

THE GREEN GODS

I

Life had won.

On Earth it was the year 2000 of the cosmic reckoning—and of the green night. The great cataclysm which had once ravaged the world was dissipating in the eternal passage of time. A few sacred books, graven on jade and onyx and fixed to their altars by chains of orichalc, recorded that the world's death had come from the stars. One day, Earth's magnetic field had shifted, the earthly shell had burst, and the world's outlines had undergone profound changes. Oceans left their limits, overwhelming continents. A rain of meteors paved the mountains with jeweled fire. Two unprecedented moons—one blue, one green—rose over the horizon.

Human colonies scattered on the habitable planets of the galaxy tried in vain to observe the outcome. The new magnetic field, 100 times more powerful than the old, created an impenetrable barrier of cosmic particles; the clouds of Venus have the same origin. No voyager from space could force that barrier. By the thousands, pilots battered themselves against it; they drifted thereafter in Earth's wake, in their glittering steel coffins. The galaxy's scientists comforted themselves with the prediction that the force of it would diminish in several thousands of years. It was supposed that such phenomena had happened before and that Earth's magnetic field resulted from them.

The dream-ridden planet entered its long absence from the great harmony of the Free Stars.

But on the world's surface, life went on. In the southern hemisphere a continent rose above the floods and a great many survivors found a landing there. Then followed a savage struggle for possession of this ruin-covered bit of Earth; all madness unleashed... until the day a demigod established his hegemony there. As in the Sumerian tales which spoke of another deluge, he was handsome and wise, and he came from the sea.

His first act was to bring order to mankind, and to take from men their most dangerous weapons. These were destroyed or hidden away, and what survived of mankind could breathe easily again.

Was so radical a measure too hastily applied? The god who called himself Hellemar had seen that man was his own worst enemy. He himself did not live long enough to see the mutations... but his work would last. He outlawed war among humans and established a rigid caste system to minimize the effects of the radiations. He restored the cities and tried to preserve what was left of civilization. Then he died. A dynasty ruled in his name.

And centuries passed.

Or millennia.

By the time spectrographers at Altair had noted a decided weakening of Earth's magnetic barrier, three powers existed on Earth.

There was the fading Empire of Man, founded on the site of a forgotten land named A-atlan, or Mexico.

On its borders, in the jungles, rose the warlike kingdoms of the wearers of antennae and chitined wing cases.

After a wild mutation which began with the cataclysm, insects, particularly the scarabs, grew as much as three meters in height. They became the dominant species then—not superior in all senses, far from it. They peopled strange cities, termite hills of beaten earth, riddled with subterranean passages. Indeed they progressed, but their instincts ruled them. Their evolution was fixed in the ways of the anthill and the hive. They were fast-breeding, brash, cruel, and thick-witted. Any alliance between them and mankind was impossible. And most of the great vertebrates had perished.

In the heat of the greenhouse effect which had settled over Earth by reason of the cosmic clouds, plants had become another matter entirely. The simultaneous explosion of all the storage sites of plant hormones was surely a primary cause of their mad proliferation. The drowned Earth covered itself in forests which devoured the fields and the cities and surrounded the waterways. In jungles of ferns, living walls of spore-carried plants moved upon the continents. In all instances the progressive species

among the plants were quickly limited to the cacti and to certain orchids. Cultivated especially in cities and moving only with great difficulty, the orchids in particular had allies in every copse. They made themselves indispensable to their hosts. It became evident that these conquerors-from-within brought out of their long history—strange riches: seven or eight additional senses, a mathematical forevision, and certain powers of hypnosis.

They offered humanity a “fraternal communion”—a sharing of flesh and blood... in the form of the juice of the peyotl, the pulp of the poppy, and the incense of the Indian hemp, all of these in great strength. Each city had its Green Temples, its Colleges of Dream, its distilleries of visions. This bliss was given gratis. One could forget all his worries and his wounds, sunk in bottomless cotton-wool; one would imagine himself a plant, or a butterfly, or a beetle armed with cruel pincers. Every instinct was satisfied. There were no consequences—until one awoke at the end of the reckoning.

And when the Empire of the Sun, consumed by vile radiations and its orgy of drugs, tried to awaken—it was too late. Instead of the precise science which humanity had lost, there were rites of plant or mineral origin. Plants were now in the city, and they divided the inheritance of man.

And the Holy Council which ruled the land of A-atlan reckoned itself 70% plant.

At the thin edge of dawn, the immense city, built by the survivors of the cataclysm, witnessed the fall of its god.

The slanted sides of the pyramids and the surfaces of the zodiac wheels reflected it. The colossus fell without quake or tidal wave. Set at the entrance of the harbor, the white onyx shape, face uplifted to the wide universe, represented man, that vanishing species. Its whiteness symbolized the Children of the Sun, and the sculptor had made it in the likeness of Hellemar, the god arisen from the waves. Its features were hard and perfect.

For eyes, the artist had set two huge black diamonds. In that age, they had known the secrets of ensorcelling light into such stones, and these twin lamps for centuries had brightened the paths of sailors on the seas.

One night the fires had gone out and no one had known how to relight them.

And on another night...

Startled awake on their terraces, the radioactive, mahogany-red Giants and the graceful Elnyans (whose jeweled corselets and antennaed diadems made them look like moths) searched in vain between the Council palace and the queen's gardens for a statue 100 cubits high, whose crown had sheltered eagles.

The whole population was stricken with a terrible foreboding, well knowing that the gods express themselves in signs. It was an ancient people, and very noble; its records went back before the cataclysm; it was even rumored that they had brought it on themselves—but of course the plants and insects vied in inventing such slanders. At least, the people had hoped to the very last that salvation would come to them from the gods and the stars—as it knew their ruin had come. Senseless hopes, if there were any hopes in them.

The Sun rose on the mauve rim of the east, as the chanting mob reached the palace of Uxmal, the prince regent.

In the center of a porphyry foundation sat that baroque residence, made of broken bits of ruined temples. Heritage of the House of E-enor, it charmed the eye with its polished artistry, its grandeur, the grace of its ornaments. Its galleries were surrounded with wind harps, and in the halls, which were shaded and cool even in bright midsummer, the vaulted ceilings shone with a glow of moonstone.

A thousand voices summoned. The prince appeared on the balcony, a jeweled figure clothed in violet byssus. His hands and his ivory brow were traced with green veins; after a certain age humans lived swiftly—and little. Two Elnyans whose masks—Persian-blue phosphor—imitated the wings of Mexican moths, fanned him with peacock feathers. Below him, the grieving crowd moaned.

“The human gods are dead!”

The harbor master stepped forward, a man wearing a helmet with knobbed antennae and bearing a lance of white coral. He belonged to the warrior caste, serving the radioactive ascendancy of the 70%.

He struck the drum. “The god Hellemar is gone,” he declared. “Tonight, between the two moons, we saw him topple and sink down into the abyss. There you can still see him, where the road ends. Fifty cubits down, his helm gleams among the algae and the starfish. The lord has fallen!”

“The gods of men are deserting the Earth,” the mob chanted.

Uxmal listened to this musical wake, taut with rage. Not a one of them protested this interpretation of events, this death sentence on humanity itself. To a man they raised their noise; unmixed, three chords bore witness to their grief.

The human race, irradiated from the time of the cataclysm, had suffered from it in differing degrees. The DE (Direct Exposure) victims were slaves, wearing the shape of toads, their faces as green-cruled as old pagodas. They abased themselves, crawling in the dust. The mahogany-red radioactives were the warrior caste; quetzal-plumed, they smote their shields. And the Elnyans, whose distant ancestors had lived in shelters, as if shelters could save them, looked like some languid cluster of nocturnal moths.

“We shall go see,” Uxmal said.

He descended the stairs in his star-broidered robe. Around him the rose-colored platform was clean and polished. No plant was witness, fortunately, to this defeat. A sedan chair borne by lower hexapods awaited him below. Guards armored in golden wing cases, with eyed helmets—the better to mime the insects—parted the crowd with blows of their short lances. For years the regent had avoided public appearances. The land was well-governed without him. He was loath to leave his sheltered palaces, his wind harps, and his singing manuscripts.

The chair made slow progress. A great silence had fallen over the square; not a breath, not the rattle of a drum disturbed it. The streets through which he traveled were a carpet of bent backs and beseeching hands. Uxmal felt a sudden chill; they *knew*, and suffered with him.

The prince regent had no need of signs and omens. He carried in his own veins the last Sunborn blood, pure of radioactivity, and with it the very damnation of the human empire. He could no longer doubt that Time was drawing to its close. The great cataclysm had given Earth over to deaf powers, to the emanations of a land in torment. Today there was only boiling and ferment, plumes of smoke spreading over volcanoes once reckoned extinct, and torrents of hot mud gouting down their flanks. Around the city, mimosas reached unprecedented heights and ferns cracked rock. The forest was on the march.

Man himself was sliding down the slope of shadows. He had already lost his soul and his gods. Soon he would lose his very shape.

When they reached the quays, the chair halted. Uxmal dismounted and leaned over the sapphire waters. Of course; it must lift to the sight of the condemned that human perfection—the prince regent made out the form of the colossus, sunk beneath the weeds which would soon devour it. In a white face of pathetic beauty two vast eyes begged for help. The regent shuddered. The weed-shrouded god resembled the sea lord, his own son. According to forgotten rituals, this was his mystic double. And no one knew at the moment where the fleet of Prince Aran lay.

A sounding of trumpets, a strident blare of sea conchs, invaded the Sunborn’s musing. He lifted his head and looked.

A procession was coming down the quay.

The marble jetty extended to the white, terrace-girt pyramid which towered over the deeper gardens. This was the Council palace, a terrible building, so secret that people avoided even looking on its gates. At the moment, its two doors were wide open. In a silence which became palpable, a solemn procession came out toward the port. The chanting mob gave way before it. The prince regent stood alone, face-to-face with his enemies.

As in his nightmares, all flight was impossible.

The stapelias came at the head of the train, yellow and purple and violet-spotted, like sacs of leather. By some caprice of the radiations, they stood two or three meters high and trailed after them a skein of prehensile roots. From the time of the great catastrophe, human science had wondered—these plants, torn out of the earth... what feeds them? But move they did. A line of faucarias that opened great pale flower cups, cavities of fearsome jaws... like wolves, like caimans, like cats, they surrounded the procession. Beyond them the cereus speciosus and their cousins the flagelliformis raised spikes of rosy flowers and fleshy spines with sulphurous cups, spattered with blood. A heap of precious stones that was the lithops. Wool-topped rackets, grayish hued, distinguished the doddering Old Man cacti, the cephalocereus.

They are all there, thought Uxmal, *the praetorians, the magistrates, the councilors*. A vast horror enveloped him. These plants were—human.

The most precious of them, the most delicate, had themselves carried on crystal thrones by Elnyans of noble blood. Thrones... no, *vats*, cubes filled with transparent rose fluid, in which white and green filaments writhed. These were the truly strange ones, resembling jewels, or lips. For some of them it seemed that nature in a moment's madness had used plastic, or leather, or minerals. They bore ancient names which had ceased long ago to have meaning for anyone; they were as beautiful as women or as terrible as nightmares. But all were flesh-eaters... the violet *oncidia*, the palpitating moth orchid, the tiger-striped *schilleriana*. The *cattleya labiata* was a rosy open mouth; the giant *albans* were formed of pale, translucent membranes, and the *anthuriums* glistened like hearts laid bare, lacquered with blood.

A heavy vanilla perfume flowed like a wave over the land.

Uxmal closed his eyes as the last contingent crushed him with horror: green gourds, severed heads of bloated buddhas, the *echinocacti williamsi*, commonly called *peyotl*.

The prince regent forced himself to open his eyes. Motionless, transfixed with horror, he watched the enemies of his species advance—his successors.

The hindmost of the *peyotls*, high priest A, had the proportions of a great world globe. Twelve Elnyans lowered his chair to the ground. Eyeless, mouthless, he was yet in full communication with the universe, and Uxmal received full in the face the overwhelming, acid thought which came from this gently swaying monster.

Behold the end of the human gods, Uxmal. A new age is beginning.

"That of the green gods, is it?"

What matters the form which clothes the spirit?

"Spirit?" asked the regent coldly. "Have you a mental dimension like ours? Or a moral one?"

A logical one, at least, said the globe. We have waited so long, all these ages, the Tertiary, the Quaternary... Now our hour is at hand. And think of it, Uxmal, nothing can stop us. Not even a being of your own flesh and blood.

"I know," said Uxmal, his teeth clenched. Drops of sweat beaded his saffron-hued temples.

(He does not.) But these overseas expeditions are in vain. Man's destiny is sealed. What power can you set against the cycles of destiny? What hero, what god? The last of them is dead, with Hellemar. Where will come this help for the human race?

Uxmal turned away and held his inmost thoughts to himself. But someone answered for him. At the instant the company had passed beneath the pyramid, on the Tower of the Equinox, over a nacreous, prised sea, the Waker of the Day had seized his beryllium hammer. Now the first blow struck that great shield suspended between two pillars, the shield men said had once belonged to Hellemar himself.

A sound pure as a harp note cleaved the air. Below, the crowd stood motionless, listening. Faces lifted. An omen, it was an omen from heaven. Brazen echoes filled the harbor. For a measureless instant the two assemblies listened—and with them the city and the bloody sea. The enormous *echinocactus* rested easily on his litter, but Uxmal felt the air saturated with his fury.

Twenty-two blows could warn the empire of invasion.

The 23rd meant the return of the fleet.

At that 23rd blow, the whole city sighed with ecstasy and hurled itself toward the harbor.

The ships of the Lord Prince Aran appeared across the horizon.