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the
fire
and
the
flesh

by . . . E. Hoffmann Price

Was Agni Deva flame? Or was she
flesh? In either case the woman
of the volcano was irresistible.

"DAMN IT, WOMAN!" Harmon thrust his chair back from the breakfast table. "Java and Bali will keep, and so will the Hindu ruins. They've been at Borobudur for untold centuries, and they'll be just as romantic and glamorous next month or next year. Be *reasonable*—haven't I got enough on my mind, without sightseeing, here and now?"

Half-whimsically half-querulously Lorella Harmon complained, "It's *my* fault that blight or smut or whatever it is has struck the crop? Good Lord, Wade! You worked on this dry rice for a couple of years before the war.

"Won't it keep till next year? Haven't you all the time in the world? They haven't starved in Java or anywhere else so far for lack of this miracle super-rice that'll grow without irrigation on the rockiest mountainside!"

The new strain of "dry" rice, which Wade Harmon had developed after long experimentation, was doing worse than fall away from its early promise. And Lorella, just come to Tanah Merah from the States, seemed to feel badly let

Biologically man may be a far cry from the moth. Yet, perhaps as with the moth, in each of us lurks a fascination for fire that dates back to the dawn of human emergence from animal primitivism. Fiery meteor, swift lightning, blazing forest or prairie, terrifying volcano—each is fire and each attracts strangely even while it fills us with fear. Or is fire, in its essence, something more—an entity, perhaps? One of America's able author-craftsmen brilliantly explores this possibility upon these pages.

down—not because the crop had taken a setback but because he refused to leave the plantation and go on the promised sightseeing tour until he learned what had caused the trouble.

Though slender, Lorella had no need at all for any artifices to round out her pale-blue lounging robe. Her hair had ruddy glints and an almost-nacreous sheen. Her skin was fine and smooth. Good nose and long lovely hands—all in all Lorella Harmon was an uncommonly attractive armful but for the petulance that lurked about her mouth.

"I might as well have stayed in the States! You're not a bit glad to see me!"

But Harmon had beaten her to the punch in quitting the table so Lorella did not leave. Instead she sat there to weep with heroic restraint until the door slammed. Then she bounced to her feet and pressed her face against the panes of the solarium to see how far he would go before coming back to apologize.

Wade was a wiry quick-stepping man, perhaps too impatient for the tropics. She tried to make allowances for that and for the lingering effects of war injuries, though there was scarcely a trace of a limp.

Active as he was in body, his mind left it lagging behind. That expression of farseeing-ness in the deep-set dark eyes had attracted her from the start—from their very first meeting after the war, while

he was still scrambling for funds to return to Tanah Merah to resume his experiments with dry rice.

And now, she told herself bitterly, he saw so far that his opposite number at breakfast was too near to be in focus!

Harmon had no intention of coming back to apologize. Once well away from the bungalow, which had for so many weeks awaited Lorella's arrival, he divided his bitter gaze between the volcano. Merah, and the crop which would surely fail. Sniffing the air he caught a barely perceptible taint of sulphur.

Harmon began to blame Merah, the Red One, for the unfilled heads of rice, the stunted growths that had sprouted with such promise. Merah had always been an overshadowing beauty—the ever-changing hues as the sun shifted, at times ash-rose, and again a luminous purple during the brief dusk. Merah was red only when the towering cone of lavender-gray pumice was tinged by the slanting rays of early morning and late evening.

Harmon frowned at the failing crop. His plantation was on the highest of the succession of terraces from which the cone rose. Except for the ground he had cleared the entire shelf was overgrown by jungle, though there had always been a small area cultivated by the natives of the village. These people now worked for Wade Harmon.

Ahmat, the Javanese labor fore-

man, appeared at his side. Though his hair had whitened and his eyes were ancient, his delicately modeled face was smooth albeit sharp of line.

"*Tuan*, she is angry," he said. "I have tried to make peace with her but she will not listen to the servant when the master should speak."

"*She*, Ahmat?"

"You know us of old. I have watched you looking at her long and often." Ahmat gestured. "The Red Mountain is only the house of One who lives there. She who lives in the house, her one does not see. Do you go and talk to her."

"How does a man talk to a mountain? What did you do, Ahmat, when you—talked to *her*?"

"I set fruit and flowers on the rim of the crater. As if at a shrine or image. The Presence is everywhere. Go, place your gift and perhaps she will be pleased."

"That smell in the air is what's poisoning the rice."

"No, *tuan*. It comes and it goes, it has always been so. Rice has a soul. It is frightened when Merah is angry. So it dies."

Many of the islanders believed that rice had a spirit. They believed that only a certain sort of blade was fit for cutting the stalks, else the spirit of the cereal would be angry.

"Each living thing," Ahmat had once explained, "dies in its time to nourish another living thing. That is the Excellent Law. But he who

eats without giving thanks for the sacrifice of the eaten, he is cursed for his pride and it is not well with *him*."

This had set Harmon thinking during pre-war years in Tanah Merah when he lived in his bungalow, alone with the problem of crossing one plant strain with another to accentuate desirable traits.

"But what starts the original mutation?" Harmon had once asked a lecturer at school. The man had given him a look, half of pity, half of resentment. Later there had been talk of cosmic rays, radioactivity—explanations which explained nothing.

When Ahmat had seen that under Harmon's care, the dry rice was actually changing as to the size and number of grains in each head he had offered an explanation no worse than that of the scientists and a good deal more picturesque.

"It is this way—the plant guardians, the *devas* who make things grow, they amuse themselves sometimes by making a single grain sprout a stalk that is not like any of the other stalks."

"That makes as much sense as what they told me at school."

Later, pleased by Harmon's open-mindedness, Ahmat had added, "The *devas* make changes when there is a man who sees and understands. There has always been dry rice—but the changes did not start until you came."

This queer primitive reasoning

had finally warped Harmon into line. But he could not tell Lorella that until the rice *devas* felt like dispensing with his presence he could not take her to see Bali and Borobudur and the rest of the tourist bait.

What sustained Almat's contention was that growing things did respond to Harmon's touch. But Harmon felt foolish about offering gifts to a volcano.

II

When Almat handed him the small basket Harmon skirted the base of the cone, wanting to be out of sight of the bungalow when he began the ascent. He went cold at the thought of Lorella spotting him, insisting on going along.

There were lava beds between the plantation's edge and the foot of the cone. For perhaps a mile, he picked his way among windrows of black fragments, which looked as though a giant had picked up uncounted gondola-loads of coal to dump them in heaps. Between these bunkers was a fairly level floor, seamed and slashed by crevasses.

Finally he began a slantwise ascent of the cone. At each step he sank ankle deep, and started small slides of cinder. Before long he was exhausted and sat down on the steep slope. A feeling that he had been cut off from humanity, from all animate creatures, became stronger. Then, as his gaze shifted, he saw that Almat had well and rightly referred to Merah as *she*.

There were cinder dunes which began where the lava flow ended, a succession of mounds, whose curvature the somewhat overrated ladies of Bali might have envied. Each was banded and mottled, white and tawny, coral and buff, scarlet, ochre, and ash-roses. Mottled and banded like the Primordial Serpent in the shadow of whose hooded heads Brahman the Creator sleeps, waiting for the Destroyer to finish his work, resting until the time for new creation.

Harmon remembered the museum where he had seen the many-breasted statue unearthed at Ephesus. The linkage of association was so strong that he said aloud, "Diana of the Ephesians mated with the Great Serpent—Merah, the great granddaughter of all of the Nagas . . ."

And then the scientist in Harmon rebelled. He told himself, "Those color bands are caused by chemical changes in the cinder when anhydride vapors from below encounter atmospheric moisture and become acids."

Having built up a good case against intuition he resumed the ascent until at last he could look back and see, far below, the red tiles of the bungalow roof. It was like looking into another world.

On reaching the crater lip, he looked down into a bowl whose flat floor was broken by crevasses. It supported a confusion of towering lava bulwarks and pinnacles. Wisps of steam curled from several floor

and wall crevasses. A light snow-pack clung to the slope.

He made his way down into the shadow of the turrets and spires. There were passages almost arched over into arcades with only a thin thread of sky showing through. More and more, he got the feeling that all this had been erected by gods or demons—and for no good purpose.

Then, disconcertingly, mist gathered. It thickened. It plumed and spiraled. Murky twilight became darkness at noon: Sudden panic made him turn and run until he emerged from the passage. There he stopped, for he could neither see the crater wall nor anything that was more than a yard from him.

Whichever way he went, he should soon reach the side of the bowl and come up into the light again. But to do so he would have to move in a straight line—and this was impossible. Gaping crevasses and towering pillars kept him from holding a straight course. Every few paces demanded a detour.

He cursed the volcano and his own folly and Ahmat's as well. Then a detached segment of consciousness warned him and he sat down. He closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath—a second—a third.

A moment later he perceived that he was not alone. There was a blurred something coming toward him. Though it took shape before tension could again mount he got to his feet, all a-quiver.

Of a sudden, the form blossomed

into color. It was as if a spotlight had been turned on the girl. Her garments were not of the island pattern. If her skirt was actually wound sarong-wise, then she had her own trick of arranging it. Instead of blouse or short jacket, she wore her breasts bound with a scarf, leaving her midriff bare.

Over this foundation she wore a long garment that put him in mind of the *sari* of Hindustan, a tunic which after enveloping her body, left a fold sufficient to conceal all but a glimpse of black hair and of ear lobes from which hung ornately worked golden pendants.

In one hand she carried a tiny basket, much like the one Harmon had abandoned in panic. The other, peeping from the garment, gathered the folds. They were exquisite hands, cream colored, with fingertips henna-dyed. She wore neither bracelets nor anklets. There was no caste mark to brand her smooth forehead—no jewelled stud defaced her nose.

Her grave loveliness, at first finding expression in eyes which were dark and longish, now spread into life with her smile. Her glance took in the abandoned basket. Understanding at once she said, "You don't know where to put it? I'll show you."

"Ahmat told me," Harmon began, gropingly. "He didn't want to offer these things to—ah—Merah. He thought . . ."

"I'm Agni Deva," she said as though to explain why her features

were not Malayan—why, without seeming in any wise foreign, she was in so many small ways unlike other island women. Then, "Don't worry about the fog. I shall guide you."

He followed her into another of the labyrinth's entrances. Surely some conscious and designing one had modeled the once-plastic lava as a baker might garnish a cake. The shrine at which Agni Deva stopped was not human handiwork nor could it have been made by nature. He sensed that Agni Deva herself was an ambiguity in flesh and blood.

After a genuflection she set her basket on the altar and pronounced words he could not understand. Stepping back she said, "I'll say it for you if you've forgotten what Ahmat told you."

"Will it be just as good?"

"Oh, of course!"

Harmon recited, "I bring the Red One an offering of good will and ask for the sweetness of her breath to be good for my rice. I ask for good will toward the rice I plant in the courtyard of her house."

Agni Deva was pleased. "That was just right. But you were angry at her awhile ago, and frightened, and you cursed her in your heart. Sit down while you wait for the fog to lift. Sit here. Throw your thoughts toward the altar." Her voice dimmed a little as she repeated, "Toward it—toward her—in front of you—always in front.

Away from you—out from yourself . . ."

When, with a start, he realized that he was alone and that brilliant sunlight reached down just behind him, he knew that for a measurable time his thought and more than any mere thoughts had been "out in front."

Harmon picked his way from the crater rim to go down the slope. He looked back but saw no trace of Agni Deva nor of the way she had left.

III

Harmon was not surprised by the quick recovery of the rice from its setback, though all he did was observe and record. He set down the readings of instruments which measured temperature, humidity, air density. He set forth his findings on soil analysis, and on all the insect pests and plagues. He entered everything except his visits to the volcano.

Every so often he met Agni Deva. He did not mention her to Ahmat. Natives would gossip and sooner or later the story would work its way to the bungalow staff. Lorella had her ways of learning things.

That she quit nagging about the postponed cruise was a relief until her flattering interest in his work became overdone. This hampered Harmon. Getting to the crater was impossible without being observed. He racked his brain for an excuse to get away from Lorella long

enough to make the climb—but in vain.

The rice continued thriving, yet Ahmat looked worried—for there were now earth tremors. Gentle nudges rattled dishes in the china-closet, the glassware on the buffet. Sulphur fumes became strong.

Lorella became alarmed. "We'll be burned alive or buried without warning!" she cried, one morning when fumes entirely concealed the black bulwarks of the lava beds. "And that everlasting hissing!"

"It's no more dangerous than geysers back home."

"Good Lord! Why did you have to pick a volcano!"

"There isn't any other sort of mountain in the archipelago."

"Well, but most of them are extinct."

"Merah is practically so."

"Practically so!" Lorella echoed, her voice rising. "If we don't leave here soon, I'll get out and you can have your volcano!"

In fairness, Harmon didn't blame her.

He said, "Let's wait a few more days, darling. These things aren't touched off with a fuse. They give plenty of warning."

He told Ahmat to prepare a basket. That night, when moonlight reached into the bungalow, Harmon tiptoed to the verandah, carrying his boots. The crater would be safe enough. The subterranean forces were finding escape at the base of the cone, in the lava beds, as they had done before.

He had barely set out when Lorella's voice checked him. She wore slacks and sneakers. Even by moonlight he read the anger in her face. "Let me go and see how *she* likes orchids! Oh, don't give me that *I-don't-know-what-you-mean* look. I was awake when Ahmat set the basket on the porch. I've noticed how you two always change the subject the minute I come near."

"Orchids . . ." Harmon began, gropingly.

"Yes, orchids! I got a peep. Whoever she is, she must be quite a girl. My coming to join you must have been quite an upset. Is she pre-war or someone new?"

"This is not what you think."

"Purely platonic!" Lorella mocked. "Merely interested in her beautiful soul! Is she almost white?"

"Go back to bed!" he answered. "She's neither white nor brown nor any other color. Go back where you belong."

She recoiled as though he had struck her. In his mind he had done just that. Then she renewed the attack. "I'm going to see this lady of yours."

"You're going back," he said, with a coldness which surprised him. "Back to the States. You can have your sightseeing tour on the way. I'm not going to meet a woman. Though I probably will soon enough at the rate you're cutting up."

"Wade, what is this? Don't quarrel with me. What is this?"

"Come and see," he challenged and turned toward the lava beds. "But if you're wrong, you're through, as far as I'm concerned. This is Tanah Merah. You're not in the States, where your tiniest whim was law!"

"I'll risk that," she decided and went with him.

But when they came to the edge of the lava beds and the swirling girdle of low-hanging vapor she caught his arm. "You can't lead me on any wild-goose chase!"

He tried to brush her aside. She got in front of him. She struck the basket from his hand, spilling the flowers and cakes.

"No chewing gum? No beads or mirrors?"

Harmon picked up the offering and put it back in the basket. Lorella's belittlement and contempt prodded him to recklessness and revolt.

"I'm taking this to Merah. Not a woman but a volcano. To stop this eruption. I've tried for days to get rid of you long enough to come out here but since you have to know you've found out. We have to make friends with Merah or get out. Is that clear?"

It was not. Her eyes became saucer wide. He had not moved, though he may have swayed a little on his feet. Perhaps the mist-filtered moonlight played an eerie trick with his expression. Lorella's mouth moved soundlessly and then she screamed. Then she ran.

Harmon drew a breath of pure

relief and picked his way among the traps of the lava field until he came to the now well-defined path he had cut in the cinder slopes.

In the morning, hours after his return from the silence and peace of the crater, Harmon sat in the breakfast alcove. Brilliant sunlight made the slopes of the cone gleam and shimmer. He thrust aside the papaya and limes. And as though there had been no clash the previous night, he called.

Lorella stepped lightly from then on. She was not in the least interested when, the following day, he went to make his next offering. This time he had a few words with Agni Deva in the crater, and while he did not mention that strange woman, her words gave force to what he said to Lorella on his return.

"Whether or not it makes any sense I'm keeping her happy. And you should see that rice! It's more than made up for the setback."

Nevertheless he had the feeling that Lorella was laying it on heavily in her effort to convince him that she was convinced.

IV

Not until Ahmat handed him a blotter some days later did Harmon realize his troubles were only beginning.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"*Tuan*, it lay in the compound. Doubtless the wind blew it from a window. It is in writing, which I do not read."

This was delivered just a shade too suavely. Natives, most of them wholly illiterate, did have a respect for anything written. Yet Harmon was certain Ahmat knew more than he would admit—that the man had in fact taken it from the writing desk in the bungalow or had got it from a servant he had set spying on Lorella.

Harmon held the blotter to a mirror. Lorella had penned a note to the American consul in Batavia, asking his advice—

. . . cracking under strain . . . cannot persuade him to take time out . . . hallucinations . . . not believe . . . him violent, but . . . aside from . . . what authorities can I consult . . . send him . . . States . . . guardian appoint . . .

First thing he knew, he'd be hustled home under guard. They'd blame it all on his wartime hardships and he'd wind up as a guest of the Veterans Administration, at least for awhile. By the time he got himself into the clear his work would have been so long neglected he'd have to start all over.

The tension between him and Lorella became so unbearable that he spent more and more time in the crater—it became a refuge from the artificial amiability of the bungalow.

At times he saw Agni Deva leaving the shrine just as he was approaching. He tried vainly to overtake her but she knew the labyrinth

far more intimately than he did. Once he looked up and saw her on the crater lip, dwarfed by distance and foreshortening, yet splendid of color and shape against the stark blue of the sky. She waved before she stepped out of his sight to go her way.

When he described her to Ahmat the old man declared he had never seen any such person. Nevertheless, Ahmat's address thereafter became respectful in a new way.

Then, one afternoon as he approached the bungalow, he spotted visitors on the verandah—Kirby and Voerhaven, the copra planters he had not seen since Lorella's arrival. She had set out a stone jug of Bols, tumblers and tonic on the table.

Kirby was broad and deep-chested, a thick-necked muscular man, ruddy and square-faced. Voerhaven, though large, was lean and rangy with a long, angular face and a long inquisitive nose. Both were hearty fellows and gave Harmon no chance to apologize for his apparent unsociability in not having joined them from time to time for *rijstafel* or a few rounds of gin. After several Holland-sized drinks they insisted on having a look at the crop.

"It's true," Voerhaven rumbled. "It's better than they said."

Kirby wagged his head, saying, "Takes an American, every time, Dirk!"

Harmon protested, "That kind of talk never made Americans

popular anywhere else in the world except in the States."

"Oh, all right! Dirk and I have a chap down at his *kampung* who's interested. Traveling for a foundation. They seem to have foundations for everything but copra. This one's for the better understanding of someone by someone else and rice seems to enter."

"Hmmm . . . Wants to buy in? I have all the backing I need—trust fund from an uncle's estate. And when the strain's really established half the seed goes to the Indonesian government. The other half is mine to exploit."

Voerhaven shrugged and made a gesture to acknowledge defeat. "Oh, very well, Wadel We've tried to fix up a little surprise for you. The man's name is Forest Millington. You've been favorably considered for an award by the Foundation for Fostering Far Eastern Amity."

"A surprise but you're such a damn skeptic—" said Kirby.

"Way you keep yourself buried," Voerhaven carried on, "we might have known—"

When they got back to the house, Lorella, all aglow, added her enthusiasm. "Oh, I'm so thrilled! Do hurry and take your shower."

"Let's have another noggin," said Kirby.

Lorella splashed the oily gin into a tumbler with one hand, the tonic with the other. Harmon snatched the glass, raised it, and said, "How!" He wagged his free hand and with

fingers wrapped about the tumbler hustled for the bedroom with its adjoining shower.

Intentionally he knocked a chair over, made a point of cursing luridly. He took another wary taste of the drink. The glass contained too much gin, not enough tonic.

Harmon remained dressed while dipping into the big earthenware jar and splashing water on the floor of the stall. Next he turned on the shower, which was fed from a small tank on the roof. Under cover of the sound he tiptoed to the rear and skirted the building.

There were no voices to overhear. That was the payoff.

He retraced his course. He reentered from the rear in time to see Voerhaven, Kirby and Lorella huddled at the bedroom door, heads cocked close to the panel.

Kirby had some luggage straps. Voerhaven had a length of clothesline. They were waiting for him to pass out.

Then they became aware of him. On both sides there was an unmasking.

"You go with us," Kirby said commandingly.

Lorella's face was hard and tense. The Dutchman needed a moment to nerve himself to tackle a man who was sober and alert. Harmon recoiled, not so much from the physical threat as from the actual sight of what he had for some moments suspected.

Lorella had taken her problem to the only other white men on the

island—evidently these two former good friends had been convinced by her story. The yarn about the "foundation" must have been to get Harmon as far as the waterfront. There, plied with gin, he was to have been dumped into a *prahu* and taken to Batavia.

Straps and cords to tie a madman—that was what prodded Harmon to wildness exceeding their expectations. His momentary recoil had thrown them off guard. As they gathered themselves to close in, Harmon charged. He upset Kirby, knocking him into Lorella. Flung against the door she tumbled over the threshold. Voerhaven tried to tackle him and missed.

Harmon yelled, "You're crazier'n you think I am!"

He smashed the tall man with a driving wallop, knocking him athwart Kirby.

"Get him!" Lorella screamed. "He'll go for the car!"

Harmon, clear of the three, raced for the front, not to take the jeep but to get his shotgun from the rack in the living room. It was not there. Lorella must have seen to that.

He had missed his chance to kick and slug the two men helpless. They were on their feet and Lorella was at their heels.

"Don't let him get away!" she screamed. "He'll kill us all!"

V

There was nowhere to go with a car except to the waterfront vil-

lage. From there the only refuge was an open boat to Java. By then Harmon would be established as a madman who had beaten up his guests and his wife. Having taken a stand the three could not afford to retreat.

All Harmon wanted was to get away. He wanted escape from white faces and English speech. He wanted neither sight nor sound of his own kind. He had but one refuge—Merah, the Red One.

He had wrenched his ankle in the scuffle. His old wound betrayed him. Yet for a moment desperation made him gain on his pursuers.

"Wade, *do* come back!" Lorella cried.

Wearing slacks and flat heels she kept up with the men. She knew the ground as they did not.

Once in the lava beds Harmon hoped to trick them into a pocket. But they stayed too close on his heels. Desperate, winded, his leg threatening to let him down, Harmon gambled on his final resource. He bolted for the foot of the cone. His pursuers' advantage was set off to a degree by Harmon's experience as they zigzagged up the slope. Drawn by the contest Lorella kept up.

They shouted. Though they were too winded to shape their words Harmon guessed their meaning. They were trying to dissuade him from what they considered the futility of his going ever upward to the apex, the end of flight. Or perhaps they feared he would plunge

headlong into the depths of the crater.

Mists gathered about the rim. He had only a little way to go. Behind him he heard the rustle and rattle of cinders dislodged by the three on his heels.

"Come back!" Kirby shouted.

Voerhaven burst out with a gasping, "we won't hurt you!"

Fatigue had turned Harmon's legs to wood. He stumbled, he rolled, he clawed the slope. He checked himself. During his tumble, he saw that the three had halted. Their faces were distorted from breathlessness and from strain. And there was fear. This last puzzled Harmon. But he surprised them and himself by regaining his feet.

"I'm staying up here! I won't be locked up. Get out or you'll wish you had!" His wrath checked them.

Refreshed he fairly bounded up the grade. There, on the lava rim, stood Agni Deva, her arms extended in welcome. Her flame-colored *sari* wavered, rippled and seemed to transmit light. And her body was more than half translucent.

Looking back he saw through many veils of mist that his pursuers stood open mouthed, their faces still shaped by the cries which they could not repeat. Kirby took Lorella by one arm, Voerhaven by the other. They half-dragged, half-carried her.

Agni Deva nudged Harmon. "When they've taken care of her they'll stay away." She smiled cryptically. "The elevation is bad for

people who aren't accustomed to it," she said as he went with her into the crater's bowl.

"They looked scared," Harmon observed thoughtfully. "As though they'd seen a ghost."

Agni Deva's soft little laugh had an indulgent, almost maternal note. "That would be hard to explain. But once you have seen enough of my home, you will realise that nothing worth knowing can be put into words anyway."

"Your home, *here*?"

"Oh, I didn't ever tell you, did I?"

Presently, he realised she did live in the crater. He followed Agni Deva into a tunnel which had walls glass-smooth and perfectly circular except for the flattening of the bottom. There were cross-passages and crypts, most of them softly lighted by rays which reached down through rifts and the tubular opening. In one passageway she picked up a brazen pot which she filled from a natural basin in which water accumulated.

This she balanced on her head and went on until she showed him the blue flames issuing from crevices in a hearth. Very much in the way of a housewife rightly proud of her home she said, "Always fire. It comes from below, so I never have to gather wood. The four elements are always right at hand. Fire, water, earth and air. Oh yes, earth, of course—I'll show you my garden later.

"You've done so well with earth.

All your life you've loved earth, so the rice followed your coaxing. Earth was your way to wisdom. But you can learn the way of fire also. It's so much faster for those who can take that way."

Harmon didn't even try to keep up with her cozy patter as he looked about at the carved teak chest, the mats, the scarves and sarongs. There were wall niches where silver betelnut boxes and ear-pendants and cosmetic jars mingled in comfortable confusion. A low archway opened into an adjoining crypt.

Seeing his glance wander, Agni Deva ceased speaking of the way of fire and said, "My friends often bring me presents. But they'll not disturb you. Do sit down—you're awfully tired."

Harmon sat on the teak chest. Agni Deva spread a mat at his feet and seated herself crosslegged in the "lotus posture" so that the henna-stained soles of her tiny feet were upturned. The hierophantic posture reminded him of the figures sculptured at Borobudur and Ankor Vat.

But when she flung aside the head covering, exposing her sleek black hair, and leaned back to pillow her head against his knee, he could hardly associate her with sculptured images. He got off the chest and seated himself beside her.

"This seems more a pagoda than a home. What are you, the priestess of Merah?"

"You mean the temple slave?" She reflected for a moment. "Words

can't express anything that's really important. The only things you can know are those you experience directly. The Gods don't talk. If you really want to know what I am the knowledge is here and waiting.

"After all, the way of earth is familiar to you, so why can't the way of fire be your next step? You needn't pass through air and water. The truth is, you probably couldn't."

Harmon smiled at her baffling whimsies, smiled to conceal his perplexity and relish the touch of her body against him. This strange woman was warm and solid and definite without any suggestion of vagueness.

"Agni Deva," he said, speaking the words with the slowness of entire relish. "Deva . . . Deva . . ."

"My parents named me to honor the fire spirits," she explained. "We name children after gods and *devas* the way your people name them after saints. If you knew the old, old language that was brought over from Hindustan, you'd understand. But you needn't bother with language. There are better ways—"

"By becoming one with that which is to be known," Harmon said and took her in his arms and bent down to her upturned mouth.

To make the most of the embrace she uncoiled herself from the lotus posture. And Harmon knew that she had been well named for *agni* meant fire . . .

Since dense mist obscured the crater and blotted out the sun Har-

mon wondered at the permanent twilight of Agni Deva's home. His watch had stopped for he knew not how long—though time did not concern him any too much.

He was engrossed with a thought which he finally put into words. "Ahmat and some of the others spoke of a deva of the volcano but never as though they'd seen her," he said. "Well now I have and you're she. To every one of the senses, you're a flesh-and-blood woman—still, all *that* must be illusion and you're not only the way of fire but you *are* fire. Not in the form we know it on the outside, something which is set or built or made or lighted, but fire—that-always-was."

She nodded, smiled contentedly. "And always will be, Wade," she said. "Elemental fire—all of me you've seen and heard and touched and smelled and tasted is *maya*, the unreal. The only reality of me is what you have not yet known and cannot know through any of your senses."

"But I just said I knew and you agreed," he objected.

"Oh, that was only a necessary handy way of speaking. What you meant was that you had begun to have a knowledge that there was actually something to be known. Don't you see the difference?"

With a chuckle he answered, "Sure I do! It's the sort of jargon my philosophy professor used to spout by the hour—except that you give sense to it and he didn't."

"Of *course* he didn't—he couldn't. He was talking about something far too far from him. You, who listened, knew he didn't know and so you were smarter."

"If he could only hear this!" Harmon exclaimed delightedly. "It's funny, though, but I begin to see the sense of what he was trying to say when he spoke of the essence of the thing-in-itself, the reality apart from the weight or size or bulk or any quality at all. All right, you're the essence of fire, and just for convenience or necessity or because you want it that way you're tricked out as a woman. In which you couldn't have made a neater choice!

"But if I, the so-called 'I' that my friends were chasing up the cone to catch and lock up, am *maya*, what is the actual me, where is it?"

She looked at him a long time, steadily but with mysteriously changing eyes and a smile that was entirely inward. She closed her eyes as though to blot out illusion and when she opened them she said, "Let that answer itself when the times comes. Now cease trying to get ahead of yourself. I'm going to make a *rijstafel*."

The dish which Agni Deva prepared exceeded the fieriness that Harmon had so extravagantly described. It was an initiation.

"This *is* the way of fire!"

She laughed at his grimace, said he'd soon get used to it and added very soberly, "Wade, one day you

may learn that fire is not hot. If ever the test comes accept it—don't be afraid."

"Accept it? Suppose I have no choice?"

"All the more, do not be afraid. It is not as you think."

So he ate a slice of fresh mango to extinguish the flame. Then he said, "Kiss me and see if a bite of mango will be cooling."

* * * * *

But at last there came into those timeless hours the recollection of the rice crop. Harvest time was near. Whenever Harmon spoke of it to Agni Deva she assured him he had nothing at all to worry about.

Eventually, however, he declared, "I should go back. They must by now have cooled down enough to get rid of their notion of locking me up. If they haven't I'll know where to go and what to do. Probably I'll surprise them when I show up just as though nothing had happened."

She smiled cryptically. "You will. Oh, you surely will."

"If there's any trouble I'll be back and in a hurry."

"Must you go?"

"It's my work. All this has been beautiful. I've never before known beauty. What I took for beauty was always *maya*. Lorella's face—the unmasking—it's not on her account I'm going back. You know that."

"That much I can count on! But the rice is thriving. I've made it thrive. After all, *I am Merah*. You

know this but you're impatient, restless."

"Because I'm human." With one hand he gripped his other, kneading and twisting it. "All this is *maya*. But whatever the real I, it has to do and act. Sitting here and *being* is not enough. You're different. Your doing is only a sideline. Maybe if I knew more about *being* I'd see less importance in *doing*."

She drew a deep breath. Her smile became a glowing loveliness. "Go then and don't think of me as neglected or deserted. Go, do your work and come back when it's done. Maybe then you'll be ready to walk the way of fire, to become fire with me, like me."

"We'll *be* the volcano, you and I?" he said in affectionate whimsy. He kissed her.

VI

Taking no chances of another encounter with Lorella's allies, one or both of whom might still be at the house, Harmon made a wide circuit and headed for the native *kampung*, to see Ahmat.

Instead of greeting him the men and women who had worked in the fields regarded him with consternation. They looked as though they wanted to run but could not. The laughter of women and the speech of the groups of men who sat gossiping stopped at the sight of him. The silence that followed made Harmon feel life had suddenly left the Malays, that the

houses of thatch and rattan were homes of the dead.

He saw Ahmat and called him by name. "Tell these people I am not crazy. You know why those two fellows tried to take me away."

"They told us you were dead—fallen into the fires of Merah. You were on the rim and fire came up to pull you down. We believed but plainly it is not true." He addressed the others. "Merah let him come back. Merah does what pleases her. Do you believe what is before you, or believe what they told us?"

Harmon asked, "Ahmat, what's been happening?"

"Come, sit with us, we aren't afraid."

Harmon accepted the invitation. Ahmat's face was troubled but from natural reasons. The others had a similar expression. Disturbed, they exchanged glances. It was as though his being alive had raised a new problem.

"What's wrong?"

"Your wife, the lady who calls herself your widow, she went last week to Batavia with Kirby to be married. We expect them back in a few days."

"See here! I can understand her marrying Kirby or Voerhaven or anyone else, and I'm all in favor of it. But what do you mean, *last week*?"

"You have been gone many weeks, *tuan*."

"What?"

"Be pleased to come with me and see the new rice crop." When Har-

mon had followed, with most of the *kampung* at his heels, Ahmat gestured at the expanse of sprouting blades. "You had too much on your mind to notice this when you came," the old man said. "But surely you remember that when you went a crop awaited harvest. Could it become young again or is this a new one?"

The field spoke for itself. Dazed, Harmon asked, "Tell me more of what they said? What happened to me that day?"

"You ran. They chased. They said fire came to pull you into the crater. When they looked back there was no more fire—only steam. When they tried to look heat drove them and fumes choked them before they could get to the rim. They knew that nothing could live through that fire."

Harmon said, "All I saw was mist and a young woman reaching to give me a hand if I stumbled. Her name is Agni Deva. She lives up there. When it seemed time to return to my work I left. How is it at my bungalow?"

"There is no enemy. There is only a young woman there, Kirby's sister. She came by air when they told her of his plans to marry. What you do or what you do not do, that is for you to decide. Haste is evil. Talk to her and think and when you know what is to be done, then we will do it with you and for you. And that is on our head and on our eyes!"

And so, presently, Harmon met

Eileen Kirby, who was not in the least disconcerted at the sight of him, since they had never until that moment met.

Eileen was just short of being plump and like so many solidly built women she had unusually small feet and dainty ankles and carried herself straight up. He had scarcely seen her move more than a few steps when he realized that this was one of the only two or three women he had ever seen who could wear high heels without seeming to stilt along, ever on the verge of falling on her chin.

Her tawny golden hair waved naturally. The curl was particularly noticeable in the strands on either side of the part, at the center. Her cheekbones were sufficiently prominent to give a piquant touch, which kept her features from being too regular, though her nose added zest, being neither tiptilted nor yet quite straight. The nostrils had an eager flare and the friendly eyes, dark and warm, made him welcome at once. Harmon knew that she would be easy to talk to and she was.

She listened to his story without revealing any doubts as to his sanity. She finally said, "You've described Lorella and my brother Dave, and you've told me where to find your picture and other things in the house. Oh, don't try to explain or prove anything!

"However it happened, whatever did happen, you're Wade Harmon. Oh, it's awful—what an embar-

assing fix Lorella and Dave are in. They *did* believe you dead."

Harmon shrugged. While her sympathy did her credit he saw no good cause for being concerned.

"Suppose we take it easy till they get back from their honeymoon," he said. "There must be some way out of all this without hurting anyone."

"You're not at all resentful?"

"The more I think about it the less I can hold it against her or them for thinking I was balmy. She couldn't really think otherwise. And we couldn't have got along again afterward. We'd not been doing any too well before it happened. It's simply a matter of getting the property and the business unscrambled. What possessed you to take over the place by yourself?"

"I could hardly tag along on their honeymoon, could I?"

"No, I suppose not. So you just stayed here to carry on with your sketching and painting?" he asked.

"After all, that's what I came over for. I'd wanted to for a long time but Dave discouraged me. The political mess. But that's quieted down now."

The more Eileen told him the more complex Harmon's problem became. He sat up with her until some hours past midnight, testing one suggestion after another. But there was no way in which he could straighten out such material essentials as the trust fund without making Lorella's unintentional bigamy conspicuously public.

The following day he and Eileen resumed the discussion. She devoted herself to the human side of the problem as though it involved far more than merely her brother, who certainly knew his way around and had little need for her solicitous pondering. She ended by going with Harmon to look at the new crop, then to the granaries where the first crop of the improved strain was stored.

"All this," he said, as they regarded the warehouses of woven rattan, "is left after sowing every bit of cleared ground on the shelf. It's a growing business your brother married into."

He told her how his success would help the ever-increasing population of Java to feed itself without imports from other countries equally short of grain. Dry rice had always grown after a fashion but not in a way to be relied upon. The crop which fed the Indies required terraced and dyked fields, which had to be flooded. Thus land above the irrigation level could not be cultivated, since pumping sufficient water was out of the question. With dry rice, it would be otherwise.

It never occurred to Harmon that all this might be an old story to Eileen—and each day, he showed her how the new growth was developing, true to type.

"It can probably be improved—anything can. But this is success, no doubt about it." He glanced up at the volcano, during a long mo-

ment crowded with memories. "My work is done. There's no reason why I should be a nuisance or obstacle."

Eileen's eyes became wide and troubled. She did not speak until they were back on the verandah. "Wade, you sounded so solemn and out-of-this-world back there. Not depressed but—well, you've got me feeling low. What was on your mind?"

"Oh? Back there?"

Again Agni Deva loomed up in his mind. The recollection of her loveliness was so keen as to be painful. Yet he could not go back. Not even a *deva* could be a twenty-four-hour-a-day interest for one who, as she herself had so often phrased it, was "bound to the wheel" of action and doing. Agni Deva had understood. She had been too wise to keep him imprisoned. Each succeeding day Harmon spent with Eileen convinced him of Agni Deva's wisdom.

"What was it, Wade?" she persisted.

Regarding her intently he saw not the serene omniscience of the timeless but the troubled spirit of a warm and human woman, one who like himself was bound to the wheel.

"I was thinking," Harmon said, "how easy it would be to end this muddle. Just make it so."

"Oh, no!"

The cry was low-voiced but stabbing, shocking in its intensity.

"Darling!" he exclaimed. "I

didn't mean it *that* way. Good Lord, I meant just that there are other things to do, other work to do, other experiments to carry on. That's what I meant when I thought of making it so. The notion that I was finished suggested going somewhere else to carry on, where I'd bother no one."

Reaction unstrung her. With a cry of relief she caught him in both arms. She kissed him time and again—her tears trickled down his cheeks. But though all this was purely human sympathy the fact remained that Eileen was a woman and wholly desirable. Her distress on his behalf, her solicitude, went beyond the friendliness they had set out to express.

Before the two had relaxed from the first tension of contact Harmon was saying, "We can leave together. You're so very much like me. Your work brought you out here. Wherever we go you can carry on. We shan't hamper each other—for all I know we can be mutually helpful."

She drew back a little and looked up at him with gleaming eyes. "Wade, do you mean that? We've been thrown together so closely from the moment we met. . . . Are you sure this isn't just an impulse?"

"If you're wondering whether it's not a case of your being too exciting an armful of woman for me to stay cool and aloof around you, you're right. But it's more than that. What counts is that you had a thought for me and weren't do-

ing any figuring for yourself. You've been groping and grappling with this problem from the start, not for your brother's sake but for mine. Now do you see what I mean?"

"I do and I love it. And some day you might tell me what really happened up there in the crater. I won't think you're crazy." Eileen laughed softly. "Maybe that's the artist in me. And you with your plant biology—you're an artist in a more important way."

Harmon glanced at the volcano. He knew now that Agni Deva was surely a goddess. The contrast between her and a human woman gave him the knowledge directly.

"Someday I may find the words to tell you. Right now there's so much I can't understand. The only certainty is that Merah did stop erupting when I took an offering to the crater."

"They admitted that themselves."

Harmon chuckled. "But since they could not understand or explain why, they insisted the fact proved I was crazy. Do you know, a lot of scientists are just that way?" He stretched in a yawn of contentment, slumped comfortably, drew Eileen closer.

"I've half a notion not to wait for Dave and Lorella to come back from that king-sized honeymoon of theirs. Though I guess we should wait so they won't be worried about you or by yarns the natives tell

about my ghost coming down from the mountain."

"I'd like to leave now," she murmured. "I have a feeling that we should while we can. But—well, you're right."

"What are you afraid of, fuss-budget? Brother raise Cain at the thought of your taking charge of a lunatic?"

"Oh, I don't *know*. It's just—but we'll wait."

Several days later there was an earthquake. Fumes issued from the crevices at the foot of the cone. Ahmat came to say, "*Tuan*, you are our father and our grandfather. You have increased our rice. But Merah is jealous. She is displeased because of the yellow-haired lady. Send her away or it will not be well with any of us."

"Is danger close at hand or is this a first warning?"

"That we do not know. But all the seed-rice may be destroyed if Merah sends lava over the *kampung*."

"But how can I send this woman away? Where would she go? Have you ever sent your guest away or anyone who had your protection?"

"I have never been put to that test," Ahmat admitted. "But with your permission we will pack up our goods, carry seed-rice on our heads and save what we can. If Merah is angry . . ."

"What makes you think it's on *her* account?"

"Because Merah saved you from

your enemies, so now you belong to her. You cannot belong to this strange woman."

"Do what seems good, Ahmat," was all that Harmon could answer. There was even less that he could say to Eileen when, that night, they noted the dull glow which indicated lava was flowing into the debris of the previous upsurge.

"Maybe we'd better not wait for Dave and Lorella," she finally suggested. "If this keeps up I'd better start packing."

"We'd better," he amended and, thinking back to Ahmat's words, he wondered if it would be as simple as all that.

VII

The following afternoon, Dave and Lorella arrived with Voerhaven in his jeep. Harmon found and pocketed his pistol. "Go and break the news," he told Eileen. "Tell them I'll not be chased around again. I'll not put up with any attempts at manhandling. I don't want trouble but they'll get it if they force my hand."

"Darling, I don't want trouble either. But I'm all for you, and with you. I don't care who's hurt, not if it has to be."

That morning the subterranean muttering had subsided. The earthquakes had ceased. Harmon, watching from a window, noted that the hiss of escaping vapors was not as loud. Then he dismissed Ahmat's fears, for the meeting of Eileen with the three who had come

into the compound held all his attention.

He heard their voices crack with shock and incredulity. He saw them recoil and regain their ground. They made false starts for the bungalow, then checked themselves. The three closed in on Eileen as though to force her to deny the whole story as a hoax. It was as if they counted her mad and felt that she could become sane again by admitting she was crazy.

Harmon strolled into view. "Let her alone," he said easily. "I sent her to break the news but since you can't take it that way, have a look. Who am I? You know now. Come on in—and congratulations. Sure I mean it—no double talk."

Once in the house he said, "Sit down—Eileen, tell them about us. They'll believe it sooner, coming from you. The servants are out and they'll stay away until this is settled. They want no part of it. Tell them while I round up a drink."

When he returned Eileen had done with reciting what she and Harmon proposed.

"In the first place, Dave," she summed up, "it's none of your business what I do or who with. In the second place, even if Wade and I were planning, as you put it, big-amy, it's no worse than what you two have already done.

"It will simply put us all on a par, so you'll never have any cause to doubt our good faith. You'll know we don't mean to embarrass

you, much less blackmail you.

"And finally, Wade and I will clear this up legally. In Paris or Manila, I don't know where, but somewhere."

"Drink to it," Harmon proposed cheerily.

Voerhaven reached for a glass. Kirby snatched Lorella's wrist when she would have followed suit.

"Don't be silly!" Harmon said. "We'll take the two left after you've had your choice. It all came from the same bottle."

Kirby gulped and grimaced. "This has shaken us."

"What do you suppose," Harmon said, "your doings, weeks ago, did to me? But I told you I'm not griped and I mean it. No unkindness meant, Lorella, but all I can say is I'm just lucky. You and I could never have picked up where we left off, not even if we'd wanted to. Not after that straitjacket proposition.

"Eileen's right. We'll disappear, she and I, take new names if it'll make you feel better. You can stake us to my half of the property and income and rights and the like she's inherited from me. I'm making myself so much a party to fraud and all the other legal violations that I'd not dare do other than shoot square. Wake up, Dave! Can't you see I'm not resentful, that you've given me a big break?"

Dave Kirby got up. He thrust out his hand. "We'll meet you all the way. It took us awhile to believe you'd trust us or leave your

work in our hands. Now that there's so little to do but routine."

Voerhaven said, "Harmon, you and Eileen come to my house. Mr. and Mrs. Kirby—ah—they're bound to be embarrassed otherwise. Let me help you with your luggage."

"Come on, Lorella," Eileen said, "help me finish packing. I'd already started. Dave, round up the servants. Now that all's under control they'll come back. We might as well have dinner together before Wade and I move on to our next station."

Packing had scarcely reached the halfway stage when Dave Kirby came back from the *kampong*. "The natives," he said, "are hauling out, bag and baggage. And with baskets of seed-rice. The volcano has them worried silly. And we'd better follow their example. They've got an instinct for such things."

His voice had a note in it which brought the entire group together in the living room. They followed him to the verandah. There, thanks to the several bays of copper screening, they got a true picture of how much the situation had changed during the short time since the arrival of Voerhaven and the honeymooners.

The fumes were more dense and acrid than any Wade Harmon had ever before observed. The wind was hot and charged with fine particles of pumice. The hissing had become ominous—the underground muttering and mumbling had increased in volume.

There came a tremor that made the ground of the garden surge and billow. The bungalow creaked and groaned and rattled for what seemed an endless period. A table skated on its casters, smashing against the buffet. When the shock tapered off there persisted an unbroken vibration as though, far beneath the plantation shelf, jolt after jolt kept the foundations of the island in motion.

Smoke rose from the jungle beyond the rice-fields. The luxuriant growth had caught fire from the lava-flow. Clouds of steam rose from the bed of a small stream. Deer came racing into the open.

"Getting bad," Harmon said. "The less dallying, the better."

"Lava over that way," Voerhaven pointed out. "Judging from the steam there must be a big surge from a fresh crack."

"If the road's blocked," Kirby said, "we're in a pretty mess."

After loading their goods in the jeep Voerhaven drove, with the others plodding after the vehicle. They had not gone far when he pulled up. The road was blocked by lava. In the shadow of the trees it had a dull red glow. The second wave, flowing over the first, was not cooling as rapidly. It glowed a much brighter red.

"She's stopping over," Voerhaven said. "We'll get out with nothing except what we can carry. I'll run the jeep up on high ground, where it'll have a better chance of not being swamped."

Kirby's voice cracked a little when he said, "Lucky if we get out with our hides."

Harmon turned on him angrily. "Shut up! Pull yourself together. I'll go up to high ground, where I can see far enough to pick a way and keep us from wasting any more time barging into dead ends."

His confidence quieted incipient panic. Eileen took his hand.

"Come on, Wade," she said, "let's go. You know every inch of ground around here."

"No, darling—you stay here. It's going to be pretty rough where I'm heading." He grinned. "Be nice if you twisted an ankle and I had to carry you."

He could not tell Eileen that he was now certain Agni was bent on destroying her—that she, of all the party, should come no nearer the cone than absolutely necessary. On the heels of this dreadful knowledge came that which told him why these people hemmed him in. They knew by instinct that he had reason for not fearing as they feared. He was not surprised when they refused to wait for him to reconnoiter.

"Don't try to get shed of us," Kirby cried and Voerhaven said, "We're going to be right on hand so we can go through the minute you pick a clear way."

Though the sun was now low it did not even make a red blob. The curtain of steam and dust was quite too dense and there was an ever-thickening pall of smoke from

trees that burned as lava girdled them.

"One puff of hot gas and you're knocked out for keeps," he warned them. "For one to risk it is enough."

Nevertheless they persisted in following him. When he came to the edge of the old lava flow he repeated his warning. Lorella cried hysterically, "Don't let him get away! He wouldn't be here now if he didn't have some trick with that volcano. He must have a power!"

Her panic infected the men. They seized him by the arms before he could resist. During the futile attempt to shake them off the pistol in Harmon's pocket jammed against Kirby, who cried. "Don't you try to use that gun!" and dipped in, taking it. "Twist his wrist!"

"Oh, take it, you damned fool!" Harmon said quietly and relaxed. "I don't mind. You'd not use it on me regardless."

They released him. Kirby let the weapon slide back into Harmon's pocket. He looked shamefaced and embarrassed.

"Listen, you!" Harmon said. "The both of you. And you, Lorella. Why would I run out on you?"

"Because—because of what we did."

"Would I leave Eileen here?" He stepped to the girl's side. She had stood apart, the calmest by far of the four who had come with Harmon. "There is a way out, my dear," he said to her. "But I have to pick it myself. I have to get close to the flow before I can climb

up to where I can see the way and give you all the direction.

"It'll be tough going. I can't have you all milling around. It may be touch-and-go. I've been over the ground so often I know every inch of it—but you, any or all of you, might kill yourselves in one flash of panic."

"I understand," Eileen said quietly.

She thought she understood, though he knew she actually was far indeed from understanding. And to him the knowledge was very good.

"Try to keep those fools off my heels!" he said.

He went to a vantage point much nearer than the one to which he had told them he must go. Actually that spot, just within sight of the dunes, was high enough for his purpose, high enough for him to see that there was but one way out. Yet that one way was something he could not possibly explain to them.

On the face of it there seemed to them no good reason why they could not all climb up the cone until they were far above the vents at the base, from which the fumes and lava came, and then circle until they could descend to that portion of the shelf which, as far as he could tell, was not lava-flooded.

As far as he could tell—by his five senses, that was, or by anyone else's—yet he was sure that the logical route was no longer open. Even if it were a single upsurge could and surely would block it. The

ever-widening reach of the viscous red flow he did see told him of all the unseen possibilities.

Only by the grace of Agni Deva could any of his companions escape. The lady of fire was stalking them. She had weapons other than mere lava. A blast of gas, hot as the earth's very heart, could accomplish her will. Any attempt to outwit her would fail from the very start. But she would meet fair dealing with a fair answer.

VIII

Harmon retraced his steps. "Wait right here," he said easily. "I have a hunch but before I play it I have to go pretty high up on the cone to make sure I'm not leading you into a pocket."

"You think we're crazy?" Kirby shouted. "Wasting all that time while you come back to tell us?"

"I'll wave—I'll beckon you up."

"Well, why wait? We're taking no chances."

Lorella cried, "You're trying to get even with us! You're going to talk to Merah and have us all killed. You *do* have a power! You quieted her before—why don't you do it again? You're working against us. We're staying so close to you that whatever happens to us will happen to you."

She caught him with both hands, clawing him by the shirt, digging her fingers into his shoulders. She went on, "Take Eileen with us, grab her! He won't let her get hurt."

Tainted by Lorella's frenzy, Kir-

by and Voerhaven snatched Eileen by the arms. She did not resist. Harmon sat down, taking Lorella with him.

"Then you'll have to carry *me*," he said. "You don't have the manpower for that." Shaking himself loose from Lorella he got out a cigarette and with steady hand touched light to it. "You're all in more of a hurry than I am. Do as I say or take your chances."

They released Eileen and stepped well away from her. Harmon went to her, caught her hand, drew her close. He lowered his voice, though there was hardly any need of this because of the incessant hiss and rumble. Great lumps of incandescent lava, blown up from the spreading pools by surges of gas, rocketed up, and dropped back, splashing fiery liquid.

"Don't follow me," he said. "Whatever else you do, don't follow. You'll be awfully scared when they all flock after me but trust me. I know what I'm doing. Stay right where you are. You'll come out of it—I promise you that."

"You *are* going to talk to Merah," Eileen said. "You're going to bring her a gift. Offer her one from me. Tell her that if she spares you I'll go away. You and I will never see each other again. We'll always have our beautiful few days and nights to remember. But you forget them if Merah wants you to. She can't care at all what *I* remember."

Eileen pressed close. Her kiss was unlike any of all the lovers' kisses

they had exchanged. Harmon stood back, his hands lying for a moment on her shoulders. "Just wait and don't worry. And stand fast."

Harmon turned to climb. As he expected Lorella and the two men crowded on his heels. He bent into the zigzagging course, following the tracks he had made in the past. Finally, stopping for breath, he looked back to wave to Eileen. She returned the gesture but kept her place.

He said to the others, "We're getting close, too close. Stay here! With my game leg ready to let me down, how the hell can I get away from you?"

He looked back again. Eileen had left her place. Explosions showered a fiery rain about her, driving her from what had been a safe spot. She stumbled and lurched to her knees.

"Fumes are getting her," Harmon said. "But she'll be all right when the wind changes."

Kirby let out a strangled cry. "You told her—come on, Dirkl We've got to give her a hand!"

Harmon knew that his moment had come. He looked up toward the crater's rim. "Agni Deval!" he called. "I'm coming back to take the way of fire—the way of no returning!"

As if to challenge him, there came from the thus-far quiet crater great plumes of flame, which rose and then bowed their crests. They lapped over the rim and down, reaching like many eager arms. The

heat was such as Harmon had never imagined. The colors covered the entire range of the spectrum. There were bands of blankness, as though composed of colors that passed beyond what the human eye could perceive.

He stretched out both arms. He took another step and despite the blasting breath which reached far beyond the tips of a million wavering fingers he found the breath to call, "Agni Deva! I come to take the way of fire—the way of no returning!"

He fancied he could smell the scorching of his hair and his garments though he was not sure of this. But there was flame on his head. He took another step with legs fresh and strong and unwearied. "Agni Deva—I come to take . . ."

Then there was coolness and flame lapped him like rippling of water. Where there had been voids in the bands of color he now perceived the octaves beyond violet and the octaves below red—zone after zone, color after color for which he had no name, of which no human had ever had experience, even in dreams.

In that vortex of fire stood Agni Deva, all splendid and smiling. The first touch of her fingers, as he took her outstretched hand, was intolerably painful. He experienced at once heat and cold and shock of lightning. Then he was beside her and at ease.

"There is no returning," Agni Deva said. "And you will never

wish to return for now you see me without veils. You know what fire is by direct knowledge."

Harmon said out of his contentment, "And know how *being* goes far beyond *doing*."

What he had done, he now knew, was trifling compared to what he had become. Being so nearly one with Agni Deva he could not be sure whether it was her thought or his own that next came to him—that there was no separateness between them at all.

Agni Deva said, "Look back, look down, and see that I did not hurt her nor the rice either."

He saw Eileen plainly. He did not ask what had happened to Lor-ella and Kirby. Voerhaven was safe and Harmon was glad for this, glad also that Eileen's lurking surmises had blossomed into knowledge during their final moment together, so that while she could never know all, she knew enough.

"She knows," Agni Deva said, "and she has accepted. She will remember but she cannot mourn for she knows—as much as she need." And then, as they made for the dark bulwarks of the crater, she added, "This will be good, Wade, and better than you think. There'll be the rice to watch and ever so much more. Because *being* isn't a matter of standing still at all, it's an everlasting *becoming*."

Harmon smiled reminiscently and said, "*The Gods were once what man now is and man one day will be what Gods now are.*"