

March 2007

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The Kar-chee Reign

Avram Davidson

THE PLANET SCAVENGERS

It was the distant future of Earth, and the mother planet of a galaxy-wide empire had been forgotten by her far-flung colonies. Forgotten, tired, old and stripped of her ores and natural fuels, Earth and the scattered bands of humans left behind were totally unprepared for the invasion of the strange, monstrous Kar-chee from the depths of the stars.

The Kar-chee had come to strip Earth of the few natural resources the planet had left—to crack the marrow of the aged planet and scavenge whatever of worth was left there. It was a massive, planet-wide operation in which continents were sunk and oceans drained, and if the tiny, insignificant humans died in these holocausts, what did that matter to the Kar-chee?

But it mattered to the humans... and, at last, they began to fight.

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ace double G-574

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I



The big place on the old Rowan homesite had just been freshly thatched—and what a disturbance of birds, snakes, lizards, mice and spiders the removal of the previous thatch had caused—but its thick walls had stood there for generations: scarred and chipped and streaked with smoke and smeared with grease, but in all, still sturdy. The first Rowan had built well; he had not come here with his wives and children and his flocks and herds after the sinking of California, for he had had none of those. He had in fact landed with one small boat and one small dog and a determined mind and a hopeful heart, marrying a daughter of the land (that is to say, he had concluded a major treaty by the terms of which he granted use of his infinitely precious cold chisel for half a year of every year and in return was granted use for the whole of every year of an area of land for building and farming and hunting and fishing, plus a girl who had been captured almost casually from a far-off people years back and was of an age to be manned), and had put up his house according to a plan existing in his own head only—then, unprecedented; since, the standard model.

He had left behind more than a set of walls and a style in housing. His long head and long bones and wide, smiling mouth were now part of the common fabric of the people; his casual, personal turns of speech had become the way one spoke. If a problem was regarded calmly as something capable of solution instead of occasion to retreat into dreams and resigned surrender, this, too, was part of the long legacy of Rowan the

first settler.

The present head of the homesite, old father and artificer, was one Ren Rowan, six generations descended from the settler on one side and seven generations removed on another; his wife's lineage was similar, though of distant cousinship. He was all seamed and grizzled now, she—though slightly younger—only now beginning to show gray in her long hair. Her hands were deft at many tasks. It was her way to offer advice to her husband quietly and in private, it was his—usually—to take it.

"Well, we needn't thatch this roof again for a while," he said to her, she coming to join him on the bench more to treat him with her company than because she particularly needed rest from directing the work of feeding those who had helped with the work.

"Might think of cutting some house timbers," she said, in her soft, slow voice. Meat sizzled and spat. There was a burst of laughter. A child stumbled and wailed, was righted and comforted with a grilled bone that filled the small mouth.

"Might," Ren agreed. "Always might... why now?"

His eyes followed hers to where his youngest son stood in conversation with a girl on whose hip his hand rested so lightly that one might almost assume neither of them to know it was there at all. Almost; but not quite. "Mmm... That seems a flighty girl to me. I suppose she's twitched her rump at him and now he doesn't know whether to build a house or drag her off into the bushes... Of course, one needn't preclude the other. Still. Flighty."

Moma said, "Babies make good ballast. You were on the flighty side, too, recollect."

"That was before the Devils came," he said mildly.

"Not so long ago as that... Well. House timbers. Might think about it... "

A comfortable silence fell between them. He, his work being officially over, might have put on the loose shirt and kilt, both decoratively worked in dyed threads, which she had laid out for the purpose in their room. She, her work being officially still on, would not yet slip into the equally loose dress (only the unmarried women need endure the discomfort of tight ones), equally brightly embroidered, which hung in her corner. Both, then, were girded briefly around the waist, and wore no other clothing. The afternoon's sun was still warm.

The moma and popa of Home Rowan looked on and about quietly and contentedly. The large, sturdy old house with its rounded ends was well-

and newly-thatched; let the rains fall in due season as they surely would (forfend a drought!), it would not let by a drop. The walling palisade and gate were solid and well-set, the pens held fat stock and poultry, fields and garden were in good tilth, and the storehouses were as full as any homesite's should be that was not niggard with its help. Neighbors, kinsmen, and even those not so allied had come to help with the work and were feeding and—depending on age—frolicking or enjoying a peaceful visit. A potbellied pupdog, descended out of the lean loins of the Settler Rowan's lone companion on the long voyage hither, nosed along for scraps, followed by an equally potbellied grandchild. The pupdog paused, spread its legs, piddled. The child did the immediate same... Startled by the sudden laughter, he looked up, ready for tears. Seeing only Moma and Popa, he smiled proudly, and gurgled vigorously as he tottered off in pursuit of the pupdog.

It hadn't always been a goodly scene. There had been famine, preceded by droughts; plagues of beasts and plagues of men; there was once something mightily like a little war; wild beasts had raided and attacked, and—rarely, rarely—wild men. Floods had lapped almost to the doorsills; retreating, they had left behind mud and wreckage and bloated bodies. A favored daughter had suffered of a long and painfully wasting illness before dying, and a less favored son (perhaps because of that, or for another reason none could think of) had one day walked down into the ocean and not come out. Nor had Old Ren, as he was beginning to be called, inherited the homesite peacefully. His years of enduring the usurpatous tenure of his wicked and godless uncle, Arno Half-Devil, and how he had finally wrested all away from him and sent him to die in the caves, formed the integuments of a legend which was still in formation.

And now, when the minor festivity of the thatch party ordinarily would be beginning to slow down, it received fresh life. In past the carven blue gate posts came another party of guests, their cries and gestures as they saw the new roof firmly in place already expressing a mixture of dismay and self-reproach and rueful good humor.

Old Ren said, "Jow's people... late because they started late... started late because they didn't think to come at all. Only coming now because Jow's got something on his mind that came up on a sudden. Well. Got to feed them." He rose and prepared to welcome them.

His wife said, "Won't be enough meat. Kill or hunt?"

But he had already gestured his decision to his two younger sons, and was now waiting for Jow to bring his people and his unhappy face up to the bench to be welcomed.

Lors, Duro, four or five of young nephews and cousins to beat and help bear, and one of the just-arrived guests, uninvited, but not thereby unwelcome—trotted off, hunt-bound. Duro was still young enough to love hunting next to eating. Lors would much rather have stayed with his hand on Mia's hip... he would much, *much* rather have gone with her where he could put his hand somewhere else... but his father's expression and gesture were alike unmistakable and undeniable. Guests had to be fed, there was no ignoring it, and it was up to the popa to decide if stock were to be killed or if the huntsmen were to go out. The alternatives were equally honorable to the guests. The fields lay, for the most part, up and away from the sea. There were deer in the rainier lowlands; guanaco were to be found only in the highs, well above the fields; and now, as they came to the fork in the way, they had to decide which it was that they were to hunt.

"We'd best go down," Lors said, trying to give his words the sound of judicious reflection. "We can get deer quicker and not delay our guests."

Duro at once countered, seemingly innocently, "And then you can get back and away quicker, and on top of Mia."

The younger boys laughed; the newcomer smiled. Lors wondered if he should hit his brother, decided against it for the moment. "I was thinking only of our guests," he said with dignity. And added, "How do they call you, guest?"

"Tom-small," said the guest, putting the boys to giggling again. He was about Lors' own age, and a rather large young man.

"I shouldn't like to have to share a sleeping-hammock with Tom-big, whoever he is," said Duro. This was an acceptable excuse: Lors hit him.

"No way to talk to guests," he said, righteously.

"He's my uncle," the guest said, unannoyed. "I *used* to be smaller than him, but the name sticks..." He looked up the fork to the right, raising his head toward Mount Tihuaca, only partly obscured by drifting clouds. "I've never been up there. I've heard... it's said that on a clear day you can see the ocean on all sides, the whole coastline, from there..." His voice ended on a vaguely questioning note. He was a diffident, amiable one.

Duro said, "Yes, maybe, but I've never seen the day that was that clear. There always seems to be at least some part of the coast you can't see."

Lors understood what Tom-small had in mind. "We really do not have time to go that far today," he pointed out, kindly enough. His eyes were

blue-gray, his hair was long and black, his skin a light brown. "Maybe, if you stay over, we could make a special trip—" A half-smile of pleasurable, anticipating assent lit up Tom-small's broad and open face. Lors went on, "But right now we have to get meat. So: it's downward ho for us. Let me tell you the plan.

"There's a spring which the deer favor. And we usually set salt there for them, as a further attraction. The boys will go ahead and around to beat them back this way—if there are any there now. I'll show you, by and by, where we crouch for them along their trail. With three bows, we ought to have luck. Oh! Say—you're all right for hunting, aren't you? I mean, you haven't touched a corpse or a cat or a fluxy female today, have you?" Tom-small shook his head. "That's all right, then."

But Duro wasn't sure it was all right. "How about Mia?" he asked. "*You* were touching *her!*"

Lors had forgotten. His heart gave a thump, and the blood ran into, then away from his face. How could he have forgotten? But after a second he said, "No, I'm sure it's all right. She knows better; she wouldn't have let me, if— Besides, Popa saw me. He must think it's all right, too, or he wouldn't have sent me."

Satisfied, they started off down the down-slope branch of the fork. Far off below, through a break in the hills, they saw the blue sea. Lors pointed. "That's where the first Rowan landed," he said.

Tom-small looked impressed. "Before the Devils came," he said.

Duro, looked at him. "How could that be?" he asked. "If the Devils hadn't come, Rowan would have stayed where he was and not come *here.*"

The young guest looked confused. Then, dismissing the need to figure the matter out, he said, "Well, anyway, it was a long time ago."

It had been, indeed.

And it had all begun much further ago than that.

Earth had become like a woman who has, after a long and painful labor, given multiple birth... flat, empty, weary and bare. For the Earth was long enough over the final wave of outward, star-bound emigrants for the last trace of concern and excitement in it to have ebbed utterly away. And there was, it seemed, nothing else.

It had begun calmly enough, this move to the known hospitable worlds swimming around the distant stars. Mankind had waited long enough to

be patient at first. No one could say at just exactly what point it all became a frenzy. The Earth went mad; contentedly, controlledly mad... and stayed so for centuries. For on the one hand there was instant and continual concern to solve once and for all the old problem of overpopulation. Those nations which were actually overpeopled—which was most of them—wanted to make an end at last, forever, to crush and hunger. The few that weren't did not and could not remain aloof, for they wanted just as much an end to the fear that the overcrowded countries would spill out of their borders in war. So all worked intently. The first wave of migrants wanted just to get away. Their zeal was negative. But it was nonetheless *zeal*. Then came those who wanted to claim a share of what they heard was out there—land, room, opportunity, adventure. Then came those who wanted just to see for themselves what it was like... they said. The next wave went to join family and friends. Finally it became indiscriminately contagious, a roaring wind, sucking up that which lay behind as well as driving on that which lay before it. Those who toiled in sending people out were themselves caught up in it and strove to be themselves sent out. And so, finally, there were comparatively few left behind.

The long morning had been filled with noise. The long afternoon was strangely silent. The silence at first was filled with remembered echo.

Earth's remaining people had worked themselves into an unprecedented fatigue. They had also, it seemed, finally and forever plundered their planet dry. Scarcely a trace of crude metals remained, and not even a trace of mineral fuels. The very wastes of the ancient mines had been reclaimed, reprocessed, redigested and reconsumed. In the last stages, the technicians had cannibalized their own technology, gobbling up factories and smelting down fabric and machinery to consolidate and produce the ultimate ships. The near-empty cities were at last dismantled for their bones and scrap, ruins ravaged like pigs nosing for truffles.

Finally, no more ships were built on earth and no more migrant parties sent off. For a while yet, though, the old world Earth stayed in touch with her children via out-world-built ships touching down with visitors. But there were never many of them; and as the Earth-born in the outer worlds grew old and died off, there were ever fewer. So, finally, even they ceased. There was no announcement, only that the perhaps penultimate one bore notice, in the form of so few passengers, that the children-planets had become too caught up in their own concerns to care much about the withered mother-world.

Yet no doubt habit alone might have served to keep up a

communication with some semblance of regularity. The migrants had been as careful as they might to purge and to protect themselves against bringing communicable disease with them as they swarmed out to the series of worlds which later became known as The Inner Circle. But when they learned of the presence among them of the deadliest such disease of all it was too late: it had blazed up, and it was not to die down for centuries. Its name was War.

And it was then, when all the other worlds of human tenancy were so pre-empted and preoccupied that the very awareness of the Earth-Mother-world became only faint memory—less, perhaps, than the memory of Juteland was to England during her Colonial wars—it was then that the Kar-chee came. Earth-planet may have seemed sucked dry, worthless, to those who now lived or whose fathers had once lived on it... just as the rind and the pulp of a squeezed orange might. But that same would not seem worthless at all to a pig or a swarm of flies. Nor did it seem so to the Kar-chee. They left their lairs around the Ring Stars and swarmed down onto weary, exhausted, riven old Earth, to pick the bones and crack the plundered planet for its marrow.

The spring and the man-made salt-lick were well set up for hunting, the arroyo and ravine being so as to provide an almost perfect situation for ambush. Only the one narrow way led up to the water welling up at the foot of an abrupt cliff: as the deer went up, so that same way they had to come down. "Beating" was here not the most exact word—the younger boys went up to the top of the cliff-face by another and roundabout way and pelted any deer they might find below with stones and sticks. It was doubtless not sporting, but this was a conception unknown to them. They killed what they needed, and no more, and it made sense to kill as quickly and easily as possible.

Lors and Duro levered down their goat-foot crossbows and loaded them with a bolt each, Tom-small nocked an arrow into his short straight bow, and the three of them picked their hiding places among the rocks and hunkered down.

They could, if need be, maintain the position for hours. But as it turned out, they had to maintain it for something much less.

From above and ahead, faint but clear, after perhaps a quarter of an hour, the three heard a series of whistles. Duro got up, swearing. Lors shrugged. To Tom-small, who looked at them inquiringly, he said, "No game at the spring. Well, we'll have to go all the way up there to see if

there's anything along the path... and then come all the way down again, if there is or there isn't."

"Oh, Devil!" said Duro, again.

And there was nothing along the path.

There was nothing along the usual beats, either—no actual game, that is. There was spoor and trace, to be sure, and these signs made them all look at each other with faces wrinkled in uncertainty.

"Upland," Tom-small said. "Everything seems to have gone upland... Do you know why?"

The brothers didn't. "I don't know who'd be beating up from downland hereabouts," Lors said. "I don't smell any fire, either." Automatically, at this suggestion, they all sniffed the air. As though to accommodate them at just that moment the wind shifted.

"What is *that*?" Duro asked, scowling.

No one knew. It was musty and pungent and utterly strange. It might be connected with the curious absence of game; it might not. "Let's go see what it is," said Duro.

Lors shook his head. "Popa didn't send us out for anything but to get meat, and the meat's all gone upland, it seems, so we just have to go upland after it. When we get back we can tell him about it, and he'll know what to do."

"By the time we get back with anything—if we find anything—they'll all be hungry, anyway," his brother pointed out. He looked windward, made as though to reload his crossbow.

"The longer we wait and gibble-gabble, the hungrier they'll be. Up," said the elder. And turned and started. Tom-small and the younger boys followed at once. So, after a moment, did Duro. They went upland, all of them, but they came within shot of no game. Once they stopped stock-still at the sight of three deer outlined upon the top of a ridge, heads all up. For a moment nothing moved, nothing was heard. Then, far off and below, it came... deep and distinctive and strange, and it sounded again—the deer darted off and were gone—and it seemed to have ended upon a higher, a questioning note.

"It's no horn," guest Tom-small said, low-voiced, evidently answering his own unspoken questioning.

But as to what it was, none had any suggestion. They nodded when Lors said, finally, "All game gone upland... nobody beating besides us, that we

know of... a bad smell, a strange smell... and now a strange noise...

"My guess is that whatever made the smell is making the noise. It's gotten late. We'd better go back and tell Popa, that's the best thing, and we can kill stock for the guests and then we'd all better find out what this thing is."

As they started back, Duro said, "Maybe it would be better to find out as soon as can be, even if it's got to be done on an empty belly." His brother grunted his agreement. The smaller boys were all silent, and kept close instead of spreading out. The sun declined away behind the mountain and the air felt chilly on their skins—and perhaps it was not just the air

They followed Lors without questioning when he picked a trail over fallen rock which would cut time off their return. And it was while the loose shale was still sliding a bit under their feet that they all stopped short with no more sound at first than the hissing intake of breath and looked down where his hand pointed and where it trembled despite all his brave effort.

Along the distant shore below, at that same shelving beach where the first Rowan had brought his tiny boat ashore, there, outlined against the wine-dark sea, they saw the forms of two utterly strange and utterly dissimilar figures stalking across the twilight landscape—one erect, though slightly stooping; the other on all four giant legs which held it high above the sand.

Slowly, fearfully, they sank down and spread themselves flat upon the shale. After an infinity of time the two strange beasts passed out of sight around a bend in the shore line. Then, crouching, sliding, trotting almost as they squatted and slid, spraddle-legged, the young hunters vanished into the safe-promising shadows. And only when the dearly familiar walls of the homesite, outlined by the vigorous fires still burning outdoors, came into view did any of them speak. It was the youngest and smallest of the boys.

"Devil," he said. "Devil." He was not swearing. "Devil-Devil—it was the Devil!" he chattered.

And Lors said, "Maybe... Maybe... But—*which one?*"

II

The raft was low on one side. Whether the underbeams had been lashed wrong, or if something in the wood had caused more and sooner waterlogging, or— No one worried or cared about that any longer. It was accepted with a brute resignation, like the burning sun and the scant food and drink, the waves which lapped up and over all around and left salt encrustations which itched and stung the swollen flesh. Three people already had gone off that perilous slope —one had slipped and slid, shrieking, while the others had looked on and blinked their burning eyes and licked their cracking lips and otherwise done nothing; one had simply rolled off, a scatter of rags and flailing limbs, uttering no sound; and the third, with a pleased smile and a look of anticipation, had just walked off at a brisk pace, knee-deep before he'd plunged out of sight.

Now and then a shark circled, leisurely, and those who still had the energy to do so crawled as high as they could, as though fearing that the great cartilaginous fish might suddenly sprout legs and climb up after them. And now and then a huge sea-turtle flipped by, paying them no attention at all; some eyed it hungrily, but helplessly: the small boat in which they might have pursued it had gone in a storm uncounted time ago, and even had it remained it was doubtful if any of them now would have had the strength to man it.

Some few fishing-lines still dangled, some presently without even hooks, and none with other bait than a bit of cloth of similar counterfeit. It had been days since any of these had succeeded in catching anything—a bony, ugly thing, but the man whose line it adhered to had eaten it at once, fearful and famished and secretive and swift. Then he had vomited it all up. Then he had eaten it a second time, shameful and slow and sick.

It had been months. It seemed like months. Perhaps it was only weeks. Perhaps, by now, years. Liam would know, if anyone knew, Cerry thought. Vaguely, she considered asking Liam if he still kept up his records. But the notion soon ceased to interest her. She had too little voice left, her mouth and throat were too dry, for her to call over to him where he sat, crouching, motionless. He might be dead. But she didn't want to face this possibility. If Liam were dead then the rest of them were as good as dead. So she made her mind consider other things.

Suppose the raft were to encounter flying fish. A whole entire school of them. Then the sail and the awning could be used as nets. Everyone would have something to eat. And then—since flying fish lived in the tropics and

in the tropics it was very rainy—then it would rain, and the rain water would be caught in those same sails and awnings. All at once everyone would be better, healthy, alert, in good spirits and humor. Their luck thus once turned, obviously land would be the next thing to appear. *Land!*

It would be a good land, with friendly people, not savage, neither terrible nor terrified. The land and people didn't know of hunger, and there were no dragons in that land and neither were there Kar-chee. And... and then...

Cerry wondered what was next, smiling and giving little nods. The bubble did not so much burst as simply vanish; and, the vision forgotten as though it had never begun, she wondered and fretted mildly how long they had all been on the raft. At least a month. She had had her courses just before they'd embarked—a minor discomfort and a common and regular one: odd that she should remember it against the background of that hideous time and trouble—and then, surely, she had had them again at least once since then, aboard the raft. She could not remember it having happened another time. Which meant that it had not been two months yet. Or, possibly, that her body no longer functioned as it once had. Small wonder, if this were so. But what if Liam were dead?

The fear was worse than the pain of finding out. So, slowly and so slowly, Cerry raised herself onto her painful hands and knees and began to crawl and to creep and to climb across the cant of the raft toward the figure which half-sat, half-crouched, in the splotchy shade of the tattered awning. And the gorgeous golden sun beat down unceasingly from the blazing blue of the silent sky. There was a child stretched out, face down, back moving in slight rise and fall of feeble breath. Cerry did not dare stop or try to move other than as she was moving. Neither did the woman move who croaked, "Murderers! Murderers!" as Cerry dragged herself over the child.

"Are you human beings?" the woman demanded. "Or are you dragons? Kill me, kill me, only leave my child alone..." Her, head, at least, at last, commenced to weave from side to side, but by then Cerry was past. "Help, help," the woman croaked, striking her head with her skeletal paw of a hand. "Human beings: help, help. There are dragons on the raft..." The child gave a ghost of a whimper. "Yes, my darling," the woman said, instantly sane. "Yes, my precious. Don't cry, my dearest love. Mother's coming..." She moved toward the child like a crippled snake.

A hot gust smote the sea. The torn cloth slapped and snapped. The raft shook. A wave hit it; it shook again. Something dead went floating by and someone not quite dead pointed and wept, but it was too far away. Liam

had one brown eye and one blue eye and otherwise his eyes were red as blood. His sun-bleached, salt-encrusted hair moved in the light wind like clumps of dirty marsh grass. He didn't blink or breathe as Cerry came lurching and creeping. "Liam, don't be dead. Tell me how long it's been," Cerry asked. He didn't blink or breathe. She could see the wind moving the little hairs on his chest, but she couldn't see the chest move.

She butted his knee with her head, like a lamb forcing its dam to give down milk. He fell over on his side. "Don't be dead, Liam," she begged.

After minutes, hours, years, he said something. He made a sort of snoring noise. He said something. "What, Liam? What?"

She crept close. "Maybe a dream," he said. She listened. She strained to hear. The man who had pointed to the dead thing watched them. He sat up a bit. He watched them. The mother stroked her child's face. But her eyes did not really watch the child. Her eyes watched them. "May be a dream, Cerry," Liam said. "But I think I did. One night... I think..."

It had not been a dream. He had. He really had. In the box with the rotting ropes and other gear and tackle, he had really, on that night he half-remembered, secretly and cautiously placed some food—then, when food had still been plentiful and all had been optimistic, for they would soon reach Gal; none had ever been to Gal but all had been sure it was only a week's voyage away—against the possible time when, if Gal had not been reached, they might well be thankful for the food. And of course they had not in any week's voyage reached Gal, they did not know now if it were one week or a year of weeks, if winds and currents had carried them forever past it or if Gal itself had been sunk by the Kar-chee. But the food was still there.

It lay in her hands as she brought it up to the surface for long enough for her to see that it was in a bag sewn of soft cloth, part of a dress, and by the feel of it potatoes. Small, gone soft, gone sprouty, but food. "It's to be divided," she warned herself softly. "It's to be divided!" she shrieked as it was torn from her hands. The man who had pointed to the dead thing in the sea and wept because it was too far to secure it for the raft did not weep now, but gibbered and spat and clawed Cerry's face with his left hand. The bag was torn from his right hand by the woman of the child. "*It's to be divided!*" screamed Cerry.

And it was divided, though not according to the calm and rational scheme intended. Who would have thought there was still so much life left in them all? So much evil, so much greed? The dead rose up from the deck which was their grave and screamed and growled and fought. They bit the

hands which held the shrunken, blackened potatoes, and clawed them up into their own hands. But the woman of the child, when the cloth of the bag ripped and the black manna fell and scattered, did not use her hands to seize. She crawled upon her hands away from the scene, her sunken cheeks full and smiling. She crawled to her child and kissed the child mouth to mouth and chewed for the child and fed it as a bird is fed. The thin, scrunnel throat moved, slowly, slowly. When the child smiled at last, the woman, her own mouth now empty of all but love, said, in loving and rapturous tones, "*There, my darling... There, my precious. Did you like that? Was it good?*" She composed herself beside the child, carefully arranged some tatters of her dress so as to cover the small face from the shade, and then, still smiling, died.

The man who had pointed to the dead thing in the sea and had wept and then later had snatched the sacket of food wept again. Or so it seemed. Drops flowed down his face, but they were red and he lay still. And more than one looked at him and looked at each other and looked away from each other and then looked back at him. For the few and small bits of provision in the sacket were gone now, but the hunger which had been lying somewhat dulled and anesthetized was wide awake now and gnawing. And the man himself was dead now and he was not at all too far away to be reached.

"*Are you human beings? Or are you dragons?*" one of them had lately asked. And now it might be that none of them was at all sure.

In ravaging and in ravishing their own world for its minerals in order to make the means to abandon that world forever for newer and fresher, richer ones, the men of Earth had carried on—more or less—as they had done for the mere thousands of years in which mining had engaged the attention of their species. The holes they dug were deeper and the pits they scooped were wider and both of course were more numerous. They had left the landscape scarred and fractured, but it was, when they had done with what they were doing, still recognizably the same landscape.

But long before the Kar-chee were done with it, it was no longer so.

The Kar-chee were ten feet tall and a dull, dull black, with heads which seemed tiny in comparison to their height and perhaps particularly in comparison to the huge anterior forelimbs. In this they resembled the mantis, but in nothing else did they resemble anything else with which the scattered handfuls of infinitely wearied peoples on Earth were familiar.

Kar-chee they were called, from a real or a fancied similarity to sounds which they were heard to make by those few who had come close to them, close enough to hear them, and departed whole; but what they called themselves, no man knew. There had been no dialogue between the two species. Had there ever been between men and ants?

So, the old dwellers called the incomers *Kar-chee* in much the manner that a child calls a dog *Bow-wow*—though the *Kar-chee*, of course, were nothing at all like dogs. The *Kar-chee*, in a way, were audible ants. Conquering ants. Ants which brought with them their fulcrum, and, finding a place on which to rest it, did what Archimedes never could do, and moved the Earth.

Piece by piece.

Of old, in the lost land of California, came the Americans and dug and washed the dirt for gold, and left behind great heaps of soil from which all profit was extracted. After them came the Chinese, and washed the once-washed dirt again and, counting labor and toil as nothing, extracted profit from the unprofitable, content with tiny flecks of dust where only nuggets had satisfied their predecessors. Neither of them, of course, in the least understanding the other. But understanding, at least, that there was something to understand.

This much seemed at least clear—the *Kar-chee* had done this before. Their movements were too practiced, their equipment too suitable, their techniques too efficient, to allow for any of it to be new to them. Scavengers of worlds beyond number they must have been, for ages beyond counting; and in those worlds throughout those ages they had developed systems of working titanic changes in oceans and in continents in order to get at and get out the veins and pockets and the merest morsels of minerals and such as were left behind by human exploiters. First they reprocessed the slag and the tailings and the cinders and the ashes and all the mountainous heaps of (to man) worthless by-products. Then they scored great trenches on land and sea and turned their contents over and over again like earthworms, digesting and redigesting. They peeled the earth like an onion. But all of this was the merest beginning...

When they had done what they wanted with a given section of land, for the present time, at least (and who knew what "time" meant for them? how long they lived? or how they died, or where, or at all?), then with inhuman efficiency and ineffable insouciance they disposed of it. They triggered the long-set charge provided by the pre-existent San Andreas Fault, and California in convulsions and hideous agonies sank shrieking into the sea. And before the waters had in the least begun to settle, they

were convulsed again as the floor of the Gulf of California arose trembling and quaking and flinching from the air it had not encountered in countless ages. The Kar-chee barely waited for it to dry before they settled onto it like flies upon a carcass and commenced to suck the hidden treasures of its sands.

There must have been some plan determining which lands should live and which should die, which perish by volcanic fire and which by the overwhelming of water. But no man knew in the least what plan there was. Sometimes, though, it did seem that here a land was sunken and here a land raised up, not because of immediate particular concern for either but instead because of problems concerning the adjustment and readjustment of the weight upon the Earth's surface. Thus Gondwanaland arose again, and lost Atlantis, and land-masses—subcontinents or great islands—were newly designed and surfaced, while the familiar terrains were often fragmented or destroyed. And all the while the vast equipages of the Kar-chee, like huge and mobile cities, alien beyond the phantasizing ability of the human mind, slowly and relentlessly roamed surfaces and sea-depths, turning and churning and extracting and processing. And the great black hulks of the Kar-chee ships came and went... endlessly... endlessly...

And—meanwhile—what of man?

At first, then, of man: nothing. What of the ants, when man had first come to occupy and to use new territory? One might step on an ant, idly encountered. If they become too intrusive, too troublesome, then one might take means to prevent their incursions. One would not, ordinarily, think too much about them; they were too small, alien, insignificant. Who considered a possible "history" of ants? Or who reflected that ants might have a "prior claim," as it were, to any place? But if in time ants became more troublesome, then, and only then, would attention take the form of destroying ant-hills—or, ecologically, introducing natural enemies which might do the work of destroying them and allow mankind to go about its own and proper business of plundering and polluting the world man lived in.

Thus, meanwhile, *that* of man.

Some handfuls of them dwelt, drowsy and fatigued, in what had been called the British Isles, when the Kar-chee came. Some, out of curiosity, had investigated... intruded... had been destroyed. Others had moved away. And continued to move, as the Kar-chee and their gargantuan machinery advanced. There was no thought of fighting, of resisting. Man was too few, Kar-chee too many; the invaders too strong, the autochthones

too weak, too weary, too disorganized and inexperienced. One might hypothesize a situation wherein the children-worlds became aware of Earth's plight, and had sent help. But the children-worlds were not aware, and after the few first generations had died away, the very memory of such worlds had died away with them.

Man, in short, adjusted.

Where there were no Kar-chee, the people slowly increased in number, slowly developed new skills, new forms, new views. Where there were Kar-chee, the people either perished or retreated before them. The remnants of Earth's wild life, where the Kar-chee did not yet venture or remain, and while man was still so few, increased as well. Once again the trees grew tall, the herbivores replenished their flocks and herds, the wild swine flourished in the marshes and masted on the nuts and acorns, the fish returned to the cleansed-again waters.

It was fortunate, providential, that the last centuries of the movement of man away from Earth had coincided with the last centuries of a cold cycle. It may well have made no difference to the Kar-chee what the climate of the northerly part of the Northern Hemisphere was, tapping as they did the molten heart of the planet for energy. But the return of a warm cycle may have made all the difference to the bands of men living there. And when Britannia proper sank beneath the waves it once had ruled, and most of Ireland with it, when a new great island was created by joining the Outer Hebrides and the Isle of Man with much of Northern Ireland—then, great though the shock was, it was the milder climate which enabled the survivors to... survive. New rivers flowed into the sea through new beds; for a while they ran brackish as the rains washed the salt from the new-formed land. Eventually the whole new land was cleansed, and, richer than the older lands now joined with it by reason of its accumulations of eons of organic matter, it benefited by the milder climate and the longer growing season, and its people benefited even more. For the Kar-chee did not come. Perhaps they had intended the changes wrought in the south. No one ever knew. What they did know was that the Kar-chee did not come, and this was of the most infinite importance.

Indeed, it might have been that what had occurred there had been done to balance what had occurred in California, when Rowan the first had fled, a sea-borne single Noah, an Aeneas fleeing fatherless across the sullen seas. None could say.

So the centuries continued to pass; there, in the Kar-chee-created (yet Kar-chee-ignored) northern land, as in the fragment of former South

America which Rowan found, man rediscovered old skills and learned and developed new ones. New societies began to form, were formed, and new forms of civilization arose. A distorted memory of what had happened remained with them in both places, as in others. But for the most part a life was lived which concerned itself more with the present than with the past. And then, in a village located on the high hill which was once the Hebridean island of Benbecula, men looked out and saw, with astonished anger, the Kar-chee coming at long last.

It was different this time than the first time. The human race had recovered from its fatigue, for one thing. For another, distance and the long, blind oblivion of time had hidden from Liam and Cerry and their fellows experience of how dangerous the Kar-chee really were.

The great war-horns sounded, the alarm-drums were beaten, the farmers came running from the fields and the herdsmen from their kine, the fishing-coracles put in from sea. And while Liam and the other fighting men mustered on the palisades which topped the earthen embankments around the townlet, Cerry and the other women boiled huge earthen pots of water by dropping red-hot stones in them. Thus they had prepared themselves against attack by either local factions or pirate-raiders from across the seas; and thus, straining and pulling and pushing, they set the lumbering catapults in place and loaded them with cold charges and set the stone shot to heating in the fires. On the part of the men, then, all proceeded according to plan.

But the Kar-chee, seemingly, had other plans.

A miner takes small heed of the swarming of an ant-hill.

The men of Benbecula had no such things as surveying-instruments; they would not have recognized them even had the devices been of human manufacture. The local chief, peering through the single and ancient telescope the place afforded, saw only that enemies had engines and that these moved in direction to and fro, and when they paused a moment and seemed pointed and poised at his defenses, he waited not, but gave the signal to fire.

Probably not a single shot struck the cluster of tall and slightly stooping black figures, but the thumping and crashing of their various impacts nearby drew the attention of the Kar-chee. The tiny triangular heads whipped up from their instruments and peered around; the stout anterior arms unfolded and waved about. The Kar-chee commenced to move on. Perhaps they did so merely because it was time to move on. But the men

of Benbecula did not consider this. They had fired on their enemies and their enemies were beginning to retreat. *When the enemy retreats, advance.* Thus, the old maxim. And, thus, shouting fierce cries of triumph and menace, waving war-clubs and making feints with their bone-tipped lances, arrows ready to be nocked on bowstrings, the levy en masse poured out of the fortified hamlet and down upon the aliens. The wind shifted and suddenly smelled no more of woodsmoke and heather and human sweat, but of something murky and pungent and strange. The shaggy ponies on which the lancers were mounted, toes gripping leather stirrups, neighed, fought, bolted for a less hateful air.

The charge, to give credit, did not stop for more than a moment. Liam, frank, said later to Cerry, "We didn't dare retreat, for then they should have attacked *us*—and they had the longer legs!" Now the Kar-chee did retreat, it seemed, or most of them did. Others stayed and whipped about them with the tripods of their instruments (clumsy weapons, the men considered!), but, being to being and implement to implement, not even the superior height of the Kar-chee availed them victory. Their longer legs did not prevent their being clubbed to the ground, and if their chitinous exoskeletons protected them for a while against thrusting points, it was only a short matter to discover that this armor had unprotected under-folds. The lances entered, were pressed home, the clubs beat and threshed, soon the clickings and churfings of the aliens ceased; the alien limbs twitched but a moment more.

So, dragging bodies and booties behind them, and singing impromptu songs of victory—including several verses directed at the unhappy cavalry—the triumphant defenders returned. The postures of defense were abandoned as quickly as they had been assumed, and Benbecula plunged into a frenzy of drunken feasting and rejoicing.

But Liam did not entirely join in it.

"What's wrong?" Cerry asked him. She had never at all made the error of thinking that because his eyes were different colors and his appearance therefore odd that there was anything at all wrong with the rest of him.

His face twisted, and he shook his head. All around him drunken shouts resounded. She put her ears to his lips. "Don't like it," he said. "Acting as though they'd driven off a raider-bunch from Orkland or Norland... This is more, Cerry—much, much more..."

He mumbled, shook his head, frowning, like a bothered child: another of the things which made some people think him a mere daftie. She knew better. She listened. She heard him, reconstructing from his mutterings,

explain what was vexing him. That not everything the oldmothers nattered about the Kar-chee as they sat warming their dried-up feet by the fire, not all of it was or could be true: of course not, else the Kar-chee would have arrived riding upon their dragons as in the old tales, flying through the air and throwing bolts of fire. Would have picked up the land bodily and flown it away to the Northern Hell, whence the sight of the flames could be seen of nights now and then. Would have dipped it in the burning waters and burnt them off like beetles off a burning log.

Well, then? she asked. If not true—and he reasoned well that it was not—why worry, then? A merrymaker came garbling up to him, waving what seemed to be a Kar-chee's foot, and Liam pushed him away with such force that he never came back for explanation or fight, but hunted a horn of honey-strong to soothe his bewilderment. Why worry, then? Because, clearly, not all the oldmothers' tales had been false, either. For the existence of the Kar-chee, whom none of them had ever seen or smelled until today, was the very warp and woof and thrums of the oldmothers' tales...

Now Cerry had the turn to frown and squint. Although sharing in the rejoicing, initially, and feeling no more misgivings than resentment at not having gotten to scald the attackers with boiling well-water, her long-felt and distinctive respect for Liam convinced her that if he thought something was wrong, then something was *wrong*. She tried to follow his line of thought, but it was too strange for her. So, instead, she tried to tell him what she felt for him and about him; but all that came out was the old, conventional question: "Shall I take my sheepskin and come and be a while in your cabin?"

If he had given one of the old, conventional answers—say, if only, "Take and be"—why, that would have been good and she would have been happy; if, "You may take your featherbed and come and be in my cabin forever,"—why that would have been very, very good and she would have been very, very happy.

But now instead he looked, at her straightly, one odd eye as brown as loch-water and the other as blue-green as the open sea itself; and what he said now was stranger yet: "You may take your sheepskin and follow after me, if you will, but not to lie by me as a woman lies by a man. For I fear there will be many nights upon the cold ground and many upon the cold, cold sea before ever we may think of love or bairns or houses once again."

The words sounded as through from an old tale, sung and chanted to the background of pipe or harp or drum; yet she knew that she had never heard them before. And fast and hard upon this she knew, quite suddenly,

in her heart, that the times were now come about which songs were sung and tales composed; and that Liam was and had always been destined to be one of those men, seers and doers and heroes, who figured in those tales. And, like a hand taking hold of her heart and tightening on it, she knew she would and must go with him and endure with him as long as his tale was run, come what might.

Liam got up and left the sound and sight of the feasting and the fires and went out into the chill night. And Cerry followed after him and they took their sheepskins and their sticks and their little pots of fire and their sackets of food and they walked toward the north. Thus it was that when the dragons came to Benbecula Liam and Cerry were in North Uist and when the dragons came to North Uist he and she were part-way to Ulsland. The dragons were not then in quick haste to make an end of men, and indeed it did seem that they drew out their destruction to suit their pleasure and that of the Kar-chee, to avenge whom they had come. And by the time that the dragons began to stir toward the marches of Uls, Liam and Cerry were building in haste their great raft to carry them and those who believed in Liam and his warning over the seas to Gal.

Gal, however, they never found. Nor any other place which it seemed might do for refuge. They found bleak lands, all salt and sterile, all stone or sands, or crushed stones; they found lands all smoking and burning and slag; they found lands where naked men hid behind the rocks and then rushed howling out upon them. And once they found a land of grass and trees and they gave thanks before they prepared to go ashore... but then the watcher on the masthead cried out that he saw that there were Kar-chee and dragons already in that land; and they rushed to hoist the ragged sail again and gave greater thanks than before when wind and currents carried them safely past and out, even though it were to starve and parch, to sea.

And so, finally, there was no more food and no more water and the sky and sun grew hot upon them and they looked with greedy and sickened eyes upon the body and the blood of the one who had made to steal the last of the food; and they wondered if they dared not use it as food. Cerry wept for sorrow that her hunger had been aroused once again and for joy that Liam was not dead. Liam muttered, but not to and not about Cerry; he muttered words as confused as his own mind; he muttered about maps.

Maps! The very concept drew a blank look from all but a few of his countrymen. But Liam knew what a map was, knew what a book was; had seen both. Both were, presently, pragmatically, useless, referring to and

depicting things which no longer existed. But the conceptions were infinitely important, and they stirred his mind with excitement and frustration. Inside his tattered trews was a rough, ungainly copy of a map which he had once made. It was, of course, useless as a guide, showing as it did lands which no longer existed and failing to show lands which now did. He wondered, fevered, sunstricken, famished and parched, if accurate maps of any sort existed anywhere at all. Not likely. He avoided the obvious admission: not possible. So, as Cerry had dreamed of flying fish and rain, so Liam lay dreaming of an accurate map, a true chart, showing lands and currents and winds...

He saw the island as it came slowly into view and he did nothing. He watched the island change into a ship and he did nothing. He watched the one or two or three of the others on the raft who still had the semblance of strength, watched them creep and heard them croak and saw them gesture; he did nothing. The ship was not that at all, it was a whale; the whale calfed, the calf came toward the raft, men riding on it... in it... He watched his craft become the captive of the whale and he suffered himself to be carried into the belly of the whale. He did nothing. But after an age of darkness he felt wet upon his tongue. And he swallowed.

Still later, he thanked his graybeard succorer, whispering, "We would have died. We have no maps."

"I know," said graybeard.

"Fled... dragons... killing, tearing... Kar-chee..."

"I know. I know."

"No land... no refuge... no rain..."

Said graybeard, "I know."

After a long pause, he asked, "Who are you? And what is this place?"

Said graybeard: "I am the Knower. This is the Ark."

III



A **stock animal** had already been killed and was in process of being eaten when Lors, Duro, the young guest Tom-small and the younger boys arrived back at the Rowan homesite. But there did not seem to be much pleasure

taken in the eating by anyone. Lors wondered, shortly, why guards had not already been posted and the gates secured—or why everyone had not fled inland and upland—but before long this became clear enough, though it never became acceptable, to him.

They found guest Jow, a very dark-brown man with a fleece of curly hair, off in a corner with old Ren Rowan: now Jow talked, intently, and Ren gnawed on a piece of meat; now Ren expostulated as Jow bit into his own victual. They shook their heads, they waved their hands, they took each other by the arms and elbows and shoulders. But they spoke so low that no one else could hear a word of what they were saying.

But moods, of course, are as contagious as maladies. Jow may have bottled up whatever was on his mind en route to Rowen homesite, but he had not bottled it up any longer than it took to bring his mouth next to Ren's ear. Ren, clearly, was not disposed to take the matter as something light or easy. The arrival of the young men and boys caught at once the attention of the two older men, and a curious mixture of relief and apprehension came over their seamed faces as they spoke almost at once.

"Did you see anything?"—from Ren.

"What did you see?"—from Jow.

But before Ren's sons or Jow's son could answer, one of the little boys burst out with, "We saw the Devils—we saw two Devils!" and broke into tears and sobs of pent-up fright. A moment's stunned silence. Women and girls ready to laugh and dispel the tension, thinking that the two elders were talking of some matter, perhaps, of a threatened and serious feud: a love affair discountenanced for weighty reasons, a disputed inheritance, a man-slaughter or serious injury done in anger, a land-quarrel—all sufficient to justify the mood of secretive agitation. It was a mood they would be glad enough to lighten; the women and girls ready to laugh looked up and over at the older men's faces—

And saw no amusement in them, not even justified annoyance at boyish babbling; but saw the muscles of Jow's mouth and throat writhing as if he had been struck by an arrow, saw a look of sick dismay upon the face of Ren Rowan. And as though it was death's approach made visible and the women and the girls began to wail and weep. A log of wood collapsed into its own embers in the fire and the sudden shower of sparks flaring outward and upward illuminated the scene of ignorant alarm and confusion and fright—children screaming, dogs jumping up and barking, babies awaking to add their contribution to the clamor—

"Enough of this!" shouted Jow, his huge voice felling the turmoil like an

axe a tree.

And, "Women, be quiet," Ren growled, standing up and showing the flat of his hand. Noise did not altogether cease but it went from a scream to a murmur. "Better," he rumbled. "I'll give you more Devil, otherwise, than you can use. —You: little Tino, put some meat in your mouth. The rest of you, too. Now—my sons and Jow's son—and you, Carlo" —he beckoned over his eldest, a married man whose skilled hands made up for his bad leg—" come over here." Rapidly he made a decision. This was no mere inter-family matter. "And all the men and older boys, too. All of you. Over here."

Lamps were brought, shallow shells of oil or animal grease, and sticks were thrust hastily into the fire and then pulled out again to make torches. Flames flickered and flared, breaths were drawn noisily, and finally all were settled around the two elders.

"Now," said old Ren once more. "You, Tom-small; what did you see?" He didn't ask him to mind his voice didn't carry past the male circle, but pitched his own low enough to get his point across.

Tom-small gave a feeble, bashful smile, but went on with what he had to say firmly enough. "We saw all the game had gone upland and we smelled a bad smell none of us knew and we saw two creatures that none of us knew. They were big. We came back, host Rowan."

"Well told. Short. Anything to add, any of you?"

None had, until Jow, his face now expressionless, asked, "These two strange creatures—what did they look like?"

Attempts to describe them were made, but were not successful. Then Carlo, Ren's oldest son, said, "May I, then? So... so look here..." He took up a stick, broke it with a snap, scratched in the dirt with the now-sharp point of it. "Did what you see... did it look like this? Or like this? Anything like this? Or like this? Think before you answer, and don't say it did unless you are quite sure that it did... Eh?"

His brothers and the young guest drew in their breaths, hissing. They nodded, lips drawn back from their teeth. And Lors said, pointing, "One of them did look like that—just like that." He pointed to Carlo's first sketch-figure, of something thin and somewhat stooping, standing on four thin limbs, with two stout limbs folded aloft. "And the other was like this other, yes, except that in this picture it's upright, running on two legs... and when we saw it, it was walking, walking on all fours..."

"But it's them, all right, Carl... It's them. It's them."

And he asked the same question his father now asked, voice upon voice. "How did you know?"

The oldest brother said, "In one of the caves, far, far to the back, up through a crack in the upper part, is a chamber... I think there's more, even beyond there, but I never dared to look past there... and only once, when I was a boy and playing a game and hiding, I found my way there. But no one else came after me and I grew frightened. I had my fire things with me and I made fire. What I drew here—that's what I saw on the wall in that chamber. Someone had drawn them there, with lamp-black and green clay mixed with lamp-black. Of course, when I saw them, I was even more afraid than ever, and I got out as fast as I was able. I even left my fire things there. They may still be in there, for all I know... Anyway, the second I saw those drawings, I felt in my heart that they had to be Devils. It was a long time ago and I never told anyone, but I've dreamed of them so often I never forgot them."

All was so quiet upon the finish of his words that they could hear one of the llamas protesting in the stock pens. And old Ren said, "Well, now... You saw paintings when you were a boy, in a sort of secret, side-room in one of the caves; and you felt in your heart they must be Devils. Now, today, your younger brothers and some more young ones, they saw—seems clear enough, seems to be true enough—they saw, alive, what you saw drawn. And Tino, he said that what you saw was Devils. So. It seems to me that it's natural enough, whenever a boy sees something strange and new and frightening, for him to call it Devil. But, after all, we don't *know* what these creatures really are. Fear is easily come by.

"None of you, not even guest Jow, are old enough to remember my rogue uncle, Arno. Everyone was in fear of him, and largely it was because of a tale that nights, when it pleased him, he'd go and change his body into the shape of what they called a half-Devil, a sort of giant cat, all spotted, do you see. I never believed it, never believed any of it. Whichever body he was to die in, they said, he'd turn into the other. So. When news was brought me that he'd died at last, in the caves there, down I went; found him dead enough, and one of his women with him—a miserable thing, she was, fit for him, but she was loyal at least.

" 'Did he die as a man?' I asked her.

" 'As a man,' she said.

" 'And has he changed his shape yet?' " I asked her.

" 'Not yet,' she said.

"So I had him brought out and we watched him, someone always

watching him, by day and by night, till he began to moulder. Then I told them and showed them how the tale was nothing but a tale, and we buried him. So. Time passed. Years. And once, looking in some old bales and boxes from his time, Rogue Arno's, I'll tell you what it was I came across—it was a pelt, you see, the skin of a sort of giant cat, all spotted. Never I saw such a thing alive, nor don't know where or when it lived or died. But it was not a Devil, any more than Arno was. It was a strange thing, and easy to fear. He knew it, he dressed himself with it by nights, played upon that fear..."

The words of old Ren, slowly, softly, calmly spoken, had gradually softened and calmed the mood of most of his listeners. But they had not calmed Jow, who said, shaking fleecy head, "You don't mean us to think, host Ren, that whoever drew those pictures in the cave, and our boys, today—you don't mean to have us think that what they saw were *men*? Men who put on strange hides to frighten us?"

Ren said, "I don't know. I didn't see them. The boys today didn't see them close, either. I know this: for one thing, if a picture of them was made at the time or before the time that Carl was a boy, then the things the pictures were drawn of were either here then or had been here before then. Nothing happened then to make us fear them, so why should we fear them now? There are, of course there are, strange creatures on land and sea. What of it?"

Jow had vigorous ideas as to what of it. The land they lived in, he pointed out, was an island, and they knew of—though they had not themselves visited them—other islands to the south and east. But they all knew well enough that this land and those other lands had once formed one great land, long ago, before (he used the common speech-figure which meant long, *long ago*)—"before the Devils came."

"What did they do when they came?" Jow asked. "Didn't they split the great land apart? Didn't they sink most of it? Didn't they hold it under the water to kill the folk, the way you'd hold a kitten under to kill it? No, Ren. *No!* You say that fear comes easy. True. But so does the fear of fear, I tell you. I'd rather be afraid for nothing, for then, by and by, we'll find out it's nothing—if it is nothing—than let danger slip up and find us unaware and unprepared. Wasn't California sunk, too? Wasn't the first Rowan my oldfather, too, as well as yours? Ren! Have you forgotten what it was that he said—the same thing as was said by the other oldparents already here:

" *'There is a thin Devil that has four limbs to walk with and two limbs to work with. And there is a thick Devil that walks on four limbs and runs on two: this is the thin Devil's scout, spy, and dog. And the smell of*

each is strong, but the thin one's stench is stronger. The thin Devil is all wicked mind and evil brain; the thick one is that, and teeth and claws as well. Flee before their coming: for the name of the one Devil is Kar-chee and the name of the other Devil is Dragon..."

It was an old man, a net-maker in the days of his strength, and Jow's near neighbor, who—restless from the thin sleep of old age—had gotten up groaning from his bed before dawn was. more than a thin promise on the horizon. First he walked because he could not sleep, next he walked because he had in his mind a certain warm spring which he thought might relieve somewhat his aching bones. Then he walked because he decided he was hungrier than he was rheumatic and his intention was to return. And finally he walked and walked because he had gotten well lost. Then he saw what he had seen and hid half a day in terror and risked moving about only because it came to him at last that the terror of night is greater than the terror of day; and so he came upon Jow, off by himself inspecting his bee-hives.

Jow at first had inclined to disbelieve his frightened babblings, then sent him off home with strong advice to say nothing to anyone else. "I wasn't convinced he was right," Jow said later to old Ren; "but I wasn't convinced he was wrong, either. So I thought I'd take advantage of your thatch-raising, late for that though it was, and come and talk to you about it."

Now, his face taut and haggard in the fire- and torchlight, he said, "*Flee ... There is nothing else for us to do! Who can fight Devils? We must leave everything behind and sail to the other islands, Zonia or Aper or the others. If there is no wind, we must paddle. And if the people there will receive us as we received Rowan, then good—if not, we must fight them and take their land. We must—*"

Ren sighed and gripped his friend's knees. "*Must. Jow... listen. 'Who can fight Devils?' No one. True enough. But how do you know for sure that we must fight? That we must flee? That the Devils are here to destroy either us or our land? Obviously they are here. Obviously they have been here before—but our land is still here. Isn't it?*"

Jow nodded, half-reluctant, half-reassured. "But... Ren... you know... lots of times I warn people against danger and they laugh and say, 'Nothing has ever happened before.' And I tell them... listen, Ren... I tell them: '*Nothing ever happens until the first time it happens...!*' "

This was so true as to require no comment. Ren therefore made none

and went on, grave and calm as before, "It is dark now and we can do nothing. Stay with us, be our guests. And tomorrow you and I, Jow, you and I will see for ourselves whatever is to be seen. Our boys are good fellows, but they are only boys. *Woman!*" He got to his feet.

From beyond the fires came his wife's voice. "Ren?"

"Our guests will stay the night. Get things ready for them." The women visitors broke into louder talk, deploring face-saving... as the relieved note in their voices showed. They did not know what was wrong, but they accepted that they need not know until the men thought fit to tell them. Yet it was a long way back, they were tired, their younger children were sleeping, and they welcomed the invitation to stay.

In the night Lors awoke to find his father's right hand on his shoulder, his father's left hand over his mouth. No word was spoken as they slipped out into the chill night air, the drops of the first dew dripping like the lightest of rains from the trees; the very stars, huge and swollen with lights, seeming themselves to be swimming down upon the earth through a black and liquid sea of night. He followed Ren across the compound to the most distant fire-pit, and there sat down beside him. Warmth still arose in a faint mist. The father took a stick and brushed off the embankment of ashes and blew upon the coals; as they went from gray to red he placed a small twig on them. In the brief half-light, his face shown ruddy and haggard.

"Lors," he said—and stopped. He swallowed.

"Popa?"

"Lors. Could... It is no disgrace to be mistaken..." His voice was a bare whisper. Lors leaned close to listen. "It would be about the wrongest thing possible to allow so many people to be frightened for an error... Or for a game... You would not—Lors?—is it not possible that you are not really sure that you did see what you say? Perhaps you jumped too quickly to conclusions. Perhaps—"

Lors put his hand on his father's knee. "No, Popa. Don't think that. It's no game. It's no error. We did see them. We saw the thing that Carlo drew. We did. We saw them." His voice, despite his resolution that it would not, trembled. Not so much from fear of what he had seen as from his shock and grief at seeing and hearing his father so shaken. He gave a little sound of anguish as he heard his father moan at his reply, saw him rock back and forth.

"Popa—there were only two of them! Only two!"

Barely audibly, old Ren said, through the hand which covered his face, "There will be more. There will be more. There will be—"

Lors seized the hand and shook it. "Then we'll do what Jow said—we'll leave this land and go where they can't find us!"

The hand came away from Ren's face. His son felt the track of the tears upon it and, try as he would not to, began to weep, himself.

"Where is there a place where they can't find us? And if we knew of such a place, how would we get there? In our fishing-canoes? They wouldn't hold a hundredth-part of the people, boy. Are we to build more? Bark trees and wait for them to dry and cut them and hollow them and season them and prepare provisions—enough for who knows how long a voyage? Will they give us time? Or are we to try and make our escapes in boats of green wood and watch them founder under us? Jow didn't think of this. He didn't think!"

Ren wiped his face. "You see why, Lors? You see why you have to be wrong? Because even if there were the possibility of us all getting away, why?—what for?—to wait in some other island for the Devils to get around to coming for us? To spend the rest of our lives in that fear and then, if we die in our beds, to hand that fear down to our children like an inheritance?"

His son said, unsteadily, but not without courage, "But what's the choice? Either we stay and fight, or we turn and we flee. What other choices are there?"

His father raked the ashes back upon the embers. His voice came from the darkness, thick and dull. "No choice. We can't stay. We can't escape. We can't fight. We have no choices. None. None..." His voice died away. He did not move. Then, slowly, his head sank down upon his knees. But he moved no more than this. And he moved no more.

Lors stared. He swallowed. He wiped his nose with his hand. He could have sat, himself, or crouched, motionless for hours beside a game trail. But he could not sit still for this. It was horrible. Death was only a theory to him, and the deeds of Devils something he had merely heard of it. His mind could not encompass either his own destruction or the destruction of his land and family and friends. What tore at him now was the incredible and shocking spectacle of his father, that roof-pillar of strength, reduced to tears and to utter despair. This was intolerable. He jumped to his feet, filled with a childish urge to run away and run and run and stay away until he could come back to find everything in order once again,

trouble forgotten. Even as he turned to set his feet, and even as he realized how useless and impossible this impulse was, the night vanished in a burst of rose-colored noise which ceased on the instant, leaving him blinded and deafened—

Again the blaze. of ruddy light—his father's face open and aghast and all the homesite—again the ear-shattering, mind-benumbing noise— Again the darkness and the thick, echoing silence.

From the house came the sound of a woman's voice, a hooting, ululating, uncontrolled, almost sexual sound. And upon this breakthrough every conceivable human and animal noise followed. The people poured out of the house, stumbling, trampling, crying, calling, shouting, shrieking; children wailing, woman wailing, boys trying to assert manhood and courage but betrayed by breaking voices, men demanding to see the faces of their enemies—

"Earthquake!"

"*Devils!*"

"Attack!"

"*Devils!*"

"Raid!"

"*Devils! Devils!*"

"A volcano in the sea!"

"Wild men!"

But, louder, shriller, deeper, more often, more deeply felt because more deeply feared than any of these—again and again and again: "*Devils! Devils! Devils!*"

They fell upon their knees, fell and sprawled full-length, stumbled, were knocked down, and they bellowed like the beasts in the pens. And, looking up, they saw two trails of fire across the sky, greater than the greatest meteor, and again came the blast of light and the rose-flambeau of sound, and now, looking upward, in the instant brief as lightning-flash, they saw the huge black hulls of the Devil-ships as they wheeled—*blaze! blast!—and circled—blast! blaze!—and* wheeled—blazing! blasting!—inward, downward, turning, turning—

And vanished toward the south in one final smash of sight and sound and staying forever upon the seared eyes, only turning colors, on! off! as the astonished lids sprang down and up and down: blink, blank, red, black, hull, horror, chaos, Kar-chee, dragon, dark, fire, flame, burning

light, Devils, Devils, death.

Daylight came at last, and when the morning mists had cleared away some strange disturbance in the air was seen toward the south, where the black sky-ships had gone.

This was the morning when Ren and Jow and the other men were to have gone to see for themselves the truth, if any, of the reports of the boys and the doddering oldfather.

They did not go.

Nobody went.

Nobody did anything.

Now and then a woman, movement automatic, perhaps more in response to habit or an aching breast, thrust her nipple into a tiny screaming mouth. Older children, not old enough to have quite succumbed as yet to the general paralysis of mind and body, either found food left over or went without. Now and then a groan or a sigh or whimper was heard, a rattling cough, a wordless and toneless murmur; nothing more. The wind spoke and the cattle complained, but nothing else. The very dogs were silent, scarcely bothering to crawl out of the sun. The very songbirds in their twig cages seemed to have caught the contagion and were silent.

It was close to noon when old Ren's wife appeared in her doorway. She looked around, made a gesture of dreadful despair. Her hair hung in witchlocks, sluttishly about her pendulous cheeks. She walked with melting strides toward the tiny cages hanging under the eaves of thatch, one by one flung open the tiny doors. The little birds fluttered, but none fluttered out. She opened her mouth and breathed painfully. Then, as though each gesture cost her infinite effort and infinite agony, she reached her hand into every little pen and closed it around each bewildered creature and drew it out and flung it away from her. "Go," she muttered. "Go... go..."

When the last of them had been released she looked around her once more; repeated her gesture of horror and hopelessness. For a moment only her expression changed to something approaching bewilderment and she shaded her eyes and peered as though looking for, as though missing something... someone... The moment did not long last. She melted back into her house. And all therein was silent.

Duro held his crossbow by the butt. He gazed, slack-mouthed, into space. Then his mouth closed, tightened, He swung forward on his knees and lifted the bow as though he were going to smash it into the ground.

Lors put his hand out. "Don't."

"Why not?"

The older brother's face and hand and head did not move much, nor did his eyes. But Duro knew him well enough to understand that an answer existed and would be presently forthcoming. He sank back and waited.

"Listen," Lors began after a long while. "When I was on my first overnight hunt, way out in the uplands," he began, looking straight at his brother, no trace of condescension or rivalry in his voice: equal to equal, now; and Duro, for the first time since the trouble began, felt pleasure grow in his heart; "—you've heard me tell of that?"

Duro said he had. "But tell it again," he said. The story was obviously intended to make a present point; besides, the hearkening to a story makes a pain to be forgotten (so the old proverb went).

A squall of snow, unseasonal and—peculiarly—driving downward from the middle upper ranges, had driven the hunting party even further up and out of their intended path. And up there in the clefts and rifts of the slope of Tihuaco they had come upon a hamlet of the dying and the dead and of the living-dead as well.

"The sickness had come on them," Lors said, recollection making his mouth twist, "and it was still on them, so—you can imagine—we didn't stay. But we stayed long enough for me to get the picture of it in my mind. Later on, hearing the older ones talk about it, I got it all clear and fixed. There's no cure for the sickness—either you recover or you don't. But those who were already sick just lay there as though they were already dead, and those who weren't sick just lay there as though they already were. They could have left, but they didn't. And not because they didn't want to risk infecting others, either, because they never opened a mouth to warn us off when they heard and saw us coming. It wasn't, either, that they stayed there to tend to the others, because we saw them begging for help and no one fetched them water.

"They just stayed and waited to die the way a rabbit does when it's face to face with a big snake. It trembles but it doesn't run. Even a rat will run or fight if it's cornered."

He paused and took a deep, shuddering breath.

"I saw Mia on my way out before," he said. "She just lay against the wall

and breathed... Yesterday you said I was in a hurry to get back and get on top of her. Well, I could have gotten on top of her right then and there and she wouldn't have said *No*, *Yes*, or *Oh, more*. But it would've been like mounting a corpse.

"Is it like this everywhere, Duro? It must be. If even Popa and Moma have given up, then who hasn't? They're all just waiting to die. They seem to think they're already dead."

Duro's head bent lower and lower. Then he lifted his hair out of his eyes as though it were very heavy, and said, "Who hasn't? You haven't. And I haven't. Thanks for not letting me smash the bow. If there's only one bolt left in all the world, then, brother, there'll be one dead Devil." And, just as Lors had made no stand of being older and in command, so Duro now made no stand of being younger and defiant. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it." Their eyes met in perfect understanding. They had never been so close before. They would never again be as far apart as they had been.

"I don't know what to tell you to do," Lors said, softly. "I don't know what you should do or what I should do. Something happened yesterday and something happened last night and something is happening today and probably they're all connected.

"But I don't know..."

"And even if they are connected, I still don't know... We heard our fill of oldfathers' tales about Devils' and big Devils and little Devils. What does it mean? Maybe no more than the ones about Arno Half-Devil—and there are *still* people who'd stake their privates on his changing into a giant cat in the night! What can I tell you to do? I don't know what's right or what's wrong. I only know what *I'm* going to do."

He got to his feet. Duro did the same. They both knew.

They hadn't gone far when someone swung onto the trail beside them. It was Tom-small, but not the placid Tom-small of the day before. They exchanged looks. "You're going south to see what's there," he said. It was a statement.

"Yes."

"So am I." That was a statement, too.

It did not fail to occur to them that if they were capable of smelling the dragon-Devils, the dragon-Devils might be equally capable of smelling them. The thing, then, was to keep the wind in their favor... but this was a figure of speech: they could not of course keep the wind, they had to keep

with the wind. At the moment there was none discernable, and this gave them time to reflect on the other part of the equation, which was the matter of where the Devils, thick or thin, might now be.

"Maybe along the beach-coast," Duro suggested. There they had seen them yesterday, after all. Lors pointed out that it was no mere disinterested desire to find the creatures which alone had brought them, all there, upon the trail.

"There's a way down to the beach not far from here, at Goat Rock," he said. "And that's all the way, either up or down, from here on south, until you get to the caves... which is quite a ways."

Duro didn't see what he meant. "It's no ways at all; we can walk it in an hour..."

"And suppose we get caught half-way? How long would it take us to *run*? We can't sprout wings and fly, you know. And I wouldn't want to have to try swimming, either."

The point was conceded. Here and there, almost automatically, one or the other of them pointed out clumps of hair frayed against a tree; but no move was made or intended to pursue these signs of game. It was not venison that they were after now, descending the forest trails—indeed, none of them was quite sure what they *were* after. A sight of the strange creatures, to be sure... a safe sight, certainly. But then what? And after then, what? Such questions were equally unspoken and unanswered. Now and then, warily crossing open terrain, they felt the sun hot upon their heads and shoulders; but in short moments they were back in the shade once more. It soon became obvious that Lors was not intending to make for the beach by the nearest way, if at all. Duro and Tom-small said nothing; they followed. Few signs of life were observed, but now, so close to noon, when most live things favored rest and shade, was never a propitious time of day for such observations. Now and then a faint taste of the sea came on the light and intermittent breeze, or the familiar smell of sap and grass and rotting leaves; once, a stronger scent, a musky one, of some male creature's harboring or staling. But these were of only negative significance. The wind—such wind as there was—was still toward them, and it carried no warning on it.

There was no river in the land worthy of the name, but there was a point within sighting from their route where within a short distance a number of streams joined to make what was called, as it ran coursing through the savannah, the Spate. Such was its noise that they were long in hearing the other one, and did not recognize it when they did. They slowed

their gait, they moved more cautiously, they frowned in concentration... Logs, perhaps, thudding against each other or against rocks... logs perhaps escaped from woodcutters in the farther uplands, or perhaps intended by them to be thus moved downward... or trees, it might be, dislodged by the undercutting of some distant embankment by the eternal action of the streams...

Such notions did not long bemuse them, for, the Spate and the savannah coming suddenly and alike into sight, they saw far off and below down the gentle incline three huge black hulks pointing blunt snouts at the silent skies.

They rested there as the three points of a wide-based triangle and it seemed in that second that each one was an eyeless face from which protruded a long and rippling tongue. One rooted up rocks and earth and licked them along, one sucked up water, and one conveyed the mixture into a single black cube from which, it seemed, the rhythmic thudding came. It seemed to them that things moved in the open side of this cube, tall things, thin things, things with other things in their great claw-hands... it seemed... shock and the distance made semblance uncertain. The wind shifted.

The rank and alien odor struck them like a blow, so benumbing them that they looked all around ahead for the source before it occurred to them that it was against the crawling hairs of their napes and the backs of their heads that the breeze now blew. And therefore the dragon was behind them—

To cock and load and aim and fire a crossbow while lying on one's back is probably not the most difficult thing in the world, but neither does it rank among the easiest. The dead and heavy tree limb still dangling from the breach in the branch was just within bow-shot. Lors's bolt split the flap of bark; almost the instant the small sound of this reached them they saw the bulk of withered wood fall and saw the dust spiraling in the beam of sunlight, and then they heard the sound of the crash. Hard upon this, forgetful of harsh spikes of grass or roots or stones against their flesh as they embraced the ground, they heard another sound: a hiss, louder than the hiss of the largest serpent they could conjure fantasy of. They heard it so short a time that they might almost have imagined that they had imagined it, but even as the sound vanished in their ears they felt along the whole supine lengths of them the ground shudder (they felt it, did not hear it), saw the great green-black form move so delicately diagonally toward the place where the limb had fallen from the tree that although they could not see they could imagine with dreadful detail and probable

truth how the grained webbing between each great toe would fold in as the foot was silently lifted and then expand as each great foot was silently, swiftly set down again.

Oblivious of pain or anything else but flight—*instant flight!*—they crawled upon their bellies backwards and sideways and vanished into the concealing covert of the thickets. Thorns tore at them and took toll, bushes resisted parting, but they pressed onward and away.

The Devil-dragon must have found the crossbow bolt—they afterward agreed on this—*must*, in that moment of sight, have understood everything: that there was nothing there of itself to draw a shot and even if there had been they would not have ventured to shoot at it so close to the alien encampment, and that therefore the bolt had been loosed for no other reason than to part the heavy branch and use the noise of its fall to draw away pursuit. Upon understanding came rage—at least rage; perhaps more—a signal, an alarm, an appeal—

—From behind came the hiss again, this time not cut short, and, after the air had ceased to quiver from the hiss, came a great burst of guttural sound, the coughing of a giant; and then noise for which no words existed for them. Roaring? Bellowing? Thundering? They had no need for names or words. They responded by the shrinking of their cullions and the swelling of their hearts and the cold sweat upon their skins. And by pressing on, writhing, sliding, ever away. Long after the noise behind them ceased they still had not dared rise up to run like men: and perhaps they owed to this that they were still live men.

And they did not rise to their feet until Duro saw before him the tumbled, Assured mass of rock like half-melted honeycomb, which he knew ran on and on and on, if not forever, at least for long enough for him to breath deep and know he would draw at least a several few breaths safely thereafter:

The caves!

IV



The raft as such had ceased to exist by the time Liam was well enough to come on deck, half-expecting to see it bobbing behind. A pile of its

timbers were stacked nearly about; a few more were in the process of being split into planks; a few piles of such planks were pointed out to him, as well as a bin of fragments from which an old woman was feeding a fire-box well bedded in sand.

"You seem to have made good use of it," Liam said. 'Waste not, want not,' " graybeard Gaspar intoned. "A saying of our wise ancients, as true today as the first day it was uttered. I am sure it relieves you to know that you, have already payed your own way."

Liam looked at him just a trifle askance. On the one hand, he was of course grateful and glad for his life; glad for the food and the drink and the care: hence, yes, pleased that Gaspar and his people considered that the raft had paid for all this. On the other hand, he entertained a view of the whole matter which could not be fitted into a framework which contained the conception of payment in goods for saving lives. And he wondered what Gaspar the Knower and the others in the Ark might have done if the raft had not been there to serve for payment. But this was like wondering about a two-sided triangle...

And not every life had been saved; small wonder if fresh-baked bread and dried fruit and smoked meat and broth of parched vegetables and cool water and shelter from the burning sun, wonders though they were, did not come in time to make up for the so-long lack of them.

There had been those who had clung to life with tenacious avidity even in the face of famine and drought, only to let go their hold on life with food and water still on their lips. And others to whom strange fantasies had become, if not facts, at least attitudes: that the arkfolk had not merely—fortuitously or providentially—in saving their lives done a deed of mercy, but that in some unknown, but not unsuspectible, way the arkfolk were part of an overall scheme... details infinitely vague... a scheme in which Liam (to the minds of some of them) might be also involved, wittingly or otherwise... "Weary, wary, cynical, grim, bitter," they declared by their manner if not by their words that they were not to be cozened or deceived any further; that they had suffered enough so far; that henceforth they were to be exceedingly canny and cautious and that the burden of proof lay upon everyone else.

And the fact that they had never heard of an "ark" merely added to the bitter mystery of things.

Liam, moving slowly, slowly around the deck of this curious vessel, sometimes holding to the side and sometimes to Gaspar, as yet did not fully grasp the meaning of the odd looks cast him by a few of his followers,

themselves crawling cautiously about or merely reposing on the deck of the ark in the positions which had become habitual to them through reposing on the deck of the raft, His eyes and mind were both at work, but for the moment, satisfied that his people were not in want, he preferred to concentrate on other matters.

"Another thing our wise ancients used to say," Gaspar went on; "our wise ancients used to say, 'Knowledge is power.' Do you understand that? No, you don't, you only think you do. If you had understood it you wouldn't have been dying of hunger and thirst. You *were* dying of hunger and thirst, so that proves you didn't understand it. But the fact that you had made an attempt indicates that you are capable of understanding it. Listen to what I tell you, young man, and then you will understand, you will become knowledgeable, and hence powerful.

"Do you see how well prepared this Ark is? How cleverly and how sturdily it is made? How it is provisioned with food and fuel and water? Look at the drain-gutters and pipes and barrels—if a sudden shower occurred at this minute not a drop of water would be lost. Observe how all of our people are engaged in assigned and useful tasks, not sunken in corrosive sloth or corrupting idleness. See how well-cared for our beasts and poultry are. Do you notice the young people at their lessons? You do. May I ask you the rhetorical question, 'Did you make any of these beneficial arrangements for your own vessel and people?' "

Liam put one peeling foot down carefully in front of another. "There wasn't time," he said.

"You did not. Exactly. Time? Wasn't time? There is always time. It depends what one does with time. You are the product of a society given over to violence and self-indulgence, confusing knowledge with knowing. By suffering the hypocrisy of a regime which ignored the laws of Nature, you saw that society met its inevitable destruction. Can Nature be successfully resisted? Of course not."

Liam resisted the temptation to say, "Old graybeard Gaspar, you are babbling." For one thing, it was not courtly; for another, it was not... hardly... safe. And besides, there was just a germ, a grain of conviction in the fact that the ark *was* exceedingly well made, arranged, provisioned, and ordered. Gaspar's words were persuasive of foolishness, but the existence and circumstancing of the ark seemed anything but folly. Liam resolved to listen well and long before voicing curt conclusions.

Gaspar passed his hand over his beard in a smooth motion, said, equally smoothly, "you perceive how unanswerable my argument is. Very

well. To continue. The man of the multitude, contented with little, observes that a thing happens, and to him it is as though the happening has neither past nor future: as though something materializes from nothing and will subsequently dematerialize into nothing. But this is not so. Am I correct? Of course I am correct. Follow me closely, now. *Nothing happens without a cause*. The acceptance of this maxim is the solid foundation of all human knowledge, progress and hope."

He paused to watch and nod approval as the hide of a just-slaughtered bull-calf was carefully scraped with a sharp stone to remove the hair from one side and the fat from the other. Even these were not wasted and went carefully into containers provided for them. The fat was edible and the hair could be used to make brushes. "And therefore—" Liam gave the conversation a polite nudge. He scanned the horizon. Nothing in sight but water. Nothing. Surely Gaspar and his people did not intend to remain afloat forever?

"And therefore," Gaspar took up the thread once more, "it is necessary to inquire as to the cause of a thing, and this is to say that it is necessary to inquire into the causes of all things. Does this not follow?"

"Granted."

"So. Suppose a man neglect or abuse his body. What is the inevitable result? The inevitable result is disease, blemishes, decay, breakdown, the appearance of evil sores and destructive parasites; all of which attack the body further. The foolish man bewails what has happened to him, not realizing that it has not merely or actually *happened* at all—but that he, through his folly, has *caused* it to happen! Now, fellow from a far country, let us apply this knowledge to the social body as well as to the individual body. Follow me closely. Suppose the social body, or, if you prefer, the body social, is neglected or abused. What is the inevitable result? The same... only, of course, on a much wider scale. *Disease*—a plague spreads. *Blemishes*—accident and misfortune vex the land. *Decay*—more people die than are born. *Breakdown*—bridges and boats and buildings are destroyed. *Evil sores and destructive parasites*—this means dragons and Kar-chee. Now—"

Liam blinked and gaped. He put out his hand and Gaspar politely raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

" 'Evil and destructive' means *what?*"

"You have not listened carefully; However, I make allowances for the several circumstances of, firstly, you grew up in a benighted outland and not in a community of Knowers; secondly, you have suffered physically and

mentally from your ill-managed venture upon the raft; thirdly, I do not wish to dwell upon it and perhaps hurt your feelings, but I must testify to what I see and in this case I see that you suffer from a physical malady: to wit, your eyes do not match, and from this it follows that—"

Liam, trying intensely hard to recall the Father Knower's exact words and stem the flood of rhetoric, said, rather loudly, " '*Destructive parasites.*' "

And Gaspar immediately said, "Kar-chee."

He was about to say more but a young woman of the stranger people, lighthaired and not ill-favored, rose from where she was sitting and stroking a small gray lamb, and said, "Liam!"

Her friend began to smile, then made an abrupt, impatient gesture, and she started to back away. He grasped her hand and drew her along, saying, "Father, your pardon, but—"

"Granted. Young person, your name has not been made known to me."

"Cerry... Cerry, I'm called."

"Have all your wants been made known to the Mother?"

"Yes... She's been very kind."

" 'Kind,' a word of insufficient exactitude. The Mother knows her work; if you have made known your wants to her they will by now have been supplied if it is proper and convenient for them to be so. Has she informed you on the subject of cohabitation? You flush. How becoming and proper. So be it. Accompany us on our conversational circuit of the ark if you wish, but feel no compulsion, and on no account interrupt us further or again."

So on they went, past the sheep-pens freshly littered with sawdust, past the woman plying distaff and spindle, past the sick-bay where some of the raft-people still lay, down to the close-packed but neatly arranged living-quarters—hammocks lashed and stowed; bachelors' section here, single women there, nursery, married couples' quarters; supplies: food, seed, tools, cloth, yarn, hides, salt, spices, water. Father Gaspar checked everything, inspected the rude but serviceable pumps, peered into each of the tripart hulls—and talked... talked... talked...

After a long, long time he informed them that it was his period for rest, and politely dismissed them.

Back up on deck, in a niche which, as no one else seemed to have claimed it, they made their own, Liam looked at Cerry. And she at him.

After a moment, he asked, "And what, exactly, did the Mother inform you about cohabitation?"

She half-smiled, half-scowled. "Oh... since no one knows for sure how long we'll be at sea, and since pregnancy and childbirth would be inconvenient for the duration of the voyage, all cohabitation has to be, well, 'qualified,' was her word for it. I can go into details if you'd really like."

"Not necessary."

"That's what I thought," she said, moodily.

"I haven't forced you or distrained you. I don't now."

She blew out her lips. "Thank you, brave one. I understand that I am free to take my sheepskin elsewhere for qualified cohabitation..." With a quick expression of her face she showed what she thought of that, and with a quick glance of her eye and pressure of her hand on his she showed what she still thought of Liam. Then, "Well, the Mother is not a bad old one, considering that she's been the sole wife of old Father Know-it-all for thirty years. Tell me, Liam: are they all quite mad? Or just him?"

He said, "I suppose it's a sort of qualified madness, one may say. Don't laugh, lewd woman... I don't know for sure what to think of it all. Except that I think for sure that I am glad this vessel, *ark*, as they call it, was there when we were there... wherever we were... If we just had a map... Well. *Every man hath his own madness*. A saying from our own wise ancients..."

He ruffled her light hair. The ark women had been obliged to cut it short, so tangled had it been. "This is no single, simple thread we have to follow; this you know, Cerry, don't you? It goes weaving in and weaving out, it leads through the fire and the sea and storm, it's full of knots, but the knots are proper parts of it. The Knowers are one knot. We'll unravel it yet. And we will be sure of finding use for the slack as well. I'm sure of that."

He was sure of little else but that. The ark folk were kind enough—"imprecise" though their captain-priest-father might find the term; they went about their duties with efficiency. If Liam were pressed to name a particular impression received from them, he might have inverted the reply by saying that he was most impressed by a lack of any strong impression. Listless was by far too strong a term. Browbeaten was equally untrue—Gaspar, the Father Knower, might perhaps have simply

overwhelmed them all by his ceaseless flow of wordage. Chiefly he felt the lack of any stronger personality, single or collective. And if there were more to it than that, then he did not know.

The vessel was both the largest and the oddest he had ever seen. It had stepping for a mast—and, indeed, several mast sections as well as huge rolls of matting doubtless intended for sail were all clearly visible on deck—yet the mast was not stepped and the breeze did no more than cool the air... cunningly diverted belowdecks by screens set for the purpose at the ladderheads. Also, thole-pins were in place and sweeps of a size for them all neatly arranged; yet no oar was set up; only the tiller oar, and that was lashed fixed. Still, the ark did move; it moved—as Liam observed, having for that purpose tossed a chip overboard—at a good pace. It seemed, then, that the ark had gotten into an ocean current, a mer-stream, and that old Gaspar knew enough about it to be quite confident as to where it was taking him, and at what speed, and for how long. Whence it was a reasonable assumption that eventually the mast would go up and the sails, too; and then, though not necessarily at once, the oars.

Liam had a strong sentiment that, in some things at least, Father Gaspar was, indeed, and literally, a Knower.

The sea had long since come to seem to him the natural element; memories of the land behind receded; the land (or lands) before remained as yet but unformed hopes. He watched the sun plunge into the sea, a descent so much more swift than the long, slow sunsets of his lost northern homeland. The luminous washings of the night waves seemed now merely proper and familiar and no more, no longer sinister. Something was happening to the forms of the star-clusters; he wished now with all his heart that he had taken thought to make a map of the constellations long before now; but it was not too late... he could ask the Father Knower for sketching materials tomorrow; if they were refused (or, a likelier negative, smoothly and reasonably declined), he would manage to improvise them somehow.

His mind was filled with this as he sat on deck with Cerry, beneath a sort of high chair in which sat a young man who had the lookout watch. And presently they became aware that someone else had joined them. He thought at first it was probably one of his own, the raft people—although with that thought came another: were they still "his own people"? and how many, if any? and which ones?—but before the faint star-gleam and almost equally faint sea-gleam could reveal the lineaments of the face, the accents of the low, soft voice told him it was one of the ark's people.

"You don't know... you didn't, ever, know Serra?"

"I'm sure I never heard of her. Or—him?"

The young man laughed, softly, shyly. The laugh ended abruptly. Someone else had joined them. After a moment: "No... oh... Serra is the place where we used to live." The name still meant nothing to Liam. But he now knew that the conversation was a clandestine one, that the speaker had for a moment been concerned about the identity of the last arrival, but was now content about it.

"In which direction did Serra lie? And what sort of a place was it?"

A hand was waved vaguely. "Back that way... It used to be a part of—do you know the old names?—of Africa. But we aren't of the old Serran stock. Before, although I don't remember it, we lived in Sori. And before that, we used to live in Jari. And before that— But it doesn't matter. My name is Rickar."

Even softer, from the other: "And mine is Fateem." It was a girl's voice.

There was a curious silence.

Rickar, launching his speech upon a sigh, began to tell them of life in Serra: the rich, intensely-cultivated soil, the games played, the songs sung, the names of the towns and what each was specially noted for—this one for the friendliness of its women, that one for the strength of its men, another for commerical cunning, a fourth for cloth of good weave, a fifth for its famous view... His voice died away upon another sigh.

"And which one," asked Cerry, "were you from?"

Rickar made an abrupt sound in his throat. "We weren't from any of them, really. We kept apart. We were the Knowers. We worked, traded, studied... but all the while, you know, all the while, we waited."

"Waited for what, Rickar?"

"For the sinning to start. For the punishment to follow. For the time to come for us to leave and move on again. You must know about all that. You were with my father so long this afternoon. I know he was the same man this afternoon as he was this morning, so I am sure that he must have explained it all to you."

Neither Liam nor Cerry denied it. They said nothing. Rickar nevertheless began to repeat what he knew that they knew, and they suffered him to do so. It was like looking through another window; the sight was the same, but the angle was different—if some details were lost to sight, others were thus revealed.

And another crept up through the gentle darkness, and another, and another.

...then the village headman stole some of the tax-goods, and my father and the elders and elderesses shook their heads...

"...but her second husband sold her property and spent it on other women, and when my mother heard of this she said...

"...it was said that the bridge was almost a hundred years old and a wonder it had stood up so long, but when it collapsed...

"...so we began to assemble the ark again and get things to be ready, and, really, that was many years ago, and all those many years the people—the other people—laughed at us. But my father said it was useless to warn them. Well... it's true. The Kar-chee Devils and their dragons did come, they were sighted at the western end of Serra, and the whole place began to boil like an ant-hill. You never saw such preparations for war!"

Liam said, even more softly than Rickar, "Perhaps I have..."

Abruptly, Fateem spoke, her voice quite young and very sweet in tone. "You attacked and defeated them, didn't you? You really did! You really did!"

"Ah, well, no as well as yes," Liam began. But there was a stir in the darkness, and those there had no mind for equivocations or even for explanations.

Yes, he had attacked the Kar-chee Devils! Some of the other raftsmen had told about it. (The tale, quite clearly, had grown great in the telling.) He had defeated the Kar-chee Devils! *And* the stinking dragon Devils! Shot monstrous stones and monstrous arrows at them with tremendous engines! Left their encampments burning and smoking! And then—

(And here he thought they were all about to overwhelm him and smother him with their youthful eagerness and touch him for a touch of potent luck as though he were a mage-tree or a sage-stone.)

—And then he and his men and his women had, in more zeal than cunning, set off in the raft to bring the news to other peoples that the Devils *could* be defeated!

"That they are only beasts of flesh and blood," Fateem declared, her slight voice trembling. "You *did!* You *did!*"

It seemed almost as though she defied him to deny it. And he did not quite accept the challenge. "There is a time for telling and a time for dwelling," he said, evasively. "Not every new thing heard is true and not

every old thing heard is false. I think it would be best for you to please me by speaking no more of this matter for now. We are guests and strangers aboard your craft. Do you understand? Then go, as you favor me, go one by one and quietly to your places and to sleep..."

Long, long they sat there, after the young ark-folk had gone. They watched the sea and they watched the sky and after a while they saw a piece of a star come melting down and by this sign they knew that great matters were a-wing; but they did not yet know what.

Liam said, "I think we'll sleep ourselves now. First I'll go slumber with my gray eye open and my brown one shut, and then I'll change about. I don't think that anyone aboard will try to slip up and wrong me, but I am not utterly convinced of it."

Later, as they lay between the sheepskins, Cerry heard him murmur, "There never was a religion lasted even two days yet without a day-old heresy..."

The Mother Knower—Gaspar's wife and Rickar's mother—was a tall, stooped, flat-chested woman, with large sunken eyes. Some whisper, some rumor, of the prior night's clandestine gathering must have reached her ears, for late the following morning she betook herself from her duties and came to ask Liam if he could be of help in sorting wool. Certainly there must have been among the ark folk others whom she knew to be of use in this; equally certainly he would not refuse... so his thoughts ran. He was feeling, it seemed to him, stronger by every hour.

"This is not our kind of wool," he commented, fingering the pile, dirty-gray-black on the surface of each fleece, and underneath ranging from pure black to creamy-fawn to pure white. "But it smells much the same."

Mother Nor smiled faintly. "I never minded that," she said. "It is a healthy smell. Of course, wool was not much suited to the climate of Serra—or, for that matter, Sori or Jari. The sheep came with us from Amhar, our first home. Perhaps someday we will live in a cooler place; then we will see fulfilled the counsel of our wise ancients, always to bring the sheep with us."

His hands picked and pulled and placed, the familiar feel and scent of lanolin bringing memories before his inner eyes.

"Had they good sheep, in your own home land?" she asked, softly.

"Yes... Good sheep... Good men, too."

She sighed, shook her head. "But not good enough. They sinned greatly, or else the punishment of the Double Devils would not have been visited upon them... don't you see?"

Liam thought he would change the subject. "Do you think eventually to find your way north once more, to a cooler climate?"

The sunken, gentle eyes looked at him with mild surprise. "It may be so. We do not know. But it would not be necessary to go north in order to find the climate cooler, for it will become so eventually if one ventures far enough south. Didn't you know that?"

He shook his head, perplexed. "I had always been told that it grew always hotter as one proceeds south, until eventually no one can live because of the intense heat of the Southern Hell. I wasn't sure that I believed in the Southern Hell—or, for that matter, in the Northern one. Still... there must be something up in that frozen place, because we did see the lights. Have you ever seen them? They shone not long before I left... as though a great bowl of shimmering green had descended upon the night sky. So... it seemed reasonable that if there was a Northern Hell that there should be a Southern one, too. But I was never sure."

Now it was her turn for head-shaking. "No," she said. "Oh, no... there is no such thing as a Southern Hell. It grows hotter only up to a point, and afterward it commences to grow cool. As for these so-called lights, they are probably a delusion. A delusion," she said, firmly, "like the delusion that the visitations of outraged nature can or should be resisted."

He gave up trying to change the subject. Let her have her say and say it out; everyone else was doing so. "The Kar-chee, you mean. And the dragons."

She meant. Yes. The Double Devils. Could it really be that his own landsmen, not content with bringing this punishment upon themselves by sins and breaches of judgment and neglect of proper ways, had actually been so blasphemous as to *resist*? To *attack*? He assured her that they had, indeed. She was truly, genuinely shocked. "And what happened afterward, Liam? Wasn't there greater destruction than before? Surely there was! And did that not prove it? Was this not evident, obvious proof of the—not merely futility, but the absolute *wrongness* of resisting the Double Devils?"

"But... Mother Nor... what would you have people do? Submit, supinely, and see their land destroyed?"

She took his hands in hers. "Young Liam, can they, by resisting, prevent their lands from being destroyed? The destruction of the land, like the appearance of the Kar-chee and the dragon, is an act of Manifest Nature. Man can no more hope to resist it successfully than he can hope to subdue the waves with a broom, or bring down the stars with a noose. Salvation does not lie in resistance. Salvation lies in *compliance!* Man is but clay in Nature's hands. A course of action has been outlined for him and it is for him to follow that course. Proper action, correct deeds, the application of justice and equity: *these* will bring safety; these alone.

"What should the people of your home land have done when the Double Devils appeared? They should have built an ark and departed in search of a place to settle in—"

He broke in, "And waited there, passively, until the next visitation?"

But (she protested) if they would only be virtuous, obedient, diligent in the pursuit of proper conduct, then there would be no "next visitation"!

"Not 'passively,' no. Activity—but active in the correct way. Have you never thought to wonder *why* the Double Devils exist at all? Surely you know that nothing happens without a cause, and that no cause exists without a purpose? I'm told that your people believe that the Kar-chee come from the stars. This is mere superstition. No—this is *rank* superstition! The stars are made of purest fire and nothing comes from them but burning embers... sometimes we see them streak, flaming across the sky at night; sometimes we find the burnt-out coals upon the ground. But no living thing comes from the stars because no living thing can live in the stars. Why? Because the stars are fire and living things cannot live in fire." Her voice was earnest and sincere and she looked at him to see if he understood.

Liam, suppressing a sigh, said, "Well, Mother, your arguments are persuasive, and it is perhaps not for me, being rude and unsure, to say that they are not correct. You speak of it being possible to prevent the visitation of the Kar-chee. To me, their non-appearance would be a miracle. But you say that in order for this to happen, all mankind must become virtuous. And, to me, Mother, this would be an even greater miracle."

She swept up a pile of tufts of wool with her hand. "My son, it is necessary, then, for you to learn that man can compel the performance of miracles, that it lies within his power to do so; and that, indeed, he *must* do so, for man is a miraculous creature."

"Land is near," Gaspar declared, approaching Liam in his usual majestic fashion, and leaving moderate excitement in his wake. "All things, of course, are comparative: in terms of walking, or, to be more accurate, swimming, land is still very far. But in terms of the distance we have voyaged, land is rather near. Yes, yes," he said, contentedly, stroking his vast gray beard.

Liam asked the obvious question.

"How do we know? We are Knowers. It is our duty to know. But to reply more specifically: by the observation of the clouds, by the flight of birds, by the scent and direction of the winds, by the nature of drifting wood and weeds, by the color of the sea; and by many other numerous and significant things. We *know*—as you could, too, if you were one of us. But we will leave that matter for the immediate present. Only for the immediate present, though. By and by we must take it up. We are determined that our stay in this newest land, if it is suitable for habitation, must be of long duration. From which it must follow that we can harbor none among us who are not of our knowledge and our ways. Otherwise the same sorry story of sin, injustice, and iniquity, followed by punishment and Devilish visitation and destruction will repeat itself. We are wearied of it. Yes, Liam, we are wearied of it."

With a firm nod of his head he passed on, leaving Liam with much to think about.

But within a few moments his meditations were interrupted. Gaspar was giving orders. The helm was unlashd and a man stationed on it. The mast was stepped into its socket, and the sails of sewn-matting bent in place to the yards. Oars were gotten ready. So far, evidently, they had ridden with the current (though presumably sail or oars had been needed to get them into it, in the first place)—but they were going to take no chances now, either of the current's taking them past the land or perhaps wrecking them upon reefs or shoals or shores or shallows.

All day long they watched, the arkmens abating somewhat their attitude of abstraction, and the raftmen theirs of suspicion... but no land came into sight.

And that night Rickar and his friends returned again for whispering heresy. Liam hardly felt that he could either encourage or discourage them. He agreed that something better than the present group of choices should exist, but he did not know what that something might be. Pressed, urged that his "experience" demanded him to know more than the Knowers, old or young, at least upon this particular subject, he scowled...

paused... said, at last, "We could hardly know less about Kar-chee and dragon than we do. Perhaps if we knew more we could do more... perhaps not..."

"But if we should find them here, or anywhere—or if they should find us—I wonder if we wouldn't do better—rather than at once fleeing, or at once fighting—oh, I'm *sure* we would do better—to lie low. Not let ourselves be seen a while, or seen again. And concentrate everything on finding out as much as we can about them... without their finding out anything about us."

Rickar said: "Hiding and skulking?"

"Put a stinking name to it and say it smells bad, if you like. You're vexed because I won't offer to lead you in a charge, aren't you? If I thought it would do more than momentary good, I would. If I ever do, I will. But meanwhile... Knowers? On this subject, let us all become knowers. Father Gaspar's proverb: 'Knowledge is power.' "

A sudden, dull glow of light suffused the horizon.

"Heat lightning," someone murmured, even as it vanished. It appeared again, twice more. The air seemed to quiver. Then, darkness, and the silent stars.

Late the next afternoon land appeared—lying upon the rim of the sea like some crouching beast, and, presumably far inland, surmounting the high-massed land, a mountain peak with a long wisp of cloud pendant to it.

Gaspar had appeared to welcome the suggestion of Liam that he and other raftmen accompany the arkfold chosen to make an exploratory landing. Perhaps because this way, should anything untoward happen to the makers of the first landfall, the losses to and of his own people would be thereby diminished... or so thought Liam.

But Gaspar would not allow the ark to put in close until the next day. For the remainder of light time they stood down the coast, making soundings, but finding no bottom anywhere. And toward the last he gave a little sound of satisfaction and pointed toward a line of white or yellow in between the dark water and the darker land.

"Beach-coast, you see. Just the place for a small boat to put ashore—" He was interrupted by a shout. Bottom had been found at last. "Good, then. We'll anchor and ride here tonight."

It was cold and the stars were just beginning to pale when Liam, Rickar,

an older Knower named Lej who was the uncle of Fateem, and the raftsmen Skai descended into the small craft, hoisted a small triangular sail, and let the wind take them in. Day crept out, the sun leaped up, something moved upon the beach, and presently they saw it dissolve into three things... three men. Warily they checked their weapons. The three men were soon seen to be three very young men, two of them evidently brothers. Surprise and suspicion jostled for place on their faces; Liam felt he knew exactly how they must feel.

Lej was the first to speak. "War is not our wish," he said. He took a tiny pouch of flour, emptied it into his hand, tossed it north... south... east... west. "Peace and plenty to the four quarters of your land. May the blessings of Nature be made manifest upon them and upon you and upon yours."

The three young men looked uncertain, perhaps regretting a ritual of welcome which they didn't have. Then, after exchanging glances, they stowed their bows and stepped into the water and helped beach the canoe. The older brother said, "All men are welcome here now, I think..."

They looked around them with something close to fright, and they lifted their heads and sniffed the air. Some of the near-fear seemed to ebb. And the younger brother said, "There are dragons hereabouts..."

V



Ren Rowan now seemed old enough to be the father of the man he had been but a few days before. The homesite already had a slovenly and half-abandoned air to it. He gazed at the newcomers blankly at first, squinted and gaped at his sons, frowned as he observed the signs of decay quickening about his yard and house. Then he said, after several starts and stops and with idiot soundings and smackings of tongue and palate and throat, "So... Came here to die... Could have died at home..." Then he looked at them with the dull, sick look with which a man painfully and irrevocably ill may reproach those who do not share his pain.

Lej's answer was brisk. "Everyone has to die, but no one has to die just yet. This man here, he with the strange eyes, he and men and women from his country, were found by us at sea on a raft. They had despaired to do other than die, but they are, as you may see, alive and well nonetheless."

Liam listened with wry appreciation, noting how Lej said nothing of the raft people who were *not* now "alive and well nonetheless." He noted with some surprise that this seemed to be a different Lej. Aboard the ark he had apparently been in some sort of suspended animation, with nothing to do except perform his duties and listen to old Father Gaspar. Now the mantle of Gaspar, the principal knower, seemed to have devolved upon him by proxy and by right of senior age. This was not now the obedient subordinate speaking; it was the true believer, preaching to the ignorant.

"Needn't die just yet..." Old Ren repeated the words. A very faint flicker passed over his face. It was not hope—not yet—it may have been only disagreement. But it indicated the return of some emotion other than lethargy and absolute resignation. Lors looked from Lej, smooth, utterly confident, to his father, so suddenly and prematurely bereft of hope and strength and even manhood. He did not know what Lej was about to say, but he felt at that moment that if it would restore his father to the man he had been, then, whatever it was, he, Lors, would follow and obey.

"There can be no right action without right knowledge," Lej went on. "I see this house building, these outbuildings, these fields and groves and cattle and stock; and I observe that they do not pertain to savages nor to barbarians, nor to men who live like brutals with no inkling of the social complex. I see here a settlement of civilized people, of people who possess knowledge and the ability to know more."

He paused to let this sink in, and turned his head to look at the others, some of whom had already begun to look up from every conceivable moribund posture. His eye seemed to draw them up, draw them out and away from the all-consuming terror which had blunted the senses. The wind blew sweet from the grasslands and woods and a bird sounded its territorial note, liquid and prideful. The trees rustled and shook a powdery shower of tiny blossoms down upon them where they lay or crouched and slumped. Already, merely by the intrusion of the stranger with his strange words, they had suddenly become aware of many things which had been forgotten.

"But I see here, too," Lej went on, "a community which does not yet know enough... one whose knowledge has not been sufficient to save it from nearly dying of fright. Friends! Listen to me! I have very important things to say to you! Only men themselves, and women, are capable of totally arbitrary and capricious actions. But Manifest Nature is not. Manifest Nature does nothing without a cause, nothing without a purpose. The fearsome demons who have, I am told, now appeared among you, have been sent here by Nature for a purpose, and that purpose is not

to destroy you, utterly. *Is not!*

"Only if you are foolish and sinful enough to resist is destruction certain. But if you will examine your inner selves, admit that you have done wrongfully, if you resolve to learn from the Knowers how to avoid future transgression, and if you are determined, friends, not only to learn what to do *but to do it!*—then salvation is possible. If you wish to learn, we will teach you. If you, having learned, having come to know and having joined the community of the Knowers, then take the next inevitable and logical step—that of leaving the land tainted by former transgressions—"

Old Ren groaned. He struck his head with his hands.

"Leave? What for? So that the Devil can follow us? If we're to be killed, then let's be killed here... Here! Where we were all born and where we've all lived..."

Lej almost smiled at him. "But, old sir and friend, that's what we've come to show you: that you need not any of you be killed. Not here and not anywhere. Animals kill because they are hungry. So do sharks. But Devils are not animals, they are Devils! In their actions toward mankind the creatures of Devilkind aren't moved by necessity of hunger. If your children do wrong, you cut a switch and you punish them. The switch is not moved by any intelligence or force of its own. The switch is moved by you! *You* are the one perceiving the necessity of punishment, but the switch itself perceives nothing. The child fears the switch itself only if he lacks the wit to understand that he should rather fear his father's arm... but it takes only a little while for him to realize that *if he will not misbehave he will not be punished!*

"Are you beginning to see? The Double Devils are merely the implements by which we, children of Manifest Nature, are being punished. They have no mind of their own, you know. All we need do to avoid them is to cease deserving them. And if you should ask, in that case why need we build the vessels which the Knowers call *arks* and why should we prepare food and drink and timber and seeds and stocks of goods and select the best of our beasts and why need we venture into exile upon these arks?—why will it not suffice if we repent and begin to follow a proper course of actions right here where we already are?—"

He had either made this same address often before, Liam considered, watching Lej's very ordinary face suffused with a confidence which seemed to lift him above self, or else he had heard it so often before that he had soaked it up and was now disgorging it word for word and point by point.

"If this is what you're about to ask, friends, then you needn't wait long

for the answer. The exile is itself a necessary form of the punishment. Do you see it now? Of course you do. It's so very simple, isn't it? This land has been tainted. The appearance of the Devils proves that—if it weren't tainted they wouldn't be here. The land is seeped and soaked in sin; it's running over with it. You *can't* stay here; you *couldn't* follow a course of genuine knowledge and proper conduct here; you *must* leave it and venture out upon the cleansing sea and reflect and ponder and—"

His words went on and on and on. He had an answer for everything. The Kar-chee weren't everywhere at once; neither were the dragons. They did not move with the speed of the wind, they moved, indeed, rather slowly in their work of purifying the land from sin. It was only necessary to keep out of their way as they went about their pre-ordained and essential tasks. If they came near, then move far. And, meanwhile, let trees be selected for felling if seasoned timber enough was not available: there would be time. Oh, yes, there would be time. Haste makes waste. Knowledge is power. Meanwhile, the very palisade of the homesite itself was useful timber, and there were the beams of the houses, too. The Knowers knew how. The Knowers knew why. And when. The Knowers, in short, *knew*.

Skai, a pale-faced and scant-bearded man, standing next to Liam, said, "Makes sense. Makes sense. Wouldn't you say, Liam?"

Liam said, "It makes sense of a sort. But there's more than one sort of sense... wouldn't you say, Skai?"

The man blinked, mumbled wordlessly. After a while, Liam noticed, he wasn't standing next to him any longer. He was up front, crowding close, listening to Lej. And nodding... nodding... nodding.

A sheltered and concealed cove was found for the ark, and Gaspar directed her putting in to there. The vessel was warped in quite close to shore, the depth of the water there permitting it; and then Gaspar, in whom common sense was never totally obscured by either verbiage or dogma, directed that leafy branches be cut and placed over the topside of the vessel. More: he had them changed daily, as soon as they began to wilt. Perhaps he might have preferred not to tarry at all, but there were many things inducing him to stay a while. So he carefully camouflaged his vessel and began to see to those things.

Shelters were set up ashore for the ill, both of the ark- and the raft-group. (Work of proselytizing among the latter proceeded apace, a captive audience being in Gaspar's view the best audience of all.) The ark itself was overhauled, repaired, refurbished. A part of the livestock was

taken ashore, turn and turn about, to be grazed. Meat was killed and fish caught and both salted, dried, smoked—but a portion of kill and catch consumed as part of the daily rations., Ebbing supplies were renewed. The disrupted state of local society had almost destroyed the opportunity for regular trade, but the Knowers managed to procure what they wanted nevertheless.

And all the while they preached their message—vigorously, urgently, persuasively, incessantly.

And not without success.

Yet, curiously—and whether old Knower Gaspar noticed or not, it seemed to make no difference to him—his campaign seemed to be a two-edged blade. On the one hand, he drew many to him. On the other hand, he pushed many away. Some there were who had been willing to lie down and die who now arose and with all vigor engaged in scrutinizing their past deeds and prepared to repent and to migrate. Others there were who had been in the same comatose condition who now recovered and rejected not only their previous condition but the doctrinal preaching which had aroused them from it.

"What does he mean, Devils are only a switch to beat us?" demanded Jow. "Did anyone ever see a switch move around by itself? These Knowers—how many places have they moved to? So many, most of them don't know, themselves. They ever convert any place—*really* convert it—so good that it *stayed* converted, so that no Devils ever came there? It's plain that they didn't."

Jow, apparently, was going to be a hard nut to crack. If, indeed, he cracked at all.

Some of the raft-people, minds still afire with reflected memory of the destruction wrought in New North Britland, wanted nothing but to keep as far away from Kar-chee and dragon as they could. They took it for granted that Liam, having led them in on migration to safety, would certainly not stay behind after the next one. Others had second thoughts. Devils *had* been defeated once back in the old home land in the northern seas. Chop it and change it as one would, that fact remained. Which was reducible to a very simple formula: *The Devils could be defeated*. Liam, to these, was not a man who had fled from the folly of further resistance; he was the very leader of resistance, his wisdom being only further enhanced by having realized—concerning a second stand to fight back there and then—that *the time had not yet been right*. Liam, to these, was only waiting for the time to become ripe and right. This might be after the next

migration; on the other hand, it might come right here—in which case, of course, there would be no migration... at least not for them. Let the proud-nosed old Knowers move where they pleased.

And all the while the proud-nosed old Knowers bent to their tasks, from preaching their word to pouring melted deer fat into dried deer bladders—dutiful, efficient, coordinate; and all the very while rebellion simmered below the surface. It took the form of advocating the blasphemy of resistance to Devils, but it might have taken another or other forms. Once, in ultra-ancient Byzantium, at a time when religion and chariot-racing were the national preoccupations, each faction in the church had had a corresponding faction in the hippodrome; historians had tended, to believe that those who supported the chariots of the greens did so because they were Monophysites: but it might well have been that those who supported the doctrines of the Monophysites did so because they were Greens. So perhaps it was here; The younger and rebellious among the Knowers may perhaps have most resented, say, the ban on "unqualified" cohabitation—or the earnestly endless solemnities of their elders—or the fact that they themselves were tired of being reproved for levity—or, excluded from making any but the most minor decisions.

But it was not such terms that Rickar used when he and Fateem and Cerry, Lors, Liam and a few others found themselves together and unobserved one middle morning. Their official mission there was the bringing down of a supply of choice seed-corn from a granary high up above the uncultivated thickets. When people are determined to be together for any reason the events of life lose much of their casual nature and occur only either to gather or to separate them. So it was now. The mission was a chance to be free of being overlooked and overheard. It was seized upon.

The llamas would much rather have been allowed to remain loose to gambol and nuzzle and dance about, and did not submit without protest to having the panniers laden onto them. Up the trail they all went, lighter of heart than any of them might have been willing to admit.

Lors said, almost as though the words were unsafe, "We haven't seen anything more of the Devils since you came. I think it was a lucky thing for us that you did."

Rickar, determinedly grim, said, "It may be luckier for us... for some of us, anyway."

"I think that Father Gaspar is right in one thing, anyway," Liam considered. "It's better to keep away from them, generally speaking, than

not to keep away from them."

Rickar grunted, probably annoyed to think that his father could be right in anything. Cerry was thinking that it was a relief to be away from the eternal self-righteousness of the arkfolk. She looked down to where the vessel lay harbored, but only undisturbed greenery met her eye. Gaspar had seen to the work of concealment well. She said so.

Fateem shook her head of soft, brown curls. Everything about her was small and clear and, somehow, managing to seem at the same time delicate and sturdy. "Conceal," she said, bitterly. "Hide. Run. Preach."

She flung up her head and looked at Rickar. "Why do we stay?" she asked. "We don't have to. When the ark, when all the arks, are ready to leave, why don't we just stay behind?"

He was more than startled, he was shocked. In a moment he seemed to have withdrawn, not only from what she had just said, but also from everything which he himself had said. He half-turned to look back down at where the ark was concealed, then quickly looked back, embarrassed. His eyes met no one's. "That's a rather big decision to make," he said, in an uncertain, unhappy voice. Then, a satisfactory answer to her question occurring to him, he looked up and said with more assurance, "It will be a while before anything can be ready to go. That gives us a lot of time to think about it... Anyway, we've got this seed corn to load. It's very different from our Serran-type of corn, isn't it, Fateem?"

She blew out an angry breath, but made no other answer. Nor did she answer him afterward, either, until, annoyed, he switched his conversation to Cerry. "We saw no such light-haired women as you before we saw you," he told her; "although we had heard about them. And how red your skin was from the sun! But now you look exceedingly well."

Lors, from time to time, seemed on the point of saying something, but never did. They filled basket after basket of the thick and twisted ears of corn, so different from the thin and slender ones of the type of Serra, and dumped them into the panniers. Presently they paused to eat and drink, and Liam found himself sitting apart with Fateem under a tree. From time to time Rickar would look up at them, his face an unsuccessful mixture of anger and unconcern; then he would turn to say something to Cerry and laugh.

"These cakes are good," Liam said. "We didn't have this corn at all in Britland—just rye and barley and wheat... Come," he said, "don't stay angry at your young friend. Give him a chance to adjust to your ideas. Think what it means for him to leave all his family and friends and—"

She burst out, "It should mean no more to him than it means to me!"

"Well... there's that."

"He was the first to talk of this among us, and he talked the longest and the most. I was contented, before. I would probably be still contented—believing what I was taught, doing as I was told. Receiving the wise words of the ancient elders, humbly accepting everything. But I can't, anymore—and it's all Rickar's doing! If he wasn't willing to face leaving the Knowers, why—well, what did he *think*?" She sat up, facing Liam indignantly. "Did he think that a miracle would occur? And his father and his mother and all the others would suddenly come around to his way of thinking?—when they haven't any of them the slightest notion in the world of the things he's been thinking of! And now for me to find out that it was all just thinking—and all just talk!"

Again, Liam was pacific. "Be patient—" he began.

But this was what she could not be. "No. No. But it's just as well that it's happened. I should have known better —I *will* know better—than to trust a boy!" She threw a fleeting, disgusted glance at the unfortunate lad, then turned her face, alive with indignation and disdain, to Liam again. "But *you*," she burst out— "you are a man!"

"True..."

But he said nothing more; after a moment, she demanded, "Then don't tell me that you are really going to become a Knower and run meekly off with the rest of them? You'd better not tell me that! I wouldn't believe it, but I'd hate you for lying to me!"

He took the small hand she had held out to him. "No, don't hate me," he said. "I can't tell you for certain sure, Fateem, what I will do. I rather incline to doubt that good Father Gaspar will be wanting me on his next voyage. And I wouldn't want you to make up your mind, and make it up not to change it... now... that you'll be leaving your people so certainly—not on the chance of anything I might be going to do."

Something like despair came into her golden brown eyes. "Oh, but I thought I might depend on you," she said, low-voiced. She frowned, slightly. "Is it because of her? Cerry? Because..." She stopped, confused.

He rose, still holding her hand, and pulled her to her feet. "It's not. You can talk to her as you talk to me. If you want... from me... any more than that, I'm sorry. I don't speak of forever or for never, but for now. But this I can tell you, Fateem: as I will tell her of what my plans may be, when I have a better way of knowing what my plans may be, so I will tell you. And

just as she will be, as she is now, free to decide if she will go or stay, or whatever, so, Fateem, will you.

"And now, let's go back to our corn. Whatever happens, and wherever it happens, there must be seed to sow."

It was on the way back that Rickar, carefully not looking toward Fateem, said, in a determined voice, "Liam, what you said about learning more of the Devils—"

And Lors, in a relieved tone: "Ah—!"

None of the party was willing to stay behind with the laden beasts; none wanted even to risk it by drawing straws. So the llamas were "deposited" in a small blind-end barranco and the narrow mouth of it plugged with stones and branches. Then, free, they followed Lors at a rapid pace which soon took them far from the main trail, and after that the pace was no longer quite so rapid. They clambered over fallen trees, scaled boulders hot from the sun, plunged through obstructive thickets; came at last to a sort of slot in the rocky face of the hill through which not more than two of them at a time could look down a long stretch of deep and narrow gorge.

A hawk rode upon the air, floating, rising, falling softly, rising again. "It would be nice if we could do the same," Liam murmured. Then: "What's beyond the end, there?"

Lors said, "Wait." They waited quite a long time, looking at the stretch of empty ground beyond the farther end of the gorge. At length he clutched Liam's arm. Something which perhaps both of them had assumed to be a tree now detached itself from a shady mass of obscurity and moved across the landscape. They could not see it at all clearly, nor could they see clearly the shapes which followed it. But they could see them move and pass and vanish. It was certain that they were large, certain that they were strange, certain that they could not be trees. Nothing more moved, down and afar off, though they waited a long time further. But at last they felt the breeze in their faces, and the breeze told them that what had been known without proof was indeed true.

Devils!

But they saw nothing more.

Cerry said, "We can't learn very much about them at that distance, can we?"

"We can't learn anything at all about them at that distance," Liam said. "Except that they're there. Or at least that some of them are there. No—"

"Lors, is there a way through? A safe way? Or at least safer?"

"A safer way to what?"

It was not the words of the question which brought them up short, dismayed, nor the tone of voice in which it was asked, for the tone was mild enough. But they were so thunderstruck at seeing Gaspar, the Father Noah, up here that astonishment made them all for a moment mute.

Rickar it was who broke the short silence. "A safer way, in case one should ever be necessary, through to the coast, father... But what brings you here? Is anything—"

"Wrong? No. But it is well to look about on all sides and to know what lies behind as well as before. Indeed, is this not the very motive which inspired the question of Liam? And a good question, too. Is there an answer, Lors Rowan?"

"Not the way we have just been," Lors said. "But it's possible that there may be one by other ways. If we might take time out to look...?"

Gaspar stroked his beard and pursed his lips reflectively. He nodded. "Speak to Lej," he said, after a moment. "He is this week's Orderer of Schedules... But I see that you are all here. Where, in that case, are the animals? Not unguarded, I hope? And the seed corn? What of that? Lors Rowan's father's generosity should not be repaid with carelessness."

He was somewhat appeased on being shown the effectively-blockaded animals, all comfortably sitting down and ruminating their cuds. Lors took the occasion to deliver a running lecture on the intelligence and habits of llamas, which occupied the rest of the return trip and which (they hoped) effectively prevented the old Knower from entertaining suspicions.

"Clearly," he said, when Lors at last paused, dry-mouthed, and at a loss for further comment, having already repeated himself at least twice; "clearly, we must take a breeding stock of these intelligent and useful creatures with us."

"There is another breed related to them that runs wild in the Uplands—guanacos. They're smaller, but the fleece is softer."

"We must have those, too. I will make a note of it."

They watched him leave as they started unloading the seed-corn. They indicated neither by word nor conscious expression any fears not yet laid quite to rest. But evidently nothing more than a routine inspection of yet another aspect of the work of preparation had brought Gaspar up to look at them. It was probably fortunate that the inspection had not been made

by someone with younger legs and keener eyes who might have traced them up the vantage-point and overheard what they were saying there.

Thus, as on the raft, consultation awaited the fall of night. When they were together again Lors said, "My brother—Duro, my younger brother—has an idea which might bring us to a safer way through the hills."

But Rickar was feeling somewhat discouraged. "I did speak to Lej, but he said that three people were enough for a scouting trip. Not that the others are especially needed for anything else; it's just the Knowers' frugal way: if three are enough, then only three will go."

Liam, in the darkness, felt someone settle next to him, felt an arm touch his—a smooth and not a hairy one. A woman. He reached, gently, and his hand encountered a soft mass of curls. Fateem. He patted them, and heard Rickar ask, "What now?"

Liam said, "Now we ask Lors to think of where we'll all rendezvous... after he arranges for the rest of us to start out for the Uplands to see about those—what did you call them? Ah, yes. Guanacos. Can't a rendezvous be set for—where is this place your brother has in mind, Lors?"

Out of the darkness Lors said, "We call it the caves..."

VI

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The **scheme** had worked... so far. Rickar, Duro, and Cerry had gone off to the caves. Lors, Liam, Fateem, a raftsman named Dunal, and Seqah, one of the young and crypto-heretical Knowers, were the Uplands party. Lej had felt himself obviously less certain as to the number required for the unprecedented task of seeing to the acquisition of guanaco breeding-stock, and Lors had been insistent. Lej's final statement—"Since they are smaller animals, then, five people should be enough"—seemed to indicate that he perhaps thought they would each carry one of them slung across their backs!

What they did carry, slung across their backs, were several days' rations apiece. And so, when they came across him, was Tom-small.

Tom-small shrugged. "My popa has been building canoes in a fury. He claims that even though the strangers seem to have taken over the

country, at least they've attracted enough fools—your pardon, friends—so that he can handle the rest of ours who've stayed faithful. *Then* (he says) if it's really necessary to flee, he'll find out where the arks intend to go, and he (that means us) will make damned sure to go somewhere else... He won't admit, but he's following Knowers' advice in at least one way. We're living in brushwood shacks now, for the most part, because he's having the houses pulled down for boat-timbers.

"He says that if we've got to leave, then the houses won't be of any use to us. And if we haven't got to leave, we can always build new ones. Any news of the thick-and-thins?"

Lors exchanged quick looks with the others. They raised their eyebrows, shrugged, leaving the decision to him. He said, "The two kinds of Devils, you mean... Well, Jow's son, we have some hopes of our finding out some news before very long. But it's got to be private news... if we get any... for the time being, at any rate. Understood?"

Tom-small straightened the skin bag of supplies slung across his broad shoulders. "Understood. Where's Duro, then?"

"We'll meet up with him at the caves, later on."

"But this isn't the way to the—"

"The longest way around is sometimes the straightest way there. A saying from the wise wisdom of the knowledgeable ancient old Knowers, which I just made up... What do you know about chasing down the wild guanaco, shorty?"

Jow's son grinned. "Not a thing. Why?"

"You'll soon know something. Knowledge is contagious. And now, talk more if you like, but I'm going to save my breath for climbing."

The thickets thinned out, were succeeded by farmlands, which in turn gave way to moor. The winds began to nip at them, and they were glad for the extra clothes Lors had had them bring; and, when night began to settle, glad for the warmth of the fire in the grove they picked for their camp: not only did it serve as a windbreak, but it was naturally supplied with wood. They ate, drank hot infusions of herb, and, well-tired, turned to sleep.

After a while someone came and lay down next to Liam and he felt arms close softly around him. There was a whisper: "It is me—Fateem."

He grunted. "I'm relieved it's not one of the boys, behaving so."

She breathed angrily. " 'Behaving so—' Silent hero, cautions, careful,

stiff and aloof! Should we all behave the same? I won't. I can't!"

He sighed. "What do you want, then?"

Her whisper trembled, broke—perhaps still with anger, perhaps with cold—but went on again. "I don't know what you— I can't go along, waiting forever. I can't be alone like this any more. Before, there was the safety of the family and the folk. Then there was the ark... and Rickar. What's Rickar? Very little. I— Tomorrow the entire ground may give way beneath our feet. And you go on, as if— What do I *want*? I want to know that I'm not alone, not just one of a band of brothers or something like that. I want to know that I'm something special to some special person. Not forever. I don't know about forever. I know about tonight—

"Tom has his father, Lors has his brother, you have your secret dreams, I—what do I have? You know what I have. Tonight is not for dreaming! Aren't you a man, made like other men? Ah... yes... there... so... I knew that you were—" Her voice broke off, then began again, even lower, without words.

Morning was cold and wet and there was very little in the way of talk until more hot herb tea was made and drunk; then they went on, following the path with lowered eyes, the dim light of sunrise made further dim by the thick mists.

And then, as a portion of the mists blew away, they saw three figures: as strange to all but Lors as they were suddenly come upon... and even somewhat strange to him.

Three men stood athwart the trail, tall, each one with a tall staff in the crook of one arm and a bow as tall as himself resting, unstrung, in the crook of the other. The pelt of the wild, fleet guanaco was their clothing, and the mists and dews distilled in droplets in their thin, dark beards.

One said, "Hey, people!"

One said, "Where do you go, people?"

One said, "Only maybe not, eh, people?"

They straggled to a halt, irresolute. Tom and Lors, in turn, identified themselves, and began an explanation of their purpose. But presently they stopped. The three men were not listening to them, were not looking at them. They were looking at Liam. Intently.

One said, "Hey, person, your eyes don't match!"

One said, "You've got power of a sort, person?"

One said, "Only maybe not, eh, person?"

Liam said nothing. He returned their looks. By and by the long silence was broken again as the men touched their breasts in the identification which was, evidently, among them a form of greeting.

"This is Lehi."

"This is Nephi."

"This is Moroni."

And again there was a silence. Then Liam said, "It's been told you what is wanted of you. You are not obliged to agree. You may answer *Yes*, you may answer *No*, you may answer *Maybe*. But, persons, before the sun is warm enough and the air is dry enough for you to have safely re-strung your bows, persons, you will have answered." And he touched his breast and said, "This is Liam."

And he was correct. They thought him perhaps the only sane man among madmen—but only perhaps—but they were willing to provide the live guanacos... for a consideration. For what consideration? That, it was stated clearly, would have to await further thought.

"Three men alone cannot catch the wild ones alive, person. Many men will be needed to catch the wild ones alive. Some to creep up on them... slowly... slowly... so... dressed in the skins of the wild ones. They will be suspicious at first"—Lehi mimed how the wild guanaco would lift up his head and look dubiously at the odd "guanacos" so slowly "grazing" and advancing—"but by and by and little by little, they get used to it. They forget."

"Only maybe not," said Moroni.

"They never get completely used to us, they never completely forget their suspicions of us," Nephi conceded. "To hunt them to the death is difficult, yet we must do it, for such is their fate and such, for that matter, is ours."

And then the three of them, with words, with gesture, mime, and dance, enacted for them the rest of the hunt of the wild guanaco: concealment and disguise, gradual approach from all sides, the off-throwing of disguise by one group, the blowing of the horns, the swift flight of the alarmed animals, the rising up of another group waving flags, the wheeling and turning and the fleetly flying yet again of the wild ones until, their sides turned most advantageously to the hidden archers lying low, they were at length shot to death.

"We do not slay them all, hey, person," said Lehi.

"We spare the colts and the mares, eh, person," said Nephi.

And Moroni said, "Only maybe not."

The other two conceded that such conservation represented the ideal, but not, invariably, the actual practice. "But capturing the wild ones alive, hey, this is something else. We must build corrals, eh, and station many men with horns and banners. But we will do it, persons; tell us how many you want, and we will supply them, every one of them."

"Send us someone in a week's time to tell us the news you have to tell, Liam said. "Meanwhile, what do you intend to do about the Kar-chee and about the dragons?"

They shrugged. They mimed the stooping gait of the Kar-chee, the dragon on four feet and the dragon on two. They would deal with them as they dealt with the wild guanaco: hunt them—confuse them—destroy them. So. That was what they would do. Moroni as usual had the last word. "Only maybe not," he said.

One last question they had for Liam as he and his friends prepared to go. "You are not of this island-place, person. How did you get here?"

"I came on a raft with others," he said.

The sun's rays came slanting through the clouds, and the hunters looked slantingly at each other. "Persons have ventured far on rafts before," one said. "And perhaps will venture far again," said another. And the third said, "There is no end; there are only beginnings."

They strung their bows and hefted their spears and strode away across the moor and rolling hills, upward, upward, and up. Mists closed in, parted, rallied a last time, were burned off by the sun. And when Liam last looked back there was no one in sight.

Long, long, on the long downward way, with Fateem silent but serene by his side, he considered. What was his duty toward these hunters, for example? For even if their wild, free life on the open heights were doomed, surely they themselves need not be? That is, not unless the whole house of mankind need be... That is, unless their own stubborn intransigence might turn their fate to *need be*. What was his, Liam's, own duty toward them?

Toward those who had followed him from Britland on the terrible raft?

Toward those who followed the Knowers?

Toward Lors and Tom and their fellow-islanders?

Toward Cerry, who followed him and asked for nothing and had received little more? Toward Fateem, who had asked for that which he

had determined not to give... and yet had, like any other man, gladly in the moment given?

And—for that matter—toward himself?

The moors gave way to farmlands, fields, forests, thickets, rocks and sand; and all the time his thoughts roamed and prowled and always they came out the same door they had come in.

His duty was to learn all that he could learn and by whatever means and at whatever risks about the Kar-chee and about the dragons.

Duro felt his responsibilities so keenly and weightily that it abated his pleasure in being more-or-less in charge of two older people. He was also unable to forget what had happened the last time he had come down to the caves. The recollection was like a heavy hand upon his stones. He and Lors had agreed to rendezvous as far away from that particular part of the region as possible, but... still...

"We have some caves in our part of Britland," Cerry said, as she looked about, awed, "but they are not so regular as these. It looks—of course, that would be impossible—but it does look as though they had been *dug* here! Right through the solid rock..."

Rickar smiled at the absurdity of the suggestion, but Duro nodded his head. "They say that it was so. They say that in the oldest days there were, the days before the old days, that these hills were full of *metal*"—he spoke the word with awe—"and that the men who were alive then dug these caves with tools of metal to get out the metal that was here.

"And I've heard Popa say that when the great land that was before the Devils came split up and parts of it sank, you know—that the whole fore-part of this region was split away and sank, too, and this is what was left after that."

They lifted torches and peered about them, silent and reverent and almost overwhelmed. Here the walls were far apart and the ceilings high; there, everything narrowed and closed in upon itself. For a long while the passage ran straight as the path of a well-made arrow, then it curved with measured symmetry; now it was level, now it rose up, now it sank. Strange markings were found in the rock from time to time. And once they came upon a place where water dripped from a cleft in the wall and formed a stream which found its way into a deep pool which reflected the light of their torches.

Cerry shivered. In the low voice which had become natural to the three

of them, awed by the initial echoes, she said, "I'd be afraid to be here without light... The truth is, I'm afraid to be here, even now—"

"Well go back," Duro said.

They set up their meager camp in a chamber he showed them, off a short side passage; it was entered from below, and they closed the way up, once they had ascended, by pushing over a shard of broken rock; but not so completely that air couldn't enter. Then he set up his lamp, a clever and curious thing whereby oil trickled slowly through a series of pierced egg-shells, replenishing the bowl as the small wick consumed the fuel. The light flickered for a few moments, dancing wildly, then it settled down and commenced to burn steadily, if a trifle smokily. They ate lightly, conversed a while in the tones now dared to be raised a trifle louder. Presently the older two became aware that Duro had dropped off to sleep. They laughed, then yawned, then did the same.

And in the night-time, Cerry wept.

Rickar awoke to hear her sobbing. "Are you ill?" he asked, raising himself on an elbow. "Have you a pain?" She shook her head, her face concealed in her hands. "Then what's wrong?"

But all she would say was, "Liam! Liam!"

And after a while she fell silent and turned her back. So Rickar sighed and blinked his eyes and then Duro was jogging him and beckoning him to follow. Daylight filtered in, dimly, below. He followed him, wondering, waiting for the boy to speak, but all he did was stop and face against a wall. "Well?" Rickar asked, after a moment. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" Duro asked, over his shoulder. "Don't you Knowers have bladders, too?"

"Oh," Rickar said, blankly. A mildly insistent internal pressure supplied the answer. "Yes," he said, "we do. Uh... yes... thanks."

"No fee to guests. Sleep well?"

"I did, yes. Except when Cerry woke me up. She was crying. You didn't hear her? I thought not. Wouldn't say what was wrong."

Duro adjusted his breech-clout. "Well," he said, cheerfully, "that was your opportunity. You should have blown out the lamp and taken her into your arms and kissed away her fears. Oh well. Crying, hmm. Too bad. Probably had a bad dream. You all finished? Then let's get back before she wakes up and gets scared all over again." He started back, nodding his head sagely. "No accounting for dreams, you know. No accounting for them."

In after ages there came to be much marvel at the technology of the Kar-chee. But there could never have been much marvel at their technology of what an earlier age would have called "security"—except, perhaps, to marvel at the almost complete absence of it. Yet this was not without reasonable cause. Just as there are organisms who cannot digest anything which has not been already partly pre-digested by decay, so the Kar-chee's social-scientific organism could digest no planet which had not been already partly pre-digested by decay. Hence they picked none for their attention which had not already been either abandoned or as close to it as made no matter of difference. In such cases there was little or no capacity for resistance by the few remaining inhabitants. A man, in the days when men had still been scanty upon the surface of their own mother-world and still exploring newly-found portions of it, might have been clawed by a bear or nipped by an owl, but he did not think that the owls or the bears were *resisting*. And no matter how many such accidents or incidents occurred, it still never came into the mind of man to establish a system of "security" against owls or bears..

It was the notion of Lors and of Liam to pick their way cautiously through the honeycomb of caves and come out high up on the other side, where they might be able to peer down, seeing without being seen; and even, perhaps, at night, creep down with infinite caution and spy about the outskirts of the enemy camp. What happened was rather different, of course.

None of them had ever had personal experience of any engine or device more complex than a loom or a wine- or oil-press. The meaning of what lay far below them there on the floor of the vast cavern was thus largely hidden from them. An infinity of lights, a multitude of great black cabinets (so they thought of them), a profusion of moving parts, odd noises, hummings, buzzings, shrill-high batlike squeakings, rumblings... sounds for which they had no names. Kar-chee came and went, bound on tasks which—concerned as they must have been with the machinery—were meaningless to the unobserved observers. There were no dragons immediately below, but at the opposite end of the cavern, a good distance off, there were a number of them, milling slowly about.

To Cerry, what was going on below made no more sense when she last looked at it than when she first looked at it. Except for the presence of the Devils, it simply was not something to be comprehended. But with Liam it was otherwise. His eyes roamed slowly and systematically over the entire

area, back and forth, back and forth, up and down, up and down. Again and again. Again and again. And so, gradually, line upon line, principle upon principle, here a little and there a little, something of what was going on below began to fall into a sort of a sequence and to make a sort of a sense to him.

There was a continual flashing of blue points, a rushing of waters, crashing percussions, dust, a flow of crushed rocks in moving paths, Kar-chee bending and stooping and rising, the air shuddering, the solid stone shuddering.

But, now, as he looked and looked, he began to believe that although all this was going on simultaneously, all the *these* which made up the *this* were going on separately. He perceived repetitions, from the repetitions he perceived sequences, and from the sequences he derived causes and effects. As yet he could not in any manner understand purpose. But that might yet come. It might yet. He inched forward yet another little bit, and stared intently, trying to isolate a sequence and follow it through from start to stop.

A great serpent of metal mesh and joints reared itself up, extending and extending, stretching and stretching, rigid where it had been flaccid, its head all monstrous gears and metal beak. At a height higher than that of ten men standing on each other's shoulders, the head struck. Plates fell into place, protecting the gears as the beak imbedded itself in the rock. And bit. And burrowed. The head vanished; the "neck" stretched and extended. Dust and new-made sand, like dry dribble, came from the orifice. The head withdrew. The plates opened. The monstrous beak sank down... down... The body withdrew into itself, turning, serpentine, retreating across the floor of the cavern. And at length it paused by a Kar-chee and, in a movement which made Liam, watching, shudder, so closely did it counterfeit life and affection, it raised its head to the Kar-chee and the Kar-chee lowered a monstrous arm and laid its hand upon the monstrous head.

But this curious simulation lasted but a second. The Kar-chee hands contained implements, which removed the beak-drill and placed it in a container; then the Kar-chee hands dipped into another place, came out with one of the curious objects Liam had come to think of as *points*, and—

But then, far down the immense cavern, a section of wall slid away, revealing an immense corridor leading off into obscurity and fitfully illuminated with reddish light like the reflection of enormous fires, and from this emerged a blast of heat which made the humans fight for breath. Out and up from this inferno crawled a long and armored

Something on many clanking feet; mud and water dripped from it. Behind it, very far behind it, a door slid shut. And before that, another. And another. Another...

It was as though there lay something very strong and dangerous far below there, which had to be caged and fenced and walled away...

The Kar-chee, all of them, looked up and paused in their doings and walkings and watchings. Farther away, the dragons did the same, lifting their heads up and some even rearing on their hind legs. All turned, all regarded. Something of greatmost importance seemed imminent.

But what this might be, Liam could not know. He could suspect, however, and his suspicion turned his courage into terror. But not for long. The greater and nearer the danger, the sooner and more effectively the quest for knowledge must be accomplished. He returned his intent gaze to the glittering and flashing blues... his eye and his attention had been caught by them at the first. In terms of language with which he was not familiar it could perhaps have been said that *his* subconscious mind had made an important discovery which his conscious mind had yet to make. Liam did not think in such terms. He knew only that he must now start over again in trying to discover a sequence and trace its progress along its circuit.

The metallic serpent, thick and gross as any python, but, even at its shortest length, longer incomparably than any serpent or python of flesh and blood—

—raised its head—

—the Kar-chee—

—placed the point, rather like a longer, larger, crossbow bolt, flashing in every shade of blue, in the "head" of the serpentine machine, as though it were feeding it—

The thing retracted, retreated, undulating across the floor of the teeming cavern until it came to the rocky wall-face, reared up, entered one of the drill-holes once more, retreated from it, more slowly this time, emerged entirely and withdrew... withdrew... withdrew... the head moving backward and ever backward but always keeping in direct line with the opening...

An object whose precise shape Liam could not make put appeared briefly in the front of the monstrous "head" where its mouth would have been had it been a living thing.

This it spat and, having projected it, at once the whole equipage

subsided and Liam did not watch it. He observed the object shoot forward and enter the drill hole. And the drill hole vanished and all the wall of the rock about it vanished too as it came bursting... shattering... flying forward...

Noise upon noise, crash upon crash, sound upon sound, rolling and thundering.

Below, vast engines which had come into place received the expelled rubble. Moved it. Deposited it. Transported it. Washed it. Sorted it. Carried it away.

And the sequence began all over again.

The thing had been going on when they had first emerged at the abruptly shorn-off end of the old mine-tunnel, to discover this vast and (so Duro and Lors said) new-made cavern. But until Liam had set himself to analyzing and tracing the sequence, all had seemed chaos and Devilish confusion. He now had at least a part of it all clear in his mind. As he cast his eyes around again to see what he should next concentrate on, Cerry made a shuddering noise and Rickar made a sick one. The Rowan brothers hissed and half-started to their feet—but abruptly they lay down once more.

And Liam, his eyes now following theirs, saw a dragon walking down the floor of the cavern and pausing slightly from time to time to move its head as though to fix a better hold on what it carried in its mouth—arms flailing, legs thrashing, mouth opened to utter unheard and unavailing screams and cries—

—a man.

The brothers looked at Liam, scowling—masking shock and outrage and bafflement. "Get down?" Lors repeated. "To rescue that one? It's madness—"

"How could we do it?" Duro demanded. "We couldn't do it! We would be killed, simply... or"—he winced and shuddered—"not so simply."

They could hear him now, for the machines had fallen silent and the blasting and the fall of broken rock had ceased. They could hear the hissing of the dragons and the clicking and shuffling sounds produced by the Kar-chee. They could hear the pad-pad-pad of dragon feet and even, if a second's silence fell, the running of the feet of the man down there below. But over all of this, almost incessantly, they could hear the man's voice—the voice of terror and of the fear of death—human, because it was

neither dragon nor Kar-chee, but otherwise scarcely human in its absolute loss of control.

Man's voice screaming as the dragon lifted and tossed him and caught him in its mouth. Man's voice shrieking as the dragon shook him as a dog shakes a rat. Man's voice babbling witlessly as the dragon released him. Man's voice gibbering as man's feet tottered and ran. Man's voice screaming as the dragon came after him again.

There seemed no end to it.

They had formed a circle, the Devils had—Kar-chee on the inside, dragons on the outside. The man ran blindly, stumbling, drooling and piddling in terror. The Kar-chee cuffed him back. He fell, he crawled, he got up, he ran. The Kar-chee cuffed him back. The dragon caught him up again. Blood streamed down his naked sides. And suddenly the dragon, as though tired, of the sport, closed his jaws with a crunching, mashing sound. The man's voice continued for another second, still, high and thin, like an insect's screech; then it stopped. The dragon tossed the mangled body aside.

Rickar was sick. Cerry moaned, eyes closed, hands to mouth. Duro said, through clenched teeth, "So he's dead. No reason to go down now. We'd be dead, too. He's dead. No reason—"

And Lors, his voice high-pitched and trembling, incredulous, on the point of breaking: "Oh— Oh— Another. Another—"

They had not known the first man, and they did not know this man. They felt his pain, his anguish, fright, terror, the body that hopped and ran and bled and screamed...

and screamed... And it all began all over again, everything as before.

"We—must—go—*down!*" Liam said, hoarsely. "To save him? I don't know. But—look you, all of you: *They* are down *there*. Down *there*. All of them. So—"

He forced them to listen; he seized them by the hair, struck them in the face. He dared not raise his voice, but they listened to the voice—the voice of Liam—and, slowly, unwillingly, in fear and in trembling, they listened. But now and then despite themselves their eyes would move, only to jerk back to his eyes, away from the hideous gathering below. Their eyes were fixed by Liam's eyes and they listened and they nodded. And, slowly, slowly, scuttling sideways like crabs, they retreated.

The screams were still going on when they emerged through the

half-buried fissure three-quarters of the way down the side of the cavern wall. The cavern itself was more or less horizontally cylindrical and so they had reasonable purchase for hands and feet as they descended. From far away the screams still sounded, but they could not tell if they were still coming from the same man or from another. They did not stop to try and decide. Uppermost in their minds was that they not be caught. And next in claim upon them was to follow Liam, which they did, instinctively crouching as they moved. A thick and bitter odor overlay the air, mingled as it was with several other ones—the dust of the shattered rock, the smell of sea mud which had come up from the now-closed cavern, various unfamiliar reeks probably pertaining to the machinery—but over all was the bitter odor of the Kar-chee and the thick stench of the dragons.

Liam had no easy task orienting his passage here below in terms of what he had seen from high above. But he managed it, somehow. The mesh reticulations of the serpentine bores lay motionless, but they stepped over them fearfully as though not certain that they would not, if touched, spring to dreadful life. On and on in the curious lighting and the rubble and clutter they moved, bent over. Trying not to listen to the sounds of agony from far ahead. And at length Liam found what he was looking for.

The Kar-chee had reached down into the container. Liam had to climb up—but not very far up. He reached out his hand and he noticed that it trembled. The blue points shimmered and flashed. He took one in his hand. It seemed to feel both hot and cold at the same time. He seized it firmly, thrust it into the sacket which had been emptied of food. Thrust in another. And another. And another... He filled the bag, handed it down, received another one. He filled them all, filled the sheepskins, tied them up, and then descended, carrying the last of them.

"Don't stumble," he warned them. "Don't drop any of these. Don't run—but if you *do* run, lay them down—gently—first, and just leave them lie."

Off they started, back the way they had come, walking delicately, stooping beneath their burdens. The cavern echoed with the mind-shaking sounds from behind, but they did not stop. Liam had carefully observed his landmarks. *Here* a spring of water gushed from the rock face into a sluice; *there* two serpentine borers lay coiled together as though in some cold, loveless pythonic embrace. He gave a short hiss, turned. Behind them the screams suddenly ceased. There was another hiss... not from Liam. And another. The air was filled with them. And then came the first bellow. And the pad-pad-pad of dragon feet. This became a quick and thudding and ground-shaking stamp. They climbed the slanting face of the cavern

wall. They did not look back. They knew they were discovered.

"Duro and Lors, drop behind—you others, up with you! Don't wait for us, don't drop anything—go!" As he spoke, he drew open the mouth of a sacket, took out two of the blue points and stood there with one in each hand. "Cock your bows," he directed. They did so; took the points, once each, loaded, followed Liam's pointing finger; fired; turned and were scrambling up again when the double blast behind caught them and flung them. On hands and feet they crawled back, crept upward, slowly, carefully, the lips of their sacks between clenched teeth, echoes roaring and rolling, dust and gravel; on hands and on knees they reached the safety of the cleft in the rock and sidled through. Through the obscurity a dragon came thundering, pounding upright on two feet, the claws of its forefeet slashing at the air, the nodules on its cheeks swelling and puffing, body a dark-green-black along the back, a paler tint below. It shattered their eardrums, so it seemed, with its bellows. And then the finger on the trigger of the crossbow tightened, the blue point flew flashing through the air—the flashing seemingly reflected in the flashing iridescence of the great faceted dragon-eyes—the point and the dragon alike vanished in a cloud of thick dust and darkness and the noise of it rolled and roared.

Lors' chin was bleeding where a sharp stone had cut it in ricochet. He grinned a twisted, terrified, yet quite triumphant grin, shot his hand inward, directing. "Go on, Liam! Go on! I'll cover you! Go—"

But Liam shook his head, pulled out two more of the strange but unquestionably potent points, handing as before one to each brother. "Shoot these—*there*," he said, pointing. "And try for as much distance as you can get."

The clouds rolled around, thinned, thickened again. Here and there something lay upon the ground, still; here and there something thrashed and bellowed and bled. Lors and Duro nodded. Their other shots had been of need hasty and impromptu. Now, for the moment at least, nothing seemed to be pursuing them. They hefted the points, spoke briefly to each other, made swift, skillful adjustments of their crossbows, downed them, foot against lever for the pressure that hand and arm couldn't give, cocked them, raised and loaded, aimed, holding them a bit higher than before.

They shot.

Through the haze they saw a group of Kar-chee, black chitinous exoskeletons covered and gray with dust, chirring and gesturing in front of that great closed gate which led—which led where?—which led below, wherever or whyever—

Thud-thud—

As they dashed for their lives deeper into the fissure, and, suddenly remembering, slowed, clutching more tightly on the sacks and skins containing the explosive points, they retained one single swift-flashing recollection of the great blast of fire and steam and scalding air and boiling mud that came vomiting up and out from that hellish corridor where once the Kar-chee had chirred and gestured and where once that door had been.

And Liam, too, clutched at the sheepskin packed with the blue and flashing points, but even tighter was his grip on the curious object that had been standing so casually there among the engines where the Kar-chee had stood distributing the points; the object between his shirt and skin, warming his heart. He had had no chance to take more than the most rapid and inconclusive glance at it; it was perhaps even likelier that he was wrong than that he was right...

But he might be right!

And in that case what he held would be a map.

VII

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Afterward he was to compare their retreat through the mine-caves to the passage of a troop of ants crawling through a sponge caught in a high wind. Over quivering ground, pelting by falling debris, half-stifled with dust, singed by burning air, more than once finding that either the roof or the floor or sometimes both the roof and the floor of a corridor they had planned to take had given way—such was their trip from the Kar-chee cavern to the world outside.

But the world outside seemed little if any more stable. No sky appeared likely to fall down in upon them, true, but the land quivered. Off-shore, far off-shore, a great bubble broke the surface of the water, and a great puff of steam rose and vanished into the air; presently the hot and muddy breath of the vexed sea-bottom reached them. Again and again and again...

While they watched, fascinated, alternately sweating and chilled, an entire headland slid, sighing and rumbling, into the ocean. Their ears were next buffeted by soundless concussions. As they stood, straining to

hear, the earth rose and fell and rose again. Carefully they lay down their sacks and skins of warheads and subsided into sitting positions. Cracks and chasms opened, closed again with the sound of thunder-claps, only to reappear—so it seemed to their bemused and confused sight: as though a chasm was a living creature, now hiding and now disclosing himself—elsewhere.

And after these great shocks came stillness and silence.

Several of them made as though to get up, but Liam gestured them to remain where and as they were. His eyes were rapt and intent; the eyes of the others followed his without being able to see what he could see—but never doubting that he did see. "Wait..." he murmured through slightly-parted lips. They waited, uneasy but content. Cerry felt as she had upon that night when she had known that it was for him to lead and for her to follow and that he was one of those about whom tales were composed and songs sung: seers and doers and heroes...

And after the silence and the stillness came another quake, and this second one was greater than the first. And after that one they looked at him again and still his eyes (the one brown as loch-water and the other as blue-green as the sea itself) were focused afar off and again he said, this time in a whisper, "Wait..."

The third shock was mild and brief, and after it subsided Liam rose to his feet in one swift motion and stooped and carefully picked up his burden and walked off, silent and absorbed. And they silently followed them, all of them.

The face of the land was much changed in places. Here had been a stream and now already the gravel of its bed was drying in the sun; there had been an old watercourse dry except in the rainy season: now it rolled to the roiled sea in a torrent of liquid mud and it stank of the bowels of the earth. Once they had to detour inland because where the path had led now lay a new lagoon of water still faintly streaming and full of dead fish; but once they were able to proceed straight on through because what had been a high ridge of rock was now a flatland. Such marvels were many, but most marvelous of all was a gushing pillar of flame where natural gas, long imprisoned beneath the earth, had been freed and, rushing to the surface, had been met by a transforming touch of fire.

It was having gone but a short way beyond that they saw the Kar-chee.

There were a number of them—six, perhaps, or seven—and they stood upon their four lower limbs with their huge two upper limbs in the folded manner common to them, as though engaged in silent meditation and

prayer. Only one of them looked up as the people came suddenly out of the woods, and this one made no motion other than the lifting of its head. Liam turned back on a diagonal course; Lors did the same; so did Duro, Fateem, and the others... except Rickar. He, as though unseeing, continued walking as he had been. Liam snapped his fingers. Clicked his tongue. Said, finally, low-voiced, "Rickar—"

A second Kar-chee lifted its wedge-shaped head. And a third. And Rickar gasped and halted. He looked wildly around him. What happened next was probably attributable to the fact that his whole mind and body told him to run but that he remembered—now!—Liam's words of warning in the cavern: "*Don't stumble. Don't drop any of these*"—the blue detonation points.—"*Don't run—but if you do run, lay them down—gently—first, and just leave them lie...*" So he bent forward and deposited the sack he was carrying, and turned to run away after his friends.

And a fourth Kar-chee lifted his head, and a fifth.

And Rickar took two long steps. And saw that his friends were not running at all, but walking at a steady pace. He walked after them, perhaps half-a-dozen paces more. Then he realized what he had done. And he tried to undo it. He turned around and went back.

The act was confused, but it was not cowardly, and he might in the end have gotten away with it—if he had walked. But he did not. He ran. He ran back and he stooped. And the Kar-chee broke out of their own introspective detachment, or whatever mood it was which had been holding them fast; the Kar-chee were all around him and the Kar-chee were upon him and held him fast. One low and mournful cry he uttered; then he was still.

It was but a moment before they had the sack and knew what was in it. Perhaps they might have killed him then and there... but, although the people had seen, all of them, the Kar-chee cuffing the man in the cavern back to be baited by dragons, neither then nor anywhere else had they seen, nor heard—save in legend—of Kar-chee actually killing any human being themselves. This they seemed to leave to the dragons. And there seemed to be no dragons about.

Rickar's friends looked on to see him dragged away—but for a moment only. They dared not use the blue warheads, of course—but the brothers Rowen still had in their pouches conventional crossbow bolts. At Liam's nod they shot once... twice... so that the bolts landed in front of the retreating Kar-chee. The Kar-chee hesitated—but they did not stop. So

Lors and Duro loaded again. And this time they loosed their bolts into the bodies of the two Kar-chee carrying Rickar between them, dangling. He fell. The Kar-chee stumbled. And then—and this was curious—it was as though the same train of thought now passed through the minds of the Kar-chee, for the one carrying the sack of blue detonators stooped and laid it on the ground; as he was doing so, two others seized Rickar, who had been too dazed to escape. And the others surrounded the injured Kar-chee; and all of them began to run.

They were heavy-laden, but they had four legs to run with, and the recocking of the heavy crossbows could not be done in a second. Then, from far off, but again and again, and each time nearer, came the call—the questing call—of a distant dragon. The people saw the wounded Kar-chee fall, saw the others—Rickar now swinging limply back and forth—race away. And then, at another command from Liam, they turned and walked rapidly off.

Old Gaspar trembled and shook. The quake had not unmanned him as this had. Liam felt for him; he had not realized that the Chief Knower had so much softness in him.

"My son, my only son... what a blow... what a blow," he repeated. And then, shaking his head, lips trembling and eyes brimming, he asked, "How could he have done it? *You*—you have lived in ignorance; but *he* was a Knower. I knew that all was not well with him in his heart and that he lacked proper zeal to fulfill the obvious intentions of Manifest Nature... but still—but still! To engage in the blasphemous futility of resistance—!"

And his wife, old Mother Nor, covered her face with her hand and withdrew, silently, silently shaking her head.

The ark—and the other arks in process of building—had inevitably sustained some damage in the upheavals. Gaspar and his council of elders now set to work at quickened speed to repair, finish stocking up, and be gone. "For already the work of punishment and destruction has begun!"—thus, their cry.

But Liam had not quite the same notion.

"There's no doubt that the Kar-chee had begun to put this place through the usual process. But I doubt that they're ready for it yet. In fact, I'm confident that they're not," he told his small band of followers.

"Do you think that what's happened has been just natural phenomena?" one of them asked, somewhat doubtfully.

Liam shook his head. "No. I'm sure that we set it off ourselves by firing the blue thunderheads down below, there! That cavern?—and the corridor we saw leading down from it? From the looks and the smell of it it seems to me that the Kar-chee were mining or sapping or perhaps just sampling and exploring down there. But likely not *just*—did you see how wary they and their Devil-dragons all were when the door on it opened? How they looked up and how they all kept on looking till the door closed?"

Lors said, softly, "And we blew it open again! We dropped the fire into the tub of oil..."

"Something like that. But I've been wondering and wondering, now... It does seem to me that two fire-charges shouldn't have done all of this. And the Devils weren't ready to have it done, either—else they wouldn't have been down below in danger of being crushed to death like grubs or beetles. No..."

"I think there must be another explanation, and I think that this is it: the Kar-chee had made that corridor, that shaft, to tap the hidden fires beneath the earth. And they planned to drive it even deeper and they must, I think, have had a great store of the blue fire-heads in that shaft. What drew their attention and kept it there? Eh? *Danger!*"

Lors repeated, "We dropped the fire into the tub of oil..."

The conversation was not slow, leisurely, philosophical. It was quick, excited, grim. And it turned, abruptly, onto another tack, as Liam opened his shirt. "Look at this," he said, drawing something out.

This was a something for which they had no name or word, having never before seen it nor anything like it. They looked at it as he had directed and made sounds of awe or bewilderment as it changed shape in his hands: he drew it out... he pushed it back into a smaller compass than before... he showed them to what extent it was pliable in his hands... how now it became globular and now cubical and now it was flat... And with each change, and, it seemed—if one looked quickly and closely—even without each change of shape, the designs upon it changed... changed... subtly changed...

"What is this?" Fateem asked, whispering.

"I am not totally sure," His voice had dropped, too. "But I am almost so—I believe this is what was called by men, *a map!* But it is not a man-made map, it is a Devil-made map—a Kar-chee map! I've always, as long as I've known that such things had ever been, wanted one. But not one like those very few I'd seen, ancient and worn and crumbling and of no practical use because they showed things as they had been, hundreds of

years ago—"

"*Before the Devils came... !*"

"Yes... 'before the Devils came.' And, since then, do we not know?—what changes occurred? No! We do *not* know! Only that changes *have* occurred. Look! Look here— Do you see this?" His finger traced the curious outline upon the curious surface. "Do you know what it is? it's a map of this land, this island! I'm sure of it. Or rather I should say, " 'This is how this island appears upon this map.'— Now: Thus it appears as though we were birds, looking down on it from the air as though floating fixed in one place. *Now*—" His hands moved, the "map" moved, the design changed, flowed, changed, stopped... more or less. "And this is how it looks as though from the side, but at what angle I am not sure, and... follow my finger... it goes right down from the top to the sea and beneath the sea... down... down... so... down, to where the island grows from the bottom of the sea the way a tree grows from, well, the bottom of the air—"

He groped for unfamiliar phrases to express unfamiliar conceptions. His eyes glowed and glittered and there was life and light upon his face such as none of them had ever seen before. But even as he spoke and" they listened there was a distant rumble, the ground shook again, the sound of the surf was disturbed, and Cerry pointed a shaking finger at the outline of the map. And now it was she who whispered, "Look... look..."

At one point upon the surface of the chart the outline altered as they watched. Shifted... flowed... was still.

"What? Liam? What...?"

He said, with a kind of fierce joy in knowledge, "The ancients spoke of things, of measures, which they called *dimensions*. Length. Width. Depth. Time. Most of their maps showed only two of them: length and width. Some, as they called them, *relief maps*, these showed *depth* as well." His fingers, scrabbling hastily in the dirt, tried to give evidence of what he was trying to explain and convey. "But none of these ancient maps ever showed or could ever show *time*! If an area changed, the map became obsolete... outdated... useless. It was necessary to make a new one. But—somehow—I don't know how and it doesn't matter now—somehow this Devil-map does show time!"

And his finger stabbed the surface of the chart. "And here we have the proof! Just now, this moment before, we heard and we felt another portion of the land go sliding into the sea—no doubt another link in the chain of reactions from the first shock—and when we heard this and felt this, *we saw it, too!* This map never becomes obsolete or ancient, for it is somehow

a mirror reflecting every aspect of the earth-sea surface—and *responding to every change in the earth-sea surface!*"

There was brief silence. Some implication of what he was trying to imply came through; more confusion than enlightenment remained. But the conversation now shifted, and abruptly, for the third time, as Fateem said, in a dreamy, stifled voice, "But the Devils have Rickar, and we know what they will do with him..."

Gaspar would not listen. That is, they spoke to him, and they refused to stop speaking until they had told him in complete detail Just what they had seen the Kar-chee and the dragons doing to the captives there in the cavern; and in a physical sense he could not have helped but hear them. Once or twice his eyes blinked very rapidly, but there was not a tear in them, and he neither replied nor even stopped in his moving from one place to another nor in his giving ceaseless orders and directions. His ears must have heard. But his mind would not listen. It was entirely possible that after they had done with talking he could not have repeated a single thing they had told him, even if he had wished to.

In his own way, certainly, he had loved his son—and from any ordinary danger he would certainly have risked his own life and the resources of his community in order to try to save his son's life. But his commitment to the axioms and principles of the Knowers was total: Manifest Nature made certain demands of mankind, not capriciously but of necessity; if these were flouted the inevitable result was the punishment consisting of the double-Devils; the double-Devils were produced by unjust and sinful conduct; to resist them was to square the transgression, and—certainly—an attempt to aid one caught in doing so would be (at least) to cube it. Therefore Gaspar did not, would not, dared not, could not, allow his mind to consider what Liam and Fateem or anyone else was trying to tell him—that it was possible for Rickar still to be saved, perhaps—that it might well be that, in the shock of the quakes, no man-baiting had been held—and that, if Rickar were still living, it might be possible... somehow... somehow... to save him.

In which case it was imperative to try.

But Gaspar, clearly, would not try.

He would not even try.

Nor would any Knower.

What then?

While all those who followed Gaspar, whether of his original following, or the converts from the raft people, or those of the island's people who had been persuaded that there was no hope or answer save in the arks—while all these toiled and troubled and swarmed like ants to bring their departure to as soon a moment as possible, Liam spoke his mind aloud to those few who followed him and who looked to him for hope and answer.

"He came with me because he trusted in me, and he trusted in me because I had once been in arms against the Kar-chee. He himself had never even seen them—to him they were just part of what the older people nagged on and on about. Probably he didn't fully realize how dangerous they really are. But I did. And I let him come with me. Why? I wasn't trying to defy people who had always been telling me what to do... No, it wasn't mere rebellion with me. I wanted to know more about the two Devils, and I wanted to know more so that the next time I resisted them I would feel that something more than flight or slaughter would be the result.

"And he trusted and he followed. Now, the trip wasn't for nothing. We've learned a few things. We know what they use to make the thunder that splits the rocks apart—and we've got much of it with us, too. And we know that what we saw in the cavern isn't all that there is to see about the Kar-chee. There's something more, much more, and it lies below—deep below. Well—

"Easy to say he was taken because of his own act. His act was based on my words and my words were meant to save the blue thunderheads. He did his best for them... for us... me...

"Shouldn't we do our best for him? Should we? We saw something of the risk. Are we to take it? And if we aren't, then what are we to do in place of it which justifies anything we've already done?—and particularly Rickar's capture—"

His voice broke off. Not more than a few paces away three men trotted by, driving a group of llamas en route to the arks. The men's face were grimed with the sweat of their haste and the dust of the path which rose and swirled around them. They did not notice the others; the others, intent upon Liam and on Liam's questions, did not notice them. But Liam noticed them. And as he did, there welled up in him the thought that here was his answer—

But when he sought words to frame the answer he could not find them, and when he tried to resolve his thoughts he realized that he had no clear

pictures of them. Yet the certainty persisted. The brown and white fleeces of the llamas, then, aboard the older ark... the newer ones, too, if they were readied in time, presumably... And then the answer, like a bubble, welled up and broke upon the surface of his mind.

He saw the relief mingled with excitement on the faces of his friends as they saw the change on his face. They listened, intent, undoubting, willing, absorbed, as he told them what was to be done. Their numbers were to be divided—thus and thus and thus—and, with them, the quantity of thunderheads; immediately the blue points were carefully separated. A few more directions were given, places appointed, hands shaken and withdrawn regretfully, caresses briefly exchanged.

On all sides sweating people streamed like ants to and from carrying provisions and material to the arks. Liam, Lors, and Duro walked, rapidly, apart, bound upon this mission of their own. The others watched out of sight, then parted upon their own assigned tasks. They had made their decisions. There was to be no room for them in the arks.

The two tall, gaunt dusty-black forms lay where they had fallen. Either the Kar-chee felt no impulse toward retrieving their dead for burial, or else the necessities of their present condition had allowed them no time to come back for this purpose. Still, the men had no way of knowing that the Devil-things might not come back at any moment. Prudently, Lors and Duro stood on different rises of ground, standing watch—but, equally prudently, they first pulled out the fatal bolts with their obsidian points and vanes and replaced them in their ammunition pouches.

Liam and Tom had in their time flayed and flensed many a carcass, but neither had ever dismembered a Kar-chee carcass. The task was inherently unpleasant, and was made more so by the bitter reek. Tom, his mouth twisted, said, "They have no bones, then... *okh!*"

Liam said, "They have, in a way, yes. This... this armor... on the outside—this is their bone. But as to the rest, I am in full agreement with you: *okh!*" He carefully pried and scraped. They had to use exceeding care, but they were infinitely hampered by their ignorance of the alien anatomy.

"If we had the time," he said, "and if we had a vessel big enough, we might boil them like lobsters." He grimaced and grunted, went on with his digging. They were not so much skinning these cadavers as excavating them. "This is one sort of armor which must have a chink in it..."

He wished that the three vigorous guanaco-hunters from the Uplands were here with them now. It had been the sight of the drove of llamas

which had started the quick train of thought which led to guanacos, "cousins" to llamas; and simultaneously to what Lehi, Nephi, and Moroni had said about their methods of hunting the wary and wind-swift cameloids. Experienced in this technique, the Uplanders would be very useful in this present and dangerous enterprise... were they but here. But they were not; and there was no time to fetch them here.

Wind sounded and sighed in the trees, the surf (now unvexed in its timeless, ceaseless motion once again) murmured, and Liam and Tom, with teeth clenched and jaws set, worked at their grisly task. And at last they had done the brute and greater part of it; now came the part of more cunning and craft. Cords of sinews were threaded through and inserted and fastened, sticks put into place, the crossbows themselves—vertical—acting as excellent frames and braces. And then—

"Who's to go inside?" Lors asked, eyeing the rude, quick jobs of taxidermy with a mixed air of admiration, doubt, caution, and impatience.

"I, not," Liam grunted. "For I must have fully free movement of head and eyes to look all about and see what's to be seen. Let the three of you choose amongst you."

He had stripped before beginning work and so had only his hair and beard and skin to wash, squatting in the small pool left to dry up gradually when the brook had been ripped untimely from its accustomed bed. They had none of the coarse soap along with them; he ripped up grass and wadded it and scrubbed, then he scooped up sand and scrubbed, wincing, but nonetheless grateful that the abrasion removed the thickened, gummy ichorous exudations from his skin and hair. It should not have taken them long to choose, and, since Tom did not come to join him in the pool, he assumed that Tom had lost the choice; he was right.

Prepared as he was for what he saw, still he started at the sight: Two Kar-chee, erect and towering (but stooping a bit as was their way) over Lors, who—on seeing Liam stop and stare and then come on—assumed the stunned and hang-head look he evidently believed appropriate to a captive. And Liam, once into his clothes again, and thinking the other's manner was right enough, assumed it, too. The pair started off, and, behind them, heads bobbing a bit, extra legs dragging a bit, from time to time uttering muffled exclamations, came Tom and Duro, concealed inside the armored skins of the dead Kar-chee.

VIII



Twice they saw Kar-chee off in the distance but could not tell if they themselves had been seen or not. And once a dragon lifted its head and flashed its faceted eyes at them; but then its head went down again and, with no more than a rather plaintive lowing, it ignored them as before. Once they heard the voices of men and themselves turned aside so as neither to encounter nor to be encountered. And once without warning a young girl and a much younger boy crossed their path. One of the men began to say something, but before his useless caution *Don't be afraid* could advance more than a syllable the girl had snatched up the child and fled, silently, the long vocable of the boy's wail floating behind them after they had gone from sight.

There was no need for them to go seeking for the right hole in the cliff-face which would lead to the right cave—for the cliff-face itself was rent apart as though it were a rotten piece of cloth; the immense rift running from top to bottom. And there, far within, beyond the fallen rubble and the shattered rock, like a cavity in a rotten tooth, they saw what they wanted.

The cavern they had formerly been in was recognizable by an occasional fragment of machinery protruding from beneath the caved-in roof. Very likely the store of thunder-heads, detonated by the collapse of the rock overhead, had done more damage than the quakes themselves. Liam feared that the way below might have been covered up altogether; and, indeed, he was never sure that it was not, for the corridor-shaft they found at last was located on altogether the other side of what had once been the immense chamber, its doors lying twisted and shattered beside the gaping orifice.

The strange and curious lamps which had once made the cavern a mixture of hissing, off-color lights and heaped-up shadows were now for the most part dim and silent where they were not vanished altogether... but only for the most part. Here and there a lamp lay on the uneven ground or protruded askew from a twisted wall or hung perilously from the rocky overhead, its sound reduced to a faint sibilant and its light reduced to a pale flicker... but it was enough for them to pick their way along by.

The smell of dragon was missing here but the smell of Kar-chee was musty and strong—not that Duro and Tom, inside their Kar-chee husks, would have noticed, half-stifled as they were by the smell of their own concealing cortices! They went, peering and pattering and picking and stumbling their way through the dim and tortured corridor. The ground trembled faintly. The way led steadily down and around.

Presently Liam stopped and held out his hands for the others to stop. After a moment, "Listen..." he said. He lifted his face and stared at the rock above.

After a while the others heard it, too. A whisper at first. Then the sound increased... ceased... was repeated more faintly... and again and again...

"What is it?" Lors asked.

"The surf. We are under the water now. Not very far under, but—"

Lors finished the phrase for him. "But the farther on we go, the farther under the water we'll be."

Liam nodded. He listened another moment to the long sound of the withdrawing/advancing/withdrawing waves up, up above and over them. Then he shrugged. Then they went on.

But, curiously, the trembling of the ground did not decrease as they went on. Liam at first thought that this might mean that the descent of the beach was matching the descent of the tunnel. It took not long for him to realize, however, that this implied by far too prolonged a beach, an interminable shallow which would have exhausted the drive of any surf. And, by and by, the trembling took on a rhythm which was different from that of the surf altogether.

And therefore the source of it, as it did not lie above, must lie below.

His preoccupation with this was such that he did not become fully aware of the other sounds until some time after—he realized—he had first become aware of them at all.

For a moment he thought he recognized those sounds: the dragging of the Kar-chee feet, the supernumary "extra" pair which were not animated by the human legs of Tom and Duro. *Scrape ... scuffle ... rustle ... drag...* Again he stopped and signaled the others to stop.

Scuffle... rustle...

Scuffle... rustle....

Tom and Duro had stopped, but the other sounds persisted—only to stop, themselves, abruptly. He moved on, signaled the three others to

follow.

Scrape... drag....

Scrape... drag....

And then—

Scrape... scuffle... rustle ... drag....

Now he knew the sounds that Tom and Duro made, by themselves. And now he knew, too, the sounds that whatever-it-was-behind-him made. And it was clear now, too, that whatever-it-was-behind-him knew that there was something ahead of itself: hence the stopping and the waiting when they stopped and waited. Did whatever-it-was-behind-him have a clear notion of what they were, there, ahead? Was whatever-it-was being merely cautious and avoiding catching up for no other reason than safety? Or was whatever-it-was fully aware of what Lors and Liam and Duro and Tom were?—and was it following them?

Such speculation might go on forever and leave him none the wiser; he might still be speculating when the boom dropped or the roof fell in, or— He looked ahead and around him for a favorable lay of land. *Scrape . . . scuffle...rustle... drag...*

The pallid, shuddering light faded away behind them. Shadows crouched, simulating rocks, doors, monsters, beasts, pools. The air was tight and close and thick... thick as the shadows. *Scrape ... scuffle ... rustle... drag. ...* But only part of this series of sounds was significant, now. Tentatively, he thrust his foot into a heap of shadow; turned, gestured to the others to go on; withdrew into the shadows, into the cleft of the rock, as silent as the shadows and as the rock itself.

He watched Lors continue on his way, watched the two masquerade-figures go after him, each with head bowed, fore-limbs folded, lower-limbs two moving slowly and stiffly and two scraping and dragging.

Liam hid. Liam waited.

Before him in the half-light and the half-darkness, the sound of *scrape* and *drag* became fainter; the sound of *scuffle* and *rustle* became louder. Ever since the sound had first reached him, he had known what it must have been. A multitude of images had clustered and gestured: Old Gaspar muffled in a cloak and bound on the mission of exposing blasphemous resistors. A raftsman still resentful of Liam's leadership and now intent on vengeance. A friend or kinsman of young Rickar, brooding over Fateem's transfer of affection and awe... Others. Others. Many others. But he had all

along known them for what they were: illusions. And now came truth.

And truth came, as he had known it must, in the form of a Kar-chee.

The strange procession continued on its way down and along the twilighted corridor, the twisting and tubular corridor which the invaders must have made and made quickly, as naturally and as easily an ant-hill or a wasps-nest is made. First went Lors. Men: Captive. Then came Duro and Tom. Men: Masked: Pretended Captors. Then came the live, the real Kar-chee. Then came Liam, not so much pursuing the pursuer as tracking the tracker.

It was impossible to say with surety that the creature was suspicious or alarmed or that the creature knew exactly what had happened. How could any man know these things? Yet everything seemed to point toward the Kar-chee's being aware that all was neither right nor normal. It had been following them for some time, now. It had not intentionally made its presence known. When they had stopped, it had stopped, too. Liam tried to imagine... suppose that two smaller Kar-chee had slain and flayed two men and concealed themselves in the skins—somehow— The image would not itself be imagined; Kar-chee were even less fitted for that imposture than the other way around. Still... still... was it possible that he, Liam, could be deceived?

The dragon had clearly seen them in the daylight and had done nothing. Had seemed neither alarmed nor in the least suspicious. So why—now, in the darkness—should this Kar-chee be stalking them? But even as he asked the question he admitted to himself that the question was no proper question: it was comparing apples with onions, or seals with foxes. The dragons were the creatures of the Kar-chee and no man knew just how close the relations between them were... but the dragons were, after all, *dragons*. And not Kar-chee. What, therefore, the Kar-chee had in mind was known and could be known only to the Kar-chee itself.

Which the Kar-chee proceeded soon enough to reveal.

The shadows had begun, faintly but perceptively, to lengthen in Liam's direction. And shortly the light ahead of them came into sight. And the Kar-chee "spoke"! The three ahead, as they heard the loud challenge, the chirring and clicking that resounded and echoed; jerked and started and had begun to turn around—all quickly and in an instant—

But the Kar-chee moved more quickly and it hurled itself forward on its four hind limbs and raised its two huge upper limbs as though to strike. Liam ran and leaped and hurtled upon it, hitting it low down but catching

hold at once as it staggered. As it gibbered and threshed, he threw his whole weight forward. The Kar-chee staggered, straggled desperately to keep its balance, jerked and clashed its "arms," fell forward.

Lors slipped his knife into it just below and behind the head, twisted, slashed. The Kar-chee writhed, then lay very still.

"If I hadn't noticed that soft spot there, when you were skinning it—" Lors panted. "If I hadn't noticed it—!"

Liam hissed for quiet. Tom and Duro stood about, helpless as they had been during the brief straggle. Something sounded from ahead and below. Liam and Lors dragged the body back and into the shadows, and the younger concealed the knife once more in the scabbard hanging within his shirt; then he and Liam resumed their position in front as before and they all went on.

Light burst in upon them.

They came out upon an immense shaft which seemed to extend as far above them as it did below them. Their passage, and others which they could see, entered upon a spiral ramp which threaded its way from top to bottom, winding around and around and around. Above was an immense dome and around the rim of this water dripped and ran incessantly and fell in sheets and torrents. Strange engines crawled around and around the framework below the rim, clicking and clacking and moving slowly; where each one passed, the inflow of water ceased; then it began to drip once more. And below—

Even at the first glimpse of the gigantic vertical tube two—at least two—possibilities had come to Liam's mind. Either this enormous work had been done in the short time since the Kar-chee had entered the island... or it had been prepared by them at a previous visitation: perhaps at the time they had split the area off from the mainland and, having mulcted and milked and crushed and washed and wasted most of it, sunk the major part beneath the sea. Subsequently a third possibility occurred to him: that it was not a Kar-chee work at all, but was a remnant of the ancient works of man. But all this was theory and speculation and of no immediate importance or assistance.

For below was a scene which dwarfed even the one they had seen in the great cavern above. Catchment channels received and carried off the flow of water—this was essential, but this alone was, comparatively, nothing; for on the floor of the immense pit below the Kar-chee swarmed and toiled like ants. An enormous ramp led up from the floor and was lost from sight to them looking down from above as its length went out of sight and out of

the pit. But as to what its purpose was and what had used it recently, they were left in no doubt. The sky-ships were a dull black which seemed the negation of all light. Even at that height they were gigantic. One of them seemed to rest a bit askew and its lines appeared vaguely asymmetrical at that point where Kar-chee and machines most closely swarmed around and upon it; a second received at least as much attention and had had a part of its hull peeled back. It was like looking into the inside of an insect-nest—cells and passages pullulating with quick, inhuman life. And the center and seeming source of all this fevered energy was the third ship. Nothing at all untoward seemed to have befallen it and evidently it was serving as principal energy source for the repairs which its two fellow-vessels were undergoing; they and the clustering engines were attached to it by a multitude of throbbing and umbilical-like connections.

Deprived of one subterranean passage by the quakes and crashes, the Kar-chee still had another one and still their engines toiled into and within and out from it. Despite all of Liam's skepticism, the sight of those flickering flame-shadows and the recollection of those blasts of heat and the hot-steamy ocean-muddy smell brought to his mind an unwanted speculation: that perhaps the several Hells of which the oldmothers had prattled and nattered had a counterpart somewhere here below... And, as before and elsewhere, great armored engines crawled and humped themselves along this route until they, too, vanished from sight.

"There," said Lors, slightly inclining his head to indicate direction; "there are the things which we saw in the sky at night before the ark came. Those great black things—with thunder and lightning— What are they, Liam? Do you know? And how did they get here? And what is being done to them?"

Equally low-voiced, Liam said, "I think that they must be the things the Devils came in... a sort of, well, *ship*... that rides the air instead of the water. I don't know how. There must be a huge passage into this place from above to below. Here is the Kar-chee headquarters, no doubts of that. And here they are repairing the damage done by the quake. Here they are... and here *we* are. And now, what are we going to do?"

"Look for Rickar?"

"Yes... we came here for that. He's not down below on the bottom, as near as I can see. Where, then? It's possible, I suppose, though I hope not, that they might have killed him before bringing him here—didn't bring him here at all, I mean. But somehow I doubt that. No... And clearly they're in no mood for games down there right now. But—when they're done—

"So. If not there, where?"

Suddenly he began to whistle, and he went on whistling. There was no reaction from any of the Kar-chee, either down below or anywhere on the winding ramp. Possibly the noise of the repair-work at the bottom masked the sound down there. But it must surely be audible for quite a distance and at levels far enough removed from the mechanical noises. Quite possibly the sound simply conveyed nothing to them. It was unlikely that any human had ever before deliberately undertaken to whistle in the presence of Kar-chee; it was, after all, an occupation inseparable from leisure and from peace of mind. Or it might be that the sound was not registerable on their auditory equipment... whatever that might be like, and if indeed they had any. Just as there were sounds which dogs and other beasts could hear but humans could not, so it might be that this particular sound made by and hearable by humans was simply not hearable by the Kar-chee.

Now and then some one or two of the Kar-chee bent on errands of their own looked up or down or across the great pit at them and fixed gaze upon them for a while; but it was never a long while. In a moment the gaze passed on, and so did the Kar-chee. For all that he could observe to the contrary, Liam's hope and scheme that other Kar-chee would merely assume that he and Lors were captives of the two supposed Kar-chee behind them was working out so far.

It had gotten them a good way into the enemy camp. But whether it would help fulfill their mission there and get them all out safely again remained to be seen.

Lors said, "Stop."

It seemed to Liam that he could hear a faint, shrill sound far away upon the close air. Whence had it come? From the corridor whose doorway they had just passed? Or from elsewhere? Liam started on again down the ramp.

Duro said, "Stop."

His voice was muffled by the concealing carapace. He had moved so that he was facing across the pit. A Kar-chee was there, facing them. His chirring and clicking was only faintly audible, but if that and the precise meaning of his gesticulating was incomprehensible, the direction in which he was gesturing was not. *Back*, the gestures indicated. *Up—back—*

Liam said a word or two. The four of them exchanged places, reversed directions, proceeded up and back the way they had come, entered the doorway they had passed before. The other Kar-chee proceeded on his way

with the same deliberate pace as before.

There was only a doorway, there was no door. Whether this was usual or not Liam could not say. There had been doors and more than one door, in fact, in that glimpse of the deep-driving undersea caverns. But no door on any corridor here. As for the gaunt, black Kar-chee castles which legends place here and there in far lands, legend did not report on any man who had returned to speak in detail on the subject of doors.

The hallway wound down and around as well, through on a lesser incline than the main ramp, and it smelled mustily of Kar-chee and it was lit in the same odd fashion as all their other habitations; Liam wondered if this might be due not only to differences in mechanics but to difference between Kar-chee and human eyesight... and he wondered, rather more pressingly, if the Kar-chee who had gestured them hither had done so because he had seen through the disguise and was calmly sending them to somehow their death, or because—

Lors had said *Stop* and Duro had said *Stop* but Liam now merely held up his hand and held it out, holding the others back. Not far ahead, but hidden from sight by the curving corridor, a single Kar-chee "spoke." Another one, sound just perceptibly different, "answered." Then the first one replied... or at any rate "spoke" again. There was a groan, in the midst of which the second Kar-chee resumed his speaking. The strange dialogue continued, thus, intermittently. But there was not another groan. Liam's hands made swift motions. And things began to move.

He and Lors helped, as quickly as they could—unfamiliar task—Duro and Tom to wriggle and squirm out of the Kar-chee carapaces. They emerged, ichorous and odorous and with faces indicating pleasure at being out and loathing at having been in. The cross-bows, which had served as framework to hold the upper parts of the scarecrows in place, were next extracted, and Liam pulled off his shirt for a rag to clean them—quickly and hastily and not totally effectually, but well enough, so that the cord was not likely to slip or the bolt to stick.

Then the four of them went on... Tom and Liam first, propping one of the Kar-chee-things up and holding it up and holding it so that it projected ahead of them. It was not an easily performed task, and they went on slowly, slowly... slowly...

It was not too hard to conjecture the feelings of two men, conversing together, if suddenly the head and upper torso of another man came into sight round the bend of a corridor—head drooping, torso at a probably impossible angle—and then, equally suddenly, vanished from sight again.

The men who witnessed this might have thought... anything. But it is reasonably sure that, think what they might, part of their natural reaction would be to go and see *what*—

And thus did the Kar-chee.

The first one came into full and almost immediate view, incautiously, and, as it turned out, almost immediately fatally: Duro, to whom first shot had been assigned, caught it with a bolt which pierced an eye and emerged through the top of the brain pan. The second showed himself just as the first was falling, took in enough of the scene to be warned, and withdrew—but not quite soon enough. They were never sure just where the second bolt had pierced this one, so swiftly had it turned and tumbled, thrashing about; they did not pause to find out, but flung themselves upon it, knives in hand, seeking for the soft and unprotected hidden places in the chitin, the chinks in the armor; trying all the while to avoid the blows of the huge and murderous-looking anterior fore-limbs.

They found what they had sought.

And found too, in a chamber opening onto the corridor, naked and bleeding and bound... incoherent... Rickar.

They unfastened his curious bonds (there was actually only one knot, and that behind, where he could never have reached it: yet it gave upon a single tug of the short, protruding claw, and fell in loose folds away from him) and he moaned; they rubbed his limbs, and he groaned; they spoke to him... softly... sharply... he rolled his eyes... and, at last, they slapped his face.

He stopped rolling his eyes and whimpering. He saw the dead Kar-chee and he screamed—a cry which caught them so by surprise that he had time to catch his breath before they muffled his mouth with their hands.

What the Kar-chee had done to him, or what he had thought they might do to him, they did not know, and had no time to ask. "Listen, Rickar," Liam said, urgently, "we have risked our lives in coming here, and we have come here for *you*. So get hold of yourself, and now!—so that we can get away from here, all of us!"

Rickar's eyes had begun to focus and now seemed fully sensible; he nodded.

"Can you walk now?"

"Yes..."

They helped him to his feet and he hissed in sudden pain and pulled away. They eyed the cruel marks on his lower fore-arms where his captors had gripped and carried him away. And then, though they had been in full haste, they now came to full stop. Something forgotten lay before them—the husks of the dead Kar-chee, which two of them had for a while inhabited. And both two now said, simultaneously, "Not me, this time!"

There was only a second's hesitation, then Liam said, "No time for anyone, this time!"

Out the winding corridor and up the winding ramp they went again, hugging the wall in hopes they might not be seen from below, and in fear that they might encounter any coming down from above. From far down below the ceaseless clangor of repairs testified to the continued presence of the many Kar-chee there. Above, visible between the struts and bars of metal scaffolding, the great and ponderous engine crept around and around with infinite slowness along the inside of the dome, sealing and resealing it against leaks from the sea above and outside which pressed forever down upon and against it with its terrible and eternal pressure.

But on the middle areas, where their route lay, there appeared no one and nothing except themselves, as up they toiled, around and around the inside of the pit, like insects on the screw-thread of an enormous cylinder. And then from below, though not very far from below, a new sound suddenly burst upon their ears, like the nocturnal screech of insects, but magnified ten-thousand-fold.

And from farthest below, a background of equally sudden and ringing silence, came awareness that the mechanical noise of repair had ceased.

Duro and Rickar, ignoring or perhaps not even hearing Liam's hissed warning not to stop, went almost instinctively to the edge of the ramp and looked. Below and across stood a single Kar-chee, head thrown far back and thorax visibly vibrating, and from this one came the shrill high chirr of alarm; in its foreclaws was the flayed integument of one of the dead Kar-chee. Again and again the ear-piercing tocsin sounded, then it faded... and then it suddenly rang out afresh and with a different note as the Kar-chee gestured for attention with one fore-limb and with the other pointed up and over to the two who stood, as though ossified, where they had stepped—on the rim of the ramp and plain to all view.

"Come back! Away! Come away!" Liam cried, knowing it was too late anyway.

But still they didn't move and still they stood there and still the dread shrill chittering and chirring of accusation and alarm stirred the close air

of the great pit and beat upon the shuddering ear-drums. Swiftly flashed through Liam's mind the possibility that the sound was intended perhaps not only to alert the Kar-chee of danger but also as a sort of auditory fascinating directed against the creature posing the danger... something instinctive and reactive, likely—and what inner Kar-chee realizations must have taken place, now, here, suddenly, *now!* for them for the first time thus to react to mankind or any of its deeds...

Liam and Lors rushed forward and seized the recalcitrant pair and hustled them back and away, breaking the spell; they ran, they ran, they all ran, fleeing and sounding in swift and troubled breath full awareness of danger: but Liam and Lors, in doing what they had done, had also exposed to the enemy their own presences—

From below arose great and shuddering, shattering sound which made the very air to tremble, as all the Kar-chee below broke into the same clamor of alarm—and, abandoning engines and machines and tools, toil and repair alike, poured up the winding ramp in pursuit.

The men caught one glimpse of this and then dared look no more either behind or below, but tore up the incline with flying limbs and quavering breaths, not attempting to think how many more turns or how turns were to be measured before they reached the corridor which would lead them eventually to the outside and (they hoped, perhaps without much reason) to safety. Hearts swelling, bodies sweating, feet pounding, knees bent—

"Blasphemers!" cried Gaspar.

"Recusants! Rebels!" shouted Lej.

And they barred the way.

"For the sake of our life—of all our lives!—yours, yours!—don't stop us now!" cried Liam, seizing the old Knower and trying either to thrust him aside or to pull him along. But he stood there, fixed and firm, like stone, immovable. And so did Lej and so was Lej.

"Father, father," wept Rickar. "What they did to me—! Let us go!" he implored.

But Gaspar's face showed no sign of joy on seeing his son among the living; it became clear to Liam, afterward, that most of the old man's sorrow—perhaps even all of it—had been for his son's defection and not for his actual loss. "Impious child," he declared, shaking his head so violently that his beard and his long hair whipped about, "do those who have entered the grave seek to crawl up from it to instruct the living?"

Shouting, "Look *down* there! Look! Look!" Lors threw himself upon Lej, who thrust him back so quickly and strongly that he almost lost his balance and fell into the pit.

"Down there is nothing but deserved judgment and punishment for you!" cried Lej.

"Deserved or not, it will be punishment for all of us," Liam shouted, frantic at the thought that, having thus far escaped all perils, they were now in danger of perishing from this pair's fanaticism. Previously, however absurd old Gaspar's arguments had been, they had still been presented calmly and with some show of logic. But now the old Knower acted like one unhinged.

"Rogues!" he shouted. "Scoundrels! Rebels! Is it not enough, the damage you have already done? As a result of your wicked resistance we suffered the crippling quakes and waves which have delayed our necessary departure. And now you wish to tempt and provoke Nature even more, and thus destroy us all!"

Little bubbles of spittle lined his lips, and his hands clawed the air; then, abruptly, he hastened to the rim of the ramp and in a voice between a scream and a howl he cried, "Devils, Devils! Just is your rage, but direct it towards these, to them who have defied you, and not against us! We have lived virtuously all of our lives, Lej and I and the rest of us, never resisting, never—"

Liam lifted his hand and rushed at Lej, who tensed and pushed to parry the blow; and Liam seized him and threw him heavily to the ground. "*Come on! Come on!*" He darted up and away, and Lors and Duro and Tom rushed after and along with him.

Behind they could hear Gaspar still shrieking out his insane petition. Then, abruptly, his voice dropped, and he declared, quite calmly. "Let them run; from the Manifestations of Nature there can be no escape for long... Devils, Lej and I will step aside so as not to impede you in your pursuit: but spare the others above—or at least spare those of them who..."

Distance, and the noise of their own running feet and the strident ululation, prevented the fugitives from hearing the rest of his comments. And then came a sound which broke their stride—and then another which brought them to a halt: Gaspar's voice, raised in one long and incredulous vocable of protest; and overwhelming that, Lej's voice, raised beyond a pitch they would have thought possible, in terror...

And in pain...

Rickar's eyes bulged; his mouth swept back into a grim and almost skeletal grin; he half-turned. Tom and Liam grabbed him, Lors pulled, Duro pushed, and they all fled once more; and now their pace flagged never.

IX



When they saw the light of outside day, looking strange and pale, ahead through the rift in the curtain of rock, Tom—small it was who stopped to offer his first word of advice. His chest labored and shone with sweat, and his voice was faint; his gesturing hand trembled.

"If... if... if we have a firehead... should... shouldn't we..."

Block off the passage behind them?—so Liam understood him. He drew a shuddering breath and shook his head. They fled on, staggering, stumbling, not daring to stop: fleeing through the dying day like animals who dare not pause to look back for sight of the hounds they can no longer hear...

Later, long later, when they had found refuge in a blind cave whose entrance they had closed by moving boulders across its narrow opening, then Liam, when he had caught his breath, explained his reasons.

"We don't know that they knew that was the way we came in," he said, throat still burning and lungs still aching. "For another thing, it wouldn't keep them from getting out. They know other ways out. But... us?... do we know any other ways *in*?"

Rickar seemed not to have heard him. His head was cocked and he seemed straining to hear something else; his face still bore signs of the rictus which had seized it at the sound of what might have been his father's death-cry. Might: then again, might not: and perhaps they all had visions of Gaspar, stripped of clothes and faith and dignity and subjected to the cruel sport of the man-ring—baited and bloody...

Lors parted his sodden hair with his hands, too tired even to toss his head to clear his eyes. " 'Any other ways *in*? ' " he repeated, aghast. "Are you as mad as those two were? By my mother's milk, what could ever bring us back in again?"

Duro said, "Don't say 'us.' "

And Tom added, "No, don't. Not me. Never."

But Lors, still facing Liam, and with a rising and incredulous inflection in his voice, asked, "What do you think of going back for?"

Liam said, his hands roaming aimlessly, nervously, among his sweaty body-hair, "I don't know... I don't know that I think of— But I don't know that I don't." Then, less reflectively and more than a little more personally, eyeing each of them in turn, he declared, "And anyone who doesn't feel up to going wherever I go is free to go—well, somewhere else... I haven't twisted any arms," he concluded, resentfully.

There was silence, broken only by their still laboring breaths. Lors broke it. "We've been going where you went," he pointed out, "not because we were bound to you by oaths or had lost to you in a game of forfeits or owed you a hereditary allegiance, or any of those things... anything like that... no..."

"We went with you because you had a sound purpose in mind, so we thought... so I, at least, still am thinking. To find out more about the Devils: wasn't that our purpose? All right, then. So suppose we just consider together and see what we've learned about them—before we either forswear ourselves never to go back or start getting ready to go back right now. Eh? Duro? Tom? Agreed? Well, then...Liam?"

Liam noticed the omission of Rickar, but a swift glance at that one confirmed that he might as well be omitted, at least for the moment. Certainly it looked not only as though Gaspar's son were not listening to what they were saying, but as though he were incapable of doing so.

"Agreed, then," he said. And he lifted his head, cleared his throat.

What had they learned about the Devils?

For one thing, they had learned that Kar-chee and dragon were not always found together; although they had seen both on the surface and in the cavern where the serpent-drills had been at work coring and sampling, they had seen only Kar-chee in the great cylindrical pit. What did this prove? Or, if it proved nothing, did it at least hint at something? That the dragons were not essential to the basic tasks of the Kar-chee and served only as, or chiefly as, a sort of army or watch-force?

Further—they had seen the great ships with which the Kar-chee (and, one must assume, the dragons, too) rode the air... and, according to some legends, the airless spaces in between the stars. They had seen these ships damaged, whence it followed that they were damageable. And they had seen the Kar-chee at work repairing them. And what this showed was

certainly more than just a possible hint—

"You mean that they want to get away?" asked Lors.

"I mean that they want to be able to get away! I mean that they don't look as though they've come to stay," Liam replied.

But even as he stated this deduction so clearly and so definitely, a doubt nibbled at the edges and corners of it. The nibbling doubt went round and round, and round and round, and—curious!—try as he would, he could see no other motion to it, nor could he get it to stop so that he could look at it and see clearly what it was...

"Anything wrong?" Lors asked, giving him an alert glance.

Liam roused himself. "No... no... not really. Well, to go on, then—"

To go on, they had had confirmed by their own eyes the information which Lors could have given them from his own experience in Britland: that men at arms were capable of physically destroying Kar-chee. It now remained to be seen whether or not this destruction would be followed by immediate attack—as it had been in New North Britland from Uist to Ulst.

"But I have the notion that it just might not be," he said.

Rickar muttered; they looked at him, quickly, then at each other. Duro shifted his weight from one haunch to another, asked, "Why not?"

"Because they would have acted after our first attack on them, they would have tried to avenge the death of the first two Kar-chee we killed... or... if they weren't sure that they were dead, wouldn't they have tried to rescue them? Still— We haven't learned *much* about them, whatever we have learned. Their notions of responsibility one to the other may not be the same as ours. On the other hand, remember how they reacted down there in the pit? Who could have predicted that? Was it only because there we were striking so close to home?"

The cave was dark and small and smelled of bat-mould and drying sweat. It seemed a strange place to be discussing, with almost academic detachment, the psychology of an alien race... and yet the fate of this whole island and all of mankind who dwelt upon it might very well have been hanging upon this discussion.

Liam said he wasn't sure what the reason was, but he thought it might well be that the Kar-chee were devoting all their energies to repairing their ships so that they could get soon away. And maybe they *had* been roused to frenzy out of fear that the invading humans were somehow capable of further injuring the Kar-chee ships.

"Then the ships," said Lors, thoughtfully, "are their weak spot. Maybe their weakest..."

"Until they get them fixed. Then they might well be their strongest."

Tom seemed to struggle with an unfamiliar idea; he turned to Rickar, as though forgetting that Rickar had been tacitly deemed to be outside the discussion. "The ark people... the Knowers... you can manage big ships. Do you suppose that you could manage these big Devil-ships?"

Lors looked at him almost scornfully, Duro gave a *Huh?* of surprise, but Liam—

Rickar, to everyone's surprise, answered, "I don't see how. Ours go by wind or oars and these have engines. Ours go on the water and these others go on the air. No... no..."

Tom winced his disappointment. "Oh. Too bad... I was thinking that if you could, if any of us could, then we could go just anywhere at all and alert the men in every place, and then—"

"If we could manage their ships we might be able to wipe them out, Devils of both kinds, all by ourselves," Lors said, impatiently.

But Liam looked at Tom and his head slowly rose and slowly fell and, slowly, slowly, he nodded to himself.

As zealously as the Kar-chee had toiled to repair their own ships, so the Knowers, old and new, now toiled to repair theirs. Rickar's appearance at first produced no disturbance in the toil and labor; some did not look up to see him, others had never known who he was, some had forgotten that he had been missing, some now merely assumed that there was no truth to the report of his having been gone, others—

But one came forward now, with a cry of joy, her gaunt face transfigured, her worn hands raised and wavering: Mother Nor.

"My son, my son! I knew it, my son; I knew it! Your father could not look at you and not yearn to help and save you—ah, no..." She caressed his face as he stood there before her; and now others began to gather around them— none actually leaving off the work of repair, but many pausing en route from having laid a burden down. "You were wrong, you and your friends were of course wrong: Gaspar knows that, who does not know that—but he was willing to harrow Hell for you!" Her eyes searched among the thronging people, brimming with tears and confidence. "Your father? Gaspar? Where has he gone to?" And her glance came back to her son and her face changed, suddenly, terribly.

"What has happened to him?"

Her voice was a scream. Rickar shuddered, his body jerked and trembled. His mouth opened but only uncouth clicks and barks came forth from it. His limbs twitched, his head sat stiffly to one side and the horrible and lipless grin returned to his face. A murmur of dismay and fright went through the crowd. And still Rickar remained incapable of coherent speech.

And so it was left to Liam to speak for all of them. He sighed very deeply. "Mother Nor," he said, after a moment, "things are not as you suppose. Gaspar didn't follow us to rescue Rickar from the Devils, but to drive him back to them! Oh, Mother—

"Is it possible for you to consider—not to accept, that may be asking too much—but just for a moment to *consider* the possibility that the Kar-chee have other functions besides that of being Devils in regard to sinful mankind? Just make-believe for a moment... can you do that? Make believe that the Kar-chee are living creatures like we are and that they have come here for a purpose of their own which hasn't got anything to do with us—neither with us here nor any other men or women anywhere else. Make believe, pretend that it isn't to punish that they've come here, but on a purpose which would be the same if we had all died long ago..."

He had to credit her, for she did make the effort to imagine it; he could see her doing so. That something extraordinary was going on, this she realized, and so for the moment she not so much abandoned her faith but stood, as it were, a bit outside and apart from it. Her thin lips moved, she still caressed her son's tormented face, and she asked, "And what would this pretended purpose be?"

Liam said, "We saw them down below in a great cavern drilling into the rock and taking out parts of the rock and washing these parts after they'd been crushed; and the way in which this was done, Mother, was the same way in which I've seen the men called *miners* working the rock and soil in my old home land on those parts of it which were raised up from the sea in the old, old days when the rest of it had been sunk beneath the sea. Washing it to see if it contained metallic traces enough to justify mining on a regular scale. All over the world, from all I've heard, are found evidences of mining which was done on a great scale; and it might seem, metal being now so scarce and rare with us, that this whole world has been mined out. But even after a carcass has been stripped of meat and the meat eaten and even after the bones have all been gnawed, still, you know, inside the bones is the marrow.

"And if hunger is deep enough and teeth and jaws are strong enough, the bones will be cracked and crushed and then the bones will be sucked for the marrow they contain..."

"I believe this to be true, but I ask you only to pretend that it *might* be true: that the Kar-chee have come here from someplace else, hungry and sharp of teeth and strong of jaw, to crack the bones of this earth of ours and to suck them dry of marrow. Only the marrow they seek is not really marrow, it is *metal!* Can you, if only for a moment, imagine this?"

The crowd muttered. Mother Nor compressed her forehead. A moment passed, She said, "And therefore—?"

"And therefore, Mother, therefore all of these great and monstrous engines which we have seen below—" He described them, turning to Lors and Duro and Tom for confirmation of what they had seen as well as he. "—These things are for mining, Mother. The Kar-chee have come here to mine. They dig deeply because only in the deeps and depths are rocks worth mining to be found. The sinking of lands, the raising up of other lands, all these are for no other purpose except as they connect with mining operations. The effect of all this on mankind is coincidental; as far as the Kar-chee are concerned, mankind is beside the point. They have not come with the intention of making us suffer, but if we suffer as a result of their coming, that is no concern of theirs. If we stay, they are indifferent; if we flee, they are indifferent. On only two levels, Mother, do they take cognizance of us at all—

"One, is if we menace or seem to menace them: they strike back. It is perhaps only natural. We have nothing in common except life and death and a desire to occupy the same space; we cannot communicate, our species with their species. And so what else is there to do, if one strikes out at or seems likely to strike out at the other, except to strike back?"

"I've said that this is natural. Not 'good'—'*natural!*'

"But there's another level on which they interest themselves in us, Mother, and this seems to me less natural, in the sense that it is less inevitable. *They sometimes use us for their sport.*

The older woman's face changed; in a low voice she said, "My child, you babble."

Lors took a deep breath and shook his head. He seemed ten years older than the stripling who, a short while ago, had had no greater concern than hunting a deer or lying with a girl. The soft lines had gone from his face, his voice was deeper and harsher, his movements at the same time more cautious and more emphatic. "He isn't babbling at all, Moma," he said,

straightforwardly. "We've all seen it. We can't forget it. That's what's bothering your son, I'm afraid. Have you ever seen a cat playing with a mouse or with a very young rat? Is that really *play*? Isn't it a kind of punishment, too? The cat gives pain and gets pleasure. And in the end, no matter how long it takes, the smaller creature dies.

"Well, that's what we've seen the Devils doing. We've seen the dragons bring in men, one at a time, and the other dragons and the Kar-chee form a circle, do you see? Then begins the baiting, the sport, the play, the torture, call it whatever you want. The dragon picks up the man and tosses and worries him the way a dog might do with a rat. But the dragon is careful at first not to kill the man, as the cat is careful not to kill the mouse. It even drops the man and lets it try to escape. *But there is no escape!*

"The Kar-chee strike the man down when he tries to get away from the circle they've made around him. The Kar-chee drive the man back. And then the dragon begins to work on him again. Teeth and claw, claw and teeth... We've seen it; we've all seen it."

Duro said, "We've seen it."

Tom said, "Yes. We all saw it."

And Rickar, in a low, low voice, grinding his teeth: "We saw it. We did see it. I saw it, too."

The crowd groaned. Mother Nor moistened her lips. "If you all did, then there is no need for imagining or making believe, is there? But this is only another form of punishment, of the punishment the Devils inflict upon men for violating the practice of justice and equity. My husband would never say differently, of that I am sure." She took her son by his arms. He looked at her now, his face still fixed in that dreadful grimace. "Rickar, tell me now—*where is your father?*"

"In Hell," he said.

There was a long silence. "He followed us down, he and Lej, not to help me get out, but to see that I never got out. It was better, he thought, for me to die so that he could still say that he was right all along than for me to get out and prove that he was wrong all along—"

"No, Rickar. My son, no—"

"And then they were all aroused, all the Kar-chee Devils, and they started after us all, and we fled—we fled—my friends who'd risked their lives to save me—but *they* didn't flee, Father and Lej didn't flee, no, not they. They stayed behind, you know that? They stayed behind to preach a

sermon to the Devils to tell the Devils how right they were and how wrong we were and they urged the Devils on after us—

"But the Devils didn't take us! The Devils took *them!* And they screamed—and they *screamed*—and *we could hear them screaming!*"

And he threw back his head and he screamed himself, again and again and again, and then he pitched forward and fell upon his face with his eyes rolled up, and his mother knelt and gathered him in her arms and soothed him and cradled him and murmured, over and over again, "My son, my son... My son, my son..." She must have realized that she had lost her husband forever—and in his person not her husband alone but her leader, the guide of her life in its spiritual and communal aspects, the head of her people—and under circumstances the most cruel: cruel in the physical circumstances of her loss, and perhaps more cruel in that if his teachings were correct, as she had always implicitly believed, then he himself had been a sinner whom she had always deemed to be righteous, and, if his teachings had not been correct then he had lived and died in folly—and in a void and a chaos all his followers were now to find themselves.

And in the night the alarm was sounded and the cry arose. "*Dragons! Dragons! Devils! Devils! Dragons! Dragons!*" The people rose up from their slumber and their beds and heaped wood upon the fire and then, confused, in terror and concern, milled around, uncertain of anything except their own fear and the very uncertainty which perhaps terrified them as much.

Liam had not lain down. He and his friends had eaten and had then talked themselves to sleep. He awoke to find his knees wet with the sweat of his face and had a confused recollection of having thus fitfully slumbered, half-sitting, half-crouching. He was afterward never altogether sure if he had *seen* the dragons, there, at the perimeter of the camp, upreared and immense in the firelight and the moonlight; or if the image had been nothing else than a vision of the night, a creation of the obscurity and uncertain illumination, the dream from he had been ripped, the fears which pressed in and down upon him.

But the dragons had certainly been there. And they had flung their monstrous message into the enemy camp, the camp of men, and then retreated into the mists and darks from which they had come.

Message?

Messages!

Stones flung into an ant-heap were nothing in the creation of panic and swarming and fleeing compared to this. And to wonder. Liam saw the things as they came flying through the air and thudded upon the ground and bounced and flapped and then lay still; he saw this, but did not then in that split instant of fire-flickered and moon-silvered time see clearly enough to recognize it. It was not very long, though, before the ground was clear enough of people—screaming, maddened, gone off into the darkness—for him to venture out and over. And there he saw full clearly what was there, and for the first time in all this long sequence of events he felt something as close to guilt as he ever came to it. He had not felt it in Britland, leading his followers to (as he had thought) safety and the sea; he had not felt it in the raft, not even when famine and thirst and death had laid heavy hands upon it; but he felt something like it now—

"Gaspar..." It was Tom who spoke, in a stifled, sickened tone.

And Lors, his mouth stiff, made the second identification. "Lej, too..."

Duro said nothing. Rickar began to weep. Liam looked. He knew what he was seeing, and he knew immediately why he was seeing it. It had been his idea to flay the two dead Kar-chee and use their cortices for stalking-horses. The other Kar-chee had been intent on carrying away Rickar: true. But they had certainly been aware that two of their number had been slain by men. Yet neither then nor afterward had they seemed particularly concerned. And when that dreadful and strident Kar-chee alarm had been raised by the discovering one in the great cylindrical pit, he holding the flayed integument of one of the two over the rim of the ramp so that all the others could see, and when the shrill sound had come, repeating, echoing, prolonged, from (seemingly) everyone of the other Kar-chee there—when they had abandoned their works of repairs and poured upward in pursuit—

Even then Liam had somehow assumed that it was only the *death* of their fellows which had aroused and concerned them, and nothing more.

But now, looking down, his heart pounding violently, his mouth filled with a sick taste and the muscles of his jaw and stomach stiffened against nausea, the sounds of panic around the camp transmuted into a clamoring buzz; now, as he gazed upon the meticulously flayed skins of Gaspar and of Lej, skins which contained no bodies—now, at last, he knew better.

What synapses had been sparked or set in motion by the Kar-chee discovery of what men had done to those two Kar-chee, what reflexes or reactions set off, what deep instincts or emotions roused, Liam did not

and probably forever could not know; but he could and did know that they had been exceedingly great. Some faint hypothesis occurred to him: perhaps only by this act of his and his friends had the Kar-chee suddenly or finally been convinced that the race of mankind was an intelligent race capable of intelligent i.e. malign i.e. *dangerous* action; not merely any longer stinging ants or biting dogs...

But this was speculation and nothing more; it was not facts. The facts lay before them—the empty husks which had once covered Gaspar and Lej.

"This cannot go on," someone said. "This cannot be endured. If it can be done to Gaspar and to Lej, then no one is safe."

Liam turned to see who had spoken. He marveled at her control. "No one is safe, Mother Nor. And never will be until—"

Her face was like a mask in the lights of the spurting fire and the gibbous moon. Her voice sank. "If such things are done in the green wood, what shall be done in the dry...?" She threw up her hands. "What shall be done, what shall be done? What *can* be done? I would say, Flee, let us flee again, ready for flight or not. I would say, Let us leave this accursed land! But all the Earth is accursed, and there is no part of it to which we can go where these Devils cannot follow and torment us again.

"Always I believed that following the clear and just path of Manifest Nature, the path of charity and justice and diligent equity, would eventually see an end to suffering and punishment and flight—" Her face worked. Suddenly it became stiff and still and masklike again. Liam shifted; she put out her hand to stop him. Then, slowly, slowly, as he watched, wanting to move and be about doing things, unable to stop watching and wondering, her face changed and became certain and satisfied and vigorous once more; and yet changed greatly from her former face of days.

She said, "I see now quite clearly how it is. The Devils have over-reached themselves. They have ceased to be instruments and have begun to move of themselves instead of being moved by Nature. The results, of course, are evil, hideously evil"—her hand's sweeping gesture indicated the things on the ground she did not look at—"but at least now they have set us free. Resistance is no longer sinful, for it is now resistance against sin itself." She looked at Liam. "And we will have to consider, consider quickly, what form resistance can take. You will have thought of that, and as soon as the people are rallied and returned, you will tell us about that. Leadership must come from you, for I am too old."

He shook his head. Her face fell; her hands went out to him. "Rally the

people, by all means, Mother Nor. And explain your new discovery to them. But I can't stop and wait. There is something I must do now... perhaps I should have done it before, but events...

"One thing only I must impress on you, and you must impress it on everyone else: *Get as far away from the water and stay as far away from the water as you can.* Do you understand?"

Faintly, she frowned. "I understand the words," she said, nodding. "But I don't understand the meaning which must be beneath them. Are you asking me to act on faith alone? All my life I have acted on faith, but it was never at any time only on faith, for always there was enough evidence that the ways of the faithful produced a better result than those of the unfaithful."

He told her that he had little evidence which was able to be looked at calmly and understood. But he had some such. And he would tell her what he proposed to do and what he expected would have happened by and by as the result, and what the results of the result would inevitably be. She listened further. She looked, and she nodded. "So may it be," she said. "I will tell them. And..." She ceased, suddenly, to be leader, became again mother. Liam understood her look, her gesture.

"No, Rickar I will not need. Let him stay here, and let him add his descriptions to your explanation." He didn't bother to add, *Besides, he is in no condition to go off and do anything else.* "Duro—get back to your fathers place and spread the same word all around there, and do your best to see that others spread it as far as can be. Tom—that goes for *you, your father's place*, and you see to it that the word gets as far around the coast and all the lowlands. Have you got it? I'll give it to you again. Listen."

"Get as far away from the water and stay as far away from the water as you can."

The air was as close as ever before, and, as before, it throbbed with the pulse of the engines from far inside and below. "I hoped we'd never have to come back," Lors muttered, as they walked very quickly and very carefully down yet another of the many corridors leading off from the many caves... leading inward... leading downward.

Liam said, "Well, it's for damned certain that we'll never be coming back again." He grunted, and his mouth moved wryly. "One way or another..." His voice died away. They moved along, heads moving cautiously from side to side.

After a time they emerged once more onto the ramp running threadwise down the inside of the great cylindrical pit. They did not peer over and down this time; it would have been a needless and useless risk. And one other thing, too, was different now from the last time—this time their route was *up*.

The strange lamps cast their strange light. They looked across and over: they saw no one. They quickened their steps. Upward they climbed. Upward and up. And finally they came to the first strut. They did not know what kind of metal it was or by what process it had been worked or by what process cast. It was fixed into the wall of the pit firmly and on all sides were fixed the other struts, on this level and on levels above, supporting a framework or scaffolding which seemed to go up almost forever, up to the dome roofing over the pit itself.

Lors stroked it almost reverently. "So much metal," he said, awed.

"Up with you, or let me," Liam said, curtly. Lors sucked in his breath with a hiss; he reached out his arms, grasped, set his right foot down, then his left. Liam followed behind him. There were odd curves and indentations in the girder, their purpose unknown, but they provided excellent hand- and foot-holds. Upward and onward they climbed, and finally reached the first of the horizontal sparrings. Here they paused to rest a short moment, and in the comparative silence they heard the sound of water trickling, and beyond that they heard something else.

A voice. A human voice.

They climbed out and along another distance to have a clearer view downward. The voice was muttering. Then it hummed something. Then it said, quite clearly, "I know you're there!"

Lors shot out his hand, grasped Liam's wrist. Liam pressed his lips together, shook his head.

"I know you are there. Don't hide. Why hide? No use hiding. I know you are there. I'll find you. I came here for that. Do you hear? Do you hear, Devils? Devils? Do you hear I'm here?" The man down below laughed, low at first; then, losing control, louder, loudly, a whooping sound which ended abruptly as though axed.

Only the thump of the engines, the dripping of the water...

"Devils, Devils, I'm going to get you for what you did to my father. He was the best father who ever lived. I didn't deserve him. It's my fault he's dead. I was bad. But it was *you* who killed him, Devils." The words sank lower, vanished into gibberish which then became a low and agonizing

moan which froze the hairs of Lors' neck.

Cautiously, he and Liam climbed farther out, cautiously peered down. It was, of course, Rickar. Sometimes he moved with exaggerated, almost ridiculous care, picking up each foot and lifting it high before setting it down again. Sometimes he walked sideways, like a crab, hugging the wall. Once he stumbled and Lors's hand dug into Liam's wrist—but Rickar did not go over the side. He landed on his knees, and, thus, still on his knees, continued on his way, crawling, creeping, crooning his insane warning. Downward. Downward. Down, down... down...

Liam sighed. He shook his head again. There was nothing they could do for Rickar this time. Nothing.

Their route continued to be upward. They climbed the girders, struts and spars like clumsy monkeys; ground-apes, returning rather gingerly to the long-forsaken trees. The sound below had either ceased or had sunk below their capacity to hear. There was once again nothing but the slow drip-drip of water. And then, gradually, another sound began to make itself known to them. A slow, infinitely slow, but infinite and endless ratcheting. It seemed to repeat its dull, one-note message over and over again forever as they climbed and climbed...

... and climbed...

The reticulations of the scaffolding finally came to a visible end, and there, above them, a railing surmounted the whole and circled about beneath the dome. And there, riding the railing and seeming to swallow it as it did so and then to extrude it as it passed on, was an engine of sorts... fastened right behind it, another engine... fastened right behind the second, a third... and then no more. The engines mounted up to the rim of the dome. They grasped the rim, grappled with it. The engines moved slowly, so very, very slowly; they almost seemed not to move at all. The struggle was a long and slow one. Water oozed in along the rim, fell in minor torrents. The engines approached... the engines worked... at last, after longer time than Liam could count in his head, the engines crept on along.

Before them, the rim was wet. Behind them, the rim was dry.

The two men reached up their hands and arms, took hold, and took the last few steps upward.

The rail itself was no simple single bar of metal curved into a circle. It received part of the engine carriage deep within itself and retained it as the engine or engines crept around with deliberation and slow determination. Liam crept up himself as close behind the retreating third

as he could. He peered within, and seemed to see the glint of wheels... He thrust his hand within the bosom of his shirt, pulled it out. Something flashed with a blue glint of fire. Liam's hand, moving dreadfully carefully, vanished within the continuous cavity which was the inside of the railing. It emerged. He repeated the gesture. Again. Again. Again. At last his hand groped within his shirt and found nothing. He grunted then descended. Lors took his place.

The engine had moved only a few inches in this time.

Blue fire flashed again, flashed many times. There remained nothing more inside of Lors' shirt, either. He got down from the rail. And now, alternately moving more quickly than they had in going up and, caution overcoming fear, more slowly, they made their way down and across. Once only, before taking earth, they allowed themselves one last glimpse into the abyss. But they could discern no new things: the three black-hulled spaceships, the tiny dots which were the swarming Kar-chee, the dull flaring-flickering glow as the mysterious gateways into the subcavernous cavern were briefly opened and quickly closed—all was as before.

And of Rickar himself they could see nothing.

"Here we go," Liam said, pointing to an opening in the rock wall.

"That's not the way we came in," Lors said.

"Well, that's the way we're going to go out," Liam answered, making his way toward it. "If we get to go out at all, that is... You coming?"

"Don't move so slowly," said Lors.

X

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Jow wiped sweating forehead with his forearm and looked at his son. "We've been doing nothing but make boats," he said, partly annoyed, partly alarmed... and not a little confused. "And for what, if not to put them on the water and ourselves inside of them? Now you come along and tell us, Stay *away* from the water!"

"I've told you good reason for it, haven't I?—Popa, there isn't much time. *There isn't much time!*"

His father gave a deep sigh. Then he said, "I'd better believe you. Come

on, then, boy!" He leaped to his feet, seized a length of wood which was only partly fashioned into a paddle, and rushed across to where the great wooden gong hung from the branch of a tree. He struck it once... twice... a third time. *Attention!* He struck it once... twice... a third time. *Attention!* All around, all work ceased, all looked up, started rising to their feet. Fishermen heard it along the shore and commenced pulling in their nets. Women gathering shellfish in the shallow coves straightened up and began moving in toward shore. Boatmen about to launch another new canoe at the beach hesitated, slid it back a bit... listened. Everyone listened.

Jow struck the echoing wood once-twice, quite quickly. He sounded the double-note again. Again he brought down the improvised gong-stick; and again. *Doom-doom ... doom-doom... doom-doom....*

Danger!

The fishermen froze, a shell-gatherer stopped with one foot in the air, the canoe-launchers rolled their eyes at one another and did not otherwise move. They waited. Waited.

Doom-doom ... doom-doom ... doom-doom....

Danger!

Then the great hollow sounding-board gave forth three slow notes. And another three. And another three. Then once again it sounded Danger; then once again three slow notes and for a third time three slow notes. Then it fell silent. Jow, Tom, the boatbuilders, the fishermen, the shell-gatherers, the canoe-launchers, treecutters, old men, children—everyone and everyone—understood the meaning of the last signal.

The hills...

The hills...

The hills....

The net lay where it had been dropped. The basket floated and bobbed about and the shellfish began to be dimly aware that they were in water once again, the canoe lay on its side and was aware of nothing. A pot boiled over and quenched the untended fire. A parrot called out querulously, cocked its head at the silence, finally flew off, muttering.

The day was unusually clear. Away and away, off in the Uplands, three men who had gone out to scout for guanaco turned aside from their quest a moment and glanced below. After a moment one of them spoke.

"I see many persons moving very fast," said Nephi.

"Many, many persons, moving very, very fast," said Lehi. He paused, shaded his eyes, frowned. "And also," he said, "Many, many dragons also," he said, "many, many dragons also moving very, very fast. I fear that they will catch and destroy the persons."

"Only maybe not," said Moroni.

From the Rowan homesite the retreat to the hills had proceeded somewhat less precipitately, it being rather more removed from the water than Jow's place was. Not many people, in fact, were there—some had gone to join Jow's people and some had gone to join the Knowers. But old Ren and his wife were there, and their son Carlo and his family, and several others.

Ren seemed very old, very uncertain. Indeed, if his wife had not joined with her sons in pulling him onto this feet, he might not have moved at all.

"Up, up, Popa!" cried Duro. "Haven't you heard what I've been saying? Don't you believe me?"

His father did not resist, but neither did he much cooperate. "I don't know..." he groaned, allowing himself to be pushed along. He reached out and grasped the pannier of a loaded llama, perhaps not so much for physical support as for the comfort of a familiar object. "I don't know... I suppose it will make no difference... Here, there... today, tomorrow... What does it matter? Mmm... It doesn't matter."

The land had begun perceptibly to slant upward and they could see Mount Tihuaco for once all free of cloud, when they heard in the middle distance the cry of a questing dragon. Old Ren sucked his breath in between his teeth, fearfully, and trembled.

Duro took his arm, pressed him gently, firmly forward. "It's far away, Popa," he said, reassuringly. "And it's certainly not after us." The small caravan continued.

But when they heard the second dragon, and the third, and then the fourth, each nearer, and each from a different angle, Carlo voiced the inescapable conclusion: "Duro, they may or not be after us, but they seem bound to cut across our path. We'd better leave our path—" As if to confirm or to confound him then, it seemed as though every dragon in the world gave voice, from everywhere and all about, a pandemonium of hissing, roaring, bellowing. The old woman gave a little cry of fear and one of the babies started wailing.

Duro seized the lead llama and turned it at right angles to the path and pulled it along after him. The beast protested but it obeyed, and the other

ones followed after. Duro, for the moment, was torn between the need to aid his trembling old father and his brother Carlo, whose lame leg was not well-suited for tripping through undergrowth and climbing steep inclines.

It was Ren who made the decision for them. "Help your brother, then," he said. His face was suddenly resolute.

"They may catch up with us, but we'll give them a chase before they do!"

Through bushes and thickets which tore at their legs and stones which tore at their feet, bent over and clutching at any support, between boulders which barely allowed the laden llamas to pass, the party went on, went up, and finally reached a bare place which allowed them to turn once again onto still upward-slanting but somewhat more level land; and here, as though ordered to, they all looked below...

The dragons were moving in somewhat broken but clearly purposeful formation, in an irregular line at an angle of forty-five degrees. Now and then one of them reared up and stretched its neck and looked all about, its long and bifurcated tongue flashing as it flickered in and out to taste the air, and the unobscured sunlight glittered many colors from the faceted eyes. Fortunately, their change of route had taken them out of the direct line of the dragon advance; fortunately, too, the wind was in their favor.

And then the ground trembled and shook.

"Down!" cried Duro. "Down, down, everybody!"

The noise came rolling, rolling, thundering, roaring. The earth fell away beneath them, rose up and struck them, tossed them to and fro. Then, for a moment, all was still. Carlo gasped, pointed out to sea...

Out to where the sea had been.

In its place, for a long, long, very long way, was land which none had ever seen before. And beyond that was a great whirlpool. There were three sudden, sharp thunderclaps behind them. They turned just in time to see Mount Tihuaco blow off its top and vanish from their sight behind black clouds through which the lightnings which had slept in the earth now flickered and blazed like the tongues of giant dragons. They saw a vast plateau dissolve before their eyes and a valley vanish, shattered like a board whose back has been broken against a rock. Then on-rolling dust and darkness veiled all of this from them and, crawling toward each other for a comfort which was more than spacious safety, they looked out again toward where the sea had been, and there they saw that which made them—breathless as they were and dumbstruck as they had been—cry out, less at that moment in fright than in utter wonder: for the waters of the

ocean, as though piled and heaped high upon themselves by a colossal hand, now came rolling and rushing and galloping in to reclaim their lost terrains once more.

In the momentary silence of the earth and the volcano they could hear very clearly the roaring of the on-rushing, in-striding, all-devouring sea.

Liam and those with him had taken refuge on a gaunt and treeless ridge. He recapitulated it all in his mind. The triple engine so slowly and deliberately inching its way ponderously around the inner rim of the dome. He and those at the Knowers' camp trying to reach refuge in the heights of land. Not all of those at the Knowers' camp, though, for— He urging that no one run and thus exhaust himself before reaching safety, but to proceed at a rapid walk. And the engines below ratcheting their slow, slow way around the inside of the dome. The first intimation that the Kar-chee, forgetting nothing, forgiving nothing, were intent both on their work of repairs below in the pit and on their work of punishment here on the surface via the dragons. The dragons relentlessly advancing. The engines relentlessly circumambulating. And then, before sight, before sound, the first forewarning quiver of the ground.

The engines, returning on their circuit around the track, had at last reached and touched and crushed the first of the blue fireheads.

Immediately, the earth shaking...

Sliding...

Trembling...

The first detonation setting off the second... the third... Explosion upon explosion there below—

Below, the Kar-chee looking up in sudden shock... Below, the Kar-chee trying to flee...

Above, the dome, all repairs now annulled and more than merely that, the dome cracked and riven and shattered, and above the dome the tremendous pressure of the ocean no longer in the least restrained—the dome crushed forever, the ocean falling in—

The pressure of the air alone in that first second as it was compressed by the incoming water behind it must have killed them all and swept them and crushed them to the floor and wall and spread their ichorous blood and splashed and splattered it all about—

Only to be washed up and away in another second, and all their works,

their engines, their great black-hulled ships crushed and twisted as the sea came thundering, rolling, twisting in, air as heavy as a wall of rock rushing into every tunnel and corridor and killing and expelling any Kar-chee found there.

And Rickar? Had he been still then alive? Poor Rickar—

The pit become one gigantic whirlpool and the waters of his maelstrom forcing their way down into the subcavernous cavern-way which, hot and steamy and lit with flaring light led—where?

When Mount Tihuaco erupted, Liam knew where.

The sea receded, made contact with that underground river of lava, that molten lake so deep beneath sea and earth alike, turned it into steam with a sound there was no one to hear, a sound which must have been at first like the hissing and then like the roaring and bellowing of a hundred million dragons—

Sea and Earth locked in violent embrace, spending their spasms, crying out, threshing and writhing and trembling. A moment quiescent. And then the sea cannonading in upon and against and over the land, climbing higher and higher and higher and higher—

The land shaking in every limb but holding, finally, firm, and so finally casting off the sea, casting it back...

The land lying spent and lacerated and bleeding and weary.

There were those who were never seen again, living or dead, and so had to be assumed to have perished in the destruction. Of those who rejected Mother Nor's counsels as a betrayal of the true and pure doctrines as preached by Gaspar and by Lej—rejecting, too, the very evidence of their dead elders' flayed hides as mere deceitful phantoms—and who in the face of all warning launched their arks and put out to sea, defiantly: of them no conclusive trace was ever found, either. Shattered timbers which washed eventually ashore, and shattered bodies as well, might as well have belonged to the arks unlaunched and to those who had sought refuge in the heights of land but had not found it before the sea had found them.

It was days before the last reaction and counter-reaction subsided; weeks before anything resembling coherence returned to human life. But eventually most of those who survived were found by Liam's messengers and most of these attended at the great council which he summoned. It followed the pattern of proceedings which he had laid down for it—a recapitulation of all which was known of the suffering of mankind at the

hands of the Devils and the helplessness of mankind before the superior strength of the Devils began the talk; Liam delivered it. He spoke of how he had been among the first of men to resist the Devils in this age and of his first battle against them in Britland and of how he had led the bravest of the brave therefrom unto this land; and Cerry confirmed this, her eloquence undiminished by her recalling that this had not been precisely the way things had occurred in every particular...

Cerry had known from almost the beginning that Liam was one of those about whom songs were to be sung and stories told, and this and her love was why she had followed him. She knew that song and story is never bound by the mere details of the events which give them birth, but that song and story are creators of values in themselves and of their own and are not to be hobbled or mutilated by mere alignments of mere facts.

Lors and Duro confirmed, and, after them, Tom (who was no longer known as Tom-small), how Liam had led them unfalteringly to spy out the Devils and learn the secrets of the caves and caverns, their Hells and hollows and their secret fires and weapons, how they had baited men and hunted men to bait them; their own narrow escapes time after time after time, their own unfaltering bravery and how it had derived its strength from Liam's.

Fateem testified how Liam had raised up among the Knowers a group which rejected the doctrine of non-resistance and she told of how Rickar, though grievously wounded by the Kar-chee, had been carried away to freedom by Liam and his men and how later Rickar had risen from his sickbed and followed after to assist them in their final work of destruction and salvation, only to die a martyr's death in doing so.

Mother Nor spoke briefly of Liam's having opened her own eyes to the duplicity of the Devils and how she was thereby enabled to persuade many of the Knowers to find refuge and salvation on the land instead of death and destruction on the sea; then she spoke of the need to follow the principles of justice and equity... but she did not speak of this for long, for she was old and tired and the death of her son had much diminished her.

And then again Liam spoke. He spoke sitting in a chair which had been specially made for him and carved out of scented woods and cushioned with soft, washed fleeces and precious guanaco skins, with a carefully fitted-up support for his injured leg, shattered in the earthquakes.

"No one has seen any living Kar-chee since then," he said, among other things, looking around in grim triumph. His wives, Cerry and Fateem (for in those early days he had only those two and he accorded them equal

status) sat beside his chair. "It seems to be certain that those who were not drowned were eaten by the sharks and the other monsters of the sea; people have testified to seeing this happen, and there is also the dead shark found to have parts of Kar-chee inside of him. I have shown how to destroy the Kar-chee here and I will show how to destroy them everywhere else as well!"

All shouted at this and Liam's eyes glittered and his fingers strayed up to the scar on his head where he had received his second sacred injury (nor did this one ever heal entirely, either: thus did Liam suffer on behalf of all those whom he had saved).

"It is true that the dragons still remain," he admitted; "but you see how humble they have become. They avoid us. But this will avail them nothing, for I will show you by and by how we may hunt them and bait them and kill them as they once hunted and baited and killed *us!*" And all shouted even louder at this and bared their teeth.

It was at this great council, then, that the basic great plans were laid down. With the aid of the Kar-chee map of land and sea which Liam alone knew how to read and to follow (and hence had no need to show to others, he explained) and with the aid of those who had been Knowers and who knew the arts of navigation over long distances, Liam and those brave enough to fare at sea with him were to make contact with every other land inhabited by men. And so it was done, land by land, year by year. In some places Liam and his gentlemen (as they came to be known) were properly welcomed and alliances against the Kar-chee and the dragons were formed. There were not many Kar-chee found elsewhere, for most of them had been destroyed in the great destruction, and over those remaining victory was always obtained... sooner or later.

Sometimes, unfortunately, the men of other lands did not always properly welcome the gentlemen and it was essential to overcome their hostility, and to divide their lands and their women among those who had come only in friendship and unity against the natural (or unnatural) enemies of the whole race of mankind. But these battles and diversions did not long prevent mankind from wiping out its alien enemies, nest by nest and camp by camp; tracking them down and spying them out and destroying them with their own weapons. Eventually, of course, there were no more of the blue fireheads. But by that time the Kar-chee who lived afar off in the cold night in their lairs around the Ring Stars had coldly decided to cease sending replacements: there were other mineable planets with more tractable native life-forms, and thenceforth there and there only the Kar-chee concentrated their attentions. Only working Kar-chee

had ever been sent to Earth, only neuters, incapable of reproducing themselves; and this decision of their own home worlds was thus the final death sentence.

The dragons, on the other hand, multiplied, and their eggs and chicks and cockerels were known in every woodland... but they seemed more and more subject to the control of man as their former masters died off. Liam delighted to watch the dragon hunts as he grew older and less active, and many of them were held specially in his honor.

Mother Nor still maintained her few followers and continued to preach her moralistic ideals, but without the rigidity and discipline it had been subjected to under the regime of old Father Gaspar the sect of the Knowers continued to diminish. Further, it was unable to compete with the attractions of the vigorous and continually exciting adventure of life as led by Liam's gentlemen. But he himself would never allow the old woman to be mocked or abused and it was by his generous consent that she and her handful of impractical followers were allowed to settle in a land all to themselves. There were those who suspected that it was there that Fateem went secretly after her disappearance in later years, but no one ever knew for sure; Liam neither spoke nor allowed it to be spoken of.

Thus humanity renewed its strength and developed its newest ways of life upon its oldest world, forgotten by its distant children for many centuries yet to come. And as for what happened after the other worlds remembered, this is not the place to recount that; and as for the later and the last years of Liam, how he bore all before him, his slaying of the Great Kar-chee who held the daughter of the Chief of Bran a captive in his hidden cave and how Liam took her, too, to wife, and of all his deeds and triumphs and those of Lors and Duro and Tom, these are to be found wherever songs are sung among men and wherever tales are told among women.

