The figure is either eighty or eight hundred. Illegible. I have adopted the more conservative figure.

[32]

The rest of this paragraph is totally illegible.

[33]

Again a period of illegibility. What follows appears to be mostly vituperation. A phrase or two emerges . . .
“brutality of these minions . . .” “held incommunicado . . .”
The word “trial” occurs several times, and it is a pity that the mss. is so bad at this point, for Schierstedt’s account of a Murasheman criminal process could not fail to be both interesting and suggestive. I give the continuation at the earliest point where connected reading is possible.



“A man stood, half-leaning against a tree, perhaps fifty yards from the porch where we sat. His clothes, of some close-fitting dark material, were dripping wet and spotted with mud. On his head was a helmet, with narrow projections over the ears that gave him an odd faunlike appearance . . .”

The two men who rescued this traveler from outer space

were rewarded by finding themselves plunged into the middle of such adventures as no man had ever seriously dreamed of. For one, the reward was betterment on Earth, but for the other—a voyage through the cosmos that no other man, born on Earth, could hope for in the next thousand years.

ALIEN PLANET is an interstellar classic.

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- In the text versions, delimited italics text in underscores (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)

[The end of *Alien Planet* by Fletcher Pratt]