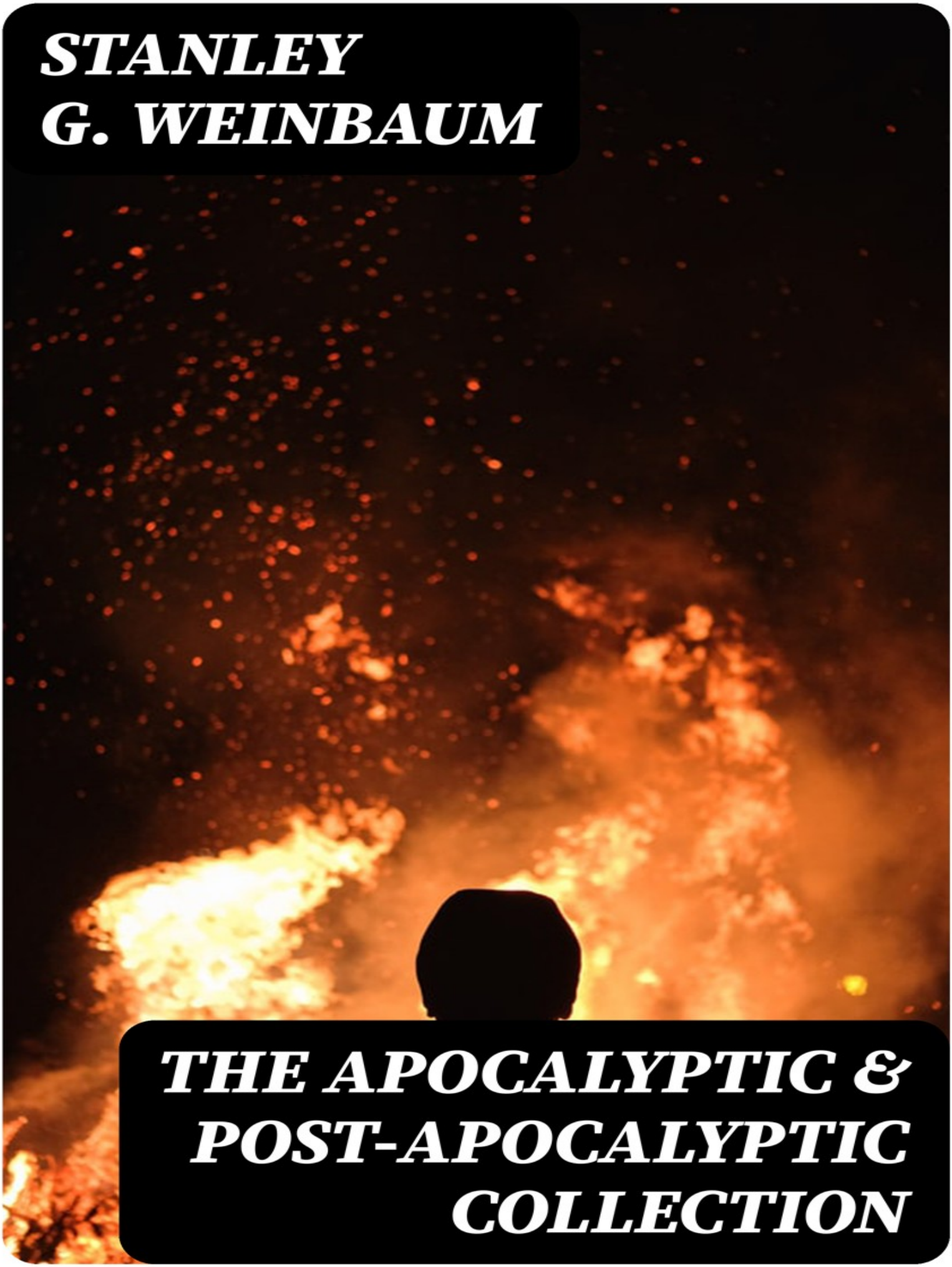
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The Apocalyptic & Post-Apocalyptic Collection

The Black Flame, Dawn of Flame, The Adaptive Ultimate, The Circle of Zero, Pygmalion's Spectacles

EAN 8596547005926

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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The Black Flame

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Penalty — and Aftermath

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Thomas Marshall Connor was about to die. The droning voice of the prison chaplain gradually dulled his perception instead of stimulating his mind. Everything was hazy and indistinct to the condemned man. He was going to the electric chair in just ten minutes to pay the supreme penalty because he had accidentally killed a man with his bare fists.

Connor, vibrantly alive, vigorous and healthy, only twenty–six, a brilliant young engineer, was going to die. And, knowing, he did not care. But there was nothing at all nebulous about the gray stone and cold iron bars of the death cell. There was nothing uncertain about the split down his trouser leg and the shaven spot on his head.

The condemned man was acutely aware of the solidarity of material things about him. The world he was leaving was concrete and substantial. The approaching footsteps of the death guard sounded heavily in the distance.

The cell door opened, and the chaplain ceased his murmuring. Passively Thomas Marshall Connor accepted his blessings, and calmly took his position between his guards for his last voluntary walk.

He remained in his state of detachment as they seated him in the chair, strapped his body and fastened the electrodes. He heard the faint rustling of the witnesses and the nervous, rapid scratching of reporters' pencils. He could imagine their adjectives—"Calloused murderer"..."Brazenly indifferent to his fate."

But it was as if the matter concerned a third party.

He simply relaxed and waited. To die so quickly and painlessly was more a relief than anything. He was not even aware when the warden gave his signal. There was a sudden silent flash of blue light. And then—nothing at all.

* * * * *

So this was death. The slow and majestic drifting through the Stygian void, borne on the ageless tides of eternity.

Peace, at last—peace, and quiet, and rest.

But what was this sensation like the glimpse of a faint, faraway light which winked on and off like a star? After an interminable period the light became fixed and steady, a thing of annoyance. Thomas Marshall Connor, slowly became aware of the fact of his existence as an entity, in some unknown state. The senses and memories that were his personality struggled weakly to reassemble themselves into a thinking unity of being—and he became conscious of pain and physical torture.

There was a sound of shrill voices, and a stir of fresh air. He became aware of his body again. He lay quiet, inert, exhausted. But not as lifeless as he had lain for—how long?

When the shrill voices sounded again, Connor opened unseeing eyes and stared at the blackness just above him. After a space he began to see, but not to comprehend. The blackness became a jagged, pebbled roof no more than twelve inches from his eyes—rough and unfinished like the under side of a concrete walk.

The light became a glimmer of daylight from a point near his right shoulder.

Another sensation crept into his awareness. He was horribly, bitterly cold. Not with the chill of winter air, but with the terrible frigidity of inter–galactic space. Yet he was on—no, *in,* earth of some sort. It was as if icy water flowed in his veins instead of blood. Yet he felt completely dehydrated. His body was as inert as though detached from his brain, but he was cruelly imprisoned within it. He became conscious of a growing resentment of this fact.

Then, stimulated by the shrilling, piping voices and the patter of tiny feet out there somewhere to the right, he made a tremendous effort to move. There was a dry,

withered crackling sound—like the crumpling of old parchment—but indubitably his right arm had lifted!

The exertion left him weak and nauseated. For a time he lay as in a stupor. Then a second effort proved easier. After another timeless interval of struggling torment his legs yielded reluctant obedience to his brain. Again he lay quietly, exhausted, but gathering strength for the supreme effort of bursting from his crypt.

For he knew now where he was. He lay in what remained of his grave. How or why, he did not know. That was to be determined.

With all his weak strength he thrust against the left side of his queer tomb, moving his body against the crevice at his right. Only a thin veil of loose gravel and rubble blocked the way to the open. As his shoulder struck the pile, it gave and slid away, outward and downward, in a miniature avalanche.

Blinding daylight smote Connor like an agony. The shrill voices screamed.

"'S moom!" a child's voice cried tremulously. "'S moom again!"

Connor panted from exertion, and struggled to emerge from his hole, each movement producing another noise like rattling paper. And suddenly he was free! The last of the gravel tinkled away and he rolled abruptly down a small declivity to rest limply at the bottom of the little hillside.

He saw now that erosion had cut through this burial ground—wherever it was—and had opened a way for him through the side of his grave. His sight was strangely dim, but he became aware of half a dozen little figures in a frightened semicircle beyond him.

Children! Children in strange modernistic garb of bright colors, but nevertheless human children who stared at him with wide–open mouths and popping eyes. Their curiously cherubic faces were set in masks of horrified terror.

Suddenly recalling the terrors he had sometimes known in his own childhood, Connor was surprised they did not flee. He stretched forth an imploring hand and made a desperate effort to speak. This was his first attempt to use his voice, and he found that he could not.

The spell of dread that held the children frozen was instantly broken. One of them gave a dismayed cry: "A–a–a–h! 'S a specker!"

In panic, shrieking that cry, the entire group turned and fled. They disappeared around the shoulder of the eroded hill, and Connor was left, horribly alone. He groaned from the depths of his despair and was conscious of a faint rasping noise through his cracked and parched lips.

He realized suddenly that he was quite naked—his shroud had long since moldered to dust. At the same moment that full comprehension of what this meant came to him, he was gazing in horror at his body. Bones! Nothing but bones, covered with a dirty, parchment–like skin!

So tightly did his skin cover his skeletal framework that the very structure of the bones showed through. He could see the articulation at knuckles, knees, and toes. And the parchment skin was cracked like an ancient Chinese vase, checked like aged varnish. He was a horror from the tomb, and he nearly fainted at the realization.

After a swooning space, he endeavored to arise. Finding that he could not, he began crawling painfully and laboriously toward a puddle of water from the last rain. Reaching it, he leaned over to place his lips against its surface, reckless of its potability, and sucked in the liquid until a vast roaring filled his ears.

The moment of dizziness passed. He felt somewhat better, and his breathing rasped a bit less painfully in his moistened throat. His eyesight was slowly clearing and as he leaned above the little pool, he glimpsed the specter reflected there. It looked like a skull—a face with lips

shrunken away from the teeth, so fleshless that it might have been a death's head.

"Oh, God!" he called out aloud, and his voice croaked like that of a sick raven. "What and where am I!"

In the back of his mind all through this weird experience, there had been a sense of something strange aside from his emergence from a tomb in the form of a living scarecrow. He stared up at the sky.

The vault of heaven was blue and fleecy with thewhitest of clouds. The sun was shining as he had never thought to see it shine again. The grass was green. The ground was normally earthy. Everything was as it should be—but there was a strangeness about it that frightened him. Instinctively he knew that something was direfully amiss.

It was not the fact that he failed to recognize his surroundings. He had not had the strength to explore; neither did he know where he had been buried. It was that indefinable homing instinct possessed in varying degree by all animate things. That instinct was out of gear. His time sense had stopped with the throwing of that electric switch —how long ago? Somehow, lying there under the warming rays of the sun, he felt like an alien presence in a strange country.

"Lost!" he whimpered like a child.

After a long space in which he remained in a sort of stupor, he became aware of the sound of footsteps. Dully he looked up. A group of men, led by one of the children, was advancing slowly toward him. They wore brightly colored shirts—red, blue, violet—and queer baggy trousers gathered at the ankles in an exotic style.

With a desperate burst of energy, Connor gained his knees. He extended a pleading skeletonlike claw.

"Help me!" he croaked in his hoarse whisper.

The beardless, queerly effeminate–looking men halted and stared at him in horror.

"'Assim!" shrilled the child's voice. "'S a specker. 'S dead."

One of the men stepped forward, looking from Connor to the gaping hole in the hillside.

"Wassup?" he questioned.

Connor could only repeat his croaking plea for aid.

"'Esick," spoke another man gravely. "Sleeper, eh?"

There was a murmur of consultation among the men with the bright clothes and oddly soft, womanlike voices.

"T' Evanie!" decided one. "T' Evanie, the Sorc'ess."

They closed quickly around the half reclining Connor and lifted him gently. He was conscious of being borne along the curving cut to a yellow country road, and then black oblivion descended once more to claim him.

When he regained consciousness the next time, he found that he was within walls, reclining on a soft bed of some kind. He had a vague dreamy impression of a girlish face with bronze hair and features like Raphael's angels bending over him. Something warm and sweetish, like glycerin, trickled down his throat.

Then, to the whispered accompaniment of that queerly slurred English speech, he sank into the blissful repose of deep sleep.

Evanie the Sorceress

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There were successive intervals of dream and oblivion, of racking pain and terrible nauseating weakness; of voices murmuring queer, unintelligible words that yet were elusively familiar.

Then one day he awoke to the consciousness of a summer morning. Birds twittered; in the distance children shouted. Clear of mind at last, he lay on a cushioned couch puzzling over his whereabouts, even his identity, for nothing within his vision indicated where or who he was.

The first thing that caught his attention was his own right hand. Paper– thin, incredibly bony, it lay like the hand of death on the rosy coverlet, so transparent that the very color shone through. He could not raise it; only a twitching of the horrible fingers attested its union with his body.

The room itself was utterly unfamiliar in its almost magnificently simple furnishings. There were neither pictures nor ornaments. Only several chairs of aluminum–like metal, a gleaming silvery table holding a few ragged old volumes, a massive cabinet against the opposite wall, and a chandelier pendant by a chain from the ceiling. He tried to call out. A faint croak issued.

The response was startlingly immediate. A soft voice said, "Hahya?" in his ear and he turned his head pain–fully to face the girl of the bronze hair, seated at his side. She smiled gently.

She was dressed in curious green baggy trousers gathered at the ankle, and a brilliant green shirt. She had rolled the full sleeves to her shoulders. Hers was like the costume of the men who had brought him here.

"Whahya?" she said softly.

He understood.

"Oh! I'm—uh—Thomas Connor, of course."

"F'm 'ere?"

"From St. Louis."

"Selui? 'S far off."

Far off? Then where was he? Suddenly a fragment of memory returned. The trial—Ruth—that catastrophic episode of the grim chair. Ruth! The yellow–haired girl he had once adored, who was to have been his wife—the girl who had coldly sworn his life away because he had killed the man she loved.

Dimly memory came back of how he had found her in that other man's arms on the very eve of their wedding; of his bitter realization that the man he had called friend had stolen Ruth from him. His outraged passions had flamed, the fire had blinded him, and when the ensuing battle had ended, the man had been crumpled on the green sward of the terrace, with a broken neck.

He had been electrocuted for that. He had been strapped in that chair!

Then—then the niche on the hill. But how—how? Had he by some miracle survived the burning current? He must have—and he still had the penalty to pay!

He tried desperately to rise.

"Must leave here!" he muttered. "Get away—must get away." A new thought. "No! I'm legally dead. They can't touch me now; no double jeopardy in this country. I'm safe!"

Voices sounded in the next room, discussing him.

"F'm Selui, he say," said a man's voice. "Longo, too." "Eah," said another. " 'S lucky to live—lucky! 'L be rich."

That meant nothing to him. He raised his hand with a great effort; it glistened in the light with an oil of some sort. It was no longer cracked, and the ghost of a layer of tissue softened the bones. His flesh was growing back.

His throat felt dry. He drew a breath that ended in a tickling cough.

"Could I have some water?" he asked the girl.

"N–n–n!" She shook her head. "N' water. S'm licket?" "Licket?" Must be liquid, he reflected. He nodded, and drank the mug of thick fluid she held to his lips.

He grinned his thanks, and she sat beside him. He wondered what sort of colony was this into which he had fallen—with their exotic dress and queer, clipped English.

His eyes wandered appreciatively over his companion; even if she were some sort of foreigner, she was gloriously beautiful, with her bronze hair gleaming above the emerald costume.

"C'n talk," she said finally as if in permission.

He accepted. "What's your name?"

"'M Evanie Sair. Evanie the Sorc'ess."

"Evanie the Sorceress!" he echoed. "Pretty name—Evanie. Why the Sorceress, though? Do you tell fortunes?" The question puzzled her.

"N'onstan," she murmured.

"I mean—what do you do?"

"Sorc'y." At his mystified look, she amplified it. "To give strength—to make well." She touched his fleshless arm.

"But that's medicine—a science. Not sorcery."

"Bah. Science—sorc'y. 'S all one. My father, Evan Sair

the Wizard, taught me." Her face shadowed. "'S dead now." Then abruptly: "Whe's your money?" she asked. He stared. "Why—in St. Louis. In a bank."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "N–n–n! Selui! N'safe!"

"Why not?" He started. "Has there been another flood of bank–bustings?"

The girl looked puzzled.

"N'safe," she reiterated. "Urbs is better. For very long, Urbs is better." She paused. "When'd you sleep?"

"Why, last night."

"N–n–n. The long sleep."

The long sleep! It struck him with stunning force that his last memories before that terrible awakening had been of a September world—and this was mid–summer! A horror

gripped him. How long—how long—had he lain in his—grave? Weeks? No—months, at least.

He shuddered as the girl repeated gently, "When?"

"In September," he muttered.

"What year?"

Surprise strengthened him. "Year? Nineteen thirty–eight, of course!"

She rose suddenly. "'S no Nineteen thirty–eight. 'S only Eight forty–six now!"

Then she was gone, nor on her return would she permit him to talk. The day vanished; he slept, and another day dawned and passed. Still Evanie Sair refused to allow him to talk again, and the succeeding days found him fuming and puzzled. Little by little, however, her strange clipped English became familiar.

So he lay thinking of his situation, his remarkable escape, the miracle that had somehow softened the discharge of Missouri's generators. And he strengthened. A day came when Evanie again permitted speech, while he watched her preparing his food.

"Y'onger, Tom?" she asked gently. "'L bea soon." He understood; she was saying, "Are you hungry, Tom? I'll be there soon."

He answered with her own affirmative "Eah," and watched her place the meal in a miraculous cook stove that could be trusted to prepare it without burning.

"Evanie," he began, "how long have I been here?"

"Three months," said Evanie. "You were very sick."

"But how long was I asleep?"

"You ought to know," retorted Evanie. "I told you this was Eight forty– six."

He frowned.

"The year Eight forty–six of what?"

"Just Eight forty–six," Evanie said matter of factly. "Of the Enlightenment, of, course. What year did you sleep?"

"I told you—Nineteen thirty–eight," insisted Connor, perplexed. "Nineteen thirty–eight, A.D."

"Oh," said Evanie, as if humoring a child.

Then, "A.D.?" she repeated. "Anno Domini, that means. Year of the Master. But the Master is nowhere near nineteen hundred years old."

Connor was nonplussed. He and Evanie seemed to be talking at cross– purposes. He calmly started again.

"Listen to me," he said grimly. "Suppose you tell me exactly what you think I am—all about it, just as if I were a—oh, a Martian. In simple words."

"I know what you are," said Evanie. "You're a Sleeper. Often they wake with muddled minds."

"And what," he pursued doggedly, "is a Sleeper?"

Surprisingly Evanie answered that, in a clear, understandable—but most astonishing—way. Almost as astonished herself that Connor should not know the answer to his question.

"A Sleeper," she said simply, and Connor was now able to understand her peculiar clipped speech—the speech of all these people—with comparative ease, "is one of those who undertake electrolepsis. That is, have themselves put to sleep for a long term of years to make money."

"How? By exhibiting themselves?"

"No," she said. "I mean that those who want wealth badly enough, but won't spend years working for it, undertake the Sleep. You must remember that—if you have forgotten so much else. They put their money in the banks. organized for the Sleepers. You will remember. They guarantee six percent. You see, don't you? At that rate a Sleeper's money increases three hundred times a century—three hundred units for each one deposited. Six percent doubles their money every twelve years. A thousand becomes a fortune of three hundred thousand, if the Sleeper outlasts a century—and if he lives."

"Fairy tales!" Connor said contemptuously, but now he understood her question about the whereabouts of his money, when he had first awakened. "What institution can guarantee six percent with safety? What could they invest in?"

"They invest in one percent Urban bonds."

"And run at a loss, I suppose!"

"No. Their profits are enormous—from the funds of the nine out of every ten Sleepers who fail to waken!"

"So I'm a Sleeper!" Connor said sharply. "Now tell me the truth."

Evanie gazed anxiously down at him.

"Electrolepsis often muddles one."

"I'm not muddled!" he yelled. "I want truth, that's all. I want to know the date."

"It's the middle of July, Eight hundred and forty–six," Evanie said patiently.

"The devil it is! Perhaps I slept backward then! I want to know what happened to me."

"Then suppose you tell," Evanie said gently.

"I will!" he cried frantically. "I'm the Thomas Marshall Connor of the newspapers—or don't you read 'em? I'm the man who was tried for murder, and electrocuted. Tom Connor of St. Louis—St. Louis! Understand?"

Evanie's gentle features went suddenly pale.

"St. Louis!" she whispered. "St. Louis—the ancient name of Selui! Before the Dark Centuries—impossible!"

"Not impossible—true," Connor said grimly. "Too painfully true."

"Electrocution!" Evanie whispered awedly. "The Ancients' punishment!" She stared as if fascinated, then cried excitedly: "Could electrolepsis happen by accident? Could it? But no! A milliampere too much and the brain's destroyed; a millivolt too little and asepsis fails. Either way's death—but it has happened if what you are telling is the truth, Tom Connor! You must have experienced the impossible!"

"And what is electrolepsis?" Connor asked, desperately calm.

"It—it's the Sleep!" whispered the tense girl. "Electrical paralysis of the part of the brain before Rolando's Fissure. It's what the Sleepers use, but only for a century, or a very little more. This—this is fantastic! You have slept since before the Dark Centuries! Not less than a thousand years!"

Forest Meeting

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A week—the third since Connor's awakening to sane thought, had passed. He sat on a carved stone bench before Evanie's cottage and reveled in the burning canopy of stars and copper moon. He was living, if what he had been told was true—and he was forced to believe it now—after untold billions had passed into eternity.

Evanie must have been right. He was convinced by her gentle insistence, by the queer English on every tongue, by a subtle difference in the very world about him. It wasn't the same world—quite.

He sighed contentedly, breathing the cool night air. He had learned much of the new age from Evanie, though much was still mysteriously veiled. Evanie had spoken of the city of Urbs and the Master, but only vaguely. One day he asked her why.

"Because"—she hesitated—"well, because it's best for you to form your own judgments. We—the people around here—are not fond of Urbs and the Immortals, and I would not like to influence you, Tom, for in all truth it's the partisans of the Master who have the best of it, not his enemies. Urbs is in power; it will probably remain in power long after our lifetimes, since it has ruled for seven centuries."

Abruptly she withdrew something from her pocket and passed it to him. He bent over it—a golden disc, a coin. He made out the lettering "10 Units," and the figure of a snake circling a globe, its tail in its mouth.

"The Midgard Serpent," said Evanie. "I don't know why, but that's what it's called."

Connor reversed the coin. There was revealed the embossed portrait of a man's head, whose features, even in

miniature, looked cold, austere, powerful. Connor read:

"Orbis Terrarum Imperator Dominusque Urbis."

"Emperor of the World and Master of the City," he translated.

"Yes. That is the Master." Evanie's voice was serious as she took the coin. "This is the money of Urbs. To understand Urbs and the Master you must of course know something of history since your—sleep."

"History?" he repeated.

She nodded. "Since the Dark Centuries. Some day one of our patriarchs will tell you more than I know. For I know little of your mighty ancient world. It seems to us an incredible age, with its vast cities, its fierce nations, its inconceivable teeming populations, its terrific energies and its flaming genius. Great wars, great industries, great art—and then great wars again."

"But you can tell me—" Connor began, a little impatiently. Evanie shook her head.

"Not now," she said quickly. "For now I must hasten to friends who will discuss with me a matter of great moment. Perhaps some day you may learn of that, too."

And she was gone before Tom Connor could say a word to detain her. He was left alone with his thoughts —clashing, devastating thoughts sometimes, for there was so much to be learned in this strange world into which he had been plunged.

In so many ways it was a strange, new world, Connor thought, as he watched the girl disappear down the road that slanted from her hilltop home to the village. From where he sat on that bench of hewn stone he could glimpse the village at the foot of the hill—a group of buildings, low, of some white stone. All of the structures were classical, with pure Doric columns. Ormon was the name of the village, Evanie had said.

All strange to him. Not only were the people so vastly at variance with those he had known, but the physical world

was bewilderingly different.

Gazing beyond the village, and bringing his attention back to the hills and the forests about him, Tom Connor wondered if they, too, would be different.

He had to know.

The springtime landscape beckoned. Connor's strength had returned to such an extent that he arose from his bench in the sun and headed toward the green of the forest stretching away behind Evanie's home. It was an enchanting prospect he viewed. The trees had the glistening new green of young foliage, and emerald green grass waved in the fields that stretched away down the hill–sides and carpeted the plains.

Birds were twittering in the trees as he entered the forest —birds of all varieties, in profusion, with gaily–colored plumage. Their numbers and fearlessness would have surprised Connor had he not remembered something Evanie had told him. Urbs, she had said, had wiped out objectionable stinging insects, flies, corn–worms and the like, centuries ago, and the birds had helped. As had certain parasites that had been bred for the purpose.

"They only had to let the birds increase," Evanie had said, "by destroying their chief enemy—the Egyptian cat; the house–cat. It was acclimatized here and running wild in the woods, so they bred a parasite—the Feliphage—which destroyed it. Since then there have been many birds, and fewer insects."

It was pleasant to stroll through that green forest, to that bird orchestral accompaniment. The spring breeze touched Tom Connor's face lightly, and for the first time in his life he knew what it was to stroll in freedom, untouched by the pestiferous annoyance of mosquitoes, swarming gnats and midges, or other stinging insects that once had made the greenwood sometimes akin to purgatory.

What a boon to humanity! Honey bees buzzed in the dandelions in the carpeting grass, and drank the sweetness

from spring flowers, but no mites or flies buzzed about Connor's uncovered, upflung head as he swung along briskly.

Connor did not know how far he had penetrated into the depths of the newly green woods when he found himself following the course of a small stream. Its silvery waters sparkled in the sunlight filtering through the trees as it moved along, lazily somnolent.

Now and then he passed mossy and viny heaps of stones, interesting to him, since he knew, from what he had been told, that they were the sole reminders of ancient structures erected before the Dark Centuries. Those heaps of stones had once formed buildings in another, and long–gone age—his own age.

Idly following the little stream, he came at last to a wide bend where the stream came down from higher ground to spill in a little splashing falls.

He had just rounded the bend, his gaze on a clear, still pool beyond, when he stopped stockstill, his eyes widening incredulously.

It was as if he were seeing spread before him a picture, well known in his memory, and now brought to animate life. Connor had thought himself alone in that wood, but he was not. Sharing it with him, there within short yards of where he stood, was the most beautiful creature on whom he had ever looked.

It was hard to believe she was a living, breathing being and not a figment of his imagination. No sound had warned her of his approach and, sublimely unaware that she was not alone, she held the pose in which Connor had first seen her, like some lovely wood sprite—which she might be, in this increasingly astonishing new world.

She was on her knees beside the darkly mirrored pool, supported by the slender arms and hands that looked alabaster white against the mossy bank on which she pressed. She was smiling down at her own reflection in the

water —the famous Psyche painting which Connor so well re–membered, come to life!

He was afraid to breathe, much less to speak, for fear of startling her. But when she turned her head and saw him, she showed no signs of being startled. Slowly she smiled and got gracefully to her feet, the clinging white Grecian draperies that swathed her, gently swaying in the breeze to outline a figure too perfect to be flesh and blood. It was accentuated by the silver cord that crossed beneath her breasts, as sparkling as her ink–black hair.

But as she smiled at Connor, instantly in the depths of her sea–green eyes he saw no fear of him; but mockery.

I did not know," she said, in a voice that held the resonance of a silvery bell, "that any Weeds ever cared enough about the beauties of Nature to penetrate so far into the forest."

"I am not a Weed," Connor promptly disclaimed, as unconsciously he moved a step or two nearer her. He hoped that she would not vanish at the sound of his voice, or at his approach. "I am —"

She stared at him a moment, then laughed. And the laughter, too, was mocking.

"No need to tell me," she said airily. "I know. You are the Sleeper who was recently revived—with the great tale of having slept a thousand years. As if you were an Immortal!"

In her laughter, her voice, was the lofty intimation that she, at least, believed nothing of the sort. Connor made no attempt to convince her—not then. He was too enthralled, merely gazing at her.

"Are you one of the Immortals?" he asked, his own voice awed. "I have heard much of them."

"There are many things more immortal," she said, half cryptically, half mockingly, "than the human to whom has been given immortality. Such Immortals know nothing of all that was known, or guessed, by the Greeks of long, long ages past."

Again Connor stared at her. She spoke so confidently. And she looked… Could it be possible that the gods and goddesses, the sprites, of that long– dead Greek age were not legends, after all, but living entities? Could it be possible that he was gazing at one now—and that she might vanish at a touch, at a word?

She seemed real enough, though, and there was a certain imperiousness in her manner that was not his idea of what should be the reaction of any lovely sprite straight out of the pages of mythology. None of it seemed real—except her extravagant, pulse–warming beauty.

A Bit of Ancient History

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The girl's words snapped him out of his reverie, with the confused knowledge that he was staring at her inanely as she stood there, swaying slightly, like a slender reed, while the gentle breeze whipped her white, gauzy draperies.

"Come," she said peremptorily. "Come sit beside me here. I have come to the forest to find adventure that I cannot find elsewhere in a boring world. I have not found it. Come, you shall amuse me. Sit here and tell me this story I have been hearing about your—sleep."

Half–hypnotically, Connor obeyed. Nor did he question why. It was all in a line with the rest, that he should find himself here above the sparkling dark pool, beside this woman—or girl, rather, since she could be no more than eighteen—whose beauty was starkly incredible.

The sun, filtering through the leaves, touched her mass of hair, so black that it glinted blue as it fell in waving cascades below her slender waist. Her skin, magnolia–tinted, was all the clearer because of the startling ebony of her hair. Her beauty was more than a lack of flaws; it was, in true fact, goddesslike. But sultry, flaming. Her perfect lips seemed constantly smiling, but like the smile in her emerald eyes, it was sardonic, mocking.

For one moment the beauty of this wood sprite, come upon so unexpectedly, swept all other thoughts from Connor's mind; even memory of Evanie. But the next moment Evanie was back, filling his thoughts as she had from the first with her cool, understandable, coppery–haired loveliness. But even in that moment he knew that the radiant creature beside him, so different from Evanie and other Weed girls he had seen, would forever haunt him.

Whoever, whatever she might be—human being or wood goddess.

The girl grew impatient at his silence.

"Tell me!" she said imperiously. "I have said to you, I would be amused. Tell me—Sleeper."

"I am no Sleeper—of the type of which you probably have customarily heard," Connor said, obedient to her command. "Whatever has come to me has been none of my doing; nor by my wishes. It was like this—"

Briefly he recited his experience, all that he knew of it, making no dramatic effort. He must have been impressive, for as he talked, he could see the incredulity and mockery pass from her sea–green eyes, to be replaced by reluctant belief, then astonishment.

"It is almost unbelievable," she said softly, when he had finished. "But I do believe you." Her marvelous eyes held a far–away expression. "If in your memory you have retained knowledge of your own ancient times, great things await you in this age to which you have come."

"But I know nothing about this age!" Connor quickly complained. "I glean snatches of this and that, of some mysterious Immortals who seem to reign supreme, of many things alien to me and my understanding. But so far, I have not been able to learn much about this age. No! Nor do I even know anything of the history of the ages that have passed while I was—sleeping!"

Connor's wood sprite looked hard at him a moment, admiration for him plain in her low–lidded glance. The mockery flickered a moment in her eyes; then died.

"Shall I tell you?" she asked. "We of the woods and valleys know many things. We learn as the cycles of years go by. But not always do we pass our knowledge along."

"Please!" begged Connor. "Please tell me—everything. I am lost!"

She seemed a little uncertain where to begin, then suddenly started to talk as if giving an all–inclusive lesson in

history from the beginning of time.

"You of the ancient world had great cities," she said. "Today there are mighty cities, too. N'York had eight millions of people; Urbs, the great metropolis of this age, has thirty millions. But where there is now one metropolis, your world had a hundred. A marvelous age, that time of yours, but it ended. Some time in your Twentieth Century, it went out in a blaze of war."

"The Twentieth Century!" exclaimed Connor. "So near my time!"

"Yes. Your fierce, warlike nations sated their lust for battle at last in one gigantic war that spread like a cloud around the planet. They fought by sea, by land, by air, and beneath sea and land. They fought with weapons whose secrets are still lost, with strange chemistries, with diseases. Every nation was caught in the struggle; all their vast knowledge went into it, and city after giant city was destroyed by atomic bombs or annihilated by infected water supplies. Famine stalked the world, and after it swept swift pestilence.

"But, by the fiftieth year after the war, the world had reached a sort of stability. Then came barbarism. The old nations had fallen, and in their place came number–less little city–states, little farming communities each sufficient to itself, weaving its own cloth, raising its own food. And then the language began to change."

"Why?" asked Connor. "Children speak like their parents."

"Not eractly," said the wood sprite, with a slow smile. "Language evolves by laws. Here's one: Consonants tend to move forward in the mouth as languages age. Take the word `mother.' In the ancient Tokhar, it was *makar*. Then the Latin, *mater*. Then *madre*, then mother and now our modern word muvver. Do you see? K—T—D—Th—V—each sound a little advanced in the throat. The ultimate of course, is mama—pure labial sounds, which proves only that it's the oldest word in the world."

"I see," said Connor.

"Well, once it was released from the bonds of printing, language changed. It became difficult to read the old books, and then books began to vanish. Fire gutted the abandoned cities; the robber bands that lurked there burned books by winter for warmth. Worms and decay ruined them. Precious knowledge vanished, some of it forever."

She paused a moment, watching Connor keenly. "Do you see now," she asked, "why I said greatness awaits you if you retain any, of your ancient knowledge?"

"Possibly," said Connor. "But go on, please."

"Other factors, too, were at work," she said, nodding. "In the first place, a group of small city–states seems to be the best environment for genius. That was the situation in Greece during the Golden Age, in Italy during the Renaissance, and all over the world before the Second Enlightenment.

"Then too, a period of barbarism seems to act as a time of rest for humanity before a charge to new heights. The Stone Age flared suddenly into the light of Egypt, Persia decayed and Greece flowered, and the Middle Ages awoke to the glory of the Renaissance. So the Dark Centuries began to flame into the brilliant age of the Second Enlightenment, the fourth great dawn in human history.

"It began quietly enough, about two centuries after the war. A young man named John Holland drifted into the village of N'Orleans that sprawled beside the ancient city's ruins. He found the remnants of a library, and—unusual in his day—he could read. He studied alone at first, but soon others joined him, and the Academy came into being.

"The townspeople thought the students wizards and sorcerers, but as knowledge grew the words wizard and sorcerer became synonyms for what your age called scientists."

"I see!" muttered Connor, and he was thinking of Evanie the Sorceress. "I see!"

"N'Orleans," said his charming enlightener, "became the center of the Enlightenment. Holland died, but the Academy lived, and one day a young student named Teran had a vision. Some of the ancient knowledge had by now yielded its secrets, and Teran's vision was to restore the ancient N'Orleans power plants and water systems—to give the city its utilities!

"Although there was no apparent source of fuel, he and his group labored diligently on the centuries–old machines, confident that power would be at hand when they needed it.

"And it was. A man named Einar Olin, had wandered over the continent seeking—and finding—the last and greatest achievement of the Ancients; he rediscovered atomic energy. N'Orleans wakened anew to its ancient life. Across plains and mountains came hundreds just to see the Great City, and among these were three on whom history turned.

"These were sandy–haired Martin Sair, and black–haired Joaquin Smith, and his sister. Some have called her Satanically beautiful. The Black Flame, they call her now—have you heard?"

Connor shook his head, his eyes drinking in the beauty of this woman of the woods, who fascinated him in a manner he would never have believed possible.

For a moment the mocking glint came back in the girl's eyes, then instantly it was gone as she shrugged her white shoulders and went on.

"Those three changed the whole course of history. Martin Sair turned to biology and medicine when he joined the half–monastic Academy, and his genius made the first new discovery to add to the knowledge of the Ancients. Studying evolution, experimenting with hard radiations, he found sterility then—immortality!

"Joaquin Smith found his field in the neglected social sciences, government, economics, psychology. He too had a dream—of rebuilding the old world. He was—or is—a colossal genius. He took Martin Sail's immortality and traded