

F&SF readers have hitherto known Robert F. Young only as the author of sensitive short stories; but like any talented writer (and Mr. Young seems to me one of the most talented newcomers of the past several years), he has more than one string to his bow. Here is a longer and more vigorous Young story—a powerful and moving tale of the sport (or the art) of mountain-climbing in the interstellar future, of a man whose explorations imperiled not only his life but his soul, and of a mysteriously landscaped Virgin which is as compellingly visual a concept as you're apt to have read in a long time.

Goddess in Granite
by ROBERT F. YOUNG

When he reached the upper ridge of the forearm, Marten stopped to rest. The climb had not winded him but the chin was still miles away, and he wanted to conserve as much of his strength as possible for the final ascent to the face.

He looked back the way he had come—down the slope of the tapered forearm ridge to the mile-wide slab of the hand; down to the granite giantess-fingers protruding like sculptured promontories into the water. He saw his rented inboard bobbing in the blue bay between forefinger and thumb, and, beyond the bay, the shimmering waste of the southern sea.

He shrugged his pack into a more comfortable position and checked the climbing equipment attached to his web belt—his piton pistol in its self-locking holster, his extra clips of piton cartridges, the airtight packet that contained his oxygen tablets, his canteen. Satisfied, he drank sparingly from the canteen and replaced it in its refrigerated case. Then he lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the morning sky.

The sky was a deep, cloudless blue, and Alpha Virginis beat brightly down from the blueness, shedding its warmth and brilliance on the gynecomorphous mountain range known as the Virgin.

She lay upon her back, her blue lakes of eyes gazing eternally upward. From his vantage point on her forearm, Marten had a good view of the mountains of her breasts. He looked at them contemplatively. They towered perhaps 8,000 feet above the chest-plateau, but since the plateau itself was a good 10,000 feet above sea level, their true height exceeded 18,000 feet. However, Marten wasn't discouraged. It wasn't the mountains that he wanted.

Presently he dropped his eyes from their snow-capped crests and resumed his trek. The granite ridge rose for a while, then slanted downward, widening gradually into the rounded reaches of the upper arm. He had an excellent view of the Virgin's head now, though he wasn't high enough to see her profile. The 11,000-foot cliff of her cheek was awesome at this range, and her hair was revealed for what it really was—a vast forest spilling riotously down to the lowlands, spreading out around her massive shoulders almost to the sea. It was green now. In autumn it would be brown, then gold; in winter, black.

Centuries of rainfall and wind had not perturbed the graceful contours of the upper arm. It was like walking along a lofty promenade. Marten made good time. Still, it was nearly noon before he reached the shoulder-slope, and he realized that he had badly underestimated the Virgin's vastness.

The elements had been less kind to the shoulder-slope, and he had to go slower, picking his way between shallow gullies, avoiding cracks and crevices. In places the granite gave way to other varieties of igneous rock, but the overall color of the Virgin's body remained the same—a grayish-white, permeated with pink, startlingly suggestive of a certain hue of human skin.

Marten found himself thinking of her sculptors, and for the thousandth time he speculated as to why they had sculptured her. In many ways, the problem resembled such Earth enigmas as the Egyptian pyramids, the Sacsahuaman Fortress, and the Baalbek Temple of the Sun. For one thing, it was just as irresolvable, and probably always would be, for the ancient race that had once inhabited Alpha Virginis IX had either died out centuries ago, or had migrated to the stars. In either case, they had left no written records behind them.

Basically, however, the two enigmas were different. When you contemplated

the pyramids, the Fortress, and the Temple of the Sun, you did not wonder why they had been built—you wondered how they had been built. With the Virgin, the opposite held true. She had begun as a natural phenomenon—an enormous geological upheaval—and actually all her sculptors had done, herculean though their labor had undoubtedly been, was to add the finishing touches and install the automatic subterranean pumping system that, for centuries, had supplied her artificial lakes of eyes with water from the sea.

And perhaps therein lay the answer, Marten thought. Perhaps their only motivation had been a desire to improve upon nature. There certainly wasn't any factual basis for the theosophical, sociological, and psychological motivations postulated by half a hundred Earth anthropologists (none of whom had ever really seen her) in half a hundred technical volumes. Perhaps the answer was as simple as that. . . .

The southern reaches of the shoulder-slope were less eroded than the central and northern reaches, and Marten edged closer and closer to the south rim. He had a splendid view of the Virgin's left side, and he stared, fascinated, at the magnificent purple-shadowed escarpment stretching away to the horizon. Five miles from its juncture with the shoulder-slope it dwindled abruptly to form her waist; three miles farther on it burgeoned out to form her left hip; then, just before it faded into the lavender distances, it blended into the gigantic curve of her thigh.

The shoulder was not particularly steep, yet his chest was tight, his lips dry, when he reached the summit. He decided to rest for a while, and he removed his pack and sat down and propped his back against it. He raised his canteen to his lips and took a long cool draught. He lit another cigarette.

From his new eminence he had a much better view of the Virgin's head, and he gazed at it spellbound. The mesa of her face was still hidden from him, of course—except for the lofty tip of her granite nose; but the details of her cheek and chin stood out clearly. Her cheekbone was represented by a rounded spur, and the spur blended almost imperceptibly with the chamfered rim of her cheek. Her proud chin was a cliff in its own right, falling sheerly—much too sheerly, Marten thought—to the graceful ridge of her neck.

Yet, despite her sculptors' meticulous attention to details, the Virgin, viewed from so close a range, fell far short of the beauty and perfection they had intended. That was because you could see only part of her at a time: her cheek, her hair, her breasts, the distant contour of her thigh. But when you viewed her from the right altitude, the effect was altogether different. Even from a height of ten miles, her beauty was perceptible; at 75,000 feet, it was undeniable. But you had to go higher yet—had to find the exact level, in fact—before you could see her as her sculptors had meant her to be seen.

To Marten's knowledge, he was the only Earthman who had ever found that level, who had ever seen the Virgin as she really was; seen her emerge into a reality uniquely her own—an unforgettable reality, the equal of which he had never before encountered.

Perhaps being the only one had had something to do with her effect on him; that, plus the fact that he had been only twenty at the time—twenty, he thought wonderingly. He was thirty-two now. Yet the intervening years were no more than a thin curtain, a curtain he had parted a thousand times.

He parted it again.

After his mother's third marriage he had made up his mind to become a spaceman, and he had quit college and obtained a berth as cabin boy on the starship *Ulysses*. The *Ulysses*' destination was Alpha Virginis IX; the purpose of its voyage was to chart potential ore deposits.

Marten had heard about the Virgin, of course. She was one of the seven hundred wonders of the galaxy. But he had never given her a second thought—till he saw her in the main viewport of the orbiting *Ulysses*. Afterward, he gave her considerable thought and, several days after planetfall, he "borrowed" one of the ship's life-rafts and went exploring. The exploit had netted him a week in the brig upon his return, but he hadn't

minded. The Virgin had been worth it.

The altimeter of the life-raft had registered 55,000 feet when he first sighted her, and he approached her at that level. Presently he saw the splendid ridges of her calves and thighs creep by beneath him, the white desert of her stomach, the delicate cwm of her navel. He was above the twin mountains of her breasts, within sight of the mesa of her face, before it occurred to him that, by lifting the raft, he might gain a much better perspective.

He canceled his horizontal momentum and depressed the altitude button. The raft climbed swiftly—60,000 feet . . . 65,000 . . . 70,000. It was like focusing a telescreen—80,000 . . . His heart was pounding now—90,000 . . . The oxygen dial indicated normal pressure, but he could hardly breathe.

100,000, 101,000 . . . Not quite high enough. 102,300 . . . Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, Comely as Jerusalem, Terrible as an army with banners . . . 103,211 . . . The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman . . . 103,288 . . .

He jammed the altitude button hard, locking the focus. He could not breathe at all now—at least not for the first, ecstatic moment. He had never seen anyone quite like her. It was early spring, and her hair was black; her eyes were a springtime blue. And it seemed to him that the mesa of her face abounded in compassion, that the red rimrock of her mouth was curved in a gentle smile.

She lay there immobile by the sea, a Brobdingnagian beauty come out of the water to bask forever in the sun. The barren lowlands were a summer beach; the glittering ruins of a nearby city were an earring dropped from her ear; and the sea was a summer lake, the life-raft a metallic gull hovering high above the littoral.

And in the transparent belly of the gull sat an infinitesimal man who would never be the same again. . . .

Marten closed the curtain, but it was some time before the after-image of the memory faded away. When it finally did so, he found that he was staring with a rather frightening fixity toward the distant cliff of the Virgin's chin.

Roughly, he estimated its height. Its point, or summit, was on an approximate level with the crest of the cheek. That gave him 11,000 feet. To obtain the distance he had to climb to reach the face-mesa, all he had to do was to deduct the height of the neck-ridge. He figured the neck-ridge at about 8,000 feet; 8,000 from 11,000 gave him 3,000—3,000 feet!

It was impossible. Even with the piton pistol, it was impossible. The pitch was vertical all the way, and from where he sat he couldn't discern the faintest indication of a crack or a ledge on the granite surface.

He could never do it, he told himself. Never. It would be absurd for him even to try. It might cost him his life. And even if he could do it, even if he could climb that polished precipice all the way to the face-mesa, could he get back down again? True, his piton pistol would make the descent relatively easy, but would he have enough strength left? The atmosphere on Alpha Virginis IX thinned rapidly after 10,000 feet, and while oxygen tablets helped, they could keep you going only for a limited period of time. After that—

But the arguments were old ones. He had used them on himself a hundred, a thousand times. . . . He stood up resignedly. He shrugged his pack into place. He took a final look down the nine-mile slope of the arm to the giantess-fingers jutting into the sea, then he turned and started across the tableland of the upper chest toward the beginning of the neck-ridge.

II

The sun had long since passed its meridian when he came opposite the gentle col between the mountains. A cold wind breathed down the slopes, drifting across the tableland. The wind was sweet, and he knew there must be flowers on

the mountains—crocuses, perhaps, or their equivalent, growing high on the snow-soft peaks.

He wondered why he did not want to climb the mountains, why it had to be the mesa. The mountains presented the greater difficulties and therefore the greater challenge. Why, then, did he neglect them for the mesa?

He thought he knew. The beauty of the mountains was shallow, lacked the deeper meaning of the beauty of the mesa. They could never give him what he wanted if he climbed them a thousand times. It was the mesa—with its blue and lovely lakes—or nothing.

He turned his eyes away from the mountains and concentrated on the long slope that led to the neck-ridge. The pitch was gentle but treacherous. He moved slowly. A slip could send him rolling, and there was nothing he could grasp to stop himself. He noticed the shortness of his breath and wondered at it, till he remembered the altitude. But he did not break into his oxygen tablets yet; he would have a much more poignant need for them later.

By the time he reached the ridge, the sun had half completed its afternoon journey. But he wasn't dismayed. He had already given up the idea of assaulting the chin-cliff today. He had been presumptuous in the first place to have imagined himself capable of conquering the Virgin in a single day.

It was going to take at least two.

The ridge was over a mile wide, its curvature barely perceptible. Marten made good time. All the while he advanced he was conscious of the chin-cliff looming higher and higher above him, but he did not look at it; he was afraid to look at it till it loomed so close that it occulted half the sky, and then he had to look at it, had to raise his eyes from the granite swell of the throat and focus them on the appalling wall that now constituted his future.

His future was bleak. It contained no hand- or footholds; no ledges, no cracks, no projections. In a way he was relieved, for if no means existed for him to climb the chin-cliff, then he couldn't climb it. But in another way he was overwhelmingly disappointed. Gaining the face-mesa was more than a mere ambition; it was an obsession, and the physical effort that the task involved, the danger, the obstacles—all were an integral part of the obsession.

He could return the way he had come, down the arm to his inboard and back to the isolated colony; and he could rent a flier from the hard-bitten, taciturn natives just as easily as he had rented the inboard. In less than an hour after takeoff, he could land on the face-mesa.

But he would be cheating, and he knew it. Not cheating the Virgin, but cheating himself.

There was one other way, but he rejected it now for the same reason he had rejected it before. The top of the Virgin's head was an unknown quantity, and, while the trees of her hair might make climbing easier, the distance to be climbed was still over three times the height of the chin-cliff, and the pitch was probably just as precipitous.

No, it was the chin-cliff or nothing. The way things looked now, it was nothing. But he consoled himself with the fact that he had examined only a relatively small section of the cliff. Perhaps the outlying sections would be less forbidding. Perhaps—

He shook his head. Wishful thinking would get him nowhere. It would be time to hope after he found a means of ascent, not before. He started along the base of the cliff, then paused. While he had stood there, staring at the stupendous wall, Alpha Virginis had descended unobtrusively into the molten sea. The first star was already visible in the east, and the hue of the Virgin's breasts had transmuted from gold to purple.

Reluctantly, Marten decided to postpone his investigation till tomorrow. The decision proved to be a sensible one. Darkness was upon him before he had his sleeping bag spread out, and with it came the penetrating cold for which the planet was notorious throughout the galaxy.

He set the thermostat on the sleeping bag, then he undressed and crawled into the warm interior. He munched a supper biscuit and allotted himself two swallows of water from his canteen. Suddenly he remembered that he had missed

his midday meal—and had not even known the difference.

There was a parallel there somewhere, an element of *déjà vu*. But the connection was so tenuous that he could not pin the other moment down. It would occur to him later, he knew, but such was the nature of the human mind that it would occur seemingly as the result of another chain of associations, and he would not remember the original connection at all.

He lay there, staring at the stars. The dark mass of the Virgin's chin rose up beside him, hiding half the sky. He should have felt forlorn, frightened even. But he did not. He felt safe, secure. For the first time in many years he knew contentment.

There was an unusual constellation almost directly overhead. More than anything else, it made him think of a man astride a horse. The man carried an elongated object on his shoulder, and the object could have been any one of a number of things, depending on the way you looked at the stars that comprised it—a rifle, perhaps, or a staff; maybe even a fishing pole.

To Marten, it looked like a scythe. . . .

He turned on his side, luxuriating in his tiny oasis of warmth. The Virgin's chin was soft with starlight now, and the night slept in soft and silent splendor. . . . That was one of his own lines, he thought drowsily—a part of that fantastic hodgepodge of words and phrases he had put together eleven years ago under the title of *Rise Up, My Love!* A part of the book that had brought him fame and fortune—and Lelia.

Lelia . . . She seemed so long ago, and in a way she was. And yet, in another way, a strange, poignant way, she was yesterday—

The first time he saw her she was standing in one of those little antique bars so popular then in Old York. Standing there all alone, tall, dark-haired, Junoesque, sipping her mid-afternoon drink as though women like herself were the most common phenomena in the galaxy.

He had been positive, even before she turned her head, that her eyes were blue, and blue they proved to be; blue with the blueness of mountain lakes in spring, blue with the beauty of a woman waiting to be loved. Boldly, he walked over and stood beside her, knowing it was now or never, and asked if he might buy her a drink.

To his astonishment, she accepted. She did not tell him till later that she had recognized him. He was so naïve at the time that he did not even know that he was a celebrity in Old York, though he should have known. His book certainly had been successful enough.

He had knocked it off the preceding summer—the summer the *Ulysses* returned from Alpha Virginis IX; the summer he quit his berth as cabin boy, forever cured of his ambition to be a spaceman. During the interim consumed by the voyage, his mother had remarried again; and when he found out, he rented a summer cottage in Connecticut as far away from her as he could get. Then, driven by forces beyond his ken, he sat down and began to write.

Rise Up, My Love! had dealt with the stellar odyssey of a young adventurer in search of a substitute for God and with his ultimate discovery of that substitute in a woman. The reviewers shouted "Epic!" and the Freudian psychologists who, after four centuries of adversity, still hadn't given up psychoanalyzing writers shouted "Death-wish!" The diverse appraisals combined happily to stir up interest in the limited literary world and to pave the way for a second printing and then a third. Overnight, Marten had become that most incomprehensible of all literary phenomena—a famous first-novelist.

But he hadn't realized, till now, that his fame involved physical recognition. "I read your book, Mr. Marten," the dark-haired girl standing beside him said. "I didn't like it."

"What's your name?" he asked. Then: "Why?"

"Lelia Vaughn . . . Because your heroine is impossible."

"I don't think she's impossible," Marten said.

"You'll be telling me next that she has a prototype."

"Maybe I will." The bartender served them, and Marten picked up his glass

and sipped the cool blueness of his Martian julep. "Why is she impossible?"

"Because she's not a woman," Lelia said. "She's a symbol."

"A symbol of what?"

"I-I don't know. Anyway, she's not human. She's too beautiful, too perfect. She's a criterion, really."

"You look just like her," Marten said.

She dropped her eyes then, and for a while she was silent. Presently: "There's an ancient cliché that bears mentioning at this point," she said: " 'I'll bet you tell that to all the girls-' But somehow I don't think you do."

"You're right," Marten said. "I don't." Then: "It's so close in here, can't we go walking somewhere?"

"All right."

Old York was an anachronism kept alive by a handful of literati who doted on the prestige lent by old buildings, old streets and old ways of life. It was a grim, canyonesque grotesquerie compared to its pretty new cousin on Mars; but during the years, parts of it had taken on some of the coloring and some of the atmosphere once associated with the Left Bank of Paris, and if the season was spring and you were falling in love, Old York was a lovely place in which to be.

They walked through the dreaming desuetude of ancient avenues, in the cool shadows of buildings mellowed by the passage of time. They lingered in the wilderness of Central Park, and the sky was blue with spring, the trees adorned with the pale greenness of nascent leaves. . . . It had been the loveliest of afternoons and, afterward, the loveliest of evenings. The stars had never shone so brightly, nor had the moon ever been so full, the hours so swift, the minutes so sweet. Marten's head had been light, seeing Lelia home, his footsteps unsteady; but it wasn't till later, sitting on his apartment steps, that he had realized how hungry he was, and simultaneously realized that he hadn't eaten a morsel of food since morning. . . .

Deep in the alien night, Marten stirred, awakened. The strange star patterns shocked him for a moment, and then he remembered where he was and what he was going to do. Sleep tiptoed back around him and he turned dreamily in the warmth of his electronic cocoon. Freeing one arm, he reached out till his fingers touched the reassuring surface of the star-kissed cliff. He sighed.

III

Dawn wore a pink dress and crept across the land like a timid girl. Her sister Morning followed, dressed in blue, the sun a dazzling locket on her breast.

There was a tightness in Marten, a tightness compounded of anticipation and dread. He did not permit himself to think. Methodically he ate his concentrated breakfast, packed his sleeping bag. Then he began a systematic examination of the Virgin's chin.

In the morning light, the cliff did not seem nearly so awesome as it had the night before. But its pitch had not varied, nor had its sheer, smooth surface. Marten was both relieved and chagrined.

Then, near the western edge of the neck-ridge, he found the chimney.

It was a shallow fissure, perhaps twice the breadth of his body, created probably by a recent seismic disturbance. He remembered, suddenly, the other signs of recent seismic activity he had noticed in the colony but had not bothered to inquire about. A dozen or so ruptured dwellings were of little consequence when you were on the verge of resolving a complex that had plagued you for twelve years.

The chimney zigzagged upward as far as he could see, presenting, at least for the first thousand feet, a comparatively easy means of ascent. There were innumerable hand- and footholds, and occasional ledges. The trouble was, he

had no way of knowing whether the holds and the ledges—or even the chimney itself—continued all the way to the summit.

He cursed himself for having neglected to bring binoculars. Then he noticed that his hands were trembling, that his heart was tight against his ribs; and he knew, all at once, that he was going to climb the chimney regardless, that nothing could stop him, not even himself—not even the knowledge, had it been available, that the chimney was a dead end.

He drew his piton pistol and inserted one of the dozen clips he carried in his belt. He aimed carefully, squeezed the trigger. The long hours he had spent practicing, while awaiting transportation from the spaceport to the colony, paid off, and the peg, trailing its almost invisible nylon line, imbedded itself in the lofty ledge he had selected for his first belay. The sound of the second charge caromed down and joined the fading sound of the first, and he knew that the steel roots of the peg had been forced deep into the granite, guaranteeing his safety for the initial 500 feet.

He replaced the pistol in its self-locking holster. From now till he reached the ledge, the line would take in its own slack, automatically rewinding itself in the chamber in pace with his ascent.

He began to climb.

His hands were steady now, and his heart had resumed its normal beat. There was a song in him, throbbing soundlessly through his whole being, imbuing him with a strength he had never known before, might never know again. The first 500 feet were almost ridiculously easy. Hand- and footholds were so numerous most of the way that it was like climbing a stone ladder, and in the few places where the projections petered out, the walls were ideally spaced for opposite pressure. When he reached the ledge, he wasn't even breathing hard.

He decided not to rest. Sooner or later the thinness of the atmosphere was going to catch up with him, and the higher he got, while he was still fresh, the better. He stood up boldly and drew and aimed the piton pistol. The new peg soared forth, trailing the new line and dislodging the old, arrowing into the base of another ledge some 200 feet above the one on which he stood. The range of the pistol was 1,000 feet, but the narrowness of the chimney and the awkwardness of his position posed severe limitations.

He resumed his ascent, his confidence increasing with each foot he gained. But he was careful not to look down. The chimney was so far out on the western edge of the neck-ridge that looking down entailed not only the distance he had already climbed, but the 8,000-foot drop from the ridge to the lowlands. He did not think his new confidence quite capable of assimilating the shock of so appalling a height.

The climb to the second ledge was as uneventful as the climb to the first. Again he decided not to rest, and, sinking another peg into a third ledge approximately 250 feet above the second, he resumed climbing. Halfway to the third ledge the first pangs of oxygen starvation manifested themselves in a heaviness in his arms and legs and a shortness of his breath. He slipped an oxygen tablet into his mouth and went on climbing.

The dissolving tablet revived him, and when he reached the third ledge he still did not feel like resting. But he forced himself to sit down on the narrow granite shelf and he laid his head back against the chimney wall and tried to relax. Sunlight smote his eyes, and with a shock he realized that the speed of his ascent had been subjective; actually, hours had passed since he had left the neck-ridge, and Alpha Virginis was already at meridian.

Then he couldn't rest; there was no time. He had to reach the face-mesa before nightfall, else he might never reach it at all. In an instant he was on his feet, piton pistol drawn and aimed.

For a while the climb took on a different character. His confidence never diminished and the soundless song throbbled through him in ever-increasing cadence; but the heaviness of his limbs and the shortness of his breath recurred at more and more frequent periods, lending a dreamlike quality to the adventure, and this quality, in turn, was interspersed by the brief but lucid

intervals that began immediately whenever he took an oxygen tablet.

The character of the chimney, however, varied only slightly. It grew wider for a while, but he found that by bracing his back against one wall and his feet against the other, he could inch his way upward with a minimum of effort. Then the chimney narrowed again and he returned to his original mode of ascent.

Inevitably he became bolder. Up to now he had been using three-point suspension, never moving one appendage till he was certain the other three were firmly placed. But as his boldness increased, his caution diminished. He neglected three-point suspension more and more often, finally neglected it altogether. After all, he reassured himself, what difference did it make if he did slip? The piton line would stop him before he fell two feet.

And it would have too—if the particular cartridge he had just discharged had not been defective. In his haste he did not notice that the nylon line was not rewinding itself, and when the chockstone, on which he'd just put his entire weight, gave way beneath his foot, his instinctive terror was tempered by the thought that his fall would be brief.

It was not. It was slow at first, unreal. He knew instantly that something had gone wrong. Nearby, someone was screaming. For a moment he did not recognize his own voice. And then the fall was swift; the chimney walls blurred past his clawing hands, and dislodged rubble rained about his anguished face.

Twenty feet down he struck a projection on one side of the chimney. The impact threw him against the other side, then the ledge that he had left a short while before came up beneath his feet and he sprawled forward on his stomach, the wind knocked from him, blood running into his eyes from a cut on his forehead.

When his breath returned he moved each of his limbs carefully, testing them for broken bones. Then he inhaled deeply. Afterward he lay there on his stomach for a long time, content with the knowledge that he was alive and not seriously hurt.

Presently he realized that his eyes were closed. Without thinking, he opened them and wiped the blood away. He found himself staring straight down at the forest of the hair, 10,000 feet below. He sucked in his breath, tried to sink his fingers into the unyielding granite of the ledge. For a while he was sick, but gradually his sickness left him and his terror faded away.

The forest spread out almost to the sea, flanked by the precipices of the neck and shoulder, the nine-mile ridge of the arm. The sea was gold and glittering in the mid-afternoon sunlight, and the lowlands were a green-gold beach.

There was an analogy somewhere. Marten frowned, trying to remember. Hadn't he, a long time ago, crouched on another ledge—or was it a bluff?—looking down upon another beach, a real beach? Looking down at—

Abruptly he remembered, and the memory set his face on fire. He tried to force the unwanted moment back into his subconscious but it slipped through his mental fingers and came out and stood nakedly in the sun, and he had to confront it whether he wanted to or not, had to live it over again.

After their marriage, he and Lelia had rented the same cottage in Connecticut where *Rise Up, My Love!* was born, and he had settled down to write his second book.

The cottage was a charming affair, perched on a bluff overlooking the sea. Below it, accessible by a flight of winding stairs, was a narrow strip of white sand, protected from the prying eyes of civilization by the wooded arms of a small cove. It was here that Lelia spent her afternoons sunbathing in the nude, while Marten spent those same afternoons feeding empty words and uninspired phrases into the manuscript machine on his study desk.

The new book was going very badly. The spontaneity that had characterized the creation of *Rise Up, My Love!* was no longer with him. Ideas would not

come, or, if they did come, he was incapable of coping with them. A part of his mood, he knew, could be ascribed to his marriage. Lelia was everything a bride should be, but there was something she was not, an intangible something that taunted him by night and haunted him by day. . . .

The August afternoon had been hot and humid. There was a breeze coming in over the sea, but while it was strong enough to ruffle the curtains of his study window, it wasn't quite strong enough to struggle through the intervening expanse of stagnant air to the doldrums of the study proper where he sat miserably at his desk.

As he sat there, fingering words and phrases, grappling with ideas, he became aware of the soft sound of the surf on the beach below, and an image of Lelia, lying dark and golden in the sun, intruded repeatedly on his thoughts.

Presently, he found himself speculating on the positions she might be lying in. On her side, perhaps . . . or perhaps on her back, the golden sunlight raining down on her thighs, her stomach, her breasts.

There was a faint throbbing in his temples, a new nervousness in the fingers that toyed with the correction pencil on the desktop before him. Lelia lying immobile by the sea, her dark hair spread out around her head and shoulders, her blue eyes staring up into the sky . . .

How would she look from above? Say from the height of the bluff? Would she resemble another woman lying by another sea—a woman who had affected him in some mysterious way and lent him his literary wings?

He wondered, and as he wondered his nervousness grew and the throbbing in his temples thickened and slowed till it matched the rhythmic beat of the surf.

He looked at the clock on the study wall: 2:45. There was very little time. In another half hour she would be coming up to shower. Numbly, he stood up. He walked slowly across the study, stepped into the living room; he walked across the living room and out upon the latticed porch that fronted the green lawn and the brow of the bluff and the sparkling summer sea.

The grass was soft beneath his feet and there was a dreaminess about the afternoon sunlight and the sound of the surf. When he neared the bluff he got down on his hands and knees, feeling like a fool, and crept cautiously forward. Several feet from the brow, he lowered himself to his elbows and thighs and crawled the rest of the way. He parted the long grass carefully and looked down to the white strip of beach below.

She was lying directly beneath him—on her back. Her arm was flung out to the sea and her fingers dangled in the water. Her right knee was drawn upward, a graceful hillock of sun-gold flesh . . . and the smooth expanse of stomach was golden too, as were the gentle mountains of her breasts. Her neck was a magnificent golden ridge leading to the proud precipice of her chin and the vast golden mesa of her face. The blue lakes of her eyes were closed in peaceful sleep.

Illusion and reality intermingled. Time retreated and ceased to be. At the crucial moment, the blue eyes opened.

She saw him instantly. There was amazement on her face at first, then understanding (though she hadn't understood at all). Finally her lips curved in a beckoning smile and she held out her arms to him. "Come down, darling," she called. "Come down and see me!"

The throbbing in his temples drowned out the sound of the surf as he descended the winding stairs to the beach. She was waiting there by the sea, waiting as she had always waited, waiting for him; and suddenly he was a giant striding over the lowlands, his shoulders brushing the sky, the ground shuddering beneath his Brobdingnagian footsteps.

Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, Comely as Jerusalem, Terrible as an army with banners . . .

A breeze, born in the purple shadows between the mountains, wafted up to his eyrie, cooling his flushed face and reviving his battered body. Slowly he got to his feet. He looked up at the enigmatic walls of the chimney, wondering

if they continued for the thousand-odd feet that still separated him from the summit.

He drew his piton pistol and ejected the defective cartridge; then he took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. When he replaced the pistol he experienced a wave of giddiness and he reached instinctively for the oxygen packet on his belt. Then he fumbled for the packet, frantically feeling every inch of the web surface, and finally he found the tiny rivets that had remained after the packet had been torn away during his fall.

For a while he did not move. He had but one logical course of action and he knew it: Climb back down to the neck-ridge, spend the night there and return to the colony in the morning; then arrange for transportation to the spaceport, take the first ship back to Earth and forget about the Virgin.

He nearly laughed aloud. Logic was a fine word and an equally fine concept, but there were many things in heaven and earth that it did not encompass, and the Virgin was one of them.

He started to climb.

IV

In the neighborhood of 2,200 feet, the chimney began to change.

Marten did not notice the change at first. Oxygen starvation had decimated his awareness and he moved in a slow, continuous lethargy, raising one heavy limb and then another, inching his ponderous body from one precarious position to another equally precarious—but slightly closer to his goal. When he finally did notice, he was too weary to be frightened, too numb to be discouraged.

He had just crawled upon the sanctuary of a narrow ledge and had raised his eyes to seek out another ledge at which to point his pistol. The chimney was palely lit by the last rays of the setting sun and for a moment he thought that the diminishing light was distorting his vision.

For there were no more ledges.

There was no more chimney either, for that matter. It had been growing wider and wider for some time; now it flared abruptly into a concave slope that stretched all the way to the summit. Strictly speaking, there had never been a chimney in the first Place. In toto, the fissure was far more suggestive of the cross section of a gigantic funnel: The part he had already climbed represented the tube, and the part he had yet to climb represented the mouth.

The mouth, he saw at a glance, was going to be bad. The slope was far too smooth. From where he sat he could not see a single projection, and while that didn't necessarily rule out the possible existence of projections, it did cancel out the likelihood of there being any large enough to enable him to use his piton pistol. He couldn't very well drive a piton if there was nothing for him to drive it into.

He looked down at his hands. They were trembling again. He started to reach for a cigarette, realized suddenly that he hadn't eaten since morning, and got a supper biscuit out of his pack instead. He ate it slowly, forced it down with a mouthful of water. His canteen was nearly empty. He smiled wanly to himself. At last he had a logical reason for climbing to the mesa—to replenish his water supply in the blue lakes.

He reached for a cigarette again and this time he pulled one out and lit it. He blew smoke at the darkening sky. He drew his feet up on the ledge and hugged his knees with his arms and rocked himself gently back and forth. He hummed softly to himself. It was an old, old tune, dating back to his early childhood. Abruptly he remembered where he had heard it and who had sung it to him, and he stood up angrily and flicked his cigarette into the deepening shadows and turned toward the slope.

He resumed his upward journey.

It was a memorable journey. The slope was just as bad as it had looked. It was impossible to ascend it vertically, and he had to traverse, zigzagging back and forth with nothing but finger-thick irregularities to support his

weight. But his brief rest and his condensed meal had replenished his strength and at first he experienced no difficulties.

Gradually, however, the increasing thinness of the atmosphere caught up with him again. He moved slower and slower. Sometimes he wondered if he was making any progress at all. He did not dare lean his head back far enough to look upward, for his hand- and footholds were so tenuous that the slightest imbalance could dislodge them. And presently there was the increasing darkness to contend with, too.

He regretted not having left his pack on the last ledge. It was an awkward burden and it seemed to grow heavier with each foot he gained. He would have loosened the straps and slipped it from his shoulders—if he had had hands to spare.

Repeatedly, sweat ran down into his eyes. Once he tried to wipe his wet forehead on the granite slope, but he only succeeded in reopening his cut, and the blood joined forces with the sweat and for a while he could not see at all. He began to wonder if the cliff was forever. Finally he managed to wipe his eyes on his sleeve, but still he could not see, for the darkness was complete.

Time blurred, ceased to be. He kept wondering if the stars were out, and when he found a set of hand- and footholds less tenuous than the preceding ones, he leaned his head back carefully and looked upward. But the blood and the sweat ran down into his eyes again and he saw nothing.

He was astonished when his bleeding fingers discovered the ledge. His reconnaissance had been cursory, but even so he had been certain that there were no ledges. But there was this one. Trembling, he inched his weary body higher till at last he found purchase for his elbows, then he swung his right leg onto the granite surface and pulled himself to safety.

It was a wide ledge. He could sense its wideness when he rolled over on his back and let his arms drop to his sides. He lay there quietly, too tired to move. Presently he raised one arm and wiped the blood and sweat from his eyes. The stars were out. The sky was patterned with the pulsing beauty of a hundred constellations. Directly above him was the one he had noticed the night before—the rider-with-the-scythe.

Marten sighed. He wanted to lie there on the ledge forever, the starlight soft on his face, the Virgin reassuringly close; lie there in blissful peace, eternally suspended between the past and the future, bereft of time and motion. But the past would not have it so. Despite his efforts to stop her, Xylla parted its dark curtain and stepped upon the stage. And then the curtain dissolved behind her and the impossible play began.

After the failure of his third novel (the second had sold on the strength of the first and had enjoyed an ephemeral success), Lelia had gone to work for a perfume concern so that he could continue writing. Later on, to free him from the burden of household chores, she had hired a maid.

Xylla was an ET—a native of Mizar X. The natives of Mizar X were remarkable for two things: their gigantic bodies and their diminutive minds. Xylla was no exception. She stood over seven feet tall and she had an I.Q. of less than forty.

But for all her height she was well proportioned, even graceful. In fact, if her face had possessed any appeal at all, she could have passed for an attractive woman. But her face was flat, with big, bovine eyes and wide cheekbones. Her mouth was much too full, and its fullness was accentuated by a pendulous lower lip. Her hair, which, by contributing the right dash of color, might have rescued her from drabness, was a listless brown.

Marten took one look at her when Lelia introduced them, said, "How do you do?" and then dismissed her from his mind. If Lelia thought a giantess could do the housework better than he could, it was all right with him.

That winter Lelia was transferred to the West Coast, and rather than suffer the upkeep of two houses they gave up the Connecticut cottage and moved to California. California was as sparsely populated as Old York. The promised

land had long since absconded starward, lay scattered throughout a thousand as yet unexploited systems. But there was one good thing about the average man's eternal hankering for green pastures: The pastures he left behind grew lush in his absence; there was plenty of space for the stay-at-homes and the stubborn; and Earth, after four centuries of opportunism, had finally settled down in its new role as the cultural center of the galaxy.

Lavish twenty-third-century villas were scattered all along the California coast. Almost all of them were charming and almost all of them were empty. Lelia chose a pink one, convenient to her work, and settled down into a routine identical, except for a change from the morning to the afternoon shift, to the routine she had left behind; and Marten settled down to write his fourth book.

Or tried to.

He had not been naïve enough to think that a change in scene would snap him out of his literary lethargy. He had known all along that whatever words and combinations thereof that he fed into his manuscript machine had to come from within himself. But he had hoped that two failures in a row (the second book was really a failure, despite its short-lived financial success) would goad him to a point where he would not permit a third.

In this he had been wrong. His lethargy not only persisted; it grew worse. He found himself going out less and less often, retiring earlier and earlier to his study and his books. But not to his manuscript machine. He read the great novelists. He read Tolstoy and Flaubert. He read Dostoevsky and Stendhal. He read Proust and Cervantes. He read Balzac. And the more he read Balzac, the more his wonder grew, that this small, fat, red-faced man could have been so prolific, while he himself remained as sterile as the white sands on the beach below his study windows.

Around ten o'clock each evening Xylla brought him his brandy in the big snifter glass Lelia had given him on his last birthday, and he would lie back in his lazy-chair before the fireplace (Xylla had built a fire of pine knots earlier in the evening) and sip and dream. Sometimes he would drowse for a moment, and then wake with a start. Finally he would get up, cross the hall to his room and go to bed. (Lelia had begun working overtime shortly after their arrival and seldom got home before one o'clock.)

Xylla's effect upon him was cumulative. At first he was not even conscious of it. One night he would notice the way she walked—lightly, for so ponderous a creature, rhythmically, almost; and the next night, the virginal swell of her huge breasts; and the night after that, the graceful surge of her Amazonian thighs beneath her coarse skirt. The night finally came when, on an impulse, or so he thought at the time, he asked her to sit down and talk for a while.

"If you weesh, sar," she said, and sat down on the hassock at his feet.

He hadn't expected that, and at first he was embarrassed. Gradually, however, as the brandy began its swift infiltration of his bloodstream, he warmed to the moment. He noticed the play of the firelight on her hair, and suddenly he was surprised to find that it was something more than a dull brown after all; there was a hint of redness in it, a quiet, unassuming redness that offset the heaviness of her face.

They talked of various things—the weather mostly, sometimes the sea; a book Xylla had read when she was a little girl (the only book she had ever read); Mizar X. When she spoke of Mizar X, something happened to her voice. It grew soft and childlike, and her eyes, which he had thought dull and uninteresting, became bright and round, and he even detected a trace of blueness in them. The merest trace, of course, but it was a beginning.

He began asking her to stay every night after that, and she was always willing, always took her place dutifully on the hassock at his feet. Even sitting, she loomed above him, but he did not find her size disquieting anymore, at least not disquieting in the sense that it had been before. Now her vast presence had a lulling effect upon him, lent him a peace of sorts. He began looking forward more and more to her nightly visits.

Lelia continued to work overtime. Sometimes she did not come in till nearly two. He had been concerned about her at first; he had even reprimanded her for working so hard. Somewhere along the line, though, he had stopped being concerned.

Abruptly he remembered the night Lelia had come home early—the night he had touched Xylla's hand.

He had been wanting to touch it for a long time. Night after night he had seen it lying motionless on her knee and he had marveled again and again at its symmetry and grace, wondered how much bigger than his hand it was, whether it was soft or coarse, warm or cold. Finally the time came when he couldn't control himself any longer, and he bent forward and reached out—and suddenly her giantess fingers were intertwined with his pygmy ones and he felt the warmth of her and knew her nearness. Her lips were very close, her giantess-face, and her eyes were a vivid blue now, a blue-lake blue. And then the coppices of her eyebrows brushed his forehead and the red rimrock of her mouth smothered his and melted into softness and her giantess-arms enfolded him against the twin mountains of her breasts—

Then Lelia, who had paused shocked in the doorway, said, "I'll get my things . . ."

The night was cold, and particles of hoarfrost hovered in the air, catching the light of the stars. Marten shivered, sat up. He looked down into the pale depths below, then he lifted his eyes to the breathless beauty of the twin mountains. Presently he stood up and turned toward the slope, instinctively raising his hands in search of new projections.

His hands brushed air. He stared. There were no projections. There was no slope. There had never been a ledge, for that matter. Before him lay the mesa of the Virgin's face, pale and poignant in the starlight.

V

Marten moved across the mesa slowly. All around him the starlight fell like glistening rain. When he came to the rimrock of the mouth, he pressed his lips to the cold, ungiving stone. "Rise up, my love!" he whispered.

But the Virgin remained immobile beneath his feet, as he had known she would, and he went on, past the proud tor of her nose, straining his eyes for the first glimpse of the blue lakes.

He walked numbly, his arms hanging limply at his sides. He hardly knew he walked at all. The lure of the lakes, now that they were so close, was overwhelming. The lovely lakes with their blue beckoning deeps and their promise of eternal delight. No wonder Lelia, and later Xylla, had palled on him. No wonder none of the other mortal women he had slept with had ever been able to give him what he wanted. No wonder he had come back, after twelve futile years, to his true love.

The Virgin was matchless. There were none like her. None.

He was almost to the cheekbone now, but still no starlit sweep of blue rose up to break the monotony of the mesa. His eyes ached from strain and expectation. His hands trembled uncontrollably.

And then, suddenly, he found himself standing on the lip of a huge, waterless basin. He stared, dumfounded. Then he raised his eyes and saw the distant coppice of an eyebrow outlined against the sky. He followed the line of the eyebrow to where it curved inward and became the barren ridge that once had been the gentle isthmus separating the blue lakes—

Before the water had drained away. Before the subterranean pumping system had ceased to function, probably as a result of the same seismic disturbance that had created the chimney.

He had been too impetuous, too eager to possess his true love. It had never occurred to him that she could have changed, that—

No, he would not believe it! Believing meant that the whole nightmarish ascent of the chin-cliff had been for nothing. Believing meant that his whole life was without purpose.

He lowered his eyes, half expecting, half hoping to see the blue water welling back into the empty socket. But all he saw was the bleak lake bottom—and its residue—

And such a strange residue. Scatterings of gray, sticklike objects, curiously shaped, sometimes joined together. Almost like-like—

Marten shrank back. He wiped his mouth furiously. He turned and began to run.

But he did not run far, not merely because his breath gave out, but because, before he ran any farther, he had to know what he was going to do. Instinctively he had headed for the chin-cliff. But would becoming a heap of broken bones on the neck-ridge be any different, basically, from drowning in one of the lakes?

He paused in the starlight, sank to his knees. Revulsion shook him. How could he have been so naïve, even when he was twenty, as to believe that he was the only one? Certainly he was the only Earthman—but the Virgin was an old, old woman, and in her youth she had had many suitors, conquering her by whatever various means they could devise, and symbolically dying in the blue deeps of her eyes.

Their very bones attested to her popularity.

What did you do when you learned that your goddess had feet of clay? What did you do when you discovered that your true love was a whore?

Marten wiped his mouth again. There was one thing that you did not do— You did not sleep with her.

Dawn was a pale promise in the east. The stars had begun to fade. Marten stood on the edge of the chin-cliff, waiting for the day.

He remembered a man who had climbed a mountain centuries ago and buried a chocolate bar on the summit. A ritual of some kind, meaningless to the uninitiated. Standing there on the mesa, Marten buried several items of his own. He buried his boyhood and he buried Rise Up, My Love! He buried the villa in California and he buried the cottage in Connecticut. Last of all—with regret, but with finality—he buried his mother.

He waited till the false morning had passed, till the first golden fingers of the sun reached out and touched his tired face. Then he started down.