

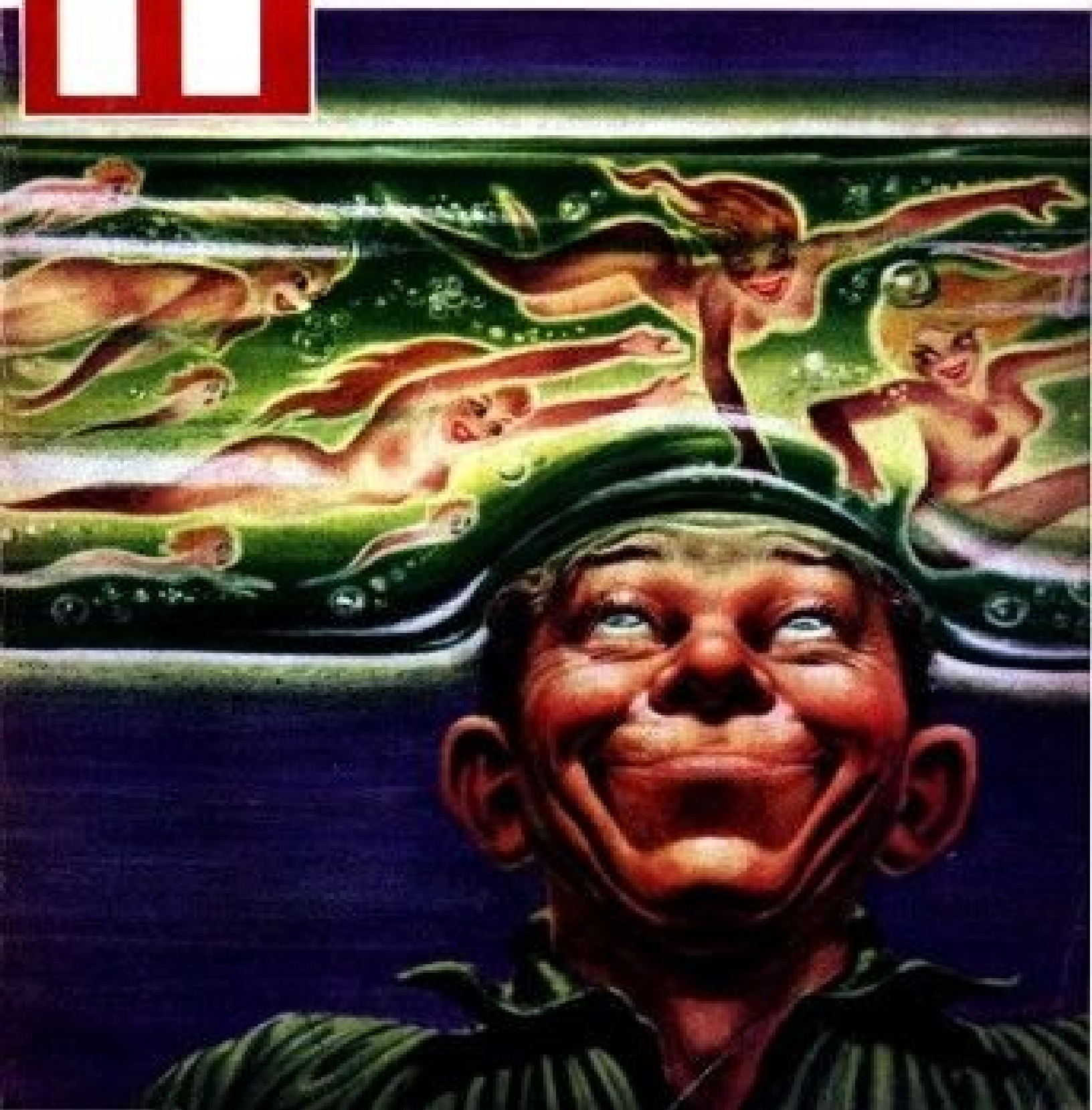


SCIENCE FICTION

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PIPE DREAM

by Fritz Leiber



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STAR OF REBIRTH

BY BERNARD WALL

*Atanta knew the red star was
the home of his people after
death.... And for months now
it had been growing brighter.*

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Everyone should have known. They should have known as surely as though it were written in the curved palm of the wind. They should have known when they looked up at the empty sky; they should have known when they looked down at the hungry children. Yet somehow they did not know that their last migratory hunt was almost over.

The stragglers had woven its slow trail among the mountains for forty days of vanishing hopes and shrinking stomachs. Ahead of the main party, the scouts had crawled until their knees and palms were raw; but still there was no track of game, and the only scent was that of the pungent air that rose from the ragged peaks of ice.

At last they halted, only a few footsteps from The Cave of the Fallen Sun, the farthest western reach of their frozen domain. In the rear of the column the women threatened the children into silence and the scouts went first to the mouth of the cave to look for signs of an animal having entered. Presently the scouts stood up with their massive shoulders drooping, turned to the rest and made a hopeless gesture.

Atanta, who stood alone and motionless between the scouts and the rest of his band, knew that all were waiting for him to use his magic to make a great leopard appear in the empty cave. "A *very* great leopard," he thought sarcastically. Enough to feed them all for a hundred days. A leopard so huge it would whine pitifully while they killed it. A leopard so gigantic that it would not leave its footprints in the snow. Indeed, Atanta was sure, the leopard his people wanted would be much too large to fit into the cave. Well, perhaps there would be a bird.

He held himself very tall and straight so that his dejection might not show to either his people or his gods. But after forty days of the trackless hunt, Atanta felt with certainty that the gods were deaf or dead ... or at least very far away.

The sun was hot and the gods were gone, and he would not keep his people waiting with false hopes. He closed his eyes and took up the crude bone cross that hung from his waist, and he cursed the gods with silent venom. And when his chastisement of the delinquent gods was done, he dropped the cross to dangle at his waist again.

Two hunters moved stealthily forward, their spears disappearing before them into the cave. It was somehow pathetic, Atanta felt, the way they moved so courageously into the empty darkness.

How many caves had there been, Atanta wondered, since they left the mouth of the river? Fully a dozen, always empty, except for the scattered bones of bears and men. Perhaps he should have kept his people at the river. No, he told himself. He had done the only thing he could do. The season had been bad and their meager catch of fish carefully stored. But the already heavy ice thickened with the approach of winter and made fishing almost impossible. When their supplies were almost gone, he had done as so many had done before him. He had led his people on the futile hunt, hoping for the miracle of a dozen sleeping bears or a great white leopard. Such miracles had happened in the past. Once he had gone with his father on such a winter hunt.

But miracles without footprints were quite another matter. That was the way his people lived: just existing when the catch was good, starving when it was not.

Presently the two hunters stepped out of the darkness with the blunt ends of their spears dragging behind them, and their countenances told the others that the cave was indeed empty.

Children began to cry. Women picked up their packs and slung them across their shoulders. The men mumbled inaudible words that turned into wisps of smoke in the icy air. At Atanta's signal, everyone entered the ice-floored cave, thankful at least to be out of the blinding brightness of the sun and snow, and into the soothing dark where they could rest.

Atanta stood while his people stretched their furry bodies out over the frozen ground. He looked down at his woman who lay before him, watching him with her black eyes large and warm. It made his stomach clutch itself into an angry knot, to see her young face so drawn with exhaustion and hunger. There were lines in her face he had never seen before; the fur of her head and body had lost its sheen and was now brittle and dry. She patted the ice and motioned him to lie down beside her; but he turned his eyes away from her, because he knew that he must tell the others before he could rest.

"Listen to me," he said, and his voice rang through the ice-sheeted cave. The tired eyes of the men and women opened and everyone sat up.

How should he tell them? They were waiting now. Should he simply say it swiftly and have done with it? Tell them that they had followed an impotent god until now they were to die? Surely he should prepare them somehow. Prepare

them for the importance of what he was to say.

"Listen, for I tell you of the end of the empty caves."

He stood silent for a moment watching hope filter into their faces, hope that made their dull eyes shine in the semi-darkness.

"Do not let joy curl your lips until you have listened, for it would be a false joy."

The lines of tiredness and worry returned to the faces about him. Atanta did not look down at his woman's face, for she knew him very well and she would know what he had to do.



"We are told of a time long ago, when the cave of man was filled with food as the night is filled with stars, and the caves and the men covered the five corners of the world. But these were not the caves that we know now. They were magic caves, and these were magic men. The men of that long-ago world created the very mountains into which they dug their caves. The mountains they created raised their peaks through the highest clouds, and every mountain held countless caves ... caves stuffed with bear and fish and captive winter winds. These were magic times when every man was a priest. Every man could make fire blossom from nowhere and every man could fly through the air like a bird.

"All this was long ago when the world was young, and the world was hot, and our people could live in the heat. But Nuomo the God of Night became jealous of these magic men, for he had seen them fly into the night itself in search of the stars. And so Nuomo wrapped his black wings around the world and shook it for ten tens of days. The world cracked and burst with flame that sprouted up into the darkened sky. The people ran in terror and their mountain-caves were sucked down into the earth or burned into ash by the flame. At the end of the ten tens of days, Nuomo thought that all were dead and so he rolled a sheet of ice across the earth to cool it.

"Only one man was able to escape the wrath of that ancient god. He was an old man with only little magic and he felt himself on the edge of death. He look from his body a rib which he fashioned into a son. But he made the son in such a way that he could live upon the ice itself, as we do now.

"The son knew that the old man was about to die, and so he said: 'Father, use your magic to make a woman to keep me from being lonely.'

"'Woman!' the old man cried. 'I should think you would want me to teach you the use of magic.'

"'Yes, father,' the son answered, 'if you can.'

"'No,' the old man told him. 'I am so near to death there is no time. A woman will have to do.'

"And so the old man drew from his chest another rib which he fashioned into a woman. This being done, he turned to his son and said: 'My son, the time has come for me to die. Do not mourn for me, for when each evening comes you will see my home—the red star which travels quickly in the night. For many ten tens of years, I have been preparing it to become a suitable place to be born again. When your time comes, you too will be welcome there.'

"Thus saying, the old man placed his hands upon the shoulders of his son. Then he wrapped his cloak about him and rose up into the heavens to the star of rebirth.

"Only when the old man had gone to the star of rebirth, did the son turn to his woman. Only then did he see that she had not been made in his image, for she was hairless and delicate and not made to live upon the ice. She was a Hotland woman. But the son, whose name was Dectar, took his woman whose name was Sontia, shielded her from the icy winds and comforted her as best he could. Some of their children had hair and loved the cold; some were weak and hairless and did not. In those days the hunting was good and the strong sheltered the weak, fed them, carried them on the long hunts. But Sontia was a jealous woman. Jealous of her strong husband and their offspring of his kind. She prayed to Ram, God of the Sun, and begged him to melt the ice. And so the ice began to melt, leaving the Hotlands a paradise for weak selfish creatures. Sontia deserted Dectar, taking with her those of their children who were hairless and weak like herself.

"When the ice began to melt, we sons of Dectar were forced to hunt farther northward year by year. The game became not so plentiful as it had been. Our people learned to fish and hunt as we do now—to fish in the summer, to hunt when the ice becomes thick.

"But the jealous sons of Sontia who swarm in the Hotlands were not content to see us perish year by year. Even to this day, if we should wander down to the edge of their domain to beg for a few scraps of food, they would answer our plea with death. And even in death they would allow us no dignity, but would strip us of our hides and wear them in mockery.

"I tell you of this now, because when a man comes on a long hunt which ends in an empty cave, it is well to remember and be proud of the successful hunts of other years."

Atanta took the white bone cross carefully from about his waist.

"It was I who first saw this god go across the sky." He held up the cross for all to see. "It went slowly like a bird from horizon to horizon and I knew that it was not a bird for it did not flap its wings, but kept them still and outstretched. I believed it to be the god who would fill our hunting trails with game, but now I know that this god is impotent. At worst it is a foolish god, lying somewhere on the white floating ice of heaven, wallowing in idleness while my people starve."

He dropped the cross to the smooth ice floor, knelt and smashed the cross into pieces with one swift blow of his hammerstone.

When he looked up the people were silent and unmoving. Perhaps he had been a fool. Perhaps he had told them nothing they didn't know. Perhaps they had already given up and knew that they would die here in the cave and that he could produce no magic to help them.

"Will you take another god?" one of the scouts asked.

"I see no other god to take."

"Then do you think we can be delivered without a god?"

Wasn't it evident? Surely they must know. Should he tell them there was no deliverance, with or without a god?

"I don't know," he lied. "I don't know."

Ark's woman drew a strip of leather from the mouth of a sleeping child and put it in her own mouth. "Then you'll have to deliver us yourself," she said and lay down to go to sleep.

A sudden rage burned in Atanta's brain. The muscles in his square jaw trembled as he glared at the sprawling furry figures, who would lie there and die while they waited like children for him to provide for the future.

Abruptly he turned and left the cave, and walked out under the yellow sun that made the ice-covered mountains shimmer. He felt that he must get away from them. He did not want to die with fools.



The sun blazed hot upon the hair of his head and back as he traveled rapidly downward and away from his people in the cave. He traveled too quickly to think of anything else but where his next footstep should be, and within an hour he was at the edge of a great ice field that stretched itself out before him like the footprint of a giant. There could be no more swift traveling now. Cautiously, he started out over the empty plain, prodding the ice before him with his spear.

It was not that they were children. He knew that he had been wrong to judge them so. There was nothing they could do. They had walked their lives away on the long hunt that ended now without a sign or scent of prey.

And he, Atanta, had led them. They were strong and loyal people, too, for if he ordered them up and back along the trail that they had come, each man would go without a word and hope that there was some magic Atanta had yet to use.

But the animals were gone and the gods were gone, and there was but one thing left. He would go down below this range where the Hotlanders were known to be. Probably he would simply die in the sun. If not, the Hotlanders would kill him on the spot, as they were usually so quick to do. The Hotlanders had good magic. Not as good as his ancestors', Atanta was sure. But still, they could kill a man from a great distance, simply by pointing a magic charm and making a certain noise.

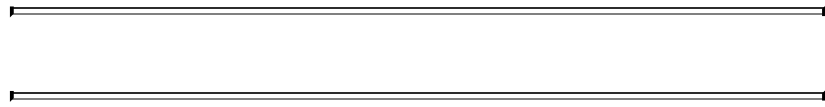
Perhaps the Hotlanders wouldn't see him and perhaps he would not die in the sun. Perhaps he would find some game by the edge of the Hotlands. Perhaps....

The sun had tucked itself behind a white western peak when Atanta at last came to the end of the ice field. Tired now, he crouched for a moment like a bird with his bottom sitting squarely upon his heels. Presently his tiredness became true exhaustion, so he dug himself a little space in a shadowed snow bank and then covered himself with a mound of snow.

While Atanta slept, a great lost bird came on the last feeble rays of light, flapping its black wings because there was no wind to glide upon and there was no footing but the frozen ground. When above Atanta, the bird caught a slight scent in the air, held its wings stiff and tilted itself to glide in slow circles that became smaller and smaller and ever lower until at last the bird's tired feet sank deep into the snow beside the mound where Atanta lay. The bird folded its wings about itself and pecked at the mound, its beak digging cautious holes in the snow. Atanta stirred slightly at this intrusion, and the bird drew its beak away and flapped its wings against the windless air and flew away.

When Atanta woke, the night wind had curled itself with a scream about the

mountains and brought with it a fresh snow. He dug himself from his bed and smiled with his eyes closed at the night that sent the wind and snow to caress his hair. When he opened his eyes, his face was tilted upward to the sky, and he smiled at the lonely stars.



The moon was full and heavy tonight, and it hung low in the western sky. Atanta wished his woman could be here beside him, nestling close to him in the soft snow, her delicate hands caressing the hair on his cheek. He thought of her hands rubbed raw from the straps of the heavy pack. Perhaps it was better that he had left without saying goodbye.

He felt rested enough to go on, and was about to hoist himself to his feet when the red star caught his attention. For months now it had been growing brighter with every night that passed, as if heralding some important event. This was the red star of rebirth, and he wished he could believe that he and his people would someday go to live there; but he no longer believed in anything.

It was then that Atanta saw the god. It was a great and fearful god that turned the black night yellow and screamed louder than the wind. In an instant it fell out of the sky; then the yellow light was gone and the voice of the god was gone, and the dark night returned and the voice of the wind returned.

Atanta fell to his knees and his trembling hand etched out the sign of the cross in the snow. Surely this must be a sign. The god had come out of the sky and fallen in the path before him—forbidding him to go into the lowlands. He knew he must pray and ask forgiveness but for many moments he was too frightened to pray, and when the fear subsided, he was too proud. Why should he pray to a god who would let his people starve? He raised his eyes, and saw the very head of the god peering up above the next rise.

He stood up with a semblance of dignity on his unsteady legs. When the god did not move from behind the rise for many minutes, Atanta's courage overbalanced his fear and he kicked the snow with his foot and obliterated the sign of the cross. He waited for the god to strike him dead, but nothing happened. The head of the god was motionless.

Atanta set out with cautious steps. Presently he hid behind a little ice dune where

he could see the god in its awesome entirety. Now he was close enough to hurl his spear at it if the god suddenly struck in anger; and he gripped the spear in readiness. Suddenly he was filled with a new awe, for he realized that this was not the god of the cross! There were no stiff wings at its side. It was like a huge shining spear with its dull end stuck in the snow and its point stretching up to the sky. But how could this be a god?

Perhaps he should not yet pray. Time had shown there were many false gods.

Presently a black mouth appeared magically in the side of the great still thing. The mouth sucked in the icy air for a moment and then extended a long jagged tongue down to the fresh snow.

Atanta saw something move in the blackness of the gaping mouth and then a figure stepped out onto the tongue and looked about at the falling snow and the white jagged mountains in the darkness. It was the figure of a man. At least it was in a man's shape, but it did not look like a man of the mountains nor did it look like the man-creatures of the Hotlands. It walked slowly and laboriously down the tongue, and it seemed to be made of the same shiny stuff as the tongue and the flying wingless god itself. For a moment, Atanta wondered which was the god. The great huge thing with the mouth and the tongue, or the man-thing?

The stranger stepped off the tongue into the snow where he knelt and scooped up the snow in his arms, tossed it into the wind which hurled it to the ground again. Then he stood and clutched his head. For a moment Atanta thought he had taken his own head off, but then he could tell that he had taken a covering off his head which he tossed into the snow. Then it seemed that the man had been entirely covered, like the men of the Hotlands who wore furs.

Presently the man had taken off all his covering, and stretched his furry arms up to feel the sweetness of the wind. Atanta leaped up, shouting his surprise. For this was a true man.

For a moment the man was startled and then his face filled with joy. Showing his empty palms, he began to walk slowly toward Atanta.

Atanta moved to meet him, the dark fur of his shoulders glistening in the moonlight. He spoke, but the man did not understand. Then he pointed up to the sky, then to the man, and tilted his head questioningly.

The man smiled and nodded his head. He pointed to the sky, but not straight up. He pointed to a spot low in the west.

He pointed to the star of rebirth.

While Atanta watched in unbelieving awe, the man touched his own chest, then stooped to lay his palms on the snow at his feet. Then he pointed once more to the red star and made a rapid upward gesture. Then he laid his closed hands beside his head and pretended to be asleep. His fingers opened and closed, again and again. "Many sleeps," said Atanta, understanding. "Tens of ten sleeps."

Smiling, the man straightened and made a rapid downward gesture, ending with his palms again on the snow. Then he stepped forward, placing one hand on his chest, the other on Atanta's.

The two furry men stood as tall and straight as their dignity could make them, and their faces were bright with joy. Then Atanta took the hammerstone out of the binding about his waist, and tossed it into the snow.

The man nodded. Stepping back, he lifted his hand in an arc across the sky, and offered Atanta the stars.

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