

JASON, SON OF JASON

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CHAPTER I

THE GATEWAY OF LIFE

It was midnight when the night superintendent called and told me No. 27 had died. I rose. The thing was no surprise. I had known it was going to happen. No. 27 had told me so himself. None the less, I went to his room. Routine in the mental hospital had nothing to do with that strange secret held in common between myself and the man—that strange state of affairs which had enabled him to predicate his own death so accurately.

And yet as I mounted the stairs to the room where his body now lay as a worn-out husk I had none of the feeling which so customarily assails the average mortal in such an hour. To me it was not as though he had died. To my mind in those moments it was no more than the casting aside by the activating spirit of that instrument which for its own ends it had used. The body then was a husk indeed—an emaciated, worn-out thing which, because of our mutual secret, I knew had been kept alive by the sheer force of the spiritual tenant, now removed.

I stood looking down upon it, with very much the same sensations one might have in viewing the tool once plied by the hand of a friend. It was nothing more than that really. Jason Croft had used it while he had need of its manipulation, and when his need was accomplished he had simply laid it down.

Jason Croft. Dead? I felt an impulse to smile in most improper fashion. Not at all. The man was not only not dead, but I knew—as positively as I knew I was presently going to leave the room where his dead shell lay on a hospital bed and return to my own quarters—exactly where he had gone.

The statement sounds a bit as though I were better qualified as an inmate than the superintendent of an institution for the care of the insane. And I don't suppose it will help any for me to add that I had seen Jason Croft die before—or that he had informed me on the former occasion, though in less specific fashion, of his approaching end.

That was after he had told me a most remarkable tale, which, in spite of its almost incredible nature, I found myself strongly inclined to believe. It had concerned Croft's adventures on another planet—Palos—one of the spheres in the universe of the Dog Star Sirius, to which he had traveled first by astral projection, but on which he had found means to establish an actual existence in the flesh.

"Unbelievable—can a man be dead and yet live again?" you will say. Well, yes, but—Croft's earth body died just as he had told me it would, and was buried, and time passed, and this patient No. 27 was committed to the institution of which I was the head; and when I went to examine and inspect him, he asked me to dismiss the attendants, and then he spoke to me in the voice of Jason Croft.

More than that, he took up the story of his adventures where he had left off in the previous instance, admitted freely that he had reversed the experiment by which he had gained material

existence on Palos, and, driven by the necessity of gaining knowledge for use in his new estate, had deliberately returned to earth. Unbelievable, you will say again. And again I answer:

"Yes—but wait."

Croft was a physician, even as am I. He was a scientific man. In addition he was a student of the occult—the science of the mind, the spirit, and its control of the physical forces of life.

He was an earth-born man. The home in which I first met him contained the greatest private collection of works on the subject I have ever seen. In dying he left them to me—I have them all about me. They are mine. According to his statements and his notations on margins, he had gone so far in his investigations that he could project the astral consciousness anywhere at will. And when I say anywhere, I mean it in the literal sense.

Many men have mastered the astral control on the earthly plane. Croft had carried it to an ultimate degree. He shook off the envelope of the earth atmosphere, led thereto, as he frankly confessed in our conversations, by the attraction of a feminine spirit, though he did not know it at the time, and recognized it only when he first viewed Naia—Princess of Tamarizia—on a distant star.

I had dabbled in the occult to some extent myself. Hence when he spoke of the doctrine of twin souls he had no further need to explain. He alleged that since a child the Dog Star had called him subtly through the years in a way he could not explain. Once having come into her presence, however, he knew that it

was Naia—the feminine counterpart of his nature—whose existence on the other planet had called across the void to him. Or so he claimed. And certainly his portrayal of the events on Palos were characterized by a detail that made the atmosphere of his alleged other existence most vividly plain.

To an accomplishment of his marrying her, Croft declared that he had done a weirdly wonderful thing. Discovering a Palosian dying of a mental rather than a physical ailment, he had waited until his death occurred, then appropriated the still physically viable body to himself, as he most comprehensively explained, describing his act in a scientific way that counseled belief while staggering the mind.

Over that body he obtained absolute control, exactly as he had gained the same ability with his own. For a time thereafter he led a sort of dual existence, sometimes on Palos, sometimes on earth, until he had fully shaped his plans. Then, and then only, did he voluntarily forsake the mundane life to enter that other and fuller existence he felt that Naia of Aphur could make complete.

I questioned him closely. I was faced by a most amazing thing. I took up first the question of time required in passing from earth to Palos. He smiled and replied that outside the mental atmosphere a man's time ceased to exist; that it was man's measure of a portion of eternity, and nothing more, and that he could not use what was non-existent, hence reached Palos as quickly in the astral condition as I could span the gulf between that member of the Dog Star's Pack and earth in thought. All other points I raised he met. Even so it was a good deal of a shock to find my new patient speaking to me with Croft's

evident understanding, looking at me out of what seemed oddly like Croft's eyes.

But in the end I was convinced. The man knew too much. He was too utterly conversant with Croft's accomplishments, his aims and ambitions and hopes, to be anyone but Croft himself. And, too, he naïvely explained that it was a poor rule that would not work two ways, and that he had therefore repeated his experiment in gaining a Palosian body when he felt the pressing need of a return to earth.

This night, earlier in the evening, he had bidden me goodbye—told me he was going back to Naia, the woman he had dared so much to win, his mate who ere long was to bear him, Jason Croft of Earth, a child. And now—well, now as before, it would seem he had kept his word. Jason Croft was dead *again*.

Is it any wonder that I felt that strange, almost amused desire to smile? Dead! Why, Croft, in so far as I knew him, could practically laugh at death—he was a man who had actually demonstrated, if one believed his narrative, of course, the truth of the saying that the spirit is the life. He was a man, who, because of the needs of his spirit, had deliberately switched his existence from one to the other of two spheres.

I gave what directions were needed for the disposal of No. 27's body, returned to my bed, and stretched myself out. But I didn't sleep all that morning. I buried myself in thought.

Both the narratives to which I had listened—first from the man I knew to be Jason Croft really, secondly from the pitiable wreck he had employed on his return, that worn-out husk

which had just died—had produced on me a somewhat odd effect. So clearly had he portrayed the events and emotions which had swayed him in his almost undreamed courtship of the Aphurian princess that I had come to accept the characters he mentioned as actually existent persons, acquaintances almost, just as, in spite of all established precedent, I still regarded Croft himself as alive.

Naia of Aphur—many a time as I listened to his account of their association I had thrilled to the picture of that supple girl with her crown of golden hair, her crimson lips, her violet-purple eyes. So real she had come to seem that I had felt I would know her had I seen her with my physical rather than my mental vision. So real indeed was her mental picture that when he told me she was about to become a mother I had cried out, on impulse, that I wished as a medical man I might attend her—would be glad to see the light in her eyes when they first beheld his, Jason's, child.

And Croft had replied, "Man, I could love you for that," and he flashed me an understanding smile.

So now that he was gone back to her—I lay on my bed unsleeping, and let all he had told me unroll in a sort of mental panorama, dealing wholly with the Palosian world.

Tamarizia! It was into the empire Croft blundered blindly when he went to Palos first—a series of principalities surrounding the shore 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 Nodhur to

the west and south. From the central sea a narrow strait led into an outer ocean to the west.

This was known as the Gateway. To the north was Cathur, a rugged, mountainous state, the seat of national learning, in its university at the capital city of Scira, and east of Cathur was Mazhur, known as the Lost State at the time of Croft's first arrival, because it had been wrested from the empire some fifty years before, in a war with Zollaria, a hostile nation to the north.

Croft, after gaining physical life on Palos, succeeded in winning it back, and in gaining thereby the consent of Naia's father, Prince Lakkon, and her uncle, Jadgor, King of Aphur, to their marriage. It was at this point his narrative had ended first.

East of Mazhur, still hugging the sea and extending into the hinterland of the continent was Bithur. And Milidhur joined Bithur to the south. West of Milidhur, completing the circle, was Aphur—the name meaning literally "the land to the west" or "toward the sun." Aphur was the southern pillar of the Gateway, ending at the western strait. Nodhur lay south of Aphur, gaining access to the sea by the navigable river Na, on whose yellow flood moved a steady stream of commerce driven by sail and oar until Croft revolutionized transportation by producing alcohol-driven motors. And—if I were to believe his second account—since then he had actually electrified the nation, harnessing mountain streams to generate the force.

Except for the waterways, traffic prior to Croft's innovations was by conveyances drawn by the gnuppa—a creature half deer, half horse, in appearance—or by means of caravans of

the enormous beast called sarpelca, resembling some huge Silurian lizard, twice the size of an elephant, with a pointed tail, scale-armored back, camel-like neck, and the head of a marine serpent tentacle-fringed about the mouth.

They were driven by reins affixed to these fleshy appendages, and streamed across the Palosian deserts, bearing huge merchandise cargoes upon their massive backs.

Indeed, it was a wonderful world into which Croft had projected himself. Babylonian in seeming he had described it to me at first.

North of Tamarizia was Zollaria, inhabited by a far more warlike race. Its despotic government had long cast a covetous eye on the Central Sea, through which, and the rivers emptying into its expanse, most of the profitable trade lanes were reached. Tamarizia, controlling the western Gateway, had remained master even after the fall of Mazhur, collecting toll from the Zollarian craft on her rivers despite the foothold gained on her northern coast.

East of Tamarizia, beyond Bithur and Milidhur, lay Mazzeria, peopled by a race little above the aborigine in their social life. Tatar-like, the Mazzerians shaved their heads of all save a single tuft of hair, with a most remarkable effect, since the race was blue of complexion and the prevailing color of their hair was red.

Mazzeria, at the time of Croft's incursion into the planet's affairs, was the acknowledged ally of Zollaria, although at peace with Tamarizia. In earlier times, however, numbers of

them had been taken captive in border wars and brought to both nations as slaves. These, in so far as Tamarizia was concerned, had later been freed and given citizenship of a degree constituting in their ranks the lowest or serving caste.

Each state was governed by a king, by hereditary succession, in conjunction with a national assembly consisting of a delegate elected by each ten thousand or deckerton of civil population. The occupant of the imperial throne was elected for a period of ten years by vote of the several states.

On Croft's advent, Scythys—a dotard—had been king of Cathur, with his son Kyphallos, the crown prince, a profligate of the worst type, sunk under the charms of Kalamita, a Zollarian adventuress of great beauty, with whom he had plotted the surrender of Cathur to her nation in return for the Tamarizian throne with Kalamita by his side.

Jadgor of Aphur, scenting the danger, had sought to bind the northern prince to Tamarizian fealty through a marriage with Naia, his sister's child. To win Naia and overthrow Zollaria's scheme had been Jason's task. The introduction of both the motor and firearms enabled him to overthrow the flower of Zollaria's hosts on a couple of bloody fields. Victory gained and Zollaria forced to cede Mazhur after fifty years of occupation, Croft prevailed upon the nation to accept a democratic form of government, it being at the end of Emperor Tamhys's term. This was accomplished without too much difficulty.

As to the Tamarizians themselves, they were a white and well-formed race. Their women held equal place with men. They believed in the spirit and a future life. They had made no small

progress in the sciences and arts. They worked metal, gold being as common as iron on Palos.

They tempered copper also and used it in innumerable ways. They wove fabrics of great beauty, one being a blend of vegetable fiber and spun gold. They cut and polished jewels. They had a system of judiciaries and courts and a medical and surgical knowledge of sorts.

They were a fairly moral and naturally modest people. Their clothing was worn for protection and ornamentation, rather than for any other purpose. It was donned and doffed as the occasion required, without comment being aroused. In women it consisted, rich and poor, of a single garment falling to the knee or just below it, cinctured about the body and caught over one shoulder by a jeweled or metal boss, leaving the other shoulder, arm, and upper chest exposed. To this was added sandals of leather, metal, or wood, held to the foot by a toe and instep band and lacings running well up the calves.

Men of wealth and soldiers generally wore metal casings, jointed to the sandal to permit of motion and extending upward to the knees. Men of caste wore also a soft shirt or chemise beneath a metal cuirass or embroidered tunic. Save on formal occasions the serving classes wore a narrow cincture about the loins.

Agriculture was highly developed, and they had advanced far in architecture, painting and sculpture. They lavished much time and expense in beautifying their homes. They had well-constructed caravan roads. As Croft had pointed out, he found

them an intelligent race waiting, ready to be trained to a wider craft.

And among them, in Naia of Aphur, he believed he had found his twin soul. And he had set about winning her in a fashion such as no other man, I frankly believe, would have dared.

He had won her according to his belief and returned to earth, for the last time, ere he should return and make her his bride. He had told me about it, and he had cast off his earthly body, severing the last tie that held him from his life in Palos. He had died.

He had gone back and found his plans disarranged through the actions of Zud, the high priest of Zitra, the capital city of Hiranur, where he had left Naia waiting his return in the Temple of Ga, the Eternal Mother—the Eternal Woman, in the Zitran pyramid. Zud, moved by Croft's works and by a story told him by Abbu, a priest who knew Jason's story, had proclaimed him Mouthpiece of Zitu, thereby raising an insurmountable barrier, as it seemed, between him and Naia, since celibacy was one of the tenets of the Tamarizian priests. And yet Croft had won to her, overcoming all obstacles, even winning a second war, with all Mazzeria egged on, her armies officered by Zollarians in disguise this time, ere he gained the goal of his desire.

These things had been told me inside the last few weeks by No. 27—the man who had been committed to the institution for a dissociation of personality, at which he quietly laughed after he had obtained my ear; because he wished to gain contact with

me, who knew his former story, and win my aid toward the fulfillment of his mission.

Only he wasn't dead, and I knew it as I lay there with the names of men and women of the Palosian world buzzing in my head. He had gone back to them, now that his work was ended—to Naia, his golden-haired, purple-eyed mate—to Lakkon, her father; to Jadgor, her uncle, and Robur his son, governor now of Aphur in the palace where his father, president of the Tamarizian republic, had been king; to Robur, who, like a second Jonathan, had ever been Croft's loyal assistant and friend, and Gaya his sweet and matronly wife; to Magur, high priest of Himyra, the ruling red city of Aphur, by whom Croft and Naia were betrothed to Zud himself, to whom he had taught the truth of astral control. And I found myself portraying them as Croft had described them, predicating their thoughts and feelings, as I might have done those of any man or woman I knew on earth.

Actually I was projecting my intellect, if not my consciousness, to Palos. The thought came to me. In spirit, if not in perception, I was there for the moment with my friend. In spirit at least I was bridging with little effort billions of actual miles. Thought and spirit and soul. They are strange things. Croft, if I was any judge, had gone back to Naia—and there was I lying, picturing the scene, where she waited for his coming in their home high in the western mountains of Aphur, given to them by Lakkon, a wedding gift, after the war with Mazzeria was won. Croft had gone back to Palos, and here was I picturing the thing in my spirit, certainly as plainly as any earth scene I had ever known.

His body would be lying there, covered with soft fabrics, waiting for its tenant on a couch of wine-red wood such as the Tamarizians used—or perhaps of molded copper. And Naia—the woman who had given him her life, would be watching, watching for the first stir of his returning.

Only—I smiled—Croft had told me he could gain Palos as quickly in the consciousness as I could project myself there in my mind—so, by now, that stirring of her strong man's limbs, beneath the eyes of the fair watcher, had occurred, and once more those two were together.

I smiled again.

The picture of that reunion appealed. There was nothing else to it at the instant. For even in my wildest imaginings I did not in the least suspect what its nearness, its clearness, the vividness of its seeming, might portend.

No, even though I myself had delved more or less deeply into occult lore, with a resulting knowledge of the subject that had brought about the sympathetic understanding of all Croft had told me from first to last, I had little or no conception that night of the inward meaning of the distinctness with which I could conjure up the scene of his return to Naia, or to where the ability might lead. Rather, I felt merely that through his narrative of her wooing he had built up within my mental cells a picture of the fair girl now his bride, so clear, so positive in seeming, that to me she appeared no more than a charming personality—a feminine acquaintance, such as one might on occasion meet. She was no more removed, so far as my feeling of familiarity with her was concerned, than had her residence

been not on Palos, but simply across the street. It is so easy to bridge distance in the mind.

I slept after a time, as one will, drifting from continued thought upon one subject into slumber. And I woke with the thought of Croft's weird homecoming still in mind. It stayed with me more or less, too, in the succeeding days.

Naia of Aphur! Oddly I dwelt upon her. Jason himself had told me that she knew me—had actually seen me—that he had brought her to earth more than once in the astral body—had pointed me out to her as the one earth man who knew and believed his story—that she looked upon me as a friend.

The thing seemed some way to establish a sort of personal bond, just as the secret Croft and I had kept between us made me feel toward him as I have never felt toward any other man.

Jason Croft and Naia of Aphur—the interplanetary lovers. It was certainly odd. I knew her, even though I had never seen her; save through the instrumentality of his description of her, and the resultant picture printed on my mind. Yet I could close my eyes at will and see her, slender, golden-haired, with her lips of flaming scarlet, and her violet-purple eyes.

And I knew her home. I could lift it into my conscious perception as a familiar scene. I could imagine her moving about it, young, vibrant, happy, alone or with Croft by her side. I could fancy her bathing in the sun-warmed waters of the private bath in the garden—the gleam of her form against the clear yellow stone of which it was constructed—until she seemed the little silver fish Croft had called her, disporting in a

bowl of gold, behind the white, screening, vine-clad walls. Or I could dream of her walking about the grounds, with the giant Canor—the huge, doglike creature she called Hupor, who was at once her pet, her companion, and guard. Distant? Why, she seemed no more distant to me in the days after Croft had gone back to be with her when her child would be born than some fair maid of earth waiting for the coming of her lover across a dividing wall in an adjacent yard.

And yet so blind is the objective mind, that even then I did not suspect I had established a sympathetic chain of interest between the atmosphere of her existence and myself, capable of stretching out to a most peculiar climax in the end. Then, one night something over a month after No. 27 had died and been laid away, I dreamed.

I don't say I thought of it as a dream at the time. Then it was all too seriously, too grippingly, real to seem other than the actual thing. It was only after it was over that I thought of it as a dream—perhaps because, despite the occurrence and all Croft had told me, I was still not fully convinced.

Later—well, that's the story. I'll let it unfold itself.

I went to bed that night and fell asleep. How long I slept I do not know. But a voice disturbed my slumbers after a time. At least it disturbed the restful unconsciousness of my spirit. To this day I am not sure whether or not my body moved.

"Murray—Murray." I heard it, dimly at first, but insistent. It kept repeating itself over and over. Beyond doubt someone was demanding my attention. I sought to rouse.

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