

Eastcliff was dying of a disease that was impervious to modern medications. And so he found himself on a river of the planet known as Silver Dollar, heading upstream towards a remarkable clinic staffed by witch doctors with medical degrees.

The Tents of Kedar

BY

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Eastcliff had been on the river three days before there was any noticeable convergence of its distant banks. Even then he wasn't certain whether the river had really begun to narrow or whether his eyes were misinforming him. He needed tangible proof that the launch was moving upstream, not merely holding its own against the current, and what a man needs often influences what he sees — or what he thinks he sees — especially when he is dying.

There were times when Eastcliff found himself thinking of the river as a lake. The illusion was reinforced by the almost imperceptible current, bolstered by the middle-of-the-stream course he had fed into the A.P. so that he might remain as aloof as possible from the forested banks and the scattered Ebononese villages. His desire for privacy accrued in large part from his nature, but there was a practical reason behind it as well. Although the equatorial region of Silver Dollar could not properly be classified as a primitive wilderness, the bush country through which the river ran and on whose southern edge the Eastcliff plantation lay constituted relatively unknown territory; and although the Order of Chirurgeons, for want of an orthodox governmental body, functioned as an authority of sorts, the bush-blacks who swore fealty to it were for the most part only half civilized.

Eastcliff spent the long, hot days reading and remembering, wearing dark glasses to protect his sensitive eyes from the river's glare. He did not read evenings. He sat in the stern, distinguishable from the darkness only by the glowing ends of the cigarettes he smoked, listening to the throb of the launch engine and the susurrus of the wake, staring at the shifting star-patterns on the water. Increasingly of late he had been able to find beauty in the commonplace — in the symmetrical serrations of a leaf, in the shy pinkness that preceded the first rays of the morning sun, in the gray mists that materialized each evening and shrouded the distant banks.

On the fourth evening, as the launch was passing a promontory that was too insignificant to have triggered a course adjustment, the mists parted and a native *driuh* appeared. Four bush-blacks plied hand-carved paddles and a fifth manned a crude wooden tiller. In the prow a woman stood. She was tall and thin, and possessed the erect, almost rigid posture of her race. A bright red kerchief half hid her night-black hair and she carried a small crimson satchel in her right hand. She was wearing a calico half-skirt and halter; sandals woven of yellow filamentous reeds encased her feet.

She waved to Eastcliff, who was leaning on the port rail smoking a cigarette. He did not wave back, but stared coldly down at the *driuh* and its Ebononese occupants, trying to analyze an irrational *deja vu* which the woman had somehow evoked. The launch had not been built for speed, and the lean and muscular paddlers had no trouble pulling the *driuh* alongside and holding it in position by seizing the bottom bar of the rail. "I wish transportation to the clinic," the woman called up to Eastcliff. "You will be amply repaid."

He wasn't surprised that she knew his destination. The Eastcliff plantation employed bush-blacks recruited from all parts of Ebonon and was inextricably tied into the "bramblevine" that connected every village, every *biayau*, every farm in the territory. All Eastcliff, his ailing mother, his sister or his brother-in-law had to do was cough, and every bush-black in the country would know about it in a matter of hours. But although the woman knew he was going to the clinic, she could not possibly know why. Both the chirurgeons and the "bush-doctors" adhered rigidly to the equivalent of a Hippocratic Oath, and the bush-doctor whom Eastcliff had consulted and who, after diagnosing his illness, had radioed the clinic, would not have dreamed of violating his privacy.

"You will be amply repaid," the woman called up again when Eastcliff made no answer. "And I will not be in your way."

She spoke English excellently. Many bush-blacks found the language unconquerable. She had high, wide cheekbones, and their width was emphasized by the thinness of her cheeks. Her complexion was so utterly clear that the blue-blackness of her skin appeared translucent.

"I have no accommodations for a passenger," Eastcliff said.

"I will gladly sleep on the deck."

He sighed. The prospect of having his privacy invaded by a bush-black female dismayed him. But he couldn't risk offending a manifestly respected member of the race that supplied the laborers and the menials without which the Eastcliff Empire would languish and die. "Very well," he said at last. "You may come on board."

She tossed up her crimson satchel and he caught it and set it on the deck. Then, hiding his revulsion to the best of his ability, he reached down, gave her his hand and helped her climb over the rail. "Thank you," she said, straightening her half-skirt. "My name is Sefira."

The *driuh* dropped swiftly behind, turned and headed back toward the promontory. Eastcliff did not bother to divulge his own name; she undoubtedly knew it anyway. Carrying her satchel, he led the way below deck to the single cabin and set the satchel on the bunk. "You can sleep here. I have a comfortable deckchair that unfolds into a bed, and I much prefer to sleep in the open in any case."

The tone of his voice forbade argument. That, and the almost tangible aura of authority that covered him like a mantle. It was the famous Eastcliff authority, compounded of arrogance, opportunism and irresistibility, that had minted the seemingly worthless wilderness that the more favored *a* Andromedae VI colonials had spurned, and had given the planet its name.

He got blankets from the inbuilt bureau (the river nights were chilly), tossed two of them on the bunk and slung one over his shoulder. Then, aware of Sefira's gaze upon him, he turned reluctantly and faced her. He found himself looking into her eyes. They were black, but the blackness was alien to his experience. It was a four-dimensional blackness — it had to be — and he felt that he was gazing into infinite space; that although no stars were visible, thousands of them shone brightly just beyond the periphery of his gaze. But the analogy was unsatisfactory. Space connotated absolute zero — coldness and indifference. But here before him, commingled with a poignant *Weitschmerz* and glowing warmly in the night of his life, were compassion and human kindness of a dimension he had not dreamed existed; and here before him, too, half hidden in the deep darkness, was something else — a quality he knew well, yet could not recognize.

As he stood there staring into her eyes, *deja vu* smote him again, with such force this time that he nearly staggered. And suddenly he understood its cause: this woman — this blacker-than-black Ebononese from the bush, with her grotesque clothes and her primitive perfume, reminded him of his dead wife. It was impossible; it was execrable. But it was true.

Angrily he turned away. "Good night," he said. Then, remembering the thinness of her face: "The galley's next door if you're hungry."

"Thank you. I will have coffee ready when you awake."

* * *

Every night when Eastcliff fell asleep it was like dying, because the odds were even that he would never awake. But he was used to dying; he had been dying now for weeks; and if it bothered him more than usual as he lay on the unfolded deckchair beneath the stars, it was because the clinic was so close. Because during his journey upstream he had weighed the skepticism with which the colonials regarded the curative powers of the surgeons and found it to be a product of apartheid and rumor rather than of fact. Because, through the persistent mists of his own skepticism, he perceived the possibility that these revered female witch doctors of the bush, these black Isoldes with their magic potions, *might* be able to accomplish that which orthodox medicine could not.

As he died and the stars went out, he dreamed as he always did of the summer of his life and of

Anastasia wafting through it like a gentle wind, breathing through his castle window and enveloping him while he slept, permeating his life and softening the austerity of his existence. Mornings, she had brought him orange juice while he sat upon the patio gazing out over the dawn lawn; evenings, she had mixed martinis when the day's work was done. And every afternoon there had been tea — tea brewed as only she could brew it — dew-sweet, mellow, as golden as the sun.

She was awed by him when she first arrived at the plantation. His full name was Ulysses Eastcliff III; he owned, or would upon the death of his mother, one hundred thousand acres of rich river-silted land upon which flourished, to the tune of four harvests a year, the farinaceous grain that constituted Silver Dollar's staff of life. But her awe of him, had she but known it, fell far short of his awe of her. It should not have. The Ebonon colonials were justifiably, if aggressively proud of the new country they had created so far from home and, mindful of the inequities of the past, were forever proclaiming that theirs was the ultimate in democratic societies; but no one knew better than he that they were lying in their teeth — that he, Eastcliff, was King. As such, he should have been totally unaffected by the beautiful commoner who stood before him, as indifferent toward her as though she had been made of clay.

He had not been. Looking into her gold-brown eyes, simultaneously seeing the swirls and undulations of her dark-red hair, he had found it impossible to believe that anything as earthly as an employment agency could be responsible for her presence in his office. She was fresh from the slopes of Olympus, the daughter of a modern-day Zeus, begot by him of the star-bedight maid of spring. And she was so young, so heart-breakingly, so poignantly young. It had frightened him that first time when he had seen his rude hands upon her smooth and flawless flesh, and he had been afraid that she would be repelled by his no-longer-youthful body. She had not been. There had been no real reason for her to have been. He had but just turned forty, and he had been lean and hard, and he had not yet become host for the lethal schizomycetes of Meiskin's disease.

His atherosclerotic mother had resented Anastasia at first. The girl had no family, her background was vague. Surely such as she was no fit vehicle through which to perpetuate the Eastcliff name. Eastcliff's sister, too, had resented her in the beginning, while his brother-in-law had been cruelly contumelious — until Eastcliff took him behind the stables and beat him nearly to death. But in less than a month Anastasia won all of them over; as for Eastcliff, he had already toppled like a tall, gnarled oak. There had been women in his life — many of them — but they had been mere mistresses: the plantation had been his one true love. No more. Two months after Anastasia became his private secretary, she became his wife, and the night of his life had brightened to day.

Eastcliff came back from death at dawn. Sefira was already up and about. She had brewed coffee in the galley, and when she saw he was awake, she brought him a cup, smiling shyly. "Good morning."

The coffee didn't taste remotely like the kind he made. For this, he was grateful. It was strong, but not in the least bitter, and she had added just enough milk to color it. "How did you know I take no sugar?" he asked, sitting sideways on the deckchair, resting the cup on his knee.

"You look like the sort of man who mightn't."

"What sort of man is that?"

She smiled. "The sort of man like you."

The first rays of the rising sun, splashing suddenly upon the river and turning the gray deck of the launch to gold, brought out the intensity of her blackness, emphasizing that unanalyzable quirk of pigmentation that made the members of the Ebononese race seem not merely black but blue. Her skin glistened, and he realized she had bathed in the river while he still slept. Her black hair glistened too, falling, without a kerchief to restrain it, to her shoulders. It was freshly combed.

He saw how close the banks were: overnight, the river had narrowed to half its former width and the current had doubled in strength. He knew the clinic must be close. The bush-doctor who had diagnosed his illness and made an appointment for him had said when Eastcliff informed him he would travel by boat, "Not long after the river narrows you will come to an abrupt bend. The clinic is just beyond the bend. By now, a surgeon will already have been assigned to your case."

He did not need the information now; he had Sefira to guide him. It occurred to him that he hadn't asked her why she was going to the clinic. He did so.

"I work there," she said.

"Oh."

"And you?"

He saw no reason to hide the truth. "I have Meiskin's disease. It's not contagious," he added quickly.

"It is not incurable either."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you act like a doomed man."

He regarded her silently for some time; then he drank the rest of his coffee and went below deck to wash up.

When he emerged from the lavatory he saw that Sefira had come down to the galley. "What would you wish to eat?" she asked.

"Nothing. I prefer to face my surgeon with an empty stomach and a clear mind."

"You will not find her that formidable."

"Do many colonials visit the clinic?"

"You will be the first."

He was surprised. "I find that hard to believe."

"You should not. It is very difficult for a man, even when he is dying, to seek help from a member of a race he considers, despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, to be different from and therefore inferior to his own. Even you, who are the first, have no doubt pinned your hopes upon the surgeons' putative magic rather than upon their knowledge of medicine."

"But they're witch doctors!"

"If you like. But they are witch doctors with medical degrees. Port D'argent is not the only spaceport on Silver Dollar."

"But they go into trances. They —"

"It is unfortunate so many wrong words have been applied to them."

"But they themselves applied the Ebonese word they're known by. And the only English word that fits it dates back to medieval times on Earth when wounded knights were cared for by ignorant noblewoman employing God knows what kind of techniques and medicines!"

"The Ebonese surgeons are neither ignorant nor noble. It is unfortunate that a more realistic translation could not have been made."

"I've even heard it said," Eastcliff said sardonically, "that they wear masks."

"You will see."

Deja vu racked him again, and he left the galley abruptly and returned to the deck. The banks were little more than half a mile apart now, and the current had again doubled in strength. The launch lumbered upstream like a pregnant water buffalo, its engine, revved up by the A.P. to meet the challenge, klonking rhythmically. He disliked traveling by air, and he had chosen the launch with comfort in mind rather than speed. He hadn't really cared whether he ever reached the clinic, hadn't really believed that the potions of the surgeons would be any more effective against Meiskin's schizomycetes than the powerful antibiotics prescribed by his internist. He did not tell his family he had the disease, and when he set out for the clinic he said only that he was going fishing. His internist, when Eastcliff had visited him last, had given him three months. That was ten weeks ago. The launch, in all probability, would turn out to be his funeral barge.

The river continued to narrow but no abrupt bend appeared. Sefira had come back on deck, and Eastcliff could have asked her how much farther they had yet to go. However, he did not. She stood leaning against the starboard rail, gazing at the bank. Once, she waved to a group of bush-blacks walking single file along a trail that bordered the river. Apparently they knew her, for all of them waved back.

Toward midmorning, she said, "We are quite close now."

Looking up ahead, Eastcliff saw the bend. But he knew shame rather than relief. Meiskin's disease was endemic to Ebonon alone, but thus far only a few Ebonon colonials had contracted it. All of them, apparently, had had the courage to spurn the clinic and die in dignity in their own beds. All of them except him.

The launch, still keeping meticulously to the middle of the stream, began rounding the bend. On either side, towering trees, flashing with the multicolored patterns of parakeets in flight, extended frond-laden branches over the river, as though seeking to make contact. Inland, similar trees marched in serried battalions to low, grass-covered hills. Beyond the bend the river widened, and the hills receded into misty distances. On the right sprawled a bush-black village from whose waterfront a sturdy pier, lined with *driuh's*, protruded. It was no different basically from a dozen other native villages Eastcliff had seen: wretched huts haphazardly constructed of sticks and stones and vines, and roofed with overlapping fronds; a maze of narrow streets, no two of them running in the same direction. Only the clinic, rising beyond the bedlam of primitive buildings, made it distinguishable from its innumerable cousins of the bush.

"Clinic" was a misnomer. Dimensionally, at least, the institution more nearly corresponded to a hospital. By native standards, it was undoubtedly a modern, soul-satisfying edifice. By Eastcliff's, it was an architectural atrocity. The building material consisted almost exclusively of blue clay that had been dredged from the river bottom and molded into large rectangular blocks. Structurally, the building seemed sound enough, and the natural coloring supplied by the blocks was inoffensive to the eye; but it was painfully evident to Eastcliff that the builders had gone about their task without a vestige of a plan. From all indications, they had begun with a square, one-storied structure, amply large enough, no doubt, to have accommodated the surgeons' first patients. But as the patients multiplied, additions had been tacked on, stories added; and then, as the need for more and more space continued, additions had been added to additions and, in those cases where the foundations could support the extra weight, stories to stories. The result was a hodgepodge of conterminous structures, no two of them the same height, that sprawled back into the bush and out of sight and that exceeded the village in size.

Eastcliff docked without undue difficulty between two *driuh's*. Sefira had gone below; now she re-appeared on deck, wearing her bright red kerchief and carrying her crimson satchel. In her new surroundings, her calico half-skirt and halter seemed less grotesque.

A crowd had begun gathering on the pier. She paused by the rail, gazing into Eastcliff's eyes as though searching for something. Whatever it was, she did not seem to find it. "Thank you for bringing me upriver," she said. Then her eyes left his and she looked out over the people on the pier. "I am black but comely," he thought he heard her murmur. "As the tents of Kedar. As the curtains of Solomon." Her eyes lowered to the gathering crowd. "They are so curious — my people. That is because they are so empty. So hollow." She returned her eyes to his. "Thank you again for your kindness." She hesitated, then turned abruptly, climbed over the rail and stepped down to the pier.

"Good-by," he called after her, mildly surprised that she had not offered him money for her passage. He watched her make her way through the crowd, enter one of the village streets and disappear, and as he watched, *deja vu* overwhelmed him so utterly that his throat constricted and his vision blurred. It was as though he had just said good-by to Anastasia — not to a bush-black female whom he would probably forget before tomorrow.

Irony added itself to his distress, rendering it the more acute. For he had never said good-by to Anastasia — he had never had the chance. They had gone to sleep one night in each other's arms and he had awakened to find her gone. Gone from his bed, gone from his house, gone from his demesne. Half out of his mind when she did not return, he had contacted the territorial governor and ordered him to initiate a discreet search. The search yielded nothing in the matter of her whereabouts, but it yielded a number of unappetizing items concerning her past. She had arrived on Silver Dollar slightly more than a year ago and overnight had become the highest priced and most sought-after whore on the Port D'argent waterfront. Two months before she showed up in Eastcliff's office, she had abruptly forsaken her chosen profession, taken a speed course in secretarial work, provided herself with a fictitious and purposely ambiguous background, and registered with Port D'argent's only employment agency. It was as though

she had known in advance that the job she presently obtained as Eastcliff's private secretary would be available.

Half numb from these blows, Eastcliff received yet another in the form of a bank statement. He had opened a \$100,000 checking account in Anastasia's name: the statement showed she had written exactly one check for exactly that amount, converting it to cash. In the same mail he received a letter from Anastasia with no return address demanding that he deposit a second \$100,000 in the account. He did so at once, then stationed himself in the bank's lobby, waiting for her to show up. He waited there every day for a week in vain. Then news came of her in the form of an official report relayed to him through the governor's office. She had gone back into the bush to shack up with two bush-blacks and had been accidentally killed one night when they fought over her. When Eastcliff heard the news he got his croc rifle, hunted the two men down and blew both their heads off. There were no witnesses, and so the incident failed to make the bramblevine. But it made the governor's office by way of Eastcliff himself, and the governor decided that for the sake of the Eastcliff name and Port D'argent's interstellar reputation the Anastasia affair should be "cosmetized." The bodies of the two bush-blacks were secretly cremated, that of Anastasia given to Eastcliff for private burial, while information was inserted in the Port D'argent Police Department files and given to the Port D'argent Spacetimes to the effect that Anastasia, after obtaining an annulment of her marriage, had left Silver Dollar on a ship bound for Earth.

But although Eastcliff had escaped juridical justice, he had not escaped poetic justice. Less than a month after murdering Anastasia's two lovers, he discovered he had Meiskin's disease.

A tall bush-black wearing a blue ankle-length cowl and reed sandals emerged from the crowd on the pier and approached the launch. His wrinkled face was thin, his black eyes cold and uncompromising. "Ulysses East-cliff?"

Eastcliff nodded.

"A room awaits you at the clinic. As you already know, a surgeon has been assigned to your case. If you will accompany me —"

Eastcliff went below deck, packed a few personal items in a small bag, returned topside, closed and locked the hatch and joined the blue-cowled man on the pier. The latter led the way through the crowd, and presently they entered one of the village streets. There were naked children underfoot, and half-naked mothers with sagging breasts watched from dark doorways, some of them nursing their young.

Viewed up close, the clinic was even less prepossessing than when viewed from afar. A flagstone walk crossed an expanse of sun-bleached sward to a porte-cochere as unsightly as it was unnecessary, and a crude double-door gave into a featureless foyer. Beyond the foyer, however, the complexion of the clinic changed. The corridor down which the blue-cowled man led Eastcliff had been scrubbed till walls and floor and ceiling seemed to emanate a bluish glow. Illumination was provided by primitive fluorescent tubes inset in the ceiling. Immaculate white doors interrupted the walls at regular intervals. Most of them were open and gave glimpses of neat, square rooms furnished with bed, cabinet and chair. Each bed contained a bush-black patient. Some were supine; others were sitting up, apparently on the way back to recovery.

Young bush-black women wearing green caps and green knee-length dresses were making the morning rounds, some of them carrying trays of medications. They appeared to be modern medications, and no doubt were — products, probably, of one of the pharmaceutical laboratories of a neighboring province. But they left him unimpressed. Modern medications did not necessarily imply a modern hospital.

The point was academic in any case. Meiskin's disease was impervious even to ultramodern medications.

A tall hush-black woman clad in blue passed Eastcliff and his escort, and Eastcliff knew without needing to be told that she was one of the surgeons. She wore a hood rather than a cap, and her gown fell all the way to her ankles. A veil-like gauze mask covered her nose and mouth and chin, its immaculate

whiteness in sharp contrast with the rest of her attire. It was true, then, about the masks. What wasn't true was the widely circulated rumor that the masks were on the order of the grotesque affairs worn in olden days by Afro witch doctors.

At the corridor's end, a stairway right-angled upward to a low-ceilinged second story. Eastcliff had to stoop to enter the room to which the blue-cowled man conducted him. Like the others he had seen, it contained a bed, a cabinet and a chair. A refuse container stood beside the bed. Wearily he sat down on the chair; when he looked back at the doorway he saw that the blue-cowled man had been supplanted by a timid girl wearing a green cap and a green dress.

Diffidently she asked him to undress and don the hospital gown she had brought. He obeyed, hiding to the best of his ability the revulsion her nearness evoked in him: He did not fool her any more than he had fooled Sefira. He sat on the side of the bed and she took a sample of his blood from his right arm. He saw that her hands were trembling and realized that she was terrified of him. When she finished she said in a trembling voice, "The surgeon that is assigned to you will come see you as soon as analysis is been made." She almost ran from the room.

He lit a cigarette, smoked for a while, then threw the butt on the floor. He lay back on the bed, covered himself with its single sheet and clasped his hands behind his head. He stared up at the scrubbed blue ceiling, realizing how tired, how exhausted he was. The river journey had consumed what little energy the Meiskin schizomycetes had left him. The brightness of the still-cool morning came through the room's only window, and the ceiling reflected it into his eyes, sending splinters of pain into his retinas. He had removed his dark glasses upon entering the clinic, but he did not bother to get them out of his coat on the chair beside the bed. Instead he continued to stare masochistically up at the ceiling. Hypersensitivity to light was the prelude to the blindness that in turn was the prelude to the death that came seconds later. Meiskin, after isolating his precious bacterium, had dealt lovingly with the inexorable progression of the disease in a learned paper in a learned journal that learned researchers like himself subscribed to. His fate was assured. Like Raynaud's, like Addison's, like Parkinson's....

Eastcliff must have slept. The morning coolness had given way to the asphyxiating warmth of midday, and he was no longer alone in the room.

Just within the doorway, a statue stood — tall, blue-gowned, white-masked. And above the mask, black depths of eyes into which he had gazed before.

Sefira.

She walked over to the bed with that effortless grace of hers and took his pulse with long, cool fingers. "Why?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me you were my surgeon?"

She did not look into his eyes. "If I had, would you have continued your journey?"

"No."

"So I did not tell you."

"What were you doing in the bush?"

"All surgeons live in the bush. It is our home. I live near where you took me on board."

"And you commute by *driuh*?"

"We reside here at the clinic except on our days off; then we depend on *driuh*. Yesterday was my day off. Yesterday evening, you came along."

He said, "You knew I was coming, didn't you."

"Yes, of course. I had been assigned to you, had I not? And now I have good news for you. The tests we made of your blood show conclusively that the vaccine series was successful."

"What vaccine series?"

Without answering, she withdrew an ampule from a pocket of her gown and rolled up his right sleeve. He felt a faint prick; a moment later she tossed the empty ampule into the waste container by the bed. "That was the first of the supplementary injections. There will be seven more, which my assistants will administer at two and one-half hour intervals. A spinal tap will then be made, but it will be routine. By tomorrow morning, you will be cured."

"That's preposterous! Meiskin's disease can't be cured overnight!"

"According to your colonial doctors, it cannot be cured at all. Besides, I did not say it could be cured

overnight. Be patient. In the morning, the administrator will explain everything to you. Now, I must go."

In the doorway, she paused and looked back at him. Looked, for the first time since entering the room, into his eyes. Looking back into hers, he knew once again, during the brief interval before she turned and vanished down the corridor, the depth and breadth of them; the Weltschmerz and the boundless compassion — and, yes, the love she bore him. And knew something else as well. They were the eyes of a saint.

The blue-cowled man sat alone in the ground-floor room to which Eastcliff had been directed. Only a desk, patterned with a parallelogram of morning sunlight, indicated that the room was an office. The blue-cowled man sat behind the desk. He motioned Eastcliff into a chair opposite him.

"How do you feel?"

"Reborn," Eastcliff said.

The blue-cowled man handed him a small sealed envelope. "It is from Sefira. There is no need for you to read it now. It will be better if you wait till you are on the river."

"Where is she?"

"She has returned to her home in the bush. The surgeons' code is a rigid one. It does not countenance a surgeon's falling in love with a patient. When this occurs, she must confess her transgression to her superiors and disqualify herself. Yours was Sefira's last case."

Eastcliff said coldly, "What manner of a woman would fall in love with a man the moment she set eyes on him?"

"It did not happen quite that way. This will become clear to you presently.

"Our name for the malady that afflicted you is 'Blinding Light.' Back here in the bush we have been coping with it successfully for generations, although the identity of its carrier continues to remain unknown to us. Were the results not so tragic, we would find it amusing indeed that a silly scientist from Earth should have presumed to give it his name and have pronounced it incurable.

"Beginning at the age of five and continuing to the age of twenty, all Ebonese are periodically given an oral vaccine. There are a few, of course, who out of superstitious fear hide from our bush-doctors and contract the disease in later life, but even in these cases it isn't fatal because we are blessed with our surgeons. A surgeon preincarnates herself in the body of the victim, if sex permits, or in the body of someone close to the victim, if sex does not, and administers the equivalent of the vaccine series before the victim contracted the disease. The victim will still contract it, not only because a paradox would be involved if he didn't but because a vaccine series administered over the space of a few months isn't as effective as one administered over the usual fifteen-year period. Thus, the series must be supplemented later on by a series of injections — 'booster shots,' you would call them. Meanwhile, although the symptoms continue to be present, the damage done will be negligible.

"This ability of the surgeons to project themselves mentally — spiritually, if you prefer — back in time is an inborn gift. Ebonese men are never born with it, and only a few Ebonese women. It is limited in that the surgeon can take over only the mind and body of a member of her own sex and in that her maximum pre-incarnation range is considerably less than an Andromedae VI year. But this still enables her to treat or pretreat all diseases retroactively, including Blinding Light. In your case, as often happens, one of our bush-doctors made the diagnosis; thus Sefira, the moment she was assigned to you, had merely to preincarnate herself in the body of someone closely enough associated with you to enable her to incorporate the vaccine series in your food and drinks. The vaccine itself she obtained by courier from the clinic. In effect, you were cured before you came here, even though your symptoms still persisted. Yesterday and last night, you received the booster shots."

"In whose body?" Eastcliff said hoarsely.

"In this respect, Sefira's task was somewhat difficult. Your mother would not do: she simply wasn't well enough. Your sister had to be ruled out because of the demands made upon her by her husband. So Sefira had to employ the body of an outsider. She was forced, finally, to make use of a prostitute named —"

"No!" Eastcliff shouted, half rising from his chair.

The blue-cowled man shrugged. "Very well, I will not mention your ex-wife's name. It isn't relevant in any case. What is relevant is that preincarnation can be sustained for only a limited length of time. Such 'trances,' as our people insist upon calling them, are extremely exhausting. Objectively, they endure for only several hours, but subjectively the surgeon experiences the same time interval as that of the person she inhabits. So you see, even if the surgeons' code had permitted Sefira to remain in your wife's body, she couldn't have done so. She *had* to return to the present.

"We are not gods, and we can't change the past. What was, was. What is, is. Nevertheless, before a surgeon is permitted to preincarnate herself in a person's body, we run a check on the post-preincarnation history of that person. Thus we knew — know — that after Sefira's departure from your wife's body, your wife obtained an annulment and left the planet. This is regrettable, but —"

Eastcliff was on his feet, gripping the edges of the desk. "You know nothing!" he screamed. "Nothing but lies!"

"We know what the records tell us," the blue-cowled man continued unperturbedly. "If something befell your wife that they don't tell, we can hardly be held responsible. We could not be in any case, because whatever happened had already happened. As I said, we are not gods. We are healers. Nothing more, nothing less. Sefira erred in permitting her host to marry you. But, you see, she couldn't have done otherwise because in one sense her host had *already* married you. Her real error — if it can be called that was in falling in love with you, something she didn't foresee. All she meant to do, as your secretary and later as your wife, was to administer the vaccine series and save your life."

"Then why didn't she *tell* me!" Eastcliff cried.

"Why didn't she indeed! If she had said to you, 'Beneath this ethnically beautiful exterior so dear to your ethnocentric heart lies the soul of a bush-black witch doctor come to cure you of a disease you have yet to contract,' what would your reaction have been?"

Eastcliff flung his chair across the room. "Damn your sanctimonious clinic! Damn your sanctimonious soul!" He threw money on the desk, handfuls of it, and walked out.

On the river, moving downstream in the lingering morning coolness, beneath the green overhanging fronds, Eastcliff felt his anguish fade to a faint but throbbing pain. He opened Sefira's letter.

Now all has been made clear to you. Except why I met you on the river. I wanted to see you one more time as a woman; I could not help myself. For this, I must be forgiven, for I was, for an entire month, your wife. I am the part of her that loved you, but not the part you loved.

There is a pier at the tip of the promontory near where you took me on board. A path leads up from it through the bush to my house. If you would care to stop by on your way home, I will have hot coffee waiting for you on the stove.

—Sefira

The path was narrow, wound senselessly among the trees, through bramblevines laden with red, red berries. Eastcliff smelled forest flowers, the morning dampness of the underbrush. He smelled smoke, and presently he glimpsed the house through the low-hanging foliage of the trees. It was a small house, hardly more than a hut. He had seen a thousand such. There would be a wood stove, a table and a chair. Perhaps two chairs. The floor would be dirt. He halted behind the final fringe of trees.

He pictured her sitting by the window in her cheap calico half-skirt and halter. Waiting. He saw the pot of coffee steaming on the stove. He realized that his hands were trembling, and he thrust them into his coat pockets to still them.

*I am black, but comely ... as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon—
Look not upon me because I am black—
Because the sun has scorched me....*

A pebbled path lined with whitewashed stones led up to the door. To all that was left of Anastasia.

He would say to his mother, in the coolness of the stately Eastcliff portico, "Look, I have brought her back. She did not die after all." To his sister, "Behold! the real Anastasia!" And they would stare down their broad aristocratic noses, and in the graveyard beyond the garden his father would turn in the black earth, bare bones groaning, outraged hubris flaming fiercely in the eyeless sockets of his skull. And the household bush-blacks would peer through the windows in exalted consternation and the bramblevine would vibrate with the earth-shaking implication of the news.

He turned his back on the hut and retraced his steps to the pier. Aboard the launch again, his homeward journey resumed, he sat listlessly in his deckchair, staring at the dark brown water. He did not eat. The day passed swiftly; mists materialized along the ever-receding banks. Night fell, and he went on sitting there, distinguishable from the darkness only by the glowing ends of the cigarettes he smoked.

He had no son. Soon, his best years would be behind him. Probably there would never be a Ulysses Eastcliff IV. So be it. No bush-black nigger was going to be the instrument of perpetuating the Eastcliff name.

Not even the one who had given him his life, who loved him as deeply as he still loved the poor dead whore whose soul she once had been. The launch slipped smoothly through the blackness of the night; the river whispered in its wake. Above, the stars shone coldly down.