

The Amphibians

S. Fowler Wright

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Title: The Amphibians

Date of first publication: 1930

Author: S. Fowler Wright

Date first posted: Nov. 30, 2017

Date last updated: Nov. 30, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20171145

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Transcriber's note: A Table of
Contents has been added for reader
convenience.]

GALAXY *Science Fiction* Novel No. 4

The Amphibians

**The COMPLETE Book Version,
Unabridged**

**A Suspenseful, Haunting Masterpiece
of Earth's Far-Distant Future**

By
S. FOWLER WRIGHT

**WORLD EDITIONS, INC.
105 WEST 40TH STREET**

New York 18, N. Y.

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Published by Arrangement with
Shasta Publishers

Printed In the United States of America

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1 Of Place and Time

"Applied science," said the Professor, "is always incredible to the vulgar mind."

"You know, George, they really did go—disappeared absolutely—and there's only one door to the room, and we sat round it. There's no kid about that," young Danby added—perhaps recognizing that his father lacked somewhat in the amenities of social intercourse.

"If I go at all, I shall take an axe," I

remarked irrelevantly.

Bryant leant forward, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Templeton went like a Pirate Chief," he said, smiling slightly.

"Look here, Bryant," I said, "tell me what really happened, and I'll do my best to believe it."

He hesitated a moment, and then answered slowly, "It's true enough, what they've told you, as far as we *can* tell it. As to theories of time and space, I know no more than you do. I used to think they were obvious. I've heard the Professor talk two nights a week for three years, and I've realized that it isn't all quite as simple as it seemed, though I don't get much further. But the next room's a fact. We lay things down on the central slab, and the room goes dark, and we go back in two minutes, and it gets light again, and they're still there. And the Professor says he's projected them 500,000 years ahead in the interval, and they

don't look worse for the journey."

"And it must be true, because they don't deny it," I said flippantly. "It sounds rather a dull game, but not very difficult."

"Yes, I know how it sounds," he answered, "and we thought just the same; but it did seem to prove one thing—that it did no harm to the objects of the experiment."

"If they went anywhere, at least they came back safely. So at last we tried it with Harry Brett—and he didn't. We left him there, and we went back, and the room was empty. It's just a bare circular room, metal-walled, with one exit. You can see for yourself."

"The next day Harry's wife came and kicked up a row, and we got frightened, and told Templeton, and he said he didn't believe a word of it, but he was going to find out, so we tried it on him too."

"He disappeared the same way?"

"No, he didn't. He came out all right, and he said, 'It's true enough, but I reckon you've settled Brett. But what's the use of half-an-hour? I'm going back now. Give me a year, and I may find him.'

"The Professor told him he couldn't repeat the experiment twice the same night, but he could come back the next, and so he did—and that's the end of it so far."

"But if he were to be gone for a year, and he went last Tuesday?"

"He wasn't to be *gone* for a year; he was to be *there* for a year, and be back in two minutes. That's simple. The Professor'll tell you."

"But—if the Professor will excuse the remark—it wouldn't be any good if he did. I've read *The Time Machine*, and I know that space is curved, thanks to Einstein's enterprising investigation. I quite understand that, if I got at the right distance from the earth (and my eyesight were good enough), I

should see our Darwinian ancestor shinning up the tree-trunk for the fatal apple, but I don't profess to follow these mysteries further. When I had to learn science, I always preferred the demonstrations. Now, if the Professor would project a pullet six months old backward, and it returned a chicken——"

Young Danby laughed, and I saw Bryant's eyes twinkle, but the Professor answered me patiently.

"It is obviously impossible to project anything into the past, which is fixed irrevocably.

"Otherwise there would be no finality, and the confusion would be intolerable. It requires no scientific training of intellect to understand that the ordered experience of life would become chaotic if, for instance, upon reading of a long-past murder, I could project myself into the past, and intervene to save the victim.

"In such event the murder would both have

occurred, and been prevented: which is absurd.

"But the future is different. It is unformed, or, at least, its facts are in a condition of fluidity. We are all occupied in forming them. If I kill an insect, I do not destroy it only, but its descendants also. I also influence the lives of other insects with which they would have mated, and which will form other alliances. From such alliances other insects will be born which would not have existed. The present consequences of any action, even the most momentous, are trivial, because the present is but a moment. Its future consequences are incalculably greater, because the future is infinite.

"Realizing this, we recognize that our present actions belong to the future almost entirely, and it becomes a less important possibility that we may be able to project ourselves forward into some future period, and influence its circumstances by the physical methods with which we are familiar here."

I don't suppose the Professor had finished, but he paused for breath for a second, and I took the chance he offered.

"I'm sorry I became a cropper over the pullet plan. And, anyway, there wasn't much sense in it. It would be too unprofitable to become popular. But why not get the chickens, and project them forward? Nine months ahead, say, and they come back cackling, with the first egg on the table? —'Professor Danby, the Magic Poulterer.' There's a fortune there, anyway."

For the first time the Professor showed distinct signs of irritation. "You may not be a scientist," he said, "but as a business man you must know that you are talking nonsense. Would you send your chickens into the future without a hen to brood them?"

"Would you expect the people of some future age to rear them for your benefit? When they discovered that they always vanished at maturity, would they not kill them a few days earlier?—But this is idle

talk. Something of the kind you imagine may follow in the years to be, as the penetration of the future, which is now the subject of theory and experiment, becomes an exact science, and when it does, such minds as yours will take it as casually as you now do the transmission of speech and sight over the earth's surface, in ways which your fathers would have considered incredible. The scientists who have conquered space have less honor in the mouths of men than Napoleon, who conquered Europe—and had not the brains to hold it. It is not reasonable to suppose that those who conquer time will be more highly regarded.

"But all this is beside the point. There are two men who have vanished, or so we tell you. We have no proof, and you are under no obligation to believe us. We may have murdered them, though we have no evident object, and your knowledge of our characters should enable you to discount that possibility. If you will take the same risk, be it much or little, I will find the sum you need, which is somewhat large and urgent."

I said, "I do need it; and if I don't accept at once, it's because the whole tale sounds too wild for believing. I should like to ask a few questions.

"First, you say these two men have disappeared entirely. I believe what you have told me is genuine, or at least that you believe it to be so. But have you told me all? Is there nothing you are holding back that might influence my decision?

"But you say that Templeton returned from his first adventure, and went again the next night. Surely he told you his experiences?"

"No; he didn't seem to want to talk," Bryant answered; "he only said it was too strange to explain, and he must go back and find out. When we pressed him, he said he supposed we thought that, if a stranger to our planet stood in his back-garden for half-an-hour, he would be able to describe the whole earth in detail, from the marriage customs of Alaska to the flora of the Zambesi. You know Templeton's way.

"But he was anxious enough to get back, and he turned up next night with a sack of things he thought he would find useful, and weapons to stock an arsenal."

"And he didn't return," I added, "so the things he took don't seem to have been sufficiently useful. As I said before, if I go, I shall take an axe; for one reason, because I spend half my leisure in tree-felling, and I know how to use it. For another, it's a useful tool, and not only intended for the destruction of your fellow-men. Whether I shall find any fellow-men, I don't know, but, if I go into a strange world, I don't propose to equip myself as though I intended to engage it in single combat. It seems tactless to me— But did he say nothing about temperature? I don't want to stumble into a glacial epoch, without even a fur collar in which to face it."

"You need have no fear of that," said the Professor, "you will be at least thirty thousand years away from the nearest glacial epoch, and Templeton didn't seem to have suffered either from change of air or an

excessively high temperature."

"He took plenty of clothes when he went back," young Dan by added, "but he said it was much easier to throw off clothes you didn't want than to put on those you hadn't got, and he didn't know where he would be going, 'it might be up, or it might be down!'—whatever that meant."

"It doesn't sound as though he had much confidence in the resources of the future world," I said doubtfully, "and there are about fifty questions I should like to ask, but they wouldn't make much difference, even if you knew the answers, which you probably don't."

"I've got tomorrow to make any preparations that seem worth while. I'll take the cheque now, Professor, if you will be so kind as to draw it—and I'll give you a note tomorrow which will clear you with Clara, if I follow Templeton's example."

2 The Empty Dawn

The room which the Professor had constructed for his experiments was circular, walled in an iron-gray metallic substance, empty, and, when the door closed upon me, it was in absolute darkness.

Waiting there, I had a curious and disquieting consciousness, as of absolute vacancy, such as a disembodied spirit might feel before its next incarnation, but nothing happened, neither did the Professor return as he promised. I knew that the two minutes were long past, but there was no movement in the room, and no break in the darkness. Had he misled me, I wondered, and was I the victim of some quite different experiment—perhaps of how much strain the human mind could endure, and yet retain its sanity? And why was the room so much colder?—the air against my face was damp, as though a mist were rising.

I looked round, and saw nothing,—upward, and the three great Stars of Orion's belt showed through the fog, and the upper part of the constellation; and other stars were in the central heavens; but lower down the mist hid them.

If I were indeed transported to some remote and future time, at least the same stars were there, without fundamental change, even of their positions in the heavens.

It was a moment when any source of confidence was needed. I had imagined many ways in which a strange world might appear around me. I had overlooked the possibility that I might arrive in the night-time. But there I was, standing on something which felt hard and very smooth, and afraid to move a step in the darkness.

How long I stood there I have no means of knowing. The mist increased, and the night continued dark, and very strangely silent.

Fortunately, I had clothed myself warmly,

in a suit of close-fitting leather garments, with the fur turned inward. I had brought sandwiches which I had calculated would be sufficient for two days, if other food should be hard to gain, and I ate some of them, and then as the hours passed, I grew too tired to stand, and sat down on the hard pavement beneath me. It felt like very smooth and polished stone, and I reached out on either hand thinking to feel some joining which would confirm this supposition, but could find nothing. As the hours passed, I tried to lie and sleep, but only those who have done this for the first time on a hard and level surface will understand my discomfort.

Yet I slept at last, and waked again, feeling both cold and hunger, and ate and slept, and waked and ate and slept again, till I became aware that all the food was gone, and still the night continued.

Then fear came, indeed.

Had Templeton come to this, and had he fired his foolish pistols into the mocking

stillness of a perpetual and lifeless night?

An ordinary English night is full of joyous, furtive, or defiant sound. A tropic night is full of life and movement, and noon is the time of quietness.

The owl hoots even above the silence of the Arctic snow.

But here there was no faintest distant call, nor any whisper of movement.

Yet I recalled that Templeton had been once, and returned, so once at least he must have seen daylight. Then I realized that the darkness was less dense, and the stars were dimmer.

Dawn approached slowly!

I must have watched for hours while the sky flushed faintly, and still the darkness was but slightly lifted.

Gradually, very gradually, the strange scene opened.

Sloping downward, and stretching as far as sight could reach toward the coming sun, was one unbroken plain of purple-brown, on which were growths of one kind only, compact and round, and averaging some eight feet in height, like gigantic cabbages in shape, and of a very vivid green.

Behind me rose a high gray cliff, so smooth and straight that I doubted whether it were of natural formation, or the work of some directing intelligence.

Between the cliff and the great plain there was a strip of smooth and lucent paving, about twenty feet in breadth, on which I had rested while the long night passed.

As the familiar sun rose slowly, a gradual gold spread over the vivid green that sloped toward it, till the whole expanse shone with a dazzling splendor; and as the rising light struck across the path on which I stood, it showed a shining band of opalescence that stretched right and left to the horizon limits, beneath the background of the dark-gray

wall.

The sky was of a deep unbroken blue, and the whole scene was one of great though alien beauty.

I had imagined that I might find myself lost amidst the inexplicable complexities of a civilization different from anything of which I had heard or known, or perhaps amidst enormous jungle growths, and beasts of unfamiliar terrors. But here seemed only an interminable and barren weirdness, offering neither menace to life nor any means by which to support it.

So I thought, in a double error, as I was to learn very quickly.

The sun was by now almost completely visible, but there was no cry or stir of life to break the silence.

The need to explore the new world in which I found myself was urgent. There was no hope from inaction amid such surroundings.

The cliff on one side was a wall unclimbable. The purple soil, from which I could see that a slight steam was rising, offered no invitation to lose myself among the great green globes, which seemed to be its sole fertility. There remained only the opal platform on which I stood, by which it seemed that I might go on, to right or left, for ever.

With nothing to direct my choice, I turned southward, and strapping on the knapsack in which I carried such things as I had brought with me, but from which my stock of food was exhausted, and shouldering the woodman's axe, which was the only thing beside a heavy clasp-knife which I carried as tool or weapon, I walked briskly forward.

3 Death?

I had gone no great distance, and the sun had yet scarcely cleared the horizon, when I

came to a high cavity in the cliff-wall.

It was of such height that an elephant would have looked a pigmy as he passed inward, and of a shape too regular to have been formed without tools.

The level sun shone into it, and illumed it, a very spacious tunnel, for a considerable distance. Then it bent out of sight. I went inward a few steps, and hesitated.

Anyone who, on a strange and lonely road, has reached a place where it branches in two directions, without knowledge or sign to guide his choice, will understand my feeling. Still in doubt, I walked back to the cave-mouth, and then, down the middle of the opal way, came something very swift and light. Someone who was neither man, nor beast, nor monkey. Someone who ran without effort, but as in urgent and silent fear.

She did not see me until she was level with the gap from which I watched her, and when she did, she leapt sideways with incredible

agility. The leap took her to the very edge of the opal way, and her left foot pressed for a second on the purple soil beyond. As it did so, with the speed of light itself, the nearest of the bright-green globes shot open in a score of writhing tentacles, of which one caught the foot, and dragged its victims down.

There came one scream, intense and dreadful, high and shrill, and then I watched a lithe furred human-seeming body which struggled against the clinging arm.

The tentacles were very long and thin, and of a brick-red color. The one which reached her first was not thicker, towards its end, than a man's finger, but for a moment only was there doubt of the issue.

Then a stronger tentacle got a firm grip of its victim's body, and as it did so the scream came again, but shriller, louder, and more exultant, and I realized that it was the plant that screamed, and not the prize it had captured.

I don't think I should have interfered but for that second scream of triumph, but there was something in its tone so hateful, so bestial, that an impulse of pity for its victim broke across the blank amazement of my mind, and with the feeling, as though that answered thought, I knew that she was calling to me to help her.

The axe lay ready to my hand on the cave-floor, and I picked it up and ran forward.

I brought the blade down on the nearest tentacle with such force as would have severed a branch of a well-grown tree, but it only dented a skin that was like rubber.

As I swung the axe again, a long arm caught me round both ankles and pulled. Had I not been so strange to it, had it better gauged my strength and weight, or had it not been occupied with its earlier capture, I suppose that the next minute would have ended my experience, but as it was, the clutch only stirred me to a desperation of terror that brought the axe down with double force, and

the severed limb fell quivering to the ground.

As it did so, the creature screamed again. It was a cry of the most utter terror.

And the forest answered.

It answered in a hundred voices that screamed, and questioned.

I had never known before the strength which panic and loathing may give to human muscles.

Backward writhed the frightened tentacles, their victim dropped and forgotten, and every axe-stroke that followed gashed or severed one of them, and where they were cut through, a wine-red semi-liquid jelly slowly welled from the gap.

I think as the creature contracted and closed its petals I might have stayed the blows if it had not screamed for mercy on a note which gave me a feeling of nausea, and a lust to kill, so that I struck till the great flesh-like leaves

were gashed and shredded; till, as the cries continued, I realized that the centre of its life was underground.

Then I lowered the axe, and looked around.

Dimly I was aware that my heart was beating wildly, and that I was breathing with difficulty.

Still the forest was screaming around me in deafening tones of fear and hate and menace.

I looked back to the comparative safety of the cave I had left, and I saw the one that I had saved slowly dragging herself towards it, and as I did so I was conscious that she knew my thought, and answered.

I became aware for the first time that the soil on which I stood was hot, and my feet were scorching.

I threw the axe towards the cave, and went to help the one that I had ventured to rescue, and doing this, I had a strange feeling of

repulsion, as from an alien body, and of attraction, as to a kindred soul.

I knew that she was mortally injured, and feared that I must horribly hurt the limp body as I picked it up.

I was startled by its lightness, and surprised that it made no sound.

As I lifted her, I was conscious again of the interchange of wordless thought, but when I answered mechanically with a spoken word I was rebuffed by the expression of repulsion which crossed her eyes.

But as I laid her down in the cave-mouth, wondering what I could do to aid her further, her thought answered mine clearly, "Do not touch my body. It is dead."

Then our minds met, and for some moments wrestled abortively, till I realized that I could not understand unless my own were willing, and blank, and receptive. Nor could she understand my thought unless it

consciously approached hers.

After that, we conversed in silence for some time, but very slowly. So wide was the gulf of separation in knowledge and experience, so baffling the mental shorthand by which agreed fact is implied without expression, so difficult was it to avoid the continual by-ways of explanation which only led to others, that it was a long time before I could receive even a blurred outline of the urgent facts which she was striving to give me.

By this time I realized that she regarded me as something strange and beast-like, and that any noise from my mouth would intensify this feeling against me, and confirm the judgment. I knew also that she recognized me as sympathetic, and in some measure intelligent, however physically repulsive—a repulsion made more acute by the clothes I wore, of which I was made to feel a sense of acute shame, so strongly did her mind impress my own with a conception of their indecency.

I thought that she regarded me much as we should do a half-tamed dog, ferocious, but amenable to kindness and reason, and of a possible loyalty.

I knew also that she regarded her body as a broken and negligible thing, and that her mind had concentrated on persuading me to undertake, and enabling me to understand an urgent errand the accident had interrupted.

So I sat there at the cave-mouth, while the sun rose clear from the hateful vivid green of the forest, that was still vocal with fear and excitement, while I slowly took my first and very difficult lesson in the new world I had entered.

"And now," she thought, "if that be all, and you understand, I shall be very glad to die. You will not touch me when I am dead? If you are a beast that needs such food, you will find that the jelly in the tentacles will supply you. You must wait here till the twilight."

And then she turned over, with a movement

of surprising ease in the broken limbs, and curled up, and I knew she had left the cave.

And I sat there thinking of all she had told me, and felt a great loneliness, and a great fear.

4 The Opal Way

I sat there a long time, trying to reconstruct her tale, and to find some possible explanation of its apparent paradoxes. Why should I stay there till the twilight came? I had learnt that where I sat I was in the very shadow of death. I knew that the way was long, and the message I had undertaken was of the utmost urgency.

Some reason for delay there had been, but it was like a dream which eludes waking thought. And how, in light or dark, could I cross the great chasm where the pavement

ended? I had asked her this, but she had replied as though she did not understand my difficulty. The bridge was where it was not. There was no meaning in that. Perhaps my physical limitations were beyond her understanding. Surely, if I tried that road by night, though I should avoid the terrors on either hand, I must fall into the abyss beyond, and perish.

I resolved that I would go forward, at least as far as the path was clear, and, at the worst, I knew that there were other cavities, such as this one, in which I could take refuge.

But again my resolve faltered. I *knew* that there was some reason against my going, though my thought could not recall it.

Why should I go by night?

Patiently I recalled the visions which had crossed my mind as our thoughts encountered.

But there was nothing there to guide me.

Only there were gaps I knew in the cliff-wall, and these were associated with the idea of deadly danger, but of what kind I could not discover. Her thought had gone forward with the message I was to bear to her kinsfolk on the dim gray beaches. These I saw clearly, and strange and mist-like as the vision rose, there at least was the lapping tide of the unchanging sea. I would go also to these creatures which were intelligent, though they were not men. Creatures which could understand, and perhaps show friendship, though they might think of me as the uncouth Caliban of some forgotten age.

Why should I wait for the dark? Safety to them might be to me the deadliest peril.

I would go now.

But first for food, and—*was there no fresh water in this accursed place?*

The thought struck me with such fear as I had not felt till then. There had been rain in the night, or at least a heavy mist, but now the

sun shone with increasing strength in a sky of absolute and cloudless blue. There was a slight stream rising from the hot dark-purple powdery soil of the forest. The cliff-side was hot to touch. There was no moisture on the opal pavement now.

Had I to wait till the long-distant night and the cold mist returned?

Well, I might live till then, if I must, but at least it was a new reason for exploring further.

As to food—the severed tentacles lay on the soil before me. I had been advised to try them. Raw? I looked at them more carefully than I had yet done. They had not bled, as severed limbs would do on the earth I knew. But not plants.

Dare I go again across the burning soil, and would the monster dare to renew the conflict? Every moment there had been less sign of the havoc the axe had made. The hacked and shredded petals were growing to their old

form again, but now they lay half-open to the sun, as did the whole of the forest.

Should I fear to approach it? And could it also read my thoughts, and would my fear give it confidence?

If that were so, I must school myself to feel courage. Is it not always the unknown that inspires terror, and was I not as strange to them as they to me?

My thought stopped to watch a new thing that was happening. Very cautiously, one of the petals moved aside, and very slowly an uninjured tentacle crept out across the soil. Was it feeling in the hope that its first victim still lay there? Did it hope to retrieve those broken tentacles? No, not that; for it touched one, as it seemed by chance, and shrank back, and trembled, and crept forward a different way.

Well, I would resolve it confidently. Axe in hand, I went forward. As I did so, I commenced to sing a lively tune that my

subconscious mind suggested.

But before the first line ended, it was drowned in the shrill scream of the monster, and the creeping arm leapt back to safety.

And again the scream was taken up and re-echoed by a hundred voices, hideous and deafening beyond description; and with no more thought of danger I went forward into that deadly space, among creatures that could destroy me in a moment, but that a song could terrify.

I walked quickly over the steaming soil, which was much hotter than before, picked up a piece of tentacle, perhaps six feet in length, and flung it on the pavement. Then I took it into the cave to examine it. The skin was tough and flexible, with a curious fibrous growth inside it, with hollow cells intervening. Then there was a thin membrane, and inside this a ruby-colored jelly-like substance, outwardly firm, but semi-liquid towards the centre.

I tasted this jelly and found it very sweet, but otherwise unlike anything to which I can make comparison. I ate a little, hesitating, and then decided to sling my snake-like larder over my shoulder, and have a good meal later, if I felt no ill-effects from my first adventure.

5 The Invisible Bridge

I had now resolved to go forward while I had the use of daylight to guide me. Yet, so pliable is the human mind, I felt already the reluctance with which a man must take farewell of familiar things, to face the perils of a homeless way.

I glanced again at my companion of an hour, and with a more detailed consideration than I had previously given.

Slim and graceful still, the body curved in

death.

Very close and soft was the fur that covered her, silver-gray on the back, but changing forward into a deepening chestnut. The legs were well and finely shaped, but below the knee of each there was a slender snake-like appendage, ending with curving fingers, like a tiny monkey's hand, which could close round the opposite limb and bind them together. The feet also were delicately shaped, but deeply slit into three webbed toes, of which the central one was the longest. Others—one at each side—set far back, were curled up normally, but could open sideways with a thumblike claw. The feet were furred equally with the legs, the silver-gray of the undersides lying so closely that it looked almost like a shining skin. They showed no sign of damage from the long rough journey that I knew they had made, nor was any road-dust upon them.

The limbs were colored in the same way as the body—silver-gray behind and chestnut-brown before, and the hands were almost

human, but for the webbing which had shown between the open fingers.

The head was to me the most singular, being furred like the body, and of a similar coloring. The eyes were of a very human quality, and I had seen them to be alert and intelligent. Now they were covered by a heavy lid which rose upward, and in its turn was protected by a thin film which closed down, and was lashed like a human eyelid. The ears were set far back, and were covered by a furry flap which could be closed at will to shut out air or water.

The mouth was lipless, a thin slit, with no sign of teeth. The cheeks were covered by retractile pads beneath which was a gill-like device for water-breathing.

The tail, which could curl up beneath the body till it was practically invisible, was forked, with two more of those tiny monkey-hands at its extremities.

I saw, or guessed, these details and their

significance imperfectly at the time—the more so for my pledge not to touch the abandoned body—but it was evident that it was adapted for land or water living with equal excellence.

I recognized that the novelty of what I saw was not surprising, but rather that there was so little structural change in the form of animal life over so long a period of earthly time. Still there was the vertebrate body, the limbs, the head; still a general similarity of external and, presumably, of internal organs.

I looked at the sinuous, graceful body, and wondered what it was that repelled me.

To an impartial intelligence it might be considered more beautiful than even an ideal human body, and the ideal in the human race is not the majority.

Surely, it was more so than the average of our domestic animals.

Was it the unfamiliarity only, or was it the

doubt of humanity?

But repulsion, from whatever cause, was countered by a very different feeling, which made my feet slow as I left the cave, and my glance go backward.

Then I turned resolutely to the task which I had undertaken.

The day was very still. There was no cry or motion from the great cliff-height above me. There was no flying life that crossed the unbroken blue. The forest had stilled its fear, and the monstrous growths were sprawling open upon the steaming soil. I wondered what control it might be which held them so far backward that none could reach a deadly arm across the path I kept. Perhaps the nearer soil was too shallow for the growth they needed.

I went forward in this quiet peace for about four hours, stopping twice to eat from the store I carried, which I found, though only semi-liquid at the center, had a gratifying quality of quenching thirst almost with the

first mouthful. I supposed it to have been formed largely of water, as many solids are, and to have been soluble to digestion to an unusual degree. But it is a matter which I have no competence to decide.

I know that I must have covered more than twelve miles in the first four hours, with times for rest included ... and then came the abyss.

The cliff-wall ended, and ran back in a black and barren hill, immense and desolate in the daylight.

The forest ended abruptly on the edge of a chasm so deep that, though it must have been nearly a quarter of a mile to the further side, the great depth made it look narrow.

Far below, dim and snake-like in the distance, a great river wound, between deep shelving banks that looked moss-grown, but were covered with (perhaps familiar) trees.

I stood upon the edge, which sank like a

wall, and I saw no possible way to go forward.

I knew that there was a way which I had been meant to take, and more than once I walked from side to side of the path on which I stood, bending perilously over an edge which fell almost sheer to not less than five-thousand feet below.

As I did this, the rope-like tentacle, which I was carrying over my shoulder, slipped forward. I made one effort to clutch it; then, conscious of my peril, let it go, but I was overbalanced already. With an involuntary cry, that echoed and re-echoed through the barren heights, I fell forward.

6 The Frog-Mouths

Was the abyss an illusion only? Dizzy and blank of mind, with a heart that beat to

choking, and with a bruised and injured knee,
I lay upon a level vacancy, and the cause of
the accident lay, as on nothing, beside me.

How long I lay there I have no conception. I
believe that, as my heart-beats slowed, and
my senses cleared, I fainted from a revulsion
of terror, and reviving, I lay afraid to move,
and gazing with half-delirious eyes into the
appalling depth beneath me. But memory is
indistinct, and it is a terror which I recall with
reluctance.

Soon or late, at last I realized that the path,
though invisible to me, must run out across
the gorge, and timidly, and then more boldly,
I felt to right and left, and wriggled back, and
stood once more upon the evident platform.

I remained there for a long time, seeking
courage to go forward. With a knowledge of
what to look for, I fancied that the sunshine
caught a faint gleam of opal light that crossed
the chasm.

How should I venture to tread it? How

could so frail a bridge extend so far without support or suspension? Would it sway beneath me as I advanced? Would it break at last, and drop me, a dead thing, before I reached the silver streak below?

In vain I tried to stimulate myself to the adventure. What hope was there if I did not cross it? Was I not pledged in honor to the attempt, and might not the path of honor be the path of safety also? Here, without apparent reason, an old line of forgotten verse intruded—

"'Be bold,' 'be bold' and everywhere 'be bold.'"

My mind searched backward to place it. In that remoteness of time, when all material things were unimaginably far, the imagination which formed the greatest romantic poem in the English tongue could reach to inspire me. I saw the vision of Britomart, her shield lifted over her face, go forward into the certain-seeming death of flame.

With no conscious change of resolution, I rose slowly and stepped forward, sounding my way by tapping to right and left with the axe-head, and giving that snake-like tentacle a push that sent it over the invisible edge into the depths below.

As I felt my way, I tried to look downward to watch my steps without gazing into the gulf beneath me, but when I found it impossible to do so, in a sickening terror I closed my eyes and felt forward blindly, or opened them only to gaze at the further hills.

And in this way, when I was more than half across, I first saw them, and as I did so I recalled in a moment the forgotten warning that had eluded my mind before. These were they which must be avoided at all costs, even at that of waiting in the deadly cavity till night had darkened.

They were descending the cliffs with an awkward waddle, comic enough to watch from some place of security, their bodies showing dead-white against the dull gray

background.

I could not tell certainly that I was their objective. They would reach the level some distance to the right of the end of the bridge I was crossing. The cliffs on that side left some margin by which they could reach the bridge-head, but if I could pass that, I saw that the cliff ran on as before, flush with the path, and with a similar expanse upon the left to that to which I had become accustomed. If, I thought, I could reach the bridge-end first, I should at least have a clear course, if I could outrun them. Caught here, I had no hope.

It is strange how a more urgent fear may drive out one which had seemed invincible. By some optical difference the path here was very faintly visible, a thin ribbon of opal-colored transparency, and the fact that I could fix my eyes on the point at which it reached the solid ground gave confidence. I ceased to feel my steps, and ran forward.

Doing so, I thought for a moment that my time was ample, but when they were on level

ground their gait changed. They were coming with great bounds, and straight for the bridge-head, to pass which was my only hope of safety.

I saw them more clearly now. They were as white as an ant's egg, and in shape like a squatting man. There were more than twenty coming with bounds of thirty feet, but with a distinct pause between each leap.

I was running hard now, and as I did so I shouted what I meant for a bold defiance, and the sound echoed and re-echoed up the gorge, and came back like a wail of terror from the depth below.

As I left the bridge, I saw the foremost coming on my right hand, not a hundred yards distant. In another moment I was on the path that ran on as before, the high cliff on my right, and what I had taken for a similar forest to that I had been passing hitherto, on my left hand.

I knew that it would be useless to run

further. No human speed could equal those gigantic leaps. I had no mind to feel one of the loathsome brutes upon my shoulder.

Fear more than courage, desperate fear it was, which turned my feet, and swung the axe to meet them. As I did so, I was aware that the cliff-wall was open. Not an irregular cave-hollow, but another of those masoned tunnels towering high over head. Then the foremost of my pursuers came down floppingly not two yards away.

I saw a hairless, dead-white, ape-like, frog-mouthed form, a width of jaws in a flat skull, and small malignant eyes, that had in them a malevolence different from anything I had known, or to which I can make comparison. Its hind-limbs ended in large round pads of flesh which splayed out as it hit the ground, and took the force of the impact, and appeared, with a jerking motion of the strong fore-limbs against the ground, to give the impetus to the next leap.

All this I saw, as I realized that for a

second's space it could not recover itself and leap again, and I swung the axe and struck. As I did it the thought crossed me that if the blade caught in the skull I should be weaponless, and I brought it round to take the side of the neck as though I felled a tree.

If they were strong brutes, they were not agile. The sharp blade cut straight through the throat some inches deep from side to side. The creature made no cry or motion, and no blood came from the wound. As I recovered the weapon, I stepped back into the archway.

It was twenty feet wide or more, and disproportionately high. An upright bar of a gray metal thinly veined with red divided the entrance for six feet upward.

There were a dozen of them by now that were close around the entrance, or that had leapt short, and were coming along with an awkward shambling motion.

I stood within, with the poised axe, desperately alert and watchful, and they

squatted motionlessly around. Even the one I had cut still sat with intent gaze fixed upon me,—no, not on me, suddenly I realized, it was at that red-gray bar that divided us. And then I knew that it was not fear of me, but of it, which held them back.

And as my own fear relaxed, I looked around, and saw that I was at the entrance of a very lofty passage which ran curving downward behind me. Step by step I went backward, still facing them, till the turn eventually hid them from view.

There I waited. Perhaps in time they would retire, and leave me a free exit.

After hours, it seemed, I went forward again, but they were there still, only there were so many more that all the space was crowded.

I was conscious now that I was tired to the point of exhaustion, and thirsty beyond patient endurance. To stay there was not hopeful. I gathered my remaining courage,

and commenced to explore my refuge further.

7 Capture

Very fearfully I went forward. The fact that those fierce beasts did not dare to follow was itself a warning. One thing was certain. I was in the presence here of an engineering capacity such as I had not seen previously, unless it were in the opal pavement. The passage sloped down steeply in a steady spiral. It was of ample width, and of great height. The floor was not earth or rock, but a smooth rubber-like substance that gave pleasantly underfoot. The walls were smooth and hard, colored a light gray, having a polished surface. The ceiling was opalescent, giving a faint but sufficient light, which was reflected from the polished walls.

I went down, expecting always that the steady turning descent would bring me into

some great hall or chamber, or at least into a level passage, but it did neither. I went on because I was too tired to stop, or at least because I was too tired to think of climbing upward, and to stay was hopeless.

There was no least change in the monotony of floor, or wall, or ceiling, till I felt that they must surely go on for ever, till I swayed dizzily as I descended on that continued curve, till I lost consciousness of time, and went on half-asleep, and half-believing myself to be in some nightmare of illusion. And because I was so dazed, I almost missed it.

It was a niche, or rather a cavity, in the wall, flatly paved, and having a great jar standing in it. I think the instinct of my parched frame told me it was water. The jar or basin was of the height of my shoulder, and about ten feet across. I bent my head into it and drank, and knew the joy of life as I had not imagined it before.

I stopped myself sharply with the thought

that it might be something different from wholesome water, in this place where all was strange, but I had drunk well by then. I looked round and saw a heap of large cakes of a dark-brown bread-like substance. There were nine of these neatly piled, and behind them was a white slab in the wall, on which there were three blue paintings, like Chinese picture-writing, one under the other, each about a foot deep, and too high on the slab for me to examine them.

I shredded off a great slice from the bread with the axe, and found it good, and ate heartily.

After I had eaten, I felt so well refreshed that I thought that I would rest for a few minutes only, and resume my exploration, but I must have fallen asleep, I don't know for how long—I had been awake already beyond the length of my accustomed day—but I woke as from a long night's rest, hungry and thirsty again, and I ate and drank awhile, and hesitated whether I should turn back, and hope for a clear passage, or continue down, to

find I knew not what of fear or horror at the end. But the thought of those squatting forms above was not encouraging, and to go down is easier than to climb, and so at last I decided to proceed.

For many hours I continued. Always there was the steady spiral of descent, the opal light, the high wide dove-gray walls, the steel-gray flooring, which looked so hard, but was so soft and springy to the tread. And always—I should have mentioned it before—a steady current of air came upward. I cannot say "blew" upward, it was too gentle, and too absolutely regular. It was of an exhilarating freshness, and like a cushion on which to lean forward, in a descent which might otherwise have been too steep.

So I went on, never knowing what might open before me at the next step of the turning way, but with a mind which became dulled with the monotony of the passage, so that I went on at last in a semi-conscious, dream-like condition that took no count of time —*there was a sound behind me*. There was

something with a heavier tread than mine that pursued me downward. With an instinct of unreasoned terror I commenced to run. And so doing, I kept ahead, but I gained little. I looked back, but the curving passage was bare. Only I heard the tread, which I could not distance.

A sense of uselessness of flight steadied me, and I recalled my resolution to meet the unknown boldly, as the safest way.

I stopped, stepped back against the wall, and waited. Then he strode past, and was gone in a moment. He was a man of giant size, with a skin yellower than old ivory, and of a curious smoothness. He wore no clothes, but had a sack or basket hanging upon his back, and round his waist a belt with bright metal studs or clips, from which, three on each side, six of the frog-like apes that had pursued me hung by a leg; swinging and writhing, and snapping with fierce teeth against the flanks of their captor—teeth which made less mark on the polished smoothness of the skin than if it had been

ivory.

So much I noticed as he passed. He gave no sign that he saw me.

I was still standing there when I heard him returning.

This time he picked me up, as a gardener might pick up an earwig, and dropped me over his shoulder into the basket he carried.

I fell among moss, of a coarse growth, like sea-weed, but very soft and yielding. It was of a sage-green color, and of a very pleasant odor, which I cannot describe. A new scent is, like a new color, beyond imagination.

I burrowed deeply into the softness of the moss, and feared and wondered. But the present comfort was very great, and I reflected that I had not been hurt, and that for such strength so to lift me meant I had been picked up gently.

I think I should have slept, had he not lifted

the basket from his shoulders, and lowered it to the ground, closing the top, which drew in with a short thong, as he did so.

For a few moments I lay still, and then wriggled through the moss till I could see out of the opening, which was wide enough for a considerable view, though not sufficient for me to escape.

I saw that we were in a cavity, like that in which I had rested previously.

There were the same furnishings, and on the wall-tablet the giant was painting a fourth mark, below three which was there already.

He had taken off his belt, and thrown it into a corner, with the six captives still fastened to it.

He now pulled one of them off, and taking it between thumb and finger, shredded the four limbs. While he did this, the creature made no sound, but the wide jaws snapped continually.

Laying down the limbless body, he proceeded to peel and eat the limbs as one might shred off the skin of a banana. They did not bleed, the flesh being like a stiff jelly, of a bright-red color, and veined with a gristly white substance, giving an appearance like the flesh of a pomegranate.

Hideous as these creatures were, it shocked me to see this callous tearing of one that still lived, apparently with undiminished vitality; but the eater's face, as I now saw it, had no suggestion of savagery. Rather it was melancholy and preoccupied, and as he ate he talked continually to himself in a plaintive monotone, though with an organ volume.

I reflected that men who are otherwise humane will swallow a living oyster, of the skinning of eels, of the fish that are boiled alive in Indian kettles, and of a hundred cruelties to which custom has inured mankind, and thought I understood, however incompletely—which, of course, I did not.

The limbs being gone, he picked up the

trunk, and, twisting off the gnashing head, he threw it down and proceeded to complete his meal. Such offal as there was—it was unlike that of any creature familiar to me—he collected neatly, with the peeled skin, and the severed head, and opening the basket in which I lay, threw them in with me. I realized afterwards that it was for the orderly deposit of such refuse, among the aromatic moss, that he carried it with him.

Afterwards—but not then. For as he shook and closed the basket the severed head rolled against me, and the snapping teeth ripped the leather of my left sleeve from wrist to elbow. Panic seized me at this, beyond reason, and I was more terrified of one severed head than I had been before of the whole animal. How, I thought, if we were both carried in the basket together, and it were shaken against me? Already I felt its wide mouth closing on my flesh, and biting deeper while I strove to shake it free, with no body to strike at. How if there should be five more heads tumbling about me? And how soon did they really die? Terror edging my wits, I realized that because

their bodies had not the thin fluid of familiar blood, the head could only be very slowly affected, by the separation. Then how long might—? I struggled up to the mouth of the basket.

It was drawn too tightly for escape, though I could see through it as before.

My captor lay stretched full length. An arm moved restlessly. More than once he muttered the same words. *E-lo-me, E-lo-me*, so it sounded, with a hopeless, falling cadence, infinitely sad.

Evidently I was forgotten, if I had ever held his thought.

After a time he slept.

Then I struggled to kick back the moss, and gain a space to stand upright, and swing the axe, and desperately I attacked the side of the basket.

It proved unexpectedly easy, and then

difficult.

The first stroke cut down a long slit with a rasping sound, and the light shone through it. The next stroke made a parallel slit, and I thought that a few more would bring my freedom. But I found that though I could make many downward slits, I could not squeeze myself through them, and to cross-cut was a different matter. I hacked long and desperately before I contrived a ragged hole, through which I crawled to freedom.

As I escaped, my fear left me. I did not dread the sleeping giant one tenth as much as the contact of the unbodied head, with its snapping jaws, and small malignant eyes.

Deliberately, I drank and ate before I turned upward way.

Of that long toil there is little that is worth a word, with so much else for telling.

Somewhat the rising current of air must have buoyed me. Coming to the higher

resting-place, I slept long, and ate and drank.

8 *The Birds*

When I came again to the surface-world there was no sign of life around, but a great stillness, and the dawn was breaking in an unimagined splendor.

On my left hand, not distant, sank the ravine, black and terrible. Beyond it was the distant forest of the nameless things. But before me, to the reach of sight, the ground sloped downward, and was covered with a level-surfaced growth, so close that I could only guess its depth, but showing only a sea of leaves, not larger than a man's hand, and of a bright green, as though varnished; and these leaves the dawn-light altered to reflected gold, so that my dazzled sight recoiled from a splendor beyond endurance.

It was as though one should look straight at the noonday sun, to find a glory not of one small-seeming orb, but of stretched leagues, and myriad facets, of an equal brilliance.

But at length, as the sun rose, the light changed and faded. A thin mist moved over the surface of the unending field of green, but was not dense enough to hide it.

The green growth came to the very edge of the opal path, and looking down I saw a tangle of sinuous macaroni-like stalks that twisted restlessly, having leaves only at the top, on the close and level surface; and as I watched, tongues like pink worms pushed upward and licked and wavered in the air, and drew backward. As the day advanced, thousands of these pink tongues were thrust upward and withdrawn continually, giving a wavering pinkness to the glossy green. It might have had beauty to familiar eyes, but to mine it had a loathsome strangeness, so that I was reluctant to walk beside it, and for some time I sat at the cave-mouth and pondered. I was half tempted to descend once more and

face what might be in the depths below. Certainly, there I had found water and something akin to human food, and evidence was in that mighty tunnel itself of such work as no brute creatures could contrive.

I reflected, was it not reasonable that there should be a less highly cultured life on a planet's surface; subject to wind and rain and all inclemencies; than in the sheltered security of its vast interior? Was it not an amazing thing that the men of my own time, fatuously imagining communication with incredibly distant worlds, had been contentedly ignorant of their own, ten miles below the surface; had made facile and contradictory theories of its interior, none of which the few known facts supported; and because they found some increase in the temperature for a trivial distance downward, had been content to conclude, without attempt at verification, that this heat increased indefinitely? How diligently they searched the secrets of the most distant stars, while they had scarcely scratched the surface of the one on which their lives depended!

So I thought, but instinct conquered. I was a creature born to the wind and rain, and not to the hidden depths beneath me. Even though these bordering growths were but the kitchen-gardens of the intelligences below—as indeed they might be—in a moment I saw it, wondering that I had not seen it sooner. Great stretches of one plant in weedless soil. Even if the life around me were but as that of insects, useful or noxious, or of beasts of food for their keepers—still here at least was the sun, and something of the stars I knew.

Here, too, I had met the only creature with which I had changed thoughts, however strangely, and to whom I had made a voiceless promise. At the thought, I rose.

As I thought of it, the idea that I was in a vegetable garden of subterranean giants gained in plausibility. The memory of that unrailed invisible bridge, which to my imagination had seemed as thin and fragile as a sheet of mica, made me doubt for a moment, till I remembered that it spanned the whole space without support from beneath or

above, and had not swayed when I crossed it, and that it was of a sufficient width to give breadth of foothold even to the huge bulk of my recent captor, if he were able to walk in confidence across it.

With this thought came a wonder of what different world might be upon the higher level of the cliff-top, which now seemed to me as no more than the side of a trenched space of tillage, but I knew that my pledged way was straight onward, even could I have climbed the abrupt wall, which gave no foothold.

On my left hand, as I went on, the sea of varnished leaves still sloped downward, stretched away to a now misty horizon, and I began to compare its sameness unfavorably with that of the familiar world I knew, till I considered how little I had yet seen, in comparison with the extent of the probable land-surface which lay beyond me.

If a visitor to my own world, from some distant planet, were set down for a few days

on the Antarctic continent, how different would be his report from that of one who spent the same time wandering in the Sahara desert, or amid the steaming heat of the Amazonian forests, or the cotton-mills of Lancashire. And there were indications already that I had reached a world where life extended deeply below the surface of the land, and where the sea had its nations also.

Only the air seemed vacant.

I had come to a place at which the cliff-wall, though still too steep to climb for the first ten or twenty yards, sloped backward considerably, so that I had a wider view of the sky above me, and looking up I saw a flock of birds of the appearance of pigeons, having a similar habit of flight, but larger, that moved above me, not flying as at ease, but darting wildly from side to side, as though in avoidance of some deadly danger.

The next moment the cause of their agitation became visible. There were a number of huge black flying shapes which

pursued them. But the inexplicable thing was that the hunted birds did not fly from their enemies across the open sky which stretched away to the horizon.

Rather, as though held back by some invisible wall, they swerved and dodged backward and forward, while their pursuers, with huge black slower-beating wings stretched across the sky, were always heading them back, but seemed themselves to be of no mind to follow them closely.

For some time I watched the duel, while the black hunters gradually closed upon their intended victims, till they had no space left to manoeuvre, and were becoming crowded overhead, yet still with no bird going over the invisible boundary within which the deadly game was played.

Then came the last act of the drama. The desperate quarry turned and tried to dart backward, through the dark line of the beaters.

Screams of siren-like exultation deafened the sky.

Then a cornered bird must have crossed the invisible boundary which they had avoided.

Like a stone it fell instantly. For a moment, as the glossy leaves parted, and the pink tongues dragged it in, I had the sight of a dove-like bird, of a wedgwood-blue color, but with a very long and slender beak, curving slightly downward. In size it resembled the large pigeons, called runts, which are bred for eating in Italy.

It was the most familiar-seeming thing, except the friendly stars, that I had yet seen.

Its attacker, perhaps misled by the error of the bird it followed, must have got at least one of its wide-spreading wings above that fatal vacancy. Down it came also, though more slowly, turning in the air, striving with desperate flutterings to recover balance in a space between the cliff and the region of its terror, which was too narrow to give its wings

full freedom.

It came down on the path quite near me; the great flapping vans making a wind against which I stood with difficulty.

Then it closed them, and gained its feet, and looked round, with a monstrous long-necked head reaching out to either side, like a hen's, as it did so.

It was not black, as it had looked to be in the sunlight, but of a dull-brown color, inclining on the head and neck to a dark yellow. It was not feathered at all, but the skin, which lay in loose folds and ridges, which it could inflate at will, and which had no doubt served to break its fall, was of a leathery texture, and the wide-spreading wings were of a similar material.

It had one eye only, but of two facets, or perhaps I should say that its eyes were contained beneath one eyelid. The eye, or facet, with which it looked, would sparkle and light up with intelligence, while the other

remained dull and vacant.

When it saw me first, it had, I thought, an instant of terror, turning into a vast perplexity. For some seconds the head remained twisted in my direction.

I had learned something in the lesson of confidence, and I looked back as steadily, but with a thought that if it wished to come my way it should have all the space available to pass me in comfort.

Whether it understood my thought I could not tell, but at length it turned its head away, and from that moment showed no consciousness of my existence. No doubt its own troubles were sufficient.

It had its head lifted now, and was calling loudly, with a whistling scream, to which a call replied from the cliff-top, and looking up I saw that the edge was lined by the great birds, now perched upon it, with long necks craning over.

I began to recognize its dilemma. For some reason it was evident that the air above the plain had no power to sustain its flight. Why, I could not imagine, but the fact was clear. On the other side was the cliff-wall, and between was the width of the opal path, on which there would be less than space to have spread its wings if it tried to rise and fly along it, even if it could rise from level ground, of which it might not be capable. The cliff here receded somewhat, as I have said, and I wondered whether it would attempt to scramble up it with beak and claws, and such help as its wings could give. But the recession was not regular. There were perpendicular crags, which might well have baffled it. Anyway, after much consultation with its friends above, of which one seemed to have the most to say, whether from leadership or affection, it decided to make its way backward the way I had come, where it may have considered that the width of the gorge, or the easier rocks from which those frog-faced brutes assailed me, would give it access to the space it needed.

So it turned from me with a rapid shuffling walk, while its companions moved along the cliff-top beside it with continued screams of advice, or encouragement; and it was with no reluctance that I proceeded in the opposite direction.

9 The Tunnel of Fear

The nervousness of the great bird while (as it were) trespassing on the opal pavement, confirmed my impression of the prestige enjoyed by the subterranean dwellers, among the creatures of the outer surface of the world into which I had entered. Its initial terror of myself, until it had recognized me as something distinct and inferior, was significant.

So far, I had seen only one of these dreaded beings, from whom I had escaped with an ease which might not be repeated. How often,

or at what times, they were likely to appear on the surface, I could not know, but I had learnt in that first dream-like interview, that the entrances to their excavations were of special danger, and I knew that these were not numerous.

Anyway, I had no choice but to push forward. It was the more urgent because the claims of thirst and hunger were becoming unpleasantly assertive—indeed, at this time, had I crossed another of those subterranean entrances, I think I must have adventured down it at the call of this primal need, but no such opportunity came, and before the sun had reached its meridian, I saw the end of this stage of my journey.

I had learnt, in my first instructions, that the path that led down to the gray beaches was one which must be traversed with the utmost rapidity. I did not guess its length, nor could I foresee that in all the strange and dreadful adventures which were before me, there would be few indeed to exceed its horror.

I knew, from the depth of the gorge I had crossed, that I was high above the sea-level. I saw that the garden-ground (if such it were) sloped down, for many gradual miles, to an indistinct horizon. I looked continually for the break in that sea of pink and glossy green which would enable me to cross it.

When it came, I did not see it at first, my eyes being drawn to the steaming tank upon my other side. For here the cliff curved backward, giving space for an artificial lake of heated water, from which a steam rose continually, such as almost hid the cliffs upon the farther sides.

I found it too hot to drink, but I filled a tin cup which my knapsack held, and waited for it to cool.

It had a bitter and unpleasant taste, but I was in too great a need to be cautious. While I cooled a second cup at greater leisure, I looked round and discovered that I had reached the place I was seeking.

I saw, on my left, the entrance to a long straight tunnel sloping gently downward. This entrance was reached by a terraced drop in the opal roadway. The tunnel had a floor of yellow sand, which was divided by a narrow conduit down which an overflow from the heated tank ran smoothly, and very swiftly, owing to the slope at which it flowed. The sides of the tunnel were of a smooth gray material, not concave but flat, converging upward, till they almost met at the top, but not quite, there being a slit of perhaps two inches dividing them, through which a certain amount of light entered the tunnel.

It had a sinister appearance, and as I sat for a time regarding it, I considered what I might possibly have to fear if I should endeavor to penetrate it.

The purpose of the great lake of heated water behind me appeared to be evident. It must be the source from which the great expanse of ordered growth was irrigated, and perhaps fed. The stream that came through the tunnel might be a mere overflow, which

was drained off into the sea, or it might be used for the filling of subterranean pipes lower down the slope. In either case, it did not greatly concern me—or so I thought, not foreseeing how greatly I should need its help.

The yellow sand on either side supplied a sufficient space on which to walk upright beneath the shelving walls.

It was dimly lit from above, and obscured by the steam which rose from the water, but I could see that it ran straight on for a long distance. Actually, it was a length of about twelve miles, as I learnt afterwards.

It appeared that, being entered, it would offer no exit until I reached the further end.

But there was no appearance of any possible danger, and I knew that it was the way which I had been directed to take. The only warning I had received was to traverse it as rapidly as possible, and it certainly did not appear to be an inviting avenue in which to linger.

Perhaps it was the fact that I must emerge from it on the threshold of a new experience, the nature of which I could only guess very dimly, that made me rest so long, even when I waked from the sleep I needed, before I entered the passage, but I remember that I did it with a great reluctance, and started at a pace which, though it might not be equal to the light swift running of my instructress, was sufficient to take me a long way forward.

After a time, I noticed that my feet were becoming warm, and realized that the sand must be heated, though not so much so as the soil on which I had walked previously. I did not think it to be sufficiently so to constitute a serious danger, or discomfort, but I considered that it might be a different matter to a foot protected only by its own fur, and, supposing that I had found the explanation of the warning, and that it did not affect me, and being somewhat short of breath from the long spurt I had taken, I slackened to a quieter walk,—and as my right foot came down, a pink streak shot out of the sand a few inches from it, and smacked against my ankle, with a

sound like a whip lash. I jumped with a cry of horror, for the grip held, and I was powerless to break it. The pink worm did not twine round my foot, but lay up the side, holding on, leech-like, by power of suction. It was trying to drag the foot into the sand, but, for the moment, that was beyond its power.

Wrenching desperately, I tried to get loose the axe, for which I had expected no use, and which was slung on my back, under the knapsack, for convenience as I ran. When I got it clear I realized that I could not strike hard against my own ankle, and to an attempt at cutting, my assailant showed the resilient rubber-like quality which seemed common to several of the forms of life with which I was becoming familiar. With a despairing effort I strained my foot a few inches from the ground, and drove a hard blow beneath it, at which the severed worm fell writhing.

But now there were two others round my left foot, and their united strength was too great for me to lift it to enable me to deal with them in the same way. I gave up the axe, and hacked them free with the clasp knife.

Then I saw that the ground behind me, and for several yards in front, showed similar worms that had pushed up through the sand, and waved and felt around for the origin of the vibrations which disturbed them.

No doubt they had been rising behind me all the time, but I had passed over the ground so quickly that I had always been in advance of my danger, and unaware that it threatened me.

I suppose that the roots of the plants without—if plants they could be called—grew under the wall of the tunnel, and lived among the sand, though the conditions did not allow of the leaves shooting up in such soil, or in the absence of the light they needed.

I noticed with some relief that the surrounding tongues could not reach me while I remained motionless, and I concluded that they must be in some way rooted, or growing from a common source, which kept them in their places.

I watched for perhaps half an hour without motion while the long tongues gradually quietened, and then thinking that the time would soon come when I could make a rush to pass them, I made a careless movement, which stirred them to fresh activity, and the weary waiting had to be commenced again. At last, when most of them had withdrawn, and the rest were quiescent, I made a sudden rush, and though more than one shot upward as I passed, I ran through them successfully.

For some time I ran on at my utmost speed, and exhausted myself proportionately. For another mile, perhaps, I kept to a panting trot, and I began to see the pink heads thrust up as I passed them. I looked back and saw them already high in the air a few yards behind. The sight gave me a fresh spurt, but it could not last. I could see no end to the tunnel. In fact I could see a very moderate distance only, owing to the steam in the atmosphere, and the narrow slit through which the light must enter. I had no means of estimating its length. It might be five miles. It might be fifty. Soon my pace slackened. Soon I was

hacking with my knife again. Then there was the weary motionless waiting, till I could again go forward in safety.

The next time my foot was caught I fell forward, and before I could rise, a dozen of them were round me. One held me by the right wrist, pulling till the hand was sunk in the sand, despite my frenzied efforts to free it. I was carrying the clasp-knife open in this hand, but I caught it up with my left and hacked through the sand, and at last cut the pulling worm that held me. I turned to others that were straining at my sides and legs, and one by one I cut them through. Then I noticed that my right wrist was streaming with blood, and thought at first that the knife had slashed it, till I saw that a broad line across the back was mottled with punctured wounds, where the worm had sucked it.

I sat there for a long time, with neither strength nor courage to adventure farther. I thought of going back, but I felt that the distance would be beyond my strength.

The distance ahead might be less—it seemed my one hope. (It was actually much longer, if I estimate correctly how far I had then gone.) Anyway, it would be uphill back, and that would defeat my speed, and I supposed that the creatures might be more alert after I had disturbed them. I wondered if I could tap the ground in front of me and cut them down, one by one, as they pushed upward. But I had had no food for many hours, and I was already conscious of exhaustion. Water I could have, and I drank again, after cooling it. I thought of wading in the central stream, but even could I have kept my feet in that swift smooth current I supposed that the heat would be unendurable. And then came a thought which animated me with a fresh hope. Could I leap to the other side? It seemed too broad to be possible—and I could get no run for the jump, unless I took it at a slant, which would make it longer. I had no more than space to stand upright for about a yard from the water's edge.

The sand had become quiet now. I would go forward while I could, and try the leap

when the need grew urgent. Was it wise to wait till I should be again too exhausted to try it? On an impulse I leapt. In the nervous fear of falling into the stream I leapt too far, and my head struck the opposite wall, though not severely.

There was no relief on this side. The jar with which I struck the ground roused my enemies with such celerity that I barely escaped them. As I ran I thought I had gained nothing, till I realized that if I were hard pressed I could always win a moment's freedom, or a fresh start, if I jumped again.

It was not much, but it was something.

Of the rest of that passage I do not wish to write in detail. I do not wish to recall it.

It is enough that the time came when a point of light showed in the distance, and when I staggered into the daylight. Of the scene that lay before me, I was not clearly conscious. I was at the utmost point of fatigue of nerve and body. I lay down and slept till

the day—which now covered a period of more than four times that to which I was accustomed—was sinking toward sunset.

10 *The Amphibians*

I awakened at last to a confused memory only, recalling how I had leapt short and fallen into the steaming water, which, when it reached that place, must have cooled.

Vaguely I remembered how it had swept me down, and of a half-stunned instinctive effort to regain my feet, but of how I got out, or whether I had struggled long in the water, or been able to wade down it, and so escape the danger of the sand, I could not recall with certainty. I think I must have been on the sand for the last few yards, or I should have been swept over the edge by the stream, which fell a sheer five hundred feet into the sea beneath. For I was lying on a level opal path such as I had traversed previously, with

this difference only, that the cultivated ground sloped upward behind me, and the cliff upon the other side sank steeply to the sea.

The sun was still hot—more so on this lower level than on the higher ground I had left—and it had dried me while I slept, but I was stiff with wounds and exhaustion, and faint with hunger, and I found that I could only stand with difficulty. My boots were soaked with blood, and the laces torn away, so that I had to use some string from my little store of necessities with which to fasten them.

If I wished to reach the end of my journey alive I knew that I must do so quickly; but I looked round in vain for any path to help.

Beneath me now was the unchanging sea, blue and smooth, with a touch of white where the ground shallowed it. Three miles out, it may be, showed the long line of rocks for which I had to look.

Beyond, I knew, must be the gray beaches

which I was seeking.

But how could I cross the intervening water? It was a difficulty which might not have occurred to a creature no more at home on land than in the water, or perhaps less so.

But I was not gilled or web-footed.

Sign of life there was none. Not even a bird was winging across the unclouded blue.

Even to descend the cliff was impossible.

I might explore the path either to right or left, and with no choice between them, for it ran straight on as far as I could see in either direction.

And then my eyes were attracted by a dark spot, a blur—a slowly lengthening blur, which came from the black rocks, and was gradually stretching toward me over the motionless water.

My perception was quickened by past experience. Here must be another invisible

bridge, by which something large and formidable was crossing toward me.

In fact, as I quickly proved, the bridge stretched out straight before the place which I was seated, and I had only to remain, and whatever was coming must inevitably encounter me.

Almost too worn for fear, and recognizing the futility of evasion, I resolved to do so.

I had arrived at so low a point that only active help could aid me. If that which approached were hostile or indifferent the result would be similar. So I waited.

It was not very long—for the approach came swiftly—before I was able to guess that it consisted of a long column of creatures similar to her whom I had first met. They stretched for half a furlong in mid-air, advancing at a rapid trot, and as they came nearer I recalled their mode of conversing, and tried to adjust my mind, to get, if possible, into sympathy with them.

After a time I succeeded—at least in hearing their minds, though they did not respond. I suppose that this was because they were all thinking as one, for normally I found it impossible to establish conversation in this way, except by mutual willingness.

I found that these creatures, who had no use for articulate speech, and to whom sound was an outrage, possessed at once a finer music and a higher poetry than our clumsier arts had even imagined.

For they made the music in their minds, or recked it, if it had been composed earlier, and its notes, that rose and fell, were the very thoughts that inspired it. It was now a marching chant, and a war-song of a kind, as I heard it—

We have offered our lives on the palm of
one hand,
(Is it Wrong that hath willed? Is it God
Who hath planned?)
To be taken and lost at our Leaders'
command.

We who are but God's thought.—

So far I followed it, and then the unison broke, for they perceived me, and doubted.

Nothing more of their thoughts could I learn till they had reached the spot where I sat, and were filing past it. I saw that they were in all respects similar to the one with whom I had been first acquainted, except that the fur of each was trimmed or patterned in a distinctive manner, until, when the first score had passed, there came a group of five who had no such marks upon them, but were in that, and in all other respects, like the one I first met. Of these, one detached herself from the group and came toward me.

I had learnt enough of their conversing to make my mind at once blank and receptive to receive her question. I say "her," not because these creatures showed any divergencies of form to indicate a bisexual species, but because the slim bodies gave me an

impression of femininity, which makes "it" an inadequate pronoun. She asked—"You bring a message? We have received it already, but I should like to hear it from you." I replied, "It is this, *I could do nothing. She is in the fifth killing-pen on the left. There is no watch on the higher side, and it can be climbed with little peril. The weapons are not guarded, but the pens are. Bring all you can, except those who pass the fish forward. You must leave my body till the return, for the fault was mine.*"

She replied, her mind an open curiosity concerning me as she did so, "You have remembered well. And she tells me that you saved her body, for which we are grateful."

I answered, "I thought I left her dead in the tunnel. Has she come here before me?"

"We hope her body may still be there. It is dead now, but it should not be damaged beyond remedy."

My mind wondered vaguely, and her own answered. "You are a strange animal, and as

ignorant as you are dirty. There are two coming which will bring you food, and which you must first eat, and then continue with us, for we could not leave you in safety, and your body, apart from its deficiencies and that its clumsy coverings are damaged, appears to be useless until food has restored it."

Her thought was without hostility; it was kind in tone, however offensive in substance. She was clearly startled on realizing the mental protest with which I received it. She went on, "You have been useful, and what we can do for you we will. But if this wild inevitable folly does not destroy us, I suppose that we must give you up to the Dwellers, for you seem to me as one that comes from other lands, whom we are unable to harbour."

I have tried to translate the thoughts she gave me into English words, but it is not easy, and the difficulty is particularly great where people or places are mentioned. For in the language of thought it is evident that proper names can have no place. The clumsy device of names is a necessity of articulate

speech, which Adam first discovered when he attempted language. Consequently, when I write of the "Dwellers" I use the best word I can apply to the idea she gave me, which was that of a dominant race, by whom the earth—or that part of it—was held as men hold civilized lands today, and without whose consent no other creature can remain in security. There was a subtle implication of a shadow beyond, against which they were leagued in common, but it was too formless for me to even understand.

Had dogs continued, I wondered, through five hundred millenniums?

The two creatures which trotted at the rear of the column, and which now paused at her signal, were shaggy, web-footed, with the flapped gills with which I was already familiar, obviously amphibious, with seals' eyes, and of the bulk of a walrus. Why should I think of dogs? But the identity of a dog is not the result of a physical pattern, or how should we call a Great Dane by the same name as a Skye Terrier?

Not for the first time or the last, I wondered less at the differences of this strange world than at its similarities to the one behind me.

Round the neck of each of these creatures hung a bag containing food, intended (as I learnt later) for their own eating. Of this she directed me to take some for my own use from the nearer one, and when I hesitated, with mingled fear and repulsion, the sea-dog thrust out an unexpected length of narrow tongue, that curled down, snake-like, into the bag, and drew out an object the size of a swan's egg, but covered with a tough flexible skin of mottled gray.

At this my guide threw me a thought of sharp impatience, and enjoined me to eat it quickly.

I took it then, and broke the skin, and found it contained a semi-liquid substance, of a slate-gray colour, which I tasted doubtfully, and then ate with eagerness, for it was sweet and of a delightful taste, and had a quality which appeased both thirst and hunger.

11 *The Problem*

I ate quickly, for the impatience of my companion's mind was affecting me like a physical pressure, and we then set off rapidly to overtake the troop, which had now disappeared in the tunnel, my energy being stimulated to the swift exertion, either by the force of my companion's will, or by the strange food.

As we ran, our minds met and contended, making little progress at first, for her curiosity was keen, and was of a kind which, being without anxiety, and regarding me only as a strange animal which had lost its way, was not easily turned, while I was acutely conscious that I had here a friendly intelligence which, if I could use the time to advantage, might give me information of vital importance, to enable me to move with safety through the unfamiliar ways to which I had

committed myself.

Consequently we each strove for some moments to obtain information rather than provide it, but in the end she gave way, thinking she would gain more by humoring me, and that my questions could hardly fail to disclose my own identity.

I then asked her how it was that the troop, the rear of which we had now gained, was able to traverse the tunnel in safety. I recognized that the pace at which they moved must give some advantage, but I should have supposed that, though the first might pass, the roused worms would strike at those that followed. She replied that the combined will-power of the troop held them down very easily, on which I mentioned my own experience, and admitted that I had made no effort to use my will-power against them. She replied that this was natural in such an animal as I, and that I had possibly allowed anger, or even fear, to enter my mind, so descending to their own level, and rendering it easier for them to attack me.

I could not deny this, but asked why she regarded me so contemptuously. She replied that, as I was a strange creature to her, she could only judge me by the degree of intelligence which I exhibited, but that a species of any eminence could hardly be content to exist in bodies so ugly, so awkward, and so badly made. She added that many of the lowest creatures of the ocean-floor possessed bodies which were complete and sufficient without extraneous coverings.

I replied that the human body was not necessarily insufficient, but that clothing might be worn from a sense of shame, or as an ornament.

She said that she understood the sense of shame, which she should feel very strongly herself if she were burdened with such a body, but if I regarded my clothes as ornamental, it was a point on which we must differ; and, in that case, the wearing of clothes confessed me to be an inferior, even among my own kind, as a Leader naturally would not enter into such a competition.

I was puzzled by this reply, and she instanced the fact that she, and other Leaders of her kind, did not pattern their fur, which would bring them into unseemly competition with those below them—a competition which would lead to envy if they succeeded, or ridicule if they failed to outdo their rivals.

I then asked a number of questions intended to guide me as to the conditions of the world I had entered, and it will be most convenient to give the facts—as far as I was then able to understand them—in the form of a direct statement rather than in that of the conversation which gained them.

I learnt that the country in which I found myself was an island continent, of about the size of Australia, but in the northern hemisphere, as the stars had told me. It was controlled by the Dwellers, who had lived below its surface for a long period of time, of the duration of which I could form no idea, nor could I obtain any information as to the depth or extent of their subterranean excavations, for the sufficient reason that no

Amphibian had ever penetrated them. The island continent was surrounded on every side by a great ocean, beyond which was a world containing such inhabitants that the Dwellers had first gone underground to escape them, and then, at a later period, planted around the whole extent of the coast a girdle of strange growths, above which the air had no sustaining power, and which had protected it so effectively that for an enormous period of time they were left in undisputed isolation.

In some remote antiquity they had entered into a treaty with the Amphibians by which it was agreed that they should be left in possession of the numerous rocky islets which surrounded a large part of the coast, on three conditions—they were to keep certain subterranean reservoirs filled with fresh fish continually; they were to hold no intercourse with the farther world; and they were to make no attempt to penetrate inland, either above or below the surface.

Until recently, these conditions had been

observed with exactness. They had, beneath the ocean, an undisputed dominion of enormous area; they did not even cross to the farther sides of the fish-tanks they filled, from which the Dwellers netted the shoals of fish which they had herded into them; they made no attempt to penetrate the protective belt which surrounded the surface area; and they entirely avoided the other continents of which the land surface of the earth consisted.

For the whole period since this treaty was made—I could only marvel at their longevity—they had been ruled by a Council of Seven, whose headquarters were beneath the black rocks which I had observed to seaward.

The Council decided all matters affecting the welfare of the community by thinking upon them until they arrived at unanimity, and these decisions were always accepted without dissent.

But there was one of the Seven who had not been present when the treaty was made. She had been long absent, and was supposed to

have been dead, but she had subsequently returned from the exploration of the caves of a range of submarine mountains at the farther end of the earth, in which she had met with such adventures as had detained her for a long period. Not having been a party of the treaty, she had not felt herself bound in honor, as had the other six, to observe it. Nor, being of the Seven, did she feel controlled by their authority, as did the rest of the community. She was of a disposition which loved the adventures of strange ways, and, from the first, had wished to explore the interior of the forbidden continent. For a very long period she had been held back by the wishes of her companions, and by the fear that she might be the cause of disaster to them, but at last a time had come when the impulse had been irresistible, and there had been none near to restrain her. She had spent the night on the forbidden land, and had returned at dawn with a strange tale of a silent country, where all things slept, and where trees and grasses grew, such as they had never seen, or remembered only with the vagueness of a distant dream.

After this escapade they watched in doubt lest the Dwellers had been aware of it, but the days passed in safety, and at length she ventured again and again—always returning before the dawn, until the tales she brought enabled them to visualize a land inhabited by many species of creatures, such as the Dwellers permitted to run wild, or conserved for their utilities to themselves, and of a fertility which was alluringly different from the ocean meadows in which they were accustomed to wander, but in which all creatures slept in the night-time, and even the Dwellers did not appear upon the surface of the land they owned.

After a time it appeared certain that these expeditions might be taken with impunity, provided that the night were chosen, and a return made before sunrise. But the time came when the desire to see the moving life of the daytime overcame her. She remained in hiding, she saw much, and the next time she stayed away for three days. Acting with great caution, and with the advantage of her past experience, she returned in safety and

unsuspected; but in the meantime a companion, alarmed at her lengthened absence, had started out to find her. On learning this, she at once set out again, though the day was then dawning, and the open paths had to be taken at a new peril; she found her would-be rescuer herself captured, and apparently in the greatest danger, and on her return to obtain the help which was essential, had encountered me, with the result of which I knew already.

Conscious that her body was damaged beyond immediate remedy, and aware that her separate mind could not communicate with her friends unless their own should be receptive, she had entrusted me with the message which I had tardily delivered. But, in the meantime, she had found it easy to establish intercourse with minds which were anxiously awaiting news of herself and her companion, and it was on the data she had supplied that the expedition was started.

It was a deliberate breach of the treaty on which their security was founded, but with

two of their number in jeopardy, and the body of one lying where the Dwellers could not fail to find it sooner or later, they had felt that they had no alternative but to attempt the enterprise.

Among the various creatures which lived upon the surface of the continent, it appeared that there were certain ferocious animals of the lowest kind, gregarious in their habits, collected in mountain strongholds, and having bodies which were like those of fish in this respect, that they decayed after a short space of years, sometimes even rotting while the unfortunate animals remained within them, and being continually replaced by young of the same species which grew up around them. They did not appear to have any life apart from these bodies, though my informant could not tell with certainty whether they actually ceased to exist when their bodies perished, or were incarnated in their descendants.

These creatures had carnivorous feasts at regular intervals, in anticipation of which

they hunted the wild things of the land, and set traps for them, into one of which the unfortunate Amphibian had fallen. As one of these feast days was shortly due, she was now penned up, not merely in anticipation of death, but that her body might be destroyed beyond remedy, in which case I understood that the path of re-incarnation might be both long and difficult.

The problems were, therefore, first, to remove the body which lay in the tunnel entrance to a place of safety, where it could be repaired, and its owner could resume it; and second, to rescue her companion either by force or subtlety, bringing their faculty of thinking in unison, and of combined will-power, to operate against opponents who were not expecting attack, and who relied upon their savage strength and weapons to maintain their own security, and to hold the prey that they had captured; and third, to do these things, if either were possible, without the knowledge of the Dwellers, whose means of information were only vaguely guessed, but who were known to come on the surface

in the daytime.

12 *The March*

We were now clear of the covered way, under a sky of brilliant starshine, holding a course through the darkness that never wavered or slackened, even when the gorge was crossed by the invisible bridge.

Here it occurred to me to ask how, if the country relied upon its girdle of strange growths for its immunity from the outside world, it could afford to risk invasion up so wide an unprotected channel as the gorge supplied, but I could learn nothing beyond the suggestion that its enemies would probably be too stupid to discover the gap (if it really were unprotected), which seemed a strange supposition when applied to a power so dreaded, and the information that this gorge was remembered as the scene of a great battle

before the protective girdle had been planted, in which the Dwellers had been destroyed in hundreds, but in which one of their enemies had also perished, and the remains of its body had blocked the channel for many years afterwards.

I had thought of the Dwellers hitherto as dominating by their strength and size, as well as by their evident physical knowledge and engineering skill, in both of which my present companions appeared to take little interest, but I now had a vision as of a world in which a race of ants of superior intelligence might revolt successfully against mankind, and of a warfare in which they had been trodden down, as a man might stamp on an ants' nest. But the truth, as I learnt later, was somewhat different.

My companion now pressed for some account of myself, and I answered many questions, finding her more ready to believe that I was the product of an earlier civilization than I should have anticipated, but that this information made it appear the

more necessary that the Dwellers should be informed of my existence, and the less probable that they would regard it with complacency.

She explained that it was known to the Dwellers that the earth had been the scene of countless civilizations, through æons of forgotten times, all of which had successively destroyed themselves by the misuse of their own discoveries, and that their whole energy was directed to overcoming this recurrent danger, which had appeared to operate with the certainty of a fundamental law. To them I might well appear as the seed of death which nature had sent forward to frustrate a purpose which might otherwise have defeated her own intention. On the other hand, she suggested kindly, my obvious ignorance and insignificance might be my protection, as I had so evidently been born upon the earth in one of its more barbarous epochs. As to their own course regarding myself, they would do what they could, but—and her mind shut suddenly, though not before I had caught a glimpse of her difficulty.

For if they were discovered in the present enterprise, even if it did not in itself cause their destruction, they might find themselves at open war with the Dwellers, in which case there would be no purpose in surrendering me, while if the expedition returned in success and secrecy, they might wish to give me up rather than risk another cause of difference—but how then could they secure that I should withhold my knowledge of the events now proceeding?

It appeared to me to be a position in which they might well decide to destroy what was, to them, nothing more than a strange and inferior animal; nor did the alternative appear more attractive in its probabilities, for if they were at war with the Dwellers, would they not retreat to the ocean-floor which was their familiar resort, and where, I supposed, their enemies would be unable to pursue them, and how could I adapt myself?

I decided that I could only act as circumstances developed, and that, in the meantime, it was both duty and policy to give

such service as I could to those who had shown me kindness.

Meanwhile, the rapid march continued. There was a moon now, the first I had seen, a thin bowl of silver in the eastern sky, more brilliant than that to which I had been used—a difference which may have arisen only from the fact that I was in a more equatorial region.

By its light the path became visible, a faint opalescence beneath us, and, later, the black entrance to the tunnel of my adventure.

Here we halted for the recovery of the body that I had left within it. But after some space of silence, a sense of grief and oppression invaded me, which I knew was felt by all those around me, as the news spread from mind to mind. The body was not there.

Whatever had happened to it—and that it had fallen into the hands of the Dwellers was almost certain—I understood that the inquiry must be delayed till the further object of the expedition had been accomplished, or at least

attempted.

The sea-dogs, which had been brought for the purpose of conveying back the body, were now ordered to return, and the forward march continued. My guide had rejoined the other Leaders of the expedition, assigning me to the care of the rearmost of the troop, beside whom I went forward, keeping up the pace with difficulty, but afraid to fall behind, and aware from the thought which combined us that there was still much ground to be covered before the darkness lifted. When I had continued for about half-an-hour, during which some miles must have been covered at the rapid trot which was maintained without alteration upon the level surface, a knowledge of my exhaustion must have entered the mind of my neighbor, for I found a small webbed hand passed into mine, and with it a thrill of nervous energy that enabled me to continue, till we shortly turned to the left, and took a rough uphill path, on which we slackened to a walk, and were soon climbing over rough boulders, and up sharp ascents where hand and knee were needed.

For a mile, perhaps two, we continued up this arduous way, at times with a glimpse, right-hand, of a gorge of black forbidding precipices, silvered in the moonlight, but most often with sight of little beyond the immediate rocks.

Then we became aware that a high wall of overhanging cliff confronted us, into which those who led us had disappeared already, and, guided by my companion's hand, I entered a narrow gulley, whether natural or artificial I cannot say, but which extended for many miles through the mountains. It was not more than five feet wide from wall to wall. A narrow line of sky showed its stars, where the gulley opened on the mountain slope hundreds of feet above us.

We emerged at last at a great height, on an open slope, on which trees grew, but not thickly. They were tall and somewhat slender, silver-gray in the moonlight, as a poplar shows its leaves when the wind lifts them. Here we continued a long time, going forward, as I thought, not directly, but

keeping always where the trees were thickest. Once, far below, we had a view of the gorge from which we climbed, narrow here, but opening out to seaward many miles away, a vision of mysterious and incredible beauty.

I judged now, by the moon's height, that we must have traveled rapidly for about twenty-four hours of my accustomed reckoning, and that the night was half over. When the sea-dogs left, I had been given a store of the food they carried, and to this I had resorted more than once already. My companions appeared to be equally independent of fatigue or food, but my condition was different. I had been without sleep for a long period, and I was aware that it was only the vitality that I received from my companion's hand, and the fear of the contempt of my new associates, that dragged me onward. These might not have availed me much longer, but now we had approached a dense wood of a different kind. I was instructed to lie flat and crawl forward under boughs too thick and low for any other method of progression. At once we were in darkness, with the great boughs close

above us, and beneath us a bed of soft resilient moss, which must have been nearly a foot in depth, over which we crawled and wriggled quite easily, but which yielded to our weight unless we moved forward. It was warmer here—the night air on the higher ground had been cold since we left the gulley—and there was a strange and pleasant fragrance from the boughs above us, so that when an order was passed to rest, I sank into the soft moss very willingly, and had I known that it would close over and suffocate me while I slept, I think that I should scarcely have had the strength to reject its embraces.

13 *The Killers*

I could not say if the others slept, for I knew nothing more till I waked bewildered in a dim golden light, with my comrade of the night touching my hand to rouse me. The rest of the troop had begun to move forward.

I was sunk deeply in the soft moss, which was of a very close texture, and of so dark a green as to look black in the shadow. The branches overhead spread low and wide, as do those of a beech. The leaves also were beech-like, but of a golden yellow. Not the yellow of Autumn, but one of an abundant vitality. I noticed the fragrance which had soothed my exhaustion when we entered. It gave me now a sense of contentment and physical well-being.

It must have been full daylight without, for the light did not increase farther within the wood, but here it was a golden twilight only. I was able to look clearly for the first time at my companion. The human mind is so ductile that already the slim furred form gave an impression of familiarity. Not being one of the Seven, she had the distinctive patterning by which each was individualized. In her case, a zebra-like striping on the back, produced by trimming the fur shorter, as it was of a darker shade beneath, the silver-gray marking of the back being superficial only.

We conversed freely as we crawled forward for some hours over the springy moss. I met here with a mind of a ready friendliness, and a very lively curiosity. I suppose, by our reckoning, she had lived for an enormous period, but the mind that met me gave an impression of an invincibly child-like quality—but it had other characteristics, which I was to learn more slowly. The impression which I gave to her was, no doubt, somewhat different.

Her keen delight in the new world—as new to her as to me—through which we were passing, contended with her curiosity to learn the still stranger world of which I could tell her, and gave little time for me to learn of her, or of the life to which she was native. But she gave me glimpses of an existence which found its pleasure in wandering through a marine world which was as much more extensive than the dry ground as it is today, and which I judged to have changed but little. One episode she gave me vividly because of the indelible impression which it had made upon her. It appeared that her kind

can wander freely among the huge savage creatures of the ocean-depths, exploring its heights and valleys, and penetrating its caves with impunity, because they can control every form of life it contains by a will-power which works without effort. She had attempted, in a spirit of mischief, to allow various savage creatures to attack her, intending to forbid them at the latest second, but she found invariably that though their minds were confused by a feeling of her complacence, the respect of her kind was too deep an instinct for them to disobey, until she tried the trick upon a species of shark of an exceptional ferocity. Vividly I saw it, under depths of green water, from which all weaker forms of life had withdrawn in terror. The savage rushes of the hungry fish which she had foiled at the last moment with a thought of derision, and the snap of his disappointed jaws. And then—the instant's diversion of mind in its too-confident certainty, and the half-second too late—the passionate repulse that sent the great fish cowed and grovelling to the sea-floor a hundred feet below—and the consciousness that her right arm was

hanging torn and useless. And then the long swim homeward for two thousand miles to the only place where help could be given, and how she had told her tale to the Seven, and they had decreed that the arm should never entirely heal, so that it should be a warning to her and all her race for ever. And in evidence she showed the scars, where no fur grew, and I understood that the scar of a healed wound was something beyond the previous experience of her kind.

Of the swimming of the great tunnel she told me also, which extends for several thousand miles from one sea to another, through an intervening continent, and of strange forms that lurk in its labyrinths of caves, such as the opened oceans have never seen—labyrinths in which you may wander for many months, seeking in vain for an exit.

Of such things I learnt much, but I noticed that her mind was little fixed upon the object of the expedition. That she understood that it was very dangerous, and might terminate her bodily life was clear enough, and that the

thought of such potential sacrifice for her Leader's rescue filled her with a pleasurable exhilaration that was stronger than fear, this I understood; but of the thought of any possible aggressive violence to achieve her end, her mind seemed as incapable as her body seemed ill-adapted for such a purpose. Frequently her thoughts were of the movements in the moss below, which must have teemed with life, though it did not annoy us in any way; or of the occasional sound of wings in the boughs above us; or of the straight and narrow paths that cut through the moss continually, down which we once saw a small form disappearing, looking like a beetle running upright on its hind legs, and of the size of a field-mouse.

But though her mind was not anxious as to the result of the expedition, I soon had evidence that those of her Leaders were differently occupied.

A thought came down the line to halt, and for me alone to go forward.

This I did, till I came to an open space in the forest. Here I found the five Leaders seated where the moss-carpet extended somewhat beyond the trees, and for a moment they waited while my mind was held by the beauty of the sight.

The trees which surrounded the glade were of one kind only: beech-like in growth, though the branches spread and drooped with greater regularity. The gold which shows faintly on an oak in spring-time was here the dominant color, tinged with green if the wind lifted the leaves, which were of a fine transparency, or deepening to the background of a Tuscan fresco, as it sank again into quietude. The moss, which extended on all sides outward from the trees for a short distance, showed dark in a strong sunlight. Beyond this, the glade was covered with a short growth of coral-pink, on which blue pigeons, such as I had seen before, were feeding.

Grace of line and harmony of color—
everywhere I found them, as in the world I

had left. Surely beauty is more fundamental than righteousness! Or may the two be one only?

If there were any difference in the new world, it was only that nature produced her effects with greater economy of material, massing her colors, and content to display a few varieties of plant or tree only, where I had been used to the combinations of hundreds. But I recognized that I had seen too little to justify such generalizations. It would be as though a man were to spend a few days on the Norfolk Broads, or in the Highlands of Scotland, and imagine the whole surface of the earth to be similar to the scenes he witnessed.

But the Five were waiting. My guide of the previous night addressed her mind to mine, and the others arranged themselves to perceive us. I was first asked if I were willing to give my aid to the object of the expedition, if it should be of any utility. It did not appear to occur to them to offer any reward or inducement, and in reply I consented

unconditionally.

I was then asked to explain the purpose of the axe I carried, with which I had defeated the vegetable octopus of my first adventure. This led me to inquire why its victim had not been able to save herself by the power of will on which they relied for their protection, to which I received the answer that it would have been of little avail, as the whole forest was against her, and was conscious that it was carrying out the duty for which it had been planted, whereas she was breaking the treaty with its originators. I recalled the way in which it had quailed before me, but it was pointed out that I was not under the obligations of the Amphibians. None the less, I felt that the incident gave me some increased prestige in the minds that considered it. The fact was that my hatred of the creature as an octopus was blended with the contempt which I felt for it as a cabbage—the first idea persisting—and that this attitude toward something which they regarded as formidable, both in itself and in its anger, impressed them inevitably.

But I soon modified this advantage. In explaining the uses of the axe, I offered to demonstrate it by felling one of the trees around us. The idea, that I should destroy life for an illustration broke upon their minds with incredulity that gave way to contempt. For a moment they regarded me as morally unfit to be associated with their enterprise, but recalling that they were contending against creatures even baser than myself (if that were possible) they decided to interrogate me further.

It was first explained to me that the spirit of her whom I had rescued so unsuccessfully was now guiding the expedition, and I was asked to put my mind at her disposal, so that I might see the creatures against which we were operating. On doing this, I received a vision of a forest path, on which three of them were walking in single file. They were about three feet in height, and in appearance they seemed to me such caricatures of humanity as might be the outcome of a nightmare dream. In color they were a bright worm-pink, and of a surface which was

repulsive beyond the resource of any word we have to describe it. Their heads were bald, but of a darker color than their bodies and limbs. Their eyes moved continuously with an alert and restless malignity. Their lips—or rather the orifice of their mouths—elongated into a narrow tube about twelve inches long, through which they could take nourishment by suction only. Through these tubes they could make whistling sounds, by which they communicated with one another. They could stand easily on their legs if sight or reach required it, but squatting was their more natural posture. Each of them carried some kind of rope or cord in considerable quantity.

There was a fourth that followed, of the same form and color, but of more than twice the size, and of a ferocity more brutal, though not more malevolent, than that of those who preceded him. He carried a powerful bow of dark wood, bent for use, and with a shaft ready for the cord.

It was conveyed to me that these were not adult and young of the species, but that the

archer was of an exceptional growth, of which they had two or three only in each generation.

In the vision, I could hear plainly that others of their kind were whistling to them through the trees, to whom they replied with notes of rising excitement. Soon I perceived that one of the frog-mouthed apes that I had already encountered was being driven toward the party that I watched. I understood that it had been separated from its companions, and headed off from the safety of its native rocks. It now came bounding in a heavy bewildered terror toward the waiting archer.

Remembering how my own axe had cut through the throat of one of these creatures without apparently disturbing its equanimity, I was curious to see how a shaft could discommode it. I soon learnt. The hunted creature saw its new foes, and turned sideways. As it did so, it crossed the bole of a giant tree, and at that instant the archer wrenched the bow back to his ear, and the shaft flew. It drove through its victim's neck,

and deep into the trunk behind it. Before the shaft had ceased to quiver, the three that bore the ropes leapt forward and were twining them round the now struggling victim, binding it first to the trunk, and then, heedless of the gnashing teeth, about the neck, till every limb was useless.

By now the beasts that had driven it were arriving, and with an inferno of exultant whistlings the worm-pink crowd had loosed it from the tree, and drawn the shaft out of its neck, that they might drag it with them, now roped beyond movement. I watched it drawn for some miles in this way, clear of the woods, and up by rocky paths, until a high plateau was reached, a mile-wide shelf of rock, beyond which the mountain rose abruptly once again. On this shelf was their stronghold. A low, continuous, smooth-sided back-sloping stone-seeming wall, very broad at the base, and rising to a sharp ridge, swept crescent-shaped from the cliff, and enclosed the larger half of the plateau.

To this wall there was one barricaded

entrance only, through which the hunters dragged their victim. Many more of their kind, of all sizes, were within the enclosure, but the sight of the captured prey was evidently too commonplace to attract their attention, and I saw that they squatted in the sun, or moved on their own errands, in complete indifference, while it was dragged toward a large cistern of boiling water, which was sunk in the ground, and into the center of which a stone pier jutted. By carrying their ropes round the sides of the cistern they were able to draw their victim along this pier, so that it fell off at the extremity into the boiling vat. It was bound too tightly to struggle, and sank at once to the bottom, where it continued to move spasmodically as long as I observed it. I understood that it would boil there for many hours till the contents of the tough skin should be reduced to a semi-liquid form, such as its captors could draw in through their sucking mouths, and the whole sight filled me with a loathing for these bestial forms, and for the cruelties they practiced. I did not reflect that the boiling of living fish, which is common in Asia, or of

lobsters in our own country, is a far greater cruelty, being exercised on creatures of higher sensibility, and with far less excuse, as they could be killed without difficulty.

I saw also that the center of the crescent did not contain any buildings, except such as were of a public character. Of these, one confined the selected victims of the approaching feast, and this was built over one end of the boiling tank, and guarded by one of the giant archers, with a number of assistants round him. There was one other giant lying against the cliff-wall, with a leg discolored and useless, in an evidently dying condition—shortly, no doubt, to share the fate of a dead body of one of their number which I saw flung over the farther side of the plateau, where it fell abruptly to a great depth.

I saw that the wall was hollow, with many doorways on the inner side, and that it formed the dwellings of the settlement. There were many young, moving in a more lively manner than the adults, and including two of the archer kind, which, though evidently

immature, were considerably larger than the rest of the tribe.

14 The Halt

I was recalled from this contemplation by the pressure of the minds around me, and my first thought was to ask why, if the Dwellers were supreme, they allowed the existence of such foulness. I was answered that it was all as strange to them as to myself, but I learnt later that the blood of creatures of a malevolent kind had a chemical quality which was required for certain purposes in connection with the defense of the continent, and that these creatures were deliberately bred to supply it.

I was then asked whether I were familiar with the weapon carried by the archers, and could use it if necessary. I replied that the bow had long been regarded as a deadly

weapon in the world from which I came, but that in my own time and country it had fallen into disuse. I was not entirely unfamiliar with it, having consorted with some who had used it in competitions of skill, in which I had done indifferently well, but the bows I had used had been little better than toys when compared with that which I had now seen, and the memory of the depth that the shaft had been driven into the hard wood made me doubt whether I should have the strength to bend it.

This information was received with quiet satisfaction. I began to have an increased respect for these Amphibians, as I recognized the serenity with which they faced a problem which might well seem insoluble, under conditions which were in some respects more alien, and must have been far more repugnant, to themselves than to me.

I noticed the unhurried care with which they arranged the facts as they perceived them, and that while they had outlined an intention of effecting the rescue by the power

of their own wills, without arousing the opposition of the willpower of their opponents, they were careful to avoid any detailed plan, until all the available information had been obtained to guide them. I began to understand how it was that they could rely upon arriving at unanimous decisions for all their actions, and the unquestioning faith with which these decisions were received by their followers. I felt that if the Dwellers were to appear at that moment with the threat of some overwhelming penalty, it would not radically disturb the equanimity of the minds that met them.

I was next asked whether I thought I could descend the cliff that rose at the back of the settlement in the moonlight, as the vision had shown it, and replied with certainty that I could not do so, either by night or day. I am without any special aptitude for climbing, and I think there are few men who would have attempted that descent under any circumstances.

I was then directed to await my previous companion, and the crawling march continued. As they passed me, two and two, I was able to estimate their numbers, for the Leaders had been at the head, and my own place was at the rear of the procession. I found that there were over three hundred whose lives had been committed.

On rejoining my companion I asked her whether this were the whole of her tribe or nation, to which she replied that there were many more, but that they could not have been summoned without delay, being scattered in many oceans, and a proportion of those available had to remain, that the Dwellers might not notice the absence of their accustomed service.

Only, I learnt, at an annual date which the stars showed them, did they all congregate, to sleep for three days' space in the feeding-tanks, and gain strength for the year to be.

I gathered that my own method of continual eating, and the swallowing of waste matter,

which my body promptly rejected, placed me definitely with the lower animals in her thought, though not unkindly—or rather with the sea-dogs and the fishes, for of a lower terrestrial creation she had little previous knowledge, and it was, indeed, stranger to her world than to that from which I had wandered. I wondered how she regarded the Dwellers, of whom the one I had seen was certainly more of my own kind, but I recognized that she had other reasons to respect, if not to love them.

I next asked what might be the natural longevity of her kind, and if there were no old, infirm, or children that had been left behind, but to this she replied that they were not fishes, and their bodies did not alter or decay as the years passed. Obviously, if their bodies were damaged beyond remedy, they withdrew from them.

How, I queried, if they were not subject to birth or change, could one so disembodied hope for any new incarnation, and by what channel could it be gained?

But I could only learn that she was unperturbed by the suggested difficulty. Beyond this, her explanation faltered, or my mind was deficient to comprehend it. But the longer that I conversed with my companion, while the slow hours passed, and the crawling march continued, the more I realized that life persisted to the same ends, by the same methods, through all its physical changes, and even these—how slight they might appear to a detached observer!

In the softened golden light of this unending forest, could I have said certainly that I was not in some untraveled part of the world I knew? Nothing was too strange for that, except perhaps the Amphibian whose hand I held, and whose nervous strength it was which enabled me to go forward. And even she—was her form as grotesque, even to my human mind, as that of many beasts or reptiles which I could have seen in my own garden, or behind the bars of menageries? And was she not, of all the things around me, becoming the most familiar through the mental intimacy which was growing between

us?

In this great forest there was an atmosphere of enduring peace; it was a lake of stillness, rippled by softly-rustling unseen wings above us, or, more faintly, by the stir of slighter life in the moss below. Frequently we crossed the narrow roads I have mentioned, and as I looked at them more closely I was confirmed in the opinion that they were the work of the beetle-bipeds, one of which I had seen for a moment, for the moss on either side was trimmed with formal regularity, for doing which the mandibles of such a creature would be well adapted. The moss would be far too close in its growth for them to penetrate it in any other way, and yet not close enough for them to walk over it without sinking, so that it would otherwise form an insurmountable barrier. I was confirmed in this opinion when we passed an open glade which was white with low regular mounds of mushroom shape, from one of which I had a glimpse of two of these creatures issuing, and passing rapidly out of sight behind it...

I began to think of the Amphibians as being independent of sleep, as they were of food, but as the morning advanced an order came that we were to move sideways to the left (the two in front of us moving to the opposite side) until we were at the edge of the forest, which we were then approaching, and there to rest, and await the order to proceed.

Meanwhile all minds were to be concentrated upon the object of the expedition, which I now learnt was their method of sleeping, the mind being rested upon one thought only for a previously-decided period, a method surely superior to our own, in which it wanders blindly through disjointed recollections, and in vain conceptions of foolish or repugnant things.

A number were, however, directed to remain alert and wakeful, and to watch for any menace which might appear from the open country before us.

Being now on the extreme left of the line which the last movement had extended in

echelon along the edges of an outjutting spur of the forest, with our Leaders at its advanced point, I was asked whether I were able to assist in this manner, and was directed to watch as long as I could do so without exhaustion, and then to arouse my companion.

The halt would continue until the sun had reached its meridian. The mind of one of the Leaders would remain receptive to any report I might send it.

Even if I had not undertaken this duty, and recognized its importance in a land which was as potentially hostile to my companions as to myself, and which was even stranger in some of its aspects to themselves than to me, I could hardly have failed, for a time at least, to remain awake and aware of the strange beauty of the scene.

My companion sank at once oblivious in the deep moss, which yielded to our weight when we halted, and in which I took a sitting position, enabling me to look out from

beneath the boughs which spread low overhead, and were sufficient to screen me from the outside observation of anything which did not approach very closely.

The ground before me sloped gently down to a deep and very wide valley. Far to the left were low hills; to the right front was a distance of wilder mountains, with snowy sides, height beyond height, with a suggestion of the foothills of the Himalayas. The valley undulated, and was heavily wooded in some places. It had wide plains, but without sign of cultivation, or of moving life.

The sky above us was the unclouded blue I had seen previously, very deep now in the strong sunlight. Far off—and sight went far in the clear air, across the lower land—there was a wide low forest with a hint of lake beyond it.

In color, the whole scene gave me a first impression of a splendor of gold and blue, with dark hills around, and snowy mountains above them, but as I looked more closely I

saw that there was an undertone of green, as in the old familiar landscapes, but with this difference, that where I had been used to the dark blue-green of trees and hedges breaking the yellow-green of the corn and grass-lands, here yellow-green, deepening to many shades of gold, was the prevailing tone of the woodlands, while open slopes and plains were covered with a blue-green verdure, in some places with no more hint of blue than in the leaves of a rhododendron, at others brighter than a peacock.

This was the general impression of a wide stretch of country, which might show differently at a closer view, or with a change of season. When I looked immediately in front of me I saw that the moss extended for two or three feet only from the forest-shade, and beyond this was a blue-green growth, of an Orchis-like kind, which covered the ground where it sloped gently before me. Here and there, other plants struggled for existence among it, including one of a trailing habit which I noticed for a very fragile and beautiful flower shaped like a Campanula,

and approaching a very deep orange shade, but different from anything I had seen, and I have therefore no word by which to describe it.

Last, and nearest, I noticed, a bare yard to my left, where a low branch shaded the moss a little in advance of the trees around it, a ground-nest of beaten moss, of the size of a hand-bowl, and in it three small black puppy-like creatures, curled close, and sleeping.

Surely there was little change in the new world from the world behind me!

Here I watched for many hours, as the sun rose slowly. Once a huge bird crossed the sky, coming from the lower hills and disappearing at last over the distant heights of snow. It was many times larger than those which I had seen previously. It flew with strong steady strokes, but was too distant for more detailed observation.

Then I noticed a dark object moving slowly up the slope toward me, and grazing as it

came.

Its body was of a dull blue color, and was of the size of a sheep, or somewhat larger, but as round as an orange. It walked on two legs only, and there was no sign of fore-limbs. But for the absence of any head, I might have imagined it to be some kind of chicken.

There was a face set in the front of the round body, consisting of two eyes which surveyed the world with a twinkling and mischievous humor, and a mouth, of which the upper lip was elongated, like an elephant's trunk, but to somewhat different purpose, and proportionately longer. Hard and thin and snake-like, it had the under-side serrated with sharp bony ridges.

With this trunk it felt doubtfully over the surface of the herbage on which it fed. Then, finding a patch that grew to its liking, it pushed its trunk into the close growth, which appeared to resist its passage, with a rasping, tearing sound, till it was curled round the selected tuft, and then it pulled, and the sharp

edges cut and tore the fibrous growth from the resisting roots, and the trunk turned inward, to push its sheaf into the gap of the wide slit mouth, that was scarcely large enough to receive it, till the trunk had pressed and packed it in. And like a thrush that has won his worm after much' pulling, the mischievous eyes twinkled.

Care or fear, it seemed, it had none, nor any thought of enmity, as it came with leisurely steps and jovial roving eyes toward the edge of the wood where we were lying.

I passed the information to my Leader's mind, but received no instructions to do more than observe it. Closer it came, peering beneath the branches, its trunk moving so near to me that in a sudden panic I gripped the axe to strike, if it should attempt to molest me. But it only gazed with eyes in which curiosity appeared to be overcome by amusement at my comic aspect.

Indeed, it was this derisive glance which first made me realize at all adequately the

appearance I must present in my tattered clothes to these creatures whose bodies were so much more easily cared for, so fitting their environment.

I thought that I had met with the humorist of the new world, and did not guess that I was on the threshold of tragedy.

My companions rested undisturbed, and it did not appear even to observe their presence, at which I was puzzled for a moment, thinking that they must be as strange to it as myself, and not understanding that the calm indifference of their minds, and the serene tranquillity of that of the Leader to whom I had reported its presence, were impregnable bulwarks against any form of molestation from a single animal of its order of intelligence.

Its eyes wandered from me, as having exhausted the amusement I offered, and fell upon the nest beside me. I thought that it surveyed the sleeping inmates with a greedy but doubtful interest. Right and left, with

swift apprehensive glances, went the twinkling eyes, then a long trunk thrust in, and one of the sleepers was caught and swept into the gaping mouth-slit, too quickly for me to have interposed, had I wished to do so.

I had a thought that it was not its accustomed food, and that it had acted rather in a spirit of practical joking, amused to imagine the consternation of the returning parent, and the vain search for the missing puppy. If that were so, it was a jest of the shortest.

Even as the mouth closed, I had an instant vision of a lithe shape, like a small black panther, that sprang down from a nearby tree at the wood's edge, something in its mouth like a snake curled close, or as a wire-worm shows when the spade exposes it. Then, on the instant, as it reached the ground, it saw, and dropped its prey, and leapt, a lightning bound of twenty feet, for the back of the robber.

Swift as it was, it was too late for its

purpose. With the speed of fear, the jester had rolled on to his back with drawnup legs, and it was the long toothed trunk that met the panther with a blow that flung it sideward.

The foiled beast drew back for a moment, crouching to spring, in its eyes a ferocity that left no doubt of its purpose, while in the glance of its opponent there was a consternation that had yet in it something that was grotesquely comic.

Twice the panther leapt in, and was flung away with a reddening line of torn fur on the glossy back. Again it sprang, and held on for a moment with tearing teeth, while the trunk slashed it. Then it struggled clear with a torn side, and a fore-limb that dragged awkwardly. But where its teeth had been in the blue-black skin, a jet of pale red fluid squirted up in the sunlight.

It was more cautious now, if no less resolute in its purpose. It circled round, crouching, and watchful, but the cunning frightened eyes never left it, and the back-

drawn trunk was ready. When next it sprang, the wounded limb told, and it fell short, and drew back with a torn ear and a bleeding jaw. I cannot say whether that gave it the idea, or whether the chance of battle befriended it. I should not have supposed it likely to succeed by cunning, when strength and agility had proved unavailing. But so it was. It leapt, and the trunk shot out to meet it, but the leap fell short, either through sleight or weakness, so short that it came down on the very end of the trunk, as it missed the intended stroke, and the strong jaws snapped upon it. Back the captured trunk wrenched desperately, and the panther was dragged some distance forward, but by now the uninjured fore-paw was holding also, and the back legs were straining to keep their ground, against an opponent which had no grip of that on which it lay. The serrated teeth were on the under-side of the trunk, and as it slapped down, missing its stroke, it was caught on the upper surface, which was smooth and soft, so that the teeth sank deeply. And then, inch by inch, the panther bit upward, biting till, foot by foot, she left it limp and useless behind her. And

gradually, as she bit, the struggles weakened. All this time that thin jet had sprayed upward, and from the appalled eyes the twinkling intelligence was gone out, as the panther leapt at last on the ball-like body, and ripped it open with strong claws that found no resistance. With each tear, the thin blood jetted out like a fountain, till the round body collapsed like a pricked bladder, in which the victor's head was sunk with a growling contentment, so that I thought that, panther-like, she was already making a meal of her opponent's body, till the head emerged again, and in her mouth was the recovered puppy.

Purring gently, she laid it in the nest, licked it all over, still alive, and seeming none the worse for its first adventure. As she did so, she saw me, and the light of battle glared again in the fierce eyes for a moment, and then died, and, regarding me no more, she lay down and licked her wounds, and cleansed her damaged fur to something of the glossy smoothness on which her comfort depended.

While she was occupied in this way, I

realized that it had become time to arouse my companion, and having done this, and communicated what had occurred, I sank into a sleep of exhaustion, from which the strangeness and excitement of my surroundings were powerless to hinder me.

15 The Plan of Attack

I was awakened by my companion from a deep sleep, out of which I was aroused with difficulty, and found that it was high noon, and the order had already been passed that we who were on the left hand of the outlying spur of the forest, around which we had rested, should cross to the other side, from which the next stage of the advance would be taken.

This we did, forming a second line behind those who were already in that position, and halting there while final instructions were

given to us, to the effect that we were now approaching the most hazardous part of the journey, and that speed and silence, with readiness to obey any orders we might receive with instant alacrity, were essential. We were directed to avoid separate intercourse, and to concentrate our minds upon the path we were taking, while holding them at the disposal of our Leaders, and under no circumstances to allow any emotion to control us, unless it were the ordered feeling of the expedition, and were operated in unison.

Although these orders were not directly applicable to myself, I was conscious of an increasing willingness to adapt myself to the methods and controls of my new companions, and was not insensible to the relief of mind which arose from the knowledge that the will of every member of the expedition could operate in this way.

It is true that all my habits were alien from a method of warfare which moved against unknown hostilities, such as were certainly

capable of physical violence, without weapons or any evident means of self-defense, trusting, apparently, only to a mental attitude for its protection, and leaving me to wonder how any aggressive action could be even attempted. But I had already realized that the Amphibians had powers of intellect which, though different from my own, were very far from contemptible.

I was inclined to wonder whether my own complacency might not be the result of some subtle exercise of their will-power upon my own mind, which was probably so, though not in the way in which I supposed it, their influence not being the result of any mental violence or assault, but resulting from my gradual recognition of the assured serenity with which they possessed their souls against any pressure of surrounding circumstance; a serenity which had no root in obtuseness or indifference, but, with their leaders at least, was consistent with an unsleeping vigilance and forethought, and a chivalrous willingness to sacrifice themselves for their companions.

We were now told to advance out of the forest in double file, all emerging at the same spot, on the right front, which was immediately before me, so that I watched the whole of the front line as it crawled to this spot and into the sunlight.

Last of this line came the Five, an order passing ahead of them that I should be in readiness to follow. I was conscious of a strong reluctance to leave my zebra'd companion, of whose vitality I had taken so freely, and to whom I was drawn in consequence in a strange inhuman intimacy. But they answered my thought instantly that this was not intended. We were to move out together, immediately behind them. Being in the rearward line, we had been able to see little beneath the low and level branches till the moment came for us to go forward. Then the first sight that met me was a round blue-black body, from which two humorous twinkling eyes surveyed me satirically. For a moment I thought that I had encountered the most amazing reincarnation of this amazing world; at the next I recognized that there were

two other similar creatures a short distance away, and that I was not encountering a reproduction of the one I had seen collapse so thoroughly.

Beyond these creatures, I had a moment's glimpse of a different landscape from that which I had watched from the other side of the spur. Here the ground rose, the upward slopes growing steeper, toward a bare and desolate mountain grandeur. The next moment I saw the last of the Five leap lightly downward into a deep and narrow trench which cut through the ground before us, and I followed more awkwardly, my companion gaining my side as I did so.

I am conscious in this narration of the paucity of proper names—of the use of no arbitrary sounds to distinguish the kinds or even the individuals of the strange beings amongst which I was moving, but the fact is that, unless I am to invent them, I have none to offer. It is the evident difference between mental intercourse and oral or written speech that such signs are imperatively needed in the

latter, while in the former they would be worse than useless. The thought that brings the picture of the individual or place itself has no use for a sign by which to describe it. But of these I felt the lack even before I attempted to write down my experiences. It is the inevitable result of the constant use of a spoken language that we acquire the habit of substituting words for realities, even in the processes of our own thought. I found in the minds of my companions no names for each other, nor any vaguest desire for such a method of differentiation, but I accustomed myself to this.

It was now the nearest of the Leaders—the one with whom I had held intercourse previously—who addressed herself to my mind. She commenced by informing me that she was about to describe the plans which they had formed, because they included a part for myself of the first importance, but of which they believed I should be capable.

Though I knew that I should undertake whatever might be suggested, if it were

within my capacity, yet the feeling that I had been called up like a dog to receive my instructions, and the instinct of my commercial training, prompting me to make a bargain for my ultimate protection, complicated my reaction to this suggestion. "Are you less than a sea-dog?" queried the mind that met me, but perceiving that I intended assent, became indifferent.

It appeared (I attempt no explanation) that the member of their number whom I had first met, on whom they were depending for guidance, could only communicate such knowledge as she had gained before she had left her body; and beyond that was only able to help them by the doubts or dissent with which she had met the various plans which they had put before her. They, were therefore in ignorance of events that were now transpiring, but were able to receive detailed descriptions of the ground they were about to traverse, and of the experiences or observations she had made thereon, one of which had been shown to me in the vision which I have told already.

The plan now proposed had been received with assent, though doubtfully, and they had finally decided to adopt it.

She explained that trenches, such as we were now following, extended for many miles along the lower slopes of the hills, and through the valleys, bisecting each other, and dividing the ground into fields of very large area. Whether they were the work of the Dwellers, or were constructed by our present opponents—whom I should not have supposed to be sufficiently numerous or intelligent for works of such magnitude—was not known, but it was certain that the latter made use of their extensive existence to herd some of the creatures they ate, which were not of sufficient agility to leap the barriers. In this connection the blue-black monstrosities I had encountered were used by them as watchdogs or drovers, being themselves immune from slaughter in return for these services. It was certain that these creatures would carry the news of our presence to their masters as soon as they were able to do so. While they had been in our immediate vicinity the will-

power of our Leaders had been sufficient to restrain them, but this would not last in a case in which it was exercised against the instincts and obligations of the creatures themselves; and a suggestion from my mind that we might destroy them was dismissed contemptuously.

They would, however, continue to watch for a while, and would know, from the direction which would shortly be taken, that the expedition was turning into the mountains. Their masters would know that no danger could threaten from that direction for a space of one or two days, as the distance to be covered was not less than five hundred miles, and part of it was over very difficult surfaces, whereas we were only about one hundred and thirty miles from their stronghold, if the direct course were taken, and the trenches which I have mentioned, which were well drained on the higher slopes, provided a road along which the Amphibians could have proceeded with great rapidity. The distances were, of course, conveyed to me visually not by measurement.

The way through the mountains was, for the Amphibians, sufficiently hazardous, and would be, for me, impossible; and the Five had decided that it would be best for me to proceed with my one companion by the easier way, where it might be anticipated that my presence would not be suspected, and myself to attempt the rescue, by peaceful stratagem if possible, or by force if necessary.

My companion would supply the nervous energy necessary to enable me to cover the intervening distance in the forty-eight hours which yet remained before sunset, while, if any physical violence were necessary to effect my purpose, I should be acting according to the laws of my own nature, and against creatures more or less on my own level of conduct.

The enclosure which it would be necessary to enter I had already seen in the vision. It was the custom to place all the hunting weapons of the tribe during the night in a central building, which was not guarded, as no attack was ever anticipated from outside,

particularly during the long night, when all the creatures on the earth's surface rested. The building in which were the killing-pens was guarded day and night by one of the giant archers, lest its victims should attempt escape, and for other reasons which I could not follow.

The main force of the expedition would arrive, if all went well, on the top of the great cliff which overlooked the enclosure, at the commencement of the second night. Had I found it impossible to attempt a rescue, or had I failed, they would proceed by other methods.

Should I succeed, I was to place myself under the orders of the one I rescued, who, being one of the Leaders, would naturally assume control of myself and my companion.

I was given a few minutes to consider this plan, and to make any inquiries which might occur to me, while our course continued in the same direction.

As I reflected upon it, I was conscious of many points which invited criticism. It appeared that the whole expedition was being led in to the mountains for no very evident purpose, while I was to take the individual peril and responsibility of the rescue.

On the other hand, we were operating under conditions which were in some respects as strange to them as to myself, and for which they might be said to be even more unfit. I was, at least, the only one who carried anything that could be used as an offensive weapon, and there was some justice in the reflection that I came from conditions of life from which the argument of violence was less alien than it was from theirs. Also, the fact that I could not pass the dangers of the mountain way, if it were really so, was unanswerable, and the fact that our opponents could not expect an attack from that direction for so long a time, certainly suggested that I could best be used in the interval in the way they had planned. Whether they expected me to succeed, or regarded me simply as a forlorn hope, or even as a feint attack to

disguise a deeper purpose, I could not know. I considered that if I should be successful in effecting the rescue undetected, we might be far on the return journey before the dawn, but that they would arrive after it had certainly been discovered, and with their enemies between them and their retreat, in which case they would share the peril.

I had, at least, no better plan to propose, and I shortly signified that I had no further questions. I was then told that I must restrain any impulse of violence which I might feel, unless there were no alternative possible, as it developed action on a plane which they despised, and on which they were unaccustomed to operate, and might bring us into additional and incalculable trouble with the Dwellers also, if they should become aware of our expedition, or were already cognizant of it. It was to descend to the level of the Killers themselves.

I write "Killers" as the nearest word I have in which to describe the thought with which she defined our opponents, but it is quite

inadequate. Scorn was in it, and loathing, if such feelings can be entirely passionless and judicial, and in it was the whole summary of what they were and did, but centrally there was the conception of them as things that killed continually, and that enjoyed killing, and as such I translate it. These worm-pink horrors with the sucking mouths were too low for any emotion to stir in regarding them. She looked on them as I, whom she regarded as a beast only, look upon one of my own kind who can kill birds for pleasure.

16 *The Sentry*

We now came to a place at which another trench extended on the right hand, at right angles to the one we followed, and striking upward toward the mountainside that now rose above us with an abruptness that appeared unscalable. Looking up the straight line of the trench, we could not see the defile

by which those heights were entered, nor was it easy to imagine that this bleak forbidding precipice was only the first of a wilderness of loftier ridges, from the top of which it would appear almost as low and flat as the plain around us.

We watched the long column of our companions as it proceeded up the narrow trench, at the end of which we saw it emerging on the open hill-side, where it must have been visible for many miles to any watchers on the plains below. Then we turned, not without a feeling of loneliness which increased the intimacy of our companionship, and went on at a gentle walk—for the time at our disposal required no haste—in the direction which had been indicated.

Yet the leisured pace had a consequence which might have been disastrous, and the exact result I am still unable to determine.

We were engaged in a pleasant intercourse, in which I was realizing that the apparent

apathy of my companion's mind in regard to the issue of an expedition for which her Leaders were responsible, which had previously surprised me, did not preclude a keen adventurous delight in an enterprise which had now been entrusted to our own initiative, when I was conscious of a shadow that fell for a moment across the floor of the trench before me, into which the midday sun shone directly downward.

Looking up sharply, I caught sight of an egg-shaped body and two jovially derisive eyes that withdrew at the instant of their detection. Instant also was my thought of the consequences if the news of our coming should go before us, and with that thought I loosed my companion's hand, and jumped for the side of the trench. The abundant vitality which that grasp supplied me lasted long enough after I had loosed my hold to enable me to grip the edge of the ground two feet above my head, and swing on to the surface.

Rising here, I confronted the detected spy not ten feet distant, gazing at me with a

glance of humorous contempt, from which doubt and even consternation were not entirely absent. Its body was less round than that of the panther's victim, being like an egg balanced on two legs, with the thicker end in front, from which the twinkling eyes looked out, with the long trunk curled beneath them.

I realized suddenly that I was not beyond reach of this weapon, and that I was likely to be swept back into the trench with little ceremony, even if no worse befell me. But the next moment I was aware that my companion was beside me.

Whatever brain was in that blue-black body, or courage for the facing of meaner things, it had no will to meet its new antagonist. Nor did the order which she gave it to avoid us even disturb the quietness of the mind that formed it. Accustomed for so long to an unquestioned supremacy over all the creatures that the oceans held, it could not occur to her that such a one could resist her will.

Fear was in the cowed but cunning eyes as it moved backward, but when it had retreated for fifty yards or more it suddenly threw up its trunk in a defiant gesture, as of one released from a reluctant hypnotism, and commenced a rapid run toward the farther end of the valley.

As it did this, I realized that I was losing it, and that our lives and the success of our enterprise were at issue.

I unslung the axe from my back, and started in pursuit. But my feet sank deeply in the soft herbage, and I found that speed was impossible. At times, too, the ground itself gave way beneath me, and I stumbled forward with difficulty. Struggle as I might, I saw that the distance was increasing continually.

My companion's mind called me to return, but I would not heed it.

Then I saw that she also was running, but far out on the left as though she were leaving

me.

I was still wallowing forward in a stubborn stupidity when I realized her purpose. She was endeavoring to cut it off, and, running far more swiftly and lightly than either of us, she was soon able to do so.

But having gained the advantage, she appeared content to hold it.

I did not understand her purpose till I found myself running upon the hard surface of the hillside, and gaining at every stride. The chased beast knew it also and turned to face me.

My hunting instinct was roused now, to reinforce my judgment of a compelling necessity, and I was determined to kill it. But I had sufficient caution to pause outside the range of the sweeping trunk that threatened me.

It did not throw itself on its back, as I expected from the conflict which I had

witnessed previously, and I began to realize that it had been running not so much to avoid me, as to carry the news to its masters. It might be in awe of my companion's mind, but toward myself it very certainly had no such feeling.

I became aware that it was advancing upon me.

My companion had paused at a distance, and made no motion to assist me further.

The trunk was waving now within three feet of my face. I swung the axe as it was raised to strike. The sharp blade grazed the tip, and it winced back swiftly.

For some moments we faced each other silently, neither willing to retreat, nor to come within range of the confronting danger. I was on the point of springing in, and risking all on one stroke, when the memory of how the blue-black body had punctured where the claws tore suggested that I could throw the axe with enough force to disable it.

But the throwing of axes is an occupation in which I was quite unpracticed. Trying to fling it over the trunk that waved and fainted before me, and with sufficient force to effect my purpose, I misjudged entirely, so that it skimmed the smooth back only, and fell ten or twelve feet behind it.

Reckless, I ran forward to recover the weapon. My antagonist might easily have struck me off my feet as I did so, but it had turned also with the same object.

Not having to turn, I was a second quicker. I stooped for the axe with the consciousness that my opponent was already upon me, and as I seized it I threw it desperately backward.

The next moment I was struck to the ground. I felt the clothes tearing from my back, and turning round I tried to come to grips with the trunk which would otherwise beat the life from my body. As I did so I was conscious that the attack had ceased.

I looked up, and saw my companion

standing above us. My antagonist cowered away from her with terrified eyes.

The axe I had thrown had stuck into its back, and remained there.

Very quietly she took the haft and drew it out. As she did this a fountain of thin red blood, such as I had seen before, shot up and sparkled in the sunlight.

I rose up, and we stood side by side looking at the creature that made no more resistance, but lay dying before us.

She handed me the axe in silence.

A moment after, she gave me her hand again, and we returned to the trench together. But though I tried to speak, her mind would not answer. She had closed it against me, and for many hours we continued thus, her mind a blank wall of negation at the advances I made.

17 The Ethics of Violence

Dusk was already rising in the narrow trench, though the world was still bright with the color of a sun that set early over the mountains, when she addressed me in the medium which is fifty times more swift than speech, and a thousand times more accurate in its transmission of thought.

"How could I answer you till there was peace in my own mind?" she asked me. "I was confused by violence. It is a thing we do not practice, either for defense or aggression. You appear to me to be partly as we are, and in part as the lower order of created things, and with such a body as is more base than either. For the first time in all my life I could not tell what was right to do—to withhold, or to aid you. It seems to me that you must have much sorrow.

"But now I have thought of what is right. It

was to you that the charge was given. You were to avoid violence if it were possible. It was left to you to judge of that necessity. The responsibility is not mine. From now you will have my help when you ask it. When I thought this, peace came, by which I know that I have thought rightly.

"For yourself, it came to me, as I saw your mind when you fell, that you have a brave spirit in a body of deplorable weakness. It is full also of strange passions, which you can scarcely control yourself, and for that reason the lowest creatures can defy you. But I saw the spirit that is imprisoned within you, and for that I respect you.

"When we return we will ask the Leaders that all shall think together that your body may be destroyed, and you may escape from it."

I answered, "I am glad that there is peace between us, and some measure of understanding, and for your promise of future help I thank you also. But in the world from

which I came my kind is supreme of all created things. Here you despise me, yet you yourselves are not supreme in your world. You fear the Dwellers, who, as I understand, eat and use violence as I do. I understand that you supply them with fish, which seems inconsistent with your objection to the slaughter of meaner creatures around you."

She replied, "I know that you are telling me the truth as you see it; and some kind of supremacy you may have in your place, though it must be, indeed, a strange one. I cannot suppose that there are other creatures with bodies weaker than yours, more quickly tired, or more awkward. Are all its animals wearers of those tattered things?"

I replied, "Our bodies are doubtless better adapted to their familiar conditions than for those in which I now find myself, as our clothes are also. The lower animals—with some unimportant exceptions—have no outer coverings. Should we dispense with our clothes we should consider that we had descended to their level. We wear them from

shame, from self-respect, and to enable us to endure the climatic changes, and the severities of the colder portions of the earth."

"I can well understand," she said, "that you are ashamed to show your bodies to other animals, or even to each other, but can you really say that you cover them from climatic changes? Your face and hands are bare, which would be of all parts the most sensitive. If you can harden them to such exposure, could you not harden the remainder of your bodies also, and feel the joys of sun and wind and water?"

"The custom of wearing clothes among my own kind," I answered, "is very ancient, and is universally practiced. Whether it be for warmth or ornament, or from causes more difficult of definition, it would be impossible for any one of us to break it. He would be persecuted or destroyed by his fellows. You must understand that we have no individual freedom. In my own land this loss of discretion has been reduced to an absurdity, there being so many laws to be obeyed that it

is impossible for anyone—even those who give them unceasing study—to know all that there are. Also, we pay men to make more laws continually, so that, in theory, we may be brought into yet closer bondage, but in practice that is a thing which is barely possible, and, as new laws are made, others fall into disuse and forgetfulness, because it is beyond human capacity to observe so many. We do not want more laws, but we have started a machine in which we ourselves are involved, so that we have no power to stop it. Many of us despise the laws that we have already—so far as we understand them—and break them whenever we can do so to our own advantage, and with sufficient secrecy. Others respect them so greatly that they will do mean and base things without shame, if the law require them, thinking it to be sufficient apology."

"It is too strange," she answered, "to be understood, unless it be told more fully, and our time is too short for that, but I have not replied to your question concerning the fish-feeding of the Dwellers. I see clearly what

you mean, but it is a thing which had been done from the beginning. It was arranged by our Leaders, and we have not thought to question it. It is true that the Dwellers, though they are superior to your kind beyond comparing, are of more animal bodies than we. They must be fed, and their food, in part, is the fish, which themselves live by the destruction of others, and are destroyed by them continually. We divide the shoals and drive those that become excessive into the great tanks which extend beneath the mountains, where the Dwellers do with them as they will. I neither doubt nor excuse it. The mackerel that we drive, or the deep-sea salmon, will eat even of their own kind, and the fruits of death are in their own entrails while we drive them. They obey us, as is natural, without protest, and this thing which we do has never troubled our peace.

"You say that you are supreme, and we are not. I think you can have supremacy only amidst a very low creation. It is something which, until now, we have neither sought nor heeded. In all the oceans we have held it

without challenge.

"But I think the difference is not there. It is that you are not sure of yourself. Your own thoughts, or even your own body, may resist your will. You are like the state of which you tell me, wherein laws are confused and changing.

"Of all this we know nothing, and therefore, were I in the midst of the Dwellers, whose powers are terrible, I should walk in greater freedom than you could do in your own land, whatever be your supremacy among inferior things. But I am hindering your mind from the adventure which is before us. It is yours to direct it, as our Leaders rightly saw, for we are contending against creatures who are more of your own kind than ours. Let me know what is your purpose, and I will give you all the aid I may, either with mind or body."

As she concluded thus, we reached the place where the trench we followed stopped abruptly before a rising bank, and we knew

that we were at the end of the divided fields, and could no longer travel in the same concealment. Steps led here to a trodden path, which we left immediately for the lesser risk of a hillside which was covered with gigantic boulders, between which we moved cautiously upward, while the day was slowly dying, the western sky showing, for the first time in my experience, something of the sunset-light of my familiar world.

My companion answered my thought: "It is the season of storms approaching. In three days' time there will be cloud, and great winds, and hidden skies. It is nothing to us, but for those that live on the earth's surface it must be distasteful."

I made no reply, for at that moment my glance fell on a Browning pistol which lay amongst the loose stones I was treading. In the compelling strangeness of the experiences through which I had passed I had given little thought to those who had come here before me, but I remembered now the arsenal of weapons with which Templeton had returned

and vanished.

I looked round, as though expecting him to appear before me. In the growing gloom I searched round for some further sign, but could find nothing. I opened my mind to my companion, but she could not help me, though she searched with keener eyes than mine. I reflected that we were a long distance from the spot on which I—and presumably he, but was that certain?—had first arrived. If he had traveled so far, he might have gone farther. The abandoned pistol was ominous, but perhaps he had only thrown it away because his ammunition was ended. Possibly he had left it there, intending to return. Possibly he dropped it by accident. Anyway, it was useless to me, and I laid it down where I found it.

And as I rose, my companion's mind, to which I was becoming increasingly sensitive, interjected urgently:

"Do not move, or fear. Look up to the right hand."

The ridge of the rocky hill we climbed stood out sharply against the sunset light behind it, and above it rose the head and shoulders of a giant form. He had stepped over to our side of the ridge, and stood above us, one hand on the crest, as a man might lean his hand on his own gate, and was gazing around, as one who is more occupied with his own thoughts than with a familiar scene beneath him.

So he stayed for a moment, and then descended the hill with giant strides.

He might have crushed us under foot, as a plough-horse treads a crouching mouse in the furrow, but we stood quiet and unmoving as he went past without seeing us—or so I thought, but my companion differed. "You cannot know the thoughts of the Dwellers," she told me. "They are not as we, or as you are. They are terrible in power, and, sometimes, in forbearance also. But they are beyond our understanding."

My own impression was different. I saw a

Titan indeed, but one of my own kind, and one, I thought, who was preoccupied with a great perplexity. But whether he had seen us I could not tell.

18 The Arsenal of the Killers

The moon had not yet risen, but the starlight was brilliant, as we climbed the path that led to the stronghold of the Killers.

As we approached it in the darkness it looked larger than it had appeared to me in the vision, and our task more formidable.

At this high altitude the night began to be cold already, and I supposed that the temperature might fall very low before the dawn of the next day. I began to understand why I had found the stillness of the first night so absolute, and why all creatures sought for rest and warmth during a night-time so much

longer than our own.

But I had more urgent considerations to engage my thoughts. To rescue the imprisoned Amphibian from a guarded prison in the midst of the stronghold of the Killers, whether it were attempted by force or strategy, appeared about equally hopeless, but the Leaders had laid this task upon me, and whether they really believed me capable of performing it, or had used me as a pawn in a larger purpose, I was committed to the adventure.

My comrade also laid the responsibility upon me, as she clearly had the right to do. I had her promise of unquestioning aid in anything for which I might call upon her, and I had learnt to rely more than a little upon her fearless serenity of mind, as well as upon the abundant physical vitality which she shared with me so freely.

On the other hand, the more I relied upon her powers of spirit or body, the more menacing became the fact that I was braving

those who had entrapped one of her own kind, of superior grade to herself, who apparently could not escape unrescued.

Whether they had received warning of our coming I could not tell, but I reflected that even though a report should have reached them that the regiment of the Amphibians had passed into the mountains six score miles away, they would not only suppose that no fear from that quarter would be possible for a day at least (or much longer if they should judge by their own speed of progression), but might not even think that any hostility to themselves were intended, nor might it occur to them as possible that an attack would be made in the night-time.

Even if they knew that two of us were wandering on the lower slopes, we might only appear to them as prey to be sought in the morning, and, I thought, with a sudden lightening of humor, they might be right in their estimate.

On the balance of probabilities, I thought

the better course would be to approach them boldly, and try what might be done in secrecy while the darkness was round us.

Indeed, when we gained the plateau, caution lacked opportunity, if we were to advance at all. For outside the enclosure it was bare and flat beneath the starlight, and a rat could have found no shelter.

Having crossed the open space as quietly as we could, we walked for some distance along the outside of the enclosure. It was a back-sloping wall, or room, as I had seen it before, having no door or window in all its length; but knowing that there were doors along the inner side, and that the Killers slept within it, and not knowing how lightly they might do so, or how thin might be the wall that divided us from them, we now moved very silently till we came to the gateway. Here we paused in surprise, for it was not only unguarded, but open.

There was a double gate that opened inward. Sockets were faintly visible in the

ground, into which vertical bolts could be driven.

You know how a fox will use all its cunning to find some illicit entrance to the poultry house, but will turn away from open door or window, lest a trap be concealed behind the apparent negligence? So I felt as I looked, and saw something dimly on the ground behind the gateway, and hesitated, and remembered that the night was long, and haste was needless, and asked my companion how soon would be the moonrise.

In the end, we went back and waited under the plateau.

It is commonly held that the capacity of the average woman for logical reasoning is inferior to that of a man, but that she has a compensating advantage in a superior ability of intuitive perception, and may even reach a more correct conclusion in some instances by such unreasoned cognition, than a man will do by a superior logical faculty.

Whatever impressions of femininity my companion might give in other aspects, it is certain that in this comparison she was more masculine than myself, and the light which I had given her into the workings of my own mind—for, in view of our understanding, I had been careful to open it to her as I had considered the various possibilities which might affect the success of our enterprise—had aroused a wonder which she now expressed with her usual clarity.

"It appears," she considered, "that there is a difference between the processes of your mind and mine. When I encounter a difficulty which requires decision, I reflect upon it systematically and thoroughly. It may be a long time before I arrive at any possible conclusion, but, when I have done so, it is final. You appear to make choices, and to decide plans, without always having recognized your reasons—if such there be—even in your own mind, and you would be unable to explain them to another if you wished to do so. This method appears to be the cause of much hesitation, worry, and

discord, by which your mind is drained of its energy to no sufficient purpose, and of actions which are contradictory or indecisive. There are even times when you appear not to be acting either by reason, or by your own will, but to have surrendered your personality to the body which it inhabits. This is repulsive to me, because I cannot conceive of a reasoning spirit being reduced to a baser servitude. Fear is good, and it would be a poor kind of body which did not give you that warning. But your body is not content with warning, it attempts control, and if you refuse obedience, you do so with difficulty. I think that this arises because your mind is not sure of itself, and your body lacks respect for its weakness. Then your physical impulses fight among themselves for supremacy, and you have no power to rule them. When I look into your mind I see also that it has little knowledge, as it has little control, of the body in which it dwells, of which the major functions are carried on quite independently of its volition, and of the existence of which it may even be entirely ignorant.

"In all these respects you might be considered inferior to ourselves. I think you are so; and I recognize the admiration you feel for our larger measure of control, both of ourselves and of the creatures that surround us. Certainly I would not be like you. It would be as though we should be eaten by our own dogs. But when I see how your mind endures amidst such surroundings I am unable to despise you. I seem as one who swims with a friendly tide, and can make no boast, though she outdistance one who fights onward amidst contrary and contending currents. Therefore, I think God may judge you the prize at last, though He has given you a body that is lower than that of a sea-dog.

"I see further, that your own methods of inductive reasoning, casual as they are, may be more appropriate to the fluctuating barbarism of the conditions of life to which you are native than would be those to which we are accustomed, and I know surely that you can use your own methods to better purpose than I could possibly do."

By this time a crescent moon was rising behind us, among stars that shone with a frosty brightness, and a cold wind moved over the plateau as we crossed it once more, so that I shivered in the torn and shredded garments that I had sewn together, as best I might.

We came again to the vague menace of the open gateway. In the clearer light we saw that objects lay on the ground immediately within it, reminding me of the twisted bands of hay which farmers sometimes use for the binding of fodder, and before them were shallow shining oval depressions.

Neither of us could make any guess as to what they were, or of what they might be significant, but of one thing I was certain, they had not been there when I saw the Killers draw their roped prey through the gateway; nor were they appropriate for a free passage.

There is a fear that comes when the nerves revolt from a danger which they perceive,

which my companion had deprecated, but there is another that arises from a reasoned caution, which it is often well to heed, though the physical frame would disregard it.

I knew that my comrade's mind approved, when I turned from that unknown fear, and continued along the wall to select a spot at which we should attempt to scale it.

Of itself, it gave no choice, being everywhere of the same height and smoothness, and leaning at the same angle. Everywhere, so far as my observation had shown, it was inhabited by the Killers, but whether in separate cells, or whether the numerous openings led into one common living chamber, I had no means of telling.

The only choice lay in selecting the nearest spot to our objective inside the enclosure, and this we did as far as memory and judgment enabled us to determine it.

The sides of the wall, or dwelling, were about ten feet high, and sloping together at

such an angle that the inner floor (without deducting the thickness of the walls, of which we had no knowledge) must have been about eight feet in width. The walls inside must have narrowed rapidly upward, suggesting that the Killers required little space for comfort during their long night's rest.

The outer side, being quite smooth, was far too steep to be climbed, and we scaled it at last by my companion leaning against it while I mounted her shoulders and gripped the ridge. When I had a firm hold she caught my foot and climbed up very lightly, and then, with her help, I was soon astride the ridge, and the descent was easy. Our only real difficulty was to do it in silence. We had to move along the ridge for a short distance before descending, as we found ourselves directly over one of the apertures by which they entered. It was fortunate for us that we took this precaution, for when we had reached the ground, and moved cautiously across the doorway, we found that it was closed by a door which slid down from the inside, but not entirely so. It came to within

about three inches of the ground, and beneath it protruded three of the long suckers, which were the mouths of the Killers. Moving onward, we saw that similar suckers were thrust out from every doorway, which at least explained in part the omission of any higher apertures by which air or light could reach them.

There was a wide bare space between the outer wall in which they slept, and the buildings we were seeking. Of these there were eight in all, each of which must have had its place in the social economy of those loathsome creatures, but we were concerned with two only, and of the others I learnt nothing, either then or later.

As we had been told that the building in which they stored their weapons during the night was left unguarded, I had determined to proceed there first, and if I were able to enter it without detection I had resolved to remain, while my companion went forward alone to the killing-pens, and endeavored to establish communication with her imprisoned Leader. I

calculated that she would be more easily able to do this than I, and the distance separating us would not be too great for her to communicate with me, so that I should know exactly what was occurring. If she were disturbed, she could return to me more quickly than any Killer could pursue her. If a diversion were necessary, I could easily make sufficient noise to draw the investigation in my direction. For two to go in the first instance would double the risk of detection, without any compensating advantage. If my aid were desirable after the first reconnoitre, and no alarm had been raised, I could easily join her. If an alarm were raised, I supposed that they would make first for the place in which their arms were stored, and in that case it was our only hope of safety that someone should be there to bar the access.

So I reasoned, not entirely at ease in thinking that I had allotted her a part which might prove the more perilous, but yet seeing that it would be a double folly to reverse our undertakings, and content that she knew my motives, and approved the plan.

I think, in her own way, she was as keen as myself that we should effect the rescue before the Leaders came to interpose their own methods, or take direction of those which we had already formulated. I know that it was in a state of controlled excitement, which approached the ecstatic, though it left her mind in its accustomed serenity, that she went with me hand-in-hand across the moonlit space, which we did not cross till we had reached a point at which the other buildings would hide us from any watchers at the killing-pens.

By this means we reached the arsenal in safety, and stood beneath thick walls of some smooth hard substance, having a low flat roof, and a door at one end which showed no handle or fastening of any kind upon the outer side.

I still think that the plan I made was in itself the best that could have been devised from the facts as I knew them, but I admit that I was less cautious here than I had been at the outer gate. Perhaps the silence, and the fact

that we had advanced to this point so easily, had made me feel too severe.

I passed my hand down the door, in the shadow of the jamb, feeling for a catch which the light might be insufficient to show me, when it yielded to the slight pressure I gave, and opened gently. Then I pushed it wider, and we entered together. We stood for a moment in the entrance, side by side, looking into the dark interior, which was only very faintly lighted by two small windows at the sides of the door. The long side-walls, the far end, and the roof, were without lighting entirely. The moon shone through the two small windows, and patterned a bare floor with horizontal bars.

We stood there for a moment, and then my comrade slipped quietly from me, and vanished in the shadow.

Thinking to sample some of the weapons which I knew to be stored there, I stepped inward, loosing the door as I did so. Smoothly and swiftly it closed behind me,

with a slight ominous sound, to which the night gave full value. It had a menace of finality, and my heart paused as I heard it.

The next moment I recalled my courage and stepped back to reopen it. My foot sounded loudly in the stillness, and something moved in the dark roof that was not more than three feet overhead. With nervous haste I felt down the inside of the door, but, as upon the outside, there was no indication of lock or latch or handle. I thought to pry it open with the axe-blade, but it fitted so closely that I could only find the crack with difficulty and to force the blade in was impossible.

Was I to be imprisoned here till the light came, and then hurried out to such a fate as I had seen dealt to another of their captives? Or did the stealthy movement above me imply an even nearer menace? I raised the axe, and brought it down with all my force on the door, in the hope that it would split beneath it, and careless of the noise I made. Noise there was in the narrow chamber and beyond it also, as I was soon to learn; but the door did

not even shake to the blow. It was of so hard a substance, that I realized that it would be the axe-edge only which would suffer.

The movements overhead were louder now, and I had the impression that something was about to spring down from the darkness. The fear of the unknown was upon me, which is of all fears the most dreadful.

19 The Duel in the Night

I think we do less than justice to the alchemists of the dark ages of Europe, and to their opponents also. We are accustomed to regard them as charlatans, and to brand those as superstitious fools who burnt them. There is a folly of credulity, but there is a folly of incredulity, which is far greater.

If they asked their patrons for money which would enable them to turn lead into gold, the

scientist of today is approaching the same point of research which they must have reached when the possibility dawned upon them. Perhaps his own progress would have been more rapid had he been readier to assume that their theories were deserving of as much respect as his own. It is not many years since it was announced as a momentous discovery that bubonic plague is distributed by rats. This was known to the Egyptian priesthood, and the information was available in one of the oldest books in the world for anyone who cared to read it. But that was a superstition only! No doubt there are other "superstitions" in the same book which we shall believe when we have rediscovered them.

On the other hand, it was realized by those among whom the alchemists practiced that they were the repositories of an esoteric knowledge, the extent and power of which could be only dimly imagined, and of which there was no guarantee that it would be used beneficently. Even now, a scientist will present his fellow-men with a more nutritious

infants' food, or a deadlier poison-gas, than has been previously invented, with the same fatuous complacency. The evil eye may have been fact or imagination. I do not know. It is no more inherently improbable than wireless.

But it is the unknown that terrifies. I do not suppose that the Killers were exceptionally intelligent. All the evidence is against it. Yet this episode of the closing door, because it was beyond my understanding, was more daunting than would have been a far more urgent danger of a familiar kind. I stood there in a panic fear which it shames me to remember, feeling that I was surrounded by those who watched in the darkness.

I think, also, that the increasing cold of the night, and the loss of my companion's vitality, may have assisted to depress me. Anyway, I stood there for some time, afraid to move, in a terror more abject than anything I had felt since I waited for the first dawn, on the mystery of the opal pavement.

Nothing happened. The noises ceased in the

roof. The moon clouded, and the narrow windows darkened.

At last, I stepped up to one of them, and saw that a fine sleet was falling without. For the first time, with a start of shame, I recalled my companion. I had promised to keep my mind in touch with hers, and had forgotten her entirely while I shrank from shadows.

The next moment we were in communication. She had been waiting to report, and to hear from me, in a natural doubt as to the meaning of my silence, but her thought showed no agitation, and learning that she was in apparent security, and that her own report had no urgency, I first explained what had happened. What she thought I cannot say, for her mind closed for a moment. Then it answered quietly: "Shall I come back and push it open again? Perhaps I had better tell you first what I have seen and heard.

"First, there is the open tank, which was boiling, as when you saw it. There are few bodies in it. I suppose it is kept boiling

continually. Beyond this are the killing-sheds. There are two of these. Each consists of ten apartments. One is empty. The other is filled. Each compartment consists of four walls of metal bars, and a roof of a very hard material. Probably it is the same as the door that has shut you in. The floors are of bars only. The boiling water extends beneath. Three days before the feast, the bars will be withdrawn, and the victims will fall into the vat. I have spoken to my Leader, and this she told me. The feast is four days from now. She will say nothing, as the Leaders have decided it, but I think she has no desire to be rescued. The other nine cells are filled by victims that the Dwellers have given them. She says that these are creatures that have offended the Dwellers. They are like my description of you, but with wings.

"There is one entrance only, from which the two sheds branch. It is at the further end: an open archway. One of the archers guards it, with six of the smaller Killers. They were all sleeping when I first approached, but the noise you made woke one of them, and he

roused the others. Four of them have scattered now to search round the buildings. If one should come to the arsenal it will be well that he find the door closed. If it be pushed open, you will know that it is he, not I, and you can strike quickly, if you wish to do so. The smaller Killers carry a strangling-cord, and a short javelin. It is two feet long, and for a third of its length it is sharpened on both sides. It is balanced for throwing. The smaller Killers are without intellect. They have only greed, and cunning, and ferocity. The archers are in every way more dangerous. The smaller Killers obey them. They cannot communicate by thought, but signal to each other by whistling noises, which they make through their suckers.

"I am in no danger. I can move more quickly and silently than they can search in the shadows. I am lying now in the steam of the vat, which is dense on the side to which the wind moves it. They have searched here already and will not..."

My mind broke in: "The door is opening.

Wait."

I stood with the axe lifted to strike as the door moved.

The drift of sleet was over, and the moon shone on the entrance.

Cautiously, as the door opened, a head came round it, about three feet from the ground. I brought the axe down with all my force, but the Killer dodged very swiftly, and avoided it, slipping past me into the dark interior.

Losing its mark, the axe glanced off the edge of the door, barely missing my foot, the side of the axe-head striking the ankle-bone so sharply that I lost my footing and was on my knee for a moment. As I slipped, I heard the whizz of the javelin that passed above me. The Killer had turned and thrown it so quickly that it passed out over my head.

As the door clicked, I sank lower, listening for a sound of my opponent in the darkness,

and thinking with a moment's satisfaction that he had now lost his weapon beyond recovery. Then, with fear, that he must be surrounded by other weapons, of which he would know the positions, and that any moment a javelin might transfix me.

I think it partly redeemed the dishonor of my previous cowardice, from which all the trouble came, that I thought at this extremity to warn my companion not to come into the same danger. I could not have imagined that I should be saving my own life as I did so. Quick as a thought came the answer: "I will wait as you wish. I have told my Leader. She says, 'Do not move. Put your hand on your neck with the palm outward. He will not think of other weapons until he has tried the strangling-cord.'"

Deadly peril and quick thought are comrades ever. At the instant, something soft and slimy flicked my face, and drew backward. It was round my neck the next moment, but my hand was there already.

Soft and slimy, and very cold, it tightened, not with a steady pressure, but by a succession of contractile spasms, through which I realized with a new horror that the cord itself was as living as the arm that threw it.

But for my hand, I should have been strangled instantly. As it was, my utmost straining hardly sufficed for breathing, and I knew that I must act quickly. The Killer, supposing that I must already be reduced to impotence, was endeavoring to drag me toward him.

An idea came to me. I loosed the axe, and drawing out the clasp-knife, I opened it with my teeth. Then, with a sudden wrench of the left hand, I got space for a moment to thrust it up within the ring, so that as the pressure came again it closed on the sharp blade and helped to cut itself as it did so. I pressed the knife outward with all my strength, and the next instant the deadly noose had parted.

I snatched at the loathsome cord as it

writhed backward, let the knife drop, caught at the axe with my free hand, and allowed myself to be dragged forward.

Simple in conception, I realized now that my idea was more difficult in execution. My opponent no doubt considered me to be strangled and insensible. My intention was to take him by surprise, and to strike him down with a sudden blow. But where he stood was in absolute darkness, and I did not know the length of the cord. If I rose too soon, in the half-light of the central chamber, I should defeat my purpose, even if I were not an easy mark for any weapon he had available. If I waited too long it might be equally disastrous.

Fortune helped me. He moved his foot slightly as the cord shortened. He was within three feet of where I lay as he did so. I loosed the cord, so that he staggered back as the weight left it. Then I leapt, and struck. The blow must have caught him fairly on the side, but (as I knew afterward) it did not break the skin. The body gave way before it, and was

flung against the wall, with a great rattling of the arms upon it. I struck again, missing him, I think, but with a blow that swept the wall and scattered the javelins.

Pandemonium followed. With a high whistling squeal he fled down the dark hall, and, knowing it to be my one chance to give him no time for recovery, I followed blindly, with sweeping blows that got him more than once, and raked the walls of their weapons. It drowned the rustling in the roof, which had gone unheeded through the more urgent dangers, and which had been accompanied at times by a plaintive chattering noise, by no means formidable.

It is curious that it was while I chased him thus, in the height of the uproar and physical exertion, that my mind found leisure to recall my companion, and to tell her what was happening. She answered me with the unhurried speed which was her characteristic in moments of crisis. "The whole settlement is awake. I think they hear you. They are running across the enclosure. The five here,

which are armed, are also coming. I cannot join you, even now, unless I run very swiftly. Shall I come?"

I answered, "If you will," and knew that she was already running across the open, at a pace no Killer could match for a moment.

It was just then that I really got him. My earlier blows had only thrown him from side to side, buffeted but not broken, while he retaliated more than once with a thrown javelin, not without result, as was shown by a foot that limped, even in the midst of this urgency. But this time the stroke caught his left leg with the wall behind it, and cut it cleanly through. He fell on the floor, in a place where the moon still lighted it. As he did so, I struck again, and the soft toughness of the elastic body, which gave way so easily in a free space, burst when the blow came with the hard floor beneath it. The contents ran out over the floor like an over-ripe tomato, or so it seemed in the moonlight.

The door was moved swiftly, and my

companion was beside me.

20 *The Bow*

The next moment a rush of the Killers broke upon the door through which she had slipped, but it did not yield. With far better sight than mine in the darkness, and with a cool detachment of mind, which did not seem to be affected by her ecstatic delight at the swift movement of the adventure, she had noticed instantly that, though the door had no fastening, there were slots in the wall—three each side—and heavy bars propped against it to fit them.

Lightly lifted, the first bar fell into place as the rush of the Killers reached the entrance.

As she placed the other bars she told me, "There is one of the great bows, and a bundle of shafts on the wall behind you—you don't

see at night as I do?—They're about the only things that are left on the wall." (Her mind smiled as she thought of it.) "Do you always make so much commotion when you kill anything? The archer shot me as I ran. He shot straight. I heard the shaft coming behind me. My mind became like yours. I was uncertain what to do, and had no time to think thoroughly. I did not know whether I had will-power enough to turn the shaft. I leapt up. It passed between my thighs as I did so. It cut the fur of one, but without breaking the skin."

"That isn't serious," my mind interjected with a thought on my own wounded foot.

"It may be," she answered. "I should have bent aside. It's absurd to be caught in such a way, because my thought failed me. I never understood so clearly before how you live and think. It must be all chance and guessing. The shaft went on into the crowd of the Killers that were running from the sleeping-places. They all whistled with fear. They are great cowards. I could not see that it struck

any of them."

As our thoughts crossed, I had felt along the wall, and found the bow. It was five feet in length or more, bent for use, and of such strength that I doubted whether I could handle it. I found the shafts, and fixing one on the cord, I stepped to the left-hand window, risking any missile they might throw, but protected somewhat by the darkness behind me. It was about four feet from the ground, and about four feet broad, but not more than a foot high, and with two horizontal bars crossing it.

As the ordinary Killers were about three feet high, they were below its level as they crowded round the door. There was an excited hubbub of whistling and whining noises, their suckers wagging in every direction as they all talked at once and found no listeners—or so I thought.

Then they were silenced by the higher note of the archer behind them. Evidently he gave them an order to move aside, for they quickly

cleared on either hand, till the space was bare before him. With his five supporters beside him, their javelins in readiness, he advanced, bow in hand, toward the window.

I thought that I had better get my shot in first, if I wished to have any further interest in the adventure. I noticed with a flicker of amusement that my companion's mind was of the same opinion. I thought she was learning fast—or was she coming down to my level?

It was a very bow of Ulysses. I pulled it back with difficulty, and the arrow leapt from the cord with little aiming. It rose high over the heads of the advancing line, and—amazing fluke!—it struck the other archer—(there were only two of these monsters who were adult and vigorous)—who was coming up behind them, and whom I had not seen at all till the shaft hit him.

He was not seriously hurt, as we learnt afterward, but had that one arrow ended half the pack the immediate result could not have been more decisive. Right and left they

scattered, with a discordant clamor of whistling signals, till the whole space was empty before us.

I was feeling the relief natural to a timid nature at the withdrawal of an instant danger, and an illogical satisfaction at the result of my clumsy shot, when my mood was changed by the realization of the gaiety of my companion's mind.

If I were in a world of strange sights and chances, it was in many ways more native to me than to her, and a condition of existence in which you directed your body to do something within its capacity and it did quite differently, had a weirdness beyond her experience.

"It seems to me," she thought, still mirthfully, "that your life in any world must be a succession of unexpected happenings, and I begin to understand why you seem to me both so brave and so cowardly. I would gladly give a hundred years of my life for a day in your company. But we may give more

than either of us wish, if we disregard what the Killers are doing. You should judge their ways better than I, being more nearly of their kind; do you think they will attack us again, and how?"

I answered, "They are not of my kind at all, but very loathsome vermin. I don't think they will attack us again very quickly. I suppose we have most of their weapons here. Also, this place seems to be designed for defense—though against what we have no means of knowing. The bars on the inside show its intention. I suppose they kept their arms here because they would retire here in any emergency. Then, we are in a world which is not used to action in the night. They may feel the cold more than we do. The fact that we have wounded or killed one of their leaders at the first attempt will dispirit them. Unless there be another entrance, which is our greatest danger, I think we shall be safe till the light comes."

She replied, "But shall we wait till dawn without action? How will that help us? At

least, if you are right, we shall have time for clearer thinking. Let us go to the end."

She led the way, for it seemed that her sight was little less in the dark than in the daytime, telling me, as she did so, that she saw no sign of any entrance, and we rested at the farther end.

Even if we decided to wait till dawn, the prospect was not pleasant. It could not be a less space away than three nights of my familiar time. I became aware that my left foot was very painful, and that the boot was full of blood. I was hungry also, tired, and very thirsty. The night, even in this shelter, was very cold. Outside, it was fine again, and the moon still shone through the windows.

I knew that my companion felt no need of food or drink, and the thin striped body seemed indifferent to heat or cold, and while I had held her hand, and shared her vitality, the call for food had been dormant in myself also. But I had fought out this last struggle unaided, and it was long since I had eaten,

though I had drunk deeply as the dusk was falling.

"Your foot is hurt," she thought, "can we mend it?" I took off the boot—what was left of it—and pulled away the remains of a clotted sock, but it was too dark for me to see the wound. With a feeling of relief unspeakable, I knew that the small webbed fingers were on it, with a vitality that thudded through the whole of my exhausted body. She said, "The javelin must have struck aslant, across the front of the foot, and entered where the string held the boot together. It did not cut deeply enough to keep its place, and must have fallen as the foot moved. I think it will heal quite easily. I suppose you are of a kind that grows again without difficulty. I know among the sea-creatures that the lower the form of the body the more easily it unites or grows, if it be torn or shredded. May I clean and close it?"

I know it was done very delicately, and the wound was trivial. A small furred finger cleaned and searched it, so that it began to

bleed freshly. "I am going to tear a little skin from its sides, because it is so unclean. Do you mind?" she asked. Of course, I assented.

"If you slept," she suggested, "and I kept my hand here, I think it would be well in a short time, and your body would be fit for use. It is no good to us now."

I have noticed among my kind, that there is nothing that draws us together so intimately as the common sharing of any physical danger; perhaps it was from this cause in part, perhaps in part that the method of our communication established an intimacy of a kind of which—however commonplace to her—I had no previous experience, perhaps, also, that the very difference of our minds attracted me, but, from whatever cause, I was aware of an attachment to this creature, who, I told myself, was less like a man than a seal, and had no sex as we understand it, such as I had never felt for any earthly woman.

As I lay there, at the gate of sleep, the slim webbed hand that pressed my foot was the

dearest thing that any world contained, and half-a-million years had no power to divide us.

And then—for one incautious instant—she let me see her mind, and I knew how she regarded me.

I remember once, at a call of urgency, I volunteered to assist a shepherd who was ministering to some neglected sheep, which had been bitten by blow-flies. The grubs had hatched in the wounds, and burrowed inward. The sores had festered, and some had become cavities several inches deep, laying bare bone and flesh, or going down to the vital organs themselves, and in them were a mass of grubs that burrowed and fed.

I still remember acutely the repulsion with which I touched and cleansed, and dressed them. Others might have felt it less, but from such things I am constitutionally averse.

But the feeling was mild to the repulsion with which she regarded the foot on which

her fingers rested. It was different in quality, because she had a mind which saw clearly what should be done, and a body that did not dream of rebellion; but it remained that she regarded the foot she touched as something more grotesque and repulsive than her familiar fishes, which swam in the clean flood, and that she felt as I might have done, had duty called me to minister to one of the Killers—to touch the worm-pink sliminess of the loathsome body while it waved its sucker in a whistling gratitude for my attentions.

She knew her error instantly. "I should not have shown you. All is well. Sleep. I will think of it thoroughly. Besides, I must communicate with our Leader."

Then her mind closed entirely; and after a time I slept.

21 The Bat-Wings

When I waked, the long night was far spent, and the moonlight had left the window. My companion's hand was still laid closely upon the injured foot, and as I stirred, her thought met me.

"I have much to tell. Lie still, and listen.

"First, of ourselves. It is true that your body is, to me, a thing both absurd and repulsive. But should this divide us? My own body does not wear out, and, if injured, in most cases can be repaired, though not easily. I know that I exist independently of it, and that I am separate from it, even though I am in it, perhaps, for ever.

"Your body is of little use, and you control it imperfectly. It needs constant repair, and it is of a kind that wears out very rapidly. What you do afterward, or whether you continue at all, is doubtful even to yourself, though in that, I suppose, you are misled by your body's impermanence. Whether you could be provided with such a body as mine, or whether you could use it, I do not know. My

Leaders might, but in such matters we have little knowledge. The Dwellers know much of these things, as you will understand from what I am about to tell you. If you have the courage to ask them, they can tell you much, if they will; but they may destroy you if they think it needful.

"Still, you have little to lose, for such a body cannot be of much account, even to its owner, and it may be worth attempting. If you should succeed, we could be companions for always, for it seems to me there are ways in which you are greater than I. If I dislike the body in which you live, it should have no power to divide us. I may dislike the killing-pens, but do I therefore dislike my Leader because she is in them? I know that you dislike my body also, because it is strange to you, though it is in all ways better made."

I answered, "I do not think my body is of little account, and I have no mind that the Dwellers should destroy it, till I have an assurance of something better, which you cannot give. It is true that in some ways you

repel me, and that I know best how well I love you when we are both in darkness. But what you say is right, and generous also. My foot feels well, and I am refreshed and rested. Tell me what you have learnt, and we will decide what can be done before morning finds us."

She replied, "I have been told much by my Leader, and some of the things are very strange. You may understand them better than I do. She is in no fear for herself, and might have escaped before, had she been in haste to do so. She was caught in a deep pit, the top of which was covered over, in a way the Killers use to capture their prey. As she fell, she found that many of the strangling-cords, of which you have had some experience, closed round her. They are like living worms, having no head, but with an instinct to bind anything which they strike, or which strikes them. The Killers know how to carry them safely. It is from these that we have most to fear, if we should be attacked again, or should ourselves attack them. They all have these cords, which they keep with

them both night and day.

"She was not strangled, but was so tightly bound that she could not escape when they found her a few minutes later. Had there been more time for thought she would certainly have seen a way to escape them. She found her will had no power whatever against the cords. They had no minds that she could subject to hers. There is such life in the oceans—too low for us to influence it. That is a mystery to us, but I cannot talk of it now.

"When the Killers arrived, she confused them for a time by the serenity of her mind, but, as more collected, and they became very eager to capture her, as a strange prey for the coming feast, she found it increasingly difficult to hold them back, and she determined to save her power and to see what they would attempt.

"They then bound her with many ropes and removed the cords (which relax after a time, and are useless till their vigor returns), and carried her to the pen, where she has

remained ever since. As its only exit is through the bars of the floor, and the vat beneath is flooded with the boiling water, they left the ropes loose, so that she was soon able to free herself. In this they showed their stupidity. Because the boiling water would kill such things as themselves they supposed that it would kill her. So she resolved to wait till the bars should be withdrawn, and learn what she might of the strange world."

"Do you mean," I asked, "that the heat of fire or water has no power over your bodies?"

"No," she said, "of fire I know less, but water of such heat would destroy us if we were to attempt to breathe it. There are boiling springs beneath the ocean, and it was in one of these that the one damaged her body beyond remedy, of whom I told you. But we often swim those springs in safety. No water of any temperature can penetrate our fur, nor can it be injured by such means. We have, therefore, to swim with closed gills and eyes, and with other precautions. We cannot breathe or see, nor dare we attempt either

until we are in cooler water again.

"My Leader's intention was not easy. It was to dive blindly into the boiling water as soon as the bars were withdrawn; to swim to the nearest side of the vat where it extends beyond the pens that are built above it; to clamber out of it, and trust to her speed for safety. She had considered every possibility, and had decided that she could do it, so that it concerned her mind no further. Our coming has altered this.

"It was the thought that I may have to swim in such water, and shall be injured, that caused me to blame my own folly when I allowed the arrow to graze me. In such event the scars on my right arm would give me trouble sufficient, though they are not as a fresh wound.

"Being in the pens, and having resolved on her own course of action, she attempted to establish communication with the creatures which were in the other compartments. She found, after a time, that she was able to do so.

She learnt that they are not creatures of this age at all, and they are so like you in mind—(though in some ways baser)—that when I told her of you she first supposed that another of their kind had escaped the custody of the Dwellers.

"They told her this. In the interior where they live, the Dwellers have captive specimens of the inhabitants of many bygone ages. These they keep under such conditions as approximate to those from which they come, so that they may study their habits and acquire their knowledge.

"Sometimes, part or all of a collection of these specimens are condemned to destruction because they do something which the Dwellers regard as intolerable, though it may be, to them, a natural action.

"The nine creatures now awaiting death have been condemned in this way. My Leader tells me that they are not worth saving, as you will agree when you hear their own account of their condemnation.

"They say that they were the controlling race on the earth's surface about 200,000 years ago. When I learnt this I remembered that you had said that you came of a race 300,000 years more ancient, and I asked my Leader to inquire whether the Dwellers had any specimens of your race also.

"They replied that they did not know, as they had never left their own reservation until this undeserved (as they considered) catastrophe had fallen upon them, but from their own knowledge of the civilizations which had preceded their own, they should think it unlikely. They said that the time mentioned was one at which there was a race of men existing for a short period, too transient and too barbarous for the Dwellers to be likely to consider them worthy of any study. Of all the myriad creations that the earth has known before and since, they were in some ways the most abortive. Although they only occupied, at their most numerous time, about one-half of the earth's surface, they are believed to have destroyed themselves for fear of their own fecundity.

They killed each other in many violent ways, and rewarded those who devised fresh methods for their own destruction.

"All this may be true, or not. You can judge of that. The creatures that tell it believe themselves to be much better, but are of a very filthy kind. Their appearances may be better than yours, but their minds are worse. I will show them to you, as my Leader has given them to me."

She then gave me a picture which was a vivid in her thought as though I stood at the side of the killing-pens, and looked through the steam at those who were confined within them.

The first I saw was of the size and shape of a man, the body very thickly and grossly formed, and of a dark sepia color, irregularly blotched with yellow, in some places as light as sulphur.

It sat cross-legged. It had a heavy head, which hung forward; the nose was very large

and horny, like a vulture's beak. The natural impression of the face was rapacious and cruel, but it had now an appearance of hopeless misery.

It had large bat-wings, wide open on either side, and as it crouched thus, with wings extended, it appeared to me as though it were seeking a space beneath an umbrella to cover it.

There were six more of these creatures—all males. There were two others—one male, one female—alike, except that their faces, though equally brutal, were less intelligent, and that their wings were closed when I saw them.

My companion interpreted—"The seven were judges, and the two were witnesses in a recent trial which has brought them all to this end, very justly. The seven cannot close their wings, which are broken at birth in recognition that they are of a high caste which does no work." (I thought of the fingernails of a Chinese mandarin, but I was too much interested in the tale which her

Leader had obtained from them to break her thought to discuss it.)

"The other two can use their wings, but they do not fly as a bird does. They can use them only to flutter up to the perches on which they sleep. It appears that there is some reason in their own land why they should not sleep on the ground, but it was not explained.

"The two came before the judges with a complaint against a female of their kind. She had been short of food, which, it seems, is divided among them according to certain duties which they fulfil, which are sometimes very difficult to complete, or from attempting which they might even be forbidden by others who have more power than themselves.

"Lacking food, and knowing that these two had it in plenty, she asked them for some, which they refused to give. She then took it, while they were absent.

"The judges did not punish these two who had refused food to the one who needed it,

and who were not ashamed of the tale they told.

"They decided that the one who had taken the food she needed should be beaten.

"They did not know that there was any world beyond that in which they lived, or that the Dwellers existed.

"But the Dwellers had watched them, and it appears that they were appalled at the wickedness of the creatures that they had caused to continue, when nature would have destroyed them. They intended at first to end the colony, thinking that they had no right to let such creatures live, whatever they might learn by observing them, but in the end they relented.

"They have removed these nine for the fate they merit, and have deputed one of themselves to endeavor to teach the first decencies of existence to the remainder of their kind.

"The Dwellers can be very merciful."

I answered, "The tale is strange enough, but it contains some things which are less so to me than they must be to you, for I have known of such in my own time and race. But there is one thing that puzzles me. When these creatures have fallen into the boiling tanks, and their bodies have become sodden with heat, and the Killers have sucked them in, it will be an end of their bodies surely, and the bodies of the Killers (who may be no better, though, it is true, we know no such thing of them, as you have told of these) will benefit.

"But that is their bodies only. If these creatures exist apart from their bodies, what is gained?"

She said, "If you cannot answer that, neither can I. It is a thing of which I have never thought till now, for all this is very new. The Dwellers, who have many thoughts, and who do things, may know, but I begin to suppose that, though they are so much greater than

you, they may sometimes change and blunder, as you do. I have also blundered since I followed you in the doing of new things. They may know what you ask, but, for me, it is too difficult."

22 Night in the Arsenal

It was very cold, and, had I been alone, I should have suffered intensely. She asked me if any plan had formed while I rested, and I replied that I had thought of many things, but that it was always difficult for me to make up my mind quickly, unless circumstances were urgent. The night was still young. We could unbar the door, if we would, but, if we were not attacked again, we could not open it. This was a difficulty that spoilt almost any plan for aggressive action. If her Leader could really swim the boiling tank in safety, the time might come when she could release us, if we should still require it, but this was not yet

possible unless she could also unbar the place which captured her.

"I have no doubt that you are right," her mind answered. "If we cannot open the door, it is best to let others open it for us. If there be a way to open it, we can see it in the morning. You see so badly at night that we should find it a great disadvantage. But I have really little fear of the Killers.

"If my Leader could release herself now, they would see her as she ran toward us. There would be less than nothing gained if she entered, for there would be no one left outside who could open later, if a chance should favor us. Let us think of other things while the night passes. Are there any in your own land who could be as base as those who wait their end in the sheds?"

I answered frankly, "I think there are, though it is difficult to explain, without making them appear even worse than they may really be. It is in our natures to act independently of one another. Each has his

own store of food, and of the things his life requires. There are often those who depend upon him, and for whom he cares more than for his own life. If all the wealth we have were divided equally, even if we would then work equally to maintain it, we should become restless and dissatisfied. Adventure, risk, and chance, are essential to our contentment.

"Living the life we do, we feel that we cannot dwell together at all, unless we can trust each other not to take the things which are ours. We could not keep any social order without judges who could punish those who transgress it. These judges, even though they might be merciful and forgiving in their private life, may feel that they have no right to be so when complaint is made by another."

She answered, "It seems to me that I have sight of a very terrible world, which you could easily alter if you would, but you have not really answered my question. In the case of which I told you, it appears to me that the real wrongs are two. First, that they had such

laws that one of their kind could be short of food, and debarred from the means by which she might obtain it. Second, that those who had it should have refused to share. The first seems to me to condemn the whole race which endures such conditions, for themselves or their neighbors. The second condemns alike the two who refused, and the judges who failed to see that the real wrong was there, and not in the theft which followed. But I cannot think quickly of these things. They are too strange, and too far below the lives of any of the creatures that the ocean holds."

I replied again, still trying to be fair to all, though my own thought was hers, and with a more vivid bitterness, having been in actual contact with the life from which she revolted.

"I agree with all that you think, but there is, with us, another trouble, which you could hardly imagine, I do not know how the food which you say you take, in your own way, once in every year, may be obtained, nor with what effort, but I suppose that there is plenty

for all, and it has become evident to me from what you have told me of the lives you lead, that you have abundant freedom and leisure, and that whatever communal duties each individual may have, they are not very onerous. Our conditions are very different. Life is maintained by the constant toil of the majority of our race—a toil often burdened by very adverse conditions, and numerous perils to health or life. Even so, there may be times when food fails, and some must go short.

"You will see that it would be unfair if some, avoiding this toil, should take by trickery or theft that which is won by the exertions of others."

"It seems to me," she replied, "that to condone one baseness you suggest another, which is even more despicable. It seems to me, also, that you may require many to judge wrong, because you have few who can lead rightly.

"I think that there are two ways of life

which are good. There is the higher way, which is ours, in which all are united; and there is the lower way, of the shark or the shell-fish, of freedom and violence, which only greater violence can destroy, and which nothing can bring into slavery. But the vision which you give me is of a state which is lower than either of these, of blind servitudes and oppressions.

"The more you tell me, the more easily do I understand the sudden violences, and crafts of your mind, and the disorders through which you think. But has there been none who has pointed out to you either the road of freedom, or the road of concord? Are you content with a social state as uncontrolled as the bodies in which you live so briefly?"

I answered, "In the country in which I live, we have invented a very curious state, in which we believe that we ourselves make all laws, for ourselves or each other. When I consider it, I know that it is not true, but it is a fact that we believe it to be so.

"You must allow for the fact that if, in any part of our world, there should arise a trusted ruler—and there have been such, who have been followed gladly by its best men, and who have made such laws that their race has prospered and increased—he will probably have lived most of his life before he gain his position, and his body will quickly decay, and there will be none to succeed him.

"In my own land we had, at one time, a custom that the son of a ruler should be a ruler after him, whether he were fit or not. Some of them did good, or at least attempted to do so. Few of them did great harm. They took more than their share of the good things of the land, and they gave to their friends. They sometimes made war when their people would have been content to remain at peace. They sometimes—but less often—prevented war, when their people desired it.

"They interfered very little with the personal freedom of their subjects, so long as their own pleasures were gratified. For their own sakes they liked to be popular. Few laws

were made, and if such as there were should be considered oppressive, the people would unite to insist that they should be reduced or altered. When the king and his subjects differed, it was always that they wanted less laws, and there was confusion, and sometimes violence, till they succeeded in their desire.

"They objected particularly to having their goods or money taken by taxation, and their kings did not dare to tax them heavily. To enforce many laws requires the employment of many men, and great expenditure of treasure, from which a king gets no benefit. Had the king made many laws, he would have had no money to administer them, even had he wished to do so.

"But even so, men were not satisfied. There is an old tale with us of a colony of frogs in a river, which had no king, and thinking that it would increase their importance to have one, they petitioned their Creator, and he, being kindly, showed them a dead log in the stream, and told them that their king was there. But

when they found that this king was inactive, they complained again, and he, being angered at their folly, gave them a stork, who chased and ate them as often as hunger moved him. The tale says that they were no more pleased than before, but that they complained in vain, for their Creator would hear them no further. We, having tried kings of both qualities, the predatory and the inactive, and being no more satisfied than the frogs, have devised an imagination which has conquered those who conceived it. Even though we recognize the incubus which is upon us, and that it is of our own devising, we cannot perceive a way to remove it.

"The fact is this. Our ancestors of a previous century, believing that they had discovered a way to freedom, devised a plan by which the people of each locality should choose one of their number, and these men, meeting together, should have power to frame laws, and to make impositions upon them. Every few years a new choice should be made, so that they could replace any they disliked.

"This procedure has now been followed for many years, with a variety of unforeseen consequences, all of which I could not explain without a previous understanding of the whole social order—or disorder—in which it is rooted.

"But one sequel is simple. These men, being appointed to make laws, have proceeded to do so for many years with uninterrupted diligence, and there is no power to stop them.

"How can they be stopped, but by a law of their own making? And that is the last law which they would consider.

"The result is that we are oppressed by a weight of laws, to which we render a partial and bewildered obedience, aware that there are many of which we have not even heard; and every year hundreds of thousands of us, most of whom have no intention of law-breaking—are indeed nervously anxious to avoid it—are insulted and plundered by the innumerable officials through whom these

laws are administered, and whom we toil to support."

I went on to show her pictures of the life from which I came, so that she should realize the existence which was possible under such conditions, where personal freedom had disappeared beyond anything which our planet had previously known, or is ever likely to experience again; where you might not even die in peace, except under the penalty that your body would afterward be seized and cut open, to ascertain how you'd done it.

Horror, pity, curiosity, disgust, contempt, and wonder chased themselves across the surface of my companion's mind as the nature of this life became visualized before her. With these there was a satisfaction that I had escaped, by whatever channel, from conditions of such barbarity, and a certain admiration or respect for myself, such as we may feel for one whom we recognize to have lived through some unusual tragedy, beyond the common experience of mankind. Then there was a desire to see for herself the

strange and alien life which I showed her, and I knew that, were it not an impossibility for her to enter a past to which she did not belong, she would gladly have adventured it with me. I thought, with curiosity, of how she would encounter such an existence, could I have translated her to a mortal body and the conditions of life with which I was myself familiar, and I had a moment's doubt of one who, I felt, had experienced only the pleasures of existence without its pain, but my final thought was that the serenity of her mind was a spiritual quality too fundamental for any servitude to subdue it.

She asked me whether or not our world had always lacked a leader to propose any rule of life other than this state which lacked either individual freedom or a rational mutuality, and I replied that there had been an event of two millenniums earlier than my own life, which was commonly regarded as a revelation from Heaven. Its Exponent had announced a series of paradoxical aphorisms for the conduct of life, which were of an unforgettable kind, and were still highly

respected. If they were obeyed, life would be fundamentally different, but the common opinion was that they were quite impracticable. Each of these aphorisms prescribed a line of conduct and foretold its result. It might seem difficult to honor the Teacher, and reject His wisdom so absolutely. But it was contrived very simply. The consequences which had been ascribed to the course of life which He taught were allocated to a vague existence which was to follow at a distant time, and in another sphere. Meanwhile, if they were obeyed at all, it was regarded as an act of self-sacrifice, no one supposing for a moment that the results which He foretold would actually follow. I admitted that I knew of no authenticated instance of anyone obeying these precepts with unsatisfactory results.

As the long night passed I went on, in response to a curiosity which seemed insatiable in its desire of exploration, to describe many phases of the social and economic chaos which we call civilization.

I noticed that she was particularly impressed by the precarious tenure on which we hold the houses which our defective bodies require, and the uncertainty of many of us in obtaining a regular and sufficient supply of the very necessities of life itself and the consequent bitterness with which we regard a stranger who lays hands on anything to which we consider we have a prior claim.

Realizing this, she began to understand how those among us of the baser sort, who have more than sufficient for their own comfort, may yet without incurring the contempt or punishment of their fellows persecute any who attempt to share it.

Joined to this bitter resentment at any private theft, I had to exhibit the docility with which we allow ourselves to be robbed by legal process, and the immunity and respect enjoyed by those who are the instruments and beneficiaries of these extortions; and, as I showed it, I had to realize the fantastic inequity with which these impositions are levied, as, for instance, that a man who

prefers salt shall pay less than one who eats sugar, or that one who keeps a dog shall pay more than one who keeps a pet of another species, or—an idea almost devilish in its lunacy—that a man shall pay more heavily because he provides a larger home, with the increase of children dependent upon him.

I reverted to the explanation that, while no king could have imposed this burden of taxation upon us, we were bewildered by the belief that it was of our own doing, and that this conviction acted as a paralysis ...

The shaft struck the wall sharply, and rebounded to the floor beside us.

23 The Escape

It is the habit of mankind to depreciate the appliances of its ancestors, when it has superseded them with other contrivances. In

our time, bows and arrows have become symbolic of futility among engines of war. Yet, before the introduction of gunpowder, the long-bow was considered a weapon sufficiently formidable to threaten the whole order of feudalism, and it is at least doubtful whether stupidity alone, or a deliberate purpose, exposed the archers at Bannockburn, without the usual support of pikemen, to the charge of the Scottish horse.

It is certainly true that a company of Crécy archers would have quickly cleared more than one of the Flanders trenches, which were too near for comfort, yet too far for a grenade to reach them, and too deep for the trajectory of a bullet.

We had talked and slept and talked again as the long night continued, and had not noticed the first faint light that came slowly from a sun that rose to so prolonged a dawn, till the arrow fell rattling on the floor beside us.

My companion laughed as it fell—not with her lips, that only opening slightly for a

breathing which it seemed no haste could quicken, nor with her eyes, to my knowing, for it was too dark to see them, though they must have been alight with the joy of unfamiliar action, but with her mind.

Our thought was single that we should go back to our first station beneath the door, where we supposed we should be safe from the arrows. She rose lightly—another shaft striking the place where she had lain, as she left it—and slowly and stiffly, from my long vigil, I followed her. She was becoming used to the frequent evidences of the imperfections of my physical existence, but this exhibition stirred her to a fresh wonder. "Didn't it know," she asked, "that you wanted to get up quickly? Is it insubordinate, or stupid?"

I defended it as I could. "I think it really does its best for me, in its own way. I have used it very hardly of late, and it needs repair; within a few minutes, when it understands that it must work again, it will be ready. Did it never protest, I should use it beyond its capacity, and soon destroy it. But perhaps if

you had come to my world, you would have found your own body less perfectly adapted to more strange conditions than you find here."

She answered frankly, "It is likely enough. Though I should at least know what was happening. You seem to me to live in yours like a stranger, without control or confidence.

"But I agree with you the more easily because I am already feeling the need of the water in which I most naturally live, and I am also conscious of the loss of the energy I have given you, which, in about two months from now, should it continue at the same rate, would exhaust me entirely."

As this thought reached me, we were moving down the center of the hall, she in front, because she was confident that her will could turn a shaft if it were coming directly at her. Suddenly I saw her bulk more broadly in the dim light, and was sharply startled, till her thought assisted my eyes to explain it. She had lifted and shaken loose her fur, which

was of a surprising length, and then drawn it down again more closely than ever, so that its surface was as smooth as a serpent's skin.

I had an impulse to lay my hand on the glossy back, but dare not break the barrier of her physical difference and aloofness. It was as though an unapproachable virginity surrounded her. I vaguely realized the power by which she could control the fiercest creatures of the deep, and how they felt as they cowered before her.

If she understood my thought, she gave no sign, but went on to tell me, "In the ocean are many springs, some that are hot, and some that are very cold, where we can lie with lifted fur, and let the water go through it. Here I can only shake it loose, and every hair is too sensitive to rest content if any speck of dust be upon it, especially of organic origin, for they dread corruption in any form."

We were two-thirds down the floor by now, and she was stepping delicately to avoid the body of the Killer, which had spilled across

it, when an arrow passed us, and the next moment I was struck sharply behind the shoulder so that I staggered and recovered myself with difficulty. "I've got it now," I thought, for there was a dull pain under my shoulderblade, and I was aware of a feathered shaft that projected behind me, but her mind only laughed in answer.

"It isn't easy to tell where your body begins or ends, but I don't think that arrow has hurt you."

She was right. It had entered the knapsack in a downward direction, pierced a variety of its contents, and then been deflected by a burning-glass which I had brought in case my small stock of matches should be exhausted—but so far I had had no occasion to use it. Now it projected three inches from the lower corner of the knapsack, a narrow, steel-like, unbarbed head, of razor sharpness.

But how had it struck me there?

We crouched with our backs to the barred

door, and understood.

The walls and ceiling were of the same substance as the door that had turned my axe-edge, and the shafts that struck them fairly rebounded, but they were shooting now so that the shafts glanced from the roof, and then did diabolic turns, like the wizardry of billiard balls when a master guides them. Whether there were any quality of an unfamiliar kind in shaft or ceiling I cannot say, but such shooting I had never seen, or imagined.

Fortunately for us the side walls were still hung with enough weapons to make such jugglery difficult upon them—the end was bare like the ceiling—and the floor was scattered with those I had brought down in my chase of the Killer.

"Unless you have something better to suggest than sitting here, we shall probably be in the stewing-vats before sunset," my comrade considered judicially, as a shaft slanted.

"I am of the same mind," I answered amiably, "but what can we do? I might send one arrow from the window. I should probably aim too hastily to hit any one. I should not be likely to send a second. We can unbar the door, but we cannot open it. We could ask your Leader to do so, if she can escape from her present confinement, but the moment seems inopportune. Can you get in touch with her, and learn what is happening outside?"

In response to this suggestion she established communication almost at once, and was soon passing on the report to me.

"There are two archers shooting. The one you hit is hurt in the head, but only slightly. The smaller Killers have gone to the farther side, and are out of view. The very old, the young and the diseased, are congregated together at the far end of the enclosure. The infirm archer is with them, but he was consulted by the others, and it seemed that he gave them the plan of attack they are following.

"There is a young one of the larger kind who is turning somersaults in excitement, because he hopes that the older may be killed, and he will obtain a bow.

"They suppose that the arrows have destroyed you already, but they are cautious, and will continue to shoot till their ammunition is ended. The smaller Killers, who have gone round to the side, are well provided with strangling-cords, and have also many javelins. They have fetched a quantity from one of the other buildings. They are elaborately made, and have red shafts. Probably they were of a sacred or ornamental character, and have been acquired for fighting purposes only in this emergency.

"The javelins are not dangerous to you at present, as they turn in the air when thrown, and the window bars are too narrow for them to pass.

"There is no guard here now, and the bat-winged victims are greatly excited by the hope of escape, but they appear to have no

means of releasing themselves ... I think the arrows are ended."

We thought so too, for they had now ceased to enter. If our enemies hoped or supposed that we had been disabled, they must advance to investigate, and I had the sense of relief which comes when you can at last strike back, after being exposed to an attack which there is no means of resisting. I had a moment's inclination to unbar the door, and rush out upon them when they pushed it open, with such axe-blows as might scatter them, and win our freedom at a moment.

I had the thought that if the archers could be cut down, the rest would be panic-stricken to see it, and that without their bows they might not be very formidable, but the recollection of the strangling-cords checked this impulse.

Then I thought that if they expected that they had killed us, they would not suppose that the door had been unbarred, and how would they endeavor to enter?

The light had increased now, so that the whole extent of the hall was visible. It showed nothing that we had not already seen or imagined, except that in the roof there were slits of an oblong shape, and of a regular occurrence, and over the sides of these we saw the heads of small lizard-like creatures protruding—bright yellow, snout-like heads, with small emerald eyes, that watched us fearfully, but with an impression of malevolence, and of an intelligence that gave me a feeling of actual discomfort as I gazed, so that I looked elsewhere, and then remembered how an animal will turn uneasily from a man's eyes, and was ashamed, and looked back, but my gaze was reluctant.

My comrade followed my thought, and surveyed them with her usual coolness. "They are more intelligent than the Killers, of whom they are not afraid. The Killers serve them. They must have built that roof for their dwelling. They fear us, and therefore hate us. It might be well if you sent an arrow to frighten them."

But as the thought came, the yellow heads shot back, and the openings were quiet and vacant.

"I thought so," she smiled, "they can read our thoughts, while they watch us. They are dangerous and might do us mischief, but I think the Killers are too stupid to use them."

Meanwhile, I had again secured the bow, which I had used the night before with such success.

When I had drawn it once or twice, and felt that I could control it to some purpose, though it was almost beyond my strength to handle, I stepped to one of the windows on a sudden impulse, and saw the ground before me was pink with advancing Killers. Swiftly and silently they came, having appeared again from the side which had hidden them from the sight of our Leader. There was no whistling from the suckers, but they were waving them from right to left, and tossing them in the air in their excitement, as does an elephant when he trumpets. Many of them

had the red-stemmed javelins. All had strangling-cords in readiness.

The archers moved beside them, one on each flank, bow in hand, but I saw that there were no arrows on the strings.

There was no need to aim. I bent the bow to my strength's limit, and sent the long shaft into the hideous crowd that confronted me. I think that it might only have dented the slimy bladder-like skin of the first it struck, without puncturing it, had it been able to throw him back without striking any solid substance behind him, but—perhaps because they were advancing so closely—it went through him and two others before it spent its force, and left them heaped and squealing. In a moment the whistling cries arose to a point which I cannot hope to tell, for I lack words for any possible comparison. Right and left ran the Killers, the archers first in flight, and in a few seconds were beyond my range and seeing, beneath the side walls of the arsenal that was at once our jail and our safety.

My comrade, looking from the other window, gazed at the stricken, struggling heap with eyes that danced in triumph. Her age-long wandering in the ocean ways had familiarized her to death and cruelty in a hundred forms. Her repugnance had been to doing things herself which she regarded as natural only to a lower order of creation. I suppose in all her life she had never knowingly done harm to any sentient thing. But she loved adventure as a child loves it.

Then her eyes clouded to an instant's blankness, and turned to me again.

"My Leader says, 'Tell that animal not to shoot again, and if it does so, leave it entirely. We are not Killers, nor do we practice their ways. Besides, it may cause trouble with the Dwellers, of which we have prepared sufficient already.'"

I answered in anger at such perversity. "Tell her that if she is not a Killer, neither am I an Amphibian, and I shall play this game in my own way."

"But she is a Leader——"

"She is not mine. Tell her I have the authority of five Leaders, and she had better do as she is told."

"She says that she has already loosed a bar from the floor, and is coming to take direction."

"Tell her that if we open the door to let her in we shall have to keep it open, and how then shall we resist them? If we close it, who will be left outside to open it, when we are ready? Tell her to stay where she is."

"Be quiet, please. She has dived in the boiling tank. We must not divert her mind. She dare not look nor breathe. Now she has reached the outer tank. It is worse than she expected, and she is very nearly exhausted. She has risen to the surface, and is looking through the steam for a place to land. There are Killers on that side. She will dive again, and swim under the killing-sheds so that she may reach the farther side before they can run

round. You must help her with such will as you have. She has risen. But it is too soon. There's a floor above her head, in the water. She is swimming on. She has struck something under water. It is one of the boiling bodies. It is a Frog-mouth. It is not quite dead. It has seized her with its teeth. Now she has willed herself free. She has risen to the surface. She can breathe, but she can only swim very slowly. She is exhausted, and she is holding one arm out of the water. It has been burnt by the water where she was bitten. She is at the edge now, but the Killers are there also. There are only three yet, and their wills are not strong enough to resist her. They are confused and frightened in mind. One has tried to push her back, striking with a javelin. She has caught it in her hand. He has fallen into the water. I have not heard one of them squeal quite like that before. She has pulled him out again, but he is still squealing. I think he will die. More Killers are coming. She is running here. She says, 'Have the door unbarred.'"

I lifted the bars down, though I was far

from sure of the wisdom of opening. Then I went to the window. She was already in view, running at a great pace, but with an ease and coolness that gave no impression of being hunted, but rather of one who constrained others to follow. I cannot easily convey the feeling that came to my mind as I watched her. The Killers were too far behind to throw to any good purpose.

But round the side of the building from which I watched came another crowd, forgetful of arrows in their excitement, and were between her and the door.

"She says do not shoot. She will draw them off, and then return to the door, and I must be ready to run out with her. They will then try to cut us off from the gate, but we shall make for the cliff behind, and climb it, and go to meet our companions. She says I can bring you if you can climb."

I answered, "I cannot climb that cliff. No man could."

"She says we must go that way. It is necessary. The animals can go on killing each other if they will. She will have none of it."

I said, "Tell her I did not come here for my own pleasure, but to help her. If she does not need my help she can go her own way, and you can choose for yourself also. I am not going to lose the chance of giving these brutes another lesson."

All these thoughts exchanged in less time than it will take to read them, and even while my comrade answered, with a troubled mind, "She is a Leader. She will do right. Do not shoot," I had already sent a shaft among them which found its victim, and this I followed with another which went weakly astray as they turned and fled to safety.

The Amphibian, who had first taken a sideward leap to avoid their rush, was already moving away to draw them off the door, but seeing the effect of my shot she ran swiftly, pushed it open, and entered.

She stood there, holding the door open with her right hand—the left arm, which had been bitten and then scalded in the water, hanging loosely beside her—with a quiet dignity, which I could not but respect, however much I might resent her attitude to myself. She did not turn her eyes to me, nor give me a thought—she never did this from first to last.

She looked at the inside of the door for a moment, and then I was aware that their minds were in contact. Thought is swift, but it seemed a long time that we stood there. I was conscious that my comrade was fighting for her own will, and was, in a way, defying her Leader, if defiance it could be called, where I knew that both minds retained their poise and coolness, and the one that heard was both aloof and judicial.

At last she asked me, "Are you content that I go with her and can you escape by the way we came?"

I replied, "You must make your own choice," and closed my mind very quickly. I

was angered at the course that events had taken, and in no mood to let her know that I was at an extremity of exhaustion. As I drew the bow the last time I had known that it was my own giddiness that made the shaft go wrong. I was standing upright with difficulty, and knew that if we separated there was not one chance in a thousand that I should escape the handling of those nauseous suckers.

Her mind fought for a moment to pierce the blankness with which I met it. Then it recognized its failure. "Wait," she answered. "I have a thought," and again she turned to her Leader, and a longer silence followed.

At last she turned to me, and relief of some kind gave light to the serenity of her eyes. "She goes. I stay with you. How long depends on yourself. But it is a condition that I must not explain."

I was so gladdened by this decision that I was disposed to be generous. "I am very glad," I answered, "unless it will expose you to greater danger than you would otherwise

meet. But I hope I have not been the cause of any difference between you and your Leader."

She answered coldly, "I am in no danger that I fear to meet. We are not animals such as you are. Nor do we differ among ourselves. Our Leaders are always right."

As she gave me this thought, her Leader looked at me for the first time. I thought there was inquiry in her glance, but it passed me dumbly. She threw a thought to my companion, "You should watch the floor," and turned and went out, and the door closed behind her, with the click which had sounded so ominously in the night when I first heard it.

24 The Fight in the Arsenal

When the door closed I was very glad to sit

down with my back against it, as we had done before, and my companion was quick to perceive my exhaustion. Again I felt the small life-giving hand in mine, and, for the time at least, the effects of thirst and starvation, and the long night-hours, were overcome by the reserves of her vitality.

She was very calm and quiet at first, and indisposed for conversing.

At length I asked her, "I know how I must appear to you in many ways, but why was your Leader so contemptuous of me?"

She answered, "She was not contemptuous. She did not regard you at all. Why should she? She had more serious things of which to think. Besides, you think of our Leaders as one, because their decisions are always unanimous. But this is wrong. Each is different. There is none like this one in all practical issues, and in control of material things. That is why it was she who came to seek the first one, when she did not return. I think she regards the whole expedition as a

mistake, and that she should have been left to her own ways. But such things are not for me. They are for themselves only.

"She taught me much while we talked together. When I am with you only, I think myself superior in many ways. Your body breaks so easily, and you are never sure when it will fail you. Your mind is confused, and inconsequent. It is only when I think of yourself as of a Leader whose followers are mostly treacherous or disloyal, but who still endeavors without loss of courage to fulfil his purpose, that I respect you at all. But when my Leader showed me my stupidity I felt that there is little difference between us.

"She showed me, among other things, that I accept your conclusions without thought, and that I do not even take notice of what is beneath me.

"You are used to opening doors in certain ways, and so you assumed that this could not be opened at all from the inside, and I believed you without reason. The Killers

must have been preparing an attack from beneath our feet, and were only interrupted when they ran out to waylay my Leader, and I did not hear it. I know that your senses are rudimentary, but do you not hear it now?"

No—I heard nothing. But she said they were moving busily under our feet, so that we must be prepared for an attack at any moment. She showed me what her Leader had known at a glance, that if we pressed the hinge the door would open.

I said, "If there be a cavity beneath us, there is probably a trap-door from it to this hall. In that case, I wonder they haven't used it earlier."

We examined the floor from end to end. It was of the same hard smooth substance as the walls. It was laid in squares, about a yard each way, so finely mortised that the divisions were scarcely perceptible. But there was one in the middle of the hall that attracted our attention.

It was set as close as the others, even more so, but there was no appearance of mortar between it and those adjoining. I cleaned the dust from the floor with my ragged sleeve, and the difference became more evident.

As we bent above it, there was a slight sound overhead, and looking up suddenly I saw a row of yellow heads that were regarding our movements with interest. "I wish I could kill those creatures. They will harm us yet," I thought, and my companion answered, "They wish us evil, but you will do us injury if you fear them. They know every thought they cause you. But tell me what plans you have. Our Leader is rescued—if any rescue were needed. We can open the door when we will, and there is nothing to keep us here, if we have courage to venture out. But perhaps it would be better to defend this sheltered place, till our friends come in the evening?"

I answered, "I think we can go free together when we will, though I could not have done so singly, for I shall have no strength of my

own till I come on food of some kind; but we shall need to know where we are going, and why.

"I suppose that at any moment this stone may move, and there will be a rush of enemies upon us. Yet if we wait till that moment we lose nothing, for they could not come up quickly through such an opening, and the more of our enemies that are congregated beneath the building when the door is opened, the better it will be. But you are right that we should have a plan as to where we are going, and why we do it, either together or separately.

"When I came here, it was with the object of finding two of my friends who had preceded me. Almost at once I involved myself in another obligation. It seemed to me that the one might help the other, and apart from that I had no guidance as to where to search, nor hope of aid.

"So far, I have not found them, though I have seen evidence that one has been near

here. I think it is most probable, if they live at all, which I greatly doubt, that they are in the hands of the Dwellers, and it is there that I should seek them.

"I have no wish to do this. It is very perilous, and not hopeful. Also, I do not wish to part from you, and I know you cannot come there.

"But if I should return with you, I suppose that there is no way by which I could live in your own element.

"If you will help me to get clear of this danger, and back to where food and water are possible, I think I ought to leave you, and by doing this I shall also relieve your Leaders of a difficulty with the Dwellers."

She replied, "I think we shall not part so soon, if we escape the vats of the Killers. I have something to tell you. When my Leader wished me to go with her, and leave you here, I objected. Then I told her my reasons—as our custom is—knowing that she would judge

them fairly, and more capably than I could do myself. She found that they were not good. She showed me that you are yourself of the kind of the Killers, that you have little faculty of reason or self-control, that you are violent and untrustworthy, and (she thought) untamable. If that should prove to be so, we could not even make you as one of the sea-dogs. Also, you could only live on the roof of our island, where you would probably die when storms swept over it.

"First or last, you would have to go to the Dwellers.

"She has seen that, every day, as the sun sets, one or more of them will come over the mountains, and disappear to seaward. She supposes that it is a regular patrol, and that they come out at some inland spot during the earlier day, and retire down one of the passages which you have seen.

"When they pass, the Killers are afraid, and hide in the wall.

"She proposed that we should leave you here, where you could defend yourself till the evening, and you could then go out and give yourself up to the Dwellers, or escape entirely, while the Killers will be hiding.

"At first I could not answer this; but then I had a new thought. I replied that now she was safe we had still to rescue the body of our Leader which was left in the tunnel, if that should be possible. I should be willing to go to seek it, if you were with me, but not otherwise. It is plain that we cannot take it by force from the Dwellers, even though we should all go together. If we go secretly, we must be few. In many ways you might help me there, for you are more nearly of their kind, and you do not fear them as you do smaller things. Even if the body be destroyed it is necessary that we should know.

"She did not like my plan. I thought that she would refuse it, and I held to it with all the force I had, which was little. Then she closed her mind from me. I knew she had many thoughts which she would not show me. At

last she decided, 'You may do this, if you can. But you must not ask this animal to go down to the Dwellers to aid you. If he offers to do so, you may take him with you. But he must make his own plan before he learns of yours, and to that he must keep. You must be in hiding before the sun goes down. If we should return this way, and should meet with the Dwellers, you may watch us meet, but you must hold your minds blank and closed, so that neither they nor we can perceive you, unless we ourselves should signal to you. You must not release the Bat-winged men, nor allow their escape. They must die, as the Dwellers have willed.' That is all she told me, but there is none like her for foresight, even of the Seven, or for plans that are so made that they can change as the chances alter, and still reach to where they will. She saw me foolish, but she decided to make a plan which used my folly. I am glad that we shall go together, and see the homes of the Dwellers."

I answered, "I am glad also. I cannot say that if I had no search to make I should give myself to the Dwellers, as your Leader

advised so kindly. They might decide my fate with great wisdom, but I prefer to do that for myself. As she said, I am not easily tamable. Besides, if I once get clear of this place, I think I might find means both to hide and to live in this new world, and I should well like to explore it. It is already apparent to me that it is full of beauty and of strange wonders, of which I have yet seen very little—and the tunnels of the Dwellers seem the more perilous way. But we both have good reasons for the choice we have made, and I think we may do better together than either could do separately. But why should we not attempt escape immediately? Why should we not return to the lower way while there is still daylight to guide us, and before the Dwellers appear, to add a new peril to the road we take?"

"I am not certain which is best, and I think, as you do, that we might escape at any time with no great risk, if we were sudden and rapid in the attempt; but I think that she wished us to remain to see whether my friends will still come by this way, and are

allowed to pass in safety. There is also this to think, that if the Dwellers always return to the interior when the night comes, and they travel more rapidly than we should do, they might overtake us if we enter one of the tunnels earlier, while, if we follow behind them, we may do so in safety, with little fear that they will know of our coming till we have passed the tunnel and arrive at what lies beneath it."

So we agreed to wait, and as we thought that the loose stone in the floor was now the point that threatened us, we sat closely round it. I kept the bow beside me, thinking to send a shaft through any opening that might appear, but as the time passed without movement I loosed my knapsack, and finding thread and a strong needle, I commenced to repair my rags as best I was able, my companion watching, half in amusement and half in sympathy, and wondering why the creatures of my race never tried to train their skins to utility.

Then for some time she was silent, her head rested on her updrawn knees, and when at last

she moved again she told me, "I suppose you think of us as all being alike, as we live the same lives, just as I should think of your kind, if I were among them, while to you they are widely different by character and appearance and occupation. But we are not so. I have a vice which I cannot break, which is shared by one only among all our thousands. Our Leaders have considered it, and showed us that it comes only when our minds are tired by new things, and desire rest when we do not will to take it.

"Then our thoughts change to sleep of themselves, and on a note which is not of our own choosing.

"There was a distant time when I was very foolish, and I went into a part of the ocean where there was much depth and great darkness. There I found a pressure which came upon me so that I could not release myself. I was held there very long, with a horror you may imagine.

"When the time came at which our nation

assemblies, and my absence was noticed, the Leader whose body we are now seeking, and who is like myself in the love of strange and difficult ways, though of a much higher capacity to traverse them successfully, undertook to search for me, and knowing the direction which I had been seen to go, she at last discovered and released me, by methods which would be beyond your comprehension, if I should attempt to tell them. In doing this she risked her own life, and lost so much of her vitality that she rested afterward for many years till her strength returned, and did not even take part in the Councils of the Seven.

"Now, when I wished to gain my own way, I looked for every argument that would support me, and I recalled this to my Leader's mind, as a reason why I should go, if someone must be risked to seek her. Then, as we sat here, the horror of that place came back to me, and in a moment I was asleep and within it. But it has left me now, and, I hope, for ever...

"It is in my mind that there will be fighting

when that stone moves, and that I am pledged to help you."

She picked up one of the short javelins from the floor, and balanced it thoughtfully on an out-stretched finger. When she had turned it over, and looked at it carefully for some time, she threw it against the wall, watching its flight very closely. It turned once in the air, failed in its balance, and struck the wall feebly.

Unperturbed, she collected six others, and threw them one by one, so quickly that the next was in the air before the first had fallen. Of these the two last struck the wall at the same spot, and with the full force of the throw.

"I think I can play that game if they should ask it," she laughed in her mind, and collected others.

"Could you hit the same spot twice in succession?" I asked.

"Surely," she answered, "even you could not forget so quickly. But I myself forget that your body is not as mine. I understand that yours may do your will with exactness on one occasion, and on the next, though you have the same will, and it be equally capable, it may fail entirely. All the games of which you told me, in which your body is used, are based on this quality. But with us it is different. I know now that I can hit any spot at which I can aim, and as often as I attempt it."

She picked up two of the javelins, and sent the first against the farther wall—but the second did not follow it. At the moment her hand was lifted, the stone beside us disappeared from sight, leaving a yard-wide gap, and as swift as thought itself her javelin was flung into the open pit beneath us.

An outburst of loud whistling screams told us that it had carried no welcome message, but the next second we had our own troubles to deal with. Back into its place the stone shot upward, and with such force that certain

things which had been placed upon it were thrown to the roof and fell scattering upon us. Four of them there were—four eight-foot lengths of living, writhing rope—but to me, at least, they seemed forty.

I suppose that my companion, of cooler mind, and of quicker hands also, made no such error.

I know that while I was struggling with one that had caught my leg and was thrusting upward for a more deadly grip, her mind reached mine with the quiet quickness of thought and buoyant gaiety of spirit that physical danger always waked within her. I had a feeling that the idea that she should be threatened by hostile violence always came to her as an absurdity, to be met with laughter.

"We must watch the stone. Put your foot on its end. Jump to the left, or the other one will get you." So she called to me, while she ripped one which had fallen round her own waist with a javelin point till it loosed her and fell squirming, and as it did so she flung the

javelin, not at the next of them, though it was round her feet already, nor at the gap which showed again where the stone had left it, but at the lizard-forms, that were twittering.

It struck one of them fairly on the out-stretched head, and down it came, a bright yellow snake-like form, turning head-under-heels as it came—or under tail, to be literal—and falling in the open gap, at which there rose a chorus of such consternation from the unseen Killers beneath us, that it was evident that to them a lizard must be a dreaded or a sacred thing.

"Two each," she laughed, as she caught the still restless portions of the living cords on an arrow's point, and threw back into the gap beneath us. "Did you notice that they became almost harmless after I had struck one of the lizards, and the others bolted? I believe it was their minds that guided them to attack us. It was to reach them, if the need came, that I first tried the javelins, but I dared not tell you, nor let the thought make growth in my own mind, lest they should know it. I fear them,

but I do not fear the Killers at all." And just then the Killers came.

I think the falling of the lizard must have produced a confusion that delayed their attack, but that this was succeeded by such a tide of fury as swept away the natural cowardice that underlay their ferocity, and caused them to forget the caution with which they had approached us previously.

They came leaping upward, with their hands on the edge of the gap, and the first fell back with a javelin in the throat, and a second I knocked back with a side-sweep of the axe, and from the third I sliced off the sucker at its foot, and stopped his whistling. But the crowd pushed up, and flung him sprawling outward.

They had no cords—perhaps they thought them useless after the way we returned the four they sent us; perhaps they would have been too dangerous to themselves in that crowded rush—and they had little time or space to use their javelins before the axe was

on them. I struck, and struck, with steady sweeping strokes, at the pushing crowd that rose against me, the tough skins bursting.

And always, if they rose too fast, or one should dodge my stroke, a javelin found it, from where my comrade had stepped back to the wall to reach them down as she needed them. Once I thought I had failed, as the pressure spewed up two or three at once, too quickly for the axe to take them, but her mind reached me serenely. "Keep the others down—and leave these to me," and I was vaguely conscious that she was avoiding their weapons with a cool celerity, while her own bore them her message that their hours were over.

And then amid an up-rush of damaged bodies which he was using for his own protection I saw the red-brown malignant head of one of the archers, and struck with all my strength a straightdown cleaving blow, and was conscious that the attack had collapsed before me, and the gap was empty.

With a sudden dizziness, I looked on the shambles that now surrounded the opening. I have told something of the outward repulsiveness of the Killers, with their worm-pink skins that were both tough and slimy, but of the interiors of these foul bodies I cannot write. An axe-stroke has no reticence.

I thought it was from that nauseous sight that a sudden faintness threatened, and I struggled against it, stepping back, and leaning on the axe, and turning to my companion to share my triumph.

She stood very still, her eyes bright and watchful, her mind beginning to question her for the thing she had done—which was, no doubt, outside the experience not only of herself, but of all her kind—but her will meeting it confidently. Then she looked at me, and her thought changed. I made an effort to reassure her that I was uninjured, and was aware that I was falling.

I don't think I was unconscious for long, and I believe that she neither helped nor

hindered, but watched quietly beside a phenomenon beyond her experience.

When my senses returned, she was alert and near, and her mind was quick to reach me.

"You can rest while you will. I think your last stroke was enough to still them. You made it work that time!" She always spoke of my body thus, as something separate from myself, as we might praise a friend who carved well with a blunted chisel. "I am sorry that I failed you. The Killer rose on your farther side, and I could not reach it till it had made its throw. I have much yet to learn of the ways of fighting—do you not understand me? Did you not know that your body was broken again?—does it tell you nothing?—look under your right arm."

I looked, and understood. The excitement of the fight, in which my life had literally depended upon the speed and force with which I could strike, and recover, and strike again, and then the utter exhaustion that had followed, and now the dizzy weakness that

possessed me—each in turn had left me unaware that a javelin had found its mark. Thrown straight upward, and probably with no great force, in the pushing crowd that gave scant space for free movement, it had struck me in the armpit as the axe was lifted—no depth of wound, but it bled freely.

It was evident that I must rest for a time at least, and so I lay there, while she sat beside me and watched the empty gap before us, conquering once again the repugnance she felt at touching my body, so that the smooth furred fingers should close the wound, and the soft palm should give its strength to heal me.

"I am ashamed," I thought, "that I should be so incapable from so slight a wound. You regard me as a creature of violence, yet I break down at every conflict, where you come through with a clear victory."

She answered, "It was I who failed you. I should have stood nearer, and it need not have happened. I held them too lightly, and

you, who took the harder part, have been hurt through my folly."

My mind protested, but as the thought formed I was sleeping.

25 The Forbidden Thing

There have been those, from the Egyptian civilization to our own times, who have believed a dream to be in the nature of an occult visitation, from which future events can be foretold or avoided. But even they would admit that a dream must be remembered on waking if it is to be of any utility, and that is just where so few dreams are satisfactory.

When I waked I recollected vividly that I had dreamed of the making of a fire a short distance outside the door, which had stood open while I made it. I had built up a pile of

wood, which I had cut from the javelin shafts, and set the burning-glass in their midst, and I had sat and watched the smoke of the heated wood curl upward, till a blaze showed faintly in the sunlight.

So far I remembered clearly, and I supposed that the incident when the arrow had struck the glass might have brought it into my dreaming mind, but I knew that the dream went further, and was of a very exciting character. I had a feeling that it was very urgent that I should recall it, but I tried in vain to do so.

I was on the point of telling my trouble to my companion, but the feeling that it might only increase her contempt or pity for the internal anarchy in which I existed deterred me. Had I done so she would have given me a convincing reason why no fire should be attempted, and our adventure must have had a widely different sequel.

As it was, I rose, and with my left hand—for my other arm was stiff at the shoulder,

and likely to be of little use to me for some time to come—I picked up one of the javelins, to ascertain whether it were suitable to the purpose for which my dream had used it.

For one-third of its length it was of metal, pointed and with double knife-like edges, but the remainder was of a dark and very resinous wood, such as would take fire readily. Here, at least, my dream had made no error.

It seemed to me that, as my arm would be of little use for further axe-work if they should attempt to rush us again, a fire, which could be lighted safely on the stone floor beside the opening, would be our best protection, as it could be instantly swept down upon them, and could scarcely fail to be sufficiently disconcerting to give time for my companion's javelins to operate.

I was elated in mind that I should be able to demonstrate my practical genius in this way, recalling in some wonder that I had as yet seen no evidence of fire in all my

wanderings, unless the heated water supplied it. But I would say nothing until I had proved the success of my project, and the fire was blazing.

I wondered for one foolish moment why I had dreamed that the fire was lighted on the open ground, till I noticed that the sun, which was now past its noon, was no longer visible from the windows, and that, within the hall, the glass on which I relied would be useless.

I told my companion that I would demonstrate a new method of fighting, as my arm was useless, and I made a heap of javelins upon the very edge of the pit, while she regarded my work with an observant curiosity. Then, using the clasp-knife with the left hand as best I could, I shredded some of the wooden shafts into such splinters as should take fire very easily, and asking her to watch the hole for a moment, and giving an assurance that I should not go far from the door, I opened it, and stepped out.

The space around me was bare, as far as

sight could reach it, except that a group of Killers, probably the infirm and young, showed at the far end of the enclosure, but I knew that there might come a rush of them from round the side of the building at any moment, and very watchfully therefore I arranged the splinters with the glass in the midst of them. It was a very short time before a rising smoke changed into the uncolored flame of a noonday fire, and picking up two or three of the longer splinters by their outer ends, I went back into the hall.

My companion did not turn as I approached, but told me, "There is something that has frightened the lizards. They have thrown themselves from the roof into the pit beneath us. If they have read your mind, your new way of fighting must be very terrible." With the thought she looked round, and her mind waked to a swift insistent protest—*No! It is the Forbidden Thing!*—but at the same moment I had thrust the splinters into the pile I had prepared to receive them.

For a few seconds our minds fought

strenuously. "Do not let it burn. We know little of the ways of the Dwellers, but all the world knows that. It is the one thing they will not endure." "I am not bound to the Dwellers. To us it may be a weapon of safety." "But I am; and to my Leaders it would be unforgivable." "We can keep a watch for the Dwellers, and put it out if they approach." "The mere knowledge that it had been lit might destroy us all." "The responsibility is mine, only." "If I am with you I share it." "It can be put out in a moment, if it be scattered on the stones." "I know nothing of that; but I know that for many centuries it has not been seen on the surface of this continent—not since it was used in the great war, before the barrier had been planted." "Do they use it under the surface for themselves? How are the tanks heated?" "I do not know; but I think that there may be other ways. Please put it out, if you can do so. It threatens war to my nation." "I think you fly from a shadow, and that it would save your life, not destroy; but, as you wish it, I will."

The swift exchange of thought was of a

moment's duration only, but already the dry wood was crackling, as I kicked it apart, and commenced to stamp upon it. And then a fresh fact met me. The hard cold stony smoothness of the floor, which looked less inflammable than asbestos, was more so than celluloid. As I tried to stamp them out, the flames did not appear to bite into it, but played over its surface with a slight clear hissing noise. It was only for a second that the event was doubtful. Then I leapt back from the flames that were all around me. The next I was flying down the hall, with the flames licking their way as fast behind me.

A second sooner than myself, my comrade had judged the issue, and was at the door before me, and held it open. But for that I do not think it possible that I could have escaped from that inferno.

As we turned to look back at the building we had left, a flame crept out of the right-hand window, and spread swiftly in all directions. As we gazed, my companion's mind turned to me with unruffled gravity.

"For your part, I know that you meant well, and I think that you did rightly. I see also that you have powers of which the limits are beyond my sight. But I think also that my world is ended."

I answered more hopefully, "The flames appear to move over the surface only. The building is of such material as will not burn at all in the world I come from. I think that it must be covered with some protecting varnish, which is inflammable. That will burn itself out very quickly."

"No," she said, "the building burns," and even with the thought the increasing heat drove us farther away, and the flames, which burned with a hissing sound, rose higher.

"In any case," I continued, "the fault is mine, and if we meet the Dwellers, I will tell them."

"The act was yours, but the cause was ours," she answered—"and the Dwellers will soon be here, that is a very certain thing, and

it is our part to decide how we shall meet them."

By now the building rose a solid oblong of bright flame in a windless air, and the heat was terrible.

On our right hand as we faced it, we saw six other buildings of a similar type, and on our left was the steaming vat, with the killing-pens built over it.

"The next building is catching."

"Yes," she answered, "they will all go."

On the farther edge of the enclosure we saw the Killers, a pink crescent standing outside the doors of the inner wall. They were quite silent, and very still.

A yellow blotch on the sand, the wiser lizards made their way to the open gate.

26 *The Trial*

As the heat increased we again moved backward, and stood there in a pause of indecision; at least my own mind hesitated, and hers had closed, as it would when she sought decision.

At last I asked her, "Had we not better follow the example which the lizards set so promptly? There is nothing here to do, and the Killers seem too appalled for movement. As the fires die, their consternation may give place to fury. I have lost my axe, and my knapsack, and all it held. The bow is burnt, and were it not so, my right arm is useless. I think we should make a rush for the gate."

She had a javelin in her hand, and she spun it in the air, and caught it lightly as it fell, before she answered.

"Should the Killers try again, there is one that will sorrow. But I think differently. It is with the Dwellers only that this game is played from now onward. Perhaps it may be

well to go. It is hard to say. But you have not thought of the Bat-wings."

"I don't see that they concern us," I answered, "unless you think that we should release them before we leave. They are not very attractive animals, but I don't know that I want them to be burnt to death. Still, your Leader said they ought to die."

"That is just the point," she replied, "it was the order that they should die, and I am of no mind to go, and leave them living."

"I suppose your Leader meant that if we drove off the Killers, we should do wrong to release them, and I have no wish to do so. But the Killers are still here to boil them, if the fire should prove more merciful. Surely that is sufficient. I did not think you so blood-thirsty. Besides, the circumstances are different from anything that your Leader could have foreseen."

"Yes, the circumstances are certainly different. I think, where you are concerned,

they always are," she answered drily, "but it is in my mind that the Killers will not be here much longer. I think, also, that my Leaders see very far, and that when we have gone a different way we have not found it a good one. It seems to me that it is a thing that we cannot leave to the chance that the Killers will remain, or of the flames failing. We have this to think. We are in the land of the Dwellers, where we have no right to be. They had judged these Bat-wings, which were theirs, and they had given them to be used at a Feast which will very surely not be held, through our doing. They had not judged them to burn. I think we should see that their will is done."

I saw that she regarded the fate of the Bat-wings no more than that of a shoal of cod that she might guide to the fish-tanks—or, indeed, less, if she compared them, for the cod would be innocent of anything worse than feeding when hunger urged them—but that her feeling was as that of one who has unavoidably trampled his neighbor's garden, and would smooth it over, as best he may,

before leaving.

I said, "I see your view, and for you it may be right. But though you regard me as a lower creature than yourself, and addicted to violence, I am not willing to throw wretches into the boiling tank—which seems your purpose—for faults which I have not judged, and the guilt of which I am unable to estimate. Neither am I willing to release them, lest they might do us mischief, or desire our company. Nor do I think the fire will reach them, for the steam will quench it."

She answered equably, "Of both steam and fire I know something, though not on the earth's surface, and this is not the time for the telling. But I think that the killing-pens will burn to the water's edge as the heat increases. As to the Bat-wings, I have lived for many centuries, and I did not know that creatures of such baseness are, or had been. I care nothing for them, except that they should cease to be, and it seems best to me that it should be done quickly. I know that my Leader's mind is more far-seeing than mine, and that she

thought so also. But I think that we have done so much harm that it might not be easy to increase it. I can see that we cannot go on together unless we find some reconciling way when our thoughts differ. Let us do this. We will go to them, and they shall say for themselves what they can say, to which one of us shall answer, and the other shall judge their fate. Which is to question, and which to decide, shall be their own choice; and we will both agree to take the judgment of the other, which will be fairly given."

I said, "Come quickly, for the fire increases," and we ran together.

We went round to the entrance, where the sound of my axe-stroke had roused the sleeping guard, the night—it seemed so long!—before, and finding none there to stay us, we climbed some stairs to a platform-grating which extended between the pens. There were five to a side. The floors of them were of loose bars only, and were somewhat higher than the grating on which we stood, so that the Killers could pull out the bars without

stooping. The water steamed and bubbled beneath them, and we looked down and saw it below the grating on which we stood. Beyond the pens we saw the open tank extending on every side but that by which we entered.

Four of the pens on the left hand were occupied. In each was one of the judges. They crouched dismally on the bars, with wings extended. The heavy dark bald heads, with their cruel horny beaks, were drooping hopelessly forward. Their eyes followed us with an intelligence that seemed afraid to hope, but begged for pity.

On the other side, there were three like them, and then two others that could move their wings, and these two were not still, but flopped unceasingly from side to side, sometimes almost reaching to the roof, and then coming down with clumsy flappings.

My companion addressed the one with the largest beak, and reached her point very promptly. "My Leader told me of you. It

appears from your own tale that you are unfit for life. Do you agree?"

He answered, "She was very treacherous, for she let us tell all before she gave any sign that she had a Dweller's mind."

"I also may have a Dweller's mind," she answered very coldly, "but listen, for your lives are balanced on the choice I give you. There is one with me who is not as I. You may think him more of your kind. I do not know. I think that you should die quickly, but he is less willing.

"Neither of us has heard your defense, and we will do so fairly. Your choice is this. One of us will question you to show that you should be in the tank below, and you shall reply as best you may. The other shall judge, and all shall accept the issue. It is yours to choose the one that shall judge you. You can also choose the one that shall speak for the rest, but it must be one only, except that the two who were the accusers can speak separately, if they will."

Then the nine closed their minds from us, and disputed for a long time (as thought is counted) among themselves. Then the one to whom we had spoken told us, "We are all agreed that we shall argue this thing, and accept your verdict. The two wish to speak separately. We are not agreed on who shall speak for the seven, nor which shall judge us."

My companion answered with patience, "It is necessary that you should agree quickly, but we cannot make you do so. In two minutes from now, if you should still be in this difficulty, we will drop one of you into the tank, and perhaps you will find that six agree more easily. If not, we will make further reductions as long as this assistance is needed."

It was but a few seconds later that he answered, "I am to speak for the seven. You will argue against me, and the Prehistoric will judge us. So we have decided by a majority, for fools are many."

"You may be right in that," my companion answered, "but I think that it will make no difference."

27 The Verdict

My companion commenced the examination immediately. I have thought since that it might be a model in many ways for the conduct of a prosecuting counsel in our own courts.

I knew that she considered the accused unfit to live, and that they had been competently tried and condemned already. Yet, now that the decision had been placed with me, and it was her part to accuse them, her questions were direct and fair.

The fact that the spokesman of the accused was accustomed to legal argument, (which she certainly was not), and was of an acute

and vigorous mentality, gave additional interest to the quick exchange of thoughts by which their lives were decided.

"We have been told that you are judges among your own kind."

"Yes."

"Is it necessary that you should be unanimous, or do you decide by a majority?"

"By a majority."

"A female was brought before you for stealing food, and was condemned to be beaten?"

"Yes."

"Were you unanimous?"

"Yes. I should explain. She was first brought before two only. She was condemned, and appealed. The appeal was heard by five, who confirmed the verdict."

"Did the appeal relate to her guilt only, or to her sentence also?"

"To both."

"Was the sentence altered at the appeal?"

"It was increased. But that was because the accused attempted escape, while the appeal was pending."

"What were the two sentences?"

"Eight strokes were to be given under the wings with a five-thonged scourge for the theft, and sixteen similar strokes for attempt to break her prison."

"Then two of the judges are not responsible for the larger part of the sentence?"

"We are all responsible. It is our law that if a sentence be increased, or an additional one given, by an appeal court, it must be approved by the court below. The power of the appeal court being to confirm, reduce, or cancel."

"Tell us, in your own way, of what this female was charged, on what evidence she was condemned, why you considered her action worthy of punishment, and defend the sentences."

"She was charged with the theft of a neighbor's food. She confessed her guilt. We consider theft deserves punishment, and that the safety of the community requires it. But we do not make the laws. It is our duty to administer them. The responsibility rests with the whole community. We considered the sentence to be fair and moderate, and such as is necessary to prevent the spread of dishonesty among the class of population to which the accused belonged. We have ourselves been condemned with greater severity, for a fault which we do not recognize or understand, by a tribunal of which we were previously ignorant, and under a code of conduct of which we had not even heard, and under which our civilization could not be maintained for a week."

"You have not defended the second

sentence."

"I did not suppose that any defense were needed. She had been condemned as guilty, and was in custody, pending appeal against the sentence she had received. To attempt to escape under such circumstances was a defiance of the laws under which we live, and it would be impossible to maintain order or discipline if such incidents should pass unpunished."

"I understand your arguments, though they may not convince me. The injustice of inflicting further penalties for an attempt to escape those already threatened is too obvious for serious argument, and I notice that you do not attempt to assert it, but prefer to rely upon the argument of expediency only. It is not reasonable to suppose that the victim of such a sentence as you had imposed should be a consenting party thereto, and in this instance you knew that she was not, for she had appealed against it. You could not suppose that she would submit to the sentence, if she could avoid it successfully.

By keeping her in custody while the appeal was pending, you admitted this to be so. This duty (if such it were) was performed inefficiently, or the opportunity to escape could not have arisen. For this fault of your own servants you condemned her to a penalty even heavier than that which had been inflicted originally.

"The argument of necessity could have been used with greater force in her own defense as against the first accusation than by you in this connection, and additionally so because the rights of the community, if it be justly organized, must always be subordinate to those of the individuals who compose it. For the rest, I propose to explain exactly why I think the decision of the Dwellers is right, and that your lives should not be continued. You will then be better able to reply in such a way as may be convincing to the one you have chosen to judge you. But there are a few points of fact on which I am ignorant, which may possibly help you, and these I will ask you first. You complain that you yourselves have been condemned under a law of which

you had not known, and to which you had not consented. You said also that she had confessed her guilt, and you said later that she appealed both against the verdict and the sentence. This requires explanation. I think you should answer here very carefully, for I think we are confronted with that which threatens the foundation of the strongest defense you have set up."

For the first time there was a pause of some seconds before his mind took up the challenge. I think he was quick to recognize her meaning, and the danger of which she warned him. I think he also appreciated for the first time the keenness of the intellect which confronted him.

"The explanation is simple. We were dealing with a female of exceptional obstinacy. She was charged with theft. She admitted the theft. That is a plea of guilty according to the custom of our courts. She appealed on the ground that the theft was justified. There is no such thing as a justified theft in the code of any civilized state. Her

appeal had no possibility of succeeding. She was in the position of having pleaded guilty, yet of declining to admit it that she had done so."

"Then, when you said that she admitted her guilt, you meant only that she admitted the accuracy of the statements made by those who complained against her. You also admit the facts on which your own condemnation is founded. To that extent you have pleaded guilty also. How can you assert the authority of your own tribunal over this female, and deny that of the Dwellers who condemned you?"

"Very easily. She was a female of our nation, and was under the authority of our laws."

"Do you contend that she was under the authority of your laws simply because she was a female of your species, or had she herself consented to them?"

"It is necessary in any civilized state to

assume the assent, or, in any case, the liability, of individuals to the laws of those among whom they live, and to impose penalties should they fail to obey them."

"Let us be clear upon our facts before we argue upon them. She had not consented?"

"To obtain individual consent to every law is impossible."

"She had not consented?"

"Not in that way; but she knew that she must obey the laws of the country in which she lived."

"That cannot be so, because in fact she refused to do so."

"She knew that she must submit to the laws of her people, or render herself liable to the penalties provided."

"But such knowledge—if she had it—did not imply consent?"

"Not necessarily, but, as I have said, the individual must be subordinate to the state, or no civilized community could continue."

"It is not self-evident that every civilized community should continue. But your contention is clearly not that she consented, but that such consent is not necessary. By whom were you appointed a judge, and under what compulsion?"

"I belong to the class from which judges are chosen, after certain tests have been passed."

"Would there have been any penalty, had you declined to act in that capacity?"

"No; but I had no reason to do so. It is regarded as a position of honor among us."

"Do you regard all the laws of your country as just and good?"

"They are not perfect, but they are well adapted for the needs of those for whom they are made, and they are being improved."

"They cannot be very good, or continual improvement would be impossible. What course do you, or your fellow-judges, take when confronted with a bad law?"

"It is not our duty to consider whether a law be good or bad, but to administer it. The responsibility of the law is not on us, but on the whole nation. Ours is to administer it accurately and impartially."

"The responsibility for a law cannot be upon a whole nation, unless it be agreed unanimously. It is upon those who make or support it. This responsibility must rest in the largest degree upon those who directly enforce it."

The rapid interchange paused for a brief moment, and thinking that my companion was about to formulate her accusation, I interposed a suggestion. The swift duel of thought, which I have translated into written words as best I can, had taken a few minutes only, but the heat already seemed greater than when we entered the building. Through the

open bars of the pens we could see the towering pinnacle of fire, where the seven buildings were now burning together. A wind moved occasionally in our direction, and the high flames swayed toward us.

I said, "If we are not speedy, we shall all burn together. I understand that you wish to set out their guilt as it appears to you, now that you have heard their explanations, to which the horny-beaked orator will make reply, and then I am to judge the issue. Will it not save time if we interrogate the other two first?"

She agreed at once, but added, "I think you should question them. I am conscious that their world is less strange to you than to myself, and you might discover circumstances in their favor which I should fail to do."

I assented, and we walked down to where the two whose complaint had originated the trouble were flapping with impatience to pour out their wrongs.

I think it was well that I had taken on the interrogation. Here was no keen argument, cool when at its deadliest, but a confused clamor from two vulgarities that exposed themselves without shame.

I cannot translate the mental invectives, vituperations, recriminations, and contradictions they poured upon us, but the facts came out with unmistakable clearness.

Their tale was this. Through the vague impression of a complex and highly organized civilization, there stood out clearly a group of dwellings, inhabited by members of a trading class, of one of which these two were occupants and owners.

As was customary, they did not use the ground floor, on account of a plague of white slugs which rose from the ground at certain seasons and crawled into the houses. The higher floors were gained through circular openings in the ceilings, to which they flew from perches in the rooms below. This left much of their domestic economy

unexplained, but I did not pursue a subject that was only indirectly material to the inquiry. I gained an impression that the higher floors were in some way immune from these slugs, which were a serious danger or annoyance, and of which no method had been discovered by which to keep the ground floor entirely free. For this reason it was usual to allow an industrial worker of the poorer kind to occupy it in return for certain menial services. These sub-tenants were not allowed to fly into the upper stories.

Until a few weeks earlier, the present couple had lived prosperously. Trade was good, and they had only been detected in cheating once in every moon, as the law permitted. They had been fortunate enough to breed a daughter with a bright yellow blotch on either shoulder, which they had been able to sell for a large sum.

The ground floor had been occupied by a female who had been employed in some industrial process by which the wings were liable to become damaged, and had lost the

use of hers, so that the ring on which she perched at night had to be hanged within a few feet of the ground. A beneficent law provided that those who suffered in this way could take certain pickings from the main roads, by the sale of which life could be maintained. She had, however, complained of a growing blindness, which prevented her from snatching her due share of this bounty, and when the time of the spring meal approached had caused annoyance by waylaying her employers as they went in and out of the house, and petitioning that they would provide food for her. They declined a request so unreasonable, and had advised her kindly of the methods of suicide best adapted to her condition, and when they saw that their advice was not taken, they even went the length of recommending her to a medical practitioner who would destroy her without a fee, in return for an opportunity of investigating the diseases from which she suffered. Unfortunately, they did not kill her themselves, which they could have done for a slight penalty, for their laws are, in this instance, more just than ours, the penalty of

murder being in proportion to the expectation of the victim's life, and its estimated value to him. Then they might have committed the murder jointly, and halved the penalty between them, for in this also their law is more equitable than ours, and if two or three people unite to commit a crime they can each be punished for one-half or one-third of the crime only.

But the time had passed without any decisive action being taken, till the week of the summer meal approached, and the wretch, being blinder than before, and weak from six months' fasting, had failed to gain the right to a meal for herself, and had again resorted to begging them to supply her need.

On the eve of the feast, they had collected their food in an upper room, and had gone out to barter a ring-eared monkey, very quaintly tattooed, for the wing-powder which they would need after the second day's eating, and on coming back they had found her sitting on the edge of the aperture above the room she occupied, afraid to flutter down, owing to the

condition of her wings. They found a savory mess of pomegranates and pigs' liver (such as is eaten on the first day before sustaining food is taken) had been entirely consumed, and two of the food-balls also. She would give no explanation of how she climbed into the room, and it was supposed that she must have had an accomplice, who should have helped her down also, but who had become alarmed, and fled. She admitted that she had eaten the food, but claimed that she was obliged to do so, and that there was an abundance remaining.

The two judges before whom she was taken had treated her with great consideration. They had sentenced her to eight strokes, which she would almost certainly have survived, in view of the food that she had swallowed, and they had ordered that the sentence should not be executed for three days, during which she should be placed in a cell designed for such cases, where she could release herself from her troubles without further difficulty.

The cell had a deep well, in which she

could have drowned herself very easily had she had sufficient sense to do so. A kindly regulation had provided that the sides of the well, above water, should be deep and smooth, as there had been distressing instances of prisoners who had changed their minds when half-drowned and had clambered out, so that all their misery was repeated. There were also weights which she could have tied to her feet, had she wished to do so.

Instead, however, of following these suggestions, she had contumaciously appealed against the sentence she had received, which had delayed its execution, and entailed a two-days' journey into the Upper City for her accusers. The food she had taken appeared to have renewed her youth, or rather her energy (for she was not old), so that she had attempted to escape her confinement, and had almost succeeded; and when rebuked by the Superior Judges for not availing herself of the provision for her comfort which the cell provided, she had actually uncrossed her legs, and shaken the damaged wings derisively, asking if she were

likely to commit suicide with three months' food in her body.

I endeavored to put such questions as might have elicited any extenuating circumstances which had bearing on the main incident, such as a past kindness, or a past ingratitude, but I obtained nothing that was helpful.

Their replies were inconsequent, and their minds worked round continually to self-reproaches that they had not killed her themselves, and to a choking indignation at the thought that it was the stolen food in her body which had supplied her with strength to fight back.

We went back to where the Chief Justice crouched unmoving, but with eyes that watched the scene with sombre keenness.

My companion commenced immediately—"I have thought of all that you said, and of much that your thoughts implied, though it was not stated. The conditions of life which you showed me are beneath anything I had

imagined previously, though I have heard strange and dark things from the friend beside me. It may be that your own state is no worse than that to which he is native, but that it appears different to him because he is of a different kind. For when I heard how that half-blinded creature, whom you had condemned to wretchedness, and would have persuaded to destruction, shook derisive wings at your inability to subdue her, it came to me that even in these dark and dreadful worlds there may be fair ways to tread for such spirits as are sufficient in themselves to find them. It seemed to me for a moment that our spirits are the only reality, and all the rest illusion. Yet, if that be so, round spirits of what kind can so dark a dream have gathered as that which has brought you here? It is a thought which I cannot grasp in a moment, but to which I may give much time when occasion allows it. Meanwhile, my inclination is changed. I still think that you should die, and my Leader, who is wiser than I, was of the same mind, as were the Dwellers who condemned you. But I am less sure than I was, and I will say nothing more to urge it.

You have chosen another judge, and I am content for him to decide it."

When she ceased he looked at her in silence for a few seconds. I think he was regretting again the choice of judge which the majority had forced upon him. Then he accepted the position, and seeing that I was waiting to consider the defense which he would set up, he opened his mind toward me.

"You are of a world different from ours," he began, "but sufficiently like it to understand how necessary are the laws which regulate the possession of property, and that any law without penalty would be no deterrent. You know also that the function of a judge is different from that of a legislator, and that it would be grotesque to punish a judge for a defect in the law which he dispenses. We have fallen into strange hands, of whom we knew nothing previously, and it is by the mercy of circumstance that we are able to lay our case before you. I can do this confidently because I know that you will understand our position, and I am assured that you are not in

yourself either unjust or merciless. I will not weary you with many thoughts, for I know that you are in haste, and we would ourselves very gladly be free from the increasing heat and danger. Our defense is three-fold, and I submit that each point is in itself sufficient: (1) We think that the sentence was fair; (2) if it were harsh, which we deny, it was in accordance with the laws of our country, which we were sworn to administer; (3) if these two pleas should fail—which is beyond my imagination—it would still remain that for any possible fault we have been tortured and punished already beyond our deserving. Consider that it is in the name of mercy that this fate has been threatened! We are accused of brutality, but we have never sentenced any of our people to be boiled alive, even for the foulest crimes. It may be that the Dwellers did not intend that such a horror should happen. I think it more likely that they proposed to alarm us only, and foresaw your coming, and that you would release us, so that we can go back to our duties, knowing their wishes, and introducing their methods into our country, with consequences which

they will no doubt themselves direct to a satisfactory issue."

I replied, "I will not torture your minds with a long judgment, though the issues which you have raised invite it. I will tell you at once that the first two pleas fail. The sentence was not fair, and on hearing the evidence you should rather have addressed your minds to the inequity of the social conditions which it revealed, and to exhort the prosecutors to observe a higher standard of social morality in future. Having heard them, however, I think your arguments would have been wasted. They, at least, are unfit to exist, and as I do not wish to prolong their agony, after they have heard this decision, I propose to deal with them before I complete my judgment."

I then went with my companion to the two pens which contained them, and drew out the bars on which they rested.

As the last bar withdrew, the male leapt to the uprights at the side, but found that they

were made of a material too smooth for his grasp to hold, and he fell backward into the bubbling water.

Having disposed of the female in the same way, I resumed my verdict. "The second point, as I have said, is of no more avail than the first, because it appears to me to be a very evil thing that legislators or judges should attempt to exalt the laws they dispense as being higher than the essential justice which they are intended to demonstrate. It should be the greatest difficulty in putting an unjust law into operation that no judges of good character should be found who would consent to enforce it. A judge who solemnly administers a law which he knows in his heart to be unjust is baser than one who takes bribes from a litigant. In the one case he is bribed by an individual to do injustice at some risk to his own position; in the other he is bribed by the State to do injustice, with an assurance that it can be perpetrated with impunity.

"But your third point is of a different

quality. To consider it fully would take more time than is now available, and we might all be involved in a common fate the while I should do so. It appears to me that there is force in your contention that the fate to which you have been condemned has an even greater severity than the harshness of your own laws, for which they have condemned you. I am not sure that this is so, but it is at least a plausible and confusing argument. I have endeavored to consider it from their standpoint, and I think that their reply would be that there is no point in the comparison, because they have acted from different motives, and with different intentions. Your laws are designed to produce certain courses of conduct in your individual citizens, to repress tendencies which might be subversive of the State as it is organized, and as you were content to continue it; you endeavored (we may hope) to use no more harshness than you considered that these objects required. They have no such objects in view. They do not make you examples to others, nor design to coerce you into observing any rules of future conduct. They regard you as having a

mentality so base that it should be destroyed entirely. But you say that they may not have intended that this fate should fall upon you. I think that this is less than possible, for, having heard your arguments, I accept their decision very heartily."

28 The Fate of the Killers

The horny beak must have been softening in the boiling tank before my mind could free itself from the fierce despairing cry, "The fools, the fools!" with which the chief of the culprits had splashed down to his allotted end. It confirmed my opinion that there would have been a different choice of judge if his advice had been taken.

But we had no time for thought, where action was urgent. With a sense of good work done, we passed out from a building on which the fire was already falling. The wind

had risen, and as the buildings burned, not down but inward—I mean that the outside of the walls was burnt off evenly to a core of somewhat different quality—burning flakes, almost as light as air, began to float on the wind, and sometimes would have driven against us, so that we avoided them with difficulty.

It was to withdraw from these that we moved away from the boiling tank, which my companion left with reluctance, so much did the sight of any water allure her, and but for the fact that it was in the condition of a thin soup from the many bodies which had been boiled within it, and indescribably repulsive, I doubt whether the heat would have been sufficient to deter her from the swim she needed. For myself, my thirst was such that only this new danger was sufficient to force me from it. But my cup was gone, with all my other possessions, excepting only what my pockets held. So I had no means of cooling the water, if I could have persuaded myself to drink it; and of boiling water I had just had a sufficient experience. For the Chief Justice,

as he plunged, had contrived a kick which sent a swirl of water over the grating on which I stood as I pulled at the last bar, and though I jumped very quickly I had not escaped entirely, and to a stiff right arm I now added the infirmity of a blistered left foot.

I scarcely grudged him his revenge—he was a good fighter, and perhaps fate had used him hardly—but I felt an increased doubt of how we could hope to escape from the surrounding Killers that grouped beneath the crescent wall that enclosed us.

My companion was not troubled in that direction. "There is water near," she told me jubilantly, and the next moment we were standing beside a large pool that sparkled clear and cool in the sunlight. A stream came in at one end from the cliff-side, and was drained away through a sluice at the other, so that it was fresh continually. Weeds grew in a clear depth, but did not reach the surface.

She dropped the javelin, and dived.

I had seen seals swim, and many graceful forms to which the water is native, but I had seen nothing like I saw then.

The legs did not move separately, but the appendages of which I have told held them together as one limb. The double tail, which was carried on land in such a way that it was barely visible, now came out, and with the tiny monkey hands at each extremity, may have done much, both in steering and propulsion. But the whole body seemed to move without effort. A curve, a twist, and it shot the pool's length and back, without evidence of any further directing motion.

I have always loved the water and (having drunk all I would) I was already taking off my damaged rags to join her, when I noticed that she was motionless above the weeds and looking intently at or through them. I marvelled how she could maintain her position, and paused a moment to watch her. The next, she had looked up, and must have recognized what I was doing, for her thought was urgent against it. I was not instantly

willing to give up my intention, and while she still pressed me to desist, there came a movement under the weeds that caused the whole surface to tremble. The next second she had leapt out beside me.

"Water-snakes," she explained. "They do not know us here, as do those of the ocean. Under the weeds, it is deep beyond seeing. I do not think I could have saved you, if you had come in. But I have taught those snakes that such as I am not for a meal."

I did not reply, for I had looked up, and seen that the living-wall was ablaze for all its length from cliff to cliff.

She saw it also, but more coolly. "Did you not foresee that it must be? I only thought that the Dwellers would be here sooner. It is a place of hiding that we need; but the water drew me."

"I do not see where we can hide on this plateau."

"I think there is only one place, and that I have seen it already."

She led me toward the southern corner, where the cliff was met by the blazing wall. The Killers had left it at this point, for they were all thronging wildly to the gateway, and pouring out through the narrow neck between the burning of the open gates.

When we were about fifty yards from the wall, we turned to the cliff-side, and looking up saw a fault in the rock, it could scarcely be called a cave, but there was a shallow horizontal gap, about two feet high at one end, and about ten feet wide, narrowing to a point at the farther side, and about eight feet from the ground. I don't think I could easily have climbed even that height in the condition in which I was, but she led the way, and wriggled easily, feet first, into the gap, and helped me till I was lying there beside her.

In the shadow, with the sun already descending toward the hills behind us, they

would be good eyes indeed which would have detected us from any distance, while we had a wide view of the whole plateau, of the cliff on the left hand where it curved slightly forward, and of the whole stretch of the lower country beneath us.

"It is to our left," she told me, as we watched and waited, "that our people will descend the cliff if they continue in that purpose. It is only there that it is climbable."

It looked impossible to me, even there, but I did not question it.

"The Dwellers come," she said, "we are none too soon. If you make your mind blank and observe only, I do not think they will detect us. Everything may depend on that. Avoid thought. Do not communicate with my kind either, if they should appear."

Then she closed her mind, and I was alone beside her.

When the Killers ran out from the blazing

gateway, they had scattered aimlessly about the plateau as ants do when their nest is broken, and for some time they remained in restless tumult, moving continually without direction or purpose, but this was changed in a moment to the frantic desperate rushes of rats when the dogs are among them.

The Dwellers came up the hillside in no appearance of haste, and what they thought or knew of the events we had occasioned they gave no sign to indicate.

There were three of them side by side, taking cliffs in their stride round which our path had wound, and approaching from the only point at which the sides were not too precipitous and deep, even for their attempting.

Arriving on the level ground, they consulted for a moment, and then one of them came forward alone. The wall was still blazing in places, or I think he would have stepped over it without change of pace, but, as it was, he leapt easily, and then proceeded

systematically to investigate the smouldering ruins of the settlement. The killing-pens, which had caught fire last, were still blazing, and he approached them with caution, but I think that ivory-yellow skin, on which I had seen the teeth of the Frog-mouths bite in vain, must have been insensitive to fire also, so closely was he standing, as he looked down to observe the victims that boiled beneath it.

He stood there for a long while, as though he found difficulty—as well he might—in understanding all that had happened. I tried to avoid thought, as I had been directed, but the idea crossed me that had the Bat-wings lived, they would not have failed to disclose the whole tale of the imprisoned Leader, and of my companion's presence, if they had thought that they could have gained anything by so doing. Had it been in that Leader's mind when she had directed us to destroy them? I thought it likely; but at least the minds of my companion and myself had been free from any such consideration, and the deed itself had been a good one.

With a heavy thoughtfulness he went back to his companions.

Meanwhile, they had not been idle.

It is probable that it had not been the mere coming of the Dwellers, so much as the sight of the things they carried, which had produced so sudden a panic among the Killers who saw them. For they had now shaken out a net, with which they were sweeping the ground from end to end till the whole of the Killers were a kicking, whistling confusion within its ample meshes. One of them then sat on the ground, and taking the basket from his back, he abstracted from it a lidded vessel or cup, which he set open before them.

One by one he pulled the frantic victims loose from the net that held them, and after a glance of inspection, squeezed them in his hand over the cup, so that their blood drained into it.

When he had squeezed sufficiently, he

threw the empty carcass with a careless aim, high into the air, to fall far off in the boiling tank, from which its own meals had been so often taken.

This went on for about an hour, during which he dealt with some hundreds in this way, and also selected about two dozen which he inspected more carefully, and then passed to his companions, who also looked over them, and either handed them back to take their turn at the squeezing, or dropped them into his basket.

I supposed that they had decided to destroy this colony, and to found a new one with the few which they had saved for that purpose, but I reflected that this could not have been their intention when they handed over the Bat-wings for destruction, at a feast which would never be held, and if they had now come prepared to take that course, it implied a foresight or knowledge of what was passing, which was disconcerting.

I could not resolve that problem, but it soon

became evident that the occasion was of some further importance, for one by one they were joined by others, until I had counted fourteen of these giants assembled on the plateau.

More than once their words came over to us as the wind helped them, but to me they bore no meaning. Whether they conversed among themselves by other means, as they were able to do with the Amphibians, I could not tell, but they spoke little outwardly, and mainly in monosyllables. They seemed to be waiting.

Thus they waited, till the twilight was nearing. As I saw them on the plateau, their huge bulks dwarfed by the proportions of the scenery around them, I thought of them again as Titans of an earlier, world, and of a size the most natural to the background against which they moved.

I was conscious not only of my own insignificance, but of a vulgarity also, which was not personal to myself, but belonging to the race from which I came.

I clothed them in imagination with the garments to which I was accustomed, and their significance and their dignity at once departed.

But for what were they delaying? As the time passed I was increasingly convinced that they were aware of the Amphibians, and were awaiting their arrival; and as this conviction grew, there came with it an increasing fear that I was watching the prelude of a tragedy, for which the great sweep of the wooded valleys beneath us, and the amphitheatre of mighty hills, were a setting of appropriate grandeur.

The thought impressed me with an awe which left no space for consideration of my own relation to the shadow which I believed to be falling, nor do I think the fear I had was influenced by the expectation of any personal consequence.

But when this depression was at its worst, and the strain of uncertainty was becoming unendurable, I was suddenly aware of the

influence of a bolder and more confident
spirit, and into my mind there came a music,
such as I had felt when I first watched the
Amphibians cross the seaward bridge:

From the force that withstands shall we
falter or flee,
Who have bent in our hands the
untamable sea?
From the cloud that is close ...

Surely the Amphibians were approaching
over the cliffs behind us.

From the nights that have been, from the
midnights to be,
There shall dawns intervene, there shall
...

My companion's mind spoke once only, but
very urgently. "It may be the end of all, if you
cannot isolate yourself from that which is

near us."

I closed my thoughts as best I could from everything but a passive photography of that which was developing before me.

The Dwellers had risen, and were standing in a group of no regular order, upon the side of the plateau from which descent was possible. They were looking silently toward the cliffs above us.

Next, on my left hand, I saw the Amphibians descending. The six Leaders came first. They climbed down as easily as a fly walks on a wall. I think the long center toe gripped the rock more firmly and easily than a human foot could do, and the appendages of the legs helped also, the little hands grasping and steadying, but there was an ease of balance, and a certainty in every movement for which these differences were less than explanation. After them came the whole regiment of the Amphibians. They formed up below, with the six Leaders in the front. I think their song was still continued, but I

would not hear it. They took no notice of the smoking ruins, or of the steaming tank, which was now covered with the floating husks of the bodies which had designed it.

Straight forward went the Amphibians to the spot where the Dwellers blocked their passage. They did not hesitate, nor did the Dwellers give way before them.

What would have happened I can only guess, had there not come an unexpected incident.

From I know not where, there appeared the group of yellow lizards that had fled from the burning arsenal.

A small bright yellow patch they showed on the sandy soil, and the Amphibians stopped, and the Dwellers grouped to look down upon them.

I have thought since that they must have timed their appearance, intending to give such information to the Dwellers as would

win favor to themselves, and bring destruction on others.

Whether they knew of our hiding-place I could not tell, nor whether they were aware of the confinement of the Leader who had escaped—but of what use is conjecture?—all I know is what I saw from my hiding-place.

There were long seconds of silence, which seemed minutes as I watched, and then one of the Dwellers stepped forward and put his foot firmly down upon the spot of bright yellow malignity. When he lifted it the color was gone, and there was nothing left that showed at that distance.

He stepped back, and the protagonists remained facing one another in a continued silence.

Then, at last, the Dwellers stepped wide of the path on either hand, and the Amphibians moved quietly forward between them, filing through till the last had passed. I noticed that three of the Leaders had remained aside, and

supposed that they might be retained as hostages or culprits, by surrendering whom the rest had won to safety, but as the last file passed I saw them fall in behind it, and the Dwellers made no motion till they had disappeared into the narrow trench which we had traversed on the night before.

Then they also turned, and departed.

The dusk was already falling over the valley, as my companion's mind laughed its relief, and the tension ended.

"I think," she said, "that this is the beginning of the next adventure."

... *The End* ...

[The end of *The Amphibians* by S. Fowler
Wright]