

Isaac Asimov - "Nightfall"

(1941)

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God?' EMERSON

Aton 77, director of Saro University, thrust out a belligerent lower lip and glared at the young newspaperman in a hot fury.

Theremon 762 took that fury in his stride. In his earlier days, when his now widely syndicated column was only a mad idea in a cub reporter's mind, he had specialized in 'impossible' interviews. It had cost him bruises, black eyes, and broken bones; but it had given him an ample supply of coolness and self-confidence. So he lowered the outthrust hand that had been so pointedly ignored and calmly waited for the aged director to get over the worst. Astronomers were queer ducks, anyway, and if Aton's actions of the last two months meant anything; this same Aton was the queer-duckiest of the lot.

Aton 77 found his voice, and though it trembled with restrained emotion, the careful, somewhat pedantic phraseology, for which the famous astronomer was noted, did not abandon him.

'Sir,' he said, 'you display an infernal gall in coming to me with that impudent proposition of yours.' The husky telephotographer of the Observatory, Beenay 25, thrust a tongue's tip across dry lips and interposed nervously, 'Now, sir, after all -- '

The director turned to him and lifted a white eyebrow.

'Do not interfere, Beenay. I will credit you with good intentions in bringing this man here; but I will tolerate no insubordination now.'

Theremon decided it was time to take a part. 'Director Aton, if you'll let me finish what I started saying, I think -- '

'I don't believe, young man,' retorted Aton, 'that anything you could say now

would count much as compared with your daily columns of these last two months. You have led a vast newspaper campaign against the efforts of myself and my colleagues to organize the world against the menace which it is now too late to avert. You have done your best with your highly personal attacks to make the staff of this Observatory objects of ridicule.'

The director lifted a copy of the Saro City *Chronicle* from the table and shook it at Theremon furiously. 'Even a person of your well-known impudence should have hesitated before coming to me with a request that he be allowed to cover today's events for his paper. Of all newsmen, you!'

Aton dashed the newspaper to the floor, strode to the window, and clasped his arms behind his back.

'You may leave,' he snapped over his shoulder. He stared moodily out at the skyline where Gamma, the brightest of the planet's six suns, was setting. It had already faded and yellowed into the horizon mists, and Aton knew he would never see it again as a sane man. He whirled. 'No, wait, come here!' He gestured peremptorily. 'I'll give you your story.'

The newsman had made no motion to leave, and now he approached the old man slowly. Aton gestured outward.

'Of the six suns, only Beta is left in the sky. Do you see it?'

The question was rather unnecessary. Beta was almost at zenith, its ruddy light flooding the landscape to an unusual orange as the brilliant rays of setting Gamma died. Beta was at aphelion. It was small; smaller than Theremon had ever seen it before, and for the moment it was undisputed ruler of Lagash's sky.

Lagash's own sun. Alpha, the one about which it revolved, was at the antipodes, as were the two distant companion pairs. The red dwarf Beta -- Alpha's immediate companion -- was alone, grimly alone.

Aton's upturned face flushed redly in the sunlight. 'In just under four hours,' he said, 'civilization, as we know it, comes to an end. It will do so because, as you see. Beta is the only sun in the sky.' He smiled

1 grimly. 'Print that! There'll be no one to
2 read it.'

3 'But if it turns out that four hours
4 pass -- and another four -- and nothing
5 happens?' asked Theremon softly.

6 'Don't let that worry you. Enough will
7 happen.'

8 'Granted! And *still* -- it nothing
9 happens?'

10 For a second time, Beenay 25 spoke.
11 'Sir, I think you ought to listen to him.'

12 Theremon said, 'Put it to a vote,
13 Director Aton.'

14 There was a stir among the remaining
15 five members of the Observatory staff,
16 who till now had maintained an attitude of
17 wary neutrality.

18 'That,' stated Aton flatly, 'is not
19 necessary.' He drew out his pocket watch.
20 'Since your good friend, Beenay, insists so
21 urgently, I will give you five minutes. Talk
22 away.'

23 'Good! Now, just what difference
24 would it make if you allowed me to take
25 down an eyewitness account of what's to
26 come? If your prediction comes true, my
27 presence won't hurt; for in that case my
28 column would never be written. On the
29 other hand, if nothing comes of it, you will
30 just have to expect ridicule or worse. It
31 would be wise to leave that ridicule to
32 friendly hands.'

33 Aton snorted. 'Do you mean yours
34 when you speak of friendly hands?'

35 'Certainly!' Theremon sat down and
36 crossed his legs.

37 'My columns may have been a little
38 rough, but I gave you people the benefit
39 of the doubt every time. After all. this is
40 not the century to preach "The end of the
41 world is at hand" to Lagash. You have to
42 understand that people don't believe the
43 *Book of Revelations* anymore, and it
44 annoys them to have scientists turn
45 aboutface and tell us the Cultists are right
46 after all -- '

47 'No such thing, young man,'
48 interrupted Aton. 'While a great deal of
49 our data has been supplied us by the Cult,
50 our results contain none of the Cult's
51 mysticism. Facts are facts, and the Cult's
52 so-called mythology *has* certain facts

53 behind it. We've exposed them and ripped
54 away their mystery. I assure you that the
55 Cult hates us now worse than you do.'

56 'I don't hate you. I'm just trying to tell
57 you that the public is in an ugly humor.
58 They're angry.'

59 Aton twisted his mouth in derision. 'Let
60 them be angry.'

61 'Yes, but what about tomorrow?'
62 'There'll be no tomorrow!'

63 'But if there is. Say that there is -- just
64 to see what happens. That anger might
65 take shape into something serious. After
66 all, you know, business has taken a
67 nosedive these last two months. Investors
68 don't really believe the world is coming to
69 an end, but just the same they're being
70 cagy with their money until it's all over.
71 Johnny Public doesn't believe you, either,
72 but the new spring furniture might just as
73 well wait a few months -- just to make
74 sure.'

75 'You see the point. Just as soon as this
76 is all over, the business interests will be
77 after your hide. They'll say that if crackpots
78 -- begging your pardon -- can upset the
79 country's prosperity any time they want,
80 simply by making some cockeyed prediction
81 -- it's up to the planet to prevent them. The
82 sparks will fly, sir.'

83 The director regarded the columnist
84 sternly. 'And just what were you proposing
85 to do to help the situation?'

86 'Well' -- Theremon grinned -- 'I was
87 proposing to take charge of the publicity. I
88 can handle things so that only the
89 ridiculous side will show. It would be hard
90 to stand, I admit, because I'd have to make
91 you all out to be a bunch of gibbering
92 idiots, but if I can get people laughing at
93 you, they might forget to be angry. In
94 return for that, all my publisher asks is an
95 exclusive story.'

96 Beenay nodded and burst out, 'Sir, the
97 rest of us think he's right. These last two
98 months we've considered everything but
99 the million-to-one chance that there is an
100 error somewhere in our theory or in our
101 calculations. We ought to take care of that,
102 too.'

103 There was a murmur of agreement
104 from the men grouped about the table, and

1 Aton's expression became that of one who
2 found his mouth full of something bitter
3 and couldn't get rid of it.

4 'You may stay if you wish, then. You
5 will kindly refrain, however, from
6 hampering us in our duties in any way.
7 You will also remember that I am in
8 charge of all activities here, and in spite of
9 your opinions as expressed in your
10 columns, I will expect full cooperation and
11 full respect -- '

12 His hands were behind his back, and
13 his wrinkled face thrust forward
14 determinedly as he spoke. He might have
15 continued indefinitely but for the intrusion
16 of a new voice.

17 'Hello, hello, hello!' It came in a high
18 tenor, and the plump cheeks of the
19 newcomer expanded in a pleased smile.
20 'What's this morgue-like atmosphere
21 about here? No one's losing his nerve, I
22 hope.'

23 Aton started in consternation and said
24 peevishly, 'Now what the devil are you
25 doing here, Sheerin? I thought you were
26 going to stay behind in the Hideout.'

27 Sheerin laughed and dropped his
28 stubby figure into a chair. 'Hideout be
29 blowed! The place bored me. I wanted to
30 be here, where things are getting hot.
31 Don't you suppose I have my share of
32 curiosity? I want to see these Stars the
33 Cultists are forever speaking about.' He
34 rubbed his hands and added in a soberer
35 tone. 'It's freezing outside. The wind's
36 enough to hang icicles on your nose. Beta
37 doesn't seem to give any heat at all, at
38 the distance it is.'

39 The white-haired director ground his
40 teeth in sudden exasperation. 'Why do
41 you go out of your way to do crazy things,
42 Sheerin? What kind of good are you
43 around here?'

44 'What kind of good am I around
45 there?' Sheerin spread his palms in
46 comical resignation. 'A psychologist isn't
47 worth his salt in the Hideout. They need
48 men of action and strong, healthy women
49 that can breed children. Me? I'm a
50 hundred pounds too heavy for a man of
51 action, and I wouldn't be a success at
52 breeding children. So why bother them

53 with an extra mouth to feed? I feel better
54 over here.'

55 Theremon spoke briskly. 'Just what is
56 the Hideout, sir?'

57 Sheerin seemed to see the columnist
58 for the first time. He frowned and blew his
59 ample cheeks out. 'And just who in Lagash
60 are you, redhead?'

61 Aton compressed his lips and then
62 muttered sullenly, 'That's Theremon 762,
63 the newspaper fellow. I suppose you've
64 heard of him.'

65 The columnist offered his hand. 'And,
66 of course, you're Sheerin 501 of Saro
67 University. I've heard of you.' Then he
68 repeated, 'What is this Hideout, sir?'

69 'Well,' said Sheerin, 'we have managed
70 to convince a few people of the validity of
71 our prophecy of -- er -- doom, to be
72 spectacular about it, and those few have
73 taken proper measures. They consist
74 mainly of the immediate members of the
75 families of the Observatory staff, certain of
76 the faculty of Saro University, and a few
77 outsiders. Altogether, they number about
78 three hundred, but three quarters are
79 women and children.'

80 'I see! They're supposed to hide where
81 the Darkness and the -- er -- Stars can't
82 get at them, and then hold out when the
83 rest of the world goes poof.'

84 'If they can. It won't be easy. With all
85 of mankind insane, with the great cities
86 going up in flames -- environment will not
87 be conducive to survival. But they have
88 food, water, shelter, and weapons -- '

89 'They've got more,' said Aton. 'They've
90 got all our records, except for What we will
91 collect today. Those records will mean
92 everything to the next cycle, and *that's*
93 what must survive. The rest can go hang.'

94 Theremon uttered a long, low whistle
95 and sat brooding for several minutes. The
96 men about the table had brought out a
97 multi-chess board and started a six-
98 member game. Moves were made rapidly
99 and in silence. All eyes bent in furious
100 concentration on the board. Theremon
101 watched them intently and then rose and
102 approached Aton, who sat apart in
103 whispered conversation with Sheerin.

104 'Listen,' he said, let's go somewhere

1 where we won't bother the rest of the
2 fellows. I want to ask some questions.'

3 The aged astronomer frowned sourly
4 at him, but Sheerin chirped up, 'Certainly.
5 It will do me good to talk. It always does.
6 Aton was telling me about your ideas
7 concerning world reaction to a failure of
8 the prediction -- and I agree with you. I
9 read your column pretty regularly, by the
10 way, and as a general thing I like your
11 views.'

12 'Please, Sheerin,' growled Aton.

13 'Eh? Oh, all right. We'll go into the
14 next room. It has softer chairs, anyway.'

15 There were softer chairs in the next
16 room. There were also thick red curtains
17 on the windows and a maroon carpet on
18 the floor. With the bricky light of Beta
19 pouring in, the general effect was one of
20 dried blood.

21 Theremon shuddered. 'Say, I'd give
22 ten credits for a decent dose of white light
23 for just a second. I wish Gamma or Delta
24 were in the sky.'

25 'What are your questions?' asked
26 Aton. 'Please remember that our time is
27 limited. In a little over an hour and a
28 quarter we're going upstairs, and after
29 that there will be no time for talk.'

30 'Well, here it is.' Theremon leaned
31 back and folded his hands on his chest.
32 'You people seem so all-fired serious
33 about this that I'm beginning to believe
34 you. Would you mind explaining what it's
35 all about?'

36 Aton exploded, 'Do you mean to sit
37 there and tell me that you've been
38 bombarding us with ridicule without even
39 finding out what we've been trying to
40 say?'

41 The columnist grinned sheepishly.
42 'It's not that bad, sir. I've got the general
43 idea. You say there is going to be a world-
44 wide Darkness in a few hours and that all
45 mankind will go violently insane. What I
46 want now is the science behind it.'

47 'No, you don't. No, you don't,' broke
48 in Sheerin. 'If you ask Aton for that --
49 supposing him to be in the mood to
50 answer at all -- he'll trot out pages of
51 figures and volumes of graphs. You won't
52 make head or tail of it. Now if you were to

53 ask me, I could give you the layman's
54 standpoint.'

55 'All right; I ask you.'

56 'Then first I'd like a drink.' He rubbed
57 his hands and looked at Aton.

58 'Water?' grunted Aton.

59 'Don't be silly!'

60 'Don't you be silly. No alcohol today. It
61 would be too easy to get my men drunk. I
62 can't afford to tempt them.'

63 The psychologist grumbled wordlessly.
64 He turned to Theremon, impaled him with
65 his sharp eyes, and began.

66 'You realize, of course, that the history
67 of civilization on Lagash displays a cyclic
68 character -- but I mean *cyclic!*'

69 'I know,' replied Theremon cautiously,
70 'that that is the current archaeological
71 theory. Has it been accepted as a fact?'

72 'Just about. In this last century it's
73 been generally agreed upon. This cyclic
74 character is -- or rather, was -- one of the
75 great mysteries. We've located series of
76 civilizations, nine of them definitely, and
77 indications of others as well, all of which
78 have reached heights comparable to our
79 own, and all of which, without exception,
80 were destroyed by fire at the very height of
81 their culture.

82 'And no one could tell why. All centers
83 of culture were thoroughly gutted by fire,
84 with nothing left behind to give a hint as to
85 the cause.'

86 Theremon was following closely.
87 'Wasn't there a Stone Age, too?'

88 'Probably, but as yet practically nothing
89 is known of it, except that men of that age
90 were little more than rather intelligent
91 apes. We can forget about that.'

92 'I see. Go on!'

93 There have been explanations of these
94 recurrent catastrophes, all of a more or less
95 fantastic nature. Some say that there are
96 periodic rains of fire; some that Lagash
97 passes through a sun every so often; some
98 even wilder things. But there is one theory,
99 quite different from all of these, that has
100 been handed down over a period of
101 centuries.'

102 'I know. You mean this myth of the
103 "Stars" that the Cultists have in their *Book
104 of Revelations.*'

1 'Exactly,' rejoined Sheerin with
2 satisfaction. 'The Cultists said that every
3 two thousand and fifty years Lagash
4 entered a huge cave, so that all the suns
5 disappeared, and there came *total*
6 *darkness all over the world!* And then,
7 they say, things called Stars appeared,
8 which robbed men of their souls and left
9 them unreasoning brutes, so that they
10 destroyed the civilization they themselves
11 had built up. Of course they mix all this up
12 with a lot of religio-mystic notions, but
13 that's the central idea.'

14 There was a short pause in which
15 Sheerin drew a long breath. 'And now we
16 come to the Theory of Universal
17 Gravitation.' He pronounced the phrase so
18 that the capital letters sounded -- and at
19 that point Aton turned from the window,
20 snorted loudly, and stalked out of the
21 room.

22 The two stared after him, and
23 Theremon said, 'What's wrong?'

24 'Nothing in particular,' replied
25 Sheerin. 'Two of the men were due
26 several hours ago and haven't shown up
27 yet. He's terrifically short-handed, of
28 course, because all but the really essential
29 men have gone to the Hideout.'

30 'You don't think the two deserted, do
31 you?'

32 'Who? Faro and Yimot? Of course not.
33 Still, if they're not back within the hour,
34 things would be a little sticky.' He got to
35 his feet suddenly, and his eyes twinkled.
36 'Anyway, as long as Aton is gone -- '

37 Tiptoeing to the nearest window, he
38 squatted, and from the low window box
39 beneath withdrew a bottle of red liquid
40 that gurgled suggestively when he shook
41 it.

42 'I *thought* Aton didn't know about
43 this,' he remarked as he trotted back to
44 the table. 'Here! We've only got one glass
45 so, as the guest, you can have it. I'll keep
46 the bottle.'

47 And he filled the tiny cup with
48 judicious care. Theremon rose to protest,
49 but Sheerin eyed him sternly.

50 'Respect your elders, young man.'

51 The newsman seated himself with a
52 look of anguish on his face. 'Go ahead,

53 then, you old villain.'

54 The psychologist's Adam's apple
55 wobbled as the bottle upended, and then,
56 with a satisfied grunt and a smack of the
57 lips, he began again. 'But what do you
58 know about gravitation?'

59 'Nothing, except that it is a very recent
60 development, not too well established, and
61 that the math is so hard that only twelve
62 men in Lagash are supposed to understand
63 it.'

64 '*Tcha!* Nonsense! Baloney! I can give
65 you all the essential math in a sentence.
66 The Law of Universal Gravitation states that
67 there exists a cohesive force among all
68 bodies of the universe, such that the
69 amount of this force between any two given
70 bodies is proportional to the product of
71 their masses divided by the square of the
72 distance between them.'

73 'Is that all?'

74 'That's enough! It took four hundred
75 years to develop it.'

76 'Why that long? It sounded simple
77 enough, the way you said it.'

78 'Because great laws are not divined by
79 flashes of inspiration, whatever you may
80 think. It usually takes the combined work
81 of a world full of scientists over a period of
82 centuries. After Genovi 4I discovered that
83 Lagash rotated about the sun Alpha rather
84 than vice versa -- and that was four
85 hundred years ago -- astronomers have
86 been working. The complex motions of the
87 six suns were recorded and analyzed and
88 unwoven. Theory after theory was
89 advanced and checked and counterchecked
90 and modified and abandoned and revived
91 and converted to something else. It was a
92 devil of a job.'

93 Theremon nodded thoughtfully and
94 held out his glass for more liquor. Sheerin
95 grudgingly allowed a few ruby drops to
96 leave the bottle.

97 'It was twenty years ago,' he continued
98 after remoistening his own throat, 'that it
99 was finally demonstrated that the Law of
100 Universal Gravitation accounted exactly for
101 the orbital motions of the six suns. It was a
102 great triumph.'

103 Sheerin stood up and walked to the
104 window, still clutching his bottle. 'And now

1 we're getting to the point. In the last
2 decade, the motions of Lagash about
3 Alpha were computed according to
4 gravity, and if *did not account for the orbit*
5 *observed*; not even when all perturbations
6 due to the other suns were included.

7 Either the law was invalid, or there was
8 another, as yet unknown, factor involved.'

9 Theremon joined Sheerin at the
10 window and gazed out past the wooded
11 slopes to where the spires of Saro City
12 gleamed bloodily on the horizon. The
13 newsman felt the tension of uncertainty
14 grow within him as he cast a short glance
15 at Beta. It glowered redly at zenith,
16 dwarfed and evil.

17 'Go ahead, sir,' he said softly.

18 Sheerin replied, 'Astronomers
19 stumbled about for year, each proposed
20 theory more untenable than the one
21 before -- until Aton had the inspiration of
22 calling in the Cult. The head of the Cult,
23 Sor 5, had access to certain data that
24 simplified the problem considerably. Aton
25 set to work on a new track.

26 'What if there were another
27 nonluminous planetary body such as
28 Lagash? If there were, you know, it would
29 shine only by reflected light, and if it were
30 composed of bluish rock, as Lagash itself
31 largely is, then, in the redness of the sky,
32 the eternal blaze of the suns would make
33 it invisible -- drown it out completely.'

34 Theremon whistled. 'What a screwy
35 idea!'

36 'You think *that's* screwy? Listen to
37 this: Suppose this body rotated about
38 Lagash at such a distance and in such an
39 orbit and had such a mass that its
40 attention would exactly account for the
41 deviations of Lagash's orbit from theory --
42 do you know what would happen?'

43 The columnist shook his head.

44 'Well, sometimes this body would get
45 in the way of a sun.' And Sheerin emptied
46 what remained in the bottle at a draft.

47 'And it does, I suppose,' said
48 Theremon flatly.

49 'Yes! But only one sun lies in its plane
50 of revolution.' He jerked a thumb at the
51 shrunken sun above. 'Beta! And it has
52 been shown that the eclipse will occur

53 only when the arrangement of the suns is
54 such that Beta is alone in its hemisphere
55 and at maximum distance, at which time
56 the moon is invariably at minimum
57 distance. The eclipse that results, with the
58 moon seven times the apparent diameter of
59 Beta, covers all of Lagash and lasts well
60 over half a day, so that no spot on the
61 planet escapes the effects. *That eclipse*
62 *comes once every two thousand and forty-*
63 *nine years.'*

64 Theremon's face was drawn into an
65 expressionless mask.

66 'And that's my story?'

67 The psychologist nodded. 'That's all of
68 it. First the eclipse -- which will start in
69 three quarters of an hour -- then universal
70 Darkness and, maybe, these mysterious
71 Stars -- then madness, and end of the
72 cycle.'

73 He brooded. 'We had two months'
74 leeway -- we at the Observatory -- and that
75 wasn't enough time to persuade Lagash of
76 the danger. Two centuries might not have
77 been enough. But our records are at the
78 Hideout, and today we photograph the
79 eclipse. The next cycle will *start off* with the
80 truth, and when the *next* eclipse comes,
81 mankind will at last be ready for it. Come
82 to think of it, that's part of your story too.'

83 A thin wind ruffled the curtains at the
84 window as Theremon opened it and leaned
85 out. It played coldly with his hair as he
86 stared at the crimson sunlight on his hand.
87 Then he turned in sudden rebellion.

88 'What is there in Darkness to drive *me*
89 mad?'

90 Sheerin smiled to himself as he spun
91 the empty liquor bottle with abstracted
92 motions of his hand. 'Have you ever
93 experienced Darkness, young man?'

94 The newsman leaned against the wall
95 and considered. 'No. Can't say I have. But I
96 know what it is. Just -- uh -- ' He made
97 vague motions with his fingers and then
98 brightened. 'Just no light. Like in caves.' ,

99 'Have you ever been in a cave?'

100 'In a cave! Of course not!'

101 'I thought not. I tried last week -- just
102 to see -- but I got out in a hurry. I went in
103 until the mouth of the cave was just visible
104 as a blur of light, with black everywhere

1 else. I never thought a person my weight
2 could run that fast.'

3 Theremon's lip curled. 'Well, if it
4 comes to that, I guess I wouldn't have run
5 if I had been there.'

6 The psychologist studied the young
7 man with an annoyed frown.

8 'My, don't you talk big! I dare you to
9 draw the curtain.'

10 Theremon looked his surprise and
11 said, 'What for? If we had four or five suns
12 out there, we might want to cut the light
13 down a bit for comfort, but now we
14 haven't enough light as it is.'

15 'That's the point. Just draw the
16 curtain; then come here and sit down.'

17 'All right.' Theremon reached for the
18 tasseled string and jerked. The red curtain
19 slid across the wide window, the brass
20 rings hissing their way along the crossbar,
21 and a dusk-red shadow clamped down on
22 the room.

23 Theremon's footsteps sounded
24 hollowly in the silence as he made his way
25 to the table, and then they stopped
26 halfway. 'I can't see you, sir,' he
27 whispered.

28 'Feel your way,' ordered Sheerin in a
29 strained voice.

30 'But I can't see you, sir.' The
31 newsman was breathing harshly. 'I can't
32 see anything.'

33 'What did you expect?' came the grim
34 reply. 'Come here and sit down!'

35 The footsteps sounded again,
36 waveringly, approaching slowly. There
37 was the sound of someone fumbling with
38 a chair. Theremon's voice came thinly,
39 'Here I am. I feel . . . *ulp* . . . all right.'

40 'You like it, do you?'

41 'N -- no. It's pretty awful. The walls
42 seem to be -- ' He paused. 'They seem to
43 be closing in on me. I keep wanting to
44 push them away. But I'm not going *mad*!
45 In fact, the feeling isn't as bad as it was.'

46 'All right. Draw the curtain back
47 again.'

48 There were cautious footsteps
49 through the dark, the rustle of
50 Theremon's body against the curtain as he
51 felt for the tassel, and then the
52 triumphant *roo-osh* of the curtain

53 slithering back. Red light flooded the room,
54 and with a cry of joy Theremon looked up
55 at the sun.

56 Sheerin wiped the moistness off his
57 forehead with the back of a hand and said
58 shakily, 'And that was just a dark room.'

59 'It can be stood,' said Theremon
60 lightly.

61 'Yes, a dark room can. But were you at
62 the Jonglor Centennial Exposition two years
63 ago?'

64 'No, it so happens I never got around
65 to it. Six thousand miles was just a bit too
66 much to travel, even for the exposition.'

67 'Well, I was there. You remember
68 hearing about the "Tunnel of Mystery" that
69 broke all records in the amusement area --
70 for the first month or so, anyway?'

71 'Yes. Wasn't there some fuss about it?'

72 'Very little. It was hushed up. You see,
73 that Tunnel of Mystery was just a mile-long
74 tunnel -- with no lights. You got into a little
75 open car and jolted along through Darkness
76 for fifteen minutes. It was very popular --
77 while it lasted.'

78 'Popular?'

79 'Certainly. There's a fascination in
80 being frightened *when it's part of a game*.
81 A baby is born with three instinctive fears:
82 of loud noises, of falling, and of the
83 absence of light. That's why it's considered
84 so funny to jump at someone and shout
85 "Boo!" That's why it's such fun to ride a
86 roller coaster. And that's why that Tunnel of
87 Mystery started cleaning up. People came
88 out of that Darkness shaking, breathless,
89 half dead with fear, but they kept on paying
90 to get in.'

91 'Wait a while, I remember now. Some
92 people came out dead, didn't they? There
93 were rumors of that after it shut down.'

94 The psychologist snorted. 'Bah! Two or
95 three died. That was nothing! They paid off
96 the families of the dead ones and argued
97 the Jonglor City Council into forgetting it.
98 After all, they said, if people with weak
99 hearts want to go through the tunnel, it
100 was at their own risk -- and besides, it
101 wouldn't happen again. So they put a
102 doctor in the front office and had every
103 customer go through a physical
104 examination before getting into the car.'

1 That actually *boosted* ticket sales.'
2 'Well, then?'
3 'But you see, there was something
4 else. People sometimes came out in
5 perfect order, except that they refused to
6 go into buildings -- any buildings;
7 including palaces, mansions, apartment
8 houses, tenements, cottages, huts,
9 shacks, lean-tos, and tents.'
10 Theremon looked shocked. 'You mean
11 they refused to come in out of the open?
12 Where'd they sleep?'
13 'In the open.'
14 'They should have *forced* them
15 inside.'
16 'Oh, they did, they did. Whereupon
17 these people went into violent hysterics
18 and did their best to bat their brains out
19 against the nearest wall. Once you got
20 them inside, you couldn't keep them there
21 without a strait jacket or a heavy dose of
22 tranquilizer.'
23 'They must have been crazy.'
24 'Which is exactly what they were. One
25 person out of every ten who went into
26 that tunnel came out that way. They
27 called in the psychologists, and we did the
28 only thing possible. We closed down the
29 exhibit.' He spread his hands.
30 'What was the matter with these
31 people?' asked Theremon finally.
32 'Essentially the same thing that was
33 the matter with you when you thought the
34 walls of the room were crushing in on you
35 in the dark. There is a psychological term
36 for mankind's instinctive fear of the
37 absence of light. We call it
38 "claustrophobia", because the lack of light
39 is always tied up with enclosed places, so
40 that fear of one is fear of the other. You
41 see?'
42 'And those people of the tunnel?'
43 'Those people of the tunnel consisted
44 of those unfortunates whose mentality
45 did not quite possess the resiliency to
46 overcome the claustrophobia that
47 overtook them in the Darkness. Fifteen
48 minutes without light is a long time; you
49 only had two or three minutes, and I
50 believe you were fairly upset.
51 'The people of the tunnel had what is
52 called a "claustrophobic fixation". Their

53 latent fear of Darkness and enclosed places
54 had crystalized and become active, and, as
55 far as we can tell, permanent. That's what
56 fifteen minutes in the dark will do.'
57 There was a long silence, and
58 Theremon's forehead wrinkled slowly into a
59 frown. 'I don't believe it's that bad.'
60 'You mean you don't want to believe,'
61 snapped Sheerin. 'You're afraid to believe.
62 Look out the window!'
63 Theremon did so, and the psychologist
64 continued without pausing. 'Imagine
65 Darkness -- everywhere. No light, as far as
66 you can see. The houses, the trees, the
67 fields, the earth, the sky -- black! And
68 Stars thrown in, for all I know -- whatever
69 *they* are. Can you conceive it?'
70 'Yes, I can,' declared Theremon
71 truculently.
72 And Sheerin slammed his fist down
73 upon the table in sudden passion. 'You lie!
74 You can't conceive that. Your brain wasn't
75 built for the conception any more than it
76 was built for the conception of infinity or of
77 eternity. You can only talk about it. A
78 fraction of the reality upsets you, and when
79 the real thing comes, your brain is going to
80 be presented with the phenomenon outside
81 its limits of comprehension. You will go
82 mad, completely and permanently! There is
83 no question of it!'
84 He added sadly, 'And another couple of
85 millennia of painful struggle comes to
86 nothing. Tomorrow there won't be a city
87 standing unharmed in all Lagash.'
88 Theremon recovered part of his mental
89 equilibrium. 'That doesn't follow. I still don't
90 see that I can go loony just because there
91 isn't a sun in the sky -- but even if I did,
92 and everyone else did, how does that harm
93 the cities? Are we going to blow them
94 down?'
95 But Sheerin was angry, too. 'If you
96 were in Darkness, what would you want
97 more than anything else; what would it be
98 that every instinct would call for? Light,
99 da[*rn*] you, *light!*'
100 'Well?'
101 'And how would you get light?'
102 'I don't know,' said Theremon flatly.
103 'What's the *only* way to get light, short
104 of a sun?'

1 'How should I know?'
2 They were standing face to face and
3 nose to nose.

4 Sheerin said, 'You bum something,
5 mister. Ever see a forest fire? Ever go
6 camping and cook a stew over a wood
7 fire? Heat isn't the only thing burning
8 wood gives off, you know. It gives off
9 light, and people know that. And when it's
10 dark they want light, and they're going to
11 get it.'

12 'So they bum wood?'
13 'So they burn whatever they can get.

14 They've got to have light. They've got to
15 burn something, and wood isn't handy --
16 so they'll burn whatever is nearest. They'll
17 have their light -- and every center of
18 habitation goes up in flames!'

19 Eyes held each other as though the
20 whole matter were a personal affair of
21 respective will powers, and then
22 Theremon broke away wordlessly. His
23 breathing was harsh and ragged, and he
24 scarcely noted the sudden hubbub that
25 came from the adjoining room behind the
26 closed door.

27 Sheerin spoke, and it was with an
28 effort that he made it sound matter-of-
29 fact. 'I think I heard Yimot's voice. He and
30 Faro are probably back. Let's go in and
31 see what kept them.'

32 'Might as well!' muttered Theremon.
33 He drew a long breath and seemed to
34 shake himself. The tension was broken.
35 The room was in an uproar, with members
36 of the staff clustering about two young
37 men who were removing outer garments
38 even as they parried the miscellany of
39 questions being thrown at them.

40 Aton hustled through the crowd and
41 faced the newcomers angrily. 'Do you
42 realize that it's less than half an hour
43 before deadline? Where have you two
44 been?'

45 Faro 24 seated himself and rubbed his
46 hands. His cheeks were red with the
47 outdoor chill. 'Yimot and I have just
48 finished carrying through a little crazy
49 experiment of our own. We've been trying
50 to see if we couldn't construct an
51 arrangement by which we could simulate
52 the appearance of Darkness and Stars so

53 as to get an advance notion as to how it
54 looked.'

55 There was a confused murmur from
56 the listeners, and a sudden look of interest
57 entered Aton's eyes. 'There wasn't anything
58 said of this before. How did you go about
59 it?'

60 'Well,' said Faro, 'the idea came to
61 Yimot and myself long ago, and we've been
62 working it out in our spare time. Yimot
63 knew of a low one-story house down in the
64 city with a domed roof -- it had once been
65 used as a museum, I think. Anyway, we
66 bought it -- '

67 'Where did you get the money?'
68 interrupted Aton peremptorily.

69 'Our bank accounts,' grunted Yimot 70.
70 'It cost two thousand credits.' Then,
71 defensively, 'Well, what of it? Tomorrow,
72 two thousand credits will be two thousand
73 pieces of paper. That's all.'

74 'Sure.' agreed Faro. 'We bought the
75 place and rigged it up with black velvet
76 from top to bottom so as to get as perfect a
77 Darkness as possible. Then we punched
78 tiny holes in the ceiling and through the
79 roof and covered them with little metal
80 caps, all of which could be shoved aside
81 simultaneously at the close of a switch. At
82 least we didn't do that part ourselves; we
83 got a carpenter and an electrician and
84 some others -- money didn't count. The
85 point was that we could get the light to
86 shine through those holes in the roof, so
87 that we could get a starlike effect.'

88 Not a breath was drawn during the
89 pause that followed. Aton said stiffly, 'You
90 had no right to make a private -- '

91 Faro seemed abashed. 'I know, sir --
92 but frankly, Yimot and I thought the
93 experiment was a little dangerous. If the
94 effect really worked, we half expected to go
95 mad -- from what Sheerin says about all
96 this, we thought that would be rather likely.
97 We wanted to take the risk ourselves. Of
98 course if we found we could retain sanity, it
99 occurred to us that we might develop
100 immunity to the real thing, and then
101 expose the rest of you the same way. But
102 things didn't work out at all -- '

103 'Why, what happened?'

104 It was Yimot who answered. 'We shut

1 ourselves in and allowed our eyes to get
2 accustomed to the dark. It's an extremely
3 creepy feeling because the total Darkness
4 makes you feel as if the walls and ceiling
5 are crushing in on you. But we got over
6 that and pulled the switch. The caps fell
7 away and the roof glittered all over with
8 little dots of light -- '

9 'Well?'

10 'Well -- nothing. That was the whacky
11 part of it. Nothing happened. It was just a
12 roof with holes in it, and that's just what it
13 looked like. We tried it over and over
14 again -- that's what kept us so late -- but
15 there just isn't any effect at all.'

16 There followed a shocked silence, and
17 all eyes turned to Sheerin, who sat
18 motionless, mouth open.

19 Theremon was the first to speak. 'You
20 know what this does to this whole theory
21 you've built up, Sheerin, don't you?' He
22 was grinning with relief.

23 But Sheerin raised his hand. 'Now
24 wait a while. Just let me think this
25 through.' And then he snapped his fingers,
26 and when he lifted his head there was
27 neither surprise nor uncertainty in his
28 eyes. 'Of course -- '

29 He never finished. From somewhere
30 up above there sounded a sharp clang,
31 and Beenay, starting to his feet, dashed
32 up the stairs with a 'What the devil!'

33 The rest followed after.

34 Things happened quickly. Once up in
35 the dome, Beenay cast one horrified
36 glance at the shattered photographic
37 plates and at the man bending over them;
38 and then hurled himself fiercely at the
39 intruder, getting a death grip on his
40 throat. There was a wild threshing, and as
41 others of the staff joined in, the stranger
42 was swallowed up and smothered under
43 the weight of half a dozen angry men.

44 Aton came up last, breathing heavily.
45 'Let him up!'

46 There was a reluctant unscrambling
47 and the stranger, panting harshly, with his
48 clothes torn and his forehead bruised, was
49 hauled to his feet. He had a short yellow
50 beard curled elaborately in the style
51 affected by the Cultists. Beenay shifted his
52 hold to a collar grip and shook the man

53 savagely. 'All right, rat, what's the idea?
54 These plates -- '

55 'I wasn't after *them*,' retorted the
56 Cultist coldly. 'That was an accident.'

57 Beenay followed his glowering stare
58 and snarled, 'I see. You were after the
59 cameras themselves. The accident with the
60 plates was a stroke of luck for you, then. If
61 you had touched Snapping Bertha or any of
62 the others, you would have died by slow
63 torture. As it is -- ' He drew his fist back.

64 Aton grabbed his sleeve. 'Stop that!
65 Let him go!'

66 The young technician wavered, and his
67 arm dropped reluctantly. Aton pushed him
68 aside and confronted the Cultist. 'You're
69 Latimer, aren't you?'

70 The Cultist bowed stiffly and indicated
71 the symbol upon his hip. I am Latimer 25,
72 adjutant of the third class to his serenity,
73 Sor 5.'

74 'And' -- Aton's white eyebrows lifted --
75 'you were with his serenity when he visited
76 me last week, weren't you?'

77 Latimer bowed a second time.

78 'Now, then, what do you want?'

79 'Nothing that you would give me of
80 your own free will.'

81 'Sor 5 sent you, I suppose -- or is this
82 your own idea?'

83 'I won't answer that question.'

84 'Will there be any further visitors?'

85 'I won't answer that, either.'

86 Aton glanced at his timepiece and
87 scowled. 'Now, man, what is it your master
88 wants of me? I have fulfilled my end of the
89 bargain.'

90 Latimer smiled faintly, but said
91 nothing.

92 'I asked him,' continued Aton angrily,
93 'for data only the Cult could supply, and it
94 was given to me. For that, thank you. In
95 return I promised to prove the essential
96 truth of the creed of the Cult.'

97 'There was no need to prove that,'
98 came the proud retort. It stands proven by
99 the *Book of Revelations*.'

100 'For the handful that constitute the
101 Cult, yes. Don't pretend to mistake my
102 meaning. I offered to present scientific
103 backing for your beliefs. And I did!'

104 The Cultist's eyes narrowed bitterly.

1 'Yes, you did -- with a fox's subtlety, for
2 your pretended explanation backed our
3 beliefs, and at the same time removed all
4 necessity for them. You made of the
5 Darkness and of the Stars a natural
6 phenomenon and removed all its real
7 significance. That was blasphemy.'

8 'If so, the fault isn't mine. The facts
9 exist. What can I do but state them?'

10 'Your "facts" are a fraud and a
11 delusion.'

12 Aton stamped angrily. 'How do you
13 know?'

14 And the answer came with the
15 certainty of absolute faith. 'I know!'

16 The director purpled and Beenay
17 whispered urgently. Aton waved him
18 silent. 'And what does Sor 5 want us to
19 do? He still thinks. I suppose, that in
20 trying to warn the world to take measures
21 against the menace of madness, we are
22 placing innumerable souls in jeopardy. We
23 aren't succeeding, if that means anything
24 to him.'

25 'The attempt itself has done harm
26 enough, and your vicious effort to gain
27 information by means of your devilish
28 instruments must be stopped. We obey
29 the will of the Stars, and I only regret that
30 my clumsiness prevented me from
31 wrecking your infernal devices.'

32 'It wouldn't have done you too much
33 good,' returned Aton. 'All our data, except
34 for the direct evidence we intend
35 collecting right now, is already safely
36 cached and well beyond possibility of
37 harm.' He smiled grimly. 'But that does
38 not affect your present status as an
39 attempted burglar and criminal.'

40 He turned to the men behind him.
41 'Someone call the police at Saro City.'

42 There was a cry of distaste from
43 Sheerin. 'Da[rn] it, Aton, what's wrong
44 with you? There's no time for that. Here' -
45 - he hustled his way forward -- 'let me
46 handle this.'

47 Aton stared down his nose at the
48 psychologist. 'This is not the time for your
49 monkeyshines, Sheerin. Will you please
50 let me handle this my own way? Right
51 now you are a complete outsider here,
52 and don't forget it.'

53 Sheerin's mouth twisted eloquently.
54 'Now why should we go to the impossible
55 trouble of calling the police -- with Beta's
56 eclipse a matter of minutes from now --
57 when this young man here is perfectly
58 willing to pledge his word of honor to
59 remain and cause no trouble whatsoever?'

60 The Cultist answered promptly, 'I will
61 do no such thing. You're free to do what
62 you want, but it's only fair to warn you that
63 just as soon as I get my chance I'm going
64 to finish what I came out here to do. If it's
65 my word of honor you're relying on, you'd
66 better call the police.'

67 Sheerin smiled in a friendly fashion.
68 'You're a determined cuss, aren't you? Well,
69 I'll explain something. Do you see that
70 young man at the window? He's a strong,
71 husky fellow, quite handy with his fists, and
72 he's an outsider besides. Once the eclipse
73 starts there will be nothing for him to do
74 except keep an eye on you. Besides him,
75 there will be myself -- a little too stout for
76 active fisticuffs, but still able to help.'

77 'Well, what of it?' demanded Latimer
78 frozenly.

79 'Listen and I'll tell you,' was the reply.
80 'Just as soon as the eclipse starts, we're
81 going to take you, Theremon and I, and
82 deposit you in a little closet with one door,
83 to which is attached one giant lock and no
84 windows. You will remain there for the
85 duration.'

86 'And afterward,' breathed Latimer
87 fiercely, 'there'll be no one to let me out. I
88 know as well as you do what the coming of
89 the Stars means -- I know it far better than
90 you. With all your minds gone, you are not
91 likely to free me. Suffocation or slow
92 starvation, is it? About what I might have
93 expected from a group of scientists. But I
94 don't give my word. It's a matter of
95 principle, and I won't discuss it further.'

96 Aton seemed perturbed. His faded eyes
97 were troubled.

98 'Really, Sheerin, locking him -- '

99 'Please!' Sheerin motioned him
100 impatiently to silence. 'I don't think for a
101 moment things will go that far. Latimer has
102 just tried a clever little bluff, but I'm not a
103 psychologist just because I like the sound
104 of the word.' He grinned at the Cultist.

1 'Come now, you don't really think I'm
2 trying anything as crude as slow
3 starvation. My dear Latimer, if I lock you
4 in the closet, you are not going to see the
5 Darkness, and you are not going to see
6 the Stars. It does not take much
7 knowledge of the fundamental creed of
8 the Cult to realize that for you to be
9 hidden from the Stars when they appear
10 means the loss of your immortal soul.
11 Now, I believe you to be an honorable
12 man. I'll accept your word of honor to
13 make no further effort to disrupt
14 proceedings, if you'll offer it.'

15 A vein throbbed in Latimer's temple,
16 and he seemed to shrink within himself as
17 he said thickly, 'You have it!' And then he
18 added with swift fury. 'But it is my
19 consolation that you will all be damned for
20 your deeds of today.' He turned on his
21 heel and stalked to the high three-legged
22 stool by the door.

23 Sheerin nodded to the columnist.
24 'Take a seat next to him, Theremon -- just
25 as a formality. Hey, Theremon!'

26 But the newspaperman didn't move.
27 He had gone pale to the lips. 'Look at
28 that!' The finger he pointed toward the
29 sky shook, and his voice was dry and
30 cracked.

31 There was one simultaneous gasp as
32 every eye followed the pointing finger
33 and, for one breathless moment, stared
34 frozenly.

35 *Beta was chipped on one side!*

36 The tiny bit of encroaching blackness
37 was perhaps the width of a fingernail, but
38 to the staring watchers it magnified itself
39 into the crack of doom.

40 Only for a moment they watched, and
41 after that there was a shrieking confusion
42 that was even shorter of duration and
43 which gave way to an orderly scurry of
44 activity -- each man at his prescribed job.
45 At the crucial moment there was no time
46 for emotion. The men were merely
47 scientists with work to do. Even Aton had
48 melted away.

49 Sheerin said prosaically. 'First contact
50 must have been made fifteen minutes
51 ago. A little early, but pretty good
52 considering the uncertainties involved in

53 the calculation.' He looked about him and
54 then tiptoed to Theremon, who still
55 remained staring out the window, and
56 dragged him away gently.

57 'Aton is furious,' he whispered, 'so stay
58 away. He missed first contact on account of
59 this fuss with Latimer, and if you get in his
60 way he'll have you thrown out the window.'

61 Theremon nodded shortly and sat
62 down. Sheerin stared in surprise at him.

63 'The devil, man,' he exclaimed, 'you're
64 shaking.'

65 'Eh?' Theremon licked dry lips and then
66 tried to smile. 'I don't feel very well, and
67 that's a fact.'

68 The psychologist's eyes hardened.
69 'You're not losing your nerve?'

70 'No!' cried Theremon in a flash of
71 indignation. 'Give me a chance, will you? I
72 haven't really believed this rigmarole -- not
73 way down beneath, anyway -- till just this
74 minute. Give me a chance to get used to
75 the idea. You've been preparing yourself for
76 two months or more.'

77 'You're right, at that,' replied Sheerin
78 thoughtfully. 'Listen! Have you got a family
79 -- parents, wife, children?'

80 Theremon shook his head. 'You mean
81 the Hideout, I suppose. No, you don't have
82 to worry about that. I have a sister, but
83 she's two thousand miles away. I don't
84 even know her exact address.'

85 'Well, then, what about yourself?
86 You've got time to get there, and they're
87 one short anyway, since I left. After all,
88 you're not needed here, and you'd make a
89 darned fine addition -- '

90 Theremon looked at the other wearily.
91 'You think I'm scared stiff, don't you? Well,
92 get this, mister. I'm a newspaperman and
93 I've been assigned to cover a story. I
94 intend covering it.'

95 There was a faint smile on the
96 psychologist's face. 'I see. Professional
97 honor, is that it?'

98 'You might call it that. But, man. I'd
99 give my right arm for another bottle of that
100 sockeroo juice even half the size of the one
101 you bogged. If ever a fellow needed a
102 drink, I do.'

103 He broke off. Sheerin was nudging him
104 violently. 'Do you hear that? Listen!'

1 Theremon followed the motion of the
2 other's chin and stared at the Cultist, who,
3 oblivious to all about him, faced the
4 window, a look of wild elation on his face,
5 droning to himself the while in singsong
6 fashion.

7 'What's he saying?' whispered the
8 columnist.

9 'He's quoting *Book of Revelations*,
10 fifth chapter,' replied Sheerin. Then,
11 urgently, 'Keep quiet and listen, I tell
12 you.'

13 The Cultist's voice had risen in a
14 sudden increase of fervor: ' "And it came
15 to pass that in those days the Sun, Beta,
16 held lone vigil in the sky for ever longer
17 periods as the revolutions passed; until
18 such time as for full half a revolution, it
19 alone, shrunken and cold, shone down
20 upon Lagash.

21 ' "And men did assemble in the public
22 squares and in the highways, there to
23 debate and to marvel at the sight, for a
24 strange depression had seized them. Their
25 minds were troubled and their speech
26 confused, for the souls of men awaited the
27 coming of the Stars.

28 ' "And in the city of Trigon, at high
29 noon, Vendret 2 came forth and said unto
30 the men of Trigon, 'Lo, ye sinners! Though
31 ye scorn the ways of righteousness, yet
32 will the time of reckoning come. Even now
33 the Cave approaches to swallow Lagash;
34 yea, and all it contains.'

35 ' "And even as he spoke the lip of the
36 Cave of Darkness passed the edge of Beta
37 so that to all Lagash it was hidden from
38 sight. Loud were the cries of men as it
39 vanished, and great the fear of soul that
40 fell upon them.

41 ' "It came to pass that the Darkness
42 of the Cave fell upon Lagash, and there
43 was no light on all the surface of Lagash.
44 Men were even as blinded, nor could one
45 man see his neighbor, though he felt his
46 breath upon his face.

47 ' "And in this blackness there
48 appeared the Stars, in countless numbers,
49 and to the strains of music of such beauty
50 that the very leaves of the trees cried out
51 in wonder.

52 ' "And in that moment the souls of

53 men departed from them, and their
54 abandoned bodies became even as beasts;
55 yea, even as brutes of the wild; so that
56 through the blackened streets of the cities
57 of Lagash they prowled with wild cries.

58 ' "From the Stars there then reached
59 down the Heavenly Flame, and where it
60 touched, the cities of Lagash flamed to
61 utter destruction, so that of man and of the
62 works of man nought remained.

63 'Even then -- " ' "

64 There was a subtle change in Latimer's
65 tone. His eyes had not shifted, but
66 somehow he had become aware of the
67 absorbed attention of the other two. Easily,
68 without pausing for breath, the timbre of
69 his voice shifted and the syllables became
70 more liquid.

71 Theremon, caught by surprise, stared.
72 The words seemed on the border of
73 familiarity. There was an elusive shift in the
74 accent, a tiny change in the vowel stress;
75 nothing more -- yet Latimer had become
76 thoroughly unintelligible.

77 Sheerin smiled slyly. 'He shifted to
78 some old-cycle tongue, probably their
79 traditional second cycle. That was the
80 language in which the *Book of Revelations*
81 was originally written, you know.'

82 'It doesn't matter; I've heard enough.'
83 Theremon shoved his chair back and
84 brushed his hair back with hands that no
85 longer shook. 'I feel much better now.'

86 'You do?' Sheerin seemed mildly
87 surprised.

88 'I'll say I do. I had a bad case of jitters
89 just a while back. Listening to you and your
90 gravitation and seeing that eclipse start
91 almost finished me. But this' -- he jerked a
92 contemptuous thumb at the yellow-
93 bearded Cultist -- '*this* is the sort of thing
94 my nurse used to tell me. I've been
95 laughing at that sort of thing all my life. I'm
96 not going to let it scare me *now*.'

97 He drew a deep breath and said with a
98 hectic gaiety, 'But if I expect to keep on the
99 good side of myself. I'm going to turn my
100 chair away from the window.'

101 Sheerin said, 'Yes, but you'd better talk
102 lower. Aton just lifted his head out of that
103 box he's got it stuck into and gave you a
104 look that should have killed you.'

1 Theremon made a mouth. 'I forgot
2 about the old fellow.' With elaborate care
3 he turned the chair from the window, cast
4 one distasteful look over his shoulder, and
5 said, 'It has occurred to me that there
6 must be considerable immunity against
7 this Star madness.'

8 The psychologist did not answer
9 immediately. Beta was past its zenith
10 now, and the square of bloody sunlight
11 that outlined the window upon the floor
12 had lifted into Sheerin's lap. He stared at
13 its dusky color thoughtfully and then bent
14 and squinted into the sun itself.

15 The chip in its side had grown to a
16 black encroachment that covered a third
17 of Beta. He shuddered, and when he
18 straightened once more his florid cheeks
19 did not contain quite as much color as
20 they had had previously.

21 With a smile that was almost
22 apologetic, he reversed his chair also.
23 'There are probably two million people in
24 Saro City that are all trying to join the
25 Cult at once in one gigantic revival.' Then,
26 ironically. 'The Cult is in for an hour of
27 unexampled prosperity. I trust they'll
28 make the most of it. Now, what was it you
29 said?'

30 'Just this. How did the Cultists
31 manage to keep the *Book of Revelations*
32 going from cycle to cycle, and how on
33 Lagash did it get written in the first place?
34 There must have been some sort of
35 immunity, for if everyone had gone mad,
36 who would be left to write the book?'

37 Sheerin stared at his questioner
38 ruefully. 'Well, now, young man, there
39 isn't any eyewitness answer to that, but
40 we've got a few da[rn]ed good notions as
41 to what happened. You see. there are
42 three kinds of people who might remain
43 relatively unaffected. First, the very few
44 who don't see the Stars at all: the
45 seriously retarded or those who drink
46 themselves into a stupor at the beginning
47 of the eclipse and remain so to the end.
48 We leave them out -- because they aren't
49 really witnesses.

50 'Then there are children below six, to
51 whom the world as a whole is too new and
52 strange for them to be too frightened at

53 Stars and Darkness. They would be just
54 another item in an already surprising world.
55 You see that, don't you?'

56 The other nodded doubtfully. 'I
57 suppose so.'

58 'Lastly, there are those whose minds
59 are too coarsely grained to be entirely
60 toppled. The very insensitive would be
61 scarcely affected -- oh, such people as
62 some of our older, work-broken peasants.
63 Well, the children would have fugitive
64 memories, and that, combined with the
65 confused, incoherent babblings of the half-
66 mad morons, formed the basis for the *Book*
67 *of Revelations*.

68 'Naturally, the book was based, in the
69 first place, on the testimony of those least
70 qualified to serve as historians; that is,
71 children and morons; and was probably
72 edited and re-edited through the cycles.'

73 'Do you suppose,' broke in Theremon,
74 'that they carried the book through the
75 cycles the way we're planning on handing
76 on the secret of gravitation?'

77 Sheerin shrugged. 'Perhaps, but their
78 exact method is unimportant. They do it,
79 somehow. The point I was getting at was
80 that the book can't help but be a mass of
81 distortion, even if it is based on fact. For
82 instance, do you remember the experiment
83 with the holes in the roof that Faro and
84 Yimot tried -- the one that didn't work?'

85 'Yes.'

86 'You know why it didn't w -- ' He
87 stopped and rose in alarm, for Aton was
88 approaching, his face a twisted mask of
89 consternation. '*What's happened?*'

90 Aton drew him aside and Sheerin could
91 feel the fingers on his elbow twitching.

92 'Not so loud!' Aton's voice was low and
93 tortured. 'I've just gotten word from the
94 Hideout on the private line.'

95 Sheerin broke in anxiously. 'They are
96 in trouble?'

97 'Not *they*.' Aton stressed the pronoun
98 significantly. 'They sealed themselves off
99 just a while ago, and they're going to stay
100 buried till day after tomorrow. They're safe.
101 But the *city*. Sheerin -- it's a shambles. You
102 have no idea -- ' He was having difficulty in
103 speaking.

104 'Well?' snapped Sheerin impatiently.

1 'What of it? It will get worse. What are
2 you shaking about?' Then, suspiciously,
3 'How do you feel?'

4 Aton's eyes sparked angrily at the
5 insinuation, and then faded to anxiety
6 once more. 'You don't understand. The
7 Cultists are active. They're rousing the
8 people to storm the Observatory --
9 promising them immediate entrance into
10 grace, promising them salvation,
11 promising them anything. What are we to
12 do, Sheerin?'

13 Sheerin's head bent, and he stared in
14 long abstraction at his toes. He tapped his
15 chin with one knuckle, then looked up and
16 said crisply, 'Do? What is there to do?
17 Nothing at all. Do the men know of this?'

18 'No, of course not!'

19 'Good! Keep it that way. How long till
20 totality?'

21 'Not quite an hour.'

22 'There's nothing to do but gamble. It
23 will take time to organize any really
24 formidable mob, and it will take more time
25 to get them out here. We're a good five
26 miles from the city -- '

27 He glared out the window, down the
28 slopes to where the farmed patches gave
29 way to clumps of white houses in the
30 suburbs; down to where the metropolis
31 itself was a blur on the horizon -- a mist in
32 the waning blaze of Beta.

33 He repeated without turning. 'It will
34 take time. Keep on working and pray that
35 totality comes first.'

36 Beta was cut in half, the line of
37 division pushing a slight concavity into the
38 still-bright portion of the Sun. It was like a
39 gigantic eyelid shutting slantwise over the
40 light of a world.

41 The faint clatter of the room in which
42 he stood faded into oblivion, and he
43 sensed only the thick silence of the fields
44 outside. The very insects seemed
45 frightened mute. And things were dim.

46 He jumped at the voice in his ear.
47 Theremon said. 'Is something wrong?'

48 'Eh? Er -- no. Get back to the chair.
49 We're in the way.' They slipped back to
50 their comer, but the psychologist did not
51 speak for a time. He lifted a finger and
52 loosened his collar. He twisted his neck

53 back and forth but found no relief. He
54 looked up suddenly.

55 'Are you having any difficulty in
56 breathing?'

57 The newspaperman opened his eyes
58 wide and drew two or three long breaths.
59 'No. Why?'

60 'I looked out the window too long, I
61 suppose. The dimness got me. Difficulty in
62 breathing is one of the first symptoms of a
63 claustrophobic attack. '

64 Theremon drew another long breath.
65 'Well, it hasn't got me yet. Say, here's
66 another of the fellows.'

67 Beenay had interposed his bulk
68 between the light and the pair in the
69 corner, and Sheerin squinted up at him
70 anxiously. 'Hello, Beenay.'

71 The astronomer shifted his weight to
72 the other foot and smiled feebly. 'You won't
73 mind if I sit down awhile and join in the
74 talk? My cameras are set, and there's
75 nothing to do till totality.' He paused and
76 eyed the Cultist, who fifteen minutes earlier
77 had drawn a small, skin-bound book from
78 his sleeve and had been poring intently
79 over it ever since.

80 'That rat hasn't been making trouble,
81 has he?'

82 Sheerin shook his head. His shoulders
83 were thrown back and he frowned his
84 concentration as he forced himself to
85 breathe regularly. He said, 'Have you had
86 any trouble breathing, Beenay?'

87 Beenay sniffed the air in his turn. 'It
88 doesn't seem stuffy to me.'

89 'A touch of claustrophobia,' explained
90 Sheerin apologetically.

91 'Ohhh! It worked itself differently with
92 me. I get the impression that my eyes are
93 going back on me. Things seem to blur and
94 -- well, nothing is clear. And it's cold, too.'

95 'Oh, it's cold, all right. That's no
96 illusion.' Theremon grimaced. 'My toes feel
97 as if I've been shipping them cross-country
98 in a refrigerating car.'

99 'What we need,' put in Sheerin, 'is to
100 keep our minds busy with extraneous
101 affairs. I was telling you a while ago,
102 Theremon, why Faro's experiments with the
103 holes in the roof came to nothing.'

104 'You were just beginning,' replied

1 Theremon. He encircled a knee with both
2 arms and nuzzled his chin against it.

3 'Well, as I started to say, they were
4 misled by taking the *Book of Revelations*
5 literally. There probably wasn't any sense
6 in attaching any physical significance to
7 the Stars. It might be, you know, that in
8 the presence of total Darkness, the mind
9 finds it absolutely necessary to create
10 light. This illusion of light might be all the
11 Stars there really are.'

12 'In other words,' interposed
13 Theremon, 'you mean the Stars are the
14 results of the madness and not one of the
15 causes. Then, what good will Beenay's
16 photographs be?'

17 'To prove that it is an illusion, maybe;
18 or to prove the opposite; for all I know.
19 Then again -- '

20 But Beenay had drawn his chair
21 closer, and there was an expression of
22 sudden enthusiasm on his face. 'Say, I'm
23 glad you two got onto this subject.' His
24 eyes narrowed and he lifted one finger.
25 'I've been thinking about these Stars and
26 I've got a really cute notion. Of course it's
27 strictly ocean foam, and I'm not trying to
28 advance it seriously, but I think it's
29 interesting. Do you want to hear it?'

30 He seemed half reluctant, but Sheerin
31 leaned back and said, 'Go ahead! I'm
32 listening.'

33 'Well, then, supposing there were
34 other suns in the universe.' He broke off a
35 little bashfully. 'I mean suns that are so
36 far away that they're too dim to see. It
37 sounds as if I've been reading some of
38 that fantastic fiction, I suppose.'

39 'Not necessarily. Still, isn't that
40 possibility eliminated by the fact that,
41 according to the Law of Gravitation, they
42 would make themselves evident by their
43 attractive forces?'

44 'Not if they were far enough off,'
45 rejoined Beenay, 'really far off -- maybe
46 as much as four light years, or even more.
47 We'd never be able to detect
48 perturbations then, because they'd be too
49 small. Say that there were a lot of suns
50 that far off; a dozen or two, maybe.'

51 Theremon whistled melodiously.
52 'What an idea for a good Sunday

53 supplement article. Two dozen suns in a
54 universe eight light years across. Wow!
55 That would shrink our world into
56 insignificance. The readers would eat it up.'

57 'Only an idea,' said Beenay with a grin,
58 'but you see the point. During an eclipse,
59 these dozen suns would become visible
60 because there'd be no *real* sunlight to
61 drown them out. Since they're so far off,
62 they'd appear small, like so many little
63 marbles. Of course the Cultists talk of
64 millions of Stars, but that's probably
65 exaggeration. There just isn't any place in
66 the universe you could put a million suns --
67 unless they touch one another.'

68 Sheerin had listened with gradually
69 increasing interest. 'You've hit something
70 there, Beenay. And exaggeration is just
71 exactly what would happen. Our minds, as
72 you probably know, can't grasp directly any
73 number higher than five; above that there
74 is only the concept of "many". A dozen
75 would become a million just like that. A
76 da[rn] good idea!'

77 'And I've got another cute little notion,'
78 Beenay said. 'Have you ever thought what
79 a simple problem gravitation would be if
80 only you had a sufficiently simple system?
81 Supposing you had a universe in which
82 there was a planet with only one sun. The
83 planet would travel in a perfect ellipse and
84 the exact nature of the gravitational force
85 would be so evident it could be accepted as
86 an axiom. Astronomers on such a world
87 would start off with gravity probably before
88 they even invented the telescope. Naked-
89 eye observation would be enough.'

90 'But would such a system be
91 dynamically stable?' questioned Sheerin
92 doubtfully.

93 'Sure! They call it the "one-and-one"
94 case. It's been worked out mathematically,
95 but it's the philosophical implications that
96 interest me.'

97 'It's nice to think about,' admitted
98 Sheerin, 'as a pretty abstraction -- like a
99 perfect gas, or absolute zero.'

100 'Of course,' continued Beenay, 'there's
101 the catch that life would be impossible on
102 such a planet. It wouldn't get enough heat
103 and light, and if it rotated there would be
104 total Darkness half of each day. You

1 couldn't expect life -- which is
2 fundamentally dependent upon light -- to
3 develop under those conditions. Besides --
4 '

5 Sheerin's chair went over backward
6 as he sprang to his feet in a rude
7 interruption. 'Aton's brought out the
8 lights.'

9 Beenay said, 'Huh,' turned to stare,
10 and then grinned halfway around his head
11 in open relief.

12 There were half a dozen foot-long,
13 inch-thick rods cradled in Aton's arms. He
14 glared over them at the assembled staff
15 members.

16 'Get back to work, all of you. Sheerin,
17 come here and help me!'

18 Sheerin trotted to the older man's
19 side and, one by one, in utter silence, the
20 two adjusted the rods in makeshift metal
21 holders suspended from the walls.

22 With the air of one carrying through
23 the most sacred item of a religious ritual,
24 Sheerin scraped a large, clumsy match
25 into spluttering life and passed it to Aton,
26 who carried the flame to the upper end of
27 one of the rods.

28 It hesitated there awhile, playing
29 futilely about the tip, until a sudden,
30 crackling flare cast Aton's lined face into
31 yellow highlights. He withdrew the match
32 and a spontaneous cheer rattled the
33 window.

34 The rod was topped by six inches of
35 wavering flame! Methodically, the other
36 rods were lighted, until six independent
37 fires turned the rear of the room yellow.

38 The light was dim, dimmer even than
39 the tenuous sunlight. The flames reeled
40 crazily, giving birth to drunken, swaying
41 shadows. The torches smoked devilishly
42 and smelled like a bad day in the kitchen.
43 But they emitted yellow light.

44 There was something about yellow
45 light, after four hours of somber, dimming
46 Beta. Even Latimer had lifted his eyes
47 from his book and stared in wonder.

48 Sheerin warmed his hands at the
49 nearest, regardless of the soot that
50 gathered upon them in a fine, gray
51 powder, and muttered ecstatically to
52 himself. 'Beautiful! Beautiful! I never

53 realized before what a wonderful color
54 yellow is.'

55 But Theremon regarded the torches
56 suspiciously. He wrinkled his nose at the
57 rancid odor and said, 'What are those
58 things?'

59 'Wood,' said Sheerin shortly.

60 'Oh, no, they're not. They aren't
61 burning. The top inch is charred and the
62 flame just keeps shooting up out of
63 nothing.'

64 'That's the beauty of it. This is a really
65 efficient artificial-light mechanism. We
66 made a few hundred of them, but most
67 went to the Hideout, of course. You see' --
68 he turned and wiped his blackened hands
69 upon his handkerchief -- 'you take the pithy
70 core of coarse water reeds, dry them
71 thoroughly, and soak them in animal
72 grease. Then you set fire to it and the
73 grease burns, little by little. These torches
74 will burn for almost half an hour without
75 stopping. Ingenious, isn't it? It was
76 developed by one of our own young men at
77 Saro University.'

78 After the momentary sensation, the
79 dome had quieted. Latimer had carried his
80 chair directly beneath a torch and
81 continued reading, lips moving in the
82 monotonous recital of invocations to the
83 Stars. Beenay had drifted away to his
84 cameras once more, and Theremon seized
85 the opportunity to add to his notes on the
86 article he was going to write for the Saro
87 City *Chronicle* the next day -- a procedure
88 he had been following for the last two hours
89 in a perfectly methodical, perfectly
90 conscientious and, as he was well aware,
91 perfectly meaningless fashion. But, as the
92 gleam of amusement in Sheerin's eyes
93 indicated, careful note-taking occupied his
94 mind with something other than the fact
95 that the sky was gradually turning a
96 horrible deep purple-red, as if it were one
97 gigantic, freshly peeled beet; and so it
98 fulfilled its purpose.

99 The air grew, somehow, denser. Dusk,
100 like a palpable entity, entered the room,
101 and the dancing circle of yellow light about
102 the torches etched itself into ever-sharper
103 distinction against the gathering grayness
104 beyond. There was the odor of smoke and

1 the presence of little chuckling sounds
2 that the torches made as they burned; the
3 soft pad of one of the men circling the
4 table at which he worked, on hesitant
5 tiptoes; the occasional indrawn breath of
6 someone trying to retain composure in a
7 world that was retreating into the shadow.

8 It was Theremon who first heard the
9 extraneous noise. It was a vague,
10 unorganized *impression* of sound that
11 would have gone unnoticed but for the
12 dead silence that prevailed within the
13 dome.

14 The newsman sat upright and
15 replaced his notebook. He held his breath
16 and listened; then, with considerable
17 reluctance, threaded his way between the
18 solarscope and one of Beenay's cameras
19 and stood before the window.

20 The silence ripped to fragments at his
21 startled shout: '*Sheerin!*'

22 Work stopped! The psychologist was
23 at his side in a moment. Aton joined him.
24 Even Yimot 70, high in his little lean-back
25 seat at the eyepiece of the gigantic
26 solarscope, paused and looked downward.

27 Outside, Beta was a mere smoldering
28 splinter, taking one last desperate look at
29 Lagash. The eastern horizon, in the
30 direction of the city, was lost in Darkness,
31 and the road from Saro to the
32 Observatory was a dull-red line bordered
33 on both sides by wooded tracts, the trees
34 of which had somehow lost individuality
35 and merged into a continuous shadowy
36 mass.

37 But it was the highway itself that held
38 attention, for along it there surged
39 another, and infinitely menacing, shadowy
40 mass.

41 Aton cried in a cracked voice, 'The
42 madmen from the city! They've come!'

43 'How long to totality?' demanded
44 Sheerin.

45 'Fifteen minutes, but . . . but they'll
46 be here in five.'

47 'Never mind, keep the men working.
48 We'll hold them off. This place is built like
49 a fortress. Aton, keep an eye on our
50 young Cultist just for luck. Theremon,
51 come with me.'

52 Sheerin was out the door, and

53 Theremon was at his heels. The stairs
54 stretched below them in tight, circular
55 sweeps about the central shaft, fading into
56 a dank and dreary grayness.

57 The first momentum of their rush had
58 carried them fifty feet down, so that the
59 dim, flickering yellow from the open door of
60 the dome had disappeared and both above
61 and below the same dusky shadow crushed
62 in upon them.

63 Sheerin paused, and his pudgy hand
64 clutched at his chest. His eyes bulged and
65 his voice was a dry cough. 'I can't . . .
66 breathe . . . Go down . . . yourself. Close all
67 doors -- '

68 Theremon took a few downward steps,
69 then turned.

70 'Wait! Can you hold out a minute?' He
71 was panting himself. The air passed in and
72 out his lungs like so much molasses, and
73 there was a little germ of screeching panic
74 in his mind at the thought of making his
75 way into the mysterious Darkness below by
76 himself.

77 Theremon, after all, was afraid of the
78 dark!

79 'Stay here,' he said. 'I'll be back in a
80 second.' He dashed upward two steps at a
81 time, heart pounding -- not altogether from
82 the exertion -- tumbled into the dome and
83 snatched a torch from its holder. It was
84 foul-smelling, and the smoke smarted his
85 eyes almost blind, but he clutched that
86 torch as if he wanted to kiss it for joy, and
87 its flame streamed backward as he hurtled
88 down the stairs again.

89 Sheerin opened his eyes and moaned
90 as Theremon bent over him. Theremon
91 shook him roughly. 'All right, get a hold on
92 yourself. We've got light.'

93 He held the torch at tiptoe height and,
94 propping the tottering psychologist by an
95 elbow, made his way downward in the
96 middle of the protecting circle of
97 illumination.

98 The offices on the ground floor still
99 possessed what light there was, and
100 Theremon felt the horror about him relax.

101 'Here,' he said brusquely, and passed
102 the torch to Sheerin. 'You can hear *them*
103 outside.'

104 And they could. Little scraps of hoarse,

1 wordless shouts.

2 But Sheerin was right; the
3 Observatory was built like a fortress.
4 Erected in the last century, when the neo-
5 Gavottian style of architecture was at its
6 ugly height, it had been designed for
7 stability and durability rather than for
8 beauty.

9 The windows were protected by the
10 grillwork of inch-thick iron bars sunk deep
11 into the concrete sills. The walls were solid
12 masonry that an earthquake couldn't have
13 touched, and the main door was a huge
14 oaken slab rein -- forced with iron.
15 Theremon shot the bolts and they slid
16 shut with a dull clang.

17 At the other end of the corridor,
18 Sheerin cursed weakly. He pointed to the
19 lock of the back door which had been
20 neatly jimmed into uselessness.

21 'That must be how Latimer got in,' he
22 said.

23 'Well, don't stand there,' cried
24 Theremon impatiently. 'Help drag up the
25 furniture -- and keep that torch out of my
26 eyes. The smoke's killing me.'

27 He slammed the heavy table up
28 against the door as he spoke, and in two
29 minutes had built a barricade which made
30 up for what it lacked in beauty and
31 symmetry by the sheer inertia of its
32 massiveness.

33 Somewhere, dimly, far off, they could
34 hear the battering of naked fists upon the
35 door; and the screams and yells from
36 outside had a sort of half reality.

37 That mob had set off from Saro City
38 with only two things in mind: the
39 attainment of Cultist salvation by the
40 destruction of the Observatory, and a
41 maddening fear that all but paralyzed
42 them. There was no time to think of
43 ground cars, or of weapons, or of
44 leadership, or even of organization. They
45 made for the Observatory on foot and
46 assaulted it with bare hands.

47 And now that they were there, the
48 last flash of Beta, the last ruby-red drop
49 of flame, flickered feebly over a humanity
50 that had left only stark, universal fear!

51 Theremon groaned, 'Let's get back to
52 the dome!' In the dome, only Yimot, at

53 the solarscope, had kept his place. The rest
54 were clustered about the cameras, and
55 Beenay was giving his instructions in a
56 hoarse, strained voice.

57 'Get it straight, all of you. I'm snapping
58 Beta just before totality and changing the
59 plate. That will leave one of you to each
60 camera. You all know about . . . about
61 times of exposure -- '

62 There was a breathless murmur of
63 agreement.

64 Beenay passed a hand over his eyes.
65 'Are the torches still burning? Never mind, I
66 see them!' He was leaning hard against the
67 back of a chair. 'Now remember, don't. . .
68 don't try to look for good shots. Don't
69 waste time trying to get t-two stars at a
70 time in the scope field. One is enough. And
71 . . . and if you feel yourself going, *get away*
72 *from the camera.*'

73 At the door, Sheerin whispered to
74 Theremon, 'Take me to Aton. I don't see
75 him.'

76 The newsman did not answer
77 immediately. The vague forms of the
78 astronomers wavered and blurred, and the
79 torches overhead had become only yellow
80 splotches.

81 'It's dark,' he whimpered.

82 Sheerin held out his hand. 'Aton.' He
83 stumbled forward. 'Aton!'

84 Theremon stepped after and seized his
85 arm. 'Wait, I'll take you.' Somehow he
86 made his way across the room. He closed
87 his eyes against the Darkness and his mind
88 against the chaos within it.

89 No one heard them or paid attention to
90 them. Sheerin stumbled against the wall.
91 'Aton!'

92 The psychologist felt shaking hands
93 touching him, then withdrawing, a voice
94 muttering, 'Is that you, Sheerin?'

95 'Aton!' He strove to breathe normally.
96 'Don't worry about the mob. The place will
97 hold them off.'

98 Latimer, the Cultist, rose to his feet,
99 and his face twisted in desperation. His
100 word was pledged, and to break it would
101 mean placing his soul in mortal peril. Yet
102 that word had been forced from him and
103 had not been given freely. The Stars would
104 come soon! He could not stand by and

1 allow -- And yet his word was pledged.
2 Beenay's face was dimly flushed as it
3 looked upward at Beta's last ray, and
4 Latimer, seeing him bend over his
5 camera, made his decision. His nails cut
6 the flesh of his palms as he tensed
7 himself.

8 He staggered crazily as he started his
9 rush. There was nothing before him but
10 shadows; the very floor beneath his feet
11 lacked substance. And then someone was
12 upon him and he went down with
13 clutching fingers at his throat.

14 He doubled his knee and drove it hard
15 into his assailant. 'Let me up or I'll kill
16 you.'

17 Theremon cried out sharply and
18 muttered through a blinding haze of pain.
19 'You double-crossing rat!'

20 The newsman seemed conscious of
21 everything at once. He heard Beenay
22 croak, 'I've got it. At your cameras, men!'
23 and then there was the strange awareness
24 that the last thread of sunlight had
25 thinned out and snapped.

26 Simultaneously he heard one last
27 choking gasp from Beenay, and a queer
28 little cry from Sheerin, a hysterical giggle
29 that cut off in a rasp -- and a sudden
30 silence, a strange, deadly silence from
31 outside.

32 And Latimer had gone limp in his
33 loosening grasp. Theremon peered into
34 the Cultist's eyes and saw the blankness
35 of them, staring upward, mirroring the
36 feeble yellow of the torches. He saw the
37 bubble of froth upon Latimer's lips and
38 heard the low animal whimper in Latimer's
39 throat.

40 With the slow fascination of fear, he
41 lifted himself on one arm and turned his
42 eyes toward the blood-curdling blackness
43 of the window.

44 Through it shone the Stars!

45 Not Earth's feeble thirty-six hundred
46 Stars visible to the eye; Lagash was in the
47 center of a giant cluster. Thirty thousand
48 mighty suns shone down in a soul-searing
49 splendor that was more frighteningly cold
50 in its awful indifference than the bitter
51 wind that shivered across the cold,
52 horribly bleak world.

53 Theremon staggered to his feet, his
54 throat, constricting him to breathlessness,
55 all the muscles of his body writhing in an
56 intensity of terror and sheer fear beyond
57 bearing. He was going mad and knew it,
58 and somewhere deep inside a bit of sanity
59 was screaming, struggling to fight off the
60 hopeless flood of black terror. It was very
61 horrible to go mad and know that you were
62 going mad -- to know that in a little minute
63 you would be here physically and yet all the
64 real essence would be dead and drowned in
65 the black madness. For this was the Dark --
66 the Dark and the Cold and the Doom. The
67 bright walls of the universe were shattered
68 and their awful black fragments were falling
69 down to crush and squeeze and obliterate
70 him.

71 He jostled someone crawling on hands
72 and knees, but stumbled somehow over
73 him. Hands groping at his tortured throat,
74 he limped toward the flame of the torches
75 that filled all his mad vision.

76 'Light!' he screamed.

77 Aton, somewhere, was crying,
78 whimpering horribly like a terribly
79 frightened child. 'Stars -- all the Stars -- we
80 didn't know at all. We didn't know anything.
81 We thought six stars in a universe is
82 something the Stars didn't notice is
83 Darkness forever and ever and ever and
84 the walls are breaking in and we didn't
85 know we couldn't know and anything -- '

86 Someone clawed at the torch, and it
87 fell and snuffed out. In the instant, the
88 awful splendor of the indifferent Stars
89 leaped nearer to them.

90 On the horizon outside the window, in
91 the direction of Saro City, a crimson glow
92 began growing, strengthening in
93 brightness, that was not the glow of a sun.

94 The long night had come again.