

The Mouthpiece of Zitu

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CHAPTER I

THE NEW PATIENT

I took my stethoscope and went over the patient's chest. I wanted to determine his general condition, since he was now committed to my care as medical director of the State Hospital for the Insane. He had struck me as being in a rather bad way when he was brought in from the capital city farther north. It was part of my professional duty to look out for his physical welfare as well as endeavor to set right his distorted brain.

I had one of the nurses remove the hospital garment into which he had been put, and then I set the disk of my instrument over the region of his heart. It was bad, very bad indeed. The burr and whisper of its labored action came through his emaciated flesh with surprising loudness. I frowned and went on to the lungs, and found them suffering from the effects of that faulty circulation.

A dissociation of personality had been alleged by the physicians who had sent him into my hands. In other words, the man was supposed not to know who he was—to have lost his true identity, or be confused about it in his own mind. But the case was not violent, had given no indications of any wish to work harm to any one about him. Indeed, the entire course until now had been of a melancholic turn.

I finished my examination and straightened, and met the regard of his eyes. They were a very dark brown, and they

were fixed intently on my face. What was more, they gave me one of the oddest sensations I had ever had in my life.

I had never seen the man before. Of that I was positive. And yet as I met the steady glance he held upon me, I felt that I knew those eyes—the eyes, mind you—or what was behind them—looking out as through a window in a darkened house. I'm not sure, but I think I caught my breath.

"Send the nurse away, will you, Dr. Murray?"

For the first time during my examination the patient spoke, and the sound of it was almost like a half-checked laugh. It was as though the man felt a perfectly sane and understanding amusement in the situation in which he found himself.

Then as I hesitated, more in surprise than from any other reason, he went on: "Oh, I'll not be violent or try to escape, or anything like that. I merely want to talk to you—yourself."

I nodded to the attendant, who left the room, and turned back once more to encounter those strangely familiar eyes.

"Don't you know me, Dr. Murray?" their owner inquired.

"I never saw you before," I said, determined to meet this phase of the man's condition, whatever it was, in as natural a way as I might. "And yet—" Right there I paused.

"And yet—you aren't sure about the denial even while you make it." He laughed without any sound. Insane in a mild way he might be, but he certainly seemed to know what he was saying and to be enjoying the somewhat puzzled expression which I fancy must have shown upon my face. "Murray, you're

both right and wrong. You've never seen this body, so far as I know, but I hardly think you've forgotten Jason Croft."

"Croft! Good Heavens!"

The words dribbled off my lips. I gasped. Now I knew what it was about those eyes that held me. Croft I had not forgotten, but—so far as earth was concerned—he had died; I had pronounced him dead myself; had seen his body consigned to the grave. And it had been the body of a splendidly proportioned man—no such pitiful physical wreck as this figure in the bed.

But it had been Jason Croft who had given to me what as nearly amounted to a proof of spiritual life apart from the mortal body as any man might have—who had told me, shortly before his death occurred, the most remarkable tale my ears had ever heard, a tale incredible in itself, and yet one which, despite all arguments against it, I had always felt myself inclined to believe. In addition to that, when his story was ended he had announced that he was forsaking his earthly body for life on another planet; had told me that some day I would receive a call and find his earthly body dead, but that on that other star, Palos—a world in the system of Sirius the Dog Star—he would be possessed of another body and Naia, Princess of Aphur, as wife.

Unbelievable? Of course it was unbelievable. And yet Croft's earth body died, just as he said it would. And if any one could have heard his story as I did when he told it, I think the auditor would have been moved to credence just as I was myself.

Croft was a physician even as I am. He was a scientific man. In addition, he was a student of what most of us call the occult—the science of the mind, the spirit, the soul. So much I know, not only from his words but material evidence. His former home had contained the greatest private collection of works on the subject I have ever seen. According to his own statements, he had advanced so far in his investigations of the subject that he could project his own astral body anywhere at will. And by anywhere, I mean to be understood in the literal sense.

Many men have acquired the ability of which he was master, as applying to the earthly sphere; Croft, however, had carried it to its ultimate degree and had shaken off or entered the atmospheric envelope of our planet at will. In our conversation, which ended with his announcement that he was going back to Palos to wed Naia and live out his life in that other world, he had explained the whole thing to me—largely as I felt at the time and after, because I had dabbled in the occult to some extent, and he knew I would understand, in part at least.

In making clear his motives he had even broached the subject of twin souls—the doctrine that each spirit is originally dual, but incarnates as two individuals—a male and a female in the flesh. He alleged that since a child he had felt a vague prompting toward the Dog Star, which he could not understand until he went there in the astral form, once he had gained the power, and found on Palos a woman—his true counterpart, his twin soul, as he declared his belief.

But, to accomplish his mating with her, Croft declared further that he had done a most remarkable thing. Discovering a man dying from a mental rather than a bodily condition on the

other star, he had waited until his death occurred and then appropriated the still physically viable body to himself; and he explained the thing in a very comprehensible manner at the time, describing the whole procedure in a scientific way, until unbelief faltered and one felt that the thing had been done.

Over that body he had acquired as full control as he had of his own. He might at will throw it into a cataleptic sleep. After that he led a sort of double existence—sometimes on Palos, sometimes on earth—until his plans were finally shaped. Then, and then only, did he finally forsake the mundane life for that other and fuller existence which he felt the Palosian girl would make complete.

At the time I had questioned him as fully as time and my own knowledge would permit, and he had answered in a way which not only convinced me, but amazed me.

I had asked him concerning the time of his passing from earth to that other distant star billions of miles across space, in a universe outside our own. And he had replied that outside the mental atmosphere of man time did not exist; that between the planets was only eternity; that one could not use what was non-existent; that he could reach Palos in the condition toward which he journeyed to it as quickly as I could project myself there in thought. In similar fashion he had been able to meet each of my several interrogative points. In the end I had been content to merely listen to the astounding narrative he told.

That story I had not forgotten any more than I had the man himself. But that he should have reversed the experiment which had given him a physical life on Palos in order to return

to earth was more astounding still. And yet—if I were to believe the evidences of my well-nigh reeling senses—that was exactly what had occurred; because, no matter how beyond all accepted tenets of life the thing was, I couldn't help feeling that it was Croft's spirit looking out at me from the new patient's eyes.

Then as I stood there, tongue-tied, considering those things, he spoke again.

"Rather fusses you a bit, doesn't it, Murray? Well, never mind. I didn't expect to come back here when I left, but needs must, you know, as they say on earth. I don't wonder that it surprises you to find me speaking to you with the lips of this poor hulk of flesh—not very much like the one in which you knew me, is it?—but it will suffice, even if it has a pair of lungs badly engorged because of a very shaky heart. Your laboratory will show the kidneys affected, too. Oh, it's an incipient wreck that I'm holding together simply for my use—because I need it, and because I wanted to get down here with you."

"With—me?" I faltered. Almost as surprising as all else was his calm announcement that he was here because he wanted to see me.

He smiled slightly. "Yes—you, of course. Murray, come down to facts and quit speculation. There is nothing surprising in that. You were the only man on earth who knew my story—who had the truth—who could understand—and I knew you understood a good bit of the forces involved—the spiritual forces, that is. So, when I needed certain information which I couldn't gain save in the flesh, I knew you were the man to help

me gain it—the one man to whom I could appeal with a chance of success. But in order to reach you I had to limit my choice of earthly bodies. That's how I came to choose this thing at which you're looking—"

"But—but—" I interrupted. "Good Heavens, Croft! I never dreamed of your reversing the process. I—"

He shook his head. "It's a poor rule that won't work both ways, isn't it, Murray?" he said.

I nodded. "Yes—of course. And you've really done it—come back—like this?"

I asked the question as I would have asked a similar one of Croft, because now I was convinced that I was speaking to the man himself—his intelligence, that is.

And he answered me without the least hesitation: "Yes. And it's your job to keep me alive until I can gain what I came for—to help me, if you will. Earth possesses knowledge I need on Palos for my work—you can help me gain it just as well here as anywhere else. 'Stone walls do not a prison make,' Murray or 'iron bars a cage.' Man, it's your cooperation for the advancement of a wonderful people I've come a-seeking. I want you to prescribe a certain course of study as a part of my treatment and discuss the things I'm after with me. Do you catch my plan?"

Oh, yes, I caught it. I began to understand. Bizarre, wonderful, beyond anything imaginable as it seemed, I felt that I appreciated the whole concept of his scheme. And I was flattered—I confess that I thrilled at his words—that he should

have come to me for such aid as he felt I would give. All at once I had the feeling that a wonderful privilege was placed in my hands—that I was to have a part in this remarkable adventure between two worlds which Croft had made his. I made an effort to rally my staggering senses, and, as one will at such a time, I made a casual rather than a pertinent remark:

"Just how is the Princess Naia?" I asked.

Croft nodded. He seemed to find acceptance of my part in my question. "The Princess Naia is very much all right."

And then I remembered what he had told me before he went to Palos for what I had thought a definite stay. And it struck me that it was rather odd to be speaking of the Palosian girl as one would of a neighbor next door, but I amended my reference to her none the less: "Or perhaps I should have asked for Mrs. Croft—you said that you expected to be married immediately upon your return to Palos."

CHAPTER II

EXPLANATIONS

Croft frowned. "What one expects and what one meets are not always one and the same, friend Murray," he rejoined. "As a matter of fact, I returned to Palos after my conversation with you, to encounter a situation of which I had never thought."

"You mean that it interfered with your marriage to the princess?" I exclaimed.

He made a grimace. "I mean exactly that, both on the part of Naia herself and because of something else. You remember Zud, the high priest of Zitra, the imperial city of which I told you—who sponsored me with Tamhys before the Zollarian war. And you recall no doubt that I mentioned the fact that I left the body of Jasor of Nodhur, which I had made my own, in Zud's apartments in the pyramid of Zitra when I came back here for the last time, and that Naia was quartered during my absence in the rooms set apart for the Gayana—the Vestals of Ga the Virgin in the pyramid, too. Murray, when I got back there, fully expecting to take things up where I had left them, I found that Zud had proclaimed me the Mouthpiece of Zitu himself."

"The Mouthpiece of Zitu!" I drew a chair close to the bed and sat down. The thing affected me oddly.

I cast back in my mind for what Croft had told me concerning the religion of Tamarizia, which was the nation in whose affairs he had taken an active part on the distant star. Zitu was God in

their belief. Ga was the woman—a virgin. Azil was her son—known as the Giver of Life. And if Croft had been proclaimed by the high priest of the central state of the empire, the head of the clerical college, as the Mouthpiece of Zitu I began to sense dimly the position in which he must have found himself on his return—just what it might have meant.

If Zud had proclaimed Croft anything of the sort, it was just about the same as naming him the representative of the Divinity in the flesh—and from what Croft had told me of his claiming while in Tamarizia to do all that he did by the grace of Zitu—which was, of course, no more than the truth in a sense—I could see how his very words might have laid the foundation for the high priest's act.

Yet, Croft at our former conversation had said that he had induced the Tamarizians to adopt a republican way of government rather than their system of allied principalities, and had declared that when he went back he expected to be elected president. All that flashed through my mind, and then, "Rather changed your plans, I suppose," I said.

"Changed them?" he returned, with an almost whimsical expression. "Murray, it almost wrecked them at the start—the most important part of them, that is. Remember why I did what I did do really—that all I had done up until that time was in order to win the woman who meant more to me than anything else in life—and then picture if you can my mental condition when I found myself trapped, as it were, by my own acts."

"Your own?" I queried.

He nodded. "Oh, certainly yes—my own, of course—my acts and my overthought—my failing to take into account what a terrible impression I had managed to make on the high priest. I—hang it all, Murray—I knew so entirely what I was up to that I didn't give proper consideration to the effect of my words and acts must have on less well-informed minds. I failed to put myself in the place of Zud, and Magur, the head of the church in Aphur, whom I first enlisted in my aid at Himyra, as I told you before.

"You remember the old saying, 'Whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad,' and one equally as true, that 'Pride goeth before a fall'? Well, my friend, I was a bit like that, I think, toward the last of the Zollarian war. Things came my way too fast. The completeness of the Tamarizian victory, and her father's pledge of the girl to me, backed up by the sanction of Jadgor, the Aphurian king, made me feel altogether secure.

"It seemed to me that there could be no question but I carried the destiny of myself and Naia and all Tamarizia in my hands. I had only to speak to see my commands fulfilled.

"Honestly, Murray, in those days I couldn't have been more absolute if I had been the Mouthpiece of Zitu indeed. Perhaps if I'd stayed there and rushed things through, everything would have been all right. But, as you know, I returned for a final visit to close up all matters pertaining to my earthly life before I snapped the astral chord which until then had kept my original body alive. And there was where I made my mistake.

"As I've told you, I left my Palosian body in Zud's quarters, rather magnificently placed. Zud saw to that. I suppose now he

was turning the elements of what he fancied the truth in his old brain. My form was stretched out on a golden couch, covered with a sheet of orange-colored silk, in the apartment set apart for my use. And I'd been planning, as you know, many things I wanted to do. I'd drawn plans—designs for things common enough on earth, but never before dreamed of on Palos. And I left the drawing I had made in that room in a golden chest. You remember I told you gold was as plentiful on Palos as iron on earth and used as freely in the metal working arts.

"Night and day a guard was kept in the chamber where I lay in what they believed was my knowledge-gaining sleep. But—the guard was a priest. He would do anything Zud said, of course. I never thought of that. I was anxious only to get back here and close things up and return and claim Naia as my wife.

"So you see I fell into the error of not considering old Zud's thoughts or his interpretation of my claim that everything I did was by Zitu's grace. Of course that was plain enough, however, after I got back and found that he had all along placed a literal interpretation on my remarks and considered my sleeps as no more than a period of spiritual communion with Zitu himself. Then it became very forcibly clear to me that I should have taken Zud more fully into the truth of the facts. And because I hadn't I found myself in a most embarrassing case.

"The high priest had got into that golden box. He had examined my working charts. He had dimly sensed them as designs for things I meant to make—and his wonder knew no bounds. And after that he played the deuce, though I am convinced the old man only thought he was doing what was absolutely right, according to his rights."

"And Naia?" I asked. "How did she view your elevation to such a lofty state?"

Croft gave me a glance. "I told you Zud messed everything up," he replied. "But—it's a long story. Murray, this ramshackle carcass I've seized won't last out a great many days. The weakling soul who once possessed it broke it down by every sort of abuse, including drugs. But, I've got to learn certain things before I abandon its use.

"Suppose you send me up the latest works you have on internal medicine and surgery and therapeutics, and drop in tonight. If you're willing to sacrifice a few hours' sleep, I'll spin you the whole yarn."

"All right," I agreed as I rose. "I don't think I was ever more startled in my life, but I'll send up the books, and I'll be right here after nine myself."

"Right," he accepted. "My physicians wouldn't let me have tobacco, though this body craves it. Bring some cigars when you come, and we'll have a good long talk."

Before, however, I enter upon Croft's actual story, I think it better perhaps to briefly describe, in some part at least, those details of the Palosian world with which he had put me in touch on the occasion of our former meeting to which I have already referred.

And toward a fuller understanding of that world itself, I think it best to take up the geography of that part of Palos Croft visited first. Mainly that which has to do with the Tamarizian nation—a series of allied principalities surrounding the shores of a vast

inland sea, with the exception of a central state—the seat of the imperial capital, embracing the island of Hiranur, located in the sea itself, and the kingdom of Nodhur to the west and south.

From the central sea a narrow strait led west toward an outer ocean beyond the continent on which the several principalities found place. To the north of this strait, known as the Gateway, was Cathur, a mountainous country and the seat of the national university at its capital city Scira. East of Cathur was Mazhur, known at the time of Croft's arrival as the Lost State, since in a former war it had been wrested from the original Tamarizian group by the Zollarians, a hostile nation lying still farther north.^[1]

Croft, by defeating Zollaria, after his entertainment of physical life on Palos, had brought Mazhur back. In fact, he had just completed that bit of work at the time of our former conversation, thereby raising himself to a very high position of influence and power, as I have sought to indicate, and winning from Naia's father, Prince Lakkon of Aphur, the promise of his daughter's hand, as well as the consent of Jadgor, King of Aphur, and Naia's uncle, that the union should take place.

On Croft's advent Scythys—a man old to dotage—had been king of Cathur, with Kyphallos the crown prince, a profligate of the worst type, for a son. Yet Jadgor of Aphur, scenting a danger unless it was checked in advance in Kyphallos's ascent of the Cathurian throne, had sought to bind the northern prince to the Tamarizian fealty more surely by offering him Naia, his sister's child, to wife.

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