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THE EPHEMERAE



By
Edmond Hamilton

The death-drums of a bewildered, frightened race of savages—the Ephemerae—formed the background to the death of a man—and the death of Man's civilization.
Man's lifetime was seventy days!

DISTANT drums began to throb dimly, down in the night-shrouded wilderness of rusting towers that was dead New York. The sound drifted up through the hot, still night into this candlelit room where Kimball Drew sat writing.

It was a big, shadowy and dusty room that had once been his own laboratory here in Manhattan University. The timid light of the single candle on his desk flickered scaredly, throwing a shaking gleam on the woven tungsten suit that covered Kimball's whole head and body except his face.

"B-rroom," throbbed the distant drums, in dull, slow rhythm. "B-rroom—"

Kimball Drew looked up. Through the open window in front of his desk, he could look down into the vast black wilderness of rusting buildings whence came the sound.

A shadow of pity crossed his strong, weary young face as he listened. "Another of the Ephemerae dying," he muttered. "Poor devil . . . a few weeks of life and love and sunshine, and now his little life is over."

He had heard the death drums of the superstitious Ephemerae many times before, accompanying one of their number into eternity. But tonight they seemed heavier.

Kimball rose slowly and walked through the shadowy, untenanted lecture rooms and laboratories until he emerged from the big building. He stood on its steps in the darkness, gazing southward. Around him, dark and lonesome in the starlight, bulked the proud structures of the university. In front of him, sloping downward in the

darkness beyond the campus, stretched the black metropolis.

"B-rroom," muttered the insistent death drums of the Ephemerae, down there.

Numbing heartbreak came into Kimball's heavy, weary young face as he listened. "Children . . . superstitious savages," he whispered. "Everyone on Earth, like that, except Ormond and myself. And it's all my fault—"

His tormented eyes lifted toward the brilliant white star that blazed supernally in Aquila, like a huge, scintillating diamond. And his voice was a thick mutter of tortured self-accusation. "God, why did I let this happen to humanity? Why didn't I save them from it?"

There was no sound except the sluggish sighing of the hot breeze, and the dim, far-off pulsing of the death drums. The old, black sense of guilt, the agonizing self-reproach that had haunted Kimball Drew for two long years, was writhing in his soul tonight as he stared sickly at that blazing white nova that glared over the roofs of dead New York.

That glaring star seemed to him a living thing, looking down gloatingly upon the terrible change it had wrought, winking and twinkling in remote, malign amusement. For it was that far star that had changed the whole race of mankind into—the Ephemerae. Two years before that nova had exploded and had drenched Earth with a flood of hard radiation that had so affected the human genes as to cause a world-wide mutation of the human race.

KIMBALL DREW looked down sickly at the tungsten suit he wore. He and Ross Ormond, his young fellow-

scientist, had escaped the mutation by wearing these ray-proof suits. They had not been changed into Ephemerae.

"But I ought to have changed and died, like all the rest," Kimball whispered deadly, as he looked down across the vast, black city. "I didn't save the others . . . I should have died with them—"

Then the reaction came, and his haggard face hardened once more in desperate determination. "No, it's better that Ormond and I escaped," he muttered. "With us two left, there's a chance to teach and civilize the Ephemerae."

B-rroom! B-rroom!

The drums of the Ephemerae were talking on, down in the lightless city. Whispering of the approach of Death, of the shoreless night into which a human soul was slowly and reluctantly slipping. But there was a strange terror also in their thudding rhythm tonight, a quivering fear of something monstrous and unbelievable. Something that couldn't happen, but was happening. Like the pound of a fearful heart, they throbbed.

A vague chill came over Kimball Drew as he listened. The dim horror in that rumbling rhythm reached him and plucked his nerves like harp strings. Something had happened down there, something that had terrified the Ephemerae.

Then he saw one of the Ephemerae running up across the dark, weed-grown campus toward him. A full-grown man, a white savage with wild black hair and beard, clothed only in an old pair of breeches. His face was terrified in the starlight.

"Lord!" he cried frantically to Kimball Drew. "The Other God . . . he is dying!"

"Ormond dying?" Kimball repeated stupidly. "That can't be! He was all right a month ago, when I last saw him."

"He dies . . . The Other God dies!" wailed the terrified man. "We

are afraid! What will become of us if the Gods die?"

"Lead me to the Other God—quickly!" Kimball snapped.

The terrified savage turned and started in an unsteady run, back down into the city. Kimball followed, a cold fear clutching at his heart. Had some accident overtaken Ross Ormond? Lord, if that had happened—if the only companion of his own race were taken from him—if he were left completely alone in the world with the Ephemerae—

The heavy, fearful throb of the death drums came louder to his ears as he followed his savage guide through the dead metropolis. And he could hear a wailing of terror-laden voices, a keening chant of long, falling inflections. Huge black towers of a people dead for two years looked down broodingly on Kimball Drew and his guide as they hurried through the dark, littered streets. Around rusting wrecks of stalled automobiles and busses they hastened, past long rows of looted stores whose shattered windows gaped at them like blind eyes.

The hot, heavy darkness seemed pregnant with something strange and menacing, tonight. The thud and rumble of the drums ahead, the long, plaintive chant, deepened the somberness of mood that weighed down Kimball's soul.

HE FELT as though ghosts were watching him from the black buildings—ghosts of the millions of his race who had inhabited this place before the great mutation had swept them away. Shadowy wraiths who were peering at him from dark rooms, phantoms bitterly watching the man who might have saved them and hadn't.

"The God dies!" came the plaintive wail from close ahead. "The Other God dies . . . and we are lost!"

B-rroom! Boom! Loud pulsed the drums in a heavy, terror-laden undertone to the keening chant.

Kimball emerged into a cross street where a big fire burned on the pavement. It was outside a tall, dark apartment building, and in its flickering light sat a crowd of hundreds of the Ephemerae. Wild white savages, clothed in queerly assorted garments from the looted stores, they squatted in the firelight with all their faces turned toward the entrance of the tall building, and with naked terror on their firelit features.

The Ephemerae—the butterfly race into which mankind had suddenly been mutated by the radiation from that distant, exploding star! A race that looked outwardly the same as the old human species, but one whose life-processes were hundreds of times accelerated. A race whose life span from birth to senility occupied, not seventy years, but seventy *days*.

In this terrified crowd of the Ephemerae, Kimball saw half-grown boys and girls who were only a few days old, crouching fearfully against their mothers. Stalwart young men of three weeks' age, in the prime of life, gripped clubs and spears as though to repel an approaching horror. Aging men two months old, the elders of the tribe, thumped the skin-headed drums to whose throbbing rhythm the others lifted their fearful chant.

As Kimball approached in the shaking red firelight, a hoarse cry went up from the crouching Ephemerae.

"Lord, the Other God dies!" they cried pleadingly. "Save us . . . doom is upon us!"

"You fear without reason!" Kimball told them loudly. "The Other God cannot die . . . he is immortal, like me. Have we two not lived through many, many of your generations? Did not your grandfathers and their grandfathers know us, as we are now?"

"Yes, lord," sobbed one of the Ephemerae, "we know that the two gods have lived forever, for all our forefathers, back into the misty generations, have

known and worshiped you. But now we know not what to do, when one of the gods is dying—"

With an impatient exclamation, Kimball strode through the whimpering, wailing throng, past the thudding drums into the building. In the great, shadowy room that had once been a lobby, torches flared on the walls. And two youths of the Ephemerae, tall striplings a fortnight old, were crouching terrifiedly beside a couch on which lay a thin, wasted form.

"Ormond?" cried Kimball, striding toward the couch. "Is that you?"

There came a cracked whisper from the thin and wasted figure who lay before him. "Yes, Kim—"

Kimball stopped, staggered by the shock of what he saw as he looked down at the figure on the couch. It was Ross Ormond, he saw. But not the blond, good-looking young Ormond he had last seen, not the robust young scientist who had for two years been his companion.

THIS WAS an old man with thin, clawlike hands that plucked nervously at the blanket that covered him. An old, old man with snow-white hair, and a wrinkled, age-seamed face out of which fading blue eyes peered blindly up at Kimball.

"Kim—" that senile figure whispered again, through stiff, cracked lips.

"Ormond!" yelled Kimball hoarsely. "For God's sake, what happened to you? Only a month ago, you were as young as I—"

Then he saw. Ormond was not now wearing the tungsten suit which was the only protection from the deadly stellar radiation that had mutated mankind into an ephemeral race. Ormond had taken the suit off—and had been mutated, like the rest of mankind. Had become one of the Ephemerae! And had aged with the same swiftness that they did, a year in every day, thirty years in the last month!

"Yes," the aged Ormond was whis-

pering. "I took the suit off. I let the radiation make me one of the Ephemerae. I've lived out half my lifetime in this last month . . . and now I'm dying."

Kimball's haggard face was frozen, as he looked down into the wrinkled, senile features of his friend. Through the frozen silence in this torchlit room stabbed the keening wail of the Ephemerae gathered outside.

"The Other God dies! He dies—"
B-rroom! Boom!

"Ormond, why did you do it?" Kimball's voice was choked with tears as he bent over the other. "You were the only companion I had, the only other living person of the old race. You're leaving me alone now, with the Ephemerae."

"I know," muttered the dying, senile man. "I'm sorry, Kim, but I couldn't help it. You remember Mara?"

"Mara? That girl of the Ephemerae you married last month?" Kimball repeated. His mind flew back to that night a month before, when Ormond had returned to their quarters in the university with a ragged girl of the Ephemerae clinging to his arm. A scared, eager, pretty girl-savage who had looked up at Ormond with eyes in which awe, worship and love were mingled.

"This is Mara," Ormond had said, his blond young face defiant. "I'm going to marry her."

"You marry one of the Ephemerae?" Kimball had cried dismayedly. "You're mad! You know that in a few weeks this girl will have aged to an old woman, will be dying of senility."

"We'll have a few weeks of happiness, at least," Ormond had muttered. "It's better than this cursed loneliness that's driving me crazy."

"You're quitting on me!" Kimball had accused. "Our work of teaching the Ephemerae—of rekindling human civilization among them—you're giving it up!"

"It's futile, useless," Ormond had de-

clared somberly. "Civilization is gone forever, Kim. No civilization can ever be built up among a people whose whole life span is only a couple of months. We might as well stop trying, and get what happiness we can out of life."

"I'll never stop trying to rebuild civilization, not while I'm alive!" Kimball had declared fiercely.

HE AND ORMOND had parted in anger. And he had not seen Ormond and his girl bride since, though he had known they were living somewhere in the dead metropolis.

"Mara . . . your wife . . . where is she?" he asked of the dying man.

Ormond raised his clawlike hand and pointed to another couch in a shadowed corner. Kimball saw a blanket-shrouded figure on it, the still body of an aged woman whose white hair and one parchmentlike wrist lay uncovered by the blanket.

"That's Mara," Ormond whispered. "She died yesterday. She was very old." He lay, looking up at the ceiling with faded eyes, his thin chest rising and falling jerkily. The two youths beside his couch watched silently, with dumb grief.

"The Other God dies!" wailed the plaintive chant from the firelit street. "The God who lived forever dies!"

Steady throbbed the thudding drums out there, beating through the night to Kimball's ears like the fearful heartbeats of the dread-haunted savages.

Ormond was speaking again. A dry, difficult whisper that hardly moved his lips. "It was a week after I married Mara that I took off the tungsten suit, Kim. You see . . . we two were so happy at first. But like all the Ephemerae, she was aging more than a year in every day, and at the end of that first week, she was perceptibly older than I.

"She didn't complain. She said she knew that I was a god and would live forever, while she must grow old and

die in a few weeks. We had been happy together, and she was glad of that, she said, and wouldn't mind dying.

"But I *couldn't* see her grow old without me, Kim! I couldn't! You see, at first she had only been somebody to ease my loneliness. But I knew by the end of that week that I loved her. I knew I loved her, and that her fate had to be mine, too, that I couldn't live on after her, without her.

"So I took the suit off. And I felt the radiation changing me. I felt every vital process of my body infinitely accelerated, and I knew that I was like the Ephemerae, that I was aging a year in every day. Time seemed to stretch out subtly, so that a day suddenly seemed a long, long time.

"I was *glad* to be one of the Ephemerae! For it meant that Mara and I were really together now, that we would grow old at the same rate, that nothing now could separate us. And when our children were born—"

"Children?" cried Kimball, startled.

Ormond nodded feebly, and pointed to the two youths squatting at the foot of his couch and looking up at him with dumb fear and anguish on their faces. They edged closer, at his gesture. And his wrinkled, trembling hand lovingly touched the dark head of the nearest.

"These are . . . our sons, Kim. Born to us more than two weeks ago."

"Why didn't you tell me what you were doing?" cried Kimball, his voice raw with emotion. "I'd have stopped you, somehow."

"I knew you would try," Ormond murmured. "That's why I didn't let you know, but lived with Mara and the Ephemerae down here, all these weeks." His thin voice cracked as he added, "She died yesterday. I told you that. She had been getting weaker and older every day, and the disease took her quite quickly. I was glad when it seized me, too, after she died. I'm glad to be going, with Mara."

KIMBALL'S haggard face was working and there were tears glimmering in the corners of his eyes. "You shouldn't have done it, Ormond," he said chokedly. "You've thrown away your whole life . . . all the thirty or forty years you might have lived . . . for a mere few weeks of happiness."

"No, I've *lived* my whole life out, in these few weeks," Ormond whispered. "Kim, we always thought the lives of the Ephemerae were pitifully brief and frustrated. But they're not. I've found that out. Their life span may be short, but it holds as much joy and pain and sorrow as any long one.

"Kim, I've lived longer in this last month than in all my thirty years before. I've learned love and loyalty; I've held my sons in my arms and watched them grow to manhood; I've seen my wife and by friends among the Ephemerae grow old with me, and die one by one. And now I can die, as contentedly as if I'd lived eighty years in my other life."

"But you've thought only of yourself!" Kimball exclaimed passionately. "Your duty to the race, to these Ephemerae, was to live on, so that together we could teach them, and relight civilization among them.

"You knew that, Ormond! You knew how hard I've labored for these two years, teaching the Ephemerae, trying to start human progress going again among this new race. And yet you deserted me, and now you're dying, leaving me forever."

Ormond's defending whisper came feebly over the wailing and heavy throb of drums. "It was a vain dream we had, Kim . . . to civilize the Ephemerae. I came to see that. Human civilization is gone forever. It was doomed on the day that star exploded, and with its radiation mutated mankind into a short-lived race."

His fading eyes turned toward the open window beside him, where, in a blue-black oblong of starred sky, Novae

Aquilae blazed brilliant over New York's roofs. "You can't fight destiny," Ormond whispered. "A star a billion miles away explodes . . . and human civilization falls like a house of cards. The fantastic, inexorable mathematics of fate!"

His voice trailed into silence. In the stillness, the somber rhythm of the drums out in the firelit street, the wailing chant of the Ephemerae, rose loud. "The Other God dies—"

B-ROOM!

Death drums of the butterfly people, throbbing through the dead and mighty city, pulsing into the room where an old, old man lay dying— Ormond lay, with an expression of strange, relaxed tranquillity on his wrinkled face, in his half-closed eyes. His thin hand still rested on the dark head of his oldest son, as he listened to the thudding drums.

"Things could all have been so different!" Kimball Drew burst, his haggard face working. "If people had only listened when I published my warning about what the new radiation would do to humanity! If only a hundred people had worn protective suits as we did. If even a dozen people had done it—"

"I KNOW," Ormond whispered. "Then we would still have had a nucleus for a long-lived race. But they wouldn't believe; they wouldn't wear the suits. Only you and I."

"It's those first weeks that keep haunting me," Kimball said thickly. "Those first horrible weeks when the effects of the radiation began to appear. That sudden speeding up of human growth, the terror of all those bewildered millions as they began aging a year in every day, the crash of civilized institutions around us, the riot and panic and death here in New York—"

His voice rose to a raw and tortured shrillness. "I should have prevented it all, Ormond! I *could* have prevented it, if I'd somehow made them heed my

warning. And because I failed to make them listen, the mutation went on, and man became an ephemeral race forever. Because I failed!"

"No, Kim!" Ormond whispered earnestly, his wrinkled, senile face shadowed with anxiety and pity. "It wasn't your fault that they wouldn't believe your warning."

"It was my fault," Kimball repeated, self-accusation in his worn, brooding face. "My fault, that the human progress of ten thousand years crashed overnight." The torture in his heart broke through into his anguished voice. "That's why I've tried so hard to teach the Ephemerae, to bring them back to civilization, Ormond. So that I can atone for my failure to prevent this world-disaster. And now you're leaving me to carry on that task alone."

He buried his quivering face in his hands, and his voice came muffled and jerky. "So long, these two years since the mutation! Two years in this city of ghosts, working with these savages who are the great-grandchildren of our own contemporaries, trying to teach them the first rudiments of civilization.

"And the work so hard, so slow! Because they think I'm an immortal god, they've tried to learn, poor devils . . . but they have done it simply to obey me, and not because they have any understanding of what I'm trying to teach them. And now I've got to go on with that slow, groping work, alone until I die."

Ormond raised himself a little with a feeble effort, and looked down at his friend's quivering shoulders with wise, faded old eyes. "Kim, why do you keep torturing yourself with this impossible task?" he whispered. "For it is impossible to civilize the Ephemerae. The very basis of human civilization was leisure . . . spare time in which to indulge curiosity and experiment. And the Ephemerae, rushing from birth to death in days, have no leisure."

"I know that," Kimball said, raising his haggard face, "but I'm trying to get them to think and work in generations, instead of in individual lifetimes. One generation will sow grain, and the next generation will harvest it. One generation will gather fuel in the fall, for the generation of winter to use."

"You'll never succeed in getting them to think that way," Ormond murmured. "They're too human to want to work for posterity. Back in our own civilized era, how many people were willing to perform even the slightest labor for posterity?"

"I'll *make* them work for the generations to come!" Kimball declared desperately. "I'm their immortal god, and I'll implant in them a sacred command, a racial tradition, of preparing for the next generation. It's the one chance, the one device, by which the Ephemerae can possibly progress to civilization."

HEAVY AND LOUD, the drums were rumbling out in the darkness. Strong and hoarse rose the keening wail. Ormond, listening, kept his faded eyes upon his friend's haggard face. "Kim, you've let a fancied guilt goad you on for two years in your feverish attempt to civilize the Ephemerae," he whispered. "And you've failed. You'll always fail. Why don't you give up this quixotic attempt, and snatch a little happiness for yourself while you still live?"

"I've learned a lot of things . . . a lifetime of lessons . . . in these last few weeks, Kim. I've learned that nothing is important in life but the little bit of love and laughter and sunshine that we can have before we die. These weeks with Mara . . . our sons . . . those are what comfort me now that I'm going to die. And you won't even have that little to comfort you on your death-bed, if you waste away your life in this futile toil."

"I can't give up! I can't!" cried Kimball. "It would be treachery to all the

generations of the past and of the future!" He pointed agonizedly through the open window to the looming black masses of silent, lifeless towers. "This city . . . think of the knowledge and science and skill it took to build it . . . knowledge and skill painfully, slowly gathered by thousands of past generations. All that great structure of human endeavor, doomed now, lost and wasted forever unless these Ephemerae can become the heirs of humanity!"

"If I can start them along the right road with my teaching, they will inherit all that knowledge and it won't be lost. But if I fail, if I give up, they're doomed to be mere savages wandering Earth for all their future. No one else will ever be able to teach them, when I'm gone. I'm their last chance!"

There was pity in Ormond's fading eyes, the pity of the very old looking at the young.

"That . . . it's all I've got to live for now," Kimball added desperately. "My work . . . my teaching of these people—"

He looked out again at the brilliant fleck of light flaring balefully over the clustered roofs. "No star can beat man," he muttered. "Not ever."

Ormond had closed his eyes. There was a space of stillness, heavy with wail and drum throb. The thudding, rumbling rhythm suddenly broke off. At the same moment, the wailing chant ceased.

Kimball went tiredly to the door and looked out. In the red firelight, hundreds of white faces looked dumbly up at him in strange, naked horror.

"What now—" he started to say. Then he heard the low, quiet sobbing from in the room behind him. The sobbing of Ormond's sons. They had pressed their faces against the couch on which their father lay, and their broad, naked shoulders were quivering.

"Ormond!" cried Kimball, stumbling back across the room.

ORMOND'S faded blue eyes were open again—and serenely empty. His wrinkled face was still and peaceful, with that touch of shadow at its edges that told everything.

Kimball looked down dully at his dead friend. He felt no great emotion, now. He felt tired, and heavy, and infinitely lonely.

"Is the Other God truly dead?" The awed whisper came from Ephemerae looking timidly into the shadowy room from the doorway.

Kimball Drew nodded dully. "He is dead."

"But can the gods die?" asked one, still incredulous, staring wildly at the still form on the couch.

Boom!

The drums were vibrating again out there, not to rolling rhythms now, but in deep, heavy strokes, at long, regular intervals.

Boom!

"The Other God is dead!" wailed the terror-laden chant now.

Kimball spoke heavily to the Ephemerae staring awedly into the dusky hall. "Wrap the Other God and his mate, and bring them after me," he directed. "We shall bury them together."

Presently he was moving tiredly back through the dark and littered streets, back the way he had come, toward the campus of the university. Behind him through the hot darkness came a trailing cortege of flickering red torches.

The Ephemerae carried the wrapped bodies of Ormond and Mara as they followed him toward the campus. Their drums boomed solemnly through the dead streets; their hoarse chant hollowly reverberated from the brooding black towers. "He is dead . . . dead . . . dead! The Other God is dead!"

Room!

Strange funeral procession through the dead, haunted metropolis! And a stranger funeral it seemed to Kimball Drew, with flaring red torches and awe-

stricken faces ringing the wide, hastily dug grave in the weedy campus. Long, rolling rhythm of the rumbling drums, crescendoing to a climax as the two blanket-wrapped bodies were lowered slowly into the grave. Drums of the Ephemerae, throbbing up to heart-swift beat for a moment.

And then silence, deep and pregnant, as the earth was gently pushed back into the yawning grave. Silence, except for the soft patter of falling clods.

"The Other God is gone . . . but I am left," Kimball heard himself telling the silent, torchlit throng in a dull, remote voice. "There is nothing to fear."

For there was terror in the wild faces before him and there was terror in the trembling voice of the old man who answered him. "Yet we fear! For we have now no gods to protect us!"

"Am I not still here?" Kimball demanded, but the old Ephemera shook his head grievously.

"You are not a god. We thought you were, but gods do not die. You are but a man such as ourselves."

And a deep murmur went through the whole fearful, torchlit throng of the Ephemerae. "Gods do not die."

THEY LOOKED at Kimball as he stood stunned, and they looked at him, not reproachfully, but sadly. "Aie, this is a black night for us, my people!" exclaimed the old Ephemera tremulously. "Always we thought that the two gods would protect us from the evils of the world, always we depended upon them to foresee disasters to come.

"And now we see that they were not gods, and so we are left alone and unprotected, and have only our own poor skill and strength with which to protect ourselves."

"You mean . . . that you're not going to obey me, not going to listen to my teachings, any more?" Kimball cried hoarsely.

The old man nodded solemnly. "We tried to learn the things you commanded, even though we could not understand them, because we thought you were more than a man. But now we know you are but a man."

Kimball Drew made a desperate, urgent gesture with his metal-clad arm.

"I tell you, I ~~am~~ a god!" he cried. "Have I not lived just as I am now, ever since the oldest of you was a child? Did not your grandfathers and their grandfathers know me?"

"Yes, but it was the same with the Other God . . . and yet he died," answered the old Ephemera. "So will you die also, some day. And gods do not die."

"Gods do not die!" echoed the hoarse, fearful chorus.

They started to move away across the dark campus. Kimball shouted frantically after the receding throng. "Come back! You can't turn against me like this! You've got to let me teach you, guide you! You've got to—"

He found himself alone in the heavy darkness, shouting hoarsely into silence. The red torches of the Ephemeræ were disappearing down into the black wilderness of the city.

"Come back!" Kimball's hoarse voice trailed off into silence. His shoulders sagged, and he stood stricken. "They'll never come back to me," he whispered thickly.

No, never! His long, desperate struggle to teach the Ephemeræ, to revivify them, was done at last. Finished. A failure.

A last wave of blind heartbreak and revolt surged in him as he looked down through blurring tears at the raw grave at his feet.

"You destroyed my last chance by dying, Ormond," he choked. "But you didn't know—"

HE STOOD there in the solemn darkness, and felt all hope and fear and

self-reproach drowning in the utter weariness that flowed through his brain like an icy opiate.

Now, at the end of his strange road, that was all he could feel; a vast weariness.

"Tired . . . so damned tired," he muttered, staring down at the silent grave. "And there's nothing more I can do now. Nothing but rest—"

He started back toward the tall Physics Building, with slow, dead steps. The yellow-glowing window of his candlelit laboratory beamed cheerily through the dark.

Once inside the big room, he moved over to his desk by the window and sat stiffly down. He sat there, his broad metal shoulders sagging down, and his haggard face strange and wistful as he looked out across the starlit campus and the black city.

Novæ Aquilæ was sinking westward in flaring splendor. And about and above it burned the bright cressets of the farther and nearer stars, those distant suns that the dreaming sons of men had once thought to conquer and harness.

"Not for man, no," Kimball whispered. "But we ran a good race, didn't we? We accomplished some things, in our day."

He raised his metal-sheathed arm in ironic salute to the blazing orb sliding down behind the brooding pinnacles. "To . . . the victor," he muttered.

His arm froze like that, in midair. His whole body stiffened, and his dilated eyes stared wildly out through the window. Someone was coming up the starlit campus toward this building—someone who carried a rifle and who wore a *gleaming metal suit!*

Kimball Drew began to tremble violently. "No," he told himself thickly. "Delirium of some kind . . . can't be real—"

BUT THE sturdy little figure in gleaming metal out there was coming

on! He glimpsed the white blur of a face raised toward his own candlelit window. He got to his feet and reeled like a drunken man toward the door. He burst out into the starlight, and the metal-clad newcomer swiftly raised the rifle to cover him.

"Stand back!" warned a clear silver voice with a ring of danger in it.

"Who . . . you—" Kimball stutted. He could not find further voice.

The figure before him stiffened, staring incredulously at his own starlit form. "You're wearing a tungsten suit?" cried the newcomer throbbingly. "Tell me, are you Kimball Drew, the scientist?"

"Yes!" he shouted hoarsely. "But in God's name, who are you?"

The rifle was lowered. And as he stumbled forward, he heard the other suddenly sobbing.

It was a girl who was sobbing in the starlight, a tired, worn-looking girl whose whole body, except for her white face, was covered by a flexible tungsten suit like his own. "I'm Jean Crail," she choked. "Thank God I've found you, Kimball Drew. Thank God there's someone left in the world besides myself who has a normal life span."

"Do you mean that you've been wearing a protective suit from the first?" Kimball cried wildly. "From two years ago?"

Jean Crail nodded unsteadily, her

tear-streaked face glistening in the starlight. "I was a biological student in a Los Angeles university two years ago. I read the first warnings you published about the new radiation, and I believed you were right, so I made and wore a protective suit from the very first. And it saved me from being mutated by the radiation as everyone else was.

"My family, all my friends, aged and died. There was no one around me but the new people, the savages who were born and aged and died in a few weeks. I was the only normal person. But I knew that you, too, must have escaped the mutation, and might be still living here in New York.

"So for a year, I've been traveling across the country. And when I entered New York tonight, I came here to Manhattan University, the only place where I had any hope of finding you. I saw your lighted window—"

She stopped, breathless. And Kimball, heart pounding, caught her in his arms. "Jean, do you realize what this means?" he cried. "It means renewal of our former long-lived race! The nova will soon subside . . . and you and I, both normal . . . our children and descendants will be long-lived!"

His face flashed wildly. "Long-lived men and women, who can bring back civilization, can tutor and lead the generations of the Ephemerae—"