

# FANCIFUL TALES

## Table of Contents

THE NAMELESS CITY	<i>H. P. Lovecraft</i>	5
a story of a city so old that no man ever knew of it...the nameless city of an Elder Age.		
UMBRIEL	<i>Donald A. Wollheim</i>	19
a short-short story of a shunned satellite		
THE FORBIDDEN ROOM	<i>Duane W. Rimel</i>	21
a weird tale of fine ability		
SOLOMON KANE'S HOMECOMING	<i>Robert E. Howard</i>	26
a poem		
THE TYPEWRITER	<i>David H. Keller, M. D.</i>	28
a different story than usual		
THE MAN FROM DARK VALLEY	<i>August W. Derleth</i>	34
weird fiction		
THE GLOBE	<i>William S. Sykora</i>	39
a midgetale		
THE ELECTRIC WORLD	<i>Kenneth B. Pritchard</i>	41
a science-phantasy with a kick		
Cover Design—Clay Ferguson, Jr. Story Heads—Duane W. Rimel		

## COMING!

In future issues we have stories by the above authors and more—*Judgment of Netheris* by J. Harvey Haggard, *The Psycho Traveler* by Ralph Milne Farley, *The Escape* by Robert Bloch, and numerous others.

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# UMBRIEL

by DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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## A SHORT SHORT STORY

*Form letter from the files of the Oberon Government Department of Interlunar Navigation:—* In answer to the oft-repeated q u e r y o f space-minded citizens as to why our vessels always avoid the second satellite of our Uranian system, the following document is in evidence. It is a condensation of the report of K'yaldiu, pioneer astronaut of several generations ago.—

My craft slipped through the atmosphere of Umbriel without much trouble. It was much thicker and warmer than any previously experienced. After landing, my instruments registered as high as 60 degrees below zero fahrenheit (Earth translation)!

I grounded the ship upon a flat surface of soft greenish sod (or so it s e e m e d a t first glance through the ice windows.) After shutting the rockets off, I made ready to g o ashore and claim the territory for Oberon,—providing there were no natives.

Stepping out, my nostrils were greeted by a most foul stench. The air was thick, heavy, warm, and very bad of odour. It was barely breathable, and an excessive heat poured up from the ground i t s e l f, which soon sapped my energy very much.

As soon as I set out to walk about, my feet sunk into t h e soil and it w a s necessary to keep pulling them out, which was accompanied by a most discomforting sucking noise. The ground seemed more like some of the semi-liquids that our scientists produce in their l a b o r a t o r i e s when they get temperatures high enough to almost melt ice!

F o r a w h i l e I squashed my way along. Then a section of the ground before m e swelled while I watched into a large hemispherical d o m e a n d snapped. A cloud of noxious vapour was released and swirled past me. It was most peculiarly like a bubble.

Coming upon a large pitted yellowish rock, towering isolated out of the ground, I stopped and examined it. It was composed of some porous hard shiny substance unlike anything nature produces. There was a most unnatural feeling about the thing.

There was a movement behind me and turning I saw one of the beings native to Umbriel. Oozing from a hole in the ground, came a large shapeless white object having neither arms, legs, eyes, ears, nor other external appendages. It had a mouth and a tubular several foot long slimy body. And something else.

I stared at it to see what it was doing. And when I saw and recognized, I knew then what sort of sphere I was on. For the thing was eating the soil! It was devouring the greenish ground with considerable voracity! It was a worm, a grave-worm of enormous proportions. And it could only be eating the flesh of a dead creature!

Fleeing back to my Ovoid, I found it already half sunk in the rotting terrain. Leaping into it, I slammed the door and took off with a crash of my gunpowder rockets that lit the scene.

Never will any sane creature go to Umbriel again. For it is not a natural globe— it is the curled up carcass of a dead animal, a great monster from some colossal world out of far space. Somehow it had been hurled through the void and captured by Uranus. And now that it has been warmed a little by the heat of the far off sun and near Uranus, it has started its rotting, and the worms have come out of the depths of its body to feed.

Forever let it fester in isolation, for they or not the only beings that dwell there. About the worm's surface was a metal belt with strange glyphs on it. Somewhere in the depths, in the very bowels of that rotten corpse world, lives intelligence, a race of unutterable horror feeding off the bodies of the worms, even as the worms feed off the rotten planet-being. A race of unbreakable foulness and revoltingness dwelling therein. So far they know nought of other worlds. Grant that they never do learn.