

The Light from Beyond

Clark Ashton Smith

It will be said, by nearly all who peruse this narrative, that I must have been mad from the beginning; that even the first of the phenomena related herein as a sensory hallucination betokening some grave disorder. It is possible that I am mad now, at those times when the gulfwardsliding tide of memory sweeps me away; those times when I am lost anew in the tracts of dreadful light and unknown entity that were opened before me by the last phase of my experience. But I was sane at the outset, and I am still sane enough to write down a sober and lucid account of all that occurred.

My solitary habit of life, as well as my reputation for eccentricity and extravagance, will no doubt be urged against me by many, to support the theory of mental unsoundness. Those who are unconventional enough to credit me with rationality will smile at my story and deem that I have forsaken the province of bizarre pictorial art (in which I have achieved a certain eminence) to invade that of superscientific fiction.

However, if I wished, I could bring forward much corroborative evidence of the strange visitations. Some of the phenomena were remarked by other people in the locality; though I did not know this at the time, owing to my thorough isolation. One or two brief and obscure notices, giving a somewhat commonplace meteoric explanation, appeared shortly afterwards in metropolitan journals, and were reprinted even more briefly and obscurely in scientific gazettes. I shall not quote them here, since to do so would involve a repetition of details which, in themselves, are more or less doubtful and inconclusive.

I am Dorian Wiermoth. My series of illustrative paintings, based on the poems of Poe, will perhaps be familiar to some of my readers.

For a number of reasons, some of which it is needless to mention, I had decided to spend a whole year in the high Sierras. On the shore of a tiny sapphire tarn, in a valley sheltered by hemlocks and granite crags, I had built a rough cabin and had stocked it plentifully with provisions, books, and the materials of my art. For the time being, I was independent of a world whose charms and enchantments were, to say the least, no longer irresistible.

The region possessed, however, other allurements than those of seclusion. Everywhere, in the stark mountain masses and pinnacles, the juniper-studded cliffs, the glacier-moulded sheets of rock, there was a mingling of grandeur and grotesquery that appealed most intimately to my imagination. Though my drawings and paintings were never, in any sense, literal transcriptions of nature, and were often avowedly fantastic, I had made at all times a careful study of natural forms. I realized that the wildest evocations of the unknown are merely, at bottom, recombinations of known shapes and colors, even as the farthest worlds are compositions of elements familiar to terrene chemistry.

Therefore, I found much that was suggestive in this scenery; much that I could interweave with the arabesques of weirdly imaginative designs; or could render more directly, as pure landscape, in a semi-Japanese style with which I was then experimenting.

The place in which I had settled was remote from the state highway, the railroad, and the path of airplanes. My only near neighbors were the mountain crows and jays and chipmunks. Occasionally, in my rambles, I met a fisherman or hunter; but the region was miraculously free of tourists. I began a serene regimen of work and study, which was interrupted by no human agency. The thing that ended my stay so prematurely, came, I am sure, from a sphere that is not mapped by geographers, nor listed by astronomers.

The mystery began, without forewarning or prescience, on a quiet evening in July, after the scimitar-shaped moon had sheathed itself in the hemlocks. I was sitting in my cabin, reading, for relaxation, a detective story whose title I have since forgotten. The day had been quite warm; there was no wind in that sequestered valley; and the oil lamp was burning steadily between the half-open door and the wide windows.

Then, on the still air, there came a sudden aromatic perfume that filled the cabin like a flooding wave. It was not the resinous odor of the conifers, but a rich and everdeepening spice that was wholly exotic to the region -- perhaps alien to the Earth. It made me think of myrrh and sandal and incense; and yet it was none of these, but a stranger thing, whose very richness was pure and supernal as the odors that were said to attend the apparition of the Holy Grail.

Even as I inhaled it, startled, and wondering if I were the victim of some hallucination, I heard a faint music that was somehow allied to the perfume and inseparable from it. The sound, like a breathing of fairy flutes, ethereally sweet, thrilling, eldritch, was all about me in the room; and I seemed to hear it in my inmost brain, as one hears the seawhisper in a shell.

I ran to the door, I flung it wide open, and stepped out into the azure-green evening. The perfume was everywhere, it arose before me, like the frankincense of veiled altars, from the tarn and the hemlocks, and it seemed to fall from the stilly burning stars above the Gothic trees and granite walls, to the north. Then, turning eastward, I saw the mysterious light that palpitated and revolved in a fan of broad beams upon the hill.

The light was soft, rather than brilliant, and I knew that it could be neither aurora nor airplane beacon. It was hueless -- and yet somehow it seemed to include the intimation of a hundred colors lying beyond the familiar spectrum. The rays were like the spokes of a half-hidden wheel that turned slowly and more slowly, but did not change their position. Their center, or hub, was behind the hill. Presently they became stationary, except for a slight trembling. Against them, I saw the bowed masses of several mighty junipers.

I must have stood there for a long while, gaping and staring like any yokel who beholds a marvel beyond his comprehension. I still breathed the unearthly odor, but the music had grown fainter with the slackening of the wheel of light, and had fallen to a sub-auditory sighing -- the suspicion of a murmur far away in some undiscovered world. Implicitly, though perhaps illogically, I connected the sound and the scent with that unexplained luminescence. Whether the wheel was just beyond the junipers, on the craggy hilltop, or a billion miles away in astronomic space, I could not decide; and it did not even occur to me that I could climb the hill and ascertain this particular for myself.

My main emotion was a sort of half-mystic wonder, a dreamy curiosity that did not prompt me to action. Idly I waited, with no clear awareness of the passing of time, till the wheel of rays began once more to revolve slowly. It swiftened, and presently I could no longer distinguish the separate beams. All I could see was a whirling disk, like a moon that spun dizzily but maintained the same position relative to the rocks and junipers. Then, without apparent recession, it grew dim and faded on the sapphire darkness. I heard no longer the remote and flute-like murmur; and the perfume ebbed from the valley like an outgoing tide, leaving but elusive wraiths of its unknown spicery.

My sense of wonder sharpened with the passing of these phenomena; but I could form no conclusion as to their origin. My knowledge of natural science, which was far from extensive, seemed to afford no plausible clue. I felt, with a wild thrilling, half-fearful, half-exultant, that the thing I had witnessed was not to be found in the catalogues compiled by human observers.

The visitation, whatever it was, had left me in a state of profound nervous excitement. Sleep, when it came, was intermittent; and the problematic light, perfume, and melody recurred again and again in my dreams with a singular vividness, as if they had stamped themselves upon my brain with more than the force of normal sensory impressions.

I awoke at earliest dawn, filled with a well-nigh feverish conviction that I must visit the eastern hill immediately and learn if any tangible sign had been left by the agency of the turning beams. After a hasty and half-eaten breakfast, I made the ascent, armed with my drawing-pad and pencils. It was a short climb among over-beetling boulders, sturdy tamaracks, and dwarf oaks that took the form of low-growing bushes.

The hill-top itself comprised an area of several hundred yards, roughly elliptic. It fell gently away toward the east, and ended on two sides in sheerly riven cliffs and jagged scarps. There were patches of soil amid the enormous granite folds and out-croppings; but these patches were bare, except for a few alpine flowers and grasses; and the place was given mainly to a number of gnarled and massive junipers, which had rooted themselves by preference in the solid rock. From the beginning, it had been one of my favorite haunts. I had made many sketches of the mightily mortised junipers, some of which, I verily believe, were more ancient than the famed sequoias, or the cedars of Lebanon.

Surveying the scene with eager eyes in the cloudless morning light, I saw nothing untoward at first. As usual, there were deer-tracks in the basins of friable soil; but apart from these, and my own former footprints, there was no token of any visitor. Somewhat disappointed, I began to think that the luminous, turning wheel had been far-off in space, beyond the hill.

Then, wandering on toward the lower levels of the crest, I found, in a sheltered spot, the thing that had previously been hidden from my view by the trees and out-croppings. It was a cairn of granite fragments -- but a cairn such as I had never beheld in all my mountain explorations. Built in the unmistakable form of a star with five blunt angles, it rose waist-high from the middle of a plot of intersifting loam and sand. About it grew a few plants of mountain phlox. On one side were the charred remnants of a tree that had been destroyed by lightning in recent years. On two other sides, forming a right angle, were high walls to which several junipers clung like coiling dragons with tenacious claws, embedded in the riven rock.

On the summit of the strange pile, in the center, I perceived a pale and coldly shining stone with star-like points that duplicated and followed the five angles. This stone, I thought, had been shaped by artificial means. I did not recognize its material; and I felt sure that it was nothing native to the region.

I felt the elation of a discoverer, deeming that I had stumbled on the proof of some alien mystery. The cairn, whatever its purpose, whoever its builders, had been reared during the night; for I had visited this very spot on the previous afternoon, a little before sunset, and would have seen the structure if it had been there at that time.

Somehow, I dismissed immediately and forever all idea of human agency. There occurred to me the bizarre thought that voyagers from some foreign world had paused on the hill and had left that enigmatic pile as a sign of their visit. In this manner, the queer nocturnal manifestations were accounted for, even if not fully explained.

Arrested by the weird enigma of it all, I had paused on the verge of the loamy basin, at a distance of perhaps twelve feet from the cairn itself. Now, my brain on fire with fantastical surmise, I stepped forward to examine the cairn more closely. To my utter dumfounding, it appeared to recede before me, preserving the same interval, as I went toward it. Pace after pace I took, but the ground flowed forward beneath me like a treadmill; my moving feet descended in their former tracks; and I was unable to make the least progress toward the goal that was apparently so near at hand! My movements were in no sense impeded, but I felt a growing giddiness, that soon verged upon nausea.

My disconcertment can more readily be imagined than expressed. It seemed obvious that either I or nature had gone suddenly mad. The thing was absurd, impossible -- it belied the most elementary laws of dimension. By some incalculable means, a new and arcane property had been introduced into the space about the cairn.

To test further the presence of this hypothetical property, I abandoned my effort at direct approach, and began to circle the basin, resuming the attempt from other angles. The pile, I found, was equally unapproachable from all sides: at a distance of twelve feet, the soil began its uncanny treadmill movement when I tried to encroach upon it. The cairn, to all intents and purposes, might have been a million miles away, in the gulf between the worlds!

After a while, I gave up my weird and futile experiments, and sat down beneath one of the overhanging junipers. The mystery maddened me, it induced a sort of mental vertigo as I pondered it. But also, it brought into the familiar order of things the exhilaration of a novel and perhaps supernatural element. It spoke of the veiled infinitudes I had vainly longed to explore; it goaded my feverish fantasy to ungovernable flights.

Recalling myself from such conjectures, I studied with sedulous care the stellar pile and the soil around it. Surely the beings who had built it would have left their footprints. However, there were no discernible marks of any kind; and I could learn nothing from the arrangement of the stones, which had been piled with impeccable neatness and symmetry. I was still baffled by the five-pointed object on the summit, for I could recall no terrene mineral that resembled its substance very closely. It was too opaque for moonstone or crystal, too lucid and brilliant for alabaster.

Meanwhile, as I continued to sit there, I was visited by an evanescent whiff of the spicy perfume that had flooded my cabin on the previous night. It came and went like a dying phantom, and I was never quite sure of its presence.

At length I roused myself and made a thorough search of the hill-top, to learn if any other trace had been left by the problematic visitors. In one of the sandy patches of soil, near the northern verge, I saw a curious indentation, like the slender, three-toed footmark of some impossibly gigantic bird.

Close at hand was the small hollow from which a loose fragment of stone, doubtless employed in the building of the cairn, had been removed. The three-pointed mark was very faint, as if the maker had trodden there with an airy lightness. But apart from the finding of this doubtful vestige, my search was wholly without result.

II: The Mystery Deepens

During the weeks that ensued, the unearthly riddle upon which I had fallen preoccupied me almost to the point of mania. Perhaps, if there had been anyone with whom I could have discussed it, anyone who could have thrown upon it the calm and sober light of technical knowledge, I might have rid myself of the obsession to some extent. But I was entirely alone; and, to the best of my belief, the neighborhood of the cairn was visited by no other human being at that time.

On several occasions, I renewed my efforts to approach the cairn; but the unheard-of, incredible property of a concealed extension, a treadmill flowing, still inhered, in the space about it, as if established there to guard it from all intrusion. Faced with this abrogation of known geometry, I felt the delirious horror of one for whom the infinite has declared its yawning gulf amid the supposed solidity of finite things.

I made a pencil drawing of the long, light footmark before it was erased by the Sierran winds; and from that one vestige, like a paleontologist who builds up some prediluvian monster from a single bone, I tried to reconstruct in my imagination the being that had left it there. The cairn itself was the theme of numerous sketches; and I believe that I formed and debated in turn almost every conceivable theory as to its purpose and the identity of its builders.

Was it a monument that marked the grave of some intercosmic voyager from Algol or Aldebaran? Had it been reared as a token of discovery and possession by a Columbus of Achernar, landing on our planet? Did it indicate the site of a mysterious cache, to which the makers would return at some future time? Was it a landmark between dimensions? a hieroglyphic milepost? a signal for the guidance of other travelers who might pass among the worlds, going from deep to deep?

All conjectures were equally valid -- and worthless. Before the wildering mystery of it all, my human ignorance drove me to veritable frenzy.

A fortnight had gone by, and the midsummer month was drawing to its close, when I began to notice certain new phenomena. I have mentioned, I think, that there were a few tiny patches of alpine phlox within the circle of occultly altered space around the cairn. One day, with a startlement that amounted to actual shock, I saw that an extraordinary change had occurred in their pale blossoms. The petals had doubled in number, they were now of abnormal size and heaviness, and were tinged with ardent purple and lambent ruby. Perhaps the change had been going on for some time without my perception; perhaps it had developed overnight. At any rate, the modest little flowers had taken on the splendor of asphodels from some mythologic land!

Beyond all mortal trespass, they flamed in that enchanted area, moated with unseen immensities. Day after day I returned, smitten with the awe of one who witnesses a miracle, and saw them there, ever larger and brighter, as if they were fed by other elements than the known air and earth.

Then, presently, in the berries of a great juniper bough that overhung the ring, I perceived a corresponding change. The tiny, dull-blue globes had enlarged enormously, and were colored with a lucent crimson, like the fiery apples of some exotic paradise. At the same time, the foliage of the bough brightened to a tropic verdancy. But on the main portion of the tree, outside the cryptic circle, the leaves and berries were unaltered.

It was as if something of another world had been intercalated with ours... More and more, I began to feel that the star of lucent, nameless stone that topped the cairn was in some manner of source or key of these unique phenomena. But I could prove nothing, could learn nothing. I could feel sure of only one thing: I was witnessing the action of forces that had never intruded heretofore upon human observation. These forces were obedient to their own laws -which, it appeared, were not altogether synonymous with the laws that man in his presumption has laid down for the workings of nature. The meaning of it all was a secret told in some alien, keyless cipher.

I have forgotten the exact date of those final occurrences, in whose aftermath I was carried beyond the imaginable confines of time and space. Indeed, it seems to me that it would be impossible to date them in terms of terrene chronology. Sometimes I feel that they belong only to the cycles of another world; sometimes, that they never happened; sometimes, that they are still happening -- or yet to happen.

I remember, though, that there was a half-moon above the crags and firs on that fatal evening. The air had turned sharp with a prescience of the coming autumn, and I had closed the door and windows and had kindled a fire of dead juniper-wood that was perfuming the cabin with its subtle incense. I heard the sighing of a wind in the higher hemlocks, as I sat before my table, looking over the recent sketches I had made of the cairn and its surroundings, and wondering for perhaps the millionth time if I, or anyone, would ever solve the unearthly riddle.

This time, I began to hear the faint, aerial music, as if in the inmost convolutions of my brain, before I caught the mystic odor. At first, it was little more than the memory of a sound; but it seemed to rise and flow and pour outward, slowly, tortuously, as if through the windings of some immeasurable conch. till it was all about me with its labyrinthine murmuring. The cabin -- the world outside -- the very heavens -- were filled with tenuous horns and flutes that told the incommunicable dreams of a lost elfland.

Then, above the redolence of the clearly burning, smokeless wood, I smelt that other perfume, rich and ethereal, and no less pervasive than on the former occasion. It seemed that the closed doors and windows were no barrier to its advent: it came as if through another medium than the air, another avenue than the space in which we move and have our being.

In a fever of exalted wonder and curiosity, I threw the door open and went out into the sea of unearthly fragrance and melody that overlowed the world. On the eastern hill, as I had expected, the turning wheel of light was slowing in a stationary position beyond the tower-like junipers. The rays were soft and hueless, as before, but their luster was not diminished by the moon.

This time, I felt an imperative desire to solve the enigma of that visitation: a desire that drew me, stumbling and racing upward among the craggy boulders and low-grown bushes. The music ebbed to a far, faint whisper, the wheel revolved more gradually, as I neared the summit.

A rudiment of that caution which humanity has always felt in the presence of unknown things, impelled me to slacken my reckless pace. Several immense trees and granite outcroppings, however, still intervened betwixt myself and the source of those trembling beams. I stole forward, seeing with an inexpressible thrill, as of some mystic confirmation, that the beams emanated from the site of the stelliform cairn.

It was an easy matter to climb the massive folds of rock and reach a vantage from which I could look directly down on that mysterious area. Crawling flat on my stomach, in a line with the mightiest of the over jutting junipers, I attained my objective, and could peer from behind a heavy bough that grew horizontally along the rock; at the wall's edge. The loamy basin in which the cairn had been reared was beneath me. Poised in mid-air, level and motionless, and a little to one side of the cairn, there hung a singular vessel that I can liken only to a great open barge with upward curving prow and stern. In its center, above the bulwarks, arose a short mast or slender pillar, topped with a fiery, dazzling disk from which the wheel of beams, as if from a hub, poured vertically and transversely. The whole vessel was made of some highly translucent material, for I could see the dim outlines of the landscape beyond it: and the beams poured earthward through its bottom with little diminution of their radiance. The disk, as well as I could tell from the sharply foreshortened position in which I viewed the barge, was the only semblance of mechanism.

It was as if a crescent moon of milky crystal had come down to flood that shadowy nook with its alien light. And the prow of this moon was no more than six or seven feet from the granite wall that formed my place of vantage!

Four beings, whom I can compare to no earthly creatures, were hovering in the air about the cairn, without wings or other palpable support, as if they, like the barge, were independent of terrene gravity. Though little less in stature than men, their whole aspect was slight and imponderable to a degree that is found only in birds or insects. Their bodily plasm was almost diaphanous, with its intricate nerves and veinings dimly visible, like iridescent threads through a gauzy fabric of pearl and faint rose.

One of them, hanging aloft before the wheel of beams, with his head averted from my view, was holding in his long, frail hands the cold and lucent star that had topped the cairn. The others, stooping airily, were lifting and throwing aside the fragments that had been piled with such impeccable symmetry.

The faces of two were wholly hidden; but the third presented a strange profile, slightly resembling the beak and eye of an owl beneath an earless cranium that rose to a lofty ridge aigretted with nodding tassels like the top-knot of a quail.

The tearing-down of the pile was accomplished with remarkable deftness and speed; and it seemed that the pipy arms of these creatures were far stronger than one would have imagined. During the process of demolition, they stooped lower and lower, till they floated almost horizontally, just above the ground. Soon all the fragments were removed; and the entities began to scoop away with their fingers the soil beneath, whose looseness appeared to evince a previous digging at some recent date.

Breathless and awed before the cryptic vision, I bent forward from my eyrie, wondering what inconceivable treasure, what cache of unguessed glory and mystery, was about to be exhumed by these otherworld explorers.

Finally, from the deep hollow they had made in the loamy soil, one of the beings withdrew his hand, holding aloft a small and colorless object. Apparently it was the thing for which they had been searching, for the creatures abandoned their delving, and all four of them swam upward toward the barge as if wafted by invisible wings. Two of them took their stations in the rear part of the vessel, standing behind the mast-like pillar and its wheel of rays. The one who bore the shining, star-shaped stone, and the carrier of the dull, unknown object, posted themselves in the prow, at a distance of no more than nine or ten feet from the crag on which I crouched.

For the first time, I beheld their faces in front view, peering straight toward me with glowing, pale-gold eyes of inscrutable strangeness. Whether or not they saw me, I have never been sure: they seemed to gaze through me and beyond -- illimitably beyond -- into occulted gulfs, and upon worlds forever sealed to the sight of man.

I discerned more clearly now, in the fingers of the foremost being, the nameless object they had dug from beneath the dismantled cairn. It was smooth, drab, oval, and about the size of a falcon's egg. I might have deemed it no more than a common pebble, aside from one peculiar circumstance: a crack in the larger end, from which issued several short, luminous filaments. Somehow, the thing reminded me of a riven seed with sprouting roots.

Heedless of any possible peril, I had risen to my feet and staring raptly at the barge and its occupants. After a few moments. I became aware that the wheel of beams had begun to turn gradually, as if in response to an unperceived mechanism. At the same time, I heard the eerie whispering of a million flutes, I breathed a rushing gale of Edenic spices. Faster and faster the rays revolved, sweeping the ground and the air with their phantom spokes, till I saw only a spinning moon that divided the crescent vessel and seemed to cleave asunder the very earth and rocks.

My senses reeled with the dizzy radiance, the everpouring music and perfume. An indescribable sickness mounted through all my being, the solid granite seemed to turn and pitch under my feet like a drunken world, and the heavily buttressed junipers tossed about me against the overturning heavens.

Very swiftly, the wheel, the vessel and its occupants took on a filmy dimness, fading in a manner that is hard to convey, as if, without apparent diminishment of perspective, they were receding into some ultra-geometric space. Their outlines were still before me -- and yet they were immeasurably distant. Coincidentally, I felt a terrific suction, an unseen current more powerful than cataracting waters, that seized me as I stood leaning forward from the rock, and swept me past the violently threshing boughs.

I did not fall toward the ground beneath -- for there was no longer any ground. With the sensation of being wrenched asunder in the ruin of worlds that had returned to chaos, I plunged into gray and frigid space, that included neither air, earth, stars nor heaven; void, uncreated space, through which the phantom crescent of the strange vessel fell away beneath me, bearing a ghostly moon.

As well as I can recollect, there was no total loss of consciousness at any time during my fall; but, toward the end, there was an increasing numbness, a great dubiety, and a dim perception of enormous arabesques of color that had risen before me, as if created from the gray nothing.

All was misty and two-dimensional, as if this new-made world had not yet acquired the attribute of depth. I seemed to pass obliquely over painted labyrinths. At length, amid soft opals and azures, I came to a winding area of rosy light, and settled into it till the rosiness was all about me.

My numbness gave way to a sharp and painful tingling as of frost-bite, accompanied by a revival of all my senses. I felt a firm grasp about my shoulders, and knew that my head and upper body had emerged from the rosiness.

III: The Infinite World

For an instant, I thought that I was leaning horizontally from a slowly plunging cataract of some occult element, neither water, air nor flame, but somehow analogous to all three. It was more tangible than air, but there was no feeling of wetness; it flowed with the soft fluttering of fire, but it did not burn.

Two of the strange, ethereal entities were drawing me out on a luminous golden cliff, from which an airy vegetation, hued as with the rainbows of towering fountains, projected its lightly arching masses into a gold-green abyss. The crescent barge and its wheel of beams, now stationary, were hovering close at hand in a semi-capsized position. Farther away, beyond the delicate trees, I saw the jutting of horizontal towers. Five suns, drowning in their own glory, were suspended at wide intervals in the gulf.

I wondered at the weird inversion of gravity that my position evinced; and then, as if through a normalizing of equilibrium, I saw that the great cliff was really a level plain, and the cataract a gentle stream.

Now I was standing on the shore, with the people of the barge beside me. They were no longer supporting me with their frail, firm hands. I could not guess their attitude, and my brain awoke with a keen electric shock to the eerie terror and wildering strangeness of it all. Surely the world about me was no part of the known cosmos! The very soil beneath me thrilled and throbbed with unnameable energies. All things, it seemed, were composed of a range of elements nearer to pure force than to common matter. The trees were like fountains of supernal pyrotechnics, arrested and made permanent in mid-air. The structures that soared at far intervals, like celestial minarets, were built as of moulded morning cloud and luminescence. I breathed an air that was more intoxicating than the air of alpine heights.

Out of this world of marvel, I saw the gathering of many people similar to the entities beside me. Amid the trees and towers, from the shimmering vistas, they came as if summoned by magic. Their movements were swift and silent as the gliding of phantoms, and they seemed to tread the air rather than the ground. I could not hear even the least whispering among them, but I had the feeling of inaudible converse all about me -- the vibrant thrilling of overtones too high for the human ear.

Their eyes of pale gold regarded me with unsearchable intentness. I noted their softly curving mouths, which appeared to express an alien sadness, but perhaps were not sad at all. Beneath their gaze, I felt a queer embarrassment, followed quickly by something that I can describe only as an inward illumination. This illumination did not seem to be telepathic: it was merely as if my mind had acquired, as a concomitant of the new existence into which I had fallen, a higher faculty or comprehension impossible in its normal state. This faculty was something that I drew in from the strange soil and air, the presence of the strange multitude. Even then, my understanding was only partial, and I knew there was much that still eluded me through certain insuperable limitations of my brain.

The beings, I thought, were benignantly disposed, but were somewhat puzzled as to what should be done with me. Inadvertently, in a way without parallel, I had trespassed upon another cosmos than my own. Caught in the pull of some transdimensional vortex wrought by the crescent vessel as it departed from earth, I had followed the vessel to its own world, which adjoined ours in transcendental space.

This much I understood, but the mechanics of my entrance into the supernal realm were somewhat obscure to me. Apparently my fall into the rosy river had been providential, for the stream had revived me with its supereaqueous element, and had perhaps served to prevent a sort of frostbite that would otherwise have been incurred by my plunge through an interspatial vacuum.

The purpose of the granite cairn, and the visits made by its builders to earth, were things that I could apprehend but dimly. Something had been planted beneath the cairn, and had been left there for a stated interval, as if to absorb from the grosser mundane soil certain elements or virtues lacking in the soil of this ethereal world. The whole process was based on the findings of an arcanic but severely ordered science; and the experiment was one that had been made before. The lucent stone on the cairn, in some way that I could not grasp, had established around it the guarding zone of fluent treadmill space, on which no earthly denizen could intrude. The earthly changes of the vegetation within this zone were due to certain mystic emanations from the planted seed.

The nature of the seed eluded me; but I knew that it possessed an enormous and vital importance. And the time for its transplanting to the otherworld soil was now at hand. My eyes were drawn to the fingers of the entity who carried it, and I saw that the seed had swollen visibly, that the shining rootlets had lengthened from its riven end.

More and more of the people had gathered, lining the shore of that rosy river, and the intervals of the airy boskage, in silent multitude. Some, I perceived, were thin and languid as wasting specters; and their bodily plasm, as if clouded by illness, was dull and opaque, or displayed unhealthy mottlings of shadow amid the semi-translucence that was plainly a normal attribute.

In a clear area, beside the hovering vessel, a hole had been dug in that Edenic soil. Amid the bewildering flux of my impressions, I had not noticed it heretofore. Now it assumed a momentous import, as the bearer of the seed went forward to deposit his charge in that shallow pit, and bury it with a curious oval spade of crystalline metal beneath the golden element that was like a mixture of loam and sunset glory.

The crowd had drawn back, leaving a vacant field about the planted seed. There was a sense of awful and solemn, ceremonial expectation in the stillness of that waiting people. Dim, sublime, ungraspable images hovered upon the horizon of my thought like unborn suns; and I trembled with the nearness of some tremendous thaumaturgy. But the purpose of it all was still beyond my comprehension.

Darkly I felt the anticipation of the alien throng ... and somewhere -- in myself or in those about me -- a great need and a crying hunger that I could not name.

It seemed that whole months and seasons went by; that the five suns revolved about us in altered ecliptics, ere the end of the interim of waiting... But time and its passing were perhaps obedient to unknown laws, like all else in that other sphere, and were not as the hours and seasons of earthly time.

There came at last the awaited miracle: the pushing of a pale shoot from the golden sod. Visibly, dynamically it grew, as if fed with the sap of accelerating years that had turned to mere minutes. From it, there burst a multitude of scions, budding in their turn with irised leafage. The thing was a fountain of unsealed glories, an upward-rushing geyser of emerald and opal that took the form of a tree.

The rate of growth was beyond belief, it was like a legerdemain of gods. From moment to moment the boughs multiplied and lengthened with the leaping of wind wrought flames. The foliage spread like a blown spray of jewels. The plant became colossal, it towered with a pillarthick stem, and its leafage meshed the five suns, and drooped down toward the river and above the barge, the crowd, and the lesser vegetation.

Still the tree grew, and its boughs came down in glorious arches and festoons, laden with starlike blossoms. I beheld the faces of those about me in a soft umbrage, along arboreal arcades, as if beneath some paradisaical banyan. Then, as the festoons hung nearer, I saw the fruiting of the tree: the small globules, formed as of blood and light, that were left by the sudden withering of the starry blossoms. Swiftly they swelled, attaining the size of pears, and descending till they grew well within my reach -- and within the reach of that embowered throng.

It seemed that the marvellous growth had attained its culmination, and was now quiescent. We were domed as if by some fabulous Tree of Life that had sprung from the mated energies of Earth and the celestial Otherworld.

Suddenly I knew the purpose of it all, when I saw that some of the people about me were plucking and devouring the fruit. Many others abstained, however, and I perceived that the sanguine-colored pears were eaten only by the languid, sickly beings I have mentioned before. It seemed that the fruit was a sovereign curative for their illness: even as they devoured it, their bodies brightened, the mottlings of shadow disappeared, and they began to assume the normal aspect of their fellows.

I watched them -- and upon me there came a kindred hunger, a profound and mystic craving, together with the reckless vertigo of one who is lost in a world too far and high for human tread. There were doubts that woke within me, but I forgot them even as they woke. There were hands that reached out as if to warn and restrain me, but I disregarded them. One of the luscious, glowing pears hung close before me -- and I plucked it.

The thing filled my fingers with a sharp, electric tingling, followed by a coolness that I can compare only to snow beneath a summer sun. It was not formed of anything that we know as matter -- and yet it was firm and solid to the touch, and it

yielded a winy juice, an ambrosial pulp, between my teeth. I devoured it avidly, and a high, divine elation coursed like a golden lightning through all my nerves and fibers.

I have forgotten much of the delirium (if delirium it was) that ensued... There were things too vast for memory to retain. And much that I remember could be told only in the language of Olympus.

I recall, however, the colossal expansion of all my senses, the flowering of thought into stars and worlds, as if my consciousness had towered above its mortal tenement with more than the thaumaturgic spreading of the Tree. It seemed that the life of the strange people had become a province of my being, that I knew from all time the arcana of their wisdom, the preterhuman scale of their raptures and sorrows, of their triumphs and disasters.

Holding all this as an appanage. I rose into spheres ulterior and superior. Infinities were laid before me, I conned them as one conns an unrolled map. I peered down upon the utmost heavens, and the hells that lie contiguous to the heavens; and I saw the perennial process of their fiery transmutation and interchange.

I possessed a million eyes and ears; my nerves were lengthened into nether gulfs, were spun out beyond the suns. I was the master of strange senses, that were posted to oversee the activities of unlit stars and blind planets.

All this I beheld and comprehended with the exultation of a drunken demiurge; and all was familiar to me, as if I had seen it in other cycles.

Then, quickly and terribly, there came the sense of division, the feeling that part of myself no longer shared this empire of cosmic immensitude and glory. My delirium shrank like a broken bubble, and I seemed to lose and leave behind me the colossal, shadowy god that still towered above the stars. I was standing again beneath the Tree, with the transdimensional people about me, and the ruddy fruit still burning in the far-flung arches of leafage.

Here, also, the inexorable doom of division pursued me, and I was no longer one, but two. Distinctly I saw myself, my body and features touched with the ethereal radiance of the beings who were native to that world; but I, who beheld that alter ego, was aware of a dark and iron weight, as if some grosser gravity had claimed me. It seemed that the golden soil was yielding under me like a floor of sunset cloud, and I was plunging and falling through nether emptiness, while that other self remained beneath the Tree.

I awoke with the sultry beams of the midday sun upon my face. The loamy ground on which I lay, the scattered fragments of the cairn beside me, and the rocks and junipers, were irre recognizable as if they had belonged to some other planet than ours. I could not remember them for a long while; and the things I have detailed in this narrative came back to me very tardily, in a broken and disordered sequence.

The manner of my return to Earth is still a mystery. Sometimes I think that the supernal people brought me back in that shining vessel whose mechanism I have never understood. Sometimes, when the madness is upon me, I think that I -- or part of myself -- was precipitated hither as an aftermath of the eating of the Fruit. The energies to whose operation I exposed myself by that act were wholly incalculable. Perhaps, in accord with the laws of a transdimensional chemistry, there was a partial revibration, and an actual separation of the elements of my body, by which I became two persons, in different worlds. No doubt the physicists will laugh at such ideas...

There were no corporeal ill effects from my experience, apart from a minor degree of what appeared to be frostbite, and a curious burning of the skin, mild rather than severe, that might have resulted from a temporary exposure to radioactive matters. But in all other senses, I was, and still am, a mere remnant of my former self... Among other things, I soon found that my artistic abilities had deserted me; and they have not returned after an interim of months. Some higher essence, it would seem, has departed wholly and forever.

I have become as it were, a clod. But often, to that clod, the infinite spheres descend in their terror and marvel. I have left the lonely Sierras and have sought the refuge of human nearness. But the streets yawn with uncharted abysses, and Powers unsuspected by others move for me amid the crowd. Sometimes I am no longer here among my fellows, but am standing with the eaters of the fruit, beneath the Tree, in that mystic otherworld.