

May  
1953

# SCIENCE FICTION Quarterly

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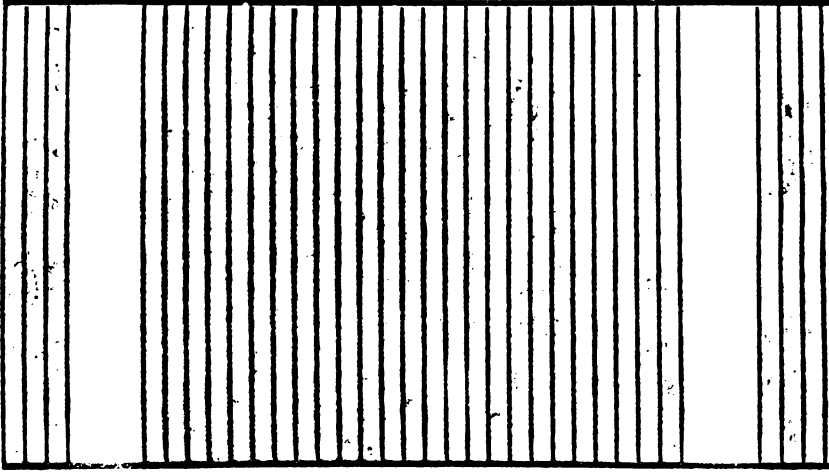
*Cover by Milton Luros, from "The World She Wanted!"  
Interior illustrations by Beecham, Luros, Murphy and Orban*

**ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor**

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# LIFEWORK



It is a terrible thing, when the being  
who has excited you returns and tells  
you that you have accomplished  
little...

**An Ironic Novelet**

**by Robert Abernathy**

*(Illustrated by Paul Orban)*

**F**OR GENERATIONS, the People had inhabited the valley, scarcely venturing beyond the great rock mountains that walled it. To the east, they knew, lay the waterless desert; no one could say how wide. In the west, were greener and more fertile valleys, and an alien horde of a darker race. These, in a time that was fading from men's memories, had driven the People to their last refuge on the desert's edge.

Southward also was desert; but to the north, the land rose higher and higher, mountain above mountain, to the great pine-clad tablelands. There dwelt giants and gods; no man living had seen them.

The People lived hardly from the

arid land; only once a year they enjoyed abundance, when the rains came and the earth was green. To hold starvation from them, they cast lots at the birth of every child; if the omen was evil, the child was carried into the desert to die.

Once in high summer, in the days when Henzen was leader of the People, three youths climbed the eastern mountains to look for birds' eggs. The People feared the mountains, and only in desperation invaded the hollow crags where owls and hawks nested; but the rains had come late, and there was famine in the valley. So the three climbed trembling, clutching spears and axes, their gathering baskets slung about their necks.



Only Kiin escaped, jumping back as the monster struck . . .

The oldest and strongest of them was Kiin, firstborn of Sorim.

In a ravine of the mountain's slope, half-choked with rock-fragments from above, they met their terror in bodily form. A monster had made its dwelling in a cave under fallen boulders, and it heard them and waited. Then it came crabwise, swiftly, out of its hiding, and before the boys could find footing to make a stand it had taken two of them in its mighty seizing arms and squeezed out their lives.

Only Kiin leaped recklessly backward into space beyond the thing's ten-foot reach, striving to break his fall with his spear. Bruised and half-stunned among the rocks, he saw the monster carry his dead companions into its hole. When the shadow hid it,

he tried to rise; but his leg had wedged into a crevice, and the effort to move it made the brilliant day swim and grow dark before his eyes. Beneath the blazing sun he felt cold creeping within him; but he gripped his broken spear and waited.

A scuffling and rattling of rocks in the burrow. The monster sidled into the open, turning its hairless head from side to side with slitted eyes. It saw Kiin. It dropped to all fours and scuttled awkwardly, yet agilely, across the rock-slide toward him.

At that moment, the god Kasson—who, three days before, had left the northern forest land and was skirting the valley along the backbone of the range—had halted on the jutting cliff-edge above the monster's cave. He

saw the trapped youth facing his death with courage, and, god though he was, felt pity. As the monster hesitated an instant before the splintered spear, Kasson lifted the weapon he carried.

YOUNG KIIN heard the echoing crash and saw, as in a dream, the monster leap convulsively into the air and go rolling and thrashing down the slope—to fetch up sprawling like a great killed spider against tumbled boulders, many yards below. He raised his eyes, and saw the god standing against the sky a hundred feet above him. He saw with a sense of delirium the gleam of metal in Kasson's hands, and the awe-inspiring beard. And he fainted.

Kasson told no one the mission that had led him this way. From chance remarks, they learned only that he meant to go alone, into the southern desert, an act which the People thought daring—even for a god. But he was in no hurry; he stayed with them many days after he had brought the hurt boy Kiin into the village at the mountain's foot. And the People were glad; for not even in the memory of the old man Monsuu, who was almost idiotic with his great age, had a god come to visit them.

He showed special favor to Kiin, who, with a broken ankle, would very likely have died, save that Kasson laid his hands upon him to heal him. And the People knew that Kiin was destined for great things; it was plain that his life was sacred, since the god had twice saved it. Some began saying that Kiin would be leader, that he had learned from his benefactor secrets to make the People great and victorious over the brown horde. In truth they talked often together alone, the god and the boy.

But Kasson spoke freely also to others who had courage to come to the house they had given him—to Henzen, the leader; to the old man Hwalzen; and even to the sorceress Musenez, who had more than once barely missed stoning on account of her

evil wisdom. The god was a friend to all. Yet they were few who dared sit face-to-face with him, and look upon the great black beard that fell to his chest and was sign to them of his god-head; for the People were beardless.

To all the People, Kasson gave gifts of knowledge. To Henzen he revealed a way to chip flints with fire and water; a way to bank earth about tender plants so that fewer died in the scorching noon; a way to straighten shafts for spears (and this was very helpful, since in the valley grew little wood that was not gnarled and crooked); a way to make magically-successful traps for rabbits and ground-squirrels.

With Hwalzen, the wise old man, Kasson spoke of strange matters that, to most of the People, meant nothing: of sun and moon and stars; of life and death and immortality; of how men came upon the earth, and of what was before they came. And many of these sayings passed beyond the understanding of Hwalzen; for who can fathom all the mysteries of the gods?

As for Musenez, the witch, though she talked many times alone with Kasson, she kept his words to herself, and grew more feared thereby. However, it became known that Kasson had taught her something of the art which had made the boy Kiin whole again; and the People, when sickness or injury fell on them, crept in secret to the sorceress.

Sometimes, as Kasson walked about through the villages of the People, watching their work and their play, they glimpsed on his bearded face a faint half-smile that was tinged with a strange sorrow. To some who saw him then, it seemed—although he walked among them in human form and was little taller than the men of the People—that Kasson towered far above them, looking down from some unimaginable height. And others—among them, old Hwalzen—felt that the height was of years; the face of the god was like that of a man in his strength; but from his eyes looked age-

less wisdom, the remote sad wisdom of the immortal.

**O**NLY ONCE his composure was broken. When the second girl-child of Hek, the leader's daughter, had been born and, the lot having been evil, they were carrying the child away, Kasson was standing near the house, and heard the cries of the young mother. And one who saw him then fled away in fear, for the god's face was terrible. But Kasson said nothing, and the rite was completed.

Later he spoke of this to Hwalzen.

"It is the law of Shanon, the god, who was with us long ago."

Kasson nodded slowly, as if remembering.

Hwalzen leaned forward tremulously. "Is it true—as the stories say—that Shanon will return some day to lead us?"

"No..." Kasson's dark gaze came back from a far distance; he saw the old man's disappointment, and tried to soften the blow. "All things are possible, but...I do not think Shanon will return. However, you do right to follow his laws; they are hard, but they are wise."

"Life is hard," said Hwalzen dully, and a look of bitter understanding gave his wizened countenance a queer resemblance to the young-seeming face into which he peered. "If we did not obey the law...you know, most of the People do not even understand that it would be possible to disobey it; but if we did not, there would soon be many too many, and great hunger. It is better that some should die before they have taken firm hold on life. Among the brown people they do not kill the young; but they eat each other."

A new thought struck the old man, and his eyes grew intent on the bearded face. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you will stay with us and lead us in Shanon's stead."

Kasson shook his head. "That I cannot do," he declared. "I must go on—and soon, now that the rains have

begun and the heat is less. But I will come back, when I have fulfilled my purpose yonder"—he flung out a hand toward the south, where the blue clouds of afternoon were gathering—"and will remain here again for a time. And I will teach the People again."

**I**N THE MEANTIME, Kiin had recovered with scarcely a limp—thanks to the healing-power of the god. He accompanied Kasson on the latter's frequent walks about the valley, marching proudly by his protector's side while others looked on from an awe-struck distance. Afterward when Kiin was alone, those his own age—and even the older ones—drew back from him shyly. If he missed human companionship, he made up for the loss in exploiting his new position as divine favorite. A novel air of command sat on him, and people instinctively moved to obey his confident orders. Henzen began to look with jealous suspicion upon the arrogant youth—and Henzen's two sons, Ekeblek and Lesnuud, with open fear.

But Musenez, the witch, invited Kiin into her house and gave him food and a charm which, she said, would make him irresistible to any or all of the girls of the People. And, in truth, Kiin had little difficulty from that time on in making any conquests he desired.

There came the day when Kasson left the valley. Kiin wept bitterly, and with him all the People. But Henzen was secretly glad.

Kasson bade them goodbye with upraised hand; he carried again the weapon with which he had killed the monster; and belted round his body were the long rows of gleaming metal cases, each of which—he told them—contained a death of man or beast. He wore the familiar look of faintly-wry amusement as the People bowed themselves low before him, returning his salutation of farewell.

Then Kiin, alone of all, stepped forward boldly and extended his right

hand to the god. Kasson looked sharply at the youth, then gripped the hand briefly, smiling, before he turned to go. And the People continued to kneel in the dust—as if they knelt before Kiin, who stood erect and exalted before them.

From that time forward there was a widening rift in the ranks of the People, and a worm gnawed the heart of Henzen. He, who also had talked with Kasson, had not the same reverence as the others for the semi-divine aura surrounding Kiin; he would have killed the young man—for Kiin was accepted now as a man—without hesitation, had he not feared the natural and human consequences of the deed. There were too many who believed.

And, more ominously still, around Kiin grew up a faction of the young men, who followed and obeyed him as if he—and not Henzen—were the leader. The People had always been ruled by their elders; and to this rebellious band of youth, a chief of their own years was an intoxicating novelty. They swaggered, these satellites of Kiin, and trampled on the privileges of the old. And while Henzen hesitated and raged in secret, a new generation rose up which mocked his authority. His sons, the legitimate heirs of power, were outcasts among their contemporaries.

## 2

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WHEN IT was already obvious that Henzen must act or be lost, an irruption of the brown horde delayed his decision still further. In the battle, which lasted two days and nights

in the western passes, Kiin and his young men fought as a close-knit group, covering themselves with the new glamor of warlike glory. Henzen had no joy of the victory or the spoils.

His lowering sullenness throughout the festival that followed failed to eclipse the radiant triumph of Kiin.

Now Henzen bethought himself of a way to assert his authority—if any remained to him—over the insolent youth; he remembered that Kiin, now long since of age for a hunter and warrior, had never performed the arduous ceremonies which by custom signalized the admission of a boy to the status of manhood. The youth of the People underwent ingenious tests of courage and endurance, devised by his elders—who thereby eased a conscious or unconscious jealousy of the rising generation—before receiving this confirmation. It might be possible, brooded Henzen further—a large number of the older men were still devoted to him—to arrange that his rival fail to survive the tests.

So the leader stood up resolutely in the midst of the victory-feast. When his ominous stare had silenced the revelers, despite the wine they had drunk, he raised his voice to accuse Kiin of neglecting the custom of his folk.

In a still deeper hush of expectancy the young man rose lithely from his place on the opposite side of the circle in which sat the chief men of the People, and into which he had thrust himself unasked. Coldly he returned Henzen's glare, saying: "Whether I am a warrior now—ask the dead that I left on the mountains."

Henzen's sunburned face grew darker with swelling fury. "You are not a man, because you have not fulfilled the ritual. I say it because it is the law!"

"And I say that your ritual is a sport of stupid and worn-out old men—like you."

With a deadly deliberation Henzen bent into the shadow at his feet and picked up the spear he had brought. But he was shaking as he raised it. "I am your leader; I command you to fulfill the rite."

"You are not my leader," retorted

Kiin without flinching. "I belong to Kasson."

"I will kill you," threatened Henzen, and revealed his pitiful weakness, in that he substituted the menace for the deed.

"You cannot," answered Kiin coolly: "I am Kasson's."

Henzen's face twisted, and he swayed on his feet; then he threw the spear. Kiin did not move, and the shaft passed him by. And Henzen toppled forward without a cry and lay with his face in the fire, unmoving.

Then there was no doubt any more. By the time of the spear-cast the whole festival encampment, overflowing the largest village of the People, had known that the moment was come; many of them had seen the god's vengeance strike Henzen down. Kiin's young men dealt then and there with two or three unregenerate old fools who still took the part of the dead leader; and likewise they dealt with Henzen's sons. Lesnuud, the elder, was speared through before he could make his escape; and when later they ran down Ekeblek hiding in a gully, they slew him shamefully with stones.

**SO KIIN** was leader of the People. And though still a young man—he had not yet taken a wife—he proved no more unwise than his predecessors; and in some ways, perhaps he was above them. With ruthless energy he drove the People—apart from his picked band of warrior-partisans, led by his trusted lieutenant Dawn—to greater industry in their struggle for survival, and thus kept famine from their villages. With his fighting-men he invaded the eastern range, killed two more monsters which had housed in its crags, and made it safe for the food-gathering expeditions. He constructed more and bigger traps to provide the tribe with meat.

Musenez, who had from the first stood by Kiin with counsel and magic, found only one fly in the ointment—

the fact that her granddaughter, Jezephaik, was not old enough to be married to the new leader. For the rest, Musenez received full measure of the frightened respect which was what she wanted from the People. To the vague dread of her sorceries was added the concrete fear of her influence on Kiin. Now, even when it was known for sure that she had cast a destructive spell on a neighbor's field, there could be no question of trying to intimidate her into removing it; all that could be done was to placate her with gifts. Thus she acquired substantial wealth in provisions, utensils and trinkets.

But the discomforts of Kiin's reign were not sufficient as yet to provoke rebellion—especially since his bodyguards had the best weapons and made up the cream of the tribe's fighting force. He won over some of the conservatives by wedding the daughter of the revered old chieftain Huuzed. And always around his kingship hung a mystic awe, the divine right to rule of one who had taken the hand of a god.

Among those who held to the belief in Kiin's destiny to lead the People was Kiin himself. But, search as he would among his own memories of the beginnings of his greatness, he could discover nothing of use to him now. Clearly he recalled Kasson's black-bearded features, the firm mouth, the wise eyes. But of Kasson's words and sayings he recollected little—and that little was either useless or incomprehensible, now as then. The god had spoken of a golden time that had been, and of a great future that must be—and had said that thus-and-so must be done to bring that future; but the thus-and-so was what Kiin would not remember.

**HE REMEMBERED**, though, that Kasson had once praised the boy Kiin for his quick intelligence—praise which Kiin had understood only dimly, for the People had no concept of

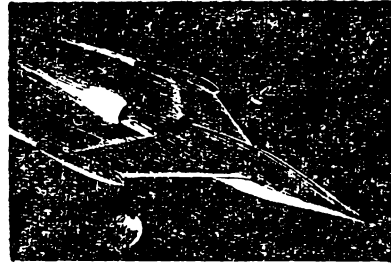
intelligence as such—only that of wisdom acquired by long experience of the world. But Kiin had learned—by experience—that the originator of new ideas may be superior to him who has mastered all the old lore; he tried earnestly to accomplish the will of Kasson, by setting his brain to work in original ways.

Easiest, since he had begun as a rebel, was to break customs. He took a second wife, shocking the monogamous People; he flaunted other traditions, with impunity, for he was the master. But nothing real seemed gained thereby; on the contrary, the People took to emulating their leader's lawlessness, and he had to punish them.

Then, during a heavy season of rains and floods, he rediscovered the purpose of the ancient system of ditches, which could still be traced over much of the valley-floor. There were old men who remembered a tradition that Shanon had built the ditches, though they could not say why. It came to Kiin, in a flash of insight, that they had been meant to channel the runoff water from the hills and carry it to the People's fields. He saw the possibility of an increased and assured crop and, of more drinking-water; he set about restoring the irrigation system.

By the time the job was finished, however, the rains were past and the ditches were as good as useless until next year; when the following rainy season arrived, the sketchy work of renovation had been almost wiped out by blown sand, by growing things, and by the carelessness of the People, who threw rubbish into the ditches. And the rains caught Kiin unaware, so that there was no use in renewing the effort. He shrugged and abandoned the project.

But he could not shrug away the ever-waxing awareness in his very bones that the drive, the youthful energy he had brought to the leadership, was failing. He was no longer young;



he was middle-aged. He had reached that time of life when a man realizes the fewness of his days, and gropes for some stay in eternity—some value, not transitory, to justify and give meaning to his life. It was a sign of Kiin's real superiority of mind that he could not find satisfaction in counting his past successes—the heights he *had* attained.

Was it only for this that Kasson had promised him a shining future?—for Kiin was convinced now that the god had done so.

Long since, Hwalzen, the wise, had died at a great age, repeating till the last the promise of Kasson to return and lead the People. Now Kiin's thoughts turned often to this other promise. Perhaps that was what the god had meant; rather than that the People should become great under Kiin's leadership. At the idea, Kiin felt a faint, undefined pang of jealousy—which he stifled with the reflection that Kasson was after all *his* god, whose triumph would be Kiin's—if Kasson returned.

He began to dream of that return, the more so as he thought he discerned the first mutterings of mutiny among his subjects. There was a new and fretful generation, on which Kiin's more-or-less-benevolent tyranny sat heavy; and the tyrant himself had demolished many of the barriers of tradition and respect, that had formerly held the young in check.

**A**T LENGTH Kiin conceived the idea of going forth to look for Kasson. In the preparation for that quixotic venture he felt some of the



eagerness of youth come back to him. He gathered together a company of his most faithful retainers, with Dawn, and many of the others who had first helped him to power, armed them with straight spears and sharp-edged axes; and taking food for many days, they marched toward the midnight.

Why northward, Kiin could not really have said, but in all the legends the home of the gods lay there. He remembered well enough that Kasson had journeyed toward midday from the valley of the People. But the god might have gone home by another road, without paying his promised visit.

After two days' march they found themselves on the high tableland, where the great pine forest sighed unendingly in a chilly wind. Here, in fable, was the land of the giants, beyond which dwelt the gods. And at the end of the next day's journey, where the mesa ended in a gorge that plunged to dizzying depths where a dark river muttered, they found a giant. His clean white bones lay outstretched, scarcely disarranged, at the foot of a mighty pine on the canyon's rim.

Kiin would have pushed on, but the motionless skeleton cast greater fear into his men than would have a score of living giants. What dreadful thing, they reasoned, could have slain a man who had stood ten feet high? That, and the known terror of the precipices, turned them back.

For the first time the leader was powerless to command his followers. Bitterly complaining, he accompanied the retreat; the men were sullen under his scolding.

When they had descended once more into their native valley, footsore and exhausted from their headlong pace on the back track, a man ran swiftly from the nearest village to meet the column. Gasping, he poured out his message: "Kasson has returned!"

The god had come as before unheralded, in the night following Kiin's departure. . . . The chiefs of the People met Kiin and led him to the house where Kasson was lodged.

Outside the door Kiin halted and waved the deputation back. "I wish to talk alone with—my friend."

As he stooped and entered the single room, Kasson stood up ceremoniously and looked down from his great height, squinting against the light of the doorway. "You are Kiin?"

Once again, as so long ago, the god smiled and took Kiin's hand. When the man's eyes grew used to the darkness of the hut he saw that the stern face was unaltered, that the black beard fell crisply curling as of yore over the broad chest. And he felt with a poignant thrust what change there had been in himself since, as a boy, he had last clasped the hand of Kasson.

Then he saw too Musenez, the withered hag, who crouched immobile in the shadow behind Kasson. And she met Kiin's look and grinned in answer, screwing up her whole wicked old face.

Vague fear chilled Kiin; but he disregarded the witch and spoke only to Kasson: "Will you stay with us this time?"

The god nodded gravely. "That is my decision. I will remain here to help you, and live among you like one of the People." He paused, then added, "I have arranged with Musenez to marry her granddaughter, Jezephaik."

Kiin's thrill of anxiety became hot anger. He had never trusted Musenez far, and now he saw her scheming obscurely to undermine him. But he controlled himself. "It is good. My people will build you a fine house. . . . one as large as the leader's house."

"And I," said Kasson, "will show the People how to build better houses—and many other things. There is very much to be done, Kiin, and I can see that you have done little since I left you."

3



**I**N THE YEARS that followed, the god kept his promise; he taught them a great deal which, left to themselves, the People would hardly have discovered. He taught them to make bows and arrows; to smelt

copper; and to catch and tame the wild cattle which wandered now and then into the valley through the low passes of the southern range. He led them up into the pine woods to cut tall, straight trees for building houses, and over the mountains to surprise the brown horde on its own soil, and deal it a defeat which gave the People long peace from raids.

Through his lessons the ways of life were changed so greatly that many of the People felt themselves lost, adrift in the sea of change.

Kiin spoke, once, of his attempt with the irrigation-ditches; the god listened closely, with the wry half-smile that came so easily to him, then gave orders that the work be begun again, under his own supervision.

It was that which precipitated the storm of revolt, which would have broken over Kiin's head long before save for the return of his god. Leader of the mutiny was the once-trusted Dewn. It was put down bloodily; at the head of the warriors who remained loyal, Kasson overwhelmed the rebels, both by his generalship and by his terrifying presence. The work on the irrigation-system was finished; the rains filled the reservoirs; and the people had water beyond their wildest dreams.

But Kiin grew old. His strength failed and his eyes grew dim; he looked less and less to the future, and lived more and more with his memories. And bitter as gall, hot as a

red-hot coal, was in him the recollection of Kasson's words on their second meeting: "*You have done little.*" Slowly Kiin groped his way to the realization of how easy—how appallingly easy—it must be for an immortal, surveying the sweep of years without number, thus to sentence to ignominy the lifework of a man. "*You have done little.*"

And there were other things that went to heap up resentment in his heart. The fright he had got from the revolt of Dewn had helped to change the erstwhile iconoclast, making him conservative despite himself; and, like so many of his subjects, Kiin felt bewildered, swept away and smothered by the innovations of Kasson. Cattle-breeding, carpentry, irrigation made life too complex for one man's understanding. Kiin found himself yearning for the old days, when life was simple and sweet...and when he was young.

More than that, Kiin, of course, hoped to see the eldest of his four sons, Salzen, take his place as leader of the People. Now Kasson also had begotten sons, three of them, from his wife Jezephaik; and the children of the god were noble youths, beloved by the People. There was no harm in that, of itself; but the sons of Kasson were the grandsons of Musenez. And Musenez still lived, an incredibly-aged, but still sharp and spiteful crone. It was she, Kiin felt sure, who sought, with a word well-placed in this and that ear, to turn the allegiance of the many from the family of Kiin to the sons of Kasson. There were still those who remembered that Kiin's power had come, in the beginning, from no more than a touch of the god. What then was the due of these, who were Kasson's flesh and blood?

In justice, Kiin did not see it as a contest between him and his divine patron, but solely as between himself and Musenez. Indeed, Kasson had shown scant interest in his offspring since their birth. With his wry smile, or sometimes with a look of some-



thing like sadness, he had watched them grow to young manhood; and he had left most of their education—as was moreover the custom of the People—to their grandmother, the witch.

**T**HE OLD man fell sick as he brooded on it; and, feeling death near him, his tortured brain came at last to a decision. He cast about for men he could trust, and could think of none save his own four sons.

For them he sent, and he made them promise to do all their father's will. And they promised.

And they did his bidding the same day. They went first to the rich house of the witch and struck her down in the doorway, and found inside the youngest son of Kasson, a mere boy, whom they killed likewise; and they fell upon the two other sons of Kasson in the open outside the village, and slew them both, though one of the sons of Kiin remained also dead in the desert.

When the deed was known, it cleft the People more sharply than had been even in the time of Henzen or during the rebellion of Dawn. For many held to Kasson, crying vengeance on the murderers; but others, mostly of the older generation, flocked to Kiin and demanded that all the uncanny work of the god be rooted out.

But each side fought the other with the bows that Kasson had taught them to make.

The valley was divided between the two camps, too equally, so that for a

time neither side could make head against the other. But Kiin, in the midst of his forces, knew with despair that he had lost; the power which had made weapons out of useless sticks would do that much again and more to destroy him. He could not match the wisdom of Kasson, the immortal.

However, the end was otherwise. On the fifth day in the morning, as Kiin, leaning heavily on his spear-bearer's arm, was consulting with his chiefs on top of a low hill, someone cried out, and they looked up to see Kasson approaching alone across the desert from the west. He had passed the sentries unseen.

**K**IIN SHIVERED as he looked once more on the god. Then he waved his babbling henchmen aside and advanced tottering, but resolute, to meet his enemy.

Kasson said brusquely, "This quarrel of ours it must be forgotten now." And as Kiin only stared his question, "Last night the brown hordesmen crossed the mountains. They are attacking, now, the villages my people held. As you can see." He gestured back the way he had come, and now everyone saw the spire of smoke that was rising steadily higher, straight into the still morning air.

By noon the People were united once more against the common disaster. And before sundown battle was joined on the plain, a battle that raged far into the night with terrific slaughter.

It was clear that the rulers of the horde had learned of the People's division, and had come to destroy them once and for all. Never before had they passed the mountains unresisted with such a host. On the open desert, before the village of Nuhl, the People made their stand against overwhelming numbers.

Toward dawn the moon went down and fighting ceased—both armies scattered, disorganized in the blackness. The bows and bronze weapons

of Kasson had wrought great havoc, but it could not be enough. The defending warriors, those who still lived, fell back and among the swarms of women and children, who had fled the villages, and huddled through the night in helpless fear behind the fighting line. Now these infected their men with the contagion of terror; and all that remained of the People was a panicky mass, crying and stumbling in the night. The darkness was the world's end; beyond it lay only the cannibal horde.

Somehow, Kasson found his way through the dark and the route to a mean hut in the village. Kiin was there, abandoned by all the chiefs; his sons had died in the battle. Everyone knew it was the evil Kiin had done that had brought destruction upon the People. But they had not harmed him; vengeance was Kasson's.

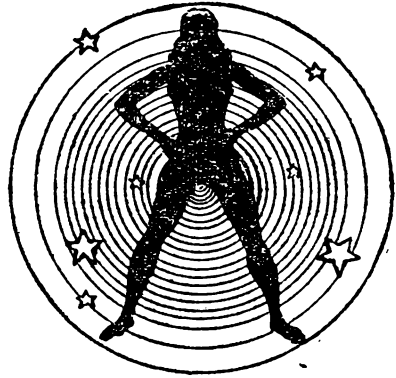
But the god only greeted Kiin in words that held no anger, and lowered himself wearily to the earth floor beside the huddled old man. The doorway of the hut faced east; and already they could distinguish the boundary of earth and sky.

The god said, "There is no time for escape; they will be over us as soon as it is light."

The whimpering of the doomed People came from far away and near, all around. Kiin's voice cracked harshly as he spoke: "It is all my fault; slay me now, Kasson, but save the People."

"I cannot," replied Kasson in a low level voice that buried all hope. "The battle is lost, and in the morning, it seems, we will all be dead... Yes, gods die too, Kiin, even as men. But that *you* still think of saving the People—that is something. It means I was not wholly mistaken in you; though, of course, I expected far too much."

**T**HE WORDS of his god touched on what was still for Kiin, through all disasters, the burning question of his life. He cried out,



"What did you expect? What should I have done?"

"It does not matter, now; it is not your fault... I do not know whether I can make you understand what these things have meant to me, because we come of different worlds. To me, Kiin, you were an experiment. One of my experiments; my children were another—wherefore I cannot regret them too greatly—and the whole People was a third." To the blank silence he explained, "An experiment is an attempt that failed."

"But what attempt—" began Kiin in a stifled voice.

"You, or your People, cannot be blamed that this last battle has been lost." And Kiin sensed that the battle of which Kasson spoke was not merely the struggle with the brown horde. "A greater battle was fought—and lost—long ago, and because of that you suffer. I will tell you its story, if you like." Kasson glanced at the eastern sky.

"Tell me," said Kiin.

"Ah, you still have curiosity—from that quality I once hoped for much.

"But the story is this. In the far past—before the People were, in the time when I was a boy—the earth was populated by a single race of the beings which you call gods. They were divided into nations, and those nations were so numerous that in one of them your People—yes, and the brown horde—would be lost like a single grain of sand in the desert.

"They—we—were powerful magicians. We could fly; we could move mountains; we could make our voices heard all over the world. Most wonderful of all were the weapons we had. You would not understand such things as weapons, since they were nothing a man could wield, but more like great natural disasters—winds and fires and burning lights, that one people could send to destroy another. And the nations were often at war.

"In my own youth, the last war of the gods began. Its armies and its dead were counted in thousands of thousands, for the warring peoples smote one another with unimaginable forces, even with the fire of suns. So they fought, and died not like gods, but like vermin."

Kasson's voice had risen, with a greater intensity of feeling than Kiin had ever known him to show before. He paused; and when he spoke again it was flatly, wearily: "We are not gods. The people of the old time were men, and you are their descendant as surely as am I."

"But..." Kiin choked and swallowed with effort. "But you are not like me. You are...immortal."

**T**HE OTHER chuckled drily. "I am coming to that. As the war dragged on, and the millions died, the advantage for a time was with that side whose numbers were greater. But on the other side there were many wise men called scientists; among whom were those who understood the fire of suns, and those who understood the secrets of the seed which is planted in the continuing war. There were men and they learned that when the seed is touched by sun-fire, there is a chance that the young will be unlike their parents—and also a chance that the offspring so changed will pass the changes on to their own children.

"They learned to work such changes purposely, and did so to create various new breeds of men to fight as soldiers in the continuing war. There were men

of great stature, and other hideously formed for combat—the giants of whom you know, and the hated monsters; and there were very small men, and ones who could climb like squirrels, and ones who could swim under water like frogs... But all these were little more than experiments, and a few of them survive today. Some few monsters were also born, no doubt, by accident; for as I have said, they used the sun-fire itself as a weapon, and in some places, the fire lingered in the earth for years.

"But the great achievement of the scientists was the creation of a race of men that attained their growth, and bred children, in about a tenth of the time which men till then had required. Before then, you see, they had been able to speed up the production of every resource of war except manpower. Already a whole generation of fighters had died, but with the new race they could replace their armies in a few years and continue to replace them. It did not matter that the useful lives of the new men were short, for the average life of a combat soldier in that war was only a few months anyway.

"It was not long, of course, until their enemies learned of and duplicated the new creation. All the peoples of that time were very wise in some ways.

"There were disadvantages, all the same, in addition to the difficulties of feeding and clothing the swiftly growing race and providing arms for the soldiers. One of the great superiorities of men—or the 'gods'—over the beasts had always been their long, long period of immaturity—which was twice the lifespan of your oldest men—and which, as you may imagine, served them for the accumulation of enormous wisdom, which they had time to use in their long adult lives. The new breed had hands, and a complex brain, and speech; but their growth and aging was like that of the animals. At an age when the infants

of the older race had scarcely learned to talk, they were adults—soldiers and women fit to bear children.

"They learned what they were taught, to fight, but they had no time to learn the complicated skills and knowledge of the long-lived people. And every year, as the war went on, the new men became more numerous, and the old race fewer and fewer—because of the great difference between their breeding-rates.

"At last the war that had been begun with the fire of suns was finished with knives and sticks and stones, as the great armies fell apart, and fought one another in ever smaller bands, and starved, and devoured each other. From that time it has been some thirty years—more than ten generations of your people.

"During most of that time I have wandered over the face of the earth, seeing the short-lived people take root in their tribes, and make their ways of life with the ignorance and folly and cruelty of great children, and thrive or suffer, and forget. For eleven years now—since about the time of your grandfather's birth—I have not seen or heard of any other survivor of my own kind; perhaps I am the last.

"So I returned to the People three years ago and began the experiments of which I spoke. I wanted to know if your kind could be taught up to a higher civilization, though I knew that the god whom you call Shanon—and whom I knew, and who is dead now—had failed in this. But I am sure now that whatever I might have done in the remainder of my lifetime would not have endured long after my death. And my sons—I had hoped against hope that they might be like me, though it is certain that the new strain is dominant—that the children are shortlived. Nevertheless, if my sons had lived, some of their descendants would have been gods; the law which governs such things was known in the old time. But they are dead."

Kiin's face was buried in his hands;

he wept bitterly, silently, with childish, senile tears.

"I do not blame you, Kiin. You too were an experiment of mine. I saw in you a greater intelligence and curiosity and originality than the usual, and I hoped to build on that. But I did not reckon sufficiently with the shortness of your life—and I see now that I failed also to regard you as an adult, with an adult's passions and virtues and failings... If you had been born of the old race, Kiin, you would be a precocious child now; in fifteen or twenty years you would grow into a superior man. But as it is—you are seven years old, and your lifework is ended before it has had time to begin."

In the cold pale morning Kiin raised his bowed white head and peered into the face of the god. And he saw what he had not seen before: Kasson's black hair and his great black beard were shot with threads of gray.

#### 4



NOT FAR AWAY, in the dawn light, the horde began to move. Screams tore through the silence. The brown people came across the desert in long skirmish lines, chanting in unison their war cries.

A handful of the People rallied on a rise of ground, where they fought off the swarming attackers until almost noon. Then the lines broke and the shrieking hordesmen rolled over them.

Kiin fell, slain by an ax-blow, at the feet of his god. They surrounded Kasson and would have struck him down, save that the leader of the horde had heard of a god among the People; he wished this god taken alive. So they fell upon Kasson with bare hands and dragged him bound but living to Yerk, general of the horde.

Yerk looked with interest upon the captive. "Where are his weapons?" he asked his men, but they could tell him nothing. Yerk repeated the question to Kasson, stumblingly, in the language of the People.

"I have none," said Kasson, and it was true; in his long wanderings in the south, he had exhausted the virtue of his magic weapon and had cast it away.

"Liar!" said Yerk and slapped him, not lightly, once on each side of the face. Kasson blinked and set his jaw.

"You are the fool," he answered stubbornly, "because I have nothing you want."

"Torture him," Yerk ordered his men.

They beat Kasson with the shafts of spears until he fell; then they began making a fire ready, but at that the victim rolled over, shielding his head, and cried, "What do you want?"

Yerk stood over him, grinning. "The gods have weapons. I know, because my great-grandfather talked with a god, and afterwards killed him and took what he possessed. But after a while it did not work any more. Where are your weapons?"



"I have none," repeated Kasson. But as the hordesman motioned to his helpers, he went on hurriedly, "But I know where the weapons of the gods are hidden."

"Tell me the place."

"I cannot tell you, but I can lead you there."

Yerk considered, then nodded slowly. And to his warriors: "Bind him well, but give him food."

**T**HREE DAYS later, having burned the villages, trampled the crops, and wrecked the irrigation-system—lest any remnant of the People that might be hiding in the mountains should try to begin again—the brown horde marched once more, this time northward into the high country. They were a nomadic folk, and one way was to them much like another; but this way they had rarely gone before. They, too, feared the giants. But no giant let himself be seen in all the whispering pineland; and Kasson said that they had all died, because they were too large.

That was unintelligible to Yerk; but he thought, with satisfaction, that if the giants were really gone, this forest-country with its wealth of game—untouched for so long because of the fear that remained from the old time—would make a fair new home for his people.

In the evening of the fourth day, Kasson halted. He was gaunt now, covered with bruises from the beatings they had given him in their impatience, and he stumbled frequently; but his sunken eyes burned with a fixed fire.

"What is it?" growled Yerk.

The god pointed. "There."

It was a cave-mouth on the flank of a mountain that towered above the table-land a mile or more away. The entrance of a very large cave, apparently, but so masked by its union with the natural form of the mountain's jutting shoulder, and by the new growth of trees that covered it, that they might have marched past many times without seeing it.

Yerk licked suddenly dry lips. His slitted gaze darted to and fro, seeing the sweat beaded on the coppery faces of his warriors, their awed eyes. He

demanded hoarsely, "The gods' dwelling?"

A sardonic ghost of the old remote amusement passed over Kasson's haggard face. "There is no one alive there, now," he said; "the gods are dead."

Yerk thrust out his chest, gripping his stone-headed ax, bawling orders. A hundred of the horde went with their chief and his prisoner to seek the god-weapons; the rest were to encamp here, to rest from their heavy march and hunt fresh meat.

A roadway, hewn from the living rock by Titanic builders, had slanted up the mountainside. It was ruined now, and the climb was hard; nor did they see any sign that men had passed this way before them. The desertion of the place reassured the men of the horde, as did what they saw when, panting, they reached the top of the ascent: the cave-mouth was carpeted with blown soil and pine needles and fragments of fallen rubble, and no footprint had disturbed it.

**A**T THEIR leader's command they lit pinewood torches and ventured into the dank darkness, having first bound Kasson's hands once more as a precaution. After a dozen steps fear clutched them again, for the smoky glare of the torches showed that the cave was immense, and the form of its interior was disturbingly regular, making them feel that they had stepped out of reality into a fantastic geometric world. Underfoot, beneath the windborne detritus, was a queer surface of uncannily smooth stone.

Out of the shadows loomed a colossal winged shape. Incredibly huger than any bird, it dwarfed the invaders to insect smallness; reflections as of many eyes winked down from its lofty head, and for a moment it seemed swooping... But Yerk seized a torch and brandished it on high, shrilling, "Look! Its wing is broken; it is covered with dust; and it does not move! It died long ago!" He



wheeled on the fettered god and thrust the flaring pine-knot almost into the bearded face. "Where are the weapons?"

Kasson coughed and jerked his head indicatively toward the darkness of the cavern's depths. Then, prodded by spears, he led the way. Other weird, unmoving shapes appeared from the gloom, and things flashed like great cats' eyes or gleamed like ice and fire.

They halted, huddled together, where the roof arched vaulted above them. Here was a row of squat, wheeled platforms, and on some of them lay great cylinders of dully gleaming metal, held in place by metal wedges.

"These are the weapons of the gods," said Kasson.

Yerk struck him across the face. "Do not lie! How can such things be weapons?" Merely to look at them, it was plain that any number of men would have been unable even to lift one of those things.

Kasson said stolidly, "I will show you how they work; untie my hands."

"You will tell me how the god-weapons work. Am I a fool?"

"Very well," answered Kasson wearily. "First, you must turn the round thing at this end. It will come loose, and you will find..."



"Shamsh!" snapped Yerk, and a hordesman came shakily forward. "Do as the god directs—and we shall see." Yerk knew that a weapon does not harm the man who wields it, but he was taking no chances, though his brain was ablaze with eagerness for the power soon to be his.

The dead Kiin might have remembered and understood a saying of his god: "*You would not understand such things as weapons...*"

"Now," said Kasson quietly, "you must move the little arrowhead until it points straight up, and then..."

**F**OR MILE after mile the great pine forest was fallen and burning. The remnant of the horde that still lived struggled through a flame-bright hell to escape; now and then one dropped, burned or exhausted, and was hidden by the billowing smoke and buried under the rains of hot ashes and cinders that fell from the sky; and still more perished as the crown-fire over-

took them, whipping through the tops of the still standing pines. None survived who had seen the mountain burst asunder and rain earthward again; but some noticed that the felled trees all lay pointing away from the direction in which Yerk had gone with his captive god, and they knew by this sign that it was the vengeance of Kasson.

In the end, some two hundred won clear and found their way back to the land of their people. Not until much later—in their time-reckoning—could it be known whether these had truly escaped, or if they carried within their bodies the seeds of a new age of change.

And the fiery cloud that had risen from the crucible of Kasson's last experiment was carried by the prevailing winds far eastward, over the fertile prairie lands, and was washed to the earth by rains.

