

The Planet of the Dead

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A unique story of star-gazing—a bizarre tale of life in two planets and the splendors of a far world

1

BY PROFESSION, Francis Melchior was a dealer in antiques; by avocation, he was an astronomer. Thus he contrived to placate, if not to satisfy, two needs of a somewhat complex and unusual temperament. Through his occupation, he gratified in a measure his craving for all things that have been steeped in the mortuary shadows of dead ages, in the dusky amber flames of long-sunken suns; all things that have about them the irresolvable mystery of departed time. And through his avocation, he found a ready path to exotic realms in further space, to the only spheres where his fancy could dwell in freedom and his dreams could know contentment. For Melchior was one of those who are born with an immedicable distaste for all that is present or near at hand; one of those

who have drunk too lightly of oblivion and have not wholly forgotten the transcendent glories of other eons, and the worlds from which they were exiled into human birth; so that their furtive, restless thoughts and dim, unquenchable longings return obscurely toward the vanishing shores of a lost heritage. The earth is too narrow for such, and the compass of mortal time is too brief; and paucity and barrenness are everywhere; and in all places their lot is a never-ending weariness.

With a predisposition ordinarily so fatal to the acquisitive faculties, it was indeed remarkable that Melchior should have prospered at all in his business. His love of ancient things, of rare vases, paintings, furniture, jewels, idols and statues, made him readier to buy than to sell; and his sales were too often a source



"The sun was overtaken at high noon by the doom the astronomers had foretold."

of secret heart-ache and regret. But somehow, in spite of all this, he had managed to attain a degree of financial comfort. By nature, he was something of a solitary, and was generally looked upon as eccentric. He had never cared to marry; he had made no intimate friends; and he lacked many of the interests, which, in the eyes of the average person, are supposed to characterize a normal human being.

Melchior's passion for antiquities and his devotion to the stars, both dated from his childhood days. Now, in his thirty-first year, with increasing leisure and prosperity, he had turned an upper balcony of his suburban hill-top house into an amateur observatory. Here, with

a new and powerful telescope, he studied the summer heavens night after night. He possessed little talent and less inclination for those recondite mathematical calculations which form so large a part of orthodox astronomy; but he had an intuitional grasp of the heavenly immensitudes, a mystic sensitivity toward all that is far off in space. His imagination roamed and adventured among the suns and nebulae; and for him, each tiny gleam of telescopic light appeared to tell its own story and invite him toward its own unique realm of ultramundane fantasy. He was not greatly concerned with the names which astronomers have given to particular stars and constellations; but nevertheless, each of them possessed for

him a separate individuality not to be mistaken for that of any other.

In especial, Melchior was drawn by one minute star in a wide-flung constellation south of the Milky Way. It was barely discernible to the naked eye; and even through his telescope, it gave an impression of cosmic solitude and remoteness such as he had never felt in any other orb. It allured him more than the moon-surrounded planets or the first-magnitude stars with their flaming spectra; and he returned to it again and again, forsaking for its lonely point of light the marvelous manifold rings of Saturn and the cloudy zone of Venus and the intricate coils of the great nebula of Andromeda.

Musing through many midnights on the attraction the star held for him, Melchior reasoned that in its narrow ray was the whole emanation of a sun and perhaps of a planetary system; that the secret of foreign worlds and even something of their history was implicit in that light, if one could only read the tale. And he longed to understand, and to know the far-woven thread of affinity which drew his attention so perennially to this particular orb. On each occasion when he looked, his brain was tantalized by obscure intimations of loveliness and wonder that were still a little beyond the reach of his boldest reveries, of his wildest dreams. And each time, they seemed a trifle nearer, and more attainable than before. And a strange, indeterminate expectancy began to mingle with the eagerness that prompted his evening visits to the balcony.

One midnight, when he was peering through the telescope, he fancied that the star looked a little larger and brighter than usual. Unable to account for this, in a mounting excitement he stared more intently than ever; and was suddenly seized by the unnatural idea that he was peering downward into a vast, vertiginous abyss, rather than toward the zenithal heavens.

He felt that the balcony was no longer beneath his feet, but had somehow become inverted; and then, all at once, he was falling from it into the headlong ether, with a million thunders and flames about and behind him. For a brief while, he still seemed to see the star he had been watching, far down in the terrible Cimmerian void; and then he forgot, and could find it no more. There was the sickness of incalculable descent, an ever-swiftening torrent of vertigo not to be borne; and after moments or eons (he could not tell which) the thunders and flames died out in ultimate darkness, in utmost silence; and he no longer knew that he was falling, and no longer retained any sort of sentiency.

2

WHEN Melchior returned to consciousness, his first impulse was to clutch the arm of the chair in which he had been sitting beneath the telescope. It was the involuntary movement of one who has fallen in a dream. In a moment he realized the absurdity of this impulse; for he was not sitting in a chair at all; and his surroundings bore no manner of resemblance to the nocturnal balcony on which he had been seized by a strange vertigo, and from which he had seemed to fall and lose himself.

He was standing on a road paven with cyclopean blocks of gray stone—a road that ran interminably before him into the vague, tremendous vistas of an inconceivable world. There were low, funeral, drooping trees along the road, with sad-colored foliage and fruits of a deathly violet; and beyond the trees were range on range of monumental obelisks, of terraces and domes, of colossal multiform piles, that reached away in endless, countless perspectives toward an indistinct horizon. Over all, from an ebon-purple zenith, there fell in rich, unglorious rays the

illumination of a blood-red sun. The forms and proportions of the labyrinthin mass of buildings were unlike anything that has been designed in terrestrial architecture; and, for an instant, Melchior was overwhelmed by their number and magnitude, by their monstrosity and bizarre. Then, as he looked once more, they were no longer monstrous, no longer bizarre; and he knew them for what they were, and knew the world upon whose road his feet were set, and the destination he was to seek, and the part he was fated to play. It all came back to him as inevitably as the actual deeds and impulses of life return to one who has thrown himself obliviously for a while into some dramatic rôle that is foreign to his real personality. The incidents of his existence as Francis Melchior, though he still recalled them, had become obscure and meaningless and grotesque in the re-awakening of a fuller state of entity, with all its train of recovered reminiscences, of revived emotions and sensations. There was no strangeness, only the familiarity of a homecoming, in the fact that he had stepped into another condition of being, with its own environment, with its own past, present and future, all of which would have been incognizably alien to the amateur astronomer who had peered a few moments before at a tiny star remote in sidereal space.

"Of course, I am Antarion," he mused. "Who else could I be?" The language of his thoughts was not English, nor any earthly tongue; but he was not surprized by his knowledge of this language; nor was he surprized when he looked down and saw that he was attired in a costume of somber moth-like red, of a style unknown to any human people or epoch. This costume, and certain differences in his physical personality that would have appeared rather odd a little previously, were quite as he expected them to be.

He gave them only a cursory glance, as he reviewed in his mind the circumstances of the life he had now resumed.

He, Antarion, a renowned poet of the land of Charmalos, in the elder world that was known to its living peoples by the name of Phandiom, had gone on a brief journey to a neighboring realm. In the course of this journey, a distressing dream had befallen him—the dream of a tedious, unprofitable life as one Francis Melchior, in a quite unpleasant and peculiar sort of planet, lying somewhere on the further side of the universe. He was unable to recall exactly when and where he had been beset by this dream; and he had no idea how long it had lasted: but at any rate, he was glad to be rid of it, and glad that he was now approaching his native city of Saddoth, where dwelt in her dark and splendid palace of past eons the beautiful Thameera, whom he loved. Now, once more, after the obscure clouding of that dream, his mind was full of the wisdom of Saddoth; and his heart was illumed by a thousand memories of Thameera; and was darkened at whiles by an old anxiety concerning her.

Not without reason had Melchior been fascinated by things antique and by things that are far away. For the world wherein he walked as Antarion was incomputably old, and the ages of its history were too many for remembrance; and the towering obelisks and piles along the paven road were the high tombs, the proud monuments of its immemorial dead, who had come to outnumber infinitely the living. In more than the pomp of earthly kings, the dead were housed in Phandiom; and their cities loomed insuperably vast, with never-ending streets and prodigious spires, above those lesser abodes wherein the living dwelt. And throughout Phandiom the bygone years were a tangible presence, an air that enveloped all; and the people were steeped in the crepuscular

gloom of antiquity; and were wise with all manner of accumulated lore; and were subtle in the practise of strange refinements, of erudite perversities, of all that can shroud with artful opulence and grace and variety the bare uncouth cadaver of life, or hide from mortal vision the leering skull of death. And here, in Sadoth, beyond the domes and terraces and columns of the huge necropolis, like a necromantic flower wherein forgotten lilies live again, there bloomed the superb and sorrowful loveliness of Thameera.

3

MELCHIOR, in his consciousness as the poet Antarion, was unable to remember a time when he had not loved Thameera. She had been an ardent passion, an exquisite ideal, a mysterious delight and an enigmatic grief. He had adored her implicitly through all the selenic changes of her moods, in her childish petulance, her passionate or maternal tenderness, her sybilline silence, her merry or macabre whims; and most of all, perhaps, in the obscure sorrows and terrors that overwhelmed her at times.

He and she were the last representatives of noble ancient families, whose untabulated lineage was lost in the crowded cycles of Phandiom. Like all others of their race, they were embued with the heritage of a complex and decadent culture; and upon their souls the never-lifting shadow of the necropoli had fallen from birth. In the life of Phandiom, in its atmosphere of elder time, of eon-developed art, of epicureanism consummate and already a little moribund, Antarion had found an ample satisfaction for all the instincts of his being. He had lived as an intellectual sybarite; and by virtue of a half-primitive vigor, had not yet fallen upon the spiritual exhaustion and desolation, the dread implacable en-

nui of racial senescence, that marked so many of his fellows.

Thameera was even more sensitive, more visionary by nature; and hers was the ultimate refinement that is close to an autumnal decay. The influences of the past, which were a source of poetic fruition to Antarion, were turned by her delicate nerves to pain and languor, to horror and oppression. The palace wherein she lived, and the very streets of Sadoth, were filled for her with emanations that welled from the sepulchral reservoirs of death; and the weariness of the innumerable dead was everywhere; and evil or opiate presences came forth from the mausolean vaults, to crush and stifle her with the formless brooding of their wings. Only in the arms of Antarion could she escape them; and only in his kisses could she forget.

Now, after his journey (whose reason he could not quite remember) and after the curious dream in which he had imagined himself as Francis Melchior, Antarion was once more admitted to the presence of Thameera by slaves who were invariably discreet, being tongueless. In the oblique light of beryl and topaz windows, in the mauve and crimson gloom of heavy-folded tapestries, on a floor of marvelous mosaic wrought in ancient cycles, she came forward languidly to greet him. She was fairer than his memories, and paler than a blossom of the catacombs. She was exquisitely frail, voluptuously proud, with hair of a lunar gold and eyes of nocturnal brown that were pierced by fluctuating stars and circled by the dark pearl of sleepless nights. Beauty and love and sadness exhaled from her like a manifold perfume.

"I am glad you have come, Antarion, for I have missed you." Her voice was as gentle as an air that is born among flowering trees, and melancholy as remembered music.

Antarion would have knelt, but she took him by the hand and led him to a couch beneath the intricately figured curtains. There the lovers sat and looked at each other in affectionate silence.

"Are all things well with you, Thameera?" The query was prompted by the anxious divination of love.

"No, all things are not well. Why did you go away? The wings of death and darkness are abroad, they hover more closely than ever; and shades more fearful than those of the past have fallen upon Saddoth. There have been strange perturbations in the aspect of the skies; and our astronomers, after much study and calculation, have announced the imminent doom of the sun. There remains to us but a single month of light and warmth, and then the sun will go out on the noontide heavens like an extinguished lamp, and eternal night will fall, and the chill of outer space will creep across Phandiom. Our people have gone mad with the predicted horror; and some of them are sunk in despairing apathy, and more have given themselves to frenzied revels and debaucheries. . . . Where have you been, Antarion? In what dream did you lose yourself, that you could forsake me so long?"

Antarion tried to comfort her. "Love is still ours," he said. "And even if the astronomers have read the skies aright, we have a month before us. And a month is much."

"Yes, but there are other perils, Antarion. Haspa the king has looked upon me with eyes of senile desire, and woos me assiduously with gifts, with vows and with threats. It is the sudden, inexorable whim of age and ennui, the caprice of desperation. He is cruel, he is relentless, he is all-powerful."

"I will take you away," said Antarion. "We will flee together, and dwell among the sepulchers and the ruins, where none

can find us. And love and ecstasy shall bloom like flowers of scarlet beneath their shadow; and we will meet the everlasting night in each other's arms; and thus we will know the utmost of mortal bliss."

4

BENEATH the black midnight that hung above them like an imminence of colossal, unremoving wings, the streets of Saddoth were aflame with a million lights of yellow and cinnabar and cobalt and purple. Along the vast avenues, the gorge-deep alleys, and in and out of the stupendous olden palaces, temples and mansions, there poured the antic revelry, the tumultuous merriment of a night-long masquerade. Every one was abroad, from Haspa the king and his sleek, sybaritic courtiers, to the lowliest mendicants and pariahs; and a rout of extravagant, unheard-of costumes, a melange of fantasies more various than those of an opium dream, seethed and eddied everywhere. As Thameera had said, the people were mad with the menace of doom foretold by the astronomers; and they sought to forget, in a swift and ever-mounting delirium of all the senses, their dread of the nearing night.

Late in the evening, Antarion left by a postern door the tall and gloomy mansion of his forefathers, and wended his way through the hysteric whirling of the throng toward Thameera's palace. He was garbed in apparel of an antique style, such as had not been worn for a score of centuries in Phandiom; and his whole head and face were enveloped in a painted mask designed to represent the peculiar physiognomy of a people now extinct. No one could have recognized him; nor could he, on his part, have recognized many of the revellers he met, no matter how well-known to him, for most of them were disguised in apparel no less outré, and wore masks that were whimsical or ab-

surd, or loathsome or laughable beyond conception. There were devils and empresses and deities, there were kings and necromancers from all the far, unfathomed ages of Phandiom, there were monsters of mediæval or prehistoric types, there were things that had never been born or beheld except in the minds of insane decadent artists, seeking to surpass the abnormalities of nature. Even the tomb had been drawn upon for inspiration, and shrouded mummies, worm-gnawed cadavers, promenaded among the living. All these masks were the screen of an orgiastic license without precedent or parallel.

All the needful preparations for flight from Saddoth had been made; and Antarion had left minute and careful instructions with his servants regarding certain essential matters. He knew from of old the ruthless, tyrannic temperament of Haspa, knew that the king would brook no opposition to the indulgence of any whim or passion, no matter how momentary. There was no time to be lost in leaving the city with Thameera.

He came by winding devious ways to the garden behind Thameera's palace. There, among the high and spectral lilies of deep or ashen hues, the bowed funereal trees with their fruit of subtle and opiate savor, she awaited him, clad in a costume whose antiquity matched his own, and which was no less impenetrable to recognition. After a brief murmur of greeting, they stole forth together from the garden and joined the oblivious throng. Antarion had feared that Thameera might be watched by the henchmen of Haspa; but there was no evidence of such watching, no one in sight who seemed to lurk or loiter; only the swift movement of an ever-changing crowd, preoccupied with the quest of pleasure. In this crowd, he felt that they were safe.

However, through a scrupulous caution,

they allowed themselves to be carried along for awhile in the tide of the city's revel, before they sought the long arterial avenue that led to the gates. They joined in the singing of fescennine songs, they returned the bachannalian jests that were flung by passers-by, they drank the wines that were proffered them by public urn-bearers, they tarried when the throng tarried, moved when it moved.

Everywhere, there were wildly flaming lights, and the ribaldry of loud voices, and the strident moan or feverous pulsing of musical instruments. There was feasting in the great squares, and the doorways of immemorial houses poured out a flood of illumination, a tumult of laughter and melody, as they offered their hospitality to all who might choose to enter them. And in the huge temples of former eons, delirious rites were done to the gods who stared forth with unchanging eyes of stone and metal to the hopeless heavens; and the priests and worshippers drugged themselves with terrible opiates, and sought the stupefying ecstasy of abandonment to an hysteria both carnal and devout.

At length Antarion and Thameera, by unobtrusive stages, by many windings and turnings, began to approach the gates of Saddoth. For the first time in their history, these gates were unguarded; for, in the general demoralization, the sentinels had stolen away without fear of detection or reproof, to join the universal orgy. Here, in the outlying quarter, there were few people, and only the scattered flotsam of the revels; and the broad open space between the last houses and the city wall was utterly abandoned. No one saw the lovers when they slipped like evanescent shadows through the grim yawning of the gates, and followed the gray road into an outer darkness thronged with the dim bulks of mausoleums and monuments.

Here, the stars that had been blinded by the flaring lights of Saddoth were clearly visible in the burnt-out sky. And presently, as the lovers went on, the two small ashen moons of Phandiom arose from behind the necropoli, and flung the despairing languor of their faint beams on the multitudinous domes and minarets of the dead. And beneath the twin moons, that drew their uncertain light from a dying sun, Antarion and Thameera doffed their masks, and looked at each other in a silence of unutterable love, and shared the first kiss of their month of ultimate delight.

5

FOR two days and nights, the lovers had fled from Saddoth. They had hidden by daylight among the mausoleums, they had traveled in darkness and by the doubtful glimmering of the moons, on roads that were little used, since they ran only to age-deserted cities lying in the ulterior tracts of Charmalos, in a land whose very soil had long become exhausted, and was now given over to the stealthy encroachment of the desert. And now they had come to their journey's end; for, mounting a low, treeless ridge, they saw below them the ruinous and forgotten roofs of Urbyzaun, which had lain unpeopled for more than a thousand years; and beyond the roofs, the black unlustrous lake surrounded by hills of bare and wave-corroded rock, that had once been the inlet of a great sea.

Here, in the crumbling palace of the emperor Altanoman, whose high, tumultuous glories were now a failing legend, the slaves of Antarion had preceded them, bringing a supply of food and such comforts and luxuries as they would require in the interim before oblivion. And here they were secure from all pursuit; for Haspa, in the driven fever and goaded ennui of his last days, had doubtless

turned to the satisfying of some other and less difficult caprice, and had already forgotten Thameera.

And now, for the lovers, began the life that was a brief epitome of all possible delight and despair. And, strangely enough, Thameera lost the vague fears that had tormented her, the dim sorrows that had obsessed, and was wholly happy in the caresses of Antarion. And, since there was so little time in which to express their love, to share their thoughts, their sentiments, their reveries, there was never enough said or enough done between them; and both were blissfully content.

But the swift, relentless days went by; and day by day, the red sun that circled above Phandiom was darkened by a tinge of the coming shadow; and chillness stole upon the quiet air; and the still heavens, where never clouds or winds or bird-wings passed, were ominous of doom. And day by day, Antarion and Thameera saw the dusking of the sun from a ruinous terrace above the dead lake; and night by night, they saw the paling of the ghostly moons. And their love became an intolerable sweetness, a thing too deep and dear to be borne by mortal heart or mortal flesh.

Mercifully, they had lost the strict count of time, and knew not the number of days that had passed, and thought that several more dawns and noons and eves of joyance were before them. They were lying together on a couch in the old palace—a marble couch that the slaves had strewn with luxurious fabrics—and were saying over and over some litany of love, when the sun was overtaken at high noon by the doom astronomers had foretold; when a slow twilight filled the palace, heavier than the umbrage wrought by any cloud, and was followed by a sudden wave of overwhelming ebon darkness,

and the creeping cold of outer space. The slaves of Antarion moaned in the darkness; and the lovers knew that the end of all was at hand; and they clung to each other in despairing rapture, with swift, innumerable kisses, and murmured the supreme ecstasy of their tenderness and their desire; till the cold that had fallen from infinitude became a growing agony, and then a merciful numbness, and then an all-encompassing oblivion.

6

FRANCIS MELCHIOR awoke in his chair beneath the telescope. He shivered, for the air had grown chill; and when he moved, he found that his limbs were strangely stiff, as if he had been exposed to a more rigorous cold than that of the late summer night. The long and curious dream that he had undergone was inexpressibly real to him; and the thoughts, the desires, the fears and despairs of Antarion were still his. Mechanically, rather than through any conscious renewal of the impulses of his earthly self, he fixed his eye to the telescope and looked for the star he had been studying when the

premonitory vertigo had seized him. The configuration of the skies had hardly changed, the surrounding constellation was still high in the southeast; but, with a shock that became a veritable stupefaction, he saw that the star itself had disappeared.

Never, though he searched the heavens night after night through the alternation of many seasons, has he been able to find again the little far-off orb that drew him so inexplicably and irresistibly. He bears a double sorrow; and, though he has grow old and gray with the lensor of fruitless years, with the buying and selling of antiques and the study of the stars, Francis Melchior is still a little doubtful as to which is the real dream: his lifetime on earth, or the month in Phandiom below a dying sun, when, as the poet Antarion, he loved the superb and sorrowful beauty of Thameera. And always he is troubled by a dull regret that he should ever have awakened (if awakening it was) from the death that he died in the palace of Altanoman, with Thameera in his arms and Thameera's kisses on his lips.