

A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



THE LOST CAVERN

AND OTHER TALES OF THE FANTASTIC

H. F. HEARD



THE THAW PLAN

I. THE SEA SYMPTOM

“I’m puzzled by some of my readings,” Skelton volunteered.

None of the men in the clubroom were sufficiently interested to raise their eyes from the illustrated papers they were leafing over. Skelton was the tidal expert. The other specialists of this team at the newest marine laboratory agreed about few things, but Skelton’s job was one of them, and Skelton was another. “After all,” they used to remark, “he’s really only a sort of lab. boy to us. The meteorologist has really more of value to give. Skelton’s nothing but a timekeeper.”

But Skelton was evidently puzzled enough not to take a snub. He cleared his throat with a certain defiance: “I’ve mentioned the possibility earlier on to one or two of you. But now there’s no doubt of it and, what’s more, no possible reason for it.” Still no one reacted.

“It’ll really matter to all of you, to all of you first and foremost, if it’s true.” A note of urgency made his voice strain. The tone more than the words irritated Bolder, one of the chemists. To stop the sound, which he found made reading difficult, he looked over the edge of *Life* and asked:

“What are they showing?”

“Well, it’s slight of course, but it’s unmistakable now, and there’s no doubt it is growing. The high-tides for each corresponding month have each of them been gaining on the last. There’s no doubt there’s an increase in the maxima, and there’s no reason for it.”

That made Exon intervene. He was the large marine biologist. Some one said that he had taken to his subject because molluscs were of all creation the hardest of animals to pick quarrels with.

“You’ll be saying next the moon’s out of step or the sun’s got a swelled head.”

“Laws of Nature don’t change.” This was from Stimson. He was the

geneticist, one who had never quite recovered from the violent controversies with which the birth of his subject had been attended. He was an old man now and had been only a boy then. But his father—biology ran in the family—had been involved in the bitterness between the elder Darwinians and the Mendelians, as they were then called. Stimson reacted into the strictest orthodoxy. He repeated his maxims like a mantra whenever anyone introduced findings which might be radical. “Your instruments are wrong, young man, that’s what it is.”

Of course such a remark is a reflection. But it was clear that Stimson had the room with him. Skelton could not command a single ear. He was upset, quite upset. Of course it was clear that, if this was the reception given by such men as his colleagues, he could hope for nothing better from anyone outside—at least in the professional world. And how could he expect the lay world to attend if the experts disregarded?

He left the clubroom but before going to his apartment went back again to his division of the laboratories. He checked his tables over again with worried care. He plotted his graph over again. The result stood. Of course it was slight, but science had no right to disregard facts because they first emerged as small divergencies. Of course it might well be—no, not the instruments or faulty observation—but some more or less local peculiarity, some current shift, surface wind pressure even, or perhaps, actually, an oceanic floor change of levels. His instruments were the best in the world—this new set-up had been equipped with plant better than any other marine lab. had ever had. And, though the rest might look down on his job as mere routine and himself as a “routineer,” yet he knew he had been picked as a first-class observer. No one else in the tidal world had as yet reported any evidence of possible shift of maxima. But then, why should they? These instruments were incomparable. Besides, the change, whatever it was, might have become evident here on this shore line first. Well, then he would be right in one thing—it would be peculiarly awkward for all those colleagues of his.

II. THE LIQUIDATION OF THE POLES

That was a Midsummer Day, 1975. The world had been going on its increasingly odd way for thirty years since, in '45, W.W.2.A. (World War Second Armistice) had begun. Tension for thirty years makes crisis turn into a kind of stasis.

“Bomb! Bomb!” had gone the degenerative way of “Wolf! Wolf!” People had to go on living. Besides, there had been changes—large political changes. All the old lot were gone. Of course the world was still stuck in that balance of power which was commonly called The Two Powers and The Hyphen. There were the U.S., the U.K., and the U.S.S.R. When someone asked once in Congress why The Hyphen was still called the United Kingdom, a wise-cracker shot in that U.K. was really a contraction for “the Un-O.K.” There was no doubt of it—the world had shrunk to two big balances with a diminishing rider-on-the-beam.

But there was a bigger and less foreseen change than that. The great Moscow ascendancy passed very quickly after Stalin’s death. The Greek Orthodox Church canonized him as St. Joseph of Moscow, and Moscow followed the fate of all Holy Cities. Actual administration had found it increasingly necessary to move East. Just as had happened to the earlier world empire—when Rome had had to make a New Rome and then abdicate to it—so now the administrative center had shifted away, back to the site of Genghis’ world-capital of Karakorum. Once the assimilation of China took place, then the center of population, industry, and business lay there. China, as usual, had swallowed those who rashly tried to get her into their clutches. Finally that astute Commissar, Yang Chin, ruled that Moscow had become a place of too sacred memories to be defiled by business and that the Russians were too mystically gifted a race to be involved in politics. Just as England used to get rid of individual politicians who were in the way by “kicking them upstairs”—making them peers—so, as became the new order that thought no longer in terms of individuals but of classes, the new Commissar of Commissars, as he chose to be entitled, elevated all the Russians to Ritual Rank—the highest rank, which performed all the ceremonies. The rank below, naturally, did all the hard work—the actual running of the machine. The Commissar was said to have remarked that besides Laudanum and Religion there is a third opium with which you can kill a whole class, and its name is Prestige.

It seems that these internal shifts were going to keep the huge land-mass empire outwardly quiet. Most people wanted good auguries, and so they claimed that this change was one. “A Chinaman,” they told each other, “never likes war. We’ll have peace for a long while now, you mark my words.” And their words appeared to have been accurate.

But Washington—or rather the tip of it—was not really easy. On that tip now sat President Place. He had many points that recommended him. First, his name. It had given him his first three terms largely through the great success of the

three slogans: “Place the Irreplaceable,” “Place him again,” and that fine starter, “Make Place for the People, Give Place to the People.” Second, there was his size. He was a mammoth of a man. His hands were bigger even than George Washington’s he was taller than Lincoln, he weighed more than Taft. “The biggest President ever.” That told, too. Third, behind the bulk and the bellow—for he could shout down anyone—behind those rolls of rhetoric and fat, that seemed so obvious that nothing more could be in that balloon of bluffness, there was a curiously observant mind. He certainly was not nearly so simple as he looked. His sudden assaults of frank man-to-man openness, which proved often so disconcerting to the clever, were uncommonly well-timed. After a time it was noted that he never let anyone else put over that kind of thing on him. It was always he who brought down that great sirloin of a hand and wrist on the shoulder of the other disputant, patted him almost to his knees, and, bellowing that they really agreed, pushed him out of the room.

One of his chief advantages was that he certainly didn’t look a vigilant man. That, no doubt, was the reason why he had so seldom been caught napping. Naturally, then, his opposite number right round on the other side of the globe was seldom out of his mind.

Some three months after Skelton’s failure to interest his marine colleagues, Place the Irreplaceable was waiting in his White House room for the Chief of Staff, who had been away on a courtesy mission which covered inevitably a secret inquiry. The mission was to carry congratulations to the Commissar of Commissars on his unanimous election to preside for another Five Years of Plan. The inquiry was to find if there could be any truth in one of those maddeningly ambiguous reports that secret-service agents of the highest standing delight in sending to their superiors. Such reports are like the oracles of the Pythian Sybil—they may be just to fill the time and show you are worth your fee, they may be ways of tying up a message so that only your own *nous* can see the point. If Place and the C. of S. were right, this message was the latter. But if so it was quite unusually urgent and confirmation must be had. The only way—and it seemed providential—was for the C. of S., since he must go with the congratulations, to go himself as a secret-service agent.

The C. of S. was late. It was no use trying to find what a plane was doing once it was over the territories of the U.S.S.R., an empire that now stretched from Bangkok to the Rhine Basin. While Place waited, his secretary came in.

“There’s no news of the plane yet.” She paused. “You have a few minutes?”

“What do you want me to do?” he questioned, as he spun his huge bulk slowly

in its specially constructed revolving chair. He was in his shirt-sleeves—it was damp-hot—and he looked, as he swelled out from his pants, like a giant egg neatly fitted into its egg-cup.

“Well, he’s a relation of my sister, and he’s worried me, and I’ve looked him up for he’s managed to meet me several times at my sister’s house. And he evidently is a good man at his job. Seems to me that it’s just because he may have found out something a little too startling that maybe his colleagues won’t listen to him. And he’s quite certain now that nobody but you would, and that you’d understand if he only could see you for five minutes, and that now—for he is getting obviously more alarmed—you alone should know.”

Irreplaceable Place had replaced quite enough experts and specialists by others that proved to be just as good so that he had no particular respect for the breed. Just for the moment there was nothing to do. He had to wait, and he hated waiting. His secretary wanted it. Pity women can always be worried by men that worry. Besides, in his flair-fancying mind somehow this request and that queer report of the secret-service agent seemed to have some possible link.

“You said he’s a tidal expert?”

“Yes, he’s from that biggest, newest set-up on the Atlantic Coast.”

“All right, but five minutes to the tick. If he can’t interest me by then, out he goes. After all, I was made Place for the People—direct access and all that.”

As he entered, Skelton was met with, “You’ve only got three hundred seconds. Can you make it?”

“I’ve got it in three charts.” Skelton had been a teacher before he took up pure research. He knew how to catch attention, if he was given a chance. On the table in front of the President he dealt his papers like a card-dealer, saying, as he spread the sequence: “The tables of co-ordinate tidal records”; “The sequences of maxima”; “The graph curve plotted to show the angle of acceleration.”

Place was used to “gutting” documents. He grunted at One, said “Um” to Two. At Three he began to tap his lower teeth with his thumbnail—a sign that he was interested.

“Why haven’t we all heard of this, if it’s true?”

Skelton was ready for that. “I was puzzled, too. Sure, the effect is showing most down at our place and we have better instruments. But before trying to see you I did visit a number of other marine labs. The effect can be traced in the tables—not so clearly, but it’s already appearing. But, since there’s no explanation, no one wants to take too much notice of it till they can say what causes it.”

Place threw himself back in his chair. "I could, of course, hand you over to another expert who'd discredit you and save me further trouble. But what you show here may fit in with something else. There—the three hundredth second's gone! Off you go—no, not out that way—into that small room over there. Shut the door and wait. Maybe I'll be wanting you after all." As the door closed behind Skelton, Place heard the handle of the room's principal door turn. Quickly, for a man of his size, he turned the charts over on their faces and turned his own face to that door as his secretary entered.

"He's in," she said, "and will be over in a few minutes. What have you done with Dr. Skelton?"

"I've told him to wait. Now give me all those papers I'll want for Chase."

They went through them together, and he spread them over the top of the charts.

"I'll go and be bringing him up now," she said, when that was settled. Five minutes later she ushered in a tall man with the appearance of a rather kindly attorney. He took the chair beside Place's desk.

"Was there anything in it?"

"I've had the microphotos developed and enlarged already."

"You got some shots? But do they show anything?"

For answer the Chief of Staff took from his wallet-pocket an envelope and picked from it some strips of aerial photos. The President took them from him.

"Yes, you certainly have got something there. That's pretty big building. But surely it wasn't building that you were snooping for. The U.S.S.R.'s always building. Mongolian megalomania, I call it—Big Wall and all that nonsense."

"Well, we used to be fond of a bit of big building once," Chase smiled.

"Adolescent ambition! Now we want not big dumps but big men." Chase smiled again, and so did the President, who then went on: "How did you get them, and why did you choose just these?"

"The first answer'll tell you the second. Everything went according to plan. There was the planned breakdown of the stratoplane. Even the pilot didn't know we'd arranged that. There was the planned providentialism that a small little old low-down 350-an-hour plane was, as it happened, waiting about after some repairs at Cologne. I cabled I could just make it if I came along to Karakorum, where His Mongolian Majesty was about to be inaugurated, in that little old plane. Of course at the Rhine I was met by the high-up spy whom Yang had specially sent me for my outward honor and my inner inspection. He came, as his rank required, with his two attendants. So he had me and my two aides under

constant surveillance. We went straight ahead, and nothing was done to distract our attention from the outlook—scenery’s very pleasant from seven thousand feet; we hardly ever see it now. But when we were approaching the Urals I noticed my host was getting ready for something. He and his aides were not only unpacking some light refreshments but were also laying out some kind of little show for us. He then came over to my seat and asked if I and my aides wouldn’t like to look at the actual models of the big inaugural pageant, which he had brought with him to beguile the tedium of the ride. He told us that no one had seen them outside his office save, of course, the Supreme Commissar. He got out a folding table from his baggage, gathered us round, and he and his two set up the models—pretty little things, they certainly have a gift for that sort of thing—and made this miniature marionette show go through all its dance steps. He explained that lighting would play a great part and fussed about to get it right, finally saying that the daylight spoiled the effect. So he pulled down the shades on the plane windows and rigged up a miniature floodlight set. Oh, he took a lot of trouble to please us, so much that of course the moment he called us into that little huddle I knew he wanted us away from the windows. So, as I welcomed his offer to his ingenious little preview, I hung up my fountain pen, with which I had been writing till that moment, on the little sling that in that pattern plane is next to each window for one’s book, papers, or what-have-you. Of course these photos come from that pen. It’s a neat little gadget; it was quite easy to hang it so that it could go on taking microfilm every five minutes all the time our obliging usher was keeping us away from the windows. The pen hung very neatly so it could squint the landscape through the fine line between the shade and the window-jamb.”

“Well, granted these are things that they didn’t want us to see, what do they mean?”

“I believe they do link up with the secret-service report. First of all, look at these.” Chase bent down and took from his portfolio some maps.

“This is the district of Russia we were then flying over. These green crosses show where each photo was taken. You see a fairly straight red line—one that wavers but is going across country fairly well—links up those green crosses. See, too, that a couple of big rivers flow down and cut across the red line. The red line is the hundred-foot contour line. Where those two big rivers cross the red contour line, you see, are two of the large building projects that are shown in nearly all the photos. Do you get it?”

Place scratched his head. “I thought they were some big power development.”

“Mr. President, put all the facts I’ve told you, and the secret report together—you remember that all the code could say—because since Spy L 55, B 2 holds the chair of Neo-Communist Casuistry at Karakorum he naturally can’t report in person or send proper messages—was ‘coast-line, contour, change,’ and that had to be distributed through the messages so it took us some time to be sure. But that’s certain now, and, what’s more, I’m certain I know what it means, and I’ll bet I’m right by betting that in five minutes you’ll have guessed as I did.”

There was silence for about a minute, broken only by the sound of the President’s thumbnail tapping his teeth. That sound then stopped, but his mouth remained open. From it came quietly but with the greatest conviction the word “Gosh!”

“Yes,” said Chase nodding. “You’ve got it. It’s worthy of Yang, I think! A very neat use of giant power. I don’t know quite how he’s doing it, but there’s no doubt he’s nearly ready for his grand slam.”

“But what are we to do about it?”

“Well, it’ll take some time, whatever it is—I mean, whatever the motive power. Anyhow, beyond this I don’t know what actually he’s up to. The photos are too vague to tell us more than that he’s up to some plan rather bigger than anything so far, and that he’s getting ready for some big change in which he intends to be ready and leave us behind—indeed, sunk in some way. That’s as far as I can go. I expect we have time to take counter measures. But I’m sure we should be doing something. That’s for you to decide. Besides, I’m not sure that this won’t prove to be something quite outside the Army’s province.”

Place had been watching his Chief of Staff while he spoke. When he’d finished, the huge Head got up, ambled over to the small door, and threw it open: “Dr. Skelton, I want you to meet General Chase.”

While the two were shaking hands, the President unearthed the charts, arranged them neatly with the map sections, and put under them the photo strips.

“Now, gentlemen, I have ready my exhibit. Dr. Skelton, these, I think, will click in your mind. When you have grasped their significance, please explain your charts to the General.”

Skelton was as quick as the President, for here was the cause, the possible reason for his puzzling phenomenon. After all three of them had bent over the papers on the table, the scientist and the soldier straightened up and looked at the politician. The huge executive was already back in his chair.

“I see,” remarked Chase. “You were right, Mr. President. We haven’t got time, as I had thought. My question is then all the more urgent, ‘What are you going to

about it?”

“There’s only one thing to do. Or, leastways, till we’ve done that we can’t do anything else, and it might work. I believe, you know, in frontal attacks of frankness.”

“What do you mean?” both men asked.

“Send for the Secretary of State, Chase. No, get him now on the phone for me. No, Dr. Skelton, you can stay here. Frankness begins at home. I’m going to call this—this bluff—if it is. But we can at least know that and then—well, we’ll see.”

As soon as the Secretary of State was on the line the President told him to come over, but added, “Before you do, leave instructions that a television long-distance conference set-up be sent along here at once, at once. It must get here as soon as you do.”

The urgency in his voice told. The Secretary of State and the radio specialists who geared the plant for T. L-d. C. S. turned up almost together. The Secretary of State sent through his diplomatic code beam message requesting conference immediately with the Commissar of Foreign Affairs. In five minutes they were talking. “Would it be possible for the Supreme Commissar to speak with the President?” Another five minutes brought the answer *Yes*.

The screens were then set; the President with the Secretary of State standing behind him were grouped in their little apse of beams. It was rather like the staging of an old family photograph a century earlier. On the screens opposite the two men, through their grayness, figures began to glimmer and waver, then were steady, plain, colored, stereoscopic. They were as though alive and moving in the room, and their voices as clear. Yes, it was Yang in his plain blue silk robe, and beside him his Commissar of Foreign Affairs. Place bowed. The Secretary of State made the formal introduction. Yang bowed and in perfect English, though with something of that archaic accent once called Oxford, remarked on the pleasure it gave him to see that the President was in such good health. Place countered by hoping that the Commissar of Commissars was in equal health and that the strain of the continued duties to which he had again been called would not tax his energy. Yang almost smiled and bowed again. Then, without a moment’s warning Place showed his hand.

“I am appealing to you as the world’s most powerful man....”

Yang did not smile; he inclined his head a little to show he would listen.

“I am not going to say anything about what I don’t know,” continued the President. “I’m not interested in theories, and surely I don’t want suspicions....”

Again Yang bowed, but as he bent his head he kept his eyes on the face of the fat man who, the other side of the earth, was trying to get at him.

“But there are some big world facts, facts of climate, that concern us all, desperately if they go wrong. I’m asking for co-operation in fact-finding. We’re all on this globe together...”

Yang’s eyelids drooped for a minute. He looked then like those photos that used to show him seated receiving the congratulations of the endless Committees of Soviets on St. Joseph’s Day. Place saw he must cut to the center at once.

“We fear, our tide experts fear, that something on a vast scale may have shifted, gone wrong, and the center of the disturbance may be in your districts.” He stopped.

Yang raised his head: “Did you want to ask anything further?” The tone was as though the question were a real one.

“Yes, we want to ask that we may get together on this thing and help. As I’ve said, we’re on one planet which is covered, more than three-fifths of it, by sea. It’s a common concern if we are going to lose much more land to the sea. We have this in common: we are all land-dwelling animals.”

Place smiled. Yang’s Mongolian features palely reflected a shadow of humor or perhaps courtesy. Then he was grave, obviously grave. He paused and then remarked slowly, “It is kind of you to come so quickly to our assistance, on what must have been no more than a rumor. But I will repay generosity with frankness. Yes, we have met with—not a disaster, but a reverse—a miscalculation which will exact perhaps a greater cost for ultimate gain than we had estimated. One of our most hopeful experiments—undertaken for mankind at large, a global enterprise—has had consequences that some of the experts did not suspect. On us will fall the weight of the cost. This great discovery was to have been given to the world at the next Inaugural—at which I have once more the honor to preside—instead of which it will have to be another challenge to face crisis. But we are brave. We will face our losses and, as the old literature used to say, Casting our bread upon the waters and sowing in tears we shall yet reap in joy, for after many days we shall find a new harvest. We do not then ask you to help. Not for a dollar do we appeal. We ask only for your sympathy. And your ready inquiry at the first breath of rumor shows that we have that.”

He rose, bowed, and gave a signal with his hand, and the image of himself and his Secretary wavered, became iridescent round the edges, and on the gray glass remained nothing.

“Can you beat it!” It was the President’s voice. “Switch us off!” he called.

“But can you beat it! Glad of our sympathy; touched by our rushing to his aid; won’t ask a dollar. Chase, we’re out of date. This is the new war. This makes war obsolete.”

“Mr. President.” It was the Secretary of State speaking. “Please understand that I, at least, don’t understand. What has happened? The secret-service report and the return of the Chief of Staff! Surely there is no need of such precipitancy. If war is obsolete, diplomacy becomes even more essential.”

“Did y’ever hear, ‘Time and Tide wait for no man’?” Place cut in. “That’s what we’re up against. Did y’ever hear another old wise-crack, ‘Between the Devil and the Deep Sea’? Well, that again describes just where we are, just where we’ve been put on the spot. Chase, show’m those maps and charts. I must think and think the fastest I’ve ever. Well, the frontal attack of frankness has failed, been jiu-jitsued by that mealy-mouthed Mongolian.”

The silence was disturbed only by the shuffling sound of the charts and maps as Chase and the Secretary of State handled them. Staccato on this whisper came the tapping of the President’s thumbnail on his teeth.

“But, Mr. President.” The Secretary of State had turned to the large man filling the chair. “If this preposterous evidence really agrees, and these three reports mean the same thing, the tidal records, the building preparations on the hundred-foot contour line, and the Supreme Commissar’s statement, even then we must be circumspect. Why rush to such wild conclusions? Granted there has been an unparalleled miscalculation by the U.S.S.R. experts—well, their plans have gone wrong before. But that may only mean a vast dislocation, perhaps a disaster for them. Don’t you see, they are the first to suffer. Diplomacy doesn’t surely make a man an idealist, but it does teach him that men act in the light of their own obvious interests! Why should this master of half the world choose to cut off his nose in the hopes that we shall have an attack of sneezing?”

“Oh, stop it, old man! That’s stuff for the papers. Look at those maps again.”

“Well, it’s clear he’ll lose first and lose, I guess, as heavily.”

“Surely, though, you know your Chang now? Do I have to remind you that our dear Mongol brother doesn’t like Russians any more than he likes Americans? Don’t you see that he’s going to kill a whole covey of birds, drown a whole flock of geese with one flush? Of course he’ll inundate a great deal of Russia, and holy Leningrad will go under the sea where he’s long wanted it, and the Moscow River will swallow up the corpses of the two Founding Fathers he’s anxious to have forgotten. And the U.S.S.R. will be turned permanently East, by literally sinking the West, his own as well as ours; for, of course, he’ll sink every seaport

west of him—all maritime Germany, France, England, and half the capitals, for they are on the sea. Cortes burnt his ships and so conquered Mexico. Yang drowns his bridge to the West and so Orientalizes Communism. He'll lose, of course, not a few of his own people also. But another score of millions more or less never has mattered to Yang. He thinks in the grand manner when playing the old game of 'Beggar-My-Neighbor.'

"You mean—"

"Have I to cross the *t* and dot the *i* in 'Inundation'? Sure, it's got a large but neat inevitability about it! Armies, Chase? Pharaoh found himself up against this when he followed Moses into the Red Sea. Armies! Why, they're now no more use than Lewis Carroll's 'Seven Maids with Seven Mops' trying to sweep out the tide. That's exactly it. Can't you get the hang of it? Why, even I've heard of the possibility. Sure, a President doesn't hear much—his mouth's making too much noise all the time. But that possibility everyone heard about thirty years and more ago. Don't you see, he's succeeded in using atom-energy to melt all the frozen tundra, and he's well across the Arctic Ocean by now, isn't he?" Place turned to Skelton, who nodded.

"And, as gently as a mother rocking her child to sleep, he'll drown Leningrad—good for him—London, better—New York, best—yes, and swamp this little city. Maybe the Capitol dome will stick out like the Ark on Ararat, but more likely than not fishes will be breeding in the cornices of this very room. Oh, it won't be a sudden rush of a monster tidal wave"—again he looked across to Skelton, who nodded again—"it will be quiet as a summer dawn. We'll have time, time to do nothing. For nothing can be done to stop it. All we can do is to get ready to bear Yang's brotherly, 'Be brave,' 'How I sympathize,' 'I've been through it myself!' Where's Diplomacy now! Sunk, sunk with Chivalry. What's the use of sending an army and bombing the U.S.S.R. cities? Will that stop the tide from coming in and going on rising? Now that it's started it goes on of itself, this giant melt, just as a house, once it's well lit, burns when the fire-bug has cleared off."

To Chase's and the Secretary of State's self-protective protest, Skelton added, "President's right. Everyone interested in geophysics has known that. If you once did start the melt—and of course once you had the atom open you could—then you'd upset the cold-balance at the Poles. It's simply a hangover of the last Ice Age. Once those packs of ice and the snow that throws back the heat into the sky are both melted they won't re-form. Yes, we are headed for a warmer place than ever we thought we'd see this side the grave."

“And we’ve just got to wait.” It was the President again. “That’s what gets me! Oh, yes, we can spend our time becoming the most unpopular President that ever was, by telling people that nothing can be done. Nowadays that damns an Executive. He’s got to say he could do something about a total eclipse if the People say they wish it put off. I’m in a tighter jam than even the last Depression President. We can spend our remaining spell of office moving population to higher land. ‘Go West, young man; go and sit above the 100-foot contour line, and then the 150, perhaps. I can’t guarantee when you’ll ever be able to sit down again and have dry pants.’ We’ll end like one of those pictures of the Deluge, in the old illustrated Bibles—all that remains of us huddled out along the foothills of mountains looking across the new ocean that once was the plains of the United States. And the U.S.S.R. will be sitting comfortably on the bracing heights of the tablelands of Tibet and China. That’s right, isn’t it, Skelton?”

“Yes.”

“And there’s no way out?”

“Well ... there is, if not a way out, a way on. I mean there’s something that *can* be done, if you feel that just doing nothing is the worst thing of all. I didn’t have time to show you Chart Four. It’s my Prognosis.”

Skelton took a map from the portfolio under his arm and placed it on the table. The other three gathered over it. It was as clear in its meaning as the other three. The silence showed the degree of attention that it aroused. Only that thumbnail tapping could be heard in the room. Then the President spoke, but from the tone of his voice it was clear that he was only asking for a final confirmation.

“The green lines show, don’t they, the coast line as it will be when the present melt has all flowed out into the oceans, and the red lines show—well, the other possibility?”

“That’s it, Mr. President, and the one is as certain as the other.”

But the other two men had turned to the big man in the chair: “But you can’t! It’s absolutely out of the question!”

“*Can’t!* That from a soldier! *Mustn’t!* From a master of diplomats!” The President was in full bellow. “I tell you, there’s just one thing I can’t and won’t do—that’s to tell the people I can’t do anything. I’m Irreplaceable because in every jam I have done something. Don’t any of you yet know the A.B.C. of politics? I’ve now got a chance to do something—to put the initiative back into the hands of the U.S., and, by Hell and High Water, I’m going to do it!”

He gave them a moment, sitting back in his chair glaring up at them. Yes, he was right, he knew; the man who has something to suggest, a line to take,

however wild that line, always wins against those who have nothing to say except that you can only sit down under it.

“Skelton,” he called, “sit down other side of this desk and figure out what force it would need. You can, can’t you?”

“Yes, that’s pretty simple. The rough figure’s been known, both for power needed and mass to be reduced, for quite a long time. I’ll just check through on it, though. Please give me back Chart Four. I’ve most of the figures on that. Thought you might be wanting them.”

Place handed him the map sheet with the calculations on its other face. He sat totting it over. The others waited, standing on either side of Place’s chair. The tap of the pencil on one side of the desk and of the thumbnail on the other made a miniature tattoo.

In a few moments Skelton handed a half-sheet of paper over the desk. Place looked at it and then held it out to the Chief of Staff:

“There’re your instructions. Figure out at once what force you’ll need. Have ’em posted with sealed orders and a zero hour for taking off when I give the signal.”

His ascendancy was now complete. General Chase bowed.

“Ring me up as soon as your part is ready.” The President nodded him toward the door and then turned to the Secretary of State.

“Now, you, get the Ambassadors together at once, here. I’m going to give ’em all a conference. Be as quick as Chase.”

When the Secretary of State was gone, Place disposed of his third guest.

“Thanks,” he said. “After all, that visit was worth three hundred seconds of my time. Now all you have to do is to keep your mouth shut and forget you were ever here. I’ll get my secretary to get you out.” He buzzed for her and handed over Skelton.

“So that’s politics,” thought the bewildered researcher as the lift sank him to floor level. “As long as he can do something, he’s just as gay as a bird—it doesn’t matter what happens as long as it’s he that’s mattering.”

Left alone, the President yawned, looked down on his huge bulk, and remarked in a whisper, “Weight must be going up still,” then, with a chuckle, “Well, the fatter you are the better you float.” Then he swung himself forward, took a pencil, and began to jot down notes. A few moments later, with his head on one side, he spoke over a passage or two, then nodded, again muttering to himself, “Can’t see it’s worse than the Gettysburg. Maybe, Place my boy, you’ll sink physically, but you’re up for a high place in History. Time’s ever-rolling tide

will have to roll quite a bit before it'll sink you!" He smiled and, when the desk-phone buzzed, said with high spirits, "Let 'em all come. Just my luck that so many would be in D.C. now."

Shortly after the Secretary of State appeared, the first of their Excellencies began to report. Place had chairs put for them. It was to be quite a little meeting. Evidently they had sensed something big was afoot. All the chairs filled rapidly. Place had told the Secretary of State to make an urgent but general appeal for their presence. Now the Secretary rose and told the meeting that the President had called them because he wished to confide some information which he thought concerned them as much as himself. They regretted that the Ambassador of the U.S.S.R. could not be present but he had been called home just lately. "But we have a quorum." He smiled and sat down.

Certainly the President's address interested them—so much so that they probably hardly remembered the peroration, which was the part he prized most, when they got outside. Even their own phrases, in which they had tried with diplomatic correctitude to hide their reaction, now seemed hardly worth putting into their diary-for-memoirs. But they were quite good in their way and characteristic. The British Ambassador, of course, was called on first, as he was the Hyphen leading to the rest. Lord Blasket at the moment thought he was doing pretty well with, "Well, Britannia's always ruled the waves and, by George, now she'll do it in earnest." The Italian owned that he wished he had someone worthy to speak to such a theme. "Ah," he said, "if only now we could hear Savonarola himself! What a sermon the dread Fratere of San Marco would give us on his favorite text, then only directed against the French"—he looked lightly at his colleague—"Behold, I bring a flood of waters on the earth!" It was a good enough *bon mot*. But the *mot juste* belonged, of right, to the Frenchman.

"Well, gentlemen, we have lived to surpass the Bourbons. After all, Louis Quinze's famous phrase was mainly a phrase of inflation. But now we shall put real water into '*Après moi le deluge.*'"

When the Secretary of State had ushered them out to make their reports to their Governments he came back for a moment with his Chief.

"They take it quietly?"

"Well, there's time. People'll get used to anything, if you give 'em time and something to do in the spell between. I've given them the time-table for the upper line on those Skelton charts. Europeans are getting used to being bossed around and milled this way and dumped that way. It'll only be one more

population shift.”

Place, though, was restless, and when the desk-phone buzzed through again he took it hastily. “Yes, Chase?... Yes, everything’s set here. Now give the zero hour at nine P.M. tonight. Weather’s all right at the further objective? Good, good, just my luck again. And good enough in the other direction? Good, good—that’s all.” He hung up and turned to the Secretary of State. “Now get me a world-wide hookup and network distribution. I’ll have what I want to say ready in twenty minutes. Isn’t much to say. Just want to polish a period or two—this won’t be forgotten readily. Better leave something worth writing into the record!”

If he had felt misgiving the cloud had gone, and already he was jotting down some fresh phrases as the Secretary of State left the room. He stopped only when the mikes and their attendants entered. The full T.A.V.—Tel.Aud.Vis.—set-up was deployed round him. The flashes had been going out for the best part of twenty minutes now, calling to the radio-netted world to Listen, urgent, Listen, urgent, Washington has a key message, President’s going to speak to the world.

His speech was short: “Peoples of the earth, this is an earth proposition. I’m speaking not for one people but for all, for mankind. This isn’t a time for comments but for information—not for rumor or recrimination but for facts. I’m speaking to you right across frontiers, not because I’m President of the United States but because I know what you’ve got to know—and now. I’m speaking over all frontiers because the frontiers are going, are melting, are being sunk. The very geography you’ve known, that mankind’s always known, is just being wiped off like old lines on a slate. We can’t recall anything. No use trying to put things back. All that’s gone for good. We’ve got to go on. Don’t look back.”

He then told the world briefly that the Arctic icefield was melting, the huge tundra of the Obi subarctic land-mass had already been thawed. The tides would gradually inundate all the Atlantic seaboard for a depth of eighty feet and probably one hundred, and this process would spread then into the Pacific. These new sea-level heights would be permanent. Every country therefore would shrink, and men must move gradually onto the higher land. Their ports would all be submerged.

“The U.S.S.R.,” he went on, “has pointed the way. They have prepared against a rainy day. They have built fine harbors in places that till now were far inland. We must do the same. We must follow suit.”

So far he had spoken with the quietness of a man demonstrating a proposition about which there is no controversy. Now his tone changed.

“We must follow suit. I have to report to you that, though we have been slow, now we have followed, and I believe I can assure you that we have made”—he paused—“a reply which puts us once more ahead. When I have ceased speaking, look at your maps. You are now involved in a world proposition and must think as Mankind Unlimited, unlimited at least in a common Liability.” His voice became strident. “Look at your maps.” He picked up Skelton’s, his Fourth Exhibit, held it against him so that on his chest the world could see the world outline. “See, the U.S.S.R. will have now a vast tableland on which to rest while you of the coast lines must flee and shelter on mere spines of countryside, standing out above interminable lagoons.

“I am determined, I have determined, that this shall not happen. We will adjust, we have already adjusted, the balance of the old world in the new. Our planes have already blasted the Greenland icecap. More, far more, the atom bombs have hit the huge icecap that covers the hidden continent, rich with ores, the one continent yet unclaimed by man, that of Antarctica. I claim it in the names of the free peoples for whom I, as President of the United States, stand as Trustee and Sponsor.”

His voice swelled. “As a second Moses I will lead you to a new Promised Land, a land which this very day I have ordered to be unveiled. It rides proudly above the flooding oceans, and, like Moses smiting the rock, I have ordered our atom bombs to beat upon its precipices of ice and to turn them into water which will fertilize that vast land-mass. This land, so long preserved in ice, unexhausted, rich in minerals, waiting to yield its plenty, I name as the new Territory of the United States, the central homeland of the democratic peoples of the Earth.”

He paused and then, in tones quieter, more informative, but, he felt, still sufficiently prophetic, he added: “Here we shall find a climate suited for us, prepared for us, when all the temperate lands in which we the freer peoples flourish have become tropical and enervating. Here we will have a foothold and fortress from which we can never be flooded out. My friends, I ask you, is not this providential? Is not this the hand of Manifest Destiny? I appeal to you—have I not acted as the finger of that August Hand, am I not placing before you”—he stressed his “place-name”—“a new and glorious future? Have I not snatched out of the jaws of defeat and the dragon of the flood waters the victory whereby you shall enter on a new earth?”

He paused to let his questions have their proper reaction, watching the small fluctuating green line in the liquid-filled disk-dial that showed, with its climbing

vibrating miniature staircase, the piling-up number of radio sets that were listening to him. Yes, he had the ear of his half of the world. He swung easily into his peroration:

“In the name of the Pilgrim Fathers, I call upon you to rise and harness yourselves to go forth on this new and greater pilgrimage. In the immortal words which henceforward will have a still higher overtone of triumph, I say, Let us go forward in our great task that Government of the people and by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth!”

III. THE FINAL FLOOD

So mankind set about its last and biggest trek. They had time. The flood rose insistently, remorselessly, but so slowly that there was time to make plans. Some people were sure that it would pass—“Merely a climatic accident aggravated by a foolish experiment,” they said; “mark my words, the balance of nature will put it right.” But they overlooked the fact that the balance might find another adjustment than that which they had known and taken as eternal. Finally even the dug-in die-hards had to clear off South. And by the time they went they had plenty of warning that it was time to have migrated. The stratoplanes looked down on ever more widely spreading arms, hands, and fingers of silver sea, spreading over and pulling under the green expanses of earth. Visibly, month by month and year by year, the old continents were changing their outlines and the big islands such as Britain shrinking to spines and ribs of land, skeletons of countryside emerging from an ever widening ocean, floating like the clean-picked carcasses of whales.

Indeed, the flood surpassed the scientists’ calculation, which had been, as they said in their curious language of understatement, “Conservative, yes, quite on the conservative side!” The Greenland icecap had, when sounded fifty years before—when echo sounding was new—surprised the world by its thickness, six thousand feet of solid ice, layer on layer of epochs of snows packed and laid down as ice. And Antarctica had gone one better. It was even colder, and it had heaped up an even greater mound of ice-cake. Before the new atom bomb, boring its way through it and spreading scalding water and exploding steam in every direction, had melted it, it had discharged into the seas in liquid form, never to freeze again, what had been on the average a twelve-thousand-foot thickness of ice. The great rising slope of Antarctica up which explorers had

toiled was nothing but a monstrous ice mountain the size of a continent, a pear-shaped icicle on the south end of the earth. Thus, when the floods came to first pause, the old coast lines lay sunken nearer 300 than 250 feet under the new seas.

Of all the spectacular sights of those foundered shores, New York was considered the best. The skyscrapers stood out like a grotesque gargantuan sepulchral Venice. The tide races swirled and rushed round these great deserted posts of stone. For a few generations a queer mob of fisherfolk lived on the middle floors, netting the narrow, surging straits at the bottom of which had once roared the city streets and carrying on feuds with each other, each building an island community that quarreled with the rest. But the fishing was not good, and life in these great columbaria was squalid and hard. Some tried to raise a few crops on the roofs, but the climate was too stormy and bringing soil to these small summits not worth the effort. Finally the whole place was deserted by man. Flocks of seabirds then took over, and the guano-crowned towers stood in gaunt ruin, with the tides eroding at their bases and rushing with bellowing fury through the office suites. The glass went, and the landsmen said the place was haunted, for far inland on wild nights you might hear in the roar of the gale the great pierced-shaft buildings moaning and shrilling—not Memnon saluting the dawn with song but monstrous monuments of a defeated creed, now played on by the tempest like giant flutes and organ pipes and giving out to the gathering darkness and ruin a demonic music of despair.

At his end of the world Yang and his successor were evidently content—or nonplussed. They had enough of population problems themselves to leave the other side alone. The oceans had begun again their priestly task of making a *cordon sanitaire* round the two groups who otherwise seemed fated to fight each other for the mastery of the earth and leave the world with no man living. Yang's empire was moving north as Place's pilgrimage moved south. Inevitably they were being drifted out of each other's way. The U.S.S.R. was entering upon its new territories that ringed round the Arctic Ocean, now smiling like the central Atlantic, a new Mediterranean, a sea rich in food with a circular coast line rich in minerals and industry.

Further went the change. The U.S. moved its capital to Antarctica. Already that country had revealed its noble outlines. Mountains and great valleys, fiords and tablelands. Volcanic ranges that poured rich fertilizers on the already rich, unexploited soil. Minerals of all sorts, stores of radioactive lodes. But, above all, lakes, rivers, and waterfalls—"A land of streams." And it was like the Lotos

Land in another respect: The amount of cosmic radiation coming in at the Poles made plants and animals mutate far more rapidly there than elsewhere. New varieties of crops and farm beasts were always being bred. Living was easy and, at first, stimulating and interesting.

Gradually, though, the high stimulation of the cosmic radiation—which had always caused a certain percentage of “Arctic Hysteria” in those men who lived far north or south—began to tell. The higher nervous type—the “cerebrotonic,” as Sheldon christened them—began to fret and break down into nervous irritation at everything. The type that could stand this stimulant and not become neurotic was a passive type, rather Mongolian in its stolidity and its power to let things pass. They were not inventive, this type that dominated now. They were not explorers. They liked to stick to their productive farms, small and intensively managed, with great skill and endurance, but with no wish to become more productive or to expand. Man was stabilizing at last with his environment.

And it was well he was, for what had been begun with a gentle hint to move away to less easily swamped land had now become an order to stay away from the old homelands forever. For as the oceans increased in area these vast shallow seas stepped up the temperature, already raised a number of degrees by the disappearance of both polar caps and all giant ice- and snowfields. The lagoon, marsh, and swamp areas gave footing to semiaquatic plants. The conditions of the Amazon Valley and the mouth of the Congo River spread and became general round the whole equatorial belt of the earth. A vast belt of impenetrable jungle wove itself round the earth’s middle. It put out from the shores into the oceans, and Sargasso seas—hundreds-long miles of floating wrack—began to weave themselves out over the waves. These giant “sud” islands, monstrous developments of those floating packs and islands of vegetation that block the Nile, began to rear thickets and trees. They were tentacular semilands, putting out feelers to make contacts with each vegetation-crowded island, linking these up with one another, and finding anchorage between them. Then they would block the sea-passages in between, let down their roots, and so become fixtures.

In these thick-woven jungles no light came save a green glow, and the ground was but a swamp yards deep in rotting fruit, leaf, and wood. Above the matted treetops an almost incessant warm rain poured down, feeding this spinning coil of vegetable life. In that green darkness not only another flora began to appear but another fauna. The great increase in carbon dioxide which the vast multiplication of vegetable life gave off made these jungles increasingly difficult for mammals. They became sluggish and stupefied. The giant insects of the

Mesozoic began to appear and then swarm. Something like the dragonfly, but twenty-four inches across the wing, began to dart and swoop through the green dusk, gleaming like a ruby as it shot through a shaft of heavy golden sunlight. The mosquitoes were smaller, but a stinging fly only two inches across the wings could pierce through any coat of felt or hide. Animals then began to appear, who, with their warted armor-skins, could suffer such attacks, and these animals also were those who could stand much carbon dioxide and little oxygen. In short, in this equatorial belt the history of life was now being put into reverse. As the Mesozoic ended, the shallow warm seas went, grass appeared, the vast swamp forests went, the carbon dioxide fell, the oxygen increased, the Saurians therefore failed, and the mammals came forward. Now it was the turn of the Saurians to be offered a comeback and for man to be ordered into the wings.

The few people who tried to get through this great wall and belt came back with hair-raising stories; most never returned. The survivors said they had pushed on where the only way was to creep, where direction was almost impossible to tell, where the whole place was alive with a crawling, craving life—leeches that festooned you as soon as you touched a tendril, stinging vines that wrapped round you, and, when you thought you had hold of a clean strong rope of a vine to hold you, it twisted in your hand and you were in the grip of some giant hamadryad or boa. And, if you did get through, the Northerners gave you no welcome—you were an utterly different people already. With no news of each other you already were regarded—and you felt toward them—as another species. Besides, you had to be driven out. If you had come through the Belt it was pretty certain that you were carrying in your blood one or another of its deadly fevers—the hosts of varieties of malaras and sleeping sicknesses, or molds and fungus pests that gorged upon the skin, under the skin, and through the vesicles and lymphatics until the man when he died appeared like a shapeless balloon. The Belt, then, quite naturally filled both sides—men of the North and of the South—with horror. Finally morality confirmed opinion and said it was evil and wrong to go there, and that thither, after death, went the souls of those who behaved wrongly.

IV. AILUCK'S ADVENTURE

There was one last story of a man who went through and came back. It was called the Saga of Ailuck and was told as a moral tale, learned by heart by all

children when they were twelve years old and might feel that dangerous urge, the ancestral wanderlust.

Ailuck was one of the fisher clan. All the other clans clung to the mainland. The fishers, though, had an exemption. Of course they went to the great Temple called The Place. There, with the whole of mankind—for the Northerners, it was now taught in the schools, were sub-human degenerates—he and the fisher clan worshiped with the rest before the great figure of the Pilgrim President, the deified man who had called this continent out of the ice and made it the new world. The actual skeleton was encased in the vast white granite figure before which everyone bowed at the ritual services. Once a year the monolith was swung open, it gaped like the Iron Maiden, and as the two carved blocks were spun out on their pivots the faithful saw within the very bones of the Place of all Places, the Perpetual President. You were supposed to exclaim, “Never again, never again such a man and such a vision, such a leader and such a pilgrimage”—and then the great blocks swung back and there was the image guarding, as a giant reliquary, the holy bones. But as the chorus rose Ailuck was always more interested in looking, trying to see whether this deified man was really quite different from himself.

People had become smaller. There was something stunting in the Austral atmosphere or perhaps the diet. The fisherfolk were the tallest; they were called in consequence the clumsiest, though they were skillful enough in their trade and calling. The face-type of Austral man had tended to become that hawk-nose, high-forehead, high-cheekbones, sharp-chin profile associated with one strain of the American Indian. This was most marked in the fisher clan. Ailuck was secretly proud of his height, but the sharp noses, chins, and cheekbones of the women of his people pleased him not at all. He thought they looked like wizened men—woman, he thought to himself, should be round and smooth. Altogether he was more than a little a rebel, a critic, a skeptic. He thought that the Place bones showed that the holy leader had been big but showed nothing to support the tales about his superhuman carriage that was said to have matched his superhuman powers of leadership, judgment, and discernment.

And when the Thirty-nine Commands were intoned and recited by the national congregation and they came to the last, “Thou shalt not touch the barrier forest for the man that goest therein shall be cut off from the people,” though he repeated it, it always made him ask himself, “What about us fishers?” Everyone knew that they went right up to the trailing shores of the Central Belt. Indeed there was a trade which led them not merely in sight of the forbidden frontier but

actually onto it. The Austral epicures delighted in a kind of truffle—it was really a species of seaweed that grew only in particular brackish waters. An inferior sort could be found floating on wracks of sud that had dragged its moorings. But not only was this supply small and sporadic, it was of poor quality. There was no doubt, the nearer the Belt itself the better the truffle. There it grew in many varieties, of an incomparable succulence and in adequate quantities. The epicures were sufficiently well placed in the social hierarchy to see that unpleasant questions were not asked as to why the supplies were so constant and plentiful. The truth was pretty generally known, but taste was stronger than truth. Another truth was that once you contracted a taste for this food it became something of an addiction—you would give very large sums for it—and some of the price you paid to get your supply was, of course, priestly hush-money; many of the priests themselves were said to have acquired the taste and to be on the racket.

So Ailuck had his doubts, his curiosities, yes, and his contempts, for the wise moralists who gave out the law and secretly took in supplies that came from breaking it. The intervening sea was easy to cross. The huge winds that used to pump round the old open, well-ventilated world had tended to disappear, for the great mountain ranges had gone; their great icefields, glaciers, and so-called eternal snows had all gone to swell the ocean. There were now no snowfields, and the great contrasts of heat and cold, damp and dry, had been flattened out. The small fleets of the fisher clan used to sail away at regular intervals and finish up their course outward by fishing the banks in sight of the great Central Belt. Then, when they had the permitted foods all caught and salted, and, for the rich, enough of the catch in water tanks—then they drew near the actual swamp jungle and from the shore itself drew up and dug out the tendrils, rhizomes, bracts, and roots of the prized succulent.

The best sites of this plant were well marked by searchers, and the harvest was well gleaned. It was not a quick grower and not very widely distributed. Everyone suspected that the beds were being over-gathered, and, further, that these beds were mere outliers; farther up the lagoons that wound their way into the green glow of the Belt it was pretty clear—indeed, no one doubted—there were ample supplies and probably of better quality. But even the fisher clan was conventional. At home they would have their own jokes at the expense of the strictly conventional and law-abiding. But out on the seas and especially when—as of course they did now and then, though none told on the other—they actually set foot on the accursed pseudo-land and felt it quake and quiver and heave

under them as a net moves as it begins to close on a fish—then they would warn each other, “Come off, quick; don’t look into those glades. Pray to Place: he sees. He knows that we have just to touch this shore but that we’d never break the spirit of his Law by going actually into the Belt.”

But even this conventional morality of his own kind, liberal as it was, began to chafe on Ailuck. When he was bending down and pretending to be wrestling with an uncommonly tough root, he used to scan the great wall of vegetation that marked where the Belt proper must begin. It didn’t look evil, but very interesting, far more interesting than those tiringly healthy, boringly open and elegant uplands of the South.

And one day fortune favored him, or opportunity showed how great can be its guilt. He was actually told to stay behind with his kayak in a small fern-fringed baylet and finish clearing up a small plantation of the precious weed. After he had loaded it all on, he was to follow round a small cape of wrack crowned with some giant ferns. He worked in silence and found more than had been suspected. This was to the good. He would get an extra share for himself. Then he saw that the extra rhizomes he had dragged up were linked with others, and, in a few moments, he was in among plentiful beds. Tracking these and picking the best kept him so busy that when he looked up he found he had been following a creek that led out of the small bay in which he had been left. He was in fact now quite some distance from the open sea. The ocean, when he looked back, was only visible in a small gap. All the rest of his surroundings was the forest of the Belt, the forbidden Belt.

He sat still for a moment. He was tired, anyhow. The silence was great. The lapping of the ocean swell and its occasional surge, grunt, and sigh could just be heard, but only just. He listened to see if he could catch any tone of voice coming from the party who should be in the next cove. But no, not a sound. They must have moved still farther, thinking he was just behind them. Well, it would be safe to look ahead. The small creek or lagoon shaft in which he was ran straight into the forest, a smooth waterway for his boat.

Then a second temptation hit him, just as he was at pause. The water of the stream was clear, light brown but otherwise like glass. And as he looked down into it he saw large molluscs adhering to the tendrils of the submarine vines. He put down his hand and picked a couple off, prized them open with his knife, and began gulping the oysters. He was hungry; he had been working hard and had forgotten his midday munch. As he chewed them something struck against his teeth. He picked from his mouth a large and well-shaped pearl. There was a

market for these, too. Of course it was forbidden and was on a very small scale. People said when they gave their wives a fine necklace that they had been putting it together for years, and there were some oysters and other pearl-making molluscs on the Austral coast. But most people knew that the rich had them smuggled in from the outer waters of the Belt. Still no one suspected that, up these water-lanes, the bivalves increased so much, both in numbers and in size. Ailuck pushed on, only picking up now and then one of unusual size. It seemed to him that the farther he went the larger was the breed. Nor did his luring luck let him go then. Time and again as he opened a shell he saw the gleam of a fine pearl. After some hours of this he had the small skin pouch round his neck swelling with pearls—why, he would have enough to live all his life never doing a stroke of work again, even if the black market took 80 per cent from him in commission!

Then, as he peered down to see if the oysters were still larger up here, he found he could not see quite so well. He looked up around him. True enough, he had reached so far in and up this natural canal that drained out of the Belt that the trees and creepers had begun to lace and mat overhead. But that was not all. The sky that he could see was changing tint. The blue had turned into violet, and there were streaks of pink here and there—there was a glow in the air. Of course, he had forgotten—sunset up here came on and then night. He was used to a world where there was a season of light when everyone worked and slept little, little more than dozing, and then a season of dark when the whole place was wrapped in a warm, damp mist. It was then so dark that, save for routine business that had to be done and the long drowsy services in the shrines and especially in the Place, people idled indoors, took naps, and lay abed half hibernating. But sunset here and now was of course swift.

Even while he watched the glow sank to violet, purple, indigo. He was benighted. He was far from being a nervous man, but this was high adventure. He thought with some misgiving but with clearness what he could do. He decided that he was in danger but that he had a good chance of getting out and back if he kept his head. To move in the dark would be fatal, he felt. He took his thin mooring rope with its little grapnel-anchor at the end, sank it from the prow, let the slight current pull his bark, played his line, and had the satisfaction of feeling the grapnel scrape and then hold. The boat stopped. In the stillness he could just hear the glug-glug of the water passing the anchored prow, and far away he thought he could catch now and then a sigh of the distant ocean. He squirmed his way down in the kayak through the small space out of which his

body rose when he was rowing: He got hold of his skin cloak stowed down there and wrapped himself in it. He drew out some dried fish which had been stored in the thwarts and took a drink of a juice the fishers found a warming draught. Slowly chewing the tough fish, he fell asleep.

He was wakened by the swift dawn. As he put his head out of the manhole, the sky was still violet. But by the time he had loosed and stored his grapnel-anchor, re-stored his cloak, taken a few mouthfuls of the dried fish and a drink, the day was already in full possession. He felt fresh. He looked back and could just see, down the long lane of gleaming water, where the stream opened out and met the sea. Well, his route back was clear; he had anyhow been away a whole night. Either the others would come back to this bay in a couple of days—which was most likely—or they would take him off in the large vessels at the next visit. He waited a moment, thinking what he would do. Then he decided that he would go at least as far as this open canal led—it did not look as though it would take more than a couple of hours of sculling. But distances in that strange, green-tinted gloom were deceptive, and perspectives on a lane of gleaming water misleading. He was a strong rower. Hour by hour he drove his light skiff along a current that offered at first little resistance and then none. In fact, he finally noticed that the flow was with him. But, though he knew he was now quite a considerable distance into the Belt itself, he did not check. He did pause for a space after some hours, but only to take hold of some clusters of tawny fruits that hung down like the fingers of a swollen hand. The fruit under the rind was succulent and filling. He tasted the water of the stream: it was now practically fresh. He struck his paddle into the stream and pushed farther inland.

The shores did not invite a landing. You could not be sure they were true land at all. They looked as if they were far more likely to be just floating sud. The growth was such as he had never seen before, and it fascinated him. He saw practically no distance out at either side. The thicket hung like a close-woven arras. Sometimes he saw a sizable trunk, but mostly the walls of the canal—for it was now walled—were unbroken, a fencing of fibers, tendrils, aerial roots, bracts, rhizomes, and sprays, all enriched with leaves of every shape, flowers of every color, and tassels and bosses of fruit clusters and seed pods. But still the canal went on, clear as a road driven into the wilderness. Just under the water there was the same density of life, and there were places where the kayak seemed to be moving over a floor of leaves and not of water. But he could still travel swiftly.

“I will go to where this stops,” he said, “and then I will turn back.” But it

didn't stop—at least in the way that he had expected when bargaining with himself. The stream began not to narrow but to broaden, and then, in the space of some fifty fathoms, it had widened into a large lagoon. His craft shot out into the midst of this, moving more swiftly as the slight drag of the water-lily pads ceased on its keel. He took five or six strong strokes, then paused and looked about him. The lake was perhaps five hundred fathoms across—but, again, distance, with no scale to help, was hard to judge. The ramp of foliage that walled it right around and stood, in fact, straight out of the water was unbroken and unrelieved. He could not tell one part of it from another, and when his eye had ranged around he couldn't say when he had actually finished the circuit. The boat, left without drive, lost its headway and began to curve aimlessly, rocked a little, and was still. It was then he noticed something that gave him his first serious alarm. Where was the entrance whereby he had entered this pool? He looked back in what he took to be the direction he had come, but the wall of creeper seemed dense. He struck out with his paddle and soon reached the spot. His first glance had been right—there was no way through here.

He was a ready man. Without delay he set himself to skirt the whole circumference. At last he found the opening—at least he felt it must be that; he knew that when you come back to a place it always looks different than when you come from it. He had a general feeling that this must be the opening. Certainly, there was the lane of water leading him away from the pool. He began to feel he would very much wish to get back—even if he did get something of a rating from the head mate of their crew. He struck then quickly down the lane, and soon the pool was far behind; he was once more in the close-walled lane with a polished floor and that woven green arras on either side and, above, the loops and awnings made by creepers that had spanned across and begun to make a roof.

It was this that caused his next misgiving. He began to be sure that the roofing had been nothing like so dense when he had been looking up to it before he came to the pool. At last he was sure that this was so. He stopped and drew from a special inner pouch, sewn into the fold of the bigger one, his stone.

A fisherman's stone was his talisman—very much so. For not only was it given to him when he came of initiation age and was made one of the adults of the clan, but it was necessary to him and was given to no one outside that clan. The geologists and petrologists, as they had explored the newly uncovered continent of Antarctica, had discovered a number of new crystalline rocks—just as Labradorite, with its curious fluorescent capacity, had been discovered in

Labrador, and Iceland spar in Iceland. One of these rocks had in it every now and then pure crystals of fine size. The best were parallelogramic and, when in perfect condition and properly polished, had in them a feature which looked like the refraction phenomenon to which the crystalline construction of the star sapphire gives rise and which gives that stone its name. When you looked into the stone, which was pale green, you could see at the center such a star. If you held the stone flat in your hand you could see it was a four-beamed star. Two of these beams were longer than the other two, and were set at right angles to them. But the odd thing was that these longer beams, it was discovered, always pointed north and south. So you had only to swing your stone until along it the long beams lay straight, until the axis of this ray was the same as the axis of the crystal, and then you knew you were pointing to the Pole. What was more—since the fishermen were of course very near the Pole and sometimes on it, this star appeared tilted, and when you were on the Pole itself the star in the crystal stood right on end, pointing downward. The stone was a natural and very efficient compass. The landsmen did not need it, but it was of great use to the fisher clan, and so each boy as he came to man's estate was given one.

It was this treasure and insigne that Ailuck now drew out. He crouched down in the boat, drew up his skin cloak, and put it over his head. The star could be seen in daylight, but it was much clearer if ordinary light was cut off. There was no doubt, he was pointed not south but toward the Belt. Good observers could tell their position north and south not only by the angle of dip at which the star seemed to be but also by the fact that the beam that pointed to their Pole was a little longer than the one that pointed away. Ailuck had handled his stone long enough to have no doubt: he was heading away from mankind, heading into the impenetrable swamp of the Belt. He stopped. The moment the gentle splash of oar and keel ceased there was dead silence. He looked back down the lane through which he had come. Yes, he must return.

Then his ear was caught by a sound. It was little more than a sigh, but a sigh on an immense scale. He sat listening. It grew, it swelled rapidly. It was becoming a roar. At the same time the greenish daylight around him sank to an olive tint. He now knew that the tumult was approaching him from the left. Almost the next moment he heard distinct sounds, trees straining, the pelting drive of rain, and almost immediately the wall of woven green arras on his left seem to bulge, bend down, and fall like a huge net into the canal. Through its twisting fibers, a mixture of wind, water, leaves, and mud rushed. He had been caught in a small typhoon. He and his boat were lifted bodily and thrown into the

writhing thicket on his right. Water gushed over him, tendrils lashed at him. The boat's keel was turned toward the blast. Firmly wedged in the aerial roots among which it had been flung, and embedded behind their growth, it offered little purchase to the frantic wind that stormed above it, laying the upper fringes of the forest flat. It was all over in a quarter of an hour. But when he dragged his kayak out from its net and sought to find the canal, the whole track had vanished, woven over by the plaited wreckage left by the storm.

He shouldered his kayak—the storm had flung out his truffle cargo and it was nothing to him now. But the pearls were still in his toggled pouch. He made his way stumbling along wherever an opening was offered in the tangled thicket. And then, as quickly as the storm had risen and fallen, so suddenly the path of its destruction came to an end. He found himself on the brink of a canal, perhaps the canal along which he had been traveling. He got into his craft and again consulted his stone. The storm had gone, he had escaped its blow, but it had dealt him something that, after all, might well mean death. For it was clear it had closed the path backward. He was probably on the canal up which he had come from the ocean, but the way that alone was now open led away, ever deeper into the dreadful Belt. He was, however, sufficiently used to peril to know that to sit down under fear is the worst of reactions. He must go on, if only deeper, for there was nothing else to do. Back and either side, all three were closed.

So many days passed. At night he slept in the floor of his moored boat, safe from any night-prowling beasts and, since he stuffed the manhole with his cloak, from the stinging insects, which mainly swarmed at night. Not infrequently, he heard great bodies floundering and crashing in the jungle at either side of him, but he never saw any break through the dense thicket into view. It was a place so full of vegetation that all animal life seemed more or less on the defensive, and that which existed seemed to be sluggish and to lie as much as it could buried and bogged. The canal did not go due north and south but, though it twisted and went, sometimes for days, in a big curve, nevertheless the main tendency was always toward the Equator. Sometimes he heard again that sighing and then the sudden rush, but none of these twisters and line squalls actually hit him again. They were evidently very narrow in their path and short in their spell.

Three or four times he came to large pools and even lakes across which he rowed and had then a clear view of the sky. Out on one of these at night he for the first time saw, just above the dark bank of trees that made the lake's boundary, stars he had never seen hanging in the sky. "So," he thought, "the priests are right. I have come into another world, no part of ours. The Belt is

another place. Perhaps I am dead and the dead are all around me.”

A greater fear than he had yet known took him. Again he knew his only refuge from madness was to work. He drove the boat along. As he neared the other side of the lake the moon rose. Even it had been changed. It should be, he knew, in its first quarter—a broad sickle pointing down as though to reap the earth. Instead it was now bent over like a bow above where the sun had gone. But this was the last glimpse of the stars, sun, and moon that he had, and he realized soon after that that must have been a rarity—a tear in the high fog made by one of the twisters. He began to enter the true Central Belt. Here the heat was terrible, dense, like a vapor bath, and every day and often in the night the torrential rains, without a moment’s warning, beat down till he gasped, wondering whether he had already been sunk. Yet, with his skin cloak covering the manhole, little water entered the boat, and in such a flooded floating land there was no real danger of inundation. At last he lost all sense of days and time. With mechanical weariness, with the routine of an automaton, he slept, rowed, fed himself, slept, rowed, fed.

After an epoch of such routine he began to notice things again. The monotony of the canals and their woven green borders was unrelieved, but something new was present—more of a feeling than an observation of his dulled mind. First he became aware that either he must be getting completely lightheaded or the going was easier. Then he did try to observe. Two things were very soon obvious—one was that the skiff was in a slight current that was carrying it down the canal, the other was that besides this current a draft of wind was also following after him. As soon as he recognized this, he rigged his cloak onto the paddle as a sail. Yes, the wind was now strong enough to fill it, and indeed the whole canal was rippling in the direction in which he was headed. He guided the bark with his hand in the water so as to keep it in the fairway. That method of travel—he judged it was considerably faster than his paddling, and the pace grew day by day—he followed, he thought, for perhaps some twenty days. At the end the following wind was almost brisk, and the current quite strong.

Each night as he made fast he noticed that the vegetation growth was less lush, and each day he saw more of the sky as the overhead lattice of tendrils thinned. And the sky he saw was no longer a fog. Each day it grew clearer. At last he sighted his first definite clouds with patches of real blue between them. And at night the new stars rode unmistakably in the sky. The stars he had known all his life were all gone, the moon was turned round, and the sun at midday was behind him. He felt his mind waver between a hopeless vertigo and a paralyzing

numbness. Again he knew that the only thing to do was to go forward. Besides, how could he ever face again, or ever hope to pierce again, the deadly green net through which somehow he had slipped? He was getting to conditions which, though in all their main and master markings the reverse of all he had known, still were conditions more possible for at least a short survival than those of the Belt through which he had passed.

The end came quickly. The great banks of forest wheeled away one noon to right and left. He was out in a big lake or sea in many ways like his own. The wind was still behind. Far away, far down on the horizon ahead, he could see a faint blue bank that to his far-sighted, sea-practiced eye—relieved from all that close-up bank of greenness—should mean a coastal line. He managed his skiff with mastery, and she sheared her way over the easy-flowing sea. He felt some kind of exultation—after all, he was free, he had come through. By sundown the coast was certainly a place of possible landings, the faint undifferentiated blue had turned to patchy coloring, coves, beaches, cliffs, shore-valleys—he knew.

It was dusk, though, with a small moon risen behind him, when, on a gentle swell, he made a landing where a small river came down and found a sand cove. He beached his boat, turned his cloak from sail to coverlet, got into the thwarts of his craft, and, after munching some fruit he had stored—he had drunk of the stream and found it good water—he fell asleep. He woke to find that the cove on which he had landfallen was very small and narrow; cliffs rose on each side of it so that there was no way on either hand up or down the coast. And ahead only a narrow defile, hardly more than a ravine, led steeply upward to the land. Down this fissure the little stream came cascading.

He was a cautious man. Taking his boat, he carried it to some tumbled rocks and there hid it, covering it over with wracks of seaweed that he picked up. He even took care to brush away the footprints he had made on the sand above the narrow tide line and for the rest stepped only on stones. Then he made his way warily up the ravine. It was perhaps not more than six or seven hundred fathoms, he judged, before the climb—for it was practically that—brought him to where he could look out over the landscape.

The first shock was that it was so like home. He had been told that there was a realm beyond the infernal Belt but that it was horrible and wild and quite beyond a sane mind's imagination. And here was a quiet landscape—perhaps not so dramatic and picturesque as his own but if anything a tamer, more peaceful variant. There was not a man or beast or building in sight. He stood up and shaded his eyes. As far as he could see the ground spread away in quiet, thinly

grassed meadows. Soon he began to feel hunger and searched for anything to eat. Farther and farther afield he went. He found a spring and drank from it—but never any food. He chewed some grass and so went on till sundown over this savanna. As dusk was coming on, he found some puffball fungus and, though it tasted unpleasant, he ate it. It helped to stop his hunger but, though it was not poisonous, it disagreed with him, and he felt no strength from having eaten.

So he went for three days, making long diagonals across the landscape, hoping always he might find a stream with fish in it or bushes with some kind of berry. It was on the third day that he was seized with a shuddering fit—one of the fevers of the Belt had developed in him. For three days it mounted in him. When the shuddering became severe, he crept under a bush and lay there with his skin cloak round him. On the third day he lost all consciousness. After that blank he remembered that he felt something being put between his teeth and a flowing down his throat. Then there was rest, and after a time this happened again. After perhaps half a dozen such experiences he opened his eyes. He could see a hand holding something to his mouth. He raised his eyes. Close to him, almost as close as the hand, was a face—not a face like any he had seen. It was very soft, smooth, round; it really had hardly any features at all, the smooth surface just flowed up to the suggestion of a nose, three gentle folds suggested eyes and a mouth, and then the head smoothed away into a mere suggestion of a chin. But there was something very gentle in this faint appearance. And whoever it was was taking care of him. He yielded himself.

After a week he was stronger, but, as soon as the fever was gone, as he was stretching himself and looking over his perished frame, he saw certain patches. It was while he was examining these that his befriender came back, bent down, looked at them, and then hurried away. But, before leaving, the nurse took his hands and moved them away from the patches. Evidently he was not to touch them. She—for he presumed it was a female of the Northern species—came back with a rush basket full of some kind of mud. It was still hot. She plastered it over him and showed that he must lie still. Then she fed him and left him. He lay quiet. The mud kept its heat remarkably long and was very soothing. He fell at last to sleep. He had not been awake long before she was there again. She cracked off the dried, caked mud, and the patches were gone—indeed, his skin glowed with health.

Gradually he and his nurse grew to know each other without speech. She was a goat-tender. Her dog, also, after a little while, made friends with him. She was evidently out on these distant pastures all by herself for long stretches—they

were useless lands save for grazing, but for that they were good. She had a hut, a kind of half-cave cove, about two hours' walk north from where she—or, rather, her dog—had found him under the bush. Inevitably their great loneliness made a companionship as strong. Somehow, with scrawled drawings and through their keen mutual sympathy, she made him understand that she was somewhat of an outcast—her features were too distinct, so she was too ugly for social success. An inbred taste had made the Northerners specialize in a type of Mongolian beauty in which the ambition was to have no nose at all—noses were considered the mark of bestiality, the snout of a brute. Ailuck found that she was quite beautiful to him. She took him for granted as her friend, for till then she had had none.

They did not say anything but knew that they would travel together. Nor did he make any plans. He helped her with the goats and waited for her when she went to the out-station to deliver one flock and receive another. On one return, however, she was alarmed. She could not tell him any details, but she made it clear that his presence was known. They pondered this—but did nothing for a day, for two days. Then, when they were sitting in the shade of a bush, the dog, who was at their feet, suddenly cocked an ear, half rose, and was in a moment on his feet with his hackles rising. She showed that she could judge how near intruders had come. Already the dog was barking, and then he rushed out to meet whoever had been stalking them. They heard the snarl and then cries, blows, and a howl. Without a moment's delay she seized his hand and, dashing into the thicket, she ran, stooping, through it until they were out on the other side.

They were in a shallow valley which, as he knew, led south to the bay across which he had come to this land. She ran bent but swiftly. He was a good runner. He realized as clearly as she that if they were taken both of them would be killed. As the valley curved and they came in sight of the bay he looked back. Yes, a group of people were chasing them. They kept their distance, though, for both she and he were clearly the better runners. So they came to the shore. He recognized the coast line and after a short run along the low cliff came to the spot where the spring made its way down to the beach.

They ran down. He went at once to where the kayak had been stored. The wrack had withered but was still covering it. He threw back the seaweed. The boat lay there. He snatched it up and then, with a groan, let it drop. It was riddled. A kind of crab ran out of its thwarts. Whether it was because rawhide had been used for its lashings or because of the smell of the old stock fish, the crabs had gnawed and torn holes in the sides from keel to gunwale.

But the woman took hold of the wreck and pushed it into the sea. It floated, and holding onto it she beckoned him to follow. So, using it as a raft, they floated themselves out. She pointed they should go right, so as to round the small headland that there blocked the way along the beach. When they were around, she pushed inshore again—for she swam, to his surprise, well—and beached the broken canoe. Then she set out running along the sands to the right. When they had run like this for ten minutes or so, she looked back. They saw small figures standing on the cliff far behind them. After another quarter-hour's running a second look showed no one on the skyline behind. She then settled down to a walk. She had evidently made up her mind—knew that she must go.

They slept that night in a seashore cave. It was not difficult to get sea-food—mussels, clams, oysters, and some edible seaweed. They went thus for ten days. She was evidently heading for some particular spot. At last he saw, out in the waters of the gulf, the shores of which they were following, a blue line—they were approaching the gulf's western end. After another day's travel they were there. The coast curved around, they could go south. And south she evidently intended to go, for she never paused. And he was as willing. Hadn't he gone through the Belt before, and now with this strong, resourceful companion—there was nothing weak about her, or frail, or diffident—why should they not do as well? She evidently had thought the same. There was only death behind them. It was clear that once an intruder had been sighted he would be hunted until killed, and on those open plains that would not take long.

She made no attempt to stop when they reached the end of western shore of the gulf, and already they could see a thicker, richer growth of vegetation before them. Without consultation but with a common mind they headed for the Belt. He did not count the days it took before they could be said to have reached the Belt proper. All he thought was, "The way I came before must have been one of the old ocean-bed ways, and this must be over one of those land masses which we used to be told once ran north and south in the old world." They were traveling down what had been Africa, while he had come up across what had been the Indian Ocean and some of its islands and flooded Arabia ending in a wide northerly extension of the Arabian Sea.

The first part was then rather better going. When the forest became complete, day by day, with the help of his compass, they kept their path, swinging themselves by the lianas, and night by night they climbed trees, and, coiling themselves into a hammock made of these natural ropes, slept. As the density became complete underneath, they found they could actually travel on the

treetops, which had matted into a kind of roof, a roof that was woven close by vines and further plugged and piled by a thick, stringy moss. But this only lasted for a day's travel or so, after which they had to go down—not to ground level, but to swamp and mush line.

One day they were plunging along through this when she, who was ahead, stepped onto a green tussock. It looked firm. It was actually a moss floating on a bog-hole. Her foot went through and she sank up to mid-hip. She called out, and he took hold of her arms with both of his and began to pull her out of the sucking mud. Suddenly she began to scream, and he felt her weight apparently increase. He redoubled his effort, and, though his feet began to settle in the boggy humus on which he stood, he seemed to be getting her free. He was dully puzzled as to why she should be screaming when she was now nearly safe, when his eye, which could see her legs as they slowly rose from the mud, saw that one, just above the knee—she was clear now to that—seemed to have on it a black, gleaming boot. It was encased in the mouth of a giant subaquatic leech, a monstrous black tube. Just around the top of this boot could be seen small studs of red and pearl. The creature had fine teeth, and these were embedded in the woman's leg. Blood beaded around each indentation. He struggled with all his might. But gradually the creature was able to coil around its underwater purchase. For a moment it was a tug of war with the screaming woman as the link. Then the black thing began to gain. Gradually, do what he would, she began to sink. The black boot went, she was down to the waist, the breast, shoulders, neck. Now only her mouth and face were above the filthy water. His own head was being dragged down to it. He smelled its rotten stench as her struggles stirred up its gases. Her head went under and her struggles increased. His chest was now in the muck, and he was on his knees. She had ceased to struggle, though her fingers were stuck into his arm muscles. As the water touched his face, he threw himself back, seized an aerial root that thrust out over the water, and with a huge effort heaved himself onto the bank, shuddering and dripping with mire. The thick liquid of the pool rippled for a moment, and a couple of bubbles rose and burst on the surface. There was no trace that he had ever had a companion.

He turned away and lunged blindly through the forest. Automatically, night by night, he coiled himself up in the lianas. Once or twice he was attacked, but the creatures were evidently so specialized that they hardly recognized this strange object as possible prey. If he did not blunder on them, they hardly ever struck at him, far less trailed or stalked him. They were sluggish beasts, whose reactions

were almost automatic and who had become so specialized that these reactions were hardly ever awakened save by the presence of their specific prey. Once as he stumbled along he felt a tendril flip round his neck. He caught it and looked up. From a tangle of creeper above him waved a cluster of tentacles. He took the tendril in his hands and tore it away. Fine spines in the under side of it had left a series of bleeding punctures in his skin. In terror he gazed up, expecting the other winnowing arms to close around him. But the moment the creature, which now he could see was some kind of land octopus, felt the unfamiliar contact of the human hand tearing it away, it was seized with a contractile reaction and curled itself up into a ball.

Another time, when on comparatively open swamp land, he heard a great trampling coming toward him from the left. It was advancing so quickly that he stood still. But before he could take cover the thing broke out of the bush and swung across the open. It was a huge, lumbering beast. He had never seen anything to approach it. The legs, stumpy but stout as the masts of the biggest ships, sank and sucked and plunged as it plodded over the half-solid marsh. Its body nearly touched the ground and rose at the back to a frill of spines that came forward and spread like a collar round its neck. From this protruded a small head with a beak. The whole beast was the size of a ship, and it forged ahead like a boat wallowing over a choppy sea. It grunted as it thrust itself along and swung its head from side to side. He was unable to fly, so horrible did the monster seem to him. Its track brought it close by him, and in those steady swings of the head it swept its eyes over him time and again. But once more it was clear that this queer little human figure awoke no reaction in that dim coil of reflexes which were the sum activity of the minute brain that had to fit in behind the beak and the dull, heavy-lidded eyes. It stumbled grunting past. He was close enough to see its great rumpled and cracked hide, a rough pavement of horny plates, covered with parasites, barnacle growths, and limpet-like shells, with leeches and the tunnels of worms in the fissures. Then the head and shoulders met the thicket, and he heard the stamping and tearing as it drove its way along, the great calloused tail, like the coulter of a plough, leaving a last furrow in the packed leaf-mold as it was dragged after its owner.

These incidents awoke him for a moment from his daze. Otherwise he had become almost as automatic as these creatures. He went on like a migrating animal. Sometimes he would take out his compass stone and look at it. But as the days went on he seemed to travel more by a blind instinct that told him he was making south. Automatically, too, when he came to the lush parts he

wiped over his body, grooming off fresh leeches that had managed to make a purchase or driving off the giant flies before they had pierced deep and sucked. He ate in the same blind way, reaching up his hand to fruit when it was near and munching it as he stumbled on.

He hardly noticed, then, that the forest was becoming clearer, the mist had thinned, and rain was far less frequent. Indeed, he went right on until one day he found himself at the shore—the ocean itself before him. He had come right through. The sun was out. The sands were warm. A fresh spring flowed out there to the sea. He drank, ate some bananas that grew here almost to the water's edge, threw himself down on the warm sand, worked himself into it, and fell asleep at once. He woke as the sun was setting, pushed himself into the cover of dried fallen leaves around the thicket of bananas, and went to sleep. So he stayed for some days, just waking to eat and drink and then sleeping again. At last he rose and stretched himself, looked out to the sea, and set out along the coast. He went around three or four shallow bays. Then he heard a shout—he was being hailed. He stood still. In a few minutes two men were standing looking at him.

He remembered, as though in a story he had been told in childhood, that these men were of the fishing clan—he did not find his mind saying, “These are men of my clan...” Then he noticed that they were looking strangely at him. He put his hand to his neck pouch. Yes, it was there after all those days, years perhaps. He didn't know or care. He took out his stone and showed it to them. Yes, that worked: they came nearer. Then he reached inside and picked out several of the round objects from the inner pocket. They saw the huge, shining pearls—looked at them in silence for a moment. Then, as he put them back, they put out their hands and pointed to him where they were going and he should go.

They did not touch him. They led him back to a camp. He heard them speak to the master of the crew. This expedition had just finished a visit to the shores of the Belt and was about to set home. The two Ailuck had met had gone a little farther afield to see if they could find better sea-truffle beds. The ship captain ordered him into the boat. He was put forward in the small forecastle. They never touched him but pushed his food to him. Perhaps it was because they dreaded him—though they knew him to be one of themselves, he had come from the haunted interior—that they did not try to take the pearls from him. When they arrived at their small port in Antarctica, and the ship had been inspected by the harbor officials, he was ordered off, but again not touched. They shut him in an empty room and pushed his food to him through a small hatch.

After three days the door opened and one of the priest administrators stood

there. He beckoned Ailuck out. In the street a car was waiting and attached behind it a trailer. Into this he was told to go, and the equipment set off. They went to the capital, to the great Place. Evidently his arrival had been foretold, for, though the common people paid him no attention, when he was brought into one of the administrative courts, it was empty of public, but a full court of officials was present. He was set down before them. To the questions whether he had been into the Belt, he nodded. They told him that the penalty for that was death. He nodded again. Then the court told him to withdraw, and he was led away by the priest who had come to fetch him—a young, clever-looking man. This man, when he had taken Ailuck to a cell, stood for a moment in the door looking at him. Ailuck put his hand into his pouch and took out a few pearls, holding them in the palm of his hand. The other pointed that he should put them on the ground, just under the stone bench that edged the wall. When Ailuck had done this with all the contents of his pouch, the other looked at him, nodded, shut the door, and locked it. After an hour he returned and led Ailuck back to the court room.

The President spoke: “You have been condemned to death, but the priest who took you into custody says you have utterly repented of your sins.” Then, turning to the young man, he said, “Tell the prisoner what you have suggested as an alternative to his execution.”

The young priest began by saying that mercy was not contrary to justice. “True, the victim of illusion had no doubt become seriously infected in the place of Evil. But the holy stones could purify him, and then his testimony, the witness that here was a man who had gone to Hell and come back and who could with his own word confirm what the Scriptures said and tradition ordered, would establish authority. If he were killed men might still doubt whether it were not blind superstition defending its rights that had destroyed him who had found out the truth to be other than was taught. But now, if he was spared, he could show that truth and authority were one.”

The chief priest spoke again: Would Ailuck so serve for the rest of his life, if his life were spared? Ailuck bowed. Why shouldn't he? Surely none of them could know as he did the horror of the Belt.

He was taken away into a shrine behind the temple. There, on special altars covered with heavy, carved reliquaries of lead, rested the secret stones of power. The officiating priests robed and gloved themselves in lead-plated vestments and put visors of paste-glass over their eyes. They raised the lead hoods, and the radioactive ores shone in the dusk with an unhealthy glow. They took up the

stones they needed. It was clear they had quite a good practical knowledge of radioactive ores and of giving treatment with them. They passed them over Ailuck's body, which they had stripped naked. Already the molds and fungus patches had appeared. After one treatment by the rays, they were gone. There were patches all over his body, some quite near the eyes. But all were gone in three days. But after the first day Ailuck found his eyes dazed. On the second, they were slower in recovering. On the third, his sight began to fade, and finally, after a week it was gone. It never returned. After a week's treatment, he was left to rest. He felt very tired and slept much. The fevers only manifested themselves in one slight night attack. The infection he had caught going north had apparently given him resistance and almost immunity. Then he was led in front of the court. They were no longer afraid to touch him. He knew it was the court for he heard his young defender speak of the success of the purification and the High Priest admit it, and add, "And now that sight has been yielded as the price of such grave trespass, you will remember all the better what you have seen, that you may recite your pilgrimage in Hell to confirm the faith."

So his second life began. He was sent around the country, and at all great festivals he recited his saga. He was not allowed to tell of the actual quiet days in Arctica, but the whole of his wanderings he reduced to a kind of chant. It became known as the Divine Tragedy, and when he died it was put into written form and recited at all festivals. It was also learned by all those who were passing their high-school examinations.

V. THE PLANETARY LINEUP

So, as far as man was concerned, the Earth behaved toward him—now that he had set its balance at another adjustment and its course on another tack—like a giant centrifuge. *Homo sapiens* was driven away from the lands where he had been evolved because he chose to make these temperate zones impossibly tropical. He was driven up to find the temperate conditions he requires, right onto the Poles. The desert belt of the earth had long gone. The Sahara had swamped almost at once. Lake Chad had taken back its dominion. The African section of the Great Vegetation Belt spread up here and engrossed nearly the whole Mediterranean basin. No, man had nothing but the Poles, and the two Poles were now really, as far as communication went, two quite different worlds.

Man was thus segregated into *Homo borealis* and *Homo australis*, Arctic man

and Antarctic man. As ever, segregation began to tell—difference in variety began to become difference in species. Now at last there were really two races of man. Providentially they never, after that, met. They could have recognized no common humanity. The few thinkers that remained at either Pole could do little to prevent this, nor did they see any reason why they should. The dwindling number of minds that knew history, that could envisage the story of man, saw, they felt, with perfect conviction, that this had been inevitable. Man would not get on with man—the lines had at last been drawn for the battle royal when each—as in the duel with razors, with left wrist tied to left wrist—could with the new atomic weapons give the other the death-blow. The historian-philosophers thought therefore that the change, the new flood, the great Barrier Belt, all these things were providential. They were the only things that could have saved mankind from extinction and given him, if not progress, at least a decent, quiet life for some more millennia on the surface of the earth.

Whether they were right or wrong, it is clear that, being sensible men and knowing that the art of good sense is to accept the inevitable, they could not have come to any other conclusion. The slightly larger number of people who cared a rap what they thought, approved their conclusions. Pragmatically they were, then, right. They gave reasons for living, for Life, and so possibly they were right even *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The Martian astronomers—a class as small—were, however, puzzled. They found themselves involved in controversies which became—as such will—quite bitter. For no good observer could doubt that some immense change had overtaken the Earth with what any geologically minded Martian, still more an astronomer, had to call indecent haste. There was not the slightest reason why it should have happened. They were men who had brought astronomy to unequalled heights. They knew the causes of ice ages—sun-fluctuation, cosmic dust, loss of carbon dioxide, spread of oceans through volcanic upheaval. They knew them all, and they knew that none of them would serve. So, suffering from what to a researcher is a severe nervous disorder—acceptance of observations, masses of them, to which no possible explanation will apply—their tempers suffered, and each took it out on his opposite number. So desperate became some that they dared postulate that on the Earth there might possibly be some form of life—a quick-growing yeast, perhaps—that could generate enough heat to melt the polar caps—after which, of course, the other phase would follow. But this suggestion the majority scouted as mere superstition—just making up fancy things to get your mind out of a fix it's too stupid to solve rationally. No one was quite so rash

with his reputation as to suggest that there could be a rational intelligence which could have done such a thing. That would have been highly unpatriotic. Mars knew it was the one abode of life and intelligence—the chosen site—it was easy to prove that. Indeed, when this disloyal doubt did flash through one star-gazer's mind he laid it easily enough—for if there were intelligent creatures on the Earth, would they have been such fools as to have made such cataclysmic changes? If there were they had undoubtedly perished, so anyhow the matter was self-closed.

They could all meet on the wide, high platform of observation. Season after season—as their beautiful series of colored telescopic photographs showed—their inner neighboring satellite showed remarkable changes growing. From being a greenish object, mildew blue-green with rust-mold markings on it, it had become a body with a belt whose brightness was equal to that of Venus, and on either side, instead of those rather garish light spots, the bright belt tapered into a lovely aquamarine tint. Yes, it was a distinct addition to the Martian outlook. However much the observers might be at loggerheads when they tried to account for this improvement, they all had to agree that of all the objects that adorned the night sky, the planet next out from the White Planet need not now fear comparison. For sheer beauty of coloration and remarkable quality and distribution of albedo, it had established itself as unique.