

FUTURE FICTION

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SIX ASTOUNDING NOVELETS

- LIQUID HELL**.....*Neil R. Jones* 8
 Nez Hulan finds himself battling amidst the bloodiest mob of space-pirates in the solar system! Himself an outlaw, he struggles for supremacy on a tiny asteroid, where he is trapped to die a lingering death in a lake of acid!
- LAUGHTER OUT OF SPACE**.....*Dennis Clive* 24
 A world of laughing death, where a plague of madness promises the destruction of all Mankind!—such is the world that Conrad Smith fights to save! But the powerful evil out of space is not to be conquered—and we promise you a powerful, realistic climax that will leave you awestruck!
- PROPHECY OF DOOM**.....*Ross Rocklyne* 43
 Argus Nesban was the master of the Imperians—the handful of people that composed the last remnant of the human race—and he upheld the Rule that Knowledge should be shunned as an evil! The Rule demands that the Imperians ignore the prophecy of Zaga-meen—He-Who-Broke-The-Rule—a prophecy of certain Doom to Man's last stand!
- THE CITY UNDER THE SEA**.....*Duane W. Rimel* 55
 Two undersea explorers are thrust into a weird adventure amidst a kingdom beneath the waves! Huffman finds himself battling a strange science, to save the surface world from the traitorous plans of Belton, conspirer against his own people!
- THE MAGNIFICENT POSSESSION**.....*Isaac Asimov* 71
 After many patient years of painstaking experiment, Walter Sills makes the discovery that promises him great fame and a million dollars! But success is no bed of roses, as Sills finds out—trouble and terror threaten from every side!
- THE POISON REALM**.....*John Coleridge* 83
 Two helpless humans in a far world of another dimension, Lona and Terrance fight a torturing doom as the poisonous gases of a strange atmosphere threaten a painful death in that weird jungle of alien monsters!

AN AMAZING SHORT STORY

- GRAVITY OFF!**.....*Leslie F. Stone* 100
 Jerry Moore looked like anybody else—except that his face became very red when he stood upright—for "upright" to us was "upside-down" to him! Tired of walking on ceilings as a side-show freak, he considers just letting himself fall into the sky!

SPECIAL FEATURES

- FAN MAG DIGEST**..... 41
LETTERS FROM READERS..... 66
FANTASY TIMES.....*James V. Taurasi*.. 82

COVER BY SCOTT

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PROPHECY OF DOOM

by ROSS ROCKLYNNE

Zagameen had broken the Rule—the Rule that said Death to all Knowledge! But his Knowledge brings to the ignorant Imperians, last of the human race, the prophecy of a Doom that will roar in from the East, to destroy the last remnant of Mankind!



Imperians swept past and cried out in voices of terror!

IN THE large clearing beyond the orange trees and the vast fields of wild tomatoes and cantaloupes, the Council of Discipline, led by the bleak-faced Argus Nesban, advanced from the long-house, and formed a pitiless circle around the white-

facéd Imperian whom they were to judge.

Hovering about the circle, almost two hundred in number, were others, quiet now as Argus was about to speak, to pronounce judgment on him who had broken the laws handed down for an unknown number of

generations to the present one.

Argus Nesban was still young, and his body was powerful, and his forehead was broad. He had inherited his leadership from his father, which was the Rule; but he had ever been a cold-hearted leader, who did without nothing that he could not take. And throughout all the Valley, from the Salton Sea to the north, and to the A'Mercan Canal on the south, there was little that a man might want that he could not pluck from a tree or vine—little, except a woman who did not return his love. Twice in the last five years, Argus Nesban had taken a new wife, and under pain of jailing would permit no least sign of indignation.

These things also thought Zagameen, who stood straight and tall on the judgment dais, his blue eyes very wide, his corn-silk hair falling far beneath his broadening shoulders. He would not show terror though it dwelt within him. Hate he also could not show, lest it destroy him and the hopes of mankind. Speak he could not, in remonstrance of the shameful thing that was to be done.

Dreadful silence settled, and then came the voice of Argus Nesban, sounding through the roar of escaping steam from the bubbling mud-pots and geysers on the salt shores of the Salton Sea.

"The Will of the majority shall be done, as speaks the Rule that guides us. We are gathered here to judge, and shall be judged by God if we do not judge as the Rule tells us to judge."

His voice drifted away into the bordering, fruit-laden trees. For the first time, his cold blue eyes rested on Zagameen, he of the soft, corn-silk hair.

"The Council of Discipline has met and deliberated, and from this, judgment has come for Zagameen. And also has come to us clearly the need for again impressing on the minds of all Imperians the code of the Elders."

His voice lashed out.

"Man ruled all the world, and learned

many things. Chief amongst these things that he learned was how best to kill his fellow men. For thousands of years he had killed, and ever sought better ways to kill, and found them—for every secret that he wrested from nature could be used to kill. Then came the Final War. Killing there was, across the face of the world. Diseases killed, by the millions. Airplanes fled across the raging sky, and killed, and their flyers were killed.

"And in the end humanity was utterly destroyed. Death to knowledge!"

BACK came the low-voiced chant, "Death to knowledge!"

Argus Nesban's glittering eyes came back to Zagameen's, and Zagameen gave stare for stare, his own hot bitterness at the senseless chant almost rising to his lips; but he spoke not.

"Zagameen has broken the rule, from childhood up. To all sides of us, beyond the Cochella Canal, and the A'Mercan Canal, and the mountains on the west, and the borders of the Salton on the north, lie the forbidden lands, the lands that were laid desolate by the men who destroyed their enemies, and in destroying them destroyed themselves. These lands, though they stretch around the Earth, we are forbidden, by the Rule, to enter! Zagameen has broken that rule. For he went beyond the Salton Sea and into the city of Salton, and there sought knowledge.

"The evidence of his iniquity lies beside him."

Still Zagameen made no motion, save to move his naked foot slightly, so that it might touch, in desperation, the four tattered books stacked on the judgment dais beside him. And the eyes of all the other Imperians, all that remained of the human race, one hundred ninety-nine in number, swung to the books and held there.

"Members of the council," again spoke Nesban, "What is your decision?"

Old Herambas, at the left side of Argus,

quavered: "The books are to be destroyed, and Zagameen is to be jailed for a period of four weeks."

Zagameen darted to the edge of the judgment dais, his face agonized. "No, Herambas!"

"So," said Argus Nesban softly, "you do not like to be deprived of your freedom."

Zagameen stopped stock still, his young, beardless face shocked. "Deprived of my freedom," he breathed. "That is nothing. It is the books I must have, and not my freedom. I will rot forever in the jail, Mentor, if only you will not destroy my books! Many, many years ago I wandered into the city of Salton, and there found a book, and would not have treasured it had not the Rule forbade books—and would not have learned to read had not the Rule forbade reading. I was a child, and thus knew I was doing wrong. And as I grew older, I found other books and many of them fell to dust beneath my fingers, and of them all, only four remain! And now I know it is not wrong to read, nor to learn! Nor is the Rule wrong! Punish me for having gone into Salton, but do not punish me for learning to read—for the Rule did not mean that all eternity were to pass before we strove again, not for knowledge, but for—wisdom!"

"The books shall be destroyed," said Argus Nesban. "The knowledge that was taught some of you, and Zagameen in particular, shall be forgotten."

"It shall never be forgotten!" cried Zagameen. "Men shall never forget that there is fire. I have rediscovered that rubbing makes fire. Who is there that will forget it?"

The Mentor's face tensed. "It shall be forgotten!" he hissed. "It shall not remain in the minds of any of us!"

"**W**HO is to forget that a log will roll?" cried Zagameen, addressing himself now to the alarmed assembly. "Who is to

forget that it will float on the canals, and that the very air we breathe will push against a leaf and make the log move faster? Who will forget these things that I have taught?"

The Council of Discipline stared at him, speechless.

Zagameen drew himself to a terrible height and flung a golden-brown arm to the east. "Who," he whispered, seeking each eye, "will forget what a tattered, yellow page in one of the forbidden books has taught me: That doom overhangs the Imperial Valley, the land of Man? Who will forget it?"

The throng stirred uneasily, and even the members of the Council looked at Argus Nesban with eyes of faint alarm. But Argus Nesban's golden-tanned face only twisted and whitened. When he spoke, his voice was tight and rage-filled.

"I demand," he said, facing the other eleven members of the Council, "that Zagameen be put to death! Already he has broken many of the rules that have been handed down to us. If he goes free to speak his mind, and free to marry, soon he will break the two-children law! Then what will become of us? We shall grow great in number, and soon shall so overflow the valley that there will not be enough food to feed us all."

A murmur of remonstrance ran around the council, and old Harambas, almost shocked beyond speech, muttered in awe, "There will always be food! How else could it be?"

Nesban drew his dignity back to him. "Zagameen breaks all the sacred laws, and blasphemes against the Ancients whose Word says that Man shall forever be happy in the Valley. He is not one of us. He will make others break the same laws, and will make others blaspheme against the Ancients. He must die."

This was too much, even for the silent throng that circled the Council. Alarmed, plaintive voices cried out, "No, no! Za-

gameen must not be killed. You are wrong, Argus Nesban, wrong!"

Argus Nesban's fists curled at his side. "The will of the majority must be done," he whispered, so low that few could hear him. "Zagameen shall not die, then. But he must promise, never again, upon his sacred word of honor, to break any Rule; never to venture beyond the boundaries laid down by the Ancients; never to seek knowledge; never again to speak of the knowledge he broke the Rule to gain. He must promise never to break the Rule."

HIS bright, cold eyes bored into those of Zagameen.

Zagameen stared back at him. "You cannot have me killed, Argus Nesban. The others will not permit it. I shall not make the promise."

But the circling throng cried out in terror, "Make the promise, Zagameen. You must make the promise. For if you do not, what will become of us?"

Zagameen's chiseled, gold-tanned young face paled. For a moment he stood with head held high.

He spoke, finally, as to the empty air, so low were his words. "I will make the promise. I will promise never again to break any rule—unless something terrible happens to the Imperians first!"

Argus Nesban relaxed, and drew his lips back from his gleaming white teeth in a smile; and the encircling throng sighed with relief.

"Zagameen has made the promise. He shall be jailed for a month. His books shall be destroyed. He shall never again break the Rule, unless," Argus Nesban added in amused deference, "something terrible happens to the Imperians first!"

It was done, and Zagameen was led away, and his books were placed in the hands of Argus Nesban, who sat down before three witnesses, and himself extracted pages from the books, and tore them into tiny bits, and then took the pieces to the

edge of the bubbling mud-pots and left them to flutter away on the steaming wind.

Zagameen would not die, nor would he ever break the Rule—for all knew that nothing terrible had ever happened to the Imperians, and, therefore, nothing terrible ever would happen.

* * *

The wind held thin and chill as it swept down out of the Chocolate Mountain slopes. The high-riding Moon spun webs of silver radiance through the night forest. The ripple of muddy waters lapping against the banks of the criss-crossing canals was the only sound to mar the far-reaching silence. The fragrance of continually fruitful trees permeated the softly sighing air, and was wafted to Zagameen, where he lay on the cold earth floor of his wooden cage.

He lay immersed in sadness, tracing again the years that had passed since first he had wandered into Salton. Many things he had learned from the books, of the vast civilization that was Man's; and had kept these things to himself until the foolhardy day when he had thought to teach the children of the village the elemental facts of fire and water and air. Or perhaps it was foolhardy. Perhaps. For in time, the children would believe him when he read to them the one tattered, yellowed page that prophesied, in language too strong to be denied, the doom that overhung the Valley, and that would—it could not be far in time—soon descend. Doom lay in wait, but now Zagameen's lips were sealed, until the doom itself came.

Suddenly, he heard a light footstep outside his cell, and a soft, tearful voice cried, "Zagameen!"

Zagameen rolled himself lightly to his feet, his heart beating faster as he went to the cell window.

"Elnas!" he cried softly, as the girl's slim body took form out of the darkness.

Two soft hands came through the orange wood grating and grasped his own.

There were tears in the girl's eyes. "Oh, Zagameen," she whispered, "it is so bad

to have you in the disfavor of the Council! Why, Argus Nesban was going to kill you!"

Zagameen gently touched the soft curve of her cheek. He smiled. "What would you have done if he had?"

"I would have *killed* Nesban. Then I would have thrown myself into the Salton Sea!" She nodded her head in solemn promise.

"And would have floated in its salty waters until the Sun fried you," said Zagameen, and laughed, and drew her closer to the bars and kissed her.

She drew back doubtfully. "Why did you do that?"

Zagameen's eyes lingered on the curve of her sweet lips. "Because I love you," he said promptly. "And because you love me too."

Even in the shadows of the orchard, he could see her blush, and then her lips trembled and she came forward and touched her lips to his. "Yes, I do." She searched his eyes. "You must not break any more rules, Zagameen."

"Unless something terrible happens," reminded Zagameen.

She clutched his hand involuntarily, her eyes growing big with fear. "You mustn't—ever, Zagameen. Never even think of it. For what if you should die? Then I would be alone! . . . But then," she drew a big breath, "nothing terrible will ever happen. Unless—?" Again her eyes searched his, but he slowly shook his head in the darkness.

"I have made the promise," he said, and there was despair in his voice. "I must not speak, I must not break the Rule—unless," and something of fear showed in his own face as he turned his eyes away from Elnas and looked into the east, where the great river thundered, "unless something terrible happens to the Imperians first."

THE MAN WHO BROKE THE RULE

TWO summers came and went, and peace reigned undiminished over the Imperial Valley, the last stronghold

of man, whose watchword was ignorance. And peace it was, for across the face of the valley, from north to south extremities, criss-crossed a system of canals, which, fed by the wild river, gave water and opportunity for plant and animal life in great abundance. The valley was fertile, and men did not work, nor was there aught of worry.

Worry? Sometimes a youngster broke a minor rule, sometimes an oldster. But none ever broke the big rules, for how could they? For the rules were axioms, given them by the ancients who had escaped the holocaust that swept the world. And, indeed, the laws laid down by the Ancients had been wise. Two hundred the Imperians were in number, nor ever, in all the countless generations, had that number gone above or below for long. What need had the human race of more than that? Two hundred could live in the valley without fear of a tomorrow, in a plentiful land which needed no slightest tilling of the soil.

Happy and lazy and contented were the Imperians; for in these last two years, Argus Nesban had kept his third wife, and seemed likely to keep her for the rest of his life; and he ruled his clan's small troubles wisely.

Zagameen lived, all his knowledge held in abeyance, but looked with longing eyes toward the west where, in the great tumbling cities on the sea coast, the knowledge of the ancients but awaited him who would secure access to it. Elnas by his side, they wandered the broad face of the valley, and followed the Cochella Canal, that led from the greater canal on the southern border.

And Zagameen would point, his eyes troubled: "Follow the canal and you will come to the source of our very life. For without the great river, we would be nothing. And yet, in the river also lies—"

Nor would he finish; and on this particular day, they turned and followed the trail back to the village, past the bubbling mud-pots and the spouting geysers on the shore of the Salton Sea, and never dreamed of

what was to happen when they returned to the village.

Through the streets of the village they went, hand in hand, and did not note the frightened faces around them. Then, as if at a prearranged signal, Argus Nesban came walking down the street. His lower lip was hanging slack, and his red-rimmed eyes saw Elnas and Zagameen, and his eyes shifted from side to side of the street as he passed them and entered his own house.

They were not long in finding the trouble. Herambas himself told them.

"It is the end of our peace," he whispered, for he was lying deathly still on his cot. "The old evilness has risen again, and a woman lies dying in her house."

"Dying," repeated Zagameen, his face paling.

"Dying, and struck down by Argus' own hand."

A cold chill wrapped itself around Zagameen's heart.

"And why?" he whispered.

"It is the old story, Zagameen. Happy we are in the valley, and have been wise to stay here. But now it will never be the same, and the Imperians are done with and finished! Finished!" A sob caught in his throat. "For all things there are in the valley for a man at his will, all save love. Too often has Argus Nesban taken his bride whether she willed it or no; now it is once too often, for a woman lies dying in her house, and there is none to place a hand against Argus. Yet he has broken a rule greater than any you ever broke, though never did the Rule of the Ancients say aught of murder, for fear it would put the thought in our minds." He closed his eyes and his breathing was a shallow thing that had little life in it.

ALL through the small village the news sped, and men hid themselves in their homes, for they knew nothing of dealing with this horror that had come to the valley.

But that night, in the hour of greatest quiet, brazened forth a gong. Out from their houses men then trooped, frightened, reluctant, but too well versed in the Rule to do aught but obey.

His cheeks sunken, flaming with remorse, with horror at himself and what he had done, Argus Nesban stood on the great, flat-topped tree trunk that was the judgment dais, and let all men look upon him.

The Moon had risen, and shadows began moving, and when a shadow moved from the face of Argus Nesban, he spoke.

"Murder has been done," he said, "and I am the murderer."

He waited, but no man spoke a word. His gaunt face twisted, and looked out over the throng; and he found only faces that showed bewilderment, and in them he could find no hate.

"I am a murderer," said Argus Nesban. "What sentence will the Council pass upon me?"

And he looked at the Council of Discipline where they were grouped, but they could say nothing and could do nothing save look at Argus Nesban without comprehension.

The Mentor quivered as if an icy breeze had touched his heart, and threw out his hands. "What is in your minds for me?" he cried. "Is there no one to condemn me, to say I have broken the Rule?"

And even Zagameen stood silent, his fists knotted at his sides, his face pale and sweating, his mind telling him to step out and denounce Argus Nesban, but his tongue unwilling to obey. What could he say that Nesban had not said, that would whip these bewildered Imperians to reason and justice?

And after awhile, Argus Nesban stepped down from the judgment block, and walked like a dead man through the crowd, and went into his own house; and the gathering dispersed also.

When the Sun rose, people began to move forth again, on their endless pleasures. Argus Nesban himself came from his house,

and sat in front of it all day, and went to sleep again that night. And on the next morning, he arose, and ventured forth into the orchards to eat, and then came back, and cuffed a child soundly for running across his path. And the following day the Council of Discipline met and pronounced sentence on one of their number who had attacked a comely maiden and taken her into his house to be his wife. The sentence was not heavy, and, as pronounced by Argus Nesban, was upheld and obeyed. And in the month to follow, three major crimes were committed, the first of which were dealt with, justly, by imprisonment; and the third of which—murder—was dealt with unjustly, for the murderer, having followed in the footsteps of Argus Nesban, who had gone unpunished, was imprisoned also.

ZAGAMEEN stood looking out over the valley, to the east, a skin of water stretched over his shoulder. Elnas stood partly behind him, but so near that her bare shoulder brushed his.

"I am afraid," she said, and he felt her quiver.

"I will be back," said Zagameen, keeping his eyes fixed away from hers. "I am going beyond the Cochella Canal and up into the mountains. And when I return, I will know what it is that threatens the valley."

"I am afraid of Argus Nesban," said the girl.

Zagameen turned, a look of steel coming into his eyes. "If Argus Nesban speaks to you, or touches you, tell him that when I return I will kill him!"

She shook her head, and her eyes filled with tears. "No," she said. "You won't, Zagameen. *They* will kill you! For you are breaking the Rule."

He put his large hands on her bare shoulders, his eyes troubled. "I am breaking the Rule, but not my promise. I must go. The days of men in the valley are done forever. Soon we must go, and it is best that way. For a butcher rules us, and has but to rule

us a short while until we are all butchers."

She met his eyes steadily. "If you come back and find that I am the wife of Argus Nesban, what will you do?"

For long and long he met her eyes with his own troubled ones; then he kissed her; and in the next moment was gone down the trail, past the bubbling mud-pots, toward the yellow, golden brightness of the Cochella Canal where it crawled around Salton Sea through its hot channel.

And Elnas went back to the village, and in the day to follow told no one that Zagameen had gone.

BUT on the second day of Zagameen's departure, Elnas wandered near the spot where they had parted, as if to recall Zagameen's presence back to her. And though the roar of the escaping steam from the geysers on the shore of the Sea filled her ears still, on this day, so expectant was she of Zagameen's unscheduled return, that when she heard footsteps behind her, she quivered with delight, and whirled—only to stop stock still as she saw Argus Nesban standing in the trail before her.

She moved back a step as he approached slowly across the path, moving with a casual grace.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"Your lover has gone," said Argus. "I have come to take you. Long have I looked at you, and desired you, but could not fulfill my desires. You are mine."

"No," said the girl, still moving backward. "No. Zagameen is returning! Go away!" She raised her arm, held it out stiffly before her, pointing rigidly, the outstretched finger touching Argus Nesban's chest. "Go away!" she gasped, and knew that behind her as she moved was the beginnings of the soggy flats that gave upon the mud-pots.

"Zagameen will not come back," said Argus. He swept her arm aside with one movement, and with another, grasped it,

pulled her to him, and kissed her harshly, brutally.

"You are mine," he said. "I am without another mate. You are mine. What is there to stop me?"

SUDDENLY she squirmed, and cried out, and beat at him with small fists—and strove to turn and send him staggering into the mud-pots. But he only held her the tighter, though she screamed piercingly; and finally became limp, and breathless from the relentless pressure of his encircling arms. Then he let her go, grinning his cold triumph, and she sank to the soggy ground, and remembered only her screams, and hoped that Zagameen, far, so far away, had heard them.

He was carrying her now, back to the village, moving swiftly, easily, and though a strange wind, unheard of in its strength, began to blow, and though hollows in the ground were strangely filling with water, he took no notice and carried her back to the village.

And not until he was walking down the very central street of the village, occasional Imperians looking toward him, but saying nothing, did his knowledge of external things touch his mind. Then he stopped, Elnas fast in his arms, and knew that far away to the east was a rushing roar that filled the heavens and echoed back to his ears, that the very trees around the village were bending under the onslaught of a steadily rising wind.

He stopped and then slowly turned his face upward and thus stood, and the fierce wind blew back the long black strands of Elnas' hair, and seemed likely to capsize the fragile houses of the Imperians.

Then, frowning, he moved on again, and had almost reached his house, when he heard light footsteps behind him, and beheld—Zagameen.

"Woman-stealer," Zagameen lashed out, his voice like a thunder-cloud. He came forward on the balls of his feet, took the

girl from Argus, and then put her upon the ground. Trembling with rage, he started toward Argus.

But Argus Nesban folded his arms across his chest, and said coldly, "Return to your house, Zagameen. On the morrow you shall be reported to the Council of Discipline."

A thin smile etched itself across Zagameen's lips. "The Rule of the Ancients is done, and the Council of Discipline, that knows no discipline, is dissolved by a force greater than you or I. I am not going to kill you, Argus Nesban, I am going to let you kill yourself," and leaving Elnas where she lay, he turned his back, and leaped to the judgment dais, while the strange wind howled, and the ominous rush and roar from the east filled the air.

THE ROAR FROM THE EAST!

ZAGAMEEN held up a hand, and thus caught the attention of the people below him, and waited until those in the orchards returned, running, fear and dismay on their faces.

"Imperians," Zagameen cried to the muttering throng, and they quieted—but not because of him, for Argus Nesban now stood before the council dais and it was on him they placed their eyes, and because of his look that they were silent.

But resolutely, though Argus Nesban had brought a new, cold fear to Zagameen's heart, Zagameen again faced the throng.

"Imperians," he cried again. "Heed me! Flood rushes on us from the east! The sound of it, the faraway roar of it, the vibrations of its approach fills the ears! It sweeps a wind before it! To the east it has risen beyond the banks of the canals, and is now one mighty canal that sweeps all vegetable and animal life before it!

"Imperians! I stood on a hill below the San Barino Mountains, and as I looked at the sky-line where the great river flows, I saw a piece of the sky-line chip out and saw the white, swirling waters of the river come

through. And seconds later I heard the thunder as the river-wall fell! And I waited no more, but came back to the village, running, for the flood was on my very heels!

"And now, it flows through our valley, and every moment it grows in height and in bulk and in swiftness. In but a short time, it will sweep into our village, and into the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea will rise, and rise, and flood the valley. And then man will be done with forever!"

He pointed imperatively into the west. "Beyond lies safety, Imperians. Flee, if you would not die!"

"There is nothing to fear," said Argus Nesban, his voice following so closely on Zagameen's that it might have been merely a continuation of Zagameen's plea. "I tell you this, I, Argus Nesban, your leader, who has ruled you these many years." And he raised his hand as if to bestow a benediction, and the throng was silent, though the trees and the heavens and the far distance were not.

Argus spoke again. "Long and long ago the Ancient Ones, who knew no wrong thought, came to the valley with their people and taught them certain things. Amongst these was that no man should—ever—leave the valley. For, said the Rule, in the valley man should always find that which he desired. And should he leave the valley, he would work for his living, and in times to come would spawn, and grow great in number, and divide, and war again, and destroy himself.

"The Rule which the Ancient Ones laid down shall be followed now and forever by you who are their descendants."

Zagameen cried bitterly, "The Ancient Ones were not gods, Imperians! They were but human beings, and human beings err. Even they knew nothing of the flood that was destined to sweep the valley. But others knew of it, for I read of it in the Book. Once before, how long ago I do not know, the valley was flooded by the great river's breaking a canal heading. And men

fought with their science to save the valley from inundation, and succeeded. But we cannot stem the river, where it has broken a hole through its canyon." His voice rose passionately. "If we obey the Rule of the Ancients, it is the Ancients who have murdered their own flesh and blood!"

A RUMBLE grew in the crowd, an ominous rumble of threat, that drowned out the rumble that came from the ground, and the shriek of the flood-born wind; but before their recriminations could result in physical anger, there was a rending from the orchards that surrounded the clearing, and a wild bellowing. A small herd of wild cattle broke through, looked about with red-rimmed eyes, and then charged for the opposite side of the clearing and disappeared, leaving a wild turmoil of human beings in their wake. Other animals, pigs, goats, hares, sheep, followed.

Zagameen, exasperated and frightened beyond all measure, cried bitterly, "Go then, to the open spaces beyond the orchard and see if the Ancient Ones can save you from a peril they knew nothing of!" and he leaped from the dais himself, and caught Elnas to him. As soon as he saw the smile on her lips, he kissed her, and then, his arm around her waist, went for the clearing himself, on the heels of more slowly-moving Imperians.

The two hundred lined up there on the edge of the knoll on which stood the village, and looked out over a sight never before seen by man.

Far and far away were the San Bernardino Mountains, misty, uprising hulks of majesty, purple in their farness. And far across the Imperial Valley, losing themselves in the distance, reflecting the hotness of the Sun from their muddy surfaces, were the canals that men had built so long ago.

To the eye, each had visibly swollen, broadened, and down the center of each rushed a head of water as tall as two men, and a roar filled the inverted dome of the

sky, and was thrown back from the sky so that the echoes clashed. And behind the head of the flood, all the canals had broadened out, until the swollen torrents touched each other, merged, became one, and sullenly rushed toward the Salton Sea.

Silently the people watched, nor moved from the spot through the hours, as the crest of the flood struck the Sea, and continued to pour into the Sea, until it overflowed its salty shores, and covered the mud-pots, and crept ever higher toward the low knoll on which stood the village of the Imperians.

Zagameen found Argus Nesban, and said without inflexion, "The days of men in the valley are done. We must see that our people are saved."

But Argus Nesban stood straight and still, looking with glazed eyes on the boiling expanse of water that stretched both to north and south, and east and west, and was ever rising higher.

He whispered tonelessly: "There is nothing to fear."

BELOW foot, the ground grew soggy, and the trees of the orchards were shaken into such motion that fruit dropped continuously, and at times trees themselves crashed. As the waters came higher, children splashed about until they became frightened at the undercurrent.

Old Herambas said wretchedly to Zagameen, "The Rule cannot be wrong, Zagameen! Yet, what is this? If the waters continue to rise, then we shall drown! It is the judgment of God!"

"It is the judgment of the river," said Zagameen without life in his voice. "As the river flows, so does it carry silt to raise the level of its bed. It overflowed its own mountainous shores, and in overflowing broke away the wall of mountain that hemmed it in; and now, as happened farther back than anyone knows, it again pours all its body into our valley, in a never-ending flow."

"It is the judgment of God," whispered

old Herambas and fixed his faded eyes on Argus Nesban.

But Argus Nesban walked back and forth amongst his people, saying over and over, "The rise of the water will stop. The water will recede. There is nothing to fear."

BUT all during the night the waters rose, and so great was the faith of those who believed in Nesban that they slept that night in their own homes, and believed that by the morrow the danger would be over. In the morning, with the shroud of mist rising over the valley to shut out the far distances, they awoke, and found then that Salton Sea was a mighty lake, that stretched without end; that the canals that criss-crossed the Imperial Valley were buried beneath inconceivable tons of water; and that the Imperial Valley as the Imperians knew it was no longer a valley, but swiftly becoming a vast inland sea, soon to make its own outlet through gaps in the mountains, and to bury and drown the Imperians beneath its own resistless flow.

Herambas ran like a devil through the early morning, water sloshing at his ankles. Through the village he ran, with thunder in the sky, and lightning, and rain, shouting aloud the doom that a terrible God had sent.

Zagameen quieted him in a rage. "Quiet, old man! There is nothing to do now."

"Nothing?" cried the old man, and suddenly swept his hand toward Argus, where he stood calmly, arms folded across his chest, awaiting the recession of the flood. "There stands he who has brought us our doom. Did he not murder, and did not he not close our mouths against him? There he stands," old Herambas shrieked to one and all, as thunder roared and water crept upward along his skinny, bowed legs. "Kill your destroyer! Perhaps then the waters will go back into the river, and the break in the river wall will heal!"

But the throng cried in terror, "No, no! The flood will pass!"

But without waiting to hear what was

further said, Zagameen turned and, with Elnas, waded to the edge of the knoll where the water became abruptly deeper. He held Elnas tightly while he looked out over the roiling wastes, and though his heart was heavy, he turned to her with a smile playing on his lips. "This is the end of the Imperians. There is nothing that anyone can do to save them. It will be their Rule which killed them—and Argus Nesban."

Then he stood straight and tall and gestured out across the wastes where the magnificent, tumbled city of the fallen people lay. "A civilization awaits us, Elnas, and we have but to go there and, in time, rebuild it."

Without more ado, he went back into the orchard and in a space between two trees, he gathered old, stout logs, until they numbered in the dozens. Then, from trees, he unwrapped strong vines, and so worked over his raft, until, with the Sun high in the misty sky, it was completed.

And when he had finished, the water was rising toward his hips, and the raft itself floated off the ground, and was rising ever higher with the water.

His plan in mind, Zagameen bade Elnas stay where she was, and then left her, and went back to the flooding village, where the bedraggled people were standing without sound, hip deep, some of their children, as many as could crowd it, placed out of harm's reach on the flat-topped tree trunk that was the judgment dais.

This scene Zagameen took in with a roving eye, and fastened his gaze on those children who were held in their mother's arms, crying, whimpering, and no longer eager to wade. Slowly Zagameen huddled with the people, and took a girl child from its mother's arms, to ease her burden. From another woman he also took a boy child.

Thus he stood, until the attention of the mothers in question was focused mainly on the problem of keeping themselves from being sucked under by the ever-strengthening under-tow. Steadily the muddy brown

water, abob now with cantaloupes and tomatoes and oranges and other fruits, rose. As they rose, Zagameen took two other children, and perched them on his shoulders, and held the other two in his arms.

Then, as the water rose above Zagameen's hips, and there was no longer any hope of escape for the Imperians, their whimpering rose also; and the rise of the water became too much, even, for Argus Nesban.

Without thought of any save himself, he waded, swam, toward the central dais, tried to clamber to its top. And his very weight, combined with the resistless push of the current, tore the old tree trunk from its rotten roots, and it tipped.

Zagameen, forgetting his own task, gave a cry, and started toward the judgment dais; but too late.

A HUNDRED voices rang out, and above them all came the shriek of old Herambas: "It is the end! It is the end!"

The judgment dais toppled, and spilled its load of whimpering children, and emptied them into the flood, though Argus Nesban clung to the bobbing tree trunk. Zagameen stopped stock still, looking on with horror. Children screamed as they struck the water, and for a moment the spot was a mass of tiny arms and legs. Mothers rushed screaming to their children, passed by those drowning ones who were not their own, and thus did not succeed in saving any. Herambas rose out of the water almost at Zagameen's elbow, his gray, stringy hair plastered down over his face. He clutched at Zagameen, and gasped, "Zagameen Zagameen! Save me!"

But Zagameen only said softly, "Your time is finished, Herambas. Sleep in peace!" And the old head sank and returned no more.

Then Zagameen turned against the current and set his jaw, and went off into the uprooting forest, with the shrieks and groans of the mortally afraid and the drowning bedlam in his unheeding ears.

He found Elnas, cold, shivering, blue-faced, clinging to the edge of the illy-constructed raft.

"I do not have the strength to lift myself upon it," she gasped.

Zagameen did not answer, but hoisted his heavy burden of four onto the raft, made sure of their safety, and then lifted Elnas in his strong arms and placed her aboard also.

And then, with one sad look around, he clambered up himself. His weight listed the raft so that it seemed likely to turn over at any moment, for half of it was immersed in water; and no matter how Zagameen rearranged weights, thus it remained.

All that day they lay there, while the water rose, and bore the raft upward toward the tops of the bedraggled, lashing trees. Three times, Imperians were swept past, clinging to small logs or mere twigs, and cried out in voices of terror for Zagameen to take them in. But Zagameen was forced to deny them, and so they floated away into the encircling darkness.

The night passed, and the Sun rose, and all that the six of them could see was a

broad expanse of water, with mountains rising far in the distance. Of the Imperial Valley there was nothing, save for the tops of trees sticking up through the water.

"They are all dead," said Zagameen sadly, and with grief held her trembling, cold body tight in his arms. Then he looked deep into her eyes, and smiled away the sadness in her face.

"But the human race still lives."

With the coming of sunset, Zagameen, using a makeshift oar, paddled toward the mountains on the west, toward the tumbled, magnificent city of the ancients on the west coast, his rescued children somberly quiet, though hungry, around him.

And once, but he knew he was mistaken, he thought he saw the tilted tree trunk that had been the judgment dais; and thought he saw a man clinging to it; and thought he heard Argus Nesban cry, as he saw them, and slipped beneath the waters, "There is nothing to fear!"

And Zagameen wondered, with a chill, if with that last obstinate, brave cry, Argus Nesban had truly known that there was nothing, nothing at all to fear, now.