

BORN OF THE WINDS

by

Brian Lumley

Consider: I am, or was, a meteorologist of some note – a man whose interests and leanings have always been away from fantasy and the so-called ‘supernatural’ – and yet now I believe in a wind that blows between the worlds, and in a Being which inhabits that wind, striding in feathery cirrus and shrieking lightning-storm alike across icy Arctic heavens.

Just how such an utter *contradiction* of beliefs could come about I will now attempt to explain, for I alone possess all of the facts. If I am wrong in what I more than suspect – if what has gone before has been nothing but a monstrous chain of coincidence confused by horrific hallucination – then with luck I might yet return out of this white wilderness to the sanity of the world I knew. But if I am right, and I fear that I am horribly right, then I am done for, and this manuscript will stand as my testimonial of a hitherto all-but-unrecognised plane of existence ... and of its *inhabitant*, whose like may only be found in legends whose sources date back geological eons into earth’s dim and terrible infancy.

My involvement with this thing has come about all in the space of a few months, for it was just over two months ago, fairly early in August, that I first came to Navissa, Manitoba, on what was to have been a holiday of convalescence following a debilitating chest complaint.

Since meteorology serves me both as hobby and means of support, naturally I brought some of my ‘work’ with me; not physically, for my books and instruments are many, but locked in my head were a score of little problems beloved of the meteorologist. I brought certain of my notebooks too, in which to make jottings or scribble observations on the almost Arctic conditions of the region as the mood might take me. Canada offers a wealth of interest to one whose life revolves about the weather: the wind and rain, the clouds and the storms that seem to spring from them.

In Manitoba on a clear night, not only is the air sweet, fresh, sharp and conducive to the strengthening of weakened lungs, but the stars stare down in such crystal clarity that at times a man might try to pluck them out of the firmament. It is just such a night now – though the glass is far down, and I fear that soon it may snow – but warm as I am in myself before my stove, still my fingers feel the awesome cold of the night outside, for I have removed my gloves to write.

Navissa, until fairly recently, was nothing more than a trail camp, one of many to expand out of humble beginnings as a trading post into a full-blown town. Lying not far off the old Olassie Trail, Navissa is quite close to deserted, ill-fated Stillwater, but more of Stillwater later . . .

I stayed at the judge's house, a handsome brick affair with a raised log porch and chalet-style roof, one of Navissa's few truly modern buildings, standing on that side of the town towards the neighbouring hills. Judge Andrews is a retired New Yorker of independent means, an old friend of my father, a widower whose habits in the later years of his life have inclined towards the reclusive; being self-sufficient, he bothers no one, and in turn he is left to his own devices. Something of a professional anthropologist all his life, the judge now studies the more obscure aspects of that science here in the thinly populated North. It was Judge Andrews himself, on learning of my recent illness, who so kindly invited me to spend this period of convalescence with him in Navissa, though by then I was already well on the way to recovery.

Not that his invitation gave me licence to intrude upon the judge's privacy. It did not. I would do with myself what I would, keeping out of his way as much as possible. Of course, no such arrangement was specified, but I was aware that this was the way the judge would want it.

I had free run of the house, including the old gentleman's library, and it was there one afternoon early in the final fortnight of my stay that I found the several works of Samuel R. Bridgman, an English professor of anthropology, whose mysterious death had occurred only a few dozen miles or so north of Navissa.

Normally such a discovery would have meant little to me, but I had heard that certain of Bridgeman's theories had made him something of an outcast among others of his profession; there had been among his beliefs some which belonged in no way to the scientific. Knowing Judge Andrews to be a man who liked his facts straight on the line, undistorted by whim or fancy, I wondered what there could be in the eccentric Bridgeman's works that prompted him to display them upon his shelves.

In order to ask him this very question, I was on my way from the small library room to Judge Andrews's study when I saw, letting herself out of the house, a distinguished-looking though patently nervous woman whose age seemed rather difficult to gauge. Despite the trimness of her figure and the comparative youthfulness of her skin, her hair was quite grey. She had plainly been very attractive, perhaps even beautiful, in youth. She did not see me, or if she did glimpse me where I stood, then her agitated condition did not admit of it. I heard her car pull away.

In the doorway of the judge's study I formed my question concerning Bridgeman's books.

"Bridgeman?" the old man repeated after me, glancing up sharply from where he sat at his desk.

"Just those books of his, in the library," I answered, entering the room proper. "I shouldn't have thought that there'd be much for you, Judge, in Bridgeman's work."

"Oh? I didn't know you were interested in anthropology, David?"

"Well, no, I'm not really. It's just that I remember hearing a thing or two about this Bridgeman, that's all."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Eh? Why, certainly! Should there be more?"

"Hmm," he mused. "No, nothing much – coincidence. You see, the lady who left a few moments ago

was Lucille Bridgeman, Sam's widow. She's staying at the Nelson."

"Sam?" I was immediately interested. "You knew him, then?"

"I did, fairly intimately, though that was many years ago. More recently, I've read his books. Did you know that he died quite close by here?"

I nodded. "Yes, in peculiar circumstances I gather?"

"That's so, yes." He frowned again, moving in his chair in what I took to be agitation.

I waited for a moment, and then, when it appeared that the judge intended to say no more, I asked, "And now?"

"Hmm?" His eyes were far away even though they looked at me. They quickly focused. "Now – nothing ... and I'm rather busy!" He put on his spectacles and turned his attention to a book.

I grinned ruefully, inclined my head and nodded. Being fairly intimate with the old man's moods, I knew what his taciturn, rather abrupt dismissal had meant: "If you want to know more, then you must find out for yourself!" And what better way to discover more of this little mystery, at least initially, than to read Samuel R. Bridgeman's books? That way I should at least learn something of the man.

As I turned away, the judge called to me: "Oh, and David – I don't know what preconceptions you may have formed of Sam Bridgeman and his work, but as for myself ... near the end of a lifetime, I'm no closer now than I was fifty years ago to being able to say *what is* and *what isn't*. At least Sam had the courage of his convictions!"

What was I to make of that? – and how to answer it? I simply nodded and went out of the room, leaving the judge alone with his books and his thoughts ...

That same afternoon found me again in the library, with a volume of Bridgeman's on my lap. There were three of his books in all, and I had discovered that they contained many references to Arctic and near-Arctic regions, to their people, their gods, superstitions, and legends. Still pondering what little I knew of the English professor, these were the passages that primarily drew my attention: Bridgeman had written of these northern parts, and he had died here – mysteriously! No less mysterious, his widow was here now, twenty years after his demise, in a highly nervous if not actually distraught state. Moreover, that kindly old family friend Judge Andrews seemed singularly reticent with regard to the English anthropologist, and apparently the judge did not entirely disagree with Bridgeman's controversial theories.

But what were those theories? If my memory served me well, then they had to do with certain Indian and Eskimo legends concerning a god of the Arctic winds.

At first glance there seemed to be little in the professor's books to show more than a normally lively and entertaining anthropological and ethnic interest in such legends, though the author seemed to dwell at unnecessary length on Gaoh and Hotoru, air-elementals of the Iroquois and Pawnee respectively, and particularly upon Negafok, the Eskimo cold-weather spirit. I could see that he was trying to tie such myths in with the little-known legend of the Wendigo, of which he seemed to deal far too positively.

“The Wendigo,” Bridgeman wrote, “is the avatar of a Power come down the ages from forgotten gulfs of immemorial lore; this great *Tornasuk* is none other than Ithaqua Himself, the Wind-Walker, and the very sight of Him means a freezing and inescapable death for the unfortunate observer. Lord Ithaqua, perhaps the very greatest of the mythical air-elementals, made war against the Elder Gods in the Beginning, for which ultimate treason He was banished to frozen Arctic and interplanetary heavens to ‘Walk the Winds For Ever’ through fantastic cycles of time and to fill the *Esquimaux* with dread, eventually earning His terrified worship and His sacrifices. None but such worshippers may look upon Ithaqua – for others to see Him is certain death! He is as a dark outline against the sky, anthropomorphic, a manlike yet bestial silhouette, striding both in low icy mists and high stratocumulus, gazing down upon the affairs of men with carmine stars for eyes!”

Bridgeman’s treatment of the more conventional mythological figures was less romantic; he remained solidly within the framework of accepted anthropology. For example: “The Babylonian storm-god, Enlil, was designated ‘Lord of the Winds’. Mischievous and mercurial in temperament, he was seen by the superstitious peoples of the land to walk in hurricanes and sand-devils ...”

Or, in yet more traditional legend: “Teuton mythology shows Thor as being the god of thunder; when thunderstorms boiled and the heavens roared, people knew that what they heard was the sound of Thor’s war-chariot clattering through the vaults of heaven.”

Again, I could not help but find it noticeable that while the author poked a sort of fun at these classical figures of mythology, he had *not* done so when he wrote of Ithaqua. Similarly, he was completely dry and matter-of-fact in his descriptive treatment of an illustration portraying the Hittite god-of-the-storm, Tha-thka, photographed from his carved representation upon a baked clay tablet excavated in the Toros Mountains of Turkey. More, he compared Tha-thka with Ithaqua of the Snows, declaring that he found parallels in the two deities other than the merely phonetical similarity of their names.

Ithaqua, he pointed out, had left webbed tracks in the Arctic snows, tracks which the old *Esquimaux* tribes feared to cross; and Tha-thka (carved in a fashion very similar to the so-called ‘Amarna style’ of Egypt, to mix ethnic art groups) was shown in the photograph as having star-shaped eyes of a rare, dark carnelian ... and webbed feet! Professor Bridgeman’s argument for connection here seemed valid, even sound, yet I could see how such an argument might very well anger established anthropologists of ‘the Old School’. How, for instance, might one equate a god of the ancient Hittites with a deity of comparatively modern Eskimos? Unless of course one was to remember that in a certain rather fanciful mythology Ithaqua had only been banished to the North following an abortive rebellion against the Elder Gods. Could it be that *before* that rebellion the Wind-Walker strode the high currents and tides of atmospheric air over Ur of the Chaldees and ancient Khem, perhaps even prior to those lands being named by their first inhabitants? Here I laughed at my own fancies, conjured by what the writer had written with such assumed authority, and yet my laughter was more than a trifle strained, for I found a certain cold logic in Bridgeman that made even his wildest statement seem merely a calm, studied exposition ...

And there were, certainly, wild statements.

The slimmest of the three books was full of them, and I knew after reading only its first few pages that this must be the source of those flights of fancy which had caused Bridgeman’s erstwhile colleagues to desert him. Yet without a doubt this book was by far the most interesting of the three, written almost in a fervour of mystical allusion with an abundance – *aplethora* – of obscure hints suggestive of half-discernible worlds of awe, wonder and horror bordering and occasionally impinging upon our very own.

I found myself completely enthralled. It seemed plain to me that behind all the hocus-pocus there was a great mystery here – one which, like an iceberg, showed only its tip – and I determined not to be satisfied with anything less than a complete verification of the facts concerning what I had started to think of as ‘the Bridgeman case’. After all, I seemed to be ideally situated to conduct such an investigation: this was where the professor had died, the borderland of that region in which he had alleged at least one of his mythological beings to exist; and Judge Andrews, provided I could get him to talk, must be something of an authority on the man; and, possibly my best line of research yet, Bridgeman’s widow herself was here now in this very town.

Just why this determination to dabble should have so enthused me I still cannot say; unless it was the way that Tha-thka, which Being Bridgeman had equated with Ithaqua, was shown upon the Toros Mountains tablet as walking splay-footed through a curious mixture of cumulonimbus and nimbostratus – cloud formations which invariably presage snow and violent thunderstorms! The ancient sculptor of that tablet had certainly gauged the Wind-Walker’s domain well, giving the mythical creature something of solidity in my mind, though it was still far easier for me to accept those peculiar clouds of ill omen than the Being striding among them ...

II

It was something of a shock for me to discover, when finally I thought to look at my wristwatch, that Bridgeman’s books had kept me busy all through the afternoon and it was now well into evening. I found that my eyes had started to ache with the strain of reading as it grew darker in the small library room. I put on the light and would have returned to the books yet again but for hearing, at the outer door of the house, a gentle knocking. The library door was slightly ajar so that I could hear the judge answering the knocking and his gruff welcome. I was sure that the voice that answered him was that of Bridgeman’s widow, for it was vibrant with a nervous agitation as the visitor entered the house and went with the judge to his study. Well, I had desired to meet her; this seemed the perfect opportunity to introduce myself.

Yet at the open door to the judge’s study I paused, then quickly stepped back out of sight. It seemed that my host and his visitor were engaged in some sort of argument. He had just answered to some unheard question: “*Notme*, my dear, that is out of the question ... But if you insist upon this folly, than I’m sure I can find someone to help you. God knows I’d come with you myself – even on this wild-goose chase you propose, and despite the forecast of heavy snow – but ... my dear, I’m an old man. My eyes are no good any more; my limbs are no longer as strong as they used to be. I’m afraid that this old body might let you down at the worst possible time. It’s bad country north of here when the snows come.”

“Is it simply that, Jason,” she answered him in her nervous voice, “or is it really that you believe I’m a madwoman? That’s what you as good as called me when I was here earlier.”

“You must forgive me for that, Lucille, but let’s face it – that story you tell is simply ... *fantastic!* There’s

no positive proof that the boy headed this way at all, just this premonition of yours.”

“The story I told you was the truth, Jason! As for my ‘premonition’, well, I’ve brought you proof! Look at this –”

There was a pause before the judge spoke again. Quietly he asked, “But what is this thing, Lucille? Let me get my glass. Hmm – I can see that it depicts –”

“No!” her cry, shrill and loud, cut him off. “No, don’t mention *Them*, and please don’t say His name!” The hysterical emphasis she placed on certain words was obvious, but she sounded calmer when, a few seconds later, she continued: “As for what it is –” HiHHI heard a metallic clinking, like a coin dropped on the tabletop, “just keep it here in the house. You will see for yourself. It was discovered clenched in Sam’s right hand when they – when they found his poor, broken body.”

“All that was twenty years ago –” the judge said, then paused again before asking: “Is it gold?”

“Yes, but of unknown manufacture. I’ve shown it to three or four experts over the years, and always the same answer. It is a very ancient thing, but from no known or recognisable culture. Only the fact that it is made of gold saves it from being completely alien! And even the gold is ... not quite right. Kirby has one, too.”

“Oh?” I could hear the surprise in the judge’s voice. “And where did he get it? Why, just looking at this thing under the glass, I should have taken it for granted – even knowing nothing of it – that it’s as rare as it’s old!”

“I believe they are very rare indeed, surviving from an age before all earthly ages. Feel how cold it is. It has a chill like the ocean floor, and if you try to warm it ... but try it for yourself. I can tell you now, though, that it will not *stay* warm. And I know what that means ...

“Kirby received his in the mail some months ago, in the summer. We were at home in Mérida, in Yucatán. As you know, I settled there – after –”

“Yes, yes I know. But who would want to send the boy such a thing – and why?”

“I believe it was meant as – as *aremind*, that’s all – as a means to awaken in him all I have worked to keep dormant. I’ve already told you about ... about Kirby, about his strange ways even as a baby. I thought they would leave him as he grew older. I was wrong. That last month before he vanished was the worst. It was after he received the talisman through the mail. Then, three weeks ago, he – he just packed a few things and –” She paused for a moment, I believed to compose herself, for an emotional catch had developed in her voice. I felt strangely moved.

“– As to who sent it to him, that’s something I can’t say, I can only guess, but the package carried the Navissa postmark! That’s why I’m here.”

“The Navissa –” The judge seemed astounded. “But who would there be here to remember something that happened twenty years ago? And who, in any case, would want to make a gift of such a rare and expensive item to a complete stranger?”

The answer when it came was so low that I had difficulty making it out: “There must have been *others*, Jason! Those people in Stillwater weren’t the only ones who call Him master. Those worshippers of His – they still exist – they must! I believe it was one of them, carrying out his master’s orders. As for where it

came from in the first place, why, where else but –”

“No, Lucille, that’s quite impossible,” the judge cut her off. “Something I really can’t allow myself to believe. If such things could be –”

“A madness the world could not face?”

“Yes, exactly!”

“Sam used to say the same thing. None the less he sought the horror out, and brought me here with him, and then –”

“Yes, Lucille, I know what you believe happened then, but –”

“No buts, Jason – I want my son back. Help me, if you will, or don’t help me. It makes no difference. I’m determined to find him, and I’ll find him here, somewhere, I know it. If I have to, then I’ll search him out alone, by myself, before it’s too late!” Her voice had risen again, hysterically.

“No, there’s no need for that,” the old man cut in placatingly. “First thing tomorrow I’ll find someone to help you. And we can get the Mounties from Nelson in on the job, too. They have a winter camp at Fir Valley only a few miles out of Navissa. I’ll be able to get them on the telephone first thing in the morning. I’ll need to, for the telephone will probably go out with the first bad snow.”

“And you’ll definitely find someone to help me personally – someone trustworthy?”

“That’s my word. In fact I already know of one young man who might be willing. Of a very good family – and he’s staying with me right now. You can meet him tomorrow –”

At this point I heard the scrape of chairs and pictured the two rising to their feet. Suddenly ashamed of myself to be standing there eavesdropping, I quickly returned to the library and pulled the door shut behind me. After some little time, during which the lady departed, I went again to Judge Andrews’s study, this time tapping at the shut door and entering at his word. I found the old man worriedly pacing the floor.

He stopped pacing as I entered. “Ah, David. Sit down, please, there’s something I would like to ask you.” He seated himself, shuffling awkwardly in his chair. “It’s difficult to know where to begin –”

“Begin with Samuel R. Bridgeman,” I answered. “I’ve had time to read his books now. Frankly, I find myself very interested.”

“But how did you know –”

Thinking back on my eavesdropping, I blushed a little as I answered, “I’ve just seen Mrs. Bridgeman leaving. I’m guessing that it’s her husband, or perhaps the lady herself, you want to talk to me about.”

He nodded, picking up from his desk a golden medallion some two inches across its face, fingering its bas-relief work before answering, “Yes, you’re right, but –”

“Yes?”

He sighed heavily in answer, then said, “Ah, well, I suppose I’ll have to tell you the whole story, or what

I know of it – that’s the least I can do if I’m to expect your help.” He shook his head. “That poor, demented woman!”

“Is she not quite ...*right*, then?”

“Nothing like that at all,” he answered hastily, gruffly. “She’s as sane as I am. It’s just that she’s a little, well,*disturbed*.”

He then told me the whole of the thing, a story that lasted well into the night. I reproduce here what I can remember of his words. They formed an almost unbroken narrative that I listened to in silence to its end, a narrative which only served to strengthen that resolution of mine to follow this mystery down to a workable conclusion.

“As you are aware,” the judge began, “I was a friend of Sam Bridgeman’s in our younger days. How this friendship came about is unimportant, but I also knew Lucille before they married, and that is why she now approaches me for help after all these years. It is pure coincidence that I live now in Navissa, so close to where Sam died.

“Even in those early days Sam was a bit of a rebel. Of the orthodox sciences, including anthropology and ethnology, few interested Sam in their accepted forms. Dead and mythological cities, lands with exotic names and strange gods were ever his passion. I remember how he would sit and dream – of Atlantis and Mu, Ephiroth and Khurdisan, G’harne and lost Leng, R’lyeh and Theem’-hdra, forgotten worlds of antique legend and myth – when by rights he should have been studying and working hard towards his future. And yet ... that future came to nothing in the end.

“Twenty-six years ago he married Lucille, and because he was fairly well-to-do by then, having inherited a sizeable fortune, he was able to escape a working life as we know it to turn his full attention to those ideas and ideals most dear to him. In writing his books, particularly his last book, he alienated himself utterly from colleagues and acknowledged authorities alike in those specific sciences upon which he lavished his ‘imagination’. That was how they saw his – fantasies? – as the product of a wild imagination set free to wreak havoc among all established orders, scientific and theological included.

“Eventually he became looked upon as a fool, a naïve clown who based his crazed arguments on Blavatsky, on the absurd theories of Scott-Elliot, on the insane epistles of Eibon and the warped translations of Harold Hadley Copeland, rather than in prosaic but proven historians and scientists ...

“When exactly, or why, Sam became interested in the theogony of these northern parts – particularly in certain beliefs of the Indians and half-breeds, and in Eskimo legends of yet more northerly regions – I do not know, but in the end he himself began to *believe* them. He was especially interested in the legend of the snow- or wind-god, Ithaqua, variously called ‘Wind-Walker’, ‘Death-Walker’, ‘Strider in the Star-Spaces’, and others, a Being who supposedly walks in the freezing boreal winds and in the turbulent atmospheric currents of far northern lands and adjacent waters.

“As fortune – or misfortune – would have it, his decision to pay this region a visit coincided with problems of an internal nature in some few of the villages round here. There were strange undercurrents at work. Secret semi-religious groups had moved into the area, in many cases apparently vagrant, here to witness and worship at a ‘Great Coming’! Strange, certainly, but can you show me any single region of this earth of ours that does not have its crackpot organisations, religious or otherwise? Mind you, there has always been a problem with that sort of thing here ...

“Well, a number of the members of these so-called esoteric groups were generally somewhat more

intelligent than the average Indian, half-breed, or Eskimo; they were mostly New Englanders, from such decadent Massachusetts towns as Arkham, Dunwich and Innsmouth.

“The Mounties at Nelson saw no threat, however, for this sort of thing was common here; one might almost say that over the years there has been a surfeit of it! On this occasion it was believed that certain occurrences in and about Stillwater and Navissa had drawn these rather polyglot visitors, for five years earlier there had occurred a very large number of peculiar and still unsolved disappearances, to say nothing of a handful of inexplicable deaths at the same time.

“I’ve done a little research myself into just what happened, though I’m still very uncertain. But conjecture aside, hard figures and facts are – surprising? – no, they are downright disturbing!

“For instance, the *entire population* of one town, Stillwater, vanished overnight! You need not take my word for it – research it for yourself. The newspapers were full of it.

“Well, now, add to a background like this a handful of tales concerning giant webbed footprints in the snow, stories of strange altars to forbidden gods in the woods, and a creature that comes on the wings of the winds to accept living sacrifices – and remember, please, that all such appear time and again in the history and legends of these parts – and you’ll agree it’s little wonder that the area has attracted so many weird types over the years.

“Not that I remember Sam Bridgeman as being a ‘weird type’, you understand, but it was exactly this sort of thing that brought him here when, after five years of quiet, the cycle of hysterical superstition and strange worship was again at its height. That was how things stood when he arrived here, and he brought his wife with him ...

“The snow was already deep to the north when they came, but that did nothing at all to deter Sam; he was here to probe the old legends, and he would never be satisfied until he had done just that. He hired a pair of French-Canadian guides, swarthy characters of doubtful backgrounds, to take him and Lucille in search of ... of what? Dreams and myths, fairy-tales and ghost stories?

“They trekked north, and despite the uncouth looks of the guides, Sam soon decided that his choice of these two men had been a good one; they seemed to know the region quite well. Indeed, they appeared to be somehow, well, cowed out in the snows, different again from when from when Sam had found them, drunk and fighting in a Navissa bar. But then again, in all truth, he had had little choice but to hire these two, for with the five-year cycle of strangeness at its peak few of Navissa’s regular inhabitants would have ventured far from their homes. And indeed, when Sam asked his guides why they seemed so nervous, they told him it was all to do with ‘the season’. Not, they explained, the winter season, but that of the strange myth-cycle. Beyond that they would say nothing, which only excited Sam’s curiosity all the more – particularly since he had noticed that their restlessness grew apace the further north they trekked.

“Then, one calm white night, with the tents pitched and a bright wood fire kindled, one of the guides asked Sam just what it was that he sought in the snow. Sam told him, mentioning the stories of Ithaqua the Snow-Thing, but got no further; for upon hearing the Wind-Walker’s name spoken, the French-Canadian simply refused to listen any more. Instead, he went off early to his tent where he was soon overheard muttering and arguing in a frightened and urgent voice with his companion. The next morning, when Sam roused himself, he discovered to his horror that he and his wife were alone, that the guides had run off and deserted them! Not only this, but they had taken all the provisions with them. The Bridgemans had only their tent, the clothing they stood in, their sleeping bags and personal effects. They had not even a box of matches with which to light a fire.

“Still, their case did not appear to be completely hopeless. They had had fair weather so far, and they were only three days and nights out from Navissa. But their trail had been anything but a straight one, so that when they set about making a return journey, it was pure guesswork on Sam’s part the correct direction in which to head. He knew something of the stars, however; and when the cold night came down, he was able to say with some certainty that they headed south.

“And yet, lonely and vulnerable though they now felt, they had been aware even on the first day that they were not truly alone. On occasion they had crossed strange tracks, freshly made by furtive figures that melted away into the firs or banks of snow whenever Sam called out to them across the wintry wastes. On the second morning, soon after setting out from their camp in the lee of tall pines, they came upon the bodies of their erstwhile guides; they had been horribly tortured and mutilated before dying. In the pockets of one of the bodies Sam found matches, and that night – though by now they knew the pangs of hunger – they at least had the warmth of a fire to comfort them. But ever in flickering shadows, just outside the field of vision afforded by the leaping flames, there were those furtive figures, silent in the snow, watching and ... waiting?

“They talked, Sam and Lucille, huddled together in the door of their tent before the warming fire, whispering of the dead guides and how and why those men had come to such terrible ends; and they shivered at the surrounding shadows and the shapes that shifted within them. This country, Sam reasoned, must indeed be the territory of Ithaqua the Wind-Walker. At times, when the influence of old rites and mysteries was strongest, then the snow-god’s worshippers – the Indians, half-breeds, and perhaps others less obvious and from further parts – would gather here to attend His ceremonies. To the outsider, the unbeliever, this entire area must be forbidden, taboo! The guides had been outsiders ... Sam and Lucille were outsiders, too ...

“It must have been about this time that Lucille’s nerves began to go, which would surely be understandable. The intense cold and the white wastes stretching out in all directions, broken only very infrequently by the boles and snow-laden branches of firs and pines – the hunger eating at her insides now – those half-seen figures ever lurking on the perimeter of her vision and consciousness – the terrible knowledge that what had happened to the guides could easily happen again – and the fact, no longer hidden by her husband, that she and Sam were – lost! Though they were making south, who could say that Navissa lay in their path, or even that they would ever have the strength to make it back to the town?

“Yes, I think that at that stage she must have become for the most part delirious, for certainly the things she ‘remembers’ as happening from that time onwards were delusion-inspired, despite their detail. And God knows that poor Sam must have been in a similar condition. At any rate, on the third night, unable to light a fire because the matches had somehow got damp, events took an even stranger turn.

“They had managed to pitch the tent, and Sam had gone inside to do whatever he could towards making it comfortable. Lucille, as the night came down more fully, was outside moving about to keep warm. She suddenly cried out to Sam that she could see distant fires at the four points of the compass. Then, in another moment, she screamed, and there came a rushing wind that filled the tent and brought an intense, instantaneous drop in temperature. Stiffly, and yet as quickly as he could, Sam stumbled out of the tent to find Lucille fallen to the snow. She could not tell him what had happened, could only mumble incoherently of ‘something in the sky’!

“... God only knows how they lived through that night. Lucille’s recollections are blurred and indistinct; she believes now that she was in any case more dead than alive. Three days and nights in that terrible white waste, wholly without food and for the greater part of the time without even the warmth of a fire. But on the morning of the next day –

“Amazingly everything had changed for the better overnight. Apparently their fears – that if they did not first perish from exposure they would die at the hands of the unknown murderers of the two guides – had been unfounded. Perhaps, Sam conjectured, they had somehow managed to pass out of the forbidden territory; and now that they were no longer trespassers, as it were, they were eligible for whatever help Ithaqua’s furtive worshippers could give them. Certainly that was the way things seemed to be, for in the snow beside their tent they found tinned soups, matches, a kerosene cooker similar to the one stolen by the unfortunate guides, a pile of branches, and finally, a cryptic note which said, simply: ‘Navissa lies seven miles to the south-east’. It was as if Lucille’s vision of the foregoing night had been an omen of good fortune, as if Ithaqua Himself had looked down and decided that the two lost and desperate human beings deserved another chance . . .

“By midday, with hot soup inside them, warmed and rested, having slept the morning through beside a fire, they were ready to complete their return journey to Navissa – or so they thought!

“Shortly after they set out, a light storm sprang up through which they pressed on until they came to a range of low, pine-covered hills. Navissa, Sam reckoned, must lie just beyond the hills. Despite the strengthening storm and falling temperature, they decided to fight on while they had the strength for it, but no sooner had they started to climb than Nature seemed to set all her elements against them. I have checked the records and that night was one of the worst this region had known in many years.

“It soon became obvious that they could not go on through the teeth of the storm but must wait it out. Just as Sam had made up his mind to pitch camp, they entered a wood of thick firs and pines; and since this made the going easier, they pressed on a little longer. Soon, however, the storm picked up to such an unprecedented pitch that they knew they must take shelter there and then. In these circumstances they came across that which seemed a veritable haven from the storm.

“At first, seen through the whipping trees and blinding snow, the thing looked like a huge squat cabin, but as they approached it they could see that it was in fact a great raised platform of sorts, sturdily built of logs. The snow, having drifted up deeply on three sides of this edifice, had given it the appearance of a flat-roofed cabin. The fourth side being free of snow, the whole formed a perfect shelter into which they crept out of the blast. There, beneath that huge log platform whose purpose they were too weary even to guess at, Sam lit the kerosene stove and warmed some soup. They felt cheered by the timely discovery of this refuge, and since after some hours the storm seemed in no way about to abate, they made down their sleeping bags and settled themselves in for the night. Both of them fell instantly asleep.

“And it was later that night that disaster struck. How, in what manner, Sam died, must always remain a matter for conjecture; but I believe that Lucille saw him die, and the sight of it must have temporarily broken her already badly weakened nerves. Certainly the things which she *believes* she saw, and one thing in particular which she believes happened that night, never could have been. God forbid!

“That part of Lucille’s story, anyway, is composed of fragmentary mental images hard to define and even harder to put into common words. She has spoken of beacon fires burning in the night, of a ‘congregation at Ithaqua’s altar’, of an evil, ancient Eskimo chant issuing from a hundred adulatory throats – and of that which *answered* that chant, drawn down from the skies by the call of its worshippers . . .

“I will go into no details of what she ‘remembers’ except to repeat that Sam died, and that then, as I see it, his poor wife’s tortured mind must finally have broken. It seems certain, though, that even after the . . . horror . . . she must have received help from someone; she could not possibly have covered even a handful of miles in her condition on foot and alone – and yet she was found *here*, near Navissa, by certain of the town’s inhabitants.

“She was taken to a local doctor, who was frankly astounded that, frozen to the marrow as she was, she had not died of exposure in the wastes. It was a number of weeks before she was well enough to be told of Sam, how he had been found dead, a block of human ice out in the snows.

“And when she pressed them, then it came out about the condition of his body, how strangely torn and mangled it had been, as if ravaged by savage beasts, or as if it had fallen from a great height, or perhaps a combination of both. The official verdict was that he must have stumbled over some high cliff on to sharp rocks, and that his body had subsequently been dragged for some distance over the snow by wolves. This latter fitted with the fact that while his body showed all the signs of a great fall, there were no high places in the immediate vicinity. Why the wolves did not devour him remains unknown.”

Thus ended the judge’s narrative, and though I sat for some three minutes waiting for him to continue, he did not do so. In the end I said, “And she believes that her husband was killed by ...?”

“That Ithaqua killed him? – Yes, and she believes in rather worse things, if you can imagine that.” Hurriedly then he went on, giving me no opportunity to question his meaning.

“One or two other things: first, Lucille’s temperature. It has never been quite normal since that time. She tells me medical men are astounded that her body temperature never rises above a level which would be death to anyone else. They say it must be a symptom of severe nervous disorders, but are at a loss to reconcile this with her otherwise fairly normal physical condition. And finally this,” he held out the medallion for my inspection.

“I want you to keep it for now. It was found on Sam’s broken body; in fact it was clenched in his hand. Lucille got it with his other effects. She tells me there is – something strange about it. If any, well, *phenomena* really do attach to it, you should notice them ...”

I took the medallion and looked at it – at its loathsome bas-relief work, scenes of a battle between monstrous beings which only some genius artist in the throes of madness might conceive – before asking, “And is that all?”

“Yes, I think so – no, wait. There is something else, of course there is. Lucille’s boy, Kirby. He ... well, in many ways it seems he is like Sam: impetuous, with a love of strange and esoteric lore and legend, a wanderer at heart, I suspect; but his mother has always kept him down, earthbound. At any rate, he’s now run off. Lucille believes that he’s come north. She thinks perhaps that he intends to visit those regions where his father died. Don’t ask me why; I think Kirby must be something of a neurotic where his father is concerned. This may well have come down to him from his mother.

“Anyway, she intends to follow and find him and take him home again away from here. Of course, if no evidence comes to light to show him positively to be in these parts, then there will be nothing for you to do. But if he really is here somewhere, then it would be a great personal favour to me if you would go with Lucille and look after her when she decides to search him out. Goodness only knows how it might affect her to go again into the snows, with so many bad memories.”

“I’ll certainly do as you ask, Judge, and gladly,” I answered immediately. “Frankly, the more I learn of Bridgeman, the more the mystery fascinates me. There *is* a mystery, you would agree, despite all rationalisations?”

“A mystery?” He pondered my question. “The snows are strange, David, and too much snow and privation can bring fantastic illusions – like the mirages of the desert. In the snow, men may dream while yet awake. And there again, there is that weird five-year cycle of strangeness which definitely affects this

region. Myself, I suspect that it all has some quite simple explanation. A mystery? – I say the world is full of mysteries ...”

III

That night I experienced my first taste of the weird, the inexplicable, the *outré*. And that night I further learned that I, too, must be susceptible to the five-year cycle of strangeness; either that, or I had eaten too well before taking to my bed.

There was first the dream of Cyclopean submarine cities of mad angles and proportions, which melted into vague but frightful glimpses of the spaces between the stars, through which I seemed to walk or float at speeds many times that of light. Nebulae floated by like bubbles in wine, and strange constellations expanded before me and dwindled in my wake as I passed through them. This floating, or walking, was accompanied by the sounds of a tremendous striding, like the world-shaking footsteps of some ponderous giant, and there was (of all things) an ether wind that blew about me the scents of stars and shards of shattered planets.

Finally all of these impressions faded to a nothingness, and I was as a mote lost in the darkness of dead eons. Then there came another wind – not the wind that carried the odour of outer immensities or the pollen of blossoming planets – a tangible, shrieking gale-wind that whirled me about and around until I was sick and dizzy and in dread of being dashed to pieces. And I awoke.

I awoke and thought I knew why I had dreamed such a strange dream, a nightmare totally outside anything I had previously known. For out in the night it raged and blew, a storm that filled my room with its roaring until I could almost feel the tiles being lifted from the roof above.

I got out of bed and went to the window, drawing the curtains cautiously and looking out – before stumbling back with my eyes popping and my mouth agape in an exclamation of utter amazement and disbelief. *Outside, the night was as calm as any I ever saw, with the stars gleaming clear and bright and not even a breeze to stir the small firs in the judge’s garden!*

As I recoiled – amidst the rush and roar of winds which seemed to have their origin in my very room, even though I could feel no motion of the air and while nothing visibly stirred – I knocked down the golden medallion from where I had left it upon my window ledge. On the instant, as the dull yellow thing clattered to the smooth pine floor, the roaring of the wind was cut off, leaving a silence that made my head spin with its suddenness. The cacophony of mad winds had not ‘died away’ – quite literally it had been *cut off!*

Shakily I bent to pick the medallion up, noticing despite the warmth of my room, it bore a chill that must have been near to freezing. On impulse I put the thing to my ear. It seemed that just for a second, receding, I could hear as in a sounding shell the rush and roar and hum of winds far, far away, winds

blowing beyond the rim of the world!

In the morning, of course, I realised that it had all been a dream, not merely the fantastic submarine and interspatial sequences, but also those occurrences following immediately upon my 'awakening'. Nevertheless, I questioned the judge as to whether he had heard anything odd during the night. He had not, and I was strangely relieved ...

Three days later, when it was beginning to look like Lucille Bridgeman's suspicions regarding her son were without basis – this despite all her efforts, and the judge's, to prove the positive presence of Kirby Bridgeman in the vicinity of Navissa – there came word from the Mounties at Fir Valley that a young man answering Kirby's description had indeed been seen. He had been with a mixed crowd of seemingly destitute outsiders and local layabouts camping in crumbling Stillwater. Observers – two ageing but inveterate gold-grubbers, out on their last prospecting trip of the year before the bad weather set in – had mentioned seeing him. Though these gnarled prospectors had by no means been made welcome in Stillwater, none the less they had noted that this particular young man had appeared to be in a sort of trance or daze, and that the others with him had seemed to hold him in some kind of reverence; they had been tending to his needs and generally looking after him.

It was this description of the boy's condition (which made it sound rather as if he were not quite right in his head) that determined me to inquire tactfully of his mother about him as soon as the opportunity presented itself. For the last two days though, I had been studying the handling and maintenance of a vehicle that the judge termed a 'snow-cat': a fairly large motorised sledge of very modern design that he had hired for Mrs. Bridgeman from a friend of his in the town. The vehicle seemed a fairly economical affair, capable in suitable conditions of carrying two adults and provisions over snow at a speed of up to twenty miles per hour. It was capable, too, of a somewhat slower speed over more normal terrain. With such a vehicle two people might easily travel one hundred and fifty miles without refuelling, in comparative comfort at that, and over country no automobile could possibly challenge.

The next morning saw us setting out aboard the snow-cat. Though we planned on returning to Navissa every second or third day to refuel, we had sufficient supplies aboard for at least a week. First we headed for Stillwater.

Following a fall of snow during the night, the track that led us to the ghost town was mainly buried beneath a white carpet almost a foot deep, but even so, it was plain that this barely fourth-class road (in places a mere trail) was in extremely poor repair. I recalled the judge telling me that very few people went to Stillwater now, following the strange affair of twenty years gone, and doubtless this accounted for the track's derelict appearance in those places where the wind had blown its surface clean.

In Stillwater we found a constable of the Mounties just preparing to leave the place for camp at Fir Valley. He had gone to the ghost town specifically to check out the story of the two old prospectors. Introducing himself as Constable McCauley, the Mountie showed us round the town.

Originally the place had been built of stout timbers, with stores and houses and one very ramshackle 'saloon' bordering a main street and with lesser huts and habitations set back behind the street façades. Now, however, the main street was grown with grass and weeds which showed through the snow, and even the stoutest buildings were quickly falling into dilapidation. The shacks and lesser houses to the rear leaned like old men with the weight of years, and rotten doorposts with their paint long flaked away

sagged on every hand, threatening at any moment to collapse and bring down the edifices framing them into the snow. Here and there one or two windows remained, but warped and twisting frames had long since claimed by far the greater number, so that now sharp shards of glass stood up in broken rows from sills like grinning teeth in blackly leering mouths. A stained, tattered curtain flapped mouldering threads in the chill midday breeze. Even though the day was fairly bright, there was a definite gloominess about Stillwater, an aura of something *not quite right*, of strange menace, seeming to brood like a mantle of evil about the place.

Overall, and ignoring the fact that twenty years had passed since last it knew habitation, the town seemed to be falling far too quickly into decay, almost as if some elder magic had blighted the place in an effort to return it to its origins. Saplings already stood tall through the snow in the main street; grass and weeds proliferated on window ledges, along façades, and in the black gaps where boards had fallen from the lower storeys of the crumbling buildings.

Mrs. Bridgeman seemed to notice none of this, only that her son was no longer in town . . . if he had ever been there.

In the largest standing building, a tavern that seemed to have fared better in its battle against decay than the rest of the town, we brewed coffee and heated soup. There too we found signs of recent, if temporary, habitation, for the floor in one of the rooms was fairly littered with freshly empty cans and bottles. This debris, plus the blackened ashes of a fire built on stones in one corner, stood as plain testimony that the building had been used by that group of unknown persons whose presence the prospectors had reported.

The Mountie mentioned how chill the place was, and at his remark it dawned on me that indeed the tavern seemed colder inside (where by all rights it ought to have been at least marginally warmer) than out in the raw air of the derelict streets. I was about to voice this thought when Mrs. Bridgeman, suddenly paler by far than usual, put down her coffee and stood up from where she sat upon a rickety chair.

She looked first at me – a queer, piercing glance – then at McCauley. “My son was here,” she abruptly said, as if she knew it quite definitely. “Kirby was here!”

The Mountie looked hard at her, then stared about the room in mystification. “There’s some sign that your boy was here, Mrs. Bridgeman?”

She had turned away and for a moment did not answer. She seemed to be listening intently for something far off. “Can’t you hear it?”

Constable McCauley looked at me out of the corner of his eye. He frowned. The room was very still. “Hear what, Mrs. Bridgeman? What is it?”

“Why, the wind!” she answered, her eyes clouded and distant. “The wind blowing way out between the worlds!”

Half an hour later we were ready to move again. The Mountie in the meantime had taken me to one side, to ask me if I didn’t think the search we planned was just a little bit hazardous considering Mrs. Bridgeman’s condition. Plainly he thought she was a bit touched. Perhaps she was! God knows, if what the judge told me was true, the poor woman had enough reason. Being ignorant of her real problem at that time, however, I shrugged her strangeness off, mentioning her relationship with her son as being

obsessive out of all proportion to reality. In truth, this was the impression I had already half formed – but it did not explain the *other* thing.

I made no mention of it to the Mountie. For one thing, it was none of his business; and for another, I hardly wanted him thinking that perhaps I, too, was ‘a bit touched’. It was simply this: in the derelict tavern – when Mrs. Bridgeman had asked, ‘Can’t you hear it?’ – I had in fact heard something. At the exact moment of her inquiry, I had put my hand into a pocket of my parka for a pack of cigarettes. My hand had come into contact with that strange golden medallion, and as my fingers closed upon the chill shape, I had felt a thrill as of weird energies, an electric tingle that seemed to energise all my senses simultaneously. I felt the cold of the spaces between the stars; I smelled again, as in my dreams, the scents of unknown worlds; for the merest fraction of a second there opened before me reeling vistas, incredible eons flashing by in a twinkling; and I, too, heard a wind – a howling *sentience* from far beyond the universe we know!

It had been so momentary, this – vision? – that I thought little more of it. Doubtless my mind, as I touched the medallion, had conjured in connection with the thing parts of that dream in which it had featured so strongly. That was the only explanation . . .

I calculate that by 5:00 p.m. we must have been something like fifty miles directly north of Stillwater. It was there, in the lee of a low hill covered by tall conifers whose snow-laden branches bowed almost to the ground, that Mrs. Bridgeman called a halt for the night. Freezing, the snow already had a thin, crisp crust. I set up our two tiny bivouacs beneath a pine whose white branches formed in themselves something of a tent, and there I lit our stove and prepared a meal.

I had decided that it was time tactfully to approach Mrs. Bridgeman regarding those many facets of her story of which I was still ignorant; but then, as if there were not enough mystery, I was witness to that which brought vividly back to me what the judge had told me of the widow’s body temperature.

We had finished our meal, and I had prepared my bivouac for the night, spreading my sleeping bag and packing snow close to the lower outside walls of the tiny tent against freezing draughts. I offered to do the same for Mrs. Bridgeman, but she assured me that she could attend to that herself. For the moment she wanted ‘a breath of fresh air’. That turn of phrase in itself might have been enough to puzzle me (the air could hardly have been fresher!) but in addition she then cast off her parka, standing only in sweater and slacks, before stepping out from under the lowered branches into the sub-zero temperatures of falling night!

Heavily wrapped, still I shivered as I watched her from the sanctuary of our hideaway beneath the tree. For half an hour she simply wandered to and fro over the snow, occasionally glancing at the sky and then again into the darkening distance. Finally, as I suddenly realised that I was quickly drawing close to freezing while waiting for her to come back to camp, I went stiffly out to her with her parka. She must by now, I believed, be very close to suffering from exposure. Blaming myself that I had not recognised sooner how terrifically cold it was, I came up to her and threw her parka about her shoulders. Imagine my astonishment when she turned with a questioning look, completely at ease and plainly quite comfortable, immensely surprised at my concern!

She must have seen immediately how cold I was. Chiding me that I had not taken greater care to keep warm, she hurried back with me to the bivouacs beneath the tree. There she quickly boiled water and made coffee. She drank none of the hot, reviving fluid herself, however, and I was so astounded at her apparent immunity to the cold that I forgot all about those questions I had intended to ask. Since Mrs.

Bridgeman now plainly intended to retire and since my own sleeping bag lay warm and inviting inside my bivouac, I simply finished off the coffee, turned down the stove and lay down for the night.

I was suddenly tired, and the last thing I saw before sleeping was a patch of sky through the branches, illuminated by brightly twinkling stars. Perhaps that picture of the heavens, imprinted on my mind's eye as I fell asleep, coloured my dreams. Certainly I dreamed of stars all night long, but they were uneasy dreams. The stars I saw were particularly sentient and paired like strange eyes; they glowed carmine against a moving black background of hideously suggestive design and immense proportions . . .

In the morning over breakfast – cheese and tomato sandwiches, followed by coffee and fruit juice – I briefly mentioned Mrs. Bridgeman's apparent immunity to the cold, at which she looked at me with a very wry expression and said, "You may believe me, Mr. Lawton, when I tell you that I would give all of what little I have just once to feel the cold. It is this –*affliction* – of mine, an extremely rare condition which I contracted here in the north. And it has come out in –"

"In Kirby?" I hazarded the guess.

"Yes." She looked at me again, shrewdly this time. "How much did Judge Andrews tell you?"

I could not conceal my embarrassment. "He – he told me of your husband's death, and –"

"What did he say of my son?"

"Very little. He is not the kind of man to gossip idly, Mrs. Bridgeman, and –"

"And you suspect that there might be much to gossip about?" She was suddenly angry.

"I only know that I'm here, helping a woman look for her son, following her instincts and whims without question, as a favour to an old man. To be absolutely truthful, I suspect that there is a great mystery here; and I admit that I am addicted to mysteries, as curious as a cat. But my curiosity is without malice, you must believe that, and my only desire is to help you."

She turned away from me for a moment or two, and I thought she was still angry, but when she turned back her face was much more composed.

"And did the judge not warn you that there would be – danger?"

"Danger? Heavy snow is due, certainly –"

"No, the snow is nothing – I didn't mean the snow. The judge has Sam's books; have you read them?"

"Yes, but what danger can there be in mythology and folklore?" In fact, I guessed what she was getting at, but better to hear it from her own lips, as she 'believed' it and as her husband had 'believed' it before her.

"What danger in myths and legends, you ask?" She smiled mirthlessly. "I asked the same question of Sam when he wanted to leave me in Navissa. God, that I'd listened to him! What danger in folklore? I can't tell you directly – not without you thinking me a madwoman, as I'm sure the judge must more than half believe – but I'll tell you this: today we return to Navissa. On the way you can teach me how to drive the snow-cat. I won't take you to horrors you can't conceive."

I tried to argue the point but she would say no more. We decamped in silence, packed the bivouacs and camp utensils aboard the cat, and then, despite a last effort on my part to dissuade her, she demanded that we head directly for Navissa.

For half an hour, travelling fairly slowly, we followed the course of a frozen stream between brooding fir forests whose dark interiors were made darker still by the shrouding snow that covered the upper branches. It was as I turned the snow-cat away from the stream, round a smaller copse of trees to head more nearly south, that I accidentally came upon that which should have gone far towards substantiating Mrs. Bridgeman's hints of terrible dangers.

It was a large depression in the snow, to which I had to react quickly in order to avoid a spill, when we might easily have tumbled directly into it. I halted our machine, and we stepped down to take a closer look at this strangely sunken place in the snow.

Here the drift was deeper, perhaps three or four feet, but in the centre of the depression it had been compacted almost to the earth beneath, as if some great weight had rested there. The size of this concavity must have been almost twenty feet long by seven or eight feet wide, and its shape was something like –

Abruptly the judge's words came back to me – what he had mentioned of the various manifestations of Ithaqua, the Wind-Walker – *and particularly of giant, webbed footprints in the snow!*

But of course that was ridiculous. And yet . . .

I began to walk round the perimeter of the fantastic depression, only turning when I heard Mrs. Bridgeman cry out behind me. Paler than I had ever seen her before, now she leaned dizzily against the snow-cat, her hand to her throat. I went quickly to her.

“Mrs. Bridgeman?”

“He – *He was here!*” she spoke in a horrified whisper.

“Your son?”

“No, not Kirby – *Him!*” She pointed, staring wide-eyed at the compacted snow of the depression. “Ithaqua, the Wind-Walker – that is His sign. And that means that I may already be too late!”

“Mrs. Bridgeman,” I made a half-hearted attempt to reason with her, “plainly this depression marks the spot where a number of animals rested during the night. The snow must have drifted about them, leaving this peculiar shape.”

“There was no snow last night, Mr. Lawton,” she answered, more composed now, “but in any case your explanation is quite impossible. Why, if there had been a number of animals here, surely they would have left tracks in the snow when they moved. Look about you. There are no tracks here! No, this is the footprint of the fiend. The horror was here – and somewhere, at this very moment, my son is trying to search Him out, helped on by those poor devils that worship Him!”

I saw my chance then to avoid an early return to Navissa. If we went back now, I might never learn the whole story, and I would never be able to face the judge, having let him down. “Mrs. Bridgeman, it's plain that if we go south now we're only wasting time. I for one am willing to face whatever danger there may be, though I still can see no such danger. However, if some peril does face Kirby, then we won't be

helping him any by returning to Navissa. It would help, though, if I knew the background story. Some of it I know already, but there must be a lot you can tell me. Now listen, we have enough fuel for about a hundred and twenty miles more. This is my proposition: that we carry on looking for your son to the north. If we have not found him by the time our fuel reserves are halved, then we head back in a direct line for Navissa. Furthermore, I swear here and now that I'll never divulge anything you may tell me or anything I may see while you live. Now, then – we're wasting time. What do you say?"

She hesitated, turning my proposition over in her mind, and as she did so, I saw to the north the spreading of a cloud sheet across the sky and sensed that peculiar change of atmosphere which ever precedes bad weather. Again I prompted her: "The sky is growing more sullen all the time. We're in for plenty of snow – probably tonight. We really can't afford to waste time if we want to find Kirby before the worst of the weather sets in. Soon the glass will begin to fall, and –"

"The cold won't bother Kirby, Mr. Lawton – but you're right, there's no time to waste. From now on our breaks must be shorter, and we must try to travel faster. Later today I'll tell you what I can of ... of everything. Believe what you will, it makes little difference, but for the last time I warn you – if we find Kirby, then in all probability we shall also find the utmost horror!"

IV

With regard to the weather, I was right. Having turned again to the north, skirting dense fir forests and crossing frozen streams and low hills, by 10:30 a.m. we were driving through fairly heavy snow. The glass was far down, though mercifully there was little wind. All this time – despite a certainty in my heart that there would be none – nevertheless I found myself watching out for more of those strange and inexplicable hollows in the snow.

A dense copse where the upper branches interlaced, forming a dark umbrella to hold up a roof of snow, served us for a midday camp. There, while we prepared a hot meal and as we ate, Mrs. Bridgeman began to tell me about her son, about his remarkable childhood and his strange leanings as he grew into a man. Her first revelation, however, was the most fantastic, and plainly the judge had been right to suspect that the events of twenty years gone had turned her mind, at least as far as her son was concerned.

"Kirby," she started without preamble, "is not Sam's son. I love Kirby, naturally, but he is in no wise a child of love. He was born of the winds. No, don't interrupt me, I want no rationalisations.

"Can you understand me, Mr. Lawton? I suppose not. Indeed, at first I, too, thought that I was mad, that the whole thing had been a nightmare. I thought so right until the time – until Kirby was born. Then, as he grew up from a baby, I became less sure. Now I know that I was never mad. It was no nightmare that came to me here in the snow but a monstrous fact! And why not? Are not the oldest religions and legends known to man full of stories of gods lusting after the daughters of men? *Therewere* giants in the olden times, Mr. Lawton. There still are.

“Do you recall the Wendy-Smith expedition of ’33? What do you suppose he found, that poor man, in the fastnesses of Africa? What prompted him to say these words, which I know by heart: ‘There are fabulous legends of star-born creatures who inhabited this earth many millions of years before man appeared and who were still here, in certain black places, when he eventually evolved. They are, I am sure, to an extent here even now.’

“Wendy-Smith *was* sure, and so am I. In 1913 two monsters were born in Dunwich to a degenerate half-wit of a woman. They are both dead now, but there are still whispers in Dunwich of the affair, and of the father who is hinted to have been other than human. Oh, there are many examples of survivals from olden times, of beings and forces which have reached godlike proportions in the minds of men, and who is to deny that at least some of them could be real?

“And where Ithaqua is concerned – why! – there are elementals of the air mentioned in every mythology known to man. Rightly so, for even today, and other than this Ithaqua of the Snows, there are strange winds that blow madness and horror into the minds of men. I mean winds like the *foehn*, the south wind of Alpine valleys. And what of the piping winds of subterranean caverns, like that of the Calábrian Caves, which has been known to leave stout cavers white-haired, babbling wrecks? What do we understand of such forces?

“Our human race is a colony of ants, Mr. Lawton, inhabiting an anthill at the edge of a limitless chasm called infinity. All things may happen in infinity, and who knows what might come out of it? What do we know of *the facts* of anything, in our little corner of a never-ending universe, in this transient revolution in the space-time continuum? Seeping down from the stars at the beginning of time there were giants – beings who walked or flew across the spaces between the worlds, inhabiting and using entire systems at their will – and some of them still remain. What would the race of man be to creatures such as these? I’ll tell you – we are the plankton of the seas of space and time!

“But there, I’m going on a bit, away from the point. The facts are these: that before I came to Navissa with Sam, he had already been told that he was sterile, and that after I left – after that horror had killed my husband – well, then I was pregnant.

“Of course, at first I believed that the doctors were wrong, that Sam had not been sterile at all, and this seemed to be borne out when my baby was born just within eight months of Sam’s death. Obviously, in the normal scale of reckoning, Kirby was conceived before we came to Navissa. And yet it was a difficult pregnancy, and as a newborn baby he was a weedy, strange little thing – frail and dreamy and far too quiet – so that even without knowing much of children I nevertheless found myself thinking of his birth as having been ... premature!

“His feet were large even for a boy, and his toes were webbed with a pink stretching of skin that thickened and lengthened as he grew. Understand, please, that my boy was in no way a freak – not visibly. Many people have this webbing between their toes; some have it between their fingers too. In all other respects he seemed to be completely normal. Well, perhaps not completely ...

“Long before he could walk, he was talking – baby talk, you know – but not to me. Always it was when he was alone in his cot, and always when there was a wind. He could hear the wind, and he used to talk to it. But that was nothing really remarkable; grown children often talk to invisible playmates, people and creatures that only they can see; except that I used to listen to Kirby, and sometimes –

“Sometimes I could swear that the winds talked back to him!

“You may laugh if you wish, Mr. Lawton, and I don’t suppose I could blame you, but there always seemed to be a wind about our home, when everywhere else the air was still ...

“As Kirby grew older this didn’t seem to happen so frequently, or perhaps I simply grew used to it. I really don’t know. But when he should have been starting school, well, that was out of the question. He was such a dreamer, in no way slow or backward, you understand, but he constantly lived in a kind of dreamworld. And always – though he seemed later to have given up his strange conversations with draughts and breezes – he had this fascination with the wind.

“One summer night when he was seven, a wind came up that threatened to blow the very house down. It came from the sea, a north wind off the Gulf of Mexico – or perhaps it came from further away than that, who can say? At any rate, I was frightened, as were most of the families in the area where we lived. Such was the fury of that demon wind, and it reminded me so of ... of another wind I had known. Kirby sensed my fear. It was the strangest thing, but he threw open a window and he shouted. He shouted right into the teeth of that howling, banshee storm. Can you imagine that? A small child, teeth bared and hair streaming, shouting at a wind that might have lifted him right off the face of the earth!

“And yet in another minute the worst of the storm was over, leaving Kirby scolding and snapping at the smaller gusts of air that yet remained, until the night was as still as any other summer night ...

“At ten he became interested in model aeroplanes, and one of his private tutors helped him and encouraged him to design and build his own. You see, he was far ahead of other children his own age. One of his models created a lot of excitement when it was shown at an exhibition of flying models at a local club. It had a very strange shape: its under-side was all rippled and warped. It worked on a gliding principle of my son’s own invention, having no motor but relying upon what Kirby called his ‘rippled-air principle’. I remember he took it to the gliding club that day, and that the other members – children and adults alike – laughed at his model and said it couldn’t possibly fly. Kirby flew it for them for an hour, and they all marvelled while it seemingly defied gravity in a fantastic series of flights. Then, because they had laughed at him, he smashed the model down to its balsa wood and tissue-paper components to strew them like confetti at the feet of the spectators. That was his pride working, even as a child. I wasn’t there myself, but I’m told that a designer from one of the big model companies cried when Kirby destroyed his glider ...

“He loved kites, too – he always had a kite. He would sit for hours and simply watch his kite standing on the air at the end of its string.

“When he was thirteen he wanted binoculars so that he could study birds in flight. Hawks were of particular interest to him – the way they hover, motionless except for the rapid beating of their wings. They, too, seem almost to walk on the wind.

“Then came the day when a more serious and worrying aspect of Kirby’s fascination with the air and flight came to light. For a long time I had been worried about him, about his constant restlessness and moodiness and his ominous obsession.

“We were visiting Chichén Itzá, a trip I hoped would take Kirby’s mind off other things. In fact the trip had a twofold purpose; the other was that I had been to Chichén Itzá before with Sam, and this was my way of remembering how it had been. Every now and then I would visit a place where we had been happy before ... before his death.

“There were, however, a number of things I had not taken into account. There is often a wind playing among those ancient ruins, and the ruins themselves – with their aura of antiquity, their strange glyphs,

their history of bloody worship and benighted gods – can be . . . disturbing.

“I had forgotten, too, that the Mayas had their own god of the air, Quetzalcoátl, the plumed serpent, and I suspect that this was almost my undoing.

“Kirby had been quiet and moody during the outward trip, and he stayed that way even after freshening up and while we began to explore the ancient buildings and temples. It was while I was admiring other ruins that Kirby climbed the high, hideously adorned Temple of the Warriors, with its façade of plumed serpents, their mouths fanged and tails rampant.

“He was seen to fall – or jump – by at least two dozen people, mainly Mexicans, but later they all told the same story: how the wind had seemed almost to buoy him up; how he had seemed to fall in slow motion; how he had uttered an eerie cry before stepping into space, like a call to strange gods for assistance. And after that terrible fall, on to ancient stone flags and from such a great height . . .

“It was a miracle, people said, that Kirby was unhurt.

“Well, eventually I was able to convince the authorities at the site that Kirby must have fallen, and I was able to get him away before he came out of his faint. Oh, yes, he had fainted. A fall like that, and the only result a swoon!

“But though I had explained away the incident as best I could, I don’t suppose I could ever have explained the look on Kirby’s face as I carried him away – that smile of triumph or strange satisfaction.

“Now all this happened not long after his fourteenth birthday, at a time when here in the north the five-year cycle of so-called ‘superstitious belief and mass hysteria’ was once more at its height, just as it is now. So far as I was concerned, there was an undeniable connection.

“Since then – and I blame myself that I’ve only recently discovered this – Kirby has been a secret saver, hoarding away whatever money he could lay his hands on towards some future purpose or ambition; and now of course I know that this was his journey north. All his life, you see, he had followed the trail of his destiny, and I don’t suppose that there was anything I could have done to change it.

“A short time ago something happened to clinch it, something that drew Kirby north like a magnet. Now – I don’t know what the end will be, *but I must see it* – I must find out, one way or the other, once and for all . . .”

V

By 1:30 p.m. we were once again mobile, our vehicle driving through occasional flurries of snow, fortunately with a light tail wind to boost us on our way. And it was not long before we came upon signs

that warned of the presence of others there in that white waste, fresh snow-shoe tracks that crossed our path at a tangent and moved in the direction of low hills. We followed these tracks – apparently belonging to a group of at least three persons – until they converged with others atop one of the low bald hills. Here I halted the snow-cat and dismounted, peering out at the wilderness around and discovering that from here, between flurries of snow, I could roughly make out the site of our last camp. It dawned on me at once that this would have been a wonderful vantage point from which to keep us under observation.

Then Mrs. Bridgeman tugged at the sleeve of my parka, pointing away to the north where finally I made out a group of black dots against the pure white background straggling towards a distant pine forest.

“We must follow them,” she declared. “They will be members of His order, on their way to the ceremonies. Kirby may even be with them!” At the thought, her voice took on a feverish excitement.

“Quickly – we mustn’t lose them!”

But lose them we did.

By the time we reached that stretch of open ground where first Mrs. Bridgeman had spied the unknown group, its members had already disappeared into the darkness of the trees some hundreds of yards away. At the edge of the forest I again brought our vehicle to a halt, and though we might easily have followed the tracks through the trees – which was my not-so-delicate companion’s immediate and instinctive desire – that would have meant abandoning the snow-cat.

Instead, I argued that we should skirt the forest, find a vantage point on its northern fringe, and there await the emergence of whichever persons they were who chose to wander these wastes at the onset of winter. To this seemingly sound proposal Mrs. Bridgeman readily enough agreed, and within the hour we were hidden away in a cluster of pines beyond the forest proper. There we took turns to watch the fringe of the forest, and while I took first watch, Mrs. Bridgeman made a pot of coffee. We had only unpacked our stove, deeming it unwise to make ourselves too comfortable in case we should need to be on the move in a hurry.

After only twenty minutes at my post I would have been willing to swear that the sky had snowed itself out for the day. Indeed I made just such a comment to my pale companion when she brought me a cup of coffee. The leaden heavens had cleared – there was hardly a cloud in sight in the afternoon sky – and then, as if from nowhere, there came the wind!

Instantly the temperature dropped, and I felt the hairs in my nostrils stiffening and cracking with each sniff of icy air. The remaining half cup of coffee in my hand froze in a matter of seconds, and a rime of frost sprang up on my eyebrows. Heavily wrapped as I was, still I felt the cold striking through, and I drew back into the comparative shelter of the trees. In all my meteorological experience I have never known or heard of anything like it before. The storm that came with the wind and the cold, rising up in the space of the next half hour, took me totally by surprise.

Looking up, through the gaps in the snow-laden branches, I could plainly see the angry boiling up of clouds into a strange mixture of cumulonimbus and nimbostratus, where only moments before there had been no clouds at all! If the sky had seemed leaden earlier in the day, now it positively glowered. The atmosphere pressed down with an almost tangible weight upon our heads.

And finally it snowed.

Mercifully, and despite the fact that all the symptoms warned of a tremendous storm to come, the wind remained only moderate, but by comparison the snow came down as if it had never snowed before. The *hushh* of settling snow was quite audible as the huge flakes fell in gust-driven, spiralling myriads to the ground.

Plainly my watch on the forest was no longer necessary, indeed impossible, for such was the curtain of falling snow that visibility was down to no more than a few feet. We were stuck, but surely no more so than that suspicious band of wanderers in the forest – members of ‘His order’, as Mrs. Bridgeman would have it. We would have to wait the weather out, and so would they.

For the next two hours, until about 5:00 p.m., I busied myself making a wind-break of fallen branches and packed snow until even the moderate wind was shut out of our hideaway. Then I built a small fire in the centre of this sheltered area close to the snow-cat. Whatever happened, I did not want the works of that machine put out of order by freezing temperatures.

During all this time Mrs. Bridgeman simply sat and brooded, plainly unconcerned with the cold. She was frustrated, I imagined, by our inability to get on with the search. In the same period, busy as I was with my hands, nevertheless I was able to ponder much of what had passed, drawing what half-formed conclusions I could in the circumstances.

The truth of the matter was that there did seem to be too many coincidences here for comfort, and personally I had already experienced a number of things previously unknown to me or alien to my nature. I could no longer keep from my mind memories of that strange dream of mine; similarly the odd sensations I had felt on contact with or in proximity to the yellow medallion of gold and obscure alloys.

Then there was the simple, quite definite fact – bolstered both by the judge and the widow Bridgeman alike, and by McCauley the Mountie – that a freakish five-year cycle of strange excitement, morbid worship, and curious cult activity *did* actually exist in these parts. And dwelling on thoughts such as these, I found myself wondering once again just what had happened here twenty years gone, that its echoes should so involve me here and now.

Patently it had not been – could not possibly have been – as Mrs. Bridgeman ‘remembered’ it. And yet, apart from her previous nervousness and one or two forgivable lapses under emotional stress since then, she had seemed to me to be as normal as most women ...

Or had she?

I found myself in two minds. What of this fantastic immunity of hers to sub-zero temperatures? Even now she sat there, peering out into the falling snow, pale and distant and impervious still to the frost that rimed her forehead and dusted her clothes, perfectly comfortable despite the fact that she had once again shed her heavy parka. No, I was wrong, and it amazed me that I had fooled myself for so long. There was very little about this woman that was normal. She had known – *something* . Some experience to set her both mentally and physically aside from mundane mankind.

But could that experience possibly have been the horror she ‘remembered’? Even then I could not quite bring myself to believe.

And yet ... what of that shape we had stumbled across in the snow, that deep imprint as of a huge webbed foot? My mind flashed back to our first night out from Navissa, when I had dreamed of a colossal shape in the sky, a shape with carmine stars for eyes!

But this was no good. Why! – here I was, nervous as a cat, starting at the slightest flurry of snow out there beyond the heavy branches. I laughed at my own fancies, albeit shakily, because just for a second as I had turned from the bright fire I had imagined that a shadow moved out in the snow, a furtive figure that shifted just beyond my periphery of vision.

“I saw you jump, Mr. Lawton,” my companion suddenly spoke up. “Did you see something?”

“I don’t think so,” I briskly answered, my voice louder than necessary. “Just a shadow in the snow.”

“He has been there for five minutes now. We are under observation!”

“What? You mean there’s someone out there?”

“Yes, one of His worshippers, I imagine, sent by the others to see what we’re up to. We’re outsiders, you know. But I don’t think they’ll try to do us any harm. Kirby would never allow that.”

She was right. Suddenly I saw him, limned darkly against the white background as the whirling snow flurried to one side. Eskimo or Indian, I could not tell which, but I believe his face was impassive. He was merely – watching.

From that time on the storm strengthened, with the wind building up to a steady blast that drove the snow through the trees in an impenetrable icy wall. Behind my barrier of branches and snow we were comfortable enough, for I had extended the shelter until its wall lay open only in a narrow gap to the south; the wind was from the north. The snow on the outside of the shelter had long since formed a frozen crust, so that no wind came through, and the ice-stiffened branches of the surrounding trees gave protection from above. My fire blazed and roared in subdued imitation of the wind, for I had braved half a dozen brief excursions beyond the shelter to bring back armfuls of fallen branches. Their trimmed ends burning, Indian fashion, where they met like the spokes of a wheel to form the centre of the fire, these branches now warmed our small enclosure and gave it light. They had burned thus all through the afternoon and into the night.

It was about 10:00 p.m., pitch-black beyond the wall of the shelter and still snowing hard, when we became aware of our second visitor; the first had silently left us some hours earlier. Mrs. Bridgeman saw him first, grabbing my elbow so that I started to my feet and turned towards the open end of our sanctuary. There, framed in the firelight, white with snow from head to foot, stood a man.

A white man, he came forward shaking the snow from his clothes. He paused before the fire and tipped back the hood of his fur jacket, then shed his gloves and held his hands out to the flames. His eyebrows were black, meeting across his nose. He was very tall. After a while, ignoring me, he turned to Mrs. Bridgeman. He had a strong New England accent when he said, “It is Kirby’s wish that you go back to Navissa. He does not want you to be hurt. He says you should return now to Navissa – both of you – and that you should then go home. He knows everything now. He knows why he is here, and he wants to stay. His destiny is the glory of the spaces between the worlds, the knowledge and mysteries of the Ancient Ones who were here before man, godship over the icy winds of earth and space with his lord and master. You have had him for almost twenty years. Now he wants to be free.”

I was on the point of questioning his authority and tone when Mrs. Bridgeman cut me short. “Free? What kind of freedom? To stay here in the ice? To wander the icy wastes until any attempt to return to the world of men would mean certain death? To learn the alien lore of monsters spawned in black pits

beyond time and space?"

Her voice rose hysterically. "To know no woman's love but to sate his lust with strangers, leaving them for dead and worse in a manner which *only his loathsome father could ever teach him*?"

The stranger lifted his hand in sudden anger. "You dare to speak of Him like –" I sprang between them, but it was immediately apparent that I was not needed.

The change in Mrs. Bridgeman was almost frightening. She had been near to hysterics only seconds ago; now her eyes blazed with anger in her white face, and she stood so straight and regal as to make our unknown visitor draw back, his raised arm falling quickly to his side.

"Do I dare?" Her voice was as chill as the wind. "I am Kirby's mother! Yes, I dare – but what *you* have dared ...! You would raise your hand to me?"

"I ... it was only ... I was angry." The man stumbled over his words before finding his former composure. "But all this makes no difference. Stay if you wish; you will not be able to enter the area of the ceremonies, for there will be a watch out. If you did get by the watch unseen – then the result would be upon your own heads. On the other hand, if you go back now, I can promise you fair weather all the way to Navissa. But only if you go now, at once."

My white-faced companion frowned and turned away to stare at the dying fire.

No doubt believing that she was weakening, the stranger offered his final inducement: "Think, Mrs. Bridgeman, and think well. There can be only one conclusion, one end, if you stay here – for you have looked upon Ithaqua!"

She turned back to him, desperate questions spilling from her lips. "Must we go tonight? May I not see my son just once? Will he be –?"

"He will not be harmed." She was cut off. "His destiny is *–great* ! Yes, you must go tonight; he does not wish to see you, and there is so little –" he paused, almost visibly biting his tongue, but it seemed that Mrs. Bridgeman had not noticed his gaffe. Plainly he had been about to say 'there is so little time'.

My companion sighed and her shoulders slumped. "If I agree – we will need fair weather. That can be ... arranged?"

The visitor eagerly nodded (though to me the idea that he might somehow contrive to control the weather seemed utterly ridiculous) and answered, "From now until midnight, the snow will lessen, the winds will die away. After that –" he shrugged. "But you will be well away from here before then."

She nodded, apparently in defeat. "Then we'll go. We need only sufficient time to break camp. A few minutes. But –"

"No buts, Mrs. Bridgeman. There was a Mountie here. He did not want to go away either. Now –" again he shrugged, the movement of his shoulders speaking volumes.

"McCauley!" I gasped.

"That was not the Mountie's name," he answered me, "but whoever he was, he too was looking for this lady's son." He was obviously talking about some other Mountie from Fir Valley camp, and I

remembered McCauley having mentioned another policeman who set out to search the wastes at the same time as he himself had headed for Stillwater.

“What have you done to him, this man?” I asked.

He ignored me and, pulling on his gloves, again addressed Mrs. Bridgeman: “I will wait until you go.” He pulled the hood of his jacket over his head, then stepped back out into the snow.

The conversation, what little there had been, had completely astounded me. In fact my astonishment had grown apace with what I had heard. Quite apart from openly admitting to what could only be murder, our strange visitor had agreed with – indeed, if my ears had not deceived me, he had *confirmed* – the wildest possible nightmares, horrors which, until now, so far as I was aware or concerned, had only manifested themselves in the works of Samuel Bridgeman and others who had worked the same vein before him, and in the disturbed imagination of his widow. Surely this must be the final, utmost proof positive of the effect of the morbid five-year cycle on the minds of men? Could it be anything else?

Finally I turned to the widow to ask, “Are we actually going back to Navissa, after all your efforts? And now, when we’re so close?”

First glancing cautiously out into the falling snow, she hurriedly shook her head, putting a warning finger to her lips. No, it was as I suspected; her almost docile concurrence, following that blazing, regal display of defiance, had merely been a ruse. She in no way intended to desert her son, whether he wished it or not. “Quickly – let’s get packed up,” she whispered. “He was right. The ceremony is tonight, it must be, and we haven’t much time.”

VI

From then on my mind was given little time to dwell on anything; I simply followed Mrs. Bridgeman’s directions to the letter, questioning nothing. In any case it was obvious that her game must now be played to outwit the enemy (I had come to think of the strange worshippers as ‘the enemy’), not to defeat them physically or to talk them down. That was plainly out of the question. If indeed they had resorted to murder in order to do whatever they intended to do, they would surely not let a mere woman stop them now.

So it was that when we set off south aboard the snow-cat, in a direction roughly that of Navissa, I knew that it would not be long before we would be doubling back on our tracks. And sure enough, within the half hour, at about 11:00 p.m., as we came over a low hill in the then very light snow, there Mrs. Bridgeman ordered a wide swing to the west.

We held this westward course for ten more minutes, then turned sharply to our right flank, bringing the snow-cat once again on to a northerly course. For a further twenty minutes we drove through the light

snow, which, now that it had the slackening north wind behind it, stung a little on my face. Then, again at Mrs. Bridgeman's direction, we climbed a thinly wooded slope to fetch a halt at the top not twenty minutes distant from our starting point. At the speed we had travelled, and given that the enemy had no machine comparable to our snow-cat, we could not possibly have been followed; and here, sheltered by the thin trees and the still lightly falling snow, we should be quite invisible to the enemy somewhere to our front.

Now, while we paused for a moment, I once more found questions forming in my mind for which I had no answers, and I had no sooner decided to voice them than my pale companion pointed suddenly out through the thin branches of the trees on the summit of the hill in the direction of a great black forested area some half mile to the north.

It was that same forest into which the enemy had vanished earlier in the day when we had been trailing them. Now at its four cardinal points, up sprang great fires of leaping red flame; and now too, coming to us on the wings of the north wind, faint and uneven, we heard massed voices raised in a chilling ritual – the Rites of Ithaqua:

Iä! Iä! – Ithaqua! Ithaqua!

Ai! Ai! Ai! – Ithaqua!

Ce-fyak vulg-t'uhm –

Ithaqua fhtagn!

Ugh! - Iä! Iä! – Ai! Ai! Ai!

Again and again the wind carried that utterly alien chorus to our ears, and inside me it seemed suddenly that my blood froze. It was not only this abhorrent chanting with its guttural tones, but also the *precision* of the – singing? – and the obvious familiarity of the voices with the song. This was no blind, parrot-like repetition of obscure vocal forms but a combination of a hundred or more perfectly synchronised voices whose soul-rending interpretation of a hideous alien liturgy had transformed it into this present awesome cacophony – a cacophony whose horror might indeed breach the voids between the worlds! Suddenly I knew that if there was an Ithaqua, then He must surely hear and answer the voices of His worshippers.

“Very little time now,” my companion muttered, more to herself than to me. “The place of the ceremony must be central in that forest – and that's where Kirby is!”

I stared hard through the snow, which again was beginning to fall heavily, seeing that the nearest and most southerly of the four fires blazed some distance to the north-east of our position. The westerly fire was about a half a mile south-west of us.

“If we head directly between those two fires,” I said, “entering the woods and heading straight for the northerly fire, on the far side, then we should come pretty close to the centre of the forest. We can take the snow-cat to the edge of the trees, but from there we must go on foot. If we can grab Kirby and make a run for it – well, perhaps the cat can take three, at a push.”

“Yes,” she answered, “it’s worth a try. If the worst comes to the worst . . . then at least I’ll know what the end of it was . . .”

With that I started up the cat’s motor again, thankful that the wind was in our favour and knowing that under cover of the continuous chanting we stood a fair chance of driving right to the edge of the forest without being heard.

As we headed out across the white expanse of snow to the forest’s edge, I could see in the heavens the glow of the fires reflected from the base of towering, strangely roiling nimbostratus. I knew then, instinctively, that we were in for a storm to end all storms.

At the edge of the forest, undetected so far, we dismounted and left the snow-cat hidden in the lower branches of a great pine, making our way on foot through the forest’s dark depths.

The going was of necessity very slow, and of course we dared show no light, but having progressed only a few hundred yards, we found that we could see in the distance the fires of individual torches, and the chanting came much louder and clearer. If there were guards, then we must have passed them by without attracting attention. The chanting was tinged now with a certain hysteria, a frenzy that built steadily towards a crescendo, charging the frosty air with unseen and menacing energies.

Abruptly, we came to the perimeter of a great cleared area where the trees had been cut down to be built into a huge platform in the centre. All about this platform a mongrel congregation of fur- and parka-clad men and women stood, their faces showing ruddy and wild-eyed in the light of numerous torches. There were Eskimos, Indians, Negroes, and whites – people from backgrounds as varied as their colours and races – over one hundred and fifty of them at a guess.

The time by then was rapidly approaching midnight, and the deafening, dreadful chanting had now reached such an intensity as to make any increase seem almost impossible. Nevertheless there *was* an increase, at which, with one final convulsive shriek, the entire crowd about the pyramidal platform prostrated themselves face-down in the snow – all but one!

“Kirby!” I heard Mrs. Bridgeman gasp, as that one upright man, proud and straight-backed, naked except for his trousers, commenced a slow and measured climb up the log steps of the platform.

“*Kirby!*” She shouted his name this time, starting forward and avoiding the arms I held out to restrain her.

“*He comes! He comes!*” The cry went out in a hiss of rapture from one hundred and fifty throats – drowning Lucille Bridgeman’s shout – and suddenly I felt the expectancy in the air.

The prostrate figures were silent now, waiting; the slight wind had disappeared; the snow no longer fell. Only Mrs. Bridgeman’s running figure disturbed the stillness; that and the flickering of torches where they stood up from the snow; only her feet on the ice-crusting surface broke the silence.

Kirby had reached the top of the pyramid, and his mother was running between the outermost of the encircling, prostrate figures when it happened. She stopped suddenly and cast a terrified glance at the night sky, then lifted a hand to her open mouth. I, too, looked up, craning my neck to see – and something moved high in the roiling clouds!

“*He comes! He comes!*” The vast sight went up again.

Many things happened then, all in the space of a few seconds, comprising a total and a culmination beyond belief. And still I pray that what I heard and saw at that time, that everything I experienced, was an illusion engendered of too great a proximity to the mass lunacy of those who obey the call of the five-year cycle.

How best to describe it?

I remember running forward a few paces, into the clearing proper, before my eyes followed Mrs. Bridgeman's gaze to the boiling heavens where at first I saw nothing but the madly whirling clouds. I recall, however, a picture in my memory of the man called Kirby standing wide-legged atop the great pyramid of logs, his arms and hands reaching in a gesture of expectancy or welcome up and outwards, his hair streaming in a wind which sprang up suddenly *from above* to blow slantingly down from the skies. And then there is the vision that burns even now in my mind's eye of *adarkness* that fell out of the clouds like a black meteorite, a darkness grotesquely shaped like a man with a carmine stars for eyes in its bloated blot of a head, and my ears still ring to the pealing screams of mortal fear and loathing that went up in that same instant from the poor, paralysed woman who now saw and recognised the horror from the skies.

The Beast-God came striding down the wind, descending more slowly now than at first but still speeding like some great bird of prey to earth, its fantastic splay-footed strides carrying it as if down some giant, winding, invisible staircase straight to the waiting figure atop the pyramid, until the huge black head turned and, from high above the trees, the thing called the Wind-Walker saw the hysterically screaming woman where she stood amid the prostrate forms of its worshippers – saw and *knew* her!

In mid-air the Being came to an abrupt, impossible halt – and then the great carmine eyes grew larger still, and the blackly outlined arms lifted to the skies in what was clearly an attitude of rage! One monstrous hand reached to the rushing clouds, and through them, to emerge but a split second later and hurl something huge and round to earth. Still Mrs. Bridgeman screamed – loud, clear and horrifically – as the unerringly hurled thing smashed down upon her with a roar of tortured air, flattening her instantly to the frozen ground and splintering into a mad bomb-burst of exploding shards of – ice!

The scene about the log pyramid at that hellish moment must have been chaos. I myself was thrown in the rush of pressured air back into the trees, but in the next moment when I looked out again upon the clearing, all I could see was ... blood!

The ice-torn, mangled bodies of a wide segment of worshippers were still tumbling outwards from the blasted area where Mrs. Bridgeman had stood – a number of bloodied bodies still fell, lazily almost, like red leaves through the howling air; logs were beginning to burst outwards from the base of the pyramid where flying chunks of ice had crashed with the force of grenades.

Nor was Ithaqua finished!

It seemed almost as if I could read this horror's thoughts as it towered raging in the sky: *Were these not His worshippers? – and had they not betrayed their faith in this matter, which was to have been His first meeting with His son on earth? Well, they would pay for this error, for allowing this daughter of man, the mother of His son, to interfere with the ceremony!*

In the space of a few more seconds huge balls of ice were flung to earth like a scattering of hailstones – but with far more devastating effect. When the last of them had scattered its ice-knife shards far and wide about the clearing, the snow was red with spouting blood; the screams of the torn and dying rose even above the howling devil-wind that Ithaqua had brought with Him from the star-spaces. The trees bent

outwards now from the clearing with the fury of that fiendish storm, and logs snapped and popped like matchsticks from the base of the platform at the crimson clearing's centre.

But a change had taken place in the attitude of the lone figure standing wild and wind-blown at the top of the tottering pyramid.

While the gigantic, anthropomorphic figure in the sky had raged and ravaged, raining down death and destruction in the form of ice-globes frozen in His hands and snatched down out of the heavens, so the man-God-child, now grown to strange adulthood, had watched from his vantage point above the clearing all that transpired. He had seen his mother ruthlessly crushed to a raw, red pulp; he had watched the demoniac destruction of many, perhaps all, of those deluded followers of his monstrous father. Still, in a dazed bewilderment, he gazed down upon the awful aftermath in the clearing – and then he laid back his head and screamed in a composite agony of frustration, horror, despair, and rapidly waxing rage!

And in that monumental agony his hellish heritage told. For all the winds screamed with him, roaring, howling, shrieking in a circular chase about the platform that lifted logs and tossed them as twigs in a whirlpool round and about in an impossible spiralling whirl. Even the clouds above rushed and clashed that much faster for Kirby's rage, until at last his Father knew the anger of His son for what it was – but did He understand?

Down through the sky the Wind-Walker came again, striding on great webbed feet through the currents of crazed air, arms reaching as a father reaches for his son –

– And at last, battered and bruised as I was and half unconscious from the wind's screaming and buffeting, I saw that which proved to me beyond all else that I had indeed succumbed to the five-year cycle of legend-inspired lunacy and mass hysteria.

For as the Ancient One descended, so His son rose up to meet Him – Kirby, racing up the wind in sure-footed bounds and leaps, roaring with a hurricane voice that tore the sky asunder and blasted the clouds back across the heavens in panic flight – Kirby, expanding, exploding outwards until his outline, limned against the frightened sky, became as great as that of his alien sire – Kirby, Son of Ithaqua, whose clawing hands now reached in a raging blood-lust, whose snarling, bestial, darkening features demanded revenge!

For a moment, perhaps astounded, the Wind-Walker stood off – and there were two darkly towering figures in that tortured sky, two great heads in which twin pairs of carmine stars glared – and these figures rushed suddenly together in such a display of aerial fury that for a moment I could make out nothing of the battle but the flash of lightning and roar of thunder.

I shook my head and wiped the frost and frozen blood droplets from my forehead, and when next I dared look at the sky, I could see only the fleeing clouds madly racing away – the clouds and high, high above them, two dark dots that fought and tore and dwindled against a familiar but now leering background of stars and constellations ...

Almost twenty-four hours have passed. How I lived through the horrors of last night I shall never know; but I did, and physically unscathed, though I fear that my mind may be permanently damaged. If I attempt to rationalise the thing, then I can say that there was a storm of tremendous and devastating fury, during the course of which I lost my mind. I can say, too, that Mrs. Bridgeman is lost in the snow, even that she must now be dead despite her amazing invulnerability to the cold. But of the rest ...?

And on the other hand, if I forgo all rationalisations and listen only to the little winds whispering among themselves behind my flimsy shelter ...? Can I deny my own senses?

I remember only snatches of what followed the terrible carnage and the onset of the aerial battle – my return to the snow-cat and how that machine broke down less than half an hour later in a blinding snowstorm; my frozen, stumbling fight against great white drifts with various items of equipment dragging me down; my bruising fall into a frozen hole in the snow whose *outlines* sent me into a renewed frenzy of gibbering terror across the wastes – until, exhausted, I collapsed here between these sheltering trees. I remember knowing that if I remained still where I had fallen, then I must die; and I recall the slow agony of setting up my shelter, packing the walls solid and lighting the stove. There is nothing more, however, until I awakened around noon.

The cold roused me. The stove had long since burned itself out, but empty soup cans told me that somehow I had managed to feed myself before giving in to my absolute fatigue. I opened the reservoir of fuel in the stove's body and fired it again, once more attending to my hunger before drying out and warming my clothes item by item. Then, fortified and almost warm, heartened by a slight rise in the outside temperature. I set about the strengthening of this, my last refuge; for I knew by then that this was as far as I could hope to go.

At about 4:00 p.m. the sky told me that soon it must storm again, and it was then that I thought to search out the snow-cat and fetch precious fuel for my stove. I almost lost myself when the snow began to fall again, but by 6:00 p.m. I was back in my shelter having recovered almost a gallon of fuel from the crippled cat. I had spent at least fifteen futile minutes trying to restart the vehicle, which still lies where I found it less than half a mile from my refuge. It was then, knowing that I could live only a few days more at the outside, that I began to write this record. This is no mere foreboding, this grimly leering doom from which there can be no escape. I have given it some thought: I am too far from Navissa to stand even the slightest chance of making it on foot. I have food and fuel for three days at the most. Here ... I can live for a few days more, and perhaps someone will find me. Outside, in some futile attempt to reach Navissa in the coming storm ... I might last a day or even two, but I could never hope to cover all those miles in the snow.

It is about four in the morning. My wristwatch has stopped and I can no longer tell the time accurately. The storm, which I mistakenly thought had passed me by some miles to the north, has started outside. It was the roaring of the wind that roused me. I must have fallen asleep at my writing about midnight.

This is strange: the wind howls and roars, but through an opening in my canvas I can see the snow falling *steadily* against the black of the night, not hurried and hustled by the wind! And my shelter is too steady; it does not tremble in the gale. What does this mean?

I have discovered the truth. I am betrayed by the golden medallion which, when I discovered the howling thing still in my pocket, I hurled out into a drift. There it lies now, outside in the snow, shrieking and screaming with the eternal crying of the winds that roar between the worlds.

To leave my shelter now is certain death. And to stay ...?

I must be quick with this, for He has come! Called by the demon howling of the medallion, He is here. No illusion this, no figment of my imagination but hideous fact. *He squats without, even now!*

I dare not look out into His great eyes; I do not know what I might see in those carmine depths. But I do know now how I will die. It will be quick.

All is silence now. The falling snow muffles all. The black thing waits outside like a huge hunched blot on the snow. The temperature falls, drops, plummets. I cannot get close enough to my stove. This is how I am to pass from the world of the living, in the icy tomb of my tent, for I have gazed upon Ithaqua!

It is the end ... frost forms on my brow ... my lips crack ... my blood freezes ... I cannot breathe the air ... my fingers are as white as the snow ... the cold ...

NAVISSA DAILY

THE SNOWS CLAIM A FRESH VICTIM!

Just before the Christmas season, bad news has come out of Fir Valley camp where members of the Royal Canadian North-West Mounted Police have winter residence. During the recent lull in the weather, Constables McCauley and Sterling have been out in the wastes north of Navissa searching for traces of their former companion, Constable Jeffrey, but they did discover the body of Mr. David Lawton, an American meteorologist, who also disappeared in the snow in October. Mr. Lawton, accompanied by a Mrs. Lucille Bridgeman, still missing, set out at that time in search of one Kirby Bridgeman, the woman's son. It was believed that this young man had gone into the wastes with a party of Eskimos and Indians, though no trace of this party has since been found. The recovery of Mr. Lawton's body will have to wait until the spring thaw; Constables McCauley and Sterling report that the body is frozen in a great block of clear ice which also encloses a canvas shelter and bivouac. The detailed report mentions that the eyes of the corpse are open and staring, as though the freezing took place with great rapidity.

NELSON RECORDER

A CHRISTMAS HORROR

Carol singers in the High Hill quarter of Nelson were astounded and horrified when, at 11:00 p.m., the frozen body of a young man crashed out of the upper branches of a tree in the grounds of No. 10 Church Street where they were carolling. Such was the force of its fall that the icy, naked figure brought down many branches with it. At least two of the witnesses state that the horribly mauled and mangled youth – whose uncommonly large and strangely webbed feet may help to identify him – fell not out of the tree but through it, as from the sky! Investigations are continuing.