Mad Planet

Leinster, Murray

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About Leinster:

Murray Leinster (June 16, 1896 - June 8, 1975) was the nom de plume of William Fitzgerald Jenkins, an American science fiction and alternate history writer. He was born in Norfolk, Virginia. During World War I, he served with the Committee of Public Information and the United States Army (1917-1918). Following the war, Leinster became a free-lance writer. In 1921, he married Mary Mandola. They had four daughters. During World War II, he served in the Office of War Information. He won the Liberty Award in 1937 for "A Very Nice Family," the 1956 Hugo Award for Best Novelette for "Exploration Team," a retro-Hugo in 1996 for Best Novelette for "First Contact." Leinster was the Guest of Honor at the 21st Worldcon in 1963. In 1995, the Sidewise Award for Alternate History was established, named after Leinster's story "Sidewise in Time." Leinster wrote and published over 1,500 short stories and articles over the course of his career. He wrote 14 movie and hundreds of radio scripts and television plays, inspiring several series including "Land of the Giants" and "The Time Tunnel". Leinster first began appearing in the late 1910s in pulp magazines like Argosy and then sold to Astounding Stories in the 1930s on a regular basis. After World War II, when both his name and the pulps had achieved a wider acceptance, he would use either "William Fitzgerald" or "Will F. Jenkins" as names on stories when "Leinster" had already sold a piece to a particular issue. He was very prolific and successful in the fields of western, mystery, horror, and especially science fiction. His novel Miners in the Sky transfers the lawless atmosphere of the California Gold Rush, a common theme of Westerns, into an asteroid environment. He is credited with the invention of parallel universe stories. Four years before Jack Williamson's The Legion of Time came out, Leinster wrote his "Sidewise in Time", which was first published in Astounding in June 1934. This was probably the first time that the strange concept of alternate worlds appeared in modern science-fiction. In a sidewise path of time some cities never happened to be built. Leinster's vision of nature's extraordinary oscillations in time ('sidewise in time') had long-term effect on other authors, e.g., Isaac Asimov's "Living Space", "The Red Queen's Race", or his famous The End of Eternity. Murray Leinster's 1946 short story "A Logic Named Joe" describes Joe, a "logic", that is to say, a computer. This is one of the first descriptions of a computer in fiction. In this story Leinster was decades ahead of his time in imagining the Internet. He envisioned logics in every home, linked to provide communications, data access, and commerce. In fact, one character said that "logics are civilization." In 2000, Leinster's heirs

sued Paramount Pictures over the film Star Trek: First Contact, claiming that as the owners of the rights to Leinster's short story "First Contact", it infringed their trademark in the term. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia granted Paramount's motion for summary judgment and dismissed the suit (see Estate of William F. Jenkins v. Paramount Pictures Corp., 90 F. Supp. 2d 706 (E.D. Va. 2000) for the full text of the court's ruling). The court found that regardless of whether Leinster's story first coined "first contact", it has since become a generic (and therefore unprotectable) term that described the overall genre of science fiction in which humans first encounter alien species. Even if the title was instead "descriptive"—a category of terms higher than "generic" that may be protectable—there was no evidence that the title had the required association in the public's mind (known as "secondary meaning") such that its use would normally be understood as referring to Leinster's story. The Second Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the lower court's dismissal without comment. William F. Jenkins was also an inventor, best known for the front projection process used for special effects in motion pictures and television in place of the older rear projection process and as an alternative to bluescreen. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Leinster:

- *Operation: Outer Space* (1958)
- *Space Tug* (1953)
- *The Wailing Asteroid* (1960)
- *Talents, Incorporated* (1962)
- *Long Ago, Far Away* (1959)
- *Operation Terror* (1962)
- *Space Platform* (1953)
- *The Machine That Saved The World* (1957)
- *This World Is Taboo* (1961)
- *The Fifth-Dimension Tube* (1933)

In his lifetime of 20 years, Burl had never wondered what his grandfather had thought about his surroundings. The grandfather had suffered an untimely, unpleasant end, which Burl remembered vaguely as a fading succession of screams as he was carried away at his mother's top speed.

Burl had rarely thought of the old man since. Surely he had never wondered what his great-grandfather thought, and there certainly never entered his head such a hypothetical question as what his many-times-great-grandfather—say of the year 1920—would have thought of Burl's world.

He was treading cautiously over a brownish carpet of fungus growth, creeping furtively toward the stream he generically called "water". Towering overhead, three man-heights high, great toadstools hid the grayish sky from sight. Clinging to their foot-thick stalks were other fungi, parasites on growths that had once been parasites themselves.

Burl was a slender young man wearing a single garment twisted about his waist, made from the wing-fabric of a great moth his tribesmen had slain as it emerged from its cocoon. His fair skin showed no trace of sunburn. He had never seen the sun, though the sky was rarely hidden from view save by the giant fungi which, along with monster cabbages, were the only growing things he knew. Clouds usually spread overhead, and when they did not, perpetual haze made the sun but an indefinitely brighter part of the sky, never a sharply edged ball of fire. Fantastic mosses, misshapen fungi, colossal molds and yeasts, comprised the landscape about him.

Once, as he dodged through the forest of huge toadstools, his shoulder touched a cream-colored stalk, giving the whole fungus a tiny shock. Instantly, from the umbrellalike mass of pulp overhead, a fine, impalpable powder fell on him like snow. It was the season when toadstools sent out their spores, dropping them at the first disturbance.

Furtive as he was, he paused to brush them from his head and hair. He knew they were deadly poison.

Burl would have been a curious sight to a 20th century man. His skin was pink, like a child's, and sported little hair. Even that atop his head was soft and downy. His chest was larger than his forefathers', and his ears were capable of independent movement, to catch threatening sounds from any direction. The pupils of his large, blue eyes could dilate to extreme size, allowing him to see in almost complete darkness.

He was the result of 30,000 years of human adaptation to changes begun in the latter half of the 20th century.

Then, civilization had been high and apparently secure. Mankind had reached permanent accord, and machinery performed all labor; men needed only supervise its operation. Everyone was well-fed and well-educated, and it seemed that until the end of time Earth would be home to a community of comfortable human beings, pursuing their studies and diversions, illusions and truths. Peace, privacy, and freedom were universal.

But just when men were congratulating themselves on this new Golden Age, fissures opened slowly in the Earth's crust, and carbon dioxide began pouring out into the atmosphere. That gas had long been known to be present in the air, and necessary to plant life. Plants absorbed its carbon, releasing the oxygen for use again in a process called the "carbon cycle".

Scientists noted the Earth's increased fertility, but discounted it as the effect of carbon dioxide released by man's burning of fossil fuels. For years the continuous exhalation from the world's interior went unnoticed.

Constantly, however, the volume increased. New fissures opened, pouring into the already laden atmosphere more carbon dioxide—beneficial in small amounts, but as the world learned, deadly in quantity.

The entire atmosphere grew heavy. It absorbed more moisture and became humid. Rainfall increased. Climates warmed. Vegetation became more luxuriant—but the air gradually became less exhilarating.

Soon mankind's health was affected. Accustomed through long ages to breathing air rich in oxygen and poor in carbon dioxide, men suffered. Only those living on high plateaus or mountaintops remained unaffected. All the world's plants, though nourished and growing to unprecedented size, could not dispose of the continually increasing flood of carbon dioxide.

By the middle of the 21st century it was generally recognized that a new carboniferous period was beginning, when Earth's atmosphere would be thick and humid, unbreathable by man, when giant grasses and ferns would form the only vegetation.

As the 21st century closed, the human race began reverting to savagery. The lowlands were unbearable, the air depressing and enervating. Life there became a sickly, fever-ridden existence. All mankind desired the highlands, and men forgot their two centuries of peace.

They fought destructively, each for a bit of land where he might live and breathe. Those forced to remain at sea level died in the poisonous

air. Meanwhile, the danger zone crept up as the earth fissures tirelessly poured out steady streams of foul gas. Soon men could not live within 500 feet of sea level. The lowlands went uncultivated, becoming jungles unparalleled since the first carboniferous period.

Then men died of sheer inanition at 1,000 feet. The plateaus and mountaintops were crowded with folk struggling for footholds and food beyond the invisible menace that crept up, and up—

These events occured over many years, several generations. Between the announcement of the International Geophysical Institute that carbon dioxide in the air had increased from .04% to .1% and the time when at sea level 6% of the atmosphere was the deadly gas, more than 200 years intervened.

Coming gradually as it did, the poisonous effect of the deadly stuff increased insidiously. First lassitude, then heaviness of brain, then weakness of body. The human population of the entire world slowly declined to a fraction of its former size. At last there was room in plenty on the mountaintops—but the danger level continued to rise.

There was but one solution. The human body would have to inure itself to the poison, or face extinction. It finally developed a toleration for the gas that had wiped out entire races and nations, but at a terrible cost. Lungs increased in size to secure the oxygen of life, but the poison, inhaled at every breath, left the few survivors sickly and perpetually weary. Their minds lacked energy to cope with new problems or communicate knowledge.

So after 30,000 years, Burl crept through a forest of toadstools and fungus growths. He was ignorant of fire, metals, or the uses of stone and wood. A single garment covered him. His language was a meager group of a few hundred labial sounds, conveying no abstractions and few concrete things.

There was no wood in the scanty territory his tribe furtively inhabited. With the increase in heat and humidity the trees had died out. Those of northern climes went first: oaks, cedars, and maples. Then pines, beeches, cypresses, and finally even jungle forests vanished. Only grasses and reeds, bamboos and their kin, flourished in the new, steaming atmosphere. The jungles gave place to dense thickets of grasses and ferns, now become treeferns again.

Then fungi took their place. Flourishing as never before on a planet of torrid heat and perpetual miasma, on whose surface the sun never shone directly because of an ever-thickening bank of clouds hanging sullenly overhead, the fungi sprang up. About the dank pools festering over the

earth's surface, fungus growths clustered. Of every imaginable shade and color, of all monstrous forms and malignant purposes, of huge size and flabby volume, they spread over the land.

The grasses and ferns gave way to them. Squat footstools, flaking molds, evil-smelling yeasts, vast mounds of fungi inextricably mingled as to species, but growing, forever growing and exhaling an odor of dark places.

The strange growths grouped themselves in forests, horrible travesties of the vegetation they had succeeded. They grew and grew with feverish intensity, while above them fluttered gigantic butterflies and huge moths, sipping daintily of their corruption.

Of the animal world above water, insects alone endured the change. They multiplied, and enlarged in the thickened air. The sole surviving vegetation—as distinct from fungi—was a degenerate form of the cabbages that had once fed peasants. On those rank, colossal masses of foliage, stolid grubs and caterpillars ate themselves to maturity, then swung below in strong cocoons to sleep the sleep of metamorphosis from which they emerged to spread their wings and fly.

The tiniest butterflies of former days grew until their gaily colored wings measured in terms of feet, while the larger emperor moths extended their purple sails to a breadth of yards upon yards. The overshadowing fabric of their wings would have dwarfed Burl.

Fortunately, they, the largest flying creatures, were harmless. Burl's fellow tribesmen sometimes found a cocoon ready to open, and waited patiently until the beautiful creature within broke through its matted shell and emerged into the sunlight.

Then, before it could gather energy from the air, or its wings swell to strength and firmness, the tribesmen attacked, tearing the filmy, delicate wings from its body and the limbs from its carcass. And when it lay helpless before them, they carried away the juicy, meat-filled limbs to be eaten, leaving the still living body to stare helplessly at this strange world through multifaceted eyes, and become prey to voracious ants who would soon clamber upon it and carry it in fragments to their underground city.

Not all insects were so helpless or harmless. Burl knew of wasps, almost the length of his own body, with instantly fatal stings. To all wasps, however, some other insect is predestined prey. The sphex feeds solely on grasshoppers; other wasps eat flies only. Burl's furtive tribe feared them but little.

Bees were similarly aloof. They were hard-pressed for survival, those bees. Few flowers bloomed, and they were reduced desperate expedients: bubbling yeasts and fouler things, occasionally the nectarless blooms of rank, giant cabbages. Burl knew the bees. They droned overhead nearly as large as he, bulging eyes gazing at him with abstracted preoccupation. And crickets, beetles, spiders—

Burl knew spiders! His grandfather had fallen prey to a hunting tarantula, which had leaped with incredible ferocity from its excavated tunnel in the earth. The vertical pit, two feet in diameter, went down 20 feet. At the bottom, the black-bellied monster waited for the tiny sounds that would warn it of approaching prey (Lycosa fasciata).

Burl's grandfather had been careless, and his terrible shrieks as the horrible monster darted from the pit and seized him had lingered vaguely in Burl's mind ever since. Burl had seen, too, the monster webs of another species of spider, and watched from afar as the huge, misshapen creature sucked juices from a three-foot cricket entangled in its trap.

Burl remembered the stripes of yellow, black, and silver crossing its abodomen (Epiera fasciata). He had been fascinated by the struggles of the imprisoned insect, coiled in a hopeless tangle of sticky, gummy ropes the thickness of Burl's finger, cast about its body before the spider attempted to approach.

Burl knew these dangers. They were part of his life. It was his and his ancestors' accustomedness to them that made his existence possible. He evaded them, and survived. A moment of carelessness, an instant's relaxation of his habitual caution, and he would be one with his forebears, forgotten meals of long-dead, inhuman monsters.

Three days before, Burl had crouched behind a bulky, shapeless fungus, watching a furious duel between two huge horned beetles. Their jaws, gaping wide, clicked and clashed on each other's armor. Their legs crashed like cymbals as their polished surfaces ground and struck each other. They fought over some particularly attractive bit of carrion.

Burl had watched until a gaping orifice appeared in the armor of the smaller beetle. It uttered a shrill cry, or seemed to. The noise was, actually, the tearing of the horny stuff beneath the jaws of its victorious adversary.

The wounded beetle's struggles weakened. At last it collapsed, and the conqueror placidly began to eat the conquered—alive.

After the meal was finished, Burl approached the scene with caution. An ant, forerunner of many, was already inspecting the carcass.

Burl usually ignored ants. They were stupid, shortsighted insects, not hunters. Save when attacked, they offered no injury. They were scavengers, seeking the dead and dying, but became dangerous, vicious opponents if their prey were questioned. They measured from three inches, for tiny black ants, to a foot for large termites.

Burl heard the tiny clickings of their limbs as they approached. He hastily seized the detached, sharp-pointed snout of the victim, and fled.

Later, he inspected his find curiosly. The victim had been a minotaur beetle, with a sharp-pointed horn like that of a rhinocerous to reinforce its offensive armament, already dangerous because of its wide jaws. A beetle's jaws work side to side, instead of up and down, making its protection complete in no less than three directions.

Burl examined the sharp, daggerlike instrument. He pricked his finger on its point, and flung it aside as he crept to the hiding-place of his tribe. They numbered only 20: four men, six women, the rest adolescents and children.

Burl had wondered at the strange feelings that came over him when he looked at one of the girls. She was younger—perhaps 18—and fleeter of foot than he. They talked, sometimes, and Burl occasionally shared with her an especially succulent find of foodstuffs.

The next morning Burl found the horn where he had thrown it, sticking in the flabby side of a toadstool. He retrieved it, and gradually, far back in his mind, an idea began to form. He sat awhile with the thing in his hand, considering it with a faraway look in his eyes. From time to time he stabbed at a toadstool, awkwardly, but with gathering skill. His imagination began to work fitfully. He visualized himself stabbing food as the larger beetle had stabbed the former owner of the weapon he now possessed.

Burl could not imagine attacking one of the fighting insects. He could only picture himself, dimly, stabbing something that was food with this death-dealing thing. It was no longer than his arm and though clumsy to the hand, an effective and terribly sharp implement.

He thought: Where was there food, food that lived, that would not fight back? Presently he rose and made his way toward the tiny river. Yellow-bellied newts swam in its waters. Aquatic larvae of a thousand insects floated about its surface or crawled along its bottom.

Death lived there, too. Giant crayfish snapped horny claws at the unwary. Mosquitos of four-inch wingspread sometimes hummed above the river. They were dying out for lack of the plant juices on which males of

the species lived, but even so they were formidable. Burl had learned to crush them with fragments of fungus.

He crept furtively through the forest of misshapen toadstools, brownish fungus underfoot. Strange orange, red, and purple molds clustered about the bases of the creamy toadstool stalks. Burl paused to run his sharp-pointed weapon through a fleshy stalk and reassure himself that his plan was practicable.

He heard a tiny clicking, and froze into stillness. It was a troop of five heavily laden ants, each eight inches long, returning to their city. They moved swiftly along the route marked with black, odorous formic acid exuded from the bodies of their comrades. Burl waited until they passed, then went on.

He came to the bank of the river. Green scum covered much of its surface, occasionally broken by a slowly enlarging gas bubble released from decomposing matter on the bottom. In the center of the placid stream the current ran faster, and the water itself was visible.

Over the shining current, water-spiders ran swiftly. They had not shared in the general increase in size of the insect world. Depending on surface tension to support them, an increase in size and weight would have deprived them of the means of locomotion.

From the spot where Burl peered at the water, green scum spread out many yards into the stream. He could not see what swam, wriggled, and crawled beneath the evil-smelling covering. He looked up and down the banks.

150 yards downstream, an outcropping of rock made a steep descent to the river, from which shelf-fungi stretched out. Dark red and orange above, light yellow below, they formed a series of platforms above the smoothly flowing stream. Burl moved cautiously toward them.

En route he saw one of the edible mushrooms that formed most of his diet, and paused to break from the flabby flesh an amount that would feed him for many days. Often, his people would find a store of food, carry it to their hiding place, then gorge themselves for days, eating, sleeping, eating, sleeping until all was gone.

Burl was tempted to abandon his plan. He would give Saya of this food, and they would eat together. Saya was the maiden who roused unusual emotions in Burl when she was near, strange impulses to touch and caress her. He did not understand.

He went on, after hesitating. If he brought her food, Saya would be pleased, but if he brought her of the things that swam in the stream, she would be more pleased. Degraded as his tribe had become, Burl was yet

a little more intelligent. He was an atavism, a throwback to ancestors who had cultivated the earth and subjugated its animals. He had a vague remnant of pride, unformed but potent.

Burl's people herded together in a leaderless group, coming to the same hiding place to share the finds of the lucky and gather comfort in numbers. They had no weapons. They bashed stones against the limbs of insects they found partly devoured, cracking them open for what scraps of sweet meat remained inside, but sought safety from enemies solely in flight and hiding. If Burl did what no man before had done, if he brought a whole carcass to his tribe, they would admire him.

He reached the rocky outcropping and lay prostrate, staring into the water's shallow depths. A huge crayfish, as long as Burl, leisurely crossed his vision. Small fishes and even huge newts fled before the voracious creature.

Eventually the tide of underwater life resumed its activity. The wriggling dragonfly grubs reappeared. Little flecks of silver swam into view—a school of tiny fish. A larger fish appeared, moving slowly.

Burl's eyes glistened; his mouth watered. He reached down with his long weapon. It barely touched the water. Disappointment filled him, yet the nearness and apparent practicability of his scheme spurred him on.

He considered the situation. The shelf-fungi were below him. He rose and moved to a point just above them, then thrust his spear down. They resisted its point. Burl tested them tentatively with his foot, then dared to trust his weight to them. They held firmly. He clambered onto them and lay flat, again peering over the edge.

The large fish, as long as Burl's arm, swam slowly to and fro below. Burl had seen the former owner of his spear strive to thrust it into an opponent. So when the fish swam by, he thrust sharply downward. To Burl's astonishment, the spear seemed to bend where it entered the water, and missed its mark by inches. He tried again and again.

He grew angry with the fish. Repeated strokes had left it untouched, and it was insultingly unwary, not even trying to flee.

Finally, the big fish stopped directly beneath his eyes. Burl thrust straight down with all his strenth. This time the spear, entering vertically, did not seem to bend. Its point penetrated the scales of the swimmer below, transfixing that lazy fish completely.

An uproar began. The fish, struggling to escape, and Burl, trying to draw it up to his perch, made a huge commotion. Excited, he failed to notice an ominous, approaching ripple on the water.

The unequal combat continued. Burl clung desperately to the end of his spear. Then there was a tremor in Burl's support; it gave way, falling into the stream with a mighty splash. Burl submerged, eyes wide open, facing death.

As he sank, he saw waving before him the gaping claws of the huge crayfish, large enough to sever a limb with one stroke of their jagged jaws. Burl was sure he would die, for he could not swim. The only question was whether he would drown or be devoured first.

But the section of the shelf fungus that had collapsed beneath him was lighter than water. It rapidly surfaced, with Burl still on top. The crayfish, deprived of its prey, wandered off.

Burl's situation seemed scarely improved, however. He was floating downstream, perched—weaponless, alone, and frightened—on a soggy, degenerate fungus. In the water lurked death unseen, on the banks stalked peril, and above, danger fluttered on golden wings.

He finally recovered his self-possession, and looked for his spear. It was floating in the water, still transfixing the fish whose capture had endangered Burl's life. The fish now floated lifelessly, belly upward.

Burl forgot his predicament upon seeing his prey just out of reach. He gazed at it, mouth watering, while his cranky craft went downstream, spinning slowly in the current. He hastened to the edge of the raft.

It tilted and nearly flung him overboard. Experimenting, Burl soon found that it remained stable if he lay flat across it. He wriggled into position, and waited until the slow revolution of his vessel brought the spear shaft near. He stretched his fingers and arm, and grasped it.

A moment later he was tearing strips of flesh from the fish and cramming the oily mess into his mouth with gusto. He had lost his edible mushroom, yet Burl ate contentedly of what he possessed. He happily visualized the delight with which Saya would receive a gift of part of the fish he had caught.

Burl suddenly realized he was being carried farther and farther from Saya. Stricken with dumb sorrow, he lifted his head and looked longingly at the riverbanks.

A monotonous row of strangely colored fungus growths. No healthy green, but pallid, cream-colored toadstools, some bright orange, lavender, and purple molds, vivid carmine "rusts" and mildews, spreading up the banks from the turgid slime.

In the faintly pinkish light filtering down through the ever-present clouds, myriad flying objects were visible. Now and then a giant cricket or grasshopper made its bulletlike flight from one spot to another. Huge

butterflies fluttered gaily. Bees lumbered anxiously about, seeking the cross-shaped flowers of monster cabbages. Occasionally, a slender-waisted, man-sized wasp flew alertly past. And far above soared dragonflies, their spindlelike bodies thrice the length of his own.

Burl ignored them all. He sat, an incongruous creature of pink skin and soft brown hair on an orange fungus floating in midstream, despondent because the current carried him forever farther from the slender-limbed maiden whose glance caused an odd commotion in his breast.

The day wore on. Once, just beyond the riverbank, Burl saw a band of large, red Amazon ants, marching in orderly array, to raid a city of black ants, and steal their eggs. The eggs would be hatched, and the small black creatures enslaved by the brigands. Amazon ants live solely by the labor of their slaves; perforce they are mighty warriors in their world.

Later, etched against the pervasive steaming mist, Burl saw strangely shaped, swollen branches rearing from the ground. They were a hard-rinded fungus that grew on itself in mockery of the vegetation that had vanished from the earth.

He spied pear-shaped objects above some of which floated little clouds of smoke. They, too, were fungi, puffballs, which when touched emit what seems a puff of vapor. These would have towered above Burl's head had he stood beside them.

As the day drew to an end, he saw in the distance what seemed a range of purple hills. Some 70 feet high, they were the agglomeration of a formless growth, multiplying its organisms upon itself until the whole became an irregular, cone-shaped mound. Burl watched them apathetically.

Presently, he ate again of the oily fish. The taste pleased Burl, a rare break from his diet of insipid mushrooms. He stuffed himself, though the size of his prey left most uneaten.

He kept his spear, despite the trouble it had caused. Burl, unusually stubborn for his tribe, still associated the weapon with the food it had secured rather than with his current difficulties. He examined it again; its sharpness was unimpaired.

He next stripped a sinew from the garment about his middle and hung the fish from his neck with it. That left him both hands free. Then he sat cross-legged on the soggily floating fungus, like a pink-skinned Buddha, and watched the shores go by.

Time passed, and sunset drew near. Burl, never having seen the sun, did not think of this as "sunset". To him it was the letting down of darkness from the sky.

Far to the west, the thick mist turned gold, while the thicker clouds above became blurred masses of dull red. Their shadows seemed lavender, from the contrast of shades. The river's still surface reflected faithfully the myriad tints and shadings, and the shining tops of giant mushrooms aside the river glowed faintly pink.

Dragonflies buzzed overhead in swift, angular flight, bodies glistening with metallic luster in the rosy light. Great yellow butterflies flew lightly above the stream. Here, there, everywhere on the water appeared the shell-formed boats of a thousand caddis flies.

Burl could have thrust his hand down into their cavities and seized the white worms inhabiting the strange craft. The huge bulk of a tardy bee droned heavily overhead. He glanced upward and saw the long proboscis and hairy hinder legs with their scanty load of pollen, the compound eyes with their expression of stupid preoccupation, and the sting that would mean death alike for him and the giant insect, were it used.

The crimson radiance at the edge of the world dimmed. The purple hills had long been left behind. Now the slender stalks of 10,000 round-domed mushrooms lined the riverbank and beneath them spread fungi of all colors, from rawest red to palest blue, fading slowly to a monochromatic background in the glowing dusk.

The buzzing, fluttering, and flapping of diurnal insects died slowly down, while from a million hiding places there crept soft and furry bodies of great moths, who preened themselves and smoothed their feathery antennae before taking to the air. Strong-limbed crickets set up their thunderous noise—grown gravely bass with the increasing size of their sound organs—and there began to gather on the water those slender spirals of tenuous mist that would presently blanket the stream in a mantle of fog.

Night fell. The clouds above seemed to lower and grow dark. Gradually, now a drop and then a drop, the languid fall of large, warm raindrops that would drip from the moisture-laden skies all night began.

Great disks of coolly glowing flame appeared along the stream's edge. The mushrooms there were faintly phosphorescent (Pleurotus phosphoreus) and shone coldly on the "rusts" and fake-fungi beneath. Here and there a ball of lambent flame appeared, drifting idly above the steaming, festering earth.

30,000 years before, men called them "will-o'-the-wisps" but Burl simply accepted them as he accepted all that passed. Only a man attempting to advance in the scale of civilization tries to explain everything. A savage or child is content to observe without comment, unless he repeats legends from wise folk possessed by the itch of knowledge.

Burl watched a long time. The beacons of fireflies as long as his spear flashed intermittently, illuminating the stream for yards around. Softly fluttering wings, in great beats that poured torrents of air onto him, passed above.

The sky was full of winged creatures. Their anguished cries, mating calls, and wing beats broke the night. Above and all around the intense life of the insect world went on ceaselessly, but Burl only rocked sadly back and forth on his frail mushroom boat because he was being carried from his tribe, and from Saya—Saya of swift feet and white teeth, of shy smile. This, after he had dared so greatly to bring her a gift of fresh meat, captured as never before!

Homesick, he lay on his floating atom all night. At last the mushroom raft struck gently and remained grounded on a shallow in the stream.

At daybreak, Burl gazed keenly about. He was 20 yards from shore, and the greenish scum surrounded his now disintegrating vessel. The river had widened until the other bank was barely visible through the haze above the surface, but the nearer shore seemed firm and no more dangerous than the territory his tribe inhabited. He tested the water's depth with his spear, then was struck with the multiple usefulness of that weapon. The water would come but slightly above his ankles.

Burl timidly stepped down into the water, then made for the bank. A soft something clung to one of his bare feet. Terrified, he ran faster, and stumbled ashore. He stared down at his foot. A shapeless, flesh-colored pad clung to his heel, and as Burl watched, it swelled slowly, while the pink of its wrinkled folds deepened.

It was simply a leech, sharing in the enlargement nearly all the lower world had undergone, but Burl did not know that. He scraped frantically at it with the side of his spear, and it fell off, leaving a blotch of blood on his skin. It lay, writhing and pulsating, on the ground, and Burl fled.

He found himself in another toadstool forest, and finally paused. He recognized the type of fungus growths around him, and began eating voraciously. In Burl the sight of food always produced hunger—Nature's compensation for his lack of an instinct to store food.

Burl's heart was small within him. He was far from Saya and his tribe. Just 40 miles separated them, but Burl did not think of distances. He had come down the river. He was alone in a land he had never known or seen.

Food was plentiful. The mushrooms surrounding him were edible, a supply of sustenance Burl's whole tribe could not have eaten in many days, but that very fact made him think of Saya. He suddenly remembered the large oily fish he had caught for her, still hanging down his back from the sinew about his neck.

He took it and fingered it all over, getting his hands and himself thoroughly greasy in the process, but he could eat no more. The thought of Saya's pleasure at the sight of it gave him renewed determination.

With all the immediacy of a child or savage he set off. He had come along the bank of the stream. He would return along the bank of the stream.

Through the awkward aisles of the mushroom forest he moved, eyes and ears open for danger. Several times he heard the omnipresent clicking of ants on their multifarious businesses in the wood, but he ignored those shortsighted foragers. He feared only one kind of ant, the army ant, which sometimes travels in hordes of millions, eating all in its path. Ages ago, when they were tiny creatures not an inch long, even the largest animals fled from them. Now that they measured a foot long, not even the gorged spiders whose distended bellies were a yard thick dared challenge them.

The mushroom forest ended. A cheerful grasshopper (Ephigger) munched at some dainty it had found. Its hind legs were bunched beneath it in perpetual readiness for flight. But a monster wasp—as long as Burl himself—suddenly dropped from the sky and seized the luckless feaster.

The battle was brief. The wasp's flexible abdomen curved delicately. Precise as a surgeon's scalpel, its sting entered the jointed armor just beneath the head of its prey. All struggle ceased.

The wasp grasped the paralyzed—not dead—insect and flew away. Burl grunted, and passed on.

The ground grew rough, impeding Burl's progress. He clambered arduously up steep slopes and cautiously down their farther sides. Once he climbed through a mass of small mushrooms so densely tangled that he had to smash them with blows of his spear to clear a path. They shed torrents of a fiery red liquid that rolled off his greasy breast and sank into the ground (Lactarius deliciosus).

Overconfidence now possessed Burl. He walked less cautiously, more boldly. The fact that he had struck something and destroyed it lent him foolhardy courage.

He climbed to the top of a red clay cliff, 100 feet high. Erosion from the river had carved it ages ago, but now the riverbank came no nearer than a quarter-mile.

Shelf-fungi, large and small, white, yellow, orange, and green, in indescribable confusion and luxuriance, covered the cliffside. From a point halfway up the cliff the inch-thick cable of a spider's web stretched down to an anchorage on the ground. The geometrical pattern of the web glistened evilly.

Somewhere among the cliffside fungi the huge creature waited until some unfortunate prey should struggle helplessly in its monster snare. The spider waited motionless, implacably patient, invicibly certain of prey, utterly merciless to its victims.

Burl strutted at the cliff's edge, a silly little pink-skinned creature with an oily fish slung about his neck, a draggled fragment of moth's wing about his middle, and a minotaur beetle's nose in his hand. He looked scornfully down on the whitely shining trap. He had struck mushrooms, and they had fallen before him. He feared nothing.

60 paces before him, a shaft sank vertically in the sandy, clayey soil. Carefully rounded, lined with silk, it descended 30 feet, then enlarged into a chamber where the owner and digger of the shaft might rest. An inconspicuous trapdoor, camouflaged with mud and earth, sealed the top of the hole. Only a keen eye could have perceived the opening. But a keen eye now peered out from a tiny crack, the eye of the engineer of the underground dwelling.

Eight hairy legs surrounded the creature that hung motionless at the top of the shaft. Two pairs of ferocious mandibles stretched before its fierce mouthparts. Two eyes glittered evilly in the darkness of the burrow. Rough, mangy, brown fur covered the huge misshapen globe of its body.

Implacably malignant, incredibly ferocious, was the brown hunting spider, the American tarantula (Mygale Hentzii). Its body was over two feet in diameter. Its hairy legs, outstretched, would cover a circle three yards across. Eyes glistening, jaws slavering, it watched Burl.

And Burl strutted at the cliff's edge, puffed up with a sense of importance. The white snare of the spinning spider below amused him. He knew the spider would not leave its web to attack. Using his spear, he shoved a chunk of fungus growing at his feet down the cliffside into the

colossal web. The black bulk of the hidden spider swung out to investigate. Burl kept pace with it, knocking more lumps of shelf-fungus loose, and laughing as they narrowly missed the confused, black-and-silver creature. Then—

The trap door clicked faintly, and Burl whirled. His laughter became a scream. Approaching with incredible speed, the monster tarantula opened its dripping jaws. Mandibles gaping wide, poison fangs unsheathed, the creature was 30 paces away, 20, 10. It leaped into the air, all eight legs extended to seize!

Still screaming, Burl thrust out his arms to ward off the impact. In his terror, his grasp on his spear became agonized. The spear point shot out, and the tarantula fell on it. Nearly a quarter of the spear entered the body of the ferocious thing.

Transfixed on the spear, the monster writhed nightmarishly, still struggling to reach Burl, who himself was transfixed with horror. Mandibles clashed, awful sounds came from the beast. One of the attenuated, hairy legs rasped across Burl's forearm. He instinctively stepped backward—off the edge of the cliff.

Down through space, eyes glassy with panic, the two creatures—man and skewered tarantula—fell together. With a strangely elastic crash and crackling, they hit the web below.

Burl could be no more fear-struck. Struggling madly in the gummy coils of an immense web, ever binding him more tightly, with a wounded creature still striving to reach him with poison fangs—Burl had reached the limit of panic.

He fought madly to break the coils about him. His arms and breast were greasy from the oily fish; the sticky web did not adhere to them, but his legs and body were inextricably fastened by the elastic threads spread for just such prey as he.

He paused, exhausted. Then he saw, five yards away, the silvery and black monster waiting patiently for him to tire. It judged the moment propitious. The tarantula and man were one in its eyes, one struggling thing that had fallen opportunely into its snare. They moved but feebly now. The spider advanced delicately, swinging its huge bulk nimbly along the web, paying out a cable after it, coming inexorably closer.

Burl's arms were free because of the greasy coating they had received. He waved them wildly, shrieking at the approaching, pitiless monster. It paused. Those moving arms suggested mandibles that might wound or slap.

Spiders take few hazards. This one was no exception. Its spinnerets became busy, and with one of its eight legs, it flung a sheet of gummy silk impartially over both tarantula and man.

Burl fought the descending shroud, striving vainly to thrust it away. Within minutes he was covered in a silken cloth that hid even the light from his eyes. He and his enemy, the giant tarantula, were beneath the same covering, though the tarantula moved but weakly.

The shower ceased. The web spider had decided they were helpless. Burl felt the cables of the web give slightly, as the spider approached to sting and suck the sweet juices from its prey.

Burl froze in an ecstasy of terror, waiting for poison fangs to be thrust into him. He knew the process, having seen the leisurely way giant spiders delicately stung their prey, then withdrew to wait patiently for the venom to take effect.

When their victim ceased to struggle, they drew near again, and sucked the sweet juices from the body until what was once a creature vibrant with life became a shrunken, withered husk—to be flung from the web at nightfall. Most spiders are tidy housekeepers, destroying their snares daily to spin anew.

The bloated, evil creature moved meditatively about the shining sheet of silk it had cast over Burl and the giant tarantula. Now only the tarantula moved feebly. Its body, outlined by a bulge in the concealing shroud, throbbed faintly as it struggled with the spear in its vitals. The rounded protuberance offered an obvious target. The web spider moved quickly forward, and stung.

Galvanized into fresh torment by this new agony, the tarantula writhed in a very hell of pain. Its legs struck out purposelessly, in horrible gestures of delirious suffering. Burl screamed as one touched him, and struggled himself.

His arms and head were free beneath the silken sheet because of the grease and oil coating them. Striving to escape his deadly neighbor, Burl clutched at the threads about him. They did not break, but parted, and a tiny opening appeared. One of the tarantula's attenuated limbs touched him again. With the strength of utter panic he hauled himself away. The opening enlarged, Burl's head emerged into open air, and he stared down 20 feet on an open space carpeted with chitinous remains of his captor's former victims.

Burl's head, breast, and arms were free. But his lower body was held firm by a gummy snare far more tenacious than any birdlime ever manufactured by man.

He hung a moment in his tiny window, despairing. He saw, at a little distance, the monster spider, waiting patiently for its poison to take effect and the struggling of its prey to cease. And the tarantula was weakening, only shuddering now.

Burl withdrew his head and thrust desperately at the sticky stuff about his loins and legs. The oil on his hands kept it from clinging to them, and it gave a little. In a flash of inspiration, Burl understood. He reached over his shoulder and grasped the greasy fish; tore it in a dozen places and smeared himself with the now rancid exudation, pushing the sticky threads from his limbs and oiling the surface from which he had thrust it.

He felt the web tremble. To the spider, its poison seemed to have failed. Another sting seemed necessary. It would again inject its deadly venom where the disturbance was manifest—into Burl!

He gasped, and drew himself toward his window. It felt as if he was pulling his legs from his body. His head emerged, his shoulders—half his body was outside the hole.

The colossal spider surveyed him, and made ready to cast another silken sheet over him. The spinnerets became active, and the sticky stuff about Burl's feet gave way! He shot through the opening and fell sprawling to the earth below, crashing onto the shrunken shell of a flying beetle which had fallen into the snare and had not escaped.

Burl rolled over and over, then sat up. An angry, foot-long ant stood before him, mandibles extended threateningly, antennae waving wildly. A shrill stridulation filled the air.

In ages past, when ants were tiny creatures fractions of an inch long, scientists knew they possessed a cry. Grooves on the body of the insects, like those on the great legs of crickets, enabled them to generate sounds.

Burl knew the stridulation emanated from the insect before him, though he had never wondered how it was produced. The cry was used to summon others of its city, to help it in difficulty or good fortune.

Clickings sounded nearby. Reinforcements were coming. Normally harmless—except the army ant, that is—the whole ant tribe was formidable when provoked. Utterly fearless, they could pull down a man and slay him as so many infuriated fox terriers might have done 30,000 years before.

Burl fled, without debate, and heard the shrill sound suddenly subside. The ant, shortsighted like all ants, no longer felt threatened and went peacefully about the business Burl had interrupted, that of finding

among the gruesome relics beneath the spider's web some edible carrion to feed the inhabitants of its city.

Burl ran a few hundred yards, and stopped. It behooved him to move carefully. Even the most familiar territory was full of unexpected dangers; unknown lands such as these were doubly perilous.

Burl too found difficulty in moving. The glutinous stuff from the spider's snare still stuck to his feet, picking up small objects as he went. Old ant-gnawed fragments of insect armor pricked him even through his toughened soles.

He removed them, took a dozen steps and had to stop again. Burl's brain had been uncommonly stimulated lately. It had gotten him into at least one predicament—due to his invention of a spear—but extricated him from another. Reason had led him to oil his body to escape the spider's snare.

Cautiously, Burl looked about. He seemed safe. Then, deliberately, he sat down to think. Never in his life had he done such a thing; his tribesmen were not given to meditation. But a powerful idea had struck Burl—an abstract idea.

When he was in difficulties, something within him seemed to suggest a solution. Would it do so now? He puzzled over the problem. Sharp pebbles, remnants of insect-armor, and other things hurt his feet when he walked. They always had, but never had his feet been sticky so that the irritation continued with him more than one step.

He gazed at his foot, and awaited inspiration. Meanwhile, he slowly removed the sharp-pointed fragments, one by one. Partly coated with the half-liquid gum from his feet, they clung to his finger, except where the oil was thick.

Burl's reasoning, before, had been simple and of primary order. Where oil covered him, the web did not. Therefore he would coat the rest of himself with oil. But to apply knowledge gained in one predicament to another difficulty was something he had never done.

A dog may be taught to pull a latchstring to open a door, but the same dog coming to a high, close-barred gate with a latchstring will never think of pulling it. He associates a latchstring with opening the door. Opening a gate is another matter entirely.

Imminent peril had stirred Burl to invention. That was extraordinary enough. But reasoning in cold blood, as he now did, that oil on his feet would nullify the glue there and enable him to walk in comfort—that was as much a triumph of intellect as any masterpiece of art in the ages before. He oiled his feet.

It was an infinitesimal problem, but Burl's struggles with the mental process of reasoning were real. 30,000 years earlier, a wise man declared that education is simply training in thought, in efficient and effective thinking. Burl had received no such training, but now, sitting at the base of a squat toadstool, he reexemplified Rodin's Thinker for the first time in millennia. He was teaching himself how to think.

He stood up, walked, and crowed in delight, then paused a moment in awe of his own intelligence. 35 miles from his tribe, naked, unarmed, ignorant of fire, wood, or any weapons save a spear he had experimented with the day before, abysmally uninformed concerning the very existence of art or science, Burl stopped to assure himself that he was very wonderful.

With touching faith in this new pastime, Burl sat down again and knitted his brows. His questions were easily answered. He was naked. He would fashion garments. He was weaponless. He would find a spear. He was hungry. He would seek food. He was far from from Saya and his tribe. He would go to them. Puerile reasoning, of course, but valuable, because it was conscious reasoning, conscious appeal to his mind for guidance, deliberate metal progression from desire to resolution.

Even in the high civilization of ages before, few men had really used their brains. The great majority had depended on machines and leaders to think for them. Burl, however, was developing the habit of thinking—a leadership quality, and an invaluable asset to his little tribe.

He stood again and faced upstream. Gigantic butterflies, riotously colored, fluttered overhead through the misty haze. Sometimes a grasshopper hurtled through the air like a projectile, transparent wings beating frantically. Occasionally a wasp sped by, intent on its hunting, or a bee droned heavily along, anxious and worried, striving in a nearly flowerless world to gather pollen for the hive.

Here and there Burl saw various flies, some no larger than his thumb, others the size of his whole hand. They fed on juices dripping from maggot-infested mushrooms, when filth more to their liking was unavailable.

Far away a shrill roaring sounded faintly. It was like multitudinous clickings blended into a single sound, but was so distant that it did not gain Burl's attention. He had all the strictly localized vision of a child. What was near was important; what was distant could be ignored.

Had Burl listened, he would have realized that army ants were abroad in countless millions, deploying themselves in a broad array and wreaking greater destruction than so many locusts.

Locusts in past ages had eaten all green things. Only giant cabbages and a few such tenacious rank growths survived. The locusts had vanished along with civilization, knowledge, and most of mankind, but army ants remained as an invincible enemy to men, insects, and fungi alike.

Burl did not notice the sound, however. Preoccupied, he moved forward, briskly though cautiously, searching for garments, food, and weapons. He confidently expected to find them all shortly.

Surely enough he found a thicket of edible fungi just half a mile beyond the spot where he had sat down to think. Burl tugged at one and broke off a piece. Nibbling as he went, he entered a broad plain over a mile across, broken into odd little hillocks by gradually ripening and suddenly developing mushrooms with which he was unfamiliar. Their rounded, blood-red protuberances forced aside the earth as they grew.

Burl passed among them without touching them. They were strange, and strange things meant danger. Besides, he was full of new purpose. He wished garments and weapons.

Above the plain a wasp flew, a heavy object dangling beneath its black belly, ornamented by a single red band. It was a hairy sand wasp, carrying a paralyzed gray caterpillar. After depositing the caterpillar in a deep underground burrow, the wasp would lay an egg on it, then emerge and seal the entrance with dirt and stones. Later, the egg would hatch into a tiny grub, which would feed on the torpid caterpillar until it waxed large and fat. Then it would weave itself a chrysalis and sleep a long sleep, only to wake as a wasp and dig its way to open air.

Uncomprehending, Burl watched the wasp go by, then trudged onward. Reaching the farther side of the plain, he found himself threading the aisles of a fungus forest where the growths were hideous, misshapen travesties of the trees they had supplanted. Bloated, yellow limbs branched off from rounded, swollen trunks. Here and there a pear-shaped puffball, Burl's height and half as much again, waited craftily until a chance touch should cause it to shoot upward a curling puff of fine dust.

There were dangers here, and Burl moved forward cautiously. He continued to eat from the mass of edible mushroom under his arm, while his large eyes scanned about for threats of harm.

Behind, a high, shrill roaring grew slightly louder, but remained too far away to impress Burl. The army ants were working havoc in the distance. By millions, they were foraging the country, climbing every eminence, descending every depression, antennae waving restlessly,

mandibles extended threateningly. The ground was black with them, each ten inches long.

A single such creature would be formidable to an unarmed, naked man like Burl, whose wisest move would be flight, but in numbers they presented a menace from which escape seemed impossible. They advanced steadily and rapidly amid shrill stridulations and multitudinous clickings.

The great helpless caterpillars on the cabbages heard them coming, but were too stupid to flee. Black multitudes covered the rank vegetables, and tiny but voracious jaws tore at the flaccid masses of flesh.

Each creature had some futile means of struggling. Caterpillars writhed and contorted ineffectually. Bees fought their entrance to the gigantic hives with stings and wingbeats. Moths took to the air in helpless blindness when discovered by the relentless throngs of small black insects.

There was a strange contrast between the ground before the advancing horde and that immediately behind it. Before, a busy world, teeming with life. Mushrooms and fungi fought with thinning numbers of giant cabbages for food. Behind the black multitude—nothing. Mushrooms, cabbages, bees, wasps, crickets, every creeping, crawling, or flying thing that did not get aloft before the black tide arrived was lost, torn to bits by tiny mandibles. Even spiders and tarantulas fell before the host of insects, killing many their final struggles, but ultimately overwhelmed by sheer numbers. And the wounded and dying army ants became food for their comrades. There is no mercy among insects.

Surging onward, flowing like a monstrous, murky tide over the yellow, steaming earth, the army ants advanced. Their vanguard reached the river, and recoiled. Burl was five miles distant when they changed course, communicating the altered line of march to those behind with antenna gestures, stridulations, and formic acid trails.

A million tragedies marked the insect army's progress. There was a tiny colony of mining bees—Zebra bees; a single mother, four feet long, had dug a huge gallery with ten cells, in which she laid her eggs and fed her grubs with hard-gathered pollen. The grubs had waxed fat and large, become bees, and laid eggs in turn, in the same gallery.

Ten such bulky insects now foraged busily for grubs within the ancestral home, while the founder of the colony had grown draggled and wingless with passing time. Unable to forage herself, the old bee became hive guardian, as is customary among mining bees. She closed the opening of the hive with her head, making a living barrier at the entrance,

withdrawing to give entrance and exit only to duly authenticated members of the colony.

She was at her post when the wave of army ants swept over her. Tiny, evil-smelling feet trampled on her. She emerged to fight with mandible and sting for the sanctity of the hive. In a moment she was a shaggy mass of biting ants, rending and tearing her chitinous armor. The other bees emerged, fighting as they came, for the gallery leading down was a dark flood of small insects.

An epic battle raged. Ten huge bees, each four feet long, fighting with leg and jaw, wing and mandible, with the ferocity of tigers. The tiny, vicious ants covered them, snapping at their multiple eyes, biting at the tender joints in their armor—sometimes releasing the larger prey to leap upon an injured comrade wounded by the huge creature they battled in common.

The outcome, however, was inevitable. Struggle as the bees might, herculean as their efforts might be, they were powerless against the incredible numbers of their assailants, who tore them into tiny fragments and devoured them. Before the last shred of the hive's defenders had vanished, the hive itself was gutted alike of the grubs it contained and the food brought them by such weary effort of the mature bees.

The army ants went on. Only an empty gallery remained, and a few fragments of tough armor, unappetizing even to the omniverous ants.

Meanwhile, Burl was inspecting the rent and scraped remains of a great beetle's shiny casing lying on the ground. A greater beetle had met the first and slain it.

A few minims, little ants barely six inches long, foraged industriously among the remains. A new ant city was to be formed and the queen ant lay hidden a half-mile away. These were the first hatchlings, who would feed larger ants on whom would fall the great work of the city. Burl ignored them—and the rising noise of the advancing army any horde behind him—as he searched with his eyes for a weapon.

The best he could find was a fiercely toothed hind leg. He picked it up, and an angry whine rose from the ground.

One of the black minims was busily detaching a fragment of flesh from the joint of the leg, and Burl had snatched the morsel away. The little creature advanced toward Burl, shrilling angrily. He struck it with the leg. Two of the other minims appeared, attracted by the noise the first had made. Discovering the crushed body of their fellow, they unceremoniously dismembered it and bore it away in triumph.

Burl went on, swinging the toothed limb in his hand. Accustomed to using stones to crush the juicy legs of the giant crickets his tribe sometimes scavenged, he formed a half-defined idea of a club. The sharp teeth of the thing in his hand made him realize that a sidewise blow was better than a spearlike thrust.

The sound behind had become a distant whispering, high-pitched and nearer. The army ants swept over a mushroom forest, and the yellow, branching, treelike growths swarmed with black creatures devouring the substance to which they clung.

A great bluebottle fly, shining with metallic luster, reposed in an ecstasy of feasting, sipping through its long proboscis the dark-colored liquid that dripped slowly from a mushroom. Maggots filled the mushroom, and exuded a solvent pepsin that liquefied the white firm "meat".

They fed on this soup, this gruel, and a surplus dripped to the ground below, where the bluebottle drank eagerly. Burl drew near, and struck. The fly collapsed into a writhing heap. Burl stood over it, pondering.

The army ants came nearer, down into a tiny valley, swarming into and through a little brook over which Burl had leaped. Ants can remain underwater a long time without drowning, so the small stream was but a minor obstacle. The first wave of ants choked the brook bed, forming a living bridge for their comrades.

A quarter mile to the left of Burl's line of march, and a mile behind the spot where he stood over the dead fly, was an acre-wide stretch where giant, rank cabbages had so far resisted the encroachments of the ever-present mushrooms. The pale, cross-shaped cabbage flowers fed many bees, while the leaves fed numberless grubs, worms, and loud-voiced crickets which crouched about on the ground, munching busily at the succulent green stuff. The army ants swept into the green area, ceaselessly devouring all they encountered.

A terrific din arose. The crickets hurtled away in rocketlike flight, a dark cloud of wildly beating wings. They shot aimlessly in any direction; half fell into the black tide of devouring insects and were seized instantly. They uttered terrible cries as they were torn to bits. Horrible inhuman screams reached Burl's ears.

Individual cries of such agony were too commonplace to attract Burl's attention—but the chorus of tormented creatures made him look up. This was no minor horror, but wholesale slaughter. He peered anxiously toward the sound.

A wild stretch of sickly yellow fungus, interspersed with an occasional squat toadstool or splash of vivid color where one of the many "rusts"

had found a foothold. To the left, a group of awkward misshapen fungoids clustered in silent mockery of a forest of trees. There a mass of faded green, where the giant cabbages stood. But as Burl watched, the green became slowly black.

From where he stood, Burl could see three great grubs in lazy contentment, eating ceaselessly the cabbages on which they rested. Suddenly first one and then another began to jerk spasmodically. About each, a rim of black appeared. Tiny black motes milled over the cabbages' green surfaces. The grubs and cabbages became black. Horrible contortions of the writhing grubs bespoke their agonies. Then a black wave appeared at the further edge of the stretch of sickly yellow fungus, a glistening, living wave, moving forward rapidly with the roar of clickings and a persistent overtone of shrill stridulations.

The hair rose on Burl's head. He knew all too well the meaning of that tide of shining bodies! With a gasp of terror, intellectual preoccupations forgotten, he turned and fled in ultimate panic. And the tide came inexorably on.

Clinging desperately to his sharp-toothed club, Burl darted through the tangled aisles of the little mushroom forest with heedless disregard of the dangers that might await him there. Flies buzzed about him loudly, huge creatures, glittering with metallic luster. One struck him on the shoulder, tearing his skin with vibrating wings.

Burl thrust it away and sped on. The oil covering him had turned rancid, and the odor attracted these connoisseurs of the fetid.

A heavy weight settled onto his head, then doubled. Two of the creatures had dropped into his oily hair, to sip the rancid oil through disgusting proboscises. Burl shook them off with his hand and ran madly on. His ears were keenly attuned to the sound of the army ants behind him, and it grew little fainter.

The clicking roar continued, but the buzzing of flies began to overshadow it. In Burl's time flies had no great heaps of putrid matter in which to lay eggs. Ants—those busy scavengers—carted all carrion away long before it acquired the gamy flavor beloved by fly maggots. Only in isolated spots were flies really numerous, but there they clustered in clouds that darkened the sky.

Such a buzzing, turbulent cloud surrounded the madly running figure of Burl. It seemed as though a miniature whirwind of winged bodies and multifaceted eyes kept pace with the little pink-skinned man. He twirled his club before him, and almost every stroke connected with a thinly armored body which collapsed in a spurt of reddish liquid.

Pain like a red-hot iron struck Burl's back. One of the stinging flies had thrust its sharp-tipped proboscis into his flesh to suck blood.

Burl yelped—and ran full-tilt into the thick stalk of a blackened, draggled toadstool. There was a crackling as of wet punk or brittle rotten wood. The toadstool collapsed with a sickening splash. Many flies had laid eggs in the fungoid, and it was a teeming mass of corruption and ill-smelling liquid.

As the toadstool's "head" crashed to the ground, it fell into a dozen pieces, and the earth for yards around was spattered with a stinking liquid in which tiny, headless maggots twitched convulsively.

The buzzing of the flies took on a satisfied note, and they settled by hundreds about the edges of the foul pools, becoming lost in frenzied feasting while Burl staggered to his feet and darted off again. Now he was but a minor attraction to the flies, and but one or two pursued him. From every direction they hurried to the toadstool banquet.

Burl ran on. He passed beneath the wide-spreading leaves of a giant cabbage. A great grasshopper crouched on the ground, tremendous jaws crunching the rank vegetation voraciously. Several huge worms ate steadily from their resting places among the leaves. One had slung itself beneath an overhanging leaf—which would have thatched a dozen huts for men—and was placidly anchoring itself in prepartion for the spinning of a cocoon in which to sleep the sleep of metamorphosis. All, even the mighty grasshopper, would soon be torn to myriad mouthfuls and devoured by the great black tide of relentlessly advancing army ants.

The clicking roar of their advance overwhelmed all other sounds, now. Burl ran madly, breath coming in great gasps, eyes wide with panic. Alone of all the world about him, he knew the danger behind. The creatures he passed went about their business with the terrifying efficiency of the insect world.

There is something strangely daunting in the actions of an insect. It moves so directly, with uncanny precision, utterly indifferent to anything but the end in view. Cannibalism is almost universal. The paralysis of prey, so it remains alive and fresh—though in agony—for weeks on end, is commonplace. The eating piecemeal of still-living victims is a matter of course.

Absolute mercilessness, utter callousness, incredible inhumanity beyond anything in the animal world is the way of insects. And these vast cruelties are performed by armored, machinelike creatures with an abstraction and a routine air that suggests a horrible Nature behind them all.

Indeed, Burl now passed within yards of a space where a female dung beetle was devouring the mate whose honeymoon had begun that same day. And behind a clump of mushrooms, a great yellow-banded spider coyly threatened a smaller male of her own species. He was discreetly ardent, but if he won the favor of the gruesome creature he wooed, he would also become her next meal.

Burl's heart pounded madly. The breath whistled in his nostrils. Behind, the wave of army ants drew nearer. They met the feasting flies. Some took flight and escaped, but those too engrossed in their delicious meal were seized, and vanished into tiny maws. The twitching little maggots, stranded on the earth by the scattering of their soupy broth, were likewise torn to pieces. The serried ranks of black insects went on.

Combined, the tiny clickings of their limbs, the stridulations of the creatures, the agonized cries of their victims, and the rending of fungi, cabbages, flesh, and chitin, produced a deafening din.

Burl was putting forth his last ounce of strength. His limbs trembled, his breathing was agony, sweat dripped down his forehead. This little, naked man ran for his insignificant life, as if his continued survival among the million tragedies of that single day were the purpose for which the whole universe existed.

He sped across an open space 100 yards long. A thicket of beautifully golden mushrooms (Agaricus caesareus) barred his way. Beyond them a range of strange hills began, purple, green, black and gold, melting into each other, branching off from each other, inextricably tangled.

They rose to a height of 70 feet, and above them a little grayish haze had gathered. There was a layer of tenous vapor on their surfaces, which slowly rose and coiled, gathering into a tiny cloudlet above their tips.

The hills themselves were actually masses of mushrooms, yeasts, "musts", and fungoids of every description, which had grown upon and about each other until these great piles of strangely colored, spongy stuff had gathered into one gigantic mass that undulated unevenly across the level earth for miles. Covered with purple mold, this mass seemed a range of purple hills, but here and there patches of other vivid colors showed through.

Burl burst through the golden thicket and attacked the ascent. His feet sank into the spongy hillock. Panting, gasping, he staggered across the top. He plunged into a little valley on the farther side, up another slope. Ten minutes he forced himself on, then collapsed in a little hollow, still gripping his sharp-toothed club.

He lay motionless, breathing in great gasps, limbs stubbornly refusing to move. Above, a bright yellow butterfly with a 30-foot wingspan fluttered lightly. The sound of the army ants grew nearer.

Burl, lying in an exhausted, panting heap on the purple mass of fungus, was conscious of a strange sensation. His body felt warm. He knew nothing of fire or the sun's heat; the only sensation of warmth he had ever known occurred when his tribesmen huddled together in their hiding place to banish the damp chill of the night with the heat of their bodies.

The heat Burl now felt was hotter, fiercer. He rolled over with tremendous effort, and for a moment the fungus was cool and soft beneath him. Then, slowly, the sensation of heat began again, and increased until Burl's skin was red and inflamed from the irritation.

The tenuous vapor, too, made Burl's lungs smart and eyes water. He breathed in great, choking gasps, but the period of rest—short as it had been—enabled him to rise and stagger on. He crawled painfully to the top of the slope, and looked back.

The hillcrest on which he stood was higher than those he had passed earlier, and he could see clearly the whole purple range. He had nearly reached the farther edge of the range, which was here half a mile wide.

A thin, dark cloud had gathered overhead. To the right and left, Burl saw the hills fading into the distance, growing fainter in the haze. He saw, too, the advancing cohorts of army ants, creeping over the tangled mass of fungus growths. They fed as they went, on the fungus that had gathered into these incredible monstrosities.

Burl leaned heavily on his club and watched resignedly. He could run no more. The army ants were spreading everywhere over the mass of fungus. They would reach him soon.

Far to the right the vapor thickened. A column of smoke arose. What Burl did not know and would never know was that far down in the interior of that compressed mass of fungus, slow oxidation had been occurring. The temperature of the interior had risen. In the darkness and dampness deep inside the hills, spontaneous combustion had begun.

Just as the vast piles of coal the railroad companies of 30,000 years before had gathered together sometimes began to burn fiercely in their interiors, just as the farmers' piles of damp straw suddenly burst into flames without cause, so these huge piles of tinderlike mushrooms had been burning slowly within themselves.

There had been no flames, because the surface remained intact and nearly airtight. But when the army ants began tearing at the edible

surfaces despite the heat they encountered, fresh air found its way to the smoldering masses of fungus. Slow combustion became rapid combustion. Dull heat became fierce flames. The slow trickle of thin smoke became a huge column of thick, choking, acrid stuff that set the army ants into spasms of convulsive writhing.

Flames burst out from a dozen points. Columns of blinding smoke rose skyward. A pall of fume-laden smoke gathered above the range of purple hills, while Burl watched apathetically. And the serried ranks of army ants marched into the widening furnaces.

They had recoiled from the river, because instinct had warned them. 30,000 years without danger from fire, however, had extinguished their racial fear of fire. They marched into the blazing orifices they had opened in the hills, snapping their mandibles at the leaping flames, springing at the glowing tinder.

The blazing area widened, as the purple surface was undermined and fell in. Uncomprehending, Burl watched the phenomenon. He stood, panting more and more slowly, breathing more and more easily, until the glow from the approahing flames reddened his skin and the acrid smoke made tears flow from his eyes.

He retreated slowly, leaning on his club and looking back. The black wave of army ants was sweeping into the fire, into the incredible heat of that carbonized material burning with an open flame. At last there were only the little bodies of stragglers from the great ant army, scurrying here and there over the ground their comrades had denuded of all living things. The entire main army had vanished—burnt to ashes in the furnace of the hills.

There had been agony in that flame, dreadful agony such as no man would like to dwell on: the insanely courageous ants attacking with horny jaws the burning masses of fungus, rolling over and over with flaming missiles clutched in their mandibles, sounding shrill war cries between screams of agony—blinded, antennae burnt off, lidless eyes scorched by licking flames, yet going madly forward on flaming feet to attack, ever attack this unknown enemy.

Burl limped over the hills. Twice he saw small groups of army ants. They had passed between the widening surfaces their comrades had opened, and were feeding voraciously on the hills they traversed. Once Burl was spied, and a shrill war cry sounded, but he moved on, and the ants were busy eating. A single ant charged. Burl brought down his club, and a writhing body remained to be eaten later by its comrades.

Burl emerged from the range of mushroom hills as night fell. Utter blackness covered the whole mad land, save where luminous mushrooms shed pale light and fireflies the length of Burl's arm shed fitful gleams on a jungle of fungus growths and monstrous insects. From the sky, now a drop and then a drop, the nightly rain began.

The ground was hard beneath Burl's feet. He picked his path with his large blue eyes, pupils expanded to great size, and listened keenly for sounds of danger. Something rustled heavily in a thicket of mushrooms 100 yards away. There were sounds of preening, and delicate feet padding on the ground. The throbbing beat of huge wings began suddenly, and a body lurched into flight.

A fierce, downward air current smote Burl, and he looked up in time to catch the outline of a huge moth passing above. He turned to watch its line of flight, and saw a strange glow in the sky behind him. The mushroom hills still burned.

He crouched beneath a squat toadstool to wait for dawn.

Slowly, slowly, the sodden rainfall continued. Drop by drop, all night long, warm pellets of liquid fell from the sky. They boomed against the hollow heads of toadstools, and splashed into the steaming pools that lay festering all over the fungus-covered earth.

And all night long the great fires grew and spread in the mass of already half-carbonized mushroom. The flare at the horizon intensified. Eyes wide and full of wonder, Burl watched it grow nearer. He had never seen flame before.

The flames brightened the overhanging clouds. Over a stretch a dozen miles long and as much as three miles across, seething furnaces sent columns of dense smoke up to the roof of clouds, luminous from the glow below them, and spreading out to form an intermediate layer below the cloudbanks.

It was like the glow of the many lights of a vast city thrown against the sky—but the last great city had molded into fungus-covered rubbish eons ago. Like the flitting of airplanes above a populous city, too, was the flitting of fascinated creatures above the glow.

Moths and great flying beetles, gigantic gnats and midges grown huge with time's passing, they fluttered a dance of death above the flames. As the fire grew nearer, Burl could see them.

Colossal, delicately formed creatues swooped above the strange blaze. Moths with riotously colored wings of 30-foot spread beat the air with mighty strokes, huge eyes glowing like carbuncles as they stared with frenzied, intoxicated devotion into the flames below.

Burl saw a great peacock moth soar above the burning mushroom hills. Its wings were 40 feet across, and fluttered like gigantic sails as the moth gazed down at the flaming furnace. The separate flames had united, now, and a single sheet of white-hot burning stuff spread across the country for miles, sending up clouds of smoke through which fascinated creatures flew.

Feathery antennae of the finest lace spread before the head of the peacock moth, and its body was softest, richest velvet. A ring of snow-white down marked where its head began, and the red glow from below eerily illuminated its maroon body.

For one instant it was outlined clearly. Its eyes glowed more redly than any ruby's fire, and the great, delicate wings were poised in flight. Burl caught the reflected flash of flames on two great iridescent spots on the widespread wings. Shining purple and vivid red, the glow of opal and sheen of pearl, all the glory of chalcedony and chrysoprase formed a single wonder in the glare of burning fungus. Then white smoke swirled about the great moth, dimming the radiance of its gorgeous dress.

Burl saw it dive straight into the thickest and brightest of the licking flames, flying madly, eagerly, into the searing, hellish heat—a willing, drunken sacrifice to the god of fire.

Monster flying beetles with horny wing cases stiffly stretched blundered above the reeking, smoking pyre. In the red light they shone like burnished metal, and their clumsy bodies with spurred and fierce-toothed limbs hurtled like meteors through the luminous haze of ascending smoke.

Burl saw strange collisions and stranger meetings. Male and female flying creatures circled and spun dances of love and death in the wild radiance from the funeral pyre of the purple hills. They mounted higher than Burl could see, drunk with the ecstasy of life, then descended to plunge headlong to death in the roaring fires below.

From everywhere they came. Moths of brightest yellow with soft, furry bodies palpitant with life flew madly into the column of light that reached to the overhanging clouds. Moths of deepest black, with gruesome symbols on their wings, danced, like motes in a bath of sunlight, above the glow.

And Burl sat crouched beneath an overshadowing toadstool, watching—and listening. A continual faint hiss penetrated the sound of fire: raindrops turning to steam. From afar, Burl heard a strange, deep bass muttering. Unbeknownst to him, it was the chorus of insect-eating giant frogs, reaching his ears 15 miles from their vast swamp.

The night wore on, while the flying creatures above the fire danced and died, ever replaced by fresh arrivals. Burl sat tensely still, awed yet uncomprehending. At last the sky grew dimly gray, then brighter, and day began. The flames of the burning hills grew faint as the fire died, and at last Burl crept from his hiding place and stood erect.

He turned to continue his odyssey, and saw the remains of one of the tragedies of the night.

A huge moth had flown into the flames, been horribly scorched, and floundered out again. Unable to return to its devouring deity, it now lay immovable, one beautiful, delicate wing burned in gaping holes, eyes dimmed by flame, and exquisitely tapering limbs crushed by the force with which it had struck the ground. It lay helpless, only its broken antennae moving restlessly, painfully.

Burl approached, and picked up a stone. He moved on presently, a velvet cloak across his shoulders, gleaming with all the colors of the rainbow. A gorgeous mass of soft, blue moth fur covered his middle, and bound to his forehead were two yard-long, golden fragments of the moth's magnificent antennae. In a strip of sinew about his waist was thrust the fiercly toothed limb of a fighting beetle. He soon added to his inventory a sharp-pointed spear from another scorched victim of the flames. It was longer than he himself.

So equipped, Burl resumed his trek to Saya, looking like a prince of Ind on a bridal journey—though no mere prince ever wore such raiment in days of greatest glory.

For miles Burl threaded his way through a forest of towering toadstools, decorated with colorful rusts and molds. Twice he avoided huge bubbling pools of festering green slime, and once hid fearfully as a monster scarabeus beetle lumbered within three yards of him, moving heavily with a clanking of limbs like some great machine.

Burl saw the creature's mighty armor and inward-curving jaws, and envied its weapons. The time was not yet come, however, when he would smile at the great insect and hunt it for the juicy flesh inside those armored limbs.

Burl was still a savage, still ignorant, still timid. His principle advance had been that whereas he had fled without reasoning, he now paused to see if he need flee.

He was a strange sight, moving cautiously through the shadowed lanes of the mushroom forest. Against the play of color from his borrowed plumage his pink skin showed in odd contrast. He looked like some proud knight walking slowly through the gardens of a goblin's

castle. But he was still a fearful creature, superior to the monsters about him only in the possession of latent intelligence. He was weak—and therein lay his greatest promise. 100,000 years before, his ancestors had been forced by lack of claws and fangs to develop brains.

Burl was sunk as low as they, but he had to combat more horrifying enemies and more inexorable threats. His ancestors had invented knives, spears, and flying missiles. The creatures about Burl had knives and spears a thousand times more deadly than the weapons that had made his ancestors masters of the woods and forests.

Burl was in comparison vastly more weak than his forebears had been; that weakness that would someday lead him and those who followed him to heights his ancestors had never known. But now—

He heard a discordant, deep bass bellow, from a spot not 20 yards away. In a flash of panic he darted behind a clump of mushrooms and hid, panting in sheer terror.

The bellow came again, this time with a querulous note. Burl heard a crashing and plunging as of a struggle. A mushroom broke with a brittle snapping, and the spongy thud as it fell was followed by a tremendous commotion. Something was desperately fighting something else, but Burl could not identify the combatants.

The noise gradually faded. Presently Burl's breathing slowed, and his courage returned. He stole from his hiding place, and would have retreated, but something held him back. Instead of creeping from the scene, he crept cautiously toward the source of the noise.

He peered between two cream-colored toadstool stalks and saw the cause of the noise. A wide, funnel-shaped snare of silk was spread before him, 20 yards across and equally deep. Individual threads were plainly visible, but in the mass it seemed a fabric of sheerest, finest texture. Supported by tall mushrooms, it was anchored to the ground below, and drew away to a tiny point through which a hole led to some unknown recess. And all the space of the wide snare was hung with threads, fine, twisted threads no more than half the thickness of Burl's finger.

This was the trap of a labyrinth spider. Not one of the interlacing threads was strong enough to hold the feeblest prey, but they numbered in the thousands. A great cricket had become entangled in the maze of sticky lines. Its limbs thrashed out, smashing the snare lines at every stroke, but at every stroke meeting and becoming entangled with a dozen more. It struggled mightily, emitting at intervals its horrible, deep bass cry.

Burl watched, fascinated. Most insects have their allotted victims and touch no others. These posed no threat to him, so Burl had little interest in them. But spiders are terrifyingly impartial. A spider devouring some luckless insect was an example of what might happen to Burl.

The opening at the rear of the funnel-shaped snare darkened. The snare drew itself into a tunnel there, in which the spider had waited and watched. Now it swung out lightly, advancing toward the cricket. It was a gray spider (Agelena labyrinthica), with twin black ribbons on its thorax, aside the head, and two stripes of speckled brown and white on its abdomen. Burl also saw two curious appendages like tails.

The cricket struggled only feebly now, its cries muted by the confining threads fettering its limbs. Burl saw the spider throw itself at the cricket and witnessed the final, convulsive shudder of the insect as the spider's fangs pierced its tough armor. The sting lasted a long time, and finally Burl realized the spider was feeding, sucking the succulent juices from the now dead cricket. When at last the carcass was drained, the spider pawed the lifeless creature for a few moments and left it.

A sudden thought came to Burl and took his breath away. For a second his knees knocked together in self-induced panic. He watched the gray spider carefully with growing determination. He, Burl, had killed a hunting spider at the red-clay cliff. True, the killing had been accidental, and had nearly cost him his own life, but he had killed a spider of the most deadly kind.

Now great ambition grew in Burl's heart. His tribe had always feared spiders too much to study their habits, but they knew a few things. The most important: snare spiders never left their lairs to hunt—never! Burl hoped to make daring application of that knowledge.

He drew back from the white, shining snare and crept softly to the rear. The fabric gathered itself into a point and continued 20 feet as a tunnel, in which the spider would dream of its last meal and await its next victim. Burl made his way to a point where the tunnel was just 10 feet away. Soon, through the threads of the tunnel, he saw the thick gray bulk of the spider return to its resting place.

Burl's hair stood on end from sheer fright, but he was slave to an idea. He drew near and aimed his deadly, pointed spear at the bulge in the tunnel where the spider lay. He thrust it home with all his strength—and ran away at top speed, glassy-eyed from terror.

Much later he ventured near again, heart still in his mouth, ready to flee at the slightest sound. All was still. Burl had missed the horrible convulsions of the wounded spider, had not heard the frightful gnashings of

its fangs against the piercing weapon, had not seen the silken threads of the tunnel ripped as the mortally wounded spider struggled madly to free itself.

He came back beneath the overshadowing toadstools, quietly and cautiously, to find a great rent in the silken tunnel, and the great gray bulk lifeless and still, half-fallen through the opening the spear had made. A little puddle of evil-smelling liquid lay on the ground below, and from time to time a droplet dripped from the spear into the puddle with a splash.

Burl looked at what he had done, saw the dead body of the creature he had slain, saw the ferocious mandibles and keen, deadly fangs. The creature's dead eyes stared at him malignantly, and the hairy legs remained braced as if further to enlarge the gaping hole through which it had partly fallen.

Exultation filled Burl's heart. His tribe had been furtive vermin for thousands of years, hiding or fleeing from mighty insects, and, if overtaken, screaming shrilly in terror while helplessly awaiting death.

Burl had turned the tables. He had slain an enemy of his tribe. His breast expanded. Always his tribesmen went quietly and fearfully, but a sudden exultant yell burst from Burl's lips—the first hunting cry from the lips of a man in 300 centuries!

The next second his pulse nearly stopped in sheer panic at having made such a noise. He listened apprehensively but there was no sound. He approached his prey and carefully withdrew his spear. The viscid liquid made it slimy and slippery; he wiped it dry against a leathery toadstool. Then Burl had to conquer his illogical fear again before daring to touch the creature he had slain.

He moved off presently, with the belly of the spider on his back and two hairy legs over his shoulders. The other limbs hung limp, trailing on the ground. Burl was now a still more curious sight wrapped in a shining cloak of iridescent colors, wearing a headdress of golden antennae, and hauling the hideous bulk of a gray spider.

He moved through the mushroom forest, and, because of the thing he carried, all creatures fled before him. They did not fear man—their instinct was slow-moving—but during all the millions of years that insects have existed, spiders have preyed on them.

Burl heard loud humming and buzzing as he topped a rise opening onto a valley of torn and blackened mushrooms. He stopped and looked down.

There was not a single yellow top among the mushrooms. Each was infected with tiny maggots which had liquefied the tough meat of the mushroom and caused it to drip to the ground below. The liquid had gathered at the center of the depression to form a golden-red lake. And all about its edges, in ranks and rows, by thousands, by millions, were ranged the green-gold, shining bodies of great flies.

They were small, compared to other insects. Their increase in size had been limited due to an imperative necessity of their race.

The flesh flies laid their eggs by hundreds in decaying carcasses. The others laid their eggs by hundreds in mushrooms. To feed the maggots that would hatch, a relatively great quantity of food was needed, therefore the flies must remain small, or the body of a single grasshopper, say, would furnish food for but two or three grubs instead of the hundreds it must support.

Burl stared down at the golden pool. Bluebottles, greenbottles, and all flies of metallic luster gathered at the Lucullan feast of corruption. Their buzzing as they darted above the odorous pool of golden liquid made the sound Burl had heard. Their bodies flashed and glittered as they darted about, seeking a place to alight and join the orgy.

Those which clustered at the banks of the pool were still as if carved from metal. Their huge, red eyes glowed, and their bodies shone with obscene fatness. Flies are the most disgusting of all insects. Burl watched them, watched the interlacing streams of light as they buzzed eagerly above the pool, seeking a place at the festive board.

A drumming roar sounded. A golden speck appeared in the sky, a slender, needlelike body with transparent, shining wings and two huge eyes. It grew nearer and became a dragonfly 20 feet long, its body shimmering, purest gold. It poised above the pool, then darted down. Its jaws snapped viciously and repeatedly; each time the glittering body of a fly vanished.

A second dragonfly appeared, its body a vivid purple, and a third. They swooped and rushed above the golden pool, snapping in midair, making abrupt, angular turns, creatures of incredible ferocity and beauty. At the moment they were nothing more nor less than slaughtering machines. Their multifaceted eyes burned with bloodlust. In that mass of buzzing flies even the most voracious appetite must be sated, but the dragonflies kept on. Slender, graceful creatures, they dashed here and there above the pond like the mythical dragons for which they had been named.

A few miles farther on Burl recognized a familiar landmark. He knew it well, but always from a safe distance. A mass of rock had heaved itself up from the nearly level plain he was traversing, and formed an outjutting cliff. At one point the rock overhung a sheer drop, making an inverted ledge—a roof over nothingness—which a hairy creature had transformed into a fairylike dwelling. A white hemisphere clung tenaciously to the rock above, and long cables anchored it firmly.

A Clotho spider (Clotho Durandi, LATR) had built a nest there, from which it emerged to hunt the unwary. Within that half-globe was a monster, resting on a cushion of softest silk. If one went too near, one of the little inverted arches, seemingly firmly closed by a wall of silk, would open and a creature out of a dream of hell emerge, to run with fiendish agility toward its prey.

Yes, Burl knew the place. Hung on the outer walls of the silken palace were stones and tiny boulders, discarded fragments of former meals, and gutted armor from limbs of ancient prey. And most terrible was another decoration that dangled from the castle of this insect ogre: the shrunken, desiccated figure of a man, all juices extracted, life gone.

That man's death had saved Burl's life two years before. They had been together, seeking edible mushrooms. The Clotho spider sprang suddenly from behind a great puffball, and the two men froze in terror. It came swiftly forward and chose its victim. Burl had escaped when the other man was seized. Now he looked meditatively at the hiding place of his ancient enemy. Someday—

But now he passed on. He passed the thicket in which great moths hid during the day, and the turgid pool of slime and yeast where a monster water snake lurked. He penetrated the little wood of shining mushrooms that produced light at night, and the shadowed place where truffle-hunting beetles went chirping thunderously at dark hours.

Then Burl saw Saya, a flash of pink skin vanishing behind the thick stalk of a squat toadstool. He ran forward, calling her name. She appeared, and saw the figure with the horrible bulk of the spider on its back. Horrified, she cried out, and Burl understood. He dropped his burden, then went swiftly toward her.

They met. Saya waited timidly until she saw who this man was, and astonishment filled her face. Gorgeously attired, in an iridescent cloak from the whole wing of a great moth, with a strip of softest fur from a night-flying creature about his middle, with golden feathery antennae bound on his forehead, and a fierce spear in his hands—this was not the Burl she knew.

But he moved slowly toward her, filled with fierce delight at seeing her again, thrilling with joy at her slender gracefulness and the dark richness of her tangled hair. He held out his hands and touched her shyly. Then, manlike, he babbled excitedly of his adventures, and dragged her toward his great victim, the gray-bellied spider.

Saya trembled when she saw the furry bulk lying on the ground, and almost fled when Burl advanced and took it on his back. But something of the pride that filled him came vicariously to her. She smiled a flashing smile, and Burl stopped short in his explanation, tongue-tied. His eyes became pleading and soft. He laid the huge spider at her feet and spread out his hands imploringly.

30,000 years of savagery had not lessened Saya's femininity. She became aware that Burl was her slave, that these wonderful things he wore and had done meant nothing if she did not approve. She drew away—saw the misery in Burl's face—and abruptly ran into his arms and clung to him, laughing happily. And suddenly Burl understood that all these things he had done, even the slaying of a great spider, were of no importance whatever beside this most wonderful thing that had just happened, and told Saya so quite humbly, but holding her very close to him as he did.

And so Burl came back to his tribe. He had left nearly naked, with but a wisp of moth wing twisted about his middle, a timid, fearful, trembling creature. He returned triumphantly, walking slowly, fearlessly down a broad lane of golden mushrooms toward the hiding place of his people.

On his shoulders was draped a great and many-colored cloak made from the whole of a moth's wing. Soft fur was about his middle. A spear was in his hand, a fierce club at his waist. He and Saya bore between them the dead body of a huge spider—aforetime the dread of the pink-skinned, naked men. But to Burl the most important thing of all was that Saya walked beside him openly, acknowledging him before all the tribe.

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