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**SEEKER OF THE SPHINX**

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● Far beyond the green mountains, at the end of the winding road to the sea, lay the ancient towers of Shastar the Beautiful; and toiling on that lonely journey was young Bront of Chaldis. It was a strange pilgrimage—for Shastar was to whisper of the Past, to promise the Future, to reveal a Destiny that led to the Stars . . .

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# • SEEKER OF

## A Novel of the Last Men

*Far beyond the green mountains, at the end of the winding road to the sea, lay the ancient alabaster towers of Shastar the Beautiful; and toiling on that lonely journey was young Brant of Chaldis. It was a strange pilgrimage—for Shastar was to whisper of the Past, to promise the Future, to reveal a Destiny that led to the Stars . . .*



It was still unnaturally dark . . .  
but the shadow that lay the full  
length of Shastar was not that of  
any cloud . . .

# THE SPHINX

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

I

SHASTAR THE BEAUTIFUL

**T**HE FIRST LEAVES OF AU-  
tumn were falling when Durven met  
his brother on the headland beside

the golden Sphinx. He left his little flyer  
resting among the shrubs by the road and  
walked to the brow of the hill to look  
down upon the sea. A bitter wind was  
toiling across the moors, bearing the  
threat of early frost, but down in the valley  
Shastar the Beautiful was still warm and

sheltered in its crescent of hills. Its empty quays lay dreaming in the pale, declining sunlight, the deep blue of the sea washing gently against their marble flanks. As he looked down once more into the hauntingly familiar streets and the gay gardens of his youth, Durven felt his resolution failing. He was glad he was meeting Hannar here, a mile from the city, and not among the sights and sounds that would bring his childhood crowding back upon him.

Hannar was a small dot far down the slope, climbing in his old unhurried, leisurely fashion. Durven could have met him in a moment with the flyer, but he knew he would receive little thanks if he did. So he waited in the lee of the great Sphinx, sometimes walking briskly to and fro to keep warm. Once or twice he went to the head of the monster, and stared up at the still face brooding upon the city and the sea. He remembered how as a child in the gardens of Shastar he had seen the crouching shape upon the skyline, and had wondered if it was alive.

Hannar looked no older than he had seemed at their last meeting, twenty years before. His hair was still dark and thick, and his face unwrinkled: for few things ever disturbed the tranquil life of Shastar and its people. It seemed bitterly unfair, and Durven, grey with the years of unrelenting toil, felt a quick spasm of envy flare through his brain.

Their greetings were brief, but not unfriendly. Then Hannar walked over to the ship, lying in its bed of heather and crumpled gorse-bushes. He rapped his stick upon the curving metal and turned to Durven.

"It's very small. Did it bring you all the way?"

"No: only from the Moon. I came back from the Project in a liner ten times the size of this."

"And where is the Project—or don't you want me to know?"

"There's no secret about it. We're building the ships out in space beyond Saturn, where the sun's gravitational gradient is almost flat and a good push will send them right out of the Solar System."

HANNAR waved his stick towards the blue waters beneath them, the coloured marble of the little towers and the wide streets with their unhurried traffic.

"Away from all this, out into the darkness and loneliness—in search of what?"

Durven's lips tightened into a thin, determined line.

"Remember," he said quietly, "I have already spent a lifetime away from Earth."

"And has it brought you happiness?" continued Hannar remorselessly.

Durven was silent for a while.

"It has brought me more than that," he replied at last. "I have used my powers to the utmost, and have tasted triumphs that you can never imagine. The day when the First Expedition returned to the Solar System was worth a lifetime in Shastar."

"Do you think," asked Hannar, "that you will build fairer cities than this beneath those strange suns, when you have left our world forever?"

"If we feel that impulse, yes. If not, we will build other things. But build we must: and what have your people created in the last hundred years?"

"Because we have made no machines, because we have turned our backs upon the stars and are content with our own world, don't think we have been completely idle. Here in Shastar we have evolved a way of life which I do not think has ever been excelled. A dozen times in human history there have been moments when the art of living reached peaks which every future age has acknowledged and saluted. It happened three thousand years ago in Greece: two thousand years later in Renaissance Italy: later still in Georgian England, in the southern states of the North American republic, and along the Sea of Galilee in the Twenty-First Century. But in all those earlier cultures, only a few could enjoy what belongs to everyone of us. Ours is the first aristocracy in which there are no slaves. That is our achievement, by which history will judge us"

"I grant you this," replied Durven, "but never forget that your paradise will be built by scientists who had to fight as we have done to make their dreams come true."

"They have not always succeeded. The

planets defeated them once: why should the worlds of other suns be more hospitable?"

IT was a fair question. After five hundred years, the memory of that first failure was still bitter. With what hopes and dreams had Man set out for the planets, in the closing years of the Twentieth century—only to find them not merely barren and lifeless, but fiercely hostile! From the sullen fires of the Mercurian lava seas to Pluto's creeping glaciers of solid nitrogen, there was nowhere that he could live unprotected beyond his own world: and to his own world, after a century of fruitless struggle, he had returned.

Yet the vision had not wholly died: when the planets had been abandoned, there were still some who dared to dream of the stars. Out of that dream had come at last the Titan Drive, the First Expedition—and now the heady wine of long-delayed success.

"There are fifty solar-type stars within ten years' flight of Earth," Durven replied, "and almost all of them have planets. We believe now that the possession of planets is almost as much a characteristic of a G. O. star as its spectrum: but we don't know why. So the search for worlds sufficiently like Earth to be colonized was bound to be successful in time. I don't think that we were even particularly lucky to find Eden so soon."

"Eden? Is that what you have called your new world?"

"Yes: we thought it appropriate."

"What incurable romantics you scientists are! Perhaps the name's too well chosen: all the life in that first Eden wasn't friendly to Man, if you remember."

Durven gave a bleak smile.

"That, again, depends on one's viewpoint," he replied. He pointed towards Shastar, where the first lights had begun to glimmer. "Unless our ancestors had eaten deeply from the Tree of Knowledge, you would never have had this."

"And what do you suppose will happen to it now?" asked Hannar bitterly. "When you have opened the road to the stars, all

the strength and vigour of the race will ebb away from Earth as from an open wound."

"I do not deny it. It has happened before, and it will happen again. Shastar will go the way of Babylon and Carthage and New York. The future is built on the rubble of the past: wisdom lies in facing that fact, not in fighting against it. I have loved Shastar as much as you have done—so much so that now, though I shall never see it again, I dare not go down once more into its streets. You ask me what will become of it, and I will tell you. What we are doing will merely hasten the end. Even twenty years ago, when I was last here, I felt my will being sapped by the aimless ritual of your lives. Soon it will be the same in all the cities of Earth, for every one of them apes Shastar. I think the Titan Drive has come none too soon: perhaps even you would believe me if you had spoken to the men who have come back from the stars, and felt the blood stirring in your veins once more after all these centuries of sleep. For your world is dying, Hannar: what you have now you may hold for ages yet, but in the end it will slip from your fingers. The future belongs to us: we will leave you to your dreams. We also have dreamed, but now we go to make our dreams come true."

The last light was catching the brow of the Sphinx as the sun sank into the sea and left Shastar to night but not to darkness. The wide streets were luminous rivers carrying a myriad moving specks: the towers and pinnacles were jewelled with coloured lights, and there came a faint sound of wind-borne music as a pleasure boat put slowly out to sea. Smiling a little, Durven watched it draw away from the curving quay. It had been five hundred years or more since the last merchant ship had unloaded its cargo, but as long as the sea remained, men would still sail upon it.

There was little more to say: and presently Hannar stood alone upon the hill, his head tilted upwards towards the stars. He would never see his brother again: the sun, which for a few hours had gone from his sight, would soon have gone from

Durven's forever as it shrank into the abyss of space.

Unheeding, Shastar lay glittering in the darkness along the edge of the sea. To Hannar, heavy with foreboding, its doom seemed already upon it. There was truth in Durven's words: the exodus was about to begin.

Ten thousand years ago other explorers had set out from the first cities of mankind to discover new lands. They had found them, and had never returned, and Time had swallowed their deserted homes. So must it be with Shastar the Beautiful.

Leaning heavily upon his stick, Hannar walked slowly down the hillside towards the lights of the city. The Sphinx watched him dispassionately as his figure vanished into the distance and the darkness.

It was still watching, five thousand years later.

## II

### YRADNE

**B**RANT WAS NOT QUITE TWENTY when his people were expelled from their homes and driven westwards across two continents and an ocean, filling the ether with piteous cries of injured innocence. They received scant sympathy from the rest of the world, for they had only themselves to blame, and could scarcely pretend that the Supreme Council had acted harshly. It had sent them a dozen preliminary warnings and no less than four positively final ultimatums before reluctantly taking action. Then one day a small ship with a very large acoustic radiator had suddenly arrived a thousand feet above the village and started to emit several megawatts of raw noise. After a few hours of this, the rebels had capitulated and begun to pack their belongings. The transport fleet had called a week later and carried them, still protesting shrilly, to their new homes on the other side of the world.

And so the Law had been enforced, the Law which ruled that no community could remain on the same spot for more than

three lifetimes. Obedience meant change, the destruction of traditions, and the uprooting of ancient and well-loved homes. That had been the very purpose of the Law when it was framed, four thousand years ago: but the stagnation it had sought to prevent could not be warded off much longer. One day there would be no central organization to enforce it, and the scattered villages would remain where they were until Time engulfed them as it had the earlier civilizations of which they were the heirs.

It had taken the people of Chaldis the whole of three months to build new homes, remove a square mile of forest, plant some unnecessary crops of exotic and luxurious fruits, re-lay a river, and demolish a hill which offended their aesthetic sensibilities. It was quite an impressive performance, and all was forgiven when the local Supervisor made a tour of inspection a little later. Then Chaldis watched with great satisfaction as the transports, the digging machines, and all the paraphernalia of a mobile and mechanised civilization climbed away into the sky. The sound of their departure had scarcely faded when, as one man, the village relaxed once more into the sloth which it sincerely hoped nothing would disturb for another century at least.

Brant had quite enjoyed the whole adventure. He was sorry, of course, to lose the home which had shaped his childhood; and now he would never climb the proud, lonely mountain that had looked down upon the village of his birth. There were no mountains in this land: only low, rolling hills and fertile valleys in which forests had run rampant for millennia, since agriculture had come to an end and the fields had been overwhelmed again. It was hotter, too, than in the old country, for they were much nearer the equator and had left behind them the fierce winters of the north. In almost every respect the change was for the good: but for a year or two the people of Chaldis would feel a comfortable glow of martyrdom.

These political matters did not worry Brant in the least. The entire sweep of human history from the dark ages into

the unknown future was considerably less important at the moment than the question of Yradne and her feelings towards him. He wondered what Yradne was doing now, and tried to think of an excuse for going to see her. But that would mean meeting her parents, who would embarrass him by their hearty pretence that his call was simply a social one.

He decided to go to the smithy instead, if only to make a check of Jon's movements. It was a pity about Jon: they had been such good friends only a short while ago. But love was friendship's deadliest enemy, and until Yradne had chosen between them they would remain in a state of armed neutrality.

THE VILLAGE sprawled for about a mile along the valley, its neat, new houses in calculated disorder. A few people were moving around in no particular hurry, or gossiping in little groups beneath the trees. To Brant it seemed that everyone was following him with their eyes and talking about him as he passed—an assumption which, as it happened, was perfectly correct. In a closed community of less than a thousand highly intelligent people, no one could expect to have any private life.

The smithy was in a clearing at the far end of the village, where its general untidiness would cause as little offense as possible. It was surrounded by broken and half-dismantled machines that Old Johan had not got round to mending. One of the community's three flyers was lying, its bare ribs exposed to the sunlight, where it had been dumped weeks ago with a request for immediate repair. Old Johan would fix it one day, but in his own time.

The wide door of the smithy was open and from the brilliantly lit interior came the sound of screaming metal as the automatic machines fashioned some new shape to their master's will. Brant threaded his way carefully past the busy slaves and emerged into the relative quiet at the back of the shop.

Old Johan was lying in an excessively comfortable chair, smoking a pipe and look-

ing as if he had never done a day's work in his life. He was a neat little man with a carefully pointed beard, and only his brilliant, ceaselessly roaming eyes showed any signs of animation. He might have been taken for a minor poet—as indeed he fancied himself to be—but never for a village blacksmith.

"Looking for Jon?" he said between puffs. "He's around somewhere, making something for that girl. Beats me what you two see in her."

Brant turned a slight pink and was about to make some sort of reply when one of the machines started calling loudly for attention. In a flash Old Johan was out of the room and for a minute strange crashings and bangings and much bad language floated through the doorway. Very soon, however, he was back again in his chair, obviously not expecting to be disturbed for quite a while.

"Let me tell you something, Brant," he continued as if there had been no interruption. "In twenty years she'll be exactly like her mother. Ever thought of that?"

Brant hadn't, and quailed slightly. But twenty years is an eternity to youth: if he could win Yradne in the present, the future could take care of itself. He told Johan as much.

"Have it your own way," said the smith, not unkindly. "I suppose if we'd all looked that far ahead the human race would have died out a million years ago. Here's Jon, anyway."

Jon had entered behind Brant's back, and looked slightly sheepish when the other greeted him. He was a large, well-built youth, a complete contrast to his father, and was carrying a sheet of paper covered with engineering sketches. Brant wondered just what sort of present he was making for Yradne.

"What are you doing?" he asked, with a far from disinterested curiosity.

"Why should I tell you?" replied Jon good-naturedly. "Though it would be quite safe—it's nothing you could copy."

"Then it's not worth doing," retorted Brant. "It must obviously be something extremely simple to be within your limited mental capabilities."



"Say that again," said Jon, coming closer.

"Why should I? Don't you *ever* wash your ears?"

"Get out of here—both of you!" yelled Old Johan, perceiving that this elegant conversation was reaching its inevitable climax. They went.

IT WAS fifteen minutes or so before they returned, arm in arm. Brant was limping slightly, and his nose had been bleeding. Jon was quite unscathed, but the same could hardly be said of his clothes. They had collected a good deal of grass and topsoil and in still other respects were not fit for polite society.

"Quite a good fight," he said contentedly. "Brant's improving. He actually got me down once or twice."

"Only for a minute, though," sighed Brant, modesty and regret striving together in his voice.

Old Johan snorted. It would, he thought, do Jon good to be beaten one day, but it seemed unlikely that this would ever happen. He could take on any two of the other lads in Chaldis at once, and frequently did.

The smith had annexed the sheet of paper on which his son had been drawing and was examining it critically. After a while he turned to Jon, who was showing signs of embarrassment, and remarked casually:

"Where are you going to get the components? They're all sub-standard, and some are micro."

Jon looked vaguely round the workshop.

"There aren't very many of them," he said. "I was hoping . . ."

" . . . that I'd let you mess up the integrators to try and make them? Well, we'll see about that. My talented son, Brant, is trying to prove that he possesses brains as well as brawn, by making a toy that's been obsolete for about five thousand years. I hope you can do better than that. Now when I was your age . . ."

His voice and his reminiscences trailed off into silence. Yradne had drifted in from the clangorous bustle of the machine shop, and was watching them from the doorway

with a faint smile on her lips.

It is probable that if Brant and Jon had been asked to describe Yradne, it would have seemed as if they were speaking of two entirely different people. There would have been superficial points of resemblance, of course. Both would have agreed that her hair was very dark, her eyes brown and large, her face round rather than oval. But to Jon she seemed almost a fragile little creature, to be cherished and protected—while to Brant her self-confidence and complete assurance were so obvious that he despaired ever of being any service to her. Part of that difference in outlook was due to Jon's extra six inches of height and nine inches of girth, but most of it came from profounder psychological causes. The person one loves never really exists, but is a projection focused through the lens of the mind on to whatever screen it fits with least distortion. Brant and Jon had quite different ideals, and each believed that Yradne embodied them: This would not have surprised her in the least, for few things ever did.

"I'm going down to the river," she said. "I called for you on the way, Brant, but you were out."

That was one in the eye for Jon, but she quickly equalized.

"I thought you'd gone off with Lorayne or some other girl, but I knew I'd find Jon at home."

Jon looked very smug at this unsolicited and not completely accurate testimonial. He rolled up his drawings, suddenly became aware of the state of his clothes, and dashed off into the house calling happily over his shoulder: "Wait for me—I won't be long!"

Brant never took his eyes off Yradne as he shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. She hadn't actually invited *anyone* to come with her, and until definitely ordered off he was going to stand his ground. But he remembered that there was a somewhat ancient saying to the effect that if two was company, three was the reverse.

Jon returned, resplendent in a surprising green cloak with diagonal explosions of red down the sides. Only a very young



*It was fifteen minutes or so before they returned . . . "Quite a good fight!"*

man could have got away with it, and even Jon barely succeeded. Brant wondered if there was time for him to hurry home and change into something still more startling, but that would be too great a risk to take. It would be flying in the face of the enemy: the battle might be over before he could get his reinforcements.

"Quite a crowd," remarked Old Johan unhelpfully as they departed. "Mind if I come along too?" The boys looked embarrassed, but Yradne gave a gay little laugh that made it hard for him to dislike her. He stood in the outer doorway for a while, smiling as they went away through the trees and down the long, grass-covered slope to the river, happy in their youth and the eternal promise of the spring. But

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presently his eyes ceased to follow them, as he lost himself in dreams as vain as any that can come to man—the dreams of his own unreturning youth. Very soon he turned his back upon the sunlight and, no longer smiling now, went slowly back into the busy tumult of the workshop.

### III

#### THE RITE OF SPRING

**N**OW THE NORTHWARD-CLIMBING sun was passing the equator, the days would soon be longer than the nights, and the rout of winter was complete. The countless villages throughout the hemisphere were preparing to greet the spring. With the dying of the great cities and the

return of man to the fields and woods, he had returned also to many of the ancient customs that had slumbered through a thousand years of urban civilization. Some of those customs had been deliberately revived by the anthropologists and social engineers of the Third Millennium, whose genius had sent so many patterns of human culture safely down the ages. So it was that the Spring Equinox was still welcomed by rituals which, for all their sophistication, would have seemed less strange to primitive man than to the people of the industrial cities whose smoke had once stained the skies of Earth.

The arrangements for the Spring Festival were always the subject of much intrigue and more-or-less good-natured bickering between neighbouring villages. Although it involved the disruption of all other activities for at least a month, any village was greatly honoured to be chosen as host for the celebrations. A newly-settled community, still recovering from transplantation, would not of course be expected to take on such a responsibility. Brant's people, however, had thought of an ingenious way of regaining favour and wiping out the stain of their recent disgrace. There were five other villages within a hundred miles, and all had been invited to Chaldis for the Festival.

The invitation had been very carefully worded. It hinted delicately that, for obvious reasons, Chaldis couldn't hope to arrange as elaborate a ceremonial as it might have wished, and thereby implied that if the guests wanted a really good time they had better go elsewhere. Chaldis expected one acceptance at the most, but the inquisitiveness of its neighbors had overcome their sense of moral superiority. They had all said that they would be delighted to come: and there was no possible way in which Chaldis could now evade its responsibilities.

There was no night and little sleep in the valley. High above the trees a row of artificial suns burned with a steady, blue-white brilliance, banishing the stars and the darkness and throwing into chaos the natural routine of all the wild creatures for miles around. Through lengthening

days and shortening nights, men and machines were battling to make ready the great amphitheatre needed to hold some four thousand people. In one respect at least they were lucky: there was no need for a roof or any artificial heating in this climate. In the land they had so reluctantly left, the snow would still be thick upon the ground at the end of March.

Brant woke early on the great day to the sound of aircraft falling down from the skies above him. He stretched himself wearily, wondering when he would get to bed again, and then climbed into his clothes. A kick with his foot at a concealed switch and the rectangle of yielding foam-rubber, an inch below floor-level, was completely covered by a rigid plastic sheet that had unrolled from within the wall. There was no bed linen to worry about, as the room was kept automatically at body temperature. In many such ways Brant's life was simpler than those of his remote ancestors—simpler through the ceaseless and almost forgotten efforts of five thousand years of science.

**T**HE ROOM was softly lit by light pouring through one translucent wall, and was quite incredibly untidy. The only clear floor space was that concealing the bed, and probably this would have to be cleared again by nightfall. Brant was a great hoarder and hated to throw anything away. This was a very unusual characteristic in a world where few things were of value because they could be made so easily: but the objects Brant collected were not those which the integrators were used to creating. In one corner a small tree-trunk was propped against the wall, partly carved into a vaguely anthropomorphic shape. Large lumps of sandstone and marble were scattered elsewhere over the floor, until such time as Brant decided to work on them. The walls were more or less completely covered with paintings, most of them abstract in character. It would have needed very little intelligence to deduce that Brant was an artist: but it was not so easy to decide if he was a good one.

He picked his way through the debris

and went in search of food. There was no kitchen: some historians maintained that it had survived until as late as 2500 A.D., but long before then most families made their own meals about as often as they made their own clothes. Brant walked into the main living room and went across to a metal box set in the wall at chest level. At its centre was something that would have been quite familiar to every human being for the last fifty centuries—a ten-digit impulse dial. Brant called a four-figure number and waited. Nothing whatsoever happened. Looking a little annoyed, he pressed a concealed button and the front of the apparatus slid open, revealing an interior which should, by all the rules, have contained an appetizing breakfast. It was completely empty.

Brant could call up the central food machine to demand an explanation, but there would probably be no answer. It was quite obvious what had happened—the catering department was so busy preparing for the day's overload that he'd be lucky if he got any breakfast at all. He cleared the circuit, then tried again with a little-used number. This time there was a gentle purr, a dull click, and the doors slid open to reveal a cup of some dark, steaming beverage, a few not-very-exciting-looking sandwiches, and a large slice of melon. Wrinkling up his nose, and wondering how long mankind would take to slip back to barbarism at this rate, Brant started on his substitute meal and very soon polished it off.

His parents were still asleep as he went quietly out of the house into the wide, grass-covered square at the centre of the village. It was still very early and there was a slight chill in the air, but the day was clear and fine, with that freshness which seldom lingers after the last dew has gone. Several aircraft were lying on the green, disgorging passengers who were milling round in circles or wandering off to examine Chaldis with critical eyes. As Brant watched, one of the machines went humming briskly up into the sky, leaving a faint trail of ionization behind it. A moment later the others followed: they could carry only a few dozen passengers

and would have to make many trips before the day was out.

Brant strolled over to the visitors, trying to look self-assured, yet not so aloof as to discourage all contacts. Most of the strangers were about his own age—the older people would be arriving at a more reasonable time.

They looked at him with a frank curiosity which he returned with interest. Their skins were much darker than his, he noticed, and their voices were softer and less modulated. Some of them even had a trace of accent, for despite a universal language and instantaneous communication, regional variations still existed. At least, Brant assumed that *they* were the ones with accents: but once or twice he caught them smiling a little as he spoke.

They seemed much less reserved than his own people, and Brant soon found himself submerged by a torrent of questions—some general, others highly personal. He did his best for the honour of Chaldis.

"How many people live here?"

"What play are you going to show us?"

"We're keeping it a surprise," Brant answered. 'I only hope,' he thought grimly to himself, 'that it goes better than it did at the last rehearsal.'

"When do we eat?" (plaintively).

"What funny clothes you wear!"

"And what funny houses!"

"We'll change them later, perhaps, but they're very comfortable as they are."

"I suppose we'll have the usual games? Are your people any good at sport? We've got a man who can jump three metres high."

"When do we eat?" (still more plaintively).

At this moment one of the members of the official reception committee arrived, puffing and blowing.

"We didn't expect anyone as early as this," he hissed in Brant's ear. "Thanks for looking after them—help me shepherd 'em round to Five Oaks Glade—the food's down there."

Brant obeyed with alacrity. It looked as if he might get a good breakfast, after all.

THROUGHOUT the long morning the visitors gathered in the square and made their way down to the wide fields by the river. There were tents and bright banners here, and much shouting and laughter, for the morning was for the amusement of the young. Though Athens had swept like a dwindling but never-dying beacon for ten thousand years down the river of time, the pattern of sport had scarcely changed since those first Olympic days. Men still ran and jumped and wrestled and swam: but they did all these things a good deal better now than their ancestors. Brant was a fair sprinter over short distances and managed to finish third in the hundred meters. His time was just over eight seconds, which was not very good as the record was about seven. Brant would have been much amazed to learn that there was a time when no one in the world could have equalled this speed.

Jon enjoyed himself hugely, bouncing youths even larger than himself on the patient turf, and when the morning's results were added up Chaldis had scored more points than any of the visitors, although it had been first in relatively few events.

As noon approached, the crowd began to flow amoeba-like down to Five Oaks Glade, where the molecular synthesizers had been working since the early hours to cover hundreds of tables with food. Much skill had gone into preparing the prototypes which were being reproduced with absolute fidelity down to the last atom: for though the mechanics of food production had altered completely, the art of the chef had survived, and had even gone forward to victories in which Nature had played no part at all.

Brant decided to miss the long poetic drama that was the main feature of the afternoon. The amphitheatre was very crowded, and as he had seen the rehearsals he had no desire to go again. It was a very old play—a pastiche, though Brant did not know it, put together with some skill from the work of poets whose very names had been forgotten ages since. On the whole he found it rather boring, though there were some fine lines here and there

that had stuck in his memory:—

*"For winter's rains and ruins are over,  
And all the season of snows and sins;  
The days dividing lover and lover,  
The light that loses, the night that  
wins;  
And time remembered is grief  
forgotten,  
And frosts are slain and flowers  
begotten,  
And in green underwood and cover  
Blossom by blossom the spring  
begins."*

Curiously enough, Jon seemed to enjoy it thoroughly and had announced his intention of going again. Yradne, on the other hand, had said nothing about her plans: she had failed to secure the role she wanted, and would probably be staying away altogether. Brant hoped very much that he could find her and risk a little sympathy: but when he finally located her she was in the midst of a crowd of other girls, obviously enjoying herself thoroughly. So Brant wandered down to one of the river's more secluded bends in search of a little quiet before the evening's excitement began.

HE SAT at the water's edge, throwing twigs into the current and watching them drift downstream. From time to time other idlers strolled by, but they were usually in pairs and took no notice of him. He watched them enviously and brooded over the unsatisfactory state of his affairs.

It would almost be better, he thought, if Yradne did make up her mind to choose Jon, and so put him out of his misery. But she showed not the slightest sign of preferring one to the other. Perhaps she was simply enjoying herself at their expense, as some people—particularly Old Johan—maintained: though it was just as likely that she was genuinely unable to choose. What was wanted, Brant thought morosely, was for one of them to do something spectacular which the other could not hope to match. Unfortunately there seemed very little that he could do which Jon couldn't do better.

"Hello," said a small voice behind him. He twisted round and looked over his shoulder. A little girl of eight or so was staring at him with her head slightly on one side, like an inquisitive sparrow.

"Hello," he replied without enthusiasm. "Why aren't you at the play?"

"Why aren't you?" she replied promptly.

"I've seen it before," he said, hoping that this was an adequate excuse. "You shouldn't be running around by yourself. You might get lost."

"I am lost," she replied happily, sitting down on the bank beside him. "I like it that way." Brant wondered which of the other villages she had come from: she was quite a pretty little thing, but would look prettier with less chocolate on her face. It seemed that his solitude was at an end.

She stared at him with that disconcerting directness which, perhaps fortunately, seldom survives childhood. "I know what's the matter with you," she said suddenly.

"Indeed?" queried Brant with polite scepticism.

"You're in love!"

Brant dropped the twig he was about to throw into the river, and turned to stare at his inquisitor. She was looking at him with such solemn sympathy that in a moment all his morbid self-pity vanished in a gale of laughter. She seemed quite hurt, and he quickly brought himself under control.

"How could you tell?" he asked with profound seriousness.

"I've read all about it," she replied solemnly. "And once I saw a picture play and there was a man in it and he came down to a river and sat there just like you and presently he jumped into it. There was some awful pretty music then."

Brant looked thoughtfully at this precocious child and felt relieved that she didn't belong to his own community.

"I'm sorry I can't arrange the music," he said gravely, "but in any case the river isn't really deep enough."

"It is further along," came the helpful reply. "This is only a baby river here—it doesn't grow up until it leaves the woods. I saw it from the flyer."

"What happens to it then?" asked Brant, not in the least interested but thankful that the conversation had taken a more innocuous turn. "I suppose it reaches the sea?"

She gave an unladylike sniff of disgust.

"Of course not, silly. All the rivers this side of the hills go to the Great Lake. I know that's as big as a sea, but the real sea is on the other side of the hills."

BRANT had learned very little about the geographical details of his new home, but he realized that the child was quite correct. The ocean was less than twenty miles to the north, but separated from them by a barrier of low hills. A hundred miles inland lay the Great Lake, bringing life to lands that had been desert before the geological engineers had reshaped this continent.

The child genius was making a map out of twigs and patiently explaining these matters to her rather dull pupil.

"Here we are," she said, "and here's the river, and the hills, and the Lake's over there by your foot. The sea goes along here—and I'll tell you a secret."

"What's that?"

"You'll never guess!"

"I don't suppose I will."

Her voice dropped to a confidential whisper. "If you go along the coast—it isn't very far from here—you'll come to Shastar."

Brant tried to look impressed, but failed.

"I don't believe you've ever heard of it!" she cried, deeply disappointed.

"I'm sorry," replied Brant. "I suppose it was a city, and I know I've heard of it somewhere. But there were such a lot of them, you know—Carthage and Chicago and Babylon and Berlin—you simply can't remember them all. And they've all gone now, anyway."

"Not Shastar. It's still there."

"Well, some of the later ones are still standing, more or less, and people often visit them. About five hundred miles from my old home there was quite a big city once, called—"

"Shastar isn't just any old city," interrupted the child mysteriously. "My grand-

father told me about it: he's been there. It hasn't been spoiled at all and it's still full of wonderful things that no one has anymore."

Brant smiled inwardly. The deserted cities of Earth had been the breeding-places of legends for countless centuries. It would be four—no, nearer five—thousand years since Shastar had been abandoned. If its buildings were still standing, which was of course quite possible, they would certainly have been stripped of all valuables ages ago. It seemed that Grandfather had been inventing some pretty fairy stories to entertain the child. He had Brant's sympathy.

Heedless of his scepticism, the girl prattled on. Brant gave only half his mind to her words, interjecting a polite "Yes" or "Fancy that" as occasion demanded. Suddenly, silence fell.

He looked up and found that his companion was staring with much annoyance towards the avenue of trees that overlooked the view.

"Goodbye," she said abruptly. "I've got to hide somewhere else—here comes my sister."

She was gone as suddenly as she had arrived. Her family must have a busy time looking after her, Brant decided: but she had done him a good turn by dispelling one of his melancholy moods.

That she had planted a seed in his mind that would soon come to flower he did not even for a moment imagine.

**H**IGH above the valley, the floating lights flickered into coloured life, flooding the woods with ever-changing patterns of blue and red and gold. Answering to the call of the soft music, the crowds began to drift into the amphitheatre: in twos and threes and then in dozens and hundreds, the pairs of dancers moved out into the great oval, until it became a sea of laughing, whirling forms. Here at last was something at which Brant could beat Jon handsomely, and he let himself be swept away on the tide of sheer physical enjoyment.

The music ranged through the whole spectrum of human culture. At one mo-

ment the air pulsed to the throb of drums that might have called from some primeval jungle when the world was young: and a little later, intricate tapestries of quarter-tones were being woven by subtle electronic skills. The stars peered down wanly as they marched across the sky, but no one saw them and no one gave any thought to the passage of time.

Brant had danced with many girls before he found Yradne. She looked very beautiful, brimming over with enjoyment of life, and she seemed in no hurry to dance with him when there were so many others to choose from. But at last they were circling together in the whirlpool, and it gave Brant no small pleasure to think that Jon was probably watching them glumly from afar.

They broke away from the dance during a pause in the music, as Yradne announced that she was a little tired. This suited Brant admirably, and presently they were sitting together under one of the trees, watching the ebb and flow of life around them with that detachment that comes in moments of complete relaxation.

It was Brant who broke the spell. It had to be done, and it might be a long time before such an opportunity came again.

"Yradne," he said, "why have you been avoiding me?"

She looked at him with innocent eyes.

"Oh, Brant!" she replied, "what a nasty thing to say! You know it isn't true. I do wish you weren't so jealous: you can't expect me to be following you around all the time."

"Oh, very well!" said Brant weakly, wondering if he was making a fool of himself. But he might as well go on now he had started.

"You know, *some day* you'll have to decide between us. If you keep putting it off, perhaps you'll be left high and dry like those two aunts of yours."

Yradne gave a tinkling laugh of amusement and tossed her dark hair with great glee at the thought that she could ever be old and ugly.

"Even if you're too impatient," she replied, "I think I can rely on Jon. Have

you seen what he's given me?"

"No," said Brant, his heart sinking.

"You *are* observant, aren't you! Haven't you noticed this necklace?"

ON HER BREAST Yradne was wearing a large group of jewels, suspended from her neck by a thin golden chain. It was quite a fine pendant, but there was nothing particularly unusual about it and Brant wasted no time in saying so. Yradne smiled mysteriously and her fingers flickered towards her throat. Instantly the air was suffused with the sound of music, which first mingled with the background of the dance and then drowned it completely.

"You see," she said proudly, "wherever I go now I can have music with me. Jon says there are so many thousands of hours of it stored up that I'll never know when it repeats itself. Isn't it clever?"

"Perhaps it is," said Brant grudgingly, "but it isn't exactly new. Everyone used to carry this sort of thing once, until there was no silence anywhere on earth and they had to be forbidden. Just think of the chaos if we all had them!"

Yradne broke away from him angrily.

"There you go again—always jealous of something you can't do yourself. What have you ever given me that's half as clever or useful as this? I'm going—and don't try to follow me!"

Brant stared open-mouthed as she went, quite taken aback by the violence of her reaction. Then he jumped to his feet and called after her, "Hey, Yradne, I didn't mean—" But she was gone.

He made his way out of the amphitheatre in a very bad temper. It did him no good at all to rationalise the cause of Yradne's outburst. His remarks, though rather spiteful, had been true, and sometimes there is nothing more annoying than truth. Yradne's gift was an ingenious but trivial toy, interesting only because it now happened to be unique.

One thing she had said still rankled in his mind. What *was* there he had ever given Yradne? He had nothing but his paintings, and they weren't really very good. She had shown no interest in them

at all when he had offered her some of his best, and it had been very hard to explain that he wasn't a portrait painter and would rather not try and make a picture of her. She had never really understood this and it had been very difficult not to hurt her feelings. Brant liked taking his inspiration from nature, but he never copied what he saw. When one of his pictures was finished (which occasionally happened) the title was often the only clue to the original source.

The music of the dance still throbbed in his ears, but he had lost all interest in the gay life around him. From time to time the lights of a flyer went soaring up into the sky, for it was long past midnight and in little groups the guests were returning to their homes. The crowds were thinning, and there was that indefinable sense that everything was running down. Only the very young still seemed to have lost none of their energy and appeared determined to see in the dawn. But Brant had had enough: the sight of other people enjoying themselves was more than he could stand.

#### IV

#### DEPARTURE.

SIMON WAS LEANING AGAINST his doorpost watching the world go by when Brant came in search of him. The world usually accelerated slightly when it had to pass Simon's door, for he was a most interminable talker and once he had trapped a victim there was no escape for an hour or more. It was most unusual for anyone to walk voluntarily into his clutches, as Brant was doing now.

The trouble with Simon was that he had a first-class mind, and was too lazy to use it. Perhaps he might have been luckier had he been born in a more energetic age: all he had ever been able to do in Chaldis was to sharpen his wits at other people's expense, thereby gaining more fame than popularity. But he was quite indispensable, for he was a storehouse of knowledge, the greater part of it perfectly accurate. With this substantial foundation, and diligent



use of the village's records, he had managed to give the impression of knowing everything that could be known. It was quite an event when anyone caught him out, though there were usually many people trying rather hard.

"Simon," began Brant without any preamble. "I want to learn something about this country. The maps don't tell me much—they're too new. What was here, back in the old days?"

Simon scratched his wiry beard.

"I don't suppose it was very different. How long ago do you mean?"

"Oh, back in the time of the cities."

"There weren't so many trees, of course. This was probably agricultural land, used for food production. Did you see that farming machine they dug up when the amphitheatre was being built? It must have been old: it wasn't even electric."

"Yes," said Brant impatiently, "I saw it. But tell me about the cities round here. According to the map there was a place called Shastar a hundred miles west of us along the coast. Do you know anything about it?"

"Ah, Shastar," murmured Simon, who had only heard of it a couple of times in his life. "A very interesting place: I think I've even got a picture of it around somewhere. Just a moment while I go and see."

He disappeared into the house and was gone for nearly five minutes. In that time he made a very extensive library search, though a man from the age of books would hardly have guessed this from his actions. All the records which Chaldis possessed were in a metal case a metre on a side: it contained, locked perpetually in sub-atomic patterns, the equivalent of a billion volumes of print. Almost all the knowledge of mankind, and the whole of its surviving literature, lay here concealed.

It was not merely a passive storehouse of wisdom, for it possessed a librarian. As Simon signalled his request to the tireless machine, the search went down, layer by layer, through the almost infinite network of circuits. It took only a fraction of a second to locate the information he needed, for he had given the name and the approximate date. Then he relaxed as the

mental images came flooding into his brain, under the lightest of self-hypnosis. The knowledge would remain in his possession for a few hours only—long enough for his purpose—and would then fade away. Simon had no desire to clutter up his well-organized mind with irrelevancies: and to him the whole story of the rise and fall of the great cities was an historical digression of no particular importance. It was an interesting, if a regrettable episode, and it belonged to a past that had irretrievably vanished.

BRANT was still waiting patiently when he emerged, looking very wise.

"I couldn't find any pictures," he said. "My wife has been tidying up again. But I'll tell you what I can remember about Shastar."

Brant settled himself down as comfortably as he could: he was likely to be here for some time.

"Shastar was one of the very last cities that man ever built. You know, of course, that cities arose quite late in human culture—only about twelve thousand years ago. They grew in number and importance for several thousand years, until at last there were some containing millions of people. It is very hard for us to imagine what it must have been like to live in such places—deserts of steel and stone with not even a blade of grass for miles. But they were necessary, before transport and communication had been perfected, and people had to live near each other to carry out all the intricate operations of trade and manufacture upon which their lives depended.

"The really great cities began to disappear when air transport became universal. The threat of attack in those far-off, barbarous days also helped to disperse them. But for a long time—"

"I've studied the history of that period," interjected Brant, not very truthfully. "I know all about—"

"—for a long time there were still many small cities which were held together by cultural rather than commercial links. They had populations of a few score thousand and lasted for centuries after the passing of the giants. That's why Oxford and

Princeton and Heidelberg still mean something to us, while far larger cities are no more than names.

"Even these were doomed when the invention of the integrator made it possible for any community, however small, to manufacture without effort everything it needed for civilized living. There was no need any more for half the world's surface to be devoted exclusively to food production, and of course the population was very much smaller now than it had been at the peak of the industrial age.

"Shastar was built when there was no longer any need, technically, for cities: but before people realised that the culture of cities was coming to its end. It seems to have been a conscious work of art, conceived and designed as a whole, and those who lived there were mostly artists of some kind. But it didn't last very long: the trouble with a city is that once you've built one there's nothing more you can do—except go somewhere else and make another."

"But you've just said that some of them lasted for thousands of years," objected Brant.

"I said nothing of the sort. That may be true of exceptions, like Rome or Athens, but even here their real importance lasted only a few centuries. Moreover, they were necessary for technical or cultural reasons: Shastar was artificial like all the cities of the Third Millennium. What finally killed it, though, was the Exodus."

**S**IMON became suddenly quiet, as if brooding on those tumultuous centuries when the road to the stars had been opened up and the world was torn in twain. Along that road the flower of the race had gone, leaving the rest behind: and thereafter, it seemed that history had come to an end on Earth. For a thousand years or more the exiles had returned fleetingly to the Solar System, wistfully eager to tell of strange suns and far planets and the great empire that would one day span the Galaxy. But there are gulfs that even the swift ships can never cross: and such a gulf was opening now between Earth and her wandering children. They had less and less in common: the returning ships be-

came ever more infrequent, until at last generations passed between the visits from outside. Simon had not heard of any such for almost three hundred years.

It was unusual when one had to prod Simon into speech, but presently Brant remarked: "Anyway, I'm more interested in the place itself than its history. Do you think it's still standing?"

"I was coming to that," said Simon, emerging from his reverie with a start. "Of course it is: they built well in those days. But why are you so interested, may I ask? Have you suddenly developed an overwhelming passion for archaeology? Oh, I think I understand!"

Brant knew perfectly well the uselessness of trying to conceal anything from a professional busybody like Simon.

"I was hoping," he said defensively, "that there might still be things there worth going to find, even after all this time."

"Perhaps," said Simon doubtfully. "I must visit it one day. It's almost on our doorstep, as it were. But how are you going to manage? The village will hardly let you borrow a flyer! And you can't walk. It would take you a week to get there."

But that was exactly what Brant intended to do. As, during the next few days, he was careful to point out to almost everyone in the village, a thing wasn't worth doing unless one did it the hard way. There was nothing like making a virtue out of a necessity.

**B**RANT'S PREPARATIONS were carried out in an unprecedented blaze of secrecy. He did not wish to be too specific about his plans, such as they were, in case any of the dozen or so people in Chaldis who had the right to use a flyer decided to look at Shastar first. It was of course only a matter of time before this happened, but the feverish activity of the past months had prevented such explorations. Nothing would be more humiliating than to stagger into Shastar after a week's journey, only to be coolly greeted by a neighbour who had made the trip in ten minutes.

On the other hand, it was equally important that the village in general, and Yradne in particular, should realise that he was making some exceptional effort. Only Simon knew the truth, and he had grudgingly agreed to keep quiet for the present. Brant hoped that he had managed to divert attention from his true objective by showing a great interest in the country to the east of Chaldis, which also contained several archaeological relics of some importance.

The amount of food and equipment one needed for a two week's absence was really astonishing, and his first calculations had thrown Brant into a state of considerable gloom. For a while he had even thought of trying to beg or borrow a flyer, but the request would certainly not be granted—and would indeed defeat the whole object of his enterprise. Yet it was quite impossible for him to carry everything he needed for the journey.

The solution would have been perfectly obvious to anyone from a less mechanised age, but it took Brant some little time to think of it. The flying machine had killed all forms of land transport save one, the oldest and most versatile of all—the only one that was self-perpetuating and could manage very well, as it had done before, with no assistance at all from man.

Chaldis possessed five horses, rather a small number for a community of its size. In some villages the horses outnumbered the humans, but Brant's people, living in a wild and mountainous region, had so far had little opportunity for equitation. Brant himself had ridden a horse only two or three times in his life, and then for exceedingly short periods.

The five mares were in the charge of Treggor, a gnarled little man who had no discernible interest in life except animals. His was not one of the outstanding intellects of Chaldis, but he seemed perfectly happy running his private menagerie, which included dogs of many shapes and sizes, a couple of beavers, several monkeys, a lion cub, two bears, a young crocodile, and other beasts more usually admired from a distance. The only sorrow that had ever clouded his placid life arose from the fact

that he had so far failed to obtain an elephant.

BRANT found Treggor, as he expected, leaning on the gate of the paddock. He had a stranger with him, who was introduced to Brant as a horse-fancier from a neighbouring village. The curious similarity between the two men, extending from the way they dressed even to their facial expressions, made this explanation quite unnecessary.

One always feels a certain nervousness in the presence of undoubted experts, and Brant outlined his problem with some diffidence. Treggor listened gravely and paused for a long time before replying.

"Yes," he said slowly, jerking his thumb towards the mares, "any of them would do—if you knew how to handle 'em." He looked rather doubtfully at Brant.

"They're like human beings, you know: if they don't like you, you can't do a thing with them."

"Not a thing," echoed the stranger, with evident relish.

"But surely you could teach me how to handle them?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I remember a young fellow just like you, wanted to learn to ride. Horses just wouldn't let him get near them. Took a dislike to him—and that was that."

"Horses can *tell*," interjected the other dandy.

"That's right," agreed Treggor. "You've got to be sympathetic. Then you've nothing to worry about."

There was, Brant decided, quite a lot to be said for the less temperamental machine after all.

"I don't want to ride," he answered with some feeling. "I only want a horse to carry my gear. Or would it be likely to object to that?"

His mild sarcasm was quite wasted. Treggor nodded solemnly.

"That wouldn't be any trouble," he said. "They'll all let you lead them with a halter—all except Daisy, that is. You'd never catch *her*."

"Then do you think I could borrow one

of the—er, more amenable ones—for a while?"

Treggor shuffled around uncertainly, torn between two conflicting desires. He was pleased that someone wanted to use his beloved beasts, but nervous lest they come to harm. Any damage that might befall Brant was of secondary importance.

"Well," he began doubtfully, "it's a bit awkward at the moment—"

Brant looked at the mares more closely, and realised why. Only one of them had a foal, but it was obvious that this deficiency was soon to be rectified. Here was another complication he had overlooked.

"How long will you be away?" asked Treggor.

"Three weeks, at the most: perhaps only two."

Treggor did some rapid gynecological calculations.

"Then you can have Sunbeam," he concluded. "She won't give you any trouble at all—best natured animal I've ever had."

"Thank you very much," said Brant. "I promise I'll look after her. Now would you mind introducing us?"

\* \* \*

"I don't see why I should do this," grumbled Jon good-naturedly, as he adjusted the panniers on Sunbeam's sleek sides, "especially as you won't even tell me where you're going or what you expect to find."

Brant couldn't have answered the last question even had he wished. In his more rational moments he knew that he would find nothing of value in Shastar. Indeed, it was hard to think of anything which his people did not already possess, or could not obtain instantly if they wished. But the journey itself would be the proof—the most convincing he could imagine—of his love for Yradne.

There was no doubt that she was quite impressed by his preparations, and he had been careful to underline the dangers he was about to face. It would be very uncomfortable sleeping in the open, and he would have a most monotonous diet. He might even get lost and never be seen again.

Suppose there were still wild beasts—dangerous ones—up in the hills or in the forests?

Old Johan, who had no feeling for historical traditions, had protested at the indignity of a blacksmith having anything to do with such a primitive survival as a horse. Sunbeam had nipped him delicately for this, with great skill and precision, while he was bending to examine her hooves. But he had rapidly manufactured a set of panniers in which Brant could put everything he needed for the journey—even his drawing materials, from which he refused to be separated. Treggor had advised on the technical details of the harness, producing ancient prototypes consisting largely of string.

It was still early morning, when the last adjustments had been completed and Sunbeam was waiting more or less patiently to start. Brant had intended making his departure as unobtrusive as possible, and his complete success was slightly mortifying. Only Jon and Yradne came to see him off.

THEY WALKED in thoughtful silence to the end of the village and crossed the slim metal bridge over the river. Then Jon said gruffly: "Well, don't go and break your silly neck," shook hands, and departed, leaving him alone with Yradne. It was a very nice gesture, and Brant appreciated it.

Taking advantage of her master's preoccupation, Sunbeam began to browse among the long grass by the river's edge. Brant shifted awkwardly from foot to foot for a moment, then said half-heartedly:

"I suppose I'd better be going."

"How long will you be away?" asked Yradne. She wasn't wearing Jon's present: perhaps she had grown tired of it already. Brant hoped so—then realised she might lose interest equally quickly in anything he brought back for her.

"Oh, about a fortnight—if all goes well," he added darkly.

"Do be careful," said Yradne, in tones of vague urgency, "and don't do anything rash."

"I'll do my best," answered Brant, still

making no move to go, "but one has to take risks sometimes."

This disjointed conversation might have lasted a good deal longer had Sunbeam not taken charge. Brant's arm received a sudden jerk and he was dragged away at a brisk walk. He had regained his balance and was about to wave farewell when Yradne came flying up to him, gave him a large kiss, and disappeared towards the village before he could recover.

She slowed down to a walk when Brant could no longer see her. Jon was still a good way ahead but she made no attempt to overtake him. A curiously solemn feeling, out of place on this bright spring morning, had overcome her. It was very pleasant to be loved, but it had its disadvantages if one stopped to look beyond the immediate moment. For a fleeting instant Yradne wondered if she had been fair to Jon, to Brant—even to herself. One day the decision would have to be made: it could not be postponed forever. Yet she could not for the life of her decide which of the boys she liked the better: and she did not know if she loved either.

No one had ever told her, and she had not yet discovered, that when one has to ask, "Am I really in love?" the answer is always "No."

## V

### THE ROAD TO THE SEA.

**B**YOND CHALDIS THE FOREST stretched for five miles to the east and then petered out into the great plain which spanned the remainder of the continent. Six thousand years ago this land had been one of the mightiest deserts in the world, and its reclamation had been among the first great achievements of the Atomic Age.

Brant intended to go east until he was clear of the forest, and then to turn towards the high land of the north. According to the maps there had once been a road along the spine of the hills, linking together all the cities on the coast in a chain that ended at Shastar. It should be easy to follow its track, though Brant did not

expect that much of the road itself would have survived the centuries.

He kept close to the river, hoping that it had not changed its path since the maps were made. It was both his guide and his highway through the forest: when the trees were too thick he and Sunbeam could always wade in the shallow water. Sunbeam was quite co-operative: there was no grass here to distract her, so she plodded methodically along with little prompting.

Soon after mid-day the trees began to thin out. Brant had reached the frontier that, century by century, had been on the march across the lands that man no longer wished to hold. A little later the forest was behind him and he was out in the open plain.

He checked his position from the map, and noted that the trees had advanced an appreciable distance eastwards since it was drawn. But there was a clear route north to the low hills along which the ancient road had run, and he should be able to reach them before evening.

At this point certain unforeseen difficulties of a technical nature arose. Sunbeam, finding herself surrounded by the most appetizing grass she had seen for a long time, was unable to resist pausing every three or four steps to collect a mouthful. As Brant was attached to her bridle by a rather short rope, the resulting jerks almost dislocated his forearm. Lengthening the rope made matters even worse as he then had no control at all.

Now Brant was very fond of animals, but it soon became apparent to him that Sunbeam was simply imposing on his good nature. He put up with it for half a mile, and then steered a course towards a tree which seemed to have particularly slender and lissom branches. Sunbeam watched him warily out of the corners of her limpid brown eyes as he cut a fine, resilient switch and attached it ostentatiously to his belt. Then she set off so briskly that he could scarcely keep pace with her.

She was undoubtedly, as Treggor had claimed, a singularly intelligent beast.

The range of hills that was Brant's first objective was less than two thousand feet

high, and the slope was very gentle. But there were numerous annoying foot-hills and minor valleys to be surmounted on the way to the crest, and it was well towards evening before they had reached the highest point. To the south Brant could see the forest through which he had come, and which could now hinder him no more. Chaldis was somewhere in its midst, though he had only a rough idea of its location: he was surprised to find that he could see no signs of the great clearings that his people had made. To the south-east the plain stretched endlessly away, a level sea of grass dotted with little clumps of trees—the outposts of the army that would one day advance to meet them. Near the horizon Brant could see tiny, creeping specks, and guessed that some great herd of wild animals was on the move.

Northwards lay the sea, only a dozen miles away down the long slope and across the lowlands. It seemed almost black in the failing sunlight, save where tiny breakers dotted it with flecks of snow.

**B**EFORE NIGHTFALL Brant found a hollow out of the wind, anchored Sunbeam to a stout bush, and pitched the little tent that Old Johan had contrived for him. This was, in theory, a very simple operation, but as a good many people had found before, it was one that could tax skill and temper to the utmost. At last everything was finished, and he settled down for the night.

There are some things that no amount of pure intelligence can anticipate, but which can only be learned by bitter experience. Who would have guessed that the human body was so sensitive to the almost imperceptible slope on which the tent had been pitched? More uncomfortable still were the minute thermal differences between one point and another, presumably caused by the draughts that seemed to wander through the tent at will. Brant could have endured a uniform temperature gradient, but the unpredictable variations were maddening.

He woke from his fitful sleep a dozen times, or so it seemed, and towards dawn his morale had reached its lowest ebb. He

felt cold and miserable and stiff, as if he had not slept properly for days, and it would have needed very little persuasion to have made him abandon the whole enterprise. He was prepared—even willing—to face danger in the cause of love: but lumbago was a different matter.

The discomforts of the night were soon forgotten in the glory of the new day. Here on the hills the air was fresh with the tang of salt, borne by the wind that came climbing up from the sea. The dew was everywhere, hanging thickly on each bent blade of grass—but so soon to be destroyed beyond all trace by the steepening sun. It was good to be alive: it was better to be young: it was best of all to be in love.

They came upon the road very soon after they had started the day's journey. Brant had missed it before as it had been further down the seaward slope, and he had expected to find it on the crest of the hill. It had been superbly built, and the millennia had touched it lightly. Nature had tried in vain to obliterate it: here and there she had succeeded in burying a few metres with a light blanket of earth, but then her servants had turned against her and the wind and the rain had scoured it clean once more. In a great jointless band, skirting the edge of the sea for more than a thousand miles, the road still linked the cities that Man had loved in his childhood.

It was one of the great roads of the world. Once it had been no more than a footpath along which savage tribes had come down to the sea to barter with wily, bright-eyed merchants from distant lands. Then it had known new and more exacting masters: the soldiers of a mighty empire had shaped and hewn the road so skillfully along the hills that the path they gave it had remained unchanged down all the ages. They had paved it with stone so that their armies could move more swiftly than any that the world had known: and along the road their legions had been hurled like thunderbolts at the bidding of the city whose name they bore. Centuries later, that city had called them home in its last extremity: and the road had rested then for five hundred years.

But other wars were still to come: beneath crescent banners the armies of the Prophet were yet to storm westwards into Christendom. Later still—centuries later—the tide of the last and greatest of conflicts was to turn here, as steel monsters clashed together in the desert and the sky itself rained death.

The centurions, the paladins, the armoured divisions—even the desert—all were gone. But the road remained, of all man's creations the most enduring. For ages enough it had borne his burdens: and now along its whole thousand miles it carried no more traffic than one boy and a horse.

**B**RANT followed the road for three days, keeping always in sight of the sea. He had grown used to the minor discomforts of a nomadic existence, and even the nights were no longer intolerable. The weather had been perfect—long, warm days and mild nights—but the fine spell was coming to an end.

He estimated that he was less than five miles from Shastar on the evening of the fourth day. The road was now turning away from the coast to avoid a great headland jutting out to sea. Beyond this was the sheltered bay along whose shores the city had been built: when it had by-passed the high ground, the road would sweep northwards in a great curve and come down upon Shastar from the hills.

Towards dusk it was clear that Brant could not hope to see his goal that day. The weather was breaking, and thick, angry clouds had been gathering swiftly from the west. He was climbing now—for the road was rising slowly as it crossed the last ridge—in the teeth of a gale. He would have pitched camp for the night if he could have found a sheltered spot, but the hill was bare for miles behind him and there was nothing to do but to struggle onwards.

For ahead, at the very crest of the ridge, something low and dark was silhouetted against the threatening sky. The hope that it might provide shelter drove Brant onwards: Sunbeam, head well down

against the wind, plodded steadily beside him with equal determination.

They were still a mile from the summit when the rain began to fall, first in single, angry drops and then in blinding sheets. It was impossible to see more than a few paces ahead, even when one could open one's eyes against the stinging rain. Brant was already so wet that any additional moisture could add nothing to his discomfort: indeed, he had reached that sodden state when the continuing downpour almost gave him a masochistic pleasure. But the sheer physical effort of fighting against the gale was rapidly exhausting him.

It seemed ages before the road levelled out and he knew he had reached the summit. He strained his eyes into the gloom and could see, not far ahead, a great dark shape which for a moment he thought might be a building. Even if it was in ruins, it would give him shelter from the storm.

The rain began to slacken as he approached the object: overhead, the clouds were thinning to let through the last fading light of the western sky. It was just sufficient to show Brant that what lay ahead of him was no building at all, but a great stone beast, crouching upon the hilltop and staring out to sea. He had no time to examine it more closely, but hurriedly pitched his tent in its shelter, out of reach of the wind that still raved angrily overhead.

It was completely dark when he had dried himself and prepared a meal. For a while he rested in his warm little oasis, in that state of blissful exhaustion that comes after hard and successful effort. Then he roused himself, took a hand-torch, and went out into the night.

**T**HE STORM had blown away the clouds and the night was brilliant with stars. In the west a thin crescent moon was sinking, following hard upon the footsteps of the sun. To the north Brant was aware—though how he could not have said—of the sleepless presence of the sea. Down there in the darkness Shastar was lying, the waves marching for-

ever against it: but strain his eyes as he might he could see nothing at all.

He walked along the flanks of the great statue, examining the stone-work by the light of his torch. It was smooth and unbroken by any joints or seams, and although time had stained and discoloured it, there was no sign of wear. It was impossible to guess its age: it might be older than Shastar, or it might have been made only a few centuries ago. There was no way of telling.

The hard, blue-white beam of the torch flickered along the monster's wetly-gleaming sides and came to rest upon the great, calm face and the empty eyes. One might have called it a human face: but thereafter, words faltered and failed. Neither male nor female, it seemed at first sight utterly indifferent to all the passions of mankind: then Brant saw that the storms of ages had left their mark behind them. Countless raindrops had coursed down those adamantine cheeks, until they bore the stains of Olympian tears—tears, perhaps, for the city whose birth and death now seemed almost equally remote.

\* \* \*

Brant was so tired that when he awoke the sun was already high. He lay for a moment in the filtered half-light of the tent, recovering his senses and remembering where he was. Then he rose to his feet and went blinking into the daylight, shielding his eyes from the dazzling glare.

The Sphinx seemed smaller than by night, though it was impressive enough. It was coloured, Brant saw for the first time, a rich, autumnal gold, the colour of no natural rock. He knew from this that it did not belong, as he had half suspected, to any prehistoric culture. It had been built by science from some inconceivably stubborn, synthetic substance, and Brant realised that it must lie almost mid-way in time between him and the fabulous original which had inspired it.

Slowly, half afraid of what he might discover, he turned his back upon the Sphinx and looked to the north. The hill fell away at his feet and the road went

sweeping down the long slope as if impatient to greet the sea: and there at its end lay Shastar.

It caught the sunlight and tossed it back to him, tinted with all the colours of its makers' dreams. The spacious buildings lining the wide streets seemed unravished by time: the great band of marble that held the sea at bay was still unbreached: the parks and gardens, though long overgrown with weeds, were not yet jungles. The city followed the curve of the bay for perhaps a mile, and stretched as far inland: by the standards of the past, it was very small indeed. But to Brant it seemed enormous, a maze of streets and squares intricate beyond unravelling. Then he began to discern the underlying symmetry of its design, to pick out the main thoroughfares, and to see the skill with which its makers had avoided both monotony and discord.

For a long time Brant stood motionless on the hilltop, conscious only of the wonder spread beneath his eyes. He was alone in all that landscape, a tiny figure lost and humble before the achievements of greater men. The sense of history, the vision of the long slope up which Man had been toiling for a million years or more, was almost overwhelming. In that moment it seemed to Brant that from his hilltop he was looking over Time rather than Space: and in his ears there whispered the sighing of the winds of eternity as they sweep into the past.

## VI

### THE CITY AND THE SEA.

SUNBEAM SEEMED VERY NERVOUS as they approached the outskirts of the city. She had never seen anything like this before in her life, and Brant could not help sharing some of her uneasiness. However unimaginative one may be, there is something ominous about buildings that have been deserted for centuries: and those of Shastar had been empty for at least five thousand years.

The road ran straight and true past two tall pillars of white metal: like the



Sphinx, they were tarnished but unworn. Brant and Sunbeam passed between these silent guardians and found themselves before a long, low building which must have served as some kind of reception point for visitors to the city.

From a distance it had seemed that Shastar might have been abandoned only yesterday, but now Brant could see a thousand little signs of desolation and neglect. The coloured stone of the buildings was stained with the patina of age: the windows were gaping, skull-blank eyes, with here and there a miraculously preserved fragment of glass.

Brant tethered Sunbeam outside the first building and made his way to the entrance across the rubble and thickly-piled dirt. There was no door, if indeed there had ever been one, and he passed through the high, vaulted archway into a hall which seemed to run the full length of the structure. At regular intervals there were openings into further chambers, and immediately ahead of him a wide flight of stairs rose to the single floor above.

It took him almost an hour to explore the building, and when he left he was infinitely depressed. His careful search had revealed absolutely nothing. All the rooms, great and small, were completely empty: he had felt like an ant crawling through the bones of a clean-picked skeleton.

Out in the sunlight, however, his spirits revived a little. This building was probably only some sort of administrative office and would never have contained anything but records and information machines: elsewhere in the city, things might be different. Even so, the magnitude of the search appalled him.

Slowly he made his way towards the sea-front, moving awestruck through the wide avenues and admiring the towering facades on either side. Near the centre of the city he came upon one of its many parks. It was largely overgrown with weeds and shrubs, but there were still considerable areas of grass, and he decided to leave Sunbeam here while he continued his explorations. She was not likely to move very far away while there was plenty to eat.

It was so peaceful in the park that for a while Brant was loath to leave it to plunge again into the desolation of the city. There were plants here unlike any that he had ever seen before, the wild descendants of those which the people of Shastar had cherished ages since. As he stood among the high grasses and unknown flowers, Brant heard for the first time, stealing through the calm stillness of the morning, the sound he was always to link with Shastar. It came from the sea, and though he had never heard it before in all his life, it brought a sense of aching recognition into his heart. Where no other voices sounded now, the lonely seagulls were still calling sadly across the waves.

**I**T WAS QUITE CLEAR that many days would be needed to make even the most superficial examination of the city, and the first thing to do would be to find somewhere to live. Brant spent several hours searching for the residential district of the city before it began to dawn on him that there was something very peculiar about Shastar. All the buildings he entered were, without exception, designed for work, entertainment, or similar purposes: but none of them had been designed *to live in*. The solution came to him slowly. As he grew to know the pattern of the city, he noticed that at almost every street intersection there were low, single-storied structures of nearly identical form. They were circular or oval, and had many openings leading into them from all directions. When Brant entered one of them, he found himself facing a line of great metal gates, each with a vertical row of indicator lamps by its side. And so he knew where the people of Shastar had lived.

At first the idea of underground homes was completely repellent to him. Then he overcame his prejudice, and realised how sensible, as well as how inevitable, this was. There was no need to clutter up the surface, and to block the sunlight, with buildings designed for the merely mechanical processes of sleeping and eating. By putting all these things underground, the people of Shastar had been able to build

a noble and spacious city—and yet keep it so small that one could walk its whole length in twenty minutes.

The elevators were, of course, useless, but there were emergency stairways winding down into the darkness. Once all this underworld must have been a blaze of light, but Brant hesitated now before he descended the steps. He had his torch, but he had never been underground before and had a horror of losing his way in some subterranean catacombs. Then he shrugged his shoulders and started down the steps: after all, there was no danger if he took the most elementary precautions—and there were hundreds of other exits even if he did lose his way.

He descended to the first level and found himself in a long, wide corridor stretching as far as the torch could penetrate. On either side were rows of numbered doors, and Brant tried nearly a dozen before he found one that opened. Slowly, even reverently, he entered the little home that had been deserted for almost half the span of human history.

It was clean and tidy, for there had been no dust or dirt to settle here. The beautifully proportioned rooms were bare of furniture: nothing of value had been left behind in the leisurely, age-long exodus. Some of the machines which were semi-permanent fittings were still in position: the food distributor, with its familiar selector dial, was so strikingly like the one in Brant's own home that the sight of it almost annihilated the centuries. The dial still turned, though stiffly, and he would scarcely have been surprised to see a meal appear in the materialisation chamber.

**B**RANT explored several more homes before he returned to the surface. Though he found nothing of value, he was beginning to feel a growing sense of kinship towards the people who had lived here. Until now he had never thought of them as ancestors: they had seemed no more than remote cousins, a branch of humanity that had died and left no descendants. He knew now that this was incorrect. The

design of the houses, the unfaded colours that still glowed on every wall, these and a score of indefinable impressions told him that the people of Shastar belonged to his own lineage. But even when he had admitted this, he still thought of them as his inferiors. To have lived in a city—however beautiful, however brilliantly designed—was to Brant one of the symbols of barbarism. That the very opposite idea had once been common would have filled him with more amusement than annoyance.

In the last home he entered he came across a brightly coloured room with a fresco of dancing animals around the walls. The pictures were full of whimsical humor that must have delighted the hearts of the children for whom they had been drawn. Brant examined the paintings with great interest as they were the first works of representative art he had found in Shastar. He was about to leave when he noticed a tiny pile of dust in one corner of the room, and bending down to investigate found himself looking at the still recognisable fragments of a doll. Nothing solid remained save a few coloured buttons, which crumbled to powder in his hand when he picked them up. He wondered why this sad little relic had been left behind by its owner: then he tip-toed away and returned to the surface and the lonely but sunlit streets. He never went to the underground city again.

Towards evening he revisited the park to see that Sunbeam had been up to no mischief, and prepared to spend the night in one of the numerous small buildings scattered through the gardens. Here he was surrounded by flowers and trees, and could almost imagine he was home again. He slept better than he had done since he left Chaldis, and for the first time for many days, his last waking thoughts were not of Yfadne. The magic of Shastar was already working upon his mind: the infinite complexity of the civilization he had affected to despise was changing him more swiftly than he could imagine. The longer he stayed in the city, the more remote he would become from the naive yet self-confident boy who had entered it only a few hours before.

The second day confirmed the impressions of the first. Shastar had not died in a year, or even in a generation. Slowly its people had drifted away as the new—yet how old!—pattern of society had been evolved and man had returned to the hills and the forests. They had left nothing behind them, save these marble monuments to a way of life that was gone forever. Even if anything of value had remained, the thousands of curious explorers who had come here in the fifty centuries since would have taken it long ago. Brant found many traces of his predecessors: their names were carved on walls throughout the city, for this is one kind of immortality that men have never been able to resist.

**T** IRED AT LAST by his fruitless search, he went down to the shore and sat on the wide stonework of the breakwater. The sea lying a few feet beneath him was utterly calm and of a cerulean blue: it was so still and clear that he could watch the fish swimming in its depths, and at one spot could see a wreck lying on its side with the seaweed streaming straight up from it like long, green hair. Yet there must be times, he knew, when the waves had come thundering over these massive walls: for behind him the wide parapet was strewn with a thick carpet of stones and shells, tossed there by the gales of centuries.

The enervating peacefulness of the scene, and the unforgettable object-lesson in the futility of ambition that surrounded him on every side, took away all sense of disappointment or defeat. Though Shastar had given him nothing of material value, Brant did not regret his journey. It had been an experience whose full value he might never realize: but already it had given him a sense of detachment and taught him the beginnings of wisdom. Sitting here on the sea-wall, with his back to the land and his eyes dazzled by that blinding blue, he already felt remote from his old problems, and could look back with no pain at all, but only a dispassionate curiosity, on all the heartache and the anxiety that had plagued him these last few months. And

for the first time he realised, with no more than a mild sense of wonder, that even Yradne now seemed someone he had known in another life.

He went slowly back into the city, after walking a little way along the sea-front so that he could return by a new route. Presently he found himself before a large circular building whose roof was a shallow dome of some translucent material. He looked at it with little interest, for he was emotionally, exhausted, and decided that it was probably yet another theatre or concert hall. He had almost passed the entrance when some obscure impulse diverted him and he went through the open doorway.

Inside, the light filtered through the ceiling with such little hindrance that Brant almost had the impression of being in the open air. The entire building was divided into numerous large halls whose purpose he realised with a sudden stir of excitement. The tall-rectangle walls of discoloration showed that the walls had once been almost covered with pictures; it was just possible that some had been left behind, and it would be interesting to see what Shastar could offer in the way of serious art. Brant, still secure in his consciousness of superiority, did not expect to be unduly impressed: and so the shock was all the greater when it came.

The blaze of colour along the whole length of the great wall smote him like a fan-fare of trumpets. For a moment he stood paralysed in the doorway, unable to grasp the pattern or meaning of what he saw. Then, slowly, he began to unravel the details of the tremendous and intricate mural that had burst suddenly upon his vision.

It was nearly a hundred feet long, and was incomparably the most wonderful thing that Brant had ever seen in his life. Shastar had awed and overwhelmed him, yet its tragedy had left him curiously unmoved. But this struck straight at his heart and spoke in a language he could understand: and as it did so the last vestiges of his condescension towards the past were scattered like leaves before a gale.

## VII

## HELEN.

THE EYE MOVED NATURALLY from left to right across the painting, to follow the curve of tension to its moment of climax. On the left was the sea, as deep a blue as the water that beat against Shastar: and moving across its face was a fleet of strange ships, driven by tiered banks of oars and by billowing sails that strained towards the distant shore. The painting covered not only miles of space but perhaps years of time: for now the ships had reached that rocky coast and there on the wide plain an army lay encamped, its banners and tents and chariots dwarfed by the walls of the fortress city it was beleaguering. The eye scaled those still inviolate walls and came to rest, as it was meant to do, upon the woman who stood upon them, looking down at the army that had followed her across the ocean.

She was leaning forward to peer over the battlements, and the wind was catching her hair so that it formed a golden mist about her head. Upon her face was written a sadness too deep for words, yet one that did nothing to mar the unbelievable beauty of her face—a beauty that held Brant spellbound, for long unable to tear away his eyes. When at last he could do so, he followed her gaze down those seemingly impregnable walls to the group of soldiers toiling in their shadow. They were gathered around something so foreshortened by perspective that it was some time before Brant realised what it was. Then he saw that it was an enormous statue or model of a horse, mounted on rollers so that it could be easily moved. It roused no echoes in his mind and he quickly returned to the lonely figure on the wall, around whom, as he now saw, the whole great design was balanced and pivoted. For as the eye moved on across the painting, taking the mind with it into the future, it came upon ruined battlements, the smoke of the burning city staining the

sky, and the fleet returning homewards, its mission done.

Brant left only when the light was so poor that he could no longer see. When the first shock had worn off, he had examined the great painting more closely: and for a while he had searched, but in vain, for the signature of the artist. He also looked for some caption or title, but it was clear that there had never been one—perhaps because the story was too well-known to need it. In the intervening centuries, however, some other visitor to Shaster had scratched two lines of poetry on the wall:

*"Is this the face that launched  
a thousand ships  
And burned the topless  
towers of Illium?"*

Illium! It was a strange and magical name: but it meant nothing to Brant. He wondered whether it belonged to history or to fable, not knowing how many before him had wrestled with that same problem.

AS HE EMERGED into the luminous twilight, he still carried the vision of that sad, ethereal loveliness before his eyes. Perhaps if Brant had not himself been an artist, and had been in less susceptible a state of mind, the impression would not have been so overwhelming. Yet it was the impression that the unknown master had set out to create, Phoenix-like, from the dying embers of a great legend. He had captured, and held for all future ages to see, that beauty whose service is the purpose of life, and its sole justification.

For a long time Brant sat under the stars, watching the crescent moon sink behind the towers of the city. Two questions were beginning to haunt him, question to which he could never know the answers. All the other pictures in these galleries had gone, scattered beyond tracing not merely throughout the world but throughout the universe. How had they compared with the single work of genius that now must represent forever the art of Shastar?

It was one of the subtler ironies of fate that had given the unknown artist his final revenge. He had done his work when

the city was young and before the creative impulse of its builders had been wholly spent. To later generations he had brought a reminder of all that they had lost, and they had preferred the work of comfortable mediocrities. The artist had left Shastar in disgust, and his bones were now lying many light-years from Earth. Yet his work lived on, though seen by no more than a handful of men every century, while all else in the city had perished.

The second problem was one which in his present mood affected Brant even more deeply. No artist ever creates anything entirely new: and despite her ethereal beauty the woman on the battlements had almost certainly been inspired by some living model. Before this message from the past, Brant's own ideals seemed suddenly tawdry and worthless. Were all the women of Shastar as beautiful as this? No, that was impossible: but the general standard must have been infinitely higher than in his own age. He knew now, though he could never tell her this, that he had only loved Yradne because he knew no better.

His dreams were crumbling around him, and he had nothing to replace them save an ideal as unattainable as any that could be conceived. He felt that he never wished to return to Chaldis, for what could he say to Yradne when they met again?

As all men must do, soon or late, he had lost his first love: and already he had passed the moment when indifference succeeds regret.

**I**N THE MORNING he returned, half afraid that the magic would have faded and only disillusion be left. His first glance reassured him: all the emotions of yesterday came flooding back with undiminished strength. Though he knew he must soon return to Chaldis, he could not leave without capturing some faint echo at least of the beauty that had possessed his mind: and there was only one way in which that could be done.

Like some worshipper preparing for his devotions, Brant set up his little folding easel and prepared his paints. He had not used them before, though he had made

numerous pencil sketches, and several times had regretted bringing them. Any copy he produced would only be a travesty of the original, but it would at least be something to take with him into exile.

He worked steadily all through the day, and the sheer concentration of his labours brought him a certain peace of mind. As if reluctant to embark immediately on the most difficult task, he made several large sketches of the entire mural before commencing to copy the portrait. By nightfall he had made considerable progress, and began to think that the task was not so completely impossible as he had feared.

He lost most of his optimism on the next morning. His food supply was running low, and perhaps the thought that he was working against time had unsettled him. Everything seemed to be going wrong: the colours would not match, and the painting which had shown such promise the day before was becoming less and less like the original every minute.

To make matters worse, the light was failing, though it was barely past noon, and Brant guessed that the sky outside had become overcast. He rested for a little while in the hope that it might clear again, but it showed no signs of doing so and he recommenced work, bending lower over his paints and deciding glumly that the results could hardly be any worse and might conceivably be better.

The afternoon waned rapidly away, but in his fury of concentration Brant scarcely noticed the passage of time. Once or twice he thought he noticed distant sounds and wondered if a storm was coming up, for the sky was still very dark.

There is no experience more chilling than the sudden, the utterly unexpected knowledge that one is no longer alone. It would be hard to say what impulse made Brant slowly lay down his brush and turn, even more slowly, towards the great doorway forty feet behind him. The man standing there must have entered almost soundlessly, and how long he had been watching him Brant had no way of guessing. A moment later he was joined by two companions, who also made no attempt to pass the doorway.



*Like some worshipper preparing for his devotions, Brant set up his folding easel and prepared his paints . . .*

**B**RANT ROSE SLOWLY to his feet, his brain whirling. For a moment he almost imagined that ghosts from Shastar's past had come back to haunt him. Then reason reasserted itself. After all, why should he not meet other visitors here, when he was one himself?

He took a few paces forward, and one of the strangers did likewise. When they were a few yards apart, the other said in a very clear voice, speaking rather slowly: "I hope we haven't disturbed you."

It was not a very dramatic conversational opening, and Brant was somewhat

puzzled by the man's accent—or, more accurately, by the exceedingly careful way he was pronouncing his words. It almost seemed that he did not expect Brant to understand him otherwise.

"That's quite all right," Brant replied, speaking equally slowly. "You gave me rather a surprise—I didn't expect to meet anyone here."

"Neither did we," said the other with a slight smile. "We had no idea that anyone still lived in Shastar."

"But I don't," explained Brant. "I'm just a visitor like you."

The three exchanged glances as if sharing some secret joke. Then one of them lifted a small metal object from his belt and spoke a few words into it, too softly for Brant to overhear. He presumed that other members of the party were on the way, and felt annoyed that his solitude was to be so completely shattered.

Two of the strangers had walked over to the great mural and begun to examine it critically. Brant wondered what they were thinking: somehow he resented sharing his treasure with those who would not feel the same reverence towards it—those to whom it would be nothing more than a pretty picture. The third man remained by his side comparing, as unobtrusively as possible, Brant's copy with the original. All three seemed to be deliberately avoiding further conversation. There was a long and embarrassing silence: then the other two men rejoined them.

"Well, Eryln, what do you think of it?" said one, waving his hand towards the painting. They seemed for the moment to have lost all interest in Brant.

"It's a very fine late Third Millennium primitive, as good as anything we have. Don't you agree, Latvar?"

"Not exactly. I wouldn't say it's late Third. For one thing, the subject—"

"Oh, you and your theories! But perhaps you're right. It's too good for the last period. On second thoughts I'd date it around 2500. What do you say, Trescon?"

"I agree. Probably Aroon or one of his pupils."

"Rubbish!" said Latvar.

"Nonsense!" snorted Eryln.

"Oh, very well," replied Trescon good-naturedly. "I've only studied this period for thirty years, while you've just looked it up since we started. So I bow to your superior knowledge."

**B**RANT had followed this conversation with growing surprise and a rapidly mounting sense of bafflement.

"Are all three of you artists?" he blurted out at last.

"Of course," replied Trescon grandly. "Why else would we be here?"

"Don't be a damned liar," said Eryln, without even raising his voice. "You won't be an artist if you live a thousand years. You're merely an expert, and you know it. Those who can—do: those who can't—criticise."

"Where have you come from?" asked Brant, a little faintly. He had never met anyone quite like these extraordinary men. They were in late middle age, yet seemed to have an almost boyish gusto and enthusiasm. All their movements and gestures were just a little larger than life, and when they were talking to each other they spoke so quickly that Brant found it difficult to follow them.

Before anyone could reply there was a further interruption. A dozen men appeared in the doorway—and were brought to a momentary halt by their first sight of the great painting. Then they hurried to join the little group around Brant, who now found himself the center of a small crowd.

"Here you are, Kondar," said Trescon, pointing to Brant. "We've found someone who can answer your questions."

The man who had been addressed looked at Brant closely for a moment, glanced at his unfinished painting, and smiled a little. Then he turned to Trescon and lifted his eyebrows in interrogation.

"No," said Trescon succinctly.

Brant was getting annoyed. Something was going on that he didn't understand, and he resented it.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about?" he said plaintively.

Kondar looked at him with an unfathomable expression. Then he said quietly:

"Perhaps I could explain things better if you came outside."

He spoke as if he never had to ask twice for a thing to be done: and Brant followed him without a word, the others crowding close behind him. At the outer entrance Kondar stood aside and waved Brant to pass.

**I**T WAS STILL unnaturally dark, as if a thundercloud had blotted out the sun: but the shadow that lay the full length of Shastar was not that of any cloud.

A dozen pairs of eyes were watching Brant as he stood staring at the sky, trying to gauge the true size of the ship floating above the city. It was so close that the sense of perspective was lost: one was conscious only of sweeping metal curves that dwindled away to the horizon. There should have been some sound, some indication of the energies holding that stupendous mass at rest above Shastar: but there was only a silence deeper than any that Brant had known. Even the crying of the seagulls had ceased, as if they, too, were overawed by the intruder who had usurped their skies.

At last Brant turned towards the men gathered behind him. They were waiting, he knew, for his reactions: and the reason for their curiously aloof yet not unfriendly behaviour became suddenly clear. A very little while ago he would have felt deeply insulted, but now he had learned humility. To these men, rejoicing in the powers of gods, he was little more than a savage who happened to speak the same language—a survival from their own half-forgotten past, reminding them of the days when their ancestors had shared the earth with his.

"Do you understand, now, who we are?" asked Kondar.

Brant nodded.

"You have been gone a long time," he said. "We had almost forgotten you."

He looked up again at the great metal arch spanning the sky, and thought how strange it was that the first contact after so many centuries should be here, in this lost city of mankind. But it seemed that Shastar was well remembered among the

stars, for certainly Trescon and his friends had appeared perfectly familiar with it.

And then, far to the north, Brant's eye was caught by a sudden flash of reflected sunlight. Moving purposefully across the band of sky framed beneath the ship was another metal giant that might have been its twin, dwarfed though it was by distance. It passed swiftly across the horizon and within seconds was gone from sight.

So this was not the only ship: and how many more might there be? Somehow the thought reminded Brant of the great painting he had just left, and of the invading fleet moving with such deadly purpose towards the doomed city. And with that thought there came into his soul, creeping out from the hidden caves of racial memory, the fear that once had been the curse of all mankind. He turned to Kondar and cried accusingly:

"You're invading Earth!"

For a moment no one spoke. Then Trescon said, with a slight touch of malice in his voice:

"Go ahead, Commander—you've got to explain it sooner or later. Now's a good time to practice."

Commander Kondar gave a worried little smile that both reassured Brant and filled him with yet deeper forebodings.

"You do us an injustice, young man," he said gravely. "We're not invading Earth. We're evacuating it."

## VIII

### THE ENDING OF AN AGE.

**T**HE DANGER WAS STILL A light-year away—if indeed anything so impalpable could be said to have a definite location in space. Many names had been given to it, some official, others the reverse. Commander Kondar always referred to it as the "Sigma Field", but the mathematical physicists pointed out that it was not, strictly speaking, a field so much as the absence of one. Trescon and his colleagues, who were in a state of constant amiable warfare with the scientists, called it "Frankie," which, as they carefully explained to Brant, was short



for "Frankenstein". They were disappointed when this failed to register.

"I hope," said Trescon, who had taken a patronizing interest in Brant, "that this time the scientists will have learned a lesson—though I doubt it. They just say 'accidents will happen', and when they've cleaned up one mess go on to make another. Frankie is certainly their most spectacular failure so far, but progress never ceases.

"It all began because someone wanted to build faster spaceships. There are still parts of the universe that can't be reached even by diving into sub-space and coming up somewhere else. You didn't know that spaceships worked that way? Oh well, never mind. I'm not very sure about it either.

"Anyway, you must be familiar with the basic laws of matter. Going no deeper than the first order of sub-atomic particles—the electrons and the rest—you know that they have a small but finite probability of being *anywhere* in the universe, and not merely at the point where our instruments locate them. An electron, for instance, can be regarded as a sort of mist of probability waves, thickest at the place where for want of a better word we say it 'is.' That's been known for thousands of years, since the Ancient Greeks or the Egyptians or whoever it was discovered it.

"Our too-brilliant scientists decided that it would be a nice thing if they could organise, as it were, these probability waves. If *all* the atoms in a substance suddenly found that they were more likely to be at Point B than at Point A, one would have instantaneous transport. That was the theory—ignoring a few hundred volumes of mathematics.

"They set up their experimental equipment out in space: one must give them credit for that much foresight. And there they created the Sigma Field—of which, despite everything, they are still frightfully proud. For it does the first half of the job: it multiplies the probabilities. But, unfortunately, it doesn't organise them. If a particle is put inside the field, its atoms will all be seized by an uncontrollable urge to go elsewhere—each to a different else-

where, so that the particle is spread more or less uniformly throughout the cosmos.

"That's where the controlling apparatus went, and the field was set free. It requires no power to maintain when it's not operating on matter—and when it is, it gets all the energy it needs from mass-conversion losses. So it's infernally stable, and it's roving more or less at random through the universe. No one has been able to devise any way of neutralising it—though there's a horrid suggestion that a twin should be created and a collision arranged. I think I know what would happen then: we'd just have two of them on our hands.

"I said that the thing was moving at random. It's a light-year from earth, and it's moving at the speed of light. Do you know the mathematical problem of the Drunkard's Walk? If each step is completely unrelated to the one before, the drunkard's probable distance from his starting point increases with the square root of the time. If Frankie hits the earth at all, the chances are that he'll do it in about a year and a half: but he *might*, with very bad luck, take no more than a year. On the other hand, it's much more likely that he'll miss you altogether. But the danger is too great to risk: we waited until the last possible moment as it was."

"And what would happen if he does hit Earth?"

"There's been a lot of speculation about the matter, and I'm sure that some of the scientists will be bitterly disappointed if at least one of the planets isn't hit. Presumably it would just dissolve, without any fuss or bother. But don't worry: the chances are still better than ten to one that the Earth will be untouched. In a few years, you'll be able to go home again, just as if nothing had ever happened."

"AS IF NOTHING had ever happened!" Whatever the future brought, the old way of life was gone forever. What was taking place in Shastar must now be happening, in one form or another, over all the world. Brant watched wide-eyed as strange machines rolled down the splendid streets, clearing away the rubble of ages and making the city fit for

habitation again. As an almost extinct star may suddenly blaze up in one last hour of glory, so for a few months Shastar would be one of the capitals of the world, housing the army of scientists, technicians and administrators that had descended upon it from space.

Brant was growing to know the invaders very well. Their vigour, the lavishness of everything they did, and the almost child-like delight they took in their superhuman powers, never ceased to astonish him. These, his cousins, were the heirs to all the universe: and they had not yet begun to exhaust its wonders or to tire of its mystery. For all their knowledge, there was still a feeling of experimentation, even of cheerful irresponsibility, about many of the things they did. The Sigma Field itself was an example of this: they had made a mistake, they did not seem to mind in the least, and they were quite sure that sooner or later they would put things right.

They regarded Brant, and probably all the inhabitants of Earth, with a good-natured but slightly contemptuous tolerance at which it was difficult to take offence because it was so completely justified. Even if they felt somewhat abashed at the position in which they now found themselves, they seemed quite confident that Earth would appreciate their efforts at rescue. They would be deeply hurt if they encountered any resentment and would put it down to gross ingratitude.

Trescon was in charge of the little group of experts who were responsible for the safety of such artistic treasures as Earth might still possess. They formed a small and rebellious minority in Kondar's command—itself only a fragment of a world-wide organization, based on the twenty or thirty great ships now scattered over the face of the planet. Brant liked to think that Trescon and his friends no longer regarded him as a complete savage, and indeed the fact that they had interests in common made a bond between them which the other members of the expedition did not share.

Despite the tumult that had been loosed upon Shastar, as indeed upon the entire planet, Brant had remained stubbornly at

at his self-appointed task. It gave him something fixed and stable in a world of shifting values, and as such he clung to it desperately. There was now no hurry to return to Chaldis: indeed, at Trescon's suggestion he had scrapped his first canvas and started afresh. As the work proceeded, Trescon's advice was proffered more and more frequently, and the final painting would be as much his work as Brant's. But it would be infinitely better than anything that Brant could do unaided: even if Trescon could create nothing himself, he was one of those rare critics whose advice was of practical value to an artist.

SOMETIMES, when Brant was tired and wished to rest his eyes or brain, he would leave the great empty galleries and go out into the transformed streets of the city. It was typical of its new inhabitants that though they would be here no more than a few months, they had spared no efforts to make Shastar clean and efficient, and to impose upon it a certain stark beauty that would have surprised its first builders. As far as Brant could gather, Shastar was to be used as a headquarters for a world-wide census which was being organized with incredible speed. But only the faintest of echoes from the outside reached him as he laboured.

He had left Chaldis scarcely two weeks ago, and already it seemed a dream within a dream. Soon he must return, though he felt a profound reluctance to do so; for the picture was finished at last.

Trescon had come in quietly—just as he had done at their first meeting—when Brant was putting the final touches. He had stood silently for a while, looking at the canvas with his lips closely pursed and an unfathomable expression on his face. Then he had remarked, rather grudgingly: "It's almost as good as I could have done at your age. In another twenty years you may produce something worthwhile: but not if you only copy other people's work."

"It's the first time I've ever done anything of the sort," Brant spluttered indignantly.

"Don't get annoyed," smiled Trescon. "I only wanted to confirm my suspicions. And

now, perhaps, you'll tell me just what you were doing in Shastar in the first place. After all, we've told you everything about our affairs; it's only right that you should do the same."

For a moment Brant avoided Trescon's eye. Then he gave the other an uneasy glance: and was relieved to see no more mockery there. So he began to talk, at first so quietly that Trescon found it hard to follow him.

It is easier for a man to speak of his hopes and ambitions, above all of his desires and his loves, to someone with whom he has no ties or emotional bonds: and Brant needed such a listener more badly than he could guess. Trescon followed intently, never interrupting even when the narrative faltered or became obscure, as Brant told of his life in Chaldis, of Yradne, of the beginning of his quest, and of its ending. And as he listened, Trescon began to feel more than a little ashamed of himself. He had, in his ignorance, looked upon these people of Earth as lazy, degenerate survivals who had almost lost all claim to be called human. Now he knew that some of them at least were capable of emotions as deep as any he had ever known. Listening to Brant's hesitant groping for words, Trescon began to feel an increasing sympathy and understanding that would have surprised his many enemies almost as much as it surprised himself. Perhaps, also, he saw in Brant an echo of what might have been—a reminder of the son his selfishness had left unborn.

BRANT'S VOICE died away into the unreverberant silence of the great chamber. High above, Helen seemed to be looking down upon them as upon the armies besieging Troy, and with the same sad resignation. Then Trescon, pacing nervously back and forth, began to speak.

"I am afraid, Brant," he said gently, "we have misjudged you and your people. You have not lost as much as we thought: nor as much, perhaps, as you yourself think you have lost.

"You still have ideals—but don't let them become obsessions. You are depressed now because you have waked from one

dream, and you are trying to clutch at another. Even our arrival, the greatest single event for centuries, hasn't broken the closed circle in which you are trying to lose yourself. But it will.

"When we came here, we did so merely under a sense of duty, not because we wanted to have anything to do with your race again. We imagined that we would simply take you to a place of safety, and, when the danger was past, return you to Earth, where you could continue your descent to savagery uninterrupted. I hope you don't mind me being so brutally frank.

"That was a selfish, indeed an immoral attitude. We have a much bigger duty than that towards you—one that we have neglected for the past few thousand years.

"I have made fun of the scientists, Brant, but they have freed us forever from the stagnation that was overtaking your race. With all the Universe before us, that is the one doom we shall never meet—what ever other perils we may encounter or create.

"You must get away from Earth, Brant: you must see the stars as I have done. Can you imagine what it means to hang in space amid one of the great multiple systems, with coloured suns blazing all around you? I have done that: and I have seen stars floating in rings of crimson fire, like your planet Saturn but a thousand times greater. And can you picture night on a world near the heart of the Galaxy, where the whole sky is luminous with the glowing star-mist that has not yet given birth to suns? Your Milky Way is only a pale ghost of the splendor you can see on other worlds.

"These are the great things: but there are small things too, no less wonderful. Drink your fill of all that the Universe can offer: and when you wish, return to Earth with your memories. Then you can begin to work: then, and no sooner, you will know if you are an artist.

"And perhaps you will also find, in the busy life that ebbs and flows between the stars, that other ideal you have been seeking: though I do not know whether to wish you success or failure there. If the choice

is ever yours, Brant, remember that great art seldom comes from happiness."

Brant was deeply moved by Trescon's words, and it was some time before he could reply. There was truth in what Trescon had said: but his mind still refused to accept the challenge thrown down before it.

"I will remember," he said at last. "But I never want to leave Earth, and I don't believe that my people will go, whatever the danger. This is our world, for all its faults."

Trescon seemed neither surprised nor disappointed.

"We shall see," he answered. "A good many things can happen in six months—and we are not altogether ignorant of psychology. Yours isn't the first world we have had to evacuate, for one reason or another. If I remember correctly, your own village once swore it would never move from the north. Yet here you are."

Brant was forced to smile.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "I wonder how my people have been taking the news? I must start for home tomorrow."

"Are you still determined to go on foot? I could arrange a flyer to carry you and your ridiculous animal back in ten minutes."

Brant shook his head.

"I want time to think," he said simply. "The journey will give me that—if I travel slowly enough."

## IX

### THE HOMEWARD ROAD.

**T**HE WIND CAME DOWN THE great road to greet them as they climbed out of Shastar towards the brow of the hill, Trescon was not used to walking, and Sunbeam still resented the termination of her holiday, so they moved even more slowly than the gradient demanded. But gradually the landscape widened around them, the horizon moved further out to sea, and the city began to look more and more like a toy built from coloured bricks—a toy dwarfed by the ship that still hung effortlessly, motionlessly above it.

For the first time Brant was able to see it as a whole, for it was floating almost level with his eyes and he could encompass it at a glance. It was roughly cylindrical in shape, but ended in complex polyhedral structures whose functions were beyond imagination. The sides and back bristled equally mysterious bulges, fluting and cupolas. It had none of the smooth beauty of the ships which Brant had seen in the ancient records: but those ships had been built merely to cross the little spaces between the planets, not to vanquish the gulfs in which the suns and galaxies floated.

Brant stood silently watching as Trescon prowled round the great Sphinx, examining it from every angle and taking innumerable photographs. When Brant asked him who had made it, he reeled off the names of a dozen artists and as many schools, then confessed that he didn't really know. But he was quite sure that it had been built at the same time as Shastar, or perhaps a little later.

"Well," said Trescon presently, "remember what I've said and get in touch with me when things start to happen. I'll be travelling all over Earth in the next few months, but I'll be back in Shastar when we know if we've got to move you. And by then, your village will be linked up with our communication system."

"I won't forget," promised Brant, "and thanks again for all your help."

They shook hands and parted. Brant watched Trescon as he marched briskly down the road, towards the city that had waked from its sleep and become thereby a symbol for the world. Even when the tiny figure had vanished from sight, Brant did not move. He tried, but in vain, to recall his emotions on that morning when he had first stood here beside the golden Sphinx, looking down upon Shastar and wondering what it held.

The boy who had come this way so short a time ago belonged to another existence. What had happened to him in Shastar? One day, perhaps, he would understand: but all he knew now was that he was drained of emotion or wonder. A sense of unreality lay over all the world around him; the sea and the city seemed figments of a

dream, and even the great ship brooding above them, for all the power and the purpose it embodied, might have been no more than a cloud carved strangely by the wind.

This was the pause while history held its breath, the hushed moment between the lightning flash and the advent of the first concussion. Against the forces that were gathering around him, Brant's own problem seemed, even to himself, a matter of supreme indifference.

The fact that he had settled nothing, that his journey had, by any material standards, been utterly in vain, now no longer concerned him in the least. He had learned that in life there is no finality, that every ending is merely a new beginning: and so on to the World's end.

To the World's end? No, beyond that: for the World might end before another Spring had run its course, and he would be an exile, with all his people, wandering homelessly among the stars. That was the future he did not care to face, the future he feared more deeply than Trescon, to whom the Universe had been a plaything for five thousand years, could ever understand.

**F**OR THE LAST TIME he saluted Shastar, then turned his back upon the sea and started the long journey home. The sun was shining in his eyes and the road before him seemed veiled with a bright, shimmering mist so that it quivered like a mirage or like the track of the moon upon troubled waters. For a moment Brant thought his eyes were deceiving him: then with a sudden shock of amazement, he saw that it was no illusion. As far as the eye could see, the wide expanse of the road and the land on either side had been veiled by countless strands of gossamer, so frail and fine that only the glancing sunlight revealed their presence. For the last mile he

had been striding through them, and they had resisted his passage no more than coils of smoke.

Through the night, the wind-borne spiders must have been falling in millions out of the sky: and as he stared up into the bottomless blue, Brant could still catch momentary glints of sunlight upon drifting silk as belated voyagers went sailing by. Not knowing whether they would travel, these tiny creatures had ventured forth into an abyss more friendless and more fathomless than any he would face if the time came to say farewell to Earth.

It was a lesson he would remember in the weeks and months ahead. For in his heart he knew that Trescon had spoken the truth, and that the stars were calling him with voices that now would nevermore be stilled. And beyond the stars—always beyond them, however far and fast he traveled—would be that vision of the beauty he was seeking and would never find. A little while ago it had seemed within his grasp: yet now of his love for Yradne only a puzzled wonderment was left. So might it be again and yet again in the years ahead, but the road he must follow lay clear before him, in all its loneliness and all its splendour. What was it that Trescon had said: "*Remember, Brant, great art seldom comes from happiness.*" Very well; that was a risk he was prepared to face.

Slowly the Sphinx sank into the skyline as it joined Shastar beyond the eclipsing crescent of the hills. Only once did Brant look back at the crouching monster, as if already he had guessed that they would meet again, perhaps in the last day he would spend on Earth. Then, without haste, he walked slowly forward into the sun, while ever and again impalpable fingers brushed his face as the strands of silk came drifting down the wind that blew from home.