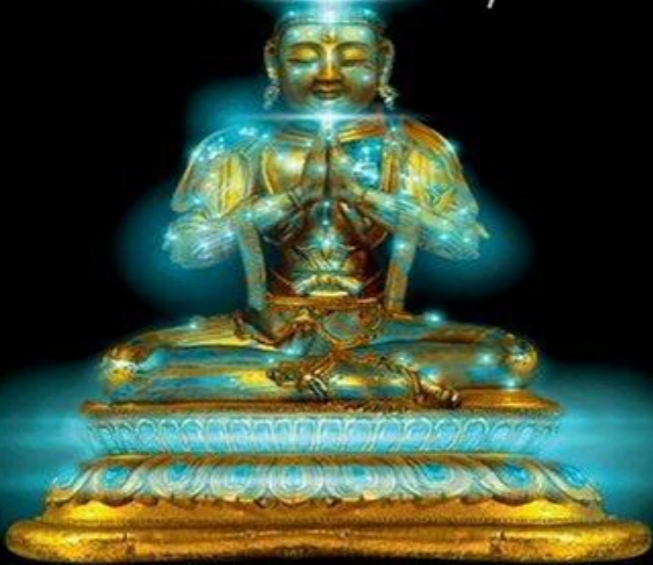


THE LEGENDARY SF CLASSIC

# LORD OF LIGHT



ROGER ZELAZNY

"TRICKY AND BRILLIANT AND HEARTFELT AND DANGEROUS."

—NEIL GAIMAN

*It is said that fifty-three years after his liberation he returned from the Golden Cloud, to take up once again the gauntlet of Heaven, to oppose the Order of Life and the gods who ordained it so. His followers had prayed for his return, though their prayers were sin. Prayer should not trouble one who has gone on to Nirvana, no matter what the circumstances of his going. The wearers of the saffron robe prayed, however, that He of the Sword, Manjusri, should come again among them, The Boddhisatva is said to have*

*heard. . .*

He whose desires have been throttled,  
who is independent of root,  
whose pasture is emptiness —  
signless and free —  
his path is as unknowable  
as that of birds across the heavens.

*Dhammapada (93)*

His followers called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha- and the -atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. But then, he never claimed not to be a god. Circumstances being what they were, neither admission could be of any benefit. Silence, though, could.

Therefore, there was mystery about

him.

It was in the season of the rains . . .

It was well into the time of the great wetness. . .

It was in the days of the rains that their prayers went up, not from the fingering of knotted prayer cords or the spinning of prayer wheels, but from the great pray-machine in the monastery of Ratri, goddess of the Night

The high-frequency prayers were directed upward through the atmosphere and out beyond it, passing into that golden cloud called the Bridge of the Gods, which circles the entire world, is seen as a bronze rainbow at night and is the place where the red sun becomes orange at midday.

Some of the monks doubted the orthodoxy of this prayer technique, but the machine had been built and was operated by Yama-Dharma, fallen, of the Celestial City; and, it was told, he had ages ago built the mighty thunder chariot of Lord Shiva: that engine that fled across the heavens belching gouts of fire in its wake.

Despite his tall from favor, Yama was still deemed mightiest of the artificers, though it was not doubted that the Gods of the City would have him to die the real death were they to learn of the pray-machine. For that matter, though, it was not doubted that they would have him to die the real death

without the excuse of the pray-machine, also, were he to come into their custody. How he would settle this matter with the Lords of Karma was his own affair, though none doubted that when the time came he would find a way. He was half as old as the Celestial City itself, and not more than ten of the gods remembered the founding of that abode. He was known to be wiser even than the Lord Kubera in the ways of the Universal Fire. But these were his lesser Attributes. He was best known for another thing, though few men spoke of it. Tall, but not overly so; big, but not heavy; his movements, slow and fluent. He wore red and spoke little.

He tended the pray-machine, and the

giant metal lotus he had set atop the monastery roof turned and turned in its sockets.

A light rain was falling upon the building, the lotus and the jungle at the foot of the mountains. For six days he had offered many kilowatts of prayer, but the static kept him from being heard On High. Under his breath, he called upon the more notable of the current fertility deities, invoking them in terms of their most prominent Attributes.

A rumble of thunder answered his petition, and the small ape who assisted him chuckled. "Your prayers and your curses come to the same. Lord Yama," commented the ape. "That is to say,

nothing."

"It has taken you seventeen incarnations to arrive at this truth?" said Yama. "I can see then why you are still doing time as an ape."

"Not so," said the ape, whose name was Tak. "My fall, while less spectacular than your own, nevertheless involved elements of personal malice on the part of—"

"Enough!" said Yama, turning his back to him.

Tak realized then that he might have touched upon a sore spot. In an attempt to find another subject for conversation, he crossed to the window, leapt onto its wide sill and stared upward.

"There is a break in the cloud cover,



to the west," he said.

Yama approached, followed the direction of his gaze, frowned, and nodded.

"Aye," he said. "Stay where you are and advise me."

He moved to a bank of controls.

Overhead, the lotus halted in its turning, then faced the patch of bare sky.

"Very good," he said. "We're getting something."

His hand moved across a separate control panel, throwing a series of switches and adjusting two dials.

Below them, in the cavernous cellars of the monastery, the signal was received and other preparations were

begun: the host was made ready.

"The clouds are coming together again!" cried Tak.

"No matter, now," said the other. "We've hooked our fish. Out of Nirvana and into the lotus, he comes."

There was more thunder, and the rain came down with a sound like hail upon the lotus. Snakes of blue lightning coiled, hissing, about the mountaintops.

Yama sealed a final circuit.

"How do you think he will take to wearing the flesh again?" asked Tak.

"Go peel bananas with your feet!"

Tak chose to consider this a dismissal and departed the chamber, leaving Yama to close down the machinery. He made his way along a

corridor and down a wide flight of stairs. He reached the landing, and as he stood there he heard the sound of voices and the shuffling of sandals coming in his direction from out a side hall.

Without hesitating, he climbed the wall, using a series of carved panthers and an opposing row of elephants as handholds. Mounting a rafter, he drew back into a well of shadow and waited, unmoving.

Two dark-robed monks entered through the archway.

"So why can she not clear the sky for them?" said the first.

The second, an older, more heavily built man, shrugged. "I am no sage that I

can answer such questions. That she is anxious is obvious, or she should never have granted them this sanctuary, nor Yama this usage. But who can mark the limits of night?"

"Or the moods of a woman," said the first. "I have heard that even the priests did not know of her coming."

"That may be. Whatever the case, it would seem a good omen."

"So it would seem."

They passed through another archway, and Tak listened to the sounds of their going until there was only silence.

Still, he did not leave his perch.

The "she" referred to by the monks could only be the goddess Ratri herself,

worshiped by the order that had given sanctuary to the followers of Great-Souled Sam, the Enlightened One. Now, Ratri, too, was to be numbered among those fallen from the Celestial City and wearing the skin of a mortal. She had every reason to be bitter over the whole affair; and Tak realized the chance she was taking in granting sanctuary, let alone being physically present during this undertaking. It could jeopardize any possibility of her future reinstatement if word of it got out and reached the proper ears. Tak recalled her as the dark-haired beauty with silver eyes, passing in her moon chariot of ebony and chromium, drawn by stallions black and white,

tended by her guard, also black and white, passing up the Avenue of Heaven, rivaling even Sarasvati in her glory. His heart leapt within his hairy breast. He had to see her again. One night, long ago, in happier times and better form, he had danced with her, on a balcony under the stars. It had been for only a few moments. But he remembered; and it is a difficult thing to be an ape and to have such memories.

He climbed down from the rafter.

There was a tower, a high tower rising from the northeast corner of the monastery. Within that tower was a chamber. It was said to contain the indwelling presence of the goddess. It was cleaned daily, the linens changed,

fresh incense burnt and a votive offering laid just within the door. That door was normally kept locked.

There were, of course, windows. The question as to whether a man could have entered by means of any of these windows must remain academic. Tak proved that an ape could.

Mounting the monastery roof, he proceeded to scale the tower, moving from brick to slippery brick, from projection to irregularity, the heavens growling doglike above him, until finally he clung to the wall just below the outer sill. A steady rain fell upon him. He heard a bird singing within. He saw the edge of a wet, blue scarf hanging over

the sill.

He caught hold of the ledge and raised himself until he could peer inside.

Her back was to him. She wore a dark blue sari, and she was seated on a small bench at the opposite end of the room.

He clambered onto the sill and cleared his throat.

She turned quickly. She wore a veil, so that her features were indistinguishable. She regarded him through it, then rose and crossed the chamber.

He was dismayed. Her figure, once lithe, was wide about the waist; her walk, once the swaying of boughs, was a waddle; her complexion was too dark;



even through the veil the lines of her nose and jaw were too pronounced.

He bowed his head. "And so you have drawn near to us, who at your coming have come home," he sang, "as birds to their nest upon the tree."

She stood, still as her statue in the main hall below.

"Guard us from the she-wolf and the wolf, and guard us from the thief, oh Night, and so be good for us to pass."

She reached out slowly and laid her hand upon his head.

"You have my blessing, little one," she said, after a time. "Unfortunately, that is all I can give. I cannot offer protection or render beauty, who lack

these luxuries myself. What is your name?"

"Tak," he told her.

She touched her brow. "I once knew a Tak," she said, "in a bygone day, a distant place. . ."

"I am that Tak, madam."

She seated herself upon the sill. After a time, he realized that she was weeping, within her veil.

"Don't cry, goddess. Tak is here. Remember Tak, of the Archives? Of the Bright Spear? He stands yet ready to do thy bidding."

"Tak. . ." she said. "Oh, Tak! You, too? I did not know, I never heard. . ."

"Another turning of the wheel, madam, and who knows? Things may yet

be better than even once they were."

Her shoulders shook. He reached out, drew back his hand.

She turned and took it.

After an age, she spoke: "Not by the normal course of events shall we be restored or matters settled, Tak of the Bright Spear. We must beat our own path."

"What mean you?" he inquired; then, "Sam?"

She nodded.

"He is the one. He is our hope against Heaven, dear Tak. If he can be recalled, we have a chance to live again."

"This is why you have taken this

chance, why you yourself sit within the jaws of the tiger?"

"Why else? When there is no real hope we must mint our own. If the coin be counterfeit it still may be passed."

"Counterfeit? You do not believe he was the Buddha?"

She laughed, briefly. "Sam was the greatest charlatan in the memory of god or man. He was also the worthiest opponent Trimurti ever faced. Don't look so shocked at my saying it. Archivist! You know that he stole the fabric of his doctrine, path and attainment, the whole robe, from prehistorical forbidden sources. It was a weapon, nothing more. His greatest strength was his insincerity. If we could have *him* back . . ."

"Lady, saint or charlatan, he *is* returned."

"Do not jest with me, Tak."

"Goddess and Lady, I just left the Lord Yama shutting down the pray-machine, frowning his frown of success."

"The venture was against such mighty odds. . . . Lord Agni once said that no such thing could ever be done."

Tak stood.

"Goddess Ratri," he said, "who, be he god or man, or anything between, knows more of such matters than Yama?"

"I have no answer for that question, Tak, because there is none. But how can

you say of a certainty that he has netted us our fish?"

"Because he is Yama."

"Then take my arm, Tak. Escort me again, as once you did. Let us view the sleeping Boddhisatva."

He led her out the door, down the stairs, and into the chambers below.

Light, born not of torches but of the generators of Yama, filled the cavern. The bed, set upon a platform, was closed about on three sides by screens. Most of the machinery was also masked by screens and hangings. The saffron-robed monks who were in attendance moved silently about the great chamber. Yama, master artificer, stood at the

bedside.

As they approached, several of the well-disciplined, imperturbable monks uttered brief exclamations. Tak then turned to the woman at his side and drew back a pace, his breath catching in his throat.

She was no longer the dumpy little matron with whom he had spoken. Once again did he stand at the side of Night Immortal, of whom it has been written, "The goddess has filled wide space, to its depths and its heights. Her radiance drives out the dark."

He looked but a moment and covered his eyes. She still had this trace of her distant Aspect about her.

"Goddess. . ." he began.

"To the sleeper," she stated. "He stirs."

They advanced to the bedstead.

Thereafter to be portrayed in murals at the ends of countless corridors, carved upon the walls of Temples and painted onto the ceilings of numerous palaces, came the awakening of he who was variously known as Mahasamatman, Kalkin, Manjusri, Siddhartha, Tathagatha, Binder, Maitreya, the Enlightened One, Buddha and Sam. At his left was the goddess of Night; to his right stood Death; Tak, the ape, was crouched at the foot of the bed, eternal comment upon the coexistence of the



animal and the divine.

He wore an ordinary, darkish body of medium height and age; his features were regular and undistinguished; when his eyes opened, they were dark.

"Hail, Lord of Light!" It was Ratri who spoke these words.

The eyes blinked. They did not focus. Nowhere in the chamber was there any movement.

"Hail, Mahasamatman — Buddha!" said Yama.

The eyes stared ahead, unseeing.

"Hello, Sam," said Tak.

The forehead creased slightly, the eyes squinted, fell upon Tak, moved on to the others.

"Where . . . ?" he asked, in a

whisper.

"My monastery," answered Ratri.

Without expression, he looked upon her beauty.

Then he shut his eyes and held them tightly closed, wrinkles forming at their corners. A grin of pain made his mouth a bow, his teeth the arrows, clenched.

"Are you truly he whom we have named?" asked Yama.

He did not answer.

"Are you he who fought the army of Heaven to a standstill on the banks of the Vedra?"

The mouth slackened.

"Are you he who loved the goddess of Death?"

The eyes flickered. A faint smile came and went across the lips.

"It is he," said Yama; then, "Who are you, man?"

"I? I am nothing," replied the other. "A leaf caught in a whirlpool, perhaps. A feather in the wind. . ."

"Too bad," said Yama, "for there are leaves and feathers enough in the world for me to have labored so long only to increase their number. I wanted me a man, one who might continue a war interrupted by his absence — a man of power who could oppose with that power the will of gods. I thought you were he."

"I am"—he squinted again"—Sam. I

am Sam. Once—long ago . . . I *did* fight, didn't I? Many times . . ."

"You were Great-Souled Sam, the Buddha. Do you remember?"

"Maybe I was . . ." A slow fire was kindled in his eyes.

"Yes," he said then. "Yes, I was. Humblest of the proud, proudest of the humble. I fought. I taught the Way for a time. I fought again, taught again, tried politics, magic, poison . . . I fought one great battle so terrible the sun itself hid its face from the slaughter—with men and gods, with animals and demons, with spirits of the earth and air, of fire and water, with slizzards and horses, swords and chariots—"

"And you lost," said Yama.

"Yes, I did, didn't I? But it was quite a showing we gave them, wasn't it? You, deathgod, were my charioteer. It all comes back to me now. We were taken prisoner and the Lords of Karma were to be our judges. You escaped them by the will-death and the Way of the Black Wheel. I could not."

"That is correct. Your past was laid out before them. You were judged." Yama regarded the monks who now sat upon the floor, their heads bowed, and he lowered his voice. "To have you to die the real death would have made you a martyr. To have permitted you to walk the world, in any form, would have left the door open for your return. So, as you

stole your teachings from the Gottama of another place and time, did they steal the tale of the end of that one's days among men. You were judged worthy of Nirvana. Your *atman* was projected, not into another body, but into the great magnetic cloud that encircles this planet. That was over half a century ago. You are now officially an avatar of Vishnu, whose teachings were misinterpreted by some of his more zealous followers. You, personally, continued to exist only in the form of self-perpetuating wavelengths, which I succeeded in capturing."

Sam closed his eyes.

"And you *dared* to bring me back?"

"That is correct."

"I was aware of my condition the entire time."

"I suspected as much."

His eyes opened, blazing. "Yet you dared recall me from *that*?"

"Yes."

Sam bowed his head. "Rightly are you called deathgod, Yama-Dharma. You have snatched away from me the ultimate experience. You have broken upon the dark stone of your will that which is beyond all comprehension and mortal splendor. Why could you not have left me as I was, in the sea of being?"

"Because a world has need of your humility, your piety, your great teaching

and your Machiavellian scheming."

"Yama, I'm old," he said. "I'm as old as man upon this world. I was one of the First, you know. One of the very first to come here, to build, to settle. All of the others are dead now, or are gods — *dei ex machini*. . . The chance was mine also, but I let it go by. Many times. I never wanted to be a god, Yama. Not really. It was only later, only when I saw what they were doing, that I began to gather what power I could to me. It was too late, though. They were too strong. Now I just want to sleep the sleep of ages, to know again the Great Rest, the perpetual bliss, to hear the songs the stars sing on the shores of the great sea."

Ratri leaned forward and looked into



his eyes. "We need you, Sam," she said.

"I know, I know," he told her. "It's the eternal recurrence of the anecdote. You've a willing horse, so flog him another mile." But he smiled as he said it, and she kissed his brow.

Tak leaped into the air and bounced upon the bed.

"Mankind rejoices," observed the Buddha.

Yama handed him a robe and Ratri fitted him with slippers.

Recovering from the peace which passeth understanding takes time. Sam slept. Sleeping, he dreamed; dreaming, he cried out, or just cried. He had no appetite; but Yama had found him a body

both sturdy and in perfect health, one well able to bear the psychosomatic conversion from divine withdrawal.

But he would sit for an hour, unmoving, staring at a pebble or a seed or a leaf. And on these occasions, he could not be aroused. Yama saw in this a danger, and he spoke of it with Ratri and Tak. "It is not good that he withdraw from the world in this way, now," he said. "I have spoken with him, but it is as if I addressed the wind. He cannot recover that which he has left behind. The very attempt is costing him his strength."

"Perhaps you misread his efforts," said Tak.

"What mean you?"

"See how he regards the seed he has set before him? Consider the wrinkling at the edges of his eyes."

"Yes? What of it?"

"He squints. Is his vision impaired?"

"It is not."

"Then why does he squint?"

"To better study the seed."

"Study? That is not the Way, as once he taught it. Yet he *does* study. He does not meditate, seeking within the object that which leads to release of the subject. No."

"What then does he do?"

"The reverse."

"The reverse?"

"He does study the object,

considering its ways, in an effort to bind himself. He seeks within it an excuse to live. He tries once more to wrap himself within the fabric of Maya, the illusion of the world."

"I believe you are right, Tak!" It was Ratri who had spoken. "How can we assist him in his efforts?"

"I am not certain, mistress."

Yama nodded, his dark hair glistening in a bar of sunlight that fell across the narrow porch.

"You have set your finger upon the thing I could not see," he acknowledged. "He has not yet fully returned, though he wears a body, walks upon human feet, talks as we do. His thought is still beyond our ken."

"What then shall we do?" repeated Ratri.

"Take him on long walks through the countryside," said Yama. "Feed him delicacies. Stir his soul with poetry and song. Find him strong drink to drink—there is none here in the monastery. Garb him in bright-hued silks. Fetch him a courtesan or three. Submerge him in living again. It is only thus that he may be freed from the chains of God. Stupid of me not to have seen it sooner . . ."

"Not really, deathgod," said Tak.

The flame that is black leapt within Yama's eyes, and then he smiled. "I am repaid, little one," he acknowledged, "for the comments I, perhaps

thoughtlessly, let fall upon thy hairy ears. I apologize, ape-one. You are truly a man, and one of wit and perception."

Tak bowed before him.

Ratri chuckled.

"Tell us, clever Tak—for mayhap we have been gods too long, and so lack the proper angle of vision—how shall we proceed in this matter of rehumanizing him, so as to best serve the ends we seek?"

Tak bowed him then to Ratri.

"As Yama has proposed," he stated. "Today, mistress, you take him for a walk in the foothills. Tomorrow, Lord Yama conducts him as far as the edge of the forest. The following day I shall take him amidst the trees and the grasses, the

flowers and the vines. And we shall see. We shall."

"So be it," said Yama, and so it was.

In the weeks that followed, Sam came to look forward to these walks with what appeared at first a mild anticipation, then a moderate enthusiasm, and finally a blazing eagerness. He took to going off unaccompanied for longer and longer stretches of time: at first, it was for several hours in the morning; then, morning and evening. Later, he stayed away all day, and on occasion a day and a night.

At the end of the third week, Yama and Ratri discussed it on the porch in the

early hours of morning.

"This thing I do not like," said Yama. "We cannot insult him by forcing our company upon him now, when he does not wish it. But there is danger out there, especially for one born again such as he. I would that we knew how he spends his hours."

"But whatever he does, it is helping him to recover," said Ratri, gulping a sweetmeat and waving a fleshy hand. "He is less withdrawn. He speaks more, even jesting. He drinks of the wine we bring him. His appetite is returning."

"Yet, if he should meet with an agent of Trimurti, the final doom may come to pass."

Ratri chewed slowly. "It is not



likely, though, that such should be abroad in this country, in these days," she stated. "The animals will see him as a child and will not harm him. Men would consider him a holy hermit. The demons fear him of old, and so respect him."

But Yama shook his head. "Lady, it is not so simple. Though I have dismantled much of my machinery and hidden it hundreds of leagues from here, such a massive trafficking of energies as I employed cannot have passed unnoticed. Sooner or later this place will be visited. I used screens and baffling devices, but this general area must have appeared in certain quarters

as though the Universal Fire did a dance upon the map. Soon we must move on. I should prefer to wait until our charge is fully recovered, but. . ."

"Could not certain natural forces have produced the same energy effects as your workings?"

"Yes, and they do occur in this vicinity, which is why I chose it as our base—so it may well be that nothing will come of it. Still, I doubt this. My spies in the villages report no unusual activities now. But on the day of his return, riding upon the crest of the storm, some say the thunder chariot passed, hunting through the heavens and across the countryside. This was far from here, but I cannot believe that there was no

connection."

"Yet, it has not returned."

"Not that we know of. But I fear . . ."

"Then let us depart at once. I respect your forebodings too well. You have more of the power upon you than any other among the Fallen. For me, it is a great strain even to assume a pleasing shape for more than a few minutes . . ."

"What powers I possess," said Yama, refilling her teacup, "are intact because they were not of the same order as yours."

He smiled then, showing even rows of long, brilliant teeth. This smile caught at the edge of a scar upon his left cheek and reached up to the corner of his eye.

He winked to put a period to it and continued, "Much of my power is in the form of knowledge, which even the Lords of Karma could not have wrested from me. The power of most of the gods, however, is predicated upon a special physiology, which they lose in part when incarnated into a new body. The mind, somehow remembering, after a time alters any body to a certain extent, engendering a new homeostasis, permitting a gradual return of power. Mine does return quickly, though, and it is with me fully now. But even if it were not, I have my knowledge to use as a weapon—and that is a power."

Ratri sipped her tea. "Whatever its source, if your power says move, then

move we must. How soon?"

Yama opened a pouch of tobacco and rolled a cigarette as he spoke. His dark, supple fingers, she noted, always had about them: movement that which was like the movements of one who played upon an instrument of music.

"I should say let us not tarry here more than another week or ten days. We must wean him from this countryside by then."

She nodded. "Where to then?"

"Some small southern kingdom, perhaps, where we may come and go undisturbed."

He lit the cigarette, breathed smoke.

"I've a better idea," said she. "Know

that under a mortal name am I mistress of the Palace of Kama in Khaipur."

"The Fornicatorium, madam?"

She frowned. "As such is it often known to the vulgar, and do not call me 'madam' in the same breath—it smacks of an ancient jest. It is a place of rest, pleasure, holiness and much of my revenue. There, I feel, would be a good hiding place for our charge while he makes his recovery and we our plans."

Yama slapped his thigh. "Aye! Aye! Who would think to look for the Buddha in a whorehouse? Good! Excellent! To Khaipur, then, dear goddess—to Khaipur and the Palace of Love!"

She stood and stamped her sandal upon the flagstones. "I will not have you

speak that way of my establishment!"

He dropped his eyes, and with pain dropped the grin from his face. He stood then and bowed. "I apologize, dear Ratri, but the revelation came so sudden—" He choked then and looked away. When he looked back, he was full of sobriety and decorum. He continued, "That I was taken aback by the apparent incongruity. Now, though, I do see the wisdom of the thing. It is a most perfect cover-up, and it provides you both with wealth and, what is more important, with a source of privy information among the merchants, warriors and priests. It is an indispensable part of the community. It gives you status and a voice in civil

affairs. Being a god is one of the oldest professions in the world. It is only fitting, therefore, that we fallen ones take umbrage within the pale of another venerable tradition. I salute you. I give thanks for your wisdom and forethought. I do not slander the enterprises of a benefactor and coconspirator. In fact, I look forward to the visit."

She smiled and seated herself once more. "I accept your well-oiled apology, oh son of the serpent. In any event, it is too difficult to remain angry with you. Pour me some more tea, please."

They reclined, Ratri sipping her tea, Yama smoking. In the distance, a storm front drew a curtain across half the prospect. The sun still shone upon them,



however, and a cool breeze visited the porch.

"You have seen the ring, the ring of iron which he wears?" asked Ratri, eating another sweetmeat.

"Yes."

"Know you where he obtained it?"

"I do not."

"Nor I. But I feel we should learn its origin."

"Aye."

"How shall we essay this thing?"

"I have assigned the chore to Tak, who is better suited to the ways of the forest than we. Even now he follows the trail."

Ratri nodded. "Good," she said.

"I have heard," said Yama, "that the gods do still occasionally visit the more notable palaces of Kama throughout the land, generally in disguise, but sometimes in full power. Is this true?"

"Yes. But a year ago did Lord Indra come to Khaipur. Some three years back, the false Krishna made a visit. Of all the Celestial party, Krishna the Tireless does cause the greatest consternation among the staff. He stayed for a month of riot, which involved much broken furniture and the services of many physicians. He did near empty the wine cellar and the larder. He played then upon his pipes one night, however, the hearing of which would have been

enough to gain the old Krishna forgiveness for near anything. But it was not the true magic we heard that night, for there is only one true Krishna—swart and hairy, his eyes so red and blazing. This one did dance upon the tables, causing much havoc, and his musical accompaniment was insufficient."

"Paid he for this carnage with other than a song?"

She laughed. "Come now, Yama. Let there be no rhetorical questions between us."

He snorted smoke.

"Surya, the sun, is now about to be encompassed," said Ratri, staring out and upward, "and Indra slays the dragon.

At any moment, the rains will arrive."

A wave of grayness covered over the monastery. The breeze grew stronger, and the dance of the waters began upon the walls. Like a beaded curtain, the rain covered that open end of the porch at which they stared.

Yama poured more tea. Ratri ate another sweetmeat.

Tak made his way through the forest. He moved from tree to tree, branch to branch, watching the trail below him. His fur was moist, for the leaves shook small showers down upon him as he passed. Clouds mounted at his back, but the sun of early morning still shone in the

eastern sky and the forest was a swarm of colors in its red-gold light. About him, birds were singing from within the tangle of branches, vines, leaves and grasses that stood like a wall upon either side of the trail. The birds made their music, insects hummed and occasionally there was a growl or bark. The foliage was stirred by the wind. Below him, the trail bent sharply, entering a clearing. Tak dropped to the ground, proceeded on foot. At the other side of the clearing he took to the trees again. Now, he noticed, the trail was running parallel to the mountains, even inclining slightly back in their direction. There was a distant rattle of thunder and after a time a new breeze came up, cool. He swung on,

breaking through moist spider webs, frightening birds into shrieking flurries of bright plumage. The trail continued to move in the direction of the mountains, slowly doubling back upon itself. At times, it met with other hard-packed, yellow trails, dividing, crossing, parting. On these occasions, he descended to the ground and studied the surface markings. Yes, Sam had turned *here*; Sam had stopped beside *this* pool to drink—here, where the orange mushrooms grew taller than a tall man, and wide enough to shelter several from the rains; now, Sam had taken *that* branch of the roadway; here, he had stopped to fix a sandal strap; at this point, he had leaned upon a

tree, which showed indications of housing a dryad. . . .

Tak moved on, about half an hour behind his quarry, as he judged it—so giving him plenty of time to get to wherever he was going and to begin whatever activity so engaged his enthusiasms. A halo of heat lightning reached above the mountains he was now facing. There was another rumble of thunder. The trail headed on up into the foothills, where the forest thinned, and Tak moved on all fours amid tall grasses. It headed steadily upward, and rocky outcroppings became more and more prominent. Still, Sam had passed this way, so Tak followed.

Overhead, the pollen-colored Bridge

of the Gods vanished as the clouds rolled steadily eastward. Lightning flashed, and now the thunder followed quickly. The wind came faster here in the open; the grasses bent down before it; the temperature seemed suddenly to plummet.

Tak felt the first drops of rain and dashed for the shelter of one of the stands of stone. It ran like a narrow hedge, slightly slanted against the rain. Tak moved along its base as the waters were unleashed and color deserted the world along with the last bit of blue in the sky.

A sea of turbulent light appeared overhead, and three times spilled



streams that rode crazy crescendo down to splash upon the stone fang curving blackly into the wind, about a quarter mile up the slope.

When Tak's vision cleared, he saw that which he did now understand. It was as though each bolt that had fallen had left a part of itself, standing, swaying in the gray air, pulsing fires, despite the wetness that came steadily down upon the ground.

Then Tak heard the laughter—or was it a ghost sound left in his ears by the recent thunder? .p>

No, it was laughter—gigantic, unhuman!

After a time, there came a howl of rage. Then there was another flash,

another rumble.

Another funnel of fire swayed beside the stone fang.

Tak lay still for about five minutes. Then it came again—the howl, followed by three bright flashes and the crash.

Now there were seven pillars of fire. Dared he approach, skirting these things, spying upon the fang peak from its opposite side?

And if he did, and if—as he felt—Sam was somehow involved, what good could he do if the Enlightened One himself could not handle the situation?

He had no answer, but he found himself moving forward, crouched low in the damp grass, swinging far to his

left.

When he was halfway there it happened again, and ten of the things towered, red and gold and yellow, drifting and returning, drifting and returning, as though their bases were rooted to the ground.

He crouched there wet and shivering, examined his courage and found it to be a small thing indeed. Yet, he pushed on until he was parallel to the strange place, then past it.

He drew up behind it, finding himself in the midst of many large stones. Grateful for their shelter and the cover they provided against observation from below, he inched forward, never taking his eyes from the fang.

He could see now that it was partly hollow. There was a dry, shallow cave at its base, and two figures knelt within it. Holy men at prayer? He wondered.

Then it happened. The most frightful flashing he had ever seen came down upon the stones—not once, or for a mere instant. It was as if a fire-tongued beast licked and licked about the stone, growling as it did so, for perhaps a quarter of a minute.

When Tak opened his eyes, he counted twenty of the blazing towers.

One of the holy men leaned forward, gestured. The other laughed. The sound carried to where Tak lay, and the words: "Eyes of the serpent! Mine now!"

"What is the quantity?" asked the second, and Tak knew it to be the voice of Great-Souled Sam.

"Twice, or none at all!" roared the other, and he leaned forward, rocked back, then gestured as Sam had done.

"Nina from Srinagina!" he chanted, and leaned, rocked, and gestured once more.

"Sacred seven," Sam said softly.

The other howled.

Tak closed his eyes and covered his ears, expecting what might come after that howl.

Nor was he mistaken.

When the blaze and the tumult had passed, he looked down upon an eerily

illuminated scene. He did not bother counting. It was apparent that forty of the flame like things now hung about the place, casting their weird glow: their number had doubled.

The ritual continued. On the left hand of the Buddha, the iron ring glowed with a pale, greenish light all its own.

He heard the words "Twice, or none at all" repeated again, and he heard the Buddha say "Sacred seven" once more, in reply.

This time he thought the mountainside would come apart beneath him. This time he thought the brightness was an afterimage, tattooed upon his retina through closed eyelids. But he was wrong.

When he opened his eyes it was to look upon a veritable army of shifting thunderbolts. Their blaze jabbed into his brain, and he shaded his eyes to stare down below.

"Well, Raltariki?" asked Sam, and a bright emerald light played about his left hand.

"One time again, Siddhartha. Twice, or not at all."

The rains let up for a moment, and, in the great blaze from the host on the hillside, Tak saw that the one called Raltariki had the head of a water buffalo and an extra pair of arms.

He shivered.

He covered his eyes and ears and

clenched his teeth, waiting. After a time, it happened. It roared and blazed, going on and on until finally he lost consciousness.

When he recovered his senses, there was only a grayness and a gentle rain between himself and the sheltering rock. At its base only one figure sat, and it did not wear horns or appear to possess more arms than the customary two.

Tak did not move. He waited.

"This," said Yama, handing him an aerosol, "is demon repellent. In the future, I suggest you annoint yourself thoroughly if you intend venturing very far from the monastery. I had thought this region free of the Rakasha, or I would



have given it to you sooner."

Tak accepted the container, placed it on the table before him.

They sat in Yama's chambers, having taken a light meal there. Yama leaned back in his chair, a glass of the Buddha's wine in his left hand, a half-filled decanter in his right.

"Then the one called Raltariki is really a demon?" asked Tak.

"Yes—and no," said Yama, "If by 'demon' you mean a malefic, supernatural creature, possessed of great powers, life span and the ability to temporarily assume virtually any shape—then the answer is no. This is the generally accepted definition, but it is

untrue in one respect."

"Oh? And what may that be?"

"It is not a supernatural creature."

"But it is all those other things?"

"Yes."

"Then I fail to see what difference it makes whether it be supernatural or not—so long as it is malefic, possesses great powers and life span and has the ability to change its shape at will."

"Ah, but it makes a great deal of difference, you see. It is the difference between the unknown and the unknowable, between science and fantasy—it is a matter of essence. The four points of the compass be logic, knowledge, wisdom and the unknown. Some do bow in that final direction.

Others advance upon it. To bow before the one is to lose sight of the three. I may submit to the unknown, but never to the unknowable. The man who bows in that final direction is either a saint or a fool. I have no use for either."

Tak shrugged and sipped his wine. "But of the demons. . . ?"

"Knowable. I did experiment with them for many years, and I was one of the Four who descended into Hellwell, if you recall, after Taraka fled Lord Agni at Palamaidsu. Are you not Tak of the Archives?"

"I was."

"Did you read then of the earliest recorded contacts with the Rakasha?"

"I read the accounts of the days of their binding. . . "

"Then you know that they are the native inhabitants of this world, that they were present here before the arrival of Man from vanished Urath."

"Yes."

"They are creatures of energy, rather than matter. Their own traditions have it that once they wore bodies, lived in cities. Their quest for personal immortality, however, led them along a different path from that which Man followed. They found a way to perpetuate themselves as stable fields of energy. They abandoned their bodies to live forever as vortices of force. But

pure intellect they are not. They carried with them their complete egos, and born of matter they do ever lust after the flesh. Though they can assume its appearance for a time, they cannot return to it unassisted. For ages they did drift aimlessly about this world. Then the arrival of Man stirred them from their quiescence. They took on the shapes of his nightmares to devil him. This is why they had to be defeated and bound, far beneath the Ratnagaris. We could not destroy them all. We could not permit them to continue their attempts to possess the machines of incarnation and the bodies of men. So they were trapped and contained in great magnetic bottles."

"Yet Sam freed many to do his will,"

said Tak.

"Aye. He made and kept a nightmare pact, so that some of them do still walk the world. Of all men, they respect perhaps only Siddhartha. And *with* all men do they share one great vice."

"That being. . .?"

"They do dearly love to gamble. . . . They will make game for any stakes, and gambling debts are their only point of honor. This must be so, or they would not hold the confidence of other gamesters and would so lose that which is perhaps their only pleasure. Their powers being great, even princes will make game with them, hoping to win their services. Kingdoms have been lost

in this fashion."

"If," said Tak, "as you feel, Sam was playing one of the ancient games with Raltariki, what could the stakes have been?"

Yama finished his wine, refilled the glass. "Sam is a fool. No, he is not. He is a gambler. There is a difference. The Rakasha do control lesser orders of energy beings. Sam, through that ring he wears, does now command a guard of fire elementals, which he won from Raltariki. These are deadly, mindless creatures—and each bears the force of a thunderbolt."

Tak finished his wine. "But what stakes could Sam have brought to the game?"

Yama sighed. "All my work, all our efforts for over half a century."

"You mean—his body?"

Yama nodded. "A human body is the highest inducement any demon might be offered."

"Why should Sam risk such a venture?"

Yama stared at Tak, not seeing him. "It must have been the only way he could call upon his life-will, to bind him again to his task — by placing himself in jeopardy, by casting his very existence with each roll of the dice."

Tak poured himself another glass of wine and gulped it. "*That* is unknowable to me," he said.



But Yama shook his head. "Unknown, only," he told him. "Sam is not quite a saint, nor is he a fool."

"Almost, though," Yama decided, and that night he squirted demon repellent about the monastery.

The following morning, a small man approached the monastery and seated himself before its front entrance, placing a begging bowl on the ground at his feet. He wore a single, threadbare garment of coarse, brown cloth, which reached to his ankles. A black patch covered his left eye. What remained of his hair was dark and very long. His sharp nose, small chin, and high, flat ears gave to his face a foxlike appearance. His skin was

tight-drawn and well-weathered. His single, green eye seemed never to blink.

He sat there for perhaps twenty minutes before one of Sam's monks noticed him and mentioned the fact to one of Ratri's dark-robed Order. This monk located a priest and passed the information to him. The priest, anxious to impress the goddess with the virtues of her followers, sent for the beggar to be brought in and fed, offered new garments and given a cell in which to sleep for as long as he chose to remain.

The beggar accepted the food with the courtesies of a Brahmin, but declined to eat anything other than bread and fruit. He accepted, too, the dark garment of Ratri's Order, casting aside his begrimed

smock. Then he looked upon the cell and the fresh sleeping mat that had been laid for him.

"I do thank you, worthy priest," he said, in a voice rich and resonant, and altogether larger than his person. "I do thank you, and pray your goddess smile upon you for your kindness and generosity in her name."

The priest smiled at this himself, and still hoped that Ratri might pass along the hall at that moment, to witness his kindness and generosity in her name. She did not, however. Few of her Order had actually seen her, even on the night when she put on her power and walked among them: for only those of the saffron robe

had attended Sam's awakening and were certain as to his identity. She generally moved about the monastery while her followers were at prayer or after they had retired for the evening. She slept mainly during the day; when she did cross their sight she was well-muffled and cloaked; her wishes and orders she communicated directly to Gandhiji, the head of the Order, who was ninety-three years old this cycle, and more than half blind.

Consequently, both her monks and those of the saffron robe wondered as to her appearance and sought to gain possible favor in her eyes. It was said that her blessing would ensure one's being incarnated as a Brahmin. Only

Gandhiji did not care, for he had accepted the way of the real death.

Since she did not pass along the hall as they stood there, the priest prolonged the conversation, "I am Balarma," he stated. "May I inquire as to your name, good sir, and perhaps your destination?"

"I am Aram," said the beggar, "who has taken upon himself a ten-year vow of poverty, and of silence for seven. Fortunately, the seven have elapsed, that I may now speak to thank my benefactors and answer their questions. I am heading up into the mountains to find me a cave where I may meditate and pray. I may, perhaps, accept your kindly hospitality for a few days, before proceeding on

with my journey."

"Indeed," said Balarma, "we should be honored if a holy one were to see fit to bless our monastery with his presence. We will make you welcome. If there is anything you wish to assist you along your path, and we may be able to grant this thing, please name it to us."

Aram fixed him with his unblinking green eye and said, "The monk who first observed me did not wear the robe of your Order." He touched the dark garment as he said it. "Instead, I believe my poor eye did behold one of another color."

"Yes," said Balarma, "for the followers of the Buddha do shelter here among us, resting awhile from their

wanderings."

"That is truly interesting," said Aram, "for I should like to speak with them and perhaps learn more of their Way."

"You should have ample opportunity if you choose to remain among us for a time."

"This then shall I do. For how long will they remain?"

"I do not know."

Aram nodded. "When might I speak with them?"

"This evening there will be an hour when all the monks are gathered together and free to speak as they would, save for those who have taken vows of silence."

"I shall pass the interval till then in prayer," said Aram. "Thank you."

Each bowed slightly, and Aram entered his room.

That evening, Aram attended the community hour of the monks. Those of both Orders did mingle at this time and engage in conversation. Sam did not attend it himself, nor did Tak; and Yama never attended it in person.

Aram seated himself at the long table in the refectory, across from several of the Buddha's monks. He talked for some time with these, discoursing on doctrine and practice, caste and creed, weather and the affairs of the day.



"It seems strange," he said after a while, "that those of your Order have come so far to the south and the west so suddenly."

"We are a wandering Order," replied the monk to whom he had spoken. "We follow the wind. We follow our hearts."

"To the land of rusted soil in the season of lightnings? Is there perhaps some revelation to occur hereabout, which might be enlarging to my spirit were I to behold it?"

"The entire universe is a revelation," said the monk. "All things change, yet all things remain. Day follows night. . . each day is different, yet each is day. Much of

the world is illusion, yet the forms of that illusion follow a pattern which is a part of divine reality."

"Yes, yes," said Aram. "In the ways of illusion and reality am I well-versed, but by my inquiry I did mean to know whether perhaps a new teacher had arisen in this vicinity, or some old one returned, or mayhap a divine manifestation, the presence of which it might profit my soul to be aware."

As he spoke, the beggar brushed from the table before him a red, crawling beetle, the size of a thumbnail, and he moved his sandal as if to crush it.

"Pray, brother, do not harm it," said the monk.

"But they are all over the place, and

the Masters of Karma have stated that a man cannot be made to return as an insect, and the killing of an insect is a karmically inoperative act."

"Nevertheless," said the monk, "all life being one, in this monastery all do practice the doctrine of *ahimsa* and refrain from taking life of any sort."

"Yet," said Aram, "Patanjali does state that it is the *intention* rather than the act which governs. Therefore, if I killed with love rather than malice, it would be as if I had not killed. I confess that this was not the case and that malice was present—therefore, even if I did not kill I do bear the burden of the guilt because of the presence of that intention.

So I could step upon it now and be none the worse for it, according to the principle of *ahimsa*. Since I am a guest, however, I of course respect the practice and do not do this thing." With this, he moved his sandal away from the insect, which stood immobile, reddish antennae pricked upward.

"Indeed, he is a scholar," said one of the Order of Ratri.

Aram smiled. "Thank you, but it is not so," he stated. "I am only a humble seeker of truth, and on occasion in the past have I been privileged to overhear the discourses of the learned. Would that I might be so privileged again! If there were some great teacher or scholar in the vicinity, then I would most surely

walk across a bed of hot coals to sit at his feet and to hear his words or observe his example. If—"

He stopped then, for all eyes had suddenly turned upon the doorway at his back. He did not move his head, but reached out to crush a beetle that stood near his hand. The tip of a small crystal and two tiny wires protruded through the broken chitin of its back.

Then he turned, his green eye sweeping across the row of monks seated between himself and the doorway, and he looked upon Yama, who wore breeches, boots, shirt, sash, cloak and gloves all of red, and about whose head was twisted a turban the

color of blood.

"If?" said Yama. "You were saying 'if? If some sage or some avatar of the godhead resided in the vicinity, you should like to make his acquaintance? Is that what you were saying, stranger?"

The beggar rose from the table. He bowed. "I am Aram," he stated, "a fellow seeker and traveler with all who wish enlightenment."

Yama did not return the salute. "Why do you spell your name backward, Lord of Illusion, when all your words and actions herald it before you?"

The beggar shrugged. "I do not understand what you say."

But the smile came again to his lips. "I am one who seeks the Path and the

Right," he added.

"I find that hard to believe, after witnessing at least a thousand years of your treachery."

"You speak of the lifetime of gods."

"Unfortunately, I do. You have made a serious mistake, Mara."

"What may that be?"

"You feel that you must be permitted to leave here alive."

"I admit that I anticipate doing so."

"Not considering the numerous accidents which might befall a lone traveler in this wild region."

"I have been a lone traveler for many years. Accidents always happen to other people."

"You might believe that even if your body were destroyed here, your *atman* would be transferred remotely to another body located elsewhere. I understand that someone has deciphered my notes, and the trick is now possible."

The beggar's brows moved a quarter of an inch lower and closer together.

"You do not realize the forces which even now contain this building, defending against any such transfer."

The beggar stepped to the center of the room. "Yama," he stated, "you are a fool if you think to match your puny fallen powers against those of the Dreamer."

"Perhaps this is so. Lord Mara,"



Yama replied, "but I have waited too long for this opportunity to postpone it further. Remember my promise at Keenset? If you wish to continue your chain of existence you will have to pass through this, the only door to this room, which I bar. Nothing beyond this room can help you now."

Mara then raised his hands, and the fires were born.

Everything was flaming. Flames leapt from the stone walls, the tables, the robes of the monks. Smoke billowed and curled about the room. Yama stood in the midst of a conflagration, but he did not move.

"Is that the best you can do?" he asked. "Your flames are everywhere, but

nothing burns."

Mara clapped his hands and the flames vanished.

In their place, its swaying head held at almost twice the height of a man, its silver hood fanned, the mechobra drew into its S-shaped strike position.

Yama ignored it, his shadowy gaze reaching now like the probe of a dark insect, boring into Mara's single eye.

The mechobra faded in mid-strike. Yama strode forward.

Mara fell back a pace.

They stood thus for perhaps three heartbeats, then Yama moved forward two paces farther and Mara backed away again. Perspiration blistered upon

both their brows.

The beggar now stood taller and his hair was heavier; he was thicker about the waist and broader across the shoulders. A certain grace, not previously apparent, accompanied all his movements.

He fell back another step.

"Yes, Mara, there is a deathgod," said Yama between clenched teeth. "Fallen or no, the real death dwells in my eyes. You must meet them. When you reach the wall you can back no farther. Feel the strength go out of your limbs. Feel the coldness begin in your hands and your feet."

Mara's teeth bared in a snarl. His neck was as thick as a bull's. His biceps

were as big about as a man's thighs. His chest was a barrel of strength and his legs were like great trees of the forest.

"Coldness?" he asked, extending his arms. "I can break a giant with these hands, Yama. What are you but a banished carrion god? Your frown may claim the aged and the infirm. Your eyes may chill dumb animals and those of the lower classes of men. I stand as high above you as a star above the ocean's bottom."

Yama's red-gloved hands fell like a pair of cobras upon his throat. "Then try that strength which you so mock. Dreamer. You have taken on the appearance of power. Use it! Best me

not with words!"

His cheeks and forehead bloomed scarlet as Yama's hands tightened upon his throat. His eye seemed to leap, a green search-light sweeping the world.

Mara fell to his knees. "Enough, Lord Yama!" he gasped. "Wouldst slay thyself?"

He changed. His features flowed, as though he lay beneath restless waters.

Yama looked down upon his own face, saw his own red hands plucking at his wrists.

"You grow desperate now, Mara, as the life leaves you. But Yama is no child, that he fears breaking the mirror you have become. Try your last, or die like a man, it is all the same in the end."

But once more there was a flowing and a change.

This time Yama hesitated, breaking his strength.

Her bronze hair fell upon his hands. Her pale eyes pleaded with him. Caught about her throat was a necklace of ivory skulls, but slightly paler than her flesh. Her sari was the color of blood. Her hands rested upon his own, almost caressing. . .

"Goddess!" he hissed.

"You would not slay Kali . . . ? Durga . . . ?" she choked.

"Wrong again, Mara," he whispered. "Did you not know that each man kills the thing he loved?" and with this his

hands twisted, and there was a sound of breaking bones.

"Tenfold be your damnation," he said, his eyes tightly closed. "There shall be no rebirth."

His hands came open then. A tall, nobly proportioned man lay upon the floor at his feet, his head resting upon his right shoulder.

His eye had finally closed.

Yama turned the corpse with the toe of his boot. "Build a pyre and burn this body," he said to the monks, not turning toward them. "Spare none of the rites. One of the highest has died this day."

Then he removed his eyes from this work of his hands, turned upon his heel and left the room.

That evening the lightnings fled across the skies and the rain came down like bullets from Heaven.

The four of them sat in the chamber in the high tower that rose from the northeast corner of the monastery.

Yama paced the room, stopping at the window each time he came to it.

The others sat watching him, listening.

"They suspect," he told them, "but they do not know. They would not ravage the monastery of a fellow god, displaying before men the division of their ranks—not unless they were certain. They were not certain, so they



investigated. This means that time is still with us."

They nodded.

"A Brahmin who renounced the world to find his soul passed this way, suffered an accident, died here the real death. His body was burnt and his ashes cast into the river that leads to the sea. This is what occurred. . . . The wandering monks of the Enlightened One were visiting at the time. They moved on shortly after this occurrence. Who knows where they went?"

Tak stood as nearly erect as he could.

"Lord Yama," he stated, "while it may hold for a week, a month — possibly even longer—this story will

come apart in the hands of the Master to judge the first of any of those here present in this monastery who pass within the Halls of Karma. Under the circumstances, I believe some of them may achieve early judgment for just this reason. What then?"

Yama rolled a cigarette with care and precision. "It must be arranged that what I said is what actually occurred."

"How can that be? When a man's brain is subject to karmic play-back, all the events he has witnessed in his most recent cycle of life are laid out before his judge and the machine, like a scroll."

"That is correct," said Yama. "And have you. Tak of the Archives, never

heard of a palimpsest—a scroll which has been used previously, cleaned, and then used again?"

"Of course, but the mind is not a scroll."

"No?" Yama smiled. "Well, it was your simile to begin with, not mine. What's truth, anyway? Truth is what you make it."

He lit his cigarette. "These monks have witnessed a strange and terrible thing," he continued. "They saw me take on my Aspect and wield an Attribute. They saw Mara do the same—here, in this monastery where we have revived the principle of *ahimsa*. They are aware that a god may do such things without karmic burden, but the shock was great

and the impression vivid. And the final burning is still to come. By the time of that burning, the tale I have told you must be true in their minds."

"How?" asked Ratri.

"This very night, this very hour," he said, "while the image of the act flames within their consciousness and their thoughts are troubled, the new truth will be forged and nailed into place. . . . Sam, you have rested long enough. This thing is now yours to do. You must preach them a sermon. You must call forth within them those nobler sentiments and higher qualities of spirit which make men subject to divine meddling. Ratri and I will then combine our powers and

a new truth will be born."

Sam shifted and dropped his eyes. "I don't know if I can do it. It's been so long. . ."

"Once a Buddha, always a Buddha, Sam. Dust off some of your old parables. You have about fifteen minutes."

Sam held out his hand. "Give me some tobacco and a paper."

He accepted the package, rolled himself a cigarette. "Light? . . . Thanks."

He drew in deeply, exhaled, coughed. "I'm tired of lying to them," he finally said. "I guess that's what it really is."

"Lying?" asked Yama. "Who asked you to lie about anything? Quote them the Sermon on the Mount, if you want. Or

something from the Popul Voh, or the *Iliad*. I don't care what you say. Just stir them a bit, soothe them a little. That's all I ask."

"Then what?"

"Then? Then I shall proceed to save them—and us!"

Sam nodded slowly. "When you put it that way . . . but I'm a little out of shape when it comes to this sort of thing. Sure, I'll find me a couple truths and throw in a few pieties—but make it twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes, then. And afterward we pack. Tomorrow we leave for Khaipur."

"So soon?" asked Tak.

Yama shook his head. "So late," he said.

The monks were seated upon the floor of the refectory. The tables had been moved back against the walls. The insects had vanished. Outside, the rain continued to fall.

Great-Souled Sam, the Enlightened One, entered and seated himself before them.

Ratri came in dressed as a Buddhist nun, and veiled.

Yama and Ratri moved to the back of the room and settled to the floor. Somewhere, Tak too, was listening.

Sam sat with his eyes closed for

several minutes, then said softly:

"I have many names, and none of them matter." He opened his eyes slightly then, but he did not move his head. He looked upon nothing in particular.

"Names are not important," he said. "To speak is to name names, but to speak is not important. A thing happens once that has never happened before. Seeing it, a man looks upon reality. He cannot tell others what he has seen. Others wish to know, however, so they question him saying, 'What is it like, this thing you have seen?' So he tries to tell them. Perhaps he has seen the very first fire in the world. He tells them, 'It is red, like a poppy, but through it dance other colors.



It has no form, like water, flowing everywhere. It is warm, like the sun of summer, only warmer. It exists for a time upon a piece of wood, and then the wood is gone, as though it were eaten, leaving behind that which is black and can be sifted like sand. When the wood is gone, it too is gone.' Therefore, the hearers must think reality is like a poppy, like water, like the sun, like that which eats and excretes. They think it is like to anything that they are told it is like by the man who has known it. But they have not looked upon fire. They cannot really know it. They can only know of it. But fire comes again into the world, many times. More men look upon

fire. After a time, fire is as common as grass and clouds and the air they breathe. They see that, while it is like a poppy, it is not a poppy, while it is like water, it is not water, while it is like the sun, it is not the sun, and while it is like that which eats and passes wastes, it is not that which eats and passes wastes, but something different from each of these apart or all of these together. So they look upon this new thing and they make a new word to call it. They call it 'fire.'

"If they come upon one who still has not seen it and they speak to him of fire, he does not know what they mean. So they, in turn, fall back upon telling him what fire is like. As they do so, they

know from their own experience that what they are telling him is not the truth, but only a part of it. They know that this man will never know reality from their words, though all the words in the world are theirs to use. He must look upon the fire, smell of it, warm his hands by it, stare into its heart, or remain forever ignorant. Therefore, 'fire' does not matter, 'earth' and 'air' and 'water' do not matter. 'I' do not matter. No word matters. But man forgets reality and remembers words. The more words he remembers, the cleverer do his fellows esteem him. He looks upon the great transformations of the world, but he does not see them as they were seen when

man looked upon reality for the first time. Their names come to his lips and he smiles as he tastes them, thinking he knows them in the naming. The thing that has never happened before is still happening. It is still a miracle. The great burning blossom squats, flowing, upon the limb of the world, excreting the ash of the world, and being none of these things I have named and at the same time all of them, and *this* is reality—the Nameless.

"Therefore, I charge you—forget the names you bear, forget the words I speak as soon as they are uttered. Look, rather, upon the Nameless within yourselves, which arises as I address it. It hearkens not to my words, but to the reality within

me, of which it is part. This is the *atman*, which hears *me* rather than my words. All else is unreal. To define is to lose. The essence of all things is the Nameless. The Nameless is unknowable, mightier even than Brahma. Things pass, but the essence remains. You sit, therefore, in the midst of a dream.

"Essence dreams it a dream of form. Forms pass, but the essence remains, dreaming new dreams. Man names these dreams and thinks to have captured the essence, not knowing that he invokes the unreal. These stones, these walls, these bodies you see seated about you are poppies and water and the sun. They are the dreams of the Nameless. They are

fire, if you like.

"Occasionally, there may come a dreamer who is aware that he is dreaming. He may control something of the dream-stuff, bending it to his will, or he may awaken into greater self-knowledge. If he chooses the path of self-knowledge, his glory is great and he shall be for all ages like unto a star. If he chooses instead the way of the Tantras, combining Samsara and Nirvana, comprehending the world and continuing to live in it, this one is mighty among dreamers. He may be mighty for good or for ill, as we look upon him—though these terms, too, are meaningless, outside of the namings of Samsara.

"To dwell within Samsara, however,

is to be subject to the works of those who are mighty among dreamers. If they be mighty for good, it is a golden time. If they be mighty for ill, it is a time of darkness. The dream may turn to nightmare.

"It is written that to live is to suffer. This is so, say the sages, for man must work off his burden of Karma if he is to achieve enlightenment. For this reason, say the sages, what does it profit a man to struggle within a dream against that which is his lot, which is the path he must follow to attain liberation? In the light of eternal values, say the sages, the suffering is as nothing; in the terms of Samsara, say the sages, it leads to that

which is good. What justification, then, has a man to struggle against those who be mighty for ill?"

He paused for a moment, raised his head higher.

"This night the Lord of Illusion passed among you—Mara, mighty among dreamers—mighty for ill. He did come upon another who may work with the stuff of dreams in a different way. He did meet with Dharma, who may expel a dreamer from his dream. They did struggle, and the Lord Mara is no more. Why did they struggle, deathgod against illusionist? You say their ways are incomprehensible, being the ways of gods. This is not the answer.

"The answer, the justification, is the



same for men as it is for gods. Good or ill, say the sages, mean nothing for they are of Samsara. Agree with the sages, who have taught our people for as far as the memory of man may reach. Agree, but consider also a thing of which the sages do not speak. This thing is 'beauty,' which is a word—but look behind the word and consider the Way of the Nameless. And what is the way of the Nameless? It is the Way of Dream. And why does the Nameless dream? This thing is not known to any dweller within Samsara. So ask, rather, *what* does the Nameless dream?

"The Nameless, of which we are all a part, does dream form. And what is the

highest attribute any form may possess? It is beauty. The Nameless, then, is an artist. The problem, therefore, is not one of good or evil, but one of esthetics. To struggle against those who are mighty among dreamers and are mighty for ill, or ugliness, is not to struggle for that which the sages have taught us to be meaningless in terms of Samsara or Nirvana, but rather it is to struggle for the symmetrical dreaming of a dream, in terms of the rhythm and the point, the balance and the antithesis which will make it a thing of beauty. Of this, the sages say nothing. This truth is so simple that they have obviously overlooked it. For this reason, I am bound by the esthetics of the situation to call it to your

attention. To struggle against the dreamers who dream ugliness, be they men or gods, cannot but be the will of the Nameless. This struggle will also bear suffering, and so one's karmic burden will be lightened thereby, just as it would be by enduring the ugliness; but *this* suffering is productive of a higher end in the light of the eternal values of which the sages so often speak.

"Therefore, I say unto you, the esthetics of what you have witnessed this evening were of a high order. You may ask me, then, 'How am I to know that which is beautiful and that which is ugly, and be moved to act thereby?' This question, I say, you must answer for

yourself. To do this, first forget what I have spoken, for I have said nothing. Dwell now upon the Nameless." He raised his right hand and bowed his head.

Yama stood, Ratri stood, Tak appeared upon a table.

The four of them left together, knowing the machineries of Karma to have been defeated for a time.

They walked through the jagged brilliance of the morning, beneath the Bridge of the Gods. Tall fronds, still wet with the night's rain, glistened at the sides of the trail. The tops of trees and the peaks of the distant mountains rippled beyond the rising vapors. The

day was cloudless. The faint breezes of morning still bore a trace of the night's cold. The clicking and buzzing and chirping of the jungle accompanied the monks as they walked. The monastery from which they had departed was only partly visible above the upper reaches of the treetops; high in the air above it, a twisting line of smoke endorsed the heavens.

Ratri's servitors bore her litter in the midst of the moving party of monks, servants and her small guard of warriors. Sam and Yama walked near the head of the band. Silent overhead, Tak followed, passing among leaves and branches, unseen.

"The pyre still blazes," said Yama.

"Yes."

"They burn the wanderer who suffered a heart attack as he took his rest among them."

"This is true."

"For a spur of the moment thing, you came up with a fairly engaging sermon."

"Thanks."

"Do you really believe what you preached?"

Sam laughed. "I'm very gullible when it comes to my own words. I believe everything I say, though I know I'm a liar."

Yama snorted. "The rod of Trimurti still falls upon the backs of men. Nirriti

stirs within his dark lair; he harasses the seaways of the south. Do you plan on spending another lifetime indulging in metaphysics—to find new justification for opposing your enemies? Your talk last night sounded as if you have reverted to considering *why* again, rather than *how*."

"No," said Sam, "I just wanted to try another line on the audience. It is difficult to stir rebellion among those to whom all things are good. There is no room for evil in their minds, despite the fact that they suffer it constantly. The slave upon the rack who knows that he will be born again—perhaps as a fat merchant — if he suffers willingly—his outlook is not the same as that of a man

with but one life to live. He can bear anything, knowing that great as his present pain may be, his future pleasure will rise higher. If such a one does not choose to believe in good or evil, perhaps then beauty and ugliness can be made to serve him as well. Only the names have been changed."

"This, then, is the new, official party line?" asked Yama.

"It is," said Sam.

Yama's hand passed through an invisible slit in his robe and emerged with a dagger, which he raised in salute.

"To beauty," he said. "Down with ugliness!"

A wave of silence passed across the



jungle. All the life-sounds about them ceased.

Yama raised one hand, returning the dagger to its hidden sheath with the other.

"Halt!" he cried out.

He looked upward, squinting against the sun, head cocked to his right.

"Off the trail! Into the brush!" he called.

They moved. Saffron-cloaked bodies flashed from off the trail. Ratri's litter was borne in among the trees. She now stood at Yama's side.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Listen!"

It came then, riding down the sky on a blast of sound. It flashed above the

peaks of the mountains, crossed over the monastery, whipping the smokes into invisibility. Explosions of sound trumpeted its coming, and the air quaked as it cut its way through the wind and the light.

It was a great-looped tau cross, a tail of fire streaming behind it.

"Destroyer come a-hunting," said Yama.

"Thunder chariot!" cried one of the mercenaries, making a sign with his hand.

"Shiva passes," said a monk, eyes wide with fear. "The Destroyer . . ."

"Had I known at the time how well I wrought," said Yama, "I might have

numbered its days intentionally. Occasionally, do I regret my genius."

It passed beneath the Bridge of the Gods, swung above the jungle, fell away to the south. Its roar gradually diminished as it departed in that direction. Then there was silence.

A bird made a brief piping noise. Another replied to it. Then all the sounds of life began again and the travelers returned to their trail.

"He will be back," said Yama, and this was true. Twice more that day did they have to leave the trail as the thunder chariot passed above their heads. On the last occasion, it circled the monastery, possibly observing the funeral rites being conducted there. Then it crossed

over the mountains and was gone.

That night they made camp under the stars, and on the second night they did the same.

The third day brought them to the river Deeva and the small port city of Koonaa. It was there that they found the transportation they wished, and they set forth that same evening, heading south by bark to where the Deeva joined with the mighty Vedra, and then proceeded onward to pass at last the wharves of Khaipur, their destination.

As they flowed with the river, Sam listened to its sounds. He stood upon the dark deck, his hands resting on the rail. He stared out across the waters where

the bright heavens rose and fell, star bending back upon star. It was then that the night addressed him in the voice of Ratri, from somewhere nearby.

"You have passed this way before, Tathagatha."

"Many times," he replied. "The Deeva is a thing of beauty under the stars, in its rippling and its folding."

"Indeed."

"We go now to Khaipur and the Palace of Kama. What will you do when we arrive?"

"I will spend some time in meditation, goddess."

"Upon what shall you meditate?"

"Upon my past lives and the mistakes they each contained. I must review my

own tactics as well as those of the enemy."

"Yama thinks the Golden Cloud to have changed you."

"Perhaps it has."

"He believes it to have softened you, weakened you. You have always posed as a mystic, but now he believes you have become one — to your own undoing, to our undoing."

He shook his head, turned around. But he did not see her. Stood she there invisible, or had she withdrawn? He spoke softly and without inflection:

"I shall tear these stars from out the heavens," he stated, "and hurl them in the faces of the gods, if this be necessary. I

shall blaspheme in every Temple throughout the land. I shall take lives as a fisherman takes fish, by the net, if this be necessary. I shall mount me again up to the Celestial City, though every step be a flame or a naked sword and the way be guarded by tigers. One day will the gods look down from Heaven and see me upon the stair, bringing them the gift they fear most. That day will the new Yuga begin.

"But first I must meditate for a time," he finished.

He turned back again and stared out over the waters.

A shooting star burnt its way across the heavens. The ship moved on. The night sighed about him.

Sam stared ahead, remembering.