

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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The Might-Have-Been

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

*"The Might-Have-Been, with tooth accursed,
Gnaws at the piteous souls of men."*

Baudelaire

GRAHAM did not dream, at first, that he had unlocked a door into infinite unknown worlds.

The possibilities of his experiment dawned on him only slowly, for he was not the type of scientist to think in sensational terms. He was a patient psychologist, who had been studying the effect of a certain subtle electromagnetic vibration upon the mind.

A graying, tired, stooped man of forty, Graham had for months been experimenting with the effect of his ray upon animals. Then suddenly, one day, he realized its incredible potentialities.

He told Harker, the young physiologist who was his closest friend at this New York scientific research foundation,

"By means of this ray, I could enter another world!"

Harker looked puzzledly but intently at the thing Graham had built, a squat thing that a little resembled a quartz-lensed searchlight.

"Another world? I don't understand. I thought you said your ray just thrust animals' minds out of their bodies, somehow."

Graham nodded. "It does that. The mind, you know, isn't material. It's a web of electric force, an electric pattern that inhabits the brain but that can be torn away from the brain by the right force.

"My ray does that. It pushes that electric pattern of the mind out of the brain, and out of our dimensional universe completely. Harker, I'm certain it thrusts the mind into one of the other Earths!"

The other looked more puzzled than ever. "The other Earths? What do you mean?"

Graham explained. "It's a basic theory of the new physical science, that our Earth is only one of the countless *possible* Earths that might exist.

"Suppose a meteor had destroyed the first ameba on the young Earth? Then Earth today would be a planet without life. Suppose Genghis Khan had conquered Europe? Then Europe today would be a Mongol continent.

"Those are possible worlds. And the new physics says that all those possible Earths may really exist like our own—that they are merely different branches in the road of Time, separated from our own particular branch by an extra-dimensional abyss.

"Real matter couldn't cross from our branch of the Timetoad to another branch, from our Earth to one of the other possible Earths. But a mind isn't matter. A mind *could* be thrust across the abyss into one of those other might-have-been Earths, by the right force. I believe my ray is doing just that to my animal subjects' minds."

Harker looked incredulous. "And their minds come back to their bodies?"

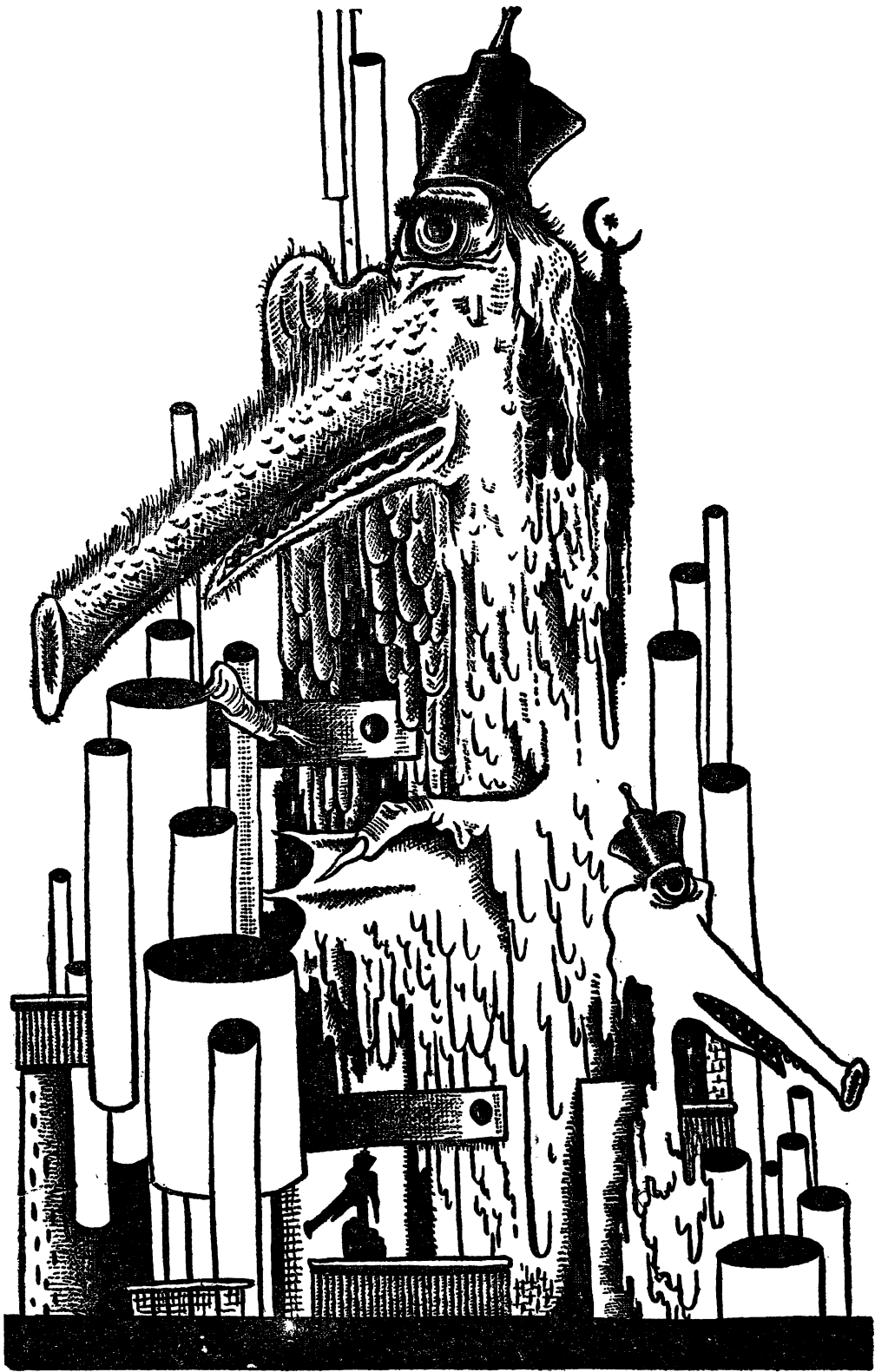
Graham nodded. "They come back, as soon as the ray that thrust them is turned off."

The other shook his head. "It's a fantastic theory! And there's no way it can ever be proved."

Graham said thoughtfully, "If a *man's* mind were thrust across to those might-have-been Earths, it could remember when it came back."

Harker laughed. "Oh, sure. But what man would be crazy enough to let you do that to him?"

*Our earth is, after all, only one of the countless possible
Earths that might exist!*



Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

"Is this world of ours, in the year 1948, so blissful that a man would refuse to leave it?" Graham asked a little bitterly.

That thought recurred to him strongly that evening, when he finally closed up his laboratory and went out into the chilly winter twilight.

THE clangor of New York, the hordes of weary, pathetic, eager faces hurrying homeward in the cold and windy dusk, the skyscrapers looming like spectral castles, had never seemed so depressing to him.

His own little apartment was dark when he entered, as it had been dark for him for eight long years. Graham went heavily into the lonely rooms and turned on a lamp.

He sat in its little pool of light for hours, brooding upon the tremendous implications of his discovery.

Again and again, his thoughts returned to what he had said to Harker of its possibilities.

"—if a man's mind were thrust out of this Earth into one of those might-have-been Earths—"

Why not do that himself? Why not go across the gulf into those might-have-been worlds, himself?

He could do it, he was certain. The ray would work on his mind as on animal minds, would thrust it across into one of those other Earths.

Why not, then? Had this world, this Earth, been so kind to him that he should shrink from leaving it?

Graham looked up at the picture that watched him from the dimness above the lamplight, and the old pain wrenched his heart. In another world, another Earth, Edith would not have died—or he would not have met and loved and lost her, and been condemned to gray loneliness for the rest of his life.

And was the pain in his life exceptional? He knew that it was not. Most of the people he knew did, as Thoreau had said, lead lives of quiet desperation, lighted only by rare golden moments of happiness.

Who *wouldn't* prefer any other possible Earth to this Earth of his own, this world of 1948? A world in which millions slowly perished from hunger and indifference, in which most of humanity led stunted, starved

and frustrated lives, in which a cataclysmic final war loomed close upon the horizon.

Wouldn't almost any other of the many might-have-been Earths be better than this exhausted, war-wracked world in which few men were happy, and which stumbled witlessly on toward final catastrophe?

Graham went to the window and looked out at the gaunt skyscrapers that seemed to huddle together under the somber winter night.

A sudden new excitement was singing through his blood like wine.

"And I can leave this and go into those other earths, those might-have-been Earths, where all this will never have happened!"

He knew, then, that he was going to do it.

He went through the streets to his laboratory the next morning, and he looked at New York as one might look at a prison which he is about to leave.

It was when Graham began to prepare his projector to use the ray upon himself, that caution once more tempered his excitement.

He could not calculate into what kind of might-have-been Earth the ray would thrust his mind. He was sure, by his calculations, that it would thrust his mind into the body of the might-have-been Graham of that other Earth, but what it would be like he couldn't foresee.

He decided that he would make trial, first, of several of those might-have-been worlds. He would set automatic controls on the projector, that would step up the power of the ray every few hours and then would finally turn it off altogether.

If his theory was correct, that would thrust his mind across the gulf into one might-have-been Earth after another, each time the power of the ray stepped up. And when it finally turned off, his mind would return back into this world and this brain and body.

Then he could decide which of those other worlds he wanted for a permanent refuge, and his mind at least could go back there to stay. It would take more planning, more devising of apparatus, but he could do it.

It was night when Graham finished arranging his automatic controls. He sat and

looked into the quartz lens of the squat machine that was going to hurl his mind across the gulf to might-have-been.

The moment came, and the automatic switch of the projector closed with a *click!*

II

THERE was a thunderous moment of transition, and then Graham suddenly found himself in another body.

He did not own or control this new body. It was another man's, and he was merely an uncanny guest in its brain. He shared this other man's sensations and memories, yet the other was completely unaware of *him*.

Graham knew at once that this other man was named "Graham" too. He realized his calculations had been right, that his mind had been thrust across the gulf to a might-have-been Earth of another time-branch, and there had entered the body of a might-have-been Graham.

The other Graham was walking at this moment through dark, somber, winter woods. He wore leather and wool, and a long sword upon whose hilt his hand rested often. For he knew that with each step he took, he was walking deeper into danger.

"Yet I'm glad that I came back," he muttered to himself as he strode along.

How long since he had left this land of Farther England? This was the year 1948. That meant that it was ten years since he had fled, a doom-threatened man.

"And all that time, I knew that I would some day come back here," he murmured.

Ten years! Ten years of wandering soldiering, of selling his sword to any buyer, from the bleak Viking kingdoms up north to the Portuguese slave-empire of the southern continent.

He had aged, in those years. Not so much outwardly, for time had merely put more iron into his face and his sword-arm. But he was no longer the same hot-blooded young man of twenty-nine who had ridden through these woods with the Duke's men-at-arms in deadly pursuit.

Or was he still, under his hard-bitten soldier's exterior, the same young fool? It must be, or he wouldn't be risking his neck now just to see a wife who had probably

forgotten him. Edith might not even want to see him, might fear for herself and the children—

"But she didn't marry again," Graham told himself. "In all these ten years, she didn't marry again."

The wench to whom he had given his secret message for Edith had told him that.

A wolf howled, away to the north in the dark, leafless woods. Graham turned, listening keenly.

Packs of wolves could be terrible, in these forests. But after a moment, the repeated howl reassured him. That was no pack, but a lone hunter.

"They're not so plentiful," Graham thought. "Too many castles and towns around here for them now."

And as Graham thought that, the *first* Graham who was a mere watching guest in his brain realized from that brain's memories and knowledge how different this might-have-been Earth of another time-branch was from his own.

This was an Earth whose history was different, an Earth in which there had been no Renaissance, no sudden awakening from the cramped life and thinking of the Middle Ages. Because of that lack, progress had been infinitely more slow.

Not until the 18th Century had the compass and the modern sailing-ship been invented. And not until 1810 had the first English ships planted a colony in this land which was called, not "America," but Vinland, after its Norse discoverers.

Static medievalism held sway here in Farther England, as in the older continent. Feudal tyranny persisted and throttled all invention. And it was for breaking the iron forest laws of that tyranny, that Graham had been forced ten years ago to flee.

"As if it were worth hanging a man, for killing the Duke's deer!" he thought bitterly.

Graham topped a slight crest, and from the northern heights looked down across the island at the lights of New York.

IT occupied the site that New York occupied in that other time-branch Earth, but was nothing like that city. This was a medieval-looking town of huddled stone streets and walls and gables, dominated by

the massive castle of Duke Clarence, Governor General of Farther England.

From the walled town down there at the tip of the island, farming commons stretched northward. Then these gave way to dark forest in whose edge Graham stood.

He went eagerly now, along the edge of the forest, until he saw the giant limbs of the great maple.

It looked the same. It looked just the same as when he and Edith had been sweethearts, meeting here secretly. She would come up from the town and wait here for him, a slim, black-cloaked figure—

As she was waiting, now!

Graham realized, as soon as he saw her, that he had never really doubted that she would answer his secret message, and be here.

Ten years of pain and hardship dropped from his mind like a cast-off garment as he went forward and took her in his arms.

"Edith! Edith!"

Her face was pale, her dark eyes brimming with tears, as she looked up at him.

"You should not have come back! It's too dangerous! You're still a proscribed outlaw, and—"

"She's right, Graham—you should not have come back!"

That rasping voice from the dark behind them spun Graham around, his sword leaping from its sheath.

He knew instantly the bulky figure in chain-mail that stepped from the shadow of a big pine. It was the man who had pursued him ten year before—Francis Quarl, the Duke's chief bloohound.

Quarl's massive face had a grim smile of satisfaction on it. And as Graham saw the shadowy men-at-arms closing in from every tree, he knew with chill certainty that this would be no escape.

Graham raised his sword. He said tightly, "I suppose it was the wench I sent the note by?"

Quarl nodded complacently. "She scented reward and brought it to me first. The Duke will be glad. He likes to make an example of outlaws."

Edith uttered a sobbing scream, and Graham pushed her violently out of the way as the men-at-arms came with a rush.

He backed against the giant maple and

stood against it as his blade hammered the other swords darting at him.

He got in three quick, savage thrusts. The first two sent a wizened guardsman to his knees clutching his belly, and the third slashed an awkward youngster's neck.

"Stand clear!" shouted Quarl's bull voice, and Graham glimpsed the man coolly aiming a clumsy, tubular object at him.

He instantly recognized it as one of the new gunpowder firearms, cumbersome flint-lock things that he had heard were being used more and more these days.

It roared flame, and a heavy slug smashed into Graham's upper right arm.

He tried to fumble his sword into his left hand, but that was hopeless. They smothered him.

He heard Edith shriek as a guardsman pulled his head back by the hair, and drew his dagger.

"Not here, you fools!" roared Quarl. "The Duke will want him to hang properly!"

Graham was efficiently and cruelly bound, and marched away. Looking back, he glimpsed Edith a huddled, sobbing heap on the ground.

Stunned as he was by his capture and what it meant, he was aware of one poignant stab of disappointment. He had not even seen his children. Edith had not dared bring them, and now he would never see them—

New York looked the same to Graham as they pushed him through its narrow, cobbled streets. The same ill-lit darkness, the same portentously overhanging houses, the same foul kennels.

He could remember when he had thought the Duke's castle here the mightiest structure in the world. He could remember peering with boyish awe at the dark stairway that led down to the dungeons, the stairway down which they were taking him now.

HE sat in the cold stone cell, when they left him there, nursing his throbbing arm. He sat thinking and remembering, for he knew how little time he had left for thought and memory.

The door opened and a priest came in. Graham recognized him as his studious, timid playmate Eric, of the years before.

"Captain Quarl sent me down to you, Graham," said Eric uncertainly. "To help you make your peace, before—"

He stopped, and Graham nodded. "So they're hanging me quickly? I might have known."

Suddenly rage swept over him like a flood of molten lava.

"Hanging me, and for what? For a couple of deer killed ten years ago! Is there sense or justice in that?"

"No, there isn't," Eric said heavily. "But that is the kind of world we live in."

"Then I wish to God it had been a different world!" raged Graham.

Eric said wistfully, "It *could* have been a different world, if things had happened differently. This feudalism, this tyranny that has smothered progress, would have been swept away long since if Roger Bacon's vision had come true.

"He was a dreamer, centuries ago, who prophesied that some day man's wisdom, his science, would grow so great that man would master nature, harness the lightning and fly through the air, make machines to do his toil. He believed it would happen so—but it didn't."

Graham looked at him haggardly. "To think what the Earth might have been, if his prophecy had come true! To think that men, if they'd only mastered science, could have lived without pain and fear!"

Then his shoulders sagged. "There might have been a world like that. But—we have to live in the world we have."

They sat silently together until dawn light filtered through the bars, and they heard the rough tramp of approaching feet.

Graham, his hands bound behind him and his shattered arm a fiery agony, walked silently up into the castle courtyard where Quarl and his hangman waited placidly by the Duke's scaffold.

A little crowd of half-curious, half-sympathetic citizens had gathered to watch the Duke's justice. Then Graham heard his name called, and knew Edith's voice.

He saw her, face deathly pale, down there in the crowd. There was a tall, scared-looking boy of fourteen beside her, and a boy and girl a few years younger, clinging to her other side.

He knew, then. He knew that Edith had

come to give him this last glimpse of his children before he died.

Graham felt a stiffness in his throat as he looked down at them. He heard Quarl's voice giving orders, as though from a remote distance. He barely felt the noose slipping around his neck.

He looked down at his children, and smiled. They would see their father die like a man. It was all that he could give them, now.

He heard Quarl give another order, and—

Click!

III

OUT of the darkness into which he had been suddenly hurled, Graham came slowly to awareness.

For a moment he was utterly bewildered. Then he realized that the projector had automatically functioned as he had planned, to hurl his mind on to another time-branch, another might-have-been Earth.

And he was now in another might-have-been Graham's brain; perceiving with his senses! Only this other self of his was not named Graham.

Graham was his name, and he was Chief Astronomer in the Temple of the Stars of the great city of New Mayapan, in this fateful year that corresponded to the 1948 of the other time-branch.

He saw with Graham's eyes, shared Graham's memories. He stood in a small, round stone room elaborately graven with strange glyphs, and with slits in its vaulted roof. Beneath one of those slits, a copper cradle held a curved mirror which imaged a bright star.

Graham was intently focusing the image of the star in the mirror, delicately shifting it in the copper cradle whose movable arc had a calibrated scale upon its edge.

"A half-year's waiting!" he murmured tensely, as he worked. "And tonight I shall learn if what I dreamed is true!"

Graham knew, from the other's brain, what Graham was trying to do. He had dreamed that the stars were infinitely far away, and he was trying to prove it by triangulation.

Then, into this little observatory atop the

temple, came a woman and a man. He knew, as questionlessly, that these were Graham's wife, Ehda, and his friend, Itzil.

The woman was dark, lovely, but with dread widening her eyes. Both she and the man wore, like Graham himself, the short white linen tunic and brilliant feathers of rank worn by all upper-class Mayans.

"Graham, we cannot stay longer!" the woman exclaimed. "Already the city is almost deserted!"

The man supported her appeal. "The Aztec troops are already burning the villages across the river! Come and see for yourself!"

He pulled Graham out of the room, onto the little balcony that encircled this high observatory tower.

They looked down in the darkness at the great city of New Mayapan. Its mighty, terraced pyramids rose like black bulks into the night, but there were few lights in its streets and gardens for the shadow of doom was upon it.

The city rose upon the island, where, in Graham's other Earth, the city New York had risen. And as he looked through Graham's eyes, he knew with Graham's knowledge all the centuries of *different* history that had led this place up to the greatness that was now about to fall.

For in this other Earth, history had been far different from that of his own Earth, and the feudalistic Earth from which he had just come. In this time-branch, the Old World had developed no high civilization at all, and so had never conquered this New World.

Instead, the ancient Mayan civilization here had risen unchecked to preeminent magnificence and splendor. From its far southern homeland, the great Mayan Empire had spread northward to embrace most of the eastern part of this continent. Here in New Mayapan, its greatest city, Mayan splendor and science had reached their apogee.

Ehda was pointing westward across the dark river. "See the fires of the villages!"

Graham saw them, red and ugly scars upon the face of the night.

"The Aztecs have boats and will be across and pouring into New Mayapan, in a few

hours!" Itzil said urgently. "We must leave!"

"A few hours?" Graham muttered. "But that would be enough time for me to complete my experiment."

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Itzil. "You know what it means if you stay here until they come!"

Graham knew. Everyone knew what it was like to live under the heel of the conquering Aztecs.

He felt the sick despair that had haunted every Mayan heart for months. The great Mayan Empire that had been the glory of the world was about to perish.

Always, it had been menaced by the slow growth of the Aztec Kingdom of the far west—those power-lusting, war-worshipping barbarians who scorned the arts and sciences of the Mayans and who had built up an autocratic military state.

But not until the Aztecs had developed such new weapons as the cross-bow and catapult, had they attacked the Empire. They had done so with such swift, concentrated, hellish efficiency that already most of the Empire was overrun.

"All the great old cities already conquered," Ehda was saying chokedly. "Uxmal, Old Mayapan, Palenque—even ancient and sacred Cichen Itza. And now the last and greatest, New Mayapan—"

"It is the end of civilization," Graham said heavily. "In the New World there will be only the Aztec barbarism, just as the Old World has always lain wrapped in barbarism."

He shook his head sadly. "A ruined world, a world of fear and darkness. And it might have been so different! If only the Old World races had developed civilization too, they would have helped us now! They would have lived in peaceful friendship with our Mayan civilization, in a peaceful, happy world."

"It's no time to think of might-have-beens!" Itzil expostulated. "The Empire is dying, but we can still avoid life under the conquerors, if we flee now!"

Graham turned and looked back into his little observatory, and then shook his head.

"I *can't* go now! I'm on the very verge of the greatest discovery of all—the secret of the nature of the stars and universe!"

"What good will such a discovery do now when barbarism is claiming the world?" Itzil cried. "Why should you sacrifice yours and Ehda's freedom for it?"

Graham put his hand on his wife's trembling shoulder. "Ehda, you must go with Itzil. I'll come soon and will overtake you."

She began wildly to protest, but he spoke peremptorily.

"It is my command! Take her, Itzil—quickly!"

When they had gone, Graham gave another quick look toward the west. The fires there were nearly to the river edge.

"Little time," he muttered. "But maybe there's enough."

He hastened back into his little observatory, and bent again over the copper cradle of his reflecting telescope.

As he carefully set the instrument and checked its reading again and yet again, all else faded from his mind.

"The angle is different!" he told himself, his blood leaping with excitement. "Now the calculations!"

He had, half a year before, taken an angular measurement on the great green star of the north. Now, when the Earth was on the other side of the Sun, he had taken that measurement again, and the angle was slightly different.

GRAHAM bent with his reed pen over sheets of paper, by the light of a small lamp. His brain raced over the calculations, yet he was checking each of them with utmost care.

An hour passed, and another. A faint scent of smoke drifted into the little room, and with it came a distant echo of triumphant, wolfish shouting.

Graham laid down his pen, and as he rose to his feet he found himself trembling with exultation.

"It is true! That star is unthinkable leagues away in space. And that means that it is a sun, a sun like our own Sun but so far away that it is tiny to the eye!"

He strode out onto the balcony. His eyes ignored the dark, ominous craft sweeping across the blood-red, firelit river. They lifted instead to the solemn sky of stars.

An awe fell upon him. "Every one of those points of light—a mighty Sun! I, first

of all men, have looked at the true face of the universe!"

And then from his rapturous heights of exultation, he fell into black despair.

"And the knowledge will perish with me, or survive only as a distorted legend! What good to learn truth now, on the very eve of the long night of barbarism that is coming?"

The Aztec troops were streaming into the city below him, torchlight shaking from the conquest-mad, victorious soldiery. Graham knew, as he had known from the first, that there was no chance to flee now.

Then a hand touched his arm, and he turned quickly. It was Ehda, her face a strained white blur in the dimness.

"I would not go with Itzil, Graham! I came back!"

"Ehda, you should not have!" he cried. "We can't get away now. You know what it will be like to live under the Aztecs."

"I know," she said. "But whatever comes, I will share it with you."

Graham put his arm around her and held her close to him.

Down in the great city below them, flames were bursting redly as the fanatic Aztecs began firing the temples.

"So ends the Empire," whispered Graham. "So ends our world."

Again, for a moment, the blind, futile longing shook his mind, the longing for that world that might-have-been.

"It would have been a world of glory, if the Old World had developed like the New," he whispered. "A world of glory, such as we shall never know."

Then he tightened his arm comfortingly closer still around the trembling woman.

"Whatever is to come, we will face it."

The Aztec troops down there were already at the base of the Temple of the Stars, were—

Click!

IV

THIS time when he emerged from darkness, Graham realized at once that again the projector had hurled his mind on to still another time-branch, another Earth and another man's body.

He knew even before he saw with his

new self's eyes that this time his name was Gra, and that he was a slave of the Scaled Ones.

He crouched with a dozen other men and women who were clad like himself in silken loin-cloths, in a room that looked exotically strange. The room had shimmering, curving walls of pale plastic. It was illuminated by a glowing plate in the ceiling, and had no windows.

He knew, from the knowledge of his new self Gra, that this was a room in the slave quarters of the New City of their masters, the Scaled Ones. And he knew too that they, few men and women, were conspiring here against their masters.

"We *can* escape, if you will but follow my plan!" Gra was saying. "Once in the cold lands of the north we would be safe, and free!"

Ea, his mate, looked at him anxiously. "But Gra, if we fail, the penalty—"

"Would death be worse than forever serving the Scaled Ones?" flashed Gra.

Old Thur shook his gray head. "Even if we escaped to the northern lands, the Scaled Ones would sooner or later find us."

"They hate cold, and would not search long," Gra declared. "We could keep hidden, could grow in numbers, could try to devise weapons like theirs."

He added, "We, or our descendants, could some day then overturn the Scaled Ones and make *man* the master of the Earth!"

There was an astonishment and horror on their faces, as though he had spoken blasphemy.

"But only the Scaled Ones can be masters—they have *always* been masters!" protested one of the men.

It was so, Graham knew from the knowledge in Gra's brain. In this time-branch, this might-have-been Earth, the history of millions of years was different.

Man had never risen to supremacy, in this Earth. Instead that supremacy had been retained by the reptile species. The great reptilian *cans* who in his own Earth had perished from climatic change and given way to the mammals, had in this time-branch *not* perished but had survived and developed an intelligent race.

That race, the bipedal Scaled Ones, had

risen to civilization through the ages. This New City, that occupied the island where in another time-branch New York stood, was but one of their many metropoli. They were the masters—and the humans who had developed ages later were merely their slaves.

"But it was only accident that it happened so," Gra asserted. "I overheard their great scientist, S'See, lecturing in their university here to the Scaled Ones.

"He said that if one reptile species had not chanced to develop enough intelligence to survive the climatic change, all the great reptiles would have perished and man would have inherited the Earth."

They stared at him, and then Ea voiced the incredulous wonder they all felt.

"A world in which humans ruled? It sounds impossible."

"Yet it might have been," Gra insisted. His tone grew wistful, dreaming. "If Earth had only been like that! Men would then have ruled the world in peace and happiness and wisdom.

"We can't have a world like that, but we *can* at least try to become free!" Gra went on. "And I've chosen you for this attempt because I felt that you, of all our people, most desired to be free."

He stood up. "The time is now, when the Birth Festival holds almost all the Scaled Ones in the great hall. Ea and I are going. You others may come with us, or remain."

A moment's hesitation, and then old Thur too stood up. "I speak for the others, I know. We will go."

Gra drew from its hiding-place the bundle that contained all his secret preparations, and went to the door. "Then come!"

Gra's brain was a riot of mingled excitement, hope and dread as he led his little band down the pale, plastic corridor that was one of the many labyrinthine ways of New City.

Even to be out of their quarters without authorization was an almost unheard-of infraction of the law, for humans. Yet on that very fact, he counted for the success of his attempt.

The familiar ways that he had known all his life, the warm, steamy passages and halls and ramps of the mighty reptile-city, were deserted as the group of humans crept through them tonight.

Eery and solemn, the strange strains of alien music drifted to them through the labyrinth from ahead.

"The music of the Birth Festival," whispered Ea, trembling.

"We must go the great hall, to win to the western water-gate where the boats are moored," Gra said. "It is the only way."

"But the guards at the water-gate, and the locks?" questioned another, fearfully.

"I have a plan," Gra repeated. "But hurry!"

The music swelled louder, and presently they crouched lower as they passed along a railed balcony high above the great hall.

THE great hall of New City was great, indeed—a colossal oval chamber whose green, shining walls bore huge, rearing figures of the giant reptiles of long ago who had been the Scaled Ones' ancestors.

Almost all the thousands of the Scaled Ones in the city were gathered down there on the floor of the hall, in silent rows. They stood solemnly, erect figures vaguely man-like in size and shape, their harnesses of woven metal glittering with jewels, every unwinking eye in those flat reptilian faces turned toward the far end of the hall.

Up there on the dais, the annual Birth Festival was reaching its climax. The hundreds of eggs that had been brought from the incubators for this solemn rite were cracking open as the music rose triumphant. The new young of the Scaled Ones, coming forth to life!

"To look upon this rite is death for any human!" Ea murmured, quaking.

"Do not linger! On, before the Festival ends!" Gra urged, in a whisper.

They left the great hall behind them, hurried through more deserted corridors and over high-flung bridges between buildings that gave view of all New City gleaming in strange splendor of curved roof and wall and minaret beneath the rising moon.

Then they went down a winding ramp into the cool open air, down to the stone dock along which the flat, long metal power-boats of the Scaled Ones were moored.

A high metal grating lay between them and the dock. And on their side of its locked gate, two Scaled Ones stood negligent guard.

Gra saw the fire-tubes those two guards wore at their belts. They could blast him in a moment. He was risking all on the fact that they would not dream of any human slave defying law.

He handed the bundle to Thur and walked right out into the moonlight toward the guards. He saw the Scaled Ones' unwinking eyes turn instantly toward him, and those behind him.

"Whose order bring you here at this hour, humans?" demanded one of the guards in his toneless, hissing voice.

Gra answered, "The orders of Zharra, our master. He sent us to tell you that—"

He had been walking forward as he spoke. And abruptly, he sprang at the nearest guard.

Sheer incredulity that a human should attack him made the Scaled One slow in drawing his weapon. He uttered a hissing cry.

BUT Gra had whipped from inside his loincloth the jewelled dagger that he had stolen weeks before. The point ripped the Scaled One's breathing-pouch and he fell, gasping and choking.

The other men had the second guard down and frantically squirming. Gra ran in and plunged the dagger again and again into the reptilian heart.

"Now the gate! How do we get through it?" cried old Thur.

"Stand back!" Gra exclaimed. He had grasped the golden fire-tube of the first fallen guard.

He pointed it at the locked gate and thumbed its catch. The tube detonated and a thundering streak of fire blasted the gate-lock.

But as they ran out onto the dock, lights were flashing across the towers of New City, and thrumming alarm-devices were sounding.

"Unchain a boat for us, Thur!" cried Gra. "Into it, you others!"

Himself, he ran along the dock, and the tube in his hand thundered fire at the stern of each moored metal boat. The crashing fire-streaks fused one power-unit after another.

He raced back as Thur started the power-unit of the remaining craft. And as Gra

leaped in with the others, the power-tubes started to flash back fire beneath the water.

"They come!" cried Ea.

Scaled Ones were pouring out of the ramp toward the dock, as the flat metal craft shot out onto the moonlit sea.

Staccato thunder barked as fire-tubes sent streaks of flame after them. The water boiled and bubbled, behind them.

"We're out of range!" Gra cried exultantly. "Straight out to sea, Thur!"

The brooding, gleaming mass of New City dropped behind them and then soon their little craft was out of the narrow entrance of the bay, tossing upon the great waves of the open ocean.

"Now, head northward!" Gra ordered. "Toward the cold lands!"

Dawn found them out of sight of land. There was no pursuit in sight behind them. But the power-unit was dead.

"We'll soon be safe," Gra proclaimed. "They hate the cold of the north so badly that they'll not follow far."

He pointed at the bundle. "In it is a sail, and enough synthefood for many days. We can reach the cold lands."

The others looked silently and fearfully at the great gray ocean around them.

"We too shall die in those cold lands, sooner or later," murmured one.

And another added, "At least, in the New City we did not suffer the hardship we shall suffer now."

Gra's voice rang harsh. "We shall suffer, but now at least we have a chance to be free and to start building a new world for our race. And we, or others like us, will succeed some day.

"We cannot have the beautiful, glorious world that might-have-been if the reptiles had perished and man had inherited Earth. But we *can* be free!"

Old Thur nodded wisely. "Our world will be one of hardship and pain, yes. But I think that *any* world must be thus. For there can be no life without both pain and joy, since pain and joy themselves are part of life."

The courage came back into their doubtful faces. The jointed mast was shipped, the little silk sail bellied in the wind.

Gra sat with Ea's hand in his, looking ahead into the gray vagueness.

"Ea, some day men will come back from the north! Some day, they—"

Click!

V

GRAHAM, for the fourth time, felt his mind hurled through bellowing darkness to a sudden shock and silence.

He opened his eyes. He was looking into the round, pale quartz lens of his projector.

He looked around almost incredulously at the familiar, electric-lit interior of his New York laboratory.

"I'm back!" he whispered.

The projector's automatic switch had again functioned, cutting the thrust-ray, and his mind had drawn back from those other Earths of the other time-branches, to his own time-branch and Earth.

Graham sat, his thoughts whirling as he remembered those three might-have-been worlds in each of which, for a few hours, he had lived.

"And the other Grahams, in those other worlds, they too were dreaming of might-have-beens!"

The tragic irony of it! Of that other Graham of the feudal world, wishing that Earth might have been a world of science because then all men would have been happy!

Of Graham of New Mayapan, dreaming of the happy world that might-have-been if the Old World had been civilized, and never suspecting that that would have doomed his own civilization ages earlier.

Of Gra, the slave, wistfully wishing that humans might have been the masters because then there would have been nothing but peace and happiness and wisdom.

All three of them, those other Grahams, wishing for might-have-beens without knowing that their realization would have been a tragic disappointment.

"Just as *my* might-have been worlds proved to be, when I entered them," Graham thought sickly.

Was this a cosmic jest of the universe against man, that on all the countless time-branch worlds he should dream of might-have-been worlds that were really as forbidding as his own?

Graham went to the window and raised

the shade, and looked out on the towers of New York rising stark and gray into the dawn.

HE KNEW now that there was no escape for him into the worlds of might-have-been. He was trapped, a prisoner, in this unhappy world into which he had been born.

"But we have to live in the world we have."

It was as though a faint, phantom voice had spoken in his memory.

Graham—the other Graham—had said that before he went to the scaffold, to die smiling so that his children might remember him so.

That other Graham, and Grahm, and the slave Gra—they too had dreamed wistfully of might-have-been, yes. But they had none the less faced their own darker worlds with courage.

"No life without both pain and joy, since pain and joy themselves are life!"

Graham, staring from his window at the dawn-lit towers of New York, saw that now as truest truth.

A stone felt no unhappiness, and no happiness. But every living thing did—it bartered endurance of agony for its golden moments of joy. And the higher in the scale of life it climbed, the greater its suffering and its ecstasy. So that for a living creature to complain because he suffered, was in reality to complain because he lived.

Graham felt new courage straighten his shoulders. He whispered, to those other selves of his who could not hear.

"Graham—Grahm—Gra—you taught me something. I won't forget!"

In the might-have-been, he had not found the happiness he sought. But he had found there the truth that was peace.