

SCIENCE FICTION IMAGINATION



THE SOUL STEALERS

CHESTER S. GEIER

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A short story.

THE SOUL STEALERS

By Chester S. Geier

Wraithlike, they came out of the darkness—dead men who walked among the living. What grim secret lay in their sightless eyes—a warning to all other men!

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THE SOUL STEALERS

A chill touched Bryan as he looked down at the figure on the hospital bed. He had seen dead men before—too many of them. He had seen them sprawled on European battlefields, had seen them huddled in wrecked cars or lying waxen and stiff on morgue slabs.

But he had never seen a dead man like the one who lay there on the bed. For, paradoxically, this man was still alive. He still breathed, his heart still pulsed. Yet it was clear that these were little more than automatic processes. In the only respect that mattered, he was as truly dead as though in the last stages of dissolution and decay.

He lay on the bed with an unnatural supineness, his head lolling at a slack angle. His eyes were open in a blank stare, eyes as empty as a waiting grave. He did not move. He made no sound. A thread of saliva ran from a corner of his gaping mouth and made a glistening path down the side of his jaw.

A mindless idiot would have shown more animation than this man. Something vital and precious had gone from him, leaving him a mere shell. His was a death-in-life, a thing somehow more terrible than a shattered skull or a torn chest.

Bryan fought back a shudder and turned to the balding white-clad man at his side. “What can you tell me, Dave? Just what seems to be wrong with this fellow?”

The doctor sighed. “Wish I knew, Terry. I’ve never seen anything like it in over twenty years of medical practice. Not even the specialists seem to know. And we have several good ones here, who donate their services to the hospital—men with experience in unusual cases.”

“But don’t you have any idea at all about how he got this way?” Bryan persisted. “Isn’t there any possibility that he has some sort of rare brain disease?”

“We gave him a careful examination, Terry,” the doctor returned. “We could find no evidence of disease—no evidence of concussion or injury, either. Except, maybe, for one thing.”

“What’s that?” Bryan asked quickly.

“When he was first brought in, we found a sort of reddish mark near his left shoulder. As though something hot had touched him. The skin wasn’t broken or burned, however.” The doctor shrugged. “It’s gone now. I doubt if anything so light and temporary could have been important, anyway.”

“This might be a case for the psychiatrists,” Bryan suggested slowly. “Maybe this fellow had a terrific shock of some kind—a psychic trauma, or whatever they call it.”

“That’s quite possible. But we’ve done the best we could at this end.” The doctor’s voice dropped. “I don’t think there’s going to be time for anything else, Terry.”

“You mean that he—”

The doctor nodded. “He’s dying. I’ve seen the signs. It’s as though he’s lost all will to live.”

~

Bryan looked at the man on the bed again, grim speculation in his eyes. His voice was solemn and soft. “Maybe I’m just a superstitious Irishman, Dave—but I think I know what’s the matter with this fellow. I knew it the first time I looked at him. He’s lost something—something you can’t see with microscopes or X-ray machines. It’s something damned important—and that’s why he’s dying. What he’s lost, Dave, is . . . his soul.”

“I’m not laughing, Terry. Oddly enough, I have the same opinion. A doctor keeps running into situations like this, where ideas thrown into the discard by the so-called scientific attitude have to be dusted off and put back to work.”

There was silence. An elevator made distant noises somewhere in the building. White-clad nurses moved crisply by in the hall beyond the open door. Late Spring sunshine was bright behind the drawn shade at the window. Life and movement, the mundane and familiar. But in this room thoughts probed beyond the earthly facade and found a mystery, a wonder as old as Man.

Bryan moved his muscular shoulders as though against an invisible resistance. Then, slowly, still fighting that resistance, he reached into the breast pocket of his rumpled tweed jacket and produced a pencil and a wrinkled but otherwise clean envelope. Most reporters carried notepads about with them; some even went in for stenographers’ shorthand notebooks. But to Bryan news was something more than mere details. It was a thing of human and emotional qualities, and these he carried in his head like songs—some gay and humorous, many more tragic and sad. This characteristic had given his by-line its great popularity with *Courier* readers. When he needed to remember details at all—comparatively unimportant facts like dates and numbers—he recorded them on envelopes.

“Anything else you can tell me about this man, Dave? Who he is, where he lives?”

The doctor fingered a slip of paper from a pocket of his white smock. “Here’s his name and address. I had an interne copy them down from the stuff we found in his clothes. Knew you’d want them, Terry.” He grinned briefly, a grin of real affection, then sobered. “The police did some checking on him. I talked to a detective just before you showed up.

“Seems this patient lived alone at a rooming house. A widower. No family. Worked as a dental technician for a small company in the Loop. It appears he was in the habit of spending his evenings in Grant Park. He was found there this morning, you know, just the way he is now.”

“Grant Park,” Bryan echoed. “That makes three. Three, Dave.”

The doctor looked puzzled. “I don’t get it, Terry.”

“I didn’t get around to this business until now, but two other men were found in Grant Park. Like this. They were taken to private hospitals.”

“Good Lord!” the doctor breathed, startled. “This goes deeper than I thought. There must be something in Grant Park—”

“Something that I intend to look into,” Bryan said quietly. “There’s a story here—if I can dig it out.”

He thrust the envelope and pencil back into his jacket, together with the slip of paper he had been given. “I’ll be running along, Dave. Thanks for your tip. It was swell of you to remember me.”

The other gestured as he followed Bryan into the hall and toward the elevators. “Maybe I had an ulterior motive. Ruth and I have been wondering why you never drop in anymore.”

“I’ve been running a rat-race,” Bryan said.

“You look it, Terry. You don’t look as well as you did when you first came back from overseas.”

“What a big medicine bottle you have, doc!”

“I’m serious, Terry. I’ve had an idea you weren’t happy about things, and now I’m sure of it. What seems to be the trouble? Your job?”

“The job’s all right.”

“You won’t tell an old friend?”

Bryan lifted his hands. “Hell, Dave, I don’t know just what is wrong. But it might be something like this. I fought a little war of my own, a personal war, to make the world a better place. Now that I’m back, though, it’s the same old world—only a lot worse. And a reporter gets to see too much of the worse side.”

“One man can’t change the world, Terry,” the doctor said. “All he can do it make the best of his small piece of it . . . What you need to do is to get married and raise a family. And while on the subject, what became of that pretty girl reporter you brought around with you a couple of times?”

“Joyce? She’s still with the paper.”

“She seemed like a sensible person. Make a nice wife.”

“Yes,” Bryan said. He stopped in front of the elevator and held out his hand. “Thanks again, Dave. I’ll drop in some evening, when the rat-race slows up a little. My love to Ruth.”

“Take care of yourself, Terry.” The doctor stood watching as the elevator doors closed on Bryan’s figure. A worried frown deepened the lines in his forehead.

~

Outside, on the sidewalk before the hospital, Bryan lighted a cigarette. He stood there for some minutes, a big man in a rumpled tweed suit, his hat pushed back on thick brown hair that had a coppery glint in the bright sunshine. He had powerful shoulders, and the hands that went with them, but his face was fine-carved and sensitive—the face of an artist, or a dreamer. There was that paradox in him. And in that paradox was his personal

tragedy. For while his strength took him easily through the deceit and cruelty of life, the stupidity and ugliness, the memory of each encounter remained with him like a scar.

The scars were beginning to show a bit too plainly. It had taken Dave to make him realize that.

Dave . . . What was it Dave had said? There was an importance in the words.

“One man can’t change the world, Terry.”

That was it. Bryan considered the remark now, intently.

Was that what he really wanted to do—change the world? He groped among old ideals and ambitions for the answer.

In the beginning he had wanted to create—to create by writing about people, about life. But to write about life required knowing it. He had become a reporter.

What he had learned of life was evilness, greed, suffering, ignorance. He could not write of that and still create as he had dreamed. But he could fight it. He could fight it wherever he found it, little by little. And he had fought. It was all that had kept him going.

A fool’s mission, doomed to failure. Dave was right.

Bryan had his answer now. He didn’t want to change the world. He wanted to do something even more impossible—he wanted to make a world of his own.

He grinned sourly and flipped the remains of the cigarette away. Hailing a cab, then, he rode to the *Courier* Building.

~

The city room was filled with the old familiar clamor, the rattle of typewriters and teletypes, the shrilling of telephones, the undulant babble of voices. Bryan waved in answer to greetings as he threaded his way to his desk. He rolled a sheet of paper into his typewriter, lighted a cigarette, and rubbed his face. Then he straightened with a jerk and began hitting the typewriter keys with the first and second fingers of each hand.

Managing Editor Frank Sanders hurried past with a bulging file envelope, his vest open and his stiff white hair a usual disorderly tangle. He whirled as though Bryan’s presence had only then registered on him.

“Terry! Where the hell have you been?” He jerked a thumb. “My office. Right away.”

Bryan finished a paragraph and then followed Sanders into his glass-enclosed cubicle. He slumped into a chair and waited.

Sanders tried without success to light a clogged pipe. He dropped it back into the ashtray and said abruptly, “That Holzheimer story, Terry. You did a nice job clearing the kid, but your copy was pretty rough on the district attorney. Too rough, Terry.”

“I should have thrown a street-car at him,” Bryan said. “Trying to frame a kid and build up a record.”

“Circumstantial evidence and re-election, Terry. It happens all the time—you ought to know. And you ought to know we’re politically on the D.A.’s side of the fence. Stories

like the one you wrote about the Holzheimer case will only hurt the campaign this paper is putting on.”

“Sometimes there’s too much incompetence to whitewash—even if it comes from the right side of the fence.”

Sanders shook his disorderly thatch. “You ought to know better than that, Terry. You’ve been around long enough. This is no time to get a rush of ideals to the head.”

“I’ve never pulled my punches,” Bryan returned quietly.

“I know. But we just can’t have any more stories like the one on the Holzheimer case.” Sanders leaned forward at his desk, his eyes suddenly shrewd. “What’s eating on you, Terry?”

Bryan shrugged. “Things like the Holzheimer business.”

“It’s all part of a system,” Sanders said slowly. “You can’t change that system any more than you can change human nature, Terry. All you can do is make the best of it. I hope you’ll look at it that way. I’ve seen too many good reporters go sour over what they keep running into.”

A telephone jangled on the desk. Sanders spoke into it briefly and returned his attention to Bryan.

“Working on anything now, Terry?”

Bryan explained about the three weirdly afflicted men who had been found in Grant Park. “I’m planning to look into it,” he finished.

“Sounds like something big is involved,” Sanders approved. “Go ahead with it, Terry . . . And take things easy, will you?” he added as Bryan started toward the door.

“Sure,” Bryan said.

Back at his desk, Bryan finished typing his copy. He was penciling corrections when Joyce Mayhew appeared.

“Hi, Terry!” She perched on the edge of a neighboring desk, a slim dark girl with a wide humorous mouth and expressive hazel eyes. She was simply dressed as always, but gave a characteristic impression of fashionable elegance. “What have you got there—a scoop, or a love letter?”

“It could be my last will and testament,” Bryan said. He stood up and called to a copyboy. “Have you had lunch?” he asked Joyce, then.

“I was hoping somebody would ask me. Somebody like you, Terry.”

“Consider yourself asked. Let’s go.”

~

They sat in a booth in a small restaurant on a side street near the *Courier* Building. Joyce’s eyes were grave as she studied Bryan’s face over the top of her menu.

“Anything in that last will and testament crack you made, Terry?” she asked at last. “I saw you come out of Sanders’ office.”

He shrugged, mobile lips twisting into a wry grin. “Nothing that serious. I just had my wrist slapped. Over the way I handled the Holzheimer story.”

“There was quite a bit of talk about that up at the office. Sanders let you off easy. But Terry, you seem to have been hitting out at things a little too hard. What’s the matter—a disappointed love life?”

“You know as much about my love life as I do.”

“Really?” She looked down to finger a spoon, sudden pain, and wistfulness in her averted face.

“I saw Dave at the County Hospital,” he went on. “You remember Dave.”

“Yes—and his wife’s cooking and his lovely children.”

“Dave mentioned you. He seemed to feel I’ve been neglecting him.”

“Maybe you’ve been neglecting a lot of people, Terry.”

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, an action compounded of agreement, weariness—and despair. “I suppose that’s true. People and I seem to have been going off in opposite directions. Take Dave. He’s satisfied with what he’s doing. I can’t talk to him without being reminded of my own dissatisfaction. He can’t talk to me without knowing that something’s wrong.”

Joyce reached across the table and caught his hand. “Terry—don’t let it get you!”

He forced a grin. “With me it’s work as usual. And this time it’s something off the beaten path—something darned queer.” He told her of the dead-alive man at the hospital and of the link to the other Grant Park victims. He straightened, animation quickening in his face, his melancholy forgotten.

“Three men,” he finished grimly. “There’s a kind of continuity to the thing. I’m going to watch the park, Joyce. I have the idea that what happened is going to happen again. I want to know just what was done to those men, just what sort of agency is at the bottom of it.”

Her face was troubled. “Terry . . . it frightens me! If something strange is really going on, you might get hurt—the way those men were hurt. I wish—” She broke off with a helpless gesture. “Be careful, Terry! Please be careful!”

~

Bryan sat on a stool in one corner of a small dimly lighted bar, frowning down at an envelope on which he had drawn a diagram of Grant Park. He had spent part of the afternoon checking on the locations where the three men had been found. These, it appeared, were concentrated roughly near the middle of the park, around a large sandstone memorial pavilion which was the center of numerous converging walks. He had visited the spot while daylight remained, familiarizing himself with it in preparation for his night vigil.

Glancing at his watch now, Bryan slid off the stool and went to a telephone alcove. He dialed a number quickly. There was a delay while an extension connection was made.

“Dave?” he said, then. “Terry at this end. How’s the patient?”

“Dead, Terry. Not half an hour ago. We tried everything—oxygen, heart stimulants. It was no use. I knew it was going to happen all along and stayed to do what I could. I was just getting ready to go home.”

“I checked up on the others who were found in the park,” Bryan resumed. “They died, too. In about the same length of time as your patient.”

“Good Lord, Terry! It . . . it’s horrible somehow. What in the name of reason could be back of it?”

“I’m working on that angle right now. I’ll let you know if I turn up anything . . . Thanks, Dave.” Bryan hung up and went back to the bar. He finished his drink, lighted a cigarette, and strode outside.

Darkness had thickened along the street, a soft warm darkness, rich with the promise of approaching summer. A block’s walk brought Bryan to the boulevard. Grant Park lay just across from him, lights shining fairy-like throughout its shadowed length.

He crossed with the traffic light, hands in his pockets, a man just strolling along on a pleasant evening. But his gray eyes were alert and grim. Vivid in his mind was the memory of a man in a hospital bed, a man who breathed and yet was not alive.

The park swallowed him. He walked directly toward the memorial pavilion, moving without haste, without apparent purpose or destination.

The pavilion took shape in the quiet gloom, a temple-like place of flowerbeds and radiating walks. On the benches around it was a scattering of romantic couples and lonely men sprawled in sleep. The atmosphere was one of serenity and peace. To Bryan it seemed briefly incredible that danger could threaten here. Yet in this vicinity three men had been struck down by something that had left them mere shells of flesh without the will to live.

He made a complete circuit of the pavilion without a glimpse of anything unusual or suspicious. Finally, choosing a bench thick in shadow and partly screened by bushes, he sat down to wait.

Time passed slowly in the lulling murmur of leaves and the distant drone of passing automobiles. The sleeping men on neighboring benches awoke one by one, stretched, and plodded away into the darkness. The spooning couples shared a last embrace and vanished in turn. Before much longer the benches around Bryan were deserted. But he knew that other persons might still be lingering in spots not visible to him.

The quiet had deepened. Bryan shifted cramped and protesting muscles and peered impatiently at the radium dial of his watch. The hour was already a late one. Soon it would be too late for what he had hoped would happen. Everyone would have left the neighborhood of the pavilion.

Hope was fading in Bryan, but he forced himself to remain where he was. More time passed. A deep somnolent hush lay over the pavilion. Even the continual rustling of leaves now seemed muted and remote. The sky pressed down, a soft dark blanket lavishly strewn

with points of brilliance. In the silver gloom the lamps spaced along the walks shone with an ethereal phosphorescent quality.

Bryan slumped on the bench in resignation. He was certain now that nothing would happen. Not tonight, at least. And in his disappointment, he wondered if there had been some warning of his presence. Or had what he had been waiting for already taken place, without his having been aware of it?

His tiredness blunted the question. Rest seemed more important now. He'd go to his furnished room and sleep. This was just the first night. There would be other nights. He'd wait and watch until something finally happened.

But right now, there was no further need for caution. He could have a smoke. He could stand up to ease his aching muscles.

~

He was reaching for his cigarettes when he heard the sound rising above the murmur of leaves. The sound of wings. There was a rushing power to them, a massive beat. And listening, Bryan had the swift certainty that it was nothing familiar that flew through the night. He crouched on the bench, frozen, searching the jeweled sky.

Then another sound—a girl's questioning voice, shrill with alarm.

Bryan swung and saw two figures against the pale outlines of the pavilion, one evidently the girl he had heard and the other that of a man accompanying her. They must have been nearby without his having noticed them. The sound of approaching wings had drawn them into view.

Bryan's pulses leaped in dread excitement. Was it going to happen now—like this? Did whatever it was that had deprived three men of the will to live ride the air on great wings?

The thought brought a chill dismay. His eyes widened on the two figures before the pavilion. If some strange attack portended, he could not stand idly by and watch it happen. The man and girl were too clearly exposed, in possible great danger.

Bryan was tensing his muscles when the beating wings swept by overhead. His glance jerked upward. He stared in numbed disbelief.

A huge bird-like shape was gliding down toward the pavilion. Flying beside it, grotesquely like fighter planes escorting a giant bomber, were a number of smaller shapes—vaguely man-like. But it was not this sight alone that filled Bryan with nightmare amazement. For astride the bird-thing was a slender-limbed figure in veil-like garments—a girl. And against the dark backdrop of the sky, girl and winged creatures alike all seemed to shine with an eerie glow, a luminous radiance.

Impossibility! Madness! Bryan's thoughts whirled in chaos. This bizarre scene couldn't be real. He was suffering a delusion. His long vigil on the bench had lulled him into a dream-like state in which he was experiencing a fantastic vision.

But even as he told himself this, he knew he was very much awake. And he knew that what he saw was no mere vision. For a scream from the girl before the pavilion testified that she and her companion saw it also.

The fantastic, winged shapes were slanting downward. Bryan realized they were moving directly toward the man and girl. The couple stood immobile, rigid, as though spell-bound by the utter weirdness of what they saw.

Bryan shouted a hoarse warning and started forward. He did not know what he could possibly do. No rational purpose motivated him. His action was instinctive, an appalled protest against what he feared was about to take place.

Bryan's warning registered upon the couple. They seemed abruptly aware of their danger. The man caught at the girl's arm as if to draw her with him in flight. But now terror struck her with its full impact, and her body began crumpling in a faint even as she turned to follow. Her companion hesitated in dismay, concern for the girl obviously struggling against desire for escape.

One of the smaller flying monstrosities had pulled ahead of the others. Skimming several feet above the ground, it darted at the man.

Closer now, Bryan was able to make out details that previously had escaped him. The creature was the size of a child, with two pairs of arms, its lean body human in shape. It had large bulging eyes in a small hairless head. Its face projected in a long tapering needle-like proboscis, which together with delicate gauzy wings gave the appearance of an enormous insect—a mosquito. The luminous radiance that glowed from the thing was not the only remaining unearthly feature; Bryan discovered that it was mistily transparent as well, somehow unsubstantial.

The man saw the winged apparition coming at him. His hands lifted in defense, but in the next instant the creature's needle-shaped snout plunged into his chest like a thrust sword. Then, with a blur of wings, the creature pulled free and circled away. The man did not move again. He stood with hands still defensively raised, statuesque, frozen. It was as if a lightning paralysis had struck him.

~

Bryan checked himself sharply, shocked by what he had seen. There was a wrenching unexpectedness about it, a chilling weirdness. And yet it held a certain logic, a deadly significance. For Bryan recalled what Dave had told him about the previous park victim. The man had been found with a queer reddish mark near the shoulder—a mark that presently had vanished. Now Bryan thought he knew how it had been caused. But how could an object penetrate flesh and bone—as he had seen the flying thing's needle-like proboscis pierce the chest of the man before the pavilion—and still make no wound, leave only a reddish mark that soon faded?

Only a few instants had passed. The winged band was still descending toward the pavilion. But Bryan's presence on the scene had been noticed. Two of the mosquito-men—their appearance automatically suggested the term—were even now curving toward him.

Bryan saw them approach. He tensed, fighting back his dismay.

Flight was out of the question. He had seen the mosquito-men in action and knew they could easily overtake him. That left only—

Bryan whipped off his jacket. He flailed at his attackers with it as they closed in. They darted back, their huge eyes widening as if in startled confusion. There was a quality about them as child-like as their shapes, appealing—and somehow not evil. It was a thing Bryan did not understand and which at the moment he had no time to fathom.

He pressed his advantage, beating at the shapes with the jacket. It was as though he beat at phantoms. He could feel no contact with solidity through the cloth. And the mosquito-men seemed to realize their immunity, for abruptly they closed in, their sharp snouts thrusting at him. He twisted aside to evade one—but the second reached him before he could move again. Its needle-shaped organ speared his shoulder.

Bryan felt a brief pain, a sensation as though electricity had surged through him. Then a complete terrible numbness gripped his body. He could not move. He could still see, could still think, but his muscles were fettered by an overwhelming paralysis.

He could still think—but it was difficult. His mind seemed detached and vague, and somehow touched by a pulse of thought not his own. Alien rhythms beat in it, formless, confused. And then—

“Leeta! This one resisted! He did not fear us as did the others.”

Child-like, piping, filled with excitement. And yet through the thought ran an undercurrent of wistful yearning, of trembling hope.

Then another thought: “Take him, Leeta! He is brave.”

“Patience, little ones.” Strangely soft and clear, this thought, ringing like delicate silver chimes.

At the edge of his field of vision, through eyes he could no longer control, Bryan saw movement—the sweep and flutter of great wings. Then a slim figure moved into his sight, a figure in a simple draped garment, walking as lightly and gracefully as though on air.

~



There was danger in the presence of this girl—and yet somehow, Terry Bryan knew he must reach her . . .

~

Leeta, he knew. Wonder rose in him—and sudden fascination.

Spectre? Witch? He could not decide. His eyes told him that she was woman—a woman like few he had seen, slender yet softly rounded, dainty yet with a suggestion of strength. Her small features held an odd, startling loveliness, elfin, somehow . . . *other-race*. Her eyes were tilted and strangely large, the nostrils of her tiny nose deeply indented and flaring, her chin pointed. Her gleaming black hair was long, thick, gently curling, a contrasting frame for flawless white skin.

She glowed luminously. And—he could see through her. Like the mosquito-men, like the giant bird, she was mistily transparent, inexplicably unsubstantial.

~

She stood before him, then. Her great liquid eyes gazed at him in wonder, with a searching curiosity. There was a tenseness and urgency about her, as though she were driven by some desperate all-important purpose. And there was an air of tragedy about her, a despair, a quality of wistful yearning like that Bryan had sensed in the child-like piping thoughts. The mystery of this woman caught at him, drew him.

Witch? Again, he wondered. He could find nothing evil in her face, nothing of cruelty or guile. Behind the compelling anxiety in her eyes, the sadness that touched her full lips, was . . . innocence.

The curiosity faded from her face. The tenseness and urgency that had been lurking in her abruptly became dominant.

Her hands lifted. Bryan saw now that she held an object in them, a globe of cloudy gray crystal, within which seemed to lay a core of pale rose light. And the light, he noticed, waxed and waned in a slow pulsing.

Bryan detected a sudden eagerness in the winged shapes that hovered beyond. And with the eagerness came the child-like piping.

“Take him, Leeta! He has courage. This time you may succeed.”

An answering thought; soft, holding a delicate note. “Patience . . .”

Then Bryan saw the crystal globe being lifted still higher—toward his face. Behind it the girl’s large exotic eyes seemed very intent. Within the globe the pulsing of the pale rose core quickened.

Bryan felt something draw at him. A strange force—like insistent hands. Hands immaterial and yet tangible, that reached into him . . . and pulled.

It was not a physical sensation. Nor was it purely mental. It was something that went beyond even this—something that gripped at the very foundation of being.

Bryan felt himself being drawn. And he did not understand. There was a purpose here and a means he could not grasp.

He resisted.

In a moment, the force left him.

The globe lowered. Over it the girl peered at him, startled, perplexed. And from the background came a piping despair.

“Failed . . . It has failed . . .”

“He has a strength I have not met before.” An echo of that other despair lay in the silver chiming. And an overtone of awe. “He cannot be taken—and that is strange. He has qualities I cannot quite explain. But his will is great—great enough, I think, to penetrate the veil unaided.”

“He cannot be taken . . .” The piping again, sorrowfully resigned.

Bryan was aware of the girl’s eyes on him. The wistfulness in them seemed to have grown. And from some deep recess within him rose a sudden queer aching.

“Farewell . . .”

Farewell? Protest surged in him. He struggled to make a detaining gesture—but it was futile. She turned away.

~

The hovering winged shapes followed her. Moving swiftly and lightly, she went toward the pavilion, before which the statuesque man stood beside the prone figure of the unconscious girl.

She lifted the globe to the man . . . its inner pulsing quickened. A radiance grew in it, as though some energy were being absorbed. The pulsing was very rapid now—triumphant.

Then the girl turned, hurrying back to the giant bird, which was waiting nearby. Behind her, even as she turned, the man swayed—fell. He fell loosely, emptily, his eyes open.

The girl leaped to the bird's back. In another moment it sprang into the air, huge wings beating. Higher it lifted, and higher. The mosquito-men followed. All soared beyond Bryan's range of vision, and the beating of wings faded . . . died.

Slowly the paralysis left Bryan. He flexed his limbs stiffly. His muscles ached, as though from cramp.

He went over to the sprawled figures of the man and the girl, then. The man had the same terrible unresponsive limpness as the man Bryan had seen at the hospital. He was beyond any aid Bryan could give.

Bryan turned his attention to the girl in an effort to quicken her return to consciousness. Shortly her eyes opened—then flared with recollection. She glanced swiftly about her, fright twisting at her face.

In the next instant she saw her fallen escort and seemed to realize for the first time that Bryan was a stranger. She went quickly to the other man and lifted his head.

"Tom!" she cried. "Tom! What is the matter?" Horror grew in her voice. "Why don't you answer me?"

Empty eyes that looked sightlessly into the night. Slack gaping lips that did not move.

The girl turned to Bryan with an expression of bewildered grief. "How . . . how did this terrible thing happen?"

Bryan hesitated. What he had experienced now seemed too wildly improbable to discuss. The very improbability of it could only add to the girl's suffering. And for a reason he did not fully understand he wanted to keep to himself the knowledge of that strangely lovely apparition whose name, it appeared, was Leeta.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know."

The girl's control seemed to break. She covered her face with her hands, convulsive sobs shaking her.

Bryan waited helplessly, with a feeling of guilt. In another moment, over the muffled sobbing, he heard the sound of approaching feet. A flashlight beam bobbed into view up

one of the radiating walks, and presently Bryan was able to make out the blue-clad running figure of a patrolman.

“What’s going on?” the patrolman demanded. “I heard a scream.” He moved his flashlight beam from the girl and the prostrate man, to Bryan. He added in surprise, “You here, Terry?”

Bryan nodded a greeting, recognizing the other now as Pat Mulvaney, a park officer. “This man seems to be hurt, Pat. We’d better get him to a hospital.”

Mulvaney bent over the sprawling figure, then returned to Bryan, speaking low-voiced. “Hurt ain’t the word for it, Terry. This case is like the other ones we found in the park. And it would have to happen tonight. Olson was supposed to be on duty at this end, but he sprained an ankle. We’re short-handed, what with the Department being on a budget.”

With the girl tearfully following, Bryan and Mulvaney carried the stricken man to a call box, where Mulvaney telephoned his report and requested that an ambulance be sent. Bryan was asked to accompany the girl to headquarters, in a squad car, for questioning.

~

It wasn’t until shortly before dawn that Bryan reached his room and began undressing for bed. He examined his bare shoulder in a mirror. There was a reddish patch on the skin, the size of a half-dollar piece, where the sharp snout of the mosquito-man had pierced him. The mark convinced him further that the whole thing had been no mere hallucination.

He felt no pain—but his body seemed faintly, oddly feverish. And he had a light-headed feeling that could not have been entirely due to tiredness.

He took a stiff drink of whisky and crawled into bed. Sleep would not come at once. Confused thoughts revolved in his mind.

He saw himself at police headquarters, answering questions. The girl had told her story up to the instant she had fainted, mentioning the flying shapes. She was unable to describe them, except to say the strangeness of their appearance had terrified her. Bryan was reluctant to discuss his own experience, but the girl had told of hearing his warning, and this placed him squarely on the scene. He could not claim ignorance of ensuing events without laying himself open to suspicion.

He had told of seeing the flying shapes also, but claimed he had been unable to make out details. They had moved too swiftly, his explanation went, it had been too dark. One had rushed at the man, knocking him down, then all had flown out of sight. A vague story—evasive. But the police had seemed satisfied, to the extent that the story checked with the girl’s.

The flying shapes . . . Leeta . . . A curious excitement surged in him as he thought of the wraithlike girl. Who was she? Where had she come from?

He recalled something she had said—something about his will being strong enough to penetrate the veil unaided. It seemed important. But what had she meant by that? What—and where—was the veil?

And—how had he been able to understand her? He realized now that neither she nor the others had used audible speech, yet he had the impression of intelligible spoken words, of voice tones.

He pondered the mystery with a growing fogginess. He slept.

And then he was not sleeping.

He was standing on a mountain ridge, looking down into a broad green valley. It was daylight. In the sky hung a great, red-tinged sun, which immediately struck him as—alien. But for the moment his wonder remained concentrated on the valley. There was something there that drew him—that had drawn him there. A bond of some sort existed, an indefinable ethereal linking, over which he had crossed like a bridge. A bond, he sensed, that even now was somehow fading . . . dissolving.

The valley was a pleasant place, idyllic. Peace and quiet were cupped within it. He had the sudden, insistent feeling that he had been seeking a place like this, a place where he could be happy, where his blind strivings would find fulfillment. A place—*where*?

He turned to gaze on the other side of the ridge. And saw—horror. The land here was a ghostly desolation, blackened, charred, lifeless, bathed in an eerie shimmering blue radiance. An unutterably deadly radiance, he knew in some strange way. And he knew, too, that the radiance lay everywhere—except in this lone valley.

He returned his attention to it with a mounting urgency. The scene was growing dim, blurring. It was escaping him. He made a frantic exertion of will, seeking in what few moments that remained an answer to a certain question.

There was . . . a shifting. The ridge was gone. He stood within the valley, at the foot of a rocky slope, up which ran a curving stairway of a building of some pink stone. The building was exotic in design, terraced, domed, fairy-like. All around it strangely beautiful flowers and shrubs grew in riotous profusion. He had the nostalgic impression of heady fragrance and warm breeze, of serenity and peace. And he felt a queer ache of longing.

Then, breaking abruptly through the deep stillness, he seemed to hear a faint piping. He turned in search and saw a flagstone path through a lane of trees. At the end of the lane was movement, a flutter as of wings.

~

He willed himself toward it. Again, there was a shifting. And now he stood at the edge of a broad shallow depression, like a sunken garden. The path dipped down into this by a short stairway and ran on to circle what appeared to be a pool at the center. All around the pool flowers grew with an incredible luxuriance and splendor, thick masses of flowers, startling in their size and beauty, that made the air almost solid with their mingled

perfume. It was as though they found some abnormally rich nourishment here that stimulated their fantastically prolific growth.

The very atmosphere of this place seemed charged with a vital energy. Bryan had a feeling of surging life, of boundless power. And he sensed that it came from the pool. Something more than water was contained within it, something strange, supernal—god-like.

The pool was filled with a pearly opalescence, alive and seething with delicate pastel hues, swirling, changing. Sparkles of chromatic brilliance raced over its surface, blazing and vanishing. A glow rose from it like a gorgeous rainbow-colored mist, spreading, charging the air with vibrant energy.

But the weird magnificence of the pool held Bryan's attention only momentarily. For kneeling at its brink like a nymph in an enchanted setting was . . . Leeta. In a semi-circle behind her a score or more of the grotesque mosquito-men made a fascinated audience. The giant bird, too, was visible, squatting, motionless.

In her hands the girl held the crystal globe, shining with its stolen radiance. Now she leaned forward, lowering the globe to the surface of the pool. It seemed to float, pulsing. Sparkles from the pool ran to it in a growing boil of motion—and were absorbed. The activity grew swifter and yet swifter, until the pool seethed and foamed with brilliance. The air turned electric with a sensation of vast striving, of super-human effort.

Watching puzzled, from his vantage point above the depression, Bryan saw the globe begin to swell. Its radiance blazed feverishly, its pulsing increased to a frenzied beat. Larger, it grew—larger. Became misty, unsubstantial, unreal. The rose core of it grew also, elongating, paling to pink. And now it was taking shape—the shape of a man. Features began forming, and then—

Stunned amazement hit Bryan as he peered intently at the figure being so weirdly created. For recognition had come. He was looking at the man who, a short time before, had been attacked in the park by Leeta and her bizarre followers.

The shape was taking on solidity. Dazed, Bryan recalled the events in the park. Leeta's strange globe, he realized, had absorbed some vital essence from its victim—perhaps the soul—and this essence was now being released by the pool. Released, somehow, in a perfect replica of the fleshly covering that originally had housed it.

The man hung over the pool. His closed eyes fluttered, opened. Animation touched his face. Fear showed in it, a rising horror, a frantic desperation. He struggled.

And began dissolving.

The pool boiled and seethed as though in a mighty effort to hold its creation intact. It did not succeed. The shape thinned, shrunk, faded . . . was gone.

There was a moment of stricken stillness. The pool had quieted. Its aura of supernal power had dimmed. An air of exhaustion lay over it now, an exhaustion in which even the surrounding flowers seemed to pale and droop.

Then a piping murmur rose like a sigh of mourning. “Failed . . . again . . .”

And Leeta covered her face with her hands, sagging. Her bowed shoulders shook, with great sobs of mingled grief, disappointment, and despair.

Bryan wanted to make some sign of sympathy, of consolation—but again the scene was growing blurred, fading. He fought to hold it together, fought as the pool had fought . . . futilely. And then a hovering blackness rushed over him, and he seemed to whirl dizzily across an enormous gulf.

He awoke in bed, soaked with perspiration, breathing hard. He had a feeling of anger, dejection.

He swung his legs to the floor and glanced at his watch. He had been asleep for less than an hour, but at the moment he was too upset by his strangely realistic nightmare to return to bed.

He lit a cigarette and fell to pacing the length of his room. Thinking back over his disturbingly vivid dream, he wondered why he should have experienced it in that particular way. The events of the preceding night had been unnerving enough, but he felt there was a deeper reason. Was it possible that the queer wound he had received in the park had something to do with it? He recalled his feverishness, his light-headed sensation.

Then he thought of the man he had seen in the dream, and came to an abrupt stop. In another instant he sprang back into motion, hurrying to the telephone near the bed. He dialed the hospital to which the man had been taken from the park, waiting impatiently while the doctor in charge of the case was put on.

Identifying himself, then, he asked quickly, “How is the fellow, doctor?”

“Afraid I have bad news. He died about five minutes ago. There didn’t seem to be a single thing I could do to prevent it.”

“I see . . .” Bryan muttered his thanks and hung up. He sat staring into space.

Five minutes ago . . . That would be shortly before he had awakened—about the time the image of the man, in the dream, had dissolved and vanished . . .

~

That afternoon Bryan sat at a secluded corner table in the small restaurant he frequented near the *Courier* Building. The remains of a fourth cup of coffee stood before him, the saucer littered with cigarette butts. He was staring into the cup, brooding. His mind kept returning to his strange dream and its incredible implications. And tangled in the thread of his thoughts was the picture of Leeta, dainty and elfinly lovely, struggling toward an end he could only dimly grasp.

A slim figure dropped into the chair opposite Bryan. It was Joyce, crisp, fresh, giving her usual effect of elegance.

“Hi! A little bird told me I’d find you here, Terry.” She studied his face in swift concern. “What on earth happened to you last night? You look like a fugitive from a horror movie.”

“Maybe I am,” Bryan grunted. And he grinned wryly at the element of truth in his retort.

Joyce was solemn, probing. “Terry, I heard what happened in the park last night. One of our fellow wage slaves is posted at Headquarters, you know. And from what he told me, I gather you were mixed up in something with a spook angle. But, Terry, it seems the police have the quaint idea you didn’t give them the whole story.”

He shook his head. “I’m not ready for the booby-hatch just yet.”

“Then you didn’t tell the whole story.” She leaned forward, her face eager. “I’m dying with curiosity over what really happened, Terry. Want to tell me—or are you saving it for your memoirs?”

He lighted a fresh cigarette, considering. Joyce was an understanding person, he knew. And she had imagination. She could be trusted not to misinterpret the fantastic nature of his experience.

Speaking low-voiced, he told her of Leeta’s arrival at the park, of the attack on the other man and himself by the grotesque and somehow unsubstantial mosquito-men, of the complete paralysis that had resulted.

Joyce broke in, “But, Terry, if the things weren’t solid, how could they possibly have affected you?”

“I’ve been trying to figure out that angle,” he said. “I think they were energy projections of some kind and were able to use this energy to stun their victims. It should work both ways—that is, some forms of energy from our end should be able to affect them, too.”

He went on to describe the crystal globe and the use Leeta had made of it. Finally, he mentioned his dream and his telephone call to the hospital.

Joyce looked shaken. “It . . . it’s gruesome, Terry. If anyone else had told me those things, I’d have said they were plain crazy.” She hesitated. “This girl with the strange way of making men friends, what was she like?”

“She was . . . beautiful,” Bryan said. He stared into distance, seeing Leeta in memory again. His voice softened. “I’ve never met anyone like her.”

“She’s a witch!” Joyce said abruptly, an unnatural sharpness in her tone. “A vampire—a ghoul. What she’s done is horrible, Terry. Someone should put a stop to her.”

“She isn’t a monster,” Bryan returned in swift defense. “Not depraved or vicious. I don’t quite understand it, but I feel there’s a good reason for what she has been doing.”

“She’s a murderess, Terry!”

“According to our standards, yes. But I don’t think she realizes she has been causing harm.”

“That’s generous of you,” Joyce said. Her mockery held bitterness. “But your lady Bluebeard has to be kept from doing any more killing, Terry. Aren’t you going to try to do something about it?”

He nodded grimly. "I'm going to keep watching the park. If she shows up again—and I think she will—I'll make an attempt to talk to her, reason with her. I have an idea about how it can be done."

"That's fine, Terry. I'm glad I don't have to do anything drastic to make an honest man of you."

He stared at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"This is a serious business, Terry. Men have died—and more men might die. If you don't do something about it, then somebody else will have to." She reached for her purse and rose abruptly. "I'll be running along. See you around."

About to turn away, she paused and looked back at him. Her lips quivered, her hazel eyes held an odd swimming brightness. Then, before Bryan could overcome his bewilderment, she whirled and hurried toward the door.

He stared after her with a disturbing sense of alarm. He had always considered Joyce a friend, but now he realized her own feelings went deeper than that. Deep enough so that she seemed fiercely to resent his interest and sympathy where Leeta was concerned.

He felt—danger. Joyce, he knew now, had become an enemy.

~

He walked slowly through the darkness, a big man whose tweed suit was more rumpled than usual. The park was oddly deserted tonight. No couples strolled along the walks, no figures occupied the benches.

And Bryan knew the reason for that. Patrolmen, on emergency duty, guarded all the approaches to the park. People were being turned away. He himself had gained admission only because he was personally acquainted with the captain in charge of the guard detail. The only formality had been a warning to remain alert.

An expectant hush lay on the air. Even the warm spring breeze seemed stilled, the rustling of leaves muted. Bryan felt the atmosphere of tension, and his excitement grew. He wondered if Leeta would appear again, if he would be able somehow to attract her notice, speak to her.

Leeta . . . He recalled the way she had looked when she had stood close to him, with the crystal globe in her hands—lovely, strange, wondering. He recalled the wistfulness that had radiated from her, the urgency. And in his mind seemed to ring an echo of the delicate silver chiming, voice-like, that seemed associated with her.

He couldn't deny his longing.

The pavilion took shape in the lamp-lit gloom. Bryan was walking toward it, when a burly figure stepped out of a patch of shadow a few yards ahead.

"Hold it, mister! Nobody's allowed in the park tonight."

Bryan chuckled, recognizing Pat Mulvaney. "Take it easy, Pat."

"Oh, it's you, Terry." Mulvaney strode forward. "How did you get in this time—sneak past the men we have around the front of the park?"

“Miller passed me through,” Bryan explained. He and the patrolman spent several minutes discussing what had happened the previous night. Bryan revealed nothing more than he had already told the police, but he mentioned the death of the man he had seen attacked.

Mulvaney was grim. “Think anything will happen tonight, Terry?”

“There’s a good chance it will.”

“Well, I’ll be ready for it.” Mulvaney slapped his holstered gun. He left, then, to continue his patrol of the area around the pavilion.

Bryan sat down on a bench and lighted a cigarette. An uneasy thought had risen in his mind. He didn’t know if Mulvaney would be able to cause any real harm in the event that Leeta appeared, but he didn’t want the girl hurt.

Time passed with tortuous slowness. The tense hush that lay over the park seemed to deepen. Bryan spoke to Mulvaney when the patrolman reached him on his rounds, but otherwise the monotony of the wait remained unbroken.

Bryan was fighting off a growing sleepiness, when at last he heard the sound he had been alternately hoping and dreading would come—the sound of wings. He saw the flying shapes, then, low against the star-studded sky, beginning their descent toward the pavilion. The structure seemed to be a favorite landmark, perhaps because it was situated in a comparatively remote location and was easy to find in the darkness.

~

Mulvaney seemed to have heard the approaching sounds also. He came running from some point on the opposite side of the pavilion, cutting through the columned structure itself as he returned to Bryan. His burly figure appeared on the pavilion steps—and then halted in amazed surprise as he caught sight of the eerily glowing shapes that were now winging downward.

Eagerness had pulled Bryan to his feet. The soaring figures were rapidly coming closer, growing more distinct. He saw the giant bird and its escort of mosquito-men. He saw Leeta, slender-limbed, elfin, her gossamer draperies fluttering behind her.

The appearance of Mulvaney momentarily tore his attention from the scene. He realized that the patrolman was silhouetted against the pavilion’s pale backdrop—a clear target. Leeta and the others would be drawn to him, unaware this time that possible great danger impended.

Anxiety hammering within him, Bryan launched himself into a headlong run toward Mulvaney. Already two of the mosquito-men were pulling ahead of the others, skimming directly at the patrolman.

Mulvaney seemed to overcome the shock produced by his first sight of the approaching shapes. He reached swiftly for his gun, raised it in deliberate aim—fired. There was a burst of luminous brightness. One of the two onrushing child-like winged

figures was abruptly gone—gone as swiftly and completely as though it had never been visible.

Bryan stumbled in his frantic stride, caught himself, numbed by a sudden dismay. Leeta and her people could be hurt! It was as though the glowing energy of which they seemed composed existed in a state of delicate balance that could be disrupted by the impact of a bullet or its shock-wave.

He reached the pavilion steps, leaped up them toward Mulvaney. He had to keep the man from firing again. Somehow, he had to show Leeta that his intentions were friendly, sympathetic. He had to talk to her, make her realize what she had been doing. Perhaps, even, he could help her.

Mulvaney's blue-clad body loomed up before him. He caught desperately at the patrolman's arm.

"Wait!" he gasped. "Don't shoot!"

"Are you out of your mind?" the other cried. "Let go of me!"

They struggled. Bryan's foot slipped on the steps . . . he fell.

The mosquito-men seemed disconcerted by the loss of one of their band. They swerved away, as though in sudden terrified realization of danger. But the great bird, with Leeta astride its back, continued toward the ground a short distance from the pavilion, its huge size evidently preventing swift evasive action.

Leeta was almost in point-blank range. And again, Mulvaney was lifting his gun.

On hands and knees, Bryan threw himself back at the other. He caught Mulvaney about the legs, pulled. The patrolman went down, his gun blasting harmlessly into the air.

Bryan was climbing back to his feet, when he saw the luminous child-like shape of a mosquito-man darting at him, its needle-snout spearing toward his chest. He sought to twist aside—too late. He felt the brief pain: the electric sensation, and then paralysis held him in its rigid grip.

A second of the mosquito-men dove at Mulvaney as he, too, struggled erect, its needle-snout piercing his back. Mulvaney remained bent-over, frozen, statue-like.

There was an odd hiatus, poignant, holding a realization of hopes lost forever. Then a slim pale figure moved into Bryan's line of sight—Leeta. She approached to stand before him, holding the crystal globe, a vast wonder in her small face. He felt a pulse of thought, soft and clear, holding a ring of silver chimes.

"It is you—he whose will cannot be overcome. Strange that we should meet again . . . stranger still that you should save my life. I do not understand . . . But I am grateful. And I wish—"

The silver melody broke as though against some cold unyielding wall. Then it came again, sad, despairing.

"But what I wish cannot be, man of the mighty will. For you would not willingly journey through the veil. You are bound to this aspect of existence, as all the others were

bound. But somewhere must be one who is not . . . And so, my quest must go on. Again—farewell . . .”

~

Once more she was slipping from him. And once more he could do nothing. Despite his frantic, violent inner struggle, he could make no sound or movement, could give no slightest indication of the purpose that drove him. He was imprisoned within a cage of flesh as unresponsive and immovable as stone.

She turned to Mulvaney . . . held the crystal globe to him. Its pulsing quickened, it brightened. And Mulvaney fell, limp—empty.

Watching through his despair, Bryan saw Leeta stand hesitating. Slowly she glanced at him, as if somehow, throughout the weird proceedings, he had been at the back of her mind. Her small face seemed to hold a reluctance, a regret.

Then she turned and moved beyond his sight. And presently he heard the flapping of wings, drawing away, fading. Stillness closed over the park again.

Bryan felt the paralysis draining from him, more swiftly this time. It was as though his body had adjusted to it since the first attack.

He was straightening awkwardly, painfully, when he heard a sudden faint rustling of branches, followed by the sound of light running feet. A figure appeared in the open space before the pavilion, hurrying toward him. The figure of a girl. And then he recognized her. Joyce!

He felt a sharp surprise . . . an unease. What was Joyce doing in the park?

“I saw what happened,” she gasped breathlessly as he came up. Her face looked pale and strained. “Are you all right?”

He nodded. “Just getting back to normal.”

She bent to make a brief, repelled examination of Mulvaney. “Can’t something be done for this man?”

“There isn’t any hope for him,” Bryan returned. “He’s in the same condition as the others.” He studied Joyce for a moment, realizing that she was oddly changed—somehow deliberate, hostile. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see what your girl-friend looked like, Terry. I sneaked past the police in front of the park.” Her voice took on a sudden accusing edge. “I saw what that half-naked witch did to this policeman. And you helped her, Terry. I saw you knock him down so he couldn’t shoot her. It was murder, Terry—murder! He isn’t dead yet, but you know he’s going to be.”

“I had to stop him,” Bryan protested. “The girl deserved more of a chance than she was getting. I told you she really didn’t know she was doing wrong. I thought I could reason with her, keep her from doing any more harm—but things happened too fast.”

Joyce shook her head coldly. “It’s still murder. And you’re in it up to your eyebrows, Terry. If the police find out what happened here, they’ll lock you up and throw away the key.”

In another moment, her features softened, her voice grew pleading. “It isn’t too late, Terry. Forget that girl. Tip off the police so they’ll be ready for her the next time she shows up. They don’t have to know exactly what you saw—or what you did. We’ll keep that to ourselves, Terry. We’ll start over again . . . you and I.”

~

Bryan stared at her, shocked by the bargain she was suggesting. She was asking him to doom Leeta, to sacrifice his pride and his hopes in return for her silence. It was a kind of blackmail, in which she was seeking to use the tragedy of Mulvaney for her own purposes. He found in this a wrong somehow vastly greater than in what Leeta had done—for this was knowing, calculating.

He had always regarded Joyce as a friend, understanding and sympathetic. Now he realized these qualities were only a veneer, and in the stress of what had happened the veneer had been stripped away. An underlying ugliness was revealed—an ugliness that seemed to be the very foundation of a world he had come to despise.

Slowly, grimly, he shook his head. “You’re asking too much for what you have to sell, Joyce. If I have to pick between you and Leeta, then . . .”

She stiffened as though struck. “Leeta!” she spat. “So, you know her name, do you? Now I see you must have been cozy with her all along—that’s why you helped her commit murder!”

Her voice grew shrill and breathless with fury. “All right, Terry! You’re asking for it. I’ve made a fool of myself in front of everyone, chasing after you, throwing myself at you. This is where I even up the score . . . The police might not believe what I just saw, but I’ll tell them a story they’ll swallow without tasting. They just love people who help kill cops. And they already have a crush on you over the run-around you gave them after the last killing. If you aren’t sent to the chair, you’re dead certain to get a job cracking shells in a nuthouse. Everybody knows you’ve been going to pieces, and they won’t be surprised to hear you’ve finally blown your top.”

She stood facing him a moment longer, her eyes blazing with deadly promise. Then she whirled and was running swiftly toward one of the paths that led away from the pavilion.

Bryan gazed after her, realizing that he might have made a serious mistake. But he was somehow unable to care. He had an enormous sense of futility, defeat. All his hopes, the very course of his life, had come to center about this evening’s meeting with Leeta—and she had slipped from him. There would not be another chance. Joyce had made it clear that the sands of time were running out for him.

He glanced down at the prone figure of Mulvaney, hesitated. It seemed callous to leave the patrolman like this. But there was nothing that could be done for Mulvaney now. Except, perhaps, to answer the questions of the police about what had happened to him. And Bryan didn't feel like answering questions. He'd had little sleep that morning, and exhaustion made his body leaden. And he had the feverish, light-headed feeling again, the aftermath of his paralysis.

He turned aimlessly and walked down one of the paths, until he found himself at the edge of an invitingly dark grassy expanse. He dropped to the ground behind some tall bushes and closed his eyes. He seemed to be floating in a lightless, depthless sea. Soothing waves of sensation washed over him. He drifted away on warm tides that held nothing of sound or feeling.

~

And then the nothingness was gone. He stood on a flagstone path that ran between a lane of trees. At one end the path led to a curving stairway that wound up a rocky slope to a building of pink stone. Peace and quiet lay over the scene, like a crystal blanket of supernal clarity.

Realization came to him, bringing with it an electrifying amazement. He was back—back in that strange and exotically beautiful other-place which seemed to be Leeta's home!

Leeta! Eagerness and wild joy flamed in him, then. There was still a chance. It was not hopeless after all—not too late . . .

His senses rushed toward the other end of the path, and now he detected a muted piping, like the shrill whispers of excited children. He sent himself toward it.

The familiar shifting again. He stood at the edge of the broad shallow depression he had seen before, with the pool of inexplicable force at its center. The flowers that crowded here were as incredibly luxuriant and gorgeous as he remembered them, filling the air with their thick perfume. And once more he felt the aura of vital power that radiated from the pool, boundless, awesome, god-like.

And kneeling beside the pool as before was the slender figure he was seeking—Leeta. Only dimly was he aware of the other shapes around her, the giant bird, the mosquito-men. She was holding the mystically shining crystal globe, even now she was bending to lower it to the surface of the pool.

Into his mind flashed the chilling picture of Mulvaney, horribly sprawled, motionless-empty. He knew he had to prevent what was about to take place.

Urgency leaping in him, he sent himself toward the pool. Leeta had to see him this time! He threw all his will into the thought in a mighty burst of effort. She had to see him!

And she saw him.

With the globe extended in her hands, she stiffened. Her tilted liquid eyes flared wide. A stark unbelieving amazement seemed to grip her slim body. And in a fashion that was

somehow a normal function of his senses here, he realized that she saw him as he had seen her back at the park, mistily unsubstantial, weirdly glowing.

“You!” she said at last. The silvery chime of her thought held the quality of a gasp.

Her stunned incredulity was echoed by the other presences before the pool.

“He is the strange one—he is here!”

“He of the great will has come!”

Then the silvery chiming again, stronger now. “You followed me here, man of the other aspect? Were you able so easily to penetrate the veil?”

“I don’t know just how I got here,” Bryan returned. “But I do know that this is where I wanted to be.”

She seemed to grasp the implications of the thought, for a sudden delight stirred in her. Yet for the moment her wonder remained dominant. “I do not understand how this can be. The others could not penetrate the veil without the aid of the Vessel. It is as though they were somehow bound to their aspect of existence—bound as you, man of the mighty will, are not . . . But why have you come?”

His answer was grave, deliberate. “Partly to ask you to stop the harm you have been causing in my world, Leeta.”

“Harm?” A silvery peal of shock burst from her. “I . . . I do not understand.”

“You took something from those men in my world, Leeta—something they could not live without. And because of this, they died.”

“Died! But the pool could not incarnate them into this aspect. The vital force escaped. I thought it returned to its shell in the other aspect.”

Bryan clearly understood the meaning behind the terms she used. He shook his head. “The vital force did not return—not once, Leeta. The shells died.”

She looked stricken. “I had not thought that happened when the vital force escaped. I had been certain that it returned through the veil, drawn back by its bonds with the shell . . . If it did not return, then it must have perished here.” The realization was one she found startling, dismaying.

Bryan nodded slowly. “It perished in this aspect, just as the energy projection of one of your winged creatures perished in mine. For I assume that the creature did perish, Leeta.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “It was a thing I did not understand. But now . . .” Her thought faded unhappily. Sorrow misted her eyes.

~

He dropped down beside her at the edge of the pool. For the moment, driven by his intense purpose, he forgot that he was somehow immaterial, a projection. He forgot the strangeness of that bizarre other-world garden and the tensely watching shapes nearby. There was only Leeta and himself. That was all that mattered.

Earnestness heavily underscored his thought. “Leeta, you must stop what you have been doing. You know now it has caused the deaths of those men in my world. And there is another reason, Leeta—danger. My people will be watching for you to appear again. They will try to destroy you.”

She shook her head with a mournful determination. “But I cannot stop. I have a duty to fulfill that is greater than any harm I might cause—greater even than my own life.”

“What do you mean, Leeta? What is this duty?”

“I shall tell you. But first—you have seen something of this valley? You have seen that it is beautiful?”

“Very beautiful, Leeta.”

“But only the valley is like that. All the rest of my world is bathed in a terrible fire that destroys any life it touches.”

“I have seen that, too,” he said. “Was it always this way?”

“Not always. Once the entire world was like the valley, beautiful, filled with life. There were fully as many people as on your own world. And they had great knowledge—too much knowledge, perhaps. They lived in vast cities and had many wonderful machines to serve them. They could have been happy, could have climbed to even greater heights—but there was war.”

The silver chiming was dulled by sadness, and a kind of instinctive horror. “It was a war fought with weapons of frightful, magic power—weapons that used the very secrets of existence itself. Life of all forms was wiped out, except in this valley. For a small group of people had guessed what the war would do and had taken refuge here. The valley, you see, was unique, not only well isolated from any possibility of attack, but shielded on all sides by mountains which contained an element capable of resisting the fire. Thus, while the fire spread like a deadly blight into other refuges, it did not reach here. Not entirely.”

Bryan felt an awed wonder at the picture Leeta had drawn. Behind her chiming thought images had moved—images that seemed to hold a tantalizing familiarity. He had been puzzling over the location of Leeta’s world, and now he speculated startled whether it wasn’t Earth itself. He recalled that she had spoken of their individual worlds as aspects, as though they were different views of the same place rather than completely different and unrelated places.

The possibility was supported by the fact that Leeta was undeniably human. Further, he knew that the consuming fire she described was radioactivity—and the people of his world were already well along in their knowledge of atomic weapons. His wonder sharpened. Was Leeta’s world actually Earth—an Earth of the distant future? Was the veil that separated them time itself?

~

She appeared not to have noticed his fleeting thoughts. It was as though her awareness was gripped by the tragedy of what she had been describing.

Slowly she went on, “The fire’s terrible breath touched the valley, and its effects were felt by the creatures who had sought shelter here—both human and animal. Some died, some . . . changed. The winged ones you see around you now are the results of that change. Even the flowers and trees became different. And the pool was created. The fire touched something in this particular spot—and the pool came into being. The process was never understood, but I do know that the pool has strange powers—that somehow it is alive . . . intelligent. It is the pool which made possible what I have done, supplying the knowledge, tools and forces that were necessary.”

“But how does it happen that you’re the only person left in the valley?” Bryan asked.

She moved her slim, gleaming shoulders. “There were not many here even in the beginning, while the fire was still at its height. After its destroying breath left the valley, only a very few were left—those, that is, who were still human. And they somehow did not care to live. My father was the last to die, but before he did, he said I must find a way to keep our race from perishing with me. He explained that I was the first human truly adjusted to the changed conditions of the valley, and only in me was there hope.

“That was . . . and remains . . . my duty—to keep humans alive in this aspect. The answer to my problem lay beyond the veil. Matter was held by the energy field of the aspect in which it was situated, and thus could not be made to cross without the use of enormous power. But the vital force contained in living matter could be made to cross easily enough—with, of course, the means of a tool like the Vessel. And the pool could incarnate the vital force, give it matter in this aspect according to the pattern of the original shell. All I had to do was bring the vital force of a man through the veil—and my race could go on. Still, I have been unsuccessful, for it seems that the vital force is also held to its aspect.”

“I think that’s because of what might be called psychic bonds,” Bryan said slowly. “The men you brought here, Leeta—they did not want to come. And once here they did not want to stay. That, it seems, is why you’ve failed.”

He indicated the globe she was holding. “And that’s why you’ll fail again. It’s wrong to destroy a life uselessly, Leeta. Wrong. Surely you realize that. You must release this man—if it’s at all possible.”

“It can be done,” she said. Then her thought grew protesting, rebellious. “But I cannot release him. I cannot give up my mission so easily. I must keep trying until I succeed. Surely you in turn must realize how great my duty is.”

“Will you persist in it even if you know you are doing wrong, bringing pain and grief to people in my aspect? Don’t you know what grief is, Leeta? Didn’t you feel grief when your father died—when that winged creature of yours died?”

“Yes,” she said reluctantly. “Yes.”

“And don’t you know what love is? Haven’t you realized that you were tearing those men away from persons they loved deeply and didn’t want to leave? I don’t mean the kind

of love you felt for your father, Leeta, but the love that exists between a man and a woman who are mated. Don't you know what that kind of love is like?"

~

She hesitated, startled, wondering. "No," she breathed at last. "Then I'll show you," he said. Though he was somehow unsubstantial, a projection, he knew he could still transmit feeling, just as the mosquito-men had transmitted their paralysis to him. He bent toward her, pressed his lips to hers. He felt her surprise—and then her pleasure, her shy response. There was somehow a sweetness in that kiss, an intensity, that moved him as no kiss had ever done.

Finally, he drew away. "That is love, Leeta—something that would bring a man willingly to your aspect."

Her small face was flushed, her liquid eyes shone. Then despair washed over her. "But if you don't—" She gestured helplessly. "Where would I find a man in whom there would be such a love?"

He looked at her intently, searchingly, then gestured at the globe. "Leeta, if I were willing to stay here with you, would you release this man?"

"For you—yes." In her was no guile, only an innocent directness. "I have thought of you from the first moment we met," she admitted. "I found qualities in you that were not present in any of the others—a strength, and yet a gentleness, a sadness. I could not forget . . . and I know now that this was love. And if you will truly stay—" She broke off eagerly. "Watch!"

She extended the globe toward the pool. She did not lower it, but held it over the surface. Her slim body grew very still. She seemed to be concentrating . . . communing.

And as he watched, Bryan saw the mists from the pool thicken around the globe. The supernal power that radiated from it took on an atmosphere of tension, strain. For an instant, even though he still saw her, he had the uncanny yet definite impression that the globe was—gone.

Abruptly, then, dismayingly, the scene dimmed, began fading, as it had done on his first visit. Panic swept him. He couldn't leave now—he didn't want to leave! He fought to keep the garden around him, summoning all the force of will of which he was capable.

The scene steadied—but remained oddly blurred. He saw now that Leeta had turned from the pool and was holding out the globe to him, smiling. The globe's mystic brightness was gone. Once more it was a cloudy gray, its core a faint rose, slowly pulsing.

"It is done," Leeta said. "He has been returned safely to the other aspect." Then her smile vanished. She stared at Bryan in swift concern. "Why, what is the matter? What has happened to you?"

Her questions seemed to come from a great distance. The scene was dissolving again—and this time he could not hold it together. Something was wrong, he knew, seriously wrong. He tried to send a last message to Leeta . . . failed.

Darkness closed around him. And from a distance even greater than before, he sensed an anguished chiming, stunned, broken.

“A trick! It was just a trick!”

~

Someone was shaking his shoulder roughly and insistently. He strained away in dull protest, groping blindly for the fragile ethereal thread that had slipped from him.

“Come on, snap out of it!” an impatient voice growled.

He forced open his eyes, then squeezed them shut again as the beam of a flashlight struck them. His awareness sharpened. He struggled to sit up, felt grass under his fingers, and realized abruptly that he was back in the park.

Hands that were not gentle caught him under his armpits and helped raise him to his feet. He saw the figures of two men now, one of them in police uniform. This man held a gun, its muzzle pointed in silent threat.

“All right, cop-killer,” the man in the suit said. He had a detective’s unemotional face and flat hard eyes. Something bright glinted in his hands as he leaned close—and Bryan felt the cold steel of handcuffs close around his wrists.

“Let’s go,” the detective said, then. “We’ve got about two-dozen men combing the park for you, friend. They won’t like to be kept on the job for nothing. Pete and I were just lucky enough to get to you first.”

Rough hands gripped Bryan’s arms, pulled him into motion. He walked leadenly, unsteadily, the two men flanking him. His body was clammy with the perspiration that had bathed him in sleep. He felt exhausted, weak, sick, as though from some tremendous labor. The energy of his body, it seemed, had been heavily drawn upon in order to sustain the projection of himself in Leeta’s aspect.

Leeta . . . He thought of her with a crushing sense of tragedy. He knew he loved her— incredible and weird as that love may have seemed. He remembered the shyness of her kiss, the numbed horror of her belief that she had been betrayed, that he had pretended love only as a ruse to obtain Mulvaney’s freedom. If only he were able to reassure her—

But he had the chill certainty that he would never see her again. For she had learned the meaning of pain.

Despair rose in him, a despair that submerged even his concern over the situation in which he now found himself. *Cop-killer* . . . The implications brought a kind of remote wonder. Joyce, it appeared, had made her threat good. She had told the police a story that they had swallowed without tasting. It was a story that had resulted in a swift and thorough search of the park, a story that had required handcuffs and drawn guns.

Bryan glanced at the detective beside him. “You boys taking me in because of what happened to Mulvaney?”

“Mostly because of Mulvaney,” the other grunted. “We don’t know what you did to him, friend—but you’re going to tell us about it. In the back room at Headquarters. You’re damned well going to tell us all about it.”

“Mulvaney isn’t dead,” Bryan insisted.

“Not yet. But he’s going to kick off sooner or later—just like the others. I know about that, friend.”

Bryan shook his head. “Mulvaney isn’t going to die.”

“That so?” The detective’s flat gaze studied him without surprise or interest. “But the other guys did—four of them. Don’t forget that.”

Bryan fell silent. Mulvaney wouldn’t die—but he would tell of Bryan knocking him down, of Bryan’s co-operation with strange creatures that had taken the lives of four men. Mulvaney, however, wasn’t likely to tell exactly what he had seen. His story, too, would be something that could be swallowed without tasting . . .

Then Bryan saw that he and the others were crossing one edge of an open space. The pavilion rose in the middle of it, a pale ghostly shape against the darkness. It would remain a symbol for him. For within sight of it his life had begun—and ended.

~

A path swallowed him and his captors. The pavilion faded from view. Ahead was the sprawling bulk of the city, dotted and splashed with light.

It was against this backdrop that the sound came, rising out of inaudibility. The flapping of great wings.

Wings!

A vast wind seemed to blow through Bryan. He stopped dead, staring up into the sky.

The detective and his companion seemed to hear the sound also. They, too, peered upward, puzzled.

Bryan thought he knew where to look. And glancing back in the direction of the pavilion, he saw a vague dark shape against the stars. Sudden urgency roared in him like thunder.

The pavilion! He had to go back!

He lifted his imprisoned arms and swung them in a sweeping club-like blow. The policeman dropped before he could move his gun back into line. The detective swore in dismay, sent a hand darting under his coat—but Bryan was already whirling toward him. He kned the man in the stomach, then felled him with a chopping blow to the back of the head.

Beyond hindrance now, Bryan ran. He ran recklessly, wildly, eagerness driving away his exhaustion, sending an explosive power into his legs.

Behind him voices shouted, a whistle shrilled. Then the sharp blast of a gun split the air.

He left the path and cut across a stretch of grass. A wall of shrubbery rose before him, and he plunged into it without checking speed. Branches lashed at him, tore at him. He fell, heaved himself erect, fought his way clear.

More grass, and then another path, running parallel to the one he had fled. He followed this, and presently the pavilion took form in the gloom. Above it a dark shape circled on huge wings. The giant bird—and it was alone. Bryan could see no other shapes accompanying it.

He was puzzling over the discovery, when a flashlight beam speared at him out of an intersecting path. Shouts followed it, filled with a swift excitement.

“There he is!”

“Stop, you!”

Bryan plunged on. Again, a whistle shrilled. Then the running sounds of a group of men came in pursuit.

The pavilion rose before him. He reached the open space around it, halted, swung his bound hands in an urgent gesture at the sky.

“Here I am!” he called, not knowing if his call would be heard. “Here—quick!”

If it did not actually hear him, the giant bird saw him. Swiftly it descended. And as it dropped toward him, he saw it held an object in its beak—the crystal globe. His perplexity mounted. For added to all the other strangeness of this event, he now detected a desperation about the bird, a consuming anxiety.

He sent his thought to meet the pulse that was reaching toward him. “Where is Leeta? Has something happened?”

With a final sweep of its wings, the bird settled to the ground. Its answer came, then, holding an odd deep twittering quality.

“The fire! Leeta is sending herself into the fire! Only you can stop her. She has commanded the winged ones not to interfere—a command we cannot disobey.”

“Leeta—planning to destroy herself? But why?”

“It is because of this thing called love that you awoke in her. She felt that without you there was no longer any reason to live.” Anxiety sharpened in the twittering thought. “Will you help to save Leeta, man of this aspect? Will you come with me through the veil?”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Yes!” Eagerly he leaned close to the slowly pulsing globe that the bird held out to him in its beak . . . felt himself drawn as though by immaterial hands that reached deep within him.

From an increasing distance sounds came to him, the pounding of feet, shouts, the roar of a gun. Something struck his shoulder, but only dimly was he aware of it. The last physical bonds were parting.

And then a pulsing darkness enclosed him.

~

Through the darkness came light, a flicker of motion and a flash of color, like the beating wings of a butterfly. The light grew, the darkness vanished. He floated in a gorgeous rainbow-hued brilliance that shimmered and swirled with the throb of a supernal laboring. Beyond the brilliance outlines were taking form. He had a sensation of swift movement—and found himself standing at the edge of the pool in that bizarrely beautiful other-world garden he remembered so well.

“Haste! Haste!”

“Leeta is going into the fire!”

All around him the thoughts rose, beating at him. He saw the giant bird, then, and the smaller winged shapes that hovered beyond.

“Haste! Haste!”

The dread anxiety communicated itself to him, kindled a swift purpose. Sensing what was required of him, he hurried toward the waiting bird, leaped to its back. It sprang skyward, its huge wings beating. The garden dropped away, became a mere patch of bright color against the mottled pattern of the valley floor.

“Haste! Haste!”

Swifter and swifter the huge wings beat. Bryan clutched at the feathers under him, rocked by the surges of giant muscles, buffeted by the torrent of air that rushed past.

The valley wall rose ahead, and through a deep cleft in the towering masses of rock he saw a deadly blue shimmer. The bird descended toward the cleft—and abruptly he felt its stunned dismay.

“Leeta has gone through the portal! She has reached the fire!”

Anguish flamed in Bryan. He had done this. If Leeta died, it would be as though he had killed her with his own hands.

“Hurry!” he pleaded. “It may not be too late.”

The bird dropped to the rocky ground at the entrance to the cleft. Sliding from its back, Bryan ran through the opening, to the brink of that ghastly desolation he had seen once before. He glanced around in frantic search—and then, below him, he caught sight of a slender white figure moving through the shimmering blue radiance that blanketed the desolate landscape.

Too late! Leeta had entered the fire. For a moment, the horrible realization held him rigid, dazed, numbed beyond thought. Then, a bleak purpose filling him, he hurried after her down a twisting rocky descent. He might not be able to save Leeta now—but he could die with her.

The blue radiance rose around him, and he felt its lethal touch. Leeta was some distance ahead of him, mistily unreal behind the shimmering curtain. And even as he found her, he saw her stumble, fall. She did not move again.

With an inner desolation even greater than that of the scene itself, he made his way over to the girl across the charred, tumbled floor. Gently he lifted her, carried her back to

the cleft. His steps were leaden, faltering. A burning sensation was spreading through his body. Outlines were blurring before his eyes, darkening. He forced himself on.

It was not until he emerged through the cleft, not until he lowered Leeta to the ground, that he gave his ravaged body the oblivion it had been demanding.

Oblivion—and yet . . . In some dim, remote fashion he had a picture of the great bird, hovering over Leeta and himself on beating wings, grasping them carefully in its claws, carrying them through the air over the valley, and then descending with them toward the pool.

Down . . . down . . . And then a swirling brilliance, a sense of delicious coolness, of returning strength. He found himself floating in the pool. And beside him, her liquid eyes even now widening with returning awareness, was Leeta. He felt the god-like power of the pool throbbing through him, and he knew that he and Leeta had been cleansed of the deadly radiation, that life and not death now lay before them. And the knowledge was a music within him that swelled into a mighty paean of exultation.

Then he stood with Leeta at the edge of the pool, and she was staring at him in wild disbelief. The silvery chiming of her thought held a vast wonder.

“Is it really you? Have you returned—through the veil? Or is this somehow only a dream?”

He shook his head gently, smiling. “Not a dream, Leeta. I’ve come back—and through the veil. Back to stay.”

Joy was a sudden brimming brightness in her eyes. “Then the love of which you told me—it was not just a trick?”

“No—and I’m going to prove it, Leeta.” He drew her to him . . . and knew, in the answering pressure of her lips, that he had convinced her.

He felt a deep content. Here was the world of his own that he had sought, and life had a meaning, a purpose it had lacked. Together he and Leeta would create a new race, as two others long before them had done, who had come from a place called Eden . . .

THE END

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