

PLANET STORIES



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They had caught up with him at last!

THE GREEN DREAM

By **BRYCE WALTON**

Owen Barslaag had brought terror to the swamp people. Joha, the little Venusian maid, was determined that he should not leave without it.

JOHA, WHO WAS PART VENU-SIAN, twined her translucent fingers through the Earthman's matted hair. She smiled. Strangely, from her light green face, red eyes shone with a terrible hatred and a malignant purpose. But the man asleep on the couch of lizard-skin softened with layers of wing-feathers from the

Kuh-Kuri Swampbird, was unaware of that evil, almost lustful hate—for it blazed outward from her delicate face only while he slept.

The greenish glow from her body seeming to alienate her from anything human, she squatted cross-legged on the damp tamped-earth floor beside him. His body

was long and gaunt, his face angular with deeply sunken eyes which were closed in exhausted sleep. Only a slight twitching of his facial muscles and an occasional jerking of his body signified the horror of his growing nightmare.

She withdrew her hand. Her eyes blazed more brightly like evil jewels into his, piercing the closed lids with invisible beams of malignant and gloating resolve. Her voice was very soft.

"You do not sleep well, do you, Owen Baarslag? Every terrible thing you have done to my people here in the swamps—the torture, the slavery, the subjection and the terror—it haunts your dreams. Your blighted conscience crawls, doesn't it, Owen?"

The sleeping man didn't answer. He was deep, deep down in the dark fastnesses of his nightmare, trying to escape, trying to awake.

Outside the synthetic shell of the hut, in the fetid heart of the Venusian swamp Sector 5, a serpent hissed as it raised its pointed head from the slime and sank back again. A gigantic flying Gruoon gurgled overhead as it fell on its prey and flapped upward into the thick mist. Beyond these more abrupt sounds was the unceasing dreeding of millions of insects and the loud croaking of the bloated albino tree-toads that sagged heavily from the five-hundred foot crinoids.

Now she looked with even greater intensity into his nightmare-twisted face, probed far behind the lids covering his black Tellurian eyes. The cold light from the captured still-living Shnug-fly which dangled from the low raftered ceiling molded a weird shadow on the walls of the tiny hut. Joha's red eyes blazed brighter, brighter still. Her slightly webbed hands gripped together with a tremendous tension of mental effort.

Owen Baarslag screamed. He sat up with a sudden heaving motion of agonized fear. His eyes were wide and horror-filled as he stared at the half breed creature beside him. Sweat streamed from his face made pallid by five years in the sunless swamp. His hands trembled over his bearded jaw.

"Stith!" he choked harshly. "Get me

Stith, quickly!" He raised an arm to strike her, but she weaved away. She brought him a box of the Stith tablets crystallized from the fermented juices of the Venusian aukweed. He tremblingly swallowed three of them. He got to his feet and stood there, shuddering, eyes wild with the memory of the terror-dream.

HE STARED at her for a long time from fear-glazed eyes while the fear gradually died into clouds of suspicion. He suspected her ability to probe his mind during sleep and implant the seeds of nightmare there, she knew that. But it was only an intangible suspicion. He needed her. She was his only companionship in the vast global rain-forest of Venus. And he wouldn't let the suspicion grow to the stage where he would have to kill her or worse. Her hold over him was a strong one. If he lost her, he would be alone.

To the Tellurian colonists scattered minutely through the rich area of Sector 5, Owen Baarslag was an unspeakable obscenity. A degenerate derelict; an abnormal who had "gone native" and things even more despicable. A Stith addict who eeked out a precarious existence in the most polluted occupation known: that of forcing the timid Venusian swamp natives to harvest the meager crops of aukweed from the lake bottoms. The vile drug brought fabulous credits when Baarslag managed to get it into the hands of secret agents on the space liners that docked at the Vencity spaceport twice a year.

And the Venusians themselves hated Baarslag with a helpless cowed fear. He beat, tortured and killed them whenever they refused to obey. And the necessity of probing the great depths of the lakes after the aukweed twisted and deformed those it didn't kill, dooming them to a life of incurable pain.

Shaking as with dohl-fever, Owen staggered to the door, peering through the insect-proof netting into the writhing tendrils coming up from the phosphorescent bogs. He kicked Joha aside as though she were some crude form of vermin.

They considered him a despised abnormality, the authorities. There was a price on his head just the same, he mused

proudly. Five thousand credits for his capture—alive.

Dead, they wouldn't care for him particularly. His brain was abnormal in an age when advanced psychometry had made abnormality a rare exception. They needed his brain for analysis. Five thousand credits—that was the price they placed on his brain in the massive Chrome laboratories in Vencity.

The labs in which his twin, Professor Albert Baarslag, held his exalted position as Chief of Psychometry!

The insidious influence of the euphoric stith burned into his mind, fogged his eye with delusions of grandeur. He saw himself as a martyr, a persecuted victim, sacrificed on the altars of socialization. He slumped down on the kuh-kuri couch again, and looked at the sinuous outline of the Venusian creature who took care of him as though love could exist between an Earthman and a half Venusian fish.

"I wasn't always what I am now," he said. "You know that, Joha!"

She nodded. Yes. She knew. She had heard various phases of Owen's life history many times. She liked to listen. The more she found out about his twisted past the more horrible she could make his nightmare by employing her powers of suggestion. That power was common among her people—she still considered herself a Venusian in spite of her Tellurian blood—but the fact that she was part Tellurian enabled her to exercise that power on the Earthman better than a pure blooded Venusian could. She knew that Owen had only a slight subconscious realization of that power which she possessed, and which she had been using for the past year to sow those insidious seeds of nightmare in Owen's mind.

To admit that she held such power over him was to admit that this green-skinned creature was superior to him—and that Owen Baarslag could never admit. No one was superior to Owen Baarslag. The whole world of science had been jealous and envious of him. That was why they had banned him, made an outlaw of him!

"I could have been the greatest cosmologist ever known," he said. "You know that, Joha!"

"Yes," she said in that strange slurred tongue that seemed to hold such emotion, yet held no tangible meaning. "I know that, Owen."

Owen's pale face that had been buried in the sunless mist clouded, darkened.

"My own brother," he said. "He betrayed me to the Scientific Council. Think of it, Joha! My own brother—my twin brother! Now it's time for him to die."

"You have found a way to kill him?" She backed away, eyes wide.

"Yes! And it is all perfect. Perfect. One would think Albert had prepared everything for my benefit, so that I might kill him. Everything is perfect. His experiment is finished. It is a great success. And he deserves to die. You know that, don't you, Joha? Don't you?"

"Yes. I know it," she said.

O WEN glared into the mist. "Fifteen years of study. My record was undeniably the highest in my study section. I might have graduated from World Tech this year, Joha! I might be in those Labs right now—instead of rotting here in the slime-pit! I took the final psychotic tests, weeks of mental probing with those damnable scanners digging into my brain. And Albert—my own twin brother—with his hypocritical love for me—he was the one who turned in the negative report! As Chief of the Psychometric Council he could have passed me. It was because he was my zygotic twin—because he knew me more intimately than even the scanners—that he was able to deny me entrance into the Labs! Now, Joha, doesn't he deserve to die?"

And Joha, who had heard this countless times before, made the customary reply. "Yes, Owen." And then added. "You have been waiting five years for him to perfect his Time-Encystment principle. This—suspended animation. You have said you would murder him, and take his place in the encystment chamber. But, Owen, are you sure you can escape detection long enough to get to him in order to kill him?"

"Yes, yes! It is all arranged. I can't fail. I must get to him. All these years of hell in this cesspool—they mustn't be wasted, Joha. They can't be wasted, can

they?"

"No," she said softly. "They can't be. But—but I love you so much, Owen. When you leave, I shall be so lonely. I will probably die of loneliness."

He laughed. It was a broken, bitter laugh. It was the laughter of a mad man. The paranoiac who is guided by a strange genius for planned destruction.

The laughter died, and he seemed to have forgotten her. He paced back and forth across the tiny damp hut. "Now. Now it is time. Five years in hell—then paradise. Albert has perfected his time-encystment chamber. He has insisted, bless him, on undergoing the experiment himself. He insists against the will of the Tellurian Government, the Council, everyone. He is noble. 'It would not be fair,' he says 'to allow another to take the chance. It is my experiment; and it is only right that I must be the guinea pig.' Ah, my brother is so noble, so fair, as are all hypocrites! How simple it is, Joha! I kill him. I become Professor Albert Baarslag. I enter the time-encystment chamber as my illustrious brother. I am put into a state of suspended animation. And I awake in five hundred years—a free man!"

Joha knelt down, a look of worship coloring the green of her half-human face. "You are so clever," she said. "So patient and so thorough, and so brave."

"Killing him, that is all that really matters," said Owen. "The encystment, that is only secondary. But it is ingenious, isn't it—to become the man I kill? There can be no punishment, no ridiculous retribution. Revenge is futile; in fact it isn't really revenge at all, if the avenger is made to suffer for his acts of vengeance."

Owen grasped Joha's slim arm, spun her around. His mouth twisted with cruel pleasure as he saw the slight painful writhing of her lips. "You may begin your slow death from loneliness now, Joha. I'm leaving for Vencity tonight."

She looked sadly resigned as she came close to him, slid one hand up and into the thick matting of his hair. "You need rest, Owen. You were out there two days in the swamp getting that last three kihns of aukweed without sleep. You should rest well before you go into danger. You only slept

an hour."

He lay down with a long sigh. "Yes. That is a good idea. I'll need all my powers when I go to Vencity. But those—those horrible nightmares." His face drained, oozing sudden sweat at the memory. "Always the nightmare. The same one. But each time I dream, the nightmare gets more horrible! There must be some cause for it. If I could only find its cause. As soon as I assume Albert's identity, perhaps I can use the psychiatric scanner on myself and find the basic cause."

But her cool fingers stroking his brows sent him back into the sleep he dreaded. Immediately her hands withdrew. "No, Owen, the psychiatric scanner will never find the cause of this nightmare. It's artificially endowed, Owen, dear. It has no roots in your twisted childhood, or in your cruelty. And the scanner could never find its source. Because I am its source, and I am alien."

Her hands drew back from his face. Her eyes pierced brighter, brighter eating down into the dregs, the dreary twisted depths of his mind.

HE WAS running, running as before, always as before. But this time his pursuers were very near. He was running in a sticky bog. With infinitely slow agony he drew each foot out of the slimy muck, sat it down, drew up the other foot. Around him was a thick blanket of cold clammy fog. And he knew it was an endless fog—that if he ran forever he could never escape it. But he also knew he wouldn't run forever, or even very long. His pursuers were too close.

His pursuers!

He looked back. A sense of profound horror sickened him. He recognized them now. For the first time they were near enough for him to identify them.

He sank down on his knees. He began to crawl through the stinking ooze. Then he felt their nearness. They were surrounding him. He couldn't escape. He saw a ring of cold green faces. Hands, innumerable hands, reached out, tickling him with a branch of small blue nettles.

He screamed. The poison fangs of the bombi-vine. The final agonies of the

darned. The bombi-vine! Death would be infinitely preferable to the sting of the bombi-vine. It was unendurable pain, indefinitely prolonged. It directly effected a mysterious distortion in the nervous structure. Science had no cure, had never found the cause. Men who stumbled onto the nettles of the bombi-vine sought a quick and merciful death as the only escape.

Without death, the victim lived out a full lifetime of raw, shrieking pain. . . .

His screams as he awoke silenced the giant tree-toads who hung heavily from the five-hundred foot crinoids. But before he left for Vencity through the darkness, he had suppressed the stark horror of the dream.

Once more he had drowned his hell in Stith.

HE CRAWLED out of the decrepit tractor, on the outskirts of Vencity. The city's lights glowed eerily through the night-thickened blanket of fog, as Owen found his way cautiously through rotting vegetation, then hesitated before entering Swamper Swhin's Dive. Tinny music came from the native band inside the smoky interior as it played the incomprehensible "music." A few Earthmen and women sat inside at the small oblong tables—tourists getting a morbid thrill from Venusian culture.

He slipped inside, around the shadowed wall and into a public audio-booth. He dialed the Vencity Laboratories. "Connect me with the Psychometric section, please. Urgent information for Chief Albert Baarslag."

"Who is calling?" the male secretary's voice said sleepily.

"Jonathon Graem, kelp farmer, Sector 5. I have highly interesting information revealing some unknown facts about psychological motivation of native swampers in my sector."

The male secretary hesitated.

"Professor Baarslag knows about me," Owen persisted. "I've submitted other discoveries of mine to him before. He told me to come back, and report any new discoveries to him immediately."

"Just a minute, sir. I'll connect your audio with Professor Baarslag's study."

He knew he would get results with that line about new psychological discoveries concerning native behavior patterns. Their mental processes were quite a mystery. Not a mystery to Owen any more. As far as he was concerned, they didn't have any mental processes at all.

Owen waited for Albert's voice. His twin still had a soft spot in his heart for him, he was pretty certain of that. A desperate appeal of the kind he intended to make would move his brother emotionally—get the sympathetic reaction he needed to complete his rather fantastic plan.

His brother's voice startled him. It was a perfect replica of his own. Soft, cultured and low. "Yes?"

"This is Owen."

He heard a catch, a pause from the other end of the audio.

"I—yes—why hello, Owen. Where are you? Wha—what do you want?"

Owen grinned coldly, but his voice was warm with repentant emotion. "Albert. I—I'm giving myself up. I've had enough. It's been a noble and futile life for me anyway. You know that it's always been just a matter of time before I would give myself up. Well, this is it. I'm—just outside the City now. At Swamper Swhin's Dive. But Albert—"

The Chief of Psychometry's voice was low, hoarse. "Yes, Owen."

"I want to see you first, Albert. I'll probably never get to see you again. I'll be a completely new personality when they release me from the reconditioning processes. I'd like to have a good talk with you before I turn myself in. Just a brother-to-brother talk, like old times, Albert. With me, it'll be a sort of cathartic, a confession. I've sinned, sinned terribly. I'd like to get it all out of my system, and you're the only one who might understand. Can I come up and see you tonight in your lab, Albert?"

There was a long pause. "Why—why, I guess so, Owen. Yes, yes of course you may."

Gullible fool, thought Owen.

"How can you get up here without being detected by the Scanner Guard?"

"I have the identification disks of Jonathon Graem. They'll pass the Scanner Guard. I—Jonathon Graem died in the

swamp two years ago."

"By accident," said Albert Baarslag pointedly.

"Naturally," said Owen with apparent sincerity, forgetting to add:—"after I pushed him into a bog and kept him there too long for his continued survival."

"Very well, Owen," said the Professor of Psychometry. Then, "I'm glad, Owen. So very glad that you're giving yourself up."

"I'll see you soon then," said Owen, and severed the audio connection.

THE automatic electronic Scanner Guard passed him freely as the swamper, Jonathon Graem. Professor Albert Baarslag was in his study, waiting. The rich luxuriance, the soothing harmonics radiating from the opaque walls—all rekindled the violent hatred Owen's paranoid mind felt for his twin.

Albert Baarslag might have been Owen, only his dress was different. His matted hair and beard were the same; Owen had been careful to keep that constant similarity as he waited for this moment when it would be time to act. A plastilex snock covered Albert, whereas Owen was dressed in the rubberoidalls of the swamp farmer.

Albert's face was tense with conflicting strain. His eyes were flooded with sympathetic emotion, and also with a disgust he could not conceal. Albert stretched out a firm hand. Owen ignored it. Albert frowned, then motioned to a chair. Owen kept on standing.

"Well," said Albert. "So you're repenting?"

"There's no use drawing out this obvious deception, Albert. I've been waiting for this opportunity. I'm here for revenge, Albert. To me, you are the most hated thing in the Universe. For the last five years I've been waiting only for this chance."

Albert's face became grey.

"Owen. Owen, listen. I did it for you. You're inherently unstable. A life in the labs would have broken you. Without perfect cortical-thalamic integration, no mind could stand six months in these Labs."

"Go on, Albert. Talk. That's what I'm here for. To watch you squirm."

"Listen to me, Owen! Whatever you do, you'll be apprehended. You can't escape. If you'll give yourself up, like you said you would do, I can see that you get special longevity treatment in my specialized Lunarian Clinics."

"It's too late for any ridiculous therapy," said Owen. "I know what happens in those Lunarian Clinics of yours. The result is called a cure, but the poor devils who are supposed to be cured aren't even the same personalities any more. Who wants to be a well-integrated but characterless non-entity?"

"No, Owen! You're not the extreme case that demands that kind of treatment. Only a slight lack of integration which can be leveled off—if you'll only—"

"That's enough," snapped Owen. "I have a cure, for both of us. A natural one, time-tested. It's as old as mankind." He revealed suddenly a small proton gun, issued to the swampers for survival against the carnivorous flora and fauna of Venus. He brought it out casually from inside the bib of his rubberoidalls, and directed it at Baarslag's chest. "Jonathon Graem's," said Owen with a stiff grin.

THE CHIEF of Psychometry staggered back from his chair, staring, eyes wet with fear and mental pain. "Not that, Owen—not from you—my—my twin."

"It is grotesque, isn't it?" said Owen. "I thought so too, when you did something perhaps worse to me. Now listen. I knew you'd finally persuade the Council and the Government to let you be the victim of your own experiment in suspended animation. I've been waiting for them to agree, and for a definite time to be set for the beginning of the time-encystment experiment. You see, Albert, I wouldn't kill you unless I knew there was a good chance to get away with it, as the old timers used to say. And I'm definitely assured of escape. Albert, I'm taking your place in the time-encystment chamber and I'm the one who's going to see the future you might have seen."

Albert Baarslag stared at his twin with incredulous horror. He no longer seemed to notice the gun. "Owen," he said faintly. "Owen. Listen to me. It won't work with

you. You're unintegrated. You—"

He finished the admonition with a long bubbling cry, and crumbled on the plastic mosaic of the floor. A bright, unreal-looking stream of blood flowed oilily from the blasted chest.

Owen leaned with a sudden awful weariness against the desk. He had wondered how it would feel to kill his twin. Now he knew. A strange mysterious fear filled his heart as he stood there in the silence looking down at the corpse. Somehow, the revenge wasn't so delectable as he had anticipated.

But after that Owen didn't waste any more time. First he dragged Albert's body into the small but expensively compact and complete laboratory just off Albert's office. He prepared a large vat which, thirty minutes after his twin's corpse was lowered into it, revealed only scant fluid evidence that Albert Baarslag had ever existed. No one would ever check because Owen was assuming his identity. The blood-stained clothes he also disposed of in a similar manner. He cleaned up the blood-stains on the floor with the immaculate care of his kind.

After that, dressed in Albert's clothes, no one could possibly have known that it was not really Albert Baarslag, but the hated, despised, obscenity known as Owen Baarslag, who sat behind his desk.

And it was the next afternoon that Professor Albert Baarslag was supposed to submit himself to the time-encystment experiments. The Professor, Owen Baarslag, was right on time as he dropped his gyrocar down on the vast roof-landing of the great Solar Museum which contained the deeply buried encystment chamber inside its massively thick and many-layered vault.

The teleo-electronic robot attendant wheeled the gyro onto an elevator while Owen, stifling a growing feeling of dusty desperation, dropped downward toward the deeply-buried rendezvous.

Professor Kaufman, one of the Chiefs from the Cosmology Section, greeted Owen with frank and open concern. From his earlier acquaintanceship with his brother, Owen knew that Kaufman had been Albert's closest associate. Others greeted Owen with formal, though terrific enthu-

siasm. This was one of the most dramatic experiments of the past five eras—eras which had been obsessed with social sciences and not sensational pastimes.

There weren't many there besides the Teleaudio Ethercast Representatives. They were busy broadcasting to Earth, Mars and the rest of Venus, the details of the experiment in suspended animation.

Owen was the center of the stage. The central actor in one of history's most sensational dramas. And it was being witnessed by a bigger audience than had ever been commanded by the greatest dramatist in solar history.

A soft-spoken interviewer from Solar Broadcasters questioned him. Owen's voice in his perfectly acted role was being broadcast and telescreened everywhere on Earth, Mars and Venus. For the benefit of the teleaudience, a microfilm was projecting a complete scientific explanation, while the smooth-voiced announcer read it aloud for those who demanded visual and aural transition.

And while the announcer explained for the fascinated audience, mostly laymen, Owen, two medics, and Kaufman, entered the many-doored thickness of the chamber, and into the very small interior where the encystment reservoir machine waited. To Owen, it resembled a streamlined coffin, barely large enough for his gaunt length . . . frightfully small, and confining.

The thick series of interlocking doors were still open and Owen could hear the announcer's voice:

“AND, as you perhaps already know, the principle of Professor Baarslag's time-encystment process involves phenomena we're all familiar with. The stasis developed by Professor Albert Baarslag, and to which in exactly fifteen minutes he will subject himself, incorporates a kind of super-sleep principle. The synaptic connections will be broken through amoeboid contraction—and this disconnection will exist until that future time, five hundred years hence, when Professor Baarslag will awaken. Five hundred years is only the opening experiment, says Professor Baarslag. The next experiment can possibly be for any definite period of time.

"This awakening is also interestingly arranged for by leaving one awaking threshold at its normal waking level. When this is activated by automatic relays—"

Owen was stripped now, and his body was outstretched in the soft, deep depths of the reservoir. The sliding panel that exposed his upper torso was slid open and he was looking up into Kaufman's red face, and the intent professional faces of the two medics. But Kaufman's face was serious now as he reached inside the reservoir and gripped Owen's damp hand.

"Goodby, Al," he said. "You're curious about man's destiny. I'm not. I wonder if you'll really be able to bear the knowledge of where we're going."

Owen's mouth was dry. He licked sticky lips. He didn't say anything.

They were preparing his arm for an injection of hypnosin.

Owen twitched. He wanted to cry out his guilt. Surrender. He knew now that he had made a horrible mistake.

But things blurred fast. He couldn't speak. There was a dull, pleasant haze, a feeling of utter relaxation. Not utterly. It should be that way, but it wasn't.

Because he knew, now!

Voices came from a very far distance, slow, soft and rhythmical. After the anaesthesia, they would sink slender electrodes through the brain tissue of the cerebrum's third ventricle. Chemical reaction would destroy the substance of the electrodes gradually, a process of slow disintegration carefully gauged. And the lesions in the posterior region of the floor and walls of the third ventricle would heal, so that he might awaken—

No! Anything would be better than this! He wanted to tell them. But he couldn't. It was too late. He was going under—deep down and far under.

He had been terribly misled by all the scientific jargon. Why couldn't they have been simple and direct? All this principle really was, was a complete mastery and understanding of the oldest phenomenon in man—the most common and the most persistent mystery.

Synapsis severed. Each cellular unit self-feeding through synthetic, inexhaustible

sources. Oxygen intake lowered to an incredibly low level. But it was really nothing other than—

SLEEP! Sleep! Pure, prolonged, unblemished, unsullied sleep!

And so . . .

Owen Baarslag was again running through the endless gray mist. His feet were again rising and falling with a terrifying, agonizing slowness from the thick, oozing bog.

He was down on his knees again, crawling with a futile frantic desperation. They ringed him in. He was trapped again. He saw the cordon of silent, emotionless green fishermen. Venusian native fishermen and in their hands reaching out, were branches of the bombi-vine!

He screamed. He kept on screaming as the nettles slashed his flesh with a burning hideous fire. It crept like molten liquid flame into his nerves, into his brain.

Unendurable pain, indefinitely prolonged. His only escape from the nightmare had been his ability to wake. But now he was doomed to go on sleeping, sleeping and dreaming and knowing the infinite, implacable pain—

—for five hundred years!

JOHA, who was part Venusian, dove easily and silently into the swamp lake. She swam to the other side and stood poised on the bank. She met them there. The green fish faces gazed at her with unblinking eyes and one of them said:

"It has been done, as you planned it, Joha?"

"It is done," she said softly. "For two years I prepared him for fulfillment of the dream. There is no escape for him now. The dream is planted too deeply. He will suffer torture greater than any he inflicted on our people. And he will suffer them for half a thousand of his years."

"Then your redemption is complete," said the little green fishman. "What you have done entitles you to enter our tribe again. Even though you are part Tellurian, you are again considered one of us. Come, my daughter. Shall we go back?"

Joha dropped down, bowed her head twice before him. "I am ready," she said.