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## Contents for December 1929

- Cover Design** ..... **Hugh Rankin**  
*Illustrating a Scene in "The Mystery of the Four Husbands"*
- Fantaisie d'Antan** ..... **Clark Ashton Smith** 724  
*Verse; decoration by Hugh Rankin*
- The Eyrie** ..... 726  
*A chat with the readers*
- The Mystery of the Four Husbands** ..... **Gaston Leroux** 730  
*A vivid weird mystery-story of a gloriously beautiful woman and her four murdered husbands*
- Children of Ubasti** ..... **Seabury Quinn** 742  
*An uncanny adventure of Jules de Grandin—a tale of a ghoulish pair who were neither brute nor human*

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE]

- The Gallows Tree** ----- **N. J. O'Neal** 760  
*A powerful occult story of a spectral tree that stood out on the moor and tured the doomed man to it*
- The Ticking of the Clock** ----- **A. and H. Greatraikes** 766  
*Cold terror assailed the bound man as the inexorable seconds ticked off his doom*
- Behind the Moon (Part 1)** ----- **W. Elwyn Backus** 769  
*A three-part weird-scientific serial story of eery perils and blood-freezing horrors encountered on the moon*
- In the Valley** ----- **Bertrande Harry Snell** 794  
*Verse*
- The Dancer in the Crystal** ----- **Francis Flagg** 795  
*Horror and panic seized the world when the crystal was broken and the black spot liberated*
- Skull-Face (Conclusion)** ----- **Robert E. Howard** 809  
*This swift-moving three-part serial rises to a crashing climax in these concluding chapters*
- The Shuttered Room** ----- **E. F. Benson** 826  
*A ghastly horror hovered over the house—a tale of clairvoyance, by a well-known British writer of weird stories*
- No Other Man** ----- **David H. Keller** 835  
*Another whimsical weird story about Cecil, son of James, Overlord of Cornwall*
- The Inheritors** ----- **August W. Derleth** 842  
*A brief story about a ghastly curse that struck on a certain day in each year*
- The Depths of the Lens** ----- **N. B. McFarland** 845  
*A short weird-scientific story involving a fantastic experience with a microscope*
- Weird Story Reprint:**  
**The Stranger from Kurdistan** ----- **E. Hoffmann Price** 848  
*One of the most popular stories from WEIRD TALES of several years back is reprinted here*
- A King in Babylon** ----- **W. E. Henley** 852  
*Verse*

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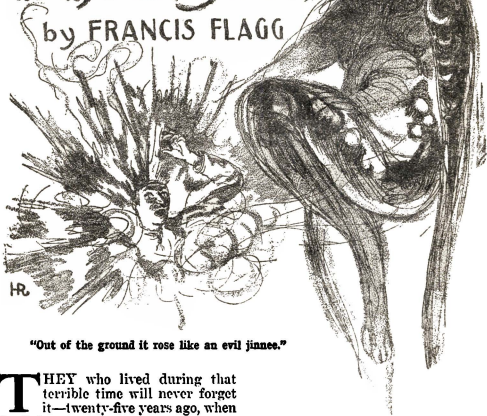
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# The Dancer in the Crystal

by FRANCIS FLAGG



"Out of the ground it rose like an evil jinne."

**T**HEY who lived during that terrible time will never forget it—twenty-five years ago, when the lights went out.

It was in 1941.

All over the world, in the same hour, and practically at the same minute, electrical machinery ceased to function.

The youth of today can hardly realize what a terrible disaster that was for the people of the middle Twentieth Century. England and America, as well as the major nations of Europe, had just finished electrifying their railroads and scrapping the ponderous steam engines which did duty on some lines up until

as late as the summer of 1939. A practical method of harnessing the tides and using their energy to develop electricity, coupled with the building of dams and the generating of cheap power through the labor of rushing rivers and giant waterfalls, and the invention of a device for broadcasting it by wireless as cheaply as it was generated, had hastened this electrification. The perfection of a new vacuum tube by the General Electric Company at Schenectady, in the United States, had made gas eco-

nomically undesirable. The new method, by which it was possible to relay heat for all purposes at one-third the cost of illuminating gas, swept the various gas companies into oblivion. Even the steamers which plied the seven seas, and the giant planes that soared the air, received the power that turned their propellers, warmed their cabins and cooked their foods, in much the same fashion as did the factories, the railroads, and the private homes and the hotels ashore. Therefore when electricity ceased to drive the machines, the world stopped. Telegraph, telephone, and wireless communication ceased. Country was cut off from country, city from city, and neighborhood from neighborhood. Automobiles broke down; street-cars and electric trains refused to run; powerhouses were put out of commission; and at night, save for the flickering light of what lanterns, candles, and oil lamps could be resurrected, cities, towns, and hamlets were smothered in darkness.

I have before me the records of that time. It was ten and eleven o'clock in London, Paris, Berlin, and other continental cities when it happened. Restaurants, theaters, hospitals and private homes were plunged into darkness. Mighty thoroughfares that a moment before had glittered and glowed with thousands of lights and wheeling signs became gloomy canyons where people at first paused, questioned, and later plunged through in terrified clamor. Various men who later wrote their impressions for newspapers and magazines say that the thing which shook their nerves the most was the sudden silence which prevailed when all traffic ceased—that, and five minutes later the maddened cries and groans and curses of men and women fighting like wild beasts to escape from crowded restaurants and theaters.

People coursed through the streets shouting to one another that the power-houses had been blown up, that

an earthquake had shaken them down. The most absurd statements were made, tossed from mouth to mouth, and added to the general bewilderment and panic. On the street corners religious fanatics suddenly sprang up, proclaiming that the end of the world had come, and that the sinners had better repent of their sins before it was too late. In the hospitals, nurses and doctors found themselves working under a frightful handicap. Gruesome tales are told of doctors caught in the midst of emergency operations. Because of the darkness it was impossible properly to attend the sick. Whenever available, candles, oil lamps and lanterns were pressed into service; but there were pitifully few of these to be had, and nowhere to turn for more. Telephone wires were dead, and automobiles, cars and busses stalled. To add to the horror, fire broke out in various places. There was no way of ringing in an alarm about them, and the fire apparatus could not have responded if there had been. So the fires spread. And the people of those neighborhoods where the flames leapt to heaven, at last had light—the light of their burning homes.

And then in the midst of all this horror and tumult the denizens of the dark, festering spots of the city crept forth. They swarmed from the filthy alleys and from the dives of the professional criminal, furtive-eyed, predatory; and houses were robbed, men killed, and women assaulted. The police were powerless to act; their mobility was gone; burglar alarms did not warn; and the city lay like a giant Samson shorn of its strength.

So that night passed, not for one city alone, but for hundreds of cities!

## 2

WHILE all this was happening in the old world, chaos gripped the new.

Across the Atlantic, in the eastern

cities of the United States and Canada, and as far west as Montreal and Chicago, the wheels stopped going at that hour when the workers began to pour forth from the factories and shops, and when the late shopping crowds were thronging the trains and the subways. On the surface cars and on the streets there was, of course, no immediate alarm. Moving-picture and vaudeville houses opened wide their doors, raised the blinds on their windows, and evacuated their patrons in good order. But underground in the various tubes and subways it was a different matter. Hundreds of cars bearing thousands of passengers were stalled in stifling blackness. Guards labored heroically to still the rising hysteria and panic. For perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes—in some cases as long as half an hour—they managed to maintain a species of order. But the great pumps and fans that usually circulated fresh air through the tunnels were no longer functioning. When the foul air fogged the lungs, the passengers went mad. Sobbing and cursing and praying, they fought to escape from the cars, as at the same moment the people of Berlin, Paris and London were fighting to escape from restaurants and theaters. They smashed the windows of the coaches, and in wriggling through them impaled the flesh of their bodies, their hands and faces, on jagged slivers of glass. They trampled each other under foot and flowed in terrified mobs along the right of way, searching madly for exits. In New York alone ten thousand of them perished. They bled to death, were crushed, or died of heart-failure and suffocation.

Above ground the streets and avenues were thronged with millions of human beings trying to get home on foot. For hours dense crowds of workers, shoppers and businessmen filled the highways and byways. Here again panic was caused by the crashing planes. In Montreal the Royal

Dominion air liner, Edward VII, en route on a non-stop flight from Halifax to Vancouver with four hundred passengers, fell from a height of three thousand feet onto Windsor Station, killing her own passengers and crew, and blotting out the lives of hundreds of people who were in the station at the time. In New York, Boston and Chicago, where the then new magnetic runabouts were making their initial appearance, hundreds of airplanes plunged to the ground, killing and maiming not only their passengers, but the men, women and children on whom they fell. "It was," states an eye-witness in a book he later wrote called *The Great Debacle*, "a sight fit to appall the stoutest heart. Subway exits were disgorging ghastly mobs of clawing people; a crashing plane had turned a near-by street into a shambles; crowds ran this way and that, shrieking, praying. Everywhere was panic."

Panic indeed! Yet the records show that what they could do, the police and fire departments did. Mounted policemen were utilized to carry candles and oil lamps to hospitals, to scour the countryside for every available horse, and to ride through the city in an effort to calm the people. Firemen were marched to various points of vantage, with axes and chemical containers, to combat any fire that might break out. But in the aggregate these precautions amounted to nothing. Whole hospitals passed the night in darkness; patients died by the hundreds; the flames of myriad fires lit up the sky; and rumors ran from mouth to mouth adding to the terror and chaos.

America, screamed the mobs, was being attacked by a foreign power, maybe Japan. The power-houses had been rendered useless by a powerful magnet. There had been a terrible storm down south; all South America was sinking; North America would go next. No one knew anything; everyone knew something. Nothing

was too wild or absurd for millions to believe. Deprived of their accustomed sources of information, the inhabitants became a prey to their own fancies and the disordered fancies of others. Religious fanatics by the light of huge bonfires preached the second coming of Christ and the destruction of the world. Thousands of hysterical people prostrated themselves on the hard street pavements, babbling, weeping, praying. Thousands of others looted wine and strong drinks from the cellars of hotels and cafés and reeled drunken through the streets, adding to the din and the panic. Nor did daylight bring much relief.

For some obscure reason, all over Europe, Asia, and America, during the hours of daylight, the sky was strangely dulled. Seemingly the sun shone with all its usual splendor, but the air was perceptibly darkened. Why this should be so not even the scientists could tell. Yet even under the light of what millions of people on earth believed to be their last day, human wolves came out of their dens and prowled through the cities, sacking stores and private homes, blowing open safes, and killing and robbing with impunity. The day that succeeded the night was more horrible than the night that preceded the day, because hundreds of thousands of people who had slept through the hours of darkness awoke and joined their fellows on the streets, and because there is something terrible about a big city in which no cars run and no factory whistles blow, in which the machine has died.

And while the cities and the inhabitants thereof were given over to madness and destruction, tragedy took its toll of the skies and stalked the seas. The aircraft of the world were virtually wiped out. Only those escaped which were at rest in their hangars, or which by some miracle of navigation glided safely to earth. Hardly a year passes now but that on

some wild mountain peak, or in a gloomy canyon or the heart of the Sahara, fragments of those airships are found. Nor did ocean-going vessels suffer less. In the space of twenty hours, two thousand ships of all classes and tonnage met with disaster—disaster that ultimately wiped out the great firm of Lloyds, in London, and a host of lesser insurance companies. Fifteen hundred steamers vanished, never to be heard of more, thirty-five of these being giant passenger boats carrying upward of twenty thousand passengers. Of the other five hundred ships, some were dashed to pieces on inhospitable coasts, others drifted ashore and broke up, and the remainder were abandoned at sea. The fate of the missing steamers may be partly inferred from what happened to the *Olympia* and the *Orania*. This is taken from the account of the second officer of the former ship:

"The night was clear and starry, a heavy sea running. We were forging full speed ahead about two hundred miles off the Irish coast. Because of our electrically controlled gyroscope, however, the ship was as steady as a rock. A dance was being given in both the first and second class ball-rooms, the music for them being supplied by the Metropolitan dance orchestra of London. In the third class theater a television moving-picture was being shown. Couples were walking or sitting on the promenade decks as, though a stiff breeze was blowing, the night was warm. From the bridge I could see the *Orania* coming toward us. She made a wonderful sight, her port-holes gleaming tier on tier, and her deck lights glowing and winking, for all the world looking like a giant glowworm or a fabulous trireme. Doubtless, to watchers on her bridge and decks, we presented the same glorious sight, because we were sister ships, belonging to the same line, and of the same build and tonnage. All the time she was coming

up I conversed with the first officer on her bridge by means of our wireless phone; and it was while in the midst of this conversation, and while we were still a mile apart and he was preparing (so he said) to have the wheel put over so as to take the *Orania* to starboard of us that, without warning, her lights went out.

"Hardly crediting my eyes, I stared at the spot where a moment before she had been. 'What is the matter with you?' I called through my phone, but there was no answer; and even as I realized that the phone had gone dead, I was overcome with the knowledge that my own ship was plunged in darkness. The decks beneath me were black. I could hear the voices of passengers calling out, some in jest and others in rising alarm, questioning what had happened. 'I can't get the engine room; the ship doesn't answer her helm,' I said, facing the captain, who had clambered to the bridge. 'Quick, Mr. Crowley!' he cried. 'Down with you and turn out the crew. Put men at every cabin door and stairway and keep the passengers off the decks.' His voice thundered into the microphone, which repeated his words through loud-speaking devices in every saloon, cabin, and on every deck of the ship—or should have so repeated them if the instruments had been functioning. 'There is no need for alarm. A little trouble to the engines, and incidentally to the dynamo, has caused the lights to go out. I beg of you to be calm. In a half-hour everything will be fixed.' But even as I rushed to obey his orders, even as his crisp voice rang out on the night air, I saw the enormous dark bulk bearing down on us, and the heart leapt in my throat. It was the *Orania*, helpless, without guidance, as were we ourselves, rushing ahead under the momentum acquired by her now stilled engines.

"She struck us, bow on, to one side, shearing through steel plates as if

they were so much cheese. At that terrific impact, in the dark and the gloom, all order and discipline were swept away. Something had happened to the gyroscopes, and the ships were pitching and tossing, grinding and crashing against each other, our own ship settling by the head, the stern rising.

"Then ensued a terrible time. The night became hideous with the clamor of terrified voices. Maddened passengers fought their ways to the decks, and to the boats. Crowded boats went down into the surging waves bow on or stern first, spilling their human freight into the sea. Hundreds of passengers, believing that the steamers would at any moment sink, leapt overboard with life-preservers, and in nearly all cases were drowned. All this in the first thirty minutes. After that the panic ebbed; it turned into dull despair. The crews of both steamers, what could be rallied of them, began to control the situation.

"Morning found the *Orania* practically intact, only making water in her No. 1 compartment. The *Olympia* forward compartments were all flooded, taking her down at the head, but the rear eight still held intact, and as long as they did so she could not sink. If the passengers had, from the beginning, remained calm and tractable, hardly a life need have been lost."

The second officer of the *Olympia* goes on to point out that both the giant liners had been thoroughly equipped with the most modern of electro-mechanical devices for use in emergencies; that they carried twin power-receiving engines; that they were electrically steered; and that from the pilot-house and the bridge communication could be had, and orders and instructions given, to crew and passengers in every part of the ships. It was, he points out, the sudden and startling going out of the lights, and the totally unexpected breakdown of all machinery, which

precipitated the tragedy, and not any negligence on the part of the officers and the crews.

Such is the story of one marine disaster; but the records are full of similar accounts, hundreds of them, which it is needless to set down here.

## 3

ON THE Pacific coast, especially in the cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco, better order was maintained than in the big cities of the Middle West and the East. Panic there was, loss of life, and damage to property both from fire and theft, but not on so colossal a scale. This was due to the fact that the authorities had several hours of daylight in which to prepare for darkness, and because in the two cities mentioned there were no subways to speak of. In the downtown districts clerks and businessmen were advised to stick to their offices and stores. Policemen, mounted and afoot, were sent to the residential districts and to the factories. Instead of allowing the workers to scatter, they formed them into groups of twenty, deputized, armed, and as nearly as possible set to patrolling the streets of the neighborhoods in which they lived. These prompt measures did much to avert the worst features of the horrors which swept New York and Chicago and the cities of Europe and Asia. But in spite of them the hospitals knew untold suffering, whole city blocks were destroyed by flames, religious frenzy ran high, and millions of people passed the hours of darkness in fear and trembling.

I was twenty-two at that time, living in Altadena, which is a suburb of Pasadena, about twenty miles from Los Angeles, and trying to write. That morning I had taken a book and a lunch and climbed up the Old Pole Road to the top of Mount Echo, intending to return by the cable car which for years has operated from the

purple depths of Rubio Canyon to the towering peak. I reached the top of the mountain after a steep climb, ate my lunch on the site of the old Lowe Observatory, and then became absorbed in my book.

The first inkling I had that something was wrong was when the light darkened. "It's clouding over," I thought, looking up, but the sky overhead was perfectly clear, the sun particularly bright.

Not a little disturbed in mind, and thinking, I must admit, of earthquakes, I strolled over to where a group of Mexican section workers, under the supervision of a white boss, had been doing some track repairing. The Mexicans were gesticulating and pointing to the cities and the countryside rolling away far beneath us. Now usually on a clear, sunny day there is a haze in the valley and one can not see for very many miles in any direction. But on this day there was an unwonted clarity in the air. Everything on which we gazed was sharply etched—no blurring, no fogging of lines. The houses stood out starkly; so did the spires of churches and the domes of public buildings. Though it was miles away to the westward, the mighty tower of the Los Angeles city hall could be plainly seen. The light had darkened, yes; but the effect was that of gazing through slightly tinted glasses.

"What do you think it means?" I asked the track boss. But before he could make a reply, a Mexican cried out volubly, pointing one shaking hand up the steep ridge which rose behind us and crossing himself rapidly with the other.

It was an awe-inspiring sight on which we gazed. Over Mount Lowe a luminous, dancing light was growing. I did not know it then, but as far east as Denver and Omaha, and as far south as St. Louis and Galveston, men saw that light. Seen from the western cities of Calgary and Edmonton in Canada it was a pillar of blue flame



growing out of the earth and, as the hours passed, mounting higher and higher into the heavens. Millions of eyes from all over the United States and the Dominion fearfully and superstitiously turned toward that glow. As night deepened upon the Pacific coast, the inhabitants of Southern California saw the sky to the north of them cloven asunder by a leaping sword. No wonder millions of people thought that the heavens had opened and Christ was coming.

But before night I had descended the steep slope of Mount Echo and walked the trackway into Altadena. Women and men called to me from doorways and wanted to know if there was a forest fire farther back in the hills. I could give them no answer. On Lake Avenue I saw the automobiles, street-cars, and motor-busses stranded.

"What is the matter?" I asked a conductor.

"I don't know," he said. "There isn't any power. They say all the power plants and machinery have stopped. A man rode through from downtown a few minutes ago and told us so."

I walked on into Pasadena. Everything was tied up. The streets were jammed with cars and people. Owing to the state ordinance which made it a penal offense for planes to fly over any Californian city—the air routes were so arranged, and the landing-stations and fields outside the cities, access to them being had by fast electric trains—the horror of airships falling on crowded city streets and on residences was entirely averted. People spoke, however, of having seen a huge air liner and some smaller pleasure planes plunging to earth to the west of them, turning over and over; and afterward I learned that the New York-Los Angeles special, which had just taken the air, had crashed into an orchard with a terrible loss of life.

I went no farther than Madison Street on Colorado Boulevard and

turned back. It was ominous to look from the windows and porches of the big house that night and see the city black and formless beneath us. Usually the horizon to the west and south was illuminated for thirty miles around. Now, save for the dull glare of several fires, the darkness was unbroken.

Everything that happened that night is printed indelibly on my memory. Far off, like the sound of surf beating on a rocky shore, we could hear the voice of the mob. It rose and fell, rose and fell. And once we heard the crackle of what we took to be machine-gun fire. In the Flintridge district, I heard later, houses were sacked and looted. Some men defending their homes were murdered and several women badly treated. But in Altadena, up in the foothills, no one suffered any violence. Only once were we alarmed by a procession marching up Lake Avenue, bearing torches and chanting hymns. It was a body of religious fanatics, Holy Rollers, men, women, and children, on their way to Mount Wilson, the better to wait the advent of Jesus. We could hear them shouting and singing, and in the flickering light of the torches, see them frothing at the mouth. They went by, and after that, save for a patrol from the sheriff's office, we saw no one until morning.

Dawn came, but if anything the tension and terror grew greater. All night the threatening simitar of light over the mountains had grown taller and taller—one could see it literally growing—and the sinister brightness of it radiated like molten steel, nor did the coming of daylight dim its radiance.

None of us had slept during the night; none of us had thought of sleep. Haggard-faced we greeted the dawn, and with despair in our hearts realized that the light of day was perceptibly dimmer than it had been the day before. Could this actually be the end of the world? Were those

poor fanatics who had gone by in the night right, and were the heavens opening, as they said? These, and more, were the thoughts that ran through my mind. Then—came the end!

It was 6 p. m. in London, 1 p. m. in New York, and 10 o'clock a. m. on the coast when it happened. Millions of people saw the pillar of light waver. For one pregnant moment it grew red-hot, with the crimson redness of heated iron. From its lofty summit jagged forks of lightning leapt across the heavens and blinded the sight of those that watched. Then it vanished, was gone; and a few minutes after its going the street lights came on, the day brightened, telephone bells rang, wheels turned, and the twenty or so hours of terror and anarchy were ended!

## 4

WHAT had been the cause of it all? No one knew. Learned men puzzled their heads over the problem. Scientists were baffled for an adequate answer. Many explanations were advanced, of course, but none of them held water. For a while there was a tendency on the part of various governments to suspect one another of having invented and utilized a fiendish machine for the undoing of rival nations. However, this suspicion was speedily dropped when it was realized how world-wide had been the nature of the disaster. Dr. LeMont of the Paris Astronomical League advanced the theory that the spots on the sun had something to do with the phenomenon; Doolittle of the Royal Academy of Science in London was of the opinion that the Cosmic Ray discovered by Millikan in 1928 was responsible; while others not so highly placed in the world of science as these two outstanding celebrities suggested anything from a dark comet, a falling meteor, to disturbances in the magnetic centers of the earth.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* for 1962, twenty-one years after the disaster which nearly wrecked civilization and perhaps the world, quotes the above theories in detail, and many more besides, but winds up with the assertion that nothing authentic as to the cause of the tragedy of 1941 has ever been forthcoming. This assertion is not true. In the fall of 1948 there was placed before the Royal Academy of Science in Canada evidence as to the origin of the great catastrophe sufficient to call forth an extended investigation on the part of that body.

Though eighteen years have passed since then, the results of that investigation have never been made public. I will not speculate as to the reason for that. In the interim a report was made of the matter to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, to the Royal Academy of Science in London, and to the Paris Astronomical League in France—a report which these learned bodies chose to ignore. And what was the evidence the Royal Academy of Science in Canada investigated?

As I have already stated, I was in California in 1941 and lived through one phase of the great disaster. Three years later—in the summer of 1944—having broken into the pages of some of the better class magazines with my stories, I made a trip to western Canada for the purpose of writing a series of stories for a western journal. It was there, miles from any city and in the foothills of the Rockies, that I met and listened to the story of the dying recluse. He was a young man, I judged, not a whit older than myself, but in the last stages of consumption.

I came upon the ranch-house—a four-room cabin made of split logs and undressed stone—after a hard day's ride. I pitched my tent on the banks of a tumbling mountain stream about a quarter of a mile from the house, and gladly accepted the invitation of the comely young mistress of the place

to take dinner with them that evening. She was, I gleaned, the sick man's sister. Her husband, now absent rounding up cattle, was proving up on an adjoining quarter section, having already done so on two others in his wife's and brother-in-law's names.

After dinner I sat on the wide veranda with the sick man, whose sleeping-porch I surmised it was, talking with him and smoking my pipe.

"Visitors are rare out this way," he said, "and an educated man a godsend."

I was surprized to find him a man of no little education himself.

"You went to college?" I hazarded.

"Yes, McGill. I took my B. A. And after that, two years of medicine."

Over the plains the sun had sunk in red splendor below the horizon and the sky was on fire with its reflected glory. Nearer in I saw a ragged black splotch on the billowing earth, burnt-looking, charred.

"A prairie fire," I not so much questioned as stated.

The invalid, propped up on his couch, followed my finger with his cavernous black eyes.

"No," he said. "No. That is where it—was."

"It?" I queried.

"Yes," he replied; "what the papers called the pillar of fire."

Then I remembered, of course. The burnt splotch was the place where the terrible luminous glow, the cleaving sword I had seen over Mount Lowe, had had its source. I stared, fascinated.

"Nothing," said the man on the couch, "will grow there—since then. The soil has no life in it—no life. It is," he said faintly, "like ashes—black ashes."

Silence fell between us for many minutes. The shadows lengthened and the twilight deepened. It was mournful sitting there in the growing gloom, and I felt relieved when the

woman turned on the light in the sitting-room and its cheerful rays flooded through the open windows and the doorway. Finally the invalid said:

"I was here at the time. My sister and her husband were absent on a visit to his folks in Calgary."

"It must have been a stupendous sight," I remarked for want of a better thing to say.

"It was hell," he said. "That's how I got this," tapping himself on the chest and bringing on a fit of coughing. "The air," he gasped; "it was hard on the lungs."

His sister came out and gave him some medicine from a black bottle.

"You mustn't talk so much, Peter; it isn't good for you," she admonished.

He waved an impatient hand, "Let be!" he said. "Let be! What difference does it make? In another day, another week——"

His voice trailed away and then picked up again on a new sentence.

"Oh, don't pity me! Don't waste your pity on the likes of me! If ever a wretch deserved his fate, I deserve mine. Three years now I've suffered the tortures of the damned. Not of flesh alone, but of mind. When I could still walk about it wasn't so bad; but since I've been chained to this bed I've done nothing but think, think. . . . I think of the great disaster; of the hours of terror and despair known by millions of people. I think of the thousands and thousands of men, women, and children trapped in subways and theaters, trampled to death, butchered, murdered. I visualize the hospitals full of the sick and the dying, the giant liners of the air and of the ocean crashing, colliding, going down into the sea; and I seem to hear the screams and the pitiful prayers for help of the maddened passengers. Tell me, what fate should befall the fiend who would loose such woe and misery on an unsuspecting world?"

"There, there," I said soothingly,

thinking him delirious, judging his mind unhinged from too much morbid brooding. "It was frightful, of course, but no one could help what happened—no one."

But my words did not calm him. On the contrary they added to his excitement. "That isn't true," he gasped. "It isn't true. No, no, sister, I won't be still, I'm not raving! Give me a drop of brandy—so; and bring me the little cedar box from the cupboard over there."

She complied with his request.

"It's all written down and put away in here," he said, tapping the box. "Put away in here, along with the third crystal which came home in the saddle-bag of John's runaway horse."

His eyes were like two black coals fastened on my face.

"I've told no one," he said tensely, "but I can't keep silent any longer. I must speak! I must!"

One of his feverish hands gripped my own. "Don't you understand?" he cried. "I'm the fiend who caused the great world disaster. God help me! I, and one other!"

"No, no," he said, correctly reading the look on my face, "I'm not crazy, I'm not raving. It is God's truth I'm telling you, and the evidence of it is in this cedar box. It began in Montreal when I was going to McGill University. The under-professor of physics there was a young French-Canadian by the name of John Cabot. He——"

A fit of coughing stopped his voice. His sister gave him a sip of water.

"Peter," she pleaded, "let it go for tonight. Tomorrow——"

But he shook his head. "I may be dead tomorrow. Let me talk now." His eyes sought mine. "Did you ever hear about the meteorite that fell back in Manitoba in 1930?"

"No."

"Nor about the seven crystals that were found in it?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, they were found," he said; "seven of them as large as grapefruit. There's nothing remarkable about finding crystals in a meteorite. That has been done before and since. But those seven crystals were not ordinary ones. They were perfectly rounded and polished, as if by hand. Nor was that all: at the core of each of them was a vibrant fluid, and in that fluid was a black spot——"

A spasm of coughing choked his utterance, and this time I joined with his sister in urging him to rest, but desisted when I saw that such advice, and any effort on my part to withdraw, only succeeded in adding to his painful excitement.

"A black spot," he gasped, "that danced and whirled and was never still. Don't try to stop me! I must tell you about it! The scientists of the world were all agog over them. Where, they asked, had the meteor come from, and what were the fluid and the spot at the center of each crystal? In the course of time the crystals were sent various places for observation and study. One went to England, another to France, two to Washington, while the remaining three stayed in Canada, finally coming to rest in the Museum of Natural Science in Montreal which, as everyone knows, was erected in 1929 and is now under the jurisdiction of McGill University.

"IT WAS during my first year at medical school that I entered the museum one afternoon, almost by accident. The sight of the crystals, newly exhibited, fascinated me. I could hardly tear myself away in time for a lecture.

"The next afternoon I came again. I watched the black spots dancing in their vibrant fluid. Sometimes they would whirl in the center of the liquid with monotonous regularity. Then suddenly they would dash at the walls which held them in and circle them with inconceivable speed. Was it y

imagination, or did the specks take on shape or form? Were they prisoners forever beating their heads against the bars of a cell, seeking to be free? Engrossed in such thoughts I did not know that another had entered the museum until a voice addressed me.

"So you have come under their spell, too, Ross."

"I looked up with a start and recognized John Cabot. We knew each other, of course, because I had studied under him for two years.

"They look so life-like, sir," I replied. "Haven't you noticed it?"

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "they are life."

"The thought stirred my imagination.

"You know," he went on, "that there are scientists who claim life originally came to the earth from some other star, perhaps from outside the universe entirely. Maybe," he said, "it came, even as these crystals came, in a meteor."

The sick man paused and moistened his lips with water.

"That," he said, "was the beginning of the intimacy which sprang up between John Cabot and me. It was often possible for Cabot to take one of the crystals to his room, and then we would foregather there and ponder the mystery of it. Cabot was a sound teacher of physics, but he was more than that. He was a scientist who was also a speculative philosopher, which meant being something of a mystic. Have you ever studied mysticism? No? Then I can't tell you about that. Only from him and his speculations I struck fire. How can I describe it? Perhaps gazing in the crystal hypnotized us both. I don't know as to that. Only night and day both of us became eaten with an overwhelming curiosity.

"What do the scientists say is inside the crystals?" I asked Cabot.

"They don't say," he replied. "They don't know. A message from

Mars, perhaps, or from beyond the Milky Way."

"From beyond the Milky Way," whispered the sick man. "Can't you see what that would mean to our imaginations?"

He beat the quilt that covered him with his hand.

"It meant," he said, "the forbidden. We dreamed of doing what the scientists of America and Europe said they hesitated to do for fear of the consequences—or for fear of destroying objects valuable to science. We dreamed of breaking the crystal!"

A big moth fluttered into the radius of light and the dying man followed it with his eyes. "That's what we were, Cabot and I, though we didn't know it; moths, trying to reach a searing flame."

By this time I was engrossed in his story. "What then?" I prompted.

"We stole the crystals! Perhaps you read about it at the time?"

I shook my head.

"Well, it was in all the papers."

I explained that in those days I had seldom seen a paper from one week's end to another. He nodded feebly.

"That accounts for it, then. The theft caused a sensation in university circles, and both Cabot and I were thoroughly questioned and searched. But we had been too clever!" The sick man laughed mirthlessly. "God help us! too clever! What wouldn't I give now," cried Peter Ross bitterly, "if we had been discovered! But a malignant fate ordered otherwise. We were successful. During the holidays I took the crystal home with me, home, to these hills and plains. Later Cabot joined me."

He broke off for a moment as if exhausted.

"I wonder," he said, after a few minutes, "if I can make what we felt and thought clear to you. It wasn't just idle curiosity that was driving us. No! It was more than that. Out of the unknown itself had come a

meteor with a message for mankind. Something stupendous was hidden in the cores of those crystals. Yet what had the scientists of the world done? They had contented themselves with weighing the crystals, looking at them under a microscope, photographing them, writing learned articles about them, and then putting them away on museum shelves! None of them—not one; or so it seemed to us—had had the courage to open a crystal. Their reasons—deadly germs, virulent forms of life, terrific explosions—we dismissed as cowardly vaporings. The time had come, we said, to investigate more thoroughly. God help us," whispered Peter Ross, "we blinded ourselves to what might be the consequences of our rash experiment! We eased our consciences with the reflection that we were safeguarding humanity from any danger by carrying it out in the wilderness, miles from any city or human habitation. If there were to be any martyrs, we thought egotistically, it would be us alone. We had, of course, no inkling of the terrible force we were about to loose.

"Early in the morning of the day of the disaster we rode from this place down there to the plains, down to where you saw that charred splotch. We had with us a portable outfit of chemical instruments. It was our intention to smash one of the crystals, catch the fluid in our test-tubes, isolate the black spot, and make an analysis of it and the liquid later. But we never did," he said; "we never did."

A cough rattled in his throat.

"It was Cabot who broke the crystal. Before noon, it was, but I'm not sure of the time. He knew how to do it; he had all the tools necessary. The crystal lay inside a metal container. I tell you there was something uncanny about it glimmering in the sun! The black spot was whirling madly, dashing itself with violence against the

restraining walls as if it sensed that freedom was near.

"Look at him," said Cabot tensely. "Look at him leaping and kicking. What a dancer! What a—in a minute now and he'll be out of that!"

"Perhaps it was the phrase; perhaps it was the masculine pronoun used in connection with the black spot; but suddenly I was afraid of the thing we would do. Fearful possibilities ran through my mind.

"John," I cried, stepping back several paces, "John, don't!"

"But Cabot never heard me. His hand went up with the heavy hammer.

"Poor John! Nothing warned him—nothing stayed him!

"The blow came down. I heard the tinkling crash; then—

"Oh my God!"

"It was Cabot's voice in a shrill scream of unutterable horror and agony. His bent figure straightened up, and from his hair and his outflung arms blue lights crackled and streamed, and all around his body a column of something shimmered and shifted and grew. So for a moment he postured; then he began to dance. I tell you he began to dance, not by any force or power that resided in his own limbs, but as if he were jerked or writhed about by an external agent. I saw what that agent was. It was the black spot! Out of the ground it rose like an evil jinnee and took on the form and shape of something monstrous, inhuman, horrible. It leapt and whirled; and yes, though I couldn't hear it, it sang and shouted. It was the nucleus of an increasing body of light. I felt searing heat scorch my cheeks and burn my throat with every breath I drew. More! I felt that streaming fingers of light were reaching out at me, clutching.

"With a sob of fear I turned and ran. Cabot's horse had broken loose and was running wildly across the plains. My own was plunging madly

at the end of its picket rope. Somehow I mounted and fled, but after several miles of such flight my horse put its hoof in a prairie-dog hole and broke its leg, pitching me over its head.

"How long I lay dead to the world I don't know; but the long shadows were running eastward when I came to. The air was acrid and bitter. With fearful eyes I saw that the day was unaccountably dark and that the pillar of fire out on the plains had grown to immense proportions. Even as I gazed on it, it grew. Hour after hour it grew, adding to its circumference and height. From the four corners of the horizon, in mighty arches that dipped to a common center, flowed infinitesimal particles of what seemed golden dust. I know now that all the electricity was being sucked out of the air, darkening the day, blackening the night, and rendering all machinery useless. But then I knew only that the pillar of fire, the center to which those particles cohered, was drawing nearer and nearer to where I lay. For I could barely move, my feet seemed like lead, and there was a tight band round my chest.

"Perhaps I was delirious, out of my head; I do not know, but I got on my feet and walked and walked, and when I couldn't walk I crawled. Hours and hours I crawled, driven ahead by a growing horror of the nightmare that pursued me; yet when I stopped, exhausted, I was still far away from the foothills and the pillar of fire was nearer than ever. I could see the monstrous black thing inside of it dancing and whirling. My God! It was reaching out dark streamers of fire after me; it was calling out that it wanted me, that it would have me, that nothing this side of heaven or hell could keep it from me; and as it shot this implacable message into my senses, it grew bigger, it danced faster, and it came closer.

"Again I staggered to my feet and ran. Late night found me several miles below here, quenching my thirst at a spring of water which trickles from the side of a rock. I looked back, and the pillar of fire was now so high that it lost itself in the heavens. All around me played a livid light, a light that flung the shape of a gigantic dancing horror this way and that. Did I tell you that this light was like a pillar? Yes, it was like a pillar whose middle swelled out in a great arc; and I knew that I was doomed, that I could not escape, and swooning horror overcame me and I fell to the ground and buried my face in my hands.

"Hours passed—or was it only minutes? I can not say. I could feel my body writhing, twisting. Every atom of my flesh was vibrating to an unnatural rhythm. I was crazy, yes, out of my head, delirious, but I swear to you that I heard John Cabot crying to me, imploring, 'For God's sake, break the crystal, break the crystal!' and I cried back into my huddled arms, not speaking, yet screaming it, 'We broke the crystal! God help us! We broke the crystal!'

"Then suddenly it came to me that he meant the second crystal. Yes, yes, I understood. The fiendish thing out there on the plain was seeking, not me, but its counterpart.

"The second crystal was in the knapsack still swung on my back. With insane fury I tore it out of its padded, protected housing and whirled it over my head. Filled with loathing of the terrible thing, I flung it from me as far as the strength of my arm would permit. Perhaps twenty yards away it crashed into a rock and was shattered to pieces. I saw the slivers of it glint and flash; then from the spot where it struck rose a column of light, and in the column of light was a whirling speck. Like its predecessor it grew and grew, and as it grew, receded from me in

the direction of the mightier pillar whirling and calling. How can I tell you of the weird dance of the evil ones? They sang to each other, and I know the song they sang, but I can not tell it to you because it was not sung in words.

"At what hour they came together, whether it was day or night, I do not know. Only I saw them merge. With their coming together the terrible power that was sucking in the world's electrical forces to one gigantic center became neutralized. The heavens split open as the bolts of lightning devastated the sky. Through the rent firmament I saw a black shape cleave its way. Whatever had been in the two crystals was leaving the earth, was plunging through the Milky Way, through the incalculable spaces beyond the reach of our most powerful telescopes, back, back. . . ."

Two days later, in a grave beside the tumbling mountain stream, his brother-in-law and I buried all that was mortal of Peter Ross. Over his resting-place we piled a great cairn of rocks so that the spring floods might not wash his body away nor coyotes worry the tomb of the dead. When I parted with the bereaved sister, she pressed me to accept the cedar box.

"Poor Peter!" she said. "Toward the last he ran a fever all the time and was delirious; but he wanted you to have the box, and so you must take it."

I saw that she attached no importance to his story.

"He never mentioned it before," she said; "he was out of his head."

And so I was inclined to believe until I examined the contents of the box. Then I changed my mind. If what he told us had been naught but the result of morbid brooding and delirium, then he must have been morbid and delirious for years preceding his death, because the written version of his story began simply, "It is nearly a year now since," and was a bare recital of facts, written plainly and in the manner of a man with no especial gift for expressing himself in words. Nor was that all. Besides the manuscript mentioned were revealed various letters which I perused, letters from Cabot to Ross, Ross to Cabot, covering a period of years and telling of their ideas and plans and of the theft of the crystals. The whole story, save for its denouement, could be pieced together from those letters.

Incredible as Peter Ross's tale had sounded in the telling, wild and incoherent though it had been, and colored with fever and delirium, none the less it was true. And as if to rout whatever disbelief might be still lurking in my mind, I saw that which finally led me to place the whole matter before the Royal Academy of Science in Canada, and before various other scientific bodies, as I have recorded; and which in this latter day, so that mankind may be warned against the menace imprisoned in the crystals, has made me put everything down here: the crowning evidence of all. For in the bottom of the box was a round object; and when I picked it up my fascinated eyes were held by a transparent bubble the size of an orange with a black spot at its core, dancing, dancing. . . .

