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OF MYSTERY AND TERROR

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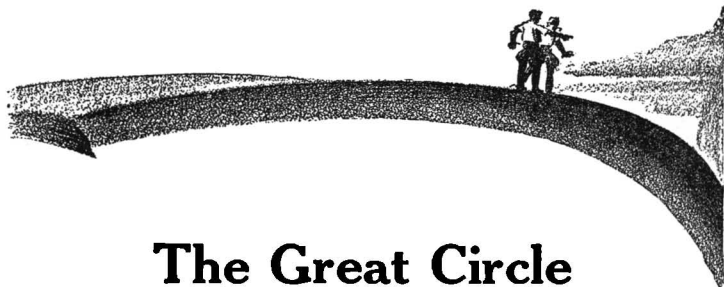
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The Great Circle

A Complete Novelette

By Henry S. Whitehead

THE transition from those hours-on-end of looking down on the dark-green jungle of virgin forest was startling in its abruptness. We had observed this one break in the monotonous terrain, of course, well before we were directly over it. Then Wilkes, the pilot, slowed and began to circle. I think he felt it, the element I have referred to as startling; for, even from the first—before we landed, I mean—there was something—an atmosphere—of strangeness about this vast circular space entirely bare of trees with the exception of the giant which crowned the very slight elevation at its exact center.

I know at any rate that I felt it; and Dr. Pelletier told me afterward that it had seemed to lay hold on him like a quite definite physical sensation. Wilkes did not circle very long. There was no need for it and I think he continued the process, as though looking for a landing place, as long as he did, on account of that eeriness rather than because of any necessity for prolonged observation.

At last, almost, I thought, as though reluctantly, he shut off his

engine—"cut his gun" as airmen express it—and brought the plane down to an easy landing on the level grassward within a hundred yards of the great tree standing there in its majestic, lonely grandeur. The great circular space about it was like a billiard table, like an English deer park. The great tree looked, too, for all the world like an ash, itself an anomaly

here in the uncharted wilderness of Quintana Roo.

We sat there in the plane and looked about us.

On every side, for a radius of more than half a mile from the center where we were, the level grassy plain stretched away in every direction and down an almost imperceptible gradual slope to the horizon of dense forest which encircled it.

There was not a breath of air stirring. No blade of the fine short grass moved. The tree, dominating everything, its foliage equally motionless, drew our gaze. We all looked at it at the same time. It was Wilkes the pilot who spoke first, his outstretched arm indicating the tree.

"Might be a thousand years old!" said Wilkes, in a hushed voice. There was something about this place

Canevin crosses the "bridge" that is a sinister English ash in Quintana Roo.



*... a face of colossal
majesty emerging there.*

which made all of us, I think, lower
our voices.

"Or even two thousand," remarked
Pelletier.

WE had taken off that morning
at ten from Belize. It was
now one o'clock in the afternoon.
We had flown due north for the first
eighty miles or so, first over the blue
waters of landlocked Chetumal Bay,

leaving Ambergris Cay on our right, and then Xkalok, the southeastern point of Quintana Roo; then over dry land, leaving the constricted northern point of the bay behind where parallel 19, north latitude, crosses the 88th meridian of longitude. Thence still due north until we had turned west at Santa Cruz de Bravo, and continued in that direction, glimpsing the hard, metallic luster of the noon sun on Lake Chihauhauca, and then, veering southwest in the direction of Xkanba and skirting a tremendous wooden plateau on our left, we had been attracted, after cursory, down-looking views of innumerable architectural remains among the dense forestation, to our landing place by the abrupt conspicuousness of its treeless circularity.

That summarizes the geography of our flight. Our object, the general interest of the outlook rather than anything definitely scientific, was occasioned by Pelletier's vacation, as per the regulations of the U. S. Navy, of whose Medical Corps he is one of the chief ornaments; from his duties as Chief of the Naval Hospital in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Pelletier wanted to get over to Central America for this vacation. He talked it over with me several times on the cool gallery of my house on Denmark Hill. Almost incidentally he asked me to accompany him. I think he knew that I would come along.

We started, through San Juan, Porto Rico, in which great port we found accommodation in the Bull Line's *Catherine* with our friend Captain Rumberg, who is a Finn, as far as Santo Domingo City. From there we trekked, across the lofty intervening mountains, with a guide and pack burros, into Haiti. At Port au Prince we secured accommodations as the sole passengers on a tramp going to Belize in British Honduras, which made only one stop, at Kingston, Jamaica.

IT was between Kingston and Belize that the idea of this air voyage occurred to Pelletier. The idea of looking down comfortably upon the Maya remains, those cities buried in impenetrable jungles, grew upon him and he waxed eloquent out of what proved an encyclopedic fund of knowledge of Maya history. I learned more about these antiquities than I had acquired in my entire life previously! One aspect of that rather mysterious history, it seemed, had intrigued Pelletier. This was the abrupt and unaccountable disappearance of what he called the earlier of major civilization. The superior race which had built the innumerable temples, palaces and other elaborate and ornate structures now slowly decaying in the jungles of the Yucatan Peninsula, had been, apparently, wiped out in a very brief period. They had, it seemed, merely disappeared. Science, said Pelletier, had been unable to account for this catastrophe. I had, of course, read of it before, but Pelletier's enthusiasm made it vastly intriguing.

Our two-men-and-hired-pilot expedition into this unexplored region of vast architectural ruins and endless forestation had landed, as though by the merest chance, here in a section presenting topographical features such as no previous explorers had reported upon! We were, perhaps, two hours by air, from Belize and civilization—two months, at least, had we been traveling afoot through the thick jungles, however well equipped with food, guides, and the machetes which all previous adventurers into the Yucatan jungles report as the first essential for such travel.

Pelletier, with those small verbal creakings and gruntings which invariably punctuate the shifting of position in his case, was the first to move. He heaved his ungainly bulk laboriously out of the plane and stood on the grassy level ground looking up

at Wilkes and me. The sun beat down pitilessly on the three of us. His first remark was entirely practical.

"Let's get into the shade of that tree, and eat," said Dr. Pelletier.

TEN minutes later we had the lunch basket unpacked, the lunch spread out, and were starting in to eat, there in the heart of Quintana Roo. And, to all appearances, we might have been sitting down picnicking in Kent, or Connecticut!

I remember, with a vivid clarity which is burned indelibly into my mind, Wilkes reaching for a tongue sandwich, when the wind came.

Abruptly, without any warning, it came, a sudden, violent gust out of nowhere, like an unexpected blow from behind, upsetting our peaceful little session there, sociably, on the grass in the quiet shade of the ancient tree which looked like an English ash. It shredded to filaments the paper napkin I was holding. It caused the squat mustard bottle to land twenty feet way. It sucked dry the brine out of the saucerful of stuffed olives. It sent Pelletier lumbering after a rapidly rolling pith sun helmet. And it carried the pilot Wilkes' somewhat soiled and grimy Shantung silk jacket—which he had doubled up and was using to sit on, and had released by virtue of half rising to reach for that tongue sandwich—and blew it, fluttering, folding and unfolding, arms now stiffly extended, now rolled up into a close ball, up, off the ground, and then, in a curve upward and flattened out and into the tree's lower branches, and then straight up among these, out of our sight.

Having accomplished all these things, and scattered items of lunch broadcast, the sudden wind died a natural death, and everything was precisely as it had been before, save for the disorganization of our lunch—and save, too, for us!

I WILL not attempt to depart from the strict truth: we were, all of us, quite definitely startled. Wilkes swore picturesquely at the disappearance of his jacket, and continued to reach, with a kind of baffled ineptitude which was quite definitely comic, after the now scattered tongue sandwiches. Pelletier, returning with the rescued sun helmet, wore a vastly puzzled expression on his heavy face, much like an injured child who does not know quite what has happened to him. As for me, I daresay I presented an equally absurd appearance. That gust had caught me as I was pouring limeade from a quart thermos into three of those half-pint paper cups which are so difficult to manage as soon as filled. I found myself now gazing ruefully at the plate of cold sliced ham, inundated with the cup's contents.

Pelletier sat down again in the place he had vacated a moment before, turned to me, and remarked:

"Now where did *that* come from?"

I shook my head. I had no answer to that. I was wondering myself. It was Wilkes who answered, Wilkes goaded to a high pitch of annoyance over the jacket, Wilkes unaware of the singular appropriateness of his reply.

"Right out of the corner of hell!" said Wilkes, rather sourly, as he rose to walk over to that enormous trunk and to look up into the branches, seeking vainly for some glimpse of Shantung silk with motor grease on it.

"Hm!" remarked Pelletier, as he bit, reflectively, into one of the sandwiches. I said nothing. I was trying at the moment to divide what was left of the cold limeade evenly among three half-pint paper cups.

IT was nearly a full hour later, after we had eaten heartily and cleared up the remains of the lunch, and smoked, that Wilkes prepared to

climb the tree. I know because I looked at my watch. It was two fourteen—another fact burned into my brain. It was estimating when, starting then, we should get back to Belize, where I had a dinner engagement at seven. I thought about five or five fifteen.

"The damned thing is up there somewhere," said Wilkes, looking up into the branches and leaves. "It certainly hasn't come down. I suppose I'll have to go up after it!"

I gave him a pair of hands up, his foot on them and a quick heave, a lower limb deftly caught, an overhand pull; and then our Belize pilot was climbing like a cat up into the great tree's heart after his elusive and badly soiled garment.

The repacked lunch basket had to be put in the plane, some hundred yards away from the tree. I attended to that while Pelletier busied himself with his notebook, sitting cross-legged in the shade.

I sauntered back after disposing of the lunch basket. I glanced over at the tree, expecting to see Wilkes descending about then with the rescued jacket. He was still up there, however. There was nothing to take note of except a slight—a very slight—movement of the leaves, which, looking up the tree and seeing, I remarked as unusual because not a single breath of air was stirring anywhere. I recall thinking, whimsically, that it was as though the great tree were laughing at us, very quietly and softly, over the trouble it was making for Wilkes.

I sat down beside Pelletier, and he began to speak, perhaps for the third or fourth time, about that strange clap of wind. That had made a very powerful impression on Pelletier, it seemed. After this comment Pelletier paused, frowned, looked at his watch and then at the tree, and remarked:

"Where is that fellow? He's been up there ten minutes!" We walked

over to the tree's foot and looked up among the branches. The great tree stood there inscrutable, a faint movement barely perceptible among its leaves. I remembered that imagined note of derision which this delicate movement had suggested to me, and I smiled to myself.

Pelletier shouted up the tree:

"Wilkes! Wilkes—can't you find the coat?"

Then again:

"Wilkes! Wilkes—we've got to get started back pretty soon!"

But there was no answer from Wilkes, only that almost imperceptible movement of the leaves, as though there were a little breeze up there; as though indeed the tree were quietly laughing at us. And there was something—something remotely sinister, derisive, like a sneer, in that small, dry, rustling chuckle.

PELLETIER and I looked at each other, and there was no smile in the eyes of either one of us.

We sat down on the grass then as though by agreement. Again we looked at each other. I seemed to feel the tree's derision; more openly now, less like a delicate hint, a nuance. It seemed to me quite open now, like a slap in the face! Here indeed was an unprecedented predicament. We were all ready to depart, and we had no pilot. Our pilot had merely performed a commonplace act. He had climbed a tree.

But—he had not come down—that was all.

It seemed simple to state it to oneself that way, as I did, to myself. And yet, the implications of that simple statement involved—well, what *did* they involve? The thing, barring an accident: Wilkes having fallen into a decay-cavity or something of the sort; or a joke: Wilkes hiding from us like a child among the upper branches—barring those explanations for his continued absence up there and his refusal to an-

swer when called to, the thing was—well, impossible.

Wilkes was a grown man. It was inconceivable that he should be hiding from us up there. If caught, somehow, and so deterred from descending, at least he could have replied to Pelletier's hail, explained his possible predicament. He had, too, gone far up into the tree. I had seen him go up agilely after my initial helping hand. He was, indeed, well up and going higher far above the lower trunk area of possible decay-cavities, when I had left him to put the lunch basket back in the plane. He had been up nearly twenty minutes now, and had not come down. We could not see him. A slightly cold sensation up and down my spine came like a presage, a warning. There seemed—it was borne in abruptly upon me—something sinister here, something menacing, deadly. I looked over at Pelletier to see if anything of this feeling might be reflected in his expression, and as I looked, he spoke:

"Canevin, did you notice that this deforested area is circular?"

I nodded.

"Does that suggest anything to you?"

I PAUSED, took thought. It suggested several things, in the light of my recent, my current, feeling about this place centered about its great tree. It was, for one thing, apparently an unique formation in the topography of this peninsula. The circularity suggested an area set off from the rest, and by design—somebody's design. The "ring" idea next came uppermost in my mind. The ring plays a large part in the occult, the preternatural: the elves' ring; dancing rings (they were grassy places, too); the Norman cromlechs; Stonehenge; the Druidical rites; protective rings, beyond the perimeter of which the Powers of Evil, beleaguering, might not penetrate. . . .

I looked up from these thoughts again at Pelletier.

"Good God, Pelletier! Yes—do you imagine . . .?"

Pelletier waved one of his big, awkward-looking hands, those hands which so often skirted death, defeated death, at his operating table.

"It's significant," he muttered, and nodded his head several times. Then: "That gust of wind, Canevin—remember? It was *that* which took Wilkes' coat up there, made him climb after it; and now—well, where is he?"

I shook my head slowly. There seemed no answer to Pelletier's question. Then:

"What is it, Pelletier?"

Pelletier replied, as was usual with him, only after some additional reflection and with a certain deliberateness. He was measuring every word, it seemed.

"Every indication, so far, points to—an air-elemental."

"An air-elemental?" The term, with whatever idea or spiritual entity, or vague, unusual superstition underlay its possible meaning, was familiar to me, but who—except Pelletier, whose range of knowledge I certainly had never plumbed—would think of such a thing in this connection?

"What is an air-elemental?" I asked him, hoping for some higher information.

PELLETIER waved his hand in a gesture common to him.

"It would be a little difficult to make it clear, right off the bat, so to speak, Canevin," said he, a heavy frown engendered by his own inability to express what might be in that strange, full mind of his, corrugating his broad forehead. "And even if I had it at my tongue's end," he continued, "it would take an unconscionable time." He paused and looked at me, smiling wryly.

"I'll tell you, Canevin, all about them, if we ever get the chance."

Then, as I nodded, necessarily acquiescing in this unsatisfactory explanation, he added:

"That is, what little, what very little, I, or, indeed, anybody, knows about them!"

And with that I had, perforce, to be satisfied.

It seemed to my taunted senses, attuned now to this suggested atmosphere of menace which I was beginning to sense all about us, that an intensified rustle came from the tree's leaves. An involuntary shudder ran over my body. From that moment, quite definitely, I felt it: the certain, unmistakable knowledge that we three stood alone, encircled, hemmed in, by something; something vast, powerful beyond all comprehension, like the incalculable power of a god, or a demigod; something elemental and, I felt, old with a hoary antiquity; something established here from beyond the ken of humanity; something utterly inhuman, overwhelmingly hostile, inimical, to us. I felt that we were on Its ground, and that It had, so far, merely shown us, contemptuously, the outer edge of Its malice and of Its power. It had, quietly, unobtrusively, taken Wilkes. Now, biding Its time, It was watching, as though amused; certain of Its malignant, Its overwhelming, power; watching us, waiting for Its own good time to close in on us. . . .

I STOOD up, to break the strain, and walked a few steps toward the edge of the tree's nearly circular shade. From there I looked down that gentle slope across the motionless short grass through the shimmering heat waves of that airless afternoon to the tree-horizon.

What was that? I shaded my hands and strained my vision through those pulsating heat waves which intervened; then, astonished, incredulous, I ran over to the plane and reached in over the side and brought out the high-powered Lomb-Zeiss

binoculars which Bishop Dunn at Belize had loaned me the evening before. I put them to my eyes without waiting to go back into the shade near Pelletier. I wanted to test, to verify, what I thought I had seen down there at the edge of the encircling forest; to assure myself at the same time that I was still sane.

There at the jungle's edge, clear and distinct now, as I focused those admirable binoculars, I saw, milling about, crowding upon each other, gesticulating wildly—shouting, too, soundlessly of course, at that distance from my ears—evidencing in short the very apogee of extreme agitation; swarming in their hundreds—their thousands, indeed—a countless horde of those dull-witted brown Indians, still named Mayas, some four hundred thousand of which constitute the native population of the Peninsula of Yucatan—Yucatan province, Campeche, and Quintana Roo.

All of them, apparently, were concentrated, pointing, gesticulating, upon the center of the great circle of grassland, upon the giant tree—upon us.

And, as I looked, shifting my glasses along great arcs and sections of the jungle-edged circle, fascinated by this wholly bizarre configuration, abruptly, with a kind of cold chill of conviction, I suddenly perceived that, despite their manifest agitation, which was positively violent, all those excited Indians were keeping themselves rigidly within the shelter of the woods. Not one stepped so much as his foot over that line which demarcated the forested perimeter of the circle, upon that short grass.

I LOWERED the glasses at last and walked back to Pelletier. He had not moved. He raised to me a very serious face as I approached.

"What did you see down there, Canevin?" He indicated the distant rim of trees.

He listened to my account as though preoccupied, nodding from time to time. He only became outwardly attentive when I mentioned how the Indians kept back to the line of trees. He allowed a brief, explosive "Ha!" to escape him when I got to that. When I had finished:

"Canevin," said he, gravely, "we are in a very tight place." He looked up at me still gravely, as though to ascertain whether or not I realized the situation he had in mind. I nodded, glanced at my watch.

"Yes," said I, "I realize that, of course. It is five minutes to three. Wilkes has been gone, up there, three quarters of an hour. That's one thing, explain it as you may. Neither of us can pilot a plane; and, even if we were able to do so, Pelletier, we couldn't, naturally, go back to Belize without Wilkes. We couldn't account for his disappearance: 'Yes, Mr. Commissioner, he went up a tree and never came down!' We should be taken for idiots, or murderers! Then there's that—er—horde of Indians, surrounding us. We are hemmed in, Pelletier; and there are, I'd say, thousands of them. The moment they make up their minds to rush us—well, we're finished, Pelletier," I ended these remarks and found myself glancing apprehensively toward the rim of jungle.

"Right enough, so far!" said Pelletier, grimly. "We're 'hemmed in,' as you put it, Canevin, only perhaps a little differently from the way you mean. Those Indians"—his long arm swept our horizon—"will never attack us. Put that quite out of your mind, my dear fellow. Except for the fact that there's probably only food enough left for one scant meal, you've summed up the—er—material difficulties. However—"

I interrupted.

"That mob, Pelletier, I tell you, there are thousands of them. Why should they surround us if—"

"They won't attack us. It isn't us they're surrounding, even though our being here, in a way, the occasion for their assembly down there. They aren't in any mood to attack anybody, Canevin—they're frightened."

"Frightened?" I barked out. "Frightened! About what, for God's sake?" This idea seemed to me so utterly far-fetched, so intrinsically absurd, at first hearing—after all, it was I who had watched them through the binoculars, not Pelletier who sat here so calmly and assured me of what seemed a basic improbability. "It doesn't seem to make sense to me, Pelletier," I continued. "And besides, you spoke just now of the 'material' difficulties. What others are there?"

PELLETIER looked at me for quite a long time before answering, a period long enough for me to recapitulate those eerier matters which I had lost sight of in what seemed the imminent danger from those massed Indians. Then:

"Where do you imagine Wilkes is?" inquired Pelletier. "Can you—er—see him up there?" He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, as artists and surgeons point.

"Good God, Pelletier, you don't mean . . .?"

"Take a good look up into the tree," said Pelletier, calmly. "Shout up to him; see if he answers now. You heard me do it. Wilkes isn't deaf!"

I stood and looked at my friend sitting there on the grass, his ungainly bulk sprawled awkwardly. I said nothing. I confess to a whole series of prickly small chills up and down my spine. At last I went over close to the enormous bole and looked up. I called: "Wilkes! Oh Wilkes!" at the top of my voice, several times. I desisted just in time, I think, to keep an hysterical note out of that stentorian shouting.

For no human voice had answered

from up there—only, as it seemed to me, a now clearly derisive rustle, a kind of thin cacophony, from those damnable fluttering leaves which moved without wind. Not a breath stirred anywhere. To that I can take oath. Yet, those leaves. . . .

THE sweat induced by my slight exertions even in the tree's shade, ran cold off my forehead into my eyes; down my body inside my white drill clothes. I had seen no trace of Wilkes in the tree, and yet the tree's foliage for all its huge bulk was not so dense as to prevent seeing up into every part of it. Wilkes had been up there now for nearly an hour. It was as though he had disappeared from off the face of the earth. I knew now, clearly, what Pelletier had had in mind when he distinguished between our "material" and other difficulties. I walked slowly back to him.

Pelletier had a somber look on his face.

"Did you see him?" he asked. "Did he answer you?" But, it seemed, these were only rhetorical questions. Pelletier did not pause for any reply from me. Instead, he proceeded to ask more questions.

"Did you see any ants on the trunk? You were quite close to it." Then, not pausing: "Have you been troubled by any insects since we came down here, Canevin? Notice any at lunch, or when you took the lunch basket back to the plane?" Finally, with a sweeping, upward gesture: "Do you see any birds, Canevin?"

I shook my head in one composite reply to these questions. I had noticed no ants or any other insects. No bird was in flight. I could not recall, now that my attention had been drawn to the fact, seeing any living thing here besides ourselves. Pelletier broke in upon this momentary meditation:

"The place is tabu, Canevin, and not only to those Indians down there

in the trees—to everything living, man!—to the very birds, to the ground game, to the insects!" He lowered his voice suddenly to a deep significant resonance which was purely tragic.

"Canevin, this is a theater of very ancient Evil," said Dr. Pelletier, "and we have intruded upon it."

AFTER that blunt statement, coming as it did from a man like Dr. Pelletier, I felt, strange as it seems, better. That may appear the reverse of reason; yet, it is strictly, utterly true. For, after that, I knew where we stood. Those eery sensations which I have mentioned, and which I had well-nigh forgotten in the face of the supposed danger from that massed horde of semi-savages in the forest, crystallized now into the certainty that we stood confronted with some malign menace, not human, not of this world, something not to be gaged or measured by everyday standards of safety. And when I, Gerald Canevin, know where I stand in anything like a pinch, when I know to what I am opposed, when all doubt, in other words, is removed, I act!

But first I wanted to know rather more about what Pelletier had in that experienced head of his; Pelletier, who had looked all kinds of danger in the face in China, in Haiti, in this same Central American territory, in many other sections of the world.

"Tell me what you think it is, Pelletier," I said, quietly, and stood there waiting for him to begin. He did not keep me waiting.

"Before Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood, Canevin, and so set anatomy on the road to its present modern status, the older anatomists said that the human body contained four 'humours.' Do you remember that? They were called the Melancholic, the Sanguine, the Phlegmatic, and the Choleric Humours—imaginary fluids! These,

or the supposed combination of them, in various proportions, were supposed to determine the state and disposition of the medical patient. That was 'science'—in the days of Nicholas Culpepper, Canevin! Now, in the days of the Mayo Brothers, that sort of thing is merely archaic, historical, something to smile at! But, never forget, Canevin, it was modern science—once! And, notice how basically true it is! Even though there are no such definite fluids in the human body—speculative science it was, you know, not empirical, not based on observation like ours of today, not experimental—just notice how those four do actually correspond to the various human temperaments. We still say such-and-such a person is 'sanguine' or 'phlegmatic,' or even 'choleric'! We attribute a lot of temperament to-day to the ductless glands with their equally obscure fluids; and, Canevin, one is just about as close to the truth as the other!

NOW, an analogy! I reminded you of that old anatomy to compare it with something else. Long before modern natural science came into its own, the old-timers, Copernicus, Duns Scotus, Bacon, the scientists of their day, even Ptolemy, had their four elements: air, earth, water and fire. Those four are still elements, Canevin. The main difference between now and then is the so-called 'elemental' behind each of them—a thing with intelligence, Canevin, a kind of demigod. It goes back, that idea, to the Gnostics of the second and third centuries; and the Gnostics went back for the origins of such speculations to the once modern science of Alexandria; of Sumer and Accad; to Egypt, to Phrygia, to Pontus and Commagene! That gust of wind, Canevin—do you—"

"You think," I interrupted, "that an air-elemental is . . . ?"

"What more probable, Canevin? Or, what the ancients meant by an air-elemental, a directing intelligence, let us say. You wouldn't attribute all this, Wilkes' disappearance, all the rest of it, so far"—Pelletier indicated in one comprehensive gesture the tree, the circle of short grass, even the insectless ground and the birdless air—"to everyday, modern, material causes; to things that Millikan and the rest could classify and measure, and compute about—would you, Canevin?"

I shook my head.

"I'm going up that tree after Wilkes," I said, and dropped my drill coat on the grass beside Pelletier. I laid my own sun-helmet on the ground beside him. I tightened my belt a hole. Then I started for the tree. I expected some sort of protest or warning from Pelletier. He merely said:

"Wilkes got caught, somehow, up there, because he was taken off his guard, I should surmise. You know, more or less, what to expect!"

I did not know what to expect, but I was quite sure there would be something, up there. I was prepared. This was not the first time Gerald Canevin had been called upon to face the Powers of Darkness, the preternatural. I sent up a brief and fervent prayer to the Author of this universe, to Him Who made all things, "visible and invisible" as the Nicene Creed expresses it. He, Their Author, was more powerful than They. If He were on my side. . . .

I jumped for the limb up to which I had boosted Wilkes, caught it, got both hands around it, hauled myself up, and then, taking a deep breath, I started up among those still dryly rustling leaves in an atmosphere of deep and heavy shade where no breath of air moved. . . .

I PERCEIVE clearly enough that in case this account of what happened to Wilkes and Pelletier and

me ever has a reader other than myself—and, of course, Pelletier if he should care to peruse what I have set down here; Wilkes, poor fellow, crashed over the Andes, less than three months ago as I write this—I perceive that, although the foregoing portion of this narrative does not wholly transcend ordinary strangeness, yet, that the portion which is now to follow will necessarily appear implausible; will, in other words, strain severely that same hypothetical reader's credulity to the utmost.

For, what I found when I went up the tree after Wilkes—spiritually prepared, in a sense, but without any knowledge of what I might encounter—was—well, it is probable that some two millenia, two thousand years or thereabouts had rolled over the jungles since that background Power has been directly exercised. And yet, the memory of It had persisted without lapse among those semi-savage inhabitants such as howled and leaped in their agitation down there at the jungle's rim at that very moment; had so persisted for perhaps sixty generations.

I went up, I should estimate, about as far as the exact center of the great tree. Nothing whatever had happened so far. My mind, of course, was at least partly occupied by the purely physical affair of climbing. At about that point in my progress upward among the branches and leaves I paused and looked down. There stood Pelletier, looking up at me, a bulky, lonely figure. My heart went out to him. I could see him, oddly foreshortened, as I looked straight down; his contour somewhat obscured by the intervening foliage and branches. I waved, and called out to him, and Pelletier waved back to me reassuringly, saying nothing. I resumed my climb.

I HAD got myself perhaps some fifteen feet or more higher up the tree—I could see the blue vault above

as I looked straight up—when, quite as abruptly as that inexplicable wind-clap which had scattered our lunch, the entire top of the tree began suddenly, yet as though with a sentient deliberation, to constrict itself, to close in on me. The best description of the process I can give is to say that those upper branches, from about the tree's midst upward, suddenly squeezed themselves together. This movement coming up toward me from below, and catching up with me, and pressing me upon all sides, in a kind of vertical peristalsis, pushed me straight upward like a fragment of paste through a collapsible tube!

I slid along the cylinder formed by these upper branches as they yielded and turned themselves upward under the impact of some irresistible pressure. My pace upward under this mechanical compulsion was very rapidly accelerated, and, in much less time than is required to set it down, I flew straight up; almost literally burst out from among the slender topmost twigs and leaves as though propelled through the barrel of some monstrous air-gun; and, once clear of the tree's hindering foliage and twigs, a column of upward-rushing air supporting me, I shot straight up into the blue empyrean.

I COULD feel my senses slipping from my control as the mad pace increased! I closed my eyes against the quick nausea which ensued, and fell into a kind of blank apathy which lasted I know not how long, but out of which I was abruptly snatched with a jar which seemed to wrench every bone and muscle and nerve and sinew in my body.

Unaccountably, as my metabolism slowly readjusted itself, I felt firm support beneath me. I opened my eyes.

I found myself in a sitting position, the wrenching sensations of the

jar of landing rapidly dissipating themselves, no feeling of nausea, and, indeed, incongruous as such a word must sound under the circumstances being related, actually comfortable! Whatever substance supported me was comparatively soft and yielding, like thick turf, like a pneumatic cushion. Above me stretched a cloudless sky, the tropical sky of late afternoon, in these accustomed latitudes. Almost automatically I put down my hand to feel what I was resting upon. My eyes, as naturally, followed my hand's motion. My hand encountered something that felt like roughly corrugated rubber, my eyes envisaged a buff-colored ground-surface entirely devoid of vegetation, a surface which, as I turned my head about curiously, stretched away in every direction to an irregular horizon at an immense distance. This ground was not precisely level, as a lawn is level. Yet it showed neither sharp elevations nor any marked depressions. Quite nearby, on my right as I sat there taking in my novel surroundings, two shallow ravines of considerable breadth crossed each other. In one direction, about due south I estimated from the sun's position, three distant, vast, and rounded elevations or hummocks raised themselves against the horizon; and beyond them, dim in the far distance, there appeared to extend farther south vague heights upon four gradually rising plateaus, barely perceptible from where I sat. I was in the approximate center of an enormous plain the lowest point of which, the center of a saucerlike terrain, was my immediate environment; the reverse conformation, so to speak, of the great circle about the tree.

"Good God!" said a voice behind me. "It's Canevin!"

I TURNED sharply to the one direction my few seconds' scrutiny had failed to include. There, not

twenty feet away, sat Wilkes the pilot. He had found his jacket! He was wearing it, in fact. That, queerly enough, was my first mental reaction to having a companion in this weird world to which I had been transported. I noted at that moment, simultaneously with seeing Wilkes, that from somewhere far beneath the surface of the ground there came at regular intervals a kind of throbbing resonance as though from some colossal engine or machine. This pulsing, rhythmical beat was not audible. It came to me—and to Wilkes, as I checked the matter over with him later—through the sense of feeling alone. It continued, I may as well record here, through our entire stay in this world of increasing strangeness.

"I see you have recovered your coat," said I, as Wilkes rose and stepped toward me.

"No doubt about it!" returned Wilkes, and squared his angular shoulders as though to demonstrate how well the jacket fitted his slender figure.

"And what do you make of—this?" he asked, with a comprehensive gesture including the irregular, vegetationless, buff-colored terrain all about us.

"Are we in the so-called 'fourth dimension,' or what?"

"Later," said I, "if you don't mind, after I get a chance to think a bit. I've just been shot into this place, and I'm not quite oriented!" Then: "And how did you manage to get yourself up here? I suppose, of course, it's up!"

There is no occasion to repeat here Wilkes' account of his experience in the tree and later. It was identical with mine which I have already described. Of that fact I assured Wilkes as soon as he had ended describing it to me.

"This—er—ground is queer enough," remarked Wilkes. "Look at this!"

HE opened his clasp-knife, squatted down, jabbed the knife into the ground half an inch or so, and then cut a long gash in what he had referred to as the "ground." In all conscience it was utterly different from anything forming a surface or topsoil that I had ever encountered. Certainly it was not earth as we know it. Wilkes cut another parallel gash, close beside his first incision, drew the two together with his knife at the cut's end, and pried loose and then tore up a long narrow sliver. This, held by one thin end, hung from his hand much as a similarly shaped slice of fresh-cut kitchen linoleum might hang. It looked, indeed, much like linoleum, except that it was both more pliable and also translucent.

"I have another sliver in my pocket," said Wilkes, handing this fresh one to me. I took the thing and looked at it closely.

"May I see yours?" I asked Wilkes.

Wilkes fished his strip out of a pocket in that soiled silk jacket and handed it to me. He had it rolled up, and it did not unroll easily. I stretched it out between my hands, holding it by both ends. I compared the two specimens. His was considerably dryer than mine, much less pliable. I said nothing. I merely rolled up Wilkes' strip and handed it back to him.

"I've stuck right here," remarked Wilkes, "ever since I landed in this Godforsaken place, if it is a place, because, well, because there simply didn't seem to be anything else to do. The sun has been terrific. There's no shade of any kind, you see, not a single spot, as far as you can see; not any at all on the entire damned planet—or whatever it is we've struck! Now that you've 'joined up,' what say to a trek? I'd agree with anyone who insisted that anything at all beats standing here in one spot! How about it?"

"Right," I agreed. "Let's make it

either north or south—in the direction of those hummocks, or, up to the top of that plateau region to the south'ard."

"O. K. with me," agreed Wilkes. "Did you, by any blessed chance, bring any water along when you came barging through?"

I had no water, and Wilkes had been here more than an hour in that pitiless glare without any before my arrival. He shook his head ruefully.

"Barring a shower we'll have to grin and bear it, I imagine. Well, let's go. Is it north, or south? I don't care."

"South, then," said I, and we started.

OUR way took us directly across one of the intersecting depressions in the ground which I have mentioned. The walking was resilient, the ground's surface neither exactly soft nor precisely hard. It was, I remember thinking, very much like a very coarse crepe-rubber sole such as is used extensively on tennis and similar sports shoes. As we went down the gradual slope of that ravine the footing changed gradually, the color of underfoot being heightened by an increasingly reddish or pinkish tinge, and the surface becoming smoother as this coloration intensified itself. In places where the more general corrugations almost disappeared, it was so smooth as to shine in the sun's declining rays like something polished. In such stretches as we traversed it was entirely firm, however, and not in the least slippery, as it appeared to be to the eye.

A cool breeze began to blow from the south, in our faces as we walked. This, and a refreshing shower which overtook us about six o'clock, served to revive us just at a point in our journey when we had really begun to suffer from the well-nigh intolerable effects of the broiling sun overhead and the lack of drinking water.

The sun's decline put the finishing touch upon our comparative comfort. As for the actual walking, both of us were as tough as pine knots, both salted thoroughly to the tropics, both in the very pink of physical condition. Nevertheless, we felt very grateful for these several reliefs.

The sun went down, this being the month of February, just as we were near the top of the gentle slope which led out of the ravine's farther side. Two miles or so farther along as we continued to trek southward, the stars were out and we were able to keep our course by means of that occasional glance into the heavens which night travelers in the open spaces make automatically.

We pressed on and on, the resilient underfooting favoring our stride, the cool breeze, which grew gradually stronger as we walked into it, blowing refreshingly into our faces. This steady breeze was precisely like the evening trade wind as we know it who live in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean.

There was some little talk between us as we proceeded, steadily, due south in the direction of a rising, still distant, mounded tableland, from the summit of which—this had been my original idea in choosing this direction—I thought that we might be enabled to secure a general view of this strange, vegetationless land into which we two had been so singularly precipitated. The tableland, too, was considerably less distant from our starting point than those bolder hummocks to the north which I have mentioned.

From time to time, every couple of miles or so, we sat down and rested for a few minutes.

AT about four in the morning, when we had been walking for more than eleven hours by these easy stages, the ground before us began gradually to rise, and, under the now pouring moonlight, we were able to

see that a kind of cleft or valley, running almost exactly north and south, was opening out before us. Along the bottom of this, and up a very gradual rise, we mounted for the next two hours. We estimated that we had gone up several thousand feet from what I might call the mean level of our starting point. For this final stage of our journey, the walking conditions had been especially pleasant. Neither of us was particularly tired.

As we mounted the last of the acclivity, my mind was heavily occupied with Pelletier, left there alone under the tree, with the useless plane nearby and those swarming savages all about him in their great numbers. Also I thought, somewhat ruefully, of my abandoned dinner engagement in Belize. I wondered, in passing, if I should ever sit down to a dinner table again! It seemed, I must admit, rather unlikely just then. Quite likely they would send out some sort of rescue expedition after us; probably another plane following the route which we had placed on file at the airport.

Of such matters, I say, I was thinking, rather than what might be the result, if any, of our all night walk. Just then the abrupt, bright dawn of the tropics broke over at our left in the east. We looked ahead from the summit we had just gained in its blazing, clarifying effulgence, over the crown of the great ridge.

We looked out.

No human being save Wilkes and me, Gerald Canevin, has seen, in modern times at least, what we saw. And, so long as the earth's civilization and science endure, so long as there remains the procession of the equinoxes, so long, indeed, as the galaxy roars its invincible way through unsounded space toward imponderable Hercules, no man born of woman shall ever again see what opened there before our stultified senses, our dazzled eyes. . . .

BEFORE us the ground beyond the great ridge began to slope abruptly downward in one vast, regular curve. It pitched down beyond this parabola in an increasingly steep declivity, such as an ocean might form as it poured its incalculable volume over the edge of the imagined geoplanarian earth-edge of the ancients! Down, down, down to well-nigh the extreme range of our vision it cascaded, down through miles and miles of naked space to a sheer verticalness—a toboggan slide for Titans.

The surface of this downward-pitching slope, beginning some distance below the level upon which we stood there awestruck, was in one respect different from the land as we had so far seen it. For there, well down that awful slope, we could easily perceive the first vegetation, or what corresponded to vegetation, that we had observed. Down there and extending out of our range of vision for things of that size, there arose from the ground's surface, and growing thicker and more closely together as the eye followed them down, many great columnar structures, irregularly placed with relation to each other, yet of practically uniform height, thickness, and color. This last was a glossy, almost metallic, black. These things were branchless and showed no foliage of any kind. They were narrowed to points at their tops, and these tapering upper portions waved in the strong breeze which blew up from below precisely as the tops of trees moved under the impulse of an earthly breeze. I say "earthly" advisedly. I will proceed to indicate why!

IT was not, primarily, the inherent majesty of the unique topography which I am attempting to describe which rooted Wilkes and me, appalled, to that spot at the ridge's summit. No. It was the clear sight of our planet, earth, as though seen

from an airplane many miles high in the earth's atmosphere, which, in its unexpectedness, caused the sophisticated Wilkes to bury his face in his arms like a frightened child at its mother's lap, caused me to turn my head away. It was the first, demonstrative proof that we had been separated from earth; that we stood, indeed, "up," and with a vengeance, miles away from its friendly surface.

It was then, and not before, that the sense of our utter separation, our almost cosmic loneliness, came to us in an almost overwhelming surge of uncontrollable emotion. The morning sun shone clear and bright down there upon our earth, as it shone here where we were so strangely marooned. We saw just there, most prominently presented to our rapt gaze, the northeast section of South America, along the lower edge of our familiar Caribbean, the Guianas, Venezuela, the skirting islands, Margherita, Los Roques, Bonaire, and, a trifle less clear, the lower isles of my own Lesser Antilles: Trinidad, Barbados on the horizon's very edge, the little shadow I knew to be Tobago.

I shall not attempt further to tell here how that unexpected, yet confirmatory sight, shook the two of us; how small and unimportant it made us feel, how cut off from everything that formed our joint backgrounds. Yet, however detached we felt, however stultifying was this vision of earth down there, it was, literally, as nothing, even counting in our conviction of being mere animated, unimportant specks among the soulless particles of space—even that devastating certainty was as nothing to the climactic focus of what we were to behold.

I sat down beside Wilkes, and, speaking low to each other, we managed gradually to recover those shreds of our manhood which had partly escaped us, to get back some of that indomitable courage which sustains the sons of men and makes

us, when all is said and done, the ultimate masters of our destinies.

WHEN we were somewhat re-covered—readjusted perhaps is the better word—we stood up and once more looked down over the edge of this alien world, down that soul-dizzing slope, our unaided eyes gradually accommodating themselves to seeing more and more clearly its distant reaches and the continentlike section which lay, dim and vague from distance, below it. We observed now what we had failed to perceive before, that the enormous area of that land-pitch was, in its form, roughly rounded, that it sloped to right and left, as well as directly away from us; that it was, in short, a tremendous, slanted column, like a vast circular bridge between the level upon which we then stood and that continentlike mass of territory down below there in the vague distance. As the sun rose higher and higher the fresh breeze died to a trickle of air, then ceased. Those cylindrical, black, treelike growths no longer waved their spikes. They stood now like rigid metallic columns at variant, irregular angles. In the increasing light the real character of what I had mentally named the Continent below became more nearly apparent. It was changing out of its remote vagueness, taking form. I think it dawned upon me before Wilkes had succeeded in placing what was slowly emerging, mentally. For, just before I turned my head away at the impact of the shock which that dawning realization brought to my mind and senses, the last thing I observed clearly was Wilkes, rigid, gazing below there, staring down that frightful declivity, a mounting horror spreading over the set face above the square-cut jaw. . . .

REALIZATION of the rewards of this world as dross had come, two millenia ago, to Him Who

stood beside the Tempter, upon the pinnacles of the Temple, viewing the kingdoms of the world. In some such fashion—if I may so describe the process without any intentional irreverence—there came to me the blasting conviction which then overtook me, forced itself into my protesting mentality, turned all my ideas upside-down.

For it was not a continent that we had been gazing down upon. It was no continent. It was not land—ground. *It was a face*—a face of such colossal majesty, emerging there, taking form in the rays of the revealing sunlight, as utterly to stagger mind and senses attuned to earthly things, adjusted for a lifetime to earthly proportions; a face ageless in its serene, calm, inhumaneness; its conviction of immeasurable power; its ab-human inscrutability.

I reeled away, my face turned from this incredible catastrophe of thought; and, as I sank down upon the ground, my back turned toward the marge of this declivity, I knew that I had dared to look straight into the countenance of a Great Power, such as the ancients had known. And I realized, suddenly, sick at heart, that this presence, too, was looking out of eyes like level, elliptical seas, up into my eyes, deep into my very inmost soul.

But this conviction, so monstrous, so devastating, so incredible, was not all! Along with it there went the heart-shaking realization that what we had visualized as that great slope was the columnar, incredible arm of that cosmic Colossus—that our night-long trek had been made across a portion of the palm of his uplifted hand!

OVERHEAD the cloudless sky began to glow a coppery brown. An ominous, wedge-shaped tinge spread fast, gathering clouds together out of nowhere as it sped into the north. And now the sun-drenched

air seemed heavy, of a sudden difficult to breathe under that pitiless, oppressive sun which glared out of the bland, cerulean corner of the sky in which it burned. A menacing sultriness filled the atmosphere, pressed down upon us like a relentless hand. A hand! I shuddered involuntarily, and turned to Wilkes and spoke, my hand on his shoulder. It was a matter of seconds before the stark horror died out of his eyes. He interrupted my almost whispered words: "Did you see It, Canevin?"

I nodded.

"I think we'll have to get back from the edge," I repeated my warning he had failed to hear, "down into that—ravine—again. There's the making of a typhoon up topside, I'm afraid."

Wilkes shot a quick, weatherwise glance aloft.

"Right-o," said he, and we started together toward that slight shelter of the shallow valley up which we had toiled as dawn was breaking.

But the wind-storm from out of the north broke upon us long before we had gained this questionable refuge. A blasting hurricane smote down upon us out of that coppery, distorted sky. We had not a chance. The first blast picked us up as though we had been specks of flotsam lint, carried us straight to the brink, and over, and down; and then, side by side, so long as we retained our senses under the stress of that terrific friction, we were hurled at a dizzyingly increasing rate down that titanic toboggan slide as its sheer vertical pitch fell away under our spinning bodies, always faster and faster, with the roar of ten Niagaras rending the very welkin above—down, down, down into the quick oblivion which seemed to shut out all life and all understanding and all persisting hope in one final, mercifully quick-ended horror of ultimate destruction.

Somehow, I carried with me into

that disintegration of the senses and ultimate coma, the thought of Pelletier.

IN order to achieve in this strange narrative which I am setting down as best I can, some sense of order and a reasonable brevity, I have, from time to time, summarized my account. I have, for example, mentioned once that enginelike beat, that regular pulsation to be felt here. I have said, to avoid reference to it, that it continued throughout our sojourn in the "place" which I have described. That is what I mean by summarizing. I have, indeed, omitted much, very much, which, now that I am writing at leisure, I feel would burden my account with needless detail, unnecessary recording of my emotional reaction to what was happening. In this category lies all that long conversation between Wilkes and me, as we strode along, side by side, on that long night walk.

But, of all such matters, the most prominent to me was the preoccupation—a natural one, I believe—with that good friend whom I had left looking up into the tree which looked like an English ash, as I climbed away from him into what neither of us could possibly visualize or anticipate, away, as it transpired, from our very planet earth, and into a setting, a set of conditions, quite utterly diverse from anything the mind of modern man could possibly conceive or invent.

This preoccupation of mine with Pelletier had been virtually continuous. I had never had him wholly out of my mind. He had uttered, it will be remembered, no protest at my leaving him down there alone. That, at the time, had surprised me considerably. But on reflection I came to see that such an attitude on his part was entirely natural. It was part of that tremendous fortitude of his, almost fatalism, which was an integral part of his character. I have known

few men better balanced than that ungainly, big-hearted naval surgeon friend of mine. Pelletier was the man I should choose, beyond all others, to have beside me in a pinch.

AND here we were, Wilkes and I, in a situation which I have endeavored to make as clear as possible, perhaps as tight a pinch as any human beings have ever been in, and the efficient and reliable Pelletier not only miles away from us, as we would think of the separation in earthly terms, but, actually, as our sight down that slope had devastatingly revealed, as effectively cut off from us as though we two human atoms had been standing on the planet Jupiter! There had been no moment, I testify truly, since I had been drawn into that tree-vortex and hurled regardless into this monstrous environment, when I had not wanted that tried and true friend beside me.

For, in that same desire to keep this narrative free from the extraneous, to avoid labored repetitions, I see that I have said nothing, so far at least, of what I must name the atmosphere of terror, the sense of malign pressure against my mind, and against Wilkes', which had been literally continuous; which by now, under the successive impacts of shock to which both of us had been subjected, had soared hauntingly to the status of a sustained horror, a sense of helplessness well-nigh intolerable, as it became borne in upon us what we had to face.

We were like a pair of sparrows in a great, incalculable grip.

Against that dread Power there seemed to be no possible defense. We were, and increasingly realizing the fact, completely, hopelessly, Its prey. Whenever It decided to close in upon us, It would strike—at intruders, as the canny Pelletier, sensing our status on Its ground, had phrased the matter. It had us, and we knew it! And there was nothing we could

do, men of action though both of us were; nothing, that is, that any man of whatever degree of fortitude could do. Therein lay the oppressive horror of the situation.

WHEN I opened my eyes my first impression was a mental one; to wit, that an enormous period of time had elapsed since last I had looked upon the world and its sky above it. This curious delusion, I have since learned, is due to the degree of unconsciousness which has been sustained. The impression, I will note in passing, shortly wore off. My second, immediately subsequent, impression was a physical one. I ached in every bone, muscle, tendon and sinew of a body which all my life I have kept in the highest possible degree of physical fitness. I felt sorely bruised. Every inch of me protested as I attempted to move, holding me back. And, immediately after this realization, that old pre-occupation with Pelletier reestablished itself in my mind and became abruptly paramount. I could, so to speak, think of nothing, just then, but Pelletier.

Into this cogitation there broke a suppressed groan. With a wrenching effort, I rolled over, and there, behind me, lay Wilkes. We were, it seemed, still together! Whatever the strange Power might be planning and executing upon us, was upon us both. Very slowly and carefully, Wilkes sat up, and, with a rueful glance over at me, began laboriously to feel about over his body.

"I'm merely one enormous bruise," said Wilkes, "and I'm a bit surprised that either of us is—"

"Alive at all!" I finished for him, and we nodded, rather dully, at each other.

"Yes, after that last dash they gave us," added Wilkes. Then, slowly: "What do you suppose it's all about, Canevin? Who, what is it? Is it—er—Allah—or what?"

"I'm none too agile myself," I said, after a pause spent going over various muscles and joints. "I'm intact, it seems, and I've got to agree with you, old man! I don't in the least understand why we're not in small fragments, 'little heaps of huddled pulp,' as I once heard it put! However, if It can use a typhoon to move us about, of course It can temper the typhoon, land us gently, keep us off the ground—undoubtedly It did, for some reason of Its own! However, the main point is that we're still here—but where are we now?"

It was not Wilkes who answered. The answer came—I am recording precisely what happened, exaggerating nothing, omitting nothing salient from this unprecedented adventure—the reply came to me mentally, as though by some unanticipated telepathy, quite clearly enunciated, registering itself unmistakably in my inner-consciousness.

"Sit tight!" it said. "I'm with you here on this end of things."

And the "voice" which recorded itself in my brain, a calm, efficient kind of voice, a voice which reached out its intense helpfulness and sympathy to us, waifs of some inchoate void, a voice replete with reassurance, with steady confidence, a voice which healed the raw wounds of the beleaguered soul—was the voice of Pelletier.

PELLETIER standing by! I cannot hope to reproduce and set down here the immeasurable comfort of it.

I stood up, Wilkes rising groaningly at the same time, a laborious, painful process, and, reeling on my two feet as I struggled for and finally established my normal balance, looked about me.

We stood, to my mounting surprise, on a stone-flagged pavement. About us rose inner walls of smoothed stone. We were in a room about sixteen by twenty feet in size,

lighted by an open doorway and by six windows symmetrically placed along the side walls, and unglazed. The light which flooded the room through these vents was plainly that of late afternoon. Simultaneously we stepped over to the wide-open doorway and looked out.

Before us waved the dignified foliage of a mahogany grove, thickly interspersed with ceiba trees, its near edge gracious with the brave show of flowering shrubs in full blossom—small white flowers which smelled like the Cape Jessamine. I had only just taken in these features when I felt Wilkes' grip on my arm from where he stood, just behind me and a little to one side. His voice was little more than a whisper:

"We're— Oh, God!— Canevin! Look, Canevin, look! We're back on earth!" His whispered words broke in a succession of hysterical dry sobs, and, as I laid my arm about the poor fellow's heaving shoulders, I felt the unchecked tears running down my own face.

WE stepped out side by side after a minute or two, and stood there, once more on true earth, in the pleasant silence of late afternoon and with the fragrance of those flowering shrubs pouring itself over everything. It was a delicate aroma, grateful and refreshing. We said nothing. We spent this quiet interval in some sort of silent thanksgiving.

And, curiously, Wilkes' oddly phrased question came forcibly into my mind: "Is it Allah—or what?" I remembered, standing there in that pleasant, remote garden with its white flowers, an evening spent over a pair of pipes in the austere study of an old friend, Professor Harvey Vanderbogart, a brilliant young Orientalist, since dead. Vanderbogart, I remembered very clearly, had been speaking of one of the Moslem theologians, Al Ghazzali. He had quoted

me a strange passage from the magnanimous opus of that medieval Saracen, a treatise well known to scholars as "The Precious Pearl." I could even call back into my mind with the smell of the tobacco and the breeze blowing Vanderbogart's dull reddish window curtains, the resonance of his serious, declaiming voice:

" . . . the soul of man passeth out of his body, and this soul is of the shape and size of a bee. . . . The Lord Allah holdeth this soul of man between His thumb and finger, and Allah bringeth it close before His eyes, and Allah holdeth it at the length of His arm, and Allah saith: 'Some are in the Garden—and I care not; and some are in the Fire—and I care not. . . .!'"

Poor Vanderbogart had been dead many years, a most worthy and lovable fellow and a fine scholar. May he rest in peace! Doubtless he is reaping his reward of a blameless life, in the Garden.

And here, somewhere on earth, which was, for the time being, quite enough for us to know, stood Wilkes and I, also in a garden, tremulously grateful to be alive, and on our Mother Earth, glad indeed of this respite as it seemed to us; free, for the time being, of the malevolent caprice of that Power from Whose baleful control, we, poor fools, supposed that we might have been, as it were carelessly, released.

Our momentary illusion of security was strangely shattered.

WITHOUT any preliminary warning of any kind, those great trees before us on the other edge of the row of flowering bushes made deep obeisance all together in their deeply rooted rows, in our direction, as a great wind tore rudely through them, hurling us backward like chips of cork before a hurricane, whipping us savagely with the strong twigs of the uprooted shrubs pelting us, ironically, with a myriad de-

tached blossoms. This fearsome surge of living air smote us back through the wide doorway and landed us in the middle of that compact stone room, and died as abruptly, leaving us, almost literally breathless, and reeling after our dislocated balance.

There was, it occurred to me fragmentarily and with a poignant acuteness, a disastrous certainty brooking no mental denial, none of the benign carelessness of Allah about this Adversary of ours! His was, plainly enough, an active maleficence. He had no intention of allowing us quietly, unobtrusively, to slip away. If we had been landed once more on earth, it was in no sense a release—no more than the cat releases the mouse save to add some infinitesimal mental torture to that pitiful little creature's dash for freedom, ending in the thrust of those ruthless retractile claws.

Brief respites, the subsequent crushing of our very souls by that imponderable Force!

We pulled ourselves together, Wilkes and I, there in that austere little stone room, and, in the breathless calm which had followed that astounding clap of air-force, we found ourselves racked to a very high degree of nervous tension. We stood there, and pumped laboriously the dead, heavy air into our laboring lungs in great gasping breaths. It was as though a vacuum had, for long moments, replaced the warm fresh air of a tropical midafternoon. The stone room's floor was thickly sewn with those delicate white blooms, their odor now no longer refreshing; rather an overpowering additional element now, in the sultry burning air.

Then the center of the rearmost end wall began to move, revealing another doorway the size of that which led outside into the little garden now denuded of its blooms. As the first heavy, grating crunching

ushered this new fact into our keyed-up joint consciousness, we turned sharply toward that wall, now parting, moving back as though on itself.

WE looked through, into what seemed an endless, dim-lit vaulted arena of some forgotten worship, into the lofty nave of a titanic cathedral, through dim, dust-laden distances along a level floor of stone to where at an immense distance shimmered such an altar as the Titans might have erected to Jupiter, an altar of shining white stone and flanked by a chiseled figure of a young man, kneeling on one knee, and holding poised on that knee a vast cornucopialike jar, for all the world, as I envisaged it, like a statue of zodiacal Aquarius.

Greatly intrigued, Wilkes and I walked through the doorway out of our stone anteroom, into the colossal structure which towered far, far above into dimness, and straight across the stone-flagged nave toward this unexpected and alluring shrine; glowing up ahead there in all the comeliness of its ancient chaste beauty.

That the architecture here, including the elaborate ornamentation, was that of those same early Mayas concerning whom Pelletier had discoursed so learnedly, there could be no possible question. Here, plainly, was a very ancient and thoroughly authentic survival, intact, of the notable building propensity of that early people, The First Mayas of the High Culture, the founders of the race and its various empires in these Western-world settlements, the predecessors of the present surviving and degenerate inhabitants. Here, about us, remained the work of that cryptic civilization which had so unaccountably disappeared off this planet's face, leaving their enduring stone monuments, their veritable handiwork, developed, sophisticated, with its strange wealth of ornamen-

tation behind them as an insoluble riddle for the archeologists.

THAT this stupendous structure was a survival from a hoary antiquity there was all about us abundant and convincing evidence. I knew enough of the general subject to be acutely aware of that, that this represented the building principles of the earliest period—the high point, as I understood the matter, of the most notable of the successive Maya civilizations. That the building had stood empty and unused for some incalculable period in time was equally evidenced by various facts. One of these, unmistakable, was the thick blanket of fine dust which lay, literally inches thick, over everything; dust through which we were obliged to plod as though over the trackless surface of some roofed and ceiled Sahara; dust which rose in choking clouds behind and about us as we pressed forward toward that distant altar and its glorious statue.

That figure of the youth with his votive jar towered up ahead of us there, white, glistening, beautiful—and the dust of uncounted centuries which lay inches thick upon its many upper, bearing, surfaces such as offered support to its impalpability, caused the heroic figure to stand out in a deeply enhanced and accentuated perspective, lending to it strange highlights in shining contrast to the very dust's thick, quasi-shadows; a veritable perfection of shading such as no sculptor of this world could hope to rival.

We walked, necessarily rather slowly, on and forward toward the altar and statue, their beauty and symmetry becoming more and more clearly apparent as our progress brought them closer and closer within the middle range of our vision.

NATURALLY enough, I had pondered deeply upon the whole affair in which we were in-

volved, in those intervals—such as our long night walk—as had been afforded us between the various actual “attacks” of the Power that held us in its grip. I had, of course, put two and two together again and again in the unceasing human mental process of effort to make problematical two-and-two yield the satisfying four of a solution.

This process, had, of course, included the consideration of many matters, such as the possible connection between the existence of the Great Power and that same ancient Maya civilization; the basic facts, the original reasons back of the terror of those massed aborigines swarming in their forest cover all about the tree-circle; the placing in their appropriate categories of the phenomena of the Great Body; that mechanical regular pulsation which could only be the throbbing of Its circulatory fluids—Ichor was the classical term, I remembered, for the blood of a god; the “ravines” which crossed each other like shallow valleys and which were the “lines” upon that primordial palm; the hirsute growth adorning that titanic forearm which had glistened like metallic tree-boles as the morning sun shone down that slope, and which moved their tapering tops in the breeze from the cosmic nostrils.

All such as these, and various other details, I had, I say, attempted mentally to resolve, to adjust to their right and logical places and settings; to work, that is, mentally, into some coherent unity, literal or cosmic.

The process had included the element of worship. The gods and demigods of deep antiquity had had their worshipers, their devotees diabolic or human, and this as an integral part, an essential, of their now only vaguely comprehended existence; since day and night struggled for primordial precedence in the dim gestation of time.

THAT those prehistoric, highly civilized Maya forebears might have been worshipers of this particular Power (which, as we had had forced upon our attention, had somehow localized Its last stand here in these modern times—that Great Circle; the tree in its center as Its bridge to and from this world of ours) was a possibility which had long since occurred to me. That such a possibility might have some bearing upon that scientific puzzle which centered about their remote and simultaneous disappearance, had, I am sure, also occurred to me at that time. To that problem, which had barely come under my mental scrutiny because it was not central in terms of our predicament, I had, I am equally sure, given no particular thought.

That there could, in the nature of the case, be any evidence—“documentary” or merely archeological—had not entered my mind. I did wonder about it now, however, as we two plodded forward through those choking dust clouds, slowly yet surely onward toward what seemed to have been a major shrine of such forgotten worship, if, indeed, what I suspected had ever had its place upon this planet.

For one thing, the worshipers themselves would by now have been dust these twenty centuries; perhaps, indeed, the once-animated basis of this very powder which swirled and eddied about us two, up from underfoot as we pushed forward laboriously toward the shrine. There, in its forgotten heyday, that worship had sent swirling and eddying upward in active spirals incense compounded of the native tree-gums; the balsams and *olibana*, the styrax and powdered sweet-leaves of the environing forests; incense bearing upward in its votive clouds the aspirations of an antiquity as remote as that of the Roman Augurs, and to a deity fiercer, more inscrutable, than Olympian Jove.

IT would, indeed, have been a relief to us to see some worshipers now, human beings, even though, devoted as they might be to their deity in Whose hostile power we were held, such personages should prove correspondingly hostile to us. This unrelenting, unrelieved god-and-victim situation was a truly desperate one. Within its terms—as I have elsewhere tried to make clear—we felt ourselves helpless. There was nothing to strike against! A man, however resolute, cannot, in the very nature of things, contend with a Power of this kind! Useless mere courage, fortitude. Even the possession of a body stalwart, inured by exercise and constant usage against conflict and the deadly fatigue of intensive competitive effort, is no match for hurricanes—powerless against a Force which could be mistaken for a major geographical division of land!

Despite the fact that we had gone without rest or sleep, to say nothing of food and water for a much longer period that was our common custom; apart, too, from the fact that these sound bodies of ours were just then rather severely strained and racked from the cosmic manhandling to which we had been subjected; leaving wholly out of consideration the stresses which had worn thin our nervous resistance—taking into consideration all these factors which told against us, I know that both of us would have welcomed any contact, even though it should involve conflict of the most drastic kind, with human beings, people like ourselves. They might be, for all of us, out of any age, past or present; of any degree of rudeness, of any lack of civilization, in any numbers—just so that they be human.

We did not know then—certainly I did not, and Wilkes was saying nothing—what lay in wait for us, just around the corner of time, so to speak!

WE had by now traversed about half of the distance between the anteroom and the altar. Behind us, a heavy, weaving, tenuous cloud of the fine dust we had disturbed hung like a gray, nebulous curtain between us and the towering rearward end wall of that enormous fane. Ahead now the altar glowed, jewel-like, in the slanting rays of a declining sun, rays which appeared to fall through some high opening as yet invisible to us. The genuflecting figure I have named Aquarius gleamed, too, gloriously, in its refined, heroic contours—a thing of such pure beauty as to cause the beholder to catch his breath.

About us all things were utterly silent, a dead stillness, like the settled, lifeless quiet of some abandoned tomb. Even our own footfalls, muffled in the thick dust of the marching centuries, registered no audible sound.

And then, with the rude abruptness which seemed to characterize every manifestation of that anachronistic divinity, that survival out of an unfriendly past, there came without any warning the deep, soul-stirring, contrapuntal beat of a vast gong. This tremendous note poured itself into this dead world, this arid arena of a forgotten worship; the sudden, pulsing atmosphere of renewal, of life itself.

We stopped there in our tracks and the fine dust rose all about us like gray cumulus. We looked, we listened, and all about us the quickening air became alive. Then the vibrating, metallic clangor reverberated afresh and the atmosphere was electrified into pulsing animation; an unmistakable, palpable sense of fervid, hastening activity. We stood there, in that altered environment, tense, strained, every nerve and every faculty aroused as though by an unmistakable abrupt challenge. The altar seemed to coruscate in this new atmosphere. The zodiacal figure

of Aquarius gleamed afresh in the sun's slanting rays with a poignant, unearthly beauty.

The slow, shattering sub-bass of the gong reverberated a third time, its mighty, overtonic echoes charging the revived air with a challenging summons; and, before these had wholly died away and silence above the dust clouds established itself, out from some point beside and beyond the altar there emerged a slow-moving procession of men in long, dignified garments, in hierarchical vesture, walking gravely, two and two.

WE watched breathlessly. Here, at long last, was the fulfilment of that half-formulated wish. Human beings! Here were worshippers: tall, stalwart men; great, bearded men, warriors in seeming; bronzed, great-thewed hierophants, bearing strange instruments, the paraphernalia of some remote ritual—wands and metal cressets; chained thuribles, naviculae, long cornucopiae, like that upon the flexed knee of Aquarius; harsh-sounding systra, tinkling triangles, netted rattles strung with small, sweet-chiming bells; salsalim, castanets, clanging cymbals; great rams' horns banded with plates of shining fresh gold; enormous, fanlike implements of a substance like elephants' hide; a gilt canopy, swaying on ebony poles, ponderous, its fringes powdered with jewels, sheltering a votive bullock, its wide horns buried beneath looped garlands. This procession moved gravely toward the altar, an endless stream of grave, bearded men, until, as we watched, stultified, wondering, the space about it became finally filled, and the slow-moving, endless-seeming throng, women and girls among the men now, turned toward us, pouring deliberately into the forefront of the nave.

It was, after this change in the course of the procession's objective, only a matter of seconds before we

were seen. There was no possibility of retreat, nothing whatever behind which we might have concealed ourselves. We could, of course, have lain down, burrowing in the dust, and so, perhaps, have delayed the instant of discovery. But that did not occur to either of us. Such a course would, too, have been quite futile. Enormous as was this vast fane—built, it appeared, to accommodate worshippers in their thousands—there were here, thronging in endlessly, more than enough to fill it to suffocation.

THERE was, once we were observed, not so much as an instant's hesitation, a moment's respite for us. Between the instant when the foremost of that great throng perceived us, strangers, outlanders, and the instantaneous corporate cry of rage which rose from a thousand throats, there was not time for us to clasp hands in a futile gesture of farewell. They rushed us without any other preliminary than that roar of fierce, primitive anger. The dust under that mass movement of sanded feet rose in an opaque cloud which obscured the altar. Out of that thick, mephitic cloud they came at us, brandishing thick, metallic, macelike clubs, great bronze swords, obvious, menacing, in that dust-dim air, the rapidly-failing light of the sun—deadly blades, thirsting for our blood.

"Back to back, as soon as they surround us," I hurled in Wilkes' ear, but I had not completed that brief counsel of despair when Wilkes, who produced from somewhere a small, flat automatic pistol, had abruptly dropped in his tracks a huge bearded warrior, who, by reason of a greatly superior fleetness of foot, had by far outdistanced the others. This giant fell within fifteen feet of us. The nearest of the others, also bounding along well in advance of the pack, was perhaps thirty feet distant. I had time to plunge forward and seize

out of a great hairy fist the enormous bronze sword of this our first casualty. With this it was my plan to rush back to where Wilkes stood, sighting calmly along his pistol barrel, as I glimpsed him, and make together some sort of stand.

The second runner was nearly on top of me, however, before I could straighten up and try to fell him with this untried weapon. Wilkes shot him through the middle precisely as he was about to bring down his macelike weapon across my skull. I secured the mace before any of the others out of that frenzied horde was within striking distance, and leaped back through the now boiling dust clouds to Wilkes' side. This was a trifle better, though obviously hopeless against those odds. I straightened myself, caught my balance, turned to face the rush beside Wilkes.

"GOOD for five more, anyhow!" said Wilkes calmly, firing past me twice in quick succession. I was turned about and again facing the oncoming rush in time to see two more of them sinking down. I thrust choice of the two primitive weapons I had secured toward Wilkes. He snatched the mace in his left hand, fired his remaining three shots, hurled the pistol into the thick of the vanguard; and then, shifting the mace to his right hand while I made my huge sword sing through the dust, we faced the attack.

We possessed jointly the single advantage of comparative lightness. Our massed opponents were uniformly men of literally huge stature, heroic-looking fellows, stalwart, bulky, deadly serious in this business of killing!

Unquestionably, as I think back over that conflict, too much emphasis cannot be placed upon this single advantage of lightness, mobility, to which I have just alluded. Otherwise, had we not been able to move

about very much more rapidly than our opponents, that fight would have been finished, with our offhand slaughter, in a matter of seconds! The odds were—"overwhelming" is not the word. "Ridiculous" comes nearer to it. Probably a thousand of the enormous warriors were using their utmost endeavor to close in upon and slaughter two men. But they necessarily got inextricably tangled up together for that very reason. If they had delegated two or three of their number to attend to Wilkes and me while the others merely stood by, there can be no question but what they would have accomplished their end, and in a very brief period of time.

The bulk, and the consequent relative awkwardness of the individual warriors, too, counted powerfully in our favor. We were, thus, both jointly infinitely more mobile than the huddled phalanx which we confronted, and individually as well when compared, man for man, to even the lightest of our opponents when considered singly. They got into each others' way through the sheer directness of their massed attack, and of this circumstance which counted so heavily in our favor we took the fullest advantage. The great warriors, too, appeared to pay no attention either to their own dead, which began to pile up after a few moments of that intensive affray, and these, as they increased, served to protect us and to cause them, intent only on reaching us, to stumble broadcast. They seemed to know nothing of defensive fighting.

WE plunged, both of us, into that fight, berserk, with no other idea but that this was the inevitable, the predestined end; no other idea than that we were going out like men—and with as much company as possible for whatever Stygian process might await us beyond the doors of that imminent death.

It was like a preface to Valhalla, that fight! In that remote edge of my brain which people call "the back of the mind," I remember the thought cropping up that such combat as this was an affair of utter futility! We had no shadow of misunderstanding with these towering, swarming legionaries out of some unguessed backwater of antiquity. They, certainly, apart from their primitive urges, had no reason for attacking us. Yet, I confess, I went into that shambles with a sense of relief, with a quite definite satisfaction, a gusto! These great, truculent, brown, bearded creatures were subjects of, part and parcel with, that hostile demigod, that basic anachronism, Who was persecuting us. Striking at them, His Myrmidons, meant blows at Him—shrewd blows they were. . . .

WE struck out, Wilkes and I. I found my great awkward-looking weapon surprisingly well-balanced and keen. It was only after I had sheared through that first torso, clear through the big neck muscles and ribs of my first actual opponent, that I realized what a sword could be! I set my teeth. Vague, hereditary instincts burgeoned in my blood-quickenened mentality. I went half mad with the urge to slay. I exulted as my great sword found its mark, struck home again and yet again. Half-articulate cries burst through my compressed lips; terrible thoughts, a fearful, supporting self-confidence boiled in my mind as I fought, and thrust, and swung; vague instincts freshly quickened into seething life and power; the inheritance from countless Nordic forebears, men who were men indeed, heroes of song and saga, men of my clan who had fought their relentless way to chieftainship, men who fought with claymores.

There came over me a terrible swift surge of security, of certainty, of appalling confidence. I was more

than a man. I, too, was a god, empowered with the achievements of those old Canevins who had feared neither man nor devil in the ancient eras of the clan's glory in the field of red battle—a sense of strange happiness, of fulfilment, of some deep destiny coming into its own like the surging up of a great tide. This, I suppose, is what people name the blood-lust. I do not know. I only know that I settled down to fighting, my brain alert, my arm wielding the sword tirelessly, my feet and legs balancing me for the great shearing strokes with which I cleared space after recurrent space about me and caused the mounded dead to make a bulwark between me and those indefatigable huge brutes who pressed on and on, filling up the ranks of their cloven, sinking colleagues.

HEREDITY laid its heavy hand upon me as I slew right and left and always before me. It was like some destiny, I say, fulfilling itself. Strange cries, deep, primitive slogans burst from my lips. I pressed upon those before me—we were, of course, surrounded—and, feeling the comradeship of Wilkes at my back, as he swung and lashed out with that metal club taking his toll of brains and crackling skulls, I surged into a song, a vast war shout, rushing upon the ever-renewed front of my enemies, flailing the great sword through yielding flesh and resistant bone and sinew, forward, ever forward into a very fulfilment and epitome of slaughter. From time to time one or another would reach, and wound me, but the blood of the ancient fighting clan of Canevin heeded not.

My bronze sword drank deep as it sheared insatiable through tissue and tendon. Before me, an oriflamme, flared a blood-red mist in that dank shambles where blood mingled with paralyzing dust clouds. It was basic; hand to hand; pure conflict. My soul exulted and sang as I ploughed for-

ward into the thick of it, Wilkes' staccato "Ha!" as his metal club went home, punctuating the rhythm of my terrible strokes against that herded phalanx. I struck and struck, and the sword drank and drank.

I strode among heaped bodies now, seeking foot leverage, a greater purchase for my blows. Against these heart-lifting odds, heedless of death, feeling none of the gashes and bruises I received, I strove, in a still-mounting fury of utter destruction. I drove them before me in scores, in hundreds. . . .

Then, insistent, paralyzing, came the last stroke, the shattering reverberation of the great gong.

WITH that compelling stroke, like the call of Fate, the conflict died all about me. The tense, striving fury dropped away from the distorted faces before me. Their weapons fell. I heard Wilkes' quick "Ha!" as his last blow went home on a crumpling skull, and then my sword hung idle all at once in my scarlet hand; the pressure of the circle about us relaxed, fell away to nothing. I breathed again without those choking gasps through air fouled with the fetor of dust and blood—old dust, newly-shed blood. We stood together, still back to back, our strained hearts pumping wildly, our red vision clearing. We stood near the very rearmost wall now, such had been the pressure into the nave.

We turned, as though by an agreement, and looked into each other's eyes. Then, as a surge of chanted song far up by the altar inaugurated this worship which was beginning, which had taken from us the attention of that mad horde, we slipped quietly out through the anteroom, and into the garden now tremulous with the verge of dusk upon it, side by side, on the short grass, we lay down upon our faces, and relaxed our sorely taxed bodies, turned, and

spoke quietly to each other, and gazed up at the friendly stars, and closed our eyes, and fell at once into the quick deep sleep of complete and utter exhaustion.

IT was Wilkes who shook me awake. It was pitch dark, or nearly so, the moon being at the moment obscured under clouds. A light, refreshing rain was falling, and my soaking wetness from head to foot evidenced a heavier shower through which both of us had slept. My wounds and bruises from that terrific mêlée ached and burned and throbbed. Yet I had lost little blood, it appeared, and when I stood up and had moved about somewhat, my usual agility seemed quite fully restored. The phosphorus-painted dial of my wrist-watch—which had survived that shambles intact—showed that it was half past four in the morning.

"I've been scouting around," explained Wilkes. "It isn't so bad in this light after you've got used to it a bit. I've discovered a sapidilla tree. That's why I awakened you, Canevin—thought you could do with a bit to eat, what?"

He held out four of the round, dull-brown fruits which look like Irish potatoes. I took them eagerly, the first food in many hours. I do not recall a more satisfactory meal at any time in my life.

Greatly refreshed, I washed my hands in the rain and wiped them clean on the short wet grass. Wilkes was speaking again:

"Those people, Canevin! There are no such people in the world, today—except here, I believe. What do you think? That is, if you've had time to think after that. Good God, man, were you a gladiator in some past existence! But, to get back to those people in there. It seems to me that—well, either those are the old-time Mayas, surviving just in this spot, wherever it may be, or

else—do you suppose He could—er—make them immortal, something of the sort, what? Sounds ridiculous. I grant you that, of course, but then, this whole affair is. . . .” He paused, leaving me to fill in the adjective. I stepped on something hard. I stooped down, picked up the enormous sword which I had carried out here to the garden when we had left the temple last night. I balanced it in my hand. I looked at Wilkes in the still dim light.

“IT’S really, in a sense, the greatest puzzle of all,” I said reflectively. “You’re right, of course. No question about it, man! Those people were—well, anything but what I’d call contemporaries of ours. I’d almost be inclined to say that the immortality alternative gets my vote.”

“Let’s go back and take a look for ourselves,” said Wilkes. “We don’t seem, somehow, to have very much choice, this trip. Now seems to be one of the slack moments. Let’s go back inside there, get up behind that altar and statue, and see what’s there, in that place they all marched out from, what? Everything seems quieted down now inside; has been for hours on end, I’d say. We weren’t molested while we slept through all that rain.”

I nodded. A man can only die once, and the Power could, certainly, do as it wished with us. The rain ended, as tropical showers end, abruptly. The sweet odor of some flowering shrub poured itself out. The clouds passed from before the moon.

“Right,” said I. “Let’s get going.” And, without another word, we entered the stone anteroom, walked across it to where the doorway had opened into the temple, and—stopped there. The door was shut now. It was not, in the dim moonlight which filtered through the openings, even perceptible now.

There was simply nothing to be seen there, not so much as a chink in the solid masonry of the wall, to indicate that there was a door.

“We’ll have to work around to it from the outside,” said Wilkes, after we had stood awhile in baffled silence. “There must be a way.”

I laughed. “They say that ‘where there’s a will there’s a way,’” I quoted. “Well, let’s try it, outside,” answered Wilkes; and we walked out into the garden again.

THERE was no particular difficulty about finding that “way.” We simply walked around the end of the small structure I have called the anteroom and followed along the almost endlessly high, blank stone-mason work of the temple’s outside sheathing. The walking was not difficult, the growth being chiefly low shrubs. At last we came to the end of the temple wall, and turned the sharp corner it made at the beginning of a slight slope which ran down very gradually in the same direction in which we had been walking.

To our considerable surprise, for we had thought of nothing like this, there stretched away from us, farther than we could see in the moonlight broken by small, drifting clouds of the cirrus variety, a succession of other buildings, all of them obviously of that same early-civilization period of the first Maya empire, rounded structures for the most part, carrying the typical stone arrangement and ornamentation. Enormous as was the great temple, the area occupied by these massed and crowded buildings, close-standing, majestic in their heavy, solid grandeur, was far greater. The nearest, less than half the height of the towering temple side walls, was joined onto the temple itself, and stretched away virtually out of our sight. We stood and looked up at this.

"Undoubtedly," I agreed, standing beside him and looking up at the solid masonry, its massive lines somewhat broken, dignified and beautiful in the fickle, transient moonlight.

Not a sound, not a whisper, even from a night insect, broke the deathly stillness. I remembered the Great Circle.

"It's His territory, right enough," I murmured; and Wilkes nodded.

"Closed for the season!" he said lightly, and lit a cigarette.

I sat down beside Wilkes and looked for my cigarette case. I had left it in the pocket of my drill jacket when I took it off and laid it on the ground beside Pelletier before going up the tree. Curiously, in all this time that had elapsed I had not thought of smoking. Wilkes handed me his case, and we sat there side by side saying nothing. A glance down at the heavy sword which I had laid across my knees reminded me of our current mission.

"We'll have to go all the way to the end of this masonry-work at least," I said, "before we can get into the inclosure!"

Wilkes tossed away the stub of his cigarette, stood up, and stretched his arms.

"All right," said he, "let's do it."

IT took us a quarter of an hour of steady walking before we came to a corner. We turned this, walked past that enormous building's end, and emerged in a kind of open space much like the quadrangle of a modern university, only many times larger in area, surrounded by more buildings dim in the present light, one side bounded by the edge of the great structure we had been skirting. The moonlight shone somewhat brighter on this side, against that long plain wall of masonry.

Suddenly Wilkes caught me by

the arm. He uttered a typically British expletive.

"My hat!" said Wilkes, "Look, Canevin! There isn't a window in the place!"

We stood looking up at the building.

"Curious," commented Wilkes. "Other old Maya architecture has windows—that little anteroom effect we called in at before going into the temple has windows, both sides. Why not this?"

"Perhaps it's a kind of store-house," I suggested. "If so, it wouldn't need windows."

"I doubt that—sort of instinct, perhaps," returned Wilkes. "All along I've had the idea that the—er—congregation came out of this into the temple. It's attached—we saw that outside there, built right onto it; we had to walk around it on just that account."

"If you're right," I said, reflecting, "if there are people in there—well, then they don't need windows—light."

"If so, why?" threw out Wilkes; and I had no answer.

We stood staring up at the blank, unornamental, solid wall.

"Curious!" vouchsafed Wilkes again. "Curious, no end!" Then: "Might bear out my idea, rather—you remember, Canevin? That 'immortality' idea I mean. If He has them—er—preserved, so to speak, ready to be revived, started going when He wants them, or *needs* them, what? As you remarked, they weren't exactly 'contemporaries' of ours! He's been going at this whole affair His own way, all through; not the way we human beings would go at it. If you ask me, He—er—needed them to scrag us in there, in the temple I mean. They tried, you know! Failed, rather! We're still on deck, Canevin! And, back of that—why, for the sake of argument, did He set us down here, on earth once more, but not at the

same old stand, not where we parked the old bus, in that circle of grass, under that tree? Perhaps it's a small matter but—well, why, Canevin? Why here, I mean to say, rather than there? It's a point to consider at any rate. Looks to me, if you ask me, as though He were trying, in His own peculiar way, to do us in, and had, so far, failed."

I PONDERED over this long speech of Wilkes', the longest I had heard him make. He was, like many engineering fellows, inclined to be monosyllabic rather than garrulous. It was, I thought, a curious piece of reasoning. Yet, anything coming from this stanch comrade in a pinch such as he had proved himself to be, was worth consideration. It might be what he called "instinct," or indeed, anything. It might be the truth.

I was very far from realizing at that moment—and so, too, I think, was Wilkes himself, despite this curiously suggestive set of ideas—that within a very short time this utterly strange adventure upon which we were embarked was to give us its final, and, thoughtfully considered, perhaps its most poignant, surprise. Even warned as I should have been by Wilkes' strange surmise, I was quite unprepared for what we found inside.

We proceeded slowly along what I have called the inner wall of the vast structure which joined the temple at its farther end. We walked for minute after minute along beside it, always glancing up at it, constantly on the lookout for an entrance. The walls remained entirely blank, without either apertures or ornamentation. The huge building might, to all appearances, have been some prehistoric warehouse or granary.

At last we came to its end, the end structurally joined onto the temple's rearmost wall. We walked

directly up to this point, where the two structures made a sharp corner.

There was no entrance except, presumably, through the temple, from the inside, there behind the altar. We had had half an hour's walk around these massive survivals of ancient architecture for nothing. It was five three by my watch in the moon's clear light. The clouds had retreated toward the horizon by now, as we stood there at that corner, baffled.

We turned, rather wearily now, away at right angles from our course just finished, and plodded along the grassy ground under the towering rear wall of the temple.

And, halfway along it, we came to an opening, an arched doorway without a door. We stopped, point-blank, and looked at each other.

"Shall we . . . ?" whispered Wilkes.

I NODDED, and stepped through, the great sword, which I had been carrying like a musket over my shoulder, now gripped, business-fashion, in my right hand.

We stepped through into an ambulatory, a semicircular passage-way behind the altar. We turned to our left, in the direction of the temple's corner against which was built the building we had been encircling, walking once more through heaped dust such as had clogged the nave, our footfalls soundless in an equally soundless environment.

Emerging from that semicircular course at the altar's side, we were able to see from this coign of vantage the overhead opening through which the rays of the late-afternoon sun had streamed down the day before. This was a wide space left vacant in the roofing, far above, overhung by what seemed another roof-structure twenty or thirty feet higher up, an arrangement plainly designed to keep out the rain while letting in the rays of the declining sun.

Now, in the moonlight of pre-dawn, both altar and statue took on an unearthly beauty. We stood rapt, looking along the altar directly toward the face of the statue.

This time it was I who joggled Wilkes' elbow.

"It's a quarter past five," I warned him. "If we're going to get a look at those people, we'd better do it now, before daylight. We haven't very long. And if they're—well, regular people, ordinary human beings, a segregated nation and not—er—'embalmed,' or whatever it is that you had in mind, we'd best take a quick glance and get away before they are awake!"

WE turned away from those shimmering, pale glories which were the altar and the statue, the one jeweled, the other shining, resplendent, toward the predicated passageway that must lead out of the temple to where its erstwhile worshippers took their repose.

We could have told where it began if we had been blind men, by the feel of the heavily-trodden dust under our feet, dust not heaped and soft as we had experienced it—dust matted into the consistency of felt by the pressure of ten thousand feet.

Along that carpet over the stone flooring of a wide passageway we walked, warily now, not knowing what we might confront, toward a high, wide archway which marked the entrance proper into the windowless barrack or storehouse we had so lately scrutinized.

Here the moonlight shone scantily. We could not see very far before us, but we could see far enough to show us what kind of place it was into whose purlieus we had penetrated. We paused, just beyond the archway, paused and looked. . . .

There, in that storehouse laid out before us as far as the dim moonlight permitted our vision to

reach, straight before us until their regular ranks were no longer visible except to the agitated eye of the mind, lay endless, regularly spaced rows of bodies, endless rows, rank upon serried rank; still, motionless, mummylike, in the ineffable calm of latency; life suspended; life merged into one vast, incalculable coma. This was a storehouse indeed, in very fact: the last abiding place of those old Mayas of the first civilization, that classical puzzle of the archeologists—a puzzle no longer to Wilkes and me of all modern men; a civilization, a nation, in bond to the Power that still held us in an ironical, unrelenting, grasp—to that One Whom these very ancients worshiped and propitiated, the Prince of the Powers of the Air. . . .

WITHOUT a word we hastened out of that grim house of a living death and back into the temple, and, with no more than a glance toward the altar and statue, hurried silently back through the ambulatory and out through the doorless archway again into the breaking dawn of another day, under the fading stars of a new morning.

And, as we emerged, toward us, diagonally across what I have called the "quadrangle," in regular formation, disciplined, there marched unfaltering, resolute, a vast horde of tall, brown men, led by two figures who stepped gravely in their van, ahead of those serried thousands. He on the left was a tall, brown man of majestic carriage, bearing in his hand a small burning torch, young, yet of a commanding dignity as one used to rule. Upon the right marched beside him a heavy, lumbering figure, who walked wearily, yet not without a certain heavy dignity of his own, a figure of a certain familiarity—the figure of Pelletier!

My immediate instinct was to cry out in sudden relief, to rush incontinently forward. I felt suddenly as though my heart would burst Pelletier, of all the men this old planet could possibly produce, here! Pelletier, the most welcome sight. . . .

I could not have done so, however, even though I had actually yielded to that impulse I have named. For Pelletier was calling out to me, in a curious kind of voice, I noted at once, with some puzzlement—in a kind of rude, improvised chant.

"Steady, Canevin, steady does it, as the British Navy says! Walk toward us, both of you, side by side; stand up straight; make it as dignified as you know how—slow; like two big guns conferring a favor on the populace. Pay no attention to anybody but me. Stop in front of me. We'll bow to each other; not too low. Then, when *He* bows, put your hands on his head—like a blessing, do you understand? On this big fellow beside me, I mean. Don't botch it now, either of you. It's important. . . . Good! That's the ticket! Keep it up now; carry the whole works through just the way I'm telling you."

WE carried out these amazing instructions to the letter. They were, of course, apart from the general idea of making an impression on Pelletier's inexplicable following, quite unintelligible to us. But, we went through with them precisely according to these weird, chanted instructions—like the directions of some madman, a paranoiac for choice! "Delusions of grandeur!" The old phrase came inevitably into my mind. Even the young chieftain did his part, kneeling with gravity before us as soon as we had finished our salutation to Pelletier, and he had majestically returned it.

Immediately after these ceremonial performances which were received in a solemn silence by the army—for the orderly ranks were numerous enough to deserve such a distinctive title—Pelletier drew us aside and spoke with haste tempering his gravity.

"I'll explain all this later. Tell me, first, how long have you been in this place?"

We told him we had spent the night here and started to outline our adventures, but Pelletier cut in.

"Another time," he said curtly. "This is vital, pressing. Is there anything here—I don't know, precisely, how to make clear exactly what I mean; you'll have to use your wits; I haven't the time to hold a long palaver now, and we mustn't waste a minute—anything, I mean, that would correspond to that tree you fellows went up; something, in other words, that would serve—er—Him as a bridge, a means of access to the earth? I don't know how to make it any clearer. Maybe you catch what I mean."

"There's a temple back of us," said Wilkes, "with an altar—"

"And a statue," I finished for him, "a magnificent thing, heroic in size; looks for all the world like the figure of Aquarius in the signs of the zodiac. Possibly—"

"Take us straight to it," commanded Pelletier, and turned and spoke rapidly to the brown chieftain in sonorous Spanish. He told him to detach one hundred or more of his most reliable warriors and follow us without the least delay, and to this task the young leader forthwith addressed himself. Within two minutes, so unquestioned appeared to be his authority, this picked company was following us at the double back to the temple entrance, back along the curving ambulatory, back to the vicinity of the altar and statue.

WE paused at the point where these first became visible, and Pelletier looked at the statue for a long instant.

"The perfect focus!" he muttered, and turned and addressed the chieftain once more.

"Advance with us in close order," he commanded, "to the figure of the man holding the vessel. Draw up the men beside it, on this side, and when I give you the signal, push it over on its side!"

This order, immediately passed on to the Indians, was set in motion without delay, the stalwart fellows crowding toward the statue eagerly.

We were almost beside the statue when the sudden roar of the great gong, almost beside us, shattered the quiet air. I winced, and so did Wilkes, and the Indians stopped in their tracks. Automatically I gripped the hilt of my bronze sword as I felt Wilkes' steadying hand close on my shoulder.

Then Pelletier raised his great booming voice and began to sing in Spanish, something about "the conquering fire"! He almost literally pushed that group of Indians toward their appointed task. Not without a certain hesitation, a reluctance, I thought, they lined up beside the statue obediently, yet with rolled eyes and fearful glances in all directions, indicating that panic lay only a little way below their corporate surface of strict obedience. Then, at Pelletier's spoken signal, the massed group heaved, all together. The great statue moved, gratefully, on its solid foundation.

"Again!" cried Pelletier, and hurled his own weight and bulk into the balance.

The statue swayed this time, hung balanced precariously, then toppled over on its farther side in a shattering crash which detached the cornucopia and the beautifully

modeled arms and hands which held it, at the very instant of the gong's second, deep, reverberant note.

PELLETIER surveyed the damage he had wrought; turned with the rest of us toward the entering procession that came marching in from that arched opening, precisely as we had seen them enter at yesterday's fall of dusk. It was now, however, the fresh, clear light of early morning, and in this better illumination I confess that I gasped at what I had not observed the day before.

Upon the garments, yes, upon the very jutting, powerful features of the members of that hierarchical company gravely advancing now toward us, upon their hair and their beards, even their shaggy eyebrows, hung the clotted dust of the centuries!

But, Wilkes and I did not hesitate over this strange sight. We knew why He had summoned once again these Myrmidons of His from their sleep-like-death in those storerooms of His, those slave pens.

"Out, for God's sake, out, as quick as you can get them going!" I cried out to Pelletier. "There are thousands of them!" And he, not hesitating now that he had accomplished what he had come here to do, over any idea of conflict against the overwhelming odds which I had indicated, passed swiftly to his Indians the word of command and retreat.

But even this immediate response of his to my warning was not swift enough. We had been observed, and already as he shouted to the chieftain, that corporate roar of rage and fury was rising, multiplying itself, as more and more voices joined in upon its fearsome volume. Already the foremost hierophants of this now-desecrated shrine were parting their ranks to let through and at us

the massed warriors who pressed eagerly to the attack.

I WAS deadly weary. Yet, something of that old fighting blood call of the Canevins, some atavistic battle lust derived from those ancient fighting forebears of mine, nerved me of a sudden. Those ancestors of mine had shirked no conflict, if tradition spoke truly down the ages. I swung up the great bronze sword, a strange, vague, yet unmistakable call from dim departed ages of red battle stirring my blood to fire. With a shout on my lips I stepped out before that company of ours, prepared to meet the oncoming rush, if need be, alone.

But I was frustrated in this mad instinctive gesture—frustrated, I say, and in the strangest manner imaginable. For I was not the only one who stepped out into the open space between our group and the rush of oncoming fighting men of a revived antiquity. No. Beside me, towering tall, slender, commanding, pressed the noble figure of that young chieftain, unarmed, his long arms held straight up before him, the palms of his hands held forward in an immemorial gesture of authority.

Then from his lips there burst a veritable torrent of some strange, sonorous speech, at the sound of which the oncoming fighting men stopped dead.

I paused, amazed at this wholly unexpected occurrence. I lowered my sword automatically as I saw the menacing weapons brandished by the others likewise lowered.

On and on went that authoritative speech, until of a sudden it stopped as abruptly as it had been begun, and the young chieftain lowered his hands, folded his arms, and stood facing the now silent throng of brown, larded warriors and the priests of their strange cult behind them, all of them equally motionless before him, their massed attention

directed to him alone, standing there like a group carved out of stone.

And then, out of the midst of them, came one great bearded giant. This man, evidently their leader, walked straight toward us where we stood grouped behind the orator, paused before him, and then this statuesque warrior flung down his bronze sword, clanging, and prostrated himself. The young chieftain took two grave steps forward, and placed his sandaled foot upon the prostrate figure's neck. Inspired, I stepped over to him and placed my own great bronze sword in his hand.

OF how we traveled back to the Great Circle through a mahogany forest interspersed with ceiba, Otaheite, and Guinea-tamarind trees, I shall say but little. We traversed levels and dips and toiled up slopes and skirted marshlands. We traveled faint trails which had to be negotiated single file. We passed through clearings recently cut free of the clinging bush and trailing liana vines. Occasionally small, tapirlike quadrupeds started up almost under our feet, disturbed at their early-morning browsing in that thick jungle. We stepped along now and again through stretches fragrant with the odors of frangipani blooms, and the rich, attarlike sweetness of the flowering vanilla orchid.

And at last we came to the edge of the Great Circle once more, at a quarter before nine o'clock by my faithful wrist-watch which had not missed a tick throughout all these alarms and excursions. Here Pelletier paused, and in a brief, emphatic speech, in Spanish, took leave of and dismissed his army, which melted away, after profound salaams in our direction, into the deeper forests forming the hinterlands of that horizon of jungle. Forty or more hostages, brought with us from the company of those Ancient Ones who had accepted the overlordship of that

remarkable young chief, departed with them. They were seen no more by us.

I was far too weary—and poor Wilkes was literally tottering in his tracks—to listen very closely to what Pelletier said to the Indians. As soon as the last of them had disappeared out of our sight, the three of us started across the stretch of short grass, up the slight slope toward the center where our plane still rested on the ground. Pelletier forged ahead to get his first-aid satchel for our wounds.

The great tree was gone!

IT was nearly ten o'clock when at last we sank down in the grateful shade of the plane's broad wings, and the last thing that I remember before falling into the sleep from which I was awakened an hour and a half later, was Pelletier holding to my mouth one of our canteens, and feeling the comfort to my parched throat of the stale, tepid water it contained.

It was the roar of the rescuing plane which awakened me, at eleven thirty.

We reached Belize a few minutes before two. I had slept part of the way in the air, which is no mean feat considering the thunderous roar of the engine. I stumbled up to my bedroom in the hotel, and did not move until seven the following morning.

When I did awaken, raw with weariness, Pelletier was standing beside my bed.

"I thought I'd better tell you as soon as possible," said he genially, "that I did all the necessary talking to that rescue party. You and Wilkes had been scouting around, making discoveries, and had got yourselves pretty well worn in the process. They swallowed that easily enough. It was ordinary engine trouble that dished us, out there where they found us. We were out of gas, too. There was the empty tank to prove it. I'll tell you later where that gasoline went

to. I'm responsible for that. You'd better stick to the same simple yarn, too. I've already told Wilkes."

I nodded, and fell asleep again, after drinking without question the glassful of stuff Pelletier handed me. I do not even remember the taste, and I have no idea what the concoction was. But just before noon, when I awakened again, I was myself once more. I got up, bathed thoroughly, and gave myself a very much-needed shave. After lunch I called on the Bishop of British Honduras, and returned to him the binoculars he had considerably loaned me with the thanks of the party.

ON the following morning Pelletier and I made our farewells to the splendid Wilkes, and to our other Belize friends and acquaintances. We had secured passage in a fruiter clearing that noon for Kingston, the first leg of our journey home to St. Thomas.

About four P. M. that afternoon Pelletier, whom I had not seen since luncheon on board, lumbered along the deck and stopped at my chair.

"Would you like to hear my end of it all now—or would it do better later?" he inquired. He grinned down at me.

"Later—in St. Thomas preferably, if it's all the same to you, Pelletier," I answered him. "I'd rather get my mind clean off it all and keep it off for the present. Later, by all means, with the home things, the home atmosphere all about me, if you don't mind. Just now I'd rather do nothing and think nothing, and hear nothing beyond ice water, and eating fruit, and sleeping!"

"I don't blame you," threw back Pelletier as he shuffled ponderously away, the smoke from his big black cigar trailing behind him. We were making ten knots or so, with the wind abaft us, a following wind. I had spoken truly to Pelletier. I did not feel just then, nor indeed, for

some time later, that I could easily bear more than casual reference to that experience, all of which, it will be remembered, had been crowded into less than two twenty-four-hour days.

I DRANK ice water. I ate fruit. I slept. And by easy stages, as we had gone to the coast of Central America, we came back again to the settled peace and comfort of the Lesser Antilles; to the kindly sophistication which is the lovely little city of St. Thomas; to the quiet efficiency of my good servants in my house on Denmark Hill. Only then, it seemed to me, could I quite bear to open my mind again to those affairs in the deep jungle of Quintana Roo, where He had established his "foci" as from time immemorial; where that had happened, with me as active participant, which the structure of our modern minds bears ill in reminiscence. . . .

For it is not always good for a man to see the things that had fallen to Wilkes and myself to see; to have to do what we had done. There were times, even after I had got back and was settled into my accustomed routines, in St. Thomas, when I would lie awake in bed, with the scent of the tuberose and of Cape Jessamine pouring in through my windows, and fail of ready sleep, and wonder what really had happened out there; whether or not certain aspects of that adventure were not basically incredible; whether, perhaps, my imagination had not tricked me—in other words, whether or not the whole madhouse affair had actually occurred in very truth; and if I, Gerald Canevin, occasional weaver of tales based upon the somewhat strange affairs of these islands of the Lesser Antilles, might not have suffered some eldritch change.

At such times, I found, it was salutary to change over my attention, when this proved possible, to some-

thing else, something as radically different as possible.

I played a good deal of contract bridge, I remember, during that interval of doubt and some distress mentally. I accepted more invitations than was usual with me. I wanted, in general, to be with people, sane, everyday ordinary people, my neighbors and friends, as much as possible. I took off some weight, I remember.

IT was not, I think, until Pelletier had related to me his account of how he had spent the period beginning with my disappearance up the tree—it had been removed, I remembered, on my arrival back at the Great Circle, and I had not asked Pelletier what had become of it—until he had marched across that "quadrangle" at the head of his army, that the whole affair, somehow, resolved itself, and ceased troubling me.

"I'll try to tell you my end of it," said Pelletier. He was in a characteristic attitude, sprawled out over the full length of my Chinese rattan lounge-chair on my cool west gallery, a silver swizzel-jug, freshly concocted by my house man, Stephen Penn, placed between us beside two tall greenish glasses, the ice-beads all over the outside of it; cigarettes going; myself, just after having done the honors, in another chair; both of us in fresh, white drill, cool and comfortable.

"I had very little to go on," continued Pelletier, after a healthy sip out of his long, green glass and an accompanying slight grunt of creature satisfaction, "as you may imagine, Canevin, very little indeed. And yet, it all straightened out, cleared itself up in a kind of natural way. It was, I suppose, partly instinct, a kind of sixth sense if you like. For I had no more idea than you or Wilkes that we were running into a—well, a survival, when I looked down out of the plane and first saw that Circle stick-

ing up to the eye out of that jungle like, like a sore thumb!"

"THE first definite indication, the first clue, was of course that original crack of wind 'out of the corner of hell,' as Wilkes put it. Wind is air, and my mind, naturally enough, stuck to that. It was not especially brilliant to deduce an air-elemental, or, at least to have that in my mind all the way through the various happenings; before you started up the tree I mean: that wind out of nowhere; the disappearance of Wilkes; the absence of animal and insect life; those Indians getting around us. It all fitted together, somehow, under the circumstances, and after what both of us have seen of the present-day survival of magic—two thirds of the world's population believing in it, practising it: Lord, look at Haiti—well, I thought, if it were something supernatural, something not quite of this world, why, then, Canevin, the logic of it all pointed toward the one possibly surviving elemental rather than in some other direction.

"For—don't you see?—man has ousted those others, by his own control of the three other elements, earth, fire, water! The whole land-surface of this planet, practically, has been subjected to human use—agriculture, mines, cities built on it—and water the same. We have dominated the element of water, reduced to its allotted sphere in this man-ruled world—ships, submarines, steam—Lord, there's no end to our use of water! Fire, too, Canevin. We have it—er—harnessed, working for us, in every ship's engine room, every dynamo and factory, in every blast-furnace, cook-stove, campfire, automobile.

"And in all this civilization-long process, the one single element that has remained unsubdued, untamed, is air. We are a long way from what people smugly call 'the conquest of

air,' Canevin, a mighty long way, even though we have started in on that, too. Even fire is controllable. Fires do not start by themselves. There is no such thing as 'spontaneous combustion'! But who, Canevin, can control the winds of heaven?

"MAYBE there's more in what I've just said than appears on the surface. Take astrology for example. Modern science laughs at astrology, puts it in the same category as those Bodily Humours, the Melancholic, and the rest of them! Astronomers nowadays, scientists busy measuring light-years, the chemistry of Antares, whether or not there is barium on Mars, the probable weight of Eros, or the 'new' one, Pluto—those fellows tell us the old beliefs about the stars are so much junk. Why? Well, because, they say, the old ideas of things like zodiacal groups and so forth are 'unscientific,' formulated on the basis of how the stars look from the earth's surface, merely! Artificial, unscientific! The stars must be looked at mathematically, they tell us, not as they appear from your gallery at night.

"But, Canevin, which of these modern sharps has told us where one *should* stand, to view the heavens? And—speaking pragmatically; that's a good scientific word!—which of them has done more than figure out weights, distances—what of them, dry approximations of alleged facts, Canevin?—a lot of formulas like the inside of an algebra book. Which of them, the modern scientific astronomers, from my good old Professor Pickering at Harvard down—for he was the king-pin of them all—has given humanity one single, practical, useful fact, out of all their up-to-the-minute modern science? Answer: not one, Canevin!

"And here's the red meat in that coconut—think of this, Canevin, in the light of relativity, or the Quan-

tum Theory if you like; that's 'modern' and 'scientific' enough, God knows: the astrological approach is the normal approach, Canevin, *for people living on this planet*. We have to view the heavens from here, because that's where Almighty God Who made us and them put us. That's the only viewpoint we have, Canevin, and—it works; it possesses the—er—pragmatic sanction of common-sense!

“WELL, now, to get down to the brass tacks of this thing, the thing we've been through together, I mean: what is it, as we human beings, constrained to live on earth and meet earth conditions know it, that upsets our schemes, plans and calculations as we deal with the three elements that we *have* brought under control, subdued? It's air, Canevin.

“It's air and air alone that sends hurricanes into these latitudes and knocks out the work and hopes of decades of effort; takes crops, animals, buildings. It's air that just this season smashed things to pieces right nearby here, in Nicaragua; knocked old Santo Domingo City into a cocked hat. Plants can't grow, leaf-plants especially, without air. Without air fire itself refuses to burn. That's the principle of all the workable fire extinguishers. Without air man and the animals can't breathe, and die like fish out of water, painfully. Without air—but what's the use of carrying it further, Canevin?

“I had, of course, that first day and night, alone, to think in. All that, and a lot more besides, went into those cogitations of mine under that tree in the Great Circle both before and after I was there all by myself; mostly after, when I had nothing else to do but think. You see? It wasn't so very hard to figure out, after all.

“But figuring it out was less than half the battle. I was appalled, Canevin, there with my merely human

brain figuring out the possible combinations, at what He could do, if He happened to take it into His head. His head! Why, He could merely draw away the breathable air from around us three intruders, and we'd flop over and pass out then and there. He could blast us into matchwood with a hurricane at any moment. He could—well, there's no use going over all the things I figured that He could do. The ways of the gods and demigods have never been the ways of men, Canevin. All literature affirms that. Well, He didn't do any of those things. He was going at it His way. How to circumvent Him, in time! *That* was the real problem.

“I had, theoretically at least, all three of the other elements to use against Him, the same as every man has—such as a dugout of earth, out there in Kansas, against a tornado of wind; a log fire, to get over the effects of a New England blizzard. I put my mind on it, Canevin, and decided to use Fire—to *burn down the tree!* I did it, toward dusk of the second day.

“I SOAKED it, all over the trunk and lower part, and as far up as I could reach and throw, with the gasoline from the plane's tanks. I used it all. I was counting, you see, on the rescue plane following our route the next morning when we hadn't shown up in Belize; but, if I couldn't get you and Wilkes back I was pretty thoroughly dished anyhow, and so, of course, were you two fellows.

“I lighted it and ran, Canevin, ran out of the shade—there wouldn't be any left in a short time anyhow—and over to the plane and sat down under the farther wing where I could get a good look through the binoculars at those savages down yonder. I wanted to see how the idea of my fighting one element with another would strike them.

“It struck them right enough!

"There had been plenty of gasoline. The fire roared up the dry tree. It was blazing in every twig, it seemed, inside two minutes after I had set it going. Talk of a study in primitive fear! Psychology! I had it right there, all around me. The only kick I had coming was that I couldn't watch it all at once. It was like trying to take in a forty-ring circus with one pair of eyes!

"They liked it, Canevin! That much was clear enough anyhow.

"It was a medium-sized limb, burned halfway through, which broke off and fell between me and the main blaze, that suddenly gave me the big idea. So far I hadn't planned beyond destroying the tree, His bridge between the earth and wherever He was. But then it suddenly flashed through my mind that here was a chance to enlist those aborigines, while they were all together, and in the mood, so to speak. I went over and picked up that blazing limb. It made a magnificent torch, and, holding it up above my head where it blazed as I walked in the falling dusk, I proceeded, slow and dignified, down toward the place at the jungle's rim where they seemed to be most thickly congregated.

"I HAD the wit to sing, Canevin! Never knew I could sing, did you? I did then, all the way, the best stab I could make at a kind of paean of victory. Do you get the idea? I walked along steadily, roaring out at the top of my voice. There weren't any particular words—only a lot of volume to it!

"It occurred to me halfway down that out of those thousands some certainly would know some Spanish. The idea took hold of me, and by the time I had got near enough to make them understand I had some sentences framed up that would turn them inside-out if it got across to their primitive minds! I stopped, and raised the torch up high over my

head, and called it out like old Cortez ordering a charge!

"For a few instants right afterwards I waited to see the effect, if any. They seemed to be milling around more or less in groups and bunches. That, I figured, would be the fellows who understood Spanish telling the others! Then—then it worked, Canevin! They prostrated themselves, in rows, in battalions, in tribes! And every one of them, I was careful to notice, still kept within the safe shelter of the woods. I had, you see, told them who I was, Canevin! I was the Lord of the Fire, that was all, the Great Friend of mankind, the Lord, the Destroyer, the Big Buckaroo and High Cockalorum of all the Elements, and pretty much everything else besides. Spanish lends itself, somehow, to those broad, general statements!

"And then, once again, I had an inspiration. I gathered myself together after that first blast that I had turned loose on them, and let go another! This time I informed them that I was destroying my enemy the Ruler of the Air, who was their enemy as well—I gathered that, of course, from their fear of the Circle—Who had been having His own way with them for a couple of thousand years or thereabouts; that they could see for themselves that I was right here on the tabu-place the Circle, and unharmed; and then I called for volunteers to come out of the woods and *stand beside me in the Circle!*

"CANEVIN, there was a silence that you could have cut with a knife. It lasted and lasted, and lasted! I began to get afraid that perhaps I had gone too far, in some unrealizable way—with savages, you know: not a single, solitary sound, not a whisper, from that mob weighed down with sixty generations of fear.

Then—to a rising murmur which grew into a solid roar of astonish-

ment—one of them, an upstanding young man with an intelligent face, stepped out toward me. I suppose that fellow and his descendants will have epic songs sung about them for the next sixty generations, nights of the full moon.

"I had had the general idea, you see, of getting this mob convinced: the new harmlessness of the ancient tabu-ground for conclusive evidence; and then enlisting them. Precisely what I was going to do with them, what to set them at doing, wasn't so clear as the general idea of getting them back of me.

"And right then, when it was working, everything coming my way, I very nearly dropped my authoritative torch, my symbol of the fire-power! I went cold, Canevin, from head to foot; positively sick, with plain, shaking, shivering fear! Did they all suddenly start after me with their throw-sticks and blow-guns? Did an unexpected hurricane tear down on me? No. Nothing like that. I had merely thought, quite suddenly, out of nowhere, of something! The air was as calm around me as ever. Not an Indian made a hostile gesture. It was an idea that had occurred to me—fool, idiot, moron!

"It had just struck me, amidships, that in destroying the tree, His bridge to earth, I might have cut you and Wilkes off forever from getting back! That was what made the quick, cold sweat run down into my eyes; that was what sent waves of nausea over me.

"I STOOD there and sweated and trembled from head to foot. It was only by sheer will power that I kept the torch up in the air, a proper front before those still thousands. My mind reeled with the trouble of it. And then, after a sudden silence, they started yelling themselves blue once more, with enthusiasm over that champion of champions who had dared to step out on the forbidden

ground; to enter the Circle for the first time in history—their history.

"That paladin was close to me now, coming on steadily, confidently, quite nearby. My eyes went around to him. He was a fine, clean-cut-looking person. He stopped, and raised his hands over his head, and made me a kind of salaam.

"The whole yowling mob quieted down again at that—wanted to see what I'd do to him, I suppose.

"I stepped over to him and handed him the torch. He took it, and looked me in the eye. He was some fellow, that young Indian!

"I spoke to him, in Spanish:

"'Exalted Servant of the Fire, indicate to me now the direction of the other forbidden place, where He of the Wind places his foot upon the earth.' Every chance the three of us had in the world was staked on that question, Canevin; on the idea that lay behind it; on the possibility that there was more than one bridge-place like this Great Circle where we stood. It was, of course, merely a piece of guesswork.

"And, Canevin, he raised his other arm, the one that was not holding the torch, and pointed and answered:

"Straight to the south, Lord of Fire!"

"CANEVIN, I could have kissed that Indian! Another chance! I went up to him and hugged him like a bear. I don't know what he thought of that. I didn't give him time to think, to make up his mind. I held him off at arms' length as though he had been my favorite brother-in-law that I hadn't seen for a couple of years! I said to him: 'Speak, heroic Servant of the Fire—name your reward!'

"He never hesitated an instant. He knew what he wanted, that fellow—saw this was his big chance. He breathed hard. I could see his big chest go in and out. He'll go a long way, believe me, Canevin!

"The lordship over—these!" he said, with a little gasp, and pointed with the torch, around the circle. I raised both my hands over my head and called out:

"Hearken, men of this nation! Behold your overlord who with his descendants shall rule over all your nations and tribes and peoples to the end of time. Down—and salute your lord! A little later, when they got it, as they dropped in rows on their faces, Canevin, I turned to that fellow holding the torch, and said:

"Call them together; make them sit in a circle around us here. Then the first thing you are to do is to pick out the men you want to help you govern them. After that, tell them they are to listen to me!"

"He looked me in the eye again, and nodded. Oh, he was an intelligent one, that fellow! To make a long story short, he did just that; and you can picture us there in the moonlight, for the moon had a chance to get going long before the Indians were arranged the way I had said, the new king bossing them all as though he had never done anything else, with me standing there in the center and haranguing them—I'd had plenty of time, you see, to get that speech together—and, as I palavered, the interpreters relayed it to the rest.

"The upshot of it all was that we started off for the place, the other place where He could 'put his foot upon the earth' as I had said, the place where we found you. It took us all night, even with that willing mob swinging their machetes."

I THANKED Pelletier for his story. He had already heard the outline of mine, such as I have recounted here somewhat more fully. I let his account sink in, and then, as I have said, I was able to be myself again. Perhaps Pelletier's very commonplace sanity, the matter-of-factness of his account, may have had

something to do with this desirable effect. I do not know, but I am glad to be able to record the fact.

"There is one thing not quite clear in my mind," said I, after Pelletier had finished.

"Yes?" said Pelletier, encouragingly.

"That figure in the temple—Aquarius," I explained. "Just how did you happen to fasten on that? I understand, of course, why you destroyed it. It was, like the tree, one of His 'foci,' a 'bridge' to earth. By wiping those out, as I understand the matter, you broke what I might call his earth-power; you cut off his points of access. It's mysterious enough, yet clear in a way. But how did you know that *that* was the focal point, so to speak? Why the statue? Why not, for example, the altar?"

Pelletier nodded, considering my questions. Then he smiled whimsically.

"That's because you do not know your astrology, Canevin!" he said, propping his bulk up on one arm, for emphasis, and looking straight at me. He grinned broadly, like a mischievous boy. Then:

"You remember—I touched on that—how important it is, or should be, as an element in a modern education! Aquarius would fool you; would puzzle anybody, I'll grant you—anybody, that is, who doesn't know his astrology! You'd think from his name that he was allied with the element of water, wouldn't you, Canevin? The name practically says so: 'Aquarius' — water-bearer. You'd think so, unless, as I say, you knew your astrology!"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "It's too much for me, Pelletier. You'll have to tell me, I'm afraid." It was plain that Pelletier held some joker up his sleeve.

DID you ever see a picture of Aquarius, Canevin, in which—stop and think a moment—he is not

represented as *pouring water out of* that vessel of his? Aquarius is not the personage who *represents* water, Canevin. Quite the contrary, in fact. He's the fellow who is getting rid of the water to make way for the air. Aquarius, in spite of his name, is the zodiacal symbol for *air*, not water, as you'd imagine if you didn't know your astrology, Canevin! He is represented always as *pouring out water*, getting rid of it! Aquarius is *not* the protagonist of water. He is the precursor, the forerunner of air!" As he said this, Dr. Pelletier waved one of his big, awkward-looking hands—sure sign of something on his mind. I laughed. I admitted freely that my education had been neglected.

"And what next?" I asked, smiling at my big friend. He laughed that big contagious laugh of his.

"Canevin," said he, wagging his head at me, "I'm wondering which of the big archeologists, or maybe some rank outsider, who will go to the top on it, and get D.Sc.'s all the way from Harvard to the University of Upsala—which of 'em will be the first to 'discover' that the first Maya civilization is *not* defunct; knock the very best modern archeological science endwise all over again, the way it's constantly being done in every 'scientific' field, from Darwin to Kirsopp Lake! An 'epoch-making discovery!'"

Then, musing, seriously, yet with a twinkle in his kindly brown eyes:

"I have great hopes of the leadership they're going to get; that they're getting, right now, Canevin. That was some up-and-coming boy, some fellow, that new king in Quintana Roo, the one I appointed, the new ruler of the jungle! Did you see him, Canevin, standing there, telling them what was what?"

"Do you know, I never even found out his name! He's one of the very few, by the way—told me about it on the trek back to the Circle—who had learned the old language. It's come

down, you know, through the priests, here and there, intact, just as they used to speak it a couple of thousand years ago. Well, you heard him use it! Quite a group, I believe, keep it up, in and around Chichen-Itza particularly. He told them, he said, how fire had prevailed over their traditional air—Aquarius lying there, toppled off his pedestal, to prove it!"

I was glad I had given the young chieftain my bronze sword. Perhaps its possession will help him in establishing his authority over those Old Ones. That giant from whose hand I originally snatched it there in the temple may very well have been their head man. He was big enough, and fast enough on his feet; had the primitive leadership qualities, in all conscience. He had been mightily impressive as he came bounding ahead of his followers, charging upon us through the clouds of dust.

I HAVE kept the sliver Wilkes, poor fellow, cut from the palm of the great Hand. I discovered it, rolled up and quite hardened and stiff, in the pocket of my trousers there in the hotel in Belize when I was changing to fresh clothes.

I keep it in a drawer of my bureau, in my bedroom. Nobody sees it there; nobody asks what it is.

"Yes—a sliver cut from the superficial scarf-skin of one of the ancient classical demigods! Yes—interesting, isn't it!"

I'd rather not have to describe that sliver. Probably my hearers would say nothing much. People are courteous, especially here in St. Thomas where there is a tradition to that effect. But they could hardly visualize, as I still do—yet, fortunately, at decreasing intervals—that cosmic Entity of the high atmosphere, presiding over His element of air; menacing, colossal; His vast heart beating on eternally as, stupendous, incredible, He towers there inscrutable among the unchanging stars.