

STRANGE TALES

Of the Mysterious and Supernatural

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The Song from the Dark Star

By RICHARD
TOOKER

Utterly strange was that haunting music that filled lovely Anna with dread . . . and brought dreams of far-off worlds. Whence came Egabl of Xarthon on his eternal quest!

"LISTEN! It's come back!"

Eric Paulson's chair grated back from the supper table as he leaped to the screen door of the kitchen and looked out across the poultry-dotted

farmyard. The golden blaze of a Dakota sunset wreathed the barn-red stables granaries and machine sheds in a halo of mystic enchantment. There was nothing unusual to see out there; Eric feared that. Yet he looked eagerly, with the hope that was half dread. It was unthinkable that a thing invisible could utter such sounds.

"See anything this time Eric?"

Hans Ahlberg's toil-warped hands upended his cutlery beside a loaded plate. Hans was just the hired man on Eric Paulson's wheat ranch, and supper bulked bigger to him than tuneless arias of unseen songsters. Eric didn't answer. His tall, cover-all-clad figure leaned from the half-open screen as if he had frozen there.

Anna Paulson stared with fear-fevered eyes at the back of her listening husband. Anna was listening, too, sitting statuesquely still in her chair before the steaming meal she had served a few moments before, listening with bated breath to that eerie serenade in the yard outside. In the mellow glow of the summer sunset flooding the chintz-draped kitchen windows, her clear Nordic skin seemed to emanate a naceous, pulsing lustre. A Viking valkyrie incarnate was Eric Paulson's young wife—tall, serene, Juno-moulded. But a growing wonder stirred the placidness of her regal brow; wonder and growing fear—the godly awe of a chaste and gentle soul that glimpses the blighting shadow of incredible sin.

Now near, now far, baffling as to exact location, the paean of the unseen singer bladed the hush of evening in that lonely hinterland. From exquisite rollicking treble, like the witching rondo of a dancing Pan, through chaotic intervals to the droning vibrato of a viol—a brief, repeated strain, without beginning or end—chords of unearthly harmony that human sense could never memorise nor human voice intone. And the startled farmyard fowls lifted their feathered necks to jerky oglings.

For dragging minutes of sentient suspense the song of the hidden visitor persisted, while Eric vainly searched the yard to the bordering green fields. Then it was gone, as suddenly as it had come. A nerve-rasping, bulletlike rocketing over the rolling prairie hills, and silence masked the secret of a thing that revealed itself as sound alone.

Eric turned back from the door. He wore an odd, strained look as he sat down and pulled up his chair. He looked at Anna anxiously, noting the slight shudder of her broad, smooth shoulders as she shifted uneasily in her chair. A quick breath parted mobile lips that were made to smile, as Eric swept back his shock of wavy auburn hair with a lean, brown hand. His wife of a year had never seemed more beautiful. Was it the magicry of the sunset or the pallor of a secret fear that made her silken yellow hair stand out like dawn against an angel's brow?

"No, I didn't see anything." His voice was perfunctory, almost harsh. "It beats me." He smiled at Anna as he asked with forced steadiness: "That racket getting your goat again, honey?"

"A little." Her voice was low, shaken. "I don't see what it could be. Maybe I'm just scared." And she tried to laugh.

"Like as not it's a new-fangled grasshopper that buzzed over from Kansas," Hans mumbled past a knifeload of fried potatoes.

Eric Paulson had graduated from an agricultural school before he inherited his father's half-section farm on the Missouri Slope. He wasn't an ignorant farmer. But in the brief silence while he helped himself to the eggs he knew that the mystery of the invisible songster was out of his line. It was a case for a Hawkeshaw or a Maeterlinck, and maybe a

Freud, since Anna's strange reactions had set in.

For nearly two weeks, now, since haying had begun, they had been hearing that maddening Ariel music off and on. He wouldn't have bothered much about it if it hadn't been that Anna wasn't herself since the first time they'd heard it. Eric loved his horses, his rotated fields; he even had affection for his big plough tractor. But when Anna wasn't right, nothing else meant much in his isolated life as a petty baron of the wheatlands.

THE meal went on with desultory, futile speech. Hans did most of the eating. After he had gone to finish the chores, Eric and Anna lingered over the litter of dishes.

"What's the matter, Anna?" Eric asked gently. "You talked in your sleep last night, and you never do that unless you have a touch of the flu or something. Is it just that infernal racket that we can't trace? It gives me the creeps, too, but—but I guess it's mostly because of the effect it has on you."

He got up and walked around the table, put his arm around her, felt her splendid body quiver against his breast.

"I don't know, Eric; I don't know." Her voice was a tired moan. "I'm tired somehow—and frightened."

He took her hand, lifted her up, led her into the parlour. With proud strength he lifted her up in his arms and sat her on his lap in the big Morris chair beside the crooning radio. "Tell me, Anna; tell me all about it." He caressed her hair with calloused fingers that were not hard in the arts of love.

"It is that music, Eric." Her voice was a muffled sob against his shoulder. "I'm sure now—after last night."

"Sure? And why?"

"Because of a dream—a terrible dream I had. Oh, I didn't want to tell any one, not even you. But I must. If I don't tell someone I'll go crazy!"

"There, there, now. It can't be as bad as that," he inserted too hastily. "Dreams are nothing to worry about."

"If it *was* only just a dream!" she cried. "Oh, you know I almost never dream—and this, this was too terrible, too real. I don't see how I can ever tell it."

He patted her, pressed her closer. "Tell me the best way you can, honey. Maybe I can help you a little."

She hesitated, as if groping among unfamiliar words for figures to express the inexpressible. He felt her strong body quiver against him, then relax a little as she said tensely: "You remember De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*?"

He nodded vaguely. She went on:

"I guess everybody has read it at some time in life. I read it in high school, but it never meant much to me until last night. De Quincey wrote something about the horror of falling for seeming ages through a black abyss and seeing cities, civilisations rise and fall before his eyes. He wanted to stop falling; it was agony for him to wait through those ages, but he couldn't stop. He had to go on.

"My dream was like that. I wasn't myself. I seemed to be just—just thought without a body. Something had me in its power—a grey, shadowy, monstrous thing that I couldn't understand and couldn't resist. I had to go where it took me."

"Go on," he murmured as she faltered, snuggling closer in his arms as if to hide from the terror of a memory.

"At first it was dark, like the night sky, and terribly cold. But I didn't feel the cold—I just *knew* it was cold. Then there were worlds—suns, millions of stars and moons like round rainbows and globes of blood. I kept sweeping on through the black space, sick with fear; and yet I was fascinated, too, like when you see something so awful you can't tear your eyes away.

"I—we—went down to some of the worlds that hung in the blackness. I saw terrible jungles, like forests of giant toadstools or mould under a microscope. In some places there were deserts the colour of sunsets, and so wide it would take years to cross them. I remember living things—monsters that I never dreamed could be, and some beautiful in a way. Once we saw a flock of ghostly flying things like wisps of white clouds. They turned into little whirling, funnel shapes as we looked, and fled away.

"Oh, I can't begin to describe all of it. I saw more than a person could see naturally in thousands of years, if they could really go where I did with that awful thing. The end of the journey seemed to come when we reached a great, dark mass that was dimly lighted by a giant sun. There were millions of black rocks on this world, some as tall as skyscrapers, with fields of glittering crystals like snow or salt between. One word rang through my mind as we hovered over the dark world. It makes me shudder to remember it. 'Dead, dead, dead!'"

SHE turned tight-shut eyes so that they were hidden in the hollow of his shoulder.

"Was there anything else?" Eric's voice was clogged with a husking phlegm. "Any other words that might give us a clue to what caused the dream?"

Her body tensed again, and one hand clenched his arm. After a moment she said: "Yes, I remember two words besides that one tragic cry. They were names of something, I think—'Xarthon' and 'Algol.' Xarthon meant 'the Dark One,' and Algol 'the Bright One.' Those names came to me somewhere on that dark world near the end of the dream. Oh, it was all so wild and terrible and confused! I wish I could forget, but something seems to make me remember, until I want to scream."

Eric put in tensely: "It must have ended when I awakened you to see what was wrong. You remember we heard that singing bird or beetle, or whatever it is, at the window that opens on your side of the bed."

She nodded eagerly. "Yes, and the noise stopped—or went away—right afterwards, as if we had frightened it or made it angry." Her voice choked a little. "Oh, I know how unreasonable, how mad it all sounds, Eric. If I could just believe it was only a dream! But I saw things that I never could conceive of anywhere on Earth or in Heaven—or even in Hell. And I know those sounds had something to do with it. I'm afraid, Eric—afraid of that thing. I don't know why, but I have a feeling that it's coming back—to take me away—forever."

"Nonsense, Anna! I'd like to see anyone, or anything, take you away from me!"

Eric's words were bold, but he swallowed hard on them. A story dullness crept into his eyes as he held Anna closer. Eric Paulson did not fear the known; he wasn't superstitious, either. Yet he knew that something was wrong in his house since that music had come out of the thin air to curse his happiness with Anna.

"I read something once," he said; "something about the effect of sound vibrations on the human mind." He was holding his voice masterfully steady for Anna's benefit. She had raised her cameo head, was looking at him with wet eyes that begged for moral support and understanding. "I think there was something about matter, living matter, being affected by sound, too. The idea seemed to be that just the right pitch of sound vibrations could even kill a person if kept up long enough. Of course, that's all imaginative rot but that cursed singing thing always harps the same tune. It might be."

His voice trailed off in the silence of swift reflection. When he spoke again it was with harsh decisiveness. "Know what I'm going to do, Anna? I'm going to call Tony Zeller."

"Tony Zeller!" She sat up stiffly in his lap, plucking at her skirt, thinking in a flutter of a seedy little German truck farmer whose words were morosely few and cryptic.

"Sure! Tony can solve this mystery and catch that singing thing if anybody can. He's always puttering around with crazy experiments; knows more about science than he does about raising potatoes. He even has a stargazer that he made himself. We've got a job for his microscope now. You don't mind, do you, Anna?"

"Anything you say, Eric." Her tone was listless as she slipped from his lap. He got up quickly, went to the wall phone that had a crank for use on a party line.

Two shorts and a long. He didn't need to wait. Tony Zeller was a prairie hermit, wedded to his stone-house cave. A grouchy "Hello" answered, but the squeaky, old voice in the receiver changed its tune after a minute of brisk persuasion from Eric.

"I'll pay you, Tony," he begged. "I want this racket stopped. It's driving us all mad."

"I do it for nothing. Be right over." Tony's voice was shrilly eager. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"He's coming." Eric turned to Anna as he hung up. "We couldn't keep him away with four horses now. I don't know if it will do any good, but we've got to do something." He sighed as he put his arm in Anna's. "Let's go out and do the dishes, honey. If that singing devil comes around with his pipes I'll take a shotgun to him."

THEY WERE finishing the dishes when the clank and snuffle of Tony Zeller's ancient pick-up advertised his arrival. Eric went out in the dusk and met a bent, thin figure in overalls, street coat and faded crusher.

Eric clapped a steely hand on the old German's arm after they shook hands. His voice was stinging imperative: "I'm not calling a doctor unless Anna gets worse. You know why. They'll say she's losing her mind. And you keep your mouth shut, Tony. Understand? No gossip."

Only Tony's broken teeth showed in a ragged, twitching smile of grim humour as he said: "You know me, Eric, better as that. Do I talk too much? I do not talk enough, they say. The books, the stars, my garten are enough for me. And now—the facts." He scrubbed his hands. "It is stunning, if what you say is true. I cannot believe it. A new species, perhaps—"

Anna was in the parlour trying to read a magazine when they went in. Hans' lantern was winking around the barn. The little Teuton bachelor recluse would have been self-conscious before Anna Paulson's glowing, ravishing beauty, in any other situation. But for once Tony Zeller

was himself in the presence of seductive woman. Under a broad, bald brown, his eagle-black eyes studied Anna as a Burbank reviews a generative progression.

Eric told him simply of the invisible songster that had come to the Paulson ranch like a Pied Piper from Hell. "I don't know if you've heard it over at your place," he concluded, "but if you did you'd never forget it."

Tony shook his head. "I have not heard it. Strange—too strange. I am stunned by this evidence. Nature is the unfathomable, the endless. But the significance—this effect you speak of?" He glanced piercingly at Anna.

Eric's voice faltered a little. "Anna, will you tell Tony about that dream—just as you told it to me?"

"I'll try." Her night-blue eyes were vivid blots of pain. She didn't look at Tony, but to Eric, as a child that hopes for prompting.

As the fantasy unfolded in broken sequence, Tony Zeller hunched out farther on the edge of his chair. His startled, incredulous eyes never left Anna's face. Sometimes his lips moved with hers, and he uttered little exclamations of awe and satisfaction.

"That's all I can tell," Anna finished in a whisper. "Eric, you tell him what you said—about sound vibrations hurting people."

Eric shook his head. "Tony knows more than I about that theory."

Tony nodded jerkily. The little German had no eyes for either of them, now. His seamy, weathered face was pale with thought; a death's head in which only the eyes were alive with the smouldering intensity of one who trembles to admit the proof of miracles.

"I must hear this music you speak of," he spoke at last in a voice that was husked with emotion. "But the dream—its meaning is clear to me, if the cause is not. The two names—Algol, the Bright One, and Xarthon, the Dark One—are significant, remarkable. Algol is a famous variable star in the constellation of Perseus. It stand for the head of the Medusa. A variable is a star that disappear sometimes. Algol is called the Demon Star because it vanish and come back like black magic."

"But I never heard of it!" Anna cried. "How could I dream of something I knew nothing about?"

"Vait!" Tony's voice was hoarsely compelling as he waved a knotty hand. "Of course you didn't know of it. But there is something more wonderful as that in your dream. Dere is a theory in astronomy that Algol vanishes because a dark companion star moves between it and the Earth. Your dream would prove that theory which not the biggest telescope can prove. Xarthon, the Dark One, is the dark star that eclipses Algol!"

Eric gasped. "You mean she could see that in a dream, knowing nothing of astronomy?"

"Himmel, no! Not in the ordinary dream—for has she not said she dreams little? That is the connection with these strange sounds you have heard—what you call the influence of sound vibrations. When I hear this music I can say more, maybe. But the dream—it is clear. At the speed of thought that is faster than light, Anna journeys through the great, cold darkness of infinite space. She see strange worlds, mighty sunstars, queer moons. There are weird beasts and peoples of other worlds. And at the end of this journey of the mind she sees Xarthon the Dark, and Algol the Bright. 'Dead, dead, dead,' say this voice of mind. And is not Xarthon a dead star if we accept these premises? And the grey, misty thing that compels Anna to see this, as she fears now—can you not see the connection?"

The music you hear is not insect, not bird. It is——"

ERIC'S incredulous gasp cut him off. "You expect us to believe that the sounds influencing Anna are from an unknown star billions of miles away in outer space? Quit yarning, Tony, and come down to Earth!"

"Have I said *finis*?" The little German's words were acrid with reproach. "To find facts from the unknown to the known, we make theories. They cost not'in. From them has come everyt'ing we know. If you cannot see what makes this music that worry Anna, are my eyes so much better?"

"Listen, Eric—Anna! You know not'ing and I too little of what life can be in the worlds of space. You judge life by a yardstick, like the point of a needle. Have you read Garret Serviss in your own language? He says 'a company of Neptunians might be as iridescent as a flight of soap bubbles.' He made a theory of life on other words, to wit: 'They would approach in constitution "disembodied spirits" or ghosts—colligations of gaseous atoms taking the place of the bones, muscles and tissues.' And if life can be gaseous, who can say that life cannot be sound—to you, to me, with only five senses and three dimensions?"

Eric and Anna were staring at Tony in stunned amazement.

"You reason like a Yogi," Eric muttered, twisting his locked fingers. "The idea that sound invisible can be alive is the craziest thing I ever heard of."

The animation died in Tony Zeller's zealot face. "You t'ink I make fun." His voice was low, wistful. "Let me tell you somet'ing, both of you. To-night you have made for me the big moment, maybe. All my life I have lived and studied for one t'ing alone—to make the great discovery for natural science, for the future when the man of Earth shall explore space. One little paper, like Einstein's relativity, like Newton's law of gravitation—that is all I vant. And then I can die happy. Now, maybe it come, like a meteor—so sudden I am stunned. You t'ink me crazy. But I do not care. Somet'ing tells me on this little Dakota farm the gift of the ages may have come to-night—the proof of life in the stars, life as Earthman cannot dream!"

Eric got up, uncomfortably. "All right, Tony. I hope your dream comes true; but if you can locate that cursed beetle with an orchestra in its wings and——"

"Listen!" It was Anna's wild cry as she and Tony leaped up. Her face was twisted in a piteous agony of fear.

It was a whirring, distant shriek, like a tiny shell hurtling at meteor speed through the outer air, straight toward the house. That thrilling, tenuous scream had scarcely manifested itself when from the front yard sounded the haunting, exquisite melody of the visitor, chanting its dirge of nameless mystery.

"Eric! Don't let it in! Don't let it come near me!" Anna moaned.

Tony Zeller ran out of the front door on to the porch, and looked off into the greying starlight where that weird song throbbled like the lyre of Calliope. Eric had dashed into the kitchen. His ice-blue eyes were grimly hard as he came back through the parlour with a pump gun. He stamped out on the porch with Tony, raised the gun with passion-shaken hands.

"Go on! Shoot!" Tony Zeller's cracked voice was hoarse with derision. "Maybe the sky rain ducks!"

"I'll put a scare into it," Eric gulped.

He pumped three crashing shots into the front yard. He shot at the sounds as nearly as he could tell from where they came. Then he tilted the hot gun, and listened. There was no faltering in the song from the starlight. Instead, it moved nearer, grew louder, until it seemed directly before the porch. The treble notes were a gleeful, elfin laughter; the bass held an ominous snore of gloat.

ERIC emptied the shotgun from his hip. It was a futile, desperate gesture. Like strong night wind under the eaves, the song went on before them, dolefully beautiful and sinister, a fragment of some demon symphony rendered by a bard of the gods.

"You see?" Tony Zeller's tones were flat, strained. "It is no insect. No fiddling wings can make such sounds. The range is not in the larynx of even the mocking bird. Put away the gun, Eric. There is work for us—to save Anna."

Eric swung fiercely on the shadowy figure of the little German. "What do you mean—save Anna? What in the name of Heaven could it want with her?"

Tony's withered hand was gentle but insistent on Eric's arm. "That is for us to find out, Eric. Come! We must go in to Anna. She has need of more help than all this little world can give!"

They hurried in. Anna was lying back in the morris chair, pale and still. She spoke to Eric as he felt anxiously of her pulse, but her voice was listless, her eyes absent, unseeing. The song throbbed on outside, hovering near the door, as elusive as night-singing cicadas.

"I'm so sleepy," Anna murmured. "Take me to bed, Eric. Don't leave me. I—I am going away."

Eric looked his alarm at Tony; but the German had bent to the radio, was turning it on full blast, until the parlour was racked with blaring static. Anna roused a little. It seemed the cacophony helped to counteract the mystic menace of the singer without. Gently, Eric led her to their bedroom, opening off an alcove of the parlour, and closed the door.

Through the raucous tumult of the radio they could hear the clarion treble of the singing thing in front of the house; not loud, but penetrating, with excruciating sentience of pitch. Unuttered curses writhed on Eric's lips as he sat with Anna on the edge of the bed, held her close, felt her tremble and twist in an agony like the travail of a spirit birth. Then suddenly, as it had so many times before, the singing ceased in brief, bee-like whine as of a thing that hurtled away at incredible speed. In the parlour, Tony Zeller turned off the roaring radio.

"It's gone again," Eric said, but there was no exultation in his voice. He seemed resigned to the certainty that his curse, and Anna's, would return. Anna passed a groping, chilled hand through the billows of her shining hair. Her eyes were dazed, delirious. She was a child in his hands as he helped her to bed. As he tucked her in she seemed to sink away into unnatural sleep, a torpor that terrified him.

Tony Zeller was coming in from the porch when Eric stepped softly from the bedroom, leaving the door half open. Tony's face seemed almost pasty around the bottomless murk of his dilated eyes.

"I've got to do something," Eric whispered frantically. "She's in some kind of coma. I'll call Doc Stangby at New England. But, Heaven knows, if this ever gets out they'll make a sideshow out of the ranch, and that will be worse for Anna."

"Call the doctor, Eric," Tony said quietly. "It will do no good, I t'ink, but it is best course—if the worst should happen."

"You think there's no hope?" Eric groaned. "The radio—didn't it scare the thing away when you turned it on loud?"

Tony shook his head solemnly. A wan smile quirked his ascetic lips. "I turned the radio on loud maybe to help Anna a little—to fight it. Radio is just a toy to this thing. I say no more till I have the proof—but Anna is in the hands of Got."

Eric reeled to the telephone and rang for the doctor. "He'll be right out, but it's twenty miles," he said between short, painful breaths, as he turned from the phone. Tony Zeller had sat down like a man in a trance. Hans stamped in from the chores. He paused a moment with a question on his lips. Then he tramped upstairs to bed, an anxious look on his round, honest face.

IN THE stillness of deepening night Eric waited, slowly pacing the floor. Tony was waiting, too, he knew, waiting for that song of Satan to return on its inexplicable, fearful mission.

"I'll take her away." Eric stopped once, his eyes lighting with feverish hope.

Tony shook his head slowly. "You cannot take her away—from that." His words were a sentence of death. "Did you not hear it come and go?"

They went into the bedroom together, a little later, and looked down at Anna. Tony lifted an eyelid gently, felt the slow, faint pulse.

"It is unnatural sleep," he whispered. "Like hypnosis. Medicine does not know this sleep."

"Anna!" Eric knelt at the bedside. "How can God let this happen to you—my beautiful, my goddess!"

Tony turned away and sat down in a chair near the wall, leaving Eric with head buried in the bedclothes between his outflung arms. The slow, moribund sigh of Anna's breathing sighed eerily through the still room. And then from the windless night a whirring, swelling burst of clarion sound, like the blind flight of a great male locust in the mating amuck.

Eric's head jerked up. His eyes swelled in an agony of fear; his fists were clenched and quivering. And in the instant he moved, the singer was in the room and the house was thrumming with wild melody. Anna stirred. The streaming curves of her tall body bowed and writhed beneath the coverlet. Tony Zeller stared as one dead who looks upon eternity beyond the grave.

A curse died on Eric's lips as a stinging tremor bathed his skin. A numbness was stealing through him. The searing, livid pain of that exquisite music racked him like a rending voltage. The room faded before his set gaze; faded to grey, steaming mists of indefinacy. The singing grew faint and fainter, gradually dying away. And then he saw the thing of Anna's dream: a shrouded clot of that swimming translucence all around him, a netted mass of hoary ganglia and veinous fibres, drawing to a peaked, eyeless head like the nucleus of some great, phantom amoeba.

He couldn't move in the unnatural stillness. A horror, an abasing awe, froze his blood. Vaguely he discerned the lucent outlines of the bed, Anna's still, quiescent form, Tony Zeller seated motionless in the chair. Netted tentacles branched from the mass that hovered over Anna; a mass half in, half out of the misted walls of the bedroom. One arm extended to his head, another to Anna's body, still another to the head of Tony

Zellar, like conduits from some intricate nerve assembly.

He couldn't feel those countless filament fingers that were closed in his brain, yet he knew that somehow he was a part of them, his mind and body delicate instruments with which a master did his will. A voice was speaking, clear, deep, sonorously compelling. He didn't know where it came from. It might have come from anywhere—as voices that speak in the mind a conscience prompting.

"Hear me, oh Earthlings! It is I, Egabl, who speaks. Egabl of the dead star Xarthon, whose black bosom glimmers in the light of the star you name Algol the Demon. In the language of thought I speak, and you hear me as a spirit echo; for I am master of life's soul that you vaguely know as vibrations.

"You see me now, oh Earthlings, as with my infinite powers I merge with your lower organisms for a brief space. All is a mist to your animal vision, that to me is a mere tropism. And mists we must be to one another, for only to that imperfect extent can we meet across the abyss of our separate evolutions. Would that we might merge wholly; but to my sorrow I have learned that cannot be.

"My history and the fact of my being can mean little to you. Your greatest mind cannot credit my kind in the limitations of their senses. Yet for your comfort—alas, I wish it were mine also!—I may explain in so far as your primitive intelligences can interpret the vibrations.

"Hear, then, oh fledgings of the Great Womb, that you of Earth are three dimensional, and I, the last of the Xarthon kind, am of but one dimension. You perceived me first as sound alone, and in your natural state I am to you no more than a tetra of sound. I move as though from vision to vision. My food is the rays of the cosmos that your plants reduce for you in indirect digestion. My beginning was in countless ages past, when all Xarthons were sexed; my end shall be countless ages hence, though now and anon I wish that end were soon, for I am as the Wandering Jew in your mythology.

"LIGHT-YEARS gone by, oh Earthlings, as you measure time, I left Xarthon, the last of my great race. Know you that Xarthon was once a hot star, but it cooled and gave forth life as a planet. Not life as you know it on your tiny world, but Life as the Great Womb knows it—life as variable as its individuals in species.

"We were a great people, we Xarthons, immune to heats and chills, to storm and starvation and violent death. But we would be greater; we would be one with the Spirit of Life that made fertile the womb of worlds. We lived long, but we would live forever. And we were wise in alchemy. Sex was abolished, for it seemed we could live forever, and sex was a crude and primitive thing beneath our dignity. But when the last of our female kind was gone, we learned too late that our lives were not eternal. Ages we might live in an ecstasy of fancy and the sensations of infinite mind, but there was an end as the Great Womb decreed.

"One day, which to you would be a century, we found a member missing from our unchanging number. We were alarmed and distraught, for it was incredible that aught of misfortune should come to one of us. Our greatest minds were baffled until, with our infinite powers, we found traces of our lost brother in the atomic orders of our atmosphere. Dead! Dead without cause that we could see.

"There was mourning among us, and fear, but too late! One by one

through the ages our number dwindled, dying the natural death which you call old age, though our span of years would be as eons to you. We could not recall our lost sex complements for propagation. We had committed the unpardonable sin against the Great Womb that bore us, and the price we must pay was extinction for our proud and godlike breed.

"And when the last of my brothers died, and I was alone on Xarthon, I faced away from the great sepulchre of my kind, hoping to find the female complement that would rebear my race on some new world. Therefore we had feared to venture beyond the strata of our native atmosphere; but I was desperate. I cared not for life alone. And through the powers of my one-dimensional being that you can never conceive, I have survived thus far in my pilgrimage through space. Countless worlds I searched vainly for the flesh that would provide my female. Countless more worlds will I search, no doubt. before I shall succeed; for here I face but one more failure.

"Little I expected to find desirable life upon this tiny dot of matter between the galaxies, and yet I came, for I am infinitely thorough in all my searching. I saw this woman and she was fair—not fair in the flesh as you see fairness; for I see deeper, to the singing voice that is the spirit of female life, the calyx of vibrations that I covet. And do not think that I have not looked on others of her kind! Between the times that you have perceived me as repeated sounds, I searched your tiny, infant planet from shore to shore and even from isle to isle. But I found this woman most nearly perfect for my purposes, strongest to endure the transition of the living spirit to a segment of my vibratory matrix.

"But I have failed again. So far, and no further, will she merge. To exert the full force of my powers would reduce to astral ash that precious treasure I have sought throughout the universe. I could leave her dead, a shell of flesh to draw your tears, but I choose not; for know you that we of Xarthon have ever been just and kind in our way. If I could take that life from her and make it woman of my kind I would not hesitate to grieve you, and you and all your ordinance of nations would be powerless to resist that theft of life. My race is far greater than yours and well deserving of such sacrifice. But now I leave her with you, whole and well, to serve her feeble time in the primal joys and woes that are a fullness for your kind.

"Last night I came to this woman in a dream and revealed to her, during my examination of her organism, the wonders of space and time; a glimpse of the powers of life in its highest orders. I hoped for favourable response, but she was much afraid and resisted me. Stark reality for me was to her a terrible dream. I left her under my control, as one of your spiders stupefies an insect with a measured poison; left her to make anatomical comparisons among her sisters. Some few, widely scattered around your world, remember fearful dreams. But I shall come no more to haunt these simple souls, and the sounds of my presence shall be forgotten as illusions of the senses. So does ignorance and innocence escape the wonders of infinite knowledge!

"To-night I have come to this woman for the last time. I am convinced of failure now. She will not merge. You see the extensions of my being playing through her now, manipulating each nerve as you perform upon a pipe organ, even as other extensions of my matrix play through you who are of my vibrations, the male kind. Fear not, my children! I go, to come no more. Before your feeble sun dawns again I shall be centuries

afar in the void, seeking new forms of life for my purposes.

"Hear me, oh Earthlings! Life too low becomes one with the dust, and life too high reverts to ether that is the Womb of Life. Remember or forget, as you will. I am Egabl of Xarthon, and I come but once to the various peoples of space. Farewell! Farewell!"

ERIC MOVED in a brief vertigo of lightning change. The grey form vanished; the room flashed clearly before his startled, aching eyes. It was as if he had slept a moment, yet he knew that his eyes had never closed; nor had they winked, for they smarted, arid of tears. In the distance he thought he heard a whirring scream across the vault of the night, like the shriek of a damned soul lost forever in immemorial silence. Then he heard Tony Zeller cry out in agony a phrase of Latin: "*Ecce homo! Ecce homo, Egabl!*"

It was Anna who quickened his pulse to surging life again. Her face had flushed with warm colour. She was opening her eyes, struggling up. "Eric," she called softly, as their hands met in a clinging clasp. "You know now. You heard. You dreamed with me!"

He drew her into his arms, kissed her hungrily, moaning his gratitude. The muffled clang of a car door in the yard outside parted them reluctantly.

"It's the doctor," Eric said, and went out to tell him that all was well.

When the mystified doctor had gone, Eric said to Tony Zeller: "You've got what you need for that paper now. It will make you greater than Einstein. This world has never heard the like—even now I'm wondering if it wasn't all a dream."

Tony sighed. The light had gone from his brilliant eyes. "It is wonderful just to know," he murmured. "But the evidence—ah, the evidence, Eric! There is none."

"Evidence! Didn't Anna and I experience it with you? We'll be witnesses to prove what you say!"

Tony had his old felt hat in his hand as he stood at the door.

"Eric," he said, solemnly, "if the testimony of speech and the observations of laymen were conclusive, then spiritism would be a positive science. My chance has come—but it was too big. Not even Millikam could do it! May Got bless you and Anna. Good-night!"