

The Dark Age

Clark Ashton Smith

The laboratory was like a citadel. It stood on a steep eminence, overtopped only by the loftier mountains, and looked out across numberless fir-thick valleys and serried ridges. The morning sunlight came to it above peaks of perennial snow; and the sunsets burned beyond a rivered plain, where forest saplings had taken the battlefields of yesteryear, and skin-clad savages prowled amid the mounded ruins of sybaritic cities.

They who had built the laboratory, in the years when Earth's loftiest civilization was crumbling swiftly, had designed it for a fortress of science, in which something of man's lore and wisdom should be preserved throughout the long descent into barbaric night.

The walls were of squared boulders from a glacial moraine; and the woodwork was of mountain cedar, mightily beamed as that which was used in Solomon's temple. High above the main edifice there soared an observatory tower, from which the heavens and the surrounding lands could be watched with equal facility. The hill-top had been cleared of pine and fir. Behind the building there were sheer cliffs that forbade approach; and all around it a zone of repellent force, which could be made lethally destructive if desired, was maintained by machines that conserved the solar radiations and turned them into electricity.

The dwellers in the laboratory looked upon themselves as the priests of a sacred trust. They called themselves the Custodians. In the beginning they had numbered eight couples, men and women of the highest ability and attainment, specializing in all the main branches of science, who had withdrawn to this secluded place from a world ravaged by universal war, famine and disease, in which all other scientists and technicians were doomed to perish. The region about the laboratory was, at that time, unpeopled; and the building, reared with utmost secrecy, escaped destruction in the warfare that wiped out whole cities and covered great empires with low-lying clouds of death.

Later, into the hills and valleys below the laboratory, there came a wretched remnant of city-dwellers from the plain. With these people, already brutalized by their sufferings and hardships, the handful of scientists held little commerce. Over a course of generations, the Custodians, intermarrying, decreased gradually in number through sterility; while the other fugitives multiplied, reverting more and more to a state of barbarism, and retaining only as a dim tribal legend the memory of the civilization from which they had fallen.

Living in mountain caves, or rude huts, hunting the forest animals with crudely made spears and bows, they lost all vestige of the high knowledge and mastery over nature possessed by their forefathers. They understood no longer the machines that rusted in the rotting cities. Through a sort of atavistic animism, they began to worship the elements that their fathers had subdued and controlled. At first they tried to assail the laboratory, impelled by a savage lust for loot and bloodshed; but, driven back with dire loss by the zone of deadly force, they soon abandoned their siege. In time they came to regard the Custodians as actual demigods, wielding mysterious, awful powers, and working incomprehensible miracles. Few of them now dared to approach the environs of the building, or to follow the wild boar and deer into the wooded valleys about it.

For many years, none of the Custodians was seen by the hill-people. Sometimes, by day, there were strange vapors that mounted to the clouds above the observatory; and at night the lofty windows burned like hill-descended stars. The Custodians, it was thought, were forging their thunderbolts in godlike secrecy.

Then, from the dreadful house on the height there came down one morning a single Custodian. He bore no weapon but carried an armful of heavy books. Approaching a small village of the tribesmen, he raised his right hand in the universal gesture of peace.

Many of the more timid fled before him, hiding themselves in their dark huts or amid the thick forest; and the other villagers received him with superstitious fear and suspicion. Speaking a language they could hardly understand, he told them that he had come to live among them. His name was Atullos. By degrees he won their confidence; and afterwards he mated with a woman of the tribe. Like Prometheus, bringer of fire to ancient mankind, he sought to enlighten these savages; and undertook to reproduce for their benefit some of the inventions preserved in the laboratory. He told them nothing of his reasons for leaving the other Custodians, with whom he had held no communication since joining the hillpeople.

Atullos had brought with him no other equipment than his few books. For lack of even the most rudimentary tools and materials, his scientific labors were fraught with immense difficulty. The savages, in their reversion, had lost even the knowledge of metals. Their weapons were those of the Stone Age; their ploughshares crooked sticks of fire-hardened wood. Atullos was compelled to spend whole years in mining and smelting the ores that he required for his tools and machines; and he even made long, hazardous journeys to obtain a supply of certain elements lacking in that region. From one of these journeys he failed to return; and it was believed that he had been slain by the warriors of a hostile and very brutal tribe upon whose territory he had intruded in his search.

He left behind him one child, the boy Torquane, whose mother had died shortly after the child's birth. Also, as a legacy to the tribe, he left a few tools of copper and iron, in whose forging he had instructed some of the more intelligent men. The machines on which he had labored with such pain and patience were only half-completed; and following his disappearance, no one was competent to finish them. They were designed for the development of electric power, and the use and control of certain cosmic radiation; but the tribesmen who had assisted Atullos knew nothing of their purpose and the principles involved.

Atullos had meant to instruct his son Torquane in all the lore of the Custodians; and thus the elder sciences, conserved so jealously by a few might again have become in time the heritage of all mankind. Torquane had reached the age of four when Atullos vanished; and he had learned no more than the alphabet and a few simple rules of arithmetic. For lack of his father's guidance, this rudimentary knowledge was of little use to him; and, though naturally precocious and brilliant beyond his age, he could not continue for himself the education that Atullos had begun.

In the soul of Torquane, however, as he grew to manhood among primitive companions, there burned the spark of a restless aspiration, an inherited craving for knowledge, that set him apart from the others.

He remembered more of his father than most children recall when deprived of the parent at so early an age; and he learned from his fellows that Atullos had been one of the Custodians, who were looked upon by the tribe as beings with divine powers and attributes. It was commonly believed that the Custodians had banished Atullos from their midst because of his desire to help and enlighten the hill-people. Slowly, as his mind matured, there came to Torquane an understanding of the altruistic aims of his father, who had dreamt of restoring the old sciences in a darkened world.

Torquane lived the rude life of the tribesmen, hunting the hare, the boar and the deer, and climbing the precipitous crags and mountains. Excelling in all barbarous sports, he became very hardy and self-reliant. Outwardly he differed little from the other lads, except for his fairer skin and straighter features, and the dreaminess that filmed his bright eyes on occasion. As he neared his full growth, he became a leader among the youths, and was regarded with peculiar respect as the son of that Atullos who had become a sort of tutelary god for the hillmen after his death.

Often the boy visited the deep, dry cave which his father had used as a workshop. Here the tools, the half-built engines, the chemicals, books and manuscripts of Atullos were stored. Torquane examined them all with a great and growing wistfulness, trying vainly to guess the secret of the machines, and spelling painfully, letter by letter, the words in the mouldering volumes, whose meaning he could not divine. Like a man who dwells in a dark place, yearning blindly for the sun, he felt himself on the threshold of a luminous world; but light was denied him, and all his strivings ended only in deeper confusion.

Often, as he grew older, his thoughts turned to the mystery of the high and guarded citadel from which his father had come down to join the tribesmen. From certain points on the higher hills he could see its observatory towers looming darkly above the cleared eminence. His comrades, like their forefathers, shunned the neighborhood as a place of supernatural peril, where the Custodians' thunderbolts would promptly strike down the intruder. For many years no one had beheld the Custodians; the voices which, it was said, had, formerly spoken like the mountain thunder, threatening or warning the whole countryside, were no longer heard. But no man dreamt of penetrating their seclusion.

Torquane, however, knowing his kinship to the Custodians, wondered much concerning them. A strange curiosity drew him again and again to the hills below the laboratory. From such viewpoints, however, he could see nothing of the occupants or their activities. All was still and silent, and this very stillness, by degrees, emboldened the boy and drew him nearer to the dreaded eyrie.

Using all his stealth of woodcraft, and treading with utmost care lest a leaf or twig should crackle beneath him, he climbed one day the steep, heavily forested slope toward the building. Breathless with awe and apprehension, he peered at last from behind the bole of a gnarly pine that grew just beyond the verges of the laboratory grounds.

Grim, repellent, fortress-like, the rectilinear walls and square towers bulked above him against a heaven of light clouds. The windows glimmered blankly, withholding all their secrets. In the building's front an open doorway arched, beyond which, in silver flashes, Torquane discerned the leaping of fountains amid a sunlit court.

Sapling firs and pines had begun to invade the level, cleared area of the grounds. Some of them were already shoulder-high, while others rose only to a man's waist or knees, offering little obstruction to the view. Amid these miniature thickets Torquane heard a vengeful humming that might have been made by some invisible throng of bees. The sound maintained always the same position, the same pitch. Peering closely, he saw that there was a yard-wide line of bare, vacant soil running like a path amid the young conifers, and following the apparent course of the sound. This line, he knew suddenly, betokened the force-barrier beyond which no man could pass; and the humming was the noise made by the repellent, lethal power.

Much of the area between the saplings and the laboratory was filled with rows of vegetables and there was also a small flower garden. The place bore evidence of careful tending and had been watered recently; but no one was in sight at the time. In the building itself, as Torquane stared and listened, there began a sonorous iron throbbing whose cause, in his complete ignorance of machinery, he could not imagine. Alarmed by the loudening noise, which seemed full of mysterious menace, Torquane fled on the wooded slope, and did not venture to return for many days.

Curiosity, and some emotion deeper than curiosity, whose nature and origin he could not have defined, impelled him to revisit the place in spite of his vague, half-superstitious fears and intuitions of danger.

Peering, as before, from the shelter of the ancient pines, he beheld for the first time one of the building's occupants. At a distance of no more than twenty yards from his hiding-place, a girl was stooping above the violets and pansies in the trimly plotted flower garden.

Torquane thought that he gazed upon a goddess: for, among all the village girls, there was none half so lovely and graceful as this incredible being. Clad in a gown of light April green, her hair falling in a luminous yellow cloud about her shoulders, she seemed to cast a brightness on the flowers as she moved among them.

Drawn by a strange fascination such as he had never before experienced, the boy leaned from behind the sheltering pine, forgetful of his fears, and unconscious that he was exposing himself to view. Only when the girl happened to glance toward him, and gave a low, startled cry as her eyes met his, did he realize the indiscretion into which he had been betrayed.

Torquane was torn between the impulse of flight and a strong, unreasoned attraction that made him unwilling to go. This girl, he knew, was one of the Custodians; and the Custodians were demigods who wished no intercourse with men. Yet, through his father he was able to claim kinship with these lofty beings. And the girl was so beautiful, and her eyes, meeting his across the flower-pot were so kind and gentle in spite of their startlement, that he ceased to apprehend the instant doom that his daring might perhaps have earned. Surely, even if he remained and spoke to her, she would not loose against him the dreadful lightning of the Custodians.

Raising his hand in a gesture of placation, he stepped forward among the seedling conifers, stopping only when he neared the vicious humming of the invisible force-barrier. The girl watched him with palpable amazement, her eyes widening, and her face paling and then reddening as she grew aware of Torquane's comeliness and the undisguised ardor of his gaze. For a moment it seemed that she would turn and leave the garden. Then, as if she had conquered her hesitancy, she came a little nearer to the barrier.

"You must go away," she said, in words that differed somewhat from those of the dialect familiar to Torquane. But he understood the words and to him their strangeness savored of divinity. Without heeding the admonition, he stood like one enchanted.

"Go quickly," warned the girl, a sharper note in her voice. "It is not allowable that any barbarian should come here."

"But I am not a barbarian," said Torquane proudly. "I am the son of Atullos, the Custodian. My name is Torquane. Can we not be friends?"

The girl was plainly surprised and perturbed. At the mention of Atullos' name, a shadow darkened her eyes; and behind the shadow an obscure terror seemed to lurk.

"No, no," she insisted. "It is impossible. You must not come here again. If my father knew--"

At that instant the humming of the barrier deepened, loud and angry as the buzzing of a million wasps, and Torquane felt in his flesh an electric tingling, such as he had felt during violent thunderstorms. All at once the air was lined with sparks and bright fiery threads, and was swept by a wave of ardent heat. Before Torquane the little pines and firs appeared to wither swiftly, and some of them leapt into sudden flame.

"Go! go!" he heard the crying of the girl, as he fell back before the moving barrier. She fled toward the laboratory, looking back over her shoulder as she went. Torquane, half blinded by the weaving webs of fire, saw that a man had appeared in the portals, as if coming to meet her. The man was old and white-bearded, and his face was stern as that of some irate deity.

Torquane knew that this being had perceived his presence. His fate would be that of the seared saplings if he lingered. Again a superstitious terror rose within him, and he ran swiftly into the sheltering gloom of the ancient forest.

Heretofore Torquane had known only the aimless longings of adolescence. He had cared little for any of the savage though often not uncomely maidens of the hill-people. Doubtless he would have chosen one of them in time; but, having seen the fair daughter of the Custodian, he thought only of her, and his heart became filled with a turmoil of passion that was all the wilder because of its overweening audacity and apparent hopelessness.

Proud and reticent by nature, he concealed this love from his companions, who wondered somewhat at his gloomy moods and the fits of idleness that alternated with feverish toil, and sport.

Sometimes he would sit for whole days in a deep study, contemplating the machines and volumes of Atullos; sometimes he would lead the younger men on the chase of some dangerous animal, risking his own life with a madder disregard than ever before. And often he would absent himself on lonely expeditions that he never explained to the others.

These expeditions were always to the region about the laboratory. For a youth of Torquane's ardor and courage, the peril of such visits became an excitant rather than a deterrent. He was careful, however, to keep himself hidden from view; and he maintained a respectful distance from the humming barrier.

Often he saw the girl as she moved about her garden labors, tending the blossoms and vegetables; and he fed his desperate longing on such glimpses, and dreamed wildly of carrying her away by force, or of making himself the master of the laboratory. He suspected, shrewdly, that the Custodians were few in number, since he had seen only the girl and the old man who was probably her father. But it did not occur to him that these were the sole tenants of the massive citadel.

It seemed to Torquane, pondering with a lover's logic, that the girl had not disliked him. She had warned him to go away, had called him a barbarian. Nevertheless he felt that she had not been offended by his presumption in accosting her. He was sure that he could win her love if given the opportunity. Mating with a daughter of the Custodians, he would win admittance to that world of light and knowledge from which his father had come; that world which had tantalized his dreams. Tirelessly he schemed and plotted, trying to devise a way in which he could pass the force-barrier, or could communicate with the girl without bringing upon himself the Custodian's anger.

Once, by moonlight, he attempted to climb the cliffs behind the laboratory, working his way hazardously from coign to coign. He abandoned the attempt only when he came to an overhanging wall of rock that was smooth as beaten metal. There came the day when Torquane, revisiting the woods that pressed close upon the laboratory garden, grew aware of an unwonted silence weighing oppressively upon all things. For a few instants he was puzzled, failing to comprehend the cause. Then he realized that the silence was due to a cessation of that humming noise which had signaled the presence of the barrier.

The grounds were deserted, and, for the first time, the building's heavy cedar portals had been closed. Nowhere was there any sound or visual sign of human occupation.

For awhile Torquane was suspicious, apprehending a trap with the instinct of a wild creature. Knowing nothing of machinery, it did not occur to him that the repellent power had failed through the wearing out of its hidden generators. Perplexed and wondering, he waited for hours, hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl. But the garden remained empty, and no one opened the frowning portals.

Alert and vigilant, the boy still watched. The forest's afternoon shadows began to lengthen, invading the laboratory grounds. Screaming harshly, a mountain bluejay flashed from the pine above Torquane, and flew unharmed across the area that the lethal screen had formerly barred to all ingress of living things. An inquisitive squirrel raced among the saplings, over the bare path of the barrier, and chattered impudently in a plot of young corn and beans. Half incredulous, Torquane knew that the barrier was gone; but still his caution prevailed, and he went away at last.

"Varia, we cannot repair the generators," said the aged Phabar to his daughter. "The work is beyond my strength or yours. Also, metals are required which we cannot procure in their native state, and can no longer make with the weakening atomic transformers. Sooner or later the savages will learn that the force-barrier has ceased to exist. They will attack the laboratory -- and will find only an old man and a girl to oppose them.

"The end draws near, for in any case I have not long to live. Alas! if there were only some younger man to assist me in my labors, and in defending the laboratory -- some worthy and well-trained youth to whose care I could leave you, and could leave our heritage of science! But I am the last of the Custodians -- and soon the darkness into which mankind has fallen will be complete, and none will remember the ancient knowledge."

"What of that boy who calls himself the son of Atullos?" ventured Varia timidly. "I am sure he is intelligent; and he would learn quickly if you were to receive him into the laboratory."

"Never!" cried Phabar, his quavering voice grown loud and deep with an old anger. "He is a mere savage, like the rest of mankind -- and moreover I would rather receive a wild beast than the progeny of the false Atullos -- that Atullos whom I drove from the laboratory because of his evil passion for your mother. One would think you were enamored of this young forest wolf. Speak not of him again."

He glared suspiciously at the girl, the rancor of unquenched enmity and jealousy toward Atullos glowing in his sunken eyes, and then turned with palsy-shaken fingers to the testtubes and retorts among which he was still wont to busy himself in pottering experiments.

Torquane, returning the next day, verified his discovery of the barrier's failure. He could now approach the building if he wished, without peril of being blasted from existence at the first step. Boldly he went forward into the gardens and followed a little path that led to the shut portals. Coming in plain view of the windows, he laid his bow and arrows on the ground as a token of his peaceful intent.

When he neared the portals, a man appeared on one of the high towers and trained downward a long metal tube revolving on a pivot. It was the old man he had seen before. From the tube's mouth there leaped in swift succession a number of little shafts of silent flame that played around Torquane and blackened the soil and flower-beds wherever they struck. Phabar's aim was uncertain, due to his aging eyesight and trembling hands, for none of the fire-bolts found its mark. Torquane went away, concluding that his overtures were still undesired by the Custodians.

As he entered the woods, he was startled by a human shape that drew back stealthily into the shadows. It was the first time he had seen anyone lurking in that century-shunned locality. In that brief glimpse, Torquane knew the man for a stranger. He wore no garment except a wolf-skin, and carried for weapon only a crude spear tipped with flint. His features were brutal and degraded, and his forehead was striped with red and yellow earths, identifying him as a member of that extremely degenerate tribe which was believed to have slain Torquane's father.

Torquane hailed the man but received no answer other than the crackling of twigs and the sound of running footsteps. He dispatched an arrow after the intruder, and lost sight of him among the tree-trunks before he could notch a second arrow to the string. Feeling that the man's presence boded no good to the Custodians or his own people, he followed for some distance, trailing the stranger easily but failing to overtake him.

Disturbed and uneasy, he returned to the village. After that, for long hours daily, and sometimes by night, he watched the hills about the laboratory, glimpsing more than once the strange tribesman together with others plainly of the same clan. These savages were very furtive, and in spite of all his woodcraft they avoided any direct encounter with Torquane. It became manifest that the laboratory was the center of their interest, since he found them lurking always somewhere in its neighborhood. From day to day their numbers increased; and Torquane soon conceived the idea that they were planning an attack upon the building. Henceforth the torments of his baffled love became mingled with fears for the safety of its object.

He had kept this love and his trips and vigils secret from his comrades. Now, calling together the young men and boys who acknowledged him as their leader, he told them all what he had experienced and observed. Some, learning that the force-barrier was dead, urged an immediate assault upon the laboratory, and promised Torquane their assistance in capturing the girl. Torquane, however, shook his head, saying:

"A deed such as this would ill become the son of Atullos. I will take no woman against her will. Rather would I have you aid me in protecting the Custodians, who are now few and feeble, against the marauding of this alien tribe."

Torquane's followers were no less willing to fight the intruders than to assail the laboratory. Indeed, the alien clansmen were regarded as natural foes; and their slaying of Atullos had not been forgotten. When it became generally known that they were lurking about the laboratory, many of the tribe's older warriors pledged assistance to Torquane in repelling them; and the youth soon found himself the leader of a small army.

Scouts were sent out to watch closely the movements of the foreigners, who had grown bolder with daily reinforcements. At midnight some of the scouts reported that they were gathering on the slope below the laboratory. Their exact number was hard to determine because of the thick forest. Some of them had been seen stripping a fallen pine of its boughs with stone axes; and it seemed plain that the attack was imminent, and that the pine would be used as a sort of battering-ram to break in the portals.

Torquane marshalled immediately his entire force, numbering close to a hundred men and boys. They were armed with copper knives or spears, well-seasoned oak or dogwood bows, and quivers filled with copper-tipped arrows. In addition to his own bow and knife, Torquane carried with much caution a small earthen jar filled with a grey powder, which he had taken from Atullos' workshop. Years before during his boyhood, prompted by a spirit of crude experimentation, he had dropped a pinch of the powder upon a bed of coals, and had been startled by the loud explosion that resulted. After that, realizing his complete ignorance of such matters, he had feared to experiment with any more of the chemicals prepared and stored by his father. Now, recalling the powder's properties, it occurred to him that he might make an effective use of it in the battle against the invaders.

Marching with all possible speed, the little army reached in an hour the starlit height on which stood the dark laboratory. The wooded slope was apparently clear of the alien savages who had swarmed upon it earlier that night; and Torquane began to fear that they had already assaulted and taken the building. However, when he and his men emerged from the forest on the edge of the gardens, they saw that the attack had just begun. The grounds swarmed with stealthy, silent shapes, dimly discernible, who moved with a concerted surging toward the still and unlit edifice. It was as if an army of shadows had beleaguered a phantom fortress. Then the eerie silence was shattered by a loud crashing together with an outburst of ferocious howling from the savages.

Torquane and his followers, rushing forward, saw the center of the dark horde surge backward a little. They knew that the battering-ram had failed to break in the cedar portals at its first impact and was being withdrawn for a second attempt.

Torquane, running well ahead of his men, ignited with a pitchy pine brand the fuse of tinder vegetable fibre which he had prepared for the earthen jar. The fuse burned perilously close to the jar's contents ere he came within hurling distance of that savage horde. He heard another and harsher crashing, followed by wild shouts of triumph, as if the door had given way. Then the jar, flung with all his strength, exploded with a great flash that lit the entire scene, together with a deafening detonation as of mountain thunder. Torquane, who had been prepared for some violent result, was hurled backward to the ground with stunning force; and his followers stood aghast, believing that they had witnessed the falling of a fiery bolt launched by some hidden Custodian.

A similar belief, it seemed, had been impressed even more powerfully upon the minds of the besiegers: for they fled on all sides in dire disorder. Some were speared in the darkness by Torquane's men, and the rest scattered amid the pines with frightful howls.

Thus, for the first time since the beginning of the dark era, gunpowder was used in battle.

Torquane, regaining his feet, found that the combat was already over. He advanced cautiously, and came upon the dismembered bodies of several of the invaders lying strewn about a garden plot that had been blasted and deeply pitted by the explosion. All the others, it seemed, had either escaped or been accounted for by his warriors. There was small likelihood that the savages would repeat their assault on the laboratory.

However, for the remainder of that night he and his followers kept watch about the building. Lest its inmates should mistake them for enemies, he went more than once to the portals, which had been shattered inward by the pine ram, and shouted aloud to declare his peaceful intentions. He had hoped for some sign from the girl: but in the courtyard beyond the broken door there was naught but the ghostly splashing of fountains. All the windows remained lightless; and a tomblike silence hung upon the building.

At earliest dawn, Torquane, accompanied by two of his warriors, ventured to enter the courtyard. In an angle of its opposite side, they came to an open doorway giving admission to a long empty hall illuminated dimly by a single globe of mysterious blue light. They followed the hall, and Torquane shouted as they went but was answered only by hollow-sounding echoes. A little awed, and wondering if the silence might betoken some cunning trap, they reached the hall's end and paused on the threshold of an immense chamber.

The place was crowded with unknown, intricate machines. Tall dynamos towered to the skylighted roof; and everywhere, on wooden benches and shelves or stone-topped tables, there were huge and strangely shaped vessels, and vials and beakers filled with hueless or colored liquids. Gleaming, silent motors bulked in the corners. Apparatuses of a hundred forms, whose use the young barbarians could not imagine, littered the paved floor and were piled along the walls.

In the midst of all this paraphernalia, an old man sat before one of the vial-laden tables in a chair of cedarwood. The light of sunless morning, livid and ghastly, mingled with the glow of blue lamps on his sunken features. Beside him the girl stood, confronting the intruders with startled eyes.

"We come as friends," cried Torquane, dropping his bow on the floor.

The old Custodian, glowering with half-senile anger, made no effort to rise from his chair, but sank back as if the exertion were beyond his strength. He spoke faintly, and motioned with weak fingers to the girl, who, lifting from the table a glass filled with a water-clear liquid, held it firmly to his lips. He drank a portion of the liquid, and then, after a single convulsive shudder, he rested limply in the chair, his head lolling on his bosom and his body seeming to sag and shrivel beneath its garments.

For an instant, with dilated eyes and pallid features, the girl turned again toward Torquane. It seemed that she hesitated. Then, draining the remainder of the hueless liquid from the glass in her hand, she fell to the floor like a toppling statue.

Torquane and his companions, amazed and mystified, went forward into the room. A little doubtful of the strange contrivances that surrounded them, they ventured to inspect the fallen girl and the seated ancient. It was plain that both were dead; and it dawned upon them that the water-clear liquid must have been a poison more swift and violent than any with which they were familiar: a poison that was part of the lost science of the Custodians. Torquane, peering down at the still, inscrutable face of Varia, was filled with a blind mingling of sorrow and bafflement. It was not thus that he had dreamt of entering the guarded citadel and winning the Custodian's daughter. Never would he retrieve the mysterious lore of the Custodians or understand their machines, or read their ciphered books. It was not for him to finish the Promethean labors of Atullos, and re-illuminate the dark world with science. These things, with the girl Varia for mate and instructress, he might have done. But now, many centuries and cycles would pass, ere the lifting of the night of barbarism; and other hands than those of Torquane, or the sons of Torquane, would rekindle the lamp of ancient knowledge.

Still, though he knew it not in his sorrow and frustration, there remained other things: the clean, sweet lips of the simple hill-girl who would bear his children; the wild, free life of man, warring on equal terms with nature and maintaining her laws obediently; the sun and stars unclouded by the vapors of man's making; the air untainted

by his seething cities.