

A Hoyer of Arcturus

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The Séance



 n a March evening, at eight o'clock, Backhouse, the medium—a fast-rising star in the psychic world—was ushered into the study at Prolands, the Hampstead residence of Montague Faull. The room was illuminated only by the light of a blazing fire. The host, eying him with indolent curiosity, got up, and the usual conventional greetings were exchanged. Having indicated an easy chair before the fire to his guest, the South American merchant sank back again into his own. The electric light was switched on. Faull's prominent, clear-cut features, metallic-looking skin, and general air of bored impassiveness, did not seem greatly to impress the medium, who was accustomed to regard men from a special angle. Backhouse, on the contrary, was a novelty to the merchant. As he tranquilly studied him through half closed lids and the smoke of a cigar, he wondered how this little, thickset person with the pointed beard contrived to remain so fresh and sane in appearance, in view of the morbid nature of his occupation.

"Do you smoke?" drawled Faull, by way of starting the conversation. "No? Then will you take a drink?"

"Not at present, I thank you."

A pause.

"Everything is satisfactory? The materialisation will take place?"

"I see no reason to doubt it."

"That's good, for I would not like my guests to be disappointed. I have your check written out in my pocket."

"Afterward will do quite well."

"Nine o'clock was the time specified, I believe?"

"I fancy so."

The conversation continued to flag. Faull sprawled in his chair, and remained apathetic.

"Would you care to hear what arrangements I have made?"

"I am unaware that any are necessary, beyond chairs for your guests."

"I mean the decoration of the séance room, the music, and so forth."

Backhouse stared at his host. "But this is not a theatrical performance."

"That's correct. Perhaps I ought to explain.... There will be ladies present, and ladies, you know, are aesthetically inclined."

"In that case I have no objection. I only hope they will enjoy the performance to the end."

He spoke rather dryly.

"Well, that's all right, then," said Faull. Flicking his cigar into the fire, he got up and helped himself to whisky.

"Will you come and see the room?"

"Thank you, no. I prefer to have nothing to do with it till the time arrives."

"Then let's go to see my sister, Mrs. Jameson, who is in the drawing room. She sometimes does me the kindness to act as my hostess, as I am unmarried."

"I will be delighted," said Backhouse coldly.

They found the lady alone, sitting by the open pianoforte in a pensive attitude. She had been playing Scriabin and was overcome. The medium took in her small, tight, patrician features and porcelain-like hands, and wondered how Faull came by such a sister. She received him bravely, with just a shade of quiet emotion. He was used to such receptions at the hands of the sex, and knew well how to respond to them.

"What amazes me," she half whispered, after ten minutes of graceful, hollow conversation, "is, if you must know it, not so much the manifestation itself—though that will surely be wonderful—as your assurance that it will take place. Tell me the grounds of your confidence."

"I dream with open eyes," he answered, looking around at the door, "and others see my dreams. That is all."

"But that's beautiful," responded Mrs. Jameson. She smiled rather absently, for the first guest had just entered.

It was Kent-Smith, the ex-magistrate, celebrated for his shrewd judicial humour, which, however, he had the good sense not to attempt to carry into private life. Although well on the wrong side of seventy, his eyes were still disconcertingly bright. With the selective skill of an old man, he immediately settled himself in the most comfortable of many comfortable chairs.

"So we are to see wonders tonight?"

"Fresh material for your autobiography," remarked Faull.

"Ah, you should not have mentioned my unfortunate book. An old public servant is merely amusing himself in his retirement, Mr. Backhouse. You have no cause for alarm—I have studied in the school of discretion."

"I am not alarmed. There can be no possible objection to your publishing whatever you please."

"You are most kind," said the old man, with a cunning smile.

"Trent is not coming tonight," remarked Mrs. Jameson, throwing a curious little glance at her brother.

"I never thought he would. It's not in his line."

"Mrs. Trent, you must understand," she went on, addressing the ex-magistrate, "has placed us all under a debt of gratitude. She has decorated the old lounge hall upstairs most beautifully, and has secured the services of the sweetest little orchestra."

"But this is Roman magnificence."

"Backhouse thinks the spirits should be treated with more deference," laughed Faull.

"Surely, Mr. Backhouse—a poetic environment..."

"Pardon me. I am a simple man, and always prefer to reduce things to elemental simplicity. I raise no opposition, but I express my opinion. Nature is one thing, and art is another."

"And I am not sure that I don't agree with you," said the ex-magistrate. "An occasion like this ought to be simple, to guard against the possibility of deception—if you will forgive my bluntness, Mr. Backhouse."

"We shall sit in full light," replied Backhouse, "and every opportunity will be given to all to inspect the room. I shall also ask you to submit me to a personal examination."

A rather embarrassed silence followed. It was broken by the arrival of two more guests, who entered together. These were Prior, the prosperous City coffee importer, and Lang, the stockjobber, well known in his own circle as an amateur prestidigitator. Backhouse was slightly acquainted with the latter. Prior, perfuming the room with the faint odour of wine and tobacco smoke, tried to introduce an atmosphere of joviality into the proceedings. Finding that no one seconded his efforts, however, he shortly subsided and fell to examining the water colours on the walls. Lang, tall, thin, and growing bald, said little, but stared at Backhouse a good deal.

Coffee, liqueurs, and cigarettes were now brought in. Everyone partook, except Lang and the medium. At the same moment, Professor Halbart was announced. He was the eminent psychologist, the author and lecturer on crime, insanity, genius, and so forth, considered in their mental aspects. His presence at such a gathering somewhat mystified the other guests, but all felt as if the object of their meeting had immediately acquired additional solemnity. He was small, meagre-looking, and mild in manner, but was probably the most stubborn-brained of all that mixed company. Completely ignoring the medium, he at once sat down beside Kent-Smith, with whom he began to exchange remarks.

At a few minutes past the appointed hour Mrs. Trent entered, unannounced. She was a woman of about twenty-eight. She had a white, demure, saintlike face, smooth black hair, and lips so crimson and full that they seemed to be bursting with blood. Her tall, graceful body was most expensively attired. Kisses were exchanged between her and Mrs. Jameson. She bowed to the rest of the assembly, and stole a half glance and a smile at Faull. The latter gave her a queer look, and Backhouse, who lost nothing, saw the concealed barbarian in the complacent gleam of his eye. She refused the refreshment that was offered her, and Faull proposed that, as everyone had now arrived, they should adjourn to the lounge hall.

Mrs. Trent held up a slender palm. "Did you, or did you not, give me *carte blanche*, Montague?"

"Of course I did," said Faull, laughing. "But what's the matter?"

"Perhaps I have been rather presumptuous. I don't know. I have invited a couple of friends to join us. No, no one knows them.... The two most extraordinary individuals you ever saw. And mediums, I am sure."

"It sounds very mysterious. Who are these conspirators?"

"At least tell us their names, you provoking girl," put in Mrs. Jameson.

"One rejoices in the name of Maskull, and the other in that of Nightspore. That's nearly all that I know about them, so don't overwhelm me with any more questions."

"But where did you pick them up? You must have picked them up somewhere."

"But this is a cross-examination. Have I sinned against convention? I swear I will tell you not another word about them. They will be here directly, and then I will deliver them to your tender mercy."

"I don't know them," said Faull, "and nobody else seems to, but, of course, we will all be very pleased to have them... Shall we wait, or what?"

"I said nine, and it's past that now. It's quite possible they may not turn up after all... Anyway, don't wait."

"I would prefer to start at once," said Backhouse.

The lounge, a lofty room, forty feet long by twenty wide, had been divided for the occasion into two equal parts by a heavy brocade curtain drawn across the middle. The far end was thus concealed. The nearer half had been converted into an auditorium by a crescent of armchairs. There was no other furniture. A large fire was burning halfway along the wall, between the chairbacks and the door. The room was brilliantly lighted by electric bracket lamps. A sumptuous carpet covered the floor.

Having settled his guests in their seats, Faull stepped up to the curtain and flung it aside. A replica, or nearly so, of the Drury Lane presentation of the temple scene in *The Magic Flute* was then exposed to view: the gloomy, massive architecture of the interior, the glowing sky above it in the background, and, silhouetted against the latter, the gigantic seated statue of the Pharaoh. A fantastically carved wooden couch lay before the pedestal of the statue. Near the curtain, obliquely placed to the auditorium, was a plain oak armchair, for the use of the medium.

Many of those present felt privately that the setting was quite inappropriate to the occasion and savoured rather unpleasantly of ostentation. Backhouse in particular seemed put out. The usual compliments, however, were showered on Mrs. Trent as the deviser of so remarkable a theatre. Faull invited his friends to step forward and examine the apartment as minutely as they might desire. Prior and Lang were the only ones to accept. The former wandered about among the pasteboard scenery, whistling to himself and occasionally tapping a part of it with his knuckles. Lang, who was in his element, ignored the rest of his party and commenced a patient, systematic search, on his own account, for secret apparatus. Faull and Mrs. Trent stood in a corner of the temple, talking together in low tones; while Mrs. Jameson, pretending to hold Backhouse in conversation, watched them as only a deeply interested woman knows how to watch.

Lang, to his own disgust, having failed to find anything of a suspicious nature, the medium now requested that his own clothing should be searched.

"All these precautions are quite needless and beside the matter in hand, as you will immediately see for yourselves. My reputation demands, however, that other people who are not present would not be able to say afterward that trickery has been resorted to."

To Lang again fell the ungrateful task of investigating pockets and sleeves. Within a few minutes he expressed himself satisfied that nothing mechanical was in Backhouse's possession. The guests reseated themselves. Faull ordered two more chairs to be brought for Mrs. Trent's friends, who, however, had not yet arrived. He then pressed an electric bell, and took his own seat.

The signal was for the hidden orchestra to begin playing. A murmur of surprise passed through the audience as, without previous warning, the beautiful and solemn strains of Mozart's "temple" music pulsed through the air. The expectation of everyone was raised, while, beneath her pallor and composure, it could be seen that Mrs. Trent was deeply moved. It was evident that aesthetically she was by far the most important person present. Faull watched her, with his face sunk on his chest, sprawling as usual.

Backhouse stood up, with one hand on the back of his chair, and began speaking. The music instantly sank to pianissimo, and remained so for as long as he was on his legs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness a materialisation. That means you will see something appear in space that was not previously there. At first it will appear as a vaporous form, but finally it will be a solid body, which anyone present may feel and handle—and, for example, shake hands with. For this body will be in the human shape. It will be a real man or woman—which, I can't say—but a man or woman without known antecedents. If, however, you demand from me an explanation of the origin of this materialised form—where it comes from, whence the atoms and molecules composing its tissues are derived—I am unable to satisfy you. I am about to produce the phenomenon; if anyone can explain it to me afterward, I shall be very grateful... That is all I have to say."

He resumed his seat, half turning his back on the assembly, and paused for a moment before beginning his task.

It was precisely at this minute that the manservant opened the door and announced in a subdued but distinct voice: “Mr. Maskull, Mr. Nightspore.”

Everyone turned round. Faull rose to welcome the late arrivals. Backhouse also stood up, and stared hard at them.

The two strangers remained standing by the door, which was closed quietly behind them. They seemed to be waiting for the mild sensation caused by their appearance to subside before advancing into the room. Maskull was a kind of giant, but of broader and more robust physique than most giants. He wore a full beard. His features were thick and heavy, coarsely modelled, like those of a wooden carving; but his eyes, small and black, sparkled with the fires of intelligence and audacity. His hair was short, black, and bristling. Nightspore was of middle height, but so tough-looking that he appeared to be trained out of all human frailties and susceptibilities. His hairless face seemed consumed by an intense spiritual hunger, and his eyes were wild and distant. Both men were dressed in tweeds.

Before any words were spoken, a loud and terrible crash of falling masonry caused the assembled party to start up from their chairs in consternation. It sounded as if the entire upper part of the building had collapsed. Faull sprang to the door, and called to the servant to say what was happening. The man had to be questioned twice before he gathered what was required of him. He said he had heard nothing. In obedience to his master’s order, he went upstairs. Nothing, however, was amiss there, neither had the maids heard anything.

In the meantime Backhouse, who almost alone of those assembled had preserved his sangfroid, went straight up to Nightspore, who stood gnawing his nails.

“Perhaps you can explain it, sir?”

“It was supernatural,” said Nightspore, in a harsh, muffled voice, turning away from his questioner.

“I guessed so. It is a familiar phenomenon, but I have never heard it so loud.”

He then went among the guests, reassuring them. By degrees they settled down, but it was observable that their former easy and good-humoured interest in the proceedings was now changed to strained watchfulness. Maskull and Nightspore took the places allotted to them. Mrs. Trent kept stealing uneasy glances at them. Throughout the entire incident, Mozart’s hymn continued to be played. The orchestra also had heard nothing.

Backhouse now entered on his task. It was one that began to be familiar to him, and he had no anxiety about the result. It was not possible to effect the materialisation by mere concentration of will, or the exercise of any faculty; otherwise many people could have done what he had engaged himself to do. His nature was phenomenal—the dividing wall between himself and the spiritual world was broken in many places. Through the gaps in his mind the inhabitants of the invisible, when he summoned them, passed for a moment timidly and awfully into the solid, coloured universe.... He could not say how it was brought about.... The experience was a rough one for the body, and many such struggles would lead to insanity and early death. That is why Backhouse was stern and abrupt in his manner. The coarse, clumsy suspicion of some of the witnesses, the frivolous aestheticism of others, were equally obnoxious to his grim, bursting heart; but he was obliged to live, and, to pay his way, must put up with these impertinences.

He sat down facing the wooden couch. His eyes remained open but seemed to look inward. His cheeks paled, and he became noticeably thinner. The spectators almost forgot to breathe. The more sensitive among them began to feel, or imagine, strange presences all around them. Maskull’s eyes glittered with anticipation, and his brows went up and down, but Nightspore appeared bored.

After a long ten minutes the pedestal of the statue was seen to become slightly blurred, as though an intervening mist were rising from the ground. This slowly developed into a visible cloud, coiling hither and thither, and constantly changing shape. The professor half rose, and held his glasses with one hand further forward on the bridge of his nose.

By slow stages the cloud acquired the dimensions and approximate outline of an adult human body, although all was still vague and blurred. It hovered lightly in the air, a foot or so above the couch. Backhouse looked haggard and ghastly. Mrs. Jameson quietly fainted in her chair, but she was unnoticed, and presently revived. The apparition now settled down upon the couch, and at the moment of doing so seemed suddenly to grow dark, solid, and manlike. Many of the guests were as pale as the medium himself, but Faull preserved his stoical apathy, and glanced once or twice at Mrs. Trent. She was staring straight at the couch, and was twisting a little lace handkerchief through the different fingers of her hand. The music went on playing.

The figure was by this time unmistakably that of a man lying down. The face focused itself into distinctness. The body was draped in a sort of shroud, but the features were those of a young man. One smooth hand fell over, nearly touching the floor, white and motionless. The weaker spirits of the company stared at the vision in sick horror; the rest

were grave and perplexed. The seeming man was dead, but somehow it did not appear like a death succeeding life, but like a death preliminary to life. All felt that he might sit up at any minute.

“Stop that music!” muttered Backhouse, tottering from his chair and facing the party. Faull touched the bell. A few more bars sounded, and then total silence ensued.

“Anyone who wants to may approach the couch,” said Backhouse with difficulty.

Lang at once advanced, and stared awestruck at the supernatural youth.

“You are at liberty to touch,” said the medium.

But Lang did not venture to, nor did any of the others, who one by one stole up to the couch—until it came to Faull’s turn. He looked straight at Mrs. Trent, who seemed frightened and disgusted at the spectacle before her, and then not only touched the apparition but suddenly grasped the drooping hand in his own and gave it a powerful squeeze. Mrs. Trent gave a low scream. The ghostly visitor opened his eyes, looked at Faull strangely, and sat up on the couch. A cryptic smile started playing over his mouth. Faull looked at his hand; a feeling of intense pleasure passed through his body.

Maskull caught Mrs. Jameson in his arms; she was attacked by another spell of faintness. Mrs. Trent ran forward, and led her out of the room. Neither of them returned.

The phantom body now stood upright, looking about him, still with his peculiar smile. Prior suddenly felt sick, and went out. The other men more or less hung together, for the sake of human society, but Nightspore paced up and down, like a man weary and impatient, while Maskull attempted to interrogate the youth. The apparition watched him with a baffling expression, but did not answer. Backhouse was sitting apart, his face buried in his hands.

It was at this moment that the door was burst open violently, and a stranger, unannounced, half leaped, half strode a few yards into the room, and then stopped. None of Faull’s friends had ever seen him before. He was a thick, shortish man, with surprising muscular development and a head far too large in proportion to his body. His beardless yellow face indicated, as a first impression, a mixture of sagacity, brutality, and humour.

“Aha-i, gentlemen!” he called out loudly. His voice was piercing, and oddly disagreeable to the ear. “So we have a little visitor here.”

Nightspore turned his back, but everyone else stared at the intruder in astonishment. He took another few steps forward, which brought him to the edge of the theatre.

“May I ask, sir, how I come to have the honour of being your host?” asked Faull sullenly. He thought that the evening was not proceeding as smoothly as he had anticipated.

The newcomer looked at him for a second, and then broke into a great, roaring guffaw. He thumped Faull on the back playfully—but the play was rather rough, for the victim was sent staggering against the wall before he could recover his balance.

“Good evening, my host!”

“And good evening to you too, my lad!” he went on, addressing the supernatural youth, who was now beginning to wander about the room, in apparent unconsciousness of his surroundings. “I have seen someone very like you before, I think.”

There was no response.

The intruder thrust his head almost up to the phantom’s face. “You have no right here, as you know.”

The shape looked back at him with a smile full of significance, which, however, no one could understand.

“Be careful what you are doing,” said Backhouse quickly.

“What’s the matter, spirit usher?”

“I don’t know who you are, but if you use physical violence toward that, as you seem inclined to do, the consequences may prove very unpleasant.”

“And without pleasure our evening would be spoiled, wouldn’t it, my little mercenary friend?”

Humour vanished from his face, like sunlight from a landscape, leaving it hard and rocky. Before anyone realised what he was doing, he encircled the soft, white neck of the materialised shape with his hairy hands and, with a double turn, twisted it completely round. A faint, unearthly shriek sounded, and the body fell in a heap to the floor. Its face was uppermost. The guests were unutterably shocked to observe that its expression had changed from the mysterious but fascinating smile to a vulgar, sordid, bestial grin, which cast a cold shadow of moral nastiness into every heart. The transformation was accompanied by a sickening stench of the graveyard.

The features faded rapidly away, the body lost its consistence, passing from the solid to the shadowy condition, and, before two minutes had elapsed, the spirit-form had entirely disappeared.

The short stranger turned and confronted the party, with a long, loud laugh, like nothing in nature.

The professor talked excitedly to Kent-Smith in low tones. Faull beckoned Backhouse behind a wing of scenery, and handed him his check without a word. The medium put it in his pocket, buttoned his coat, and walked out of the room. Lang followed him, in order to get a drink.

The stranger poked his face up into Maskull's.

"Well, giant, what do you think of it all? Wouldn't you like to see the land where this sort of fruit grows wild?"

"What sort of fruit?"

"That specimen goblin."

Maskull waved him away with his huge hand. "Who are you, and how did you come here?"

"Call up your friend. Perhaps he may recognise me." Nightspore had moved a chair to the fire, and was watching the embers with a set, fanatical expression.

"Let Krag come to me, if he wants me," he said, in his strange voice.

"You see, he does know me," uttered Krag, with a humorous look. Walking over to Nightspore, he put a hand on the back of his chair.

"Still the same old gnawing hunger?"

"What is doing these days?" demanded Nightspore disdainfully, without altering his attitude.

"Surtur has gone, and we are to follow him."

"How do you two come to know each other, and of whom are you speaking?" asked Maskull, looking from one to the other in perplexity.

"Krag has something for us. Let us go outside," replied Nightspore. He got up, and glanced over his shoulder. Maskull, following the direction of his eye, observed that the few remaining men were watching their little group attentively.



In the Street



The three men gathered in the street outside the house. The night was slightly frosty, but particularly clear, with an east wind blowing. The multitude of blazing stars caused the sky to appear like a vast scroll of hieroglyphic symbols. Maskull felt oddly excited; he had a sense that something extraordinary was about to happen. "What brought you to this house tonight, Krag, and what made you do what you did? How are we understand that apparition?"

"That must have been Crystalman's expression on its face," muttered Nightspore.

"We have discussed that, haven't we, Maskull? Maskull is anxious to behold that rare fruit in its native wilds."

Maskull looked at Krag carefully, trying to analyse his own feelings toward him. He was distinctly repelled by the man's personality, yet side by side with this aversion a savage, living energy seemed to spring up in his heart that in some strange fashion was attributable to Krag.

"Why do you insist on this simile?" he asked.

"Because it is apropos. Nightspore's quite right. That was Crystalman's face, and we are going to Crystalman's country."

"And where is this mysterious country?"

"Tormance."

"That's a quaint name. But where is it?"

Krag grinned, showing his yellow teeth in the light of the street lamp.

"It is the residential suburb of Arcturus."

"What is he talking about, Nightspore?... Do you mean the star of that name?" he went on, to Krag.

"Which you have in front of you at this very minute," said Krag, pointing a thick finger toward the brightest star in the south-eastern sky. "There you see Arcturus, and Tormance is its one inhabited planet."

Maskull looked at the heavy, gleaming star, and again at Krag. Then he pulled out a pipe, and began to fill it.

"You must have cultivated a new form of humour, Krag."

"I am glad if I can amuse you, Maskull, if only for a few days."

"I meant to ask you—how do you know my name?"

"It would be odd if I didn't, seeing that I only came here on your account. As a matter of fact, Nightspore and I are old friends."

Maskull paused with his suspended match. "You came here on my account?"

"Surely. On your account and Nightspore's. We three are to be fellow travellers."

Maskull now lit his pipe and puffed away coolly for a few moments.

"I'm sorry, Krag, but I must assume you are mad."

Krag threw his head back, and gave a scraping laugh. "Am I mad, Nightspore?"

"Has Surtur gone to Tormance?" ejaculated Nightspore in a strangled voice, fixing his eyes on Krag's face.

"Yes, and he requires that we follow him at once."

Maskull's heart began to beat strangely. It all sounded to him like a dream conversation.

"And since how long, Krag, have I been required to do things by a total stranger.... Besides, who is this individual?"

"Krag's chief," said Nightspore, turning his head away.

"The riddle is too elaborate for me. I give up."

"You are looking for mysteries," said Krag, "so naturally you are finding them. Try and simplify your ideas, my friend. The affair is plain and serious."

Maskull stared hard at him and smoked rapidly.

"Where have you come from now?" demanded Nightspore suddenly.

"From the old observatory at Starkness.... Have you heard of the famous Starkness Observatory, Maskull?"

"No. Where is it?"

"On the north-east coast of Scotland. Curious discoveries are made there from time to time."

"As, for example, how to make voyages to the stars. So this Surtur turns out to be an astronomer. And you too, presumably?"

Krag grinned again. "How long will it take you to wind up your affairs? When can you be ready to start?"

"You are too considerate," said Maskull, laughing outright. "I was beginning to fear that I would be hauled away at once.... However, I have neither wife, land, nor profession, so there's nothing to wait for.... What is the itinerary?"

"You are a fortunate man. A bold, daring heart, and no encumbrances." Krag's features became suddenly grave and rigid. "Don't be a fool, and refuse a gift of luck. A gift declined is not offered a second time."

"Krag," replied Maskull simply, returning his pipe to his pocket. "I ask you to put yourself in my place. Even if I were a man sick for adventures, how could I listen seriously to such an insane proposition as this? What do I know about you, or your past record? You may be a practical joker, or you may have come out of a madhouse—I know nothing about it. If you claim to be an exceptional man, and want my cooperation, you must offer me exceptional proofs."

"And what proofs would you consider adequate, Maskull?"

As he spoke he gripped Maskull's arm. A sharp, chilling pain immediately passed through the latter's body and at the same moment his brain caught fire. A light burst in upon him like the rising of the sun. He asked himself for the first time if this fantastic conversation could by any chance refer to real things.

"Listen, Krag," he said slowly, while peculiar images and conceptions started to travel in rich disorder through his mind. "You talk about a certain journey. Well, if that journey were a possible one, and I were given the chance of making it, I would be willing never to come back. For twenty-four hours on that Arcturian planet, I would give my life. That is my attitude toward that journey.... Now prove to me that you're not talking nonsense. Produce your credentials."

Krag stared at him all the time he was speaking, his face gradually resuming its jesting expression.

"Oh, you will get your twenty-four hours, and perhaps longer, but not much longer. You're an audacious fellow, Maskull, but this trip will prove a little strenuous, even for you.... And so, like the unbelievers of old, you want a sign from heaven?"

Maskull frowned. "But the whole thing is ridiculous. Our brains are overexcited by what took place in there. Let us go home, and sleep it off."

Krag detained him with one hand, while groping in his breast pocket with the other. He presently fished out what resembled a small folding lens. The diameter of the glass did not exceed two inches.

"First take a peep at Arcturus through this, Maskull. It may serve as a provisional sign. It's the best I can do, unfortunately. I am not a travelling magician.... Be very careful not to drop it. It's somewhat heavy."

Maskull took the lens in his hand, struggled with it for a minute, and then looked at Krag in amazement. The little object weighed at least twenty pounds, though it was not much bigger than a crown piece.

"What stuff can this be, Krag?"

"Look through it, my good friend. That's what I gave it to you for."

Maskull held it up with difficulty, directed it toward the gleaming Arcturus, and snatched as long and as steady a glance at the star as the muscles of his arm would permit. What he saw was this. The star, which to the naked eye appeared as a single yellow point of light, now became clearly split into two bright but minute suns, the larger of which was still yellow, while its smaller companion was a beautiful blue. But this was not all. Apparently circulating around the yellow sun was a comparatively small and hardly distinguishable satellite, which seemed to shine, not by its own, but by reflected light.... Maskull lowered and raised his arm repeatedly. The same spectacle revealed itself again and again, but he was able to see nothing else. Then he passed back the lens to Krag, without a word, and stood chewing his underlip.

"You take a glimpse too," scraped Krag, proffering the glass to Nightspore.

Nightspore turned his back and began to pace up and down. Krag laughed sardonically, and returned the lens to his pocket. "Well, Maskull, are you satisfied?"

"Arcturus, then, is a double sun. And is that third point the planet Tormance?"

"Our future home, Maskull."

Maskull continued to ponder. "You inquire if I am satisfied. I don't know, Krag. It's miraculous, and that's all I can say about it.... But I'm satisfied of one thing. There must be very wonderful astronomers at Starkness and if you

invite me to your observatory I will surely come.”

“I do invite you. We set off from there.”

“And you, Nightspore?” demanded Maskull.

“The journey has to be made,” answered his friend in indistinct tones, “though I don’t see what will come of it.”

Krag shot a penetrating glance at him. “More remarkable adventures than this would need to be arranged before we could excite Nightspore.”

“Yet he is coming.”

“But not *con amore*. He is coming merely to bear you company.”

Maskull again sought the heavy, sombre star, gleaming in solitary might, in the south-eastern heavens, and, as he gazed, his heart swelled with grand and painful longings, for which, however, he was unable to account to his own intellect. He felt that his destiny was in some way bound up with this gigantic, far-distant sun. But still he did not dare to admit to himself Krag’s seriousness.

He heard his parting remarks in deep abstraction, and only after the lapse of several minutes, when, alone with Nightspore, did he realise that they referred to such mundane matters as travelling routes and times of trains.

“Does Krag travel north with us, Nightspore? I didn’t catch that.”

“No. We go on first, and he joins us at Starkness on the evening of the day after tomorrow.”


Maskull remained thoughtful. “What am I to think of that man?”

“For your information,” replied Nightspore wearily, “I have never known him to lie.”



Starkness



 couple of days later, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Maskull and Nightspore arrived at Starkness Observatory, having covered the seven miles from Haillar Station on foot. The road, very wild and lonely, ran for the greater part of the way near the edge of rather lofty cliffs, within sight of the North Sea. The sun shone, but a brisk east wind was blowing and the air was salt and cold. The dark green waves were flecked with white. Throughout the walk, they were accompanied by the plaintive, beautiful crying of the gulls.

The observatory presented itself to their eyes as a self-contained little community, without neighbours, and perched on the extreme end of the land. There were three buildings: a small, stone-built dwelling house, a low workshop, and, about two hundred yards farther north, a square tower of granite masonry, seventy feet in height.

The house and the shop were separated by an open yard, littered with waste. A single stone wall surrounded both, except on the side facing the sea, where the house itself formed a continuation of the cliff. No one appeared. The windows were all closed, and Maskull could have sworn that the whole establishment was shut up and deserted.

He passed through the open gate, followed by Nightspore, and knocked vigorously at the front door. The knocker was thick with dust and had obviously not been used for a long time. He put his ear to the door, but could hear no movements inside the house. He then tried the handle; the door was locked.

They walked around the house, looking for another entrance, but there was only the one door.

"This isn't promising," growled Maskull. "There's no one here..... Now you try the shed, while I go over to that tower."

Nightspore, who had not spoken half a dozen words since leaving the train, complied in silence, and started off across the yard. Maskull passed out of the gate again. When he arrived at the foot of the tower, which stood some way back from the cliff, he found the door heavily padlocked. Gazing up, he saw six windows, one above the other at equal distances, all on the east face—that is, overlooking the sea. Realising that no satisfaction was to be gained here, he came away again, still more irritated than before. When he rejoined his friend, Nightspore reported that the workshop was also locked.

"Did we, or did we not, receive an invitation?" demanded Maskull energetically.

"The house is empty," replied Nightspore, biting his nails. "Better break a window."

"I certainly don't mean to camp out till Krag condescends to come."

He picked up an old iron bolt from the yard and, retreating to a safe distance, hurled it against a sash window on the ground floor. The lower pane was completely shattered. Carefully avoiding the broken glass, Maskull thrust his hand through the aperture and pushed back the frame fastening. A minute later they had climbed through and were standing inside the house.

The room, which was a kitchen, was in an indescribably filthy and neglected condition. The furniture scarcely held together, broken utensils and rubbish lay on the floor instead of on the dust heap, everything was covered with a deep deposit of dust. The atmosphere was so foul that Maskull judged that no fresh air had passed into the room for several months. Insects were crawling on the walls.

They went into the other rooms on the lower floor—a scullery, a barely furnished dining room, and a storing place for lumber. The same dirt, mustiness, and neglect met their eyes. At least half a year must have elapsed since these rooms were last touched, or even entered.

"Does your faith in Krag still hold?" asked Maskull. "I confess mine is at vanishing point. If this affair isn't one big practical joke, it has every promise of being one. Krag never lived here in his life."

"Come upstairs first," said Nightspore.

The upstairs rooms proved to consist of a library and three bedrooms. All the windows were tightly closed, and the air was insufferable. The beds had been slept in, evidently a long time ago, and had never been made since. The tumbled, discoloured bed linen actually preserved the impressions of the sleepers. There was no doubt that these impressions were ancient, for all sorts of floating dirt had accumulated on the sheets and coverlets.

"Who could have slept here, do you think?" interrogated Maskull. "The observatory staff?"

"More likely travellers like ourselves. They left suddenly."

Maskull flung the windows wide open in every room he came to, and held his breath until he had done so. Two of the bedrooms faced the sea; the third, the library, the upward-sloping moorland. This library was now the only room left unvisited, and unless they discovered signs of recent occupation here Maskull made up his mind to regard the whole business as a gigantic hoax.

But the library, like all the other rooms, was foul with stale air and dust-laden. Maskull, having flung the window up and down, fell heavily into an armchair and looked disgustedly at his friend.

"Now what is your opinion of Krag?"

Nightspore sat on the edge of the table which stood before the window. "He may still have left a message for us."

"What message? Why? Do you mean in this room?—I see no message."

Nightspore's eyes wandered about the room, finally seeming to linger upon a glass-fronted wall cupboard, which contained a few old bottles on one of the shelves and nothing else. Maskull glanced at him and at the cupboard. Then, without a word, he got up to examine the bottles.

There were four altogether, one of which was larger than the rest. The smaller ones were about eight inches long. All were torpedo-shaped, but had flattened bottoms, which enabled them to stand upright. Two of the smaller ones were empty and unstoppered, the others contained a colourless liquid, and possessed queer-looking, nozzle-like stoppers that were connected by a thin metal rod with a catch halfway down the side of the bottle. They were labelled, but the labels were yellow with age and the writing was nearly undecipherable. Maskull carried the filled bottles with him to the table in front of the window, in order to get better light. Nightspore moved away to make room for him.

He now made out on the larger bottle the words "Solar Back Rays"; and on the other one, after some doubt, he thought that he could distinguish something like "Arcturian Back Rays."

He looked up, to stare curiously at his friend. "Have you been here before, Nightspore?"

"I guessed Krag would leave a message."

"Well, I don't know—it may be a message, but it means nothing to us, or at all events to me. What are 'back rays'?"

"Light that goes back to its source," muttered Nightspore.

"And what kind of light would that be?"

Nightspore seemed unwilling to answer, but, finding Maskull's eyes still fixed on him, he brought out: "Unless light pulled, as well as pushed, how would flowers contrive to twist their heads around after the sun?"

"I don't know. But the point is, what are these bottles for?"

While he was still talking, with his hand on the smaller bottle, the other, which was lying on its side, accidentally rolled over in such a manner that the metal caught against the table. He made a movement to stop it, his hand was actually descending, when—the bottle suddenly disappeared before his eyes. It had not rolled off the table, but had really vanished—it was nowhere at all.

Maskull stared at the table. After a minute he raised his brows, and turned to Nightspore with a smile. "The message grows more intricate."

Nightspore looked bored. "The valve became unfastened. The contents have escaped through the open window toward the sun, carrying the bottle with them. But the bottle will be burned up by the earth's atmosphere, and the contents will dissipate, and will not reach the sun."

Maskull listened attentively, and his smile faded. "Does anything prevent us from experimenting with this other bottle?"

"Replace it in the cupboard," said Nightspore. "Arcturus is still below the horizon, and you would succeed only in wrecking the house."

Maskull remained standing before the window, pensively gazing out at the sunlit moors.

"Krag treats me like a child," he remarked presently. "And perhaps I really am a child.... My cynicism must seem most amusing to Krag. But why does he leave me to find out all this by myself—for I don't include you, Nightspore.... But what time will Krag be here?"

“Not before dark, I expect,” his friend replied.



The Hoire



It was by this time past three o'clock. Feeling hungry, for they had eaten nothing since early morning, Maskull went downstairs to forage, but without much hope of finding anything in the shape of food. In a safe in the kitchen he discovered a bag of mouldy oatmeal, which was untouchable, a quantity of quite good tea in an airtight caddy, and an unopened can of ox tongue. Best of all, in the dining-room cupboard he came across an uncorked bottle of first-class Scotch whisky. He at once made preparations for a scratch meal.

A pump in the yard ran clear after a good deal of hard working at it, and he washed out and filled the antique kettle. For firewood, one of the kitchen chairs was broken up with a chopper. The light, dusty wood made a good blaze in the grate, the kettle was boiled, and cups were procured and washed. Ten minutes later the friends were dining in the library.

Nightspore ate and drank little, but Maskull sat down with good appetite. There being no milk, whisky took the place of it; the nearly black tea was mixed with an equal quantity of the spirit. Of this concoction Maskull drank cup after cup, and long after the tongue had disappeared he was still imbibing.

Nightspore looked at him queerly. "Do you intend to finish the bottle before Krag comes?"

"Krag won't want any, and one must do something. I feel restless."

"Let us take a look at the country."

The cup, which was on its way to Maskull's lips, remained poised in the air. "Have you anything in view, Nightspore?"

"Let us walk out to the Gap of Sorgie."

"What's that?"

"A showplace," answered Nightspore, biting his lip.

Maskull finished off the cup, and rose to his feet. "Walking is better than soaking at any time, and especially on a day like this.... How far is it?"

"Three or four miles each way."

"You probably mean something," said Maskull, "for I'm beginning to regard you as a second Krag. But if so, so much the better. I am growing nervous, and need incidents."

They left the house by the door, which they left ajar, and immediately found themselves again on the moorland road that had brought them from Haillar. This time they continued along it, past the tower.

Maskull, as they went by, regarded the erection with puzzled interest. "What is that tower, Nightspore?"

"We sail from the platform on the top."

"Tonight?"—throwing him a quick look.

"Yes."

Maskull smiled, but his eyes were grave. "Then we are looking at the gateway of Arcturus, and Krag is now travelling north to unlock it."

"You no longer think it impossible, I fancy," mumbled Nightspore.

After a mile or two, the road parted from the sea coast and swerved sharply inland, across the hills. With Nightspore as guide, they left it and took to the grass. A faint sheep path marked the way along the cliff edge for some distance, but at the end of another mile it vanished. The two men then had some rough walking up and down hillsides and across deep gullies. The sun disappeared behind the hills, and twilight imperceptibly came on. They soon reached a spot where further progress appeared impossible. The buttress of a mountain descended at a steep angle to the very edge of the cliff, forming an impassable slope of slippery grass. Maskull halted, stroked his beard, and wondered what the next step was to be.

"There's a little scrambling here," said Nightspore. "We are both used to climbing, and there is not much in it."

He indicated a narrow ledge, winding along the face of the precipice a few yards beneath where they were standing. It averaged from fifteen to thirty inches in width. Without waiting for Maskull's consent to the undertaking, he instantly swung himself down and started walking along this ledge at a rapid pace. Maskull, seeing that there was no help for it, followed him. The shelf did not extend for above a quarter of a mile, but its passage was somewhat unnerving; there was a sheer drop to the sea, four hundred feet below. In a few places they had to sidle along without placing one foot before another. The sound of the breakers came up to them in a low, threatening roar.

Upon rounding a corner, the ledge broadened out into a fair-sized platform of rock and came to a sudden end. A narrow inlet of the sea separated them from the continuation of the cliffs beyond.

"As we can't get any further," said Maskull, "I presume this is your Gap of Sorgie?"

"Yes," answered his friend, first dropping on his knees and then lying at full length, face downward. He drew his head and shoulders over the edge and began to stare straight down at the water.

"What is there interesting down there, Nightspore?"

Receiving no reply, however, he followed his friend's example, and the next minute was looking for himself. Nothing was to be seen; the gloom had deepened, and the sea was nearly invisible. But, while he was ineffectually gazing, he heard what sounded like the beating of a drum on the narrow strip of shore below. It was very faint, but quite distinct. The beats were in four-four time, with the third beat slightly accented. He now continued to hear the noise all the time he was lying there. The beats were in no way drowned by the far louder sound of the surf, but seemed somehow to belong to a different world....

When they were on their feet again, he questioned Nightspore. "We came here solely to hear that?"

Nightspore cast one of his odd looks at him. "It's called locally 'The Drum Taps of Sorgie.' You will not hear that name again, but perhaps you will hear the sound again."

"And if I do, what will it imply?" demanded Maskull in amazement.

"It bears its own message. Only try always to hear it more and more distinctly.... Now it's growing dark, and we must get back."

Maskull pulled out his watch automatically, and looked at the time. It was past six.... But he was thinking of Nightspore's words, and not of the time.



Night had already fallen by the time they regained the tower. The black sky was glorious with liquid stars. Arcturus was a little way above the sea, directly opposite them, in the east. As they were passing the base of the tower, Maskull observed with a sudden shock that the gate was open. He caught hold of Nightspore's arm violently. "Look! Krag is back."

"Yes, we must make haste to the house."

"And why not the tower? He's probably in there, since the gate is open. I'm going up to look."

Nightspore grunted, but made no opposition.

All was pitch-black inside the gate. Maskull struck a match, and the flickering light disclosed the lower end of a circular flight of stone steps. "Are you coming up?" he asked.

"No, I'll wait here."

Maskull immediately began the ascent. Hardly had he mounted half a dozen steps, however, before he was compelled to pause, to gain breath. He seemed to be carrying upstairs not one Maskull, but three. As he proceeded, the sensation of crushing weight, so far from diminishing, grew worse and worse. It was nearly physically impossible to go on; his lungs could not take in enough oxygen, while his heart thumped like a ship's engine. Sweat coursed down his face. At the twentieth step he completed the first revolution of the tower and came face to face with the first window, which was set in a high embrasure.

Realising that he could go no higher, he struck another match, and climbed into the embrasure, in order that he might at all events see something from the tower. The flame died, and he stared through the window at the stars. Then, to his astonishment, he discovered that it was not a window at all but a lens.... The sky was not a wide expanse of space containing a multitude of stars, but a blurred darkness, focused only in one part, where two very bright stars, like small moons in size, appeared in close conjunction; and near them a more minute planetary object, as brilliant as Venus and

with an observable disk. One of the suns shone with a glaring white light; the other was a weird and awful blue. Their light, though almost solar in intensity, did not illuminate the interior of the tower.

Maskull knew at once that the system of spheres at which he was gazing was what is known to astronomy as the star Arcturus.... He had seen the sight before, through Krag's glass, but then the scale had been smaller, the colors of the twin suns had not appeared in their naked reality.... These colors seemed to him most marvellous, as if, in seeing them through earth eyes, he was not seeing them correctly.... But it was at Tormance that he stared the longest and the most earnestly. On that mysterious and terrible earth, countless millions of miles distant, it had been promised him that he would set foot, even though he might leave his bones there. The strange creatures that he was to behold and touch were already living, at this very moment.

A low, sighing whisper sounded in his ear, from not more than a yard away. "Don't you understand, Maskull, that you are only an instrument, to be used and then broken? Nightspore is asleep now, but when he wakes you must die. You will go, but he will return."

Maskull hastily struck another match, with trembling fingers. No one was in sight, and all was quiet as the tomb.

The voice did not sound again. After waiting a few minutes, he redescended to the foot of the tower. On gaining the open air, his sensation of weight was instantly removed, but he continued panting and palpitating, like a man who has lifted a far too heavy load.

Nightspore's dark form came forward. "Was Krag there?"

"If he was, I didn't see him. But I heard someone speak."

"Was it Krag?"

"It was not Krag—but a voice warned me against you."

"Yes, you will hear these voices too," said Nightspore enigmatically.



The Night of Departure



When they returned to the house, the windows were all in darkness and the door was ajar, just as they had left it; Krag presumably was not there. Maskull went all over the house, striking matches in every room—at the end of the examination he was ready to swear that the man they were expecting had not even stuck his nose inside the premises. Groping their way into the library, they sat down in the total darkness to wait, for nothing else remained to be done. Maskull lit his pipe, and began to drink the remainder of the whisky. Through the open window sounded in their ears the trainlike grinding of the sea at the foot of the cliffs.

“Krag must be in the tower after all,” remarked Maskull, breaking the silence.

“Yes, he is getting ready.”

“I hope he doesn’t expect us to join him there. It was beyond my powers—but why, heaven knows. The stairs must have a magnetic pull of some sort.”

“It is Tormantic gravity,” muttered Nightspore.

“I understand you—or, rather, I don’t—but it doesn’t matter.”

He went on smoking in silence, occasionally taking a mouthful of the neat liquor. “Who is Surtur?” he demanded abruptly.

“We others are gropers and bunglers, but he is a master.”

Maskull digested this. “I fancy you are right, for though I know nothing about him his mere name has an exciting effect on me.... Are you personally acquainted with him?”

“I must be... I forget...” replied Nightspore in a choking voice.

Maskull looked up, surprised, but could make nothing out in the blackness of the room.

“Do you know so many extraordinary men that you can forget some of them?... Perhaps you can tell me this... will we meet him, where we are going?”

“You will meet death, Maskull.... Ask me no more questions—I can’t answer them.”

“Then let us go on waiting for Krag,” said Maskull coldly.

Ten minutes later the front door slammed, and a light, quick footstep was heard running up the stairs. Maskull got up, with a beating heart.

Krag appeared on the threshold of the door, bearing in his hand a feebly glimmering lantern. A hat was on his head, and he looked stern and forbidding. After scrutinising the two friends for a moment or so, he strode into the room and thrust the lantern on the table. Its light hardly served to illuminate the walls.

“You have got here, then, Maskull?”

“So it seems—but I shan’t thank you for your hospitality, for it has been conspicuous by its absence.”

Krag ignored the remark. “Are you ready to start?”

“By all means—when you are. It is not so entertaining here.”

Krag surveyed him critically. “I heard you stumbling about in the tower. You couldn’t get up, it seems.”

“It looks like an obstacle, for Nightspore informs me that the start takes place from the top.”

“But your other doubts are all removed?”

“So far, Krag, that I now possess an open mind. I am quite willing to see what you can do.”

“Nothing more is asked.... But this tower business. You know that until you are able to climb to the top you are unfit to stand the gravitation of Tormance?”

“Then I repeat, it’s an awkward obstacle, for I certainly can’t get up.”

Krag hunted about in his pockets, and at length produced a clasp knife.

“Remove your coat, and roll up your shirt sleeve,” he directed.

"Do you propose to make an incision with that?"

"Yes, and don't start difficulties, because the effect is certain, but you can't possibly understand it beforehand."

"Still, a cut with a pocket-knife—" began Maskull, laughing.

"It will answer, Maskull," interrupted Nightspore.

"Then bare your arm too, you aristocrat of the universe," said Krag. "Let us see what your blood is made of."

Nightspore obeyed.

Krag pulled out the big blade of the knife, and made a careless and almost savage slash at Maskull's upper arm. The wound was deep, and blood flowed freely.

"Do I bind it up?" asked Maskull, scowling with pain.

Krag spat on the wound. "Pull your shirt down, it won't bleed any more."

He then turned his attention to Nightspore, who endured his operation with grim indifference. Krag threw the knife on the floor.

An awful agony, emanating from the wound, started to run through Maskull's body, and he began to doubt whether he would not have to faint, but it subsided almost immediately, and then he felt nothing but a gnawing ache in the injured arm, just strong enough to make life one long discomfort.

"That's finished," said Krag. "Now you can follow me."

Picking up the lantern, he walked toward the door. The others hastened after him, to take advantage of the light, and a moment later their footsteps, clattering down the uncarpeted stairs, resounded through the deserted house. Krag waited till they were out, and then banged the front door after them with such violence that the windows shook.

While they were walking swiftly across to the tower, Maskull caught his arm. "I heard a voice up those stairs."

"What did it say?"

"That I am to go, but Nightspore is to return."

Krag smiled. "The journey is getting notorious," he remarked, after a pause. "There must be ill-wishers about... Well, do you want to return?"

"I don't know what I want. But I thought the thing was curious enough to be mentioned."

"It is not a bad thing to hear voices," said Krag, "but you mustn't for a minute imagine that all is wise that comes to you out of the night world."

When they had arrived at the open gateway of the tower, he immediately set foot on the bottom step of the spiral staircase and ran nimbly up, bearing the lantern. Maskull followed him with some trepidation, in view of his previous painful experience on these stairs, but when, after the first half-dozen steps, he discovered that he was still breathing freely, his dread changed to relief and astonishment, and he could have chattered like a girl.

At the lowest window Krag went straight ahead without stopping, but Maskull clambered into the embrasure, in order to renew his acquaintance with the miraculous spectacle of the Arcturian group. The lens had lost its magic property. It had become a common sheet of glass, through which the ordinary sky field appeared.

The climb continued, and at the second and third windows he again mounted and stared out, but still the common sights presented themselves. After that, he gave up and looked through no more windows.

Krag and Nightspore meanwhile had gone on ahead with the light, so that he had to complete the ascent in darkness. When he was near the top, he saw yellow light shining through the crack of a half-opened door. His companions were standing just inside a small room, shut off from the staircase by rough wooden planking; it was rudely furnished and contained nothing of astronomical interest. The lantern was resting on a table.

Maskull walked in and looked around him with curiosity. "Are we at the top?"

"Except for the platform over our heads," replied Krag.

"Why didn't that lowest window magnify, as it did earlier in the evening?"

"Oh, you missed your opportunity," said Krag, grinning. "If you had finished your climb then, you would have seen heart-expanding sights. From the fifth window, for example, you would have seen Tormance like a continent in relief; from the sixth you would have seen it like a landscape.... But now there's no need."

"Why not—and what has need got to do with it?"

"Things are changed, my friend, since that wound of yours. For the same reason that you have now been able to mount the stairs, there was no necessity to stop and gape at illusions en route."

"Very well," said Maskull, not quite understanding what he meant. "But is this Surtur's den?"

"He has spent time here."

"I wish you would describe this mysterious individual, Krag. We may not get another chance."

"What I said about the windows also applies to Surtur. There's no need to waste time over visualising him, because you are immediately going on to the reality."

"Then let us go." He pressed his eyeballs wearily.

"Do we strip?" asked Nightspore.

"Naturally," answered Krag, and he began to tear off his clothes with slow, uncouth movements.

"Why?" demanded Maskull, following, however, the example of the other two men.

Krag thumped his vast chest, which was covered with thick hairs, like an ape's. "Who knows what the Tormance fashions are like? We may sprout limbs—I don't say we shall."

"A-ha!" exclaimed Maskull, pausing in the middle of his undressing.

Krag smote him on the back. "New pleasure organs possible, Maskull. You like that?"

The three men stood as nature made them. Maskull's spirits rose fast, as the moment of departure drew near.

"A farewell drink to success!" cried Krag, seizing a bottle and breaking its head off between his fingers. There were no glasses, but he poured the amber-coloured wine into some cracked cups.

Perceiving that the others drank, Maskull tossed off his cupful. It was as if he had swallowed a draught of liquid electricity.... Krag dropped onto the floor and rolled around on his back, kicking his legs in the air. He tried to drag Maskull down on top of him, and a little horseplay went on between the two. Nightspore took no part in it, but walked to and fro, like a hungry caged animal.

Suddenly, from out-of-doors, there came a single prolonged, piercing wail, such as a banshee might be imagined to utter. It ceased abruptly, and was not repeated.

"What's that?" called out Maskull, disengaging himself impatiently from Krag.

Krag rocked with laughter. "A Scottish spirit trying to reproduce the bagpipes of its earth life—in honour of our departure."

Nightspore turned to Krag. "Maskull will sleep throughout the journey?"

"And you too, if you wish, my altruistic friend. I am pilot, and you passengers can amuse yourselves as you please."

"Are we off at last?" asked Maskull.

"Yes, you are about to cross your Rubicon, Maskull. But what a Rubicon!... Do you know that it takes light a hundred years or so to arrive here from Arcturus? Yet we shall do it in nineteen hours."

"Then you assert that Surtur is already there?"

"Surtur is where he is. He is a great traveller."

"Won't I see him?"

Krag went up to him and looked him in the eyes. "Don't forget that you have asked for it, and wanted it. Few people in Tormance will know more about him than you do, but your memory will be your worst friend."



He led the way up a short iron ladder, mounting through a trap to the flat roof above. When they were up, he switched on a small electric torch.

Maskull beheld with awe the torpedo of crystal that was to convey them through the whole breadth of visible space. It was forty feet long, eight wide, and eight high; the tank containing the Arcturian back rays was in front, the car behind. The nose of the torpedo was directed toward the south-eastern sky. The whole machine rested upon a flat platform, raised about four feet above the level of the roof, so as to encounter no obstruction on starting its flight.

Krag flashed the light on to the door of the car, to enable them to enter. Before doing so, Maskull gazed sternly once again at the gigantic, far-distant star, which was to be their sun from now onward. He frowned, shivered slightly, and got in beside Nightspore. Krag clambered past them onto his pilot's seat. He threw the flashlight through the open door, which was then carefully closed, fastened, and screwed up.

He pulled the starting lever. The torpedo glided gently from its platform, and passed rather slowly away from the tower, seaward. Its speed increased sensibly, though not excessively, until the approximate limits of the earth's atmosphere were reached. Krag then released the speed valve, and the car sped on its way with a velocity more nearly approaching that of thought than of light.

Maskull had no opportunity of examining through the crystal walls the rapidly changing panorama of the heavens. An extreme drowsiness oppressed him. He opened his eyes violently a dozen times, but on the thirteenth attempt he failed. From that time forward he slept heavily.

The bored, hungry expression never left Nightspore's face. The alterations in the aspect of the sky seemed to possess not the least interest for him.

Krag sat with his hand on the lever, watching with savage intentness his phosphorescent charts and gauges.

