

From the Podcast Forgotten Sci-Fi

by Craig Patterson

The Space Dwellers

Raymond Gallun

DOUGLAS BARCLAY had one characteristic for which he was remembered even after his disappearance. When he heard anyone denounce some apparently wild scientific theory or dream as being impossible, he had a habit of smiling a tolerant smile that, nevertheless, seemed to be tinged with a hint of pity or even contempt. All through his short but brilliant career he refused to tie himself down to any fixed standard of distinguishing possible from impossible. His imagination seemed completely elastic. It is partly because of this, that his friends who read the last letter that he wrote, have never ceased to be puzzled. They simply can't believe what he wrote to be true. Yet there is his sudden disappearance - but let's go on with the story.

It all happened on the night of July 17th and the early morning of July 18th 1941, when Hanley's "false comet" approached its closest to the earth. The "false comet" was that queer marauder from outer space that broke all the rules of comets and acted always as though directed by some intelligent entity. It lost speed rapidly as it raced into the solar system, directed its tail straight toward the sun, and neglected entirely to swing around that body and to hurtle back from whence it came; instead it defied solar gravitation, held a perfectly straight course and vanished at last at a point among the stars opposite from where it was first seen.

At this time Barclay was working in his laboratory, which was situated on a secluded little island in a small lake of northern Wisconsin. The youthful savant sat before a paper-littered desk in a big-domed workroom, while outside a strong south wind sent moisture - laden thunderclouds racing across the night sky. He was alone with the greatest of his dreams; for it was late and Ching Loo, his Chinese servant, had retired.

Barclay was paying close attention to several dials on the control board of an enigmatic mechanism that buzzed and hummed directly in front of his desk. The machine was his super-press with which he hoped to tap the secret of intra-atomic energy. Since early youth he had felt certain that, if a substance were submitted to some titanic crushing force vastly beyond any yet in use, the well-nigh inexhaustible supply of power stored in the atoms of that substance would become available to mankind. Suddenly a wicked flash of bluish light shattered the darkness outside the laboratory. Immediately there followed a deafening roar of thunder, then Barclay heard, or thought he heard, an unfamiliar sound, a low droning. However, it may have been just fancy. Through a screen door, which led into a neglected little flower garden, he saw a nebulous patch of bluish radiance beneath the trees. It wavered for an instant like a will-o'-the-wisp buffeted by the wind, and then vanished. The droning too had died out.

With a queer tingling sensation at the nape of his neck, Barclay walked to the door and peered out. He could see nothing but blackness. It was raining violently now. Save for the hiss of falling water and the tapping of the wind-driven waves against the shore, all was silent.

"The sound and the lingering glow must be new and unrecorded phenomena of the lightning," he thought, "I'll make a note of them a limb off a tree is probably the only damage done."

But somehow he had failed to reassure himself. What if there were something out there? Foolish thought! His nerves had never troubled him that way before.

In a queerly disconnected way Barclay wished that he might see the "comet." Somehow he was morbidly fascinated by its gray ghastliness. Then as though some dark genie were up there to do his bidding, a little patch of cloud rolled back and the visiting orb shone down mistily upon the earth. The cold light revealed the island landscape dimly for a second and then was blotted out. Had Barclay's imagination again played him a trick, or was it true that he had had a fleeting glimpse of something flat and strange out there?

"I guess this big experiment has made you a little unstrung, old boy," he said to himself: "It was just a grotesque shadow, a fallen limb or something. When this downpour stops, you'll be able to tell surely."

Barclay returned to his desk. A minute passed, the screen door creaked as though a sudden gust of wind had moved it. It creaked again; but the young scientist did not notice, for he was absorbed with his work. Another minute flitted by, while a feeling of uneasiness that was almost dread crept into Barclay's mind. He turned about; and then there was the strangest meeting in the history of two worlds!

The Strange Visitor

Barclay gasped in thunderstricken astonishment. Had too-constant study driven him to madness, or was it true that some mysterious fiend had come to pay him a visit? His first impression of the creature that had entered, was that it was of heroic proportions—fully seven feet tall and black as jet. A fleeting idea that a huge negro, with malicious intent, had invaded his laboratory, quickly left Barclay when he saw the flawless perfection of his visitor's features. Certainly they did not belong to any savage African. Straight black hair, cut square at the shoulder, framed the giant's face; and was held in place by a thin band of platinum, on the forward portion of which a big ruddy jewel gleamed with all the malignant fire of some dying sun. Barclay's visitor wore no clothing save for a breechcloth of some snowy material; fastened to the belt that supported it was a small rectangular case of some greenish material. It bore a circular dial on the circumference of which were engraved many characters. A flexible metallic cord led from it to a sort of holster where reposed a weapon that looked like some quaint form of pistol.

For many seconds Barclay's eyes lingered over the bulging muscles of this splendid being. Finally he managed to gasp: "In God's name, who are you?"

The other smiled slightly and raising his hand he pointed upward. "I am Othaloma of the Stars," he said in perfect English. "I come from the 'comet' which is now crossing your solar system. Truly, Earth Man, I am as surprised at your appearance as you are at mine; for never in all my wandering have I encountered a creature so closely resembling the members of my race. I have visited many planets and many were inhabited by monsters endowed with intelligence; but never was there a single human."

A long moment passed during which Barclay struggled fiercely to collect his wits and to regain his composure. Finally he spoke in a shaky voice: "From the 'comet,' you say, you come? Rot! Since when do they speak such polished English on worlds far removed from the earth? And yet, if you don't come from the 'comet,' where can your home be? I don't know of any place on this planet where they raise your kind."

A tolerant smile crossed the giant's lips. - "I, Othaloma, Chief of the Daans, will answer your questions and supply you with adequate proof of all that I say. The fact that I can make use of your language is easy to explain. For ages the people of my race have been developing a peculiar faculty of the mind which enables us, not only to read the thoughts of others, but also to penetrate into their subconscious memory and learn and make use of the impressions stored there. Certain individuals can seal their minds against such intrusion, but this power is developed only with much practice. Since everything you know is as clear to me as an open book, I find it quite simple to choose words from your brain, form them into sentences and express myself intelligently in a tongue of which I have never heard before tonight. Some day the people of this world will doubtless make use of the same power,

"I can see very plainly that you are much puzzled as to my origin. You seem to find it impossible to believe my statement that I am an inhabitant of the 'comet.' I think I can convince you. First of all do you find anything peculiar about the temperature of this room?"

For a moment Barclay took stock of his impressions. Now he realized fully that he felt uncomfortably cold. Perhaps the feeling was the result of the nervous shock occasioned by the arrival of the black man. But no, that could not be; Barclay's breath puffed out in a white cloud just as it would do on a frosty autumn morning. The air in the domed chamber really was cold.

"Now look at me," said Othaloma: "Observe my skin carefully. Do you see anything peculiar about it?"

Barclay obeyed. He saw now that the shoulders of the big black had a glassy smoothness that seemed decidedly unnatural. Little specks of light gleamed from Othaloma's lower torso like tiny jewels—no—like frost particles! It looked as though raindrops had congealed on his ebony hide.

The colossus came forward and held out a hand. "Touch me," he commanded, "but touch me as though you were touching a wire bearing a strong electric current."

Again Barclay did as he was bade. As the tip of his forefinger came in contact with his visitor's palm, an icy chill tingled and vibrated through him. Completely chagrined, he jerked his hand quickly away.

The smile on Othaloma's lips broadened. "The chill of outer space," he said, "permeates my entire body. Where I live the temperature lingers perpetually almost at absolute zero, and there is no air."

"But life cannot possibly exist under such conditions," Barclay exploded, "such a thing is unheard of."

"Am I not living proof that it does exist under such conditions?" retorted Othaloma : "Besides, is it good sense to say that a thing is impossible merely because it is unheard of?"

Barclay was silent.

Othaloma leaned against the framework of the great press beside which he was standing. His eyes were bent on the floor. Finally he raised his head. "Earth Man," he said, "from afar I sensed the presence of a mind of unusual power upon this land and hither I have come that we might partake of each other's knowledge. I have told you I am a creature foreign to your planet and I have offered proofs that have momentarily bewildered you; but, knowing that you are a man capable of grasping great things, I think that if I tell you more you will understand and believe. Therefore with your permission I will relate to you the history of my world and my people. Will you listen?"

"Certainly," returned Barclay, his voice full of eagerness. "There is a chair beside you. Please be seated and make yourself comfortable."

Then the Chief of the Daans, and nomad of the empty abysses between the stars, began the wildest tale that has ever fallen upon human ears.

Othaloma's Tale

Far beyond the red sun which you call Antares, and several hundred light years from your earth, is another solar system. In it there spin several planets; of one of these I am a native. It was a fair world once, with green fields and forests upon which the bright sun shone; and there were great oceans-oceans now calm and serene beneath the blue sky and now lashed to white-capped fury by the Storm God. Set along the shores of those seas, nestling amid the verdant plains and snowcrowned mountains, were thriving cities; inhabited by a happy fair-skinned people. All was prosperity and peace; war had been done away with and a spirit of mutual helpfulness had brought them perhaps as near to Utopia as it is possible to get. The climate was delightful and there were plenty of the necessities and luxuries of life for everyone,

"For many thousands of years this golden age endured and then a serious trouble came to vex the minds of the fair-skinned people. Their period of leisure was over. Disquieting signs and warnings began to appear. Gradually, as the millenniums slipped by, the sun changed its hue from yellow to orange and from orange to red—a red that deepened and deepened. Plainly the old luminary was cooling. The climate of the planet was becoming cool, too. Extensive ice caps collected at the poles and lingered far into the summer season and crops were becoming harder to raise. There were other omens. The oceans were shrinking and the air was becoming more and more rarefied through slow but steady leakage into space.

"As generations passed the inhabitants of my native world were forced to desert many of their great cities and rich farm lands upon which the deserts were encroaching—deserts over which icy winds raced bearing with them choking clouds of fine sand.

"During the ages before the beginning of their tribulation, the people of my native world, pronounced Mar-Bilione, in your tongue, had amassed much scientific knowledge. With this they sought to ward off the death of their planet. Drawing water from the polar snowcaps which melted every

summer, they made fertile vast tracts of arid land by means of a wonderful system of irrigation. For a time it seemed that the greatest of their troubles was over; but wise minds knew that it was only a reprieve.

"All these things had happened long before my time. When I was born, conditions had become much worse. So thin had the atmosphere become that the sky had no longer the azure hue of former ages; instead, it was a deep blue-black, and in it the stars twinkled even during the day. The water supply had all but vanished. What little was left was kept in underground reservoirs where there was the least chance that more of it could escape.

"The dwindling remnants of the fair-skinned race lived in hothouse cities roofed with domes of quartz glass-marvels of engineering it is true, but still inadequate to ward off permanently the hostile legions of nature. Beneath the domes of these cities the air was kept constantly at a pressure endurable to mankind by means of numerous compressors.

"Within the cities thousands of brilliant minds were at work upon man's supreme problem. One scientist suggested that we migrate to some more hospitable world, but certainly no other world in our solar system would support human life. Another scientist, seeking to replenish both our air and water supply, discovered that it was possible to transmute certain heavier elements into oxygen and hydrogen; but his process was far too slow to be of the least help. Still another savant claimed that he could rejuvenate the dying sun by means of a certain combination of rays; an enormous amount of labor was spent erecting a projector, but his scheme was a complete failure.

"In those years when my father was Emperor of Mar-Bilione and I was still a mere princeling, I took much interest in science. I was under the tutorage of a marvelous old genius named Grooga. In his younger years he must have been handsome but now he was "Grooga, the Hideous. During an experiment some hellish chemical had eaten away half his face, including his left eye. Through the gaping red scar his white teeth gleamed horribly. He seemed half demon.

"Together Grooga and I built a space flyer, the first to be constructed upon my world. It was a long, torpedo-shaped craft, fitted with electric gravitational screens and propelled after the fashion of a rocket. The gravitational screens had been invented by Grooga, and I had designed the rocket-motors. Compared to the ships we have now, it was very crude, but it seemed wonderful to us then. 2 "Early one morning our strange craft arose rapidly from the landing stage just outside the dome of my father's capital city. On our maiden voyage we intended to explore the hundreds of tiny moons that encircled our planet.

"From moon to moon Grooga and I fitted in our interplanetary vessel. There was very little to attract our interest upon most of them, for they were only burnt-out, lifeless cinders.

"Then we came to Goraz, the largest moon—it is about fifteen of your miles in diameter—and there we found a thing of which not even the most imaginative of our theorists had ever dreamed. Earth Man, I doubt if there was one molecule of air or water upon the barren surface of that minute world and night and day the temperature lingered at only a few degrees above absolute zero, and yet there was life! Earth Man! Do you hear me? Life! And what eerie, horrible things there were—phantoms of madmen's dreams! All were dead black and had many tentacles. They had no fixed form, no definite number of limbs or eyes, such as have creatures of our native worlds.

"They grew as trees grow, haphazard. All were intelligent, they had brains almost equal to ours in power, and yet their mentalities were different in kind. Their main idea was to kill and destroy. As soon as we landed they made a concerted rush for our ship in a shuffling crowd. With high-explosive grenades we destroyed dozens of them, but the others rushed on. One little fellow got hold of me. Ugh! I still shudder at the thought of it! Both Grooga and I were dressed in heavy metal armor, similar to your submarine diving suits, and our faces were covered with our oxygen masks. Had it not been for this protection I am sure the Gorazian would have torn me limb from limb. Spirits of a hundred forefathers—that ghoulish thing was endowed with the strength of ten devils! I cut him in two with my sword and still the halves of him clung to me with a persistence that baffles reason. A blackish liquid dripped from him and when its flow ceased he moved no more.

What Grooga Discovered

"How did these bizarre creatures live on this airless, waterless world where the chill of outer space lingered perpetually? For a little while even Grooga was baffled; but few things in the universe could baffle the mind of Grooga for long. Together we captured a specimen of the Gorazian race, First Grooga observed it carefully, and then he killed it and made a chemical analysis of its bodily tissues in the laboratory of our ship. He also examined that tissue under a microscope. Then he made his announcement to me:

"'Prince,' he said, 'we are the discoverers of a form of life that depends upon an entirely unheard-of principle for its existence. All living things must have some source of energy to carry on their bodily processes. In the case of creatures native to our own world, this energy is derived from the chemical combination of various substances with oxygen which enters their bodies through their lungs or other breathing organs. Since there is no air on Goraz, such a supply of power is not available here. Instead, these queer animals get their energy from within the atom by means of radio-active disintegration. It sounds impossible, but it is true. The black liquid that flows in their veins is a very heavy element, even heavier than our heaviest known substance, uranium. Like uranium and radium, it is always producing energy from within itself. It is extremely radio-active, and has an enormous output of atomic energy.

"'On Mar-Bilione the liquid upon which all life depends, is water. The temperature at which living things can exist there ranges, between the freezing and boiling points of water. The radio-active liquid which corresponds to water here on Goraz boils

only when subjected to intense heat, and it freezes at absolute zero. Since it is producing heat all the time, it can never become so cold, even on Goraz. That is why these strange creatures can survive the intense cold. I have also found that they can exist at temperatures that would melt iron.'

"Grooga and I spent days wandering over the face of Goraz observing its inhabitants. At first they fought us; but they soon got it through their minds that we were dangerous and better left alone. They seemed to have attained a very considerable measure of civilization. They lived in caves and understood the working of metals. By mixing the radio-active liquid (which has since been named *xata*) with certain other chemicals, they were able to produce an intense heat and with this they smelted copper and gold.

“The principal portion of their food was *xata*. On the under sides of their tentacles were dozens of tiny suckers or mouths and through these the liquid was absorbed directly into their veins. In addition to *xata*, they consumed certain salts and substances rich in silicon to build up their body tissues.

“We found that there were two species of this strange race, inhabiting villages on opposite hemispheres of Goraz. They were continually at war. The motive of each was obviously the extermination of the other. Each longed for complete control of the rapidly dwindling supply of the vitally-important *xata*. Once there had been large lakes of it, but the greater portion had either split up to form simpler elements, or had evaporated into space even as the water of Mar-Bilione had.

“During our first stay on Goraz we saw the large village of Narbool raided (we called it Narbool after the capital of my father's empire). The slight gravitation of the tiny moon, and their great strength, enabled the invading tribes to move very rapidly in great leaps and bounds of over fifty feet. To Grooga and me, hanging above Narbool in our space ship, the *Silver Meteor*, it seemed that they came as suddenly and unexpectedly as a bolt of lightning from a clear sky. And yet the Narboolians were not taken unawares. They had been warned and were ready. In each of the two Gorazian villages there was a slender spire-like watch tower constructed from blue stone, and at its pinnacle a guardian monstrosity stood eternally on the lookout for just such a raid. At times the red rays of the sun glinted on the polished copper tip of his spear, or again the orange glow of Mar-Bilione or the ashy radiance of the hundred hurtling moons would be reflected from his queer, jewel-studded golden armor. He was always there, ready to give the alarm.

“The battle surpassed all possibility of description. If ever there was a combat of ghouls, this was one. It was horrible and disgusting beyond words—the masses of writhing, snake-like tentacles woven inextricably together, the creatures being torn to bits with half their limbs gone, yet fighting on with a vitality that mocks reason. All these things made Grooga and me shudder with revulsion and yet, even as we turned away nauseated at the sight, our hearts filled with admiration for the inhuman courage of those fiendish things battling beneath us. Their ferocity was awful to see. As soon as a Gorazian was killed, his opponent would suck the life-giving *xata* from his veins and then seek out another victim.

“After about half an hour of struggle the invaders withdrew. Each side had lost about a third of their number. It seemed to us at first that if such battles were frequent, life would soon disappear from the face of Goraz. Such, however, was not the case; the Gorazians reproduce very rapidly and, barring violence, they are immortal.

The Great Transformation

I do not know exactly when Grooga's great inspiration came to him. However we had been on Goraz for but a period equal to five of your days when he became very taciturn and thoughtful. Though he avoided speech with me as much as possible, he often muttered to himself. Naturally I became suspicious that something important was afoot, but I was intelligent enough not to attempt to induce Grooga to tell me what it was. There was nothing which the scarred old scientist so much detested as to have one, whom he considered a mere stripling, attempt to pry into his thoughts. Consequently there was nothing for me to do but keep quiet and await results.

"The results were not long in forthcoming, but they only served to mystify me the more. One day we returned to Mar-Bilione. With utmost haste Grooga loaded the *Silver Meteor* with numerous small animals and a complicated mass of scientific apparatus. Then we raced back to Goraz.

"And now a faint inkling of what Grooga was attempting, came to me. Together we gathered a quantity of *xata*. First of all, Grooga placed a tiny speck of it in a drop of water containing microorganisms native to Mar-Bilione; plainly he wanted to observe the effect of *xata* upon a form of living tissue with which we were more familiar. All of the infusoria died immediately. Next he injected *xata* into the system of a large insect; it died. How many similar unsuccessful experiments we performed I do not know; and then one day we began to be successful. A particularly hardy animal managed to survive an exceedingly small dose of *xata*. Next day we gave him a slightly larger dose and so on. Meanwhile we treated him with certain rays as yet not fully understood by savants of your earth. Soon startling changes began to take place in him. His skin, which had formerly been pink, became black, with the increasing quantity of the black radioactive chemical in his body. His blood changed from red to purple and from purple to black-pure *xata*. He shunned his food more and more, and at last dispensed with it entirely. Meanwhile his breath grew less and less rapid and then died away to nothing. The energy that was now keeping him alive was the result of the radio-active disintegration of *xata*, rather than the chemical combination of oxygen with food.

"We took frequent tests of the percentage of water in his system. It decreased as the days passed, and eventually dropped to zero. The water had been replaced by *xata*.

"While all these strange things were going on the little animal became more and more active, and its strength was almost unbelievable for so small a creature.

"Though it still kept its Mar-Bilionian form, it was Gorazian in every other way and perfectly capable of existing under the most severe of Gorazian conditions.

"Now that the complete consummation of the greatest accomplishment that he had ever conceived of, was so close at hand, Grooga was elated. However, there were still several things to do, just to clinch his discoveries. To begin with, we treated other animals in just the same way that we had the first. Several died, but the majority survived the transformation. Lastly we set about determining whether Grooga's process would work on a human being. For this experiment we used a slave whom we had brought along. The attempt was successful. The huge servitor who had formerly been white, became an awe-inspiring black genie with perhaps four times the muscular power which he had formerly possessed. He could survive in an airless, heatless void and unless he encountered some violent destructive force like an exploding bomb, or starved for want of *xata*, he was immortal. The impossible had been accomplished!

"As our space ship arose from the scarred and tortured face of dead Goraz, Grooga looked up from the control board in the conning tower and turned toward me. 'Congratulate me, Prince,' he said, 'for I have saved a great race from destruction upon a dying world. I am certain that there is an inexhaustible supply of *xata* far beneath the crust of Mar-Bilione. With it we will transform every man, woman and child even as we have transformed the slave, Zat Agga. Then, let nature try to strangle and freeze our people to death!'

"I wrung Grooga's hand enthusiastically and, according to a custom practiced by members of the royal family when they wish to reward someone who has accomplished important things, I presented him with a priceless old anklet which had been a treasured heirloom of my dynasty.

"The hull of the *Silver Meteor* glowed redly as it streaked through the thin atmosphere of Mar-Bilione. Its immense speed betokened the importance of the news it bore.

"From that night of our return dated the rise of Grooga's greatness. Two hours after our arrival on our home planet, he made a demonstration of his 'discovery' in the throne room of my father's palace before five thousand of the empire's most noted scientists. During that demonstration he reduced the temperature of our transformed slave's body well below zero, deprived him of air and finally gave him an incandescent metal bar to hold. The bar made the slave's bare hands become red-hot, yet he underwent no apparent discomfort.

The Flight

It is needless to say that Grooga's idea took Mar-Bilione by storm. By dawn the following day his name was already written indelibly in the records of eternity. He had become the idol of Mar-Bilione. Within a period equal to six of your months we had transformed practically the entire race into black-skinned supermen who could survive nature's severest rigors.

"But the first injection of *xata* killed my aged father and I inherited the empire from him together with all the troubles that go with it.

"Soon Grooga's power grew to such proportions that it began to seriously hamper my control over my realm. Earth Man, I loved Grooga as a brother, but the law is that there can be but one ruler in Mar-Bilione. On a certain dark night, the hideous old savant was torn to fragments by an explosion that wrecked his entire laboratory. Because of some miscarriage of my plans, the blame for his death was immediately fastened on me. The people went mad; they thirsted for my blood and the blood of my few faithful followers.

"For a little while I thought I had a chance against my enemies, for I had just discovered a new ray that released atomic energy in a substance instantly when it touches it. It is needless to say that it was a mighty weapon.

"What is that which I read in your mind, Earth Man? You too have sought the secret of atomic energy? Yes, I see that it is so. Your theory of compression is correct but your method of producing it is crude. My ray creates a powerful attractive force between atoms which draws them closely together, much more rapidly and easily than your press will do.

"I had hoped to keep the principle of my new weapon a secret, but it soon leaked out. Now there was nothing for my minions and me to do but flee. The only places where we could have even temporary safety were the moons. Our battle-craft were all fitted for interplanetary travel and so it took only a short time to reach our new homes. Life should have been easy there, for we had all we needed; *xata* was plentiful in the centers of several moons. However, the enraged Groogans, bent on our extermination, pursued us. Where could we go now? With atomic energy at our command the answer was almost easy. All about us was the sable sky flashing with icy stars-myriad legions of them stretching

into the endless vastness of the universe. They beckoned to us—beckoned to that burning spirit of adventure that is ever the possession of a strong, virile race. Could we resist this chance to explore and learn? No!

"On each moon we built an immense driving mechanism, of the same type used in our space ships. Then, one day, the tiny satellites tore loose from their orbits and, after joining into a cluster, began to rush with almost the speed of light out into interstellar space. Behind us always there trailed a long train of faintly-luminous gases ejected from the propelling machinery. That glowing appendage gives the swarm of moonlets the appearance of a true comet, and there is little wonder that your savants mistook it for such. . . "Thus we became the Daans or Nomads. For more than a million of your years we have been racing madly toward nowhere, visiting worlds, experimenting and amassing knowledge. To what ultimate purpose is it all? Though I am perhaps older than your first human ancestor, I am no nearer to the answer of that question than you.

"I think I have told you about all there is to tell, Earth Man. Now I must hurry home. Already I have stayed longer than I had planned; as it is, it will take me nearly two hours to reach the 'comet.' In departing, I wish to say that this little time spent with you has been most pleasant. Your mind, which I have rummaged over thoroughly, is filled with so many quaint and interesting ideas!"

By this time Barclay had rid himself of much of his bewilderment. After all Othaloma and his story, though surely fantastic, were not impossibilities. The young scientist's mind was functioning clearly again and he was not slow to see that he might win knowledge from Othaloma that would enable him to make of some of his fondest dreams, realities.

"Though the things you have told me amaze me immensely," he said, "I too have enjoyed your visit. But now there is one thing that I wish to ask you. As you know, I have sought the secret of atomic energy for a long time. I have always cherished the idea that with the power of the atom at my command I might be able to construct a space ship and visit other worlds. How is the ray which releases atomic energy produced?"

Othaloma eyed Barclay for a moment. "So you want to see other worlds, do you? Well, if that's the case, I can do more than merely tell you how to release the power of the atom. Why not come with me to the 'comet?' We will treat you with *xata* and you will become as deathless as any of the Daans. Then indeed you will see the universe. Will you come?"

Barclay felt the color fading from his cheeks. God, what an idea! What an awful and wonderful idea! The universe and practical immortality thousands of years in which to study and learn! There was nothing to hold him back—no friends, no relatives, only a paltry five hundred thousand dollars' worth of property, and that could go to the state. For a few seconds Barclay felt an icy pang of fear. What if the black giant were leading him off to perform some hellish experiment on him, vivisect him, torture him? But the terror in the savant's heart passed quickly. Seekers after wisdom must take chances. After all death was the worst thing that could happen, and that always happens sooner or later anyway.

And he could leave a message that would stupefy and amaze those dry-as-dust doubters who would try to probe the secret of his disappearance! _"Give me an hour and I will be ready," he said. Othaloma nodded and withdrew. For an hour Barclay sat writing and finally with a smile laid down his pen. We can imagine how in a short time Othaloma reappeared.

"Have you finished?" he would ask.

"Yes, lead on; I'll follow," said Barclay.

"Come then," returned Othaloma. He strode out into the little garden and Barclay, a trifle nervous, followed him closely. It had ceased raining now, and a few stars were trying to peer through the veil of clouds. By the glow from the doorway of the laboratory Barclay saw a flat, oval-shaped machine resting on the ground. On top of it were a seat and several control levers and behind the seat there was an oblong box-like affair of considerable size. Othaloma fumbled with it for an instant and then raised its lid. ** "This is my specimen chest," he said. "I use it to transport to the 'comet' the various living creatures which I collect on the planets I visit. Since you are still dependent upon air and warmth for your existence, you'll have to travel in it. It will protect you from interplanetary cold and, since it is air-tight, there will also be enough air inside to sustain you. I will of course reduce you to a state of suspended animation and in that condition you will need very little oxygen."

Barclay raised himself over the side of the coffin-like affair and then lay down in it at full length.

"You'll go to sleep in a minute," said Othaloma, "and, when you awaken a couple of weeks hence, you'll find yourself a full-fledged Daan and an inhabitant of my capital city, Narbool, which is situated on Goraz; goodbye."

He let the lid drop. The lock clicked and Barclay found himself in absolute darkness. He smelled a faint, pungent odor and then lost consciousness.

One minute later a bizarre craft, ejecting a continuous stream of blue flame from its stern, arose from the island. In a few seconds it floated above the billowing field of clouds that shone with a silvery softness beneath the light of the "comet." Then - it vanished among the myriad stars.

Today Barclay's big white laboratory is boarded up and deserted, and a solemn-eyed little Chinaman named Ching Loo is still wondering what, really, became of his master.