

Proteus Island



Stanley G. Weinbaum

Éditions de l'Âge d'Or

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The brown Maori in the bow of the outrigger stared hard at Austin Island slowly swimming nearer; then he twisted to fix his anxious brown eyes on Carver. "Taboo!" he exclaimed. "Taboo! Aussitan taboo!"

Carver regarded him without change of expression. He lifted his gaze to the island. With an air of sullen brooding the Maori returned to his stroke. The second Polynesian threw the zoologist a pleading look.

"Taboo," he said. "Aussitan taboo!"

The white man studied him briefly, but said nothing. The soft brown eyes fell and the two bent to their work. But as Carver stared eagerly shoreward there was a mute, significant exchange between the natives.

The proa slid over green combers toward the foam-skirted island, then began to sheer off as if reluctant to approach. Carver's jaw squared. "Malloa! Put in, you chocolate pig. Put in, do you hear?"

He looked again at the land. Austin Island was not traditionally sacred, but these natives had a fear of it for some reason. It was not the concern of a zoologist to discover why. The island was uninhabited and had been charted only recently. He noted the fern forests ahead, like those of New Zealand, the Kauri pine and dammar—dark wood hills, a curve of white beach, and between them a moving dot—an apteryx mantelli, thought Carver—a kiwi.

The proa worked cautiously shoreward.

"Taboo," Malloa kept whispering. "Him plenty bunyip!"

"Hope there is," the white man grunted. "I'd hate to go back to Jameson and the others at Macquarie without at least one little bunyip, or anyway a ghost of a fairy." He grinned. "Bunyip Carveris. Not bad, eh? Look good in natural-history books with pictures."

On the approaching beach the kiwi scuttled for the forest—if it was a kiwi after all. It looked queer, somehow, and Carver squinted after it. Of course, it had to be an apteryx; these islands of the New Zealand group were too deficient in fauna for it to be anything else. One variety of dog, one sort of rat, and two species of bat—that covered the mammalian life of New Zealand.

Of course, there were the imported cats, pigs and rabbits that ran wild on the North and Middle Islands, but not here. Not on the Aucklands, not on Macquarie, least of all here on Austin, out in the lonely sea between Macquarie and the desolate Balleny Islands, far down on the edge of Antarctica. No; the scuttling dot must have been a kiwi.

The craft grounded. Kolu, in the bow, leaped like a brown flash to the beach and drew the proa above the gentle inwash of the waves. Carver stood up and stepped out, then paused sharply at a moan from Malloa in the stern.

"See!" he gulped. "The trees, wahi! The bunyip trees!"

Carver followed his pointing figure. The trees—what about them? There they were beyond the beach as they had, fringed the sands of Macquarie and of the Aucklands. Then he frowned. He was no botanist; that was Halburton's field, back with Jameson and the Fortune at Macquarie Island. He was a zoologist, aware only generally of the variations of flora. Yet he frowned.

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The trees were vaguely queer. In the distance they had resembled the giant ferns and towering kauri pine that one would expect. Yet here, close at hand, they had a different aspect—not a markedly different one, it is true, but none the less, a strangeness. The kauri pines were not exactly kauri, nor were the tree ferns quite the same Cryptogamia that flourished on the Aucklands and Macquarie. Of course, those islands were many miles away to the north, and certain local variations might be expected. All the same—

"Mutants," he muttered, frowning. "Tends to substantiate Darwin's isolation theories. I'll have to take a couple of specimens back to Halburton."

"Wahi," said Kolu nervously, "we go back now?"

"Now!" exploded Carver. "We just got here! Do you think we came all the way from Macquarie for one look? We stay here a day or two, so I have a chance to take a look at this place's animal life. What's the matter, anyway?"

"The trees, wahi!" wailed Malloa. "Bunyip!—the walking trees, the talking trees!"

"Bah! Walking and talking, eh?" He seized a stone from the pebbled beach and sent it spinning into the nearest mass of dusky green. "Let's hear 'em say a few cuss words, then."

The stone tore through leaves and creepers, and the gentle crash died into motionless silence. Or not entirely motionless; for a moment something dark and tiny fluttered there, and then soared briefly into black silhouette against the sky. It was small as a sparrow, but bat-like, with membranous wings. Yet Carver stared at it amazed, for it trailed a twelve-inch tail, thin as a pencil, but certainly an appendage no normal bat ought to possess.

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For a moment or two the creature fluttered awkwardly in the sunlight, its strange tail lashing, and then it swooped again into the dusk of the forest whence his missile had frightened it. There was only an echo of its wild, shrill cry remaining, something that sounded like "Wheer! Whe-e-e-r!"

"What the devil!" said Carver. "There are two species of Chiroptera in New Zealand and neighboring islands, and that was neither of them! No bat has a tail like that!"

Kolu and Malloa were wailing in chorus. The creature had been too small to induce outright panic, but it had flashed against the sky with a sinister appearance of abnormality. It was a monstrosity, an aberration, and the minds of Polynesians were not such as to face unknown strangeness without fear. Nor for that matter, reflected Carver, were the minds of whites; he shrugged away a queer feeling of apprehension. It would be sheer stupidity to permit the fears of Kolu and Malloa to influence a perfectly sane zoologist.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "We'll have to trap that fellow, or one of his cousins. I'll want a specimen of his tribe. Rhimolophidae, I'll bet a trade dollar, but a brand-new species. We'll net one tonight."

The voices of the two brown islanders rose in terror. Carver cut in sharply on the protests and expostulations and fragmentary descriptions of the horrors of bunyips, walking and talking trees, and the bat-winged spirits of evil.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "Turn out the stuff in the proa. I'll look along the beach for a stream of fresh water. Mawson reported water on the north side of the island."

Malloa and Kolu were muttering as he turned away. Before him the beach stretched white in the late afternoon sun; at his left rolled the blue Pacific and at his right slumbered the strange, dark, dusky

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quarter; he noted curiously the all but infinite variety of the vegetable forms, marveling that there was scarcely a tree or shrub that he could identify with any variety common on Macquarie or the Auddands, or far-away New Zealand. But, of course, he mused, he was no botanist.

Anyway, remote islands often produced their own particular varieties of flora and fauna. That was part of Darwin's original evolution theory, this idea of isolation. Look at Mauritius and its dodo, and the Galapagos turtles, or for that matter, the kiwi of New Zealand, or the gigantic, extinct moa. And yet—he frowned over the thought—one never found an island that was entirely covered by its own unique forms of plant life. Windblown seeds of ocean borne debris always caused an interchange of vegetation among islands; birds carried seeds clinging to their feathers, and even the occasional human visitors aided in the exchange.

Besides, a careful observer like Mawson in 1911 would certainly have reported the peculiarities of Austin Island. He hadn't; nor, for that matter, had the whalers, who touched here at intervals as they headed into the antarctic, brought back any reports. Of course, whalers had become very rare of late years; it might have been a decade or more since one had made anchorage at Austin. Yet what change could have occurred in ten or fifteen years?

Carver came suddenly upon a narrow tidal arm into which dropped a tinkling trickle of water from a granite ledge at the verge of the jungle. He stooped, moistened his finger, and tasted it. It was brackish but drinkable, and therefore quite satisfactory. He could hardly expect to find a larger stream on Austin, since the watershed was too small on an island only seven miles by three. With his eyes he followed the course of the brook up into the tangle of fern forest, and a flash of movement arrested his eyes. For a moment he gazed in complete incredulity, knowing that he couldn't possibly be seeing—what he was seeing!

The creature had apparently been drinking at the brink of the stream, for Carver glimpsed it first in kneeling position. That was part of the surprise—the fact that it was kneeling—for no animal save man ever assumes that attitude, and this being, whatever it might be, was not human.

Wild, yellow eyes glared back at him, and the thing rose to an erect posture. It was a biped, a small travesty; of man, standing no more than twenty inches in height. Little clawed fingers clutched at hanging creepers. Carver had a shocked glimpse of a body covered in patches with ragged gray fur, of an agile tail, of needle-sharp teeth in a little red mouth. But mostly he saw only malevolent yellow eyes and a face that was not human, yet had a hideous suggestion of humanity gone wild, a stunning miniature synthesis of manlike and feline characteristics. Carver had spent much time in the wastelands of the planet. His reaction was almost in the nature of a reflex, without thought or volition; his blue-barreled gun leaped and flashed as if it moved of itself. This automatism was a valuable quality in the wilder portions of the earth; more than once he had saved his life by shooting first when startled, and reflecting afterward. But the quickness of the reaction did not lend itself to accuracy.

His bullet tore a leaf at the very cheek of the creature. The thing snarled, and then, with a final flash of yellow flame from its wild eyes, leaped headlong into the tangle of foliage and vanished.

Carver whistled. "What in Heaven's name," he muttered aloud, "was that?" But he had small time for reflection; long shadows and an orange tint to the afternoon light warned that darkness—sudden, twilightless darkness—was near. He turned back along the curving beach toward the outrigger.

A low coral spit hid the craft and the two Maoris, and the ridge jutted like a bar squarely across the face of the descending sun.

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Carver squinted against the light and trudged thoughtfully onward—to freeze into sudden immobility at the sound of a terrified scream from the direction of the proa!

He broke into a run. It was no more than a hundred yards to the coral ridge, but so swiftly did the sun drop in these latitudes that dusk seemed to race him to the crest. Shadows skittered along the beach as he leaped to the top and stared frantically toward the spot where his craft had been beached.

Something was there. A box—part of the provisions from the proa. But the proa itself—was gone!

Then he saw it, already a half dozen cables' lengths out in the bay. Malloa was crouching in the stern, Kolu was partly hidden by the sail, as the craft moved swiftly and steadily out toward the darkness gathering in the north.

His first impulse was to shout, and shout he did. Then he realized that they were beyond earshot, and very deliberately, he fired his revolver three times. Twice he shot into the air, but since Malloa cast not even a glance backward, the third bullet he sent carefully in the direction of the fleeing pair. Whether or not it took effect he could not tell, but the proa only slid more swiftly into the black distance.

He stared in hot rage after the deserters until even the white sail had vanished; then he ceased to swear, sat glumly on the single box they had unloaded, and fell to wondering what had frightened them. But that was something he never discovered.

Full darkness settled. In the sky appeared the strange constellations of the heaven's under hemisphere; southeast glowed the glorious Southern Cross, and south the mystic Clouds of

Magellan. But Carver had no eyes for these beauties; he was already long familiar with the aspect of the Southern skies.

He mused over his situation. It was irritating rather than desperate, for he was armed, and even had he not been, there was no dangerous animal life on these tiny islands south of the Aucklands, nor, excepting man, on New Zealand itself. But not even man lived in the Aucklands, or on Macquarie, or here on remote Austin. Malloa and Kolu had been terrifically frightened, beyond doubt; but it took very little to rouse the superstitious fears of a Polynesian. A strange species of bat was enough, or even a kiwi passing in the shadows of the brush, or merely their own fancies, stimulated by whatever wild tales had ringed lonely Austin Island with taboos.

And as for rescue, that too was certain. Malloa and Kolu might recover their courage and return for him. If they didn't, they still might make for Macquarie Island and the Fortune expedition. Even if they did what he supposed they naturally would do—head for the Aucklands, and then to their home on the Chathams—still Jameson would begin to worry in three or four days, and there'd be a search made.

There was no danger, he told himself—nothing to worry about. Best thing to do was simply to go about his work. Luckily, the box on which he sat was the one that contained his cyanide jar for insect specimens, nets, traps, and snares. He could proceed just as planned, except that he'd have to devote some of his time to hunting and preparing food.

Carver lighted his pipe, set about building a fire of the plentiful driftwood, and prepared for the night. He delivered himself of a few choice epithets descriptive of the two Maoris as he realized that his comfortable sleeping bag was gone with the proa, but the fire would serve against the chill of the high Southern latitude. He

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puffed his pipe reflectively to its end, lay down near his driftwood blaze, and prepared to sleep.

When, seven hours and fifty minutes later, the edge of the sun dented the eastern horizon, he was ready to admit that the night was something other than a success. He was hardened to the tiny, persistent fleas that skipped out of the sand, and his skin had long been toughened to the bloodthirsty night insects of the islands. Yet he had made a decided failure at the attempt to sleep.

Why? It surely couldn't be nervousness over the fact of strange surroundings and loneliness. Alan Carver had spent too many nights in wild and solitary places for that. Yet the night sounds had kept him in a perpetual state of half-wakeful apprehension, and at least a dozen times he had started to full consciousness in a sweat of nervousness. Why?

He knew why. It was the night sounds themselves. Not their loudness nor their menace, but their—well, their variety. He knew what darkness ought to bring forth in the way of noises; he knew every bird call and bat squeak indigenous to these islands. But the noises of night here on Austin Island had refused to conform to his pattern of knowledge. They were strange, unclassified, and far more varied than they should have been; and yet, even through the wildest cry, he fancied a disturbing note of familiarity.

Carver shrugged. In the clear daylight his memories of the night seemed like foolish and perverse notions, quite inexcusable in the mind of one as accustomed to lonely places as himself. He heaved his powerful form erect, stretched, and gazed toward the matted tangle of plant life under the tree ferns.

He was hungry, and somewhere in there was breakfast, either fruit or bird. Those represented the entire range of choice, since he was not at present hungry enough to consider any of the other

possible variations—rat, bat, or dog. That covered the fauna of these islands.

Did it, indeed? He frowned as sudden remembrance struck him. What of the wild, yellow-eyed imp that had snarled at him from the brookside? He had forgotten that in the excitement of the desertion of Kolu and Malloa. That was certainly neither bat, rat, nor dog. What was it?

Still frowning, he felt his gun, glancing to assure himself of its readiness. The two Maoris might have been frightened away by an imaginary menace, but the thing by the brook was something he could not ascribe to superstition. He had seen that. He frowned more deeply as he recalled the tailed bat of earlier in the preceding evening. That was no native fancy either.

He strode toward the fern forest. Suppose Austin Island did harbor a few mutants, freaks, and individual species. What of it? So much the better; it justified the Fortune expedition. It might contribute to the fame of one Alan Carver, zoologist, if he were the first to report this strange, insular animal world. And yet—it was queer that Mawson had said nothing of it, nor had the whalers.

At the edge of the forest he stopped short. Suddenly he perceived what was responsible for its aspect of queerness. He saw what Malloa had meant when he gestured toward the trees. He gazed incredulously, peering from tree to tree. It was true. There were no related species. There were no two trees alike. Not two alike. Each was individual in leaf, bark, stem. There were no two the same. No two trees were alike!

But that was impossible. Botanist or not, he knew the impossibility of it. It was all the more impossible on a remote islet where inbreeding must of necessity take place. The living forms might differ from those of other islands, but not from each other—

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at least, not in such incredible profusion. The number of species must be limited by the very intensity of competition on an island. Must be!

Carver stepped back a half dozen paces, surveying the forest wall. It was true. There were ferns innumerable; there were pines; there were deciduous trees—but there were, in the hundred yard stretch he could scan accurately, no two alike! No two, even, with enough similarity to be assigned to the same species, perhaps not even to the same genus.

He stood frozen in uncomprehending bewilderment. What was the meaning of it? What was the origin of this unnatural plenitude of species and genera? How could any one of the numberless forms reproduce unless there were somewhere others of its kind to fertilize it? It was true, of course, that blossoms on the same tree could cross-fertilize each other, but where, then, were the offspring? It is a fundamental aspect of nature that from acorns spring oaks, and from kauri cones spring kauri pines.

In utter perplexity, he turned along the beach, edging away from the wash of the waves into which he had almost backed. The solid wall of forest was immobile save where the sea breeze ruffled its leaves, but all that Carver saw was the unbelievable variety of those leaves. Nowhere—nowhere—was there a single tree that resembled any he had seen before.

There were compound leaves, and digitate, palmate, cordate, acuminate, bipinnate, and ensiform ones. There were specimens of every variety he could name, and even a zoologist can name a number if he has worked with a botanist like Halburton. But there were no specimens that looked as if they might be related, however distantly, to any one of the others. It was as if, on Austin Island, the walls between the genera had dissolved, and only the grand divisions remained.

Carver had covered nearly a mile along the beach before the pangs of hunger recalled his original mission to his mind. He had to have food of some sort, animal or vegetable. With a feeling of distinct relief, he eyed the beach birds quarreling raucously up and down the sand; at least, they were perfectly normal representatives of the genus *Larus*. But they made, at best, but tough and oily fare, and his glance returned again to the mysterious woodlands.

He saw now a trail or path, or perhaps just a chance thinning of the vegetation along a subsoil ridge of rock, that led into the green shades, slanting toward the forested hill at the western end of the island. That offered the first convenient means of penetration he had encountered, and in a moment he was slipping through the dusky aisle, watching sharply for either fruit or bird.

He saw fruit in plenty. Many of the trees bore globes and ovoids of various sizes, but the difficulty, so far as Carver was concerned, was that he saw none he could recognize as edible. He dared not chance biting into some poisonous variety, and Heaven alone knew what wild and deadly alkaloids this queer island might produce.

Birds fluttered and called in the branches, but for the moment he saw none large enough to warrant a bullet. And besides, another queer fact had caught his attention; he noticed that the farther he proceeded from the sea, the more bizarre became the infinite forms of the trees of the forest. Along the beach he had been able at least to assign an individual growth to its family, if not its genus, but here even those distinctions began to vanish.

He knew why. "The coastal growths are crossed with strays from other islands," he muttered. "But in here they've run wild. The whole island's run wild."

The movement of a dark mass against the leaf-sprinkled sky caught his attention. A bird? If it were, it was a much larger one

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than the inconsiderable passerine songsters that fluttered about him. He raised his revolver carefully, and fired.

The weird forest echoed to the report. A body large as a duck crashed with a long, strange cry, thrashed briefly among the grasses of the forest floor, and was still. Carver hurried forward to stare in perplexity at his victim.

It was not a bird. It was a climbing creature of some sort, armed with viciously sharp claws and wicked, needle-pointed white teeth in a triangular little red mouth. It resembled quite closely a small dog—if one could imagine a tree-climbing dog—and for a moment Carver froze in surprise at the thought that he had inadvertently shot somebody's mongrel terrier, or at least some specimen of *Canis*.

But the creature was no dog. Even disregarding its plunge from the treetops, Carver could see that. The retractile claws, five on the forefeet, four on the hind, were evidence enough, but stronger still was the evidence of those needle teeth. This was one of the *Felidae*. He could see further proof in the yellow, slitted eyes that glared at him in moribund hate, to lose their fire now in death. This was no dog, but a cat!

His mind flashed to that other apparition on the bank of the stream. That had borne a wild aspect of feline nature, too. What was the meaning of it? Cats that looked like monkeys; cats that looked like dogs!

He had lost his hunger. After a moment he picked up the furry body and set off toward the beach. The zoologist had superseded the man; this dangling bit of disintegrating protoplasm was no longer food, but a rare specimen. He had to get to the beach to do what he could to preserve it. It would be named after him—*Felis Carveri*—doubtless.

A sound behind him brought him to an abrupt halt. He peered cautiously back through the branch-roofed tunnel. He was being trailed. Something, bestial or human, lurked back there in the forest shadows. He saw it—or them—dimly, as formless as darker shades in the shifting array that marked the wind-stirred leaves.

For the first time, the successive mysteries began to induce a sense of menace. He increased his pace. The shadows slid and skittered behind him, and, lest he ascribe the thing to fancy, a low cry of some sort, a subdued howl, rose in the dusk of the forest at his left, and was answered at his right.

He dared not run, knowing that the appearance of fear too often brought a charge from both beasts and primitive humans. He moved as quickly as he could without the effect of flight from danger, and at last saw the beach. There in the opening he would at least distinguish his pursuers, if they chose to attack.

But they didn't. He backed away from the wall of vegetation, but no forms followed him. Yet they were there. All the way back to the box and the remains of his fire, he knew that just within the cover of the leaves lurked wild forms.

The situation began to prey on his mind. He couldn't simply remain on the beach indefinitely, waiting for an attack. Sooner or later he'd have to sleep, and then—Better to provoke the attack at once, see what sort of creatures he faced, and try to drive them off or exterminate them. He had, after all, plenty of ammunition.

He raised his gun, aimed at the skittering shadow, and fired. There was a howl that was indubitably bestial; before it had quivered into silence, others answered. Then Carver started violently backward, as the bushes quivered to the passage of bodies, and he saw what sort of beings had lurked there.

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A line of perhaps a dozen forms leaped from the fringe of underbrush to the sand. For the space of a breath they were motionless, and Carver knew that he was in the grip of a zoologist's nightmare, for no other explanation was at all adequate.

The pack was vaguely doglike; but by no means did its members resemble the indigenous hunting dogs of New Zealand, nor the dingoes of Australia. Nor, for that matter, did they resemble any other dogs in his experience, nor, if the truth be told, any dogs at all, except perhaps in their lupine method of attack, their subdued yelps, their slaving mouths, and the arrangement of their teeth—what Carver could see of that arrangement.

But the fact that bore home to him now was another stunning repetition of all his observations of Austin Island—they did not resemble each other! Indeed, it occurred to Carver with the devastating force of a blow that, so far on this mad island, he had seen no two living creatures, animal or vegetable, that appeared to belong to related species!

The nondescript pack inched forward. He saw the wildest extremes among the creatures—beings with long hind legs and short forelimbs; a creature with hairless, thorn-scarred skin and a face like the half-human visage of a werewolf; a tiny, rat-sized thing that yelped with a shrill, yapping voice; and a mighty, barrel-chested creature whose body seemed almost designed for erect posture, and who loped on its hinder limbs with its fore-paws touching the ground at intervals like the knuckles of an orangutan. That particular being was a horrible, yellow-fanged monstrosity, and Carver chose it for his first bullet.

The thing dropped without a sound; the slug had split its skull. As the report echoed back and forth between the hills on the east and west extremities of Austin, the pack answered with a threatening chorus of bays, howls, growls, and shrieks. They shrank

back momentarily from their companion's body, then came menacingly forward.

Again Carver fired. A red-eyed hopping creature yelped and crumpled. The line halted nervously, divided now by two dead forms. Their cries were no more than a muffled growling as they eyed him with red and yellowish orbs.

He started suddenly as a different sound rose, a cry whose nature he could not determine, though it seemed to come from a point where the forested bank rose sharply in a little cliff. It was as if some watcher urged on the nondescript pack, for they gathered courage again to advance. And it was at this moment that a viciously flung stone caught the man painfully on the shoulder.

He staggered, then scanned the line of brush. A missile meant humankind. The mad island harbored something more than aberrant beasts.

A second cry sounded, and another stone hummed past his ear. But this time he had caught the flash of movement at the top of the cliff, and he fired instantly.

There was a scream. A human figure reeled from the cover of foliage, swayed, and pitched headlong into the brush at the base, ten feet below. The pack of creatures broke howling, as if their courage had vanished before this evidence of power. They fled like shadows into the forest.

But something about the figure that had fallen from the cliff struck Carver as strange. He frowned, waiting a moment to assure himself that the nondescript pack had fled, and that no other menace lurked in the brush, then he darted toward the place where his assailant had fallen.

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The figure was human, beyond doubt—or was it? Here on this mad island where species seemed to take any form, Carver hesitated to make even that assumption. He bent over his fallen foe, who lay face down, then turned the body over. He stared.

It was a girl. Her face, still as the features of the Buddha of Nikko, was young and lovely as a Venetian bronze figurine, with delicate features that even in unconsciousness had a wildness apparent in them. Her eyes, closed though they were, betrayed a slight, dryadlike slant.

The girl was white, though her skin was sun-darkened almost to a golden hue. Carver was certain of her color, nevertheless, for at the edges of her single garment—an untanned hide of leopard-like fur, already stiffening and cracking—her skin showed whiter.

Had he killed her? Curiously perturbed, he sought for the wound, and found it, at last, in a scarcely bleeding graze above her right knee. His shot had merely spun her off balance; it was the ten-foot fall from the cliff that had done the damage, of which the visible evidence was a reddening bruise of her left temple. But she was living. He swung her hastily into his arms and bore her across the beach, away from the brush in which her motley pack was doubtless still lurking.

He shook his nearly empty canteen, then tilted her head to pour water between her lips. Instantly her eyes flickered open, and for a moment she stared quite uncomprehendingly into Carver's eyes, not twelve inches from her own. Then her eyes widened, not so much in terror as in startled bewilderment; she twisted violently from his arms, tried twice to rise, and twice fell back as her legs refused to support her. At last she lay quite passive, keeping her fascinated gaze on his face.

But Carver received a shock as well. As her lids lifted, he started at the sight of the eyes behind them. They were unexpected, despite the hint given by their ever-so-faint Oriental cast, for they flamed upon him in a tawny hue. They were amber, almost golden, and wild as the eyes of a votary of Pan. She watched the zoologist with the intentness of a captive bird, but not with a bird's timidity, for he saw her hand fumbling for the pointed stick or wooden knife in the thong about her waist.

He proffered the canteen, and she shrank away from his extended hand. He shook the container, and at the sound of gurgling liquid, she took it gingerly, tilted a trickle into her hand, and then, to Carver's surprise, smelled it, her dainty nostrils flaring as widely as her diminutive, uptilted nose permitted. After a moment she drank from her cupped palm, poured another trickle, and drank that. It did not occur to her, apparently, to drink from the canteen.

Her mind cleared. She saw the two motionless bodies of the slain creatures, and murmured a low sound of sorrow. When she moved as if to rise, her gashed knee pained her, and she turned her strange eyes on Carver with a renewed expression of fear. She indicated the red streak of the injury.

"C'm on?" she said with a questioning inflection. Carver realized that the sound resembled English words through accident only. "Where to?" He grinned.

She shook a puzzled head. "Bu-r-r-o-o-on!" she said "Zee-e-e!"

He understood that. It was her attempt to imitate the sound of his shot and the hum of the bullet. He tapped the revolver. "Magic!" he said warningly. "Bad medicine. Better be good girl, see?" It was obvious that she didn't understand. "Thumbi?" he tried. "You Maori?" No result save a long look from slanting, golden eyes.

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"Well," he grunted, "Sprechen zie Deutsch, then? Or Kanaka? Or—what the devil! That's all I know—Latinum intelligisne?"

"C'm on?" she said faintly, her eyes on the gun. She rubbed the scratch on her leg and the bruise on her temple, apparently ascribing both to the weapon.

"All right," Carver acceded grimly. He reflected that it could do no harm to impress the girl with his powers. "I'll come on. Watch this!"

He leveled his weapon at the first target he saw—a dead branch that jutted from a drifted log at the end of the coral spit. It was thick as his arm, but it must have been thoroughly rotted, for instead of stripping a bit of bark as he expected, the heavy slug shattered the entire branch.

"O-o-oh!" gasped the girl, clapping her hands over her ears. Her eyes flickered sidewise at him; then she scrambled wildly to her feet. She was in sheer panic.

"No, you don't!" he snapped. He caught her arm. "You stay right here!"

For a moment he was amazed at the lithe strength of her. Her free arm flashed upward with the wooden dagger, and he caught that wrist as well. Her muscles were like tempered steel wires. She twisted frantically; then, with sudden yielding, stood quietly in his grasp, as if she thought, "What use to struggle with a god?"

He released her. "Sit down!" he growled.

She obeyed his gesture rather than his voice. She sat on the sand before him, gazing up with a trace of fear but more of wariness in her honey-hued eyes.

"Where are your people?" he asked sharply, pointing at her and then waving in an inclusive gesture at the forest.

She stared without comprehension, and he varied his symbolism. "Your home, then?" he pantomimed the act of sleeping.

The result was the same, simply a troubled look from her glorious eyes.

"Now what the devil!" he muttered. "You have a name, haven't you? A name? Look!" He tapped his chest. "Alan. Get it? Alan. Alan."

That she understood instantly. "Alan," she repeated dutifully, looking up at him.

But when he attempted to make her assign a name to herself, he failed utterly. The only effect of his efforts was a deepening of the perplexity in her features. He reverted, at last, to the effort to make her indicate in some fashion the place of her home and people, varying his gestures in every way he could devise. And at last she seemed to comprehend.

She rose doubtfully to her feet and uttered a strange, low, mournful cry. It was answered instantly from the brush, and Carver stiffened as he saw the emergence of that same motley pack of nondescript beings. They must have been watching, lurking just beyond view. Again they circled the two slain members as they advanced.

Carver whipped out his revolver. His movement was followed by a wail of anguish from the girl, who flung herself before him, arms outspread as if to shield the wild pack from the menace of the weapon. She faced him fearfully, yet defiantly, and there was puzzled questioning in her face as well. It was as if she accused the

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man of ordering her to summon her companions only to threaten them with death.

He stared. "O.K.," he said at last. "What's a couple of rare specimens on an island that's covered with 'em? Send 'em away."

She obeyed his gesture of command. The weird pack slunk silently from view, and the girl backed hesitantly away as if to follow them, but halted abruptly at Carver's word. Her attitude was a curious one, partly fear, but more largely composed, it seemed, of a sort of fascination, as if she did not quite understand the zoologist's nature.

This was a feeling he shared to a certain extent, for there was certainly something mysterious in encountering a white girl on this mad Austin Island. It was as if there were one specimen, and only one, of every species in the world here on this tiny islet, and she were the representative of humanity. But still he frowned perplexedly into her wild, amber eyes.

It occurred to him again that on the part of Austin he had traversed he had seen no two creatures alike. Was this girl, too, a mutant, a variant of some species other than human, who had through mere chance adopted a perfect human form? As, for instance, the doglike cat whose body still lay on the sand where he had flung it. Was she, perhaps, the sole representative of the human form on the island, Eve before Adam, in the garden? There had been a woman before Adam, he mused.

"We'll call you Lilith," he said thoughtfully. The name fitted her wild, perfect features and her flame-hued eyes. Lilith, the mysterious being whom Adam found before him in Paradise, before Eve was created. "Lilith," he repeated. "Alan—Lilith. See?"

She echoed the sounds and the gesture. Without question she accepted the name he had given her, and that she understood the sound as a name was evident by her response to it. For when he uttered it a few minutes flater, her amber eyes flashed instantly to his face and reained in a silent question.

Carver laughed and resumed his puzzled thoughts. Reflectively, he produced his pipe and packed it, then struck a match and lighted it. He was startled by a low cry from the girl Lilith, and looked up to see her extended hand. For a moment he failed to perceive what she sought, and then her fingers closed around the hissing stem of the match! She had tried to seize the flame as one takes a fluttering bit of cloth.

She screamed in pain and fright. At once the pack of nondescripts appeared at the edge of the forest, voicing their howls of anger, and Carver whirled again to meet them. But again Lilith, recovering from the surprise of the burn, halted the pack with her voice, and sent them slinking away into the shadows. She sucked her scorched Singers and turned widened eyes to his face. He realized with a start of disbelief that the girl did not comprehend fire!

There was a bottle of alcohol in the box of equipment; he produced it and, taking Lilith's hand, bound a moistened strip of handkerchief about her two blistered fingers, though he knew well enough that alcohol was a poor remedy for burns. He applied the disinfectant to the bullet graze on her knee; she moaned softly at the sting, then smiled as it lessened, while her strange amber eyes followed fixedly the puffs of smoke from his pipe, and her nostrils quivered to the pungent tobacco odor.

"Now what," queried Carver, smoking reflectively, "am I going to do with you?"

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Lilith had apparently no suggestion. She simply continued her wide-eyed regard.

"At least," he resumed, "you ought to know what's good to eat on this crazy island. You do eat, don't you?" He pantomimed the act.

The girl understood instantly. She rose, stepped to the spot where the body of the doglike cat lay, and seemed for an instant to sniff its scent. Then she removed the wooden knife from her girdle, placed one bare foot upon the body, and hacked and tore a strip of flesh from it. She extended the bloody chunk to him, and was obviously surprised at his gesture of refusal.

After a moment she withdrew it, glanced again at his face, and set her own small white teeth in the meat. Carver noted with interest how daintily she managed even that difficult maneuver, so that her soft lips were not stained by the slightest drop of blood.

But his own hunger was unappeased. He frowned over the problem of conveying his meaning, but at last hit upon a means. "Lilith!" he said sharply. Her eyes flashed at once to him. He indicated the meat she held, then waved at the mysterious line of trees. "Fruit," he said. "Tree meat. See?" He went through the motions of eating.

Again the girl understood instantly. It was odd, he mused, how readily she comprehended some things, while others equally simple seemed utterly beyond her. Queer, as everything on Austin Island was queer. Was Lilith, after all, entirely human? He followed her to the tree line, stealing a sidelong look at her wild, flame-colored eyes, and her features, beautiful, but untamed, dryadlike, elfin—wild.

She scrambled up the crumbling embankment and seemed to vanish magically into the shadows. For a moment Carver felt a surge of alarm as he clambered desperately after her; she could elude him here as easily as if she were indeed a shadow herself. True, he had no moral right to restrain her, save the hardly tenable one given by her attack; but he did not want to lose her—not yet. Or perhaps not at all.

"Lilith!" he shouted as he topped the cliff.

She appeared almost at his elbow. Above them twined a curious vine like a creeping conifer of some kind, bearing white-greenish fruits the size and shape of a pullet's egg. Lilith seized one, halved it with agile fingers, and raised a portion to her nostrils. She sniffed carefully, daintily, then flung the fruit away.

"Pah bo!" she said, wrinkling her nose distastefully.

She found another sort of queerly unprepossessing fruit composed of five finger-like protuberances from a fibrous disk, so that the whole bore the appearance of a large, malformed hand. This she sniffed as carefully as she had the other, then smiled sidewise up at him.

"Bo!" she said, extending it.

Carver hesitated. After all, it was not much more than an hour ago that the girl had been trying to kill him. Was it not entirely possible that she was now pursuing the same end, offering him a poisonous fruit?

She shook the unpleasantly bulbous object. "Bo!" she repeated, and then, exactly as if she understood his hesitancy, she broke off one of the fingers and thrust it into her own mouth. She smiled at him.

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"Good enough, Lilith." He grinned, taking the remainder.

It was much pleasanter to the tongue than to the eye. The pulp had a tart sweetness that was vaguely familiar to him, but he could not quite identify the taste. Nevertheless, encouraged by Lilith's example, he ate until his hunger was appeased.

The encounter with Lilith and her wild pack had wiped out thoughts of his mission. Striding back toward the beach he frowned, remembering that he was here as Alan Carver, zoologist, and in no other role. Yet—where could he begin? He was here to classify and to take specimens, but what was he to do on a mad island where every creature was of an unknown variety? There was no possibility of classification here, because there were no classes. There was only one of everything—or so it appeared.

Rather than set about a task futile on the very face of it, Carver turned his thoughts another way. Somewhere on Austin was the secret of this riotous disorder, and it seemed better to seek the ultimate key than to fritter away his time at the endless task of classifying. He would explore the island. Some strange volcanic gas, he mused vaguely, or some queer radioactive deposit—analagous to Morgan's experiments with X-rays on germ plasm. Or—or something else. There must be some answer.

"Come on, Lilith," he ordered, and set off toward the west, where the hill seemed to be higher than the opposing eminence at the island's eastern extremity.

The girl followed with her accustomed obedience, with her honey-hued eyes fastened on Carver in that curious mixture of fear, wonder, and—perhaps—a dawning light of worship.

The zoologist was not too preoccupied with the accumulation of mysteries to glance occasionally at the wild beauty of her face, and

once he caught himself trying to picture her in civilized attire—her mahogany hair confined under one of the current tiny hats, her lithe body sheathed in finer textile than the dried and cracking skin she wore, her feet in dainty leather, and her ankles in chiffon. He scowled and thrust the visualization away, but whether because it seemed too anomalous or too attractive he did not trouble to analyze.

He turned up the slope. Austin was heavily wooded, like the Aucklands, but progress was easy, for it was through a forest, not a jungle. A mad forest, true enough, but still comparatively clear of underbrush.

A shadow flickered, then another. But the first was only a queen's pigeon, erecting its glorious feather crest, and the second only an owl parrot. The birds on Austin were normal; they were simply the ordinary feathered life of the southern seas. Why? Because they were mobile; they traveled, or were blown by storms, from island to island.

It was mid-afternoon before Carver reached the peak, where a solemn outcropping of black basalt rose treeless, like a forester's watchtower. He clambered up its eroded sides and stood with Lilith beside him, gazing out across the central valley of Austin Island to the hill at the eastern point, rising until its peak nearly matched their own.

Between sprawled the wild forest, in whose depths blue-green shadows shifted in the breeze like squalls visible here and there on the surface of a calm lake. Some sort of soaring bird circled below, and far away, in the very center of the valley, was the sparkle of water. That, he knew must be the rivulet he had already visited. But nowhere—nowhere at all—was there any sign of human occupation to account for the presence of Lilith—no smoke, no clearing, nothing.

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The girl touched his arm timidly, and gestured toward the opposite hill.

"Pah bo!" she said tremulously. It must have been quite obvious to her that he failed to understand, for she amplified the phrase. "R-r-r-r!" she growled, drawing her perfect lips into an imitation of a snarl. "Pah bo, lay shot." She pointed again toward the east.

Was she trying to tell him that some fierce beasts dwelt in that region? Carver could not interpret her symbolism in any other way, and the phrase she had used was the same she had applied to the poisonous fruit.

He narrowed his eyes as he gazed intently toward the eastern eminence, then started. There was something, not on the opposing hill, but down near the flash of water midway between.

At his side hung the prism binoculars he used for identifying birds. He swung the instrument to his eyes. What he saw, still not clearly enough for certainty, was a mound or structure, vine-grown and irregular. But it might be the roofless walls of a ruined cottage.

The sun was sliding westward. Too late in the day now for exploration, but to-morrow would do. He marked the place of the mound in his memory, then scrambled down.

As darkness approached, Lilith began to evince a curious reluctance to move eastward, hanging back, sometimes dragging timidly at his arm. Twice she said "No, no!" and Carver wondered whether the word was part of her vocabulary or whether she had acquired it from him. Heaven knew, he reflected amusedly, that he had used the word often enough, as one might use it to a child.

He was hungry again, despite the occasional fruits Lilith had plucked for him. On the beach he shot a magnificent Cygnus

Atratus, a black Australian swan, and carried it with its head dragging, while Lilith, awed by the shot, followed him now without objection.

He strode along the beach to his box; not that that stretch was any more desirable than the next, but if Kolu and Malloa were to return, or were to guide a rescue expedition from the Fortune, that was the spot they'd seek first.

He gathered driftwood, and, just as darkness fell, lighted a fire.

He grinned at Lilith's start of panic and her low "O-o-oh!" of sheer terror as the blaze of the match caught and spread. She remembered her scorched fingers, doubtless, and she circled warily around the flames, to crouch behind him where he sat plucking and cleaning the great bird.

She was obviously quite uncomprehending as he pierced the fowl with a spit and set about roasting it, but he smiled at the manner in which her sensitive nostrils twitched at the combined odor of burning wood and cooking meat.

When it was done, he cut her a portion of the flesh, rich and fat like roast goose, and he smiled again at her bewilderment. She ate it, but very gingerly, puzzled alike by the heat and the altered taste; beyond question she would have preferred it raw and bleeding. When she had finished, she scrubbed the grease very daintily from her fingers with wet sand at a tidal pool.

Carver was puzzling again over what to do with her. He didn't want to lose her, yet he could hardly stay awake all night to guard her. There were the ropes that had lashed his case of supplies; he could, he supposed, tie her wrists and ankles; but somehow the idea appealed to him not at all. She was too naive, too trusting, too awe-

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struck and worshipful. And besides, savage or not, she was a white girl over whom he had no conceivable rightful authority.

At last he shrugged and grinned across the dying fire at Lilith, who had lost some of her fear of the leaping flames. "It's up to you," he remarked amiably. "I'd like you to stick around, but I won't insist on it."

She answered his smile with her own quick, flashing one, and the gleam of eyes exactly the color of the flames they mirrored, but she said nothing. Carver sprawled in the sand; it was cool enough to dull the activities of the troublesome sand fleas, and after a while he slept.

His rest was decidedly intermittent. The wild chorus of night sounds disturbed him again with its strangeness, and he woke to see Lilith staring fixedly into the fire's dying embers. Some time later he awakened again; now the fire was quite extinct, but Lilith was standing. While he watched her silently, she turned toward the forest. His heart sank; she was leaving.

But she paused. She bent over something dark—the body of one of the creatures he had shot. The big one, it was; he saw her struggle to lift it, and, finding the weight too great, drag it laboriously to the coral spit and roll it into the sea.

Slowly she returned; she gathered the smaller body into her arms and repeated the act, standing motionless for long minutes over the black water. When she returned once more she faced the rising moon for a moment, and he saw her eyes glistening with tears. He knew he had witnessed a burial.

He watched her in silence. She dropped to the sand near the black smear of ashes; but she seemed in no need of sleep. She stared so fixedly and so apprehensively toward the east that Carver

felt a sense of foreboding. He was about to raise himself to sitting position when Lilith, as if arriving at a decision after long pondering, suddenly sprang to her feet and darted across the sand to the trees.

Startled, he stared into the shadows, and out of them drifted that same odd call he had heard before. He strained his ears, and was certain he heard a faint yelping among the trees. She had summoned her pack. Carver drew his revolver quietly from its holster and half rose on his arm.

Lilith reappeared. Behind her, darker shadows against the shadowy growths, lurked wild forms, and Carver's hand tightened on the grip of his revolver.

But there was no attack. The girl uttered a low command of some sort, the slinking shadows vanished, and she returned alone to her place on the sand.

The zoologist could see her face, silver-pale in the moonlight, as she glanced at him, but he lay still in apparent slumber, and Lilith, after a moment, seemed ready to imitate him. The apprehension had vanished from her features; she was calmer, more confident. Carver realized why, suddenly; she had set her pack to guard against whatever danger threatened from the east.

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Dawn roused him. Lilith was still sleeping, curled like a child on the sand, and for some time he stood gazing down at her. She was very beautiful, and now, with her tawny eyes closed, she seemed much less mysterious; she seemed no island nymph or dryad, but simply a lovely, savage, primitive girl. Yet he knew—or he was beginning to suspect—the mad truth about Austin Island. If the truth were what he feared, then he might as well fall in love with a sphinx, or a mermaid, or a female centaur, as with Lilith.

He steeled himself. "Lilith!" he called gruffly.

She awoke with a start of terror. For a moment she faced him with sheer panic in her eyes; then she remembered, gasped, and smiled tremulously. Her smile made it very hard for him to remember what it was that he feared in her, for she looked beautifully and appealingly human save for her wild, flame-colored eyes, and even what he fancied he saw in those might be but his own imagining.

She followed him toward the trees. There was no sign of her bestial bodyguards, though Carver suspected their nearness. He breakfasted again on fruits chosen by Lilith, selected unerringly, from the almost infinite variety, by her delicate nostrils. Carver mused interestedly that smell seemed to be the one means of identifying genera on this insane island.

Smell is chemical in nature. Chemical differences meant glandular ones, and glandular differences, in the last analysis, probably accounted for racial ones. Very likely the differences between a cat, say, and a dog was, in the ultimate sense, a glandular difference. He scowled at the thought and stared narrowly at Lilith; but, peer as he might, she seemed neither more nor less than an unusually lovely little savage—except for her eyes.

He was moving toward the eastern part of the island, intending to follow the brook to the site of the ruined cabin, if it was a ruined cabin. Again he noted the girl's nervousness as they approached the stream that nearly bisected this part of the valley. Certainly, unless her fears were sheer superstition, there was something dangerous there. He examined his gun again, then strode on.

At the bank of the brook Lilith began to present difficulties. She snatched his arm and tugged him back, wailing, "No, no, no!" in frightened repetition.

When he glanced at her in impatient questioning, she could only repeat her phrase of yesterday. "Lay shot" she said, anxiously and fearfully. "Lay shot!"

"Humph!" he growled. "A cannon's the only bird I ever heard of that could—" He turned to follow the watercourse into the forest.

Lilith hung back. She could not bring herself to follow him there. For an instant he paused, looking back at her slim loveliness, then turned and strode on. Better that she remained where she was. Better if he never saw her again, for she was too beautiful for close proximity. Yet Heaven knew, he mused, that she looked human enough. But Lilith rebelled. Once she was certain that he was determined to go on, she gave a frightened cry. "Alan!" she called. "Al-an!"

He turned, astonished that she remembered his name, and found her darting to his side. She was pallid, horribly frightened, but she would not let him go alone.

Yet there was nothing to indicate that this region of the island was more dangerous than the rest. There was the same mad profusion of varieties of vegetation, the same unclassifiable leaves,

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fruits, and flowers. Only—or he imagined this—there were fewer birds.

One thing slowed their progress. At times the eastern bank of the rivulet seemed more open than their side, but Lilith steadfastly refused to permit him to cross. When he tried it, she clung so desperately and so violently to his arms that he at last yielded, and plowed his way through the underbrush on his own bank. It was as if the watercourse were a dividing line, a frontier, or—he frowned—a border.

By noon they had reached a point which Carver knew must be close indeed to the spot he sought. He peered through the tunnel that arched over the course of the brook, and there ahead, so overgrown that it blended perfectly with the forest wall, he saw it.

It was a cabin, or the remains of one. The log walls still stood, but the roof, doubtless of thatch, had long ago disintegrated. But what struck Carver first was the certainty, evident in design, in window openings, in doorway, that this was no native hut. It had been a white man's cabin of perhaps three rooms.

It stood on the eastern bank; but by now the brook had narrowed to a mere rill, gurgling from pool to tiny rapids. He sprang across, disregarding Lilith's anguished cry. But at a glimpse of her face he did pause. Her magnificent honey-hued eyes were wide with fear, while her lips were set in a tense little line of grimmest determination. She looked as an ancient martyr must have looked marching out to face the lions, as she stepped deliberately across to his side. It was almost as if she said, "If you are bound to die, then I will die beside you."

Yet within the crumbling walls there was nothing to inspire fear. There was no animal life at all, except a tiny, ratlike being that skittered out between the logs at their approach. Carver stared

around him at the grassy and fern grown interior, at the remnants of decaying furniture and the fallen debris. It had been years since this place had known human occupants, a decade at the very least.

His foot struck something. He glanced down to see a human skull and a human femur in the grass. And then other bones, though none of them were in a natural position. Their former owner must have died there where the ruined cot sagged, and been dragged here by—well, by whatever it was that had feasted on human carrion.

He glanced sidewise at Lilith, but she was simply staring affrightedly toward the east. She had not noticed the bones, or if she had, they had meant nothing to her. Carver poked gingerly among them for some clue to the identity of the remains, but there was nothing save a corroded belt buckle. That, of course, was a little; it had been a man, and most probably a white man.

Most of the debris was inches deep in the accumulation of loam. He kicked among the fragments of what must once have been a cupboard, and again his foot struck something hard and round—no skull this time, but an ordinary jar.

He picked it up. It was sealed, and there was something in it. The cap was hopelessly stuck by the corrosion of years; Carver smashed the glass against a log. What he picked from the fragments was a notebook, yellowedged and brittle with time. He swore softly as a dozen leaves disintegrated in his hands, but what remained seemed stronger. He hunched down on the log and scanned the all-but-obliterated ink.

There was a date and a name. The name was Ambrose Callan, and the date was October 25th, 1921. He frowned. In 1921 he had been—let's see, he mused; fifteen years ago—he had been in grade school. Yet the name Ambrose Callan had a familiar ring to it.

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He read more of the faded, written lines, then stared thoughtfully into space. That was the man, then. He remembered the Callan expedition because as a youngster he had been interested in far places, exploration, and adventure, as what youngster isn't? Professor Ambrose Callan of Northern; he began to remember that Morgan had based some of his work with artificial species—synthetic evolution—on Callan's observations.

But Morgan had only succeeded in creating a few new species of fruit fly, of *Drosophila*, by exposing germ plasm to hard X-rays. Nothing like this—this madhouse of Austin Island. He stole a look at the tense and fearful Lilith, and shuddered, for she seemed so lovely—and so human. He turned his eyes to the crumbling pages and read on, for here at last he was close to the secret.

He was startled by Lilith's sudden wail of terror. "Lay shot!" she cried. "Alan, lay shot!"

He followed her gesture, but saw nothing. Her eyes were doubtless sharper than his, yet—There! In the deep afternoon shadows of the forest something moved. For an instant he saw it clearly—a malevolent pygmy like the cat-eyed horror he had glimpsed drinking from the stream. Like it? No, the same; it must be the same, for here on Austin no creature resembled another, nor ever could, save by the wildest of chances.

The creature vanished before he could draw his weapon, but in the shadows lurked other figures, other eyes that seemed alight with nonhuman intelligence. He fired, and a curious squawling cry came back, and it seemed to him that the forms receded for a time. But they came again, and he saw without surprise the nightmare horde of creatures.

He stuffed the notebook in his pocket and seized Lilith's wrist, for she stood as if paralyzed by horror. He backed away out of the

doorless entrance, over the narrow brook. The girl seemed dazed, half hypnotized by the glimpses of the things that followed them. Her eyes were wide with fear, and she stumbled after him unseeing. He sent another shot into the shadows.

That seemed to rouse Lilith. "Lay shot!" she whimpered, then gathered her self-control. She uttered her curious call, and somewhere it was answered, and yet further off, answered again.

Her pack was gathering for her defense, and Carver felt a surge of apprehension for his own position. Might he not be caught between two enemies?

He never forgot that retreat down the course of the little stream. Only delirium itself could duplicate the wild battles he witnessed, the unearthly screaming, the death grips of creatures not quite natural, things that fought with the mad frenzy of freaks and outcasts. He and Lilith must have been slain immediately save for the intervention of her pack; they slunk out of the shadows with low, bestial noises, circling Carver cautiously, but betraying no scrap of caution against—the other things.

He saw or sensed something that had almost escaped him before. Despite their forms, whatever their appearance happened to be, Lilith's pack was doglike. Not in looks, certainly; it was far deeper than that. In nature, in character; that was it.

And their enemies, wild creatures of nightmare though they were, had something feline about them. Not in appearance, no more than the others, but in character and actions. Their method of fighting, for instance—all but silent, with deadly claw and needle teeth, none of the fencing of canine nature, but with the leap and talons of feline. But their aspect, their—their catness was more submerged by their outward appearance, for they ranged from the semi-human form of the little demon of the brook to ophidian-

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headed things as heavy and lithe as a panther. And they fought with a ferocity and intelligence that was itself abnormal.

Carver's gun helped. He fired when he had any visible target, which was none too often; but his occasional hits seemed to instill respect into his adversaries.

Lilith, weaponless save for stones and her wooden knife, simply huddled at his side as they backed slowly toward the beach. Their progress was maddeningly slow, and Carver began to note apprehensively that the shadows were stretching toward the east, as if to welcome the night that was sliding around from that half of the world. Night meant—destruction.

If they could attain the beach, and if Lilith's pack could hold the others at bay until Carver could build a fire, they might survive. But the creatures that were allied with Lilith were being overcome. They were hopelessly outnumbered. They were being slain more rapidly with each one that fell, as ice melts more swiftly as its size decreases.

Carver stumbled backward into orange-tinted sunlight. The beach! The sun was already touching the coral spit, and darkness was a matter of minutes—brief minutes.

Out of the brush came the remnants of Lilith's pack, a half dozen nondescripts, snarling, bloody, panting, and exhausted. For the moment they were free of their attackers, since the catlike fiends chose to lurk among the shadows. Carver backed farther away, feeling a sense of doom as his own shadow lengthened in the brief instant of twilight that divided day from night in these latitudes. And then swift darkness came just as he dragged Lilith to the ridge of the coral spit.

He saw the charge impending. Weird shadows detached themselves from the deeper shadows of the trees. Below, one of the nondescripts whined softly. Across the sand, clear for an instant against the white ground coral of the beach, the figure of the small devil with the half-human posture showed, and a malevolent sputtering snarl sounded. It was exactly as if the creature had leaped forward like a leader to exhort his troops to charge.

Carver chose that figure as his target. His gun flashed; the snarl became a squawl of agony, and the charge came.

Lilith's pack crouched; but Carver knew that this was the end. He fired. The flickering shadows came on. The magazine emptied; there was no time now to reload, so he reversed the weapon, clubbed it. He felt Lilith grow tense beside him.

And then the charge halted. In unison, as if at command, the shadows were motionless, silent save for the low snarling of the dying creature on the sand. When they moved again, it was away—toward the trees!

Carver gulped. A faint shimmering light on the wall of the forest caught his eye, and he spun. It was true! Down the beach, down there where he had left his box of supplies, a fire burned, and rigid against the light, facing toward them in the darkness, were human figures. The unknown peril of fire had frightened off the attack. He stared. There in the sea, dark against the faint glow of the West, was a familiar outline. The Fortune! The men there were his associates; they had heard his shots and lighted the fire as a guide.

"Lilith!" he choked. "Look there. Come on!"

But the girl held back. The remnant of her pack slunk behind the shelter of the ridge of coral, away from the dread fire. It was no longer the fire that frightened Lilith, but the black figures around it,

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and Alan Carver found himself suddenly face to face with the hardest decision of his life.

He could leave her here. He knew she would not follow, knew it from the tragic light in her honey-hued eyes. And beyond all doubt that was the best thing to do; for he could not marry her. Nobody could ever marry her, and she was too lovely to take among men who might love her—as Carver did. But he shuddered a little as a picture flashed in his mind. Children! What sort of children would Lilith bear? No man could dare chance the possibility that Lilith, too, was touched by the curse of Austin Island.

He turned sadly away—a step, two steps, toward the fire. Then he turned.

"Come, Lilith," he said gently, and added mournfully, "other people have married, lived, and died without children. I suppose we can, too."

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The Fortune slid over the green swells, northward toward New Zealand. Carver grinned as he sprawled in a deck chair. Halburton was still gazing reluctantly at the line of blue that was Austin Island.

"Buck up, Vance," Carver chuckled. "You couldn't classify that flora in a hundred years, and if you could, what'd be the good of it? There's just one of each, anyway."

"I'd give two toes and a finger to try," said Halburton. "You had the better part of three days there, and might have had more if you hadn't winged Malloa. They'd have gone home to the Chathams sure, if your shot hadn't got his arm. That's the only reason they made for Macquarie."

"And lucky for me they did. Your fire scared off the cats."

"The cats, eh? Would you mind going over the thing again, Alan? It's so crazy that I haven't got it all yet."

"Sure. Just pay attention to teacher and you'll catch on." He grinned. "Frankly, at first I hadn't a glimmering of an idea myself. The whole island seemed insane. No two living things alike! Just one of each genus, and all unknown genera at that. I didn't get a single clue until after I met Lilith. Then I noticed that she differentiated by smell. She told good fruits from poisonous ones by the smell, and she even identified that first cat-thing I shot by smell. She'd eat that because it was an enemy, but she wouldn't touch the dog-things I shot from her pack."

"So what?" asked Halburton, frowning.

"Well, smell is a chemical sense. It's much more fundamental than outward form, because the chemical functioning of an

organism depends on its glands. I began to suspect right then that the fundamental nature of all living things on Austin Island was just the same as anywhere else. It wasn't the nature that was changed, but just the form. See?"

"Not a bit."

"You will. You know what chromosomes are, of course. They're the carriers of heredity, or rather, according to Weissman, they carry the genes that carry the determinants that carry heredity. A human being has forty-eight chromosomes, of which he gets twenty-four from each parent."

"So," said Halburton, "has a tomato."

"Yes, but a tomato's forty-eight chromosomes carry a different heredity, else one could cross a human being with a tomato. But to return to the subject, all variations in individuals come about from the manner in which chance shuffles these forty-eight chromosomes with their load of determinants. That puts a pretty definite limit on the possible variations.

"For instance, eye color has been located on one of the genes on the third pair of chromosomes. Assuming that this gene contains twice as many brown-eye determinants as blue-eye ones, the chances are two to one that the child of whatever man or woman owns that particular chromosome will be brown-eyed—if his mate has no marked bias either way. See?"

"I know all that. Get along to Ambrose Callan and his notebook."

"Coming to it. Now remember that these determinants carry all heredity, and that includes shape, size, intelligence, character, coloring—everything. People—or plants and animals—can vary in

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the vast number of ways in which it is possible to combine forty-eight chromosomes with their cargo of genes and determinants. But that number is not infinite. There are limits, limits to size, to coloring, to intelligence. Nobody ever saw a human race with sky-blue hair, for instance."

"Nobody'd ever want to!" grunted Halburton.

"And," proceeded Carver, "that is because there are no blue-hair determinants in human chromosomes. But—and here comes Callan's idea—suppose we could increase the number of chromosomes in a given ovum. What then? In humans or tomatoes, if, instead of forty-eight, there were four hundred eighty, the possible range of variation would be ten times as great as it is now.

"In size, for instance, instead of the present possible variation of about two and a half feet, they might vary twenty-five feet! And in shape—a man might resemble almost anything! That is, almost anything within the range of the mammalian orders. And in intelligence—" He paused thoughtfully.

"But how," cut in Halburton, "did Callan propose to accomplish the feat of inserting extra chromosomes? Chromosomes themselves are microscopic; genes are barely visible under the highest magnification, and nobody ever saw a determinant."

"I don't know how," said Carver gravely. "Part of his notes crumbled to dust, and the description of his method must have gone with those pages. Morgan uses hard radiations, but his object and his results are both different. He doesn't change the number of chromosomes."

He hesitated. "I think Callan used a combination of radiation and injection," he resumed. "I don't know. All I know is that he stayed on Austin four or five years, and that he came with only his wife.

That part of his notes is clear enough. He began treating the vegetation near his shack, and some cats and dogs he had brought. Then he discovered that the thing was spreading like a disease."

"Spreading?" echoed Halburton.

"Of course. Every tree he treated strewed multi-chromosomed pollen to the wind, and as for the cats—Anyway, the aberrant pollen fertilized normal seeds, and the result was another freak, a seed with the normal number of chromosomes from one parent and ten times as many from the other. The variations were endless. You know how swiftly kauri and tree ferns grow, and these had a possible speed of growth ten times as great.

"The freaks overran the island, smothering out the normal growths. And Callan's radiations, and perhaps his injections, too, affected Austin Island's indigenous life—the rats, the bats. They began to produce mutants. He came in 1918, and by the time he realized his own tragedy, Austin was an island of freaks where no child resembled its parents save by the merest chance."

"His own tragedy? What do you mean?"

"Well, Callan was a biologist, not an expert in radiation. I don't know exactly what happened. Exposure to X-rays for long periods produces burns, ulcers, malignancies. Maybe Callan didn't take proper precautions to shield his device, or maybe he was using a radiation of peculiarly irritating quality. Anyway, his wife sickened first—an ulcer that turned cancerous.

"He had a radio—a wireless, rather, in 1921—and he summoned his sloop from the Chathams. It sank off that coral spit, and Callan, growing desperate, succeeded somehow in breaking his wireless. He was no electrician, you see.

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"Those were troubled days, after the close of the War. With Callan's sloop sunk, no one knew exactly what had become of him, and after a while he was forgotten. When his wife died, he buried her; but when he died there was no one to bury him. The descendants of what had been his cats took care of him, and that was that."

"Yeah? What about Lilith?"

"Yes," said Carver soberly. "What about her? When I began to suspect the secret of Austin Island, that worried me. Was Lilith really quite human? Was she, too, infected by the taint of variation, so that her children might vary as widely as the offspring of the—cats? She spoke not a word of any language I knew—or I thought so, anyway—and I simply couldn't fit her in. But Callan's diary and notes did it for me."

"How?"

"She's the daughter of the captain of Callan's sloop, whom he rescued when it was wrecked on the coral point. She was five years old then, which makes her almost twenty now. As for language—well, perhaps I should have recognized the few halting words she recalled. C'm on, for instance, was comment—that is, 'how?' And pah bo was simply pas bon, not good. That's what she said about the poisonous fruit. And lay shot was les chats, for somehow she remembered, or sensed, that the creatures from the eastern end were cats.

"About her, for fifteen years, centered the dog creatures, who despite their form were, after all, dogs by nature, and loyal to their mistress. And between the two groups was eternal warfare."

"But are you sure Lilith escaped the taint?"

"Her name's Lucienne," mused Carver, "but I think I prefer Lilith." He smiled at the slim figure clad in a pair of Jameson's trousers and his own shirt, standing there in the stern looking back at Austin. "Yes, I'm sure. When she was cast on the island, Callan had already destroyed the device that had slain his wife and was about to kill him. He wrecked his equipment completely, knowing that in the course of time the freaks he had created were doomed."

"Doomed?"

"Yes. The normal strains, hardened by evolution, are stronger. They're already appearing around the edges of the island, and some day Austin will betray no more peculiarities than any other remote islet. Nature always reclaims her own."

