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He dared to worship deities who did not dare to let him live!

WHOM THE GODS LOVE

The discovery of contempo-rary gods on other planets oc-casioned a concerted inquiry into Earth's past that threw new light on the "legendary" gods of old. The Greek and the Asgard pantheons acquired new dimensions and even his-tory at last admitted that, ages ago, Zeus and company- had dwelled upon the slopes of Mount Olympus—and that in times of old, Odin had really sat on the high-seat in Hlidskjalf.

The provenance of the gods was another matter. The dead ones could not talk and the living ones could be contacted only through their worshipers who, quite under-standably, dared not risk of-fending them by voicing impious questions. The present consensus is that they are the scattered remnants of a once-great galactic race whose heyday predates the dawn of man. Such an opinion would seem to impugn their divinity. That it does not merely points up the psychological need of the average mortal to stand in awe of beings ostensibly nobler than himself, whether they be true gods, savior-kings or Ken-nedys.

—Zyre: *What is a God?*,
pp. 261-2

IF THERE were any Nief'i in-stallations on Northstar 19, Recon Officer Hale could not find them. True, no one had said definitely that there were—only that there might be. But it was Hale's job to eliminate might-be's, which explains his presence in the skies of the polestar's nineteenth planet.

But although he found no enemy installations, he found something else: four cities. They stood on the banks of an eccentric river that snaked its way across a verdant plain dominated by a shining mountain—and all of them were dead.

No time limit had been imposed on Hale's Northstar 19 mission and he certainly was in no hurry to get back to the Earth-Nief'i War. So he decided to find out what kind of cities they were, or rather, what kind of cities they had been. He chose the one nearest the mountain (for some reason the mountain fas-cinated him) and brought his recon-craft down in the middle of its central square. He opened the locks and climbed down to the ground.

Stone edifices, some still intact, others with fallen walls and collapsed roofs, stared at him in the midmorning sunlight. Both their size and design indicated they had been built by men like himself. He took a deep breath of the unpurified air, smelled the greenness of trees and grass and the dust of desuetude. He was suddenly glad he had come.

He had memorized the city's con-formation during his descent and knew that the square was on the

crest of a hill. The buildings beyond had been built upon the hillside and stood in a wide band around the base. On the east the city was bordered by the river, on the south by a forest and on the west by a park or graveyard. To the north the ruins gradually gave way to grassy low-lands, which once upon a time, no doubt, had known the bite of plow-shares.

The architecture of the buildings forming the square had a Hellenic flavor. The arch was nowhere in evidence, and columns and entablatures prevailed. One of the buildings brought the Parthenon to mind, although the resemblance was superficial at best. A huge statue stood before the columned entrance. Perhaps it was the way the morning sunlight struck it, turning it to gold, that made Hale's interest leap—perhaps it was the haughty aspect of the lofty head. In either case, he walked across the square and stood before it. It was the statue of a goddess.

Unlike the columns, which were limestone, she had been sculptured of granite. A few faded streaks of dye informed him that her hair was black. It fell to her shoulders, disciplined only by a band worn around her forehead. Breast plates, metallic skirt and thonged sandals completed her attire.

He looked up at this comely granite girl, this stone goddess of the long legs, the bursting breasts, the Grecian arms and shoulders. Her face made him think of Byron and Keats. It expressed what they had been trying to say. The quick sweep of nose from high wide forehead to upper lip spoke of strength—the sensuous yet noble mouth somehow suggested a knowledge of the weakness of men. The girlish chin was godly. Once, no doubt, painted pupils had lent life to her sightless eyes. Time had taken it away.

He brought his own eyes down to the base of the pedestal on which she stood. There was writing there, etched meticulously into the stone. Picture writing. There was a word that looked like a plow, one that looked like a sword. One that looked like a snake probably symbolized the river. There was a word that looked like a tree, three that looked like stars. There was one that suggested the city—

At length he came to her name:

Entering the temple—for such it proved to be—he found that with the exception of one feature it was devoted entirely to her. The exception stood just within the entrance—a great granite statue of Herculean symmetry and grace whose stern countenance, albeit beardless, suggested Zeus. Unquestionably it represented the major deity. Nevertheless, this was not his temple—it was 's.

Statues of her were everywhere—statues, statuettes and busts. Some were carved of limestone, some of granite—others were cast in bronze. The central floor space was given over to two parallel rows of stone benches, an aisle running down between them to a granite altar flanked by two bronze braziers black with age.

In a number of places the roof had fallen in and Hale had to pick his way around piles of fallen masonry to reach the altar. He halted before it. A life-size statue of stood just behind it. This one had eyes and wore a dress. The dress half-covered the full breasts and fell but little lower than the hips. The eyes were represented by ice-blue chips of glass.

He found them disconcerting.

As he stood staring into their cold and glittering depths the conviction overcame him that he himself was being observed. Not from within the temple or even from the adjacent buildings—but from afar.

He tried to rid himself of the feeling, but it would not go away.

Before leaving the temple, he looked once more at the towering statue just within the entrance. This time, he examined the pedestal. It, too, was covered with ideographs. At length he found the one that stood for the deity's name:

OUTSIDE, he made his way down the hillside to the lower city. Here the broken buildings were fewer, while partly filled-in depressions marked the cellars of wooden dwellings that had long ago either fallen or burned to the ground. Clearly this was the section of the poor.

He felt more at home here than on the hill.

The conviction that he was being observed intensified, but the feeling now was of being watched from nearby rather than from afar. It was possible, he supposed, that some of the buildings were inhabited. Both the reconcraft's poli-meter and its sentience detector were reliable instruments—but the former responded only to reasonably large groups of structures, while the latter could not detect the presence of intelligent life forms except in reasonably large groups (specifically, the minimum number of structures and the minimum amount of personnel the Nief'i would need to establish an effective military installation). Nevertheless, Hale found it hard to believe that anyone abided in the city. It did not matter in any case: the Nief'i could be discounted altogether (they abhorred human cities), and the high-intensity incandescer strapped to Hale's right wrist would be more than a match for anything a bronze-age semi-savage might throw or thrust at him.

He spent the rest of the day poking among the ruins. They fascinated him. He found pottery-shards, blackened utensils and bones. Most of the bones seemed to be those of women and children, but as a layman he could not, of course, be certain. Once he caught a blur of movement at the edge of his vision, but although he turned his head quickly he saw nothing.

He skipped lunch. For supper he ate a can of synthichicken and half a loaf of canned bread and drank a thermopint of ale. The ale made him drowsy and he partially dozed afterward as he sat in the reconcraft lock, watching the blue mists of evening creep down from the plain. He decided to stay the night and perhaps the morrow too. Why not? The war could get on without him for another day. From what he had learned thus far he felt sure the ruins were remnants of a once-prosperous and powerful city-state on the order of Athens or Lacedaemon. Perhaps, years ago, the four cities had engaged in an internecine "Peloponnesian War" that had left but few survivors. Among the stars man had already found a hundred histories of him-self—here, perhaps, was another.

WHEN the valley filled with night, Hale closed the locks and climbed up into the little cabin in the reconcraft's nose. He undressed, turned out the light and lay down on his bunk. On the opposite bulkhead an oval porthole looked out upon the crumbling cornices of the higher edifices. He lay helpless in the dark, waiting for Gwendolyn to come into his mind. He and she had met years earlier at a posh beach resort, where he had been employed as a swimming instructor. All summer long they had been lovers and after she had returned to her home in Greater Philadelphia he had traveled more than five hundred miles to pay her a surprise visit. The season had been late September, hazy-hot, and he had perspired as he walked up the wide shaded walk to the patio-por-tico that fronted the rambling neo-renaissance house. In the columned coolness tall young men and tall young women had lolled, tall cool glasses in their hands. He remembered a flurry of movement, a blur of color as he had come into sight from the shade. A door had opened and slammed shut. He had wanted to turn around and go back, but had been unable. He had had to keep walking until he had come to the marble steps and asked the question whose false answer still burned in his mind. *Gwen?* One of the tall young men had answered, ice cubes tinkling as he talked. *Oh, she got suddenly called away.*

Away, away, away...

Tonight as on other nights he waited and waited, but she did not come and at last he closed his eyes. He could see the ruins. They drifted past his inner vision like gray sheep. He counted them and presently he slept.

AWAKENING deep in the night, he lay in the darkness searching his mind for the reason sleep had fled. He could not find it.

At last he got up, stepped over to the porthole and looked through the thick glass down into the square. All three of Northstar 19's moons were in the sky. The flag-stones were silver in the multi-moonlight and the broken buildings stood like argent ghosts. Shadows played along their feet, making evanescent patterns in the night. At first he thought his mind was projecting an image of Gwen, but he knew instantly that the girl standing in the square was not—could not be—she. This was someone else altogether, yet someone he was sure he knew. He saw first of all the blazing blackness of her hair and then he saw the nightflower of her face. Gradually her body took shape in the multiple light—he saw

the shining hillocks of her breasts, the silver pillars of her legs, the pale shadow of her pubic hair. The pillars quivered in the multi-moonlight, subtly faded away. When he searched the shadows for her face it was no more—her black hair blended back into the night. And the square slept in the multi-moonlight, dreamed in the multi-moonlight and all was as it had been before.

He stepped back across the little room and dropped down again on his bunk. He lay with his hands clasped behind his head, thinking. Whoever had been in the square was not a ghost. Ghosts did not haunt dead poleis.

But sometimes tutelary gods did.

THE next morning Hale had a look at the building before which his nocturnal visitor had stood. It told him nothing.

The day was golden, the air sparkling with particles of dis-persed dew. Beyond the ruins, treetops twinkled in a sporadic morning wind. After a light breakfast, he went back down into the lower city and resumed his unofficial investigation of the ruins. He found more pottery shards, more blackened utensils and more bones.

He also found a second Temple of .

It stood on the southern out-skirts, at the feet of the forest that climbed the valley's slope to the plain. It was larger than its sister on the hill and this, together with its location, led him to conclude it had been built expressly for the poor.

Going inside, he found it like its sister both within and without. There were more benches and the altar at the end of the aisle was larger. But the altar statue was the same.

Down front was a girl, sitting on one of the benches. A girl clad in bronze armor, with a forehead band encircling her black hair.

Hale was not surprised. He had never seen a goddess, but he knew he was seeing one now. He also knew, from history, that Athena Polias had haunted ancient Athens long after her true worshipers had turned to dust.

If Athena Polias had haunted her dead polis, why couldn't haunt hers?

HE WALKED down the aisle, through slanted columns of sunlight, around piles of fallen stone. She did not turn her head.

When he reached the bench she was sitting on he sat down beside her, not because he dared to, but because he didn't know what else to do.

She faced him and he saw the quick sweep of nose from high wide forehead to upper lip and the god-like girlish chin. Her eyes surprised him. He had expected to find ice in them—instead he found the summer skies of Earth.

In contrast her hair made him think of the blackness of winter forests—its disarray of the wind on a winter's night.

She said, *I've been waiting for you since dawn.*

She had spoken into his mind. He found he could speak into hers. *You watched me all day yesterday. Why didn't you reveal yourself to me then?*

I revealed myself to you last night.

Yes, he said, *but not as you are now. Why did you wait so long?*

Your mind has a wall around it, like mine. I could not see inside.

Can you see inside it now?

Only a little—not enough to tell me where you really came from or who you really are. But I decided to contact you anyway.

I'm glad, he said. I've a lot of questions to ask. About you and about your city-state.

There were three other poleis like it, as you no doubt know. Many years ago they grew envious of one another and engaged in a long and disastrous war. The final battle was fought upon the plain. The women fought beside the men—those who had not been murdered along with their children in successive rapes of the four cities.

Were there no survivors?

A few. They became shepherds and live far away beyond the mountain and the plain. They blame the cities for their misfortune—they regard them as places of evil and will not live in them any more.

*But as a goddess—surely you could have ended such a war.
decreed that the gods were not to interfere.*

Is your father?

In a way he is, she said. He and his mate rule the world. I have three brothers and three sisters. My three sisters were the guardian goddesses of the other city-states. There are other pan-theons, but they are inferior to ours.

Where do you live? Hale asked.

We live high upon the mountain that looks down upon the plain. I thought you knew.

I guessed, Hale said, but I didn't know.

I saw you from the mountain when you arrived. stood up. Her armor was not new, he noticed. In places it had worn thin. *I must go now.*

One of the thongs of her sandals was broken. He kneeled and knot-ted the ends together, then stood up beside her. *Please don't go yet.*

I must. I'll come back tomor-row—perhaps tonight. Would you like to see the battlefield? I'll take you there. You seem inordinately interested in bones and it's not far from here.

Take me there now.

I can't. I'll take you there tomor-row. Perhaps tonight.

She stepped sideways, slipped from sight. He stared at where she had stood. Oddly, her absence brought home to him more forcibly than had her presence the fact that she was a goddess, and momentarily he was overcome by awe. For a while he found it difficult to believe that he had not dreamed the meeting. But in the end he knew that it had been real and that he would see her again.

HE SKIPPED his midday meal again and went on a tour of the river bank. The Earth-Nief'i War seemed to recede with every step he took. It had less reality for him now than the one that had taken place here on Northstar 19—how many years ago? He felt suspended between present and past.

Stone wharves protruded into the river. He walked out on one of them, sat down in the sunlight and let his legs hang over the water. The current was sluggish, almost imperceptible, and the river, wide at this point, brought to his mind a blue lake. Once the simile became fixed in his mind it was inevitable that he should see the raft. Even so, he found it odd that Gwendolyn should enter his reverie when she was so far backstage from the proscenium of his thoughts.

The raft was anchored in the middle of the lake. There were two people on it. Beyond their golden glistening bodies a distant frieze of summer homes showed against a blue terrestrial sky.

Hale looked but little different then from how he was now. Tall and spare, almost beautiful in his virile handsomeness. Gwen was a flaming nymph in the sunlight. When they went out together he always had trouble wearing clothes. He worked hard at it and achieved a degree of aptitude—but the poor look well dressed only to the peniless and he knew that in her eyes he was a store-window mannikin on parade. On the raft it was different. Nearly naked in the sun he was her peer and she accepted him as such. More important—he accepted himself as such.

She had said she loved him as they walked one moonlit night along the shore, the waves fainting at their feet. Her words had been more than a declaration of love—they had been an invitation. He had been accustomed to such invitations, but he had found this one disconcerting. Later, in the dark boat-house, he had been more disconcerted yet—and hurt as well—to find he was not the first and possibly not even the second or the third. But his disenchantment had not lasted and by the end of the summer he had been more deeply in love with her than he had been before. *Maturely in love . . .* had been the way he had expressed it to himself. What he had felt toward her before had been mere boyish infatuation. It wasn't finding out that the rich were like everybody else that wrecked poor-boy lover—it was finding out that the truth had no effect upon his fascination.

THE raft went away and the river came back, and a flock of heronlike birds rose from the reeds and flapped across the stream to the opposite bank where the frieze of summer homes had been. Hale liked the river better, found Northstar's warmth more com-forting than Sol's. Perhaps here was where he belonged.

HE KILLED the rest of the af-ternoon wandering over the grassy lowlands and returned to the reconcraft at dusk. He had no appetite, but he forced himself to eat. Then he walked through the ruins to the lower-city temple of .

The temple was empty. He walked down the aisle and sat on the bench where they had met. As he sat there in the silence the first moon climbed into the sky and sent her silver footprints down the aisle, then withdrew them to shine down through the crevices in the roof. The second moon arose and she too made obeisance at the altar be-fore looking down from above. He knew that it was growing late, re-mem-bered that had said "perhaps" she might be there. But he went on sitting in the silver silence, hoping.

She did not come. He stood up at last, dumb with disappointment, and walked out into the night. The third moon was climbing up the star-runged ladder of the east and the light of night was as the light of day. He wandered among the ruins. Passing a megalithic platform, he pictured a politician standing on it, making promises to the poor.

Presently he came to a garden, passed through its gate and sat down in the multi-moonlight. A lit-tle distance away a waterless foun-tain stood like a silver centerpiece. Weeds grew riotously around his feet. Suddenly he heard her step and saw her just beyond the garden wall. She came through the garden gate, her armor blazing, her black hair gleaming in the night.

You weren't in the temple, she said. Then I saw you sitting here.

He said, *I waited for you for hours. I thought you weren't coming.*

She said, *I'll take you to the bat-tlefield.*

He walked with her through the ruins and they climbed the forested slope to the plain. They walked over the plain in the multi-moonlight, the shining mountain rising on their right. Around them herds of wild livestock slept. Ululations sounded from far away.

They circumvented a quarry that had become an artesian lake and came at last to a huge circular depression bordered by sprucelike trees. She halted just beyond the fringe of trees and he halted beside her. He looked into her summer-sky eyes, silvery now—at the wild blackness of her hair. A trembling began in his hands. He said, *Let me count the ways . . .*

She looked back at him, puzzled. *The wall around your mind has grown higher. What is it you do not wish me to see?*

Nothing, he said. Is this the bat-tlefield?

Yes. The Cwm of the Dead.

He saw the bones. They began at his feet, spread outward, littering the entire basin. Interspersed among them were battered shields, broken swords, bits and pieces of armor—all black with age. Oddly, he was reminded of the utensils he had dug up.

Surely the gods could have averted such a tragedy.

No, said. We could not avert it because we were gods. The people of my polis prayed to me to bring them victory, while the people of my sisters' poleis prayed to them to bring them victory. Thus decreed as he did.

But he could have stopped it.

Only at the expense of creating dissension among the gods and this he would not do. Thus he decreed as he did, fully aware of the conse-quences. Since the war we have be-come gods without worshipers. The survivors have turned their backs on us and have taken to worshiping savior kings. We no longer know what it is like to be adored. I no longer know what it is like.

I adore you, Hale said.

She turned toward him. *Yes, but in a different way.* She stepped closer to him, her gaze warm upon

his face. He found her hand in his. It was like the moonlight, light, cool and soft—and somehow the three qualities passed from her palm through his and became com-mingled with his blood, apotheo-sizing him. He found himself kissing her in the multi-moonlight, the women he had known before her transmuting to glass beads on a cheap necklace in his mind, Gwen the gaudiest zircon of them all.

And yet it was he who pulled away. *We have no right to make love here*, he said. *Not in the Cwm of the Dead.*

In the beginning Love met Death in the dark woods of the world and found him to be her twin. I have no right to make love to you in any case.

Why?

He stared at her. *Because—*

He saw that she had turned and was pointing across the battlefield. *We are about to be attacked. Look.*

There were five of them. Wolves. Not the kind he was familiar with, but enough like them to justify the term. They were loping across the cwm, spreading outward as they came. 's right arm was al-ready extended—now she extended her fingers and white fire leaped from their tips. The lead wolf be-came a gout of flame. But the remaining four did not even slow their pace. 's second thun-derbolt missed. Hale extended his own right arm. Two tongues of blue and brilliant flame seemed to leap from his fingertips and the two foremost wolves disintegrated.

incinerated the fourth—and the fifth, badly singed, retreated into the night.

THEY walked back across the plain in the multi-moonlight holding hands, their shoulders touching now and then, the three moons slipping swiftly down the western slope of night. The moment they entered the forest she unclasped her armor and let it fall to the ground. Then she pulled him into a flower-carpeted arbor and drew him down upon her. *Not once*, she whispered. *Not once, but a thousand times . . .* A golden ladder appeared from somewhere and he climbed it high into the sky. There was a bursting in his brain—the ladder trembled and he fell. He climbed it again, this time even higher into the sky, only to fall once more, white fires burning in his brain.

He did not know how many times he climbed and fell. He did not care. Toward morning they made their way down through the forest and halted before the lower-city temple. *I must go now*, said. He pulled her tightly against him, tried to imprison her with his arms. *No, not yet. I may never see you again!* Her body trembled, lost substance. In a moment only the ghost of her re-mained. And then even the ghost was gone, but not before he heard it whisper, *You are the first real god I have ever known!*

He was thunderstruck.

HE STOOD in the fading moon-light, staring at where she had been.

You are the first real god I have ever known . . .

She had seen him ride down from heaven on a huge and shining "steed" such as she had never dreamed of. She had seen him unleash "thunderbolts" more powerful than her own. She, who had probably entered hundreds of unsophisticated mortal minds, had encountered a wall when she tried to enter his.

She had mistaken him for a god from the beginning. A god, perhaps, from one of the other pan-theons.

The rosy-fingered dawn had drawn a pink line along the eastern horizon. Hale walked slowly back to the reconcraft, climbed into the control room and sat down.

In a way, he *was* a god.

True, there were billions of other gods like him. But they did not dwell on Northstar 19 and never would.

The first golden fingers of the sun reached through the locks and ex-tended themselves toward his feet. He had always thought his feet were made of clay. He saw now that they were not.

He stood up. His shoulders seemed to brush the sky. The fading stars hovered inches from his head.

The intra-fleet communicator came to life. "FleetCom to Recon Two. Acknowledge, RC Hale."

Hale looked down from his eminence at the picayune reminder of his past.

"Repeat: FleetCom to Recon Two. Acknowledge, RC Hale. If unable to acknowledge, then return FleetCom immediately."

"I'm not going back," Hale said.

"What has gone wrong, Recon Officer Hale? Repeat: What has gone wrong?"

"I'm a god," Hale said. "I'm agoing to live among my own kind."

He got a pipe wrench out of the tool cabinet and smashed the com-municator's face.

He closed the locks and raised the reconcraft high above the dead city.

They wouldn't come looking for him—he wasn't that important. But even if they did they would never find him.

He pointed Pegasus toward the mountain.

The mountain came to meet him and high up on its shining slopes he saw the marble columns of the hall of the gods. He guided Pegasus down from the sky, brought her to rest on the slope below and dis-mounted.

He began walking up the slope in the hot sunlight. He started to sweat. Did gods perspire? He wondered. It seemed like an uncouth trait for a god.

The hall was huge, he saw as he neared it. Some of its columns had fallen. Its roof had collapsed in places. Clearly the gods were having a hard time shifting for themselves. But he would help them. He would use his techno-logical powers to help them rebuild the hall, remold it into the mag-nificent structure it had been be-fore.

They had come out of the hall and were standing before the columned entrance, waiting to welcome him. He saw tall and mighty . He saw stately .

He saw 's handsome brothers and sisters.

He saw .

She had exchanged her armor for a white dress that barely covered her breasts and fell just below her hips. Her blue eyes glittered in the sunlight like shards of glass.

He was very close to the hall now. He thought it odd that his fellow gods did not come forth to greet him. Then he saw raise his right arm, as though in salutation. He was about to raise his own in kind when a blast of brilliant blueness leaped from the deity's fingertips. The bolt passed over Hale's head and a moment later Pegasus vanished in a huge gout of flame.

The mountain trembled. A hot wind seared the slope.

Hale had halted horrified in his tracks. "You don't understand!" he screamed. He looked desperately at .

Tell them who I am! Tell them what I am!

looked coldly back at him. *Kill him!* she said to .

lowered his arm, ex-tended fingers now pointed toward Hale's head. Hale flung himself frantically to the left and the bolt passed over his shoulder. Blinded by its brightness, he went rolling and scrambling down the slope. Stones rattled around him. His in-candescer was torn from his wrist. When he reached the bottom of the slope he staggered to his feet and ran. A sound like the tinkling of ice cubes came from far above. It was the laughter of the gods.

AFTER a while his vision returned. He slowed his steps and began walking in the direction of the river. He did not reach it till late afternoon. He threw himself face down on the grassy bank and cupped water into his mouth. A low moan sounded from behind him. Turning, he saw the wolf.

He twisted his body into a sitting position. Instinctively he raised his arm. Then he remembered that his incandescer was no longer strapped to his wrist, that it had been ir-retrievably lost on the slope. He let his arm drop to his side.

The wolf did not move. Presently Hale realized that it had not followed him to the river, as he had at first assumed, but had been there before he arrived. He saw that its right flank was badly burned, and recognized it as the wolf 's final thunderbolt had singed.

There was pain in the animal's eyes. Hale raised his arm again. This time, the wolf crept to his side

and settled down beside him. He stroked its coarse fur, then lay back exhausted on the grass.

There were bound to be survivors living along the river. Eventually he would follow it far enough to find them. However much he might want to, he could not live alone. But he was not yet ready. First he must wait for his wound to heal, for the pain to go away.

He closed his eyes and presently he slept. The gods looked down from above. But they did not see him—they saw only their reflections in the stream.

What is a god? A god is a being, mortal or immortal, who can with impunity doff his/her democratic mask the moment the need for it is past.

Op. cit., p. 346