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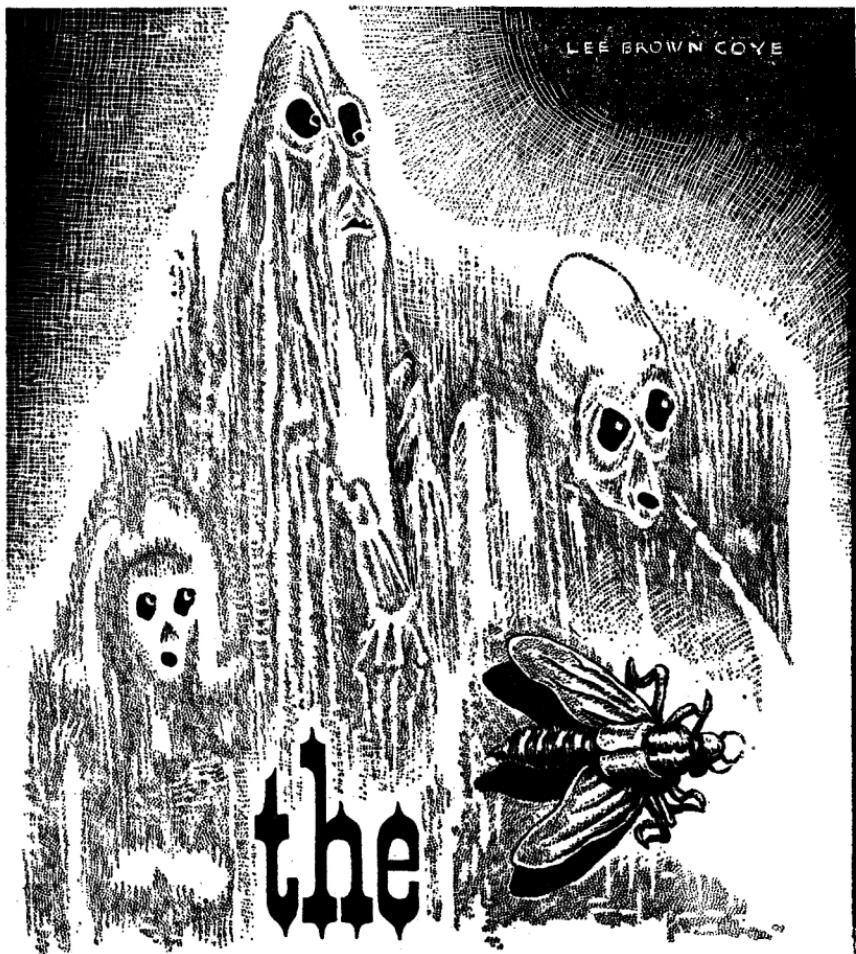
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the

FORELIFE

Illustrator COYE



MYTH

By ALBERT TEICHNER

In the white plaza the figures suddenly sparked into existence. And the old man and the young girl wondered anew about the truth of legend.

SEER Wirther had been lecturing for several hours to his students on *Some Methods of Moving Toward Eternity* when a young female rose in the back tier and said, "Seer, you have given us much interesting, useful information for the future of our souls, whatever they may be, but—."

Here she glanced uneasily at the rows of ghostly faces tipped upward toward her and, in turn, the wise one looked benignly down at her. "Yes, Miss Tarns?"

"Well," she resumed hastily as if speed would prevent them from reacting overstrongly to her words, "well, you haven't said a word about our *pasts*, about why across the ages there have been rumors of *people* from whom we may have sprung."

Everyone snickered and some

students even guffawed their contempt for such a notion, but Wirther preserved his scholarly demeanor.

"Your fellow students should not laugh so heartily, Miss Tarns. Undoubtedly most of them have believed—or half-believed—this ancient myth at one time or another. However, it does remain a myth, and more most frequently babbled by the senile just before they pass from this world."

Miss Tarns remained standing. "Isn't that a sheerly negative approach, Seer Wirther? I mean, hardly anybody ever takes seriously the question of our origins, where we came from. Isn't there a mystery to it?" Some of the students wriggled about uneasily and had to snicker themselves back into a mood of relaxed comfort. "Suddenly we're here in the world, some large, some small, some highly articulate, some incoherent and waiting to be educated. Don't you ever wonder about how it happened?"

The Seer was all good-natured tolerance. "There's an important branch of philosophy, Miss Tarns, that concerns itself with unanswerable problems like that one. It has shown, in every case, that these are pseudo-problems because they are based on pseudo-questions. In other words, if a question means nothing, the

answer will be just as empty." He tented his hands over the lectern. "We don't come from anywhere. We merely, all of a sudden, happen, have existence, and grow from that beginning through this life, then move on to the unseeable next one."

"All right, suppose I reverse that?" Miss Tarns set her jaw determinedly.

"Reverse it?"

"Yes. I could say we come from a previous life and there is none after ghostness is past!"

"You can't say that!" "Heresy!" "You *shouldn't* say that!" The whole class had sprung to noisy life, each student offering a different reason for objecting.

"We will try to disregard your last remark," the Seer informed her. "Now then, has anyone present ever been in a haunted place, ever *seen* a human person?"

Once more there was uneasiness. But this time the uneasy ones did not laugh.

"Have you, Miss Tarns?"

"Uh—well, not exactly."

"Not exactly. Not exactly." Wirther rolled the words in his mouth like a slowly melting confection. Suddenly he whirled to face another quarter of the hall, long cloak swirling with the movement, and pointed toward a young man who had risen to speak. "Yes, Mr. Staw. Have you managed to see one?"

"Oh no, Seer, not at all." Staw shuffled his right foot back and forth, somewhat abashed. When he had overcome his embarrassment he went on. "I just wanted to show Miss Tarns the error of this superstition."

SHE had been gazing interestedly across the room at him but now all respect disappeared. "I resent being called superstitious by a student of my own level."

He retreated a little. "I'm sorry if it sounded that way."

"It did. It does."

"Well, what I meant was that I could prove the widespread belief—you see, Miss Tarns, I am saying belief for your sake, not superstition—I could prove it to be unscientific and therefore in error."

"Go ahead, young man," Wirther nodded, amused.

Staw held out his hand. "Here is a solid part of my being, a hand. It exists in a five-dimensional manifold, three of space, two of time. This is the only dimension manifold in which it could exist until we achieve some Afterlife. Right, Miss Tarns?"

Her glance had once more softened toward him. "I agree, Mr. Staw. So far."

"Good. Now here is the back of a chair in front of me. I tighten my fingers on it and they find resistance in its solidity. They

do not pass through this matter. Now then, can stories of 'people' be true?" Excited by the iron-clad strength of his evidence, he plunged on without waiting for an answer. "In such stories we always hear about someone—almost never the storyteller but someone else—suddenly seeing buildings and landscapes and corridors somewhat like our own except that these 'things' pass *through* the things of our world! And, to crown it all, this someone else has also seen frightening 'people,' beings somewhat like us in outline, beings supposedly our ancestors, who pass right through our walls, even through us ourselves! How can something of five dimensions pass through this chairback or this hand?"

"Right!" the other students shouted. "There's your answer!"

"I—I don't know, of course. It's just that there has to be something to it if there have been such stories since the beginning of recorded history and—and—." She abruptly sat down, her frustration exceeded only by her sense of defeat.

Looking equally defeated—if for different reasons—Staw sat down also and Seer Wirther said, "Your refutation of Miss Tarns' contention is an effective one, Mr. Staw, but I chose to avoid that sort of contention since I wished to show that the

argument against 'people' can be successfully made in logical terms alone without referring to physical reality. It is now, I believe, time for class to be dismissed."

Already starting to forget what they had just heard, the other students hurried out but Tarns held back in the hope of avoiding some offhanded sarcasms from any of them. One other ghost, though, remained, a man much too old to be a student, who had slipped up to the lectern and was now engaged in a sibilantly-whispered debate with Wirther. Shrugging, Tarns gave up all attempts at overhearing them once the tiers had emptied out and herself hurried into the hall. There she bumped squarely into Staw who was waiting for her.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she snapped, tossing her head.

"Sure you do," he pleaded. "Whatever disagreements we have in the classroom, we can still be good friends outside it, can't we?"

"That is what you choose to think. For my part, I don't like being made fun of in front of everybody."

He firmly grasped her shoulder. "There wasn't any making fun about it. I just didn't want you to go on talking until a lot of students started hollering you

must be a silly superstitionist."

"I may be silly, that's for you to decide, but I've never been superstitious." She tried to break loose from him without success.

"Of course, you haven't been. I'm only trying to protect you from slanderous reactions." He pulled his hand away. "I'd think you'd be grateful for it, not ripping away at me."

"All right," she relented. "Still friends even though your arguments were all beside the point."

HE started to answer but was saved from the danger of renewed hostilities by the appearance of Seer Wirther. He was coming down the corridor with the elderly man. They had both tucked up their academic robes, glistening a high white which seemed twice as bright as the average layman's, and were attacking each other so vociferously that the two youngsters were passed unnoticed.

"Lorwyn, I'm always pleased to have distinguished guests sit in on my classes," Wirther was saying, "but I never expected a mathematician, a rigorous thinker, to show the slightest interest —and favorable interest at that! —in idle superstition."

"Wirther, I used to wonder precisely how presumptuous the philosophical mind could get. Now you've shown me!"

They were moving slowly away from the students, still absorbed in each other's fallacious reasonings. "Lorwyn, facts are facts—you were the very man who once refuted the probability statistics 'proving' our minds had supersensory capacities, could even contact a mythical past existence supposed to be as real as our future one. Is that part of my presuming?"

"Not at all," he said, rocking his long, bony head up and down. "I don't believe in logical proofs of the supernatural and whenever I come across such falsified logic I fight it. But you can't logically prove such things don't exist either. The question of a previous life is a religious one—so is that of reported 'people' sightings. They're matters of belief based on unexplainable experiences, even on sheer faith. Logic is totally beside the point in this area."

"It certainly has nothing to do with *your* beliefs," shouted the Seer as they went into his office, slamming the door behind them.

Staw gaped, unbelieving. "That was Lorwyn—do you have any idea who he is?"

"I've heard vaguely of him, something to do with mathematics. I hope you noticed *he* wasn't so cocksure against human people."

"Something to do with math—? Why, he's one of the very

greatest math-men! Imagine, even great thinkers can have crazy lapses!"

"Not crazy at all." The beautiful bones of her face shone triumphantly through the thin skin. "We supernaturalists can't all be such fools if a Lorwyn thinks there might be something to hauntings."

They were now passing the door to Wirther's office. Staw hesitated as he heard protesting shouts intermixed with friendly laughter coming from within. But it was now her turn to give a condescending smile and he hurried along before she could call him a chronic eavesdropper.

Outside, the sun in all its watery radiance was casting a rich pall of whiteness over the city. The youthful couple stood for a while at the head of the university's great flight of steps, gazing over the vast square and low roofs beyond to the almost transparent, gold-hued cupola of the Funerarium that dominated the city's horizon in that quarter. This was where the bodies of the dead were evaporated for release into the certain but unfathomable realities of the Afterworld. Staw's intent gaze seemed to be saying, 'There, there's the proof nothing could be more grossly substantial than we are in this life.' And Tarns' eyes, turning toward his, seemed to answer, 'It makes me wonder why, if we

are so much more thickly physical than the Afterworld's inhabitants, why can't there be creatures even more grossly constructed than us?"

AS they spoke silently to each other, there was an equally soundless *Splink!* of light at one of the nearer corners of the square and, on the edge of an instant, an elderly woman was standing there. Then sparks of light were breaking through all about her, like exploding fire-crackers seen at too great a distance to be heard, and other living ghostlings, hewn from God's void, sprang up around the first.

"Two little boys!" Tarns exclaimed, close to ecstasy at the beauty of the birthing moment.

"And three erect young men!" Staw joined in. "And a young woman holding a baby!"

"I've only seen it happen twice," Tarns sighed. "And each time there was just one person."

"Beautiful, beautiful," said someone behind them and they turned to find Lorwyn standing there. "I'm a very old man and I've seen a few cases where they appeared in a large group as well as hundreds where a lone ghostling came into being—look, thirty-four of them now!—but it's always beautiful. What can be more wonderful than the appearance of new inhabitants in our world?"

"And more mysterious," the young woman said, staring in awe as the group gathered itself together and turned off from the plaza area, already instinctually aware of the right way to go to reach the place of initial indoctrination. As the last back, that of a small girl, disappeared around a vaulting balustrade, Tarns smiled at the younger of her two companions. "Don't you find it the least bit mysterious?"

"No, not really," he answered. "In fact, not at all. Wonderful? Yes. But mysterious? No! This is just how we come into the world. Whatever is *is* and that's that. You don't have to scurry around after a supernatural explanation when no explanation is needed."

"Ah!" Lorwyn grinned. "Now I recognize the two of you, the debaters in the classroom. Good to see young minds biting off more than they can chew. You know, you two got me into a rip-snorting debate with my old friend."

"I know," Staw said, then looked embarrassed. "I mean we couldn't help overhearing a little of your discussion with Seer Wirther—."

"No need to apologize, ghostling—."

Staw looked hurt. "I'm not really all that young, Dr. Lorwyn. I appeared as a child and have had a long growth process.

Whereas Miss Tarns here appeared only two suncycles ago, partly matured at birth."

"Sorry if I offended either of you. I'm so old—when I appeared I was already very old—well, I'm so antiquated that *everybody* looks ghostling young to me."

AS soon as they exchanged introductions, Tarns launched into a statement of principles, hardly pausing for intakes of air. "I was so proud to see someone of your intellectual standing, Dr. Lorwyn, agreeing with what I said and showing the 'pure' reasoners where they've overdone their skinny faith by refusing to recognize there must be a Forelife in which living beings—yes, the people of supposed myths!—reach various levels, then pass on to us, and in a glorious case like the one we just saw some particular disaster of that life may send them on to us in one lot and—."

"Wait, wait, young lady," Lorwyn broke in. "I didn't say I believed in the existence of people."

"There you are," Staw chortled, "I knew nobody of your intelligence could swallow any of that."

"Another presuming would-be philosopher," the old man snapped. "I didn't say they are mythical either. I merely indi-

cated we should keep an open mind on the matter. There have been many cases of reputable people claiming to have seen them haunting us and even to have received meaningful emanations from them."

"There *you* are!" she came back at her fellow student. "Reputable people—."

"Of course," Lorwyn went on, "they could have been mistaken. Many explanations have been offered for such phenomena—mental breakdown, tricks of light, deliberate trickery imposed on the viewers and so forth." He considered their expressions, both of disappointment now, with amusement. "An open mind, I see, doesn't always spread happiness before it!"

She disregarded the attempt to lighten the atmosphere and started down the steps, forcing the men to follow her if they wanted to continue the discussion to a cleancut conclusion. "My theory could begin to explain a lot of things. We would no longer need the ether-void to account for the birthing moment of all ghosts. We could describe why ghostlings appear at different stages of development. Plenty of oddities would have explanations."

"What, for example?" Staw laughed.

She hesitated but went on as soon as she saw the older man

also was grinning skeptically. "All right, what about male and female?"

"Well, what about it?"

"Why does every ghostling appear on one side of the sexual line or another. Why two sexes?"

"But the reason is obvious," said Lorwyn. "Some ghosts are male to supply the logical, factual emphasis to our society, some female to cement it into a workable oneness with superior capacities for affection and general intuitive emotion."

"In this life, yes," she said impatiently. "But in the Fore-life there could have been some other reason."

They both looked shocked at her. "This sort of loose reasoning simply won't do, young lady," Lorwyn exclaimed. "There is no mystery about sex. It serves exactly the natural purpose I stated, nothing more or less. What other purpose could it possibly have served in a Fore-life, if there is such a life?"

For a moment she was genuinely bewildered and had to confess, "I haven't the slightest idea." But then her confidence returned. "I just have the feeling, the very strong feeling, that it served some other purpose back there that we'll never be able to imagine. Plenty of reasons for things must exist that we'll never be able even to imagine."

They were now at the bottom of the steps and started to move across the square. "I must continue this discussion with you, young lady—now. My original intention was to go home and relax but I can't let someone drift around in such a haze of misconceptions. You, it turns out, are even more dogmatic than your friend!" Despite his age he increased his pace, moving ahead of them, and they remained at a respectful distance behind since it was obvious he wanted some time to think by himself. When they reached the other side of the great plaza he stopped to let them catch up.

WHY do you insist on explaining *everything* with supernatural causes?" he suddenly demanded.

"I—I would never go that far," she stuttered.

"You seem to, Miss Tarns. You cannot remain satisfied with your hypothesis that we spring from a world of people, whatever they are. No, you must use it to account for *every* natural thing about us. Sex is so obviously, so naturally, a purely psychological phenomenon, yet you must make it spring from something else that is not itself proven to a certainty!"

"I only chose that as an example," she retreated, "an example of how all our thinking

could be affected by acceptance of Forelife."

He gestured toward a narrow roadway and they followed him up the alley between tall buildings that cast decreasingly pale shadows as they moved deeper into it. "The shortest way to the park," he said. "We can sit down there and really thrash everything out."

"What I'd like to know is what 'people' sighting stories really tell us," Staw broke in. "What, for example, are the conditions of alleged sightings? Where do they most frequently take place?"

"All sorts of conditions," she said before more questions could be strung onto those two. "Usually the sighter is alone when it happens but sometimes there are a few ghosts together who catch a glimpse of the haunting. Observers usually report seeing something like us yet at the same time different, of some different order of matter and differently dressed. As for places, you know as well as I do that they're reported in all kinds of settings. Why shouldn't they be, don't we have birth moments take place in all kinds of places, not just the central plaza?"

"Aha!" the old man pounced. "You reveal your thought processes so overcompletely! Right away you have to subordinate a natural phenomenon, the birth

process of our species, with a supernatural one, the appearance of 'people' in, allegedly, all sorts of places in *our* world!"

She tried to control her mounting exasperation. "Dr. Lorwyn, whose side are you on in this matter?" They turned a bend into a more deeply shadowed area. "I assumed you agreed with me. Now, though, you keep picking away at everything I say!"

His smile was all tolerant sagacity. "I am not on any 'side,' as you put it. I just say we should all keep an open mind. Once when I was but a few turns around the sun past my birthing I thought I experienced a people sighting but soon came to realize it had been in a dream. It taught me, though, to be more objective about the possibility—."

"I want to know," she demanded, "whether you believe in the existence of people or not!"

"There's much to be said on the one hand," he wavered, "and much to be said on the other too."

Now the younger man was impatient too. "You must *tend* one way or the other, though."

"Ah youth," he smiled, "youth always believes a definite answer is possible to any question."

"Why not?" she said crisply. "All I want to know is—and Mr.

Staw does too, evidently—which way you'd lean if you had to make a choice?"

"I don't particularly care to make a choice—."

"But there's no such thing as being *completely* impartial on an important issue, not for a living being!"

Her last remark stung him a little and he said quickly in a low, confessional voice, "Well, if I had to make a choice, I'd have to say I tend to the belief that Forelife people do not exist."

"Ah, good!" Staw exulted.

"I only say tend, you understand—."

He stopped, jaw dangling in unaccustomed horror, and his young companions froze, too, in their tracks. Directly ahead of them a room-sized elongated box of darkness lay across the alley's shadows which were alabaster white in comparison and this box seemed to extend right through the walls on each side, visible through the walls to its own farthest limits.

A ROOM of sheer void but now permitting lighter patches to half-emerge like an impossible birthing that would never completely happen but leave pieces sticking into natural reality while the greater part remained in the womb of nothingness. But one small patch became still more distinct. It seemed to be a

translucent material on which little figures were moving, figures that were indistinct but looked almost like ordinary ghosts except for their size and strange styles of movement and dress.

Then a much larger patch at the other end of the box lightened and the figures were explained. Seated, facing the translucent material, were something like a man and woman and, for some strange reason, the man had an arm tightly around the woman as they watched the varying translucency surface. Oddly dressed and strange in their movements, too, they were too unghostly to be believed, yet there they were, just like the people so often reported, so seldom seen, and these large people made understandable what the smaller ones on the translucent screen were and—

Miss Tarns' face glowed its deepest fright and she managed one chilling scream before her jaw froze in its open position. Both men started to say something comforting but the alien horror froze them, too.

And then the people of the black box seemed, in return, to be considering them with equal horror, eyes wide, smudgy-complexed faces deeper than ever into visible darkness! The moment itself froze within some unit of time more basic than any

of them could know. After which normal time returned and the room box *Splunked!* out of existence.

They blinked into the normal shadowiness of the alley and slowly came back to life. "No, say nothing now." Lorwyn rubbed his eyes and sighed. "Nothing. I know you saw what I did but we have to keep our minds clear of entanglements and not lose one bit of the experience. Follow me."

Even as he gave one last glance at the empty space between the walls, he swung around and started down the alley. They came round the bend and could see the square looming up ahead, all glowing whiteness, with the great flight of stairs to the university beyond it. Nothing had to be said about where they were going.

When they finally started up the steps Staw had to mutter under his breath, "Impossible, it couldn't be!" and Tarns answered, "But it was, it was!" while Lorwyn grimly shook his head for silence.

Then they were back in the building they had left a mere half hour before and standing by the door that led into Seer Wirther's office suite. Lorwyn knocked and the Seer looked happily surprised as they entered. "What," he roared, "all my argumentative friends in one

batch! Did you come together?"

"We've already met," Lorwyn muttered, tightening his fists until the last hint of a shiver disappeared from them. "Something—,"

"It proves—," she broke in.

"Must be explanation—," Staw in turn exclaimed.

"No, please, young people, let me, the more objective one, tell the story. Wirther, you've known me a long time, you know I can be objective."

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, you also know the park-ward alley across the square. We were just in it and we *saw* something, *the* thing!" Once more restraining the youngsters from interrupting, he went through the episode in minutest detail. Every once in a while the Seer gave a disbelieving tsk-tsk but Lorwyn went right on. It took over fifteen minutes for him to describe every bit of what he remembered.

YOU'VE told me everything I possible about your alleged sighting, Lorwyn, except one thing. From all you've said I cannot tell how long all this took to happen. In fact, I'm more confused on that point than if your documentation had been briefer."

"Why, there's nothing odd about that, Wirther. It was all in a split flash."

"There you are," Wirthner said.

"What do you mean, 'There you are'?"

"In such a brief time your conscious mind could not absorb so much information, now could it?"

"That's right," Staw slowly nodded. "Something's wrong—."

"Not necessarily," said Lorwyn. "Ordinary time seemed to be beside the point. It was the briefest second of *our* time but there seemed to be some superior time scale at work that controlled both the people inside the vision and us."

"Excellent, excellent," Wirthner said soothingly. "Let me approach the matter from another angle. Mr. Staw, did you seem to observe what Dr. Lorwyn has just described?"

The younger man hesitated, then grudgingly said, "It seemed exactly the same to me."

The Seer shrugged off his brief disappointment. "What about you, Miss Tarns."

"It was exactly the same to me!"

"There you are," he repeated. "After this supposed vision the three of you discussed—."

"We didn't," Lorwyn insisted earnestly. "Look, Wirthner, I'm as eager as you are to find a rational explanation for this but the truth is I wouldn't permit them any discussion until we got back here so all possibility of

mutual suggestion was eliminated."

"But it wasn't eliminated," smiled the Seer. "These youngsters had no clear idea of what they had 'seen' until they heard your account just now, an account which filled all the blanks in *their* experience of it."

"That's ridiculous!" Miss Tarns exploded. "I know perfectly well what I saw. There were people and they exist, they really exist!"

"You know perfectly well what you *think* you saw," he corrected. "Dr. Lorwyn is a man of the highest reputation and greatest probity. Naturally you would be influenced—."

"True enough," Staw agreed.

"—and, Lorwyn, don't think I'm impugning your motives but didn't you say earlier today that there are brief periods nowadays when you feel very tired? 'Utterly weary of things as they are' was the way you put it."

"I did," he admitted. "Oh, look here, Wirthner, I'm not saying with absolute certainty that we saw *people*. But I am certain we were severely shaken up by something."

I AGREE one hundred percent to that, my friend. But let me ask you one thing and here I'll stake my whole argument on your answering yes. Weren't the three of you discussing the 'peo-

ple-haunting' myth as you entered the alley and as you proceeded down it?"

"Yes. Yes, I do see your point."

"And you had also seen a mass birthing, not a unique sight, to be sure, but certainly a relatively rare one in any individual ghost's lifetime, a birthing which Miss Tarns in her vast ingenuity undoubtedly managed to connect with her engagingly vivid theories."

"So we did imagine it after all, didn't we?" Staw said, relieved.

"We did not!" she shouted. "Oh, the intolerable smugness of your thinking, refusing to see anything not covered by your ideas!"

"Mustn't excite yourself this way," Lorwyn mumbled. He straightened up and became more decisive. "You must be right, Wirther. I'm glad we straightened it out. For a while, though, you can't imagine how real they were—mind you, I'm not denying the possibility of something like that really existing, Miss Tarns, just its unlikelihood. Very frightening thing to deceive yourself—."

"We *were not* deceived!"

"These were like figures in a dream," Wirther went on implacably. "They moved to the music of your suggestibility and when that was exhausted, being

creatures of the lowest and most transient order of appearances, vanished."

"Not of a lower order," she said, calmer now. "They had to be of at least as high an order of reality as we are."

"Why?" the Seer asked.

"Because I experienced one thing these two obviously did not. I sensed what the people were communicating to each other."

"And what was that?"

"At first in that incredible second when they saw us they were frightened and then the man began to think something about some myth story they had been recently watching on the translucent screen and he said to her one thing that made her secure again. He said, 'They do not exist. They are figments of your imagination!'"

For a moment the men were chalk white, appalled by the unexpectedness of what she had just said, but then the Seer gave his broadest smile of all. "Which is the final proof that none of this actually happened." The other men began to laugh also. "Could there be anything more absurd, Miss Tarns, than the notion that *we* only exist in *their* imaginations?"

It was another question that could not receive an answer.

And it did not.

THE END