

“Aalila”

By Christopher Blayre

There is not—or at any rate there should not be—any romance in “*Nature*.” You will observe the italics and the inverted commas, which indicate that I refer to the Journal and not to the Dame. “*Nullius in verba*” is the inexorable motto of the Royal Society of London, which means that you must not state a fact unless you can table, or screen, the evidence which supports and proves it. It will be difficult, indeed impossible, to observe this rule in recording the story of Aalila, but I will do my best.

Among the “Notes” which supply to the Curious the scientific news of the week in “*Nature*” of the—well, perhaps it may be better to refer the Curious to his file of that admirable journal for the exact date, for I am writing face to face with the gorgeous panorama of the Pyrennees as seen from the Hotel de France at Pau, and I have only the paragraph—cut out—with me. It reads:

“We regret to announce the death of Professor Alured Markwand, which took place suddenly in his Observatory at Piping Pebworth on the 14th instant. The cause and manner of his death is unknown, the coroner’s jury having, as directed, returned an open verdict. It seems probable that Professor Markwand met his death by electrocution, as his body, strangely scarred, was found beside a powerful dynamo which generated the electric current of an arc light in the Observatory. It is well known that he was engaged in researches upon the development of photo-telephony, and his Observatory was fitted with an arc-light apparatus of exceptionally high voltage.” Then follow biographical details for which the Curious may be referred to the columns of “Who’s Who.”

I have given anxious thought to the question whether I should record the manner of his death, or allow the ‘open verdict’ of the coroner’s jury to stand as the only (and official) account of the matter. My own reputation for veracity, for reliability as an observer, for scientific method of record—nay, I may say for sanity itself—is at stake. In any case this record cannot be published in my life-time; my position as Professor of Psychology in the University of Cosmopoli would be seriously compromised, and though, as I believe myself to be, not lacking in physical or moral courage, I should shrink from facing the genial gathering of my colleagues in the tea-room of the Royal Society on Thursday afternoons, and probably feeling that I am relegated to that small coterie of eminent men of science who have flown—and unhappily have published an account of their flights—into the cloudy atmosphere of metaphysical—research? experiment? self-delusion?—call it what you will. Thus much by way of apologia. But I feel myself compelled to record, to enregister, the most amazing and overwhelming experience of my life.

In the reports of the inquest, it will be remembered that it appeared that it was I who gave evidence as to the discovery of Alured Markwand’s body. It was stated in those reports, that entering his Observatory at 8 a.m. on the day in question—I had been spending a month with him in Warwickshire—I found his body lying against the dynamo as described. This is not true. I dragged it there—it was the only thing to do—an explanation of some kind had to be forthcoming. *I was there when he died.*

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It has been noted in "*Nature*" (*ut suprá*) that Markwand was actively engaged in the study of photo-telephony. Those who were privileged to be present at the Soirée of the Royal Society in 1919 will remember the demonstration given by Dr. A. O. Rankine of this remarkable method of sound-transmission. The beam of light that extended above the heads of the assembled guests from the Council Chamber to the furthest of the library, the telephones attached to the mirror which caught the beam, and the delicate apparatus of Selenium cells, which enabled people to hear in the library what Dr. Rankine's assistant spoke into the receiver in the Council Chamber, and how the speech was interrupted when a sheet of card was interposed, cutting off the beam from the receiving mirror, will be within the memory of all who were present. I remember one exquisitely pretty red-haired girl who—but, however, she has nothing to do with this record. Markwand was explaining, or trying to explain, it to me—I knew he had an installation of his own—and, intimate as I was with him, as the result of a friendship that dated from boyhood and had persisted through Eton and Trinity until we found ourselves colleagues on the Professorial Staff at the University of Cosmopoli, I was vaguely distressed at the nervous absorption with which he discussed the matter.

"It is extraordinarily interesting," said I.

"Interesting!" he exclaimed, in the tone he might have adopted to the Yankee girl who, on seeing the Falls of Niagara for the first time and by moonlight, remarked 'Well—well, *ain't that cunning!*' "Interesting!" he said. "Good God! it's overwhelming—it's terrible!"

I looked at him in some disquiet; it had not struck me in that light. His face was ashy, and his lips, like his hands, trembled. I knew he had been overworking. I felt very uneasy. I had been trying to persuade him to go down to his cottage and Observatory at Piping Febworth for a real rest, and he had promised to go as soon as the term was over, on condition that I would go with him. Meanwhile I succeeded in getting him back early that evening to his rooms, where, over a pipe and a whiskey and soda, he made half-confidences. It seemed to me he was on the verge of a serious breakdown, if not of actual insanity. I felt called upon to remonstrate with him, gently, as one would humour a patient suffering from acute neurasthenia.

"Come, Markwand," I said, "what is all this about? You are overstraining the cord. It will snap if you are not careful. A Professor of Astronomy—a mathematician—should, of all people, keep a level head. Remember our motto "*Nullius in verba*," if you didn't seem to be in such deadly earnest I should say you are simply talking tosh."

"I *am* in deadly earnest," he replied quietly. "This *is* "*Nullius in verba*," I know what I'm talking about—and it's too much to know. You think I'm going mad? Well—if I don't talk about it pretty soon to somebody I *shall* go mad. And I've made up my mind to talk to *you*."

"Fire ahead."

"Not now. I'm too tired. And there's still something more to be done. I'll tell you all about it when we get down there. Meanwhile, think, man! Try to realise what photo-telephony means—the carrying power of a beam of light; the illimitable spaces of æther, across which beams of light are still reaching us from planets that became extinct thousands of years ago. Think of the lines of light that are connecting us at this moment with the other planets—Mars, Jupiter, Venus. Venus!" he repeated, reaching for his tumbler, and I saw that his hand shook like a contact-breaker. "Think of it! Has it never occurred to you that between talking from one end to the other of the Society's rooms, and talking from here to, say, Venus, is only a question of degree? Why not?" And he looked at me as if challenging me to express an unbelief—as who should say "Can I go on? Are you safe? Do you think it is worth while to listen?"

I was extremely uncomfortable. I hated to leave him, wrought up as he was, but on the other hand I was afraid to let him go on—then. I decided rapidly.

“Anyhow, it is frightfully suggestive—extraordinarily interesting—but it’s too big a subject to go into now. I’m off home. See you at lunch to-morrow.”

And so we parted for that time. Next day, as we smoked in the Common Room after lunch there was no trace visible of his agitation of the night before. Indeed he appeared to be so entirely his normal self that I felt emboldened to revert to Rankine’s demonstration.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “A delightful entertainment for an evening party. I quite envied Rankine’s assistant, fitting the receivers over the prettiest possible ears of the prettiest possible people, and listening to their delighted squeals of astonishment. But you know,” and he became graver, “our friend has hardly touched the fringe of the subject. Wait till you get to Piping Pebworth and see what I can do. I’ll astonish you! And by the way, do you remember years ago, the talk there was of transmitting designs—drawings, portraits—by wire? There were pictures of it on the back sheet of the “Daily Mail.” Well, if by wire, why not by wireless? If by wireless, why not by light? Think it over. I must get back. I’ve got a lecture. See you later.” And he was gone with a jovial nod and a quaint expression as of one who pulls the leg.

Though I saw a good deal of him both in college and out, until the end of term, we never referred to the subject again, and when the University closed for the summer vacation we found ourselves “by divers mesne assignments,” as the lawyers say, at his adorable little cottage in Warwickshire, where he had his private observatory and did his own work, uninterrupted by the need of imparting such knowledge as might be necessary to enable his students to proceed to a science degree.

* * *

I am to assume that you, who read this, know all that is necessary to be known about the equipment of a stargazer’s observatory. Markwand’s observatory was like any other in all essentials. The noticeable feature was an extremely powerful arc-light apparatus, to which the current was supplied by a powerful dynamo. This he used for his experiments in photo-telephony, and I quickly realised that he had made no idle boast when he said the subject was yet in its infancy. From his observatory he could throw a beam of light some four hundred yards into his den at the house, where, caught by the mirror and the Selenium cell apparatus, you could carry on a conversation as comfortably as if the conversant had been in the room. He could “ring up” along his beam before switching in the voice receiver, and by the same means could transmit written words, drawings, and even his own features to the receiving screen. It was positively uncanny to me who am in no sense a Physicist—it was as a Psychologist that the state of exaltation in which Markwand lived interested, and, I am bound to confess, sometimes alarmed me.

He showed me many beautiful experiments and results, but at his own research work he would never allow me to be present. He would laugh and say:

“You are too inquisitive, my dear fellow. You would fidget about and make me nervous. I should always be afraid of your monkeying with the dynamo, or touching a live wire somehow. I don’t want to have you on my hands as a horrid little burnt corpse.”

And so it went on. I was genuinely resting, but whatever may have been the nature of Markwand’s holiday researches, he certainly was not. All that I could get out of him was that he was observing certain phenomena connected with the planet Venus. He would come over from

the observatory sometimes in a state of almost wild elation, at others utterly worn out and dejected, but always shrouded in a mantle, as it were, of absorbed introspection. One day when for forty-eight hours he had been more abstracted and “nervy” than usual, he startled me by saying:

“You remember my chaff about you and the dynamo? Look here, if anything of that kind were to happen to me you will know how it happened, if any enquiry should be made. But before anything of that kind happens, and people—executors, all that sort of rot you know—come messing about, take this key off my watch-chain. It opens this writing case. Take the case and pack it up in your luggage, and take it away. You can read the papers yourself afterwards, but not until I am buried.” I was very much shocked, and begged him to relax in his work, to accept my help in so far as it might be of any avail, but he only laughed queerly and said: “I am only putting a very unlikely and hypothetical case. I’m all right. But a research worker should always be prepared for the most unlikely eventualities. As for help, my work is purely personal, no one can help.”

“When shall you publish?”

“Never.”

“Why not?”

He thought for a moment, and then he said “I have gone too far. The world is not yet fit to know what I know. Don’t think I am mad, I am not. I’m deadly sane. Some day someone else will happen on the same results, and who knows what may happen then? I won’t be responsible. It’s too much.” By this time he was apparently talking to himself. He had forgotten all about me.

By the way, I don’t think I have mentioned that Markwand was a bachelor.

* * *

I had been with him about a fortnight, and every day it had seemed to me that he was becoming more exalted—a stupid word, but I can think of no other. He spent the days as it were in a dream, seldom speaking except upon the most conventional subjects, rather impatient if I referred to our work at the University.

“Don’t talk shop for goodness sake, old man. That’s our work-a-day world, this is something different. Another world? Hardly, but perhaps the threshold.”

I didn’t like this. “The Threshold” is one of the cant terms in the Jargon of the Spiritualist, the Esoteric Buddhist, the Rosicrucian, and it turned me cold.

“I say, old fellow,” I said, “you know I’m broad minded, and I don’t sneer at poor old A, B, and C, who believe in spooks, and commune with those who have ‘passed over’; I look upon it as a mental disease, exploited by quacks (who are, I understand, generally charwomen when not doing the Prospero act), just as some physical diseases are exploited by the quacks of a different walk in life. But I do think the result is the same. The incurable is the quarry of the quack. But that you should have any truck with that kind of thing is unthinkable. Threshold of what?” I concluded rather inconsequently.

“Oh, don’t be afraid. I’m not disturbing the sainted spirit of my Aunt Jemima. When I said ‘threshold,’ I meant a real Threshold, like a flight of steps, or a plank. Difficult to find a word. But I can’t explain. I’m sorry.”

I thought seriously of writing in confidence to Sir George Amboyne, our Regius Professor of Medicine to ask him to invite himself down for a day or two to have a look at Markwand.

However I didn't, and I am glad now that I didn't. One night I woke up in his den, where I used to read, and smoke, and wait for him to come over to bed. It was just day-break, and, gadzooks, I *was* stiff! He hadn't come in, so I risked his displeasure and walked over to the observatory. The east was just reddening, and the plantation was full of the little sounds that animals and birds make when they shake themselves to start the day's work. I could see that the arc-light was burning, and I could hear purring of the dynamo. Thinking he must be asleep I reached my hand towards the door and was just about to turn the handle when the light went out and a wild cry came from beyond it—a word? A name? An exclamation? What?

“Aalila!”

Drawn out on the first syllable “A-a-lila!” I opened the door. Markwand was standing by his telescope, his arms extended over his head, looking at me. He blinked like an owl in daytime, though the struggling dawn made light hardly visible. He looked at me stupidly for a moment and then looked at the Sidereal clock.

“Good heavens,” he said quite calmly. “I *am* sorry. It's daylight. I had forgotten the time, and you, and everything else. I don't wonder either. Haven't *you* been to bed? I'm a rotten host. Come and have a bath.”

And we walked back to the house as if nothing at all had happened. Markwand was in splendid form. We bathed, made coffee, fried bacon and potatoes, and went down to the stream to fish.

“You're overdoing it, Markwand,” I said, after a rather long silence.

“Am I?” he replied laughing, and landing a trout. “Do I look like it? I've had a splendid night. Do I look the worn-out scientist?”

He certainly did not.

Later in the day we were lazing in two chairs on the lawn under a tree. I caught Markwand looking at me in the manner which is described by story-writers as “whimsical.” I fell to an irresistible temptation.

“What is Aalila?” I said.

“If you only knew!” he replied. “Well, you shall; I'm going to tell you.”

Then he plunged into it. Later I verified every detail of his marvellous story, and was able to fill in a mass of others which he left out or slurred over.

* * *

“I was observing Venus—conscientiously from full-Venus to no-Venus—last year. You will find all the notes in the Observatory Record; all that matter to the star-gazers. I shall communicate them very shortly. The rest is in that writing case. You know the one I mean.

“One night, at about half-Venus, I was lying in the chair, watching and making notes, when on the dark part, near the outer edge, I saw a bright spot. I couldn't make out what it was of course, but as I watched, it flickered, went out. And look here, don't laugh or say a word or I shall dry up. It flashed S.O.S: ... — — — ... Morse, you know. I assumed that I was dreaming, or that my eyes were tired or playing me a trick. It went out, and then it came again. Then it made a lot of letters, all higgledy-piggledy, but I swear to you that every group was a perfect letter. It went on for over an hour, and as each letter was made I wrote it down. You know I was a signaller in the regiment during the war? Then it stopped dead. I tried to make sense of the jumble of letters; of course there was nothing in it, but the last two letters were Vick E: ... — . The Signaller—don't laugh, I warn you—knew how to end a message anyhow.

“The next night, the same performance over again. I had read a lot of what I regard as tosh about “signalling from Mars”; it’s a hardy perennial, but I was as certain as I am that you are sitting there, that Venus was signalling to Earth and signalling in mad hysterical Morse at that. I found that night, and verified by references to the transcript of the night before, that before every pause in the flashes came the regulation full stop Ack-Ack-Ack . — . — . — Lord, man! can you imagine what I felt! I’ll tell you what I did. I trained the mirror of my arc-light on to the spot as near as I could make it out, aiming by the telescope, and next night the moment it began—as usual, with S.O.S.—I flashed it back, cutting the ray with a sheet of tin plate. Venus ‘went out’ for a minute, and then repeated S.O.S. Same reply from me. Then came other letters, in no kind of sequence, but I repeated each one religiously. When this had gone on for an hour, I took the initiative in a pause and flashed ‘Vick E.’ Venus understood; she flashed it back, and then Ack-Ack-Ack. That was all that night.

“I won’t weary you with what followed during months, whenever Venus was observable, but you’ll find it all there. I took the initiative again, and flashed the whole alphabet from A to Z, and got every letter back; and at last the whole alphabet came back to me in its proper order. Venus was profiting by its lessons. And then came the climax. I can’t think why it had not occurred to me before. I switched in the Selenium cells and put on the receiver. Instantly I heard a noise, sounds, linguals and labials. ‘Mu, ma, mu, la, lo, la’ and vowel sounds. It was, at least, clear that Venus had a photo-telephone in circuit, ready for me in case we had got so far as that on Earth. After listening for a minute or so I flashed ‘Ack-Ack-Ack.’ Venus knew that that was a stop, but not the ‘very end’—Vick E. I connected the transmitter. I flashed Ack, and *said* the letter A. It came back—both flash and sound! So on through the alphabet.

“After this I began teaching Venus to spell—like a child with a spelling-book—AB—ab, BO—bo, and so on, and after a time—you understand I am condensing weeks into words—the ‘conversation,’ if you can call it one, always began ‘Aa-li-la’ and after ‘Vick E.’ again, always ‘Aa-li-la.’ Man! I realized that this was the name of the Thing that was signalling. I tell you one thing and that is that Venus, the Thing, was much cleverer than I; it tried to make *me* understand sounds, but I couldn’t make head or tail of one, and meanwhile It was beginning to say English words. And what is more it had an apparatus which repeated perfectly, and improved upon, everything that mine did.

“For nights I tried to get an impression upon a photo-transmission plate, but for at least a week there was no result whatever. Then one night I said ‘Aalila ‘ and tried to transmit the letters, in Morse of course, but in dots and dashes on the plate. I only found out later what happened up there—I say ‘up’ for the sake of definition—but my plate went mad and got covered with scratches in all directions. Aalila had caught on to the idea, and was doing her—I was certain somehow it was ‘her’—best, and at last one night after weeks of patient scratching I got Aalila’s face. Lord, man! it was lovely. Just imagine to yourself a—but what’s the good? She was—she is—indescribable!

Markwand paused and looked away with that strange exalted air that had puzzled me so often.

“Is?” I queried softly. I was afraid of, as he said, drying him up.

“Yes, *is*.”

“You see her picture then?”

“I see *her*.”

To say that I was flabbergasted is to use a miserably inadequate expression. What was all this about? Was I talking to a madman? But if it was a delusion, as of course it must be, it was the sanest and most deliberately nurtured delusion that ever a man originated.

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That was all Markwand told me that day. I think his idea was to let me so far into his amazing secret, and to let what he had told me sink in, so as to judge by my manner how I took it, and whether I were worthy of further confidence. But it was evidently a great relief to him to be able to talk at all about it. He often set little traps for me, to see if I would laugh, or doubt, or sneer, but as time went on and I always listened with a keen interest which required no simulation, he arrived at telling me the progress of his adventure, step by step, and as I have said, what he left out then, I could supply from his journal of the affair—afterwards.

It would take far too long; it would indeed fill a volume of no mean size, were I to set down here the gradual “anastomosis” (to borrow a term from the Physiologists) of Markwand and Aalila, how they arrived at the meanings of words, and how, out of the chaos of incomprehensible sounds, they arrived at conversation. It is not enough, but it must be taken as enough, to record that Markwand little by little arrived at knowing all about Aalila, and about life the planet Venus, where the Physical Sciences had reached a development which would stagger the imagination of a Jules Verne produced to the power of *n*. What is really most important was the stunning fact that Markwand was in love with Aalila as only a bachelor of his age can be, when he makes his first acquaintance with the grand passion.

It will be observed that I have not hitherto touched upon a very important point. You will not unnaturally have been asking yourself how on earth—or rather in Venus—had Aalila learned the Morse Alphabet? As soon as I felt that I could safely ask questions without “drying him up” I put this to Markwand.

“Oh,” he replied, “of course I ought to have told you that. She learnt from our Fleet Signallers during the War.”

“WHAT?”

“It takes some believing, doesn’t it? The question of interplanetary signalling has always been a burning one up there. They signal to many other planets already, but they had never “picked up” Earth, which, by the way, they call Waluma. Aalila, you will not be surprised to hear, is a great astronomical ‘nut’ up there, and she has been searching Waluma for a sign for years. In August, 1914, and onwards, she observed that our seas were constantly starred with intermittent flashes—of course their telescopes are to ours what Big Bertha was to a pop-gun—and after puzzling over them for months she found that there was a regular sequence in them, that certain groups of dots and dashes continually recurred, especially ‘ringing up’ with a series of ‘E’s,’ and that a single ‘E’ at a short distance always stopped it. She got on to the full stop ‘Ack-AckAck,’ and the ‘Vick E’ at the end of a message, almost directly. And from this she gradually worked out all our letters, not in their order of course. One of her first questions when we could talk was to enquire what were ‘Toc,’ and ‘E’—T and E, our commonest letters. She had got a lot of common words pat— ‘and, the, it’ and so on.”

“What did she make of it?”

“Why—the inference was obvious to her—we were signalling to Venus!”

“Good heavens!”

“What confused her most were the constant and reiterated ‘E’s’ on land. Those were the flashes of the great guns.”

It made one’s brain reel. I seldom had to ask questions after that.

And here it becomes very difficult for me to write at all about it. I have been so shocked by the death of Markwand and all that it meant and conveyed to *me*, the terrible proof, as it would seem, that this amazing adventure was no delusion at all, but drew to its inevitable and tragic end, irresistibly, that I cannot think with equanimity of anyone even smiling at details which would readily lend themselves to humorous treatment, but which were in themselves the very essence of the tragedy. In the foremost place there stood the fact that Aalila had, conformably with the customs of her planet, seven husbands—a multiple fact that did not in any way appear to militate against her full reciprocation of Markwand's passion. Husbands in Venus appear to be of a singularly easy-going disposition, to our mundane intelligence, but an exception would appear to occur at intervals, and one of these loomed large in Aalila's cosmogony in the shape of an infuriated and jealous male. Highly intellectual as Aalila was, and occupying an exalted position in the scientific world of the planet, this husband, Illuha by name, was to Aalila what an ignorant woman (only one of course) would be to a Regius Professor in one of our own Universities—a woman who sets her own personal gratification and feelings far above the career and the life-interests of her husband. And so in her "affair" with Markwand, Aalila had to be very careful—in certain mundane circles her attitude would probably be described as "wily."

It was all very well for Aalila to shut herself up in her observatory and communicate with her Terrestrial Lover. Illuha, who was of course not ignorant of the vast potentiality of Astral physics in Venus, was, it appeared, far from easy in his mind as to the scope and extent of Aalila's researches, and—well, as I have said, Aalila had to be very careful. Very frequently the nightly communion would be intercepted by unreasonably uxorious reproaches, not to mention physical interruptions, which scared Aalila intempestatively from the photo-telephone; and it seems from a note of Markwand's that Aalila had in a moment of relaxed vigilance allowed Illuha to catch sight of sundry telephoto-graphs of Markwand, and, to put it perhaps somewhat crudely, Illuha was on the prowl.

All might, however, have been well had it not been for the high quality of Aalila's scientific knowledge, attainments and ambitions. From transmitting very remarkable, and I am bound to say often highly compromising pictures of herself, she soared to the ambition of, and devoted much research to, the accomplishment of transmitting *herself*; that is to say a replica, an astral body of herself, perfect in every essential detail, and of a bodily consistency adequate to all practical purposes. Of the development and ultimate success of this crowning triumph of Aalila's scientific career I can only gather the broad outlines, for Markwand himself seems to have grown shy of his record in this matter, and the scientific accuracy of his register is marred from this point by a doubtless proper and laudable discretion, which leaves certain details, but not many, to the imagination, and tends therefore to the detriment of scientific knowledge. It must remain enough to say that the semi-but not too-ætheral Aalila came to Earth and visited Markwand in his observatory, whenever she could get away, whilst her physical body remained on guard, as it were, in her observatory in Venus. And it must be recorded to her credit that she never attempted to conceal from Markwand the paramount, the terrible danger of these astral excursions. Though her physical body remained behind, she brought her intellect to earth with her, and this it was that in fullness of time brought her and Markwand to grief. For the physical body, temporarily bereft of its directing mind was not up to controlling the apparatus, and the romance of her interviews with Markwand must have been seriously hampered by the necessity of keeping an eye on the screen, and an ear at the photo-telephone.

Consequently these amazing interviews had to be arranged for occasions when Illuha could be counted upon to be absent from home, or at any rate not likely to come bothering after her at the

observatory. From what one could gather, the position of husbands in Venus is—setting aside, of course, their plurality—much the same as that of wives in the so-called civilized portions of the earth, and, perhaps, vice versa.

Markwand was, as I have indicated, reticent as to the details of his interviews with Aalila in conversation with me, and *a fortiori* recorded in his scientific journal only political, economical, and sometimes ethnological details of life on the planet, and looking over the record, it may be said that the personal equation must have bulked largely in their communion, for lengthy meetings with Aalila frequently furnished but a few lines in either his private or scientific journals. He tried to explain to me, however, the nature of the risks they ran, but the explanation was largely beyond my powers of comprehension—Hertzian waves—Potential—Amperage, and other technical terms bristled in his exposition, and I gave up trying to become an expert in the matter. I only knew that the physical Aalila left behind had mechanical control of the projection apparatus, and if disturbed, or damaged, might work irretrievable disaster. It was clear that the interference of any unauthorized or inexperienced person in the observatory might, and probably would, divert the full force of Aalila's generating plant along the communicating beam. Upon what would happen in that event Markwand did not care to speculate.

"The physical Aalila," he said, "would almost certainly be destroyed, and what would happen here it is difficult to conjecture. I should imagine some form of instantaneous annihilation—volatilization—I don't know. But we take all necessary and possible precautions."

I hazarded a question.

"Is the replica-Aalila of sufficient substance to suffer physical hurt?"

He thought for a moment—and I am not sure that he did not blush a little. Then he replied:

"Oh, yes. There is little doubt about that."

"Take another postulate," I said. "Supposing some unauthorized person" (we seldom or never mentioned Illuha by name, from motives of delicacy no doubt) "were to get at the apparatus in her replica-absence, and supposing that person found himself—or herself" (I hastily added), "projected along the ray in some way? What then?"

Markwand, I am sorry to say, shrugged his shoulders and laughed; yes, he positively laughed, and instead of answering he turned away, chaunting under his breath a line of an old plantation song which ran:

"The congregation all stand up, and sing—Hallelujah!

* * *

My stay with Markwand was drawing to its close, but I lingered on, obsessed with a vague feeling of apprehension. Though in no way regarding myself in any degree in the light of a chaperon, I did not think it quite safe, or quite proper, to leave him alone with Aalila. I hinted at a visit elsewhere, accompanied by him; I would have liked to see him safely back to town, but he would not hear of it. Markwand was lovelorn. And he was very happy. I grew more and more apprehensive, and, I will admit it, more and more curious. I endeavoured to convey to him that I would like to be present at one of their interviews, and then it was Markwand's turn to be shocked. I felt at once that I had been guilty of a most indelicate indiscretion, so there was nothing for it but to wait, on the chance of being of some use should an emergency arise.

We come therefore to the night, or rather the early morning of the 14th. For some days Markwand had been preoccupied, nervy, and I gathered that things were not going as pleasantly as they might. In a word, Illuha was giving trouble, and it became an increasing strain to keep in

touch, so to speak, with the observatory in Venus, whilst occupied in the researches and instructive discourse which should, from their point of view, have exclusively occupied their periods of companionship.

“It’s rather difficult sometimes,” he admitted, “to keep the necessary amount of attention fixed upon what is going on up there. For instance, only the other day” then he broke off, and I never knew (nor was there any record among his private memoranda) what had disturbed the primrose path of scientific research on this occasion.

I was sitting in the den waiting for Markwand as usual. I never liked to go to bed till he returned and I knew that Aalila had been safely packed off “home,” and I had been to sleep, also as usual.

Suddenly the beam from the observatory swung into the den, and the gong sounded furiously. I snatched up the receiver but nothing came excepting confused sounds and a violent crackling like that of a radiogram transmitter. I flung it down and rushed over to the observatory and burst in. It was full of a brilliant violet light, independently of the arc-light, and a smell of burning.

Markwand was standing as I entered, and whether my over-wrought senses deceived me or not I cannot tell now, but it seemed to me that a female form—overwhelmingly comely, I must admit—was kneeling on the floor at his feet, her arms encircling his waist, and her head turned towards the complicated mirrors and cells which constituted Markwand’s end of the apparatus. Terror was in the beautiful dark face, and she seemed to be trying to shield him, to protect him from something invisible to me. But the whole vision only lasted a second or two. Then a sort of seismic cataclysm took place; all the lights went out and the observatory was in pitch darkness, save that on the floor appeared a circle about a yard in diameter, not exactly luminous, but scintillating. I fumbled for the lighting switch. I got no light, but I got a shock that I shall remember to my dying day. It made me violently sick. After a delay, which seemed to me to be like an age in length, I got at my matches and struck a light and lit a couple of candles which always stood on the table in case of the current failing at any time.

The photo-telephone apparatus was wrecked, it looked like the debris of a spring mattress in a marine storekeeper’s back yard. The telescope was twisted off its massive base and was hanging nearly to the floor; there was a rent in the dome beside the observation slit. I was vividly aware of an uncanny silence, and then I saw that the Sidereal clock and the Heliostat had both stopped—their sonorous tick would have been such a comfort.

I was alone with Markwand.

He was lying on the floor, where I had seen him standing, quite motionless, and quite normal, save that his lips were drawn back showing both rows of teeth in a ghastly grin.

Recollection of “first-aid” classes came to me. Electric shock, artificial respiration, and so on. I loosened his waistcoat, trousers-band, and shirt-collar, and began to apply my inadequate knowledge. There was a sickening smell as I gradually got him undressed. Then I knew he was dead. I made a violent effort to retain my presence of mind, my sanity, to think. There would be doctors, an inquest, people prying about, viewing the body. Horrible! I felt that at all hazards *I must view it first*. I undressed Markwand very carefully. The instantaneous blanching of death had made his fair skin look whiter, and he was physically uninjured, externally at any rate.

But round his waist, where I had seen the arms of Aalila, was a deep brown and blistered band. He had been girt in a zone of fire, fire which had burnt deeply beyond the skin into his body, but his clothes were not even singed. A detail: in the small of his back was the burnt impress of a small right hand, deepest at the finger tips. All I could think about was “I wonder where her other hand was?”

I sat and looked at Markwand, I don't know how long, but suddenly through the rent in the dome I saw it was dawn. I dressed him carefully. I wonder if you have any idea of how difficult it is to dress a dead body? He was also growing stiff.

I made myself *think* with a mighty effort. How did he die? The newspapers, the obituary notices, the coroner. Of course—the dynamo! I dragged Markwand over to the dynamo which was apparently wrecked too. I forced up his stiff arm so that the hand rested on the commutator. I took the key off his watch-chain.

Where I had seen the scintillating circle in the darkness lay a ring of pale grey dust. This struck me, and taking a small ordinary collector's corked tube from Markwand's laboratory bench I filled it with the dust and put it into my waistcoat pocket.

Then I crept back, like a murderer, to the study, found the writing-case, and put it into my portmanteau.

Then I roused the house.