

WAY OF THE GODS

By HENRY KUTTNER

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*Spawn of atomic fission, this strange company
of mutants exiled by humanity battles against
enslavement in a foreign world dominated by
the evil Spirit of the Crystal Mountain!*

CHAPTER I

New Worlds

He looked at the October morning all about him as if he had never seen October before. That was not true, of course. But he knew that he would never see it again. Unless they had mornings, and Octobers—where he was going. It did not seem likely, though the old man had talked a great deal about key-patterns and the selectivity of the machine, and the multiple universes spinning like motes in a snowstorm through infinity.

“But I’m human!” he said aloud, sitting cross-legged on the warm brown earth and feeling the breeze which gave the lie instantly to his thought. He felt the gentle pull at his shoulder-blades which meant that his wings were fluttered a little by the breeze, and instinctively he flexed the heavy bands of muscle across his chest to control the wing-surfaces.

He was not human. That was the trouble. And this world, this bright October world that stretched to the horizon around him was made to shelter the race that had become dominant, and was jealous of its dominion. Humanity, that had no place for strangers among its ranks.

The others did not seem to care very much. They had been reared in the creche almost from birth, under a special regime that isolated them from the humans. The old man had been responsible for that. He had built the huge house on the hillside, swooping curves of warmly-colored plastic that blended into the brown and green of

the land—an asylum that had finally failed. The walls were breached.

“Kern,” someone behind him said.

The winged man turned his head, glancing up past the dark curve of his wings. A girl came toward him down the slope from the house. Her name was Kua. Her parents had been Polynesian, and she had the height and the lithe grace of her Oceanic race, and the shining dark hair, the warm, honey-colored skin. But she wore opaque dark glasses, and across her forehead a band of dark plastic that looked opaque too, and was not. Beneath, her face was lovely, the red mouth generously curved, the features softly rounded like the features of all her race.

She was not human either.

“It’s no use worrying, Kern,” she said, smiling down at him. “It’ll work out all right. You’ll see.”

“All right!” Kern snorted scornfully. “You think so, do you?”

Kua glanced instinctively around the hillside, making sure they were alone. Then she put both hands to her face and slipped off the glasses and the dark band from her forehead. Kern, meeting the gaze of her bright blue eye, was conscious again of the little shock he always felt when he looked into her uncovered face.

For Kua was a cyclops. She had one eye centered in her forehead. And she was—when the mind could accept her as she was, not as she should be—a beautiful woman in spite of it. That blue brilliance in the dusky face had a depth and luster beyond the eyes of humans. Heavy lashes ringed it, and the gaze could sink fathom upon fathom in her eye and never plumb its depths.

Kua's eye was a perfect lens. Whatever lens can do, her eye could do. No one could be sure just what miraculous mechanisms existed beyond the blue surface, but she could see to a distance almost beyond the range of the ordinary telescope and she could focus down upon the microscopic. And there may have been other things the single eye could do. One did not question one's companions too closely in this house of the mutations.

"You've been with us two years, Kern," she was saying now. "Only two years. You don't know yet how strong we are, or how much we can accomplish among us. Bruce Hallam knows what he's doing, Kern. He never works on theories. Or if he does, the theories become truth. He has a mind like that. You don't know us, Kern!"

"You can't fight a whole world."

"No. But we can leave it." She smiled, and he knew she saw nothing of the golden morning all around them. She knew nothing, really, of the cities that dotted the world of 1980, or the lives that were so irrevocably alien to her. They should have been alien to Kern too, but not until he was eighteen had the wings begun to grow upon his shoulders.

"I don't know, Kua," he said. "I'm not sure I want to. I had a father and a mother—brothers—friends."

"Your parents are your greatest enemies," she told him flatly. "They gave you life."

He looked away from the penetrating stare of that great blue single eye and past her at the big plastic house. That had been asylum, after the massacre of 1967—asylum against the hordes bent on

extirpating the freakish monsters created by atomic radiation. He could not remember, of course, but he had read about it, never guessing then that such a thing would ever apply to him. The old man had told him the story.

First had come the atomic war, brief, terrible, letting loose nameless radiations upon the world. And then had followed the wave upon wave of freak births among those exposed to it. Genes and chromosomes altered beyond comprehension. Monstrous things were born of human parents.

One in ten, perhaps, had been a successful mutation. And even those were dangerous to homo sapiens.

Evolution is like a roulette wheel. The conditions of the earth favor certain types of mutation capable of survival. But atomic energies had upset the balance, and mutations spawned in sheer madness began to spread. Not many, of course. Not many were viable. But two-headed things were born—and lived—along with geniuses and madmen. World Council had studied the biological and social problem for a long time before it recommended euthanasia. Man's evolution had been planned and charted. It must not be allowed to swerve from the track, or chaos would be let loose.

Geniuses, mutant humans with abnormally high I.Q.'s, were allowed to survive. Of the others, none lived after they had been detected. Sometimes they were difficult to detect. By 1968 only the true-line mutations, faithful to the human biological norm, were alive—with certain exceptions.

Such as the old man's son, Sam Brewster. He was a freak, with a certain—talent. A superhuman talent. The old man had disobeyed the Government law, for he had not sent the infant to the labs for

checking and testing—and annihilation. Instead, he had built this great house, and the boy had never gone far beyond its grounds.

Gradually then, partly to provide the youth with companionship, partly out of compassion, the father had begun to gather others together. Secretly, a mutant infant here, a mutant child there, he brought them in, until he had a family of freaks in the big plastic house. He had not taken them haphazardly. Some would not have been safe to live with. Some were better dead from the start. But those with something to offer beyond their freakishness, he found and sheltered.

It was the bringing in of Kern that gave the secret away. The boy had gone too long among ordinary humans, while his wings grew. He was eighteen, and his pinions had a six-foot spread, when old Mr. Brewster found him. His family had tried to keep him hidden, but the news was leaking out already when he left for the Brewster asylum, and in the years since it had spread until the authorities at last issued their ultimatum.

“It was my fault,” Kern said bitterly. “If it hadn’t been for me, you’d never have been molested.”

“No.” Kua’s deep, luminous eye fixed his. “Sooner or later you know they’d have found us. Better let it happen now, while we’re all still young and adaptable. We can go and enjoy going, now.” Her voice shook a little with deep excitement. “Think of it, Kern! New worlds! Places beyond the earth, where there could be people like us!”

“But Kua, I’m human! I feel human. I don’t want to leave. This is where I belong!”

“You say that because you grew up among normal people. Kern, you’ve got to face it. Tire only place for any of us is—somewhere away.”

“I know.” He grinned wryly. “But I don’t have to like it. Well—we’d better go back. They’ll have the ultimatum by now, I suppose. May as well hear it. I know what the answer is. Don’t you?”

She nodded, watching his involuntary glance around the empty blue sky, the warm October hills. A world for humans. But for humans alone....

Back in the Brewster plastic asylum, the inmates had assembled.

“There isn’t much time,” old Mr. Brewster said. “They’re on their way here now, to take you all back for euthanasia.”

Sam Brewster laughed harshly.

“We could show ’em a few tricks.”

“No. You can’t fight the whole world. You could kill many of them, but it wouldn’t do any good. Bruce’s machine is the only hope for you all.” His voice broke a little. “It’s going to be a lonely world for me, children, after you’ve gone.”

They looked at him uncomfortably, this strange, unrelated family of freak mutations, scarcely more than the children he had called them, but matured beyond their years by their strange rearing.

“There are worlds beyond counting, as you know,” Bruce said precisely. “Infinite numbers—worlds where we might not be freaks at all. Somewhere among them there must be places where each of our mutations is a norm. I’ve set the machine to the aggregate pattern of us all and it’ll find our equivalents—

something to suit one of us at least. And the others can go on looking. I can build the machine in duplicate on any world, anywhere, where I can live at all.” He smiled, and his strange light eyes glowed.

It was curious, Kern thought, how frequently in mutations the eyes were the giveaway. Kua, of course. And Sam Brewster with his terrible veiled glance protected by its secondary lid which drew back only in anger. And Bruce Hallam, whose strangeness was not visible but existed only in the amazing intricacies of his brain, looked upon the alien world with eyes that mirrored the mysteries behind them.

Bruce knew machinery—call it machinery for lack of a more comprehensive word—with a knowledge that was beyond learning. He could produce miracles with any set of devices his fingers could contrive. He seemed to sense by sheer instinct the courses of infinite power, and harness them with the simplest ease, the simplest mechanics.

There was a steel cubicle in the corner of the room with a round steel door which had taken Bruce a week to set up. Over it a panel burned with changing light, flickering through the spectrum and halting now and then upon clear red. When it was red, then the—the world—upon which the steel door opened was a world suitable for the little family of mutations to enter. The red light meant it could support human life, that it paralleled roughly the world they already knew, and that something in its essential pattern duplicated the pattern of at least one of the mutant group.

Kern was dizzy when he thought of the sweep of universes past that door, world whirling upon world where no human life could

dwelt, worlds of gas and flame, worlds of ice and rock. And, one in a countless number, a world of sun and water like their own....

It was incredible. But so were the wings at his own back, so was Kua's cyclopean eye, and Sam Brewster's veiled gaze, and so was the brain in Bruce Hallam's skull, which had built a bridge for them all.

He glanced around the group. Sitting back against the wall, in shadow, Byrna, the last of the mutant family, lifted her gray gaze to his. Compassion touched him as always when he met her eyes.

Byrna was physically the most abnormal of them all, in her sheer smallness. She came scarcely to Kern's elbow when she was standing. She was proportioned perfectly in the scale of her size, delicate, fragile as something of glass. But she was not beautiful to look at. There was a wrongness about her features that made them pathetically ugly, and the sadness in her gray eyes seemed to mirror the sadness of all misfit things.

Byrna's voice had magic in it, and so did her brain. Wisdom came as simply to her as knowledge came to Bruce Hallam, but she had infinitely more warmth than he. Bruce, Kern sometimes thought, would dismember a human as dispassionately as he would cut wire in two if he needed the material for an experiment. Bruce looked the most normal of them all, but he would not have passed the questioning of the most superficial mental examination.

Now his voice was impatient. "What are we waiting for? Everything's ready."

"Yes, you must go quickly," the old man said. "Look—the light's coming toward red now, isn't it?"

The panel above the steel door was orange. As they watched it shifted and grew ruddier. Bruce went silently forward and laid his hand on the lever that opened the panel. When the light was pure red he pushed the steel bar down.

In half-darkness beyond the opening a gust of luminous atoms blew across a craggy horizon. Against it there was a suggestion of towers and arches and columns, and lights that might have been aircraft swung in steady orbits above.

No one spoke. After a moment Bruce closed the door again, grimacing. The light above it hovered toward a reddish purple and then turned blue.

“Not that world,” Bruce said. “We’ll try again.”

In the shadow Byrna murmured:

“It doesn’t matter—any world will be the same for us.” Her voice was pure music.

“Listen! Do you hear planes?” the old man said. “It’s time, children. You must go.”

There was silence. Every eye watched the lighted panel. Colors hovered there to and fro through the spectrum. A faint ruddiness began to glow again.

“This time we’ll take it if it looks all right,” Bruce said, and laid his hand again upon the lever.

The light turned red. Soundlessly the round door swung open.

Sunlight came through, low green hills, and the clustered roofs of a town were visible a little distance away in a valley.

Without a word or a backward glance Bruce stepped through the door. One by one the others moved after him, Kern last. Kern's lips were pressed together and he did not glance behind him. He could have seen the hills of earth beyond the windows, and the blue October sky. He would not look at them. He shrugged his wings together and stooped to enter the gateway of the new world.

Behind them the old man watched in silence, seeing the work of his lifetime ending before his eyes. The gulf between them was too broad for leaping. He was human and they were not. Across a vast distance, vaster than the gulf between worlds, he saw the family of the mutations step over their threshold and vanish forever.

He closed the door after them. The red light faded above it. He turned toward his own door where the knocking of World Council's police had already begun to summon him to his accounting.

CHAPTER II

His Own Kind

Above them, the sky was blue. The five aliens who were alien to all worlds alike stood together on a hilltop looking down.

“It’s beautiful,” Kua said. “I’m glad we chose this one. But I wonder what the next one would have been like if we could have waited.”

“It will be the same no matter where we go,” Byrna’s infinitely sweet voice murmured.

“Look at the horizon,” Bruce said. “What is it?”

They saw then the first thing that marked this world alien to earth. For the most part it might have been any hilly wooded land they knew from the old place; even the roofs of the village looked spuriously familiar. But the horizon was curiously misted, and before them, far off, rose—something—to an impossible height halfway up the zenith.

“A mountain?” Kern asked doubtfully. “It’s too high, isn’t it?”

“A glass mountain,” Kua said. “Yes, it is glass—or plastic? I can’t be sure.”

She had uncovered her single eye and the shining pupil was contracted as she gazed over impossible distances at the equally impossible bulk of that thing on the horizon. It rose in a vast sweep of opalescent color, like a translucent thundercloud hanging over the whole land. Knowing it for a mountain, the mind felt

vertiginous at the thought of such tremendous bulk towering overhead.

“It looks clear,” Kua said. “All the way through. I can’t tell what’s beyond it. Just an enormous mountain made out of—of plastic? I wonder.”

Kern was aware of a tugging at his wing-surfaces, and glanced around in quick recognition of the strengthening breeze. He was the first to notice it.

“It’s beginning to blow. And listen—do you hear?”

It grew louder as they stood there, a shrill, strengthening whine in the air coming from the direction of the cloudlike mountain. A whine that grew so rapidly they had scarcely recognized it as noise before it was deafening all about them, and the wind was like a sudden hurricane.

That passed in a gust, noise and wind alike, leaving them breathless and staring at one another in dismay.

“Look, over there, quick!” Kua said, “Another one’s coming!”

Far off, but moving toward them with appalling speed, came a monstrous spinning tower of—light? Smoke? They could not be sure.

It whirled like a waterspout in a typhoon, vast, bending majestically and righting itself again, and the air spun with it, and the wild, shrill screaming began again.

The vortex of brilliance passed them far to the left, catching them in its shrieking hurricane of riven air and then releasing them again into shaken silence. But there was another one on its way before

they had caught their breath again, a whirling, bowing tower that spun screeching off toward the right. And after it another, and close behind that, a fourth.

The noise and the violence of the wind stunned Kern so that he had no idea what was happening to the others on the hilltop. He was susceptible because of his wings. The hurricane caught him up and whirled him sideward down the slope—shrieking in his ears with a noise so great it was almost silence, beyond the range of sound.

Stunned, he struggled for balance, leaning against the rushing wall of air as solid as a wall of stone. For a moment or two he kept the ground underfoot. Then his wings betrayed him and, in spite of himself, he felt the six-foot pinions blown wide and the muscles ached across his chest with the violence of the wind striking their spread surfaces.

The horizon tilted familiarly as he swooped in a banking curve. The glass mountain for a moment hung overhead and he looked straight down at the wooded hills, seeing tiny blowing figures reeling across the slopes in the grip of the hurricane winds. Hanging here far above the treetops, he could see that the monsters of whirling light were coming thicker and faster across the hilltops, striding like giants, trailing vortices of wind and sound in their wake. For an instant he swung in the grip of the hurricane, watching the vast whirling spindles moving and bowing majestically across the face of the new earth.

Then the vortex caught him again and he was spun blindly into the heart of the whirlwind, deafened with its terrible screaming uproar, wrenched this way and that upon aching wings, too dizzy for fear or thought. Time ceased. Half senseless, he was whirled to and fro

upon the irresistible winds. He closed his eyes against flying dust, locked his hands over his ears to shut out the deafening shrill of the blast and let the hurricane do with him as it would.

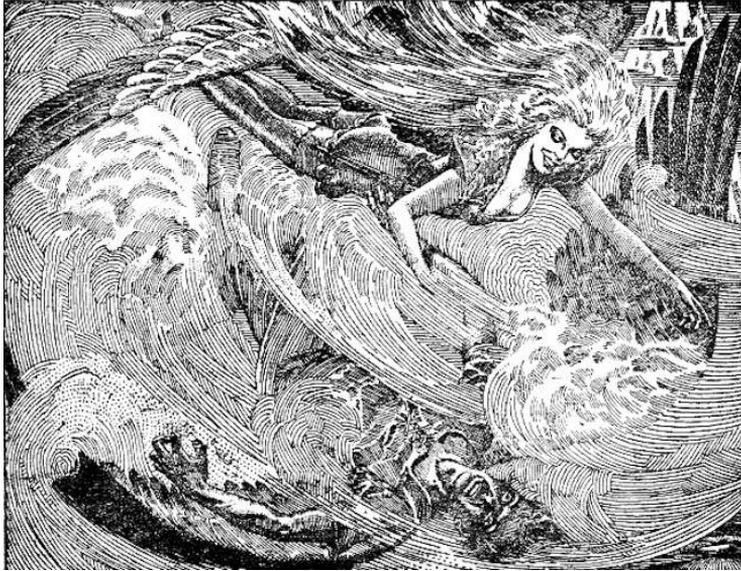
Kern felt a hand on his arm and roused himself out of a half-stupor.

He thought, I must be on the ground again, and made an instinctive effort to sit up. The motion threw him into a ludicrous spin and he opened his eyes wide to see the earth whirling far below him.

He was coasting at terrific speed through the upper air upon a cold, screaming highway of wind, and moving easily beside him, riding on broad pinions like his own, a girl paralleled his flight.

Long pale hair streamed behind her away from her blue-eyed face, whipped to pinkness by the blast. She was calling something to him, but the words were snatched from her lips by the wind and he heard nothing except that shrill, continuous howling all around them. He could see that she held him by one arm, and with her free hand was pointing downward vehemently. He could not hear her words, and knew he probably could not understand them if he did, but the gesture's meaning he could not mistake.

Nodding, he shrugged his left wing high and arched his body for a long downward spiral toward the ground. The girl turned with him, and together they glided sidewise across the rushing air-currents, delicately tacking against the wind, picking their way by instinctive muscular reactions of the spread pinions, while below them the ground swayed and turned like a fluid sea.



Together they glided across the rushing air currents.

Kern glided downward on a wave of exultation like nothing he had ever experienced before in his life. He knew little about this world or about the girl beside him, but one thing stood out clearly—he was no longer alone. No longer the only winged being on an alien planet. And this long downward glide, like the motion of perfect dancers responding each to the other's most delicate motion, was the most satisfying thing he had ever known.

For the first time he realized one of the great secrets of a flying race—to fly alone is to know only half the joy of flying. When another winged being moves beside you on the airways, speed matching speed, wings beating as one, then at last you taste the full ecstasy of flight.

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